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The Voyage that Lasted 600 Years

by Don Wilcox

Thirty generations would live and die before the Flashaway reached its destination. Could the one man who was to live on keep them to their purpose?

THEY gave us a gala send-off, the kind that keeps your heart bobbing up at your tonsils. “It’s a long, long way to the Milky Way!” the voices sang out. The band thundered the chorus over and over. The golden trumpaphones blasted our eardrums wide open. Thousands of people clapped their hands in time.

There were thirty-three of us—that is, there was supposed to be. As it turned out, there were thirty-five.

We were a dazzling parade of red, white and blue uniforms. We marched up the gangplank by couples, every couple a man and wife, every couple young and strong, for the selection had been rigid.

Captain Sperry and his wife and I—I being the odd man—brought up the rear. Reporters and cameramen swarmed at our heels. The microphones stopped us. The band and the crowd hushed.

“This is Captain Sperry telling you good-by” the amplified voice boomed. “In behalf of the thirty-three, I thank you for your grand farewell. We’ll remember this hour as our last contact with our beloved Earth.”

The crowd held its breath. The mighty import of our mission struck through every heart.

“We go forth into space to live—and to die,” the captain said gravely. “But *our children’s children*, born in space and reared in the light of our vision, will carry on our great purpose. And in centuries to come, *your children’s children* may set forth for the Robinello planets, knowing that you will find an American colony already planted there.”

The captain gestured good-by and the multitude responded with a thunderous cheer. Nothing so daring as a six-century nonstop flight had ever been undertaken before.

An announcer nabbed me by the sleeve and barked into the microphone,

“And now one final word from Professor Gregory Grimstone, the one man who is supposed to live down through the six centuries of this historic flight and see the journey through to the end.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I choked, and the echo of my swallow blobbed back at me from distant walls, “as Keeper of the Traditions, I give you my word that the *S. S. Flashaway* shall carry your civilization through to the end, unsoiled and unblemished!”

A cheer stimulated me and I drew a deep breath for a burst of oratory. But Captain Sperry pulled at my other sleeve.

“That’s all. We’re set to slide out in two minutes.”

The reporters scurried down the gangplank and made a center rush through the crowd. The band struck up. Motors roared sullenly.

One lone reporter who had missed out on the interviews blitzkrieged up and caught me by the coattail.

“Hold it, Butch. Just a coupla words so I can whip up a column of froth for the *Star*— Well, I’ll be damned! If it ain’t ‘Crackdown’ Grimstone!”

I scowled. The reporter before me was none other than Bill Broscoe, one of my former pupils at college and a star athlete. At heart I knew that Bill was a right guy, but I’d be the last to tell him so.

“Broscoe!” I snarled. “Tardy as usual. You finally flunked my history course, didn’t you?”

“Now, Crackdown,” he whined, “don’t go hopping on me. I won that Thanksgiving game for you, remember?”

HE gazed at my red, white and blue uniform.

“So you’re off for Robinello,” he grinned.

“Son, this is my last minute on Earth, and *you* have to haunt me, of all people—”

“So you’re the one that’s taking the refrigerated sleeper, to wake up every hundred years—”

“And stir the fires of civilization among the crew—yes. Six hundred years from now when your bones have rotted, I’ll still be carrying on.”

“Still teaching ’em history? God forbid!” Broscoe grinned.

“I hope I have better luck than I did with you.”

“Let ’em off easy on dates, Crackdown. Give them 1066 for William the Conqueror and 2066 for the *Flashaway* take-off. That’s enough. Taking your wife, I suppose?”

At this impertinent question I gave Broscoe the cold eye.

“Pardon me,” he said, suppressing a sly grin—proof enough that he had heard the devastating story about how I missed my wedding and got the air. “Faulty alarm clock, wasn’t it? Too bad, Crackdown. And you always ragged *me* about being tardy!”

With this jibe Broscoe exploded into laughter. Some people have the damndest notions about what constitutes humor. I backed into the entrance of the space ship uncomfortably. Broscoe followed.

Zzzipp!

The automatic door cut past me. I jerked Broscoe through barely in time to keep him from being bisected.

“Tardy as usual, my friend,” I hooted. “You’ve missed your gangplank! That makes you the first castaway in space.”

We took off like a shooting star, and the last I saw of Bill Broscoe, he stood at a rear window cursing as he watched the earth and the moon fall away into the velvety black heavens. And the more I laughed at him, the madder he got. No sense of humor.

Was that the last time I ever saw him? Well, no, to be strictly honest I had one more unhappy glimpse of him.

It happened just before I packed myself away for my first one hundred years’ sleep.

I had checked over the “Who’s Who Aboard the *Flashaway*”—the official register—to make sure that I was thoroughly acquainted with everyone on board; for these sixteen couples were to be the great-grandparents of the next generation I would meet. Then I had promptly taken my leave of Captain Sperry and his wife, and gone directly to my refrigeration plant, where I was to suspend my life by instantaneous freezing.

I clicked the switches, and one of the two huge horizontal wheels—one in reserve, in the event of a breakdown—opened up for me like a door opening in the side of a gigantic doughnut, or better, a tubular merry-go-round. There was my nook waiting for me to crawl in.

Before I did so I took a backward glance toward the ballroom. The oneway glass partition, through which I could see but not be seen, gave me a clear view of the scene of merriment. The couples were dancing. The journey was off to a good start.

“A grand gang,” I said to myself. No one doubted that the ship was equal to the six-hundred-year journey. The success would depend upon the people. Living and dying in this closely circumscribed world would put them to a severe test. All credit, I reflected, was due the planning committee for choosing such a congenial group.

“They’re equal to it,” I said optimistically. If their children would only prove as sturdy and adaptable as their parents, my job as Keeper of the Traditions would be simple.

BUT how, I asked myself, as I stepped into my life-suspension merry-go-round, would Bill Broscoe fit into this picture? Not a half bad guy. Still—

My final glance through the one-way glass partition slew me. Out of the throng I saw Bill Broscoe dancing past with a beautiful girl in his arms. The girl was Louise—*my* Louise—the girl I had been engaged to marry!

In a flash it came to me—but not about Bill. I forgot him on the spot. About Louise.

Bless her heart, she’d come to find me. She must have heard that I had signed up for the *Flashaway*, and she had come aboard, a stowaway, to forgive me for missing the wedding—to marry me! Now—

A warning click sounded, a lid closed over me, my refrigerator-merry-go-round whirled—Blackness!

CHAPTER II

Babies, Just Babies

IN a moment—or so it seemed—I was again gazing into the light of the refrigerating room. The lid stood open.

A stimulating warmth circulated through my limbs. Perhaps the machine, I half consciously concluded, had made no more than a preliminary revolution.

I bounded out with a single thought. I must find Louise. We could still be married. For the present I would postpone my entrance into the ice. And since the machine had been equipped with *two* merry-go-round freezers as an emergency safeguard—ah! Happy thought—perhaps Louise would be willing to undergo life suspension with me!

I stopped at the one-way glass partition, astonished to see no signs of dancing in the ballroom. I could scarcely see the ballroom, for it had been darkened.

Upon unlocking the door (the refrigerator room was my own private retreat) I was bewildered. An unaccountable change had come over everything. What it was, I couldn’t determine at the moment. But the very air of the ballroom was different.

A few dim green light bulbs burned along the walls—enough to show me that the dancers had vanished. Had time enough elapsed for night to come on? My thoughts spun dizzily. Night, I reflected, would

consist simply of turning off the lights and going to bed. It had been agreed in our plan that our twenty-four hour Earth day would be maintained for the sake of regularity.

But there was something more intangible that struck me. The furniture had been changed about, and the very walls seemed *older*. Something more than minutes had passed since I left this room.

Strangest of all, the windows were darkened.

In a groggy state of mind I approached one of the windows in hopes of catching a glimpse of the solar system. I was still puzzling over how much time might have elapsed. Here, at least, was a sign of very recent activity.

“Wet Paint” read the sign pinned to the window. The paint was still sticky. What the devil—

The ship, of course, was fully equipped for blind flying. But aside from the problems of navigation, the crew had anticipated enjoying a wonderland of stellar beauty through the portholes. Now, for some strange reason, every window had been painted opaque.

I listened. Slow measured steps were pacing in an adjacent hallway. Nearing the entrance, I stopped, halted by a shrill sound from somewhere overhead. It came from one of the residential quarters that gave on the ballroom balcony.

It was the unmistakable wail of a baby.

Then another baby’s cry struck up; and a third, from somewhere across the balcony, joined the chorus. Time, indeed, must have passed since I left this roomful of dancers.

Now some irate voices of disturbed sleepers added rumbling basses to the symphony of wailings. Grumbles of “Shut that little devil up!” and poundings of fists on walls thundered through the empty ballroom. In a burst of inspiration I ran to the records room, where the ship’s “Who’s Who” was kept.

THE door to the records room was locked, but the footsteps of some sleepless person I had heard now pounded down the dimly lighted hallway. I looked upon the aged man. I had never seen him before. He stopped at the sight of me; then snapping on a brighter light, came on confidently. “Mr. Grimstone?” he said, extending his hand. “We’ve been expecting you. My name is William Broscoe—”

“Broscoe!”

“William Broscoe, the second. You knew my father, I believe.”

I groaned and choked.

“And my mother,” the old man continued, “always spoke very highly of you. I’m proud to be the first to greet you.”

He politely overlooked the flush of purple that leaped into my face. For a moment nothing that I could say was intelligible.

He turned a key and we entered the records room. There I faced the inescapable fact. My full century had passed. The original crew of the *Flashaway* were long gone. A completely new generation was on the register.

Or, more accurately, three new generations: the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren of the generation I had known.

One hundred years had passed—and I had lain so completely suspended, owing to the freezing, that only a moment of my own life had been absorbed.

Eventually I was to get used to this; but on this first occasion I found it utterly shocking—even embarrassing. Only a few minutes ago, as my experience went, I was madly in love with Louise and had hopes of yet marrying her.

But now—well, the leather-bound “Who’s Who” told all. Louise had been dead twenty years. Nearly thirty children now alive aboard the S. S. *Flashaway* could claim her as their great-grandmother. These carefully recorded pedigrees proved it.

And the patriarch of that fruitful tribe had been none other than Bill Broscoe, the fresh young athlete who had always been tardy for my history class. I gulped as if I were swallowing a baseball.

Broscoe—tardy! And I had missed my second chance to marry Louise—by a full century!

My fingers turned the pages of the register numbly. William Broscoe II misinterpreted my silence.

“I see you are quick to detect our trouble,” he said, and the same deep conscientious concern showed in his expression that I had remembered in the face of his mother, upon our grim meeting after my alarm clock had failed and I had missed my own wedding.

Trouble? Trouble aboard the S. S. *Flashaway*, after all the careful advance planning we had done, and after all our array of budgeting and scheduling and vowing to stamp our systematic ways upon the oncoming generations? This, we had agreed, would be the world’s most unique colonizing expedition; for every last trouble that might crop up on the six-hundred-year voyage had already been met and conquered by advance planning.

“They’ve tried to put off doing anything about it until your arrival,” Broscoe said, observing respectfully that the charter invested in me the authority of passing upon all important policies. “But this very week three new babies arrived, which brings the trouble to a crisis. So the captain ordered a blackout of the heavens as an emergency measure.”

“HEAVENS?” I grunted. “What have the heavens got to do with babies?”

“There’s a difference of opinion on that. Maybe it depends upon how susceptible you are.”

“Susceptible—to what?”

“The romantic malady.”

I looked at the old man, much puzzled. He took me by the arm and led me toward the pilots’ control room. Here were unpainted windows that revealed celestial glories beyond anything I had ever dreamed. Brilliant planets of varied hues gleamed through the blackness, while close at hand—almost close enough to touch—were numerous large moons, floating slowly past as we shot along our course.

“Some little show,” the pilot grinned, “and it keeps getting better.”

He proceeded to tell me just where we were and how few adjustments in the original time schedules he had had to make, and why this non-stop flight to Robinello would stand unequalled for centuries to come.

And I heard virtually nothing of what he said. I simply stood there, gazing at the unbelievable beauty of the skies. I was hypnotized, enthralled, shaken to the very roots. One emotion, one thought dominated me. I longed for Louise.

“The romantic malady, as I was saying,” William Broscoe resumed, “may or may not be a factor in producing our large population. Personally, I think it’s pure buncombe.”

“Pure buncombe,” I echoed, still thinking of Louise. If she and I had had moons like these—

“But nobody can tell Captain Dickinson anything...”

There was considerable clamor and wrangling that morning as the inhabitants awakened to find their heavens blacked out. Captain Dickinson was none too popular anyway. Fortunately for him, many of the people took their grouches out on the babies who had caused the disturbance in the night.

Families with babies were supposed to occupy the rear staterooms—but there weren’t enough rear staterooms. Or rather, there were too many babies.

Soon the word went the rounds that the Keeper of the Traditions had returned to life. I was duly banqueted and toasted and treated to lengthy accounts of the events of the past hundred years. And during the next few days many of the older men and women would take me aside for private conferences and spill their worries into my ears.

CHAPTER III

Boredom

“WHAT’S the world coming to?” these granddaddies and grandmothers would ask. And before I could scratch my head for an answer, they would assure me that this expedition was headed straight for the rocks.

“It’s all up with us. We’ve lost our grip on our original purposes. The Six-Hundred-Year Plan is nothing but a dead scrap of paper.”

I’ll admit things looked plenty black. And the more parlor conversations I was invited in on, the blacker things looked. I couldn’t sleep nights.

“If our population keeps on increasing, we’ll run out of food before we’re halfway there,” William Broscoe II repeatedly declared. “We’ve got to have a compulsory program of birth control. That’s the only thing that will save us.”

A delicate subject for parlor conversations, you think? This older generation didn’t think so. I was astonished, and I’ll admit I was a bit proud as well, to discover how deeply imbued these old graybeards were with *Flashaway* determination and patriotism. They had missed life in America by only one generation, and they were unquestionably the staunchest of flag wavers on board.

The younger generations were less outspoken, and for the first week I began to deplore their comparative lack of vision. They, the possessors of families, seemed to avoid these discussions about the oversupply of children.

“So you’ve come to check up on our American traditions, Professor Grimstone,” they would say casually. “We’ve heard all about this great purpose of our forefathers, and I guess it’s up to us to put it across. But gee whiz, Grimstone, we wish we could have seen the earth! What’s it like, anyhow?”

“Tell us some more about the earth...”

“All we know is what we get second hand...”

I told them about the earth. Yes, they had books galore, and movies and phonograph records, pictures and maps; but these things only excited their curiosity. They asked me questions by the thousands. Only after I had poured out several encyclopedia-loads of Earth memories did I begin to break through their masks.

Back of this constant questioning, I discovered, they were watching me. Perhaps they were wondering whether they were not being subjected to more rigid discipline here on shipboard than their cousins back on Earth. I tried to impress upon them that they were a chosen group, but this had little effect. It stuck in their minds that *they* had had no choice in the matter.

Moreover, they were watching to see what I was going to do about the population problem, for they were no less aware of it than their elders.

Two weeks after my “return” we got down to business.

Captain Dickinson preferred to engineer the matter himself. He called an assembly in the movie auditorium. Almost everyone was present.

The program began with the picture of the Six-Hundred-Year Plan. Everyone knew the reels by heart. They had seen and heard them dozens of times, and were ready to snicker at the proper moments—such as when the stern old committee chairman, charging the unborn generations with their solemn obligations, was interrupted by a friendly fly on his nose.

WHEN the films were run through, Captain Dickinson took the rostrum, and with considerable bluster he called upon the Clerk of the Council to review the situation. The clerk read a report which went about as follows:

To maintain a stable population, it was agreed in the original Plan that families should average two children each. Hence, the original 16 families would bring forth approximately 32 children; and assuming that they were fairly evenly divided as to sex, they would eventually form 16 new families. These 16 families would, in turn, have an average of two children each—another generation of approximately 32. By maintaining these averages, we were to have a total population, at any given time, of 32 children, 32 parents and 32 grandparents. The great-grandparents may be left out of account, for owing to the natural span of life they ordinarily die off before they accumulate in any great numbers. The three living generations, then, of 32 each would give the *Flashaway* a constant active population of 96, or roughly, 100 persons. The Six-Hundred-Year Plan has allowed for some flexibility in these figures. It has established the safe maximum at 150 and the safe minimum at 75. If our population shrinks below 75, it is dangerously small. If it shrinks to 50, a crisis is at hand. But if it grows above 150, it is dangerously large; and if it reaches the 200 mark, as we all know, a crisis may be said to exist.

The clerk stopped for an impressive pause, marred only by the crying of a baby from some distant room.

“Now, coming down to the present-day facts, we are well aware that the population has been dangerously large for the past seven years—”

“Since we entered this section of the heavens,” Captain Dickinson interspersed with a scowl.

“From the first year in space, the population plan has encountered some irregularities,” the clerk continued. “To begin with, there were not sixteen couples, but seventeen. The seventeenth couple—” here the clerk shot a glance at William Broscoe—“did not belong to the original compact, and after their marriage they were not bound by the sacred traditions—”

“I object!” I shouted, challenging the eyes of the clerk and the captain squarely. Dickinson had written

that report with a touch of malice. The clerk skipped over a sentence or two.

“But however the Broscoe family may have prospered and multiplied, our records show that nearly all the families of the present generation have exceeded the per-family quota.”

At this point there was a slight disturbance in the rear of the auditorium. An anxious-looking young man entered and signalled to the doctor. The two went out together.

“*All* the families,” the clerk amended. “Our population this week passed the two hundred mark. This concludes the report.”

The captain opened the meeting for discussion, and the forum lasted far into the night. The demand for me to assist the Council with some legislation was general. There was also hearty sentiment against the captain’s blacked-out heavens from young and old alike.

THIS, I considered, was a good sign.

The children craved the fun of watching the stars and planets; their elders desired to keep up their serious astronomical studies.

“Nothing is so important to the welfare of this expedition,” I said to the Council on the following day, as we settled down to the job of thrashing out some legislation, “as to maintain our interests in the outside world. Population or no population, we must not become ingrown!”

I talked of new responsibilities, new challenges in the form of contests and campaigns, new leisure-time activities. The discussion went on for days.

“Back in my times—” I said for the hundredth time; but the captain laughed me down. My times and these times were as unlike as black and white, he declared.

“But the principle is the same!” I shouted. “We had population troubles, too.”

They smiled as I referred to twenty-first century relief families who were overrun with children. I cited the fact that some industrialists who paid heavy taxes had considered giving every relief family an automobile as a measure to save themselves money in the long run; for they had discovered that relief families with cars had fewer children than those without.

“That’s no help,” Dickinson muttered. “You can’t have cars on a space ship.”

“You can play bridge,” I retorted. “Bridge is an enemy of the birthrate too. Bridge, cars, movies, checkers—they all add up to the same thing. They lift you out of your animal natures—”

The Councilmen threw up their hands. They had bridged and checkered themselves to death.

“Then try other things,” I persisted. “You could produce your own movies and plays—organize a little theater—create some new drama—”

“What have we got to dramatize?” the captain replied sourly. “All the dramatic things happen on the earth.”

This shocked me. Somehow it took all the starch out of this colossal adventure to hear the captain give up so easily.

“All our drama is second hand,” he grumbled. “Our ship’s course is cut and dried. Our world is bounded by walls. The only dramatic things that happen here are births and deaths.”

A doctor broke in on our conference and seized the captain by the hand.

“Congratulations, Captain Dickinson, on the prize crop of the season! Your wife has just presented you with a fine set of triplets—three boys!”

That broke up the meeting. Captain Dickinson was so busy for the rest of the week that he forgot all about his official obligations. The problem of population limitation faded from his mind.

I wrote out my recommendations and gave them all the weight of my dictatorial authority. I stressed the need for more birth control forums, and recommended that the heavens be made visible for further studies in astronomy and mathematics.

I was tempted to warn Captain Dickinson that the *Flashaway* might incur some serious dramas of its own—poverty, disease and the like—unless he got back on the track of the Six-Hundred-Year Plan in a hurry. But Dickinson was preoccupied with some family washings when I took my leave of him, and he seemed to have as much drama on his hands as he cared for.

I paid a final visit to each of the twenty-eight great-grandchildren of Louise, and returned to my ice.

CHAPTER IV

Revolt!

MY chief complaint against my merry-go-round freezer was that it didn't give me any rest. One whirl into blackness, and the next thing I knew I popped out of the open lid again with not so much as a minute's time to reorganize my thoughts.

Well, here it was, 2266—two hundred years since the take-off.

A glance through the one-way glass told me it was daytime in the ballroom.

As I turned the key in the lock I felt like a prize fighter on a vaudeville tour who, having just trounced the tough local strong man, steps back in the ring to take on his cousin.

A touch of a headache caught me as I reflected that there should be four more returns after this one—if all went according to plan. *Plan!* That word was destined to be trampled underfoot!

Oh, well (I took a deep optimistic breath) the *Flashaway* troubles would all be cleared up by now. Three generations would have passed. The population should be back to normal.

I swung the door open, stepped through, locked it after me.

For an instant I thought I had stepped in on a big movie “take”—a scene of a stricken multitude. The big ballroom was literally strewn with people—if creatures in such a deplorable state could be called people.

There was no movie camera. This was the real thing.

“Grimstone's come!” a hoarse voice cried out.

“Grimstone! Grimstone!” Others caught up the cry. Then—“Food! Give us food! We're starving! For God's sake—”

The weird chorus gathered volume. I stood dazed, and for an instant I couldn't realize that I was looking upon the population of the *Flashaway*.

Men, women and children of all ages and all states of desperation joined in the clamor. Some of them stumbled to their feet and came toward me, waving their arms weakly. But most of them hadn't the strength to rise.

In that stunning moment an icy sweat came over me.

"Food! Food! We've been waiting for you, Grimstone. We've been holding on—"

The responsibility that was strapped to my shoulders suddenly weighed down like a locomotive. You see, I had originally taken my job more or less as a lark. That Six-Hundred-Year Plan had looked so air-tight. I, the Keeper of the Traditions, would have a snap.

I had anticipated many a pleasant hour acquainting the oncoming generations with noble sentiments about George Washington; I had pictured myself filling the souls of my listeners by reciting the Gettysburg address and lecturing upon the mysteries of science.

But now those pretty bubbles burst on the spot, nor did they ever reform in the centuries to follow.

And as they burst, my vision cleared. My job had nothing to do with theories or textbooks or speeches. My job was simply to get to Robinello—to get there with enough living, able-bodied, sane human beings to start a colony.

Dull blue starlight sifted through the windows to highlight the big roomful of starved figures. The mass of pale blue faces stared at me. There were hundreds of them. Instinctively I shrank as the throng clustered around me, calling and pleading.

"One at a time!" I cried. "First I've got to find out what this is all about. Who's your spokesman?"

THEY designated a handsomely built, if undernourished, young man. I inquired his name and learned that he was Bob Sperry, a descendant of the original Captain Sperry.

"There are eight hundred of us now," Sperry said.

"Don't tell me the food has run out!"

"No, not that—but six hundred of us are not entitled to regular meals."

"Why not?"

Before the young spokesman could answer, the others burst out with an unintelligible clamor. Angry cries of "That damned Dickinson!" and "Guns!" and "They'll shoot us!" were all I could distinguish.

I quieted them and made Bob Sperry go on with his story. He calmly asserted that there was a very good reason that they shouldn't be fed, all sentiment aside; namely, because they had been born outside the quota.

Here I began to catch a gleam of light.

"By Captain Dickinson's interpretation of the Plan," Sperry explained, "there shouldn't be more than two hundred of us altogether."

This Captain Dickinson, I learned, was a grandson of the one I had known.

Sperry continued, "Since there are eight hundred, he and his brother—his brother being Food Superintendent—launched an emergency measure a few months ago to save food. They divided the

population into the two hundred, who had a right to be born, and the six hundred who had not.”

So the six hundred starving persons before me were theoretically the excess population. The vigorous ancestry of the sixteen—no, seventeen—original couples, together with the excellent medical care that had reduced infant mortality and disease to the minimum, had wrecked the original population plan completely.

“What do you do for food? You must have *some* food!”

“We live on charity.”

The throng again broke in with hostile words. Young Sperry’s version was too gentle to do justice to their outraged stomachs. In fairness to the two hundred, however, Sperry explained that they shared whatever food they could spare with these, their less fortunate brothers, sisters and offspring.

Uncertain what should or could be done, I gave the impatient crowd my promise to investigate at once. Bob Sperry and nine other men accompanied me.

The minute we were out of hearing of the ballroom, I gasped,

“Good heavens, men, how is it that you and your six hundred haven’t mobbed the storerooms long before this?”

“Dickinson and his brother have got the drop on us.”

“Drop? What kind of drop?”

“Guns!”

I couldn’t understand this. I had believed these new generations of the *Flashaway* to be relatively innocent of any knowledge of firearms.

“What kind of guns?”

“The same kind they use in our Earth-made movies—that make a loud noise and kill people by the hundreds.”

“But there aren’t any guns aboard! That is—”

I knew perfectly well that the only firearms the ship carried had been stored in my own refrigerator room, which no one could enter but myself. Before the voyage, one of the planning committee had jestingly suggested that if any serious trouble ever arose, I should be master of the situation by virtue of one hundred revolvers.

“They made their own guns,” Sperry explained, “just like the ones in our movies and books.”

INQUIRING whether any persons had been shot, I learned that three of their number, attempting a raid on the storerooms, had been killed.

“We heard three loud bangs, and found our men dead with bloody skulls.”

Reaching the upper end of the central corridor, we arrived at the captain’s headquarters.

The name of Captain Dickinson carried a bad flavor for me. A century before I had developed a distaste for a certain other Captain Dickinson, his grandfather. I resolved to swallow my prejudice. Then the door

opened, and my resolve stuck in my throat. The former Captain Dickinson had merely annoyed me; but this one I hated on sight.

“Well?” the captain roared at the eleven of us.

Well-uniformed and neatly groomed, he filled the doorway with an impressive bulk. In his right hand he gripped a revolver. The gleam of that weapon had a magical effect upon the men. They shrank back respectfully. Then the captain’s cold eye lighted on me.

‘Who are *you*?’

“Gregory Grimstone, Keeper of the Traditions.”

The captain sent a quick glance toward his gun and repeated his “Well?”

For a moment I was fascinated by that intricately shaped piece of metal in his grip.

“Well!” I echoed. “If ‘well’ is the only reception you have to offer, I’ll proceed with my official business. Call your Food Superintendent.”

“Why?”

“Order him out! Have him feed the entire population without further delay!”

“We can’t afford the food,” the captain growled.

“We’ll talk that over later, but we won’t talk on empty stomachs. Order out your Food Superintendent!”

“Crawl back in your hole!” Dickinson snarled.

At that instant another bulky man stepped into view. He was almost the identical counterpart of the captain, but his uniform was that of the Food Superintendent. Showing his teeth with a sinister snarl, he took his place beside his brother. He too jerked his right hand up to flash a gleaming revolver.

I caught one glimpse—and laughed in his face! I couldn’t help it.

“You fellows are good!” I roared. “You’re damned good actors! If you’ve held off the starving six hundred with nothing but those two dumb imitations of revolvers, you deserve an Academy award!”

The two Dickinson brothers went white.

Back of me came low mutterings from ten starving men.

“Imitations—dumb imitations—what the hell?”

Sperry and his nine comrades plunged with one accord. For the next ten minutes the captain’s headquarters was simply a whirlpool of flying fists and hurtling bodies.

I have mentioned that these ten men were weak from lack of food. That fact was all that saved the Dickinson brothers; for ten minutes of lively exercise was all the ten men could endure, in spite of the circumstances.

BUT ten minutes left an impression.

The Dickinsons were the worst beaten-up men I have ever seen, and I have seen some bad ones in my time. When the news echoed through the ship, no one questioned the ethics of ten starved men attacking

two overfed ones.

Needless to say, before two hours passed, every hungry man, woman and child ate to his gizzard's content. And before another hour passed, some new officers were installed. The *S. S. Flashaway's* trouble was far from solved; but for the present the whole eight hundred were one big family picnic. Hope was restored, and the rejoicing lasted through many thousand miles of space.

There was considerable mystery about the guns. Surprisingly, the people had developed an awe of the movie guns as if they were instruments of magic.

Upon investigating, I was convinced that the captain and his brother had simply capitalized on this superstition. They had a sound enough motive for wanting to save food. But once their gun bluff had been established, they had become uncompromising oppressors. And when the occasion arose that their guns were challenged, they had simply crushed the skulls of their three attackers and faked the noises of explosions.

But now the firearms were dead. And so was the Dickinson regime.

But the menacing problem of too many mouths to feed still clung to the *S. S. Flashaway* like a hungry ghost determined to ride the ship to death.

Six full months passed before the needed reform was forged.

During that time everyone was allowed full rations. The famine had already taken its toll in weakened bodies, and seventeen persons—most of them young children—died. The doctors, released from the Dickinson regime, worked like Trojans to bring the rest back to health.

The reform measure that went into effect six months after my arrival consisted of outright sterilization.

The compulsory rule was sterilization for everyone except those born "within the quota"—and that quota, let me add, was narrowed down one half from Captain Dickinson's two hundred to the most eligible one hundred. The disqualified one hundred now joined the ranks of the six hundred.

And that was not all. By their own agreement, every within-the-quota family, responsible for bearing the *Flashaway's* future children, would undergo sterilization operations after the second child was born.

The seven hundred out-of-quota citizens, let it be said, were only too glad to submit to the simple sterilization measures in exchange for a right to live their normal lives. Yes, they were to have three squares a day. With an assured population decline in prospect for the coming century, this generous measure of food would not give out. Our surveys of the existing food supplies showed that these seven hundred could safely live their four-score years and die with full stomachs.

Looking back on that six months' work, I was fairly well satisfied that the doctors and the Council and I had done the fair, if drastic, thing. If I had planted seeds for further trouble with the Dickinson tribe, I was little concerned about it at the time.

My conscience was, in fact, clear—except for one small matter. I was guilty of one slight act of partiality.

I incurred this guilt shortly before I returned to the ice. The doctors and I, looking down from the balcony into the ballroom, chanced to notice a young couple who were obviously very much in love.

THE young man was Bob Sperry, the handsome, clear-eyed descendant of the *Flashaway's* first and finest captain, the lad who had been the spokesman when I first came upon the starving mob.

The girl's name—and how it had clung in my mind!—was Louise Broscoe. Refreshingly beautiful, she reminded me for all the world of my own Louise (mine and Bill Broscoe's).

“It's a shame,” one of the doctors commented, “that fine young blood like that has to fall outside the quota. But rules are rules.”

With a shrug of the shoulders he had already dismissed the matter from his mind—until I handed him something I had scribbled on a piece of paper.

“We'll make this one exception,” I said perfunctorily. “If any question ever arises, this statement relieves you doctors of all responsibility. This is my own special request.”

CHAPTER V

Wedding Bells

ONE hundred years later my rash act came back to haunt me—and how! Bob Sperry had married Louise Broscoe, and the births of their two children had raised the unholy cry of “Favoritism!”

By the year 2366, Bob Sperry and Louise Broscoe were gone and almost forgotten. But the enmity against me, the Keeper of the Traditions who played favorites, had grown up into a monster of bitter hatred waiting to devour me.

It didn't take me long to discover this. My first contact after I emerged from the ice set the pace.

“Go tell your parents,” I said to the gang of brats that were playing ball in the spacious ballroom, “that Grimstone has arrived.”

Their evil little faces stared at me a moment, then they snorted.

“Faw! Faw! Faw!” and away they ran.

I stood in the big bleak room wondering what to make of their insults. On the balcony some of the parents craned over the railings at me.

“Greetings!” I cried. “I'm Grimstone, Keeper of the Traditions. I've just come—”

“Faw!” the men and women shouted at me. “Faw! Faw!”

No one could have made anything friendly out of those snarls. “Faw,” to them, was simply a vocal manner of spitting poison.

Uncertain what this surly reception might lead to, I returned to my refrigerator room to procure one of the guns. Then I returned to the volley of catcalls and insults, determined to carry out my duties, come what might.

When I reached the forequarter of the ship, however, I found some less hostile citizens who gave me a civil welcome. Here I established myself for the extent of my 2366-67 sojourn, an honored guest of the Sperry family.

This, I told myself, was my reward for my favor to Bob Sperry and Louise Broscoe a century ago. For here was their grandson, a fine upstanding gray-haired man of fifty, a splendid pilot and the father of a beautiful twenty-one year old daughter.

“Your name wouldn't be Louise by any chance?” I asked the girl as she showed me into the Sperry living

room.

“Lora-Louise,” the girl smiled. It was remarkable how she brought back memories of one of her ancestors of three centuries previous.

Her dark eyes flashed over me curiously.

“So you are the man that we Sperrys have to thank for being here!”

“You’ve heard about the quotas?” I asked.

“Of course. You’re almost a god to our family.”

“I must be a devil to some of the others,” I said, recalling my reception of catcalls.

“Rogues!” the girl’s father snorted, and he thereupon launched into a breezy account of the past century.

The sterilization program, he assured me, had worked—if anything, too well. The population was the lowest in *Flashaway* history. It stood at the dangerously low mark of *fifty*!

Besides the sterilization program, a disease epidemic had taken its toll. In addition three ugly murders, prompted by jealousies, had spotted the record. And there had been one suicide.

As to the character of the population, Pilot Sperry declared gravely that there had been a turn for the worse.

“They fight each other like damned anarchists,” he snorted.

THE Dickinsons had made trouble for several generations. Now it was the Dickinsons against the Smiths; and these two factions included four-fifths of all the people. They were about evenly divided—twenty on each side—and when they weren’t actually fighting each other, they were “fawing” at each other.

These bellicose factions had one sentiment in common: they both despised the Sperry faction. And—here my guilt cropped up again—their hatred stemmed from my special favor of a century ago, without which there would be no Sperrys now. In view of the fact that the Sperry faction lived in the forequarter of the ship and held all the important offices, it was no wonder that the remaining forty citizens were jealous.

All of which gave me enough to worry about. On top of that, Lora-Louise’s mother gave me one other angle of the set-up.

“The trouble between the Dickinsons and the Smiths has grown worse since Lora-Louise has become a young lady,” Mrs. Sperry confided to me.

We were sitting in a breakfast nook. Amber starlight shone softly through the porthole, lighting the mother’s steady imperturbable gray eyes.

“Most girls have married at eighteen or nineteen,” her mother went on. “So far, Lora-Louise has refused to marry.”

The worry in Mrs. Sperry’s face was almost imperceptible, but I understood. I had checked over the “Who’s Who” and I knew the seriousness of this population crisis. I also knew that there were four young unmarried men with no other prospects of wives except Lora-Louise.

“Have you any choice for her?” I asked.

“Since she must marry—and I know she *must*—I have urged her to make her own choice.”

I could see that the ordeal of choosing had been postponed until my coming, in hopes that I might modify the rules. But I had no intention of doing so. The *Flashaway* needed Lora-Louise. It needed the sort of children she would bear.

That week I saw the two husky Dickinson boys. Both were in their twenties. They stayed close together and bore an air of treachery and scheming. Rumor had it that they carried weapons made from table knives.

Everyone knew that my coming would bring the conflict to a head. Many thought I would try to force the girl to marry the older Smith—“Batch”, as he was called in view of his bachelorhood. He was past thirty-five, the oldest of the four unmarried men.

But some argued otherwise. For Batch, though a splendid specimen physically, was slow of wit and speech. It was common knowledge that he was weak-minded.

For that reason, I might choose his younger cousin, “Smithy,” a roly-poly overgrown boy of nineteen who spent his time bullying the younger children.

But if the Smiths and the Dickinsons could have their way about it, the Keeper of the Traditions should have no voice in the matter. Let me insist that Lora-Louise marry, said they; but whom she should marry was none of my business.

They preferred a fight as a means of settlement. A free-for-all between the two factions would be fine. A showdown of fists among the four contenders would be even better.

“BEST of all would be a battle of knives that would eliminate all but one of the suitors. Not that either the Dickinsons or the Smiths needed to admit that was what they preferred; but their barbaric tastes were plain to see.

Barbarians! That’s what they had become. They had sprung too far from their native civilization. Only the Sperry faction, isolated in their monasteries of control boards, physicians’ laboratories and record rooms, kept alive the spark of civilization.

The Sperrys and their associates were human beings out of the twenty-first century. The Smiths and the Dickinsons had slipped. They might have come out of the Dark Ages.

What burned me up more than anything else was that obviously both the Smiths and the Dickinsons looked forward with sinister glee toward dragging Lora-Louise down from her height to their own barbaric levels.

One night I was awakened by the sharp ringing of the pilot’s telephone. I heard the snap of a switch. An *emergency* signal flashed on throughout the ship.

Footsteps were pounding toward the ballroom. I slipped into a robe, seized my gun, made for the door.

“The Dickinsons are murdering up on them!” Pilot Sperry shouted to me from the door of the control room.

“I’ll see about it,” I snapped.

I bounded down the corridor. Sperry didn’t follow. Whatever violence might occur from year to year within the hull of the *Flashaway*, the pilot’s code demanded that he lock himself up at the controls and

tend to his own business.

It was a free-for-all! Under the bright lights they were going to it, tooth and toenail.

Children screamed and clawed, women hurled dishes, old tottering grand-daddies edged into the fracas to crack at each other with canes.

The appalling reason for it all showed in the center of the room—the roly-poly form of young “Smithy” Smith. Hacked and stabbed, his nightclothes ripped, he was a veritable mess of carnage.

I shouted for order. No one heard me, for in that instant a chase thundered on the balcony. Everything else stopped. All eyes turned on the three racing figures.

Batch Smith, fleeing in his white nightclothes, had less than five yards’ lead on the two Dickinsons. Batch was just smart enough to run when he was chased, not smart enough to know he couldn’t possibly outrun the younger Dickinsons.

As they shot past blazing lights the Dickinsons’ knives flashed. I could see that their hands were red with Smithy’s blood.

“*Stop!*” I cried. “*Stop or I’ll shoot!*”

If they heard, the words must have been meaningless. The younger Dickinson gained ground. His brother darted back in the opposite direction, crouched, waited for his prey to come around the circular balcony.

“Dickinson! Stop or I’ll shoot you dead!” I bellowed.

Batch Smith came on, his eyes white with terror. Crouched and waiting, the older Dickinson lifted his knife for the killing stroke.

I shot.

The crouched Dickinson fell in a heap. Over him tripped the racing form of Batch Smith, to sprawl headlong. The other Dickinson leaped over his brother and pounced down upon the fallen prey, knife upraised.

Another shot went home.

Young Dickinson writhed and came toppling down over the balcony rail. He lay where he fell, his bloody knife sticking up through the side of his neck.

IT was ugly business trying to restore order. However, the magic power of firearms, which had become only a dusty legend, now put teeth into every word I uttered.

The doctors were surprisingly efficient. After many hours of work behind closed doors, they released their verdicts to the waiting groups. The elder Dickinson, shot through the shoulder, would live. The younger Dickinson was dead. So was Smithy. But his cousin, Batch Smith, although too scared to walk back to his stateroom, was unhurt.

The rest of the day the doctors devoted to patching up the minor damages done in the free fight. Four-fifths of the *Flashaway* population were burdened with bandages, it seemed. For some time to come both the warring parties were considerably sobered over their losses. But most of all they were disgruntled because the fight had settled nothing.

The prize was still unclaimed. The two remaining contenders, backed by their respective factions, were at a bitter deadlock.

Nor had Lora-Louise's hatred for either the surviving Dickinson or Smith lessened in the slightest.

Never had a duty been more oppressive to me. I postponed my talk with Lora-Louise for several days, but I was determined that there should be no more fighting. She must choose.

We sat in an alcove next to the pilot's control room, looking out into the vast sky. Our ship, bounding at a terrific speed though it was, seemed to be hanging motionless in the tranquil star-dotted heavens.

"I must speak frankly," I said to the girl. "I hope you will do the same."

She looked at me steadily. Her dark eyes were perfectly frank, her full lips smiled with child-like simplicity.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-eight," I answered. I'd been the youngest professor on the college faculty. "Or you might say three hundred and twenty-eight. Why?"

"How soon must you go back to your sleep?"

"Just as soon as you are happily married. That's why I must insist that you—"

Something very penetrating about her gaze made my words go weak. To think of forcing this lovely girl—so much like the Louise of my own century—to marry either the brutal Dickinson or the moronic Smith—

"Do you really want me to be *happily* married?" she asked.

I don't remember that any more words passed between us at the time.

A few days later she and I were married—and most happily!

The ceremony was brief. The entire Sperry faction and one representative from each of the two hostile factions were present. The aged captain of the ship, who had been too ineffectual in recent years to apply any discipline to the fighting factions, was still able with vigorous voice to pronounce us man and wife.

A year and a half later I took my leave.

I bid fond good-by to the "future captain of the *Flashaway*," who lay on a pillow kicking and squirming. He gurgled back at me. If the boasts and promises of the Sperry grandparents and their associates were to be taken at full value, this young prodigy of mine would in time become an accomplished pilot and a skilled doctor as well as a stern but wise captain.

Judging from his talents at the age of six months, I was convinced he showed promise of becoming Food Superintendent as well.

I left reluctantly but happily.

CHAPTER VI

The Final Crisis

THE year 2466 was one of the darkest in my life. I shall pass over it briefly.

The situation I found was all but hopeless.

The captain met me personally and conveyed me to his quarters without allowing the people to see me.

“Safer for everyone concerned,” he muttered. I caught glimpses as we passed through the shadows. I seemed to be looking upon ruins.

Not until the captain had disclosed the events of the century did I understand how things could have come to such a deplorable state. And before he finished his story, I saw that I was helpless to right the wrongs.

“They’ve destroyed ’most everything,” the hard-bitten old captain rasped. “And they haven’t overlooked *you*. They’ve destroyed you completely. *You are an ogre*”

I wasn’t clear on his meaning. Dimly in the back of my mind the hilarious farewell of four centuries ago still echoed.

“The *Flashaway* will go through!” I insisted.

“They destroyed all the books, phonograph records, movie films. They broke up clocks and bells and furniture—”

And I was supposed to carry this interspatial outpost of American civilization through *unblemished!* That was what I had promised so gayly four centuries ago.

“They even tried to break out the windows,” the captain went on. “ ‘Oxygen be damned!’ they’d shout. They were mad. You couldn’t tell them anything. If they could have got into this end of the ship, they’d have murdered us and smashed the control boards to hell”

I listened with bowed head.

“Your son tried like the devil to turn the tide. But God, what chance did he have? The dam had busted loose. They wanted to kill each other. They wanted to destroy each other’s property and starve each other out. No captain in the world could have stopped either faction. They had to get it out of their systems...”

He shrugged helplessly. “Your son went down fighting...” For a time I could hear no more. It seemed but minutes ago that I had taken leave of the little tot.

The war—if a mania of destruction and murder between two feuding factions could be called a war—had done one good thing, according to the captain. It had wiped the name of Dickinson from the records.

Later I turned through the musty pages to make sure. There were Smiths and Sperrys and a few other names still in the running, but no Dickinsons. Nor were there any Grimstones. My son had left no living descendants.

To return to the captain’s story, the war (he said) had degraded the bulk of the population almost to the level of savages. Perhaps the comparison is an insult to the savage. The instruments of knowledge and learning having been destroyed, beliefs gave way to superstitions, memories of past events degenerated into fanciful legends.

The rebound from the war brought a terrific superstitious terror concerning death. The survivors crawled into their shells, almost literally; the brutalities and treacheries of the past hung like storm clouds over their imaginations.

As year after year dropped away, the people told and retold the stories of destruction to their children. Gradually the legend twisted into a strange form in which all the guilt for the carnage *was placed upon*

me!

I WAS the one who had started all the killing! *I the ogre*, who slept in a cave somewhere in the rear of the ship, came out once upon a time and started all the trouble!

I, the Traditions Man, dealt death with a magic weapon; I cast the spell of killing upon the Smiths and the Dickinsons that kept them fighting until there was nothing left to fight for!

“But that was years ago,” I protested to the captain. “Am I still an ogre?” I shuddered at the very thought.

“More than ever. Stories like that don’t die out in a century. They grow bigger. You’ve become the symbol of evil. I’ve tried to talk the silly notion down, but it has been impossible. My own family is afraid of you.”

I listened with sickening amazement. I was the Traditions Man; or rather, the “Traddy Man”—the bane of every child’s life.

Parents, I was told, would warn them, “If you don’t be good, the Traddy Man will come out of his cave and get you!”

And the Traddy Man, as every grown-up knew, could storm out of his cave without warning. He would come with a strange gleam in his eye. That was his evil will. When the bravest, strongest men would cross his path, he would hurl instant death at them. Then he would seize the most beautiful woman and marry her.

“Enough!” I said. “Call your people together. I’ll dispel their false ideas—”

The captain shook his head wisely. He glanced at my gun.

“Don’t force me to disobey your orders,” he said. “I can believe you’re not an ogre—but they won’t. I know this generation. You don’t. Frankly, I refuse to disturb the peace of this ship by telling the people you have come. Nor am I willing to terrorize my family by letting them see you.”

For a long while I stared silently into space.

The captain dismissed a pilot from the control room and had me come in.

“You can see for yourself that we are straight on our course. You have already seen that all the supplies are holding up. You have seen that the population problem is well cared for. What more do you want?”

What more did I want! With the whole population of the *Flashaway* steeped in ignorance—immorality—superstition—savagery! *

* Professor Grimstone is obviously astounded that his charges, with all the necessities of life on board their space ship, should have degenerated so completely. It must be remembered, however, that no other outside influence ever entered the *Flashaway* in all its long voyage through space. In the space of centuries, the colonists progressed not one whit. On a very much reduced scale, the *Flashaway* colonists are a more or less accurate mirror of a nation in transition. Sad but true it is that nations, like human beings, are born, wax into bright maturity, grow into comfortable middle age and oftentimes linger on until old age has impaired their usefulness. In the relatively short time that man has been a thinking, building animal, many great empires—many great nations—have sprung from humble beginnings to grow powerful and then wane into oblivion, sometimes slowly, sometimes with tragic suddenness. Grimstone, however, has failed to take the lessons of history into account through the mistaken conception that

because the colonists' physical wants were taken care of, that was all they required to keep them healthy and contented.—Ed.

Again the captain shook his head. "You want us to be like your friends of the twenty-first century. *We can't be.*"

He reached in his pocket and pulled out some bits of crumpled papers.

"Look. I save every scrap of reading matter. I learned to read from the primers and charts that your son's grandparents made. Before the destruction, I tried to read about the Earth-life. I still piece together these torn bits and study them. But I can't piece together the Earth-life that they tell about. All I really know is what I've seen and felt and breathed right here in my native *Flashaway* world.

"That's how it's bound to be with all of us. We can't get back to your notions about things. Your notions haven't any real truth for us. You don't belong to our world," the captain said with honest frankness.

"So I'm an outcast on my own ship!"

"That's putting it mildly. You're a menace and a troublemaker—an *ogre*! It's in their minds as tight as the bones in their skulls."

The most I could do was secure some promises from him before I went back to the ice. He promised to keep the ship on its course. He promised to do his utmost to fasten the necessary obligations upon those who would take over the helm.

"Straight relentless navigation!" We drank a toast to it. He didn't pretend to appreciate the purpose or the mission of the *Flashaway*, but he took my word for it that it would come to some good.

"To Robinello in 2666!" Another toast. Then he conducted me back, in utmost secrecy, to my refrigerator room.

I AWOKE to the year of 2566, keenly aware that I was not Gregory Grimstone, the respected Keeper of the Traditions. If I was anyone at all, I was the Traddy Man—the ogre.

But perhaps by this time—and I took hope with the thought—I had been completely forgotten.

I tried to get through the length of the ship without being seen. I had watched through the one-way glass for several hours for a favorable opportunity, but the ship seemed to be in a continual state of daylight, and shabby-looking people roamed about as aimlessly as sheep in a meadow.

The few persons who saw me as I darted toward the captain's quarters shrieked as if they had been knifed. In their world there was no such thing as a strange person. I was the impossible, the unbelievable. My name, obviously, had been forgotten.

I found three men in the control room. After minutes of tension, during which they adjusted themselves to the shock of my coming, I succeeded in establishing speaking terms. Two of the men were Sperrys.

But at the very moment I should have been concerned with solidifying my friendship, I broke the calm with an excited outburst. My eye caught the position of the instruments and I leaped from my seat.

"How long have you been going *that way*?"

"Eight years!"

"Eight—" I glanced at the huge automatic chart overhead. It showed the long straight line of our centuries

of flight with a tiny shepherd's crook at the end. Eight years ago we had turned back sharply.

"That's sixteen years lost, gentlemen!"

I tried to regain my poise. The three men before me were perfectly calm, to my astonishment. The two Sperry brothers glanced at each other. The third man, who had introduced himself as Smith, glared at me darkly.

"It's all right," I said. "We won't lose another minute. I know how to operate—"

"No, you don't!" Smith's voice was harsh and cold. I had started to reach for the controls. I hesitated. Three pairs of eyes were fixed on me.

"We know where we're going," one of the Sperrys said stubbornly. "We've got our own destination."

"This ship is bound for Robinello!" I snapped. "We've got to colonize. The Robinello planets are ours—America's. It's our job to clinch the claim and establish the initial settlement—"

"Who said so?"

"America!"

"*When?*" Smith's cold eyes tightened.

"Five hundred years ago."

"That doesn't mean a thing. Those people are all dead."

"I'm one of those people!" I growled. "And I'm not dead by a damned sight!"

"Then you're out on a limb."

"Limb or no limb, the plan goes through!" I clutched my gun. "We haven't come five hundred years in a straight line for nothing!"

"The plan is dead," one of the Sperrys snarled. "We've killed it."

HIS brother chimed in, "This is our ship and we're running it. We've studied the heavens and we're out on our own. We're through with this straight-line stuff. We're going to see the universe."

"You can't! You're bound for Robinello!"

Smith stepped toward me, and his big teeth showed savagely.

"We had no part in that agreement. We're taking orders from no one. I've heard about you. You're the Traddy Man. Go back in your hole—and stay there!"

I brought my gun up slowly. "You've heard of me? Have you heard of my gun? Do you know that this weapon shoots men dead?"

Three pairs of eyes caught on the gleaming weapon. But three men stood their ground staunchly.

"I've heard about guns," Smith hissed. "Enough to know that you don't dare shoot in the control room—"

"I don't dare *miss!*"

I didn't want to kill the men. But I saw no other way out. Was there any other way? Three lives weren't going to stand between the *Flashaway* and her destination.

Seconds passed, with the four of us breathing hard. Eternity was about to descend on someone. Any of the three might have been splendid pioneers if they had been confronted with the job of building a colony. But in this moment, their lack of vision was as deadly as any deliberate sabotage. I focused my attack on the most troublesome man of the three.

"Smith, I'm giving you an order. Turn back before I count to ten or I'll kill you. One... two... three..."

Not the slightest move from anyone.

"Seven... eight... nine..."

Smith leaped at me—and fell dead at my feet.

The two Sperrys looked at the faint wisp of smoke from the weapon. I barked another sharp command, and one of the Sperrys marched to the controls and turned the ship back toward Robinello.

CHAPTER VII

Time Marches On

FOR a year I was with the Sperry brothers constantly, doing my utmost to bring them around to my way of thinking. At first I watched them like hawks. But they were not treacherous. Neither did they show any inclination to avenge Smith's death. Probably this was due to a suppressed hatred they had held toward him.

The Sperrys were the sort of men, being true children of space, who bided their time. That's what they were doing now. That was why I couldn't leave them and go back to my ice.

As sure as the *Flashaway* could cut through the heavens, those two men were counting the hours until I returned to my nest. The minute I was gone, they would turn back toward their own goal.

And so I continued to stay with them for a full year. If they contemplated killing me, they gave no indication. I presume I would have killed them with little hesitation, had I had no pilots whatsoever that I could entrust with the job of carrying on.

There were no other pilots, nor were there any youngsters old enough to break into service.

Night after night I fought the matter over in my mind. There was a full century to go. Perhaps one hundred and fifteen or twenty years. And no one except the two Sperrys and I had any serious conception of a destination!

These two pilots and I—and *one other*, whom I had never for a minute forgotten. If the *Flashaway* was to go through, it was up to me and *that one other*—

I marched back to the refrigerator room, people fleeing my path in terror. Inside the retreat I touched the switches that operated the auxiliary merry-go-round freezer. After a space of time the operation was complete.

Someone very beautiful stood smiling before me, looking not a minute older than when I had packed her away for safe-keeping two centuries before.

“Gregory,” she breathed ecstatically. “Are my three centuries up already?”

“Only two of them, Lora-Louise.” I took her in my arms. She looked up at me sharply and must have read the trouble in my eyes.

“They’ve all played out on us,” I said quietly. “It’s up to us now.”

I discussed my plan with her and she approved.

One at a time we forced the Sperry brothers into the icy retreat, with repeated promises that they would emerge within a century. By that time Lora-Louise and I would be gone—but it was our expectation that our children and grandchildren would carry on.

And so the two of us, plus firearms, plus Lora-Louise’s sense of humor, took over the running of the *Flashaway* for its final century.

As the years passed the native population grew to be less afraid of us. Little by little a foggy glimmer of our vision filtered into their numbed minds.

THE year is now 2600. Thirty-three years have passed since Lora-Louise and I took over. I am now sixty-two, she is fifty-six. Or if you prefer, I am 562, she is 256. Our four children have grown up and married.

We have realized down through these long years that we would not live to see the journey completed. The Robinello planets have been visible for some time; but at our speed they are still sixty or eighty years away.

But something strange happened nine or ten months ago. It has changed the outlook for all of us—even me, the crusty old Keeper of the Traditions.

A message reached us through our radio receiver!

IT WAS a human voice speaking in our own language. It had a fresh vibrant hum to it and a clear-cut enunciation. It shocked me to realize how sluggish our own brand of the King’s English had become in the past five-and-a-half centuries. “Calling the *S.S. Flashaway!*” it said.

“Calling the *S.S. Flashaway!* We are trying to locate you, *S.S. Flashaway*. Our instruments indicate that you are approaching. If you can hear us, will you give us your exact location?”

I snapped on the transmitter. “This is the *Flashaway*. Can you hear us?”

“Dimly. Where are you?”

“On our course. Who’s calling?”

“This is the American colony on Robinello,” came the answer. “American colony, Robinello, established in 2550—fifty years ago. We’re waiting for you, *Flashaway*.”

“How the devil did you get there?” I may have sounded a bit crusty but I was too excited to know what I was saying.

“Modern space ships,” came the answer. “We’ve cut the time from the earth to Robinello down to six years. Give us your location. We’ll send a fast ship out to pick you up.”

I gave them our location. That, as I said, was several months ago. Today we are receiving a radio call

every five minutes as their ship approaches.

One of my sons, supervising the preparations, has just reported that all persons aboard are ready to transfer—including the Sperry brothers, who have emerged successfully from the ice. The eighty-five *Flashaway* natives are scared half to death and at the same time as eager as children going to a circus.

Lora-Louise has finished packing our boxes, bless her heart. That teasing smile she just gave me was because she noticed the “Who’s Who Aboard the *Flashaway*” tucked snugly under my arm.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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