

CASTAWAY

The water, that at first had been so warm, enveloped him with a cold embrace that contracted his muscles, that threatened to squeeze his heart itself to a stand-still. The salt mouthfuls that he was now swallowing with almost every stroke choked him and seared his lungs. The smarting eyes were blind, no longer staring towards the yellow line of beach that, at the beginning of it all, had seemed so close. He no longer knew or cared where he was going, no longer wondered if he would ever get there. The tired limbs automatically went through their feeble, no longer rhythmic, motions — but it was only that part of himself which must always refuse to acknowledge the ultimate defeat.

Perhaps he was already drowning. Perhaps it was only his memory harking back to some happier time, some period when the world held more than this hopeless, wet misery. For it was not the whole of his past life that flashed before his inward eye as the prelude to ultimate extinction. It was only the events just prior to his present predicament.

He was walking the bridge again, warm in the afternoon sunlight, dry, the heat tempered by the pleasant Pacific breeze. And he was hearing the carefree voices of the day-workers and the watch on deck as, swinging in their bos'n's chairs, they happily slapped the Company's colours — clean, fresh cream over vividly garish red lead — on to the recently scaled funnel.

They were cheerful — and there was no reason why they should not have been. It was one of those days when, somehow, it is perfectly obvious that God is in his Heaven and that all is well with the world.

Fine on the starboard bow was the island. Lazily, he told himself that he would take a four-point bearing, would obtain a distance off and a fix. He went into the chart-room, leafed through the Pacific Pilot until he found the right page. He read ". . . when last visited, by Captain Wallis of H.M.S. Searcher in 1903, was uninhabited. There are one or two springs, and the water is good . . ."

Somebody was shouting. He put the book down hastily, went out to the bridge. The men dangling from the tall funnel were calling and pointing. He looked in the direction they indicated, could not be sure of what he saw, took the telescope from its long box.

The island — white surf, yellow beach, green jungle — swam unsteadily in the circular field of the telescope. But there was a fresh colour added — column of thick, brown smoke that billowed up from the beach, that thinned to a dense haze against the blue, cloudless sky.

He had called the Captain then. The Old Man had come up, surly at the breaking of his afternoon rest, but immediately alert when he had seen the smoke. Some poor devil of an airman, he had said it might be, or the survivors of shipwreck, victims of the tropical storm, that had swept this area a few days previously.

The course was altered at once to bring the island more nearly ahead. In this there was no danger, the soundings ran fantastically deep almost to the thin line of beach itself. And the watch on deck laid aside their paint

brushes, busied themselves clearing away the motor launch.

By this time the news had spread through the ship. The other officers came up, stared at the island and its smoke signal through binoculars and telescopes. Some of them said that they could see a little figure beside the fire, dancing and waving. And the Captain, after careful examination of the Pilot Book and of the largest scale chart of the vicinity, was conning his ship in on such an approach that his boat would have the minimum distance to run to the beach, but so that the ship herself would always be in deep water. As additional precautions the echo-sounding recorder was started up and look-outs posted.

And that was the last of his life before this eternity of cold, wet misery, of aching limbs that moved on and on of their own volition when he would willingly have willed them to stop: of blinded, smarting eyes, of throat and lungs burning from the increasingly frequent gulps of salt water.

His bare knees ground on something hard and sharp. The pain of it made him cry out. His hands went down, and he felt sand and coral rocks. He could see now, mistily, and he dragged himself up the beach to where the fire was still burning. And as he collapsed on the sand beside it the fleeting, ironical thought flashed through his bemused brain that now the castaway would have to give aid to one of his would-be rescuers. And that was his last thought until he awoke some hours later.

It was night when he woke up. There was a full moon, so he was able to take stock of his surroundings at once, did not have to go through a period of confused and panic-stricken fumbling in the darkness. Beside him, a black patch on the pale sand, the fire was no more than dead ashes.

There was something missing. At first he could not place it — then suddenly realised that it was the man who had lit the fire. He got shakily to his feet then. Every bone was aching, and the lighter which, wrapped in his tobacco pouch, he always kept in the right-hand pocket of his shorts had gouged what seemed to be a permanent hole in his hip. He stood there for a while, staring about him. There was nothing to be seen but the pale sand, luminous in the glare of the moon, stretching away on either side of him —that and the sea, smooth, misty blue, and the dark, forbidding trees inland.

He shouted then. At first it was "Ahoy! Where are you?" — and then it degenerated into a mere, wordless bellowing. But he could not keep it up for long. His throat was dry and parched, the natural aftermath of his frequent and copious swallowings of salt water was a raging thirst.

Some memory of boyhood books about castaways on desert islands stirred in his brain. He began to look for footprints. On the farther side of what had been the fire he found them. And this evidence that the castaway, the man who had built and lit the fire, did exist was rather frightening. What manner of man could he have been to have fled into the jungle? There was only one answer to the question — Mad. Possibly some poor, starved creature whose brain had finally snapped when the rescue ship, striking the floating mine (for that, the sole survivor of the rescue ship had decided, was what must have happened — even now, years after the finish of the

war, blind, insensate death still lurked along the seaways), had disintegrated in flame and thunder.

But the footprints must lead somewhere. The man from the ship followed them. A direction was the only information they gave him. They had been made in dry sand and could not tell him anything, not even the size of the feet that had made them.

They ended where the sand stretched, for perhaps a hundred feet, in wet and glistening contrast to the dry grains on either side of it. This, obviously, was one of the springs of which mention had been made in the Pilot. Inland, among the low trees, there was a shallow channel, a sluggish stream. The man went down on his hands and knees and scooped up a double handful of the water. It was only slightly brackish. He soon tired of this unsatisfactory and unsatisfying means of quenching his thirst and plunged his face into the wet coolness. Even so, he restrained himself. He knew of the discomfort that follows upon too hasty indulgence. He rose to a sitting posture and rested. Then, after a while, he drank again.

When he had finished he felt better. Automatically his hand went to his pocket for his pipe. It was not there. He tried to remember where he had left it. He forced his memory back, step by step, until it rewarded his persistence with a picture of the old briar being placed on top of the flag locker in the wheelhouse. He swore softly. The pouch in the right-hand pocket of his shorts was more than half full. He took it out, opened it, ran his fingers through the tobacco that, in spite of his long swim, had remained dry. The lighter was dry, too. At the first flick of the little wheel the flame sprang into being. He blew it out hastily. He could not afford to waste fuel. Fire might well be his most treasured possession. He remembered, then, the fire that the other castaway had lit. He remembered, with something of a shock, the other castaway.

The unpleasant vision of a homicidal maniac sprang into brief being, then receded. He knew that he had laid himself open to attack whilst drinking at the stream — and attack had not come. His first theory must be right — that of the poor, half-starved, half-crazed creature who had fled into the jungle at the sight and sound of the explosion.

Slowly, limping a little with the pain of his gashed knees, his aching bones and muscles, he made his way back to the ashes of the fire. He sat down beside them, intending to stay awake until daylight in case the other unwilling inhabitant of the island should return. And he fell asleep almost at once.

At his second awakening the sun was well up. It was the heat that prodded him into wakefulness. When he climbed stiffly to his feet he found that his clothing was stiff and prickly, was glittering with the crystals of dry salt.

He hoped wildly that the firemaker would have returned during the night. But the beach was still empty. So was the sea, that was to be expected. The island was miles from the usual shipping lanes. It was only some fancy, current-chasing trick of the Old Man's that had brought his vessel to within sight of it. Still he stared at the sea, praying that at least one of his shipmates might have survived the mysterious loss of the ship, but there

was nothing. Not even a hatch or a grating, raft or lifebuoy.

Food was now a matter of some urgency. He looked inland to where a few coconut palms waved feathery fronds across the blue sky, decided that an assault upon them could wait until he had quenched his thirst. By the time he had reached the stream the discomfort of an itching skin was greater than that of an empty belly. So, having drunk his fill, he stripped off his shorts and shirt and rinsed them thoroughly in the fresh water. He spread them on a convenient tree to dry in the sun. He took off his light canvas shoes and rinsed them too. And he splashed for a while in the shallows and then sat, half in sunlight, half in shadow, to wait for his clothing to dry.

It was still a little damp when he put it on. He hesitated before returning his pouch and the precious lighter to his pocket — then told himself that if it had survived a swim surely it would be not harmed by a temporary dampness. And he was anxious to strike inland in search of something edible and — although this was fast becoming relegated to the back of his mind — the other castaway.

The undergrowth was heavily matted, and the bed of the stream offered the best approach to the interior of the island. As he splashed inland he looked about him for anything that would serve as food. But everything was unfamiliar. Then, after a sweating half-hour or so, the loneliness of it all became oppressive. He was looking less for something to eat than signs of companionship. Often he would pause and stand there, listening, but apart from the low ripple of the stream over its rocky bed there was no sound.

Panic came then. He started to run, slipping and stumbling over the water-worn rocks. And he almost missed the ship. He was already past it when a belated message from his optic nerve made him stop suddenly, turn and retrace his steps. And the ship was too big to miss. He stood for long minutes staring at it, wondering how a contraption so huge and so outlandish could have found its way into the middle of the jungle.

It stood beside the stream, in the middle of a little clearing. It had been there for a long time. The metal of which it was built was dulled by age. Creepers from the growth all around it had evidently tried to find purchase on the smooth plating, but, with the exception of those around a ladder extending from a circular door or port to the ground, had failed.

And as the man stared he began to see something familiar about the strange construction. It was like, although on a far vaster scale, the V.2 rockets used by Germany during the war. Its streamlined body stood upright, supported by four huge vanes. There were ports in its sides. And its nose, towering above the trees, was what an airman would have called a "greenhouse".

The man shouted.

There might be somebody in the ship.

There must be somebody in the ship — the man who had made the fire.

He shouted again: "Ahoy! Is anybody —"

And he broke off in mid-sentence.

Was it a man who had made the fire?

Was it a man?

He had read somewhere that V.2 was the first spaceship. This — a huge rocket, manned, if the evidence of its ports were to be believed, could be a spaceship.

And it wouldn't be an Earthly one ...

He shivered, remembering the unpleasant extra-Terran life forms cooked up by Wells and all his imitators. This, he told himself, would explain everything. He scrambled in the bed of the stream until he found a stone, elongated and with a natural grip, that would make a club of sorts. And he walked slowly and warily towards the ladder.

It was there, at the foot of the ladder, that he found the first skeleton. He did not see it— so intent was he on the port in the ship's side — until the ribs cracked under his feet. He jumped back hastily, fearing some kind of trap. It was a long while before his heart stopped pumping noisily, before he was able to bring himself to examine the cause of his alarm.

It was a human skeleton. There was nothing alien, nothing otherworldly about it. The skull, brown and discoloured, grinned up at him with that singular lack of dignity found only in dry bones. Death is only horrible and frightening when recent.

The castaway stood for a while studying his find. He picked up the skull. He examined it with some hazy idea of determining the cause of death. He wondered to what race its owner had belonged. "It's a white man's skull," he said with conviction — although he did not know why he should be so sure. He put it down with the rest of the bones and thought — "I'll have to give the poor bastard a decent burial . . ."

Still gripping his stone club he climbed cautiously up the ladder. It was a retractable one, he saw, that when not in use telescoped into a recess in the hull. He stepped warily through the big, circular port. It gave access to a small compartment. On the bulkhead opposite to the shell plating was another door. That, too, was open.

The ship was dead. Nothing had worked in her, nobody had been living in her for a long time. Some seamanlike sense told the man this as he clambered up interminable ladders, through the central well of the ship to the "greenhouse" in the nose that must surely be the control-room. There was light of a sort, for all hatches were open and the sun was striking through the glass of the "greenhouse". There was enough light for the man to feel that his stone club was an absurd encumbrance, so he dropped it. It fell with a dull, flat thud to the plastic-covered deck.

The control-room, in spite of the encrustation of wind-blown dirt on the transparency of its walls, seemed brilliantly lit. The castaway pulled himself up through the last hatch and gazed spellbound upon the glittering complexity of apparatus, the profusion of instruments whose use he could

never hope to fathom. He ignored for a while the three skeletons that sat — or had sat, before the decay of ligaments brought collapse — before control panels.

At last he brought himself to examine them. They were all human. There was a little granular litter around their bones, the long-dry droppings of rats. There were shreds of fabric that might once have been clothing. And there was a watch, a wristlet watch with a metallic strap. The castaway picked it up. It started to tick almost at once — the faint noise abnormally loud. He looked at it curiously. The dial had Arabic numerals, one to twenty-four. There was a sweep second hand. He could see no means of winding or setting it.

He put it down beside its owner. The idea of plundering the dead never occurred to him. And then he prowled around the control-room staring at the instruments, wishing that he knew who had built this ship, and when. The technology involved must have been far in advance of anything that he had known or heard of. Yet she had obviously been here for years, at least. . . He sighed.

He clambered down the ladders into the body of the ship, searching for the storeroom. He found it at last. He could barely see, in the dim light, the little plaque over the door. It said, in bold English characters, FOOD STORES. He had trouble with the door itself. He finally discovered that it did not open in or out, but slid to one side.

There were food containers in there — not of tinned metal but of plastic. The first one that he opened — he pulled a tab and the entire top of the container fell away — contained tomato juice. The second one was asparagus. He restrained himself from running riot among the supplies, opening container after container to sample the contents, and took the two that he had already opened outside where there was more light. There was no maker's label. All that there was was a conventionalised picture of the contents in low bas-relief, and in raised characters, the words TOMATO JUICE and ASPARAGUS.

Replete, but sorely puzzled, he clambered back to the control-room. He was determined to find some evidence as to the builders of this ship. Ignoring the skeletons, he searched among the rubbish on the deck. He found what seemed to be the remains of a book. He cursed the rats that had left him no more than the stiff covers, a few torn strips of some smooth plastic between them. But he blew the dust from the cover. He read what was written on it in a bold, firm hand. And refused to believe what he had read.

Log of the Interstellar Ship CENTAURUS, somebody had penned —somewhere. Voyage I ...

Interstellar ship?

The word Interplanetary would have brought grudging credence. The word Interstellar wasn't yet in Man's practical dictionary.

And yet . . .

He looked at the glittering complexity of instruments, the strange devices.

And half believed.

"I must have a look at their engine-room," he said aloud.

The engine-room was aft. There was almost no machinery as he understood it. There were things that looked like the breeches of enormous guns, from which ran wiring and very fine tubes or pipes. The guns pointed down. It was obvious rocket drive. Atomic? He could not say.

Still not content, he started to climb again the ladders up through the central well. And he saw a door that he had passed on his way down. This time something made him stop to examine it more closely. Faintly shining in the dim light were the words — MANNSCHEN DRIVE UNIT.

Mannschen Drive?

He shook his head in puzzlement. The name meant nothing to him — but it must have meant something to the English-speaking humans who had manned this ship. He started to try to open the door. It was jammed. He decided that the investigation would have to wait until later, until he found some means of forcing an entry — and then the door yielded.

It was dark in the compartment behind the door. He saw vague, hulking masses of machinery, mechanisms that seemed to make more sense than that which he had seen in the after engine-room. There were wheels and levers, and their curves and straight, rigid lines were reassuring.

He wished that he could have more light. His hand went up inside the door, found a stud. Unconsciously he pressed it. He cried out when the lights came on. And after he had come to take the miracle of light itself for granted he still marvelled at the efficiency of the storage batteries that had made the miracle possible.

There were bodies in the Mannschen Drive room, sprawled before the machine that they had served. They weren't skeletons. The tight-shut door had kept out the intruders that had stripped their shipmates elsewhere in the ship. They could have been mummies. The skin, almost black, was stretched taut over the bones of their faces. Their teeth, startlingly white, showed in unpleasant grins. They were still wearing what appeared to be a uniform of sorts. It was simple, mere shorts and shirts that had once been blue, epaulettes upon which shone gold insignia.

The castaway bent to examine the two bodies, his nostrils wrinkling with the odour of slow decay that still hung around them. Then he saw that there was a third body behind the machine. He went to examine it, then recoiled hastily. The unlucky man, whoever he had been, had been literally turned inside out.

He had to go outside until he had fought down his rising nausea. When he returned he studiously ignored the bodies, tried to turn all his attention to the enigmatic machine. It was not long before he succeeded. The intricacy of wheels was the most fascinating thing that he had ever seen. None of its parts was especially small, yet all had the workmanship associated only with the finest products of the watchmaker's art.

There was a metal plate on one of the four pillars that formed a framework for the machine. It was covered with lettering. It was headed —INSTRUCTIONS FOR OPERATING THE MANNSCHEN INTERSTELLAR DRIVE UNIT. Most of what followed was, to the castaway, gibberish. There was continual reference to something called temporal precession. Whatever it was, it was important.

He found himself remembering the course that he had taken, not so long ago, in the operation of gyro compasses. He remembered how a gyroscope will precess at right angles to an applied force. But ... temporal precession?

Yet Time, the wise men tell us, is a dimension ...

And wasn't there an absurd limerick about it all?

"There was a young fellow called Bright,
Whose speed was much faster than light;
He started one day in a relative way
And arrived the previous night."

Temporal precession . . . An interstellar drive ...

It was utterly crazy, but it made a mad kind of sense.

The castaway turned away from the incomprehensible machine to its control-panel. Many of the switches and buttons upon it were marked with symbols utterly outside the scope of his knowledge. But there were two studs whose functions he could understand. One bore the legend START, and the other one, STOP.

He stood before the panel. His right hand raised itself. He told himself that, even though there had been sufficient power in the storage batteries to operate the lighting, there would never be enough to move one minor part of the complex machine. And the memories of occasions in the past when he had been told not to meddle, not to play with things about which he understood nothing, were deliberately pushed into the background of his mind.

It would be so easy to press the button marked START. It would be just as easy to press that marked STOP if the machine showed signs of getting out of hand.

From the deck the dead men grinned at him.

But he was not looking at them.

His right index finger came up slowly. It stabbed at the starting-button. The first joint whitened as he applied pressure. At first nothing happened. Then there was a sharp click. Immediately the lights dimmed, the many wheels of the machine, great and small, started to spin. The castaway turned to look at them, found his gaze caught and held by the largest of the wheels.

It turned slowly at first. It gathered speed. And, spinning, it blurred most strangely. It was a solid wheel. But its outlines faded. The glittering intricacy of those parts of the machine behind it showed with ever-increasing clarity. It was impossible to tear the eyes away from the uncanny spectacle. It seemed that it was dragging the man's vision, the man himself, after it, into some unguessable, unplumbable gulf.

He screamed then. But he could not look away, could not break the spell of this devil's machinery. Vivid before his mind's eye was a picture of the man at whom he had not dared to look too closely—the third body. In desperation his hand groped out behind him, fumbled, found the switchboard. He felt a stud beneath his questing fingers. He pressed. There was the same stickiness as before, the same sharp click.

The machinery slowed, spinning reluctantly to a stop. The vanishing, precessing wheel faded slowly back into view. But the castaway did not see this. Possessed by a terror such as he had never known, he had half fallen, half scrambled down the interminable ladders to the airlock; had half fallen, half jumped from there to the ground.

The afternoon sun was blazing hot as he splashed and floundered down the watercourse to the beach. The sight of the sea, an element of which he had, at least, a partial understanding, did much to calm him. And the sight of a faint smudge of smoke on the horizon, and all that that implied, almost drove the memory of his weird experience from his mind.

He ran up the beach to where the ashes of the fire had been. But the sand, as far as he could see, was clean. But what did it matter that some freak sea had swept away a handful or so of useless rubbish? Working with calm haste he burrowed into the jungle verge, emerged with armfuls of dry and partially dry sticks and leaves. As he piled up his beacon he glanced at frequent intervals to seaward. He could see the ship herself now, could see that her course would take her not more than three miles from the island.

He finished off his pile of inflammables with green branches and leaves. He knelt in the lee of it, with trembling hands fumbled in his pocket for his tobacco pouch and lighter. He got the lighter out, snapped back the cover. His thumb flicked the wheel, the wick caught at once, its faint, pale flame almost invisible in the bright sunlight.

And the lowermost layers of vegetable refuse smoked and smouldered ever so little—but refused to burn.

The castaway extinguished the lighter flame. He tore off his shirt. The garment was old and threadbare, ripped as he pulled it savagely over his head. But it was ideally suited to his present purpose. He clawed out a hollow in the sand at the base of the reluctant bonfire and stuffed the cloth into it, careful to see that it was not packed too tightly.

This time the lighter was slow to function. His thumb was almost raw before he succeeded in producing a feeble, flickering flame. But the shirt caught at the first touch of fire. In what seemed to be an incredibly short space of time the flames were licking up through the dry wood to the green stuff on top, the pillar of brown smoke was climbing up into the blue sky.

At first the castaway danced and waved beside his signal fire, then, as the ship drew nearer, he fell silent and motionless. He stared hard at the approaching rescuer. The beginnings of panic were making his heart pump violently.

It was the funnel that frightened him. He could see it plainly now—clean, fresh, cream paint slapped on over crudely vivid red lead ...

The water, that at first had been so warm, enveloped him with a cold embrace that contracted his muscles, that threatened to squeeze his heart itself to a standstill. The salt mouthfuls that he was now swallowing with almost every stroke choked him and seared his lungs. The smarting eyes were blind, no longer staring towards the yellow line of beach that, at the beginning of it all, had seemed so close ...