

Preview of Peril

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Nobody knew into what awful dimension the Mannsehen Drive would hurl that first test-ship—nobody but Martin Wayne.

And he found out too late—or was it too soon?

SO THEY ASKED ME TO WRITE your epitaph, darling. They didn't call it that, of course—they called it a valediction. Just a last tribute from the man who should have gone—but didn't —to one of those who did go. And I don't know how they found out that there had ever been anything between us—perhaps Helen talked. She knew in the end. She had to know.

Anyway—you're News. Not for the first time. But for the last time. And in a very few years people will vaguely wonder whatever became of that charming Jane Tarrant who used to speak over the interplanetary network, and your memory will fade like that of all the others who were lost in Argo—Captain Barr, Wilkes, "Happy" Farson, Kent, the physicist, and the biologist, Muriel Bennett.

Your memory will fade, my dear, in everybody's brain but mine. That is—if I am here to remember you. But I hope that I shan't be.

Memory...

I can shut my eyes now and see, with sharp edged clarity, the scene of our first meeting. It was in the yard where Argo was taking shape. And you were such a little figure among the cranes and machinery, the great hull sections. And the workmen to whom you chatted were giants beside you—and so was Captain Barr when he hurried over to challenge you, to demand how, and by whose authority, you had got into the yard. They hadn't told us that we were taking a journalist along—but when you told us who and what you were your voice was sufficient identification.

What was it that they always used to call you? The girl with the golden voice. And you used to hate it, didn't you, and say that it was all too corny for words. Corny it may have been—but it was true. And I am sure that all those who listened to you over the network never noticed that your face wasn't beautiful, wasn't even conventionally pretty. But you always had charm, my dear—and your voice was never any more—or less—than a projection of that charm.

And you looked absurdly schoolgirlish, standing there among the big men and the big machines, when Barr called us all over to be introduced. And I remember that your hair was braided somehow and brought up over the top of your head, and that it should have been dark brown, but was bleached a little by the sun, and that your eyes were grey.

I'd never noticed all these details on the many occasions that I'd tuned in to your transmissions. I suppose that, like everybody else, I was too busy listening to your voice. But I noticed them now. And I told myself that I'd watch out for them when you made your next broadcast.

WHEN we shook hands we must have held hands for rather a long time. Suddenly I became aware that Captain Barr was looking at us, hard, and that a little half smile was beginning to flicker over his broad face. And that Wilkes, the Navigator, was standing beside us, hand half out, waiting to be introduced. His too handsome face, sullen under the thick, fair hair, was more sullen than usual. He was starting to make impatient noises.

So I let go of your hand—and it was a hard thing to do. Do you remember, darling? No. You can't, of course. And yet... But I wish I knew. I wish I knew for certain. In some ways it would be bad, much worse than it is now, and in some ways it would be better. It would be a clean break.

So I let go your hand—and it seemed that we both broke the contact very reluctantly. There was something there. Something. And we both felt it. But there wasn't anything we could do about it then. We had to let Barr get on with his introductions, we had to let Wilkes take you in hand and show you his half-understood—although he would never admit it—toy, the Mannschen Drive Unit, that complexity of tubes and coils and little, spinning wheels, more than half assembled, almost ready to be hoisted into its place inside the spidery framework that was yet to be clothed with gleaming plating.

And I could see, as Wilkes launched out into recently acquired technicalities, that you didn't believe it. None of us believed it—not even Wilkes himself. A trip to Alpha Centauri in little more than a month was one of the things that make entertaining fantasy fiction but have no place in the workaday world. But, as we had all been told, the main object of the expedition wasn't so much to reach Far Centaurus as to test the Drive. Something had to happen when it was switched on, but no one yet knew what.

You lunched with us all then.

The little restaurant in which the yard technicians, and such space officers who were taking a general interest in the construction of new tonnage, had never seemed exceptionally cheerful, had never offered any inducement to those feeding there to linger over their meals. But this day there was a subtle, hard to define, atmosphere about the place, a certain glamour. Everybody felt it. But I felt it more than the others. Because I was sitting next to you.

And it was after lunch that Captain Barr told me that I wasn't required, that such parts of the ship as concerned me, as Pilot, would not be fitted for another two weeks. I have often wondered what use he thought that I would make of the unexpected leave. Did he, I wonder, assume that I should fly back to London, to Helen? Or had he seen the fire that was beginning to blaze up between us?

But I think that, even if you had not been there, I should have been granted liberty. It had been obvious for some few days that I was the fifth wheel to the coach, that I was just getting in everybody's way. And Barr knew, of course, that Helen, unlike the other wives, had not come to Port Kingsford. She liked neither Australia nor Australians—and she hated the stars and the ships that sail out to the stars. She was always jealous, was Helen, of any rival. And deep space was one rival that she could never hope

to fight.

You left the yard with me. I asked if you had any plans, and you said no. And when you got in beside me, into the passenger seat of my Spurling Two, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. And so did the pressure of your body against mine as the acceleration pushed us together. It was exhilaratingly fresh—and, at the same time, was as though we had known each other for years. No words were necessary.

NEITHER of us spoke until we were over Sydney, two hours' flying time from Port Kingsford. We looked down at the city and the harbour—like some beautiful, brilliant miniature it was, bright and distinct in the late afternoon sunlight—and I said that it was no more than an irregularly shaped aquamarine on vari-coloured velvet, green for the grass and trees, red and white for the buildings. And you looked for and pointed out the ruins of the bridge, said that they were the most effective memorial to the Atomic War that you had ever seen. And I wanted to set her down there and then—already, darling, I was eager to gratify your slightest wish—so that you could see your war memorial properly, but you said no, push on.

And then we were over the Tasman Sea, and the inevitable depression. But we were too high for it to worry us—and as we looked down at the boiling, swirling clouds, lit by the brief unsteady effulgence of the lightning, I thought that Man was not truly Man until the Mastery of the Air, the Conquest of Space. And you made a rude noise and you said that you would have to take me in hand, and that it was obvious to anybody that Man was not Man when surrounded by dirty great hunks of machinery; that, in those circumstances, he was no more than a cheap, organic brain for the machines.

And so we argued until the lights of Auckland, strung out around the harbour like a diamond necklace too wide and too brilliant to be in the best of taste, were beneath us. And there was the swinging of our turret drive to brake the forward speed, the easing down on the jets, the slow climb down the ladder of fire to the landing field. And we parked the Spurling at the Municipal Airport, and we hired a helicopter, and Jane Tarrant and Martin Wayne ceased to exist. Do you remember the dark glasses I got for you, darling? they were a poor disguise—but they seemed to serve. And I had to call Captain Barr to tell him where I was, to ask him to put Helen off with some convincing story if she should call Port Kingsford. It wasn't that I felt in any way ashamed, or that we were doing wrong—but I didn't want her hurt unnecessarily. There are certain loyalties—but you have no need to be told that.

Damn your loyalties!

I'm sorry, darling. You wouldn't be what you are if it weren't for the things that you hold important. A certain integrity, a code to which you must adhere, come Hell or high water. But in that fortnight we had together there was no thought of such matters—only the frank and unashamed enjoyment of each other, of the pleasant places in which we found ourselves. There was sailing in the Bay of Islands, was the time that we climbed to the summit of Taranaki and got as much kick out of it as we would have done had it been Ei'ereest, the winter sports among the

Southern Alps.

And there was that funny little hotel at Rotorua—do you remember?—where we tuned in the set in our bedroom, and got a recording of your broadcast covering the Cloud Country flood of a year ago. And I kidded you about your little closing down piece — Goodbye Earth, goodbye Venus, goodbye Mars—and said that with all that feeling in your voice you sounded as though you wanted all the male inhabitants of all three planets to come to bed with you. And you said: Why do you suppose I've taken a spaceman for a lover? It's the next best thing. And you practised saying: Goodbye Earth, goodbye Venus, goodbye Martin. And we both laughed, because we knew that your next broadcast would be made from Port Kingsford, and the one after that from Argo's Control Room, and that I should be among those present on both occasions.

It was a marvellous two weeks, dear. We both of us knew that we should soon have to change all this for the austerities of shipboard existence. And we knew that the way we were heading must lead, sooner or later, to disaster. There was Helen to consider. And there was John, your husband. But we laughed and played in the sun as, unaccountably, Autumn trailed into Spring, as the days of our holiday sped all too fast. It was a curiously sweet blend, wasn't it? Eager adolescence and maturity, first love and tolerant experience. I'd never had anything like it before. And I shall never have anything like it again.

We spent our last night together in Auckland.

And in the morning a taxi came to take me to the Airport, and I climbed into the cockpit of the Spurling and, in spite of the fact that I had just said goodbye to you, I felt quite happy. It was goodbye—but it was also au revoir. I should be seeing you again. Whatever the future might have in store for us—it would not be separation.

The run from Auckland to Port Kingsford was without interest. I let my mind stray, relived all the events of the past two weeks. And so it was that I almost overshot the mark. Almost? The Port Kingsford beacon was astern of me when I turned the Spurling in a great arc, came in for a landing. And the fact that I had so signally demonstrated my inefficiency as a navigator made me determined to prove my prowess as a pilot. You've seen others do it, of course. They come in on blazing jets and then, just before they hit the ground, swing the turret and come in to a spectacular landing.

That's what I did. But the turret wouldn't swing. They never found out what was wrong with it—there wasn't enough left of the Spurling. And I did the only thing that I could do. I cut the drive, tried to lift her on the ailerons. It saved my life. But when they picked up the pieces of the wreckage there were some who doubted whether it was worthwhile.

AND SO they flew me back to Auckland. Sir Michael Sanderson was there, Head Surgeon at the hospital. And he patched me up until I was almost as good as new. Almost. There were one or two little items that weren't in the original specifications when I was built—a silver plate in the skull, one short leg and a permanent limp. But they kept telling me that I was lucky to be alive and in such fine shape, and I believed them—then—and was

duly grateful to Sir Michael.

Helen was with me the whole time. She flew from London as soon as she heard of my accident. And she was very... comforting. She almost made me forget that I should not be sailing in Argo, that "Happy" Farson would be taking my place. But she couldn't make me forget you. She must have guessed, even then, how things were with us. And she was very careful never to leave us together. And the contrast between her tall, blond beauty and your tiny, brunette loveliness was so ludicrous that it hurt. And I wanted to tell her then that you and I were more than friends—but I hadn't the guts. And I loved her, too—I still do—but not in the same way that I love you.

We were alone just once.

It was shortly after I had been able to get up, to put on a dressing gown and hobble around the apartment that Helen had taken for us. She had gone into town to do some shopping. And you came round to say goodbye.

We didn't say much, did we? It was all too deep for words. And I wanted very much to beg you not to go, to plead with you to stay. But I had steeled myself for the inevitable parting and was possessed of a sort of perverse determination that it should take place on schedule. Yet I knew that, with a very few words, I could make you stay. And you knew that too. And I could feel you begging me not to say those words. You'd never have forgiven me if I had said them. You'd never have forgiven yourself. Never in your life had you backed out of an assignment...

Perhaps I would have said them.

But Helen came in when we were clasping hands for the last time, and we started apart like a pair of guilty school kids, and our farewell, when it was said, was very stiff and formal. And then I was isolated, apart, wrapped in my own thoughts, and I didn't hear what Helen was saying when I went to the window and waited for the stratoliner to take off for Western Australia, for Port Kingsford, for the interplanetary terminus and for the first of the interstellar ships.

I saw her go, her jets drawing a long line of fire against the evening sky. And I thought of you, sitting there among the other passengers, and I thought of Port Kingsford and the big ships, the Lunar Ferry and the Martian Mail, and the liners of the Venusian service with the sleek streamlining of their hulls marred by the excrescences that were their infra-red projectors.

And Argo would be there, standing a little apart from the others, not belonging in the company of those that only made pitifully short hops between the inhabited worlds of a system. And Captain Barr would be there, and the unstable, erratically brilliant Wilkes, the gloomy Farson, Kent, who had studied under Mannschen, and Bennett.

When I turned back into the room Helen was curled up on the divan. She raised her face to me as I limped towards her. It was drawn and strained, miserable.

"So she's gone," she said. "And you're sorry, aren't you?"

"Yes." And then I lied to her. I had to. I didn't want to see her hurt. "She's nothing. She's no more than the others. But I had wanted to be one of the first men to Far Centaurus, to see worlds outside our own little system..."

"And I'm glad you haven't gone. They won't come back. You wouldn't have come back. The whole thing is too impossible, too fantastic..."

"They'll come back—but I shan't have been with them..."

AND I went to her, and I let her comfort me, and she said that I was just an overgrown child crying for the moon. And all the time that she was pressing my head to her breast, was smoothing my hair, my thoughts were far away. They were with the westbound stratoliner, they were pulling me towards Port Kingsford, they were with Barr and Wilkes, Kent and Farson and Bennett, with Argo. And, above all my darling, they were with you. The next day was the day set for the blasting off, for the challenge to Far Centaurus. I must have been very hard to live with. I tried to stay in bed and tossed and twisted miserably. I tried drinking—but alcohol seemed only to put a savage edge on my dismal sobriety. And I got up and prowled around the partment, and tinkered with the radio, and got every bulletin I could concerning Argo. I must have missed several thanks to my inability to stay on one wave band...

And I toyed with the idea of borrowing Helen's Spurling, of making the hop to Port Kingsford. But I had made up my mind long since that, even if I should be sufficiently fit, I would not see you go. To have seen you climbing towards the stars, out of reach, would have been pure masochism. And now I think that not to have seen the last of you was an even greater refinement of self-torture...

And I kept looking at the clock, and Helen kept looking at me, and there was a little, wistful smile on her pale face—and some of it was pity, and some was the hurt amusement of a mother watching the antics of a beloved but incomprehensible child, and the rest of it was just a gallant attempt to hide her own misery.

At last the clock on the wall said 1745. Argo was due to blast off at 1800. And your last broadcast from Earth was scheduled for 1748.

I went to the radio. I tuned in to the wave band of the station at Port Kingsford. The air was dead. All sorts of doubts and fears chased each other through my mind, and I spun the dials desperately, aimlessly, and Helen said, in a resigned sort of voice, "I suppose you realize that New Zealand is three hours east of Westralia..."

And as she spoke the screen lit up, and we heard your voice. I never thought to take note of the wave length—but it was away up in the super high frequencies, the experimental bands. And we were looking into what could only be the Control Room of Argo. And you were there, sitting in front of the scanner, and your face was white and strained, and there was a desperation in your eyes that I hated to see—and there was a certain elation.

Behind you the scene was blurred, indistinct, out of focus. And over all was a curious red glow, and all colours seemed to change, to shift, and the

perspective was ... queer.

But Wilkes was there behind you, and Muriel Bennett. And she was sitting in one of the chairs, and Wilkes was kneeling beside her, and she was pressing his head to her breast and she was stroking his thick, fair hair. And she was frightened—but in mothering Wilkes she was forgetting her own fears.

At first I didn't hear what you were saying. The sound of your voice was enough. But it was obvious that something was wrong—very badly wrong. And you said—

". . .the temporal precession. That's what Kent told me to tell you. The precession control isn't rugged enough, won't stand up to the temporal stresses. It will have to be improved. The Mannschen Drive is impracticable unless its tendency to shift time forward can be controlled..."

"It can't be controlled!" shouted Wilkes.

He raised a tear-stained face from the soft woman-flesh to which he had fled in this moment of crisis, a face no longer sullen, a face on which there was no longer any room for any emotion save that of panic fear. "It can't be controlled!"

And you ignored him, and Muriel Bennett pulled his head down to her breast again, and I thought I heard her whisper —"Hush. Hush, my darling..." And the angles behind you shifted and stirred, and the colours sagged down the spectrum, and the perspective was all wrong so that Bennett and Wilkes loomed behind you like giants.

I SAW YOU lick your lips. It was a furtive little gesture. You didn't want the worlds to know that you were as frightened as the others. But why, my darling? You were frightened—no sane person could have been otherwise—and yet you carried on with your duties as long as it was possible for you to do so.

"This is Jane Tarrant," you said slowly. "This is Jane Tarrant, signing off for the last time. I am saying goodbye for Captain Barr, for James Kent, for Douglas Farson. They are down in the Mannschen Drive Room, trying to get the unit under control. They never will—and they know it. But they are trying.

"Farson is gone. He got caught in the field of the thing. I don't know what happened to him—perhaps Kent could explain. But what should have been inside was outside, and what should have been outside was inside. It was horrible. And he didn't die at once—not until Captain Barr beat in his head with a wrench..."

And behind you the angles stirred and shifted crazily, the colours flickered, and the perspective suddenly made Bennett and Wilkes no larger than pygmies. And you looked back at some horror that I couldn't see, that was outside the range of the scanner. And when you turned your face to the screen again it was obvious that the last, faint hope had gone.

"This is Jane Tarrant signing off," you said slowly and softly. "This is Jane

Tarrant signing off for the last time. Good- bye, Earth! Goodbye, Venus..." And you paused. And it seemed that you were looking straight at me over unguessable gulfs of Space and Time. "Goodbye, Ma . . ."

And before you could finish the screen went black, and there was a crash of static, and an almost supersonic whine. And the lights came on again, and I bent forward eagerly to catch your last words. But there weren't any last words. The same scene was played again—but backwards. And when it came to the end—or the beginning —there was darkness and silence, and nothing any more from you.

I don't know how long I was hunched over the controls, twisting dials, trying in vain to conjure up your ghost from the insubstantial ether. But during my vain efforts I got on to the Port Kingsford wavelength, and the screen showed a picture of the landing field, and the newscaster said that he would be showing us the preliminaries to Argo's sailing.

She hadn't gone yet.

You hadn't gone yet.

It was always a paradoxical affair, the Mannschen Drive, and what I had just heard and seen had been one of its Paradoxes.

There was time.

There was still time.

And when Helen stopped me I had thrown my uniform on over my pajamas, was rushing out to the roof garage and the waiting helicopter.

She was sweetly reasonable. She was all commonsense. And she pointed out that I was in no fit state to fly to Westralia, that it would take all of three hours to reach Port Kingsford, and that it was now two hours before Argo's departure. And radio waves fly faster than a Spurling, she said, and so we both of us tried to get in touch with the ship. And at last we got through on the telephone. It was a stranger who answered. He wore the uniform of a Deputy Port Captain, but I had never seen him before—and it obvious that he had never seen me before. I told him who I was, that he would have to stop Argo from sailing at all costs. He refused to believe me. He refused to call Barr or Wilkes, or Farson or Kent or Bennett, to the scanner. He refused to call you—and flatly refused even to deliver a message.

"Listen, Joe," he growled. "I've been all day on this kind of thing. Every crackpot, every fanatic, thinks he has a divine mission to stop the ship from sailing."

"But I'm Martin Wayne," I told him with a dreadfully urgent patience.

"Yeah? So's you an' about seventeen others!"

And the screen went blank and the speaker went dead, and when we tried to get through again the exchange told us that there was a top priority list almost a mile long...

HELEN tried to stop me when I went out. I struck her, I think, but I can't remember. And I took the helicopter to the Municipal Airport, and cursed the slowness of the whirling vanes, and was briefly thankful when I got there that I had remembered, somehow, to pick up the key of the private hangar. And I got Helen's Spurling out, and I know a trick or two with a Spurling's drive, and I was over the Blue Mountain's, west of Sydney, while my eyes were still smarting from the floodlights of the Auckland field.

Argo was still grounded when the spaceport came up over the rim of the desert horizon. Somebody had turned searchlights on her—and outside the circle of blinding light the sand was black with people.

I have often wondered if you, there in Argo's control, saw me coming in like a bat out of Hell, and if you allowed yourself to dream, briefly and fantastically, that it might be me. And did Barr see me—and did he decide that his sailing had already been too much delayed, that the safety of some fool in a hurry was of no importance?

I came in to a flaming landing, my forward-swung jets lancing the sand, in a cloud of fire and smoke. And before I had touched down Argo lifted, and the back blast of her interplanetary drive took the Spurling, and lifted her gently, and tipped her over on to the crumpled wreckage of her port wing. I was not hurt, and I scrambled out, and the spaceport police came running up and seized me roughly, and as they hustled me over to the Administration Building I looked up and saw that already Argo was no more than a light in the sky, more distant and more unattainable than the low, bright stars of the Cross.

I told them my story. I think that, the end, I half convinced them. But it was too late. You had already switched over to the interstellar drive, you were outrunning the signals from all Earth's stations.

ALL THAT was two years ago. Your signal has come in again, on the proper wave band, and they think that it must have been made when you were half way to Alpha Centauri. And they all know now that you are gone, and that the others are gone, and that the ship is gone. And they asked me to write your epitaph for them—a valediction they called it. And I shall write it, I suppose. This isn't it. This is for you alone. The one that they get will be trite and commonplace, full of the dear old guff about men against the stars.

And there's another thing that has always worried me a little. When you signed off for the last time—should it have been "Mars," or "Martin"? I'd like to know. Either way I'd love you. Either you did your job, lived up to your code, to the very last. . . .