

"The last voyage," said Petrie. "The last voyage for the Thunderchild. It isn't that which I mind so much. It's . . ."

"But times change, Captain Petrie," said Ludlow, the Port captain. "She's a fine old ship, but—she's old, man, obsolete. Good enough for the Lunar Ferry, maybe, or to use the drive units for the new power station on Pluto . . ."

"Lunar Ferry," growled Petrie, with all the contempt of the Deep Space man for the short hoppers. "Power stations —so that Mrs. Jones, whose old man is vice deputy assistant fifteenth gardener at the hydroponics factory has an iron hot enough to press her panties ... So that little, spotty-faced Billy Smith can tune his video to Clancy of the Space Patrol. So that ..."

Petrie laughed bitterly, looking up at the Jovian Mail liner Thunderchild whose great, gray bulk towered above them as they spoke.

"Yes," he admitted. "You're right, Ludlow. The ships exist for the colonists—not the colonists for the ships. But—I made my first Deep Space voyage in her . . . It was her maiden voyage, too. Then I was Third Pilot of her. And Engineer. I missed Second Pilot, but I came back to her as Chief, then as Commander. And when, at last, I was made Master of her she was mine . . ." His big hands clenched tightly shut as he spoke. He laughed again. "If only she were mine!"

"Captain Petrie. May I quote you on that?"

"You may not." Petrie looked at Hales, of Solar Press, with undisguised distaste.

The pressman shrugged his narrow shoulders, put away his pad. With his slight build, his pallor, his dark hair, he looked like a black and white ferret—but a ferret with a sense of humor, with the capacity for feeling sympathy with the rabbit. And, just now, he was feeling sympathy for Petrie. It was a sympathy he dared not show, a sympathy that would have awakened nothing but contempt and hostility in the shipmaster had he shown it. Hales had covered the spaceports for long enough to know that spacemen regarded the press with, at best, amused condescension—at worst, with open hostility.

Petrie took Ludlow's arm, walked with him to one of the conveyor belts up which Thunderchild's last cargo was steadily streaming. Hales followed them.

"Quite a Noah's Ark," commented Ludlow, grimacing.

Petrie grunted, looked without enthusiasm at the crated poultry, the pens containing pigs and sheep, the larger stalls with their mournfully protesting cattle. "Ay," he said at last. "Noah's Ark. And we're spacemen, not farmers. But the cargo liners are too slow, and the first class passenger liners don't want to offend the ears and noses of the mugs who're paying the big fares . . . We're just tourist class now. And so ..."

A Southdown ewe, at the receiving end of his baleful glare, bleated hysterically.

"All these animals, Captain," said Hales, "must make the voyage more difficult for you."

"No," Petrie told him. "They aren't really difficult. You see, they can't ask silly questions."

"But just think," said Ludlow, "of the four minute egg for Mrs. Jones' breakfast, of the pork chop for little Billy Smith's dinner . . ."

"I'd sooner not," replied Petrie.

"I know nothing about these things," said Hales, "but it always seems to me to be a criminal waste of space to ship out the living animals. Surely fertilized ova would be just as good?"

"They've tried shipping out fertilized ova," said Ludlow. "The results never received any publicity—had they done so they would have caused quite a panic among passengers—especially female ones. It would have been useless telling them that fertilized ova carried in the container designed by Nature for that very purpose were quite safe. But there's something about space travel that does funny things to fertilized ova carried in any kind of artificial container. It may be hard radiation—although lead vessels were used. It may have been acceleration. Anyhow — two-headed calves and six-legged lambs weren't too popular ..."

It was dusk now, and the last of the light was fading fast. The floodlights were on, and Thunderchild loomed above them, a tower of luminous silver, an enchanted tower out of some old legend, an enchanted tower that was the gateway to other, alien worlds. The bleating of the sheep, the lowing of the cattle, seemed distant, somehow, unearthly, could have been, Hales found himself thinking, the horns of Elfland, faintly blowing, and the lighted rectangle in the ship's side a magic casement fronting perilous seas ... A keen wind, that had risen with the setting of the sun, blew off the desert, bringing a chill that could almost have been that of the gulfs between the stars.

And overhead the first stars were already shining in the darkling sky—Mars and Jupiter, the sprawling giant Orion, the beckoning, beacon glamour of the Centaur and the Cross.

Petrie, the hard man, the master astronaut, was not immune to the strange, inhumanly cold magic of the night. He said softly, speaking to the Port Captain, "There are times, Ludlow, when I wish that Port Kingsford had never been opened, when I wish that all the spaceports were in the Northern Hemisphere . . ."

"Why?" asked Ludlow. "Don't you like Australia?"

Hales, with an odd feeling that he was about to hear something of the utmost importance, listened.

"Look," said Petrie, pointing to the southern sky. "Look. That's the best of this hemisphere—and the worst of it. Every time that you blast off for Mars, or Venus, or the moons of Jupiter you see it there, hanging in the sky. Far Centaurus—or Near Centaurus, as stellar distances go. The astronomers

have found planets, now, they tell us—and some of those worlds must be better than the inhospitable hunks of rock that we go to. You know, when I was a kid, just a brand new cadet in this old lady, I used to dream. I used to dream of being Captain of the first expedition, the first ship, to the stars . . . And now Thunderchild's on her way to the breakers, and I reach retiring age in a couple a years . . ."

The passengers embarked the next morning.

They were young people mostly, colonists for the artificial, man-made world that was springing into being beneath the eternally frozen crust of Pluto. Engineers were there, and miners, and hydroponics experts, and even farmers. There was a sprinkling of older people, both men and women, holders, perhaps, of executive positions—of minor executive positions, otherwise they would have traveled in one of the fine, new ships. He would have ample time to get their stories, thought Hales, as he took his place on the escalator to the main port, ample time. It would be a long lift to Pluto.

He saw Petrie, standing a little to one side of the head of the escalator. It was only natural, thought the pressman, that the Captain should take an interest in the last passengers who would ever travel in his ship. When the moving stairway brought him to the entrance port he broke away from the stream of passengers, walked to where the man was standing. He said, "Reporting on board, Captain."

The big man looked at Hales, looked at the portable typewriter and suitcase that he was carrying.

He asked, "Is this necessary? You could have written your pretty piece just as well from the landing field."

"Didn't they tell you I was coming? This is a famous old ship, you know. They've sent me to cover the last voyage."

"You can spend your time hunting for ghosts," said Petrie. "Or I can find you a job mucking out the cattle. That should be in your line."

Hales colored. He had never regarded himself as a muckraking journalist. And he resented the air of ownership worn by the Captain like a garment. Master you may be, he thought, but not owner. She belongs to all of us ...

He said, "I know that she's your ship, Captain Petrie. I know that you resent me, and all that I stand for. But can't you, won't you, understand? These ships mean something to us, too. You've never stood on a landing field in the chilly hour before the dawn, waiting for the first sign of the shooting star that isn't a shooting star at all, but Thunderchild—or Thunderbird, or Thunderqueen, or Martian Maid, perhaps, or Martian Queen, or Empress of Venus . . . You never see the things that we see—the strange, ruddy tinge that you always get from the Empress's jets for example. You don't know—unless somebody has told you—that we can tell your ship by the queer, high-pitched whistle that's always audible above the thunder of her drive. If it's overcast and raining we can always tell that it's the Child coming in by that sound, no matter what other ships are due.

"When the big ships go, Captain Petrie, you Masters must lose your sweethearts. Believe me when I say that we lose our friends."

And now, he thought, have me thrown down the gangway.

Petrie took Hales by the arm. It was a friendly pressure.

"Come," said the Captain, "away from the crowd."

He led the pressman to the elevator. The attendant in the cage needed no orders, pressed the button marked Captain's Flat. In a very short time Petrie and his guest were seated in the plainly, but comfortably, furnished sitting room, were sipping the light, dry, but very potent wine which is the main item of export from the colony at Syrtis City on Mars.

"Is it true," asked Petrie, "about that whistle? I like to feel that the old lady has something that the others haven't."

"It's true," said Hales.

"But I always thought that you people stayed in the control tower, warm and snug, watching the ships come down on the radar screens, drinking whiskey."

"Some of us do, Captain. But some of us feel that it's not, somehow, right. There's no ... magic."

"So you feel it, too. There are some, even among those wearing this uniform, who never feel it, to whom this is just a job. And there are some, like myself, who feel that we were born either too late or too early."

"Too late, or too early?"

"Yes. Too late for the first rockets to the Moon, to the planets. Too early for the first interstellar ships."

"But it's only a matter of a few years now," said Hales.

"A few years—or a few centuries. Why, man, it might well be millenia before the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle falls into place. And, meanwhile, we're tied to this one sun, to this scant handful of planets, our ships mere ferry boats, coasters . . . Deep Space . . . I tell you, Hales, that the words are meaningless, meaningless, until the day that the first interstellar ship pushes Off for the worlds of the nearer stars."

"But you've had a full life, Captain Petrie."

"Perhaps. All but the realization of the dream . . . Everything that doesn't really matter I've had—and the one thing I do want I shall never see. Think of it, man—the strange sun with its planetary family looming closer and still closer on the screens, to the naked eye. The encounters, perhaps, with alien ships, with their non-human crews. The weird cities and the queer machines, the odd ways of doing things, the logics that are not Earthly logics, yet are still logical . . ."

"But think," Hales reminded him, "of the people of the mid-Twentieth

Century—or those of them whose feet were almost on the first rung of the ladder to the stars. It must have been even more galling for them—the certain knowledge that for the price of one battleship the first rocket could climb to the Moon"

There was a sharp rapping at the Captain's door.

"Come in," shouted Petrie.

A youth entered, a cadet. The insignia of the Jovian Mail Service was bright, new and untarnished, on his uniform. He held his cap under his left arm, standing stiffly to attention. His face, thought Hales, was hauntingly familiar.

"Cadet Warwick, sir, reporting for duty," said the lad.

I don't know anybody by that name, Hales thought, and yet ... He snatched a glance at Petrie. The Old Man looks as though he's seeing another of his ghosts . . .

"Warwick," murmured Petrie. "The usual training, I suppose?"

"Yes sir. The Academy, then a year in Diana on the Lunar Ferry."

"And this will be your first voyage Deep Space, eh? Your maiden voyage—and the lady's last . . ."

"I'm sorry she's going, sir. She seems a fine ship."

"She will—after your excursion rockets. That will do, lad. You can find your own way down to the cadets' flat?"

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

Warwick turned smartly on his heel, strode out of the room.

"A likely lad," said Hales.

"Yes. And now I must ask you to leave me, Mr. Hales. I have a deal of paper work to get through, and I have to entertain a few of our brass hats before we blast off."

Hales did not use the lift on his return to the lower regions of the ship. He preferred the companionway—the spiral staircase, that led down and around and around the central well. He tried to soak up the atmosphere of the various flats as he passed through them—the Commanders Flat, the Officers' Flat, the Cadets' Flat. But the strong personality of Petrie dominated them all. He had lived in all of them—first as a smart, ambitious lad like young Warwick, then as a junior officer, then as one not so junior, next as second in command, finally as Master. Hales rather resented the strong imprint that the man's personality had made on his surroundings. If they weren't breaking her up, he thought, the Old Man's ghost would become a proper nuisance to whoever might follow him ... But she's our ship, too . . . He grinned, seeing a sudden, absurd vision of his own ghost haunting the Port Kingsford landing field, waiting, in all weathers, for the incoming of the phantom ship from Jupiter and beyond.

He snapped out of his reverie as he entered the main lounge. Once again he was the news-hound, alert for the small touches of human interest, little, human items that had made his reputation. He saw Crombie, also of Solar Press, fussing around a portable scanner, sending and recording interviews and such until the time came for him to dismantle his apparatus and get ashore.

"Hello, Hales," called Crombie. "Coming to say a few words for me?" As his colleague approached he murmured in a low voice, "You're the nearest thing we have to a celebrity in this crowd, damn it!"

"You just love your stuffed shirts, don't you?" muttered Hales. "Your stuffed shirts and your cheesecake . . . These people are of far greater importance than all your politicians and leggy video stars."

"Just try telling the public that," said Crombie.

"But I do, I do. That's why I'm going in the ship."

"You're welcome. The Moon's as far as Mrs. Crombie's little boy ever wants to go. But say a pretty piece for us, Hales."

Hales took his place before the scanner and microphone.

"This is Christopher Hales," he said, "speaking from the main lounge of the liner Thunderchild. As you all know, this grand old lady of the space lanes is making her final voyage. Upon her arrival at the Port St. John landing field on Pluto she will be broken up. I hope, during the voyage, to make broadcasts from the ship—although, such is Thunderchild's reputation for smooth running, it is extremely improbable that anything newsworthy will occur during the passage. But this, the pre-sailing broadcast, is the concern of my colleague, Mr. Crombie. Good-bye to you all for now, and —over to you, Dan!"

"Dan Crombie here, people. You have just seen and heard Christopher Hales who will be covering, as he has told you, Thunderchild's final voyage. But Solar Press hasn't a monopoly of interesting personalities—ha, ha —and so I will endeavor to persuade some of the passengers to come to the scanner. Now you, madam. Would you care to say just a few words to the people of your old home?"

The woman—youngish, blondish, utterly undistinguished—came to the scanner.

"Your name, Madam?" asked Crombie.

"Er—Edith. Edith Jones, that is. Mrs. Edith Jones."

"And you are going to Pluto ?"

"Er—yes."

"If it's not an impertinent question, Mrs. Jones, what will you be doing there?"

"Oh—er—just keeping house for my hubby, I guess . . ."

"And he?"

"Fifth assistant gardener at the hydroponics factory."

Hales, half remembering an overheard scrap of conversation, had a crazy, I-have-been-here-before sensation. He edged himself to within range of the scanner and the microphone.

"And don't forget, folks, that Thunderchild's main drive is being ripped out for service in the power station, so that Mrs. Jones will always have plenty of current for ironing her pretties!"

"If that's one of your famous human touches, Hales," flared Crombie, "I don't think much of it!"

"Neither do I!" flared the blonde, and Hales retreated barely in time to avoid what would have been one of the most resounding slaps in the history of video. He retreated as far as the bar, found congenial company in a tall man who, after two whiskey-sours, admitted to being a veterinary surgeon.

They were halfway through their third drink when Crombie found them.

"Hales," he said. "You'll have to help me out. This broadcast is—sticky. I've just had a personal call from the Big White Chief to tell me that your item was the only piece of color and human interest in it so far."

"Oh, all right. Now, Crombie, here's a man who could tell us something interesting. This ship has umpteen head of cattle and livestock in her cargo spaces, and I don't suppose you've mentioned 'em yet. Not you. They haven't got big names, or legs and busts . . ."

"Would you mind handling the interview, Hales?" pleaded Crombie.

"Oh, all right. But I'm not supposed to start doing anything about anything until the ship blasts off. At present I'm supposed to be browsing around hunting for atmosphere."

Crombie's assistant was having a hard struggle with a pimply-faced male child, whose only contribution to the entertainment of the video audience was the oft reiterated request for the autograph of Clancy of the Space Patrol. Hales got rid of him by assuring him that the last Clancy broadcast had been a recording, and that Clancy himself was at least half way to Alpha Centauri, hot on the trail of a gang of slith smugglers. Clancy, he assured the brat, might well call in at Port Saint John for stores and bunkers on the homeward passage. Luckily nobody thought to ask him what slith was—after the whiskey-sours he would have come up with some utterly outrageous answer ...

"Now," he said, "this is Hales again, people. Christopher Hales, dragged from the . . ." Crombie hacked his shin. "Dragged from the Control Room to talk to you all. And with me is Doctor Hilton, a practitioner of veterinary medicine—a man who knocks the 'Ell out of elephants, who puts, with his pretty pink pills, the dash back into superannuated dachshunds . . ."

"We have, in the lower decks of this grand old lady of the space lanes, as

fine a selection of assorted fauna as has ever graced any vessel in the long, long history of Man—with the possible exception, of course, of Noah's Ark. We have bulls, and we have cows. We have boars, we have sows. We have . . ." He made two syllables of it . . . "ewes. We have kiwis." He paused. "Have we got any kiwis? No? Then I shall complain to the management.

"However, I am not a zoologist, and I regret that, in a fit of mad inadvertence, I omitted to pack my well thumbed copy of Who's Zoo. Had we any members of the Canine species with us, and were they, perchance, in the arms of Morpheus I should perforce, let them lie. Far be it from me to force the feet of Man's Best Friend on to the stony path of veracity.

"But tell me, Dr. Hilton, why, in these decadent days of synthetics and super-yeasts, is it necessary for the Plutonians to import their protein on the hoof?"

"Have you ever eaten synthetics?" asked Hilton.

"Why, no. But now we're on the subject—has anybody here ever eaten synthetics?"

There was a pause. "Yes," said a short, thickset man. "Yes. I have."

"Come up to the front then, and tell us about it."

"It was on the Other Side, see, and a gang of us was making test drillings in Harrison's Crater. We had our insulated balloon tents, and enough water—and enough food to last us the two weeks it was going to take us—but it was all synthetics. And that, let me tell you, was the last time that the Lunar Commission ever pulled that one on the boys."

"But I always understood that the actual food value ..."

"Food value! Pah!" The miner made as though to spit, then thought better of it.

"There are more things in food than food value," said Hilton.

"Flavor," said somebody.

"The synthetics have flavor," said the miner. "But it's stale, somehow. As stale as the jokes they put over the video."

"So flavor isn't all . . . What about texture?" asked the veterinarian. "And appearance? A hunk of something with the food value and the flavor of steak, medium rare, but with the texture and the appearance of putty . . ."

"You've got something there," agreed Hales. "But both the texture and the appearance of oysters are rather revolting."

"There I must differ. A dozen oysters on the half shell, with slices of lemon, and brown bread and butter, and a glass of stout—could you, sir, conceive anything more aesthetically satisfying?"

"Yes," asserted the miner. "Two dozen."



Hales pretended not to hear the man's attempt at levity, and nodded.

"So when we finally get around to sending a ship on the Long Passage," said Hales, "it will be advisable to stock her well with animals, instead of yeasts and such, if only to relieve the monopoly of the food."

"Indubitably. Too, the care of the beasts will make life more interesting for all concerned. And think of the experiments in genetics!"

"And tell me, Doctor Hilton, is there much scope for one of your profession on Pluto?"

"Not yet—but there will be. The first, experimental dairy herd is doing quite well, they tell me. And there's no reason to suppose that the sheep and the pigs and the rabbits won't thrive once they become acclimatized. After all—climatic conditions in the caves are rather superior to those on Earth."

One of the ship's cadets had approached Crombie, was talking to him in a low voice. Crombie nodded his head. "Break it up now, old man," he said to Hales. "Blasting off in a few minutes. And I have to get this load of junk ashore."

"This is Christopher Hales signing off. Our next broadcast, on the Solar Press network, will come to you from somewhere en route to Pluto. The boys outside will show you the pretty picture of the old girl clambering up to the Outer Planets. . . And this," he said, with a little catch in his voice, "will be the first time since I've been on this job that I haven't seen her blasting off myself. I should have liked to have seen it this last time. . ." He grinned. "But I'm greedy. I couldn't watch her go—and make the trip. Goodbye now. Take her away, Dan!"

He thought, I'll see her go on the ship's screen. But it won't be the same. I shan't get the smell of the blast hitting the desert. I shan't hear that funny, high whistle I was telling the Old Man about—that never comes through the mikes.

Crombie and his assistant deftly dismantled their apparatus carried it to the main port. Captain Petrie walked slowly through the lounge. With him were Captain Hadlow. Captain Brent, the Line's Senior Superintendent, Oulenovsky of the Math Department (the Orbit King, they called him), Harrison of Freight, Clemens of Passengers. Hales, cursing himself for an ill-mannered lout, edged closer to where they were standing, hoped to overhear something in the shore officials' last goodbyes that would help him to catch something of the essential feel of the liner's farewell voyage.

"I envy you, Petrie," said Brent. "After all, I made the maiden voyage in her too. And yet . . . I think I'd sooner say goodbye to her here, watch her lose herself in the sky, than see the breaking up started."

"I will miss her," said Oulenovsky. "And my computing machines will continue to plot her orbit from force of habit."

"She always turned out a good cargo," said Harrison.

"And there was hardly ever a complaint," said Clemens.

"I wish that every ship came in with as little fuss," said Hadlow.

"Don't forget," Brent reminded Petrie, "I want her crest for my office."

Hales glanced at the ship's crest, bright above the big, ornamental mirror—a flaxen haired, laughing girl, very young, holding carelessly in her right hand a stylized lightning bolt. He heard Petrie say, "Yes, you'll get all your souvenirs. As soon as she's finished with them, you'll get them."

Sonorous, almost gong-like, the warning notes of the First Bell reverberated through the big ship. From the concealed speakers came the order. "All visitors ashore, please. All visitors ashore. All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches. All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches. Blast off in fifteen minutes. Blast off in fifteen minutes."

There was music then—the familiar Interplanetary March, with drawing room words:

"Stand there in the moonlight, look up to the sky,

Watch our jets a-fading, but, darling, do not cry

For I will still remember you,

Your hair of gold, your eyes of blue

On Mars or Far. Centaurus,

I'll still remember you!"

"All visitors ashore, please," said the speakers. "All passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches... ."

Hales walked to his cabin, singing.

"There was a girl on Venus, and she was very sweet,

I left her there with triplets, a-clustered round her feet,

I had to pay the doctor's fee

Who ever said that love was free?

On Mars or Far Centaurus, they blame it all on me!"

"All visitors ashore, please. All visitors ashore. . ."

But I'm really a visitor, thought Hales. I haven't any right here ...

He strapped himself into his couch.

"This is Christopher Hales speaking, from the good ship Thunderchild. We are three days out, now, and Earth's just the kind of thing that you'll have seen often enough in the old schoolroom—just a big globe, with the seas and continents, slowly turning. But that schoolroom globe never had clouds drifting over it, and it had as its background a plain, bare wall, not the

black sky and the bright —too bright—unwinking stars.

"But you've seen all that, time and time again, on your screens. And on this trip, more than on any other trip, perhaps, the ship is more important than the stars —is more important even than her passengers, her crew.

"She knows it, I think. And she knows that this is her last voyage, that her name will soon be inscribed on the roll of. . . of...No, not the roll of lost ships, honorable though that may be. No—on the roll of ships that have served their makers long and faithfully, that have died, in the end, not in mystery or drama or glory, but under the hammer of the breakers.

"Voices are hushed, this trip. Nobody laughs much. The officers—although they will be scornful should they overhear this—are like men and women sitting by a deathbed. And, inevitably, this mood of theirs has been transferred to the passengers. Even the animals—the pigs, and sheep, and cattle—are subdued. 'Imagination!' I hear you say. But I don't think that it is.

"I'm sorry, people. But I try to report honestly, and as well as my ability allows. Frankly, had I known that it was going to be like this I would never have accepted the assignment. They say that it's a poor funeral that hasn't at least one good laugh—but there aren't going to be any laughs at this funeral.

"So this is Christopher Hale signing off, folks. I hope that my next broadcast is a little more cheerful.

"Goodbye for now."

He switched off, then looked at his watch.

"Two minutes to run," he said, "but they can give the customers a spot of cheesecake."

He nodded his thanks to the, senior cadet who was in charge of communications, left the ship's radio office. Outside he hesitated. Should it be up to the Control Room, or down to the officers' quarters and the public rooms? He decided to make it down.

Outside the officers' smoking room he heard singing—evidently a party was in progress.

"Out beside thee spaceport; beneath the rockets' glare,

There I used to meet her; I left her standing there

There with her children at her knee,

I owned to one, but not to three—

On Mars or Far Centaurus, they blame it all on me!"

He tapped at the door. "Come in!" called somebody.

The air inside was thick with smoke. Sprawled in the biggest of the

overstuffed ehairs was Commander Welch, the Navigator, a pint tankard in his hand. The Chief and Second Pilots were there, the Surgeon and the Nursing Sister. Kenton, the Engineer, got to his feet, poured out a mug of beer.

"Take this, Hales," he said. "We're having an Irish Wake."

"So I gathered. Thanks."

"Getting your atmosphere, Hales ?" asked the Navigator.

"Yes. Too damned much. I almost sang Goodbye Old Ship of Mine into the mike just now."

"It wouldn't have mattered. You'd have been no worse than the current crop of Moaners."

"Pardon my talking shop, Welch—but do we see anything of the Belt this trip?"

Welch hesitated a long second before replying. "No," he said. "The Orbit King has given us a track well South of the Ecliptic this time. I think he's scared that one of us might go all suicidal and pile the old lady up on some hunk of rock. . ."

"It'd be better than the breakers," said Hales.

"So you really think so? Well, I don't—and none of the other officers do. We aren't in the habit of throwing away our certificates to make a pressman's holiday!"

"Keep your hair on," admonished Hales.

He finished his beer, put down his mug with more than a suggestion of clatter. He said, "Thanks for the party," and walked out, wondering why the Asteroid Belt should be such a sore point with the Navigator. Professional pride, perhaps. The spacegoing staff always reckoned that they could do at least as well as Oulenovsky, sitting snug in his office with his batteries of computators.

He continued his downward progress, ran into young Warwick just outside the cadets' quarters. "Ah," he said. "Warwick, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. And you're Mr. Hales."

"Got it in one, sonny. Where are you off to now?"

"To my room, Mr. Hales."

"Mind if I come in with you? I want somebody to talk to."

"I should be very pleased, sir."

"Good."

The cadet's room, a single berth cabin, was small, but comfortable. Hales motioned to the lad to sit in the single armchair, then parked himself on

the bunk. His gaze strayed to the single photograph on top of the chest-of-drawers, that of a woman—a dignified, but far from unattractive woman. Her relationship to the youth was obvious. Hales wondered why there was no photograph of his father in evidence. He had a vague feeling that, at some time, he must have known the youngster's father.

"My mother," said Warwick. "She's. . ." He hesitated. . . "Dead."

"I'm sorry. She must have been a very gracious and charming lady. And your father?" You nosey swine, he thought.

"Oh, he's all right. And he prefers me out of the way."

"It's none of my business, lad—but that isn't a nice way to talk of your parent."

"But he's never liked me." Hales felt as much embarrassment as was possible in one of his profession. He was sorry that the interview had taken this turn. It was all atmosphere, perhaps—but it wasn't the kind of atmosphere he wanted, was certainly not the kind that he could use. The boy's voice broke into his thoughts.

"She loved ships and the stars. All he ever dreams of is making money."

"Don't we all?"

"No. You should never say that. I've heard you broadcast many times—and under the ham there's a streak of poetry."

"I get paid for it, sonny."

"I heard father say, once, that you'd make more in advertising. He offered you a job."

"Ye-es. I remember now. Warwick, head of the Plutonian Trust. Wanted me to turn out a scad of lying copy when emigration to that dismal icebox was showing signs of falling off."

"And you refused."

"So I refused. So what?"

"So what?"

"So I like to write and say my own kind of stuff when I feel like it."

He thought, Damn the boy. But he's a nice lad—not like his fat toad of a father.

"Must you go, sir?" asked Warwick.

Hales, already on his feet, was looking at his watch with a simulated slight anxiety.

"Yes. I promised to meet a bloke in the bar at twenty one hundred—and it's that already. We must talk again some time."

Any time you like, he thought, any time you like—as long as you soft-pedal the starry-eyed idealism. My stuff has been quite slushy enough of late without any outside help.

He paused briefly in the main lounge, found nobody of interest there, walked morosely to the bar.

"A shot of embalming fluid, please, Lew," he asked.

"Embalming fluid? Oh; yeah, yeah. The joint is like a high class funeral parlor, aint it?"

"You're telling me. Thanks."

He downed his whiskey-sour in one gulp. "That vet—what was his name? Wilson? Milton? Oh, Hilton! Seen him around?"

"Didn't you know? He's working his passage. The two regular cattlemen went sick, and the Old Man asked for volunteers for the job. It means a refund of the passage money when we get to Port St. John."

"Suppose he's putting the cows to bed now."

"Guess so."

"Thanks, Lew. I'll go and see how he's making out."

From the lounge he continued down, through the decks of passenger accommodation then, through doors marked CREW ONLY, down bare steel ladders into the cargo decks. The air was warm and steamy here, and even the conditioners could not remove the not unpleasant smell of straw and hay and manure. Hales sniffed appreciatively. It was better than the ever-present odors of tobacco smoke and cooking in the higher levels.

He found Hilton—clad in overalls and knee high boots—mucking out the three Jersey cows. Another overall-clad figure was giving the Herefords their fresh bedding for the arbitrary night. Hales watched them in silence, then started to sing softly:

"Down in the sewer, shovelling up manewer,

That's where the, spaceman does ... his bit;

You can hear those shovels ring,

Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling,

When you're down in the sewer. . ."

He said, flushing, "I'm sorry."

The girl playing nursemaid to the Herefords, who had turned around on hearing his voice, laughed.

"Don't mind me," she said.

"Oh, it's you, Hales," said Hilton. "Vera, this is Mr. Hales, of Solar Press.

Hales, Miss Vera Kent—like myself a Doctor of Veterinary Science."

She transferred the pitchfork to her left hand to shake hands with the pressman. Her grip was firm and warm, capable. She was as tall as he, and what few strands of hair had escaped from under the tight fitting cap were a tawny gold. Her eyes were gray rather than blue. Her teeth —white against the deep tan of her face when she smiled—were slightly irregular.

"Coming to see how the poor live?" she asked.

"The poor? But you're rich. You seem happy enough."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm supposed to be gathering atmosphere—and these are tonight's results. Item: The star commentator of Solar Press sobbing into the microphone. Item: Irish wakes in the officers' flat, and all hands as touchy as a hunk of plutonium one milligram below critical mass. Item: The main lounge like a first class morgue on an off night. . . You know, the atmosphere down here was so refreshing after all that I just had to start singing."

"I thought it was a bit thick, myself," laughed the girl. "But it's got a bad smell. . ."

"It's all atmosphere," said Hilton.

"We'll get around to broadcasting odors some time," said Hales. "Then you'd better not get me in front of your scanner—they'll say I stink!"

"Never, Miss—or should it be Doctor?—Kent. But tell me, how are you and Dr. Hilton finding the trip?"

"Quite enjoyable, so far. But we're thankful that the two cattlemen went sick. Without these..." her hand ran affectionately over the head of one of the bulls . . . "It'd be—grim. I've never really liked ships—and this one'd give me the screaming meemies!"

"Yes," said Hilton. "There's that feeling, all the time, of dumb resentment. It's like riding some large and dangerous animal that senses, dimly, that you're driving him to the slaughterhouse. You'll think this is silly."

"No. And I know this ship well —as well as anybody could know her who's never, until now, made a trip in her. But I'm holding up the good work. Can I help?"

"Why, yes, give us a hand to get this muck down the chute!"

"Seems a waste, doesn't it?" asked the girl. "You'd think they'd save it for the hydroponics tanks."

"Maybe. But I suppose the pampered plants they have there would turn up their noses at a piece of honest muck. It has to be nice clean chemicals out of nice, clean bottles."

"Yes. But suppose the supply of chemicals ran out?"

"Hardly. They tell me that these ships are stored for a trip of twice the normal duration—just in case."

"We're the farmers, not the gardeners," said Hilton. "Down the chute with this lot!"

Day succeeded day—days that were no more than the movement of pointers over numbered dials. Time had significance only to the watchkeepers and to those with definite, routine duties. To all others it was meaningless. Even the regular service of meals meant little. When there is not the feel of early morning in the air one might as well break one's fast on roast beef and Yorkshire pudding as on fruit juices, cereals and eggs.

Time had some, slight significance to Hales—he had his regular broadcasts to make, once every two days. He succeeded in arousing some interest among the passengers, managed to bring some to the scanner whose personal stories would justify the telling. With the ship's people he was not so fortunate. From the Old Man down, they refused to play. And from the Old Man down, they treated him with what he could define only as a suspicious hostility. They had been instructed to place no obstacles in his way, he knew. May be so—but they weren't falling over each other in a mad scramble to present him with usable material.

And I thought I had the old buzzard eating out of my hand, said Hales to himself, after an attempt to persuade Captain Petrie to say a few words to the great listening and viewing public. His refusal had been unnecessarily rude.

So had Welch been unnecessarily rude. Hales had wandered up to Control, hoping, not very hopefully, that he might pick up some unconsidered crumb of news interest in the Holy of Holies. The Third Pilot, sitting stiffly in the Watch Officer's chair, had ignored him. So had the Navigator, whose lean, angular body was bent over his work table like a pair of his own dividers. Knowing nothing of navigation—but always willing to learn—Hales had walked over to the work table, peered uncomprehendingly at the instruments and the closely-spaced calculations in the Commander's work book.

Welch flared up.

"What the hell do you want, you damned spy?"

"Really, Commander. . ."

"I'd like to order you out of here—but I suppose that, as you're the Board's blue-eyed boy for this trip, I can't. But I'll ask you to leave."

"Very well, I'll leave. But what are you doing? Thinking of seizing the ship and embarking on a career of piracy?"

"Get out!" shouted Welch. Hales got out.

He went down to the bar, found Hilton and Vera Kent there.

"The usual, Lew," he said. , "And what are you two drinking?"



"Beer," said the girl. "For both of us. You look put out, Chris."

"I am. But literally. The Commander threw me out of Control with his own fair hands."

"Not really?"

"No, not really. But as near as dammit. Anyone would think that it was my fault that this blasted ship was being broken up at the end of this trip."

"I can see their viewpoint. She's home to them—and wife, or mistress, to quite a few of them. They must resent having a stranger exploiting the very real sense of loss that they must be feeling. . . ."

"I know all that. But why pick on me? Tell me, Lew, you've been in this wagon since she was knee high to a Fourth of July rocket —do you resent the pretty things I've been saying about her?"

"No, Mr. Hales. At least—not often. Only when you keep on calling her a grand old lady of the space lanes."

"Sorry, Lew. I'll not do it again." He took a gulp of his drink. "Do you think that's why the officers are so hostile?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Hales," said Lew, then moved to the other end of the bar to serve some fresh customers. And his manner thereafter was such as to discourage any further attempts at conversation.

"Even his best friends wouldn't tell him," mourned Hales. "Tell me. Do I?"

"Do you what?"

"Stink."

"Not yet. But put on some old clothes, and come down and help us with the animals."

"I will. To give 'em their due, they've never tried to bite me yet."

Yes, thought Hales, I'm happier down here. The Old Man's crack about muck-raking had some truth about it.

He was happy working beside the girl. There was something about her—a wholesome earthiness that contrasted favorably with the artificiality of the ship, with the artificiality of the life that Hales led ashore. He even began to think of buying a farm —and to think of Vera Kent in the farm kitchen. Not that she'd be content to stay in the kitchen, he told himself. Not with her degrees—and the knowledge behind the degrees.

He noticed, too, that Hilton was beginning to leave the pair of them to themselves. Which was silly. He knew that he had nothing to offer a girl like Vera Kent, that even if he did realize the crazy dream about the farm such a life would not be bearable for more than two weeks at the most. His life was news, and the collection of news, and the dissemination of news. The slow cycle of crop and season was not for him.

Still—it was good working with the girl. Only a beautiful, ship-born friendship, perhaps, a friendship that might lead to something deeper—but never to anything really permanent.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden clangor of warning bells. And the speakers came to sudden life. "All hands, all hands! Stand by for turnover! Stand by for turnover! Passengers and idle crew members to acceleration couches!"

"Turnover?" said Hales. "I'm no astronaut—but it shouldn't be for a week yet, or longer!"

"What does it mean?"

"It means that they cut the drive, and that everything in the ship is weightless."

"For the rest of the trip?"

"Good Lord, no. Only until they've got her swung on her gyroscopes, and then we start deceleration."

The girl's face was suddenly white. "Hell!" she said.

"It's nothing serious."

"Isn't it? My dear man, do you realize that all these poor beasts are going to drift out of their pens, hang in the air like toy ballons—and then crash to the deck as soon as the drive comes on again?"

"I never thought of that. What's biting me is all the damned secrecy. Never a word from Control until now."

"There's no time to worry about that." She went to the hatchway leading down to the next deck. "Dr. Hilton!" she called. "Better get the sheep and pigs all tightly secured!"

She herself ran to the nearest stall, with hasty fingers started to buckle the specially designed harness around the alarmed animal. Hales followed suit, found that the big bull, frightened by the bells, was in a fractious mood. But he got it trussed up somehow, untidily, not very securely, and moved to the next beast. By this time, the girl had dealt with three of the cattle. Round the deck they moved, Hales working anti-clockwise, the girl clockwise. They met at the last animal, faced each other across the Hereford's broad back as they worked. Vera Kent had lost her cap and her tousled hair was falling into her eyes. Her face was flushed with exertion.

"You're beautiful," said Hales suddenly, raising his voice above the bell, the lowing of the beasts. "You're beautiful."

"Don't be a fool," she said. But she smiled.

Abruptly, the bell ceased.

Weightlessness came, and nausea. The big bull bellowed mournfully, kicked out viciously. One hoof caught the girl a glancing blow—but it was sufficient

to break her loosened grip, to send her drifting to the deck-head. Hales relinquished his own hold to catch her, and followed her up—in a ship where neither "up" nor "down" had any longer any meaning—drifting with nightmare slowness. Something nuzzled at his legs. In a moment of panic he thought it was one of the animals, but it was only a bale of hay.

Then he was spreadeagled against the overhead plating—or what was the overhead plating during acceleration—with the girl beside him. She clutched his hand, gulped, then said. "What now?"

"We. . ."

"Never mind. Have you a handkerchief ? Ugh!"

"Here. As I remember from the Lunar Ferry trips I've made, the bells start again five minutes before the drive comes on. But they're still swinging her. Listen! You can hear the gyros."

"And we fall?"

"We fall. But these are only ten foot decks."

"Ten feet's quite far enough."

"It is. Here—let's grab some of these bales, get them under us. And we'll push ourselves over a clear deck space so we don't fall on the cattle."

"There're the bells."

"Turnover almost completed," said the speakers. "Turnover almost completed. Stand by for deceleration. Stand by for deceleration."

"Where's another bale? Here. The damned things are trying to escape."

"Oh, oh! Have you another handkerchief?"

"No. Use a handful of straw. Got you!"

"Turnover completed. Turnover completed. Stand by for deceleration."

The bells stopped.

It was only a ten foot fall—but it was sufficient to break the bands of the bales. And Hales, sprawling in the hay with a pretty girl in his arms, did the natural thing, kissed her, hard. She responded. It all seemed so —right.

"Break it up," said Hilton. "Break it up. Clairmont Princess of Jersey has lost her cud and. . ."

"Oh, all right," said. Vera Rent. "I think I've lost mine, too—but to work!"

"Can I help?" asked Hales.

"No, my dear. You can watch."

"I—ulp—I think I'll go up and see what they're doing in Control!"

Hales trailed his dirtiness and smelliness through the decks of the liner

with a certain perverted pride. When some of the passengers, emerging from their cabins after the turnover, wrinkled their nostrils at his approach, he burst into the ribald song:

"Down in the sewer, shovelling up manewer,  
That's where the spaceman does his bit;  
You should hear those shovels ring,  
Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling,  
When you're down in the sewer. . .

He bawled the last lines in their unprintable entirety.

"Mr. Hales!" said Lew, shocked, when he called at the bar on his way.  
"What have you been doing?"

"I've been down in the sewer, shovelling . . . No, not the usual. Rum. A double rum."

"But. . ."

"But me no butts. Rum, Lew, rum. The drink for mutineers. I'm on my way to Control to tell old Frozen-Face Petrie and the other gormless louts just what I think of them!"

"But, sir, you can't. . ."

"Can't I?"

He tossed off his drink, strode to the elevator.

"Control!" he snapped to the boy.

"But, sir. . ."

"But what? But I'm not respectable? Neither are quite a few more things in this space scow. Take 'er up."

The boy took her up.

Hales' entry into the Control Room—affecting, as it did, more senses than one—did not pass unnoticed. Before he was properly inside the door he bawled, "What the qualified hell are you qualified fools playing at?"

Welch—impersonating as usual a pair of dividers—straightened himself, moved between Hales and the transparent sphere that was the tri-di chart.

"I will thank you, Mr. Hales," he said, "not to bring either the language or the aroma of the farmyard to the Control Room of a First Class passenger liner."

"Tourist Class," sneered Hales.

The Chief Pilot swung in his deep-padded chair to glare at the intruder. Petrie walked to join the Commander in front of the chart.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Petrie.

"Only this, sir. Thanks to the secrecy about the time of turnover you endangered the lives of all the cattle and stock—to say nothing of those of the attendants."

"And are you one of the attendants, Mr. Hales? I may have been misinformed, but I understood that you were travelling here as correspondent for Solar Press."

"I should have thought about the cattle," muttered Welch.

"You should have thought about the attendants. It's no thanks to you that I didn't break my neck."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"A pity."

And what goes on? thought Hales. No cadets here, no junior' officers. . . And there's a funny feel in the air. . . The die has been cast, the Rubicon crossed, the boats burned. . . Wish I could see that chart. I'm no astronaut, but ...

He began a sidling, outflanking movement, with Petrie and Welch watching suspiciously. He moved in—and Welch made to grab him. He kicked Welch in the groin and Petrie, rushing to the aid of his executive officer, tripped over the prostrate Commander and fell heavily. The Chief Pilot jumped up from his chair but made no move to attack, ran instead to a switchboard.

Hales grabbed the pedestal supporting the tri-di chart, stared into the ball. He saw the spots of light that were worlds, the fainter ellipses that were their orbits. He saw the red spark that represented Thunder-child, the red curve that was her path through pathless infinity. He saw . . .

The chart went dead.

Petrie climbed heavily to his feet.

"Good man, Willis. Were you able to stop him in time?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the Chief Pilot.

Welch sat up, his face still contorted with pain.

"What did you see, damn you? What did you see?"

"Commander Welch, did you tell me that we weren't passing within sight of the Asteroids?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a bloody liar."

Petrie's hand came up holding a pistol. There was a puff of sweet-smelling

gas—and for Hales the episode was over.

He woke up in a strange, but comfortable bed, in a cabin furnished with an eye to hygiene rather than appearance. He refused to ask the obvious question, waited until his still muzzy brain had had time to deal with the evidence of his eyes. He said, then, "What am I doing in the Sick Bay?"

The nurse—tall, angular, severely handsome—looked up from the book she was reading, said, "Concussion, dearie. You were kicked by a cow."

"How's Commander Welch? He was kicked, too."

"Now, Mr. Hales! You're letting that imagination of yours run away with you. You've been raving about mutiny and piracy and barratry no end. Tell me, I've often wondered, is it you who does the script for Clancy of the Space Patrol?"

"No. When do I get out of here?"

"When Doctor says so, dearie." "I'm getting up now."

"You are not."

She was strong, the nurse. She was strong, but the pressman was determined—and in no mood for chivalry. He kneed her viciously in the belly, then, while she was still gasping, scrambled out of the cot and threw her on to it. His left hand he kept over her mouth to stifle her screams—and she bit it, hard and painfully, drawing blood. He cursed, managed to get his right knee over her left arm, pinning it. Luckily her right arm was beneath her.

He got her nurse's cap off, hastily withdrew his left hand and stuffed the cap in its place. With two hands to work with he found some slight improvement in the situation, managed, after another struggle, to get her turned over on to her face. He thought of tying her—but with what? Then he saw, on a table not far from the bed, a hypodermic syringe, ready for use. He had no means of telling what it contained—but assumed, hopefully, that it was there, ready to hand, so that the nurse could put him out again should the need arise. It would do nicely.

Sitting astride the heaving body of the woman, his right hand imprisoning her wrists behind her back, he stretched his left arm cautiously. The tips of his fingers just touched the barrel of the syringe, and no more. Delicately, with all the care of which he was capable, he tried to roll the instrument towards himself. The nurse squirmed and tried to turn over—and the needle was pushed away from the cot by the violent motion.

It rolled away—but it turned on its short axis. Hales found that he could grasp the plunger, not very tightly, between his first and second fingers. After that it was easy. A vicious jab into the fleshy part of the nurse's arm, the plunger pushed home—and the struggle was over.

Hales was scared by the suddenness of it. Anxiously, he turned her over, pulled the square of white fabric from her mouth. She was out—for how long he could not guess. But she was 'breathing normally. Her face was

pale, but it was not the sort of pallor that one associates with death or the nearness of death. She could have been merely asleep.

But he was in no mood to worry over much or over long. The nurse was an officer of the ship—therefore she was one of the gang. And as one of the gang she was deserving of little, if any, sympathy. Let her boyfriends do something about her when they came to see how their prisoner was and how much he knew.

My clothes, thought Hales.

Here was a fresh problem. They had taken his clothes, all of them. Nowhere in the hospital could he find them. His only apparel was a long, white hospital nightshirt that, although decent, was hardly the thing in which to go prancing around the decks of a passenger liner at any hour of the artificial day or night. He considered achieving a more dignified, toga-like effect with a sheet from the cot—but realized that the only gain would be in dignity. Meanwhile, the Doctor or the Commander or old Flinty-Face himself would be calling in at any time to bring the patient grapes, magazines and invalid port.

The speaker on the bulkhead muttered inaudibly to itself for a second or so, then announced: "Before we start the dance here is a request. You are all asked to retain your masks until after the fancy dresses have been judged. Please do not unmask until after the judging. That is all. On with the dance!"

Hales swore delightedly. He hadn't known another dance was scheduled yet. He started to strip the sheets from the bed, from under the recumbent nurse, then thought better of it. That would be as big a give-away as his appearance in a nightshirt. And there were clean sheets in one of the lockers in which he had looked. He got one out, then stripped off his shirt. He tried hard to remember the historical films he had seen as he draped the sheet about himself. He found some safety pins to hold it securely in place. He said, to the softly snoring nurse, "This was the noblest Roman of them all . . ."

Sandals were the next problem. He looked at the nurse's feet. She was a tall woman, and her shoes did not have high heels. He unbuckled them, pulled them off, tried them on. They were not a perfect fit—but they could have been worse, much worse. He took them off again, pulled the scissors from the nurse's breast pocket, hacked the footwear ruthlessly until he had a reasonably accurate approximation to sandals. The snippings he disposed of in the toilet.

The mask was easy. The nurse's dark blue uniform cape, hanging on a peg, provided that. Hales was sorry to have to ruin such a good piece of cloth with his hasty scissors, but it had to be done. Then, in toga, mask and sandals, he went through to the hospital, bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. "What?" he said to his reflection, "no laurel wreath?" But he was not displeased with the result.

He picked up the nightshirt, stuffed it under his toga. With that gone there would be a hue and cry for somebody wearing a nightshirt. In all

probability, the loss of the sheet would never be discovered.

The pressman went to the door, opened it cautiously. Hell! He should have known that Petrie would never leave the hospital unguarded. One of the cadets was there, a tall, beefy lad, but not, luckily, as alert as he should have been. He was talking to a girl, one of the passengers, and both of them had their backs to the hospital door.

"Slip down to the lounge, just for one dance," she was saying. "Nobody will miss you."

"Won't they just, honey! If old Vinegar Nell slips out and finds nobody here she'll go running straight to old Flinty-Face and then all hell'll be let loose."

"I believe you're frightened of them."

"I'm not, but. . ."

"Come on, then."

"No."

"Then you don't love me."

"I could not love you, dear, so much. . ." suggested Hales.

"Loved I not honor more," finished the cadet. "What the hell?"

Hales slammed the door shut, whipped out the nightshirt and pulled it on over his toga. The door flew open again and the cadet barged in, fists ready. Hales hit him, hard, skinning his knuckles. He jumped over the body, out into the alleyway. The girl, confronted by the sudden, masked, nightshirted apparition screamed, ran along the alleyway. Hales ran, too, stripping off his nightshirt as he ran. At a cross alleyway he paused, then, seeing nobody, ducked through the door of a two berth cabin. It was unoccupied. Hales lifted the pillow of the lower bunk, pushed the unwanted garment under it.

He opened the door of the cabin, walked out as though he had not a care in the world. Along another alleyway he walked, down a short companionway—and then he was in the lounge.

The furniture had beery removed, strings of colored lights and gay streamers seemed to be reflected in the gaily clad dancers moving rhythmically over the polished deck.

"Out where the stars are gleaming,

Out where the Cross rides high,

On the trail for Far Centaurus—

Sending you my last goodbye;

Stand there in the moonlight,



look up to the sky,  
Watch our jets a-fading,  
but, darling, don't you cry  
For I will still remember you,  
Your hair of gold, your eyes of blue,  
On Far Away Centaurus—  
I'll still remember you!"

Hales, by this time, was one of the throng of people around the dance floor. Standing next to him were two men, masked, one, tall and thin, dressed as an old-time sea-pirate, the other, short and fat, as a monk.

"What goon let them play that?" demanded the pirate irritably.

"We always do play it," said the monk.

"Yeah. But not with those words."

"They are new, aren't they, Welch? But this corny old thing must have had millions of words to it, in all languages, since it first came out. A soldiers' march, wasn't it? In one of those wars way back in the Twentieth Century? Anyhow, why don't you go to the mike and let 'em have one of your versions?"

"I'd like to. Say, Willis, do you think that Hales had anything to do with the new words? He's a writing man, you know."

"Hardly. He's not a poet. Just a lousy newscaster who comes up with a purple passage every second broadcast and thinks that his middle name is Shakespeare."

"He's safe enough now."

"Yes. Vinegar Nell can cope."

"I'll thank you not to call Nurse Murray that."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I forgot that. . ."

"Don't forget any more, that's all. Miss Murray is a very capable and charming woman."

"Talking of charming women —I could go for that blonde. But what's she dressed as? Three tufts of cotton wool could be anything."

"Snow on the mountains? Just look at those two clots in nightshirts!"

"They do at least cover hairy and knobbly knees."

"Are you insinuating, Willis, that. . . Anyhow, a monk's habit covers a fat belly."

Hales despaired of learning anything to his advantage, or to the disadvantage of Thunder-child's staff, and unobtrusively edged away from the Commander and the Chief Pilot. He had yet to map out a course of action, but he knew that the best place to hide a tree is in the forest. Until the unmasking he, an eccentrically attired man among fellow eccentrics, would be safe. He knew that it would not be long before the cadet or his girlfriend raised the alarm—but he was reasonably secure in the crowd. He would have time to think of something. Meanwhile —why not dance?

But he couldn't dance without a partner. He sat down at one of the lounges at the rim of the floor, surveyed the scene with the bored hauteur befitting one of the later Roman Emperors. He wished that he had Nero's emerald to use as a monocle. He wished that he had a few lions to throw the Christians to—then told himself that lions brought up on such a diet would certainly refuse to even as much as nibble any of the ship's company.

A couple gyrated past, almost brushing his feet—a slave girl, tinkling chains and little else, in the arms of a bem. The girl looked at him rather intently, then was carried off in the passing stream of dancers. Hales was getting to his feet to see if he could find an unattached woman anywhere when he saw the girl, alone, coming towards him. He waited.

"Chris! It is you. They told me that you had a concussion, that you couldn't have any visitors yet."

"Not so loud, Vera. I didn't recognize you, in the outfit."

"Not very flattering, are you?"

"We're supposed to be disguised, aren't we? Anyhow, every time I've seen you you've been in overalls."

"It's the first time I've seen you in a toga—but I spotted you almost at once. But what about your concussion?"

"Never mind my concussion! Got a cigarette on you?"

Surprisingly, she had—in a jewelled metal pouch hanging from her girdle. Hales puffed appreciatively. "Listen, my dear. I'm in a jam. I don't know what those louts up top are playing at—but when I was up to Control I sneaked a look at the chart. As far as I can see we're coming in to a planetfall somewhere in the Belt. Then the Old Man pulled an anaesthetic pistol on me and they removed the corpse to the Sick Bay. I suppose I've been out for quite a few hours."

"Quite a few hours? Quite a few days."

"Days?"

Hales looked at his bare right arm, saw the puncture marks. He said, "You're right. I suppose that, every time I showed signs of life that blasted woman jabbed her needle into me, kept me under. I suppose I must have developed some kind of immunity to the stuff they were using after I soaked up enough."

"But—the Asteroids? Chris. What . . .?"

"I don't know. I don't know, but I want to find out. Let's dance, anyhow. I feel safer on the floor."

They got to their feet, circled slowly to the music of The Grand Canal Waltz. Hales would have enjoyed it but for the fact that he was anxiously scanning the dance floor and the surrounding deck space for any signs of a disturbance. He had not long to wait. He saw a uniformed cadet thread his way among the dancers, catch by the elbow the tall, thin pirate. With unsailorly ungallantry the pirate at once let his arms fall from around his partner—the lady with the cotton wool—and listened intently to what the lad had to say. They were joined by the brown-habited monk.

"We'd better get out of here," said Vera.

"No. Not yet. We'll see what happens next."

Monk and Pirate retired to the perimeter of the dance floor, the cadet keeping a respectful two paces behind, the blonde—Obviously nobody had told her that this wasn't her party any longer—dragging after. Four more cadets escorted their partners to seats, then made their way unobtrusively to where their superiors were standing. Three men in fancy dress—Harlequin, Armored Knight and Mandarin—did likewise. Hales thought the Harlequin was the Second Pilot, but wasn't sure about the others.

The band brought the waltz to its saccharine conclusion, smirked appreciatively in recognition of the applause. Before they had time to start their next number the Pirate beckoned their leader to the edge of the dais, talked with him for a few moments. The leader went to the microphone, said, "Ladies and gentlemen—by popular request we are making the next number a Paul Jones. Ladies on the outside please, gentlemen on the inside."

"I don't like this," said Vera suddenly. "Who's the Pirate?"

"Commander Welch. But we'd better do as the man says."

He grasped her hand tightly, smiled at the returned pressure, then took his place with the other men in the inner, outward facing ring. He was surprised to see that the ship's people, both those in uniform and those in fancy dress, took no part.

The band started to play.

"Out beside the spaceport,

'neath the rockets' glare,

There you used to meet her, you

left her waiting there;

Wait till the next big ship is due,

Then what she'll do won't worry you

You're pulling out for Pluto,  
it shouldn't worry you."

"There're better words," panted the Rabbit on Hales' left.

"Yeah. I know."

"Out where the comets wander,  
Out where the rockets ply,  
Riding out on wings of thunder  
I'm sending her my last good-bye!"

"Manners for you," said the Rabbit. "These ship's people—do as they damn please."

"Yeah," said Hales, watching Pirate and Monk, Mandarin, Knight and Harlequin, a half dozen of uniformed cadets, inserting themselves into the women's ring. He whirled past the arc they formed—but the Pirate looked past him uninterestedly.

"Wait there in the starlight, wait there in the dark,  
Watch the skies, my darling, for . . ."

The music stopped.

Hales made straight for Vera, pushing the Rabbit to one side. He grasped her hands—then they both turned to watch a commotion on the other side of the floor. The focus of it was a nightshirted man who appeared to be having a violent difference of opinion with a Pirate. The man in the nightshirt lifted the candlestick that was part of his costume, cracked the Pirate smartly across the head. The Pirate swore and drew his cutlass. It looked unpleasantly real, reflected the light from a crimson lamp overhead in a disturbingly sinister manner. A woman screamed. The nightshirted one picked up his skirts and bolted, hotly pursued by the Pirate, the Harlequin and three cadets.

The other nightshirted dancer, perturbed by what was happening to his friend, started to sidle unobtrusively towards an exit. Seeing the Monk and the Mandarin making towards him, he started to run, too. There was a horrid clatter of tinware as the Knight, making a reckless flying tackle, caught his ankles and brought him down.

"My God!" ejaculated the Rabbit. "A pogrom of sleepwalkers!"

"I don't understand ..." whispered Vera.

"Come away from the crush . . . That's better. They think that I got away in my hospital nightshirt."

Twice around the dance floor, the first nightshirt was still going well. The Pirate, waving his cutlass, was gaining ground, however. As he passed Hales, Hales put out his foot and tripped him. "Sorry!" he muttered, trying to

disguise his voice. Then, grasping the girl's arm, he said, "Let's get out of here."

"But where?"

"Anywhere. The cattle decks?"

"They'll look there."

"They'll look everywhere. But you'd better stay here."

He pressed her hand, walked calmly to the nearest exit. It was guarded, of course—but the cadet on duty seemed to have been designed for brawn rather than brains. Hales, putting on his best Roman Emperor manner, told him that Commander Welch wanted a hand to secure the prisoner, then, as soon as the young man had hurried to the upheaval that marked the scene of the first nightshirt's eventual capture, strolled calmly out.

"It is to be regretted," the speakers were saying, "that the judging of the fancy dresses has been cancelled. Everybody is requested to unmask at once. Everybody is . . . ordered to unmask at once."

Then the alarm bells started to ring.

"They're having their fun in Control," said Vera, sitting on a bale of hay and watching Hales gulp the sandwiches she had smuggled down to him. "An uncharted meteor swarm, I heard somebody say. They're too busy with their navigation to make a proper search."

"It was near enough to the real thing for me. Some goon grazed my ribs with his pitchfork when they made sure that I wasn't under this straw ..."

"The two laddies in nightshirts are talking of suing the Line. They're saying that Commander Welch and his juniors were all drunk and disorderly at the dance."

"I wish you'd put some mustard in these."

"Think yourself lucky to get 'em. There's an order against taking food out of the saloon. The hostesses are watching us like cats watching mice. A good job I went in to breakfast in thy overalls."

"Indeed, yes," agreed Hales, remembering the slave girl outfit.

"But what are you—we—going to do?"

"Now you're asking! Honey, I've got a hunch, more than a hunch, that something big is going to break . . ."

"After what's been happening—it is more than a hunch."

"Yeah. Well—something big is going to break, and it's got past the stage of hunches. I've a feeling, somehow, that Welch's pirate get-up was more than half in earnest."

"Piracy? In these days? Absurd, my dear. It must be you who does the scripts for Clancy of the Space Patrol."

"It is not. And if anybody else makes that crack there's going to be murder. But the idea of piracy isn't too fantastic. A base in the Asteroid Belt, say. Perhaps a few assorted weapons among the cargo, shipped under false bills of lading. And the know-how regarding orbits, velocities and all the rest of it ..."

"No. I still don't see it. How are they going to return to Earth or any of the colonies to spend their ill-gotten gains? And how are they going to dispose of the passengers and any of their own people who don't feel like playing?"

"That never worried the old-time pirates."

"No. No. I'll not believe that. I'll not believe that Captain Petrie—or, for that matter, Commander Welch—would ever do such a thing. Men don't break with long years of service tradition as easily as that."

"Don't they? I don't claim to be a historian, but I've always been fascinated by naval history. The British Royal Navy had more long years of tradition behind it than all the interplanetary services combined—but it had its share of bad hats, men holding the King's Commission who were not averse to the occasional odd spot of piracy or mutiny."

"Even so—I won't believe it."

"All right, then. What's your idea?" Hales took another sandwich, munched it moodily.

"I ... Under the straw, quick! There's somebody coming."

Hales swore, took cover. Feet scraped on the rungs of the steel ladder from the deck above, a pair of shoes appeared, stockings, shorts, a uniform shirt ... Hales watched closely through his peephole, saw that it was one of the cadets, young Warwick.

Vera Kent leaned on her pitchfork, looked at the young man with a coldly hostile eye.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you all coming down here to disturb the beasts again?"

"No, Miss Kent. There's only me. And I've a message for you."

"Yes?"

"Captain Petrie's compliments, and will you and Dr. Hilton get the stock secured before we go to landing stations?"

"When is landing stations?"

"They didn't say."

"Thank you. And you'll probably find Dr. Hilton at the bar on your way back to Control. You might ask him to come down."

"Yes. Oh—sandwiches, Miss Kent? But I thought I saw you at breakfast."

"You did. But I brought these out with me. Dreaming Boy of Bentham Manor

..." She nodded towards one of the Herefords, "simply adores marmalade."

"Does he?" Warwick picked up the half eaten sandwich that Hales had left. "Then I suppose that's why he spat out this egg and bacon one . . ."

"I got them mixed. That should have been for one of the pigs."

"Encouraging cannibalism? Really . . ." He reached out, took the pitchfork from the girl's hand. "You know, I've often wanted to use one of these things. To plow and sow, and all the rest of it. To reap and mow, and be a farmer's boy."

"Give that back."

"If you insist. But I'd love just to try it out first—on that heap of straw, perhaps."

"Give it back. Really, Mr. Warwick, I shall have to Captain Petrie that you're interfering with the work on the cattle decks."

"You can tell him, too, that I interrupted the animals' breakfast of saloon delicacies . . ." He picked up the sandwich and sniffed it. "Why—they're getting a better egg than I did!"

"Will you please get out of here?"

"Not yet. You see, I'm in a bit of a jam. And I want advice. Badly:"

"There's the Captain. And Commander Welch."

"No. Not from them. It has to be from an outsider. And from somebody whom I respect . . ."

"Thank you, sir," she said."

"No, not you. Oh, I'm sorry. I do respect you, a lot. And you could advise me about part of it—but you haven't the . . . the way of feeling about things that ... You're not a shippy sort of person, that is . . ."

"What are you driving at?"

"Well, this is part of it. Suppose you found out that your father wasn't your father at all . . ."

"A lot depends on your feelings towards your father."

"But I've never liked him—old Warwick, I mean. And my real father—well, he's our sort of people. I had a long talk with him last night. He was traveling in this ship—oh, years ago, and mother was a passenger. I can't blame them, I don't know enough about life to blame them. And I'm glad that I found out. But he called me into his room to ... just to tell me good-bye."

"Do you think that you should be telling me all this?"

"I suppose I shouldn't. But I don't want to say good-bye to the Old Man now that I've found him. But I ... haven't the words to argue with him, to

say what I want to say . . . If Mr. Hales were with us, now, if he'd come out from under that straw, I could talk it, over with him."

Hales got to his feet—a bedraggled Roman Emperor with wisps of straw hanging over his brow like a threadbare wreath. "And now," he said, "I suppose that all the other goons will come pouring down the ladder to haul me back to Vinegar Nell. I thought I'd save you the trouble of doing a proper Judas on me."

Warwick flushed. "That, sir, was never my intention. Get back under your lousy straw, and we'll all consider that this conversation never took place."

"I believe it is lousy," said Hales, scratching. "But I'm sorry, lad. Tell me about it."

"But I can't. I promised father . . ."

"Then why did you tell us as much as you did? How much more can you tell me? How much did old Flinty-Face . . . Sorry, Captain Petrie . . . tell you?"

"So you know about it?"

"So I guessed. How much did he tell you?"

"Everything."

"Then . . . Is it illegal?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Then is it—er—unethical?"

"I don't think so."

"Not good enough."

"Very well, then—it's as ethical or unethical as the first Moon Rocket was."

"That's better. I was afraid that it was something with lots blood in it—spilt blood, I mean. Now here's another question—is it something that you want to do? And will your doing it cause any hurt to any other person?"

"I do—and it won't."

"Then here's the answer for you—built up from remarkably scanty data. Stick with your old man—and to hell with the rest of 'em."

"Christopher! How can you?" asked the girl. "You said yourself that it was scanty data—and here you are giving the lad advice that might well mar his life for all time."

"He'll be doing what he wanted to do. My old man was a Master Astronaut, Captain on the Martian Mail run. He was lost, and his ship with him, and my mother swore that I should stay on Earth. But I've always loved the ships, and I've always—and I always shall do so—regretted not having entered this service when I was a youngster. If I'd done what I wanted I might have been better off now—or worse off. But I'd have had something."



"Landing stations!" bellowed the speaker. "Landing stations! Secure all for landing stations!"

"I must go," said Warwick.

"Where are we landing?"

"Seven Three Four. I must go."

"Well," said the girl. "Help me with these cattle, will you?"

Feet clattered on the ladder as Hilton came down.

"That was sudden," he gasped. "So you're here. I thought as much." He said nothing further, busied himself securing the stock.

There was a sudden surge of power that threw them off their feet. Somewhere a bell was ringing—its faint, far away notes soon drowned by the bellowing of the cattle and the bleating of the sheep. Another surge of power came, and then the drive was cut suddenly.

"I hope they're enjoying themselves up there!" growled Hilton, hanging desperately on to the straps that he was adjusting.

Power on, power off—except for the sudden changes from weight to weightlessness the effect was not unlike that of a heavy sea on a surface ship. But they got the job finished, somehow, relaxed for a much needed breathing space.

"Seven three four," said the girl as soon as she had got her breath back. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing much—except that it's mostly ice."

"Ice? But what can you get from ice?"

"Water's the only thing that I know of."

"Hello," said Hilton, "we're down."

There was a slight shock, the drive was cut for the last time. The ship shuddered slightly as her members took her weight. Shuddered slightly, but that was all—for here, on this tiny planetoid, she weighed only a fraction of her tonnage on Earth.

"Careful, now," warned Hales. "If we don't watch ourselves we shall be flying up to the deck-head."

Somebody shouted down the hatch. "Is all secure there?"

"All secure!" replied Hilton.

"Then come up to the Main Lounge."

The speakers started up again. "Working party to Number Seven Compartment! Working party to Number Seven Compartment! Lively, now!"

"What's there?" asked the girl.

"As far as I can remember, equipment for the colony on Pluto . . . Surface shelters, I think . . ."

"Are you coming up?" asked Hilton.

"No," replied Hales and the girl simultaneously.

"I'd better go." He paused at the foot of the ladder. "I suppose I haven't seen you?"

"No. Thanks."

"None of my business, anyhow."

"Nice guy," said Hales. "Hadn't you better go?"

"I suppose I should, but . . ." She turned on him suddenly, took his face between her two hands. "I've the darnedest kind of feeling that if I do—this is good-bye. For keeps. And I . . . Oh; drat! You must think that this is dreadfully sudden."

"But I wish you would go . . . You, could find out what is happening and let me know."

"No. We stick together from now on. Can do?"

"Can do," he said, and kissed her.

She pulled away. "Is there no privacy in this blasted ship? Who's coming now?"

They scrambled under the straw just as two people came down the ladder. One was the cadet, Warwick, the other was a small, dark girl whom Hales had noticed, once or twice, around the ship.

"Under the straw?" asked the girl.

"Yes—for the time being. We'll find a better place later."

Hales got to his feet, the effort sending him drifting several feet into the air.

"What is all this?" he demanded.

"Keeping out of the way. They've landed the surface shelters and they're marching all the passengers out to them and all of us, the cadets, as well. We're supposed to be in charge of the encampment until help arrives. But I'm sticking with the ship."

"And I'm sticking with—him," said the girl.

"What else?"

"They've cleaned out the emergency fuel dump, and they're taking ice on board, filling up every possible tank. I heard father say that even though,

the ship is a closed economy for air and water it's as well to have plenty in hand."

"Cadet Warwick," bellowed the speakers, "Cadet Warwick, report to Control at once! Miss Kent, Miss Wellesley and Mr. Hales, report to the disembarkation airlock at once!"

"Do we?" asked Hales. "Do you know a real hiding place?"

"No. You see, this is my first trip here . . ."

Somebody scrambled hastily down the ladder. It was Hilton. "Come on!" he shouted. "There's not much time. Those buzzards up there are playing for keeps! They said it was an emergency landing—and now they're letting fly with gas pistols!"

"Father was afraid of that," said Warwick. "He hoped to do it without using force, but . . ."

"Stay, then!" said Hilton. "I'm getting out of this ship!"

"They'll find us here," said Hales.

He led the way to the hatch, dropped to the deck below, in which the sheep, pigs and poultry were penned. The hatch to the deck below that was tight shut, securely dogged, but the four of them, using the heels of their shoes, got it open. He felt a brief surprise that the airtight door, operated from the Control Room, was open—then realized that all such doors would have been opened to facilitate the discharge of such cargo and stores as were being left for those marooned on the asteroid.

They got the manually operated door shut after them as well as they could, waited until Warwick switched on the torch that he had at his belt. At first there did not seem to be any room for concealment among the well stowed crates, bales and cases, then Warwick spotted a loose board on the top of one of the big boxes. They got it up, that and the board beside it, found that there was barely room for four people at the sides of the piece of equipment it contained. And when they were inside they were able to pull the loose boards down over themselves. There were two convenient knot holes in the thin planking.

Somebody was hammering at the dogged door.

Somebody was scrambling down the ladder into the hold.

Through the knot holes they saw the reflected beam of a torch.

"But where are they?" somebody asked.

"Never mind," said somebody else. Petrie? wondered Hales. "We shall need a historian—and he'll want his woman along. Come to that—we shall need somebody for the stock, too."

"But what about young Warwick, sir? His parents?"

"His mother's—dead. His father? You know—I think he'd rather approve . . ."

After all—when I'm gone, and you, Welch, and the others, he'll be Captain . . ."

"But the girl?"

"We want women. The right sort of women are necessary." "It's not too late, darling," whispered Warwick.

"I stay," whispered his girl. Petrie raised his voice.

"We can't waste any more time searching for them. The survey ship is due any time now to check the fuel dump—and won't those boys be surprised when they find what we've left 'em! No, Welch, we've cut things fine enough as it is. If the four of 'em want to come, they come. That's all."

"But, sir, they must be here."

"I've no intention of having every case and crate of cargo shifted. Clear away for blasting off."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"You've still got time, sir," whispered Warwick to Hales.

"Yes, but ... Tell me, is it a story? A good story?"

"The story."

"I stay."

They heard the door being dogged tight shut above them, they heard the other sound—a faint swishing, a muffled clang—that told them that the electrically operated door had shut. They heard the muffled roar of the big ship's drive, felt their weight build up with the acceleration to above Earth normal.

Said Warwick, "This is where we come out, I suppose."

They clambered out of the packing case, made their way to the foot of the ladder leading to the decks above. Warwick found and pressed the button that would ring a bell in Control, that would tell the watch officer that there was somebody in the airtight compartment. Then they sat down and waited.

"Now you can tell me," said Hales.

"No, I'd sooner not. It's the Old Man's—father's—story. He'll tell you everything."

"All right."

"There's somebody coming," said the little dark girl.

Hammer blows fell on the dogs, the hatch lid clattered open and back. The remotely controlled door slid to one side. Welch peered down at them. "Ah," he said, "stowaways. Up you come." He looked at Hales, still in his toga. "So that's the way you managed it. Oh, well—whatever reports our

nightshirted friends send in won't hurt me now."

"No. Barratry, or piracy, or whatever it is, comes more expensive, when you're caught, than merely chasing passengers with swords."

"Cutlasses," corrected Welch. "Strive ever for the mot juste, my little scrivener."

"Cadet Warwick, sir, reporting for duty," said the lad,

"Oh, yes—our Mr. Warwick. Our new acting temporary Third Pilot, unpaid. Get up to Control, Mr. Warwick."

"But Miss Wellesley . . ."

"Go to your cabin, Miss Wellesley. You'll have plenty of time to see your sweetheart later —plenty of time."

"The stock . . ." started Vera Kent.

"Yes, the stock. They're all right. We, in our crude, bungling fashion, have coped. They're fed and watered and reasonably happy. So I'd like you to come with Mr. Hales and myself to see the Captain."

"Happy, isn't he?" said Hales to Vera.

"Yes, I am happy. And why not? But come on, you two."

Through deck after deck they climbed—past the cattle, up into the accommodation, through silent, deserted alleyways. In these, Hales noticed, most of the lighting fixtures had been removed, the few, remaining strips gave barely enough illumination for safety.

They came into the Main Lounge. Here there was more light and life. Here there were a few people—passengers, of both sexes, the ship's hostesses. Nurse Murray walked briskly through the big compartment, saw Hales, gave him a friendly grin. Behind the bar, Lew seemed to be taking stock of his display bottles, aided in this by the stout, middle-aged woman who was the ship's Purser. The pressman found it hard to define the atmosphere. It was, he thought, matey. "Let's call at the bar," he said to Welch.

"As you please."

"I don't know that I can spare you the usual, Mr. Hales," said Lew. "Can we, Helen?"

"Just one," said the Purser. "After all, this is a special occasion."

"As you say, my sweet," said the Barman.

They finished their drinks, but no chits were produced for anybody's signature. That, however, was not surprising—but the relationship between Purser and Bartender was.

"What goes on?" demanded Hales as they walked to the lift.

"Oh, that. The Old Man married 'em. He won't tolerate any unattached

women around."

"Won't tolerate? Who does he think he is?"

"King, I suppose," said Welch soberly. "Perhaps, after he's been dead a few centuries, even God . . ."

There was no youthful attendant; Welch operated the lift himself. He led the way to the door of the Captain's quarters, rapped sharply. "Come in," called the voice of Captain Petrie. He was seated at his table, at ease, relaxed. He looked younger. There was something in his face of the small boy embarked upon his first big adventure, something of the lover hastening to meet his mistress.

He smiled. "That will do, Welch," he said. "I mustn't keep you from Miss Murray—sorry, Mrs. Welch. Now, Hales. And Miss Kent. Will you sit down?"

"Thank you, Captain. I believe you have a story for me. Your son said that it was the story—but he wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Ay. He's a good lad. I've done wrong, perhaps, bringing him—but he has no people, and Jennifer's husband won't worry about what happens to him. And he's got his—let me see—Jane, isn't it? But it doesn't matter what her name is."

"The story!" almost screamed Hales.

"Oh, yes—the story. I was forgetting. Well, as you know, most of us here, especially those of us with long service in her, wanted to see the old lady come to a rather better end than the breaker's yard. And most of us, too, had got to the stage of regarding life aboard the ship as the only real life . . . And so . . ."

"And so?" Hales prompted.

"And so this is the maiden voyage to the worlds of Alpha Centauri."

"What?" But somehow, he'd known the answer, though he still couldn't believe it. "But it's impossible. You haven't the fuel—and even if you had, it'd take generations. You haven't the food . . ."

"It will take generations. As for the fuel—we accelerate until we're well clear, then fall free. As for food—we have livestock, we have our hydroponics tanks, we have a consignment of seed grain, and other seeds, in our cargo. We shall be a little world, Hales, a little world, self contained, falling forever—or forever as far as we're concerned—through the gulf between the stars. I forget which generation it is that will make the landing—Welch has worked it out. But it may well be that some bright boy among our descendants will come up with an interstellar drive and get her there while you and I, Hales, are still living memories . . ."

"Thanks for the story," said Hales. "But how do you know that I want to be part of it?"

"I don't know. There's time yet—I can cut the drive and give you a boat, and if you don't fancy your chances of landing it you can start screaming for

help on your radio as soon as you get within range."

"Do you want me to stay?" "Frankly, yes. As historian: Why not?"

Hales looked at the girl. "And you, my dear?"

Her hand sought and found his, grasped it tightly.

"Somebody has to look after the cattle," she said.

"Then I'm pleased to have you both with us. You'll have to get married, of course—I'll see to that. Anything else?"

"I'd like, before it's too late, to make one last broadcast. After all, that's what I'm here for—or what I came here for. Can I do it, sir?"

"No. Given a definite bearing, they might even go to the trouble of sending somebody after us. After all—we are decamping with a very sizeable hunk of property . . ."

"But I've thought of a way, sir. A transmitter packed into one of those message rockets you use sometimes, a recorded message, some kind of device for starting the record when the rocket approaches Earth . . ."

"Hm. I must get Welch on it . . ."

"One other thing," said the girl. "It's a rude question, but until you answer it I shan't feel I've the right to be happy myself . . . You've been marrying people off all through the ship—what about you?"

Petrie looked as though he were seeing his ghosts again. But they were kindly ghosts, and he smiled. He picked up the little, shining model of Thunderchild that stood on his table as a paperweight, and fondled it.

"I've got her," he said.