

LITTLE JOE

Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

Howe drove his car down the empty road that paralleled the fencing of Port Sathrea. The last trailings of the rapidly lifting pre-dawn fog whipped past his fender skirts, and the beams of his headlights were just beginning to turn pale and ineffectual as he pulled over to the shoulder and stopped a few yards from the gate.

The armed guard at the gate stepped forward and stopped him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but no one's allowed on the field until the ceremony this after--" The man's voice, which had been brisk and precise, broke off and became apologetic. "Excuse me, Captain Howe. I didn't recognize you. It's rather dark," he added in explanation.

Howe looked around him, at the cyclone fencing that fell away from him to either side, at the stacked silhouette of the faraway city, and the blue tarmac which, given a sheen by the early dew, stretched away toward the lightening horizon with a faint touch of shimmer. He raised his head and surveyed the violet-blue sky and its stars, weeded out to the primary magnitudes by the approaching dawn.

"Yes, it is still a little dim," Howe agreed. He returned his gaze to the sentry's face, which waited for his notice beneath its overlap of steel helmet. "Is it all right? The pass was issued in something of a hurry."

"The pass is certainly in force, Captain Howe," the guard assured him. He seemed to cast about for a chance to interject a few more words, and to be genuinely glad when he found it. "Anyway, sir, I'd recognize you."

Howe turned his eyes back on the man.

"I"--there was an initial hesitation, and then a rush of words--"that is, my brother . . . Edward Anderson, Stoker 2nd.; perhaps you recognize the name, sir . . . he served with you on the *Maybank*, Captain, and he told me a lot about you."

Howe turned his reflections inward. Anderson? Not the most original name in the world, certainly.

"Yes . . . I remember your brother quite well. He was a credit to the Merchant Service," he lied, finally, and waited for the guard to open the gate.

The gate slid closed behind him, and abruptly his horizon was occupied only by the damp tarmac and the sky, which had now reached cerise in color. It was not until he had made a completely arbitrary turn on the unmarked field and begun to walk diagonally across the area that the hull became visible; a squat, needle-nosed, stub-finned silhouette of flat darkness

that rested near the service hangars.

When he tried to count the number of times and the various places at which he had encountered that familiar stubbornness, he discovered that they had run irrevocably together. He could have arrived at approximate figures derived from average expectancies during the five-year-term of his captaincy on that particular vessel, but could never have assigned a definite port of call to each separate number. He was quite sure, for instance, that he had assumed command at Flushing in '06, and that his next planetfall had been Wolf. He could tick off most of the places to which his career had taken him with fair ease, but he found that he could not even discriminate between the memories of planetfalls in one of his various commands and those in another; much less determine some order, or even, by and large, a coherent purpose.

Still, one would think that there should be something in particular to remember, he thought. Immediately he saw the flaw in his reasoning, for it was not in any one specific voyage, in some peculiarity of cargo or destination, nor even in some hitherto unattainable but now-shattered record of performance or payload that the foundation of *Little Joe's* reputation rested.

There's length of service, of course, he thought. *That's part of it.*

But this thought was unsatisfactory for any purposes other than those of partial explanation, for mere tenure was one thing, and *Little Joe's* history was quite another.

He walked slowly but easily toward the ship, the shock of his footsteps on a hard surface perhaps less finely cushioned and compensated than it had been during the years of his physical peak, but, nevertheless, still not indicative of more than forty years of age.

In due course, he stood beside one of *Little Joe's* landing jacks, and turned his glance upward along the bellying curve of the ship's flank.

She's nae a beauty, but she's a brae bonny lass for a' that, he thought, and found himself confronted with simultaneous problems in introspection. One was easily solved by the inward examination of his memories until he encountered the image of a book about seafaring, and a man's description of his command, and the other fell before the rationalization that even *Little Joe's* skipper could be forgiven for an infrequent assignment of a feminine pronoun to the ship.

He abandoned dialectic, having found himself once more fallen into a habit he had acquired soon after his assumption of *Little Joe's* command; that of resting his hand on some projection on the ship's surface, and absently running his hand over the pits that had accumulated in the surface.

The ship had never had the quality of sleekness--even on the ways, the graceful and aerodynamically clean but unmistakably heavy-bodied lines must have made any such impression difficult; the addition of the thick, wide-planed fins with their cylindrical jack housings made it impossible, and the roughly cast heavy-duty plates with which the brawny struts and stanchions were sheathed had obviated even tactile sensuality.

Little Joe was a cargo ship, broad of diameter in the loading locks, massive of bulkhead, and cramped of fo'c's'le, which in spacecraft had returned to its traditional place in the otherwise useless compartments of the tapering prow. The plating bore the marks of rough

handling by more than one carelessly jockeyed cargo boom, and running years of contact with the pebbly debris of space had added further markings.

Howe's searching fingers found such a spot, and lingered over it.

The greatest part of *Little Joe's* reputation, I think, he decided, *rests in the ship's value as a symbol.*

Other craft had, perhaps, gone farther, with greater cargoes. Some were momentarily more famous, for one reason or another. Nevertheless, there was no ship so well known as *Little Joe*, no matter in what part of the galaxy one might be.

One of the first interstellar freighters, a voice, remembered perhaps from one of the recent public eulogies, said in his mind.

This was true. Not, in all probability, the very first--but certainly the last survivor of the first. The ship's bedplates and tubes had known more modifications than he would have believed improved engine designs possible. The celestial globe in the navigator's cubby had been replaced time after time, to match the progress of that evanescent line where frontier stopped and unknown dark began. The corners and odd angles of the holds were full of the trapped remains of scores of outmoded cargoes, no longer worthy of shipment from one solar system to another.

He heard, again, *Scout among the farthest frontiers of the human race.*

This was not as strictly true as the first, in its implication that the ship constantly ranged the Imperial rim. *Little Joe* went to whatever port the ship's owners specified, this port invariably being the one at which *Little Joe* served the owners' interests best. True, there had been the run a score of years ago--was Murchison the captain then?--when, as the ship hung coasting at the peak of a great arc, the audiovisual communication from somewhere out of Andromeda's heart had come sputtering into *Little Joe's* searching receivers, but, though the message, recorded and re-recorded, was permanently safe in the history of the First Galaxy, no other message had ever been caught, nor had the ship been sent to search for any such.

Pride of the Merchant Service, the remembered voice repeated in Howe's mind. This last was never true--not in any utilitarian sense. The ship was neither the largest, the fastest, the finest, nor the most efficient of all the cargo craft that knitted together the fabric of human civilization. *Little Joe* was merely the best known.

And so, he thought, *we return to length of service*, but he had already decided that this was, at best, only a partial answer, unless one analyzed and classified all the multitudinous data of the ship's history and functioning, in order to determine the manner of its service. And here, perhaps, was the proof of his earlier decision that *Little Joe* was somehow a symbol of the human race and its progress into the stars.

He took his eyes from the broken gleam of the ship's hull and saw that dawn had fully broken, and that the sky had lightened into cirrus-combed blue. He stood quietly for a moment, living in the morning air on the tarmac, and then began to climb into the ship's fin on the ladder exposed by the extended jack;

Little Joe's interior was purposely cramped. The ship had not been designed for

promenades, and the cargo holds were intersticed with a minimum number of rigidly measured companionways. Captain Howe bent himself into the one-man elevator that served when the ship was vertical, and rode immediately up to the bridge.

He knew the bridge better than any other area on the ship--the difference in his familiarity with the various other departments and divisions being only a shade less than imperceptible. The bridge however, was his particular piece of property aboard *Little Joe*; the platform from which he directed the ship's operations, the nerve center at whose heart he interpreted the hurrying messages of *Little Joe's* electric ganglia, and from which, in turn, his orders were returned along those same pathways. From the bridge, he directed the sometimes delicate task; of berthing, and the always precarious functions of blastoff.

He looked down, and saw another fragment of the legend of *Little Joe*. Nestled in clear plastic, a pair of dice had been set into the main instrument board by some one of his predecessors who had already been conscious of the growth of the ship's peculiar aura. Each die, of course, was turned so that the face bearing two dots was turned up toward the viewer. There was even a sub-legend about the one time when the faces on the dice changed, so that they totaled two, and this physical impossibility was reputed to have occurred the day the ship's first--and, therefore, automatically, to the supplement mind, best-beloved of the ship--skipper had been retired. Since it was almost sure that the dice had not come to their place until well after that almost forgotten first master, and his children, had found a peaceful rest, the sub-legend was sometimes the occasion of a quirk in Howe's upper lip, but it was interesting to note, nevertheless, that *Little Joe* had an apocrypha.

He removed his outer coat and draped it over the mate's control couch, while he himself sank down into the familiar texture and spongy response of his own chair and sat with his arms resting near the control levers. Idly, he flicked the medallion of the government seal on the main switches.

Yes, the ship has histories and historians, he thought, some factual and some romantic, some accurate, others not. The legend had begun to grow among the stars that were pencilpoints on *Little Joe's* charts, and had multiplied as the stories were repeated.

We need a symbol, I think--men tend to think in personifications. It was a peculiarity of the race that it could conceive of such things as Platonism, or Absolute Truth, or even the vague restlessness of racial spirit that sent humanity journeying outward, spreading the starborne seed of man wherever the ships could reach. And, concomitant to this peculiarity was the parallel need of a symbol to embody the concept, as though, once created, the idea needed an easily comprehensive matrix to keep it clear and visible for the searching mind of man to hold firmly before him.

As he thought of it, he somehow doubted that, if all mankind's aspiration for the continued progress of human culture were to be reduced to metal, the result would in any way resemble *Little Joe*. But one could not be equally positive that if all the separate needs fulfilled in the construction of an interstellar vessel were somehow to be made visible, they would not resemble all the needs that were fulfilled in the growth of human civilization.

Men choose their symbols strangely,; but they choose with precision, he thought.

Little Joe--a name born of whimsy on the part of the ship's first owner. Perhaps it was true that he'd built the ship with the winnings of one night at a craps table. But, most probably, this was but another fragment of apocrypha. The galaxy was large, and history is long. The

yard that built *Little Joe* had never come forward to claim the distinction--the design had been a popular one, and who, now, could equate *Little Joe*, the symbol, with Hull Number K-357, or whatever code it had been. And this, too, was the proper basis for a legend.

He ran his hand over the grip of one of the control levers, feeling the coarseness under his fingertips where perspiration had etched the original molded finish of the composition. *Many hands*, he thought, *and many masters at the ship's helm. An old and honorable ship.* This, too, he recalled, came from a book read years before.

He looked out through a porthole at the field stretching away around the ship, lying empty today because it had been closed to traffic for the ceremony. Had it not been, he knew, the sky above the field would be bright with the flashes of incoming ships, and the tarmac would be dotted with spherical hulls.

His lower lip moved in a half-smile, and he discovered that he had actually patted the worn control lever with his comforting hand. The realization disconcerted him momentarily, until he considered that sentimentality was probably the strongest prerogative that a captain of *Little Joe* could command.

He reached out and patted the nearest pocket of the coat he had thrown over the mate's couch. The manual was there, as he had expected; "Techniques of Gravito-mechanical Astronautics," fresh in its Government Printing Office wrapper, with the slim envelope containing his orders tucked inside the flyleaf.

He sighed, remembering that it was for this that he had come out to the field so early in the morning, for it was only here, on the bridge of his ship, that the decision could be made.

He recalled that, at first, he had considered voluntary retirement when the orders standardizing the gravito-mechanical drive had been put through. Physiologically, he was still a young man, and the pension for which he was now eligible, together with his considerable savings, would never leave him in financial hardship. If he so chose, as his orders explicitly stated, he was free to retire without prejudice. If not, then he was to report to the designated training installation for instruction in the handling of the new drive.

A two-faced coin, he thought. The manual on the new drive had been included with the orders. He had gone through it carefully, wondering if his mind was still unrigid, whether the complicated new data could ever be learned to the degree of skill which his captain's conscience demanded. But, in the last analysis, it had been exactly the knowledge that so many men *would* leave space, feeling themselves too old or too inflexible to accept the change, that had persuaded him into remaining.

Perhaps the choice would not have been as complicated if he had not spoken to Martin, his Mate.

Martin had sat in the chair opposite him in his cabin, his aging face restrained from the show of any emotion, his voice deliberate.

"I don't see any but one way to look at it, John," Martin had said, keeping his lean body still in his chair. "It's the same way it is with *Little Joe*, here. The ship's something like a symbol, the way the people say. It's like everything that human civilization has done or wants to do, poured into one shape and set off so people can see it, and feel what it means."

Howie had nodded. "I guess they're right about that."

"Well, all right, then. All you have to do is look at what they're doing."

"To the ship, you mean?"

"I mean putting *Little Joe* in the Smithsonian, where the ship'll always be there."

"For people to come and look at, and, for kids to worship?" Howe had asked, dryly.

"I don't mean that's what I want for myself," Martin had said quickly. "Being worshiped is fine for *Little Joe*--the ship's earned it. But the way I see it, if they're retiring the ship, then it's time for the crew, too.

"Look, John," Martin had said, leaning forward for the first time, "we're at the top of the ladder. There isn't an officer in the Merchant Service who doesn't want these berths. But if they retire the ship, where do we go? I took a look at the insides of one of those bubble ships last week; hell, it'd be two years before I could find my way around in one.

"I guess, in a way, *Little Joe's* what we've been working toward all our lives. We're tied up to it, John. It's like I said--I can't see any but one way to look at it, and that's to quit here, at the top of the ladder."

"Maybe you're right," Howe had said then.

And *maybe you're right*, he repeated now, looking absently at the control banks, subconsciously reading the instruments that told him *Little Joe!* was taut, fully fueled, and ready to have the controls unsealed for the last trip home. He pondered the thought that, when one's life was so closely associated with a symbol, it was necessary to follow that symbol wherever it might go.

But that was something he might have accepted as valid earlier this morning, but with which he could not agree now.

It is not from sitting in museums that symbols rise, he thought. Even the eulogizers--the voices and faces on the teleslide that told their innumerable stories about *Little Joe*, that recited "Old Ironsides," and reawakened the days when the pennies of schoolchildren had saved the *Constitution* from the salvage yard--even they, in their sentimental inaccuracies, had touched the source of the legend.

One of the first Interstellar freighters, the voice said again, and *Scout among the farthest frontiers of the human race*, *Pride of the Merchant Service*.

No, it was not from sitting in museums that symbols rose, for the greatness of *Little Joe's* legend rested in the fact that the ship had long and faithfully done the job which the designers intended. A ship was not a statue, nor an exhibit. There were silversided liners that poised gracefully in their berths, and snarling warcraft, but it was by the arcing freighters that the warp and woof of humanity were interlaced.

They're making a mistake, Howe realized. *What is the value of a cargo ship in the Smithsonian?* That had not been the function for which *Little Joe* was built--the ship belonged on the starways, plodding along on her intratomics, wrapped in the fragile cocoon

of the A-F warp as she might be, and if she had to be retired, why, then, there were better memorials.

No, spaceships and spacemen belonged in space.

The thought struck him, and he tensed to the thrill of it. Andromeda! The message, twenty years old now, countless centuries older as it made its tenuous way out of the nebula and crossed the dark barrier toward the First Galaxy, but a message nevertheless.

And the ship could make it; make it on inertia alone, the warp gone as the engines burned away the last fuel, but make it nevertheless, and if whatever Andromedans there were could send a message at the patient speed of light, why, then, the galaxy could respond in its own way--with *Little Joe*, a living symbol still.

But what is a symbol? The thought came, and he relaxed his hands. He sat in his chair, and remembered his thoughts of this morning. *We need a symbol, I think--men tend to think in personifications.*

That was part of it. But what else had he thought, here on his bridge?

It was a peculiarity of the race, he remembered, that it could conceive of and live by abstract concepts, but it was a concomitant trait that there was a parallel need for a symbol to embody the concept, a matrix to keep it clear and visible.

And so, the thought came to him, it is not *Little Joe* that is important, for, as long as the concepts remain, there will be other symbols, each equally valid. It is the concepts themselves that must be maintained, and this is the important task.

He slapped his hand once more, affectionately, on the control handle.

"You'll forgive me for calling you a brae bonny lass again, *Little Joe*, and for not giving you a run to Andromeda," he said aloud, and picked up his coat.

He reached into the pocket and pulled out his orders and the manual. He leafed through the closely printed pages once again, paused to look at the complex diagrams.

There was work there--hard work, and much to learn. But the GM drive and the bubble ships were out among the stars, edging the line where outer dark began, and before he was through he'd be out there with them, a skipper again, with his own command.

And the not outrageous thought came to him that perhaps the Andromedans might soon have an answer to their message--a surer, swifter answer than *Little Joe*, unmanned, and drifting at random, could ever have brought.

Moving quietly through the narrow companionways, he left the ship, and walked back across the tarmac.

The same guard who had let him in at dawn was still at the gate. As he walked toward him, Howe thought: *Anderson?* A stoker on the *Maybank*, the sentry had said. He looked closely at the young features as he walked toward the man. It would have to be an older brother. He superimposed lined tautness and a deep tan on the guard's boyishness, and the eyecreases acquired from hours of peering at flowmeters.

A face emerged from the montage, and with it a voice, and individuality. He smiled inwardly.

The guard pulled the gate open. "You'll be coming back later for the ceremony, won't you, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly. I couldn't very well miss that, could I?" He smiled.

The guard brightened in response. "No--I guess you couldn't, sir."

"What's your first name, Anderson?" Howe asked.

"Peter, sir."

Howe shook hands with the guard. "Glad to know you, Pete. Tell Eddie I said hello. Does he still know all the verses to 'The Song of the Wandering Spaceman'?"

"Sings them at the top of his lungs every Saturday night, sir," the guard said. He was trying to grin in a comradely fashion, but Howe felt a flush prickling the back of his neck at the awe in his eyes.

"Well, thank you for letting me in," he said with a vague feeling of embarrassment. "Good-by."

"Good-by, sir. Good luck!"

Howe walked back to his car, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly at the enthusiasm of that last benediction.

He climbed into his car, turned it around, and began to roll away. Strange, the way the guard had, treated him--and the stoker, Anderson; had he really been so proud of his service aboard the *Maybank* that, out of all the captains the man must have served under, it had been Howe that he chose to tell his kid brother about?

What makes a symbol? he wondered.

He shook his head in puzzlement. Why? He'd never done anything more than the things a captain's job demanded--no heroic missions, no spectacular runs.

He shifted his eyes to the rear-view screen, and felt a momentary shock.

The guard was a Marine, and Howe was a Merchant Service officer, but for some reason the man had stepped out into the road, looking after Howe's car, and had snapped into rigid salute. He was still holding it as the car dipped over the crest of a hill and Howe could no longer see him.

Story copyright © 1953 Algis Budrys
Art copyright © 1998 Kandis Elliot