

It was jokingly said that he would be late for his own funeral, but Jelks was the kind of technician who was methodical in everything he did. He was the logical operator, for instance, to send as observer on the space platform. Unfortunately, there was just one thing he missed . . .

LATE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

He was a big man, this Jelks—big, with a ruddy complexion, china blue eyes and thinning blonde hair. He was a slow man—slow, but thorough and . . . slow. In the days of his not too far distant youth he had been told, often, by parents and teachers driven to and beyond the point of exasperation, that he would be late for his own funeral. On these frequent occasions he had smiled his slow, amiable smile and, the rebuke seemingly having failed to register, had plodded stolidly ahead with whatever had been the work in hand. In spite of his slowness—and because of his thoroughness—he had won scholarship after scholarship after scholarship, had whilst still in his early thirties, become the sort of scientist and mathematician ignored by the popular press but still possessing a solid reputation among his academic peers.

"Jelks," old Professor Hartley had said, "will be the ideal man for the job. He's slow—I grant you that. He'll be late for his own funeral. But he's thorough. He'll be hanging up there for weeks—observing, monitoring, making out reports, cooped up in a tiny tin coffin. Some men it'd drive mad. It'd drive me mad. Not Jelks. He'll monitor, and he'll observe, he'll make out and transmit his reports—and they'll be good, useful reports."

"I can take it, then, that you recommend him," said the Air Vice Marshal. "Of course, there's the security angle."

"That's up to you people," said the Professor.

The security angle was, of course, checked with far greater thoroughness than had been Jelks' scientific qualifications for the job. But no pink stain upon his political purity was found. He had never, so far as could be discovered, ever talked to a Communist. Politically, his mind resembled that hard vacuum into which he was soon to be transported. There was no risk whatsoever that the knowledge he would win would ever find its way to the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.

He was commissioned, then, after a series of somewhat unpleasant medical tests. He purchased a uniform with the two and a half rings of a Squadron Leader on the sleeves and with an Observer's half wing on the breast. In the mess of the Station to which he had been posted he was just that—an observer, watching, with quiet wonderment, the fast young men with their split second reaction times who, with the careless ease of the young man in the song, flung their sleek jets and rockets about the sky. He met the crew who were to put the satellite up in its orbit, the technicians who were to build and assemble his extra-terrestrial laboratory for him around the nucleus of the third stage of the big step rocket. He was given the opportunity to learn something about rocket piloting himself.

"He'll never make a pilot," said the Flight Lieutenant. "He's slow. He's so

slow that he'll be late for his own funeral."

"Not to worry," said the Wing Commander. "He'll be taken out to the satellite, he'll be brought back. After all—boffins are wingless birds ..."

With others of the team, Jelks was flown to Woomera. He stood with Air Marshals and Air Commodores and watched the big, three-stage rocket lift on its glaring column of fire, dwindle to a vapour trail in the cloudless sky. He watched the blips on the screens, saw that the first and second steps were falling as predicted, that the third step had established itself on its orbit. He watched the second rocket blast off—the one with equipment and technicians aboard, the one whose third step would bring back the crew of the first rocket. He did not, some weeks later, witness the blasting off of the third rocket (she was using the first and second stages of the first one) because he was in it.

He took the acceleration well, did Jelks, and was unaffected by free fall. When the time came, he put on his spacesuit as unconcernedly as if he had been dressing at his usual time in the morning in the bedroom of his Cambridge lodgings. He checked the various zippers and other fastenings with far less concern than a man heeding an admonitory notice in a public convenience. But even Jelks could not be unaffected by the spectacle visible outside the outer door of the airlock—the vast globe of Earth, green and brown and blue and silver, the space station, hanging seemingly motionless, with its spidery antennae and scanners, its solar mirrors, the big, inflated plastic sphere that had been the living and sleeping quarters for the assembly crew.

The speaker built into Jelks' helmet sputtered into life. "Doctor Jelks! Can you hear me? There's a lifeline rigged to the satellite."

"I've found it, thanks."

"Well, good luck, Doctor. See you in a week's time."

"Thanks, Brown. Don't forget to bring some newspapers."

Jelks pulled himself, hand over hand, to the airlock door of the space station. His clumsy, gloved hands manipulated the opening mechanism. He stood inside the tiny compartment waiting for the green light to glow. It came on, and he opened the inner door and drifted into his laboratory. Warren was there—another Squadron Leader—fully dressed except for his helmet. He helped Jelks to remove his, then said, "Here you are, Doctor. All ready for you. All tested and working."

"I'll take your word for it," said Jelks. He had come to know Warren, had recognised in him a thoroughness almost equal to his own.

"Exactly the same as the mock-up," said Warren.

"So I see."

"The transmitter's scaled, of course," Warren went on.

"Not to be used except in an emergency," said Jelks. "They told me. There's only one emergency I can think of. Did you ever work out the chances of

being struck by a meteor?"

"No," said Warren. "But at times that plastic tent of ours out there seemed far too flimsy."

"Live in it for a hundred years," said Jelks, "and you might be hit by one large enough to do real damage. Well—all the best." His following words carried quotation marks fore and aft. "Happy landings."

"Be good," said Warren.

"And careful," said Jelks. He grinned. "Slow and careful. I know what they say about me. I just want to keep things that way."

He helped the other Squadron Leader on with his helmet, checked the fastenings of Warren's suit as meticulously as he had done those of his own. He drifted with him to the inner airlock door, watched the indicator lights until Warren was clear of the satellite and on his way to the waiting rocket. Jelks went, then, to one of the ports, watched the spaceship, now free of the lifeline, emit a brief, vivid jet of flame and slowly drop away from his field of vision. He took off the rest of his suit then, stowed it carefully in the locker designed for this purpose. For the next few hours he busied himself checking every smallest detail of the life-sustaining apparatus of his spatial laboratory. After he had done this he prepared for his first tests, his first experiments. He was a happy man—weeks of highly interesting work lay ahead of him and there was no urgency. Neither lack of gravity nor absence of company bothered him.

At the end of a week the rocket made its rendezvous with the space station. Brown—the Flight Lieutenant who was captain of the little spaceship—came across himself on the lifeline, brought with him the promised newspapers. He took with him recordings made by the instruments, also Jelks' first report. He said, "I don't think that the news has leaked out yet. When our friends on the other side of the Curtain do find out there's going to be a mass liquidation of astronomers."

"Anything in these?" asked Jelks, patting the bundle of newspapers.

"There's Jane of course—but she hasn't been the same girl since the purity drive set in . . . Overdressed in every instalment. Talking of purity drives—some crank reckons that the End of the World is at hand."

"Then it's high time that we pushed ahead with the Interplanetary Project," said Jelks.

"What do you think you're out here for?" asked the Flight Lieutenant.

After the spaceship had gone, Jelks settled down with his newspapers. There was even less haste than there had been before—it would be all of six weeks before the next rendezvous. He read the news items with an attitude of godlike detachment. He did the crossword puzzles. The listed radio programmes reminded him that not once had he used the receiver that was part of the station's equipment. He resolved that from now on he would, at least, keep up with the news. He read the accounts of the meetings at which the self-styled Prophet John had spoken, marvelled that

in this day and age, the age of atomic power and space travel, anybody should subscribe to this mystical claptrap. Then he went back to work.

It was two days before the rocket was due that Jelks was making a series of observations of Earth from the station. He was over the night hemisphere, sliding swiftly in his South-North orbit while the great, shadowed globe turned slowly beneath him. The sky was clear above South America and Jelks could see the city lights— Buenos Aires, Rio, Santiago. He was surprised when the darkness swept suddenly over the tiny, glimmering sparks that were the homes of men, thought at first that the fault lay in his instruments. It was over North America that he saw the golden glow and the thousand mile long lightnings. His vehicle carried him over the Pole and south over the sunlit hemisphere. But neither land nor sea could be distinguished—all Earth was obscured by an impenetrable layer of dense black cloud.

It must be, thought Jelks, some meteorological phenomenon. He was a physicist, and a good one, and he knew of no weapon that could have produced such an effect. On the other hand—and he felt the beginnings of cold, sickening fear—he was also a meteorologist of sorts, and he knew of no meteorological explanation for what he was seeing. Slowly, unhurriedly (he refused to hurry) he switched on the receiver. Slowly, unhurriedly, he tried waveband after waveband. The set was dead. Slowly, unhurriedly, Jelks took photographs of the black ball over which he swung in his orbit, jotted down in his log what he had seen—the obstruction of the city lights, the golden glow and the dreadful lightnings. Again he returned to the radio and this time, but all too briefly, caught what seemed to be a broadcast of some great choir, somewhere. It was the merest echo, and in spite of all his care and skill he was unable to bring the controls of the set back to the right setting.

He was tired then—a tiredness that came, he knew, more from strain than from overwork. I can do nothing, he thought. He put his cameras on automatic control, then strapped himself into his bunk. He slept—a deep sleep untroubled by dream or nightmare.

When he awoke he went straight to the most convenient port, looked down to the world. He was over the sunlit hemisphere again and Europe was below him. The black overcast was gone. Over Russia there was smoke—it was, he thought, a forest fire, covering thousands of square miles. He turned his telescope first on London. London still stood—there were no craters, no fires. Paris, Berlin, Rome, Moscow—all were, seemingly, untouched. After a while he was able to see the cities of the Southern Hemisphere, and he saw nothing to arouse his apprehension. But there was a bush fire in Australia and, within in his field of view some time later, another forest fire in Canada.

The radio was still dead.

His chronometers told him that it lacked minutes of his rendezvous with the rocket from Woomera. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera should now be alongside the space station—but space was empty. His chronometers told him that the rocket from Woomera was all of two hours overdue.

"I was hoping that Brown would be able to tell me something," he muttered to himself as he broke the seals on the transmitter. He hesitated before switching on. Was this an emergency? He decided to give Brown another hour, and filled in the time by hunting vainly up and down the wavebands of his transmitter.

He switched on the set, waited for it to warm up. His fingers reached out for the key. "James calling Rosie Bell," he sent in the pre-arranged code, on the agreed wavelength. "James calling Rosie Bell. I am worried." He sent again, James calling Rosie Bell. James calling Rosie Bell. Again he sent, "James calling Rosie Bell. James calling . . . James calling ..."

He broke out the emergency brandy bottle. Moving slowly and methodically, never forgetting to allow for the conditions of free fall, he managed to take a drink without wasting a drop of the fluid. Suddenly he felt lost and lonely, and Earth very dear and very far away. Somehow, for no reason, he remembered the thing that had always been said about him—that he would be late for his own funeral. Unless I get back to Earth, he thought, I shan't have one.

He put on his spacesuit, went outside. He studied the exterior of the station. The wings were still there—it had been worth nobody's while to remove them. The solar mirrors, the various antennae and the telescope tubes were removable. The rocket motor was, he knew, still workable, and there was fuel. It would not be an impossible task to convert the station into what it had originally been—a replica of the rocket whose rendezvous was now hours overdue.

Jelks worked slowly and carefully. He stripped the rocket of all aerodynamically undesirable excrescences. He then reduced weight by the jettison of equipment and fittings from the interior. The records he kept, also the Geiger Counter. Then, strapped to his desk in the strangely bare and spacious cabin of the station, he worked out his flight plan. Then, satisfied that nothing had been left unnecessarily to chance, he secured himself in the pilot's seat and fired the braking blast. The huddle of dumped instruments and machinery dropped away from the station. Jelks allowed himself briefly to wonder whether it would ever be picked up and used again.

Then the station had to be turned—a simple enough task using the built-in, manually operated flywheel. Jelks sat at the controls—waiting. He allowed himself one experimental wiggle of the control surfaces, but no more. He did not allow his eyes to stray from the Air Speed Indicator, ever alert for the first warning quiver of the needle.

His reaction times were slow—but then, even at his initial supersonic speed, he had to come down a long way. Through the first high cirrus he swept, and the temperature inside the ship rose to an uncomfortable level. He hoped that the refrigerating unit would prove equal to the strain. Out of sunlight into darkness he swept—and saw the lights of cities and of vast fires beneath him. Out of darkness into sunlight he screamed—and there was the sea, and ships, and the European coastline. Down, he spiralled, down, down. He felt the wrenching shock as his first ribbon parachute took hold and then was wrenched from the fuselage.

A less slow man would have fought the controls, would have striven grimly for mastery of the machine in which he rode. Not Jelks. He knew his limitations; he knew, too, the excellence of the design of the ship. He knew that she would, almost, land herself without damage. His main anxiety was that the landing should take place on a site of his own selection.

Gently, carefully, he eased the ship down, determined not to repeat the mistake that had lost him one of his parachutes. Gently, carefully, he brought her round in a wide arc, round again in a smaller one. England was beneath him—cities and towns and green fields. London was beneath him, then the seaside towns of the South Coast and the blue-green waters of the Channel. Ships he saw in the narrow sea, but there were no aircraft in the air. He thought it strange that no investigatory jets or rockets had been sent up to intercept and challenge.

Lower he spiralled, lower. He could see traffic on the roads now. He could not be sure—the speed at which he was still travelling made accurate observation impossible—but the cars, the coaches and the trucks seemed to be stationary. At one crossroads he glimpsed an untidy huddle of machines, saw the black scar of fire on grass verge and hedgerows.

At last he was over the Station to which he had first been posted.

The long runway was clear. Remembering his radio, he called the tower. There was no reply. He looked down to the windsock and saw that his line of approach could not be bettered. He lowered his undercarriage, released the last of his braking parachutes. The concrete was sweeping beneath him with terrifying speed. One wheel of the undercarriage touched, bounced, touched again. The ship heeled over, the tip of his port delta wing dug into the concrete. Landing strip and administration buildings wheeled before him, around him. Something struck the back of his head and he took no further interest in the details of the landing.

His first waking thought was to wonder who would have to pay for all the damage that he had done. "One Space Station, complete," he muttered. "That'll make a nasty hole in a month's pay ..." He realised, slowly, that he was hanging upside down in his securing straps. Before releasing himself he worked things out in his methodical manner, snapped open the catches so that he was able to ease himself gently down on to his shoulders. A clumsy, slow-motion somersault brought him to a sitting posture.

The airlock doors were hopelessly jammed, but it didn't matter. The cabin was so wrenched and battered that it was easy for him to force his way out at the minor cost of a slightly lacerated hand and a badly torn trouser knee. The unaccustomed gravity made him feel heavy and tired, for all of five minutes he stood beside the wreckage of the rocket waiting for somebody to come out to him. Somewhere a dog—one of the Station's Alsatis—was barking hysterically.

Slowly, he walked towards the Mess. If there were anybody in Administration, he thought, they'd have seen me come in. They couldn't have missed it. He noticed that the Alsatian he had heard barking was trailing him, keeping well back. He wished that he had a weapon of some kind—there was something mad about the appearance of the brute.

All doors in the Station were open. Jelks went first to the bar— hungry, uncharacteristically, for company. The bar was deserted. There were four pint tankards standing on the counter, each perhaps two-thirds full. The beer was stale and flat, and had dead flies in it. In another glass—a Martini?—a wasp was drowned. Jelks went behind the bar, found a glass, poured himself a stiff whisky. After it he felt better. He picked up a newspaper on one of the tables, looked at the side. It was a Sunday paper. It was the day that he had seen the golden glow and the supernal lightnings, the day of the impenetrable black overcast.

Jelks stood there and shouted. "Anybody at home? Is anybody at home?" Only the barking of the half-mad Alsatian outside answered him. "Is anybody here?" bellowed Jelks.

Jelks went into the pantry adjoining the dining room, found a stale loaf of bread and some butter that wasn't quite rancid. He opened a tin of sardines, made a filling yet unsatisfying meal. He watched the flies that came to feast on the crumbs on his plate almost with affection. Dogs, he thought, and flies. And I heard a bird singing . . . It can't be radio-active dust . . . There shouldn't be any need to get the Geiger counter from the ship. It's probably smashed, anyhow.

He stiffened abruptly as he heard a new sound—then relaxed. It was the sound of bells, it was the church clock in the village, two miles distant, striking the hour. In the still air the sound carried well; yet, somehow, was tenuous, could have been some ghostly carillon pealing in the almost airless depths of a lunar crater.

"I will go to the village," said Jelks—to the flies, to the barking dog outside, to nobody in particular. He picked up the remains of the loaf, took it with him. "Here!" he said to the dog. The Alsatian stopped barking, looked at Jelks suspiciously. The man threw the bread down gently, watched the dog as it sniffed the food and then began to eat ravenously. He waited until it had finished eating, then said, "Come on, boy." The dog followed him, close to heel, but only as far as the gates.

So Jelks had to walk alone to the village. After the first half mile he regretted that he had never learned to drive—he could have had his pick of the Station cars, of the abandoned vehicles along the road. The sun was high in the cloudless sky and he was perspiring inside his overalls. His feet were tender in the thin, canvas shoes that had been his footwear in the space station. Yet, in spite of his discomfort, he was able to watch, to observe, to see the animals in the fields, the birds in the sky and in the hedgerows. He was able to feel—able to sense the impalpable something that Chesterton has called so aptly "the smell of Sunday morning." But it was not a Sunday.

He was footsore and weary when he reached the village. On the window ledge of the first cottage a fat, tortoiseshell cat regarded him gravely. Jelks put out his hand to touch the animal, to stroke it. It responded to his advances with feline courtesy but without much enthusiasm. Jelks left the cat to its own devices, knocked on the cottage door. There was no reply. He opened the door, went inside. A smell of burning still lingered in the kitchen—the fire was out, but the Sunday joint was a mass of charred, acrid

stinking meat. On the oven the saucepans in which the vegetables had been boiling were dry and their contents ruined. On the kitchen table was a half finished cup of tea—in which floated the inevitable drowned, bedraggled flies.

It must have been a disaster of some kind, thought Jelks. I shall find them in the church . . . He left the cottage, walked slowly along the street to the tall, grey spire. His mind conjured up images of what he would find there—huddled corpses, victims of some fearful weapon produced by the bio-chemists. He walked more slowly than was justified by his sore feet.

The church was empty. The sunlight struck through the stained glass of the windows, a patina of rainbow colouring on altar and altar cloth, reflected by dull gleaming metal. But there was damage. In places the stone flooring of the aisle had been ripped up, the underlying earth scattered untidily and carelessly. The man (the last man, the only man) stared uncomprehendingly at this—he thought—vandalism, then walked slowly out through the side door to the graveyard.

There in the warm sunlight, he gazed at the overset headstones, the heaped and scattered earth, the odd, terrifying craters. He began to laugh—quietly at first, then with mounting hysteria. Abruptly he stopped and stood there, scarcely breathing, straining his ears to try to catch some faint echo of the trumpet that once (and once only) had sounded, the trumpet that he would never hear.

—Bertram Chandler.