

You may remember "Swap Shop" in the December 1957 issue. Here is another story of the crew of the *Eupeptic Dragon* in their trading excursions round the galaxy. This time they are involved in a quiz story—with interesting if not profitable results.

IN THE BOX

By Bertram Chandler

There was a time, and not so very long ago, when the principle of interstellar telegraphic communication was a closely guarded secret. It was inconvenient, perhaps, that the psionic radio should have been developed whilst the so-called Great Revival was in full swing—and yet, from the viewpoint of the telepaths, ever apprehensive that a mob of religious fanatics might take too seriously the Biblical injunction 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,' it was fortunate. It meant that there was a demand for their services in Deep Space and on the Outworlds, it meant that they came under the protection of the powerful Interstellar Transport Commission.

The Commission is powerful, yet there are times when it must act with a certain circumspection. The time of the Great Revival was one of them—there were too many Revivalists in important governmental positions. The public knew, of course, that it was possible to flash a message across a hundred light years with no more delay than there would be, say, between London and Sydney. It was assumed that the space warping principles of the Interstellar Drive had been, somehow, applied to the transmission of radio signals. If the public had known, as it knows now, that the only possible means of instantaneous communication is telepathic, and that the Commission was making use of the hated telepaths, there might well have been a boycott of the Commission's ships and services which would have given the various Outworld ship-ping lines a golden opportunity to run us out of Deep Space.

Anyhow, the telepaths were recruited and trained—and the very nature of their talents made it possible for this recruiting to be carried out in absolute secrecy. The amplifiers—grown, as everybody knows now, from tissue cultures taken from the brains of dogs—were manufactured and installed in the ships and freighted to the Outworld spaceports. There was, at the same time, a certain weeding out of Revivalists from spacefaring personnel—many an officer who had assumed that he would live out his entire working life in Deep Space found himself brought ashore to take up an appointment as Berthing Master or Stevedore. It was all done quietly and without fuss. Those of us who remained in the ships knew what was happening, and why—and we knew what would happen to us if we divulged the merest hint of it to any out-sider.

We got two of the new Communications Officers in *Epsilon Draconis*—known to her crew as the *Eupeptic Dragon*. The Astronautical Superintendent had told us to be nice to them. The Old Man had told us the same thing. It was rather hard at first. We were a rather closely knit family in the *Eupeptic Dragon* and inclined to resent the introduction of a pair of strangers into our midst—especially strangers who didn't look or act like spacemen, who looked as though they would never look or act like spacemen.

George Kemp was the senior of the two. He looked like what he had been in civil life—a schoolmaster. He looked like the sort of schoolmaster who takes almost too much interest in the welfare of his charges, concerning himself with Boy Scout activities and the like after hours. Somehow he managed to make the neat (but not on him) and simple shirt and shorts uniform of the Commission look the sort of thing that is worn by an absentminded and not especially dressy Scoutmaster—his shorts were far too short, revealing an amazing length of scraggly leg; one epaulette was always hanging awry.

Freda Hall was rated as Second Communications Officer, She had been on the stage—half of a mind reading act. She looked as though she should have been one of those undressed blondes who stand

around looking ornamental to distract the attention of the audience from what the conjuror is doing. Still, she filled her uniform better than George Kemp did.

These, then, were our new shipmates. We were fully pre-pared not to like them. We suspected them. We got the cold shivers whenever we thought of that overgrown dog's brain in its vat in the communications office. We found ourselves not daring to think whenever George or Freda was in the vicinity—and it was hard not to think censorable thoughts when that blonde was around.

And yet, after the first week out from Earth, we found our-selves accepting them. Freda explained it to me some time later. "We don't eavesdrop," she told me. "We regard that as being unethical. But look at it this way. You meet somebody—and he shouts, '*I hate your guts!*' You can't help hearing it, can you? In the same way, George and my-self couldn't help knowing what all of you were thinking about us. It was so *loud*. So we did something about it. George took pains to make sure that his uniform stockings were pulled up properly and that his shoulder tabs were properly made fast to his shirt. I took pains to make my uniform look more like a uniform and less like a chorus girl's stage costume. I also went easier on the cosmetics. After all, we have the gift, and we'd be fools not to use it to make things easier for everybody."

So we accepted them, and they became members of the family. And the *Eupeptic Dragon* continued on her rounds, flitting from planetary system to planetary system as demanded by the exigencies of trade, picking up a few tons of cargo here, a couple or three passengers there, rarely visiting a major colony and almost never staying in any one port for more than six hours. She was a tramp, as are all of the Epsilon Class, but we liked her and we liked the life.

It was on New Dunedin that we had an unusually long stay. The Dunedinites are descended from colonists who came originally from New Zealand, and who brought with them from their mother country strong views as to the sanctity of the weekend. No—and I mean *no*—work is done on the Sab-bath. The only work done on a Saturday is work connected with essential services and entertainment.

It was on a Friday evening that we berthed at the New Dunedin spaceport. We had an unusually large shipment of cargo to discharge—deep freeze kippers and haddock from Atlantia, casks of whiskey from Nova Caledonia—so much so that it was impossible to complete work on Friday night. Those of us not on duty would have gone ashore that evening, but it was raining heavily. And a ship is a spaceman's home—more of a home, perhaps, than the house of any planet dweller. Those of us off duty were reluctant to leave the warmth and the comfort of familiar things, of familiar faces and voices. Even George and Freda, who had been in Space a mere Dog Watch, felt as we did—being telepaths they had, I suppose, no option.

We were all sitting in the cosy little Smoking Room. We had drinks. Bill Taylor, the Mate was playing chess with Sue Perkins, the Catering Officer. Kendall, the Reaction Engineer, was enjoying one of his interminable arguments with Kennedy, the Mannschen Drive Engineer. I was helping George and Freda to solve an especially complicated three dimensional crossword puzzle. Dick Travers, the Radio Officer, was tinkering with the big TV set in the corner.

"At least there's something I can still do," he grumbled good naturedly. "Nobody's come up with psionic TV yet..."

"They will," said Freda. "Just stick around, Dick, and and you'll see it yet..."

"Let's hope that they find some decent programmes to use it for," I said. "Leave the set alone, Dick—these hick plan-ets usually have even worse shows than the civilised worlds."

"I don't know about that," he said. "Sometimes there's something quite amusing from these small stations..."

The swirling colours in the tank suddenly coalesced, solid-ified, became the figures of men and women. We looked away from our puzzles, our games, interested for a few mo-ments, at least, in what the local station had to offer. It was, we saw, some sort of Quiz show. But it wasn't the Quiz part of it that was interesting—the questions asked of the various contestants were absurdly easy—it was the diabolical follow-up. As a study in psychology it was fascinating, but the admission that we found it fascinating was an admission of sadism.

The whole thing was simultaneously simple and ingenious. Each contestant had to answer three questions, and whether or not he answered them correctly he received a small prize—a package of the goods manufactured by the sponsor, a firm rejoicing in the name of Miracle Suds. When, and if, all three questions had been correctly answered the real fun started. On the stage were twenty-four numbered boxes, each containing a card upon which was printed the name of a prize. Some of the prizes were really big—the best was a Spurling four seater runabout—and some were absurdly small, such as, for example, a packet of pins. The audience was shown what was in the boxes; the contestant, of course, wasn't. He was offered his choice of the two dozen boxes.

Then the Quizmaster really enjoyed himself. First of all he would try to make the contestant change his mind. Then, when the victim had decided at last in favour of one particular number, the Quizmaster would bid for the box, increasing his offer to as high, at times, as a thousand credits. The big laugh came at the end, when it would be found that the con-testant had decided to take the box, turning down a bid, say, of a thousand credits, only to find that his prize was a packet of pins, or when the contestant had accepted money, losing one of the really worthwhile prizes by so doing.

"I should just hate to be on that stage," said the Mate at last. "I should just hate to weaken at the bid of three hundred credits, only to find that I'd thrown away the Spurling, the same as that silly clot did just now . . ."

"We could do with a Spurling here," said Kendall. "It'd be very handy in these small parts . . . The wings can be modi-fied, you know, so that they can be folded. We could just get the brute into my spare storeroom . . ."

"I wonder . . ." murmured Sue Perkins. "Is this show on tomorrow night too?"

"You thinking of entering, Sue?" asked Taylor.

"No, Bill. But we have somebody here who could enter..."

"I'm sorry," said George Kemp. "It wouldn't be ethical. You people may not know it—but we

telepaths are all members of our own Association, and one of our rules is that no member shall use his gift for purposes of private gain."

"But it wouldn't be *private* gain, George," explained Sue sweetly. "It'd be for the good of the ship, of your ship-mates."

"There's another point, too," said Bill Taylor, "you'd be performing a public service in taking the silly grins off the faces of that sadistic Quizmaster and his moronic studio audience . . ."

"But we don't know that the show's on tomorrow night," objected Freda. "We don't know that we could get on, in any case."

"You're the Purser, Peter," said Taylor to me. "Do something for your living for a change. Find out if the show *is* on."

There was a shore telephone in the corner of the Smoking Room. I went to the instrument, dialled the number of our local Agent. His face, when it appeared on the little screen, was rather puzzled.

"Yes, Mr. Wilkins?" he asked. "Is anything wrong at the ship?"

"No, Mr. Bradley. I just called you to ask a question."

"Well, what is it?"

"We're watching that Quiz programme— *Take A Box*. Is it on tomorrow night too?"

"Yes. It's always on Friday and Saturday night. Why?"

"Well, we were thinking that the ship could do with that Spurling. It'd be a very handy thing to have. We were wondering if you could get one of us entered as a contestant tomorrow . . ."

The Agent laughed.

"Yes," he said, "I could—although I must warn you that it's contrary to the Commission's policy for its officers to make a laughing stock of themselves. Anyhow, I know Maclaren, the Managing Director of Miracle Suds. I'll get on to him right now if you like. Which of you is entering?"

"Mr. Kemp," I said.

I was afraid that the Agent would ask just what and who Mr. Kemp was. I didn't think that anybody but those directly concerned with the running of ships or with communications knew anything about the employment of telepaths, but I wasn't sure.

"All right, then. Mr. Kemp it is. I'll tell Maclaren that the officers of your ship have watched and enjoyed the Take-A-Box programme and that one of them would like to enter for tomorrow night's competition. I'll ring back."

"Well," I said to the others, "that's fixed."

"I'm still not happy about it," said George Kemp.

"I know," said Freda. "You're radiating unhappiness like mad. Stop it, please—you're making me miserable. Look at it this way, George. The promoters of this sadistic show *deserve* to have somebody win the big prize—and that somebody might as well be us. That Spurling will be of more use to the company of this ship than it will be to anybody on this planet. And it will belong to all of us. It's a plain case of the greatest good for the greatest number. Don't you all agree?"

We said that we did.

George Kemp still looked miserable.

"All right," he said, "assuming that the Agent manages to get me entered for the show, what's the drill?"

"I don't suppose that we shall be allowed to be members of the studio audience," I said. "You've all seen how when the contestant is faced with the choice, the money or the box, the audience will yell 'Take it!' or 'Take the money!' and so on. Their advice is sometimes right and sometimes wrong—but it'll be pretty obvious to whoever's in charge that we'd give you the right advice. No—we all stay here and watch it on the TV. Freda will be in contact with you by telepathy. The first part should be easy enough—the bunch of us, between us, should be able to think of the right answers to any questions the Quizmaster asks, and Freda will pass them on to you . . ."

"Why shouldn't George get the answers directly from the Quizmaster's mind?" asked Taylor.

"Because I can't!" snapped Kemp. "Dammitall, Freda and I have been members of this ship's company for *months* now, and yet none of you has a glimmering as to how telepathy really works. Oh, we can receive you all right—but it's not a clear reception. It's like . . . like . . . How shall I put it? It's like listening to a song, and being able to distinguish the tune and not the words. We can pick up emotions and make a pretty shrewd guess as to what's behind them—but for clarity you *must* have two telepaths, one to send and the other to receive."

"Sorry," said the Mate. "Anyhow, I know now."

The telephone bell rang. I went to the instrument. The Agent's face was beaming at me from the little screen.

"I've fixed it up," he said. "A ground car will be calling for your Mr. Kemp at nineteen hundred hours tomorrow evening. But I'm afraid that none of the rest of you will be allowed into the studio."

"That's all right," I said. "And thanks a lot." I hung up.

"I'm looking forward to my first flight in that Spurling," said Freda. "Aren't we all?" said Sue. "It's in the bag," said Freda. "In the box," I corrected. "In the box."

The next evening George, hostile to all the world because of the break in his routine, had an early dinner and was waiting at the airlock when the car from the studio drew up alongside. We wished him—and ourselves—well as he boarded the vehicle, waved to him as he was borne swiftly from our sight. We went back on board then to enjoy our own dinner. The Old Man had been told about our scheme by the Agent and, of course, knew, as the Agent didn't, that success was certain. He commended our astuteness. After all, he pointed out, there probably wasn't another telepath on the whole of New Dunedin, and it was highly improbable that those responsible for the show would even guess what was happening.

"In any case," he said, "there's nothing *wrong* with what you are doing. You and George have a gift, Freda, and there's no reason why you shouldn't use it—especially when it's being used for the good of all of us."

"That's what I've been telling George ever since last night," she said. "I think that I've got him convinced at last, Cap-tain."

After dinner we went into the Smoking Room, waited for Dick Travers to tune in the TV to the right channel. We watched a dozen amateurish dancers galumphing across the stage like a herd of baby elephants. We watched a third-rate conjuror. We watched a newsreel that was nothing but a succession of local celebrities doing boring things.

Then *Take-a-Box* came on.

There was the same Quizmaster. There were the same—or they looked the same—contestants; rather desperate, rather frightened people, driven into the brief glare of publicity by... greed. I felt, rather uneasily, that it had been our greed that had driven George to make one of their number.

There was the usual warming up and explanatory session during which the Quizmaster tried hard to convince us what a witty, cultured—yet not lacking the common touch—and urbane fellow he was. We endured this in stony silence, and each of us made a resolution never, on any account, to buy any of his sponsor's products. Then while an impersonal female voice described them, we were shown the prizes.

Briefly the numbers flashed in the tank, behind each one, in the three dimensional screen, glowed a picture of each prize. Number One—a bottle of Nova Caledonian whiskey. Number Two—a bar of soap. Number Three—a gleaming Wash-master ...

The voice died, the pictures faded.

"Damn!" yelled the Mate. "*Do* something, somebody!"

"It's not this set," replied Dick Travers, fiddling desperately with the controls. "It must be that bloody ancient trans-mitter of theirs!"

Colours swirled and coalesced in the tank. A picture formed. The numeral 6 it was, and behind it gleamed the Spurling, sleek and trim with swept-back wings and needle prow, climb-ing vertically against a black, star spangled backdrop. Then suddenly, it was gone.

"It doesn't matter," said the Mate to Dick. "We've seen all we want to see. Start sending that six right away. Freda,"

"We want to see George win the thing," I pointed out.

And—"I'm trying," said Freda. "I'm trying, but it's hard to get through. Just to make things worse, he's got stage fright. I should have gone, Bill..."

"It's too late to think of that now," said Taylor.

"Anyhow," I said, "there's no hurry. There are six con-testants and George comes on last. Somebody else might have won the Spurling before then."

"Don't be so bloody cheerful," snapped Kendall.

"Tell me, Freda," asked Sue Perkins, "in a case like this do you sort of say the number to yourself, or do you visualise it? The reason I'm asking is that I thought we might all help, all concentrate at the same

time as you."

"I visualise it," said Freda. "I just think of the numeral six, fat and white against a black ground. You can all help..."

"Shut up!" snarled Dick Travers. "Keep quiet, can't you?"

The set was working again, both sound and vision. We watched the elimination of the first contestant, who had failed to answer correctly the first question, the name of the capital city of the Federation. We all sneered, thinking how incred-ible it was that even on this hick planet a man should not be familiar with the name of London. We saw him retire, crest-fallen, from the stage, clutching to his bosom a Jumbo Super Economy Size packet of Miracle Suds Shampoo and hoped that his wife had more hair than he had.

The second contestant, a middle-aged woman, was made of sterner stuff. She answered the three questions without hes-itation, naming the dominant life form of Deneb VTL—which is one of the three planets upon which non-organic life is known to exist—the name of the Captain of the first interstellar ship, the Capital of the Shaara Empire. She made her choice of boxes; much to our relief it was Number Fourteen. She stuck to her guns at first, refusing to change her mind. She let the bidding get as high as nine hundred and fifty credits before she weakened. She said that nine hundred and fifty credits was, after all, a lot of money and that she'd take it. We were all of us pleased to discover that the prize in box Number Fourteen would have been a loaf of bread.

The third contestant was not so lucky. He was determined to stick to his box and, having turned down a final offer of five hundred credits, received a silk necktie as a reward for his stubbornness.

The fourth and the fifth contestants were both sadly defici-ent in general knowledge.

Then it was George's turn. He shambled on to the stage, looking extremely miserable. He shook hands with the Quiz-master. He was introduced to the audience as a spaceman, all the way from Earth, who had heard of New Dunedin's great game of skill and chance—sponsored by Miracle Suds—and who was determined to show the Galaxy that Imperial Earth was still the leader in all things. It was all very funny to the studio audience.

"And now, Mr. Kemp," said the Quizmaster, "I'm going to ask you three simple questions. Yes—simple questions. Questions that any New Dunedin schoolboy could answer in his sleep. I don't believe in being too hard on visitors ..."

"Thank you," mumbled George.

"Then here's the first one. What was the name of the team that won last year's McAllister Cup?"

"I was expecting this!" laughed Bill Taylor. "While the rest of you were snoring your heads off this afternoon I went ashore and laid in a stock of local reference books!" He was leafing rapidly through the slim volume on his knee. "Stand by to transmit, Freda!"

"Come, come, Mr. Kemp," the Quizmaster was saying. "Surely you're a sportsman. I thought that every Earthman was a sportsman."

"We are," said George bravely.

"Think of that beautiful Spurling!" chuckled the Quiz-master. "Just the thing for weekend leaves in port!"

"I am thinking of it," said George, playing for time.

"Ten seconds, Mr. Kemp. I'm afraid that that's all that I can allow you. Ten seconds, starting from now. One ... Two ... Three . . ."

"Women's basket ball!" shouted Taylor. "The team was *Pride of the Glen!*"

"Seven ... Eight..."

"Pride of the Glen," said George firmly.

The Quizmaster's face fell.

"You're right," he admitted. "But then, you're a space-man, with a girl on every planet. You should have known that one."

"Why," asked George, genuinely puzzled.

"Never mind. *I'm* asking the questions. Stand by for Number Two. What New Dunedin athlete ran a mile in three minutes fifty-eight point two seconds?"

"Hollis, on Earth, did it in three minutes, fifty seven point nine seconds," said George.

"We're not concerned with Earth, Mr. Kemp. Earth is a long way from here. We're concerned with New Dunedin."

This time Taylor was faster.

"Hannah," he yelled. "Charles Hannah!"

"Charles Hannah . . ." repeated Freda.

"Come, Mr. Kemp, we haven't got all evening," said the Quizmaster. "I always thought that you people travelled faster than light, but you are very slow."

"Charles Hannah," said George.

"Hannah it is," admitted the Quizmaster. Then, trying to rattle George, "but it took you a long time to think of it."

"My memory," said George hastily, "isn't what it was."

"No? Let's try it out on this one, then. Who is the goal-keeper of the Dunedin Wanderers?"

"What do they play?" asked George.

"Football, of course."

"Yes but what kind? There are so many varieties."

"There is only *one* game of football," said the Quizmaster sternly. "Association Football."

"They have at least seven on Altairia," said George. "Association, Rugby League, Rugby Union, Australian Rules, American Rules, Vegan Union, Altairian League ..."

"Fascinating, Mr. Kemp. But please answer my question."

"Cook!" snapped Taylor.

"Cook ..." repeated Freda.

"Cook ..." we all whispered, concentrating hard.

"Cook," said George calmly.

"Cook," almost snarled the Quizmaster. "You're in the game now, the real game, the big game. Look at all those boxes. In one of them is the piece of paper that will entitle you to the Spurling—turret drive, four seats, pressurised cabin. Which box do you want?"

"Six!" we all screamed. "Six! Six!"

"Shut up!" snapped Freda. "Let me concentrate."

"Six," said George.

"Six?" asked the Quizmaster. "And why do you want six? Is it your lucky number? What about seven, or eight, or nine?"

"Six," said George firmly.

"So you won't change your mind? So you're quite de-termined to have Number Six?"

"I am," said George.

"Would a hundred credits make you change your mind?"

"It would not."

"Two hundred?"

"No."

"I like a man who knows his own mind—but an intelligent man will change his mind if there's sufficient inducement. Six isn't the only number, you know."

"I know," said George.

"Five hundred credits—the money or the box. Five hundred credits. You can have quite a party on that."

"I want Number Six," said George firmly.

There was a pause in the proceedings as another man walked on to the stage. He looked like a technician. He whispered something to the Quizmaster. The Quizmaster nodded, then made a gesture of dismissal.

"This is my last offer," he said to George. "A thousand credits ... One, zero, zero, zero, credits ..."

"I want the box," said George.

We watched George's face fall as the box was opened. Our own faces fell as we read the lettering on the magnified image of the card that was taken from it. A year's supply of free tickets, for two persons, to the Dunedin City Sports Stadium would have been considered a prize worth having by a local, but it was valueless to us.

"Get on the phone to the station," snarled the Mate, "The game's crook!"

"And now," said the Quizmaster, "I must apologise to those of our viewers who were expecting to see our friend win the big prize. During the temporary breakdown the numeral nine—I repeat nine—was televised upside down. It was box Number Nine that held the Spurling." He seemed to be looking straight at us as he continued, "Neither the breakdown nor the presentation of the upside down image made any difference, of course, to the fairness of the contest..."

"I wish you could do teleportation as well as telepathy," growled the Mate to Freda as he hurled a beer bottle at the screen.

I thought how useful that thousand credits would have been—apart from anything else it would have bought us the new TV set which, as and from that moment, we needed.

Bertram Chandler