

THE SONG

by A. Bertram Chandler

Illustrated by ORBAN

Meteors might account for the loss of a couple of ships — but not ten. And the Thunderchild would be the eleventh, unless...

GANYMEDE QUEEN was the tenth. Ganymede Queen, of the Jovian Mail Lines, was homeward bound from Port Europa, via Ceres City, when she vanished—the tenth ship to disappear in the Asteroid Belt.

Star Seeker—owned by the Interplanetary Survey Commission, the second ship to push out as far as the Belt— was the first. It was assumed at the time that she had come into collision with one of the myriad fragments of planetary debris infesting the Ecliptic between Mars and Jupiter. Years later—when the search for wreckage was at last abandoned—it was assumed that her Captain and crew, smitten by the madness not uncommon in those relatively early days of space travel, had decided to abandon their assignment and had driven their ship out to Jupiter or Saturn, had crashed on either of the two giant planets—or, fuel exhausted, had fallen into some eccentric orbit around, but far from the Sun.

Then there were Sarah Anne and Sweet Sue, two little ore carriers owned by the Asteroid Mining Corporation. There were Yenta, Marlene and Hermione—all freighters owned by Ceres City Carriers. There was Pathfinder another Survey ship. There was Ring Master, of the Saturnian Satellites Line. There was the tramp freighter Stardust, on charter to CCC.

There was rapture on Madison's face, as he started forward like a sleepwalker. Mary clung to him, but he didn't know she was there.

There was Ganymede Queen.

There was Thunderchild.

IT WAS QUIET in the Lounge of Thunderchild. It was early "afternoon"—by the ship's chronometers—that time of day that has been devoted aboard ship, from time immemorial, to the pleasant and civilized custom of siesta. Some few passengers were not sleeping—but these were indulging in no activities that could possibly disturb either their fellows or the off-duty ship's staff. Some were reading; some were playing chess, and some were playing cards. Guy Madison was among the readers. There was nothing, he often said, like a Deep Space voyage to give one the chance to catch up on one's back reading, to plough through all the classics that one should read but that one, somehow, never finds time for on the surface of the average planet. He had brought almost a trunk full of books—ultra-lightweight, Deep Space editions, of course—along with him, mainly classics. There were the plays of Shakespeare. There was "War and Peace". There was "For Whom The Bell Tolls", There was Waldermeyer's translation of "The Odyssey". There was "From Here to Eternity". There were "Ulysses" and "Finnegan's Wake". He was reading the Waldermeyer when the soft music issuing from the loud speaker faded, to be replaced by the relatively harsh

voice of the announcer.

"This is Station AST, the Voice of the Asteroids, broadcasting to all settlements, to all miners and prospectors, to the ships in Space. This is the news, and this is Mervyn Riddell reading it.

"GRAVE FEARS are entertained for the safety of the Jovian Mail liner Ganymede Queen, now over sixteen hours overdue at the Ceres City spaceport. Signals, both broadcast and beamed along the vessel's estimated approach orbit, have not been answered. The Survey Service ship Navigator is being readied for Space, and is expected to blast off within half an hour..."

"She's not the first," said Madison to his wife.

"A typically fatuous remark," replied Mary Madison. "Listen to the News, can't you?"

"Let me finish," said Madison. "What I meant is that she's not the first in this sector of Space. There's something here that knocks off ships—and that knocks 'em off without a trace. The Belt's been well enough surveyed, and one would think that in all the years since the first disappearance—Star Seeker, I think it was—something would have been found. But—if we include Ganymede Queen—no less than ten ships have vanished completely."

"Space is big," said his wife.

"Agreed. But the Asteroid Belt, after all, has a very limited area. And the detector devices used by the prospectors would indicate, even at extreme ranges, the huge concentration of pure metal that is a ship."

"The trouble with you," she said, "is that you never forget for one minute that you're a writer of mystery stories. You insist on seeing mystery where there is no mystery. So many things can happen to a ship—collision with a large meteorite; the pile getting out of control; a failure of the air-conditioning plant... Oh, I could go on indefinitely

"ALL RIGHT," he said. "You're a Space Captain's daughter. You know all the answers. But we'll deal with the three points you raised. Point one—the collision theory. That, I admit, is possible. Such a collision could well throw the wreckage right out of the Belt—it all boils down to whatever is the resultant of the forces involved. Point two—trouble with the pile. That I can't grant you. The flare would be seen by somebody. Point three—failure of the air-conditioning plant. That I can't grant you either; there would be ample time for the ship to scream out her plight to the entire Solar System on her radio."

"Don't carry on so," she said wearily. "We're on holiday, looking forward to seeing the Jovian Satellites for the first time. We're very sorry for the people aboard Ganymede Queen, but there isn't anything that we can do for them. In any case, it might be our turn next..." The volume of sound from the loud speaker abruptly increased.

"This is the Captain speaking," announced an authoritative voice. "The ship

will be diverted from her orbit to institute a search for the missing liner, Ganymede Queen. Passengers will please retire to their cabins and strap themselves into their acceleration couches. All crew members with no maneuvering stations will do likewise. The changes of acceleration will be announced before being made. That is all."

The Madisons picked up their books, joined the general exodus from the Lounge.

GUY MADISON strapped his wife into her couch, ignoring her protests that she could manage it by herself. He wished, as he had so often wished during their married life, that she was just a little less capable. Her seeming fragility was, he knew, deceptive. The world saw her as a slight, frail blonde, and assumed she was afflicted—or that her husband was afflicted—by the blonde's traditional dumbness. This was far from the truth. She read his manuscripts; suggested improvements and then, in her capacity as his agent, she dickered with the publishing houses for the highest possible price. Madison was grateful—and more than a little resentful.

He lowered his long, lean body on to his own couch and adjusted the straps. He was still fumbling with the last fasteners when the Captain's voice came from the bulkhead speaker: "Attention, all! Attention, all! Stand by for Null G! Stand by for Null G!"

The roar of the rockets—muffled, it was, by many layers of insulation but still, normally, an omnipresent background noise to every activity—ceased. The feeling of weightlessness was offset by the couch straps, but Madison felt, nonetheless, his usual panicky fear with the loss of orientation, the failure to be able to distinguish up from down.

"They're starting the gyroscopes," said Mary.

He heard the initial hum rise rapidly up the scale to an almost supersonic whine. He felt the ship turning, as the slight centrifugal force gave the illusion of gravity. It was worse than Free Fall had been—down was now at the outboard bulkhead.

"There're plastic bags in the rack over the bunk," suggested his wife.

"I'm all right," he gulped. "Attention, all! Attention. all! 2 G acceleration is about to commence! 2 G acceleration is about to commence!"

THE WHINE of the gyroscopes was replaced by the roar of the rockets. The acceleration couches creaked under the suddenly-returning weight of their occupants. Madison fought for breath. He felt as though an elephant were sitting on his chest.

"Spacemen," remarked Mary, "can take 5 Gs without making a fuss about it,"

"I'm not a spaceman," he gasped. "I don't want to be one."

"Thank God there's one the family," said Mary icily.

"What? Hostess on the Lunar Ferry—and you call that being a spaceman?"

"I'm still a member of the Guild," she said.

"All right, all right."

"Attention, please! Attention, please! Stand by for Null G! Stand by for Null

"They're having their fun and games up there," complained Madison bitterly.

"Captain Welsh is a very competent officer," said Mary. "My father, under whom he shipped as Mate, always spoke very highly of him."

"Attention, all! Attention, all! This is the Captain speaking. It is probable that the vessel will be proceeding in Free Fall for some hours; but it may be necessary, at any moment, to make changes of velocity or orbit. Passengers and off-duty personnel will remain strapped in their couches until further notice. That is all."

"I don't..." gulped Madison. "I don't feel..."

"Use a plastic bag." said Mary unsympathetically.

THE HOSTESS who, an hour or so later, brought round refreshments was inclined to be talkative. After all, Mary was a member of the Guild; and her husband, therefore, could be assumed almost to be an honorary spaceman by marriage.

"I've been up in Control, Mrs. Madison," she said. "We're in the thick of the Drift—nothing but rocks as far as the eye can see, some of 'em no bigger than pebbles, some of 'em big enough to raise a family on. The Captain has tried to put us into the same approach orbit used by Ganymede Queen, but we're coasting in the Ceres City, with a speed only slightly in excess of that of the planetoids. I've seen some ruins, too—the first time that I've ever seen any. They were on a big, odd-shaped rock—it looked as though it must once have been a mountain, or part of a mountain. The Mate let me look through the telescope."

"And what did you see?" asked Madison.

"A long, low roof," she said, "and white pillars. It was like... Like..." She picked up the copy of "The Odyssey" that was tucked under Madison's chest strap. "Like the building on the cover of this book."

"Like a Greek temple," said Madison. "Interesting. It makes one wonder if the natives of the old fifth planet ever got as far as Earth—there's so much in Greek mythology that could be explained by the visitations of other-worldly beings..."

"MORE MYSTERIES," interjected Mary. "You do love them, don't you? Anyhow, we know that the ancient Martians and the people of the fifth planet both had space travel—otherwise they could hardly have fought a war that destroyed one world and devastated the other—so there's no reason to suppose that they didn't visit Earth."

"But there's no proof." objected Madison. "No definite proof. It's all a matter of myth and legend..."

"But what's so important about it?" asked his wife.

"It is important," he insisted. "Who knows the Past, controls the Future..."

"Our knowledge of that Past would be of no use to us," she said. She gestured toward the book that the Hostess was still holding. "Greeks and Trojans, and a long voyage home made by one Ulysses (who must have been the world's worst navigator), to his Penelope, who must have been the world's most faithful wife—what is there of value to us in that?"

"There could be something," he said.

"Tell me," she said sweetly.

"Well, for example, you know how quite a few people do think that the history of the three worlds—Earth, Mars and the fifth planet—is somehow linked up, how they think that intelligent life of all three planets had a common origin. For all we know, I may have Martian blood in my veins..."

"I should never," she said, "have let you join that absurd Society."

"BUT HERE'S something in it, Mrs. Madison," insisted the hostess. "There is, really. My first time on Mars—my first Deep Space trip after I graduated from the Lunar Ferry—I knew somehow that I had been there before. It was like... It was like coming home—and, finding your home burned to the ground. There was so much familiar, and so much—the deserts, the ruins—unfamiliar. And I'm not the only one. The Captain told me, at the time, that he'd felt the same his first time."

"And I felt the same," said Madison.

"And I didn't," said Mary Madison. "It's utterly fantastic, really, the number of times that the *deja vu* phenomenon has been explained by psychologists; and the number of otherwise intelligent people who still use it as proof of racial memory, reincarnation, and the Lord knows what else..."

"The phenomenon has never been explained by the psychologists," disagreed Madison. "It's only been explained away."

"All right—if it makes you happy." Then, to the hostess, "I hate to interfere, my dear—but don't you think that the other passengers might be waiting for their coffee and sandwiches?"

"A pity," said the hostess. "I could talk about this sort of thing for hours."

"Your trouble," said Mary Madison to her husband after the girl had left, "is that you want a woman who agrees with you all the time. Don't think I didn't notice the way you were watching that little, red-headed popsy."

"Your trouble," he replied, "is that you haven't an open mind on these matters."

"I just don't bother with 'em," she said. "They're of absolutely no importance whatsoever."

"Attention, all! Attention, all! The ship is about to swing into a new heading, after which One G acceleration will be maintained for a few minutes. The search for Ganymede Queen is still proceeding. That is all."

MADISON tried to read, to lose himself in the adventures of long ago and far away Ulysses—Circe, Cyclops, Scylla and Charbidis, the Sirens. It was all so unreal—and so real. Circe typified the power of women to remake their men, or to subject them to virtual slavery and degradation. He looked across to the couch on which Mary was sleeping, thought, She's tried to turn me into an ant—an industrious ant... He grinned, pleased by the absurd comparison. The Cyclops legend—that was easy enough to explain. Ulysses, who must have been a man of considerable intelligence, tangled with a one-track-mind fanatic, whose weakness, as well as his strength, lay in his singlemindedness. Scylla and Charbidis—the whirlpools in the Straits of Messina; no allegories there. The Sirens... (There were the Lorelei, too, of course.) Once again—how Homer harped on that theme!—the power of women to wreck a man's life ...

The bulkhead speaker coughed and crackled.

Then, "Attention, all? Attention, all..."

The Captain's voice ceased abruptly, was replaced by that of a woman, a woman singing. Music? wondered Madison. Music—at a time like this?

He ceased to wonder. His mind relaxed, lulled by the golden voice of the unknown singer. A golden woman, he thought. He could almost see her—tall, and Slim, and somehow, subtly, glowing.

I must go to her, he thought. I must go to her. She's all that I've ever wanted, all that I shall ever want. She is peace, and fulfillment, and soft arms and soft lips after the hard day's labor...

THE SHIP was accelerating again now, but he hardly noticed it. He unbuckled the straps, slid off the couch. Moving to the slow rhythm of the song, like a man walking underwater, he made his way to the door. Something—somebody—was in his way. It was Mary. Impatiently he brushed her aside, but she clung to his arm.

"Guy! Where do you think you're going?"

"I must go to... her," he muttered.

"Guy! Are you mad? That hostess, you mean?"

He did not answer, but pushed on towards the door. "Guy! Listen to me! It's dangerous to be out of your couch!"

"It is not dangerous with her."

"Guy! Guy! Stop!"

They struggled by the doorway. She was a strong woman, in spite of her appearance of fragility. She tripped him, and they fell to the deck together. His shirt pulled out from his shorts, became wrapped around his head.

Abruptly he ceased fighting.

"I can still hear it," he said, his voice muffled by the garment. "But it's not so strong. I know what it is."

"What can you hear?" she demanded.

"The song. From the loudspeaker. Let me up, Mary. I must go to the Control Room."

"There's no song." she cried. "The speaker's dead."

"To you, perhaps. Listen, my dear, this is serious. I think that they can hear the song in Control. I think that this ship is going to vanish like all the others—unless we can stop it. Get me some of that cleansing tissue of yours, and stuff my ears with it."

"I still think that you're mad," she told him.

BUT SHE got up from the deck, went to the little cabinet where her toilet requisites were stowed. When she found the cleansing tissue he was sitting on his couch. His shirt was no longer wrapped around his head, but he had a hand clamped firmly over each ear. He let his right hand fall, reluctantly. She blocked the ear with a wad of the soft tissue. She blocked his left ear next.

He could still hear the song—but faintly. It stirred in him no more than a vague sense of longing that was almost nostalgia. He was tempted to remove the ear-plugs—but he knew what the result would be and found it easy to resist temptation. He got up, walked to the cabin door, flung it open.

"Look," he said. "They can hear the song."

His wife stared out into the alleyway, stared at the men walking slowly past the door, like sleepwalkers. She stared at the women who, as she had done, were trying to restrain their husbands.

"Come with me," ordered Madison. "Bring all the tissues from the cabinet."

AT LAST, they reached Control. It had been no easy journey—the alleyways and companionways were jammed with somnambulistic men, with struggling women. And once there was an abrupt deceleration as the Drive was cut, and a new voice blaring out from the speakers: "This is the Mate. The Captain is mad and I am taking over. I am shaping orbit for..." But the song, the melody and the rhythm of the song, surged over the spoken words, drowning them before they were cut off in mid sentence. And with no warning the rockets fired again—not One G this time, but at least three. They kept on, somehow, crawling rather than walking, their bodies weighing like lead in the brutal acceleration. Mary took the lead. She knew ships—even though they had been only the relatively small rockets of the Lunar Ferry—and was able to guide her husband, almost by instinct, through alleyways and up ladders that, normally, would be used by ship's personnel only.

They climbed the final ladder, emerged through the hatch into the ship's

Control Room. Madison had been there before, during one of the conducted tours of Control and Engine Room led by a bored ship's officer. He had been there before, and had been impressed by the alertness of all those on duty, by the atmosphere of quiet efficiency. That atmosphere was gone now. The Captain and his officers were quiet—but looked far from alert. They sat in their chairs—with the exception of the Mate, who was sprawled on the deck, battered and unconscious—staring up through the forward viewport.

MADISON looked up, saw, right ahead, an unwinking blue light, a cold, somehow menacing, glow. He looked away from the light to the nearest radar screen. He did not know enough about such things to be able to read the range of whatever it was ahead—but he could see that it was a solid body, and that the range was decreasing rapidly.

"The tissues," he snapped to Mary. He gestured towards the Captain. "Block his ears!" She ignored him. She moved—slowly and painfully—to the Radio Officer, who was seated before a complex looking switchboard upon which shone little, colored lights. She prepared the make-shift earplugs. She inserted them. She screamed into that officer's ear, "Switch off the receivers! Switch off the receivers!"

Slowly, the radioman's hand came up to the board. One by one, the little lights, flickered and died. And the song cut off in mid-syllable, died with them, was no more than a haunting memory, a memory that was destroyed by the Captain's profanity, by the mad flurry of activity in the Control Room as the ship was flung out of her collision orbit.

SLOWLY, cautiously, Thunderchild circled the asteroid.

This was, obviously, no fragment of the shattered fifth planet. It was too regular in shape, an almost perfect sphere, with its own mountains and valleys, plains and plateaux. It must once have been a satellite.

The blue glow was still there—an aura around the tiny world. It flickered. It pulsed hungrily. It seemed to expand. The Captain's strong fingers depressed the firing keys on the arm of his chair. Acceleration smote Thundeechild's people like a physical blow.

"I'm getting away from here," said the shipmaster. "And fast. The Survey boys can look after this—not that they'll find any more of Ganymede Queen than we did. That uncanny light must be some sort of disintegrating radiation..."

"Yes," agreed Madison. "And the song was to lure us to within range of it."

"But why did some of us hear the song, and some not?" asked the Captain.

"That, as you say, is for the Survey boys to find out. Here's my theory, for what it's worth. This thing—obviously—was a weapon—a fully-automatic one that had to exercise a certain discrimination, that had to be able to distinguish friend from foe. Its 'brain' must be sensitive to the radiation emitted by all life forms. It was when it picked up the Martian radiation that it went into action.

"YOU'RE FAMILIAR, of course, with the theory that many of us are hybrid

Martians. Ten ships—we should have been the eleventh —have passed, by sheer blind chance, within range of this thing, and each of the ten had hybrid Martians among her personnel. Each of the ten was using her radio and, naturally, had her intercom switched on. The song, of course, was a hypnotic device to draw the ships inside the effective range of that disintegration field."

"But how did you know?" asked the Captain.

"It was a hunch—but I shouldn't have had the hunch if I hadn't been reading the "Odyssey", if I hadn't been talking, with my wife and one of your hostesses, about the hybrid Martian theory. The two added up."

"The Odyssey?"

"Yes. Ulysses and the Sirens. He was lashed to the mast, and had the ears of himself and his crew stopped with wax..."

"Even so," said the Captain, "it was quick thinking on your part to deal with the Radio Officer first and get him to switch everything off."

"Not on my part," admitted Madison. "I was going to deal with you first—and then the others would have dealt with me as they dealt with the Mate—how is he, by the way?"

"Nothing broken," said the Captain. "But go on."

"It was, as I was saying, my wife's idea. I had a job convincing her of the nature of the danger, but once she was convinced..."

"I've always said," stated Mary Madison. "that Ulysses would have got into far less trouble if he'd taken his wife along with him."