

Planet of Ill Repute

I WAS WITH COMMODORE Pendray when, in the survey ship *Matthew Flinders*, he made his big sweep through the Sagittarius Sector. Find us worlds, they had told us when we set out from Earth. Find us worlds rich in metals, rich in timber, rich in animal life, worlds that will give us room and sustenance for our ever-expanding population. Find us worlds—but don't forget The Act.

We did not forget The Act. We knew that to do so could mean, at the very least, professional ruin. And there was more to it than the legalities involved. I can say, with some pride, that it was the personnel of the Survey Service who succeeded in impressing upon the Federation Parliament the crying need for such a law. We had seen too many worlds, planets whose people had been, until our coming, living in a state of Edenic innocence, ruined, their indigenous cultures destroyed by both the trader and the missionary. The Protection of Undeveloped Peoples Act stopped that. It stopped it by saying: *Hands off!* If the initial survey revealed no mechanized industry, no religion whose rites ran counter to absolute ethics—or no religion at all—then the people of such a world were protected from further contact and their planet became a proscribed planet. That is the law today, and in spite of the occasional outcries from both religious and commercial interests I don't think that it will ever be changed.

We were over eighteen months out from Earth when we found Lishaar. To say that it was a pleasant world is an understatement. It was beautiful, unspoiled, and to us, after a long, dreary succession of planets that were either too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, it was paradise. We were all of us rather sorry when we discovered that Lishaar possessed intelligent life—all hands, from the Commodore down, had contemplated resigning from the Service and turning colonist. The Lishaarians were human rather than merely humanoid, living in simple villages that we had not been able to see from our orbit around the planet. They were a highly civilized people, although theirs was essentially a Stone Age civilization. Their state of development, according to our ethnologist, was analogous to that of the Polynesians before they had been spoiled by contact with the white man.

We came to know them well during our survey of the planet. They were courteous and helpful and, once we had mastered their simple but musical language, told us all that we wished to know. They pressed gifts upon us—succulent fruits, a mildly intoxicating wine, garlands of flowers—not in the hope of anything in return, not with the feeling that they were propitiating gods from their almost always cloudless sky, but out of sheer, unselfish friendliness. We, of course, gave gifts in return—articles that, according to the experts, could have no bad effect upon them or their way of life. Any article of worked metal we—remembering the history of Polynesia—were careful not to give them, neither did we allow them to sample our own alcoholic beverages.

Our departure from Lishaar was hasty. We had been, as I have said, a long time out from Earth, and the Lishaarian women were very beautiful. Even though interbreeding was impossible, intercourse was not. The Commodore was in many respects a simple man, and it never occurred to him that his officers would be capable of putting the matter to the test. When he made the discovery he was deeply shocked.

I remember the night well. It was during my watch—the Survey Service is run on naval lines—and I was lounging around the control room, high in the nose of the ship, looking out over the rippled sea on which the two westering moons had thrown a twin path of golden light. On one side was the sea, and on the other the forest, and through the trees I could see, when I turned, the mellow lanterns that the Lishaarians hung outside their huts.

I stiffened to attention as the Commodore came up through the hatch.

"Barrett," he said, "do you hear voices?"

I looked at him. I had heard stories of what too long service in deep space did to one. But he seemed sane enough—sane, but with one of his famous rages in the gestatory stage. The crest of white hair was beginning to stand erect, the vivid blue eyes were starting to protrude.

I listened.

I said, "I hear nothing, sir."

"Then come down to my cabin," he snapped.

I followed him down the ladder. It was against regulations for the control room to be left unmanned—but a Commodore on the spot piles on more Gs than a full Board of Admirals back on Earth. I followed him down to his cabin. I stood with him under the air intake.

I heard music at first. Somebody was playing recordings of the songs that had been popular back on Earth at the time of our departure. The sound, I realized, must be drifting through the ventilation ducts.

"Just music," I said. "It will be the junior officers having a party."

"Listen!" he ordered.

I heard, then, the unmistakable sound of a woman's laugh.

He stormed out of his cabin, down companionways and along alleyways, with myself following. He flung open the door of the room from which the noise of music and laughter was coming. There were eight people there, smoking and drinking—four sub-lieutenants and four of the native women. Three of the women had lost the grass skirts that were their only garments. All of them were drunk. One of them got unsteadily to her feet, flung her arms around the Commodore's neck and kissed him full on the mouth.

Commodore Pendray pushed the naked, golden-skinned woman from him, but used only what force was necessary.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if I may use that word when referring to you, that is.... Gentlemen, the party is over, and you may consider yourselves under arrest. Mr. Barrett, see to it that the airlock sentry responsible is also placed under arrest. Get these women off my ship."

I managed it at last, although I had to turn out three of the crew to help me. I found, at the same time, another half-dozen women in the crew accommodation. I thought that a mutiny was going to develop, but luckily some of the spacemen were sufficiently sober to realize what the penalty would be. To go out through the airlock in deep space, without a spacesuit, is one of the more unpleasant deaths.

At last I had the rapidly sobering, badly frightened females out of the ship. As the last of them staggered down the ramp the alarm bells were starting to ring and, vastly amplified, the voice of the Executive Commander was bellowing, "Secure for space! All hands secure for space!"

One of the sub-lieutenants was a friend of mine. I liked him, although we did not see eye to eye on most things. He was a misfit in the Service and was always talking of resigning his commission and transferring to the commercial side. His real ambition was to become a trader, to be a little king on a world like Lishaar, or as like Lishaar as a non-proscribed planet could be.

I was, I fear, responsible for his escape. After all, he had saved my life on Antares VI, had fought with his bare hands the vicious snow scorpion that had thrown me down and that would, save for his intervention, have pierced my body with its deadly sting. I owed my escape to him—so, when we were berthed on Calydon, our last refueling stop on the way back to Earth, I cancelled the debt. There was little doubt, even then, what the outcome of the trial would be—dismissal from the Service and a few years on one of the penal planetoids. I knew that Watkins would deserve such a sentence, but I did not want to see him serving it.

The organization of the escape was surprisingly easy—a short circuit in the wiring of the electric locks to the cells, the posting of an airlock sentry who was notorious for his sleepiness. Surprisingly enough, there were few repercussions. The sentry swore that he had been attacked and overpowered, and was able to produce some convincing bruises—doubtless self-inflicted—in support of his story. The officer of the watch—myself—had seen nothing, heard nothing. There is little that one can see or hear of happenings at ground level when you are on duty in the control room of a spaceship four hundred feet above her tail fins. The alarms, of course, should have sounded when the short circuit made the locks inoperative, and the electrical engineer and his subordinates received a first class bawling-out from the Commodore. I was sorry for them.

The local police were, of course, notified—but Calydon was then, and still is, a wild, frontier world that takes seriously only such crimes as horse stealing and, now and again, murder. They did not, obviously, regard the hunting down and arrest of four deserters from an interstellar ship, even a Survey ship, as a matter of great importance. When we blasted off a day later, nothing had been done in the matter and it was safe to assume that nothing would be done.

I thought that I should never see Lishaar again. A proscribed planet is cut off from all interstellar intercourse, its peoples are left to develop in their own way and at their own speed. Landings are made at fifty-year intervals for inspection purposes, and that is all.

It was thirty years before I was proved wrong. Commodore Pendray was long since retired, but the old *Matthew Flinders* was still in service. Spaceships have longer lives than the people who man them. I was in her still, a full Commander, although I knew that I should get no further. The Lishaar incident had meant a black mark for all the officers who were there at the time, and such black marks are as nearly indelible as makes no difference, and can never be erased by long and faithful service. I should, I knew, have been Captain of the old *Mattie* or of one of the other ships in the Service—and I would have been but for The Act.

Commodore Blaisdell was our commanding officer. He was a year or so my junior in age and was what I would never be, the complete martinet. Regulations were his gods, and the observance of them was, to him, the only possible form of worship. He was a tall man, and thin, and his pallor, his washed-out-blue eyes and his grey hair conveyed the impression of icy coldness. His manner was frigid when he sent for me to order me to prepare the ship for space.

I asked him what was happening. It was obvious that this was to be no routine voyage. Our refit was to be cut short and we were to find room, somehow, for a detachment of marines.

He told me, but not until I had got astride as high a horse as was possible to one of my rank.

One of the Commission's Epsilon Class tramps, it appeared, had put in to Lishaar to recalibrate her Mannschenn Drive controls, a job that can be done only on a planetary surface. A shipmaster may, of course, land on a proscribed planet in an emergency. The tramp captain had carried out his recalibration, but an attempt had been made to detain his ship. There had been fighting, even.

I read the report. There was, I learned, a spaceport on Lishaar and a trading post. When the Commission tramp put in she found three other ships already there—two of them privately owned trading vessels out of Calydon and one of them a small passenger liner from Waverley. The town that had grown around the spaceport combined the worst features of a red-light district and an attraction for the lower type of tourist. There was an Earthman there who had set himself up as king. His name was Watkins.

I was to learn later how Watkins had made his way back to Lishaar. With his experience he had found it easy enough to get a berth as Third Mate in one of the decrepit tramps running out of Calydon, and had succeeded in interesting her skipper in the possibilities of trade with the proscribed world. He had been landed on Lishaar and had set himself up as a trader, and as more than a trader. He had developed local industries—the brandy made from the native wine became one of the main exports. He had turned his capital city—as it soon became—into the sort of place that catered to the lowest tastes of Man.

But all this I was to learn later during the long, and sometimes painful, business of finding out just what had happened, and how, and why. Some of it I had already guessed when with Commodore Blaisdell, the marines at our heels, I marched into Watkins's palace. We did not expect to find him there—the fighting at the spaceport must have given him ample warning of our coming. But he was there, sitting in a large, luxuriously furnished room. He was alone.

In some ways he had changed a lot, in other ways very little. He had put on weight, but his brown, heavily tanned skin went well with the colorful loincloth that was his only garment. His hair was grey—but so was mine, what was left of it. His expression, the old don't-give-a-damn smile, was still the same.

He said, "Come in, gentlemen. Be seated. I'm afraid you'll have to help yourself to drinks—I sent my women away when all the shooting started out at the port." He got to his feet. "Why, Bill!" he exclaimed, advancing with outstretched hand, "I never recognized you, not with that brass hat and all that braid!"

I shook hands with him, ignoring the Commodore's icy glare.

Blaisdell said, "I hate to interrupt this touching reunion, Commander, but I have to remind you that this man is under arrest."

"I suppose I am," said Watkins. "Well—it was good while it lasted."

"Good?" flared the Commodore. "Good for whom? Good for you, perhaps, and for those scum from Calydon and Waverley. You've debauched these innocent people, Watkins, and you'll pay for it." He

said slowly, "Somebody once said—it was back in the days when spaceflight was only a dream—that Man, in his travels, will carry the dirt of Earth all over the galaxy on his boots. That's what you've done, Watkins."

Watkins smiled. He said, "Look at those pictures."

We looked at them. One was an abstract painting, one of those things that are all form and color and meaning. The other was a conventional nude—a golden-skinned woman standing beside the sea. I know nothing of art, but I knew that neither of the paintings would have looked out of place hung on the walls of Earth's finest gallery. One does not need to be an expert to recognize quality.

Watkins touched a switch on the boxed machine standing beside his chair. Immediately there was music. We all listened to it. There was depth, and there was emotion; there was the black emptiness of space and the high whine of the Drive; there was the crushing weight of acceleration and the roar of the rockets....

"That was composed," said Watkins, "by one of my proteges. He did it after his first voyage in a spaceship." He turned to me, "You remember what their music *was* like, Bill. Just a primitive thumping of drums accompanying not very tuneful voices.... These pictures, too, were painted by natives. Good, aren't they?"

"What," asked the Commodore, "are you trying to tell us, Watkins?"

"Just this," he said. "I may have brought the dirt of Earth here on my boots, as you have told me—but good things grow from dirt."

"Take him away," said Blaisdell to the marine officer. "There's no need for a trial. We'll hang him, in public, just to show all these people that we aren't to be trifled with."

Watkins paled, but his grin did not leave his face.

"Are you sure, Commodore," he asked softly, "that your own boots are clean?"