

THE

OUTSIDERS

There's always a backwater area—the sticks—a place that isn't a frontier because it isn't on the way to anywhere, and isn't anything itself. And always some people who live there. In the galaxy — it was The Rim. It wasn't anywhere, and there wasn't any place to go....

Illustrated by Summers

BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

WAS on Stree that star tramp Rimfire, received the news. He was in his day cabin at Calver, master of the the time and he and Jane Calver, who was both his wife and his catering officer, were trying to entertain the large, not unhandsome saurian who acted as Rim Runners' local agent. It had been heavy going; the lizard people of Stree are avid for new knowledge and delight in long winded philosophical discussions. Both Calver and Jane tried hard not to show their relief when there was a sharp rapping at the cabin door.

"Excuse me, Treeth," said Calver.

"Most certainly, captain," replied the agent. "Doubtless one of your officers has news of great import."

"I doubt it," said Jane Calver. "It'll be merely some minor problem of stowage."

"Come in!" called Calver.

The lizard, who had been sitting on the deck, rose gracefully to his feet, his long tail skimming the afternoon tea crockery on the low coffee table with a scant millimeter of clearance. Jane, when the expected crash failed to eventuate, gave an audible sigh of relief. Treeth looked at Calver and grinned, showing all his needle teeth. Calver wished that a childish sense of humor did not, as it too often does, go hand in hand with super intelligence.

Levine, the little Psionic Radio Officer, came into the cabin. He was obviously excited.

"Captain," he said, "I've picked up a message. An important one. Really important. Donaldson, the P.R.O. at Port Faraway, must have hooked up every telepath and every dog's brain on the whole planet to punch it through at this range!"

"And what is the news?" asked Calver.

"The Thermopylae salvage case. It's been settled at last."

"So Rim Runners get their new ship," said Calver.

"To hell with Rim Runners," replied Levine. "We get our whack—all of us who were in the poor old Lorn Lady at the time."

Treeth sat down again. He did not repeat the infantile joke with his tail and the tea things, which was unlike him. He said, in the well modulated voice that had only the suggestion of a croak, "I trust you will forgive my curiosity, captain. But we, as you know, were entirely ignorant of commercial matters until your Commodore Grimes made his landing on our world. What is salvage?"

"Putting it briefly," said Calver, "it's this. If you come across another ship in distress, you do your best to save life and property. The life-saving part is taken for granted. It's when property—the other vessel, or her cargo—is saved that the legal complications creep in. When you save property, the Courts decide what payment you shall receive for so doing. And a spaceship is a very expensive hunk of property."

"And the Thermopylae?" asked Treeth. "We heard something about it from Captain Vickery of the Sundowner. It happened shortly after the last time that you were here in Lorn Lady, didn't it? I shall be obliged if you will tell me all about it."

"All right," said Calver. "Thermopylae was—and, as far as I know, still is—one of the Trans-Galactic Clippers, a large passenger liner. She was making a cruising voyage out along the Rim. She got into trouble off Eblis—"

"A most unpleasant world," said Treeth. "I have seen pictures of it."

"As you say, a most unpleasant world. Anyhow, Thermopylae was putting herself into orbit around Eblis when she blew her tube linings, as a result of which she was doomed to make a series of grazing ellipses until such time as she crashed to the surface. We came along in Lorn Lady and tried to tow her into a stable orbit. We succeeded—but wrecked Lorn Lady in the process. Then Thermopylae used our tube linings to make temporary repairs. As you can see, it was the sort of case that brings joy to the hearts of the lawyers and money into their pockets—in addition to the straightforward salvage there was the sacrifice of one ship to save the other."

"And you have been rewarded by the owners of Thermopylae?" asked Treeth.

"So it would appear," agreed Calver.

"And how!" cried Levine, who had been waiting with ever increasing impatience. "Three-quarters of a million to Lorn Lady's crew! I haven't got the individual figures yet, but—"

"This," said Jane, "calls for a celebration. Luckily we're well stocked with liquor."

The agent got to his feet again.

"Now I must leave," he said. "For me, a stranger, to be present at your celebration would not be meet. But there is one thing about you beings that always mystifies me, the need that you feel to deaden the exhilaration that comes with good news by the ingestion of alcohol . . ."

"Good afternoon to you, captain and captain's lady, and to you, Mr. Levine. I am familiar enough with your vessel to find my own way ashore.

"Good afternoon—and my sincere congratulations."

There was Calver, and there was Jane Calver who, as Jane Arlen, had been catering officer of Lorn Lady. Calver sat at the head of the table in Rimfire's saloon and Jane, tall and slim and with the silver streak in her glossy dark hair gleaming like a coronet, sat at his right. Very much the captain and the captain's lady they had been when the other officers had been there, the officers who had not served in the Lorn Lady. But now the others were gone to their cabins, and the party was one for Lorn Lady's people only.

There was the gangling Bendix, with the few strands of black hair brushed carefully over his shining scalp, who had been Interstellar Drive Engineer in the T. G. Clippers before coming out to the Rim for reasons known only to himself. There was Renault, the Rocket King, swarthy, always in need of depilation, Reaction Drive Engineer; he, like Jane and Calver, was out of the Interstellar Transport Commission's ships. There was little Brentano, in charge of Radio Communications, highly competent and capable of standing a watch in the control room or either of the two engine rooms should the need arise. There was Levine, another small man but competent—extremely so—only in his own field. There was old Doc Malone, looking like a monk who had, somehow, put on a uniform in mistake for his habit.

The decanter passed round the table.

"A toast," said Bendix harshly. "A toast. We want to drink to you, Calver. It was you who made this good fortune come our way."

"No," demurred Calver. "We'll drink to us. To all of us. We were all in it together." He raised his glass. "To us," he said quietly.

"And to hell with the Rim!" almost shouted Brentano. "To hell with Lorn and Faraway, Ultimo and Thule and the whole Eastern Circuit!"

"And are you going home?" asked Doc Malone. "And are you going home, Brentano? To the warm Cluster Worlds, to the swarming stars and planets? Won't you feel confined, shut in? Won't you miss that empty sky, the call of it, the mystery of it? Won't you miss this freemasonry of ours?"

"What about you, Doc?" asked Brentano. "Aren't you going home?"

The old man was silent for what could only have been seconds, but seemed longer. He said, at last, very softly, ". . . And home there's no returning—"

"I'm afraid he's right," muttered Bendix.

"He is right," said Renault.

Calver remembered how he and Jane had stood in the captain's cabin aboard Thermopylae, and how her hand had found his, and how he had said, "We belong on the Rim." He said it again.

"So we belong on the Rim," said Jane practically. "We seem to be in agreement on that point, with the exception of Brentano—"

"Why make an exception of me?" asked the radio officer plaintively. "I'm as much a Rim Runner as any of you."

"But you said—"

"What I say isn't always what I think, or feel." His face clouded. "Old Doc put it in a nutshell. And home there's no returning. All the same, there must be more in life than running the Eastern Circuit."

"What if we ran it for ourselves?" asked Calver.

"You mean—?" queried Renault.

"What I said. With what we've got we can buy an obsolete Epsilon Class tramp and have enough left over for the refit. We know the trade, and there's quite a deal of goodwill on the Eastern Circuit planets that's ours rather than the company's—"

"The Sundown Line didn't last long," said Levine.

"Perhaps not," said Bendix, "but they didn't lose any money when Rim Runners bought them out."

"I never thought," said old Doc Malone, "that I should finish my days as a shipowner."

"You aren't one yet," remarked Brentano.

"Perhaps not. But the idea has its charm. Now, just supposing we do buy this ship, what do we call ourselves?"

"The Outsiders," said Calver.

Calver was rather relieved that it was not necessary to make the voyage all the way to Terra to pick up the ship. The return to his home planet would have brought back too many memories—for Jane as well as for himself. When he had come out to the Rim he had said good-bye to Earth, and he liked his good-byes to be permanent.

It was Levine who, spending his watches gossiping with his opposite numbers in all the ships within telepathic range, learned that Epsilon Aurigae had been delivered to Nova Caledon for sale to a small local company, and that the sale had broken down. It was Levine who succeeded in getting in touch with the P.R.O. of Port Caledon and persuading him to pass word to the commission's local agent that buyers would shortly be on the way.

The stickiest part of the whole business, of course, was the mass resignation of all of Rimfire's senior officers when she set down at Port Faraway. Commodore Grimes—back in harness as Astronautical Superintendent after his exploratory jaunts—stormed and blustered, threatened to sue Calver and the others for breach of contract. Then, when he saw it was hopeless, he softened.

"You're all good men," he said. "Yes—and one good woman. I don't like to see you go. But, with all that money coming to you, you'd be fools to stay

on the Rim."

"But we are staying on the Rim, sir," said Calver.

"What? If you intend to live on the interest of your salvage money, captain, there are far better places to do it."

"Commodore," said Calver, "you're an astronaut, not a businessman. I'm talking to you now as one spaceman to another, and I'd like you to respect the confidence. We—the officers who were in Lorn Lady at the time of the salvage—are going to set up as shipowners. You've often said yourself that there's a grave shortage of tonnage on the Eastern Circuit."

Grimes laughed. "I think that if I were in your shoes, Calver, I'd be doing the same myself. But I'll warn you—there won't always be the scarcity of ships, of Rim Runner ships, out here."

"But there is now," said Calver.

"There is now. We may be willing to charter you. But when there's no longer a shortage—"

"You'll run us out of Space," finished Calver.

"We will. Meanwhile, captain, the best of luck. Let me know when you're back on the Rim and I'll see what I can do for you—as long as it doesn't conflict with Rim Runners' interests, of course."

"Thank you, sir," said Calver, shaking hands.

So they booked passage for Nova Caledon, all of them, making the lengthy, roundabout voyage that was inevitable in this poorly served sector of the galaxy. At last Delta Sagittarius, in which vessel they had made the last leg of the journey, dropped down through the inevitable misty drizzle to Port Caledon. Calver, as a shipmaster, could have had the freedom of Delia Archer's control room, but he preferred to stay in the observation lounge with his own officers and, of course, with Jane.

There was only one other ship in port—obviously an Epsilon Class vessel.

"Ours," Jane murmured.

"Ours," repeated Bendix.

"She looks a mess," said Brentano.

"No more a mess than the poor old Lorn Lady was," declared Bendix.

"She's a ship," said Calver. "She'll do."

Customs formalities dragged, and then there was the problem of the disposal of their not inconsiderable baggage. The master of Delta Sagittarius was helpful, and put them in touch with the deputy port captain, who arranged temporary storage at the spaceport and also put through a call to the Commission's agent.

When the agent arrived they were already aboard the ship, were already

checking the condition of her instruments and machinery. She was a good ship, decided Calver. She was overage and obsolescent, but the Commission looks after its ships well. He, like the others, however, was disappointed to find that it would be impossible to sleep aboard her that night. There was so much to be done before she would be habitable, even though there was little doubt as to her spaceworthiness.

Later, he stood with Jane and the agent in the control room.

"You're getting a good ship here, captain," said the agent.

"I know," said Calver.

"There's one thing I don't like about her," said Jane.

"And what's that, Mrs. Calver?"

"Her name. As you know, most ships have fancy names and their crews are able to twist them around into something affectionate and amusing. But Epsilon Aurigae . . ."

"Don't listen to her," said Calver. "In any case, we're changing the name."

"Of course," said the agent. "And what are you calling her?"

"The Outsider," said Jane.

"And how in the galaxy can you twist that into anything affectionate or amusing?" asked the puzzled agent.

So The Outsider she was.

When the shining, new golden letters of her new name had been welded to the sharp prow Jane went up in the cage to the top of the scaffolding and, with all the others watching from below, smashed a bottle of what had been sold to them as genuine champagne over the gleaming characters. With the symbolic action performed, The Outsider was ready for Space. She was fueled and provisioned. Hydroponic tanks and tissue culture vats were functioning perfectly. She had, even, already begun to pay for herself, her cargo compartments being full of casks of whisky and bales of tweed for Faraway.

Manning had been the biggest problem. There is no shortage of spacemen at the Center—neither, oddly enough, is there at the Rim. It is on halfway worlds such as Nova Caledon that it is hard to find qualified officers. In the end, however, Calver found a chief officer of sorts, a drunken derelict who had missed his ship on Nova Caledon. He found a second officer—he was a Nova Caledonian who, tired of Space, had come ashore to raise sheep and now, tired of sheep, was willing to make the voyage out to the Rim provided that repatriation was guaranteed. Then there were two professors—one of physics and the other of mathematics—from the University of Nova Caledon who wanted to see something of the galaxy and who were willing to sign on as junior engineers. There were no pursers available—but Jane and the two communications officers would be able to cope quite easily.

After the brief remaining ceremony the scaffolding was wheeled away and The Outsider's crew marched up the ramp to the air lock, Calver leading, and, once inside the ship, dispersed to their stations. Spaceport Control gave the final clearance, the conventional good wishes. Renault's rockets sighed gently, and then gave tongue to the familiar screaming roar. The Outsider lifted, slowly at first, delicately balanced a-top the lengthening column of her incandescent exhaust. Faster and faster she climbed through the misty skies of Nova Caledon until the pearly overcast was beneath her and ahead of her was the black of Space.

Once she was well clear of the atmosphere Calver put her through her paces. She was a good ship, and responded sweetly to her controls. The ship was good and, with one exception, the crew was good. The two scientists made up in intelligence and enthusiasm for what they lacked in practical engineering experience. The ex-cattlemán demonstrated that he had forgotten very little about ships in his years ashore. Of the capabilities of the old crew of Lorn Lady there was, of course, no doubt. The mate was the weak link in the chain; his reactions were painfully slow and he seemed to have no interest whatsoever in his duties. Calver decided to have Brentano fix up duplicate, telltale instruments in his own cabin at the first opportunity. There is little risk of mishap to a well found, well organized ship in Deep Space—but on the rare occasions that mishaps do occur they are liable to be disastrous unless the officer of the watch is alert. Calver also made up his mind to tell Jane to keep Maudsley's liquor ration to the bare minimum and to impress upon old Doc Malone not to give the mate any of his home-made Irish whisky. Furthermore, he would have to read the Riot Act to the mate as soon as possible.

The first thing to be done, however, was to set course for the Rim. Rockets silent, The Outsider turned around her humming gyroscopes to the correct heading, checked and steadied. For the last time the rockets flared and she pushed off into the black infinity, the pale-gleaming ball that was Nova Caledon dwindling astern of her. There was free fall again as the Reaction Drive was cut, there was the familiar, yet never familiar, gut-wrenching twist, the uncanny feeling of *deja vu* as the Mannschen Drive built up its temporal precession fields.

And then, outside the control room ports, the hard, brilliant stars flickered and faded, were replaced by the hypnotically coiling whorls of luminosity, the shifting colors, known only to those who have made the Long Drop, who have ridden to the stars on a crazy contraption of precessing gyroscopes through the warped fabric of Space and Time.

Time—subjective time—passed. Time passed fast and pleasantly for most of The Outsider's people. There was so much to do, so many little things that were not quite right, that could be—and were—tinkered with until they were brought to the stage of perfection that gladdens the heart of an efficient Officer who is also an Owner. Cappell, the second mate, and Lloyd and Ritter, the two junior engineers, had no shares in the ship but were infected by the general enthusiasm. Maudsley was the odd man out, the malcontent. He kept his watch, and that was all. He refused to mix with the others, bolting his meals in silence and then retiring immediately to his cabin.

Calver discussed him with Jane.

He said, "I'm sorry we had to ship that one. Unluckily Cappell has only a second pilot's ticket, and Maudsley's a master astronaut. Even so—"

"We were stuck on Nova Caledon until we could find two certificated officers," said Jane. "We had to take what we could get. In any case—Maudsley's improving."

"Is he? I can't say I noticed it. He's as much mournful bloodhound walking on two legs as he was when we signed him on. More so, in fact. Then the liquor he had on board did give him a little sparkle."

"But he is improving," insisted Jane. "He's looking healthier. He's putting on weight."

"All right, all right. We all know that you're a good cook. It's his manner I don't like."

"I didn't like yours when I first met you. Remember ? There you were, an ex-chief officer out of the Commission's big ships, joining a scruffy little Rim Runners ramp as second mate . . . And, after all, Maudsley has been master himself ..."

"And he lost his ship, and was very lucky not to lose his ticket."

"You lost yours."

"In rather different circumstances, my dear. And nobody—neither Rim Runners nor ourselves—lost on the deal."

"What about Lloyds and Trans-Galactic Clippers?"

"They can afford it." He filled and lit his pipe. "Anyhow, I'm afraid that we shall be getting rid of our Mr. Maudsley as soon as we reach Port Faraway."

"Even though you are master and part owner," she flared, "there's no need to be so hard. With the exception of Cappell and Lloyd and Ritter —and, I suppose, Levine—we're all of us outsiders here; throwouts from the Center and the big ships, outsiders on the Rim. Maudsley's like us —or like we used to be. He's had his troubles and he's running away from them and he's just about hit rock bottom. This is his chance of rehabilitation. Would you deny it to him?"

"This," said Calver evenly, "happens to be a shipping company, even though it is only a one-ship company, not a charitable organization. When and if Mr. Maudsley stops behaving like a first-trip cadet with a bad fit of the sulks and starts behaving like a chief officer I'll consider keeping him on. Until then—"

"I still think you're being harsh," she said stubbornly.

"And I still think," he replied, "that I have the best interests of the ship and her owners at heart."

That was all that was said on that occasion, but more, much more, was

said later. This was when Maudsley, who must have possessed other attributes of the bloodhound beside the appearance, discovered old Doc Malone's secret cache of whisky and drank himself into insensibility. Calver's first reaction was annoyance, his second was disgust. He did not begin to get worried until Malone came to see him in the control room where, with the chief officer incapacitated, he was keeping a watch.

"Captain," said Malone, "we've got a very sick man on our hands."

"Doctor," said Calver, "we have a drunken, irresponsible wastrel on our hands, and I'll see to it that he's first out of the air lock when we reach port."

"He'll be first out of the air lock all right—but it'll be long before we reach port."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he's dying. He was as weak as a kitten when he joined us, and this last bout, coming as it did after a period of enforced abstinence, has been too much for his system."

"In this day and age?" scoffed Calver.

"Yes, in this day and age. In any day and age all that the doctor has ever done has been to help his patients to recover. When there's no will to recovery . . . Jane's with him now, but I think you'd better come along yourself."

"Wait until I call Brentano up here," said Calver, reaching for the telephone. Then, with the indispensable little radio officer in charge of the watch, he followed Malone to the Officers' flat.

Maudsley's cabin reeked of sickness and vomit and stale liquor. Maudsley was strapped in his bunk while Jane, quiet and efficient as always, cleared the air of the disgusting globules of fluid that floated in it with an absorbent cloth. She looked around as her husband and the doctor entered. She said, "He's unconscious again. And surely there can't be anything left in his stomach."

Calver looked at Maudsley. The man no longer resembled a bloodhound. He no longer resembled anything living. His head was a skull over which dead white parchment had been stretched. The rise and fall of his chest was barely perceptible.

"He talked," said Jane briefly. "He had a lucid moment, and he talked. He said that he was running away. But—and this was the odd part—he said that he was running from the Rim."

"From the Rim," whispered Maudsley in a barely audible voice. "From the Rim, and from the Outsiders. If I'd been sober I'd never have signed on aboard your ship. You're taking me back, and I'll not go." His voice rose to a shriek. "I'll not go. You can't make me." He laughed dreadfully. "There's wealth and power and knowledge there, and I almost had it in my grasp, but I was afraid. I'm still afraid. If you take me back to the Rim I'll know

that it's out there, waiting for me, and I'll be afraid to find it again and that will be the worst of all." He looked at Calver and Jane and Malone with intense, pleading eyes. "You must see that. Surely you must see that."

"What is it that's out there?" asked Calver.

A cunning look flickered over Maudsley's deathly face.

"I'll not tell you. It's mine, mine! If I tell you, you might get past the Outsiders, and then it would be yours. It wouldn't be fair. I lost my ship, I lost the Polar Queen, and I paid for it. Yes, I paid the price, and I'm still paying. I'll go back to the Rim when I want to, and I'll go Outside to find what I've paid for, but I'll go back to the Rim when I want to go. You can't carry me back against my will. You can't. Doctor, tell him that he can't. Tell him!"

"You'd better leave him to me," said Malone quietly. "He's frightened of you, Calver, and he hates you—"

"What about getting Levine in here?" whispered Calver.

"I'd like to—but he takes his oath very seriously. He'd never enter the mind of a nontelepath. You'd better leave me, both of you."

They sat in The Outsider's saloon, their seat belts giving the not very convincing illusion of gravity. Calver was there, and Jane, and Doc Malone. Renault kept no watch in Deep Space and Bendix felt justified in leaving his Mannschen Drive in the competent hands of a Doctor of Physics. Little Brentano was there, and Levine.

Calver waited until pipes and cigars and cigarettes were under way, was amused to see that the ever efficient Brentano watched the drifting eddies of smoke until satisfied that the circulatory system was working properly.

He said, "As you all know, we have deviated from our track. The doctor advises me that only by landing Mr. Maudsley at the first convenient port can we save his life, that his psychological condition will grow progressively worse as we near the Rim. So we shall put him ashore at Dunsinane in the Shakespearian Sector.

"However, let us forget the technicalities of navigation, let us forget that we are spacemen and regard this as a shareholders' meeting. We don't own this ship just for the fun of it—well, I suppose that in a way we do, but skip that—but to make money. As you all know, our present intention is to run the Eastern Circuit on Rim Runners' Time Charter and then, later, to compete with our late employers on the same trade. I don't think that any of us are really happy about the idea of competing with a company that is, after all, as near as government owned. Some trade of which we would have the monopoly would be the ideal setup."

"That," said Bendix, "is obvious. But what trade?"

"What about Outside?" asked Calver.

"There's nothing Outside," declared Bendix. "Nothing—not until some genius comes up with an Intergalactic Drive."

"That's what I thought," said Calver. "That's what we all thought—except, perhaps, for Levine. Anyhow, I'll start at the beginning. As you all know, our chief officer was dead drunk when we signed him on at Port Caledon, so much so that he could hardly have cared less where the ship was bound. He sobered up—but something was eating him. He managed to find old Doc Malone's private stock of what he calls Irish whisky—"

"And ye'd niver tell the difference!" interjected the doctor.

"That's a matter of opinion. Anyhow, our Mr. Maudsley hit the bottle again to try to drown his fears, and the more he tried to drown them the worse they got. What he's frightened of is something—or somebody—called the Outsiders. When we picked him up he was running, the same as we all were. But he was running from the Rim, not towards it."

"Something threw a scare into him," agreed the doctor. "It's likely that I'll have to keep him under sedation all the way to Dunsinane."

"Jane?" said Calver.

"I've been nursing him," she said. "I felt sorry for him from the very start. I feel sorrier for him now. I've listened to his ramblings. His ship was the Polar Queen, one of those odd tramps that drifts out to the Rim from time to time. He was master of her. He lost her—smashed her up making an incredibly bad landing at Port Farewell. Then he was with Rim Runners for a while—the Court of Inquiry suspended his master's ticket for six months but granted him a First Pilot's one. When the six months were up he reclaimed his certificate, left Rim Runners and has been trying to make his way back to the Center Worlds ever since."

"I've heard of him," said Bendix. "He was second mate of the Rim-star. They called him Windy Maudsley. He used to be in a state of near panic from blast-off to touch-down. Everybody thought that it was the aftermath of the loss of Polar Queen."

"What about the rest of Polar Queen's crew?" asked Brentano.

"It was a bad crash," said Bendix. "I remember being told about it by old Captain Engels—Lorn Lady was in Port Farewell when it happened. Maudsley was in the control room and escaped with only slight injuries. His chief, second and third officers weren't so lucky. They weren't killed outright, but they died in the hospital without talking. The rest of the crew were . . . mashed."

"Can you remember anything else, Bendix?" asked Calver.

"No. After all, I only got the story at second hand."

"I was just a kid when it happened," said Levine. "But I was crazy to get into Space, and anything about spaceships or spacemen in the news I lapped up. As I remember it, Maudsley's breath stank of whisky when they dragged him out of the wreckage. Luckily for him, the investigation proved that a tube lining had burned out, otherwise he'd have lost his ticket instead of getting away with a six months' suspension."

"And you've managed to get in touch with Dunsinane?" asked Calver.

"Yes, captain. There are ways and means of stepping up the power of the psionic amplifier when you know how—although I think I'll have to indent for a new dog's brain when we arrive. Anyhow, I got in touch with Donaldson. He looked up the records for us. He tells me that Polar Queen was making a relatively short hop between Ultimo and Thule, and that at the time of her arrival at Port Farewell she was overdue. Maudsley said at the inquiry that his Mannschen Drive had given trouble. He was, of course, the only witness from the ship."

"Now, Levine," pressed Calver, "what do you know of the Outsiders?"

"They've always been a sort of a legend on the Rim. Some say that they're supernatural beings, even that they're the old gods of mankind and the other intelligent races driven outside the galaxy and waiting there to return when faith and belief return. Others say that they're intelligent beings like ourselves that have made the voyage across the gulf from some other galaxy. There used to be all sorts of wild tales about strange ships in the sky, fantastic artifacts found on some of the Rim Worlds and all the rest of it. As I say, there used to be. I haven't heard the Outsiders even as much as mentioned for years."

"Just suppose . . ." murmured Calver. "Just suppose . . . Just suppose that there is a big ship hanging out there, a ship that made the Crossing ... Just suppose that her crew discovered intelligent life on the Rim Worlds—but discovered that life in the anti-matter systems . . . Just suppose that they decided that our entire galaxy was composed of anti-matter –

"People with enough curiosity to make the Crossing wouldn't give up that easily," said Jane sharply.

"I suppose they wouldn't, my dear. I was playing with ideas. I've got this strong hunch that there is something out there, and that Maudsley stumbled upon it. I've got this hunch that it, whatever it is, is worth finding."

"Maudsley found it," said Jane, "and it drove him to drink, ruined his career. Whatever it is, it's dangerous."

"I don't agree. As far as we can discover, Maudsley's ship was undamaged until the crash. All his crew were accounted for, and they were all alive until the crash killed them. I grant you this—there was something there that was frightening. But— How shall I put it?

"I was raised on Earth, a country boy, in a farming district. Earth, as you know, is very old-fashioned and will never use tanks of chemical nutrient for growing food when there's good, honest dirt to hand. There were crops—cereals—and there were the birds that regarded the fields as huge, free-lunch counters. There were scarecrows—"

"What are they?" asked Levine.

"A rough figure of a man, made of old clothing stuffed with rags or straw, held erect by a post. If it's so constructed that the arms wave in the wind,

so much the better. The birds take it for a man, and they keep off. Oh, some of the smarter ones spot the deception after a while and dig in, but the majority stay clear.

"Well, I'll get back to this hypothetical ship of mine. For some reason she's been abandoned. Her owners, however, have set up some sort of scarecrow that was good enough to scare off poor Maudsley, but not good enough to do any actual physical damage to Polar Queen and her people. We, expecting a scarecrow and, furthermore, having the right mental make-up for the Rim, might just find something worthwhile.

"This, then, is my proposal. We pump Maudsley of all he knows about the Outsiders, using every means of persuasion short of torture. We pay him well for what he tells us. Then, when our cargo is out, we go hunting Outside to find whatever it was that Maudsley found."

"Derek," said Jane, "you may be captain, but you are also no more than one of the shareholders. In all matters pertaining to the running of the ship your word is law—but in all matters concerning her future employment the Company decides."

"Then," asked Calver, "what do you propose?"

"That we put the matter to the vote. I move that we do not set off on any wild goose chases, that we put the ship on the Eastern Circuit on Time Charter to Rim Runners. We've been into all this before, and all of us agreed that, as things are at present, we need Rim Runners' repair, office and agency facilities. When we're well enough established we can set up our own shore organization."

"I second that," declared Brentano.

"A show of hands?" queried Bendix.

"All right," said Calver. "A show of hands. All in favor of Jane's motion?"

His own hand was the only one not raised.

"Derek," said Jane, "we must be sensible. We've all of us rehabilitated ourselves to an extent that would, not so long ago, have seemed impossible. Are we to throw it all away for a wild dream?"

Calver filled his pipe again carefully, used one of the archaic matches that he affected to light it. He said, "How shall I put it? I came out to the Rim as all of us did—because of the mess I'd made of my life in the Center. But there was more to it than that, much more. After all—you can drink yourself to death anywhere in the galaxy where there are human vices—even those communistic bumble bees, the Shaara, make and use alcohol. I came out to the Rim because it was, I thought, the last frontier. I've learned that it's not, that there's still another one beyond it—"

Bendix puffed a cigarette into glowing life. "I see what you mean," he said. "And I think that it applies, to a greater or lesser degree, to all of us. But Jane is right, too. We must consolidate. We must let this ship pay for herself before we think of anything else. And, Jane, we must face the fact

that Rim Runners will be using us only as a convenience and that as soon as their own fleet is built up they'll run us off the Eastern Circuit and the Shakespearian Sector trade. If we have some sort of ace up our sleeve—"

"If you can call it an ace," grumbled Brentano. "Odd legends with no foundation of fact, the ravings of a drunken derelict—"

"There's something out there," said Doc Malone. "And I, for one, would like to find out what it is. But there's no hurry. It will keep. After the ship has paid for herself, after the Time Charter's expired and we're on our own, will be time enough."

"Meanwhile," said Calver, "we must find out all we can from Maudsley. I'll leave that to you, doc—for the time being, at least."

"Talking of that," said Malone,

"I'd better have a look at the patient, now."

He left the saloon with the unhurried grace of a fat man in Free Fall. He returned with more speed than grace. He reported that Maudsley had recovered, had left his cabin and had found somewhere a bottle of cleaning alcohol. Drifting in the air of his room were mingled globules of the alcohol what was left of it—and blood from his slashed throat.

On charter to Rim Runners they ran the Eastern Circuit—Tharn, Grollor, Mellise and Stree. Cappell, the spaceman turned grazier turned spaceman, stayed with them and, after intensive coaching by Calver, managed to scrape through the examination for his first pilot's certificate and was promoted to chief officer, replacing in that rank yet another drunken derelict whom Calver had been obliged to sign on in Dunsinane. Lloyd and Ritter liked the life and, with their already high academic qualifications, found no trouble in adding engineers' certificates of competency to them. Bendix married, and Julia, his wife, was a highly efficient secretary who became, in a very short time indeed, a highly efficient purser. Brentano married, and as his bride was a biochemist she was able to take over the care of the hydroponic tanks, the yeast and algae vats and the tissue cultures from Doc Malone. Tanya Brentano was of Slavic origin and, in the opinion of everybody but Malone, her vodka was far superior to the doctor's "Irish" whisky. Brentano, as well as changing his marital status, changed his rank, sitting for and passing the Second Pilot's examination without any trouble, this making room for Elise Renault, who was a qualified radio technician.

They ran the Eastern Circuit for two years, for twenty-four busy, happy months. The Outsider was a home rather than a ship, her people a family rather than a crew. Maudsley was forgotten, Calver often thought, by everybody except himself. He had not forgotten. He still felt the tug of the Outside, the lure of the unsolved mystery out in the darkness. It was, he told himself, foolishness, that when the Time Charter expired The Outsider could run in competition with Rim Runners and, should this not prove successful, could go tramping through the galaxy. He told himself this, but he failed to convince himself. Every voyage he brought with him old books and records, carefully went through them to try to discover some sort of a clue.

They ran the Eastern Circuit for two years, until the Charter expired. For six months they tried to run as an independent company, and found that good will is all very well as long as it does not involve financial loss. Calver's friends on Tharn would have liked to have shipped their goods in The Outsider, but with Rim Runners' freight charges only sixty per cent of those asked by Calver did not feel justified in spending money on carriage that would be better spent on imports. The drably efficient humanoids on Grollor were without sentiment—they had worked out for themselves the sound commercial principle of buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest long before Commodore Grimes' survey expedition landed on their planet. For a little while there was trade to be done with both Mellise and Streebut even the happy amphibians and the philosophical lizards had begun to acquire from contact with humanity a sordid commercialism.

At the end of six months—the ship was at Port Forlorn discharging a pitifully small consignment of Mellisan dried fish and parchment record rolls from Stree—there was a shareholders' meeting. All hands were present, as Cappell, Lloyd and Ritter had been given—and had taken—the opportunity of taking some of their pay in shares and as the new wives had been given shares as wedding presents.

"Julia?" said Calver from his seat at the head of the saloon table. The purser rose to her feet.

"You all know how things have been going lately," she reported in her cool, pleasant voice. "You'll not be surprised when I tell you that we're in the red. I have the figures here for the last six months—"

"You needn't bother with them, my dear," said Bendix. "Even I can see that running costs have been far in excess of income."

"I take it," said Calver, "that we're all in agreement on that point. Thank you, Julia." The purser resumed her seat. "As I see it, we have a little control over what happens next. I have a letter here from Corn modore Grimes. Rim Runners are willing to buy the ship from us, the price to be determined after survey. Alternatively, they offer us a one-way charter to Nova Caledon, the implication being that it's as good a way as any to get us out of their hair. Then there's a third alternative—"

"Which is?" asked Jane.

"That odd business of Maudsley and the Outsiders. It stuck in my mind, if not in yours. I've been doing a deal of research on it, and even got hold of a pile of back numbers of the Port Farewell Argus covering the period of the Polar Queen disaster. At last I found what I was looking for. It was a typical Sunday Supplement article, written by some journalist who got drunk with Maudsley. It was a rehash of all the old legends about the Outsiders and it contained the statement, alleged to have been made by Maudsley, which I'll quote: 'Macbeth and Kinsolving's sun in line, and keep them so . . . That's the way that we came back. Fifty light-years and all of us choking on the stink of hot oil from the Mannschen Drive—' It's a lead."

"It could be a lead," amended Jane. "It could be. But tell me, why didn't Grimes follow it when he made his survey voyage in Faraway Quest?"

"Because Grimes, whom I've got to know quite well, is a pigheaded old man. He's made up his mind that there's nothing—and I mean nothing—Outside. He was one of the Assessors at the Court of Inquiry before which Maudsley appeared, and is of the opinion that all Maudsley's talk of the Outsiders was no more than delirium tremens."

"And it could have been," said Jane.

"I don't think so," said Doc Malone.

"Neither do I. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we own a ship. The ship is temporarily out of employment. We can sell her, and show a nice little profit on our venture. We can accept the one-way charter and then go tramping—and, as you know, tramps these days struggle along on the leavings of the big lines and government owned services. Or we can push off from Port Forlorn as soon as the cargo's out and the stores are on board and run West until we have Macbeth and Kinsolving's sun in line, and then—"

"I'd like to find out what's there, if there is anything there," murmured Bendix.

"And I," said Renault.

"And I," said Doc Malone.

"If you sell the ship," said Cappell, "I'll have to go back to farming, and I don't want that."

"Neither do we want to go back to teaching," said Lloyd, speaking for himself and Ritter.

"What have we got to lose?" asked Brentano.

"Only time," answered Levine, "and we've plenty of that now."

"And, possibly, our lives," said Jane. "Oh, if that really worried us we should never have become space men and—women. But there's a certain difference between a calculated risk and suicide."

"We've been over all this before," said Calver. "Maudsley's ship wasn't harmed and neither, so far as could be ascertained, were any of her people. They were all alive and at their stations at the time of the crash. Maudsley just wasn't psychologically adjusted to the Rim, that was his trouble. All of us have become used to that nothingness out there and it holds no terrors for us any longer."

"Oh, I want to come along for the ride," said Jane. "I wouldn't miss it for anything. I think that I'm speaking for Julia and Tanya and Elise—"

"You are," they said.

"Good. But it's just this, Derek. Women are different from men. Even though we are accepted in Space, even though we take the same risks as you, we still have that longing for security. One part of me hates to see the security that we have achieved thrown away. That part of me has spoken

now. The other part of me wants to join in this crazy adventure. I think, with you, that there's something Outside.

"I want us, all of us, to find out what it is."

Once the decision had been made, time dragged.

The discharge of the cargo occupied only a day, replenishment of stores and supplies would have taken very little longer. It was the vagueness of Maudsley's sailing directions that was the trouble. Put two stars in line right astern and then push out for fifty light-years, give or take a couple or three— But what is the actual departure ? Ten light-years from the nearer of the two stars, or five, or one, or with the exhaust gas mingling with the photosphere? And is your destination a fixed point in space, relative to the galaxy and to the leading stars, or does it follow some orbit of its own that has carried it parsecs away from its last position?

There was, reasoned Calver, only one solution to the problem. In the Rim Runners' store at Port Forlorn was the Mass Proximity Indicator that had been carried by Faraway Quest during her voyage of survey and exploration. Also in Port Forlorn was Commodore Grimes, who was supervising improvements to the spaceport.

Calver went to see Grimes.

"Good to see you again, captain," said the Astronautical Superintendent. "I shall be sorry when you and your ship leave the Rim. Of course, if you change your minds we shall be willing to buy her and to take all of you over with the ship—"

"We haven't changed our minds," said Calver. "But I've come to ask you a favor."

"As long as it doesn't cost too much," grunted Grimes.

"It's that Mass Proximity Indicator in your stores. It's the only one on the whole of the Rim."

"I know," said Grimes. "And what a job I had wheedling it out of the Federation's Survey Service when we were fitting out the Quest."

"Would you let me have it? Buy or hire, whichever suits you."

Grimes laughed. "So you're thinking of surveying and opening up your own trade routes. It's not worth it, Calver. Head to the Galactic West and you strike the anti-matter systems, head to the East and there's nothing inhabited or even habitable for parsecs after Stree. If I thought that the thing would be any use to you, I'd hire it to you, but you'll only be wasting your time and money."

"We've no intention of heading either East or West," said Calver.

"Then what do you want the Indicator for?"

"We're going Outside."

"Outside? Are you crazy? There's nothing Outside."

"How do you know, sir?"

"I don't know, but I'd hate to be so gullible as to believe those old wives' tales about the Outsiders. The only Outsiders that I believe in are yourselves."

"You remember Polar Queen?"

"Of course. And I remember, now, that you had that drunken fool Maudsley as your chief officer on your maiden voyage from Nova Caledon. I know that one is not supposed to speak ill of the dead, but I can speak no good of a man who throws away his ship and the lives of all his crew through drink. Yes . . . there were rumors that he had found something Outside. But I never placed any credence in them."

"We," said Calver, "do. We think that it's something very valuable and, at the same time, terrifying. Terrifying, that is, to the wrong type of mind, such as Maudsley's. He was scared of the Outer Night, he didn't belong on the Rim. I don't think that we shall scare so easily."

"You really think that there is something?"

"Yes. We've been saving it up until such time as our charter ran out and Rim Runners began to make this part of the galaxy commercially untenable. It's a gamble, but we can afford it. We're richer now than when we got the salvage money and the few weeks that The Outsider won't be earning her keep don't matter to us."

"You're a fool, Calver," said Grimes amiably. "There's nothing out there, but if you insist on going to find out for yourself, and if that Mass Proximity Indicator will be of any help to you, I'll not stand in your way. In fact, I wish that I were coming with you."

"Then you'll let us have it?"

"For a nominal rental of one dollar a month—but your people do the installation and you pay the insurance on it. And I insist, too, that you give me a full report on what you find. Not to me as an official of Rim Runners, mind you, who'll try to snatch some commercial advantage from the report, but to me as an individual."

"Thank you," said Calver inadequately.

The Outsider lifted from Port Forlorn, climbed through the smog filled sky to the cleanliness of Outer Space. In her control room Calver and Cappell and Brentano made their calculations, put the ship into an orbit that would bring them to within half a light-year of Kinsolving's sun. They ran on Interstellar Drive with the warped, convoluted lens of the galaxy on their port hand and the Outside emptiness to starboard. They wondered, inevitably, what that emptiness held and they talked, often, of the drunken, frightened Maudsley and of the stories and legends that were part of the culture of the Rim Worlds.

At the appointed time The Outsider re-entered the normal continuum and

the captain and his mates congratulated themselves on the accuracy of their navigation. Clear and distinct against the glowing Lens were the lead stars, almost in line. A. carefully calculated hop of only minutes' duration and calling for the utmost skill on the part of the Mannschen Drive engineers put The Outsider into position.

Directional gyroscopes whined and the ship swung slowly. The Lens was directly astern of her now. Calver and Cappell and Brentano checked and rechecked, even going out through the air lock in spacesuits to make visual observations. Renault and Bendix stood by in their respective engine rooms and Levine concentrated his mental powers on the task of punching a message across the light-years to his colleagues at the Rim World spaceports.

The great rockets rumbled and flared, building up acceleration and velocity, roared and flared and suddenly died. The spinning, gleaming wheels of the Drive blurred and faded as they began their time-twisting precession. Astern of The Outsider the Galactic Lens took on an appearance that was neither Klein Flask nor Mobius Strip but was reminiscent of both.

Ahead of her the Outside looked as it always looked.

For fifty light-years they ran—not, as Maudsley had put it, with all hands choking on the stink of hot oil from the interstellar drive; Bendix was too good an engineer for that. For fifty light-years they ran and then, with the Drive shut down, fell outwards through the emptiness. Neither radar nor the Mass Proximity Indicator gave any indication of anything in their vicinity. Levine reported only routine signals from the Rim, and Elise Renault, who was as good an electronics technician as Brentano had been, reported only signals that were, at the latest, half a century old.

Ten light-years West they ran, ten light-years In, twenty light-years East and another twenty Out. There were still no results, and Calver ordered the area of the search pattern increased.

It was during the running of the fourth search pattern that they found it. It was a glowing light and a flickering needle on the panel of the Indicator. It was a sense of vague unease in Levine's mind that worsened as the range decreased. It, at last, was a growing blip on the radar screen, but that was after the Mannschen Drive had been shut down once more and The Outsider was proceeding cautiously by rocket power.

They saw it at last, stared at it through the high-powered telescope in the control room. There was little that they could make out except that it was big and metallic and seemed to be of far too irregular a shape to be a ship—although, as Calver admitted, its builders may not have shared the Earthman's passion for symmetry.

Cautiously, with carefully timed and calculated rocket blasts, Calver nosed The Outsider in towards the . . . the derelict? He obtained readings of the mass of the thing and threw the ship into orbit around it. With his crew he stared out through the ports at the fantastic turrets, the suggestion almost of battlements and crenelations. It was like a huge castle. It was like a huge castle where no castle had any right to be.

"Levine," he called into the telephone. "Can you pick anything up? Is anyone there? Is anything there?"

"There's something there," replied the Psionic Communications Officer. "There's something there. Something. But it's not human. It's not . . . It's not alive, even."

"Do you believe in ghosts, captain?" asked Brentano.

"I do," said Calver. "But not in that sort of ghost. I believe in the ghosts that come from inside, not outside." He turned to Cappell. He said, "Mr. Cappell, some of us will have to go across to that . . . whatever it is—"

"I'm ready to go as soon as you give the word," said Cappell.

Calver grinned. "I'm sorry," he told his chief officer. "You're not going. You're my second in command. You stay here and stand by to render aid—or to get the ship out in a hurry. You, Brentano, can come if you want to. I want an electronics specialist."

"And I," said Jane Calver, who had just entered the control room, "am coming."

"You," said her husband, "are not."

"I am. It's high time that you people learned that spacewomen are as much entitled to take risks as spacemen. In any case, we took enough risks together in the old Corn Lady."

"Jane," pleaded Brentano, "if you come, Tanya will want to come, too."

She did.

The boarding party was not sent, however, until after a great deal of discussion, some of it acrimonious. Calver argued that its composition was up to the master, not to a meeting of shareholders. He managed at last to convince the others of the legality of his stand. He made the point that it would be criminal folly to leave the ship without a large enough crew to take her back to the Rim. He was taking Brentano, he said, because of that officer's known versatility. He was taking Jane and Tanya because neither of them was indispensable. If anything should happen to either of them, Julia was quite capable of adding the catering officer's duties to her own, and old Doc Malone had, in the past, served as biochemist. He did not, he admitted to himself, altogether like the idea of having Jane along, any more than little Brentano liked to see Tanya risking her life. But he could see that both the women were of the breed that prefers to meet danger side by side with their men. He loved them for it, and wouldn't have changed them for all the Universe.

Suited, laden with equipment, the four of them left the air lock together. Together they stood on The Outsider's sleek hull, waiting for the circular door to close. The curve of the shell plating hid the control room ports from them, but they knew the little compartment would be crowded, that all of their shipmates would be waiting there to watch them jet across the emptiness to the faintly gleaming enigma hanging in the black sky.

"Captain to chief officer," said Calver into his helmet microphone. "We are outside."

"Chief Officer to captain. I hear you, sir. Are there any further orders?"

"No, Mr. Cappell. You have your instructions and in my absence you are in full charge of the ship. Captain to boarding party. Are you all ready?"

"All ready," they replied.

"Then follow me."

He kicked the magnetic soles of his shoes clear of the plating, activated his suit reaction units. He allowed himself briefly to wonder what it would be like to be lost out here, alone in a suit and with the darkness, unbroken by the friendly stars, all around him. He told himself that it would be no different from being lost anywhere else in interstellar space; the chances of survival would be the same—infinitesimal.

The bulk of the . . . the thing loomed ahead of him. It had seemed huge from the ship, but there had been no yardstick for comparison. He had his yardsticks now—the space-suited figures of Jane and Tanya, himself and Brentano. Had the thing looked more like a ship an Alpha Class liner could have served as one of its lifeboats.

Skilfully using their personal rockets Calver and his three companions made a feet first landing on a flat area of hull that was not cluttered with turrets and sponsons and enigmatic antennae. Calver expected the soles of his shoes to take hold by their magnetism, but they did not. And yet he did not bounce back into space after the impact of his landing, was held in place by a field that could only be gravitational.

"Captain to The Outsider," he called urgently. "This thing has some sort of artificial gravity that must have just been switched on. You'd better adjust orbit accordingly."

"What do you think I am doing?" came Cappell's aggrieved reply. Calver saw the flare of rockets from the stern of his distant ship. He waited for the chief officer to get things under control. Then, "Sorry, sir," said Cappell more evenly. "That sudden gravitational field took me by surprise."

"And me," said Calver. "Something," said Jane, "is looking at us."

Calver turned, saw that two of the antennae—like slender, flexible masts they were—had bent so that they were pointing at the boarding party, were following their movements.

"Mr. Cappell," said Calver, "put Mr. Levine on the phone." There was a brief delay. As soon as Calver heard Levine's voice he said, "There's something here, something intelligent. Can you pick anything up."

"The uneasiness is still there," said Levine. "But there's more now. There's curiosity, but it's an unemotional sort of curiosity. There's a sort of hope—"

"Is there any animosity?"

"No."

"Can you get through to it?"

"I'm trying, captain. But it's like . . . like— Have you ever tried making love to a robot?"

"Have you, Derek?" asked Jane Calver.

He laughed, as they all did, the jest having broken the tension.

"All right," he snapped. "Boarding party to ship. We're going to try to find a way in."

"Service," said Jane. "With a smile?"

With no betraying vibration a circular doorway had opened. The four from the ship approached it carefully. They looked down into what was obviously an air lock. A short ladder ran down from its rim to its deck.

"Will you come into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly?" quoted Brentano.

"To judge from Maudsley," said Calver, "the worst that can happen to us is to be driven to drink. And we've all passed through that phase. Sorry, Tanya, you haven't."

"I'll take the risk," she said, matter of factly.

One by one, they dropped into the air lock. Suddenly, smoothly, the door closed above their heads. There were no visible controls for its reopening, but Calver was not unduly worried. He and the others carried equipment that could cut or burn through any metal known to man. What did worry him was that with the shutting of the door he had been cut off from radio communication with the ship.

"The place is filled with an atmosphere of sorts," said Brentano.

"I've a hunch," said Calver, "that it may be our sort of atmosphere. But we'll not risk taking our helmets off— There's another door opening. Shall we—?"

"What did we come here for?" asked his wife.

"The lighting," whispered Brentano. "It's . . . odd. Not a tube or globe along that whole great alleyway, and yet it's like broad daylight. How do they do it?"

"That," said Tanya, "is for you to find out. You're the electronics expert. Remember?"

"I hope," he replied, "that I do find out."

Calver strode along the seemingly interminable alleyway. Although the deck was of polished metal—as were the sides and deckhead—his booted feet made no sound. Even had he been walking in a vacuum, in normal circumstances, there would have been vibration. He looked down and saw

his reflection, as clear as in a mirror. He looked to the side, saw his reflection and those of the others in the walls, stretching on either hand to infinity. It should have been an amusing experience, reminiscent of one of those mirror mazes found in amusement halls, but it was not.

He walked, and the others walked with him. Used as they were to Free Fall the exercise was tiring. Twice they stopped, sitting down to rest and sipping water from their suit tanks. On the second occasion they made a careful check of their air-supply gauges, found that they had adequate reserves before it would be necessary to connect up the spare bottles that they had brought with them.

They walked, and they came at last to a door. Of highly polished metal it was like all the rest of the alleyway.

For lack of any visual evidence to the contrary it could have been a bulkhead, but they knew it was not. The alleyway had to lead somewhere, and to have it leading to a blank wall made no sense whatsoever.

"But why should it make sense?" whispered Calver, voicing the doubts that he, like the others, was beginning to feel. "Why should it make sense? Why should we assume that our logic is the only logic, that our way of doing things is the only right way?"

The door opened.

I hate her, thought Derek Calver. I hate her. His mother was out of the room, busy in the kitchen. The boy glared at his baby sister gurgling happily in her cot, the little, drooling monster that had robbed him of the love and affection that were his right. I hate her, he thought again. He got up from his chair, walked over to the cot, struck the infant across the face with the magazine that he had been reading. He was back in his seat before the first outraged wail broke the silence.

"Derek," demanded his mother, picking up the bawling child, "what happened?"

"I don't know, mother. I was reading."

"What are these marks on her face?"

"Where? Oh, I suppose she must have jumped around and hit her silly face on the side of the cot. In any case, mother, most parents send their babies to the robot nursery—

"Bumble bee! Bumble bee! Fly back to your stinking hive, bumble bee!" yelled the children.

The Shaara drone, who had wandered away from his ship, away from the spaceport, and who had imbibed sufficient whisky in a tavern seriously to affect his powers of locomotion, tried to ignore them. He could not ignore the ill-favored mongrel, belonging to one of the boys, that, encouraged by its master, faced the unhappy extra-Terrestrial, its ugly face creased by a vicious snarl. The drone swiped the dog with one clawed foreleg and then clumsily took to the air, flying only a few yards before tumbling to earth. He

tried to walk, but the movements of his six legs were ridiculously unco-ordinated. He turned to fight the mongrel, this time inflicting a wound so painful that the brute turned and fled, yelping.

"He's hurt my dog," screamed Derek Calver.

He picked up a stone and threw it, setting an example to the others.

Luckily the police arrived before any serious damage was done.

"Cadet Calver," asked the captain commandant of the Academy gently, "do you swear, on your honor as a Space Cadet, that you had no part in last night's race brawl?"

"I so swear," said Calver solemnly, thinking, After all, I was on the outskirts of the crowd and I never even got a chance to kick the jerk—

"You'll come back, Derek," pleaded the girl.

"Of course, darling," lied Fourth Officer Derek Calver, secure in the secret knowledge that he was to be promoted and transferred at the end of the voyage, and that with any sort of luck at all he'd never be on the Polaris Sector run again.

"Mr. Calver," ranted the notoriously irascible Captain Jenkins, "never in all my days in Space have I had to push such a sloppily loaded ship up through an atmosphere! You were in charge of the distribution of mass. What have you got to say?"

"There must be something wrong with the Ralston, sir," said Second Officer Derek Calver.

And there soon will be, he thought, if I can get my hands on it before this old crank makes his personal check.

"So you're quite determined," whispered Dorothy Calver. "Does this home I've made for you mean nothing to you? Do the children mean nothing to you? Do I mean nothing to you?"

"No," replied Calver brutally.

"I should have realized," said Jane Calver bitterly, "that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Calver tried hard to keep his temper under control.

"Jane," he said, "I was chief officer in the Commission's big ships. I was happily married. I threw all that away so that I could marry you. But I'm not going to be made over the way you want me to be made over. I'm a spaceman, not one of those foppish, planetbound puppies that you seem to like running around with."

"Happily married?" She laughed. "That wasn't what you told me. You told me, too, that you were sick and tired of Deep Space and that you'd be happy to stay on the one planet all the rest of your life, as long as you had me there with you."

"Your trouble, Derek, is that you're selfish. I've changed, in lots of ways, just to try to make you happy. You must grasp the fact that a successful marriage consists of adjustments—by both partners. Both partners.

"But you won't adjust. You'll never adjust."

"I try to."

"You say you try to. You say this and you say that, you promise this and you promise that, but that's as far as it ever goes. You're so conceited that you really think that Derek Calver is the end product of evolution, with no room for improvement. You're so conceited that you think that the Universe owes you a living. And let me tell you, my dear, that father's getting rather restive, that he's beginning to wonder why he should be paying an executive's salary to a glorified office boy."

"My heart bleeds for your father," said Calver. Then, "Where are you going?"

"It's no business of yours. If you must know, I've been asked to the Sandersons'. And if you must know, Sylvia pleaded with me not to bring —I quote `that drunken oaf of a spaceman.' "

"What courteous friends you have," said Calver. "As courteous as you are, darling."

Captain Derek Calver, with Jane Arlen at his side, stood in the master's cabin aboard the Trans-Galactic Clipper Thermopylae.

"Captain Calver," said Captain Hendriks, "my thanks are inadequate."

"I did what I could, captain," said Calver.

"At least," said Hendriks, "I shall do what I can, too. Sometimes, in wrangles over salvage awards, the owners of the ships involved are remembered and their crews, who have done all the work, are forgotten. But I am not without influence—"

"That aspect of the matter had never occurred to me," said Calver. "You must hate it out here," said the other captain. "But you'll be able to return now, to the warmth and light of the Center—"

"So we shall," said Calver, with a mild amazement. "So we shall."

And I shall be a rich man, he thought. I shall be rich, and no longer dependent upon the charity of Jane's father and perhaps, if she has not remarried, or even she has

He turned his head slightly to look at the other Jane, Jane Arlen, his lover and loyal shipmate.

She'll manage, he thought. She'll have her share of the salvage money — But perhaps money's not everything

His hand found Jane Arlen's and closed upon it, felt the answering warmth and pressure. "But I belong on the Rim," he said. "We belong on the

Rim—"

And he hated himself for the smug nobility with which he had made the gesture.

They were standing in the huge, cubical chamber with its mirror bright floor and ceiling and walls Calver and Jane, Brentano and Tanya. Calver put his arms around his wife. He saw her face through the transparency of her helmet—pale it was, and with lines of strain that had not been there before. Her eyes were the eyes of one who has looked on too much in too short a time. Yet she essayed a tremulous smile, and Calver forced himself to smile in answer. Reluctantly he turned away from her, looked towards Brentano and Tanya. They, too, were holding each other tightly.

Calver coughed.

"I assume," he said, "that we all went through the same experience —"

"I always had a rather high opinion of myself," whispered Brentano. "Until now—"

"But what did it mean?" demanded Tanya Brentano. "What did it mean?"

"Perhaps I know," murmured Jane softly. "Perhaps I know, or perhaps I can guess. There was a story I read once—it was when I had a crush on the Twentieth Century authors. It was by a man called Wells. It was called, I think, 'A Vision Of Judgment.' Wells imagined a Judgment Day, with all living, and all who ever had lived on Earth, called by the Last Trump to face their Maker, to be tried and punished for their sins or, rather improbably, to be rewarded for their good deeds . . . Everyone there had his session of Hell as his naked soul stood in full view of the multitude and the Recording Angel recited the long, long catalogue of petty acts of meanness and spite— All the trivial, shabby things, all the things in which even the most perverted nature could take no pride, no matter how much pride he took in some quite spectacular wrong-doing—"

"So you think that we have been judged?" said Calver slowly. "By whom, Jane? By whom? And why?"

"And how?" asked Brentano, but it was the genuine inquiry of a first-class technician, not a piece of stupid humor.

"There are other doors opening," said Tanya. "There is machinery behind them, apparatus—"

"Dare we?" asked Brentano.

You dare, said the voice in their minds. You dare. The secrets are no longer secrets, and are yours to use as you will. Soon you will cross the Gulf, and you will be welcomed.

They, the members of the boarding party, were back aboard The Outsider and were discussing their experiences with their shipmates.

"From Bernhardt's Nebula it must have come," said Calver. "How long ago? I don't know, but we shall be finding out. It's an intergalactic spaceship and,

at the same time, an electronic brain that makes anything built by ourselves to date no more than a glorified abacus.

"It's a Quarantine Station . . ."

"A Quarantine Station?" asked Cappell.

"Yes. It's far more logical than any of ours, too. Our Quarantine Stations are used after travelers arrive at their destination; this one is used before they set out. That's the idea I got, anyhow. And truly alien entities need not fear biochemical infections; destructive ideas—thinking—is the really communicable disease of intelligent life. This Quarantine Station checks for that! Perhaps when Levine goes across with the next boarding party he may be able to establish better rapport with the mind of the thing—can a machine have a mind?—than we did, and learn more than we have done.

There's an utterly alien way of thought behind their machines, for example, and what we take to be the intergalactic drive unit is altogether outside—outside, not beyond—our technology.

"But the Quarantine Station—

"The way I see it is this. There's intelligent life, highly intelligent life, on the worlds of Bernhardt's Nebula. It could well be that their manned ships have already visited this galaxy, at various times in the past before anything like real civilization started to develop. It could be, it seems to me, that the people of Bernhardt's Nebula want to make contact with us; for trade, perhaps, or cultural exchange, or just neighborliness.

"But—

"It could be that our neighbors in the next galaxy are, to all external appearances, horrible monsters, some utterly alien life form, something so different as to be frightening or sickening, yet something that has, underneath the shocking surface, a real and warm humanity. After all, we've come across nothing yet in our galaxy on those lines. Every race with whom we've come into contact has run very much to one or the other of the standard patterns—mammalian, saurian, arthropodal and whatever—"

"The Quarantine Station?" demanded the mate again.

"I was coming to that, Mr. Cappell. Please give me time. It was left here, out beyond the Rim—there may be others—in the hope that with the development of interstellar flight it would be discovered. It was left here to test the fitness of its discoverers to use the treasures of scientific and technical knowledge that it contains, to build the ships capable of making the Big Crossing. We, the four of us, passed the test without cracking. Had we cracked, there is little doubt that we should have been bundled outside as unceremoniously as Maudsley must have been—bundled outside with the memories of the fear and of the horror and with some sort of post-hypnotic compulsion against talking about it. It is possible that some of Maudsley's crew did pass the test—but they died with Polar Queen.

"It is possible that some of you will not pass." He added, with an unwonted humility, "But if I did, there is little likelihood that any of you will fail—

"It's an ingenious test, and amazingly simple. It's . . . it's a mirror that's held up to you, in which you see . . . everything. Yes, everything. Things that you've forgotten and things that you've wished for years that you could forget. After all, a man can meet any alien monster without fear, without hate, without panic-motivated aggression after he has met and faced that most horrible monster of all . . .

"Himself."

THE END