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EMPTINESS OF SPACE

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

AT a very tender age my latent passion for all forms of fantasy stories, having been sparked by the Brothers Grimm and the more unusual offerings in the children's comics and later the boy's adven-ture papers, was encouraged in the early 1930s by the occasional exciting find on the shelves of the public library with Burroughs and Thorne Smith varying the staple diet of Wells and Verne.

But the decisive factor in establishing that exhila-rating ‘sense of wonder’ in my youthful imagi-nation was the discovery about that time of back numbers of American science fiction magazines to be bought quite cheaply in stores like Wool-worths. The happy chain of economic circum-stances by which American newstand returns, some-times sadly with the magic cover removed or mutilated, ballasted cargo ships returning to English ports and the colonies, must have been the mainspring of many an enthusiastic hobby devoted to reading, discussing, perhaps collecting and even writing, science fiction – or ‘scientifiction’ as Hugo Gerns-back coined the tag in his early Amazing Stories magazine.

Gernsback was a great believer in reader partici-pation; in 1936 I became a teenage member of the Science Fiction League sponsored by his*Wonder Stories* . Earlier he had run a compe-tition in its fore-runner*Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of ‘One Hundred Dollars in Gold’ with true yankee bragga-dacio. Discovering the result some years later in, I think, the September 1930 issue of*Wonder Stories* seized upon from the bargain-bin of a chain store, was akin to finding a message in a bottle cast adrift by some distant Robinson Crusoe, and I well remember the surge of jingo-istic pride (an educa-tional trait well-nurtured in pre-war Britain) in noting that the winner was an English-man, John Beynon Harris.

I had not the slightest antici-pation then that I would later meet, and acknow-ledge as a good friend and mentor, this contest winner who, as John Wyndham, was to become one of the greatest English story-tellers in the idiom. The fact that he never actually got paid in gold was a disappoint-ment, he once told me, that must have accounted for the element of philo-so-phical dubiety in some of his work.

Certainly his winning slogan '*Future Flying Fiction*', al-though too late to save the maga-zine from foundering on the rock of eco-nomic depression (it had already been amalga-mated with its stable-mate *Science Wonder Stories* to become just plain, if that is the right word,*Wonder Stories)* , presaged the firm stamp of credi-bility combined with imagi-native flair that charac-terized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of fore-names conve-niently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contem-porary influence on specu-lative fiction, parti-cularly in the explo-ration of the theme of realistic global catas-trophe, with books such as*The Day of the Triffids* and*The Kraken Wakes* , and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illus-trious pre-decessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprentice-ship in those same pulp maga-zines of the thirties, competing success-fully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to high-light the chrono-logical develop-ment of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

'The Lost Machine' was his second published story, appea-ring in Amazing Stories, and was possibly the proto-type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period parti-cu-larly favour-ing time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poign-ancy of a man's reali-za-tion, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being aban-doned by his fellow-explorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remark-ably out-lined for its time. Some themes had dealt with war, such as 'The Trojan Beam', and he had strong views to express on its futility. Soon his own induc-tion into the Army in 1940 produced a period of crea-tive inactivity corres-ponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established him-self in England as a promi-nent science fiction writer with serials in major period-icals, subse-quently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detec-tive novel published. He had been well repre-sented too – 'Perfect Crea-ture' is an amu-sing example – in the various maga-zines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissi-tudes of their pre- and imme-diate post-war publish-ing insec-urity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased consi-derably, and John rose to the challenge by selling success-fully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predi-lection for the para-doxes of time travel as a source of private amuse-ment was perfectly exem-plified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawp-ing tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later success-fully adapted for radio and broad-cast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first post-war novel burst upon an unsus-pecting world, and by utili-zing a couple of unori-ginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained atten-tion to logically based expla-natory detail and realis-tic back-ground, together with his now strongly deve-loped narra-tive style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern specu-lative fiction, survi-ving even a mediocre movie treat-ment. It was the fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels inclu-ding 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Mid-wich Cuckoos' which was success-fully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was care-ful to dis-claim any responsi-bility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoy-able asso-ciation with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the*New Worlds* maga-zine-publish-ing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essen-tial assis-tance enabling me to become a specia-list dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Blooms-bury, an area of suitably asso-ciated literary acti-vities where John lived for many years, and which provi-ded many pleasu-rable meet-ings at a renowned local coffee establish-ment, Cawardine's,

where we were often joined by such person-alities as John Carnell, John Chris-topher and Arthur C. Clarke.

In between the novels two collec-tions of his now widely pub-lished short stories were issued as ‘The Seeds of Time’ and ‘Consider Her Ways’; others are re-printed here for the first time. He was never too grand to refuse mater-ial for our own*New Worlds* and in 1958 wrote a series of four novel-ettes about the Troon family's contri-bution to space explo-ration – a kind of Forsyte saga of the solar system later collected under the title ‘The Outward Urge’. His ficti-tious colla-borator ‘Lucas Parkes’ was a subtle ploy in the book version to explain Wyndham's appa-rent devia-tion into solid science-based fiction. The last story in this collection ‘The Empti-ness of Space’ was written as a kind of post-script to that series, especially for the 100th anni-versary issue of*New Worlds* .

John Wyndham's last novel was*Chocky* , published in 1968. It was an expan-sion of a short story follow-ing a theme similar to*The Chrysalids* and*The Midwich Cuckoos* . It was a theme pecu-liarly appro-priate for him in his advancing matu-rity. When, with charac-teristic reti-cence and modesty, he announced to a few of his friends that he was marry-ing his beloved Grace and moving to the country-side, we all felt that this was a well-deserved retire-ment for them both.

But ironically time – always a fasci-nating subject for specu-lation by him – was running out for this typical English gentle-man. Amiable, eru-dite, astrin-gently humo-rous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares of humanity with fright-ening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly preci-sion of detail. To his great gift for story-telling he brought a lively intellect and a fertile imagi-nation.

I am glad to be numbered among the many, many thou-sands of his readers whose ‘sense of wonder’ has been satis-facto-rily indulged by a writer whose gift to posterity is the compul-sive reada-bility of his stories of which this present volume is an essen-tial part.

— LESLIE FLOOD

EMPTINESS OF SPACE (1953)

Myfirst visit to New Caledonia was in the summer of 2199. At that time an exploration party under the leadership of Gilbert Troon was cautiously pushing its way up the less radio-active parts of Italy, investi-gating the prospects of recla-mation. My firm felt there might be a popular book in it, and assigned me to put the propo-sition to Gilbert. When I arrived, how-ever, it was to find that he had been delayed, and was now expected a week later. I was not at all displeased. A few days of com-fort-able lazi-ness on a Pacific island, all paid for and count-ing as work, is the kind of perquisite I like.

New Caledonia is a fasci-nating spot, and well worth the trouble of getting a landing permit — if you can get one. It has more of the past — and more of the future, too, for that matter — than any other place, and some-how it manages to keep them almost sepa-rate.

At one time the island, and the group, were, in spite of the name, a French colony. But in 2044, with the eclipse of Europe in the Great Northern War, it found itself, like other ex-colonies dotted all about the world, suddenly thrown upon its own resources. While most main-land colonies hurried to make treaties with their nearest power-ful neigh-bours, many islands such as New Cale-donia bald little to offer and not much to fear, and so let things drift.

For two generations the surviving nations were far too occu-pied by the tasks of bringing equili-brium to

a half-wrecked world to take any interest in scattered islands. It was not until the Brazi-lians began to see Aus-tralia as a possible challenger of their supre-macy that they started a policy of unobtrusive, and tact-fully mer-cantile, expan-sion into the Pacific. Then, naturally, it occurred to the Austra-lians, too, that it was time to begin to extend*their* eco-nomic influ-ence over various island-groups.

The New Caledo-nians resisted infil-tra-tion. They had found in-depen-dence congenial, and steadily rebuffed temp-tations by both parties. The year 2144, in which Space declared for in-depen-dence, found them still resist-ing; but the pressure was now con-sider-able. They had watched one group of islands after another suc-cumb to trade prefer-ences, and there-after virt-ually slide back to colo-nial status, and they now found it diffi-cult to doubt that before long the same would happen to them-selves when, whatever the form of words, they should be annexed — most likely by the Aus-tra-lians in order to fore-stall the es-tab-lish-ment of a Brazi-lian base there, within a thousand miles of the coast.

It was into this situation that Jayme Gonveia, speaking for Space, stepped in 2150 with a sugges-tion of his own. He offered the New Caledo-nians guaran-teed indepen-dence of either big Power, a con-sider-able quantity of cash and a prosp-erous future if they would grant Space a lease of terri-tory which would become its Earth head-quarters and main terminus.

The proposition was not altogether to the New Cale-donian taste, but it was better than the alter-natives. They accepted, and the con-struc-tion of the Space-yards was begun.

Since then the island has lived in a curious sym-biosis. In the north are the rocket landing and dispatch stages, ware-houses and engi-neer-ing shops, and a way of life fur-nished with all modern tech-niques, while the other four-fifths of the island all but ignores it, and con-tentedly lives much as it did two and a half centuries ago. Such a state of affairs cannot be preserved by acci-dent in this world. It is the result of care-ful contri-vance both by the New Cale-do-nians who like it that way, and by Space which dis-likes out-siders taking too close an interest in its affairs. So, for per-mission to land any-where in the group, one needs hard-won visas from both auth-orities. The result is no exploi-tation by tourists or sales-men, and a scarcity of strangers.

However, there I was, with an unex-pected week of leisure to put in, and no reason why I should spend it in Space-Concession terri-tory. One of the secre-taries suggested Lahua, down in the south at no great distance from Noumea, the capital, as a rest-ful spot, so thither I went.

Lahua has picture-book charm. It is a small fishing town, half-tropical, half-French. On its wide white beach there are still canoes, work-ing canoes, as well as modern. At one end of the curve a mole gives shelter for a small anchor-age, and there the palms that fringe the rest of the shore stop to make room for a town.

Many of Lahua's houses are improved-tradi-tional, still thatched with palm, but its heart is a cobbled rectangle surrounded by entirely un-tropi-cal houses, known as the Grande Place. Here are shops, pave-ment cafes, stalls of fruit under bright striped awnings guarded by Gauguin-esque women, a state of Bougain-ville, an atro-ciously ugly church on the east side, a*pissoir* , and even a*mairie* . The whole thing might have been imported com-plete from early twentieth-century France, except for the inhabi-tants — but even they, some in bright sarongs, some in Euro-pean clothes, must have looked much the same when France ruled there.

I found it difficult to believe that they are real people living real lifes. For the first day I was con-stantly accom-panied by the feeling that an unseen direc-tor would suddenly call ‘Cut’, and it would all come to a stop.

On the second morning I was growing more used to it. I bathed, and then with a sense that I was begin-ning to get the feel of the life, drifted to the*place* , in search of aperitif. I chose a café on the south side where a few trees shaded the tables, and wondered what to order. My usual drinks seemed out of key. A dusky, brightly saronged girl approached. On an impulse, and feeling like a character out of a very old novel I suggested a pernod. She took it as a matter of course.

"*Un pernod? Certainement, monsieur*," she told me.

I sat there looking across the Square, less busy now that the*dejeuner* hour was close, wonder-ing what Sydney and Rio, Adelaide and São Paulo had gained and lost since they had been the size of Lahua, and doubting the value of the gains...

The pernod arrived. I watched it cloud with water, and sipped it cau-tiously. An odd drink, scarcely calcu-lated, I felt, to enhance the appe-tite. As I contem-plated it a voice spoke from behind my right shoulder.

"An island product, but from the original recipe," it said. "Quite safe, in mode-ration, I assure you."

I turned in my chair. The speaker was seated at the next table; a well-built, compact, sandy-haired man, dressed in a spot-less white suit, a panama hat with a coloured band, and wearing a neatly trimmed, pointed beard. I guess his age at about thirty-four though the grey eyes that met my own looked older, more expe-rienced and troubled.

"A taste that I have not had the opportunity to acquire," I told him. He nodded.

"You won't find it outside. In some ways we are a mu-seum here, but little the worse, I think, for that."

"One of the later Muses," I suggested. "The Muse of Recent History. And very fasci-nating, too."

I became aware that one or two men at tables within earshot were pay-ing us — or rather me — some atten-tion; their ex-pres-sions were not unfriendly, but they showed what seemed to be traces of concern.

"It is —" my neigh-bour began to reply, and then broke off, cut short by a rumble in the sky.

I turned to see a slender white spire stabbing up into the blue overhead. Already, by the time the sound reached us, the rocket at its apex was too small to be visible. The man cocked an eye at it.

"Moon-shuttle," he observed.

"They all sound and look alike to me," I admitted.

"They wouldn't if you were inside. The accele-ration in that shuttle would spread you all over the floor — very thinly," he said, and then went on: "We don't often see strangers in Lahua. Perhaps you would care to give me the pleasure of your com-pany for luncheon? My name, by the way, is George."

I hesitated, and while I did I noticed over his shoulder an elderly man who moved his lips slightly as he gave me what was with-out doubt an encour-aging nod. I decided to take a chance on it.

"That's very kind of you. My name is David — David Myford, from Sydney," I told him. But he made no ampli-fica-tion regard-ing him-self, so I was left wondering whether George was his fore-name, or his

sur-name.

I moved to his table, and he lifted a hand to summon the girl.

"Unless you are averse to fish you must try the bouillabaisse —*spécialité de la maison* ," he told me.

I was aware that I had gamed the approval of the elderly man, and apparently of some others as well, by joining George. The wait-ress, too, had an approving air. J won-dered vaguely what was going on, and whether I had been let in for the town bore, to protect the rest.

"From Sydney," he said reflectively. "It's a long time since I saw Sydney. I don't suppose I'd know it now."

"It keeps on growing," I admitted, "but Nature would always prevent you from confusing it with anywhere else."

We went on chatting. The bouilla-baisse arrived; and excel-lent it was. There were hunks of first-class bread, too, cut from those long loaves you see in pictures in old Euro-pean book. I began to feel, with the help of the local wine, that a lot could be said for the twentieth-century way of living.

In the course of our talk it emerged that George had been a rocket pilot, but was grounded now — not, one would judge, for reasons of health, so I did not inquire further...

The second course was an excellent coupe of fruits I had never heard of, and, overall, iced passion-fruit juice. It was when the coffee came that he said, rather wistfully I thought:

"I had hoped you might be able to help me, Mr. Myford, but it now seems to me that you are not a man of faith."

"Surely everyone has to be very much a man of faith," I pro-tested. "For every-thing a man can-not do for him-self he has to have faith in others."

"True," he conceded. "I should have said 'spiritual faith'. You do not speak as one who is inter-ested in the nature and destiny of his soul — or of anyone else's soul — I fear?"

I felt that I perceived what was coming next. However if he was inter-ested in saving my soul he had at least begun the oper-ation by looking after my bodily needs with a gene-rously good meal.

"When I was young," I told him, "I used to worry quite a lot about my soul, but later I decided that that was largely a matter of vanity."

"There is also vanity in thinking oneself self-sufficient," he said.

"Certainly," I agreed. "It is chiefly with the con-cep-tion of the soul as a sepa-rate entity that I find myself out of sym-pathy. For me it is a mani-festation of mind which is, in its turn, a product of the brain, For me it is a mani-festation of mind which is, in its turn, a product of the brain, modi-fied by the exter-nal environ-ment and influ-enced more directly by the glands."

He looked saddened, and shook his head reprovingly.

"You are so wrong — so very wrong. Some are always con-scious of their souls, others, like yourself,

are una-ware of them, but no one knows the true value of his soul as long as he has it. It is not until a man has lost his soul that he under-stands its value."

It was not an obser-vation making for easy rejoinder, so I let the silence between us con-tinue. Presently he looked up into the northern sky where the trail of the moon-bound shuttle had long since blown away. With embar-rass-ment I observed two large tears flow from the inner corners of his eyes and trickle down beside his nose. He, how-ever, showed no embar-rass-ment; he simply pulled out a large, white, beauti-fully laun-dered hand-kerchief, and dealt with them.

"I hope you will never learn what a dread-ful thing it is to have no soul," he told me, with a shake of his head. "It is to hold the empti-ness of space in one's heart: to sit by the waters of Babylon for the rest of one's life."

Lamely I said:

"I'm afraid this is out of my range. I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. No one under-stands. But always one keeps on hoping that one day there will come some-body who does under-stand and can help."

"But the soul is a mani-fes-ta-tion of the self," I said. "I don't see how that*can* be lost — it can be changed, perhaps, but not lost."

"Mine is," he said, still look-ing up into the vast blue. "Lost — adrift some-where out there. With-out it I am a sham. A man who has lost a leg or an arm is still a man, but a man who has lost his soul is nothing — nothing — nothing..."

"Perhaps a psychiatrist—" I started to suggest, uncertainly. That stirred him, and checked the tears.

"Psychiatrist!" he exclaimed scorn-fully. "Damned frauds!*I* Even to the word. They may know a bit about minds; but about the psyche! — why they even deny its existence...!"

There was a pause.

"I wish I could help..." I said, rather vaguely.

"There was a chance. You*might* have been one who could. There's always the chance..." he said consolingly, though whether he was consoling himself or me seemed moot. At this point the church clock struck two. My host's mood changed. He got up quite briskly.

"I have to go now," he told me. "I wish you had been the one, but it has been a pleasant encounter all the same. I hope you enjoy Lahua."

I watched him make his way along the*place* . At one stall he paused, selected a peach-like fruit and bit into it. The woman beamed at him amiably, apparently un-concerned about pay-ment.

The dusky waitress arrived by my table, and stood looking after him.

"*O le pauvre monsieur Georges*," she said sadly. We watched him climb the church steps, throw away the rem-nant of his fruit, and remove his hat to enter. "*Il va jaire la prière*," she explained. "*Tous les jours 'e* make pray for 'is soul. In ze morning, in ze after-noon.*C'est si triste* ."

I noticed the bill in her hand. I fear that for a moment I mis-judged George, but it had been a good lunch. I reached for my notecase. The girl noticed, and shook her head.

"Non, non, monsieur, non.*Vous êtes convive. C'est d'accord .Alors, monsier* Georges 'e sign bill tomorrow.*S'arrange. C'est okay* ," she insisted, and stuck to it.

The elderly man whom I had noticed before broke in:

"It's all right — quite in order," he assured me. Then he added: "Perhaps if you are not in a hurry you would care to take a café-cognac with me?"

There seemed to be a fine open-handed-ness about Lahua. I accepted, and joined him.

"I'm afraid no one can have briefed you about poor George," he said.

I admitted this was so. He shook his head in reproof of persons unknown, and added:

"Never mind. All went well. George always has hopes of a stranger, you see: sometimes one has been known to laugh. We don't like that."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told him. "His state strikes me as very far from funny."

"It is indeed," he agreed. "But he's impro-ving. I doubt whether he knows it him-self, but he is. A year ago he would often weep quietly through the whole*dejeuner* . Rather depres-sing until one got used to it."

"He lived here in Lahua, then?" I asked.

"He exists. He spends more of his time in the church. For the rest he wanders round. He sleeps at that big white house up on the hill. His grand-daughter's place. She sees that he's decently turned out, and pays the bills for whatever he fancies down here."

I thought I must have misheard.

"His granddaughter!" I exclaimed. "But he's a young man. He can't be much over thirty..."

He looked at me.

"You'll very likely come across him again. Just as well to know how things stand. Of course it isn't the sort of thing the family likes to publi-cize, but there's no secret about it."

The café-cognacs arrived. He added cream to his, and began:

About five years ago (he said), yes, it would be in 2194, young Gerald Troon was taking a ship out to one of the larger aster-oids — the one that de Gasparis called Psyche when he spotted it in 1852. The ship was a space-built freighter called the*Celestis* working from the moon-base. Her crew was five, with not bad accom-mo-dation for-ward. Apart from that and the motor-section these ships are not much more than one big hold which is very often empty on the out-ward jour-neys unless it is carrying gear to set up new workings. This time it was empty because the assign-ment was simply to pick up a load of ura-nium ore — Psyche is half made of high-yield ore, and all that was neces-sary was to set going the

digging machinery already on the site, and load the stuff in. It seemed simple enough.

But the Asteroid Belt is still a very tricky area, you know. The main bodies and groups are charted, of course —but that only helps you to find them. The place is full of out-fliers of all sizes that you couldn't hope to chart, but have to avoid. About the best you can do is to tackle the Belt as near to your objec-tive as possible, reduce speed until you are little more than local orbit velo-city and then edge your way in, going very canny. The trouble is the time it can take to keep on fiddling along that way for thousands — hundreds of thousands, maybe — of miles. Fellows get bored and in-atten-tive, or sick to death of it and start to take chances. I don't know what the answer is. You can bounce radar off the big chunks and hitch that up to a course-de-flector to keep you away from them. But the small stuff is just as deadly to a ship, and there's so much of it about that if you were to make the course-deflector sensi-tive enough to react to it you'd have your ship shying off every-thing the whole time, and getting nowhere. What we want is someone to come up with a kind of repulse mech-anism with only a limited range of opera-tion — say, a hundred miles — but no one does. So, as I say, it's tricky. Since they first started to tackle it back in 2150 they've lost half a dozen ships in there and had a dozen more damaged one way or another. Not a nice place at all ... On the other hand, uranium is uranium...

Gerald's a good lad though. He had the authentic Troon yen for space with-out being much of a chancer; besides, Psyche isn't too far from the inner rim of the orbit — not nearly the approach problem Ceres is, for instance — what's more, he'd done it several times before.

Well, he got into the Belt, and jockeyed and fiddled and niggled his way until he was about three hundred miles out from Psyche and getting ready to come in. Perhaps he'd got a bit care-less by then; in any case he'd not be expecting to find any-thing in orbit around the asteroid. But that's just what he did find — the hard way...

There was a crash which made the whole ship ring round him and his crew as if they were in an enor-mous bell. It's about the nastiest — and very likely to be the last — sound a space-man can ever hear. This time, how-ever, their luck was in. It wasn't too bad. They dis-covered that as they crowded to watch the indi-cator dials. It was soon evi-dent that nothing vital had been hit, and they were able to release their breath.

Gerald turned over the controls to his First, and he and the engineer, Steve, pulled space-suits out of the locker. When the airlock opened they hitched their safety-lines on to spring hooks, and slid their way aft along the hull on magnetic soles. It was soon clear that the damage was not on the air-lock side, and they worked round the curve of the hull.

One can't say just what they expected to find — probably an embedded hunk of rock, or maybe just a gash in the side of the hold — any-way it was certainly not what they did find, which was half of a small space-ship projecting out of their own hull.

One thing was evident right away — that it had hit with no great force. If it had, it would have gone right through and out the other side, for the hold of a freighter is little more than a single-walled cylinder: there is no need for it to be more, it doesn't have to conserve warmth, or contain air, or resist the friction of an atmos-phere, nor does it have to contend with any more gravi-tational pull than that of the moon; it is only in the living-quarters that there have to be the com-plex-ities necessary to sustain life.

Another thing, which was imme-diately clear, was that this was not the only misad-venture that had befallen the small ship. Some-thing had, at some time, sliced off most of its after part, carrying away not only the driving tubes but the mixing-chambers as well, and leaving it hope-lessly disabled.

Shuffling round the wreckage to inspect it, Gerald found no entrance. It was thoroughly jammed into the hole it had made, and its air-lock must lie forward, some-where inside the freighter. He sent Steve back for a cutter and for a key that would get them into the hold. While he waited he spoke through his helmet-radio to the operator in the*Cel-estis's* living-quarters, and explained the situation. He added:

"Can you raise the Moon-Station just now, Jake? I'd better make a report."

"Strong and clear, Cap'n," Jake told him.

"Good. Tell them to put me on to the Duty Officer, win you."

He heard Jake open up and call. There was a pause while the waves crossed and re-crossed the millions of miles between them, then a voice :

"Hullo,*Celestis* ! Hullo*Celestis* ! Moon-Station responding. Go ahead, Jake. Over!"

Gerald waited out the exchange patiently. Radio waves are some of the things that can't be hurried. In due course another voice spoke.

"Hello,*Celestis* ! Moon-Station Duty Officer speaking Give your location and go ahead."

"Hullo, Charles. This is Gerald Troon calling from*Cel-estis* now in orbit about Psyche. Approx-imately three-twenty miles altitude. I am notifying damage by collision. No harm to personnel.*Not* repeat*not* in danger. Damage appears to be confined to empty hold-section. Cause of damage..." He went on to give parti-culars, and concluded: "I am about to inves-tigate. Will report further. Please keep the link open. Over!"

The engineer returned, floating a self-powered cutter with him on a short safety-cord, and holding the key which would screw back the bolts of the hold's entrance-port. Gerald took the key, placed it in the hole beside the door, and inserted his legs into the two staples that would give him the pur-chase to wind it.

The moon man's voice came again.

"Hullo, Ticker. Under-stand no imme-diate danger. But don't go taking any chances, boy. Can you iden-tify the derelict?"

"Repeat no danger," Troon told him. "Plumb lucky. If she'd hit six feet farther for-ward we'd have had real trouble. I have now opened small door of the hold, and am going in to examine the fore-part of the dere-lict. Will try to iden-tify it."

The caver-nous dark-ness of the hold made it neces-sary for them to switch on their helmet lights. They could now see the front part of the derelict; it took up about half the space there was. The ship had punched through the wall, turning back the tough alloy in curled petals, as though it had been tin-plate. She had come to rest with her nose a bare couple of feet short of the opposite side. The two of them sur-veyed her for some moments. Steve pointed to a ragged hole, some five or six inches across, about half-way along the embedded section. It had a nasty sig-nifi-cance that caused Gerald to nod sombrely.

He shuffled to the ship, and on to its curving side. He found the air-lock on the top, as it lay in the *Celestis* , and tried the winding key. He pulled it out again.

"Calling you, Charles," he said. "No iden-ti-fy-ing marks on the dere-lict. She's not space-built — that is, she could be used in at-mos-phere. Oldish pattern — well, must be — she's pre the stan-dard-ization of winding keys, so that takes us back a bit. Max-imum external dia-meter, say, twelve feet. Length unknown — can't say how much after part there was before it was knocked off. She's been holed for-ward, too. Looks like a small meteo-rite, about five inches. At speed, I'd say. Just a minute ... Yes, clean through and out, with a pretty small exit hole. Can't open the air-lock without making a new key. Quicker to cut our way in. Over!"

He shuffled back, and played his light through the small meteor hole. His helmet prevented him getting his face close enough to see anything but a small part of the opposite wall, with a corres-ponding hole in it.

"Easiest way is to enlarge this, Steve," he suggested.

The engineer nodded. He brought his cutter to bear, switched it on and began to carve from the edge of the hole.

"Not much good, Ticker," came the voice from the moon. "The bit you gave could apply to any one of four ships."

"Patience, dear Charles, while Steve does his bit of fancy-work with the cutter," Troon told him.

It took twenty minutes to complete the cut through the double hull. Steve switched off, gave a tug with his left hand, and the joined, inner and outer circles of metal floated away.

"*Celestis*calling moon. I am about to go into the derelict, Charles. Keep open," Troon said.

He bent down, took hold of the sides of the cut, kicked his mag-netic soles free of contact and gave a light pull which took him floating head-first through the hole in the manner of an under-water swimmer. Presently his voice came again, with a different tone:

"I say, Charles, there are three men in here. All in space-suits — old-time space-suits. Two of them are belted on to their bunks. The other one is ... Oh, his leg's gone. The meteorite must have taken it off ... There's a queer — Oh, God, it's his blood frozen into a solid ball...!"

After a minute or so he went on:

"I've found the log. Can't handle it in these gloves, though. I'll take it aboard, and let you have parti-culars. The two fellows on the bunks seem to be quite intact — their suits I mean. Their hel-mets have those curved strip-windows so I can't see much of their faces. Must've — that's odd ... Each of them has a sort of little book attached by a wire to the suit fastener. On the cover it has: 'Danger — Perigoso' in red, and, under-neath: 'Do not remove suit — Read instructions within,' repeated in Portu-guese. Then: 'Hapson Survival System.' What would all that mean, Charles? Over!"

While he waited for the reply Gerald clumsily fingered one of the tag-like books and dis-covered that it opened con-certina-wise, a series of small metal plates hinged together printed on one side in English and on the other in Portu-guese. The first leaf carried little print, but what there was was striking. It ran 'CAUTION! Do*NOT* open suit until you have read these instructions or you will KILL the wearer.'

When he had got that far the Duty Officer's voice came in again:

"Hullo, Ticker. I've called the Doc. He says do NOT, repeat NOT, touch the two men on any account.

Hang on, he's coming to talk to you. He says the Hapson system was scrapped over thirty years ago — He — oh, here he is..."

Another voice came in:

"Ticker? Laysall here. Charles tells me you've found a couple of Hapsons, undamaged. Please confirm, and give circum-stances."

Troon did so. In due course the doctor came back: "Okay. That sounds fine. Now listen care-fully, Ticker. From what you say it's prac-tically certain those two are not dead — yet. They're — well, they're in cold storage. That part of the Hapson system was good. You'll see a kind of boss mounted on the left of the chest. The thing to do in the case of extreme emer-gency was to slap it good and hard. When you do that it gives a multiple injec-tion. Part of the stuff puts you out. Part of it prevents the build-ing-up in the body of large ice crystals that would damage the tissues. Part of it — oh well, that'll do later. The point is that it works prac-tically a hundred per cent. You get Nature's own deep-freeze in space. And if there's some-thing to keep off direct radia-tion from the sun you stay like that until some-body finds you — if any-one ever does. Now I take it that these two have been in the dark of an air-less ship which is now in the airless hold of your ship. Is that right?"

"That's so Doc. There are two small meteorite holes, but they would not get direct beams from there."

"Fine. Then keep 'em just like that. Take care they don't get warmed. Don't try any-thing the instruc-tion-sheet says. The point is that though the success of the Hapson freeze is almost sure, the resus-citation isn't. In fact, it's very dodgy indeed — a poorer than twenty-five-per-cent chance at best. You get lethal crystal for-mations build-ing up, for one thing. What I suggest is that you try to get 'em back exactly as they are. Our appara-tus here will give them the best chance they can have. Can you do that?"

Gerald Troon thought for a mo-ment. Then he said:

"We don't want to waste this trip — and that's what'll happen if we pull the dere-lict out of our side to leave a hole we can't mend. But if we leave her where she is, plug-ging the hole, we can at least take on a half-load of ore. And if we pack that well in, it'll help to wedge the dere-lict in place. So suppose we leave the dere-lict just as she lies, and the men too, and seal her up to keep the ore out of her. Would that suit?"

"That should be as good as can be done," the doctor replied. "But have a look at the two men before you leave them. Make sure they're secure in their bunks. As long as they are kept in space condi-tions about the only thing likely to harm them is breaking loose under accel-era-tion, and getting damaged."

"Very well, that's what we'll do. Anyway, we'll not be using any high accel-era-tion the way things are. The other poor fellow shall have a space burial..."

An hour later both Gerald and his com-panions were back in the*Celestis's* living-quarters, and the First Officer was start-ing to man-oeuvre for the spiral-in to Psyche. The two got out of their space-suits. Gerald pulled the dere-lict's log from the out-side pocket, and took it to his bunk. There he fastened the belt, and opened the book.

Five minutes later Steve looked across at him from the opposite bunk, with concern.

"Anything the matter, Cap'n? You're looking a bit queer."

"I'm feeling a bit queer, Steve ... That chap we took out and con-signed to space, he was Terence Rice, wasn't he?"

"That's what his disc said," Steve agreed.

"H'm." Gerald Troon paused. Then he tapped the book. "This," he said, "is the log of the*Astarte* . She sailed from the Moon-Station 3 January 2149 — forty-five years ago — bound for the Asteroid Belt. There was a crew of three: Captain George Mont-gomery Troon, engineer Luis Gom-pez, radio-man Terence Rice...

"So, as the unlucky one was Terence Rice, it follows that one of those two back there must be Gompez, and the other — well, must be George Mont-gomery Troon, the one who made the Venus landing in 2144 ... And, inci-den-tally, my grand-father..."

"Well," said my companion, "they got them back all right. Gompez was un-lucky, though — at least I suppose you'd call it un-lucky — any-way, he didn't come through the resus-ci-tation. George did, of course...

"But there's more to resus-ci-tation than mere revival. There's a degree of phys-ical shock in any case, and when you've been under as long as he had there's plenty of mental shock, too.

"He went under, a young-ish man with a young family; he woke up to find him-self a great-grand-father; his wife a very old lady who had remarried; his friends gone, or elderly; his two com-panions in the *Astarte* dead."

"That was bad enough, but worse still was that he knew all about the Hapson System. He knew that when you go into a deep-freeze the whole meta-bolism comes quickly to a com-plete stop. You are, by every known defi-nition and test, dead ... Corrup-tion can-not set in, of course, but every vital process has stopped; every single feature which we regard as evidence of life has ceased to exist...

"So you are dead..."

"So if you believe, as George does, that your psyche, your soul, has indepen-dent exis-tence, then it must have left your body when you died."

"And how do you get it back? That's what George wants to know — and that's why he's over there now, praying to be told..."

I leant back in my chair, looking across the*place* at the dark opening of-the church door.

"You mean to say that that young man, that George who was here just now, is the very same George Montgomery Troon who made the first landing on Venus, half a century ago?" I said.

"He's the man," he affirmed.

I shook my head, not for disbelief, but for George's sake.

"What will happen to him?" I asked.

"God knows," said my neighbour. "He*is* getting better; he's less distressed than he was. And now he's

beginning to show touches of the real Troon obsession to get into space again.

"But what then? ... You can't ship a Troon as crew. And you can't have a Captain who might take it into his head to go hunting through Space for his soul...

"Me, I think I'd rather die just once..."

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