

Ghost

OUR LANDING ON WELDON, third world of the planetary system of Alpha Gruis, was unscheduled. No ships ever called at Weldon any more; it had dropped from its importance—never a great one—in the scheme of interstellar commerce with the exhaustion of its mineral resources. Man had come. Man had gutted the planet of its wealth. Man had left.

We hoped that the spaceport was still in a fit state for a landing. We hoped that the supplies of spare parts, of repair equipment, had not deteriorated too badly with the passage of the years. We hoped that the Pilot Book, according to which large quantities of such material had been left behind, as a cheaper alternative to its being shipped to a "live" planet, was not lying.

We could, of course, have hoped that our Drive would hold out until we reached the busy, prosperous worlds of the Centaurian system, to which we were bound. We could have done so—and, in all probability, made one of the swelling number of ships listed as "Overdue, believed lost". Nobody is quite sure what happens when the Mannschenn Drive gets out of control—according to some authorities one is slung into the remote past, according to others one finishes up in the remote future. They agree on one point—there's no returning.

I'm no technician, but I had been uneasily aware for some time that all was not well with the intricacy of spinning, precessing wheels that is the Drive. The note—which should be high, steady, almost supersonic—wavered, at times deepening to a low hum, at times rising painfully above normal aural range. And with almost every action there was the haunting sense of familiarity, the feeling of I've-done-this-before.

I was trying to check freight lists, and not making much of a job of it, when the buzzer of my telephone sounded. I picked up the instrument.

It was the Old Man on the other end.

"Mr. Rayner," he said, "come up to Control, will you?"

I wasn't sorry to leave my papers. I unbuckled myself from my chair, pulled myself out from my office to the axial shaft, caught the guide-line and pulled myself towards the nose—and the brains—of the ship. On the way I passed a few of the passengers, and I could see that they, like me, were aware that something was wrong. I didn't stop to answer their questions, which, even though I didn't know the answers, was rather foolish of me.

When I reached the Control Room it was obvious that some sort of conference was in progress. The Old Man was there, looking even more worried than the Master of an interstellar ship usually looks; I swear that the lines on his face had deepened, that his hair had become appreciably greyer in the few hours since I had last seen him. Caulfield, the Navigator, was there; the wrinkles on his brow seemed to be spreading up and over his glistening bald scalp. Welles, the Drive Engineer, was there, looking as miserable as only a fat man can look.

"All right, Mr. Welles," the Old Man was saying. "So you can't make repairs in space. You *think* that you can keep the Drive running for two more days, ship's time, but no longer."

"That's the strength of it, Captain," said Welles sullenly.

"Weldon's our best chance, sir," said Caulfield. "A ghost planet, but according to the book it has a breathable atmosphere, no lethal extremes of temperature and, even better, a stock of spares. The planet was evacuated when the mines closed down but, as there are no inquisitive natives, we have every reason to hope that we shall find the stocks intact."

"Weldon it has to be," said the Old Man. "You, Mr. Welles, will have to keep the Drive running for three more days." He turned and saw me. "You, Mr. Rayner, will inform the passengers. Whatever you do, don't frighten them."

"On the intercom, sir?" I asked, reaching for the microphone.

"No. Of all the instruments devised by man for spreading panic, the loudspeaker's the worst. The customers know that there's something wrong. An authoritative, reassuring statement over the intercom

will be anything but reassuring. We want the personal touch—and that's the Purser's job. Circulate, Mr. Rayner. Tell them that everything's under control. Tell them how lucky they are to get a look at a ghost planet—and all for free. Blind them with science.... "

"But I don't know anything about the Drive, sir."

"Neither do they. Off you go, now. We're going to be very busy here until we arrive. *If* we arrive."

It's hard to be reassuring if you're feeling very badly in need of reassurance yourself. I was remembering all the horrid stories I'd heard of ships —and people —being turned inside out with a malfunctioning of the Drive. I was wondering which would be preferable—being marooned in the remote past or the remote future— and was not wildly enthusiastic about either prospect. I was wondering what would be the best line of approach to take with the passengers.

They were gathered in the Lounge—all twenty-four of them. They knew that there was something wrong; the behavior of the Mannschenn Drive had worsened since I had left my office. They looked at me with mingled distrust and distaste; my uniform made me one of *Them*, one of the rulers of this little world who had failed, lamentably, in their duties.

"I hope you aren't worried," I said brightly.

My answer was a growl such as one would expect from the jungle, not from a gathering of allegedly civilized human beings.

"When do we take to the boats?" asked one of the men, a burly individual called Etheridge.

"We do not take to the boats," I told him. "The boats cannot be used in interstellar space, only in the vicinity of planetary systems. But I did not come here to tell you that. I came here with good news."

"So they've fixed the Drive," said Miss Hall, a tall, angular spinster. "It doesn't sound like it, young man."

"I'm afraid the Drive has not been fixed," I admitted. "Not yet. But there is no danger. Anyhow —here is the *good* news. You'll have all heard of the ghost planets—worlds that have been exploited and then abandoned. We're headed towards such a world now — Weldon, otherwise Alpha Gruis III. The mines were worked out all of fifty Earth years ago.... "

"*Why* are we going there?" asked Etheridge.

I tried to smile brightly. "I *could* say that we're going there to give all you people the opportunity, which very few travelers ever get, to look at a ghost planet. I *could* say that, but I won't. Even so, you'll be very foolish not to make the most of the opportunity. The reason, however, is this. There are large stocks of spares and repair equipment at the spaceport. We shall make use of them."

"Suits me," said Susan Willoughby.

"I am pleased that *someone* can afford the delay," remarked Miss Hall acidly.

"The delay, I hope, will be to my financial advantage," replied the girl sweetly.

"Why, Miss Willoughby?" I asked—although I had guessed the reason. Her profession, as listed on her passport, was that of writer.

"Local color," she said. "My next novel's going to be about one of the mining planets—the first discovery, the prospecting, the exploitation and, finally, the decay."

"So long as *someone's* happy," snapped Miss Hall.

"I don't see why we shouldn't all be happy," said Etheridge suddenly. "As the Purser has told us, this is a chance that comes to very few people. We shall be fools not to make the most of it — fools not to make the most of it.... " He paused, then said, "I seem to be repeating myself."

"You will," said Miss Hall, "until somebody repairs the drive."

I returned her glare.

"I'm sorry," I told her, "but I'm the Purser, not a Drive Engineer."

"Have we got one aboard?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," I told her, "but I'm the Purser, not a Drive Engineer."

"Have we got one aboard?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," I began.

"Must we have all that again?" she demanded.

"Not if I can help it," I said. "All I can do, ladies and gentlemen, is to assure you that there is no danger and that everything is well in hand. You will all—we shall all—suffer slight inconvenience until repairs have been effected. I trust that you will be able to endure this inconvenience for another three days. It will be no longer.

"Should any of you require any further information, I shall be in my office. Thank you."

Susan Willoughby came into my office while I was trying to check the freight lists.

She said, "Men amuse me."

I looked up from my papers. She was better worth looking at than they were—that is, if you like redheaded women. Some people don't; I do.

She said, "Men amuse me."

I said, "I heard you the first time, Miss Willoughby. Of course, things being as they are, you may have actually said it only once."

"I said it twice."

"Then, why do men amuse you?"

"Their passion for routine work in the face of catastrophe."

"If there's any catastrophe in here, you must have brought it in yourself," I said, joking feebly.

"I can see it all," she said half to herself. "The Captain daren't come to see us himself, or send one of his executive officers. They—and he—all know too much. They wouldn't have been able to lie convincingly. You, knowing nothing, could lie. I heard Mary Hall talking to Bill Etheridge. 'It can't be really serious,' she was saying. 'Mr. Rayner was a little worried, but he wasn't frightened—and he's the kind that scares easily....'"

"Thank you," I said.

She said, "I hope we do come through. This'll be first-class material—and so will be the ghost planet. If we get there."

"We shall," I said.

She ignored this.

"I've done quite a lot of research into the various losses of interstellar ships. Most of them seem to have been due to Drive failure. Did you hear about Mitsubishi's discovery on Antares VII?"

"Who's Mitsubishi?" I asked.

"The archaeologist. He discovered what must have been the remains of a spaceship, all of fifty thousand years old. There was a mass of corroded machinery that could have been, that must have been ..."

"What?" I asked.

"A Mannschenn Drive Unit."

"Some race, fifty thousand years ago, had interstellar travel."

"That's possible," she admitted. "But the other solution is possible, too. Correct me if I'm wrong. Remember that I'm a writer, not a physicist. The principle of the Drive is precession—precession in time as well as in space. Thanks to those fancy gyroscopes that aren't, at the moment, behaving too well, the ship goes astern, as it were, in time while going ahead in space...."

"You know as much as I do," I said. "I'm only the Purser."

"What a pity that the temporal precession can't be used to drive a time machine," she murmured. "As you know, historical novels are my speciality. If one could be on the Moon to watch Corderey's landing—the first man to set foot on a world other than his own! If one could witness the early struggle of the Martian colony!"

"Once you have time travel," I said, "you have paradox."

"And what's wrong with paradox?" she demanded.

"Nothing—except that you just can't have it. You just can't have people going back in time and murdering their grandfathers."

"I admit," she said sweetly, "that it's not done." We both laughed.

The Drive held out until we made planetfall.

Weldon lay below us—a grey-green globe, with wide white belts of cloud—when we flickered into normal space-time. Landing, we knew, would be a protracted business; the last Survey ship that had been in the vicinity of the planet had reported that the automatic beacon was no longer functioning. We should, therefore, have to circle Weldon until our telescopes picked up the city—also called Weldon. Whether or not this task would be easy would depend upon how much the buildings were overgrown by the native plant life.

Things went surprisingly smoothly.

On our third circuit of the planet we picked up the city. All that remained then was the stern-first dropping through the atmosphere, our speed adjusted to match the speed of rotation of the planet so that, in effect, we achieved a vertical descent. All, I say—but it wasn't as simple as that. What had been the daylight hemisphere at the beginning of landing operations became, inevitably, the night side. There were no lights to guide us.

We seemed, too, to be bringing the bad weather with us. We commenced our long fall from a cloudless sky; the latter part of it was through driving rain and, if the drift indicators were to be believed, gale-force winds. When at last we touched the wet concrete, we were enveloped in clouds of steam of our own making as our rocket exhausts vaporized the deep pools and puddles that had collected on the apron.

When the steam had cleared there was not much more to see. Dimly, through the driving rain, loomed a low huddle of buildings. There were no lights, no signs of life. We hadn't been expecting any, but this did not make the overall effect any the less depressing.

"Landing has been accomplished," I said into the microphone through which I had been delivering a running commentary to the passengers and crew. "Landing has been accomplished. Repairs will be put in hand at once."

"Mr Rayner," said the Old Man coldly, "by whose authority did you make that last rash promise? Even you must realize that Mr. Caulfield, Mr. Welles and myself have been three days and nights without sleep, and the other officers are in little better case. Repairs will be put in hand as soon as *I* see fit."

"Even so, sir," put in Caulfield, "there's no reason why *we* shouldn't investigate the stores around the spaceport, get some idea of what materials we shall have to work with."

"In the morning," said the Captain. "Or the afternoon. Or whenever we wake up. We're far too tired to do any work on the Mannschenn Drive Unit—the state we're in now, we couldn't reassemble a cheap alarm clock without having at least six parts left over. Mr. Rayner—amend your message."

"Attention, please," I said. "Here is an amendment. Repairs will be put in hand as soon as possible."

There was nothing further for me to do in the Control Room; the necessary entries in the Official Log I would make in my own office. I slid down the guide-line in the axial shaft, disdaining the ladder rungs. I stopped for a brief word with those passengers who were still in the Lounge. Most of them had turned in, finding the gravity tiring after the weeks of free fall.

Susan Willoughby followed me into the office.

"Men," she said, "amuse me. This passion for routine."

"I always," I said, "make it a practice to get this sort of thing clewed up as soon as possible after arrival."

"Interstellar vessel *Delta Cygni*," she read aloud, peering over my shoulder. "Arrival at Port Weldon, on Weldon, Alpha Gruis III. Time, G.M.T. Subjective: 05.45 hours. Time, Local ... " She laughed. "What *is* the local time, James?"

"Search me, Susan," I admitted.

"But you must put in something, mustn't you? You must do it now. The ghostly Port Doctor, accompanied by the spectral Immigration Officer and the phantom Customs Officials, will be boarding any time now...."

I listened to the wind whose howling I could hear even through our insulated plating. I decide that I did not envy the cadets, who would be standing airlock watch throughout what remained of the night.

"You know," she said, "I'd like to be the first, James. Well, not *the* first—but the first after fifty years."

Do you think ... ?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"The Old Man hasn't granted shore leave."

"But he hasn't *not* granted shore leave."

"Anyhow—the ship's not cleared inwards."

"By whom, James? By whom? It seems to me —of course, I'm no authority on interstellar law—that you've done all the clearing possible with your Log Book entries."

I remembered, then, Caulfield's suggestion that an immediate investigation be made of what facilities for repair and replacement the spaceport offered. If I were able to greet my superiors, when they at last awakened, with a neat list of the contents of storerooms and workshops, they would have to admit that I had made a material contribution towards getting the ship under way once more for the Centaurian system.

"Do you want a job?" I asked Susan. "Acting Temporary Purser's Pup, Unpaid?"

"Doing what? Helping you make silly entries in the Log Book?"

"No." I told her my scheme.

"I'm with you," she said, "on one condition— that you let me be first out of the ship."

Susan went to her cabin and I climbed the shaft up to the officers' flat. Nobody— excepting, of course, myself—was awake in the accommodation. I collected a heavy raincoat and a powerful torch. Pen and notebook I stuck into my pockets almost as an afterthought.

Susan was waiting for me in the Lounge when I got down.

She, too, had dressed against the weather. She, too, was carrying a torch. She was talking with Miss Hall and Etheridge. "I think you're crazy, Miss Willoughby," the spinster was saying. "And that Purser boyfriend of yours is crazier."

"I rather wish that I were going with them," said Etheridge. "Then you're crazy too."

"All right—we're all crazy." He noticed me. "Just one thing I'd like to ask, Rayner. Are there any dangerous animals on this planet?"

"None — according to the Pilot Book."

"Even so," he said, "fifty years is a long time. There were probably a few domestic animals left, inadvertently, at the time of the evacuation. Cats, perhaps, and dogs. You'd better take this—I don't suppose that the ship carries any firearms."

"No," I said, "we don't. But I can use a pistol. Thanks a lot."

I took the heavy automatic from him, checked the magazine, then slid it into my pocket.

"The odds are that you won't need it," said Etheridge.

"I should think not!" snapped Mary Hall.

We said goodnight to them and descended the companionway to the airlock. The cadet on duty was reluctant to let us out, but finally did so when I made him admit that no orders had been issued about restriction of shore leave.

As I had promised, I let Susan first down the ramp. She staggered as the wind caught her, and the beam of her torch waved wildly. A second or so later I was by her side and, heads down, we were pushing through the wind and the freezing rain towards the nearer of the low buildings. As we approached it we found ourselves in a lee, for which we were grateful. The beams of our torches were reflected from rows of windows, all of which seemed to be intact. Almost directly ahead of us was a door.

It wasn't locked—but fifty years is a long time. We got it open at last, the protesting shriek of the long idle hinges audible even above the howling wind. I cried out as I saw two glowing green eyes in the darkness—then laughed. The owner of the eyes was only a cat, a Terran cat—lean and wild, a reversion to its savage ancestors, but nothing to be afraid of.

"Puss!" I said. "Puss! Pretty Pussy!"

The animal swore at me and made off.

We were in a passageway, and we advanced along it with caution. We opened, without much trouble, the first door that we came to on our right. The room behind it must have been an office of some kind—there were stools and there were desks and filing cabinets. On one of the desks was an open book—a ledger of some kind.

"We'll see what the last entry was," said Susan, shining her torch onto the yellowed pages.

Already this is a ghost planet. There is still life, the city still lives, the spaceport is busy as the ships come in to take off personnel and such equipment as is worth the expense of shipping out and away. But today I saw a ghost—two ghosts. I saw them in broad daylight. Ghosts of the pioneers, they must have been—some long dead prospector and his wife, returned to see the ending of the dream that once was theirs, of which they were once a part. A man and a woman they were, dressed in heavy outdoor clothing. Each of them carried a torch—or so it seemed. The man carried a pistol as well, in his right hand.

I was in the main equipment storeroom, checking the Mannschenn Drive Units. The orders are that they are to be left here, so that any ship in trouble on the Centaurian run can put into Port Weldon for spares and repairs. I was applying the coat of oil that should last, if necessary, a hundred years or more.

Suddenly, I heard a man's voice say, "That's the one."

I looked up. They—the ghosts—were standing there. I don't know for how long they had been there, but I am certain they had not come through the door, which I was facing as I worked. There was this man—an ordinary-looking sort of fellow with brown hair—and the rather striking redhaired woman. The man pointed his pistol at me.

"You," he said, "You left the safety clamps off the main rotor."

"What if I did?" I asked.

"Make sure that they're on," he ordered. "Tight."

"It's no business of yours," I told him.

"It is," he said. "Take the pistol," he said to the woman. "If he tries to interfere, shoot."

I didn't know that they were ghosts. I stood still, and watched the man tighten the clamps on the main rotor. And then—they were gone. Both of them. Vanished.

I'm leaving this here in the office. Sooner or later a ship will be coming in for repairs. This is just to let you—whoever you are—know that the main equipment storeroom is haunted.

"Some people," said Susan, "have—or had—a weird sense of humor."

"Shall we find the main equipment storeroom?" I asked. "Are you afraid of the ghosts?"

"Of course not," she said. "And if there are ghosts, it's all material."

So we found the main equipment storeroom. It was easy enough—on the wall of the office in which we had found the ledger with its odd entry there was a plan of the spaceport buildings. We didn't find any ghosts in the storeroom—but we found the dogs.

Six of them there were—huge brutes, with something in them of Alsatian and something of mastiff, and they were fierce and they were hungry. Luckily—I had half believed the ghost story—I had shifted my torch to my left hand and held the pistol—cocked, and with the safety catch off—in my right. I fired when they rushed us, killing one of the brutes. The others—all save one—turned tail and bolted.

I emptied my magazine at the one who did not run. My last shot must have wounded him—even so, he was on me, and bore me down, his jaws at my throat. I tried to fight him off, but it was a losing struggle. He was strong. Then, suddenly, he collapsed on me—dead. By the light from my torch, which was still burning, I saw Susan standing over us. Her own torch was out. It had never been designed for use as a club.

"Thanks," I said inadequately.

She pulled the stinking carcass off me, helped me to my feet.

I shone the beam of my torch around the storeroom, fearing further attack from the surviving dogs. They might well, I thought, be lurking behind the machines, gathering their courage for a fresh attack.

Then, somehow, I became interested in the machines themselves. The only ones that I was able to

identify were the Mannschenn Drive units—there was no mistaking that complexity of gleaming wheels that, even in rest, seemed to draw the eye down unimaginable vistas. Several of my bullets, I saw, had hit the nearer of the Drive Units. One bullet—there was no mistaking that bright, silvery splash of metal—had struck the rim of the main rotor a glancing blow.

Suppose the wheel had turned, I thought. Suppose the wheel had turned.... Suppose that, somehow, a temporal field had been set up.... What would have happened? Nothing—according to widely publicized laboratory experiments. Or—to judge from the rumors one heard of other experiments that were given no publicity—quite a lot.

The thought of what might have happened scared me. I blessed the technician who had set up the safety clamps tightly enough to hold the rotor immobile, even under the impact of a bullet.

But ...

I remembered the absurd entry in the ledger in that deserted office.

Who had tightened those clamps?

I've been writing this to pass the time for the remainder of the voyage. I have to pass the time somehow. Rayner the Leper — that's me. I'm in bad with the Old Man and the senior officers, and once *that* happens aboard any ship you might as well pack your bags. The Captain has not forgiven me—I don't think he ever will—for disturbing his sleep that night; the duty cadet sounded the General Alarm when he heard the shooting inside the spaceport buildings. All in all, I shan't be sorry to arrive at Port Austral. I've asked for a transfer and I pay off there.

What really does hurt is the lack of any sympathy from Susan Willoughby. I think I'm entitled to it, but I'm not getting it. She had a long session with Welles and Caulfield, apparently, and thinks that she knows *all* about the Mannschenn Drive now. She thinks that if those clamps had not been tightened, if the main rotor had turned, she and I would have gone back in time, would have found ourselves in Port Weldon at the time of the evacuation of the planet—and that, she says, would have been material of a kind that comes once in a lifetime, if then.

I raised the point of the impossibility of our returning to our own time—except by the slow way—and she said that it didn't matter, that good writing sells no matter when it's written. I pointed out that she had held the pistol on the technician while I tightened the clamps."

"But," she said, "*I* can't remember it."

"No," I said, "you can't—because it never happened. But it *would* have happened if I hadn't tightened those clamps.

"So you admit it," she flared. "I'll never forgive you for it!" And that was that.

When I first got to know her I had allowed myself to dream, to hope that a casual, shipboard acquaintanceship might develop into something more permanent.

That's all over now—and all because I'm haunted by my own ghost!

—It's back there on a planet in deep space. And I can't help wondering if I'll ever be tightening those clamps again—for another ship putting in for repairs. Most of all, I wonder if I'll be on it....