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THE UNDISCOVERED OF FUTURE CENTURIES



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The Cosmic Derelict

By JOHN BROOME

Ever-deeper into that Sargasso of space
the Earth-bound Lucifer bored. And guiding
her, mocking her, was the fabled,
gaunt-skeletoned Flying Dutchman of the stars.

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It was Tug Skelly's fault that the Starways freighter, *Lucifer*, four hours out of Orion City, was running behind time; and Captain Christopher Douglas, Starways' newest and youngest Old Man, found it hard to maintain the dignity befitting a transgalactic skipper, as he inveighed against the guilty bo'sun in his cabin.

"Twenty-four hours lost in port, Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas groaned, dropping the latest triangulator readings to his desk. "A full day we can't possibly make up! And no one to blame for it but bo'sun Skelly!"

First mate Pete Jackson, who had just brought the computator results into the cabin, responded to the captain's forlorn glance with a clucking noise and a sympathetic grimace of his blue-eyed, terrier's face. There was no doubt that Douglas' vexation with Tug Skelly was justified; but Jackson felt called upon to put in a word for his unfortunate shipmate.

"I wouldn't be too hard on Tug, sir," Pete Jackson said placatingly. "He may have some queer ways, but after you get to know him ye'll likely find Tug a pretty valuable hand aboard ship."

"All I would like to know," Captain Douglas returned unhappily, "is why in Old Nick he had to nose out that stowaway in Orion right at blasting time? Why didn't he just keep that big turnip of his where it belonged!"

Jackson shrugged helplessly. The *Lucifer's* youngish, new skipper just didn't

know Tug Skelly yet, that was the truth. It was clearly no part of a bo'sun's duties to hunt down stowaways; but then Tug had never been content to perform only his duties. The plain fact was that the stowaway, a pink-skinned Orionian, had sneaked aboard right after loading was finished. He was apparently seen by no one except the usually sleepy-eyed Tug; but that alone proved more than enough to spell the poor devil's doom.

"If it hadn't been for the Orion port authorities, though," Mate Jackson essayed weakly, "we'd have blasted on schedule. I know Tug didn't intend to stir them up, sir."

"No!" Captain Douglas jeered miserably. "I suppose not. But that infernal racket he raised chasing the stowaway was enough to bring the whole city aboard!"

Jackson nodded sadly. The Orionian port officials, summoned by Tug's wild bellowings, had swarmed on the ship *en masse*, like a brood of pink and imperturbable owls. They helped Tug snag the first stowaway; and then, over Douglas' frantic protests, they very slowly and assiduously fine-combed the *Lucifer* the rest of that night for others. They didn't find any more stowaways, but by the time the *Lucifer* got clearance an entire day had elapsed, leaving Captain Douglas in a near catatonic state. The guilty Skelly meanwhile had mysteriously disappeared underdeck—where, for all Jackson knew, he still was.

First Mate Jackson stirred uneasily. A suspicion suddenly shot through his mind regarding Tug's possible motive in acting the way he did. But the little first carefully refrained from voicing his thought. If it were true, it would definitely not help the big bo'sun's case with Captain Douglas!

"Like I said, sir," Pete Jackson contented himself by sighing, "Tug's mostly a first-rate bo'sun, though sometimes he does get sort of queer ideas. However—" Jackson added hastily, "you can depend on all the boys now. I mean, Captain, Sparks told us about that message that came from the owners a while back; you can bank on it we'll all do everything possible to help you make up the time."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Douglas said gratefully. "I appreciate that."

Captain Douglas spoke with some composure, but, after Jackson saluted smartly and left the cabin, the young skipper's *papier mache* dignity melted rapidly and he slumped down into his swivel. The first officer's promise was merely a gesture, as both men knew. The *Lucifer* was at top speed, doing better than ten

and a half kilos, but the computator showed that even that would fetch New York nearly twenty hours late. Christopher Douglas' usually trim blond mustache drooped woe-begonely, but he was too miserable to straighten it.

Instead, he parted the braids of his breveted uniform and drew a crumpled slip of paper from his breast pocket. The radiogram Jackson had referred to was from A. J. Braithewaite himself, president of Starways. It had come only a few hours before; and, re-reading it, Douglas could still hardly believe his own ill luck. Belated rocketings were always held against Starways skippers; but the *Lucifer's* tardy arrival threatened to be starkly tragic.

Captain Douglas, the gram went, Solar Council going off platinum standard as of twelve midnight July third. Imperative that you bring Lucifer in as scheduled by noon that day. Any delay in arriving will cost Starways huge sum on your cargo of platinum. Am certain you will not fail us. Braithewaite.

Douglas sank down into the swivel until his smooth, clean-shaven chin almost rested on the desk top. The spanking new *Lucifer*, carguing a bin full of Orion's precious powdered platinum, was Chris Douglas's first real deep-galactic command—after years of school theorizing and practical activity as everything from a galley-knave to a blast-wiper. He loved his new ship; but already his first voyage under his own ticket threatened to be his last! Starways' hard-boiled employee policy might well put him on a muck-ridden asteroid run after this, or ground him altogether.

Chris Douglas groaned and ran a limp hand over his moist face. He hadn't felt more sheerly miserable since he was turned down by the lady of his choice when he was fifteen. The lady, to be sure, was almost twice his age then; but even so her answer still rankled. She was his schoolmarm, and she had made it painfully clear that under no circumstances would she consider becoming engaged to a fat little appleknocker like Christopher Douglas. Her name was Lucy; and it still gave him a pang to recall her cool gray eyes and her—

"Beg pardon, Cap'n. Are yuh busy?"

Douglas looked up with a start. A big face—quite different from the beautiful vision in his mind—was framed in the aperture formed by the partly open cabin door. It was a thoroughly, almost enjoyably, ugly face, that looked as if it had been kneaded by a crazy baker. It possessed just about the color and consistency

of limp dough. Captain Douglas straightened slowly in his seat as he gazed on it.

"Skelly!" He said ominously, "come in!"

Bo'sun Tug Skelly came in cautiously, as if he were afraid of wrecking the daintily appointed cabin by one awkward movement of his great, brawny frame. He held his cap very respectfully in one gnarled hand; but his huge face wore what Douglas thought was an altogether out-of-place grin. He looked like an overgrown urchin who is caught swiping pies but is unrepentant because of a full stomach.

"I suppose," Captain Douglas said icily when the big bo'sun stood before his desk, "that you know what your shenanigans in Orion has cost, Skelly!"

"Yessir," Tug grinned unblushingly, "but don't let that bother yuh too much, Cap'n. Shux, so long's we got rid o' that stowaway everything'll be shipshape, never fear."

"Listen, Skelly," Captain Douglas rose holding the shreds of his dignity around him with a shaking hand, "are you aware that we could have cargoed that Orionian from here to Betelgeuse and back for what the lost day is going to cost?"

Tug nodded brightly. He was obviously not too impressed by his young superior's analogy. "Sure, Cap'n," he said easily, "but we wouldn't have got very far with him. I mean we'd've had an accident o' some kind. Maybe a rocket tube woulda slipped its moorings; maybe the gravs woulda gone dead without no reason. But something woulda happened—that's the godshonest truth."

Captain Douglas's eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, opened wide; then narrowed dazedly. He was remembering something Mate Jackson had said about queer ideas.

"Yesiree, Cap'n," Tug spoke confidently since he obviously held the new master's undivided, even spellbound attention. "Everybody knows a stowaway's bad jinks; but not many aside from Tug Skelly knows jest how bad an *Orionian* stowaway can be! Cap'n Douglas, an Orionian stowaway's no different from a cargo o' loose cordite. He's jest bound to cause mischief on a ship."

"Mischief!" Captain Douglas felt that that was a poor way to describe the fix

they were already in; but he didn't pursue the point. Another aspect of the bo'sun's speech drew his attention. It was obvious that in Tug Skelly, he, Chris Douglas, was confronted by a withering example of ignorance on the loose. All the new skipper's years of training, his sleeplessness and his distraught nerves, rose gorgelike at this shambling, dough-faced anachronism who posed as a space sailor.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas said acidly, "your remarks reveal an incredible disregard for the scientific viewpoint. In fact, I haven't heard such sinful tommyrot since I was six—and even then I knew better. An Orionian stowaway, or any other stowaway, Mister Skelly, can cause no more damage to a vessel than the amount of edible cargo he can consume. The rest is rubbish."

Tug looked hurt. "I dunno, Cap'n," he said slowly. "Now you take the *Campanella*—the big liner that jes' blew apart one day off Venus. What did the Safety Board investigation show afterwards? Why, that she was carrying a whole nestful of Orionians underdeck!"

And Tug flashed his young master a look of triumphant vindication. Chris Douglas heaved a long breath and slumped back in the swivel. The task of bringing bo'sun's Skelly's education up to date was clearly not one for a single afternoon. Nor, with Braithewaite's message still before him, did the skipper feel any taste for the job.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas sighed disgustedly, "did you come here to regale me with your views on Orionian stowaways?"

"Eh?" Tug scratched his head and grinned a little at the captain's peculiar way of talking. "Naw, but I almost did forget, sir. Fact is, Cap'n, I come to tell yuh how to make up the day we lost. Yessir."

"You did!" Douglas sneered miserably. "How? By getting out and pushing? Or simply by wishing on a star? The *Lucifer* can't do any more than ten and a half kilos."

"She don't hafta," Tug said equably, no whit abashed by the irony. "We can gain a lot o' time by using an old route I know. I forget the real name, but it's called the Pass o' the Twin Witches. It's at the tip o' the Southern Cross, Cap'n. Joshua P. MacLevy, my old skipper, used to tell me about it. It'll save—"

But Chris Douglas was no longer heeding the big bo'sun. His eyes, which had widened suddenly as Tug spoke, were now peering at the great blue and white astrochart on the wall back of his desk. He rose and fixed his gaze on a little star-clustered area far off the main commercial routes—the tip of the Southern Cross. Then he sprang to the desk and began working with a pencil. A moment later, he looked up strangely excited. It was no wonder he hadn't thought of the Cross Straits—the old pass had been out of use for over fifty years. For vague reasons, it still had a bad name and skippers avoided it. But Chris Douglas was no shell-backed worshipper of traditions.

"Skelly," he said regarding the bo'sun with new shining eyes. "I think you've got something! Using the old Cross Straits will clip nearly a million kilos from our course, and give us a good chance to fetch New York on time. A very good chance!"

Captain Douglas' sudden, almost boyish enthusiasm was infectious, but now it was his bo'sun's turn to become oddly perturbed. The wrinkles on Skelly's massive face were as big as troughs.

"That's right, Cap'n," Tug nodded uneasily, "but the Pass is pretty dangerous, yuh know. If yuh leave it to me, there won't be no need to worry, though. I know how to fix those hags so they can't touch the *Lucifer* no matter how hard they try!"

"Hags?" Captain Douglas said with a now friendly smile. "What hags are you talking about, Tug?"

"The witches, Cap'n, that guard the Pass." Tug's voice had dropped to a whisper and he leaned forward with a fearful, secretive air. "There are two o' them, Cap'n Douglas. One on each side. Giants they are, and woe to the poor ship as passes under their hot breath without first undergoin' the ritual o' purification! But don't you worry, Cap'n. I know the formula that'll wash all the sins from the *Lucifer* and leave her clean as a baby. Yes sir!"

"What the dickens—!" Captain Douglas began with a dazed frown. But Tug Skelly went on hurriedly; it was clear that he regarded the young skipper's astonishment as an evil omen.

"All we gotta do, Cap'n," Tug pleaded, "is give the *Lucifer* a pure white soul; and I can do it. Jes' let me handle it, Cap'n Douglas, and those two witches won't

bother us a bit."

"Bo'sun Skelly!" Captain Douglas swallowed hard and gathered his benumbed senses. "I have heard tall tales and weird stories; but for sheer cockeyed balderdash yours is far and away the best yet! Your suggestion of the Cross Straits was invaluable; and I am very grateful to you for it. But by Jupiter if you go on talking about Twin Witches I'll have to clap you in irons. Good day."

Tug started to protest, but something about Young Douglas' clamped jaw made him halt and drop his big arms to his sides miserably. He stood there for a moment before mumbling a low, "Aye, aye," and offering a clumsy salute. Then he turned and walked from the cabin, his big shoulders drooped despairingly.

Captain Chris Douglas mopped his brow when he was alone in his quarters.

"Witches," he murmured incredulously. "Purifying the soul of a ship against witches!"

He gave his close-cropped, blond head a vigorous shake, as if to clear it of any goblins or pixies that might have crept in by contamination with Tug Skelly; and a second later he was at the desk communicator contacting the bridge.

"Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas said when he heard the mate's voice. "I have decided to change our course. You will take all readings necessary to bring the *Lucifer* to the Straits of the Cross.... Yes, Mr. Jackson, I said the Straits of the Cross. At once!"

The *Lucifer*, a hollow black needle in the immense twilight of space, hurtled eagerly on the second day out toward the new pole her tiny masters had set for her. But First Mate Pete Jackson alone on the bridge didn't find himself any too eager about their new route. For one thing, the last three ships known to have tried the Cross Straits had never been heard from afterwards. For another, Jackson just didn't feel easy traveling off the main lanes.

He had intimated his fears to Captain Douglas at mess that morning; but without making any impression on the young skipper.

"Sure I know about those ships that were lost in the Straits fifty years ago," Captain Douglas had responded cheerfully, fresh from a much needed sleep.

"But that was fifty years ago, Mr. Jackson. Those early ether-blasters were just clay pigeons to space hazards that can't even tickle the *Lucifer*. Our ship is equipped with every modern safety device known to astrogation. I think we'll get through all right."

Pete Jackson rolled the captain's words over in his mind and shifted in his seat before the visiplat with a sigh. A moment later, he jumped with a startled oath as a heavy finger prodded his shoulder. It was Tug Skelly, looking as big and mournful as a Great Dane bereft of his master. But Pete Jackson wasted no sympathy on his ungainly subordinate.

"Hah! It's you," the little mate said with fierce scorn. "I suppose ye've come to tell me about those witches of yours, eh? Well, you're wastin' y' time. Captain Douglas's already told me about your crazy ideas; and I must say you made a proper fool of yourself before the new skipper, Tug. I'm thoroughly disgusted with you!"

"Pete," Tug pleaded, "it's true what I said about the Twin Witches. Old Josh MacLevy told me about 'em, and you know he wouldn't jes' spin a yarn. Listen, Pete, all I need for the ritual o' purification is a lot o' white paint. You gimme a release for the paint and I'll attend to all the rest. Please, Pete."

But Jackson was adamant.

"First off," the mate grunted sourly, "we ain't got a pail of white paint aboard. Second, I wouldn't give it to ye, if we had it! The trouble with you, Tug, is you need some education. You're worse than an old Irishlady when it comes to superstitions, and that's a fact."

Captain Douglas had used those very words to describe the bo'sun when he and the mate spoke at mess. But Pete Jackson felt no qualms of plagiarism in borrowing the apt phrases. He even remembered a little more the new skipper had said.

"Tug," Jackson advised with a superior air, "I think you'd better take a home study course next voyage in the elements of physics and chemistry. That's what you need—a little educating. Take it from the Captain and me."

For a long moment, Tug Skelly played miserably with fingers that were like bananas. Then he heaved a sigh and turned. At the bulkhead, however, he looked

back.

"Edjagation," he asserted with a truculent nod, "ain't everything, Pete. No, sir!" And with that Tug lumbered out.

Pete Jackson snorted and turned troubledly once again to his forward sight. The nearer the *Lucifer* got to the Straits, the more the first mate found himself wishing they were back on the good old slow lanes. There were no familiar skymarks here; and the *Lucifer* was being guided by dead reckoning. Yet, remembering young Douglas's words, Jackson took heart.

"Witches!" Pete Jackson scoffed aloud to the empty bridge round him. "Hah!" But the sneer didn't sound too convincing even to himself.

It was the beginning of the long middle watch, when most of the *Lucifer's* crew slept; but Tug Skelly returning to his bunk didn't go right to sleep as usual. Instead, he paced his narrow deck for many long minutes—before finally beginning an activity that would undoubtedly have astonished any of his shipmates if they had been awake to witness it. Out of his cabin locker, Tug dragged his battered bulger. And as he donned it the bo'sun's massive face, gargoyle'd by the port starlight, wore a strangely desperate but determined expression. He went down into the holds and stayed there for some time before he finally emerged on the hull.

All during the long watch that ticked away inside the peaceful *Lucifer*, a shapeless, bulging form toiled outside her hull. The myriad stars roundabout blinked in amazement at the tiny, squid-like object that moved on the great hull. They watched with endless curiosity as the moving blob several times disappeared from view only to reappear again. And they marveled greatly at how the aspect of the hull was changed wherever the restless object toiled. When finally the blob disappeared for the last time, the stars blinked in delighted wonder at the vision he had left them. The middle watch inside the *Lucifer* was not yet ended when Tug Skelly crawled out of his bulger and toppled into his bunk like a stricken Sequoia.

"Captain. Captain Douglas."

The *Lucifer's* young skipper opened his eyes, focused them on the lad who was

shaking him by the shoulder, and sat upright. It was Andy, the galley-boy, who stood before the bed, his tow-thatched face screwed up puzzledly.

"Captain Douglas," Andy said scratching his head, "the cook sent me to wake you. He said to get you up. It's something about the ship, sir."

"Something about the ship!" Douglas was out of bed like a shot. "What are you talking about?"

"The *Lucifer*, sir," Andy grinned mysteriously. "She's all white outside—like a yacht. The cook saw it first this morning when we were emptying the slop pail. He says she's beautiful, nicer now than A. J. Braithewaite's yacht. The cook said that."

"He did?" Chris Douglas rubbed the last vestige of sleep from his eyes and strode to the communicator in his outside cabin, where he proceeded at once to contact first mate Jackson.

"Mr. Jackson," Douglas said suspiciously when he got the mate, "did you give orders to paint the hull? What? Yes. Unless Andy here is crazy. Put on a suit and meet me at the forward lock at once."

Two minutes later, Captain Douglas and first mate Jackson, each clad in bulgers, climbed laboriously out of the lock. Both men stared in simultaneous astonishment at the sight that met their eyes when they emerged on the broad hull. Around them, the *Lucifer's* former dark steel torso was now a sea of glistening whiteness. Every inch of the hull had been covered; the *Lucifer* preened like a snowbird under her frosty new plumage that stretched from stem to stern. Reaching down a gloved hand, Douglas found that the paint was still tacky, a little of it came away on his fingers.

"*Jumping Jupiter!*" Captain Douglas whispered shakily. "What's going on here? First, our crazy bo'sun starts chasing stowaways in port; and now someone paints my ship a pure blasted white while I'm asleep. What kind of a voyage is this, Mr. Jackson!"

But as he spoke the words "pure white" a gleam of suspicion shot into the Captain's eyes.

"Skelly!" Douglas said with sudden vehemence. "Skelly's ritual of purification."

Mate Jackson nodded troubledly. The connection between Tug's latest remarks and this deed was all too apparent. But something more was worrying the little first mate at the moment.

"Maybe it was Tug, sir," Pete Jackson said puzzledly, "but what I'd like to know is where the devil he got all the white paint? I happen to know we moved every can of paint off ship to make room for the platinum. Yes, sir. I had it done myself."

"The platinum?" Captain Douglas repeated the word very slowly; then he stared for a long, terrible moment at the white stain on his fingers. Pete Jackson stared at the stain, too. A second later, the two men broke as one body for the lock behind them.

Down in the hold where the platinum was kept, Captain Douglas panted heavily, and stared about him with the haggard look of a man who has received a mortal blow.

Around the two men, the precious cargo had been vandalled. The empty tins were strewn all over the hold. Of all the powdered platinum, perhaps a dozen or two cans remained intact. The rest of it—and no other conclusion was possible—now adorned the steel hull of the *Lucifer*!

"Bring Tug Skelly to my quarters, Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas said in a mechanical voice. "Under guard if necessary."

But Tug came to the Captain's cabin without protest, even though he came not too happily. There shone, however, under bo'sun's Caliban countenance, the kind of inner serenity that can only come from doing the right thing regardless of consequences. Captain Douglas eyed the culprit wrathfully.

"Bo'sun Skelly," Douglas shot out when Tug stood before his desk, "all I want you to do is answer one question: Was it you who painted the *Lucifer's* hull during the last watch?"

Tug shifted his big feet uncomfortably; but his serene expression did not vanish.

"Yes sir," Tug confessed. "I did it for the good of all of us. It jes' had to be done, Cap'n Douglas. Because now those witches—"

"Mr. Skelly!" Douglas cut in shakily, "are you aware that you used eight-hundred-thousand dollars worth of platinum to paint the ship! What are you trying to do, man—" the young skipper's voice rose to a croaked scream—"buy those damned witches off?"

Tug shuddered visibly at the profane reference to the dreaded Giants of the Pass.

"I wouldn't talk that way about them, Cap'n," he shivered, "no, sir. You see, the formula for purification includes platinum—that's according to old Joshua MacLevy. But I couldn't find any white paint at all. So I jes' had to use—well, what came to hand."

"Which happened to be our cargo of platinum," Captain Douglas murmured incredulously. He sank into his swivel like a man in a dream. It was still possible, of course, to salvage much of the precious metal from the hull. But doing the job now, while en route, would mean a suicidal delay; while bringing the *Lucifer* in, festooned as she was, would very likely mean his ticket. Misery seemed to threaten both courses equally; but the young skipper felt he had no choice. Somehow—white or black—the *Lucifer* had to be brought in on schedule.

"Mr. Jackson," Captain Douglas said with forgivable bitterness, "you will have bo'sun Skelly confined to irons for the remainder of the run. We may all lose our jobs for this, but with him in the holds, we'll at least have a chance to complete the voyage alive!"

The *Lucifer*, now a white spear cleaving the darkness, reacted to the proximity of the Cross Straits like a cat to danger. All flight regulations were strictly enforced, by the Captain's special command. Every instrument and delicate warning device was tested out and brought up to specifications. The ship took on the grim aspect of a citadel prepared to withstand any eventuality.

Only bo'sun Tug Skelly was idle as the *Lucifer* neared the Pass. In the tiny cell underdeck, Tug accepted his enforced inactivity with the resignation of a martyr. But he learned from Andy, the galley-boy, that the *Lucifer's* white coat lay still untouched, and that brought him some comfort.

"There's things about spacin'," Tug told the boy, as he ate the food Andy had brought him, "that nobody learns in books. Don't make no mistake, Andy,

edjagation is good—but it ain't everything. Nossir!"

"Nuts," Andy remarked picking up the fast-emptied tray. "I've heard that the skipper is gonna have you examined in New York. Says you're bugs."

Tug stared ahead of him and nodded with a long-suffering look. "People with real knowledge," he said slowly, "is always considered bugs, Andy. Sure. Look at Mad Old James Flaherty, the man who first reached Moon. And before him there was a feller named Gally Leo who told everybody the earth moved around the sun—like it does. Everybody thought they was bugs, until it turned out they was *geenyusses*!"

"Yeh," Andy grunted unimpressed, "only you *are* bugs."

The galley-boy's simple but crushing logic left Tug without a reply. He merely growled contemptuously and watched Andy, as the boy leisurely gathered his utensils and exited from the cell. Alone, the big bo'sun shivered suddenly and sat motionless on his cot as if transfixed. It seemed to Tug that through the thick bulkhead before him a low, far-off wailing sound was coming—a sound just like the one Old Joshua MacLevy had described. By Tug's private reckoning, the *Lucifer* was right at the Straits. And that wail could only be—! Despite the careful and costly precaution he had taken against the Witches of the Pass, Tug Skelly's eyes began to bulge.

Up on the bridge, a few minutes before, Captain Chris Douglas also witnessed a peculiar thing. It was mate Pete Jackson, at the forward sight, who called his attention to it. Douglas reluctantly tore his gaze from the gleaming, many-dialed instrument panel before him, and answered the mate's summons.

"A cloud," Jackson frowned. "Dead ahead."

They were at the lips of the Straits; a few moments more and they would be inside. Captain Douglas glanced hurriedly at the plate. A vague and nebulous gray mist was swirling before the ship; but even as he watched it, it seemed to melt away and disappear. Douglas quickly volted up to maximum the ray-repellers and meteor-deflectors that lined the *Lucifer's* hull.

"Whatever's in the Straits," Chris Douglas said grimly, "is going to bounce right off our hull. The *Lucifer* was made for heavy weather."

"Something's coming," Pete Jackson said flatly. "What I can't help is what's coming."

"Sure thing, Capt'n," Pete Jackson said wistfully, "but I can't help wishing we were through already!"

"We'll get through," Douglas said with more confidence than he actually felt. "The Pass can't be more than twenty-thousand kilos long. We'll be out the other side before you can whistle Home Sweet Home."

"I couldn't whistle anything now," Pete Jackson sighed as he bent his wizened face to the visiplate.

For a few moments, it looked as if the Captain's optimistic prediction might be justified. The *Lucifer* was covering almost a thousand yards every tenth of a second. It was after about five seconds that the wailing and shrieking noises first came through the hull into the bridge.

"Stars and saints above!" Pete Jackson stiffened slowly in his seat, his little blue eyes engulfed in whiteness. Captain Douglas, too, jerked nervously at the eerie sounds. But the dials before him continued to reveal nothing amiss. He shot a quick, hard command to keep the course. The mate obeyed trembling as from ague. A split-second later they were in the Pass.

There wasn't any doubt they were in something! A wave of superheated steam seemed to strike the *Lucifer* simultaneously from all sides. The needle on the tempogauge jerked sharply upward. The pressure oxygen in the bridge grew suddenly warm. Captain Douglas and mate sweat in a trice.

"What's this?" Pete Jackson started from his seat.

"Can't tell what it is," Captain Douglas frowned before the dials. "The tempogauge is going up, but I don't know why."

"Hah!" Pete Jackson's laugh broke queerly. "It couldn't be the hot breath o' Tug Skelly's witches now, could it, Capt'n?"

"Witches be blowed!" Douglas snarled.

"Still," Jackson protested weakly, "it might be a good idea to turn back, even now. That tempo-needle's going up awful fast."

"Hold the course, Mr. Jackson," Douglas said angrily. To execute a slow turning

maneuver at this point would be tantamount to suicide! Jackson knew that too, only the mate wasn't using his head any longer. Whatever danger they were in, their best chance was to hold speed and try to slip through the Pass before the blistering heat outside melted down their hull plates.

The mate steadied in his seat.

"Give her everything she'll take," Captain Douglas ordered the engine-room via his speaking-tube. "Everything!"

"*Aye, aye, sir.*" The choked reply from below was followed by a long, muttered oath that almost made young Douglas grin. He called down a word of encouragement, and stepped swiftly back to the instrument panel. The tempo-needle was mounting in the dangerous red ever closer and closer to the hull melting-point. The heat inside the bridge was insufferable by now; the two men, stripped to the waist, their bodies shining oilily, could hardly breathe. The shrieking outside had risen to a horrendous, deafening clamor. The end, one way or another, could scarcely be more than a few seconds off.

"We can't take much more," Pete Jackson gulped miserably. "She'll open a seam sure!"

"Jackson," Douglas said with sudden thought, "better get Skelly out of the hold. If the ship goes, we might have a chance with the emergency-dories." The thought was futile though, and both men knew it. A temperature that could melt the *Lucifer's* hull would reduce one of the flimsy dories to ash in an instant. Nevertheless, Jackson got to his feet. But, before he could take a step, something in the port sight caught the mate's eye. Pete Jackson slowly stiffened until he stood rigid and pallid as a corpse.

"Capt'n Douglas!" Jackson cried in the weak and despairing voice of a man whose innermost dread is all too horribly realized. "*There's the witch!*"

With an impatient frown, Douglas sprang to the port plate where the mate's gaze was transfixed. But the vision that met the skipper brought him up in his tracks. An icy chill trickled down Chris Douglas's spine despite the terrible heat around him. A great black shape, long as the *Lucifer* herself, loomed beside them; half-shrouded in mist, huge funereal form now rode alongside the freighter, so close that hissing sparks from the *Lucifer's* steaming plates sprayed it. Like some grim

and timely escort from beyond, the apparition kept pace with the stricken white ship.



"Skipper!" he screamed. "Look! Look there!"

"Merciful Mary!" Pete Jackson gasped incoherently. "We're done for now, Capt'n!"

Douglas ran a dazed hand over his sweat-ridden eyes, opening them wider. Then, even as he watched, the black shape began to turn slowly, falling back from the hurtling *Lucifer*. Only then could he see it fully. A cry of astonishment broke from the skipper as he recognized the thing for what it was. This Witch of the Pass was the gaunt and charred corpse of an ether-blaster, whose orbit lay round and round inside the Straits that had destroyed it. Like a mute, accusing ghost, the old ship was forever destined to haunt the narrow scene of its murder.

No wonder that for an instant he had half-believed the Straits bewitched! The sight outside wasn't very pleasant. Nor was it comforting to think that the *Lucifer* might yet join that lonely vigil. Captain Douglas turned from the plate and choked an angry oath back at the searing heat around him.

"Get Skelly," he snapped to Jackson; but the mate was clearly in no condition to obey. Pete Jackson still stood like a man who has looked into the inferno and is only awaiting the summons of a ghastly tap on the shoulder. Douglas scowled, blinked the sweat from his eyes, and started to exit himself. It didn't seem to make much difference, but he couldn't let the bo'sun perish like a caged rat.

However, he didn't leave the bridge. Something on the instrument panel gave Captain Douglas the sudden hope that he might be able to let Skelly stay where he was. The tempo-needle had halted its upward swing. The tiny arrow hovered motionless a hair's breadth from the hull melting-point; but it did not advance. As he watched it, the needle began to retreat, imperceptibly at first; then faster. Douglas jumped incredulously to the forward plate.

The twilighted expanse before the *Lucifer* was wide, frosty and marvelously clear. The mists had disappeared. They were through! The Captain's call brought

mate Jackson up from his seat and all the way across the bridge in two jumps.

"Praise be!" Pete Jackson blinked joyfully into the sight. "It's a miracle—that's what it is!"

"A miracle, my big toe!" was Captain Douglas's very unskipperish retort. A thought which might explain the *Lucifer's* narrow escape from the fate of the charred ether-blaster, was forming in the skipper's mind. It was a thought which gained credence when Douglas quickly tested the contents of a vial in the bridge. The glass receptacle was filled with a sampling of the misty vapor in the Straits.

"Look at this," Douglas called the mate to him. Jackson peered at the results of the test, incredulously at first; then with an abject expression as he realized what it meant. Captain Douglas's further explanation did not make the little mate feel any happier.

"I just don't know what happened to me," Pete Jackson shook his head. "First those infernal shrieks and then that old oxy-burner back there—" The mate broke off with a woeful, contrite look.

"I know, Pete," Douglas grinned with a mock shudder. "Seeing that old hulk had me believing in ghosts for a while myself. Anyway, it's over and we're damned lucky. It's double rations all around at mess tonight. And I think we'll get Skelly out of the brig. He's probably so overcooked by now that he doesn't need any more punishing. Besides, I want to talk to him."

And Chris Douglas offered the mate a significant look which made Jackson brighten up considerably as he grinned back in understanding.

"So you see, Skelly,"—several hours later Captain Douglas summed up the points of the simple but precise lecture in his cabin: "The myth of the Twin Witches can be altogether explained by the facts on hand now. The real danger in the Straits was—air. Plain dust-filled air. A wide column of it circulates about the Pass at better than gale velocity. That, and nothing else, accounts for the howling noises."

The *Lucifer's* skipper addressed his bo'sun in the presence of mate Jackson and a few other crew members. Tug Skelly's great face, as he listened, was the livid hue of broiled lobster. The heat in his little cell *had* been terrific. But no gleam

of enlightenment lit the bo'sun's eyes as the Captain spoke. Tug's only reaction was a rather mistrustful frown.

"It's clear," Douglas went on carefully, "that the old ships that tried the Straits were charred instantly by the terrible friction set up when they struck the air. The same thing would have happened to us, if it hadn't been for the platinum on our hull."

Tug's face brightened with that; but his grin cost him such pain that he gulped hard and swallowed it down. In the little room, his swollen, flaming countenance flared like a great beacon.

"Sure, Cap'n," Tug nodded as he managed an imperceptible smile. "I told you we'd get through all right if yuh left it to me."

"Now, listen," Douglas said a trifle testily, "the platinum didn't do a thing but insulate our hull from the heat. Don't you see? It was just enough to keep the plates from melting. Platinum can't be oxidized—it can't be burnt! And that's what saved our lives. You see it now, don't you, Skelly?"

"Yessir, Cap'n," Tug frowned. "I get what you're drivin' at." The big bo'sun did seem to be making an effort to understand the simple mechanics that underlay their escape. And that, Captain Douglas felt, was a momentous step in the right direction.

"Good!" Captain Christopher Douglas said with feeling. He relaxed and looked about him with a pleased smile. Another convert had been led from darkness into the light of truth and science. It was not every day that Chris Douglas was privileged to rescue some poor, superstition-ridden soul. A sense of warm beneficence filled the young skipper. But he had another reason, besides the fact that the *Lucifer* was now certain to fetch New York on schedule, to congratulate himself.

"I've got good news for you, Skelly," Douglas smiled; "you'll be glad to learn that the platinum you used on the hull was caked by the heat; and it is almost a hundred-percent recoverable."

"That's jes' fine!" Tug said with much relief. "I was sort of worried about that."

"Yes," Douglas went on pointedly but not unkindly, "and since it was your boner

in Orion City that got us into the mess in the first place, I have decided, Skelly, that you're going to do the recovering, by yourself! However, once the platinum is back in the hold we'll call all accounts square. How is that?"

"Me, Cap'n? Myself?" Tug's singed eyebrows went up in surprised disappointment. It was clear the bo'sun had expected a different kind of reward for the part he played in traversing the dread Pass. Tug scratched his head wryly. "It's OK I guess," he sighed.

"You've got three days," Douglas said, "before we arrive in New York to do the job. That's providing you start at once. I think you'd better get your bulger and go out on the hull right now—unless—" the Captain smiled a little—"unless you're still afraid of those witches, Skelly."

The Captain bantered easily. The light of science brightened every corner of the cabin now. The darkness was a thing of the past. It was impossible even to think of witches without snickering. However, the painful grin on Tug Skelly's face was hardly a snicker; rather it was a sly and knowing grin.

"No sir! Cap'n," Tug scoffed heavily. "Not me! I never was afraid o' those witches on account of myself—it was the rest of the crew I was thinkin' about all along! Yessir. Y'see, I had *this* all the time, Cap'n."

Tug drew from his huge bosom a tiny, bedraggled object that hung by a cord from his neck. With some pride, he exhibited his possession to Captain Douglas who stared puzzledly at the little, shapeless thing. But before Douglas could examine it, the bo'sun tucked it back inside his shirt and saluted with as much vigor as his par-boiled frame would allow.

"Yessir!" Tug Skelly announced confidently. "I'll have that platinum back in the hold before morning mess."

It wasn't until the group had followed Tug Skelly out of the cabin, leaving him alone, that Captain Douglas realized what the bo'sun had held up in his gnarled palm. The realization made the young skipper sigh heavily and sink back into his seat. The victory of science over bo'sun Tug Skelly was not destined to be an easy one. Tug was going bravely out onto the *Lucifer's* hull armed with an old and much-used—rabbit's foot!

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