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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VOYAGE OF
VANISHING MEN ***

**Earthmen had never ventured into the vast
unknown beyond the galaxy. But now a survey was
ordered and a ship sent out. So Braun went on—**

The Voyage Of Vanishing Men

By Stanley Mullen

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They still talk of Braun, and the Fourth Intergalactic Survey.

Other men before him had gone out into the far, dark places. Three previous expeditions had gone out and vanished completely. Then the *Venture IV* went out and out and out countless miles and light-years and whatever else it is—and out there in the lonely darkness something happened. Nobody knew exactly what happened, but there was a lot of guessing. Only one man came back. Braun. And there was talk....

Tending bar anywhere is better, they say, than an academic degree in psychology. Tending bar on one of the way stations to the stars you see people—most of them human—as they really are, and in all stages of emotion. You see them coming and going, and a few already gone. By little signs, you can tell a lot about them, and make a guess at what is wrong with the wrong ones.

There was Braun.

Angular as a stick-bug, he stood at the bar, elbows digging into the polished mahogany, one foot cocked on the rail. He was drinking alone as if it had become a habit, and the customers edged away from him as if not wanting to make it too obvious. As usual, his go-to-hell face looked past you into the backbar mirror and out again to cover the whole place. He was older and changed, though, as he would be. Deep lines furrowed the tight, tanned, leathery features, and his eyes still held some of that awful emptiness of space between

the star-packs.

Nobody said anything, at first.

Braun watched them, a humorous half-defiant glint in his eye. But there was pain in him, in his voice as he spoke.

"What's the matter? Am I poison, or something?"

Somebody said it, then. In a stage whisper. "I had friends on the *Venture IV*."

"So did I," Braun answered quickly. "A lot of friends. So before somebody works up nerve to ask, I don't know."

"Don't know?" a man named Cutter pursued the point coldly. "You were there!..."

"I was there," admitted Braun. "I still say it. I don't know what happened to anybody. I've told the authorities that over and over. I've told anybody who'd listen. You don't have to believe me. I don't give a—"

"Nobody's told us anything," Cutter insisted. "We haven't heard a whisper about it. And, speaking for all of us, we'd like to be sure about you ... before we go on drinking at the same bar...."

It was going to be like that as long as Braun lived. People will talk, and if there's a choice, they'll guess the ugly thing, every time. Wherever he went, there would be people to ask that question, and somebody to smirk if he answered it.

You could see trouble coming. Whatever Braun answered....

Braun was never a man to talk much about himself. It was always the places he had been and seen, or wanted to go. Like all old-time spacemen, he was a bird of passage. Between trips, he came in a few times, got to be a fixture. But he was always coming or going somewhere never lighting or staying put.

You don't learn too much about a man in a bar, casually. Little things add up and hint at the bigger ones. You can call him by his first name casually, and hash over mutual acquaintances, that's all.

Maybe you talk about the things men talk about. Life and death. Men and spaceships. Life on distant worlds. Braun had knocked around the galaxy like a lot of people since the DuMont space-time drive came into general use. He had seen more than the ordinary man even dreams about, but there was always a restless and curious wondering about more distant stars and their planets. On one classic occasion, you even helped him wonder about other galaxies, and if the

new drive would ever take men out into the far, dark spaces where ships never ventured.

When Braun's big break came, you heard about it from someone else, since Braun was far away, at a planet-base circling a star that was just a number in a catalog. There were no formal goodbyes out there, just technical admonitions. Then a speck diminished into nowhere, with no instruments to track an object accelerating into speeds so many times greater than light that mathematics became weird paradoxes, and nothing existing in normal dimensions even makes sense.

Eventually the ship came back, and Braun with it. Nobody knew much more than that. No official announcements were made, no actual denials or accusations. Rumor hinted at ugliness, and an investigation going on. People made the usual wild and extravagant guesses, and there were the formless whispers that start nowhere and end nowhere.

Braun put his back to the bar and looked over the crowd soberly, one by one. This must have happened to him many times before, as it probably would again. Braun had his own way of dealing with such situations, and maybe he was right.

"I don't know what happened," he said slowly. "I'll say it again, just once. I don't know. If you don't like it, I'm here, waiting. One at a time, or the whole ratpack of you. How do you want it?"

In any real, deadly brawl, voices are rarely raised. There is no loud and explosive discussion. Instead, all movement jells, crystallizes in utter silence. Something breaks it. Something like a flung beer mug. Then comes a five-ring circus of action.

Braun ducked. The beer mug struck in foaming, splintering destruction. The backbar mirror dissolved in a chiming avalanche of glass.

Cutter led the rush. Braun's back was braced to the bar. He seemed oddly relaxed, almost happy. Somebody heaved another beer mug. It missed, but most of the beer splashed into Braun's face and trickled slowly down him.

"I like beer," he said, "but not that well."



Like a spring letting go, Braun snapped out to meet them. His long arms caught Cutter and hoisted him high, then hurled him bodily over the stick and into the stacked glassware.

By then, if not before, you eased toward the light switch and cut it. Darkness slammed down like a solid barrier. But other solids moved through it, colliding, grunting, swearing, shouting, sometimes groaning. Gradually, the tumult died out of itself.

When the lights came on again, Braun still stood at the bar, though several places further down. The darkness had been kind to him. With everyone against him, he could work freely. And at saloon brawling, he was a master craftsman. Casualties held to a minimum, but there were plenty of cotton and catgut, splint and plaster cases. Cutter was still out, cold, and went to the hospital with the

others. Not everyone joins in a rough-house, and enough clear-headed witnesses remained to spare Braun any risk of charges. His fists were red and raw, but he seemed unhurt, bodily.

Somebody offered him a drink. But Braun just stood and looked at it, then raised his head to glance up where the backbar mirror had been.

"Someday, they'll use stainless steel for that," he said. "Then half the fun will be gone."

Slowly his face screwed up tight, the leathery skin wrinkling like a withered apple. Eyes closed, he hammered a raw fist on the bar till blood spurted. He was like a hurt child trying to hurt himself more to get even with fate.

"I had friends on the *Venture IV*," he cried wildly. "A lot of good friends. What happened to them? Where are they?..."

Calming down, he started talking. His voice was oddly detached, and so low you could hardly hear him.

"I was the ninth man," he said. "The rest were all techs, of one kind or another. I was the only spacetramp aboard. I've often wondered why they picked me, but somebody must have had a good reason. Maybe I was the catalyst. Each of the others could do one job extremely well. I could take over and do anything in an emergency—not as well, but a scratch job to keep the show on the road. And when the 'ologies' developed friction, I was the lubricant—the guy with no axe to grind who kept the other's axes sharpened and tempered."

Braun stopped and flung himself at the drink. He seemed to need it. But he was under control again, almost too much under control.

"We were way out—somewhere," he continued. "About as far as the others ever got. You can't express it in miles or in time, because neither of them have the right meaning. Not out there."

He stopped again. His eyes seemed to be staring beyond the outer limits of darkness, beyond the mystical barrier of the speed of light itself....

"The ship came out of warp automatically. Robot machinery was set for that, to bring us out at intervals—though nobody could be sure just how it would function. Ordinary time-intervals do not exist, and time itself is a random factor

—out there. They tell me we were gone more than five years, here. For us, it was weeks. Most of the time we were in suspended animation, of course, with automatic controls to handle the ship and rouse one or more of us at intervals. Usually the ship was out of the warp and stopped when we were awakened. Twice, both in the early stages, it was not like that.

"Those times we were awake and in motion together. It was weird. Space was like black, transparent cellophane, wrinkled and bunched together with the ship leaping from one wrinkle to another. We could not see it, but that was the way we imagined it. We could see, though.

"Stars thinned out and drew together. Stars, like luminous lice crawling on the black body of eternity...."

... Velocity and acceleration needles met in the center of the gauge. No change in the relation of the ship to anything was apparent, and none would be. Out of the warp, the ship hung, unmoving, in a vastness of dark. Even the galaxies showed but faintly in the visiplates. Destination was the spiral M31 in Andromeda, but the rest of Andromeda lay far behind, and a faint smudge ahead seemed as far away as the home galaxy, which was exactly the case.

Venture IV had reached the halfway point, with three quarters of a million light-years of loneliness in either direction. Poets and writers have called it the point of no return, when a ship has reached a point in its voyage where the distance back is as far as that still ahead.

"Well, this is it," said Charters wearily. "We'll have to decide now whether to go back ... or, if we think we can make it, push on ahead."

Charters was captain pro tem, though, on a technical ship, space formalities and titles were phantoms.

Braun was unimpressed. "All right, it's the raw end of nowhere. And we're here. What does it prove?"

Charters gave him a friendly slap.

"It proves one thing. That we can make it—next time. We could have made it this time if we'd known what to expect. We'll go back with our report, and the next ship will get there. And make it back to tell about it. We could get there,

this time—but not back. Sure, we're all disappointed. But don't take it so hard. We haven't really failed. We've made it easier to get the job done. Next time."

"Yes," agreed Braun bitterly. "The job will be done. But not by us. We'll be too old before another ship is ready. And by the time the analysts are through with this one, it will be junk. Just like us."

Charters laughed.

The two were alone in the control room. The other techs, for once all awake at the same time, were busily checking their instruments, each in his own department.

Braun was suffering from reaction. In an emergency, he could function superbly. But with nothing to do, he brooded.

It was definitely the raw end of nowhere, though the instruments and record tapes called it by a variety of mathematical equations. According to the figures, the *Venture IV* had made an interesting voyage, turning itself completely inside out several times at irregular intervals, smashing all existing speed and distance records and extending the tenuous boundaries of man's interstellar and intergalactic survey by a quarter million light-years. Other ships might have gone further, but if they had, no one knew about it. They had vanished into some limbo of space—

Mass proximity alarms blared through the corridors and cubicles of the *Venture IV*.

Nerves, already tensed, vibrated like thin glass, ready to disintegrate from resonance.

There should have been no mass anywhere near. Not even a grain of cosmic dust.

Blackness stretched in all directions, relieved only by the distant, dimly glowing smudges of galaxies. Assembled in the control room, *Venture IV*'s company discussed the mystery. No conclusion was possible. Whatever was affecting the mass detectors lay dead ahead, still out of vision range, and not even showing in the telescopic relays.

By vote, it was decided to investigate. The *Venture IV* operated on democratic

principles. Responsibility like risk was shared equally, and "Captain" Charters had one vote.

Atomic jets, still useful for short range runs and for close maneuvering, nudged the ship gently into motion, which is a relative thing in deep space. In this case, relative to—

What?...

By instrument only, the *Venture IV* groped blindly toward the unknown object. By instrument only was it possible to gauge the approach. Proximity needles wavered wildly, then settled down to indicate swiftly diminishing distance, as if the alien object were matching velocity with the *Venture IV* on a collision course.

At such speeds, collision was possible. Charters began to worry silently. Dubiously he eyed his crew, picked men, all volunteers eager to challenge the unknown. But the unknown was still unknown, and responding almost too eagerly.

"Could it be another spaceship?" asked Braun, voicing the thought in every mind.

Charters just looked at him. "From—*there*?"

"From anywhere?" Braun persisted. "Who knows about curves or orbits out here?"

Topping, the astrophysicist, smiled grimly. "Who knows about anything here? It wasn't till the mid-Twentieth Century that we even knew M31 was as big as our own galaxy and twice as far away as had been thought. Or guessed at the truth behind the Doppler shift."

"But a spaceship ... out here!" scoffed Charters.

Topping shrugged. "It could be. It could even be one of ours. From the future, perhaps. We've done some weird doubling about in the space-time continuum, remember."

"It could be anything, then," said Braun.

"Anything," echoed Topping.

"Start deceleration," ordered Charters, concerned with the more practical aspects of a possible encounter in alien space. "Swing the controls over to manual. I'll feel better about the ship if it comes to dodging a collision. You have the

practical piloting experience, Braun. Take over."

Grinning, Braun seated himself at the manual keyboard and started pressing studs. Lights blinked off and on in patterns on the screen at vision level. He switched over to the visiplates mounted on the blunt bow. A sector of blackness dead ahead was projected onto the screen.

There was nothing to see. Light in interstellar space is too feeble to reveal anything not self luminous.

"Try a radilume beam," suggested Charters.

The screen flickered, then resumed its blackness. With no dust, no anything, to reflect light back to the ship, the beam lost itself in the immensity.

Braun worked with the studs.

"We're slowing," he announced. "Now what?"

"Try a dead stop, but be ready to move out fast in case the alien continues a collision course."

Braun nodded. In the artificial gravity field, no effect of deceleration was perceptible. The ship slowed and stopped as dead as a ship stops with no reference point to anything. What actually happened was a delicate balancing upon a number of mathematical equations, themselves unstable.

Mass proximity needles, showing the expected increase by squares, indicated that the stranger also had come to a full stop by matching exactly at zero. It was an interesting fact that so far from home the familiar laws of gravity seemed to hold their familiar relations. More interesting was the fact that the alien object or ship had stopped.

"See anything?" asked Charters.

"Not a thing," admitted Topping.

"How about the telescopes?"

McClure, the astrogator, reported then. Under the circumstances, his voice sounded curiously matter of fact.

"A faint point of light. Not enough disk to tell much of anything about it. We'll

try with—"

"Can't be more than a mile away, I'd guess," said Braun. "What do we do now? Just sit here and wait?"

Topping grunted. "Reminds me of a pair of strange dogs meeting away from home and sniffing at each other with mutual curiosity and mistrust."

"That's about the way it would be," Charters agreed weakly. "If that is an alien ship out there, what else could we do?"

"We could try for contact. Communicate with them, somehow."

"Morse code?" asked Braun bitterly.

"There were humans in other parts of our own galaxy. Some of them intelligent and highly civilized. We set up communications with them."

"There was a common basis with them," argued Braun. "And we found some non-human intelligent races. Communications didn't do so well with them, and the *Venture IV* is no warship. We came here to windowshop, not to buy, and not to take over anything by force. We're not equipped for a row."

Charters broke in. "Topping is right. We'll try to set up communication. With a modulated light beam."

"Go ahead and try," said Braun. "I'll stand by, just in case of trouble. And when your idea fails, we can start talking sense."

Charters and Topping left him at the controls and joined Tal Roberts in the communications office. Braun waited.

When they returned, he could tell by the faces that their plan had fallen through.

"Struck a snag?" he asked amiably.

Charters' smile was weak. "We tried two messages. After a short wait, they repeated them. You might say we've established communications. But we're not getting anywhere."

"The same messages? Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe they have no imagination. I have an idea if you're ready to listen."

Charters nodded. "Go ahead ... if it's nothing that will endanger the ship."

"The ship isn't involved. We have two space-lifeboats—though I can't figure

where we'd escape to if anything went sour out here. I'll take one and slip away from the ship. With luck, I can sneak up on our friends. Without lights. Keep your beam turned on, aimed right at the alien. I'll stay out of the beam, but it should give enough light to see by. If the thing looks like a real spaceship, and there's a chance the occupants are human, I'll try to make actual contact. If not, I'll scurry on back. How about it?"

"It could be dangerous. If anything happens—"

"You won't be any worse off. Probably, if it's another ship, the people are just as scared and curious as we are. As the show stands, you don't even dare try to run for it. I'm expendable."

"That's a matter of opinion. I won't rule on this, Braun. We'll call the gang together and decide by vote."

Half an hour later, the lifeboat was ready. Serviced with air, food and water for an indefinite time, the tiny craft lay in its cradle.

"Keep a light in the window for me," said Braun.

He climbed aboard through the miniature airlock, which closed behind him. Solenoid magnets conveyed the lifeboat through chutes into the valve of the main airlock. Doors opened and closed with automatic finality. Air hissed back into the ship as pumps emptied the valve. With pressure equalized, the outer door opened into space.

Braun eased his tiny craft free, then turned and ran forward alongside the *Venture IV*. From outside, the explorer ship seemed tremendous. It was a small world in itself, complete, self-sustaining. But mass-conversion was necessary to power the velocities far beyond the speed of light, and already the voyage had eaten away too much of the ship's mass.

A phantom glow hovered about the forward compartments as if the metallic shell caught and reflected faint light from a distant source. Braun wondered about that subconsciously, but in the midst of so many wonders, one more mystery meant little.

There was no light beam to be seen. His instruments found a course parallel to the invisible beam and followed it for him, with the robot pilot in charge.

But for the ship dwindling behind him, the vault of space seemed empty. In the blackness ahead, though he could not see it, was a single small luminous speck. Behind him, the light of the ship diminished slowly to infinity. It vanished. Braun was alone with his mission.

With no visible reference point, Braun's senses became unreliable. Unlighted, the lifeboat seemed a mote of darkness lost in the greater immensities. Even on the brink of the last unknown, the man grew restless and depressed. With nothing to see, nothing to occupy the senses of his brain, he was bored.

Braun groped blindly and gave himself the luxury of a cigarette. While it lasted, the red glow of the cigarette's coal gave comfort to his loneliness. It gave him something on which to concentrate.

There was no up, no down, no sideways, only ahead and behind, with invisible dots of light to identify each. He felt oddly trapped, at the mercy of automatic instruments. Curious and unpleasant illusions crowded upon him.

For a time, he thought that all matter had vanished from the universe, that only he and his lifeboat existed in all the great void. Later, he thought that light itself had vanished. Telescopically, in any direction, he could have found light, but to his unaided eyes all darkness was the same. Then came the weirder illusions of other senses, that his course followed no straight line or sane curves, but moved endlessly upon some infinite spiral.

Time passed, and his eyes grew so accustomed to darkness that they did not see the light when it appeared. Ahead, just a faint point, steady, steel-hard, unwinking, it emerged from the blackness. Slowly it increased in radiance rather than in size. Then at last it was a disk, like a beacon set out to guide him in.

There was a beam, invisible with nothing to reflect its tight radiance or diffuse it. But as before, when leaving his own ship, he avoided the beam.

Cruising closer, Braun began to make out details.

It was a ship, no doubt about that. A phantom glow hovered about its forward compartments as if the metallic shell caught and reflected faint light from a distant source. It was a ship, all right. A ship painfully like the *Venture IV*. A philosopher might have meditated upon parallel evolutions, but Braun was too deeply shocked for delvings into the deeper relations between man and his environments.

The alien ship was identical. Braun satisfied himself of that by circling, studying every aspect of the stranger. There was the same indefinable quality which stamped it as man-made.

Almost hysterical with his discovery, Braun nerved himself to switch off the automatic pilot and take over manual controls. Then he eased in quickly beside an air lock which might have been the same one he had left. Magnetic grapnels reached out from the lifeboat, caught and dragged the lesser mass to the greater. At the controls, Braun guided his tiny craft to the airlock valve, and the outer doors slid shut and locked hermetically behind him.

Some kind of atmosphere would be hissing into the valve now, building up pressure. It had to work like that.

Almost beside himself, Braun crawled into a spacesuit, then settled back to wait impatiently.

Light flooded the valve as the inner doors slid smoothly open. Braun made routine tests, then opened his cockleshell lifeboat hatch. Blinded by light, he climbed out. On rubbery legs, encased in the bulging suit of space armor, he walked to the gaping doorway and entered the alien ship.

If a trap, it was a good one.

Braun staggered backward. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he stared. Disbelief in his senses and doubt of his sanity showed on his face.

Opening the vent in his space helmet, he took a deep breath. Then he stared curiously at—

Charters and Topping.

"You weren't gone long," observed Charters. The pair studied Braun, their expressions puzzled.

"I guess I didn't get very far," admitted Braun uneasily. "Am I crazy or is it everything else?"

"That's anyone's guess," said Topping. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure I know."

They waited for explanations while Braun took a stiff slug of coffee laced with brandy.

"Somehow I must have got turned around," admitted Braun ruefully. "I can

understand that, but the lifeboat was set on automatic pilot. I thought I came straight across, and with the robot pilot I should have. What do you think happened?"

Topping was sober. "There are several possible explanations. I don't like any of them. Maybe there's a flaw in space here. It could act like a mirror, reflecting back our own mass and the beam of our own light. Who knows? There may not even be an alien ship out there."

"But there's nothing material out there," objected Braun. "I was there, and our instruments would show anything above the size of a speck of dust. For that matter, we can see the thing in our telescopes, and there's nothing we know that can distort the gravity-effect of mass let alone turn it around like light reflected from a mirror. Who ever heard of—"

"Who ever heard of nine men sealed in an oversized can and set down halfway between home galaxy and M31?" reproved Topping. "Light and gravity may not be functions only of our space-time continuum but of others adjacent too and even overlapping ours. We know very little about the nature of either, and some of our unexplained phenomena may be the result of actions and reactions outside our continuum."

"That's getting too deep for me," said Braun. "I'm willing to try again ... if only to prove I didn't funk out the first time. And this time I'll go across with the lights blazing. I want you to use radar and visual scanners on me all the way."

Charters shook his head. "We're up against something we don't understand. I'm not sure I should permit—"

"What's the harm?" pleaded Braun. "I came through without a scratch before. The worst that can happen is a repeat of the same farce. Besides, I've just had a brainstorm. Suppose this is not the same ship I left. Suppose there really are two ships exactly alike, even to the people on board. Suppose that there are two civilizations that developed identically—"

"Maybe you'd better go," laughed Charters. "If you keep on in that vein, you'll give us all nightmares."

Braun's second try followed the same routine as the first. The difference was in Braun himself. Before, he had been mildly excited, calm but overstrained, expecting almost anything. There was a grimness about his second venture. He felt moody and more depressed than before. This time, there was no boredom.

Before leaving, he took a good look around, fixing the faces of his companions

into his memory, engraving the ship and endless details of its structure and decoration into his brain. He felt as if he were leaving all of it behind him forever.

The worst that can happen, he thought, is the same thing.

He was wrong about that....

Approaching the alien ship, he braced himself. There was the light. Then the ship, with its metallic shimmer of reflected light dimmed by distance.

Again he circled, studying the contours of the immense fabrication. He remembered an old French proverb about the more a thing changes the more it remains the same. The ship was the same. It was the *Venture IV*. He would stake his life and his sanity on it.

No matter. In a way he was relieved. Once inside the ship, he would let the experts explain it to him. At least he had tried. Nobody could say this time that he funk'd the job. They would have had the scanners on him all the way. And this time he knew—somehow—that he had not turned around from any confusion. Also, with the lights on, he had watched the automatic pilot. There had been no trick turns. He had it on the flight-record tapes.

If the lifeboat had returned to its point of departure, the only possible explanation was that a space-warp or a flaw in the space-time continuum had turned it inside out.

"End of the line," Braun murmured contentedly. "End of the line again."

Skilfully he maneuvered the lifeboat up to the bulk of the *Venture IV*. He grappled it to the airlock valve and slipped it inside on the skids.

The outer doors closed. This time he was so sure of where he was that he did not bother with the spacesuit. He waited till the inner doors opened to matched pressures, then scuttled out of the lifeboat. The air was breathable, the usual hydroponic cycle stuff, just what he was used to. It smelled oddly of pumps as it always does, pump-packing and growing things. Air in the lifeboat had been too rich in ozone, and Braun was giddy with the sharp tang of it.

Braun strode confidently into the ship.

No one was around to greet him. It was a gag they had worked up, he figured.

All right, he'd play along.

Through the ship he went, calling out names. Echoes rang hollowly in the vast interior, but they were the only answer. He kept wandering and calling, wandering and crying out. Finally, he was screaming hysterically.

It was a long time before the fact got through solidly to him. He was alone on the ship.

So far as he could tell, it was the *Venture IV*. Everything about the ship was the same. It was *his* ship. Wherever he had been, he was back on *his* ship. He had to keep on assuring himself of that. It was either the *Venture IV* ... or an exact duplicate. But the other duplicate had duplicated the people, too.

"Where is everybody?" he screamed.

He went on screaming for a long time. A very long time....

Smoke curled up from Braun's cigarette to join the dense layers near the bar's ceiling. Light shone through the blued stratifications in blurred blobs as through fog.

"That's the story," said Braun huskily.

"Not all of it," somebody murmured.

"Not quite. The ship was mostly automatic. I knew then why I had been picked. As I said, in an emergency, I could handle any job or even all jobs, for as long as necessary. We had all the flight tapes from the long voyage out. Mainly it was a job for the computers. You couldn't just run the tapes through backward because nothing ever stands quite still in the universe. All I know is that we did it, the ship and I. The *Venture IV* is the real hero, I guess. It brought me back."

"What about the others?" somebody persisted.

"I don't know," Braun answered irritably. "All I know is what I've told you. What happened to me. About the rest of the bunch, even the experts are still guessing. There are several theories. There were things about the ship. Odd differences. Nothing I could catch, but the experts found curiosities. They think I was tricked, that it's not really the same ship, but a clever and almost miraculous duplicate."

"But why, and how?"

Braun laughed bitterly. "Your guess is as good as anybody's. Mine is—that I wasn't wanted. The rest of the crew were all specialists, trained technicians, each one the best in his field. If *somebody* out there wanted some samples of the best brains in the human race, he really got the top quality. They were all educated to the hilt, trained for a particular job. Maybe they were picked because they were ready for something else. They had the entrance qualifications. I hadn't. That may not be the only explanation. It's probably the best one."

Braun poured himself another drink and drank it. His eyes stared blankly, as if the essential part of him was back out on the raw frontiers of the dark unknown.

Somebody dragged him back to the bar with a final question.

"But surely you must have some ideas of your own. What do you think happened to the others?"

Braun smiled soberly. His voice was tired, and it sounded as empty as those black spaces where no sun ever shines.

"What I think doesn't matter. There may be another world out there ... or something in hyperspace. That may be a point of contact, or it may be a barrier against all man's dreams of further expansion and exploration into the unknown. You've asked what I think happened to the others, and it's a good question. People are going to keep asking me that. I don't know the true answer. Maybe I'll never know—"

Braun hesitated, glanced round him at the ring of strained and questioning faces. He saw the disbelief registered on them—the thinly veiled anger that seemed to shout out at him *why don't you tell us what really happened! Tell us the truth!*

Braun sighed resignedly. It was always the same. It would always be the same. Wherever he went. And he would have to keep moving ... alone, apart from other men.

He walked past the silent questioning faces and through the door. And down the street to the next bar....

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VOYAGE OF
VANISHING MEN ***

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