

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE MOON (PUNCHLINE)

Laughter billowed down the corridor as my space-boots thudded on the thick carpet leading to the office of the boss of *Star Films*. It was a fluke of geography that the space laboratories shared the same piece of real estate as the movie company, though the personnel at both benefited from the clean air and sun-washed hills. It was also something of a fluke that my sister, who was a slim astrobiologist with a sunburn deeper than her bank account, had married the paunchy but heavily-monied movie mogul. It was no accident, however that he had asked for my help with his planned saga of the spaceways, because besides being a qualified pilot I was also a film fan. The door of the office was a chunk of fake brown mahogany, on which in silvery gothic letters was inscribed *Bill Cotton Esquire*. Beneath this flamboyant epigram was stamped PRODUCER. I was not exactly sure what kind of work this implied; but it could not be too difficult to teach a bunch of dreamy-eyed artists about the hardware of spacecraft, *could it?*

Bill Cotton's *faux* wooden door dissolved as I approached. There one moment, gone the next, it was a spin-off from the space program. Executives loved them, because the person inside could see out but not the other way around. I took a bit of pride by not breaking my stride as I crossed the invisible threshold and came to a quasi-military stop.

"Jason!" Cotton boomed from between glittering white teeth. "My favourite brother-in-law!"

He stood up and forged through his desk, the force field of its surface flowing aside like the water in front of a bulky ship, leaving a froth of memos on either side.

I shook the outstretched hand, pudgy but surprisingly firm. I tried to ignore the flashing jewel in the signet ring that overpowered the thin band of gold which signified an old-fashioned marriage. But I could not help but stare at the fat, brown cigar between the fingers of his other hand, which gave off a thick wreath of smoke whose pungent aroma bespoke real tobacco.

"Bill," I reciprocated his greeting, "my favourite stereotype."

The smile disappeared from his pink lips and his dark eyebrows ratcheted down from his bald head. Then they clicked back up and he chuckled, as his sense of humour penetrated my dead-pan expression.

"Funny boy," he said paternally. "Your sister warned me about you." I wondered briefly what else my older sibling had told him, and it still seemed odd to me that she had fallen for this

middle-aged but interesting guy. Sis was no dumb blonde, however, so her new husband must possess some brains in addition to his heaps of money. His next comment hinted at a broad knowledge of people. “I’d forgotten you’re a Limey.”

Maybe this was a get-back for my joke about his being a stereotype, but there did not seem to be any animosity behind it. Actually, I was kind of proud that my ancestors had been called limeys, because they had been the first sailors to figure out that eating limes and lemons during a long sea voyage prevented scurvy – this in some ancient age when the members of other navies were dying of vitamin deficiency. It now occurred to me that maybe my satirical, dry type of humour was also inherited. Anyway, a man who was good at making movies and knew something about history was somebody I could respect.

“How can I help, Bill?” I asked with genuine sincerity. After all, this was an opportunity to find out how the movie industry really worked.

He seemed, from his side, to have also been doing a bit of character analysis. I was wearing my space corps uniform, but minus the captain’s insignia, since I was off-base. I had gotten into the habit of letting my hair grow longer between trips, and Bill ran an envious hand over his bald pate as his face adopted a kind of fatherly look.

“Orbits,” he announced shortly.

“Orbits?” I repeated blankly.

“Yep,” he confirmed with a twinkle in his brown eyes. Then, with an apologetic wave of his hand that left a small rainbow in the air from the gem in his ring: “Please take a seat.”

“Where to?” I replied automatically. I had, without noticing, lapsed into what my beloved sister called my *Mister Silly Joke* mode.

“Ha ha,” responded Bill without humour. Yes, my sister must have told him about my lapses into juvenility.

Taking a chance, I let myself fall backwards, wondering if Bill’s penchant for new technology would save me or if I would describe my own kind of orbit, ending with my bum hitting the floor. But a comfortable seat materialized before I was halfway to the carpet; and as I landed in it, I nonchalantly crossed my knees.

“What kind of orbit do you have in mind?” I asked, as if I were the owner of some hardware store and could take one off the shelf. “Elliptic, parabolic or hyperbolic?”

He smiled, but then turned serious, leaning back in his chair with a business-like air. A bit of the fluid force-field refused to detach itself from the desk top, and formed a chewing-gum strip to his bulging stomach. Irritably, he cut across it with the red end of his cigar, and the severed blob of desk sprang back into place with a slight *twang*. The cigar winked out, and he threw it across the office in what my trained eye catalogued as a perfect parabola. It vanished into a brassy spittoon that materialized in the corner and promptly disappeared again.

“The problem with movies,” said Bill, “is that nowadays they depend on special effects, and they’re hard to get right.”

I nodded sympathetically. During my trips between the planets, I had watched hundreds of films and many were marred by unconvincing plots and impossible science.

“It’s particularly hard to get the special effects right in space movies,” continued Bill. “People these days are pretty sophisticated, and a bad scene can ruin the whole thing.”

“I know,” I commiserated. “Last week I watched that new blockbuster, *The Revenge of the Ogrons*. Just when it seemed that the aliens were about to wipe humankind from the Milky Way by detonating a vacuum bomb, the wife of the Ogron captain convinces him that humans are just misunderstood. She flips a switch, and their intergalactic cruiser stops, turns round, and heads back to their home-world, dwindling nicely into the sunset of the big bang. *But*, a big ship like that would cross light years before it even slowed down, and anyway there were no stars around just after the big bang. It was rubbish.”

Bill Cotton stared at me. No doubt he was justifiably awed by my knowledge of celestial mechanics and stellar astrophysics. Certainly his eyes were blank, and his lips were compressed. Then he quietly stated “That was one of my best movies.”

“Oh. Sorry.” I realized that, while I watched a lot of films, I seldom paid attention to the lists of producers, directors and other personnel who made them possible. I added weakly “At least, the flick showed pathos.”

“Crap!” Cotton exclaimed. And then, seeing my disapproving look: “Not you, Jason. I mean the movie. Personally, I *loved* it. But the public *hated* it. And you wanna know why?”

“Why?” I dutifully asked.

“Because the space stuff just wasn’t *slick*.” He jumped out of his seat in excitement, his paunch causing a tidal wave in the fluid of the desk. Unable to react quickly enough, the force-

field bulged up around his struggling figure, a victim caught in a technological bog. “Damm!” he exploded. “They can’t even make a desk that works right, never mind a spaceship.”

Bill brought his fist down, but it broke through the thinned-out surface of the desk with a splash of sparks. His portly body followed, arms flailing.

Suddenly there was fizzing sound in the office, and the desk flashed out of existence. So did my chair.

Bill was crawling around on his hands and feet, an angry bulldog. I was lying flat on my back, my inverted eyes watching with fascination the corner of the office, where there was a flickering on/off image of the brass spittoon.

The entrance door had also dissolved, and it there stood a thin woman with red hair and old-fashioned eyeglasses, over which she peered at us in disapproval. “What’s the game, boys?”

Bill Cotton sprang to his feet, brushing bits of force-field off his executive suit and looking embarrassed. I rolled over and bounced upright, snapping a salute.

“This is Ida,” puffed Bill. “Ida Down.”

I suppressed my fatuous response to this bed-related and unlikely name.

“Ida is in charge of our comedy team.” And then, as if it explained why we had been rolling around on the floor, “Jason is my brother-in-law.”

“Ah,” acknowledged Ida Down. Her face was lined, with calipers running to the edges of thin lips, and completely static. Her eyes behind the medically-unnecessary eyeglasses were blue; but unlike mine, her own resembled those of a fish that has seen better times. Her lanky, sexless body was covered in some kind of smock, against whose greyness the crimson hair provided a frizzy but artificial attempt at frivolity. She was the most uncomedic person I had ever seen.

“We’d better go to my office,” sniffed Ida, looking around Bill’s room, which was bare except for the intermittent cuspidor. “At least it has *real* furniture.”

She turned and marched off down the corridor, Bill and I following. Briefly, I wondered who was the real boss of the *Star Films* company. My companion, however, explained as we walked. “I didn’t get time to tell you, but our next movie is going to be a new thing – a kind of sitcom in space, but with a lot of humour.” I guess I must have looked skeptical. “Don’t be fooled, Jason. It may be that Ida looks like a battleaxe, but she’s the best joke-writer in the business.”

“I thought you wanted me for my expertise about space,” I said.

“We do. But your sister says you also have a sense of humour, even if it’s a weird one.”

“I don’t think it’s weird,” I objected. “Though my last girlfriend *did* dump me because she thought my mental development got stuck in the teenager stage. But as I said to her...”

I had lost my audience, however. Bill was back down the corridor, arguing with two men who were brandishing bits of script in his face. I decided to walk on, in the wake of the imperious Ida Down. Unlike Bill, the other employees of *Star Films* seemed to shrink away from that woman. I did not know why, but was pretty sure that the reason lay with *her*, as the other folk I passed seemed normal enough. They emerged from and went into various offices, most with the mixture of preoccupation and casualness that is typical of a large corporation. They were doing their jobs in an efficient but unstressed manner. Some of the girls were attractive, and I forgot my previous girlfriend when I passed an office in which sat a topless lass who smiled at me as I passed, leaving me guessing about the part of her trim figure that was below the level of her desk. I was, I confess, a bit disappointed at the lack of theatricality. After all, this *was* a movie company. But the actors and film-shooting locations must be elsewhere. The only unusual person I met was an introspective-looking, dark-skinned chap with a purple dot between his eyes, who levitated along the passageway in a flowing gown, leaving a stench of old curry in his slipstream.

Ida Down’s red head vanished into the office at the end of the corridor. She already had some documents spread out on her desk when I entered. They had wrinkled, yellow edges; and the musty smell that emanated from them implied that they were real paper. Intrigued, I sat down in a chair that appeared to be the cannibalized pew of some ancient church. What the hell was all this about?

Bill Cotton bumbled in, a bit short of breath. He wedged his tubby body into another chair, but he avoided the woman’s eyes, letting his gaze go through the window that formed one corner of the office to where a lazy river meandered through sand dunes.

“Did you tell him about the orbits?” Ida Down demanded.

“Yes, dear,” replied Cotton subserviently. “Er, I mean Ida.”

Although I would have thought it impossible, the woman’s face became even more stony, and her lips curled slightly with contempt. Still sore about my own recent breakup, I suddenly had an insight that explained the stressed relationship between Bill and Ida: they used to be

mates. Maybe they had even been married; and if so, it was obvious which one felt the more aggrieved by the changed state of affairs. Myself, I would rather go to bed with an asteroid than the equally granitic Ms. Down, and I could not imagine what past softness of mind had possessed the jovial Mr. Cotton. I had been away in space at the time of his marriage to my sister, and apart from a couple of casual meetings at the subsequent celebrations, I had not had much to do with him. But Sis could take care of herself, and clearly Bill had come well out of the new deal.

My daydreaming was cut short by Ida Down. “The jokes are just as important as the orbits,” she declared. “We need a new product after Bill’s bomb.”

“She means *The Revenge of the Ogrons*,” explained Cotton, looking depressed.

“Well,” I opined, “it *wasn’t* a very convincing movie.”

I said this partly because I meant it, and partly to see if I could crack the woman’s concrete facade of a face. It worked slightly, because her lips quirked into an agreeing smile for an instant.

“Comedy is a fragile medium,” Ida lectured. “What one person finds funny, another person finds boring. Some people don’t even have a sense of humour.”

“Tell me about it,” muttered Bill.

Ignoring him, Ida peered at me doubtfully, like a housewife trying to identify some insect that has appeared in the bathtub. “You *do* have a sense of humour, Jason?”

“Yes ma’am,” I assured her. “Genus *Python*, species *Monty*. From the south end of the vineyard, naturally.”

“Naturally,” she replied. My respect for her edged up, for she seemed to know about the old-time comedy classics. “However, you must have noticed that truly original gags are rare.”

“I suppose they are,” I agreed after reflecting on it.

“Indeed,” she carried on, “most jokes are just new versions of old ones. Have you yourself ever invented a genuinely *new* joke?”

I opened my mouth to say “Of course I have,” but then closed it again. Ida Down, head of the comedy division at *Star Films*, was staring at me intently. There was some hidden agenda here. Quickly, I ran through a mental inventory of my favourite gags. Reluctantly, I came to the realization that while I regard myself as having a good if dry sense of humour, most of it depended on things I had heard a long time ago.

Seeing my confusion, Ida asked “Have you in fact ever met *anybody* who invented a truly *original* gag?” Then, as I did not reply immediately, she answered her own question. “I don’t think anybody writes new jokes.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” I expostulated. “You yourself have a crew of writers. What do you pay them for, if not to write jokes?”

She shook her head. “The people on our payroll are good, but they’re good at rearranging things. We have a dozen script writers we can call in to do comedy, but none of them has ever come up with anything totally new.”

I did not know why, but I felt annoyed. Probably because the comedians I liked – mostly from the old days – were somehow being maligned. But then I recalled that I had once listened to an interview with Groucho Marx, in which he had averred that most comedians stole material from each other. I still felt annoyed, however. It was as if somebody was claiming that the *Mona Lisa* was a fake, copied from a holiday photograph or something.

I got up from my hard seat and started to walk about the office. Through the window, I could see the river wending its way slowly through the dunes, destined for the nearby sea. It must be the same watercourse which, further inland, the Space Base used to cool its launch pads. Vaguely, I sensed some analogy – about things changing form but coming from the same source. However, I had never been very good at philosophy; and any fruitful idea I might have hatched just died away in the frigid atmosphere of the office, like a petunia on Pluto.

Bill Cotton was still sitting in the vise-grip of his seat, watching me as I paced around. He was rubbing his leg, which appeared to have been bruised during our earlier melee, and looked unhappy. It suddenly seemed to me that we were all taking things too seriously. Our meeting more resembled a funeral ceremony than a comedy discussion. My mood lifted at the absurdity of it.

Bill gave a cough, breaking the awkward silence.

I intoned: “*He gave a cough*

His leg fell off

And floated down the river.”

Ida Down smiled! “Who said that?” she wanted to know.

“I did,” was my prompt reply. “Just now.”

Bill roared with laughter, perhaps partly due to the release of tension in the room. I took a liking to him. Ida's smile did not last long, but her face looked less grim than before.

"It wasn't *that* funny," I said, slightly embarrassed.

"Did you think of that line yourself?" Ida asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "I heard something like it on *The Silly Show* when I was a kid."

The head of the comedy unit at *Star Films* did not say "I told you so", but she did not need to. I was willing to concede that jokes had some mysterious origin, and that the ones in circulation now were just revamped ones from before.

"Maybe," suggested Bill to Ida, "you should tell Jason the plot of our new movie."

"Sure," she agreed. "But you're not to talk about it outside this building. In the film business, a good plot idea is like gold, and you'll have to keep it secret. I'm dead serious."

"I'm sure you are," I replied. Her manner had become business-like. "But you can relax. I may joke around, but I have a serious side. Actually, most of the really good, old-time comedians were very serious people in private. Some were manic-depressives, and a few even committed suicide."

"I know," she said. "But if we offer you a contract, there'll be a clause indemnifying the corporation against suicide. And insanity."

"And invasion by aliens, too?" I asked facetiously.

Ida Down's eyes locked on mine, as if some kind of mental X-rays were focussed by her old-fashioned spectacles in an effort to pierce my mind. Bill Cotton gave another cough, but this one sounded like a warning.

"What's wrong?" I asked innocently.

"Nothing exactly," replied the woman carefully. "Except that our plot involves something like that."

I was thinking that if most jokes were old, then stories about alien invasions must be equally old. Ida and Bill, however, were exchanging glances – perhaps evaluating how much they should tell a newcomer about their precious plot.

Finally, Ida seemed to decide in favour of divulging the thing. "The story is set in the near future," she began. "The opening scene is a large hall aboard an interstellar spaceship, where the troops are being entertained by a comedian. The audience likes his jokes, but next morning he's found murdered."

“How?” I interjected.

She waived this aside impatiently. “Something gory.” Then she continued, her eyes behind the glasses becoming abstracted as she visualized the next scene. “Back on Earth, a bunch of snobby people are watching one of Shakespeare’s comedies. It’s a modern adaptation, though. And half-way through, the main character is telling a good gag when he drops dead on the stage.”

I sat quietly. So far, I did not find the plot exactly gripping, and I failed to see where orbits came into it.

“Next, we are out in space, the camera following a beat-up mining ship as it comes in to land on an asteroid. The blue Earth is off in the distance. After docking, the pilot of the ship enters a bar. It’s full of drunken miners watching a girl doing striptease. She’s telling lewd jokes, and the men are laughing, so they don’t notice another figure who we only see as a dark shape. The girl is taking off her bra, telling a gag about sex in space, when she explodes.”

“Ugh!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, don’t be squeamish,” said Ida petulantly. “You need lots of sex and violence to sell a story these days. Any editor will tell you that.”

Bill said, “She’s right.”

“And what about me?” I asked. “Do you want me to calculate the orbit of the mining ship, or the paths of the bloody bits of the girl?”

“Both,” replied Ida. “The last murder takes place on an asteroid where the gravity is low, so you’ll have to make it convincing.”

“Okay,” I said. “But where do the aliens come in?”

“The aliens,” she explained, “are trying to invade Earth. The troops on the spaceship in the first scene are trying to track them down, but are having trouble, because the aliens are shadowy creatures who can disguise themselves as humans. In fact, several of the aliens are already on Earth, living amongst our people as spies.”

I did not voice the opinion, but it seemed to me that the plot had gotten bogged down in stereotype, and needed some novel ploy to lift it out of mediocrity. What the woman said now rather confirmed my opinion.

“Our counter-spy guys are led by a rugged ex-spaceman, who is helped by a fuddy-duddy professor.”

I groaned.

“Be quiet,” snapped Ida. “The Earth is going into a frenzy, because somehow it has leaked out that the aliens are about to invade. Mothers holding their babies, looking at the night sky, and all that. But our space guy and the professor cannot locate the alien spies who are carrying out the murders, because they can’t break the aliens’ code.”

“That’s not right,” I objected firmly. “It’s been proven that any logical code can be expressed as a Godel number, and that given enough effort it can be broken.”

Ida Down gave a short, mocking laugh. Her fishy eyes behind the spectacles took on life. “Not so fast, Mister Smarty Pants. *This* code isn’t like that, and it *can’t* be broken.”

I had a vague surmise, like the man who looked upon a far peak in Darien. There might indeed be a novel way to boost the plot above the plain of the commonplace. “You mean...”

“The code,” confirmed Ida, “is jokes.”

I sat for quite a while, thinking. Bill Cotton watched me, saying nothing but occasionally squirming his bum into a more comfortable position on his torture chair. Ida Down flounced her artificially red fuzz-ball of hair. She had removed her spectacles, and from where I sat I could tell from the lack of refraction of the light from the window that the lenses were plain glass, as I had suspected. However, her dead-fish eyes were even more off-putting without the spectacles. This woman was not stupid. And her idea of using jokes as a code was ingenious. In an age where jaded movie-goers were enticed by ever-more unrealistic things, this new storyline might just be crazy enough to work.

“I like it,” was my eventual judgment.

Not that my opinion weighed for much. Now that they had me hooked, both Bill and Ida seemed to recall that they had other, more important things to do. A contract popped hologramatically out of the air, and after a quick appraisal I agreed to the terms. The pay would double my income while I was Earth-side; and Bill must have consulted my sister, because the end-date coincided with my next scheduled flight. I thought “At least, I’ll be in space if the movie bombs.” Actually, I was fairly positive about the venture, and eager to learn the details of the storyline and add my contribution.

“Do I qualify for an office?” I asked naively. I really had no idea if people worked on scripts in the building, in some garret, or on the beach. The last possibility appealed, as the sun was shining outside on the yellow dunes, and the sea was on their farther side. But then I had an

inspiration. “I could also use some help from one of your regular people, especially about special effects and such.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bill said absently. He fiddled with one of his messaging toys. “I’ll get one of our computer people to drop in.”

While we were waiting, I tried to read the upside-down writing on the ancient documents that littered the top of Ida’s desk. They *were* real paper, brown and smelly with age. But the writing was in some kind of medieval script, and I could not decipher it.

“The oldest copy I can find of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*,” explained Ida.

I raised my eyebrows, impressed by her dedication to research. With some historical ballast, plus a few jokes and orbits from me, maybe the new movie would not bomb after all. I was just going to ask what the title would be of our proposed epic, when I heard the door of the office open.

I turned, and there was the girl I had seen down the corridor. She had pulled on a blouse, but a pair of dainty nipples perked through it. Tight shorts revealed the outline of a shapely rear end. Her smile was gentle laser.

Bill, who was his usual affable self now that he had extricated himself from his chair, did a quick introduction. “Jason, this is Dawn.”

“Don’t look so dazzled,” Ida told me cattily, noticing that I was ogling the girl’s pneumatic breasts, which to me seemed like heavenly orbs. “They haven’t risen yet.” And she shooed us out of the room.

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Walking along the beach, holding Dawn’s hand with the waves washing around our feet, I felt I was committing a cliché.

“Don’t be silly,” said Dawn. “We’ve been working hard, and we deserve a break.”

She was right. My first few days at *Star Films* had been frustrating, but had become progressively easier as I learned the bureaucratic wrinkles of the place from Dawn. She was herself involved with special effects, her expertise being explosions. “There’s no sound in space,” I had once reminded her as we watched a mock-up of a crashing starship. She had replied “I know,” and it became clear that she possessed a good grounding in the physics of space. I was impressed by this, but did not patronize her; and I made no effort to conceal that my hopes for our relationship were distinctly non-academic. However, any delusions I may have

had about my own magnetic allure quickly turned to iron filings, before being reconstituted by the field lines of bipolar eroticism. Dawn's initial friendliness towards me was due to the prosaic fact that she had known I would be visiting the movie company, because she was a pal of my chatterbox sister. Indeed, Dawn and Janet had taken the same courses in astronomy. Later, the one had gone into robotics and the other into biology. Both girls were, though, distinctly feminine. Naturally, my views about my sister were coloured by the rivalries and private things that affect any siblings; but I could appreciate why Bill Cotton had been drawn to her, since she was a pretty brunette with more than an average share of brains. Dawn's intelligence was less obvious and more relaxed, and her good humour even extended to the irascible Ida Down. But as we ambled along the beach, I forgot about the office, fascinated at how the rays of the setting Sun twisted themselves into my companion's blonde hair, livening it into a golden swirl.

The bay was deserted, and neither of us gave any thought to our nakedness. There were only a couple of clues to the existence of a technological world behind the barrier of sand dunes. One of these was an ancient gantry – a remnant of the days when chemicals powered unwieldy rockets – and now a rusty red nail poking about the yellow hills. The only other sign of civilization was our tent, a one-molecule thick artificial diamond that split the sunlight into strange strands of violet that bounced out to sea to join the restless blue waves.

The tide must be coming up, since there was a band of dried-out, water-flattened sand between the dunes and the sea. Later, I knew that the Moon would rise, dragging its bulge of water around the Earth. It was funny to think that the crashing breakers and the shuddering of the sand beneath our feet was one end of the invisible elastic band of gravity that held the hurtling satellite in its orbit – a tether that was slowly decaying as the friction at one end allowed the rock to retreat at the other end, perhaps destined in some far future to wander off on its own path among the stars.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Dawn.

“Oh. Err...” Somehow I was reluctant to explain, but it had to be done. “My next flight has been confirmed.”

She glanced at me, perhaps trying to see signs of regret or the opposite. But I daresay my face did not show a great deal of expression. Much of the emotion in my family seemed to have drained out of me and gone into my sister at some stage in our childhood. Probably when our parents had been killed in the accident.

“Where to?” Dawn wanted to know.

“Just to the Moon. I won’t be gone long.”

What I did not wish to mention was that my contract with the Space Corps obligated me to do three trips to Pluto. They were necessary to take scientific equipment to our new base out there, and each would take a hell of a chunk out of a man’s life. Suddenly, the prospect of retiring in middle age did not seem so appealing as it did before. Sure, I would be able to buy my own space speedster and whiz around the inner solar system as I liked; but maybe there were other things to do on Earth that were more important, and best done during one’s youth...

“Did Major Mac object to you working part-time for *Star Films*?”

“Not really,” I replied. I was about to inquire how she knew about my superior Mac; but realized that it must be more of the gossip which flowed so easily from my sister, Janet. “I’m on the academic side of things, not the military. We all have a clause about what they call *research development*. We can use a certain amount of time to do something on the side, as long as it’s scientific. Like a kind of sabbatical.”

Dawn laughed. “Does he know that you’re not only working out orbits, but helping to write jokes?”

“No. And please don’t blab to Janet. Or at least, ask her not to talk to Major Mac. He has about as much sense of humour as a rattlesnake with heartburn.”

I knew this for a fact. Once, the General’s adjutant had persuaded the rigid Major Mac to approve a bit of musical entertainment for the enlisted men at the base. This was during the Army’s phase of sexual ‘enlightenment’. Then “Don’t talk, don’t tell” had become “Please talk, and chat about your friends’ genital warts.” The adjutant who had persuaded Major Mac to put on the evening of music was possessed of: (a) languid eyes which had never focussed down a rifle barrel; (b) brains which always focussed on something resembling a penis. On the evening in question, the musicians had set up behind the stage curtain, ready to kick things off with a bouncy tune. The men had slowly filled up the seats in the hall, ready to enjoy an evening of patriotic music. Unfortunately (though some claimed it was no accident), there had been some miscommunication. The curtain went up, to reveal a band whose members were all nude and with enormous erections. The resulting furor was headed by the very butch Major Mac; but the band was able to escape the barrage of beer cans by using their instruments to protect their genitals.

My own thoughts were, I must admit, turning towards the erotic as Dawn and I wandered back to our tent. Chocked in by sand dunes on three sides, it was a very private place. Tired by our long walk, we plopped down in its entrance. The Sun was descending, a great ball of yellow and red that slipped in small steps beneath the haze of the horizon.

Nobody had ever accused me of being good at small talk; but I had some foresight, and had brought along a bottle of wine. It had kept itself cold during our absence, and when I picked it up it left a patch of cool dew on the bedclothes. We drank it in silence, watching the sky turn from light blue to dark blue.

It was, of course, terrifically romantic. However, my head started to droop just as a lower part of my anatomy started to rise.

“Damm!” I exclaimed softly as I jerked my head off my chest a short time later. Turning around, I saw that Dawn was already asleep, her breasts rising and falling with a steady rhythm. Her lips were not the only things that were open. But as I snuggled close to her warm body, my fading senses told me that slumber would win, at least temporarily.

I awoke to the echo of my last snore, but sure that something else had brought me out of sleep.

Thousands of stars filled the entrance of the tent, which I had forgotten to close. The surf was a shimmering white line, and I saw that the tide must have come up and gone down again while I slept. Poking my head outside, I caught the yellow, pock-marked face of the Moon peering low over one of the dunes.

I waited. Between surges of the sea, the quiet was punctuated by the sound of voices. They were indistinct, and I could not make out any words.

Curious and wary, I crept out of the tent. As an afterthought, I grabbed the empty wine bottle from where it lay in the sand. Then I moved on bare feet in what I thought was the correct direction.

Sand slipped in silent avalanches as I climbed up the side of the nearest dune. The night was almost black, but as I peeped over the top of the hill I saw two dark figures silhouetted against the phosphorescence of the waves.

The hairs on my bare back stood up instinctively, and I shivered. There was something unnatural about these two figures. They were blocky, as if they had only stunted arms and legs.

What they were saying to each other was still unintelligible to me, but the tone was short and gruff. I could not see their faces, because they were facing away – looking down the beach in the direction of the space base.

I ducked behind the dune as one of the figures changed shape, and I guessed it was turning in my direction. For quite a while, I hunkered against the sand, making no movement and grasping the neck of my wine bottle. Finally, I decided I was over-reacting, and looked over the top again.

The beach was utterly deserted.

Puzzled, I climbed to the top of the dunes, and stood up far enough to get a good view. The tent lay undisturbed in its niche below, and the empty sandhills marched away to the distance.

“This is weird,” I muttered to myself. The only sound now was the *swash* of the sea as it approached low tide.

Scrambling down a cascading dune, I came out onto the flat stretch of the beach and started to walk across it in a crouching position. Up ahead there was a group of shallow marks in the wet sand, outlined in phosphorescence. I stopped when I got there, and dropped on one knee.

They were footprints all right, but not human.

*

Major Mac was a long-standing acquaintance of mine, as I have outlined; and a person did not need movie-sharpened senses to identify him as a military stereotype. His cubical head contained a brain unencumbered by anything resembling an original thought. This was surmounted by a brush of vertically-standing hair designed to impale any enemy insects, assuming these evaded the outstanding radar dishes which passed for ears. His grey eyes were unwavering and contemptuous under the fire of any bright idea, which invariably ricocheted to inflict grievous harm on its source. The Major was married to the mousy daughter of a retired colonel, and so piteous was her demeanor that troops on the base instinctively offered her bits of their ration of cheese. He kept his wife perpetually short of money, and rumour had it that she learned to forego kitchen utensils because her husband’s grizzled moustache formed a perfectly serviceable pan-scrubber. He sat now, immovable behind his desk, his shoulders perfect right-angles and the sleeves of his uniform cliffs of cloth, unmarred by any ridge or wrinkle. For him to turn would require hidden machinery to rotate the man and his desk as one rigid unit.

Of course, I was exaggerating a bit. But what use was my sabbatical in the movie business if I could not indulge in some silent satire at the expense of my military boss?

“Did you plug ’em?” Major Mac asked, referring to the two clandestine figures I had observed the previous night on the beach.

“No, sir,” I replied. “I wasn’t armed.”

This was a trifle disingenuous, but I thought Mac would hardly consider an effete wine bottle to be a proper weapon. I was regretting having reported the incident at all, because in the morning light it had appeared less sinister; but I was aware that the base was ringed by surveillance devices, and for all I knew a report had already gone in, and it might appear odd for me to stay quiet. The troops on the base had not seen action in a long while. However, there had been rumours of recent espionage, by the fanatics who were opposed to space travel and believed that the resources devoted to it would be better spent to alleviate problems here on Earth. Some of what the army brass referred to as “bleeding hearts” were even supposed to have a quasi-military organization.

“You didn’t, even though their speech was indistinct, hear the insurgents use a password?”

“A password?” I repeated stupidly, wondering how two figures who might be merely tourists on the beach had become “insurgents”.

“Yes.” The Major’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed me. By some means, he had called a holographic display onto his desk without disturbing his statue-like immobility. No doubt he was reviewing my record to see if I was reliable. His attitude conveyed the impression that, as a civilian member of the corps, I was automatically a potential security risk. But I knew there was nothing questionable in my record; and with an air of secrecy he continued: “A password like, say, *Swordfish*.”

A flash of recognition must have passed across my face, for Mac said “Aha!”

A sibilant sound emerged from beneath his prickly mustache, as if I were an enemy spy who had just admitted to knowing where the Secret Naval Documents were hidden.

I hastened to explain. “The password *Swordfish* was used in an early Marx Brothers movie, to get into a hidden bar during the Prohibition Era.”

Major Mac looked totally blank. It dawned on me that he had never heard of the brilliant comedies put out by the brothers Marx.

“One of the brothers was called Harpo,” I added, hoping that any information I could give would be used to verify my innocence on a charge of treason. “He had big, googly eyes and couldn’t talk. But he wanted a drink, and they let him in.”

“Why?” Mac demanded, no doubt disbelieving that a dumb man could give the password, and no doubt thinking he had found a hole in my own defense.

“Because,” I added, “Harpo turned up at the bar with a real swordfish stuck in his pants.”

It sounded impossibly lame. But how do you explain something like that to a person who has no sense of humour?

Major Mac stared at me for a long time. His thoughts were almost visibly bouncing around the triangle of my innocent face, the display of my unblemished record, and the suspicion that I had been dealing with spies. Eventually, his craggy face relaxed, assuming an expression of paternal commiseration. “I thought something like this might happen, if I let you work for that crazy movie mob.”

I kept quiet, though I could have pointed out that I had every right to work temporarily for that “crazy” outfit by the terms of my (civilian) contract. Exasperated by the interview, I decided to terminate it. “Don’t worry, sir. I have only a few more orbits to work out for them, and then I’ll be on my way to the Moon.”

His face clearly told that in his opinion any orbit I worked out would look like a corkscrew. “Dismissed,” he harrumphed.

*

Ida Down’s red brush of hair bobbed up and down behind the proscenium of her desk, as she flung grenades of verbal abuse from between two tottering piles of yellowed paper that threatened to bury her under a pile of old jokes. Bill Cotton squirmed in the jaws of his armchair, a fat and easy target whose only reply was a series of protesting squawks. My eyes drifted absently to the ceiling, looking for the strings that controlled this Punch and Judy show.

“The pilot stinks!” Ida exclaimed, banging her fist on a shiny manuscript which was the disappointing product of a half-dozen well-paid but uninspired writers.

The word “pilot” reminded me that I would be commanding a ship to the Moon in the not-so-remote future, and that in the offices of *Star Films* a lot remained to be done. True, many of the special-effects scenes were already in the anachronistic ‘can’. Dawn was in her room even now, making the final adjustments to the big explosion, in which the shadowy enemies of

mankind were to blow up the world government. I mused that the aliens would have an easy job, if the film version of the world government resembled the real thing. My sweetheart had, incidentally, forgotten my encounter with possible real spies on the beach, and Major Mac's investigations had produced nothing of substance. Dawn and I had been able to work undistracted on the movie, she concocting space scenes and me working out orbits, with the occasional memo sent to Ida or Bill about a suitable joke. Ida had been right about the scarcity of original jokes. And it was the humour that was proving difficult to incorporate convincingly into the plot. In the original plan, the aliens were evil quasi-human creatures intent on exterminating humankind on Earth as well as in space; and our hope had been that the old plot would be given a new start by letting the baddies communicate via gags, thereby adding a humourous diversion to the usual grim scenario. Unfortunately, while this fresh slant might appeal to a blasé public, it was proving difficult to achieve without collapsing back into cliché. The pilot script on Ida Dawn's desk contained the dialogue to be spoken by the human actors, in scenes yet to be filmed that would be interspersed between the special-effects pieces. And most of the jokes in that dialogue were as old and flat as the Sea of Tranquility. Only the inherently convivial Bill Cotton had tried to defend the script, but his support was waning against Ida Dawn's wrath.

"Even the title's boring," complained Ida, who was willing to go back to the beginning if it would get the new movie on a better and more profitable course. "*The Enemy Within*," she sniffed.

"Sounds like my liver," agreed the dyspeptic Bill, whose lunch was not sitting well in his ample body.

"Most of the jokes are even worse than the old ones," continued the woman, gesturing at the piles of ancient scripts that flanked her. Those age-ochred heaps reflected in her eyeglasses, making her resemble a lizard.

She flipped open the file at one of numerous places she had marked. "Listen to this:

"Earthman, broke and unemployed, walks into bar on Jupiter. Alien in disguise offers to buy him a drink.

Alien: *Looking for a job?*

Earthman: *Yeah. What's your line of business?*

Alien: *I'm an undertaker.*

Earthman: *Looking for a good worker?*

Alien: *No. I'm looking for stock.*

“Now, if that’s funny,” fumed Ida, “then I’m a monkey’s asshole!”

Actually, Bill was laughing. I was smiling myself, even though I had heard the gag before. Neither of us made the obvious comment about a simian rectum, because Ida’s anger was mounting.

“And,” she continued, “tell me what’s good with the next bit. It’s about half-way through, when our guys have discovered that there’s a map in existence, showing what routes the alien ships will take when they invade Earth. One of our guys has caught an alien spy, and is throttling him to learn about the map. It goes like this:

“Earthman: *Tell me where it is, or I'll ram my blaster down your throat!*

Alien (choking): *You'll never have it, Earth pig-dog!*

Earthman (determined): *Then I'll crush your alien balls like a couple of asteroids.*

Alien (dying): *Too late, Earth scum. I threw the map into the black hole.*

Earthman (looks off, flips down visor): *Then I am going in after it! (FX: dwindling cry) Aargh..!*

“Gentlemen, that *has* to be tripe,” insisted Ida. “Or else my brain’s turned to vacuum.”

We declined to give an opinion about the pressure inside our colleague’s head, though it seemed ready to blow.

“Even the final scene is bullshit,” spluttered Ida, her eyeglasses glittering with rage. “At the end of the movie, our hero – the Captain of the Earth fleet – sets out to revenge mankind on the planet of the aliens, knowing he’ll never come home. He’s holding his wife, with the blackened ruins of his house in the background, silhouetted against the rings of Saturn. And what does the geek *say?*”

Bill and I exchanged blank stares, then looked expectantly at Ida.

“I’ll *tell* you what he says:

“This is not goodbye darling. It just means that we'll have to live out our days in parallel universes.

“That’s rubbish!” was her judgment. “Pure recycled *crap!*” She flung the offending pilot script across the room.

Watching the flight, I made a mental note to check that any thrown objects in the final scene should have accurate orbits.

Bill was watching the fluttering pages of the script as they expired symbolically in the corner of the office. “I suppose it could use some rewriting.”

“Yes,” I concurred. “The scenes you mentioned have mistakes in them, anyhow. The first is unrealistic insofar as you can’t have a bar on Jupiter, because it doesn’t have a solid surface. The second scene will make viewers cringe if they know anything about the size and tensile strength of asteroids. And the third is not only clumsy but also suspect, because in theory it’s possible to communicate between parallel universes – at least on the quantum level – by using phase-locked tachyon transmitters.”

Ida Down stared at me in silent awe, her anger sublimated by the brilliance of my little speech.

Bill Cotton stopped fidgeting in an effort to relieve the pain in his backside, and said with respect “Jason, you’re amazing.”

“Amazingly amazing,” I quipped. However, Ida Down still looked serious. She was surely right that our movie needed an infusion of quality humour. Indicating the piles of material on her desk, I asked “What have you found out during your researches?”

“John Donne did some good stuff a long time ago, and Shakespeare was no slouch. But nowadays, as I expected, nearly all jokes are variations on old themes. Of course, modern comedians use present politics and social changes to present their stuff; but the themes are ancient.

“Modern jokes are *sometimes* funny and original,” pointed out Bill, revocing the objection I had made at the beginning of the project.

“A few, maybe,” agreed Ida. “The strange thing is, I can’t seem to track down their source.”

“Perhaps they really *are* made up by aliens,” speculated Bill. “After all, just because we’re using the idea as a film plot doesn’t mean it couldn’t be true.”

“Or else,” I contributed, “perhaps the really new jokes are created by border-line crazy people. A lot of famous comedians have been certifiable loonies. And in some ancient societies, the insane were considered possessed by evil spirits, which might have been a cover for aliens.”

Ida Down, instead of squelching our comments as I had expected, turned introspective. “We could use a few original gags, *wherever* they come from. As it stands, we’re producing just another B-movie. If we could get hold of a really original gag-writer, we could make a classic

science-fiction comedy. Something that will really make a mark. Something that will earn some real *money*.”

I knew she was correct. My own brand of juvenile/smart-ass humour suited me, and amused my friends. However, having worked at *Star Films* for a period, I realized that while my sense of humour was better than average, it was still derivative from something else. The movie industry, to me, had provided an entertaining and temporary diversion – like a hobby. To people like Ida Down and Bill Cotton, it was serious and permanent – a job. Their livelihoods depended on being able to produce something that the public wanted to pay to watch. Being funny was no joke.

*

On the balcony, most of the girls were topless; and in our corner my hand rested on Dawn’s sunburned thigh, in an attempt to assuage my desire for sex. The shadow of our half-empty wine bottle pointed to the main part of the restaurant, where gowned women and suited men were intent on dinner, oblivious of the nearby pulchritude. Dawn’s long hair fell in two yellow swathes about her eyes, which were focussed on the personal communications device she held below the table’s rim trying to discern its sun-washed hieroglyphics. Dunes crowded the landscape, and sand had piled into wedges against the long line of movie sets that marked the divide between urbanization and nature. The rusty gantry on the horizon was a Cleopatra’s needle that demarked the change from the familiar pharaohs of hydrogen and oxygen to the mysterious god of phase-locked gravity. None of which interested me just then because of the growing bulge in my pants.

“Do you want it now?” Dawn asked.

Her expression was a strange mixture of the coquettish and the matter-of-fact. It reflected my own daydream – which concerned a monkey casually walking up to its mate, having sex, and sauntering away eating a banana.

“Sure!” I replied, somewhat surprised. My sweetheart’s grammar was a bit odd, but I ascribed that to the pheromones which I was sure were boiling off my body in unseen waves. In our short relationship, she had proven to be an uninhibited lover; but clearly there were depths to her eroticism I had not plumbed. The erection in my pants was an aching insistence. However, I was not sure a crowded restaurant was an appropriate venue for that sort of thing. “Er, maybe we should wait til we’re somewhere more private?”

“Phooey!” she responded. “You’re too influenced by that straight-laced Major Mac.”

Shuddering at the thought of my military colleague and how he might make love to his sexless mouse of a wife, I was going to object when my own mate cut me off with good-natured abandon.

“Let everybody see,” was her opinion. Then with a wrinkle of thought between her light eyes: “Maybe we should tell the details to your sister...”

“No!”

“... in case the spies are real and there’s an astrophysical angle to their plot.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing that we had been on different orbits. Dawn had been talking about the message on her communicator. Disappointed but slightly relieved, my visions of a public orgy began to subside, as did my penis.

“Here,” said the girl. “Look at this while I call Janet.”

An image appeared on the table top, a short block of text whose letters were blurry as Dawn’s communication console struggled to produce enough power to over-ride the fierce sunlight. The only thing that was clear was the headline:

League for All Unusual Gags and Humour

LAUGH!

The rest of the text was too difficult to read, so I only scanned its meaning. The message looked to be an appeal to members of the public who discovered – or believed they discovered – real and original jokes, inviting those individuals to get in touch and help stamp out mediocrity in the film business. There was even a hint of emolument for the rare find of a genuinely fresh gag. Staring at this strange epistle, while Dawn was busy contacting my sister Janet, it seemed to me to be too fantastic to be credible. This even in a town dominated by the film industry, and its wildly improbable products (not to mention the sometimes improbable activities of the laboratories of the Space Corps, where the quest to conquer the stars was pushing beyond science and into fantasy). However, at the bottom of the strange document there was a common-or-garden street address, which lent some credence to the thing. I noted that the address was within walking distance of the restaurant. It was somewhere in that block of buildings which had been used in the old days of movie production (before the era of wholesale computer-generated locales) and were now used to house the offices of actors’ agents, film distributors and the like.

“Hello, Jason!”

Janet's face floated in the tiny hologram which flickered on the table. Half of the image was ballooned out of proportion by the intervening carafe of wine, but the deep-set eyes and straight brow were copies of my own. As children, we had both started with 'dirty-blonde' hair, but my outdoor lifestyle meant that mine had darkened with age less than that of my sister. As I looked at my older sibling now, pieces of laboratory equipment were vaguely visible in the background, so I guessed she must still be at work.

"Hi, Janet." Since her marriage to the movie-man Bill Cotton, I had not seen much of her, and had no idea about the current course of her research. I actually had little idea about *anything* that was going on these days in the field of astrobiology. "How are the organisms – or whatever they are – getting along?"

"They flourish," she responded succinctly. Then, assuming I knew more about the subject than I really did: "We're all fired-up and working overtime here. It might be that the explosion of life in the Cambrian period was caused by the arrival on Earth of a new organism from space, maybe carried on an asteroid or comet."

"Wouldn't everything get burned up in the atmosphere?" I asked, showing my out-of-date education.

She shook her head, but declined to explain. "I'll tell you about it another time. I'm more interested in this new thing you're working on with Dawn."

I looked at my girlfriend, slightly mystified.

"About the aliens with the jokes," clarified Janet.

I groaned. It looked as if the two women had been gossiping about rumours, while I had been labouring over the mechanically sound and technically vital issue of orbits. All right – they might be orbits made for a movie – but they were still *orbits*.

"Isn't it exciting?" Janet continued. "The Earth being invaded, and spies telling gags that are really passwords. It's like something out of a movie."

"It *is* something out of a movie!" I responded irritably. I had forgotten that I had myself been partly responsible – via the business on the beach – for the subject jumping from the pages of a film script to the chatter of everyday life.

Dawn, who had been sipping her wine and following the conversation in silence, kicked me discreetly under the table. "Janet was the one who found the clip about LAUGH." Then, seeing that I did not respond, said "You could at least thank her."

“Yeah. Thanks,” I responded without enthusiasm.

“And,” added Dawn, “your sister thinks you and I should go round and check up on the outfit.”

“Oh, no,” I objected. But looking at the expressions on the faces of the two women, I foresaw that the thing would probably have to be done, in order to preserve family harmony in future (and also to ensure non-family sex that evening). However, while I knew I was being defensive, I could not let the subject pass without pointing to a defect in the logic of the whole business. “What makes you think,” I asked my sister, “that aliens would *want* to invade the Earth?”

Janet rolled her eyes in that manner typical of an older sister obliged to tolerate a younger brother. In her case, it was a mannerism which had become bound up with the maternal instincts amplified by the death of our parents, and I had long ago abandoned any hope of her changing or discarding it. Now, one of her eyes bulged through the wine carafe, enormous with contemptuous pity.

“Real estate!” she declaimed. My expression must have shown that while this might have been enough of an explanation for another doctorate-wielding, organism-savvy astrobiologist, it was not sufficient for a juvenile, speed-obsessed space-bum. “Planets are common in the Galaxy, but ones like the Earth are as rare as jewels. Our observations have filled in the blanks in Drake’s formula. A planet near a solar-type star, with a stable orbit and a nice atmosphere, and with *water*, is a miracle. The cosmic odds are enormously against it.”

I nodded slowly at this lecture, which brought back memories of Astronomy 101. “But what about the aliens and the invasion?”

Janet shrugged. “Say you came from a planet that was chock-full of people, and that you were lucky enough to find another one that could accommodate you and your kind? However, you discovered that this prime piece of real estate was already occupied by a bunch of nasty, war-mongering, low-intelligent monkeys. What would you do?”

I grimaced. There was no need for an answer.

Dawn was looking at me, silent and intent. So was Janet, her magnified eye almost daring me to do something about the *League for All Unusual Gags and Humour*. That artificial acronym no longer sounded so ridiculous.

I picked up the carafe, emptied its remaining contents into my glass, and drank. The last mouthful I held in my mouth, letting the tart liquid lie on my tingling tongue. Vaguely, I was aware that Dawn and Janet were exchanging farewells, promising to keep in touch about “the Plot”.

Sullen for some reason, I walked through the dinnertime crowd in the restaurant, and down the stairs that led to the street. Outside, the air had the cool nip of early evening, and shadows lay half way across the road.

“They might have gone home,” I pointed out. This sounded banal. If we really were dealing with aliens, they were hardly likely to traipse off like so many civil servants, to watch the latest installment of their favourite soap opera.

Dawn gave a small giggle, and snuggled closer to me as we walked along the sandy sidewalk. Maybe she was nervous, or maybe she was feeling the effects of the wine. I felt slightly inebriated myself, and also slightly belligerent.

The location of LAUGH, when we arrived, proved to be a dilapidated building which looked as if it had once been used in a movie for a western-style saloon. It was a two-storey affair. The upper part still carried the lighter outline of some name that had disappeared from the dark grey facade. The lower part was horizontal boards, warped and cracked with age. Two windows, painted over with whitewash on the inside, flanked a blank metal door. Over the doorknob, a small plaque showed that we had come to the right place.

I turned the knob experimentally. It was shiny brass, and rotated smoothly. The door did not open; but it did move inwards by about a finger’s breadth.

Frustrated, I leaned my shoulder against the metal panel and exerted some pressure. The door moved reluctantly, then stopped.

Feeling foolish and a little angry, I took a step back, keeping the doorknob turned. Then I barged forward with force.

The door flew open, and I stumbled across the threshold after it.

There was nothing on the other side except sand. Piles and piles of sand, merging away into the coastal dunes.

“It’s a front,” I announced.

Suddenly we were both laughing.

*

Confabulations of the crazy kind must have occurred before in the offices of *Star Films*, but as things progressed I began to wonder if reality itself was not unraveling.

Bill Cotton's quirky furniture was not obeying the laws of quantum mechanics (assuming such existed). Faithful to the whims of its owner – whose thoughts were clearly elsewhere – the desk had morphed itself into a pool table.

“Calm down everybody!” exhorted the harassed producer. He moved his fuming cigar over the assembly, perhaps in the hope of stupefying it. The corner of his desk promptly detached itself and reformed into an ashtray which ineffectually followed the burning tobacco.

“Don't tell *me* to calm down!” Ida Down snapped. “I'm gonna finish this movie if it's the last thing I do.” A black casket obligingly took form behind her, its lid half-open to reveal red satin that exactly matched the colour of her hair.

“Thank goodness she didn't say ‘come hell or high water’,” muttered Dawn, who alone among us had a normal chair. The device which was responsible for the accoutrements of the office must have a default mode which was reasonably sensible.

My own seat was not like that, being a pilot's couch whose arms were studded with controls I was terrified to touch in case they should prove functionable. Bill knew I was scheduled to leave for the Moon that evening, and my ship was in fact visible through the office window as a gleam among the distant sand dunes. Aided by the furniture-making device, the Penrose effect was causing his brain to amplify a wisp of thought to a tangible thing.

“I still think we should suspend the movie until Major Mac or somebody has checked to see if there are real aliens among us.”

Bill Cotton was certainly worried – maybe for his own flaccid skin, should the mysterious agents of LAUGH decide that our film was a threat. His bald head was dewed with perspiration; and while I thought he was taking matters too seriously, I felt worried about him. My sister, Janet, had confided that she also was concerned for her husband. And while she acted academically aloof on the subject, I suspected that she was as intrigued as the rest of us about the possibility that there were alien spies around, who used arcane passwords and communicated via the medium of jokes. My own attitude was shared in a sweetheartly-supportive way by Dawn. We were both pragmatic: if there really *were* aliens on Earth, what the heck could we do about it, anyway?

Ida Down, at her hard-nosed end of the spectrum of opinion, now glared at Bill and snarled “Wimp.”

It was at that moment I decided that Ida Down not only talked nasty but *was* nasty. That her comment was not entirely accurate was shown by the materialization of an axe above the woman’s frizzy hair, though with a mercifully blunt edge.

The meeting was getting a bit out of control, I thought. It would be a relief to leave the squabbling movie business for the calm of space. Right now, it seemed to me to be timely to throw a philosophical blanket over the growing fire of emotions.

“There’s an old, oriental saying...”

Bill looked at me hopefully. Ida stared at me through her antique spectacles. Dawn gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“But I’m afraid I’ve forgotten it...”

The meeting erupted again into argument. Coming to the conclusion that my skills lay with piloting a spaceship rather than diplomacy, I sneaked out of the room.

*

The Moon was growing steadily in the forward screen when I finally relaxed from the launch.

Our load was more massive than usual. However, we had one of the new, generation S motors. The S stood in my mind – as in the minds of most members of the Corps – for Stars. If it were not for the load of instruments we were packing to the farside lunar base, the S-motor was powerful enough to accelerate us to Pluto and even out of the solar system. With its phase-locked gravity innards, it represented the breakthrough mankind had been working towards for ages. There were only seven S-ships in existence as yet. They hopefully represented the nucleus of what would one day be an interstellar space fleet. I was admittedly proud to have been put in command of one.

I assumed that the crew felt the same. Due to our super-sized load, the roster had been increased to five, including myself. In accordance with protocol, the men were still in their suits, a row of black-visored heads behind me.

I removed my own helmet, tasting for the first time the antiseptic atmosphere of the control cabin. “Okay. You can all relax.”

Clamps clicked open. Buckles were released. Cramped legs flexed and there were sighs of relief. I took a bottle of whiskey out of my suit where I had secreted it, assuaging my slightly guilty conscience by promising myself that I would only open it on the way home. Everyone started to unwind, physically and mentally.

Except that one of the crew, now floating in the cabin, did not raise his visor. He just hung there, staring at me. The setting on his face-screen was extreme, so his blank gaze was just like that of some enormous fly.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded. There have been occasional cases of high-gee blackout. But I knew, even as we floated at arm’s length from each other, that something else was going on. Something very odd.

The other three members of the crew, drifting together at the rear of the cabin, started to understand that something completely out of the ordinary was happening. But like me, nobody knew what to do.

With illogical loudness, I shouted “Haven’t you got anything to say?”

The figure responded quietly: “Swordfish.”

“Ha, ha,” I replied automatically, though I was not amused. “I suppose next, you’ll say something out of the movies like: *Fly this ship to Proxima Centauri!*”

“Nearly correct.” The voice, coming from the speaker unit under the black visor, was clipped but not what might be called accented. “Except that we are going to Alpha Aquarius.”

At this, I *did* start to laugh. But then stopped.

The guy, whatever star he called home, was holding a blaster.

This surprised me. However, while the weapon was business-like, it appeared to be made of plastic; and if I could smuggle a bottle of booze aboard, he could have managed to bring a gun along.

Obviously he *had*, I thought to myself bitterly. Come on, brain! *Do* something.

“I’m sorry,” I heard myself say in a reasonable tone. “The age of Aquarius is past.”

Bang!

The bottle of whiskey smashed into the black fly-face.

Never had scotch smelled so good. Glass flew everywhere through the brown haze. I flew backwards from the force of the blow, while my enemy whizzed across the cabin and

crashed into the wall. His weapon sped into a corner, burning a mark across the control panel on its way, before going dead. Three good-sized men piled onto the would-be hijacker.

The burn in the control panel must have released some communications block, because the screen suddenly lit up.

“Where the hell have you *been?*” Major Mac’s troubled face demanded.

Vaguely, I realized from the backdrop that the soldier was in Bill Cotton’s office at *Star Films*. The producer himself was slumped in his chair, looking confused and disbelieving. My sister was flapping a towel over his sweaty bald head.

Dawn was gaping at my image, her bare bosom heaving as if she had been in a fight. At seeing my living, happy face, her eyes filled dramatically with tears.

It took me a few moments to realize that the half-human, half-alien figure in the room was Ida Down. Without the heavy disguise and the thick eyeglasses, I only recognized her by the fuzz of red-dyed hair. The creature still looked ready to make some nasty comment, but was silent under the muzzle of Mac’s laser rifle.

The Major’s block-like head was speaking again, angry now that the danger was past, wanting to know why our ship had been out of contact for so long.

I waved nonchalantly in the direction of our own prisoner, who lay sullenly in the corner. Major Mac’s face settled into its usual expression of serious obstinacy.

“Cheer up,” I said to him. “We get the last laugh.”