

## A. BERTRAM CHANDLER FALL OF KNIGHT

*We've all been guilty of the tendency to ascribe to British SF a sobriety of outlook and a pessimistic approach to the World of Tomorrow natural to a people as close to the historical realities as they are. Here is proof that this is an unwise generalization.*

It is customary for the spacemen serving in the Federation's star ships to sneer at the titles bestowed, with a lavish hand, by the Kingdom of Waverley upon its spacefaring subjects. An officer who rises to become Master of one of the Empress Class vessels—equivalent to the Federation's Alpha Class—is invariably, after a short period of probation, dubbed Knight. His Chief Engineers—Reaction and Interstellar Drives—usually are given the title of Esquire, as is the First Mate. There are quite a few Dames among the senior Pursers and Catering Officers.

A spaceman is a spaceman, however, no matter what fancy handle he has to his name. He has to know his stuff, otherwise he would not be where he is. He has to be efficient, otherwise he would never wear upon his shoulders the four gold stripes of captaincy.

So it was with Captain Sir Ian MacLachlan Stuart, Master of the interstellar liner *Empress of Skye*. When things went wrong he coped, and nobly, and saw to it that his officers coped. It was Sir Ian who had the gas turbine and the tractor wheels broken out of the cargo and with them rigged a makeshift, but effective governor for the racing, almost uncontrollable Mannschen Drive unit. It was Sir Ian who caught James Murdoch, the ship's BioChemist, in the act of introducing poisons into the hydroponics tanks that would have destroyed every plant aboard the ship—and with them her air purifying and regenerating plant. (Murdoch later confessed to other acts of sabotage, including the damage done to the Interstellar Drive unit, claiming that he was actuated by hatred for the Stuart dynasty and love for the Hanoverians.) It was Sir Ian who brought his almost unmanageable ship down to the inhospitable surface of Rob Roy, one of the less important planets ruled by King James VI of Waverley, making a landing which, in the circumstances, could not have been bettered by any space captain in the Galaxy.

Rob Roy is an unimportant planet. There is only one city—Ballantrae—and that, on any other world, would be called a village. There are no important industries. The colonists rear sheep and cattle, and distill whiskey. There is something about the radiations from the sun—Epsilon Aurigae—about which Rob Roy revolves, that has a peculiar effect upon non-indigenous animal life—the sheep, the cattle, and other imported beasts—but not upon human beings. It is said that the amount of whiskey consumed by the colonists has an inhibiting effect upon the effects of the radiation. This may well be true. Somebody once said that if the quality of the Rob Roy mutton were affected to the same extent as the quantity then Rob Roy would be famous throughout the Galaxy. This may well be true, too.

Incredible though it may seem, *Empress of Skye* succeeded in dropping unobserved through the Rob Roy atmosphere. It had been Captain Sir Ian's intention to make his landing at the Ballantrae spaceport, but this intention he had to abandon—the Hanoverian saboteur had contrived, before his detection and imprisonment, to make such a mess of the ship's controls that, during the final, ticklish phases of the landing, officers were having to make hasty, last minute repairs with string and chewing gum, and Sir Ian was concerned only with setting his ship down anywhere in safety, without overmuch worry as to the precise location. A further complicating factor was that *Empress of Skye's* frantic signals to the spaceport radio station were unanswered. Sir Ian should, perhaps, have remembered that it was Bums Night—but he had, during his descent to the surface, more things to concern him than dates.

So the big ship dropped through the night and the rain, the flare of her exhausts shrouded by cloud and storm. She landed in a field, incinerating a half dozen or so of the giant sheep and starting a short-lived fire in the sodden grass. She rocked gently for a few seconds on her vaned landing gear, then quivered for a few seconds more before coming to rest.

After a minute or so the airlock door high on her sleek side opened and the long, telescopic ramp extended itself. Down the ramp came Sir Ian, a tall, spare man bearing himself with knightly dignity,

followed by his Mate and his two Chief Engineers. The beams of their torches fell upon the charred shapes that had once been sheep, were reflected from the clouds of dirty steam still rising from the grass. The Captain led his officers to the road running beside the field.

"Ballantrae," said Malcolm Macdonald, Esquire, pointing with his torch, "must be that way, Sir Ian."

"And how far, Esquire Macdonald?" asked the Captain. "All of a hundred miles, Sir Ian," replied the Mate. "We must have help from Ballantrae to effect permanent repairs," said the Reaction Chief.

"I am aware of that, Esquire Hendry," said the Captain. "If Ballantrae had answered our signals I should feel happier about our chances of help coming with daylight."

"They have only one ship a year here," volunteered Interstellar Chief Fleming. "They'll not be manning their station when there's no ship due."

"Regulations . . ." began Macdonald.

"And who's to enforce regulations on this ball of rock and mud?" asked Fleming.

"Somebody," said Sir Ian, "will have to ride into Ballantrae."

"Ride, Sir Ian?" asked the Mate.

"Perhaps, Esquire Macdonald, it has escaped your memory that there is a horse in the cargo."

"But we're spacemen, Sir Ian. Horse riding is not a thing that we know anything about. Perhaps one of the passengers . . ."

"We are the crew of the ship, Esquire Macdonald. We must do all we can to make her spaceworthy once more, and we must not call upon her passengers for help. You, Esquire Macdonald, will make enquiries among your juniors and see if any of them know anything of the art of horse riding. You, Esquires Hendry and Fleming, will do the same."

"And supposing we find nobody, Sir Ian?" asked Hendry.

"Then, gentlemen," said Captain Sir Ian MacLachlan Stuart, "I shall ride the horse."

The first twenty miles weren't too bad. After its initial hostility the animal seemed to have become resigned to its fate as a beast of burden and was proceeding along the road at a brisk trot. Sir Ian, apart from a feeling of soreness in that portion of his body in contact with the saddle, was beginning to enjoy himself. He remembered the reluctance with which he had mounted a horse during his last leave—he had been staying with a distant cousin, the Laird of Troon—never thinking that the experience thus gained would be advantageous to him in the exercise of his profession. He began to think that, after all, horseback was the only suitable means of transportation for a knight—in olden days a knight was automatically a man on horseback.

The day was fine—but with a fineness that seemed too good to last. The air was abnormally clear, the distant, forested hills standing out in detail as though viewed through a telescope. Here and there rose thin threads of blue smoke, signs of human habitation. The Captain was tempted to deviate from the main road and to ride up to one of the farmhouses where he could use a telephone. He resisted the temptation without much effort—the other temptation, to ride into Ballantrae, a spaceman-knight on horseback, was so much stronger.

At noon he halted. There was a stream running by the road from which the horse could drink. Sir Ian dismounted clumsily, stood stiffly and watched the animal slaking its thirst. He was too stiff to leap forward in time to catch the reins as the beast, throwing up its head, galloped skittishly back along the road. Sir Ian shouted—and if the horse had had any intelligence it would never have returned after being called the things that it was called. It never returned in any case.

The Captain decided to sit by the roadside to think things out—then changed his mind. He did his thinking standing. He would walk on, he told himself. Sooner or later he must come to a house either with a telephone or transport, or both. Sooner or later some other wayfarer would overtake him and offer assistance. Sooner or later, even if he had to make the entire journey by foot, he would come to Ballantrae.

As he trudged doggedly on the afternoon deteriorated. A smeary gray veil was drawn over the sky, obscuring the sun. It started to rain—a persistent, chill drizzle at first, coalescing into larger and colder drops with the rising of the wind. With the fall of dusk a half gale was sweeping in from the north and the rain had turned to a gelid sleet. Sir Ian thought of the warmth and the comfort of his ship—far more real

to him than the hypothetical warmth and comfort to be found in Ballantrae.

When he saw the light he was, as he admitted himself, ready to lay down and die in the ditch. He drove his tired, frozen muscles over the last mile of the road, at last was hammering at the stout wooden door of the house from which the light had shone. Over his head creaked the sign, the lettering barely distinguishable in the dim glow from an upstairs, shuttered window—The *Duke of Cameron*.

The door opened slowly. Sir Ian staggered inside. He looked up at the big man, taller even than Sir Ian, who was looking down at him with a certain distaste. He looked past the big man to the golden haired girl standing behind him. He was absurdly warmed by the shy, half smile that she gave him, by the pity that he saw in her blue eyes. "I don't usually take in tramps," said the big man.

Sir Ian straightened himself. His once smart uniform must be, he knew, a sorry mess—but, even so, surely this clod should be able to see who and what he was.

"I," said Sir Ian, "am the Captain of the star ship, *Empress of Skye*. We were obliged to make a forced landing on this planet and we have been unable to get into touch with the spaceport at Ballantrae. I was riding into Ballantrae to get help to effect repairs, and I lost my horse . . .

"Your *horse*?" asked the innkeeper incredulously. "Give him a drink, father," insisted his daughter. "Canna ye see the poor man is half frozen?"

"All right."

Without much ceremony Sir Ian was shown into a warm parlor, seated in a chair before a roaring fire. It was the innkeeper's daughter who poured him a generous slug of whiskey and handed it to him.

The whiskey hit Sir Ian hard. He knew that it would be foolish to essay to speak for a while, that he would be bound to say something silly. He resolved not to open his mouth until he felt better.

"Your *horse*?" asked the innkeeper again.

"I am a knight," replied Sir Ian. "Why shouldn't I have a horse?"

"A knight?" asked the girl. Her incredulity was not so offensive as her father's.

"Yes. I am Captain Sir Ian MacLachlan Stuart, Master of the interstellar liner *Empress of Skye*."

"It could just be true, father. It could be a Captain's uniform under the mud. You remember that young spaceman who stayed here a couple of nights last year—the Second Mate of the *Countess of Stornoway*?"

"Ay, my girl. I remember him right well. And I swore that I'd never let another spaceman set foot in my house."

"Let me finish, father. He was telling me that the Captains of the big ships, the *Empress* ships, were often knights. He was saying that he hoped to be one himself one day . . ."

"And filled up your silly mind with ideas that you'd be his lady."

"Forgive me for interrupting a family discussion," said Sir Ian, "but I have to look after the interests of my ship. Have you a telephone?"

"Ay. But it's broken."

"Then have you a ground car, or a 'copter?"

"No."

"Then have you a horse?"

"No."

"The mail 'copter calls in," said the girl, "tomorrow."

"Then tomorrow it will have to be," said Sir Ian. He pulled out his notecase. "I have money with me. I should like a hot bath, a meal, and a bed . . ."

"I swore," growled the innkeeper, "that I'd never let another spaceman stay in this house."

"But a *knight*, father. He's more than a spaceman."

"Oh, all right. Come with me, *Sir Ian*, and I'll show ye the bathroom and lend ye a change of dry clothes. There'll be a meal ready down here when ye're dressed."

Sir Ian thawed out slowly in the hot bath. It was obvious, he thought, why the innkeeper disliked spacemen. That daughter of his would appeal to a man straight in from Deep Space—even to one who, like Sir Ian, had enjoyed the social life of a big ship. That daughter of his would appeal to a man. Period.

After all, thought Sir Ian, I'm not old. And after all, I'll never see this world again, ever. The girl

herself looks clever enough to handle things so that her father could never do more than suspect. I hope.

He got out of the bath, looked around vainly for the hot air blowers to dry his body. He realized at last what the big towel was for, used it. He dressed in the slacks and shirt left out for him by the innkeeper, managed by taking in a reef in the waistband of the trousers and turning up the bottoms of them to look fairly presentable. He made his way slowly downstairs.

The meal was good, made all the more enjoyable by the sound of the wind and the driving rain outside. But Sir Ian was not as comfortable as he should have been. It was the fault of the girl—she was making it all too obvious what her feelings were and what her hopes were for the night. The Captain did not object to the pressure of a feminine knee against his under the table—what he did object to was that the innkeeper would have had to be blind not to see what was going on.

It was the innkeeper who interrupted Sir Ian in the middle of a story that he was telling about his service in the Survey ships as a young man.

"I think," he said slowly, "that you should consider the interests of your ship."

"My officers," said Sir Ian, "are capable of looking after her. Besides—what can I do?"

"I have remembered," said the innkeeper, "that I can, after all, offer you transport. As you may know, certain animals on this planet grow to what would be considered abnormal sizes elsewhere. Frankly, I bore in mind at first both your knightly dignity and the fact that you are not native to this world—but I have decided now that you ride to Ballantrae tonight."

"I am content," said Sir Ian, "to wait for tomorrow's mail 'copter."

"In this weather," said the innkeeper, "it may not fly."

"Tomorrow will be time enough to find that out," said the girl.

"Tomorrow," said her father, "may be too late."

"For what?" she flared.

"I have pride," he replied, "even if you haven't."

"Pride?" she asked. "In what?"

"Enough!" he roared. He got to his feet, towering over the seated Sir Ian. "I will furnish you an animal, sir, more intelligent and sure-footed than any horse ever foaled, an animal that will deliver you safely at Ballantrae, even if he has to carry you there by the scruff of your neck!"

He whistled.

He whistled again.

Something whined outside. There was the sound of claws scrabbling and clicking on the polished floor. And then the thing that had made the noises was looking at them with big, mournful eyes, its head and shoulders completely blocking the doorway—and it was not a small door. Sir Ian felt the shock that one always feels when seeing something familiar blown up to many times its normal size.

Telling the story afterwards, he was ever to maintain that he would have refused the innkeeper's offer of a steed, ignoring all possibility of ensuing complications, but for one thing. It was, he always said, utterly fantastic how attractive women had the knack of destroying all their charm with one ill-considered word or action. It was not, Sir Ian would take pains to point out, that he was deficient in a sense of humor—it was just that he considered some forms of humor—alleged humor, that is—to be singularly unfunny. The pun, or any play on words, was a case in point.

He left the inn, said Sir Ian, without regret, in spite of the shrieking wind and the driving sleet, in spite of the weirdness of his mount. He could do nothing else after what that girl had said.

"Father," she had complained, "surely you wouldn't send a knight out on a dog like this?"