Familiar Pattern

By A. Bertram Chandler writing as George Whitley

When Captain Lessing had written his Night Orders the previous night, he had asked to be called either when Hunter Island Light was sighted or, if the light was not seen, when the vessel was within the extreme range. He had, therefore, turned in with the expectation of being aroused at approximately 0530 hours. He did not anticipate being called before; the weather was fine and, according to the forecasts and the behavior of the aneroid barometer, would continue so. His three officers were trustworthy and almost as experienced on the trade as he was himself.

He was awakened by the irritating buzzing of the telephone at the head of his bunk. This, by itself, gave slight cause for alarm—usually, if all was clear, the officer of the watch would come down from the bridge to call the master in person. Before answering the phone, Lessing switched on his bunkside reading lamp and looked at the clock on his cabin bulkhead. The time was 0335.*Something,* thought the captain,*is wrong. To have been within range of the light at this time we should have had to have done twelve knots—and this underpowered tub never did twelve even downhill with a following wind …*

The instrument buzzed again.

Lessing lifted the handset from its rest, barked into the receiver, "Yes?"

"Second officer here, Captain. There's a big aircraft just come down in the sea, about five miles ahead of us—"

"I'll be right up," said Lessing as he swung his long legs out of his bunk, his feet searching for his slippers. He pulled his dressing gown on, lit the inevitable cigarette, and hurried up to the bridge.

He found the second officer out in the starboard wing, staring through his binoculars at a pulsing luminosity on the dark horizon. It could have been the loom of a shore light, a lighthouse, but the period was too irregular. It could have been the glare of the bright working lights of a fishing vessel, dipping at intervals as the craft lifted and fell in the swell. It was nothing to get excited about.

"Is that it, Mr. Garwood?" asked Lessing.

The second officer started. Then, "Yes, sir," he replied. "That's it. Big, it was, and all lit up. There seemed to be jets or rockets working—but I don't think it was an airplane. It looked … wrong, somehow—"

"There are so many experimental aircraft these days," said the captain, "to say nothing of the artificial satellites that everybody seems to be throwing about—" Then, half to himself, "I wonder what the salvage on one of those things would be?"

"Plenty, I should imagine," said the second mate.

"I'd imagine the same," said Lessing. "You'd better notify the engine room, Mr. Garwood. The mate'll be up in a few minutes so he can see about clearing a boat away."

"So you're going to take it in tow, sir?" asked the second officer.

"Not so fast!" laughed Lessing. "We don't even know what the thing is yet. Come to that—I don't even know if it is any sort of aircraft. Those lights out there could be … anything."

"You can ask the lookout," said Garwood huffily, "or the man at the wheel."

"I prefer not to doubt the word of my officers," replied the captain stiffly. "But whether or not we tow the thing depends largely upon what it is." He stared ahead. Bright lights were becoming visible now instead of the diffused glare. "And that," he added, "we shall soon find out."

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He left the bridge and went down to his cabin, putting on a uniform over a heavy woollen jersey. He returned to the bridge. The ship had come alive during his brief absence. Shadowy forms were at work on the boat deck, electric torches were flashing, and there was the sound of low-voiced orders and replies, the thud and clatter as equipment not needed in the boat was passed out and stowed well clear of the winch.

The chief officer clattered up the ladder from the boat deck to the starboard cab of the bridge.

"I'll take it you'll be sending away the Fleming boat, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Kennedy. It'll be the handiest, especially in this swell. There'll be no catching of crabs when there are no oars out." He pointed ahead to the bright lights that lay on the heaving surface of the sea. "What do*you* make of it?"

Kennedy lifted the ship's binoculars from their box, put them to his eyes. "I don't know," he said slowly. "It's an odd-looking brute, whatever it is. All those vanes and wings or whatever they are. It's like no aircraft that I've ever seen."

"It could be American," said the second mate.

"Or Russian," said Kennedy. "I suppose it*is* manned—"

"Sparks has been trying to raise it on all the frequencies he can muster," said the second mate, "but there's no reply."

"Perhaps," ventured the third officer diffidently, "it's a flying saucer—"

"All the way from Alpha Centauri or Rigil Kentaurus," laughed the mate, pointing to where Cross and Centaur hung in the dark sky directly over the mystery of gleaming lights and shining metal. "Perhaps we can ask 'em which of the two names for their home sun*they* prefer. I'm an Alpha Centauri man myself—"

"But it*could* be," insisted the third mate.

Lessing listened, faintly amused. He neither believed nor disbelieved in flying saucers but thought that they were things that he would prefer not to see—they carried with them a greater aura of disreputability than did sea serpents. But this thing ahead, this affair of lights and metallic surfaces that they were rapidly closing in on, wasn't a flying saucer. It couldn't be. Only cranks saw the things, and then in circumstances remarkable for a paucity of reliable witnesses.

He said, "There's no wind. I'll keep the thing on my starboard side. Who's going away in the boat? You, Mr. Kennedy? Good. Take a torch with you—you might save time by flashing back to us what you find." To Garwood he said, "Put her on standby."

"Standby, sir."

The jangling of the engine room telegraph was startlingly loud.

"Stop her. Full astern."

Lessing looked down from the window of the starboard cab, saw the creamy turbulence created by the reversed screw creep slowly from aft until it was abreast of the bridge.

"Stop her. Switch on the floodlights."

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Kennedy ran down to the boat deck. The starboard boat was already turned out. Six men were sitting at the handles of the Fleming gear, a seventh sitting in the bows. The mate caught hold of a lifeline, swung himself from the boat deck into the stern sheets.

"Lower away!" he shouted.

"Lower away, sir," replied the man at the winch. It was, the captain noted, big Tom Green, the bos'n. Tom Green, who was a pure-blooded Polynesian and proud of it. Good officers are not rare—good bos'ns are rare and precious. Tom Green was a good bos'n.

He lifted the brake. The wire falls whispered from the drum of the winch, through and around the lead blocks. They hummed softly through the purchase blocks, and the boat dropped swiftly from sight. Lessing went again to the starboard cab window, saw the boat hit the water, saw the blocks unhooked and pulled up and clear by the light lines bent to them.

"Give way!" came Kennedy's order. The men at the handles swayed back and forth in the untidy rhythm unavoidable with a Fleming boat; the hand-driven propeller began to spin. The boat pulled slowly away from the ship. Lessing called the bos'n up to the bridge.

"Tom," he said, "I suppose the chief officer's told you what all this is about."

"Yes, Captain. We are ready for all eventualities. The reel of the after towing wire works freely, and we

have a good supply of shackles and wire snotters."

Lessing looked at the big dark face that hung over his own and wondered, as he had often wondered, what this man was doing as bos'n of an Australian coaster. Fo'c's'le—and saloon—rumor had it that he had been educated atOxford , that he was the son of a chief. Certain it was that he spoke impeccable—although pedantic—English and possessed in no mean degree the power of command.

"Tom," said Lessing, "what do you make of it?"

A white grin split the dark face. "It is like no aircraft that I have ever seen, sir, either in actuality or in photographs. It's too big for a satellite—as you know,*they* are only little balls or cylinders, at the largest big enough to house only a small dog—"

"Well?"

"It happened to us," said the bos'n. "It happened to us. Your ancestral navigators found our islands by chance, putting in to replenish their supplies. Sooner or later it had to happen to you."

"What do you mean, Tom?" asked Lessing.

"What I said, Captain. That it's happening to you."

"Rubbish," said Lessing, after a long pause. "That thing's just some experimental aircraft that's come to grief."

"Is it?" asked the bos'n.

"The chief officer's flashing us!" shouted the second. He came out to the wing of the bridge, carrying the Aldis lamp.

Lessing looked to the enigmatic bulk of the thing in the water and saw a little light, feeble in comparison with the glaring illumination that was streaming from the aircraft—if it was an aircraft—making a succession of short and long flashes. The beam of the Aldis stabbed out into the darkness.

"'Returning with passenger,'" read Lessing. He said, "So the thing is manned—"

"Of course," said the bos'n. "Your ships were manned, weren't they?"

"You'd better get down to the boat deck, Tom," said Lessing.

He picked up his glasses, watched the tiny shape of the lifeboat detach itself from the floating enigma. He watched it as it crept across the water. As it pulled alongside, he could see that there was another figure sitting in the stern with Kennedy. In the glare of the boat floodlights he saw that it was wearing a uniform of some kind—an overall suit of silvery gray with what could have been marks of rank gleaming on the shoulders. He saw Kennedy's bowman catch the painter and make it fast. He saw the gray-clad man coming up the pilot ladder with what was almost, but not quite, the ease of long practice. He saw the chief officer following him.

After a short lapse of time, they were on the bridge.

"Captain," said Kennedy, "this is Malvar Korring vis Korring, chief officer of the*Starlady*. Mr. Korring,

this is Captain Lessing, master of the*Woollabra.* "

Automatically, Lessing put out his hand. The stranger grasped it, said in a voice that was metallic and expressionless, "I hope, sir, that this first meeting of our two races proves auspicious."

"Kennedy," demanded Lessing, "what sort of hoax is this?"

"Sir," replied the chief officer, "this is no hoax. I'm quite convinced that these men are from Space."

"Come down to my room," said Lessing. "Both of you."

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In his cabin, with the bright deck-head lights switched on, Lessing studied the man from the … the spaceship. The stranger sat on the settee, almost insolently at ease. His body, beneath his tightly fitting uniform, seemed human enough, as did his lean, deeply tanned face. The eyes, however, were a disconcerting golden color, and there was a faint tinge of green to his fair hair, which was worn far too long for the exacting standards of any earthly service. His voice came not from his mouth but from a small square box that was strapped around his waist.

"We developed a leak in our water tanks," the stranger was saying. "It was necessary for us to replenish our supplies. This planet was the handiest to our trajectory. We had no idea that it was inhabited."

"You know that this is salt water," said Lessing, rather stupidly.

"We know. The minerals dissolved in the water will be very useful to us."

"I can't believe this," said Lessing, getting up out of his armchair. "It must be a hoax."

"I was inside their ship, sir," said Kennedy. "I didn't see much—but I saw enough to convince me that she was never built on Earth. She's a cargo vessel, like ourselves, and she's on a voyage from some planet around the Southern Cross—it may be one of the planets revolving around Acrux—to somewhere in the Great Bear."

"That's what they told you," said Lessing.

"That's what I told him, Captain," said the spaceman. "And it's true."

"I should report this," said Lessing. "It's my duty to report this. But they'll think I'm mad if I do."

"We'll back you up," said the chief officer.

"Then they'll think that you're mad too."

"Perhaps," suggested Korring, "I could leave proof with you."

From one pocket of his clothing he produced a slim tube, metallic, the size of a pencil. "This," he said, "is a torch—similar to the one that Mr. Kennedy is carrying but rather more efficient. Leave it in bright sunlight for one … hour, I think is the word. Or leave it in artificial light such as this for double the period, and it will burn continuously, if so desired, for all of the night." He handed the torch to Lessing, produced from another pocket a packet of little brown cylinders. "You put this end in your mouth," he said, "and inhale sharply. The other end starts to smolder. You suck in the smoke. It is most refreshing—"

"We smoke too," said Lessing. "Which reminds me—I'm not being a very good host." He produced whisky, and glasses, and opened the cigarette box on his desk. "You do drink, I suppose? This is one of our alcoholic liquors. You might like to try it."

"Thank you," said the spaceman.

Lessing splashed whisky into each of the three glasses. He passed the cigarettes around, struck a match to light them.

"The most interesting thing you have," he said, "is that box you talk through. What is it?"

"A psionic translator. It picks up my thoughts and converts them into your speech. It picks up your thoughts, as you speak, and converts them into my language. A simple device …" He drew on his cigarette, sipped his drink. "You know, you people are quite far advanced. This liquor of yours. These smoking tubes. And those little wooden sticks that burst into flame when you rub them against the box … I know that I am being very primitive, but I wonder if we could barter? This electric torch of mine and a packet of my smoking tubes for, say, a bottle of this subtly flavored alcohol and a packet of your smoking tubes?"

"It'd be a fair trade," said Lessing.*And it'll be proof,* he thought.*Proof I must have. I can't swear the whole ship to silence.* "It'll be a fair trade—"

The box at Korring's belt squawked then uttered a few syllables in an unknown language.

"They want me back," said the spaceman. "We must be on our way."

A few minutes later, when he was ferried back to the spaceship, he was carrying a carton of cigarettes, a packet of matches, and a bottle of whisky. A few minutes later still Lessing stood on his bridge and watched the alien vessel take off. There was no flare of rockets, no noise, no bother. There was a flickering luminosity under the vast hull as she lifted up and clear of the water, that was all. She rose slowly at first, then with increasing speed. For a short time she was a waning star among the stars, and then she was gone.

Lessing said to the mate, "We have to make a report on this—but what shall we say?"

"The truth," replied Kennedy. "But we shall never live it down."

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It was, Lessing was to realize, very fortunate that he had made the trade with the alien spaceman. Had it not been for that highly efficient—and absolutely mysterious—torch, he and his crew would have been branded as picturesque liars. They were so regarded at first. Pressmen are justifiably skeptical of flying-saucer stories. Eventually—after it was obvious that*Woollabra* 's entire crew had either suffered a mass hallucination or actually seen something out of the ordinary—the Navy condescended to take an interest in the case. Lessing had returned on board from a rather stormy interview with the company's branch manager and local marine superintendent when he found a young, keen lieutenant commander waiting for him.

"About this flying saucer, Captain," said the two and a half ringer.

"It was not a flying saucer," said Lessing. "It was more like a flying pineapple or flying porcupine. There were all sorts of vanes sticking out at odd angles."

"And you say you really saw the thing? I've been talking to your chief officer, and he tried to convince me that he was actually aboard it."

"He was," said Lessing. "And furthermore, one of the officers from the thing was aboard here." He unlocked the door of the cabin, motioned the naval officer to a seat. "Furthermore, he was sitting where you were sitting."

"Was he human?"

"He looked human."

"What language did he talk?"

"I don't know. He was wearing a little box on his belt that he said was a psionic translator, whatever that might be."

"And so you talked, you say. I suppose he told you that the people of Mars or Venus or Jupiter were watching us, and that if we didn't stop making atomic bombs it'd be just too bad, and all the rest of it."

Lessing flushed. "I've read those silly books too," he said, "and I believe them as little as you do. This spaceship of ours was an interstellar cargo vessel, and she made an emergency landing in theBass Strait to take on water, her tanks having sprung a leak. We were, it seems, the nearest handy planet. The crew of the spaceship were as surprised to see us as we were to see them—they thought that this world was uninhabited. Anyhow, they took their water and they pushed off to continue their voyage." Lessing opened a drawer of his desk and pulled the key to his safe from under an untidy layer of papers. He got up from his chair, went to his safe, and opened it. He took out the packet of alien cigars, the torch. "I've been waiting," he said, "for the chance to show this evidence to somebody official for a long time. These are cigars—of a sort. They're self-igniting—"

"There was a self-igniting cigarette on the market a few years ago," said the lieutenant commander. "It never caught on."

"All right," said Lessing. "Then what's this script on the packet? Is it Greek, or Arabic, or what? Take one of the cigars and smell it. Does it smell like any tobacco you've ever come across?"

"No," admitted the naval officer.

"Then there's this torch. I don't know how it works. You have to leave it out in bright sunlight for an hour, and it will burn all night. No, there's no way of opening it. I've tried."

"Do you mind if I take these with me?"

"I'd like a receipt."

"You shall have one. Oh, one more thing. Would you mind not saying another word about this to the press?"

"Would*you* mind," replied Lessing, "telling the press to lay off my crew and myself?"

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It is axiomatic that the tide runs sluggishly in official channels. The press had long forgotten Captain Lessing's flying saucer when he received a letter from the company's head office. This informed him that he was to be relieved of his command and that after handing over his ship he was to proceed toCanberra , there to be interviewed by sundry highly placed gentlemen. Like most Australians, Lessing had a distrust of politicians, maintaining that they came in only two varieties, bad and worse. He did not look forward to his trip to the nation's capital city.

The day of his journey was not an ideal day for flying. During the bumpy passage, a cup of hot coffee was upset over Lessing's lap, and, as he was wearing a light gray suit, his appearance suffered as well as his feelings. He was very bad-tempered when the plane touched down at the airport, and found it hard to be courteous to the obvious civil servants who were there to greet him. They were diplomatic enough to suggest a drink or two before he was taken to see the high officials who had required his presence, and after a couple of stiff whiskies he felt a little better.

He did not feel better for long. He said afterward, "They made me feel as though I were a Russian spy. And I was expecting rubber truncheons and glaring lights and all the rest of it at any minute. The trouble was, they just didn't want to believe me. There was the evidence of the torch, and the evidence of the cigars, but they just didn't want to believe me. But they couldn't explain the things that I got from the spaceship any other way."

Lessing was interviewed. Lessing was interrogated. After the politicians had finished with him, it was the turn of the scientists, and then the lawyers took over to see if they could trap him in any inconsistency. The following day he was joined by his chief and second officers and the bos'n. Their stories tallied with his; there was no reason why they should not have.

The day after that the spaceship landed in theBass Strait , just twenty miles north ofAlbatrossIsland .

Lessing, of course, was one of the last people to hear about it. It was the young lieutenant commander to whom he had given the torch and the cigars who told him the news. He burst into the comfortable hotel room in which the captain was almost a prisoner and said, "They'll have to believe you now. Another of those things has come down, just about where you saw the first one."

But it wasn't another of those things. It was the same one, and she was, apparently, on her return voyage. She lay there in the water until she was sighted by*Woollabra,* northbound toMelbourne .*Woollabra* was the only ship on the trade, and she maintained a fairly regular service, so the coincidence was in time rather than in space and was a temporal coincidence only inasmuch as the spacecraft did not have to wait longer than three hours.

Again*Woollabra* sent a boat, and again the chief officer of*Starlady,* Malvar Korring vis Korring, was ferried from his own ship to the surface vessel. Apparently he expressed surprise at not being greeted by Captain Lessing and Mr. Kennedy and said that he especially wished to see Captain Lessing to organize some sort of trade agreement.

"They're rushing you down to your old ship," said the lieutenant commander. "There's a special plane laid on from here toMelbourne , and, as luck would have it, there's a destroyer at Williamstown ready for sea. There's all the high brass going with you. I wish they could find room for me—"

So there was another flight, no better than the first one had been, and then an even more uncomfortable sea journey as the destroyer pitched, rolled, and shipped green water in the heavy southwesterly swell. It was late afternoon when she made her rendezvous with*Woollabra* and*Starlady.Woollabra,* designed for the rapid and efficient handling of cargo, was her usual unlovely self. Lessing gave her no more than a cursory glance, then stared through a pair of borrowed binoculars at the other ship, the spaceship. It had been at night that he had seen her before, and he retained no more than a confused impression of glaring lights, of gleaming surfaces that reflected the illumination at all kinds of odd angles. Seeing her now, in the light of day, he was pleased to note that his description of her as a "flying pineapple" had not been too unjust. That was what she looked like—a huge pineapple of some black, gleaming metal.

Lessing was aware that orders were being given and reports acknowledged by the destroyer's captain, that the warship's armament was manned and ready. His attention, however, was occupied by the winking daylight lamp from*Woollabra* 's bridge.

"Alien officer on board," he read. "He wishes to speak with Captain Lessing."

"Commander," said Lessing, "that spaceman, Korring was his name, is aboard my old ship. He is waiting for me. Will you send me across in one of your boats?"

The destroyer captain sucked thoughtfully at his pipe.

"I wish they'd given me more specific orders, Lessing," he said at last. "All I have is a sort of roving commission—to find out what cooks and to shoot to defend my own ship if necessary, but on no account to start an interplanetary war. It seems that these people are quite determined to see you—"

One of the civilians on the destroyer's bridge interrupted. "I think that I should go with Captain Lessing."

"All right, Doctor. It seems to me that this situation calls for an astronomer as much as anybody." He turned to his first lieutenant, gave orders for the clearing away of the motor launch.

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In a matter of minutes Lessing was sitting in the boat. With him, in the stern sheets, was Dr. Cappell, the astronomer, and the sublieutenant in charge. The boat was lowered to the water with a run, too fast for Lessing's taste; he was used to the more leisurely procedure of the merchant service. She hit the water just as a huge swell came up beneath her, and the sea fountained on either side of her. The patent slips were released smartly and the lower blocks of the falls whipped up and clear on their tripping lines. The motor was already running and pulled the boat out and clear from the destroyer in a matter of seconds. After the swift efficiency of their launching, the journey across the narrow stretch of water seemed painfully slow.

At last they came alongside the*Woollabra* and Lessing clambered up the pilot ladder to her low foredeck. He was followed by the scientist. The young sublieutenant, after giving a few curt instructions to a petty officer, followed. The third officer was there to receive them. Lessing acknowledged the courtesy absentmindedly, himself led the way up to the bridge.

FatKimberley , who had relieved Lessing, was there to meet him. He was exhibiting all the bad temper of the easygoing fat man jolted out of his comfortable routine.

"Really, Lessing," he said, "this is rather much. First you have to get me called back in the middle of my holidays, and then you have to wish this bloody flying saucer on to me. My wife's flown down from Sydney to be with me for the weekend in Melbourne—and I have to waste precious time loafing around in the Bass Strait standing guard over this … this—"

"I must apologize, Captain," said a metallic voice. It came, as before, from the little box that Malvar Korring vis Korring carried at his belt. "We thought that Captain Lessing would still be here." He advanced to Lessing with outstretched hand. "Greetings, Captain Lessing."

"Greetings," replied Lessing, feeling rather foolish. "And what can I do for you, Mr. Korring?"

"You remember," said the spaceman, "that the last time I saw you we bartered goods. You gave me some of your … cigarettes, and a bottle of the liquor you call whisky, and some boxes of … matches—"

"But this is incredible," the scientist was saying behind Lessing's back. "This is fantastic. The meeting of two races from different worlds, and all this man is worried about is cigarettes and whisky—"

"And wild, wild women?" wondered the sublieutenant audibly.

"We showed what remained of the cigarettes and the whisky to the … commissioner on Maurig, and he was rather impressed. He requested us to call here on our homeward voyage and to make arrangements for regular trade between this planet and the other planets of the galaxy—"

"This is marvelous!" Dr. Cappell was saying. "Marvelous! The secret of the interstellar drive is ours for the asking!"

"Who is this man, Captain?" asked the spaceman.

"One of our astronomers. His name is Dr. Cappell."

"Dr. Cappell," said Korring, "the secret of the interstellar drive will never be yours until you work it out for yourself. We hope to set up a trading station, and you can rest assured that only goods with which you can do no damage will be sold to you."

Lessing remembered what Tom, the big Polynesian bos'n, had said. How was it?*The familiar pattern—the chance contact, the trader, the missionary, the incident, and the gunboat ... But,* he thought,*Tom is biased. The early European seamen were a rough lot, and the politicians in their home countries were as bad, although more sophisticated. We can expect nothing but good from a people able to travel between the stars.*

"Then," persisted Cappell, "you might allow us, some of us, to make voyages in your ships, as passengers."

"We might," said Korring vis Korring, and the mechanical voice coming from the translator at his belt sounded elaborately uninterested. He turned to Lessing. "You, Captain, are the first native of this planet with whom we made real contact. In our society—I don't pretend to know how it is with you—the masters of merchantmen are persons of consequence. In any case, we want somebody who is, after all, our own sort of people to act as our … our agent? No, that isn't quite the word—or is it?"

"I think it's the nearest you'll get," said Lessing. "But it is only fair to warn you that I am a person of very little consequence on this planet. The masters of*some* merchantmen are people of consequence—but *Woollabra* isn't*Queen Mary.* "

"But we know*you,* " replied the spaceman. "Perhaps if you were to come aboard our ship we could draw up a contract."

"May we use your boat?" Lessing asked the sublieutenant.

"I'll have to ask," replied the naval officer. "Have you a signalman?" he demanded of Captain Kimberley.

"We have not," replied the fat man. "But if you're incapable of using the Aldis lamp, doubtless my third mate will be able to oblige. And he can ask your captain if I'm supposed to hang around here while you all play silly beggars. I want to be getting back toMelbourne ."

The daylight lamps flickered on the bridges of man-o'-war and merchant vessel in staccato question and answer. After a few minutes Lessing was shaking hands withKimberley , and in a minute more was clambering down the pilot ladder to the destroyer's boat. The boat was barely clear of the ship when Lessing heard the jangle of engine room telegraphs, saw the frothing wake appear at*Woollabra* 's stern. *Woollabra* 's whistle blurted out the three conventional farewell blasts. And then the alien starship was ahead of them, bulking big and black and ominous in the golden path of light thrown by the setting sun.

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Lessing wasn't quite sure what to expect when he boarded the spaceship, but he was rather disappointed. Entry was effected through an obvious air lock—but thereafter the overall effect was that of one of the larger and more luxurious liners on Earth's seas. Korring vis Korring led Lessing, Cappell, and the sublieutenant through alleyways that were floored with a brightly colored resilient covering whose sides and overheads were coated with a light, easy-to-keep-clean plastic. They passed through what seemed to be public rooms, fitted out as they were with conventional enough chairs and tables and even,

in one or two cases, functional-looking bars. Crewmembers and passengers, both men and women, looked at them with polite interest. The women, decided Lessing, were indubitably mammalian and very attractive.

They came at last to a large cabin in which, seated behind a desk, was a middle-aged man wearing a uniform similar to that worn by their guide. Like Korring, he wore one of the translators at his belt. He got to his feet as they entered.

"I am Captain Tardish var Tardish," he said. "Which of you is Captain Lessing?"

"I am," said Lessing.

"Welcome aboard my ship. Please be seated."

The Earthmen lowered themselves into chairs that proved to be as comfortable as they looked. Korring vis Korring busied himself with a bottle and glasses, then, after everybody had a drink in his hand, opened a box of the self-igniting cigars.

Lessing sipped his drink. It was undeniably alcoholic but far too sweet for his taste. He took a pull at the cigar. The smoke was fragrant but lacking in strength.

"My chief officer," said Tardish, "has doubtless told you of the purpose of our return visit. It has been decided that your world produces many commodities that would be valuable elsewhere. We are prepared to open a trading station, and we want you to be in charge of it from your side. One of our own people, of course, will be in overall charge."

"And what do you want?" asked Lessing.

"Your liquor, your cigarettes, your little firesticks. No doubt you have other goods that will be of value on the galactic market."

"No doubt," agreed Lessing. "And what do you offer in exchange?"

The captain pressed a stud at the side of his desk. There was a short silence as the men—Earthmen and aliens—waited. Then two uniformed women came into the cabin. Each of them was carrying a box not unlike a terrestrial suitcase. They put the boxes down on the desk, opened them. Lessing, Cappell, and the sublieutenant got to their feet, stared at the objects that were being unpacked. There were more of the sun-powered electric torches—half a dozen of them. There were slim, convoluted bottles holding a shimmering fluid. There were bolts of dull-gleaming fabric.

Korring vis Korring joined the Earthmen.

"These," he said, "are our samples. You already have one of the torches, but, no doubt, others will be interested in these. I must warn you that the manufacturers of them are very jealous of their secret; each one is a sealed unit and any attempt to open one up will result only in its complete destruction. The bottles contain an alcoholic liquor of which we are rather fond; it is possible that it may appeal to the taste of some of your people, just as your whisky has appealed to ours. The cloth? It is dirt repellent, water repellent, wrinkle proof. Used as clothing, it keeps you cool in summer and warm in winter—"

Cappell interrupted. His thin, bony face was flushed and his carroty hair seemed suddenly to have stood erect. He said, "I'm a scientist, not a shopkeeper. I'd like to know just where you come from, and how

your ship is powered, and whether or not you exceed the speed of light—"

"Enough!" The spaceship captain had got to his feet and was looking at the astronomer as though he were a mildly mutinous crewmember. "I am master of a merchant vessel, just as Captain Lessing is. My primary function in the scheme of things is trade,*trade, TRADE.* I have no intention of seeing this world of yours raise itself to our technological level, of seeing your ships competing with ours along the galactic trade routes. If you find out the secret of the stardrive yourselves—then good luck to you. But we're not helping you." He turned to Lessing. "There you are, then, Captain. You're appointed our agent as and from now. On our next call here we shall bring with us a full cargo of the goods of which we have given you samples. We want you to have assembled a large consignment of such goods as you think might interest us."

"This," said Lessing, "is all very vague. To begin with—when can we expect to see you again?"

"In one-tenth of a revolution of your planet about its primary."

"And where are you landing?"

"Here, of course. Our ships can land only on water. You have surface vessels; you can bring the cargo out to us."

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It was Lessing's turn to feel exasperated.

"To begin with," he said, "I haven't said that I'll take the job. Secondly—you're quite vague about weights and measures. How many tons of cargo do you want—and is it weight or measurement? Thirdly—it's obvious that you don't know that this is one of the most treacherous stretches of water in the world. You've landed here twice, and each time you've been lucky. The next time it could well be blowing a gale."

"Don't you have weather control?" asked the captain.

"No. Now, I suppose that you people have made some attempt at photographic survey of this world on your way down?"

"Of course."

"Could I see the photographs?"

The captain opened his desk, handed a dozen or so glossy prints to Lessing. The seaman studied them.

"Here," he said at last, "is your ideal landing place." He put the tip of his finger on Port Phillip Bay. "It's well sheltered, and there are transport facilities, and there's the possibility of knocking up a few warehouses on the foreshore or of taking over warehouses that are already there. I suggest that you come in at night and that you make some sort of signal before you do so. On your next visit, of course,

we'll have to tackle the problem of radio communication; meanwhile you could let off some sort of rocket that will explode with a bright green light high in the atmosphere an hour or so before you're due. This will give us a chance to outline your landing area with flares."

It was the haphazardness of it all that appalled Lessing, the way in which the onus had been placed upon Earth to make all the arrangements. Later, when he was back aboard the destroyer and on his way back to Melbourne, he realized that this was the way it must have been in the days of the early explorations. A ship, short of water or other supplies, would stand in for some hitherto undiscovered island, would make fortuitous contact with the inhabitants, would trade a few knives and axes and mirrors for whatever they had to offer, and then, having realized the possibility of commerce, would promise to return at some vague date in the future, bringing further trade goods in return for pearls or spices or anything else that would fetch a high price on the European market.

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The month and the few days were over, and all Earth was waiting for the return of the aliens. From observatories all over the planet reports had poured in that a huge unidentified object was in orbit about the world, something far larger than any of the tiny satellites yet launched. Melbourne had become the Mecca for pressmen and photographers, for radio commentators and television cameramen—and for military observers, trade delegations, and high diplomatic officials from all nations.

Waiting on the observation tower that had been erected on Station Pier was the Terran trade commissioner. Like many shipmasters, Lessing was not inclined to underestimate his own worth, and had driven a hard bargain. The aliens had insisted on dealing only with him—and he had unbiased witnesses to prove it—so it was only fair that he should be given pay and rank to match his unsought responsibilities. With him stood his two assistants—Kennedy and Garwood, who had been his chief and second officers in*Woollabra.* Lessing wished, as he stood there in the rising, chilly, southerly breeze, that big Tom Green, the bos'n, had been willing to come ashore as well. He was a good man, Tom—and it was just possible that his non-European mind might be able to spot some catch in the seemingly advantageous arrangements.

On the deck below Lessing were the diplomats and the scientists and the service chiefs. Lessing had insisted on this arrangement, not as a further bolstering of his self-esteem but as a hangover from his seafaring days. He was a firm believer in the principle of*Unauthorized Personnel Not Allowed On The Bridge.* He didn't like to have anybody around except his officers when he had to make decisions—not that there would be many to make in this case. He stared at the clear sky. Cross and Centaur were high in the south, and Jupiter, with Antares, was just rising. He tried to make out the spot of light that would be*Starlady.* Suddenly there was a brilliance in the heavens, a great sun of vivid green with a core of blazing blue drifting slowly downward.

"All right," he said to Kennedy. "Tell them to switch on the floods on the buoys—and tell them to switch off all the city lights apart from the essential ones."

The glare of lights in the bay came hard on the heels of his command. The brownout of the city took longer. Lessing remembered how long he had had to argue with civic officials about the necessity for this order. He looked shoreward from his high platform, saw the lights going out one by one—the neon signs

advertising whisky and biscuits and breakfast foods and beer, two street lamps in every three. While he was watching, the green flare in the sky faded and died. It was suddenly very dark.

There was an eerie flickering along the foreshore. Lessing wondered what it was, then realized that it came from the flaring of matches and lighters as the crowds lighted their cigarettes. He had been against allowing the public so close to the starship's landing place, but in this matter he had been overruled. He was pleased, however, that the bay had been cleared of all pleasure craft and that the entrance had been closed to inward and outward traffic.

It was a long wait. It was some sharp-eyed watcher along the beach who first spotted the spaceship. A long, drawn-out*aaahh* went up from the crowd. Lessing, Kennedy, and Garwood stared aloft, saw at last the little, but visibly waxing, point of light that was*Starlady.*

She came in slowly, cautiously. It was all of an hour before the watchers could see the big bulk of her gleaming dimly above the flickering luminescence of her drive. She came in slowly, seemingly at first a little uncertain of her landing place.*I should have ordered a complete blackout,* thought Lessing. She circled, and then steadied over the rectangle of water marked by the special buoys with their floodlights. With increasing speed she dropped. The wave created by her coming lapped the piles of the pier, drove up in foaming turbulence onto the beach and the road beyond.

Lessing came down from his tower, walked without haste to the head of the steps by which the launch was moored. Kennedy and Garwood followed him. They boarded the launch. The skipper cast off, steered for the dark bulk of the alien ship, for the circle of light that was her air lock. He seemed unimpressed by the momentous occasion. He grunted, "I'd'a thought you'd'a had some o' them admirals and generals along, Cap'n. And a few boys with Owen guns."

"I know these people," said Lessing, "and they know me."

"You're the boss."

They were passing through the line of buoys now. Even the launch skipper fell silent as he looked up to the vast bulk of*Starlady.* All that he said was, "Can that thing*fly?* " Then, expertly, he maneuvered his craft alongside the circular, horizontal platform that was the outer valve of the open air lock.

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There were people standing in the air lock itself—men and women. One of them stepped forward—it was Korring vis Korring—and caught the launch's painter, snubbed it around a convenient projection. "Welcome aboard, Captain Lessing," he said. His voice was warmly human and came from his mouth, not from a box at his waist.

Lessing stared at the spaceman. He was wearing colorful garments—a sky blue blouse, scarlet trousers, knee-high boots that could have been made of dark blue suede. "Congratulate me," he said.

"Why?" asked Lessing stupidly.

"Because I've got a planet job. I'm no longer chief officer of this wagon … I'm now the local galactic trade commissioner. I'm to work with you."

"But your translator—"

"Oh,*that.* We brought along a team of experts this time, and we were picking up the programs of your various broadcast stations before we could pick you up in our telescopes. A few hours under the hypno-tutor, and I'm a linguist. So are those who are staying here with me. I'll introduce 'em all when I have time. There's a professor of linguistics, a sociologist, a dietician, a biologist, and*the* expert on women's fashions. Oh, and a priest. I'm sure that you have your own religion, but he thinks … he*knows,* rather … that ours is better. He's still inside getting his baggage packed. He was deep in prayer while the rest of us were packing ours."

Lessing stepped from the launch onto the platform. He shook hands with the professor of linguistics, a scholarly, birdlike, gray-haired man. He shook hands with the sociologist, who was short and fat and merry. He bowed stiffly to the dietician and the biologist, both of whom were women, and attractive women. He wasn't sure whether to shake hands with or bow to the fashion expert then decided that such things were probably the same all through the galaxy as on Earth, and shook hands. He was going to shake hands with the lean, scarlet-robed priest who had just come into the air lock, but Korring, with an unobtrusive gesture, restrained him. The priest raised his arms in benediction and intoned, "The blessing be upon you, my son." Lessing felt embarrassed and vaguely hostile.

They all went then into one of the big ship's public rooms. Soft-footed stewardesses served drinks. Lessing tried to hurry matters, told Korring vis Korring of the crowds of people who were waiting ashore for some word of what was happening. "Let them wait," said the spaceman. "Our cargo consists of only luxury goods."

"Life without luxury is drab, my son," said the priest.

Lessing looked at him with a fresh interest. His figure was lean, but his face was not the face of an ascetic. It was the face of a man who has enjoyed, and who is still enjoying, all the good things of life. *Perhaps,* he thought,*their religion has its points—*

"We shall require accommodation," said Korring. "We shall be staying here after the ship leaves. I take it that you will make the necessary arrangements."

"I will. But I should like to find out now what cargo you have brought and what goods you want in exchange. We have a warehouse full of cargo—whisky, gin, all sorts of wines, all sorts of cigarettes and tobacco. There are representatives of other nations waiting ashore, and all of them have brought samples of wares in which you may be interested. Then there's the problem of how you're going to get the cargo from out of your ship onto the lighters and from the lighters into your ship. I'd like to get our stevedore out here to talk it over with whoever has relieved you as chief officer."

"All in good time, Lessing," laughed Korring. "Try to remember that you're no longer a seaman, just as I'm no longer a spaceman. We're persons of importance on this planet now. The world waits upon our decisions—and while the world is waiting, we have another drink."

They had another drink. It was some strong, oversweet and overscented spirit. Lessing would have preferred beer. But he had another drink, and then another, and the next morning, when he awoke in a strange bunk in a strange cabin with a splitting headache, he had vague memories of trying to teach the spacemen some of the bawdier drinking songs in his repertoire and had more vague memories of their

having reciprocated in kind.

A stewardess brought him in a cup of steaming fluid and a white capsule. Lessing assumed that the capsule would be good for his headache. It was. He was standing in front of the mirror when Korring came in and told him that the jar of white cream on the shelf was a depilatory. Lessing shaved—if the smearing on and off of cream can be called shaving—and dressed, and felt a lot better. He found Kennedy in the adjoining cabin and was told that Garwood had prevailed upon the launch skipper to take him ashore when the party started getting rough. Garwood was married and was a little afraid of his wife. There would be, said Kennedy, a launch on hail by the air lock until required.

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The sun was high in the sky when at last Lessing and the party from the ship boarded the waiting launch and made their way shoreward. The crowds still packed the road inshore from the beach, and the Station Pier was alive with people. Of the aliens, only Korring was unperturbed. He stood in the bows of the launch, letting the wind play with the black cloak that he was wearing over his finery. He looked, thought Lessing, like a character out of a comic strip.

The launch pulled up alongside the stage to a great coruscation of flashbulbs. Korring stepped down from the bows to allow Lessing to lead the way up the steps. The party from the ship, after a minute or so, stood facing the civil and military dignitaries. Lessing performed the introductions, explained what the arrangement was. Then, at Korring's insistence, a visit was paid immediately to the warehouse in which the goods were stocked. He smiled his approval. He said, "We can take perhaps half of this, and we will discharge an equivalent volume of cargo. The cargo from the ship will have to be discharged first, of course—"

"I've discharged and loaded ships before," said Lessing dryly. "In any case, you still haven't told me what arrangements you want for handling cargo. We'll send lighters and waterside workers out to your ship. What happens then?"

"We discharge our cargo into them," said Korring.

"Yes. But how?"

"You'll see. Come out with me in the first lighter."

Lessing did so. The dozen or so waterside workers who were in the craft were not awed by the civil and military dignitaries who rode with them and were even less awed by Korring. Lessing smiled as he heard him referred to as Superman and Mandrake the Magician. Korring ignored them, told Lessing to tell the tug to pull around to the other side of the ship. There was a larger air lock there, and obviously one used for cargo rather than for personnel.

The lighter was hardly fast when the first bale came floating out and settled with a thud into the open hold. As it was followed by a second and a third, the Earthmen gawked.

"Just a simple application of antigravity," smiled the spaceman.

"Could we have it?" asked the Air commodore who was one of those present. His voice was pleading. "Could we have it?"

"*No,*" said Korring flatly. He said to Lessing, "We aren't stevedores. I suggest that you call a boat and have us taken ashore again. There is still the matter of the accommodation for myself and my people to put in hand. Also, I would like to see your city and your shops."

"You stay in charge, Kennedy," said Lessing. He waved to one of the official launches.

"I think I'll stay here too," said the Air commodore, still looking at the stream of bales with fascination.

"As you please," said Korring. "But I must warn you that there are armed guards throughout the ship who have orders to shoot any unauthorized visitor."

"A taste of his own medicine," laughed one of the wharfies.

The airman did not hear him. When Lessing looked back from the launch he saw him still standing there, still staring at the stream of merchandise flowing from the ship as though on an invisible conveyor belt.

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That, so far as Earth was concerned, was the beginning of interstellar trade. At intervals of roughly a week, the big ships dropped down, each landing in Port Phillip Bay, which had become the world's first spaceport. All sorts of exotic drinks and foodstuffs they brought, and all sorts of fascinating gadgets. There were cameras that took photographs in three dimensions—the result, if a portrait, looking like a little statuette mounted in a cube of clear plastic. There were all sorts of devices that made direct use of solar power—for cooking, for the warming of houses, for the motivation of light machinery. There were bales of the marvelous synthetic cloth that represented the idea toward which all of Earth's manufacturers of synthetic fabrics were striving.

They took away whisky and cigarettes, brandy and chocolate, wine and honey, books and paintings. They took away things of value and things that most Earthmen considered trash. They took away living animals of every species to stock the interstellar zoos throughout the galaxy.

Malvar Korring vis Korring and the biologist, the slim brunette Edile Kular var Kular, who was his wife, stayed. The other technicians and experts came and went. The aliens were not unpopular guests in the hotel that they had made their headquarters. The priest, Glandor, stayed also. (Lessing was never able to work out the system of nomenclature used by the aliens. It involved complex family relationships, and the priesthood was held to be related by bonds of love to all men and women.)

The priest stayed, and he was joined after a while by more scarlet-robed priests and priestesses; all of them young, all of them attractive. A church was built to his specifications on the outskirts of the city. Lessing was not particularly interested in religion and did not know, for a long time, what went on in the building. He did not know, in fact, until he accorded an interview to a delegation of representative churchmen in his office.

"Mr. Lessing," said their leader, "these people are pagans. They preach the gratification of every lust, every desire. They say,*What shall it profit a man if he die before he has lived?* "

"Fair enough," said Lessing.

"But, Mr. Lessing, you don't understand. We, in this state, have always prided ourselves upon our rectitude. In Victoria, if nowhere else in Australia, the Sabbath is still the Sabbath. These aliens are desecrating the Sabbath."

"How?" asked Lessing, interested.

"In that so-called temple of theirs they serve alcoholic liquor to all comers. There is music—profane, not sacred music—and dancing. There is at least tacit encouragement of immorality."

"Immorality?" asked Lessing. "What do you mean by the word? Usury was once one of the seven deadly sins—but your churches are now among the usurers themselves. Murder is an immoral act, and so is lying—"

"You know what I mean," said the churchman. "What we want to know is this—what are you doing about it?"

"Nothing," said Lessing. "I am merely the trade commissioner. These people have signed a treaty with the sovereign government of this country—this*country,* not this*state* —giving them, among other things, freedom to make converts to their religion. It may be an odd one—but there have been some odd ones on this planet. There still are, in all probability."

That, as far as Lessing was concerned, was that.

But when trouble came—and it was not long in coming—it came not from the churches but from those who were, officially, their enemies. The big breweries, who are also the hotel owners, hate competition. It was never proved that they were the paymasters of the mob that destroyed the aliens' temple, but the riot was too well organized to have been spontaneous. The high priest was killed; two of the priestesses were murdered. A dozen earthly converts lost their lives.

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It was Korring vis Korring who brought the news to Lessing, bursting into his hotel room and shaking him into wakefulness.

"Lessing," he said. "I like you. I'm telling you to get out and to take any friends of yours with you."

Lessing was still drowsy. "Why?" he asked vaguely.

"Because, my friend, we're pulling out. All of us. We're pulling out before the retaliation starts."

"Retaliation? What for?"

"What for, you ask! A mob of puritans or wowsers or whatever you call them has just destroyed the temple. There has been bloodshed, murder. Our fleet is already in orbit about your planet and will be opening fire in a matter of minutes."

"What?" Lessing was fully awake now. He sat up in the bed and caught Korring vis Korring's arm. "Korring," he said quietly, "tell me something. Were you people as ignorant of Earth as you made out at our first contact?"

"Let go of me!" snarled Korring.

"Not so fast. Tell me, did you pick a state notorious for its blue laws, its restrictive legislation, in which to make your headquarters, in which your missionaries could start preaching their gospel? Was it deliberate?"

"Let me go!" shouted the spaceman, breaking free. He was through the door in a second. Lessing, following, tripped in his bedclothes and fell heavily to the floor. When he got out into the corridor he found that the rooms in which the aliens had lived were all empty. He had to wait a long time for the elevator to come back up to his floor. Then, at the hotel entrance, the night porter informed him that the "space ladies and gentlemen" had just been picked up by some sort of aircraft.

All that Lessing could do was to use the telephone. But it is one thing knowing whom to call and another thing to convince them of the truth of what you are saying. From the politicians and service chiefs he got little joy. When at last, in desperation, he thought of calling the city's high-ranking police officers, it was too late. The telephone went dead just as the first rumble of dreadful thunder deafened him, just as the first glare of the aliens' lightning blinded his eyes.

He remembered little of what happened afterward. He was a seaman, and his instinct was to make for the water. Kennedy was with him, and Garwood, and Garwood's young wife. Somehow they passed unscathed through the fire and the falling wreckage; somehow they found a car and in it joined the press of refugees making for the bay. Something hit Lessing—he never found out what it was—and he lost consciousness. He recovered when the cold salt spray drove over his face, and realized that he was in an overcrowded, open launch just clear of the Heads.

There were the lights of a ship toward which they were steering.

Lessing was not surprised when he found that for him the business had ended where it started, felt a sense of the essential fittingness of things when he dragged himself painfully up the pilot ladder and found himself standing on the familiar deck of his old ship, the*Woollabra.*

Somebody was supporting him. He saw, in the reflected glare from the overside floodlights, that it was Tom, the big Polynesian bos'n.

"Captain," asked Tom, "is it true thatMelbourne has been destroyed?"

"Yes. And other cities too, perhaps …"

"The familiar pattern," said the bos'n, as though to himself. "The chance contact— The trader— The missionary— The incident— And the gunboat—"

"And after the gunboat?" asked Lessing.

"We learned the answer to that question many years ago," said Tom. "Now it's your turn."

The End

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