

When the gaussjammer LODE TRADER was wrecked on the planet later - much later - irreverently named Nirvana by Commodore Ferson of the Survey Service, there was only one survivor. Only one human survivor, that is.

LODE TRADER - one of the Interstellar Transport Commission's tramps - carried only a small crew, consisting of Master, three mates, three engineers and a catering officer. She had accommodation for twelve passengers which, sometimes, was fully booked - but which, this voyage, wasn't. The sole occupant of the compartment packed with cramped dogboxes was a priest, a missionary, bound from Terra to the newly established colony on Hamal V. When the magnetic storm hit LODE TRADER, throwing her light years off trajectory, the Captain, a confirmed agnostic, sneeringly suggested that his passenger get down on his knees and start praying. The priest, somewhat acidly, retorted that in his religion the practice of pleading for divine intervention in times of stress was somewhat frowned upon and made a counter suggestion, this being that the Master and his officers should carry out their duties as ably as possible, as by so doing it was likely that they would acquire merit.

Spacemen do not need to be told to do their jobs as well as possible - a spaceman who needed to be told would not last very long; neither, in many cases, would his ship - and so relations became somewhat strained. The priest - Lee Chang was his name .. retired to his cramped quarters to spend the remainder of the voyage in meditation; the crew started the emergency diesel generators- the Pile having been drained of power by the storm - restarted the Ehrenhaft generators, and set the ship to falling along a line of magnetic force that would lead them to a likely-looking sun which might, just possibly, run to one Earth-type planet. An alternative would have been to try to navigate back to the colonized sector of the Galaxy, but the ship was hopelessly lost, the supply of diesel fuel was limited and the Catering Officer (Bio-Chemist, Acting, Unpaid) doubted her own ability to distil fresh supplies of fuel from the available hydrocarbons.

Colonies had been founded, as all LODE TRADER's people were aware, by castaway spacemen, spacewomen and passengers. But all such Lost Colonies so far discovered by the Survey Service had been established by the crews and passengers of relatively large vessels. LODE TRADER had only one woman aboard - the Catering Officer. She was not yet past child bearing age, but she had never shown any inclination towards either marriage or motherhood. She viewed the prospect of becoming a Founding Mother — the Founding Mother - with increasing alarm and despondency.

The others tried to cheer her up.

"After all," said the Captain, "it will all be perfectly legal. I can marry you..."

"I wouldn't marry you," she flared, "if you were the last man in the Universe!"

"I meant," said the shipmaster, rather stiffly, "that I could marry you to somebody else."

"But just suppose that you did want to marry her, sir," asked the Mate, who was something of a spacelawyer, "what would be the legal situation?." He added hopefully, "Of course, you could formally resign and I could supersede you as Master..."

"We could all turn Buddhist," proposed the Chief Engineer, "so that old Lee Chang could officiate."

"Do Buddhists practice polygamy?" asked the Second Mate.

“Polyandry,” corrected the Mate.

“The people of some parts of India — Nepal? — are polyandrists,” said the Chief Engineer.

“But are they Buddhists?” asked the Mate.

“I don’t know,” admitted the other.

“And I don’t care!” almost wept the Catering Officer.

“It won’t be so bad,” consoled the engineer. “Think of all the help you’ll have around the house to look after the kids. I’m told that some of these latest humanoid robots can even be trained to change nappies. And, after all, we have practically a full cargo of the things...”

“Then why can’t you do something with them?” she demanded. “They’re machines and they have built—in power units. Can’t you hook them all up to the Ehrenhaft jennies so we aren’t dependent on those stinking diesels? Then we could go anywhere we pleased, and find our way back to civilization.”

“Solar power units,” the Chief Engineer told her sadly, “and storage batteries to enable them to work through the night. I’m afraid...”

“And so am I,” she said, before he could finish.

She need not have worried - not on that score.

There is a fate that is popularly supposed to be worse than death - but many women have undergone it and carried on living quite cheerfully. While there’s life there’s hope - and death is so very final.

LODE TRADER reached the possible-looking sun and found that one of the worlds revolving around it was also possible-looking. She established herself in orbit about the planet. Her people discovered that this world was Earthlike - too Earthlike. The polar regions were inhospitable wastes of ice and snow and jagged mountains, and the regions immediately north and south of the poles were ocean covered.

One of the serious limitations of the gaussjammers was the near-impossibility of making a safe landing in regions in which horizontal force exceeds vertical force. And the gaussjammers, unlike the earlier rockets that preceded them, were designed with a disregard of the laws of aerodynamics. The later models, the ships that took to the skies just before the Ehrenhaft Drive ships became obsolete, were fitted with auxiliary rocket drive for emergency use. LODE TRADER was not so fitted.

So she had to make a landing in sub-tropical regions, coming down in too flat a trajectory, in a shallow dive, a very shallow dive. The Captain and his officers used all of their not inconsiderable skill. The Catering Officer was in the control room - after all, as the prospective bride of one, if not all, of her shipmates she now had privileges. The engineers were aft, struggling to keep the diesels working in conditions both of gravity and extreme tilt. Lee Chang was in his cabin, still meditating.

The priest never found out what was the cause of the disaster. Suddenly he was thrown from his chair with such violence that the seat belt was snapped, finding himself sprawled upon what had been the deckhead - the ceiling, in landsman’s parlance - of his room. The force of the impact smashed consciousness from him. When he recovered - slowly and painfully - he discovered that he was lying in a pool of his own blood. He discovered, too, after a while, that it was now impossible for him to stand upright in his cramped accommodation; the bulkheads were buckled and there was only a bare four feet between deck and deckhead instead of the regulation seven. The door, luckily, had been sprung open.

But these facts he ascertained later. His first reaction was to assess his injuries, which were comparatively

slight. The blood, or most of it, had come from his nose. He was badly bruised, but there seemed to be nothing broken. Then - and later he was to reprove himself for the sequence - his concern was for his shipmates. He listened - but the ship, apart from the creaking and whispering of cooling metal, was dreadfully silent. He shouted, but there was no reply. He shouted again. And then - painfully; for he was a fat man - he squirmed through the distorted aperture that had been a door, found before him a great rent in the shell plating, dropped heavily through it to long grass.

The ship, obviously, was a total loss.

She had fallen bows first, crushing the shallow dome housing her control room. (Lee Chang discovered afterwards that the great gyroscope, immediately abaft the control room, had been torn from its housing and had reduced all those in its way to an unrecognizable paste.) From a rent in the hull just forward from the conical stern issued a trickle of smoke. The priest was not an athletic man, but he managed to clamber up the twisted and torn plating, sweating heavily, gasping for breath, his hands and body slashed by sharp edges of metal. At last he was able to look into the emergency diesel room. He could see four bodies - four bodies so mangled that there could not possibly be any life left in them. The heavy generators, tearing loose from their retaining bolts, had fallen upon the men who had tended them, had ill repaid the care lavished upon them.

Lee Chang pulled himself back inside the ship and then, slowly, cautiously, pausing every now and again to shout, made his way downwards and forward through the wreckage. He was looking for the Catering Officer. She

was not in her cabin, or in her storerooms, or in her pantry. (Later, when it came to the burial, he found one of her epaulettes and an ear ring in the unrecognizable mess in the control room.)

The priest found his way out of the ship again. There was nothing that he could do for his shipmates, and the yellowish sun was sinking fast towards the gently undulant horizon. So, composing himself as he had been taught, he prepared to spend the remainder of the day, and all of the night, in meditation.

Lee Chang, as one trained for the contemplative life, was unused to hard physical labour. And there was so much to be done. There was the burial of *LODE TRADER*'s crew to be carried out. There were foodstuffs to be unloaded from the storerooms. (There was nothing immediately apparent among the local flora and fauna that the priest could recognize as food.) There was the preparation of the ground for the sowing of the various seeds that the ship carried amongst her cargo - as well as the partial unloading of the cargo so that the consignments in question could be got at.

Lee Chang was trained for the contemplative life. He was not an engineer. But he had heard the nature of the ship's cargo discussed at table. He knew of the shipment of humanoid robots. He knew, too, of the boast of the manufacturers of the mechanical servants that the instruction books were so simple that a mentally retarded child could understand them.

As heavy cargo, the crated robots had been bottom stow. Now, thanks to the disastrous crash—landing of the ship, they were top stow, and the deck above them was torn and buckled. After his night's meditation, with sunrise, the priest climbed back into the ship. He found a convenient bar in the engineroom. (He noticed, too, that the bodies of the engineers were beginning to smell a little.) He attacked the most convenient crate, levered it open. He tugged and wrestled with the inert metal body, at last succeeded in dragging out what looked like an ugly, pot-bellied dwarf, a dwarf whose only garment was a shimmering metallic cape. He lugged the thing to the side of the ship, then realized that to drop it would damage it irreparably. He considered going back to the engineroom to try to find some rope or wire or light chain so as to lower the robot to the ground. It did not appear to him to be significant that he had left it lying in a shaft of sunlight.

He cried out with amazement when he saw the metal mesh cloak open and spread in the golden illumination, like the wings of a butterfly just emerged from the chrysalis. There was fear mixed with his amazement when he cried out a second time: that was when the robot got unsteadily to its feet.

“Master,” it said tonelessly. “Master. What are your orders, Master?”

“Get the others of your kind uncrated,” said the priest at last.

“But I do not understand, Master. I have only the basic vocabulary. You must teach me the words and the actions.”

“I will teach you,” said Lee Chang.

Lee Chang taught it - him? — as he taught the others.

Lee Chang lived a long and not unhappy life. He regarded himself towards the end as the Abbot of a monastery - an Abbot who was friend to as well as master of his monks. He was wrong, perhaps, to ascribe human attributes to the mechanical men - and yet each of them, had his own character; each of them, under the priest's tutelage, developed a very real intelligence. Lee Chang found himself discussing theological matters with them - as, for example, the possibility that their mechanical bodies might house human souls, that a man could just as easily be reincarnated as a robot as in the body of some lower animal. (And would such an incarnation be a step upwards or downwards?)

And then, in the fullness of time, he died. But the odd monastic order that he had founded did not die with him.

He sat in the lotus posture under the solitary tree in the centre of the dusty square - the square in which, owing to the continual passage of metal feet, no other Vegetation could grow. He had been there all night, under the constellations that an Earthman would have called alien. He had been dimly aware of the rising of the sun as his metal cape had expanded to capture and, to store the radiation that, to him, was life. He had meditated ever since the passing of that strange, flesh—and—blood being, the Lama. He had recalled every word ever spoken by the priest, had turned them over and over in his mind, had considered their every implication. He had thought long and deeply on the subject of reincarnation, had come to the conclusion that, after all, no ordinary Earthman's soul inhabited his metal body. It had not been coincidence that he had been the first to be given life, that he had always been far closer to the now-dead mentor than any of the others.

And he already had his disciples.

Around him the monastery stirred to life. From their cells tramped the robots - the monks - each spreading his cape to the rays of the sun. Some of them went to the fields - although there was now no need for their labour - and others to the workshops where agricultural machines were made and repaired. Some of them went to tend the herds of ovinoids, suppliers of the wool from which the Abbot's robes had been spun and woven.

But he stayed there, under the tree. The sunlight drew the mist of dew from his gleaming body. He focussed his attention on the bright ring of shining metal that protruded from his bulging belly, the seemingly useless adornment that was equivalent to the navel of a human being. But robots of the non-specialized, general purpose, type were never designed for the contemplative life. They have that built-in urge always to be doing something.

The restless, cunningly contrived fingers at last found a purchase, and twisted. They twisted harder. Nothing happened.

They twisted the other way.

He sat there and looked at the bolt or stud, with its bright gleaming thread, holding it in the metallic palm of his hand. He knew that it had significance - for did not everything have significance? - and he was vaguely worried because he could not fathom it. Was this what the Earthman had meant by the contemplation of the navel?

Or should the navel be in place to be contemplated?

He replaced it.

In the cool of the evening the disciples came to sit in a circle around their Master. Gravely, from his unwinking lenses, their Master regarded them. At last he broke the expectant silence.

He said, "I have been contemplating my navel."

No comment forthcoming, he went on, saying, "I made a strange discovery. I found that my navel has a left-handed thread..."

Again he waited, but the other robots were still silent. They watched him as his fingers tightened on the ring, as he unscrewed the stud. He handed the thing to the robot on his right.

"Perhaps," he said, "all of you might acquire merit by the contemplation of this wonder. Perhaps some of you who are mechanics might be able to explain it..."

In unbroken silence the threaded stud was passed from hand to hand, each of the disciples regarding it solemnly for long minutes. At last it was handed to FM2107, a robot notorious for his clumsiness, his slow reaction time, his lack of co-ordination. He contemplated it for longer than the others had done. Then, with the mechanical equivalent of a sigh, he gave up, made to hand the mysterious object back to its owner.

He dropped it in the dust.

Impatiently, the Master unfolded his legs, got to his feet, stooped to retrieve it.

And fell to pieces.

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