

THE WORLD'S A STAGE, the fourth of the Starship Hopeful stories, was written in October of 1982, and published in Playboy in July, 1984. By this point, I knew I had a series, and I pretty much knew how it worked. The misfit crew of the Starship Hopeful would visit a new planet in every story, where the 'civilization' they'd find would be a distillation of one aspect of human life. Gambling in the first story, war in the second, religion the third, and now - tara tara! - the thee-ay-tah! Enjoy.

THE WORLD'S A STAGE

by Donald Westlake

From the beginning of Time, man has been on the move, ever outward. First he spread over his own planet, then across the solar system, then outward to the Galaxies, all of them dotted, speckled, and measlesed with the colonies of Man.

Then, one day in the year eleven thousand four hundreds and six (11, 406), an incredible discovery was made in the Master Imperial Computer back on Earth. Nearly 500 years before, a clerical error had erased from the computer's memory more than 1000 colonies, all in sector F.U.B.A.R. 3. For half a millenium, those colonies, young and struggling when last heard from, had had no contact with the rest of humanity.

The Galaxy Patrol Interstellar Ship Hopeful, Captain Gregory Standforth commanding, was at once dispatched to re-establish contact with the Thousand Lost Colonies and return them to the bosom of mankind.

THE TWO TRAMPS, picturesquely filthy, sat by the side of the road in the dusty sunshine. They were dressed in more rags than seemed absolutely necessary given the mildness of the weather; and while one of them mused upon life more or less audibly, the other removed a battered, scruffy boot and frowned mistrustfully into it, as though expecting to find something alive in there. He sighed. He blew into the boot. He sighed. He put the boot on. He took it off again. He turned to his musing, muttering companion and said, "Didi?"

"Yes?"

"What do we do now?"

"We wait."

A kind of inner earthquake of frustration vibrated through the tramp holding the boot. With a repressed scream, he cried, "For what?"

"For him," Didi said. "He promised he'd meet us here, and we're supposed to wait until---" He broke

off, gazing upward past his friends filthy forehead.

“Well?” asked the other. “Go on, go on.”

“Oh, my gosh,” said Didi. His voice, his manner, even his facial appearance, all changed.

“What is it?” asked his friend, turning to look.

The two tramps stared upward at the slowly descending spaceship, a great silver corn cob lowering through the empty air. “It’s Godot,” Didi whispered in awe. He finally got here.

Inside the spaceship, 27 birds watched Pam Stokes, astrogator, beautiful and brainy but blind to passion, play with her ancestral slide rule. The birds were all stuffed and wired to their perches around the Hopeful’s command deck, and from the expression in their fifty four glass eyes, they didn’t like it a bit. Or perhaps what they didn’t like was the sight of captain Gregory Standforth disemboweling yet another bird on the control panel. Indigo ichor oozed through the dials and switches into the panels innards, where it would make a mysterious bad smell for the next several weeks.

A tall, skinny, vague-eyed, loose wired sort of fellow, Captain Standforth was the seventh consecutive generation of Standforths to spend his life in the service of the Galactic Patrol and the first to be terrible at it. Much was expected of a Standforth, but in this case it was expected in vain. The Captain had had no choice other than to follow the family footsteps into the patrol, and the patrol had to take him, but neither had profited. All the captain wanted was to pursue his one passion, taxidermy-the stuffing of birds from everywhere in the universe-while all the patrol wanted was to never see or hear from him again.

Thump. “Ouch!”, said the captain. As vermilion blood mixed with the indigo ichor, he put his cut varicolored finger into his mouth, said, “oog,” took it out again and made a bad-taste grimace. “Nn”. Turning to Pam, he said, “What was that thump? Made me cut myself.”

“Subsidance,” she said, rapidly whizzing the slide rule’s parts back and forth. “By my calculations, ground level must have eroded seven millimeters in the last half-chiliad. Therefore, the ships computer switched off engines before we actually---”

“Half-chiliad?” asked the captain.

“What’s a half-chiliad?”

“Five hundred years. So that’s why we thumped when we landed.”

“Landed? You mean we’ve arrived somewhere?”

“Yes, sir.”

Captain Standforth looked around at his birds. They looked back. “I wonder where we are,” he said. “I wonder what kind of birds they have here.”

“Wardrobe! Wardrobe!”

“Now what?”

“My wings keep falling off.”

"All right, I'll get my needle and thread."

He's an airhead, Ensign Kybee Benson thought, raging murderously within while he struggled to appear calm and composed without. A clothead, a bonehead, a meathead. Chowderhead, fathead. Muttonhead. No, he's worse than all those—he's a Luthguster.

The Luthguster in question, Councilman Morton Luthguster of the Supreme Galactic Council, seated on the other side of Ensign Benson's desk, went obliviously on with his question: “Why name an entire planet after an actor? A planet called J. Rainsford Farnsworth is ridiculous.”

“In the first place,” Ensign Benson said, swallowing brimstone, “the planet is named Hestia IV, since it is the fourth planet from its sun, Hestia. The colony's full name is the J. Rainsford Farnsworth Repertory Company.”

Councilman Luthguster shook his jowly head. “Damn-fool name for a place,” he insisted. “Detroit, now that's a name. Khartoum. Reykjavik. But J. Rainsford Farnsworth Repertory Company?”

A tap at the frame of the open office door was followed by the cheerful, optimistic, shiny young face of Lieutenant Billy Shelby, Hopeful's second in command, who said, “We've landed, sir. We're on the ground.”

“I know what landed means,” Ensign Benson snapped. “I felt the bump. And when I've finished explaining the situation to the councilman, we'll be along.”

“OK,” Billy said happily. “We'll be waiting at the air lock. At the door.”

“I know what an air lock is.”

Billy cantered off, and Ensign Benson returned to his task. As social engineer, an expert in comparative societies, he had the job of giving Council Luthguster the necessary background on each colony they visited. “When this sector of the universe was colonized,” he explained, “a special cultural fund was set up to bring the arts to the far-flung outposts of Man. A theatrical troupe from Earth was offered its own settlement and a subsidy and was meant to tour the other colonies with a repertory of ancient and modern drama. Of course, contact was lost almost immediately, so the troupe never got its transportation and therefore never toured. There's no guessing what it's become by now.”

Luthguster pursed fat lips. “So who is this fellow J. Rainsford Farnsworth?”

“Founder of the repertory company. The actor-director-manager of the troupe.”

“Do you mean,” Luthguster demanded, puffing out like an adder, “that I shall be expected to discuss affairs of state with an actor?”

“I don’t think so.” Ensign Benson said. His face was expressionless, but his tense hand had crushed the plastoak arm of his chair. “J. Rainsford Farnsworth would be about five hundred and forty-three by now, and that’s old even for an actor.”

Gathered around the air lock were two thirds of the Hopeful’s complement: Captain Standforth, Astrogator Stokes, Lieutenant Shelby and Chief Engineer Hester Hanshaw, a stocky blunt woman with a stocky blunt manner, who was saying, “I didn’t like that thump. Bad for the engines.”

“I didn’t like it either,” Captain Standforth told her. “Made me cut myself.” He showed her the scratched finger.

Hester, the closest thing they had to a ship’s doctor, frowned at the scratch a millisecond, then said, “paint a little antirust compound on it. Be good as new.”

Bemused, the captain gazed at his finger. “Are you sure?”

Ensign Benson and Councilman Luthguster joined the group, and Billy armed the councilman with his microphone, “It’s all set, “ he said. “Just talk straight into it.”

“Fine.”

“Not yet,” Ensign Benson said.

The councilman stepped out onto the small platform suspended halfway up the side of the ship, and his amplified voice rolled out over a dusty landscape reminiscent of certain sections of Eastern Oklahoma in early June.

“Citizens of J. Rainsford Farnsworth Repertory com---Ack!”

Inside the ship, Ensign Benson frowned. “Ack?”

Councilman Luthguster bundled hastily back into the ship like a stockbroker into the bar car. “Those aren’t people! They’re, they’re things!”

“Stop talking into the microphone,” Ensign Benson said.

Billy looked out the air lock. “Oh, Wow! Cute bug-eyed monsters!”

“What?” Stepping impatiently out onto the platform, Ensign Benson found himself gazing down on as motley a collection of creatures as ever was lit by the same sun. Nonhuman to a fault but, as Billy had said, cute. They were tiny round puffballs with human legs and wings and yellow wigs over fairy faces. Tall, androgynous sprites in tights. Hoppers with humps. And in front of them stood a beautiful womanoid with gauzy wings and a gauzy gown and long, pointed ears, and a big hairy manoid with a great purple cloak and long feet that curled up into spirals at the end.

Loudly enough for Ensign Benson to hear, the manoid addressed the womanoid: “Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.”

In the doorway, the captain said, “That one over there looks like a bird, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Billy.

“What, jealous Oberon!” the woman was bellowing. “Fairies, skip hence: I have foresworn his bed and company.”

“I will not talk to things!”

“Tell that nitwit,” Ensign Benson said over his shoulder, “to stop talking into the microphone.”

Below, half the thingummies were skipping away, while the womanoid frowned up at Ensign Benson. “Fairies, skip hence,” she repeated, even more loudly. “That’s you, buster!”

Ensign Benson called, “Where are the human beings around here?”

“Nowhere in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” jealous Oberon told him, apparently exasperated.

“I will not talk to things!”

“All right,” disgusted Oberon said, “let’s go, troupe.” As his whatsits and flumadiddles obediently sloped off, he turned back to call, “And I suppose that spaceship of yours is an example of kitchen sink realism!”

The entire crowd shuffled away. They appeared to be removing wings and heads and appendages as they went, almost as though they were costumes; and 40 feet from the ship, they stepped around a curtain of air, one after the other, and disappeared.

Ensign Benson blinked. “Oh, boy,” he said.

The captain and Billy came out onto the platform, the captain saying, “Where did everybody go?”

“Um,” said Ensign Benson.

“Those were really keen creatures,” Billy said.

“And what a beautiful day, the captain said, gazing skyward, stepping back from the ship, the better to view the empyrean. “Is it morning here or after---Aak!”

“Another aak,” Ensign Benson moodily said, watching the captain tumble down the stairs to land in a dusty heap at the bottom.

“Kybee, look!” said Billy.

Ensign Benson followed Billy’s pointing finger. There in the middle of the field, an invisible curtain of air was lifting to reveal what seemed to be a house with its side wall torn away. In the kitchen, a woman wearing a slip stood wearily at her ironing board. In the living room, a man in a torn T-shirt sprawled on a sofa and drank beer.

Captain Standforth had picked himself up and was brushing himself off. Ensign Benson started down the ladder, intent on finding out what was going on here, and Billy came after. Above, Pam Stokes and

Hester Hanshaw came tentatively out to the platform, Pam looking at the oddly sliced house and saying, "Did they miss a mortgage payment?"

Hester said, "Maybe all their weather comes from the other side."

"Are the things still out there?"

"They're gone, Councilman Luthguster," Pam said. "You can come out."

"Tell him to leave the microphone inside," Ensign Benson called up the ladder, then said to the captain, "let's go find out the story here."

"I suppose we have to."

The captain and the ensign and Billy crossed the dusty field, meeting part way a frazzled woman wearing many frilly-but-worn garments and carrying a carpetbag. Smiling rather maniacally at Billy and speaking with an almost impenetrable southern accent complicated by many odd little pauses, she said, "Ah have...allwuz depended...on the...kahndness of stranjuhs."

"Me too," said Billy.

"As for me," said Ensign Benson, "I've never depended on the kindness of strangers. Seems to work better somehow."

In the living room, the man burped and yelled, "Stella!"

The frazzled woman stopped, frowned at Ensign Benson and said, completely without accent or affectation,

"Say. What's your story?"

"That's what I meant to ask you," Ensign Benson said. "What's your story?"

"A Streetcar Named Desire, of course."

Billy said, "What's a streetcar?"

"I'll tell you what my desire is," Ensign Benson said, but the captain got there first, stepping forward to say, "Madam, if you please, take me to your leader."

"Us," said Ensign Benson

"Oh, that story," said the woman.

Royal-blue carpet with the Presidential seal in the middle. Large wooden desk, flanked by flags. The Oval Office.

Coming around his desk, smiling, hand outstretched, the President of the United States greeted the people from Earth. "Welcome back. Your safe return from barren Aldebaran has ignited the spirit of

mankind. Welcome home to Earth.”

“Actually, Mr. President,” Councilman Luthguster said, puffing himself up, “We’re from Earth, and we wish to---”

“Well, of course you are,” the President said. Picking up a document from his desk, he said, “I have a proclamation here in honor of your voyage and return. ‘Whereas, in the course of human events...’”

Through the window behind the desk, the Washington Monument could be seen; but through the open doorway to the left, the same old dusty plain was visible. A group of people in overalls and sweatbands wheeled a Trojan horse by. Two women in straw hats and tuxedos bucked and wung the other way.

The proclamation ran its course. At its finish, Councilman Luthguster squared his round shoulders and said, “Mr. President, I am empowered by the Galactic Council---”

Approaching Ensign Benson, the President firmly shook his hand and said, “Captain, your voyage into the unknown makes this the most important day in all creation.”

“Sir,” said Captain Standforth, “I’m the captain.”

“You,” the President reminded him, “are the captain’s best friend.” Turning to Pam Stokes, he said, “And you are the ship’s biologist.”

“Actually,” Pam said, “I’m the astrogator. I don’t think we’d need a biologist on a---”

“Of course you do.” Irritation seeped through the Presidential manner. “How else do we discover the killer virus that’s taken over the crew’s bodies?”

“Wait a minute,” Ensign Benson said. “You aren’t the President: you’re pretending to be the President. This is a play!”

“Well, of course it is!” the President cried! “And this is the worst rehearsal I have ever participated in!”

Luthguster harrumphed. “Do you mean to say,” he demanded, “that you are not empowered to deal on a primary level with a plenipotentiary from Earth?”

Frowning, the president said, “Have you come unglued, fella?”

Ensign Benson muttered, “Director-no. Producer-no.” Snapping his fingers, he said to the President, “Take me to your stage manager.”

The man sat atop a six foot wooden ladder. Behind him were three rows of kitchen chairs, several occupied by solemn-faced people wearing their Sunday best. The man on the ladder said, “I’m the stage manager here. I guess I know just about everything there is to know about our town....”

The captain and the crew sat by the side of the dusty road. Billy took his boot off and looked in it. Councilman Luthguster, marching back and forth, announced, “This is absurd! These people can’t spend

all their time play acting. They must have a government, an infrastructure. How do they get their food?"

"Of Mice and Men for an extended run," suggested Ensign Benson.

Across the way, out in the middle of an empty field, a group of men in togas strolled out from behind an invisible curtain of air and began declaiming at one another. They all stood with one foot in front of the other.

"That's the part that bugs me the most," Ensign Benson said. "How do they appear and disappear like that?"

"Scrim," said Hester.

Ensign Benson gave her an unfriendly look. "What?"

"I know what a scrim is," Billy said. "We had one in the theater in college. It's a big mesh screen. You paint a backdrop on it and hang it across the front of the stage. If you shine a light in front, you see the painting but you can't see the stage. If you shine the light in the back, the painting disappears and you see the stage."

"Close but no psuegar," said Hester. "That's the original, old-fashioned kind of scrim, but then a way was found to alter air molecules so light would bend around them. Now a scrim is a curtain of bent molecules. You put it around a set and it shows you what's beyond it. They used to use one in the field questions for the S.E. degree, but of course its old-fashioned now."

"None of which solves," Councilman Luthguster reminded them, "the problem of how to get in touch with whoever runs this blasted colony. I'll do no more play acting!"

Standing, the captain said, "Well, Hestia's going down; there's no more to do today. We'll get an early start tomorrow.

"Wasn't it right here?" the captain asked.

"I thought," said Pam vaguely, "it was more over that way, by those little trees."

"There weren't trees here before," Ensign Benson said. "Those are cardboard, part of a set."

"I am uninterested in sets," the councilman said. "Totally uninterested. What I want is my room on the ship."

"Well, yes," said Luthguster.

The little group stood on the plain, looking around. The captain said, "It was just--- It was right around --- I know it was over here somewhere."

A man dressed in the front half of a horse costume came striding purposefully by, carrying the horse's head under his arm. Billy said, "Excuse me. Have you seen our spaceship?"

“What?” The horseman looked around, then said, “Oh, right. They struck that set.” And he walked on.

“Struck?” Echoed the captain. “Struck?”

“Theatrical term,” Pam told him. “It means to dismantle a set and take it off the stage.”

“You can’t dismantle a spaceship,” the captain said. “Not in half an hour.”

“No,” Ensign Benson said, through clenched jaws. Smoke seemed to be coming out of his ears. “But you can put a curtain around it.” Glaring at Hester as though it were her fault, he said, “Our ship is surrounded by your goddamn bent molecules!”

Darkness fell, a bit at a time. “I think,” said the captain inaccurately, “I think we’ll just have to sleep on the ground.”

“Like camping out!” said the irrepressible Billy.

“Without the camp,” said the repressible councilman.

The captain said, “We’ll each have to find a declivity to sleep in.”

“Amen,” said the councilman.

“Kybee,” Pam said, “This is my declivity.”

“It’s important to retain our body heat,” Ensign Benson explained, trying to hunker down beside her.

“Thank you, Kybee,” Pam said, “But I’m really quite warm enough sleeping by myself.”

“You would be,” Ensign Benson muttered, thumping off across the darkling plain and all at once running into a spider web. “Ptchah!” he cried, flailing at the web, then realized it wasn’t a web at all. It was a, it was some sort of, it felt like a thin sheet or a ---

Curtain.

“Oh, boy,” Ensign Benson said. Feeling the material with both hands, maintaining a lot of body contact with this drapery, he sidled along to the right, noticing how clothlike it was, giving when he pressed but resisting when he pressed too hard. Somewhere there would be, there had to be, an opening.

There. His right hand slipped off the curtain’s edge and fell forward against unresisting air, and all at once, instead of Hestia’s dull but protracted set, he was looking at somebody’s drawing room.

Comedy-of-manners time. A sofa centered, telephone on stand to its left. Several upstage doors for slamming. Occasional furniture along the walls. Steady, not-too-bright light, source uncertain.

Ensign Benson stepped through the break and inspected more closely. Windows fakes with painted views. Bookcase a painted façade. Telephone nonoperative. Water in ashtray, soap on mirror. Some

sort of mottled obscurity high above blocking the sky. Sofa real and soft.

Turning about, he looked through the curtain of bent molecules at his shipmates settling down for the night on the duty ground, like a small herd from some endangered species. Tell Pam about the sofa? Surely she wouldn't mind sharing it. On the other hand, there was the rest of the crew.

Ensign Benson sighed. Pushing open the flap, he called, "Everybody! I found us a room."

Hestia rose like thunder out of the horizon across the way. "I hear thunder," Pam said, sitting up on the sofa, squinting in the rosy light, looking tousled and adorable and unavailable.

The other earthlings, less adorable, rose from their beds of chair curtains and window draperies. "Rain," grumbled Ensign Benson, stretching his stiff, sore back. "Just to make things perfect."

But there was no rain, and when the thunder stopped, it became obvious that the sound had actually been some sort of approaching motor. For a few seconds the earthlings waited in silence, contemplating their morning mouths, and then an upstage door opened and a heedless young couple in evening dress-black tie for him, green flapper outfit for her---entered and slammed the door. "Tennis, anyone?" cried the boy, with a toothy grin; then, as he reacted to the scene onstage, his grin became a toothless O of shock. "Lor!" he breathed.

The girl stared about in disbelief. "Well, I never!" she said, in character.

Captain Standforth clambered stiffly from his settee, saying, "I'm terribly sorry. Is this your place?"

The young man stared about in well-bred horror. "Look what you've done," he said, "to this set."

"We'll fix it right up," Billy promised, fluffing the pillow that had been his sole companion on the floor.

"I've a good mind," the young man said angrily, "to report you to, report you...."

Ensign Benson and Councilman Luthguster both leaned eagerly toward him. "Yes?" asked the councilman. "Yes?"

"To the agency!"

"Of course!" cried Ensign Benson.

The vehicle was a four-wheeled land traveler with a simple metal-pipe frame and three rows of bucket seats. While the Earthfolk piled atop another in the back---Pam deflecting Ensign Benson's attempt to pile atop her---the annoyed thespians sat in front, the male kicking the engine to life and hunching over the handle bars. "We'll see about this" he said, and off they lurched.

Up a dusty slope they went and over the ridge and down the long, dusty road toward the settlement, a cluster of small buildings along an X of two streets.

“That’s the colony,” said Ensign Benson, staring around Hester’s shoulder.

“Where we landed was nothing but an outdoor---”

“Rehearsal hall,” said Billy.

“They figured,” Ensign Benson said, “we were just actors, rehearsing a---”

“Space opera,” said Billy.

“Shut up, Billy” said Ensign Benson.

Meanwhile, up front, the girl was pleading her case to her companion. “They’re just trying to attract attention,” she said. “Come on, Harv, you and I aren’t above stunts like that ourselves to get a part. They’re just between gigs, that’s all.”

“Then let ‘em go to Temp, like the rest of us.”

“Come on, Harv, don’t be a producer.”

By then they were in the middle of the most utilitarian town the Earthpeople had ever seen. The buildings were drably functional and lacking in ornamentation, with none more than two stories high. Other stripped-down land travelers moved back and forth, and the several pedestrians, male and female, were mostly dressed in plain, drab jump suits. The few people in costume—a cowboy, a striped-pants diplomat, a belly dancer—stood out like parakeets in a field of crows.

The land traveler stopped. Reluctantly, the driver said, “All right, get out. I won’t report you.”

“Gee thanks!” said Billy, bounding over the rail.

The others followed, and Ensign Benson said, “Where’s the agency?”

“Don’t milk the joke, fella,” the driver said and accelerated away. But his girlfriend, behind his back, pointed and gestured toward a nearby gray-metal building, then waved a good-luck good bye.

“She was nice,” Billy said.

“I’ve never dealt with agents before,” Luthguster said, frowning at the building.

“Only principals.”

Ensign Benson stared at him. “You only deal in principles? Come along, councilman; this I have to see.”

J. Railsford Farnsworth Successors-Talent Agency read the inscription on the frosted fiber of the door. The Earthians filed into a small, bench-lined room personed by a feisty receptionist. “Well, look at what the omkali dragged in,” she said, surveying the bedraggled Terrans.

Hester glared at the girl. "Get smart with me, snip," she said, "and I'll breath on you."

"Harridan," commented the receptionist calmly, flipping through a card file on her desk. "Battle-ax."
"Dyke."

"Sorry, got nothing for your type at the moment, We have your photo and resume on file?"

"Girlie," Hester said, leaning over the desk, "if I had my socket wrench, I'd unscrew your head."

"Just a minute, just a minute," said Ensign Benson, interposing himself. "Is the boss here?"

The girl frowned at him, then smiled. "Oh yes. You're the captain."

"That's right, and he's my best friend. Is the chief in?"

"You mean-the agent?"

"The man in charge," said Councilman Luthguster.

The girl looked dubious. "Who shall I say is calling?"

The councilman drew himself up to his full round. "The Earth," he said.

The girl looked him up and down. "I won't argue," she said.

Framed autographed photos-glossy 8 x 10s-covered every inch of wall space in the small windowless room. The roll-top desk was picturesquely old and battered, the wastebasket overflowing, the leatherette sofa sagging, the two client chairs tired and gnawed.

So was the agent. A short and stocky man in a wrinkled jump suit with sleeve garters, he looked harried, sympathetic and negative. "I'm sorry, group," he said. "I can't tell you anything more than my girl did. Space opera just doesn't move right now. How about a family drama?" Pointing to Billy, he said, "You could be the secret-faggot younger son."

"Gee," said Billy, "I don't know."

"Well, you do know the alternative," the agent said. "If you're not in rehearsal, you have to sign up with Temp. When something comes up that suits you, we'll be in touch. In the meantime, don't call us, we'll call you."

"Who's Temp?" Ensign Benson asked. "Is he in charge here?"

The agent offered a brief smile, knowing, condescending and a bit irritated. "Don't audition with me, pal," he said.

Councilman Luthguster said, "I assure you, my friend, continuing play acting is the farthest thing from my mind. I am here representing the Galactic Council, and I wish to---"

“Oh, *please*,” the agent said, becoming really annoyed. “If you people don’t get out of here at once, I’ll put your photos and resumes in the inactive file and you’ll be permanently on temp.”

“Go ahead,” Ensign Benson said.

The agent blinked at him. “What?”

“My name is Kybee Benson. I am not the captain and I don’t have a best friend; and if my picture is in your files, you’re a magician.”

“That goes for me double,” said Hester. “And I’m not a dyke.”

Ensign Benson stared at her. “You aren’t?”

“Wait a minute,” the agent said. Doubt curdled his face. “Who are you people?”

“A mission from Earth,” Ensign Benson said.

“Representing the Galactic Council,” Councilman Luthguster added.

“And I’m sorry to bother you, Captain Standforth said, “but your people struck our ship.”

“So Temp is temporary employment,” Ensign Benson said, “and it’s the source for all the necessary labor in the colony.”

“That’s right.” The agent and the Earthpersons sat around a long table in a conference room. A secretary had distributed coffee and notepads and pencils and now sat poised to one side with her memo pad open.

“And, Ensign Benson went on, “for the past five hundred years, you’ve been in rehearsal.”

“The assumption has always been,” the agent said, “that sooner or later, our transportation would arrive. ‘The show must go on eventually’ is our national motto. So we keep a group of shows ready to perform, the choice of shows ready to perform, the choice of which ones being based on popular vote. There’s a certain understandable growing negativity about space opera, which is why you’ve been having so much trouble.”

“Well, our troubles are over now,” Billy said, beaming at everybody.

“Ours, too,” the agent said. Eagerly he leaned forward. “What’s our first stop on the tour?”

The captain said “Tour?”

“It will make a difference,” the agent explained, “as to which plays we carry. You wouldn’t do *Lysistrata* in Gayville, for instance.”

“Sir,” said Luthguster, “You have misunderstood. We are an introductory mission representing the Galactic Council in the reabsorbtion of---”

“You mean, you aren’t our transportation?”

“Certainly not,” Luthguster said. “I assure you, sir, I am neither a play actor nor a tour director. I am---”

“In terrible trouble,” the agent finished. To his secretary-who had stopped note taking, the better to look shocked and horrified-he said, “Erase that bit, Emily, and don’t breath a word of this to anyone.”

“Oh, sir,” breathed Emily, with all the despairing fervor of any showbiz secretary ordered not to gossip,

The captain said, “Really, uh, your Honor, I’m sure we can arrange all the transportation you need.”

“I’m delighted and relieved to hear it,” the agent said. “Five at the very most.”

The captain said, “All we need is to get to the ship and---”

“Impossible,” the agent said.

“I knew there had to be a kicker,” Ensign Benson said. “What is it?”

The agent pressed all his fingers to his chest in the time-honored agent’s gesture of innocence. “Bubee,” he said, “do I know where your ship is? No. Certain members of the rep company do, If you go to the rep company and tell them you’re here in a spaceship, after five hundred years but you’re not their transportation, do you know what they’ll do?”

The Earth party shook its heads.

“Lynch you,” said Emily bitterly. She was shredding her pencil.

“Very probably,” said the agent.

Ensign Benson said, “Do you mean we can’t get our space ship back because, if people know it’s real but not your damned tour bus, they’ll blame us?”

“I couldn’t have phrased it better myself,” the agent said. “Remember, five hundred years is a long rehearsal.”

Emily, sniffing solemnly over her note pad, murmured, “But what else could we have done? We never knew when....”

“Yes, Emily,” the agent said sympathetically.

Councilman Luthguster said, “But this is terrible; I can’t arrange for transportation or trade agreements or development aid or anything until I’m back on the ship.”

“But how to get there,” Pam said. “That’s the problem.”

All nodded dolefully. But then Billy leaped to his feet, his fresh face eager and alight. “Say, gang!” he cried. “Why don’t we-I dunno-put on a show?”

And what a show! Dorothy and the Wizard of J. Railsforth Farnsworth Repertory Company, and Selected Shorts. The agent helped arrange for cooperation from the craft guilds, and the sounds of cheerful hammering and more cheerful whistling rose up from the stage carpenters building the sets. Backdrops were flown, specialty acts were auditioned and Ensign Benson took to wearing jodhpurs and an ascot. Councilman Luthguster sang the base notes, Billy gave pep talks from the tops of ladders and the captain flew squadrons of stuffed birds. The crew spent hours in the wardrobe shed, sequences from other shows were freely borrowed and even Emily chipped in, writing lyrics.

Curtain up!

“Somewhere over the welkin, skies are green....”

“Of thee I sing, hyperspace!”

“Toto, I don’t think we’re on Alpha Centauri anymore.”

“Heigh-ho! Heigh-ho! It’s off to J. Railsforth Farnsworth Repertory Company we go!”

“Whatever Toto wants, Toto gets.”

“Hee, hee, hee! And I’ll get that dog, too!”

“Toto! Toto!”

“Dingdong, the dingbat’s dead!”

“Ignore the man behind that curtain!”

The finale! A scrim parted and a gasp went up from the audience as Hopeful appeared, gleaming in the Hestia light. Dorothy (Pam), the Cowardly Lion (the captain), the Scarecrow (Ensign Benson), the Tin Person (Hester), the Wizard (Councilman Luthguster) and Toto (Billy) marched, singing, toward their ship.

Along the way, the agent shook Councilman Luthguster’s hand.

“Hurry back,” he said. “We’ll take lunch.”

Klonk-klonk, up the yellow-metal ladder. Snuck went the air-lock door.

Ssssssummmmmmmmmmm went the spaceship, up, up and away.

What stage effects!” marveled the cheering throng. “What magic! What realism! What a finish!”

What-no encore?