



THE LONG WAY HOME

*It's a long way home from
outer space — especially
if you have to walk it!*

WHEN Marty first saw the thing it was nearly dead ahead, half a million miles away, a tiny green blip that repeated itself every five seconds on the screen of his distant search radar.

He was four billion miles from Sol and heading out, working his way slowly through a small swarm of rock chunks that swung in a slow sun-orbit out here beyond Pluto, looking for valuable minerals in a concentration that would make mining profitable.

By FRED SABERHAGEN Illustrated by IVIE

The thing on his radar screen looked quite small and therefore not too promising. But, as it was almost in his path, no great effort would be required to investigate. For all he knew, it might be solid germanium. And nothing better was in sight at the moment.

Marty leaned back in the control seat and said: "We've got one coming up, baby." He had no need to address himself any more exactly. Only one other human was aboard the *Clementine*, or, to his knowledge, within

the better part of a couple of billion miles.

Laura's voice answered through a speaker, from the kitchen two decks below.

"Oh, close? Have we got time for breakfast?"

Marty studied the radar. "About five hours if we maintain speed. Hope it won't be a waste of energy to decelerate and look the thing over." He gave *Clem's* main computer the problem of finding the most economical engine use to approach his find and reach zero velocity relative to it.

"Come and eat!"

"All right." He and the computer studied the blip together for a few seconds. Then the man, not considering it anything of particular importance, left the control room to have breakfast with his bride of three months. As he walked downstairs in the steadily-maintained artificial gravity, he heard the engines starting.

TEN hours later he examined his new find much more closely, with a rapidly focusing alertness that balanced between an explorer's caution and a prospector's elation at a possibly huge strike.

The incredible shape of X, becoming apparent as the *Clem* drew within a few hundred

miles, was what had Marty on the edge of his chair. It was a needle thirty miles long, as near as his radar could measure, and about a hundred yards thick — dimensions that matched exactly nothing Marty could expect to find anywhere in space.

It was obviously no random chunk of rock. And it was no spaceship that he had ever seen or heard of. One end of it pointed in the direction of Sol, causing him to suggest to Laura the idea of a miniature comet, complete with tail. She took him seriously at first, then remembered some facts about comets and swatted him playfully. "Oh, you!" she said.

Another, more real possibility quickly became obvious, with sobering effect. The ancient fear of the Alien that had haunted Earthmen through almost three thousand years of intermittent space exploration, that had never been realized, now peered into the snug control room through the green radar eye.

Aliens were always good for a joke when spacemen met and talked. But they turned out to be not particularly amusing when you were possibly confronting them, several billion miles from Earth. Especially, thought Marty, in a ship built for robot mining, ore refining, and hauling, not for diplomatic

contacts or heroics. And with the only human assistance a girl on her first space trip, Marty hardly felt up to speaking for the human race in such a situation.

It took a minute to set the autopilot so that any sudden move by X would trigger alarms and such evasive tactics as *Clem* could manage. He then set a robot librarian to searching his microfilm files for any reference to a spaceship having X's incredible dimensions.

There was a chance — how good a chance he found hard to estimate, when any explanation looked somewhat wild — that X was a derelict, the wrecked hull of some ship dead for a decade, or a century, or a thousand years. By laws of salvage, such a find would belong to him if he towed it into port. The value might be very high or very low. But the prospect was certainly intriguing.

Marty brought *Clem* to a stop relative to X, and noticed that his velocity relative to Sol now also hung at zero. "I wonder," he muttered. "Space anchor. . .?"

The space anchor had been in use for thousands of years. It was a device that enabled a ship to fasten itself to a particular point in the gravitational field of a massive body such as a sun. If X was anchored, it did not prove that there was still life aboard

her; once "dropped," an anchor could hold as long as a hull could last.

Laura brought sandwiches and a hot drink to him in the control room.

"If we call the Navy and they bring it in we won't get anything out of it," he told her between bites. "That's assuming it's — not alien."

"Could there be someone alive on it?" She was staring into the screen. Her face was solemn but, he thought, not frightened.

"If it's human, you mean? No. I *know* there hasn't been any ship remotely like that used in recent years. Way, way back the Old Empire built some that were even bigger, but none I ever heard of with this crazy shape. . . ."

The robot librarian indicated that it had drawn a blank. "See?" said Marty. "And I've even got most of the ancient types in there."

There was silence for a little while. The evening's recorded music started somewhere in the background.

"What would you do if I weren't along?" Laura asked him.

He did not answer directly, but said something he had been considering. "I don't know the psychology of our hypothetical aliens. But it seems to me that

if you set out exploring new solar systems, you do as Earthmen have always done — go with the best you have in the way of speed and weapons. Therefore if X is alien I don't think *Clem* would stand a chance, trying to fight or run." He paused, frowned at the image of X. "That damned shape — it's just not right for anything."

"We could call the Navy — not that I'm saying we should, darling," she added hastily. "You decide, and I'll never complain either way. I'm just trying to help you think it out."

He looked at her, believed it about there never being any complaints and squeezed her hand. Anything more seemed superfluous.

"If I was alone," he said, "I'd jump into a suit, go look that thing over, haul it back to Ganymede and sell it for a unique whatever-it-is. Maybe I'd make enough money to marry you in real style, and trade in *Clem* for a first-rate ship — or maybe even terraform an asteroid and keep a couple of robot prospectors. I don't know, though. Maybe we'd better call the Navy."

She stood up and laughed at him gently. "We're married enough already, and we had all the style I wanted. Besides, I don't think either of us would be happy sitting on an asteroid very

long. How long do you think it will take you to look it over?"

At the airlock door she had misgivings: "Oh, it is safe enough, isn't it? Marty, be careful and come back soon." She kissed him before he closed his helmet.

They had moved *Clem* to within a few miles of X. Marty mounted his spacebike and approached it slowly, from the side.

The vast length of X blotted out a thin strip of stars to his right and left, as if it were the distant shore of some vast island in a placid Terran sea, and the starclouds below him were watery reflections of the ones above. But space was too black to permit such an illusion to endure.

The tiny FM radar on his bike showed him within three hundred yards of X. He killed his forward speed with a gentle application of retrojets and turned on a spotlight. Bright metal gleamed smoothly back at him as he swung the beam from side to side. Then he stopped it where a dark concavity showed up.

"Lifeboat berth . . . empty," he said aloud, looking through the bike's little telescope.

"Then it is a derelict? We're all right?" asked Laura's voice in his helmet.

"Looks that way, yeah, I guess there's no doubt of it. I'll go in for a closer look now." He eased

the bike forward. X was evidently just some rare type of ship that neither he nor the compilers of the standard reference works in his library had ever heard of. Which sounded a little foolish to him, but . . .

At ten yards distance he killed speed again, set the bike on automatic stay-clear, made sure a line from it was fast to his belt and launched himself out of the saddle gently, headfirst toward X.

The armored hands of his suit touched down first, easily and expertly. In a moment he was standing upright on the hull, held in place by magnetic boots. He looked around. He detected no response to his arrival.

Marty turned toward Sol, sighting down the miles of dark cylinder that seemingly dwindled to a point in the starry distance, like a road on which a man might travel home toward a tiny sun.

Near at hand the hull was smooth, looking like that of any ordinary spaceship. In the direction away from Sol, quite distant, he could vaguely see some sort of projections at right angles to the hull. He mounted his bike again and set off in that direction. When he neared the nearest projection, a mile down the hull, he saw it to be a sort of enormous clamp that encircled X — or rather, part of a clamp. It ended

a few yards from the hull, in rounded globs of metal that had once been molten but were now too cold to affect the thermometer Marty held against them. His radiation counter showed nothing above the normal background.

"Ah," said Marty after a moment, looking at the half-clamp. "Something?"

"I think I've got it figured out. Not quite as weird as we thought. Let me check for one thing more." He steered the bike slowly around the circumference of X.

A third of the way around he came upon what looked like a shallow trench, about five feet wide and a foot deep, with a bottom that shone cloudy gray in his lights. It ran lengthwise on X as far as he could see in either direction.

A door-sized opening was cut in the clamp above the trench.

Marty nodded and smiled to himself, and gunned the bike around in an accelerating curve that aimed at the *Clementine*.

"It's not a spaceship at all, only a part of one," he told Laura a little later, digging in the microfilm film with his own hands, with the air of a man who knew what he was looking for. "That's why the librarian didn't turn it up. Now I remember read-

ing about them. It's part of an Old Empire job of about two thousand years ago. They used a somewhat different drive than we do, one that made one enormous ship more economical to run than several normal sized ones. They made these ships ready for a voyage by fastening together a number of long narrow sections side by side, how many depending on how much cargo they had to move. What we've found is obviously one of those sections."

Laura wrinkled her forehead. "It must have been a terrible job, putting those sections together and separating them, even in free space."

"They used space anchors. That trench I mentioned? It has a forcefield bottom, so an anchor could be sunk through it; then the whole section could be slid straight forward or back, in or out of the bunch . . . here, I've got it, I think. Put this strip in the viewer."

One picture, a photograph, showed what appeared to be one end of a bundle of long needles, in a glaring light, against a background of stars that looked unreal. The legend beneath gave a scanty description of the ship in flowing Old Empire script. Other pictures showed sections of the ship in some detail.

"This must be it, all right,"

said Marty thoughtfully. "Funny looking old tub."

"I wonder what happened to wreck her."

"Drives sometimes exploded in those days, that could have done it. And this one section got anchored to Sol somehow — it's funny."

"How long ago did it happen, do you suppose?" asked Laura. She had her arms folded as if she were a little cold, though it was not cold in the Clementine.

"Must be around two thousand years or more. These ships haven't been used for about that long." He picked up a stylus. "I better go over there with a big bag of tools tomorrow and take a look inside." He noted down a few things he thought he might need.

"Historians would probably pay a good price for the whole thing, untouched," she suggested, watching him draw doodles.

"That's a thought. But maybe there's something really valuable aboard — though I won't be able to give it anything like a thorough search, of course. The thing is anchored, remember. I'll probably have to break in anyway to release that."

She pointed to one of the diagrams. "Look, a section thirty miles long must be one of the passenger compartments. And according to this plan, it would

have no drive at all of its own. We'll have to tow it."

He looked. "Right. Anyway, I don't think I'd care to try its drive if it had one."

He located airlocks on the plan and made himself generally familiar with it.

THE next "morning" found Marty loading extra tools, gadgets and explosives on his bike. The trip to X (he still thought of it that way) was uneventful. This time he landed about a third of the way from one end, where he expected to find a handy airlock and have a choice of directions to explore when he got inside. He hoped to get the airlock open without letting out whatever atmosphere or gas was present in any of the main compartments, as a sudden drop in pressure might damage something in the unknown cargo.

He found a likely-looking spot for entry where the plans had led him to expect one. It was a small auxiliary airlock, only a few feet from the space-anchor channel. The forcefield bottom of that channel was, he knew, useless as a possible doorway. Though anchors could be raised and lowered through it, they remained partly imbedded in it at all times. Starting a new hole from scratch would cause the decompression he was trying to

avoid, and possibly a dangerous explosion as well.

Marty began his attack on the airlock door cautiously, working with electronic "sounding" gear for a few minutes, trying to tell if the inner door was closed as well. He had about decided that it was when something made him look up. He raised his head and sighted down the dark length of X toward Sol.

Something was moving toward him along the hull.

He was up in the bike saddle with his hand on a blaster before he realized what it was — that moving blur that distorted the stars seen through it, like heat waves in air. Without doubt, it was a space anchor. And it moved along the channel.

Marty rode the bike out a few yards and nudged it along slowly, following the anchor. It moved at about the pace of a fast walk. Moved . . . but it was sunk into space.

"Laura," he called, "something odd here. Doppler this hull for me and see if it's moving."

Laura acknowledged in one businesslike word. Good girl, he thought, I won't have to worry about you. He coasted along the hull on the bike, staying even with the apparent movement of the anchor.

Laura's voice came: "It is moving now, towards Sol. About six

miles per hour. Maybe less — it's hard to read, so slow."

"Good, that's what I thought." He hoped he sounded reassuring. He pondered the situation. It was the hull moving then, the forcefield channel sliding by the fixed anchor. Whatever was causing it, it did not seem to be directed against him or the *Clem*. "Look, baby," he went on, "something peculiar is happening." He explained about the anchor. "*Clem* may be no battleship, but I guess she's a match for any piece of wreckage."

"But you're out *there*!"

"I have to see this. I never saw anything like it before. Don't worry, I'll pull back if it looks at all dangerous." Something in the back of his mind told him to go back to his ship and call the Navy. He ignored it without much trouble. He had never thought much of calling the Navy.

About four hours later the incomprehensible anchor neared the end of its track, within thirty yards of what seemed to be X's stern. It slowed down and came to a gradual stop a few yards from the end of the track. For a minute nothing else happened. Marty reported the facts to Laura. He sat straight in the bike saddle, regarding the universe, which offered him no enlightenment.

In the space between the anchor and the end of the track, a second patterned shimmer appeared. It must necessarily have been let "down" into space from inside X. Marty felt a creeping chill. After a little while the first anchor vanished, withdrawn through the forcefield into the hull.

Marty sat watching for twenty minutes, but nothing further happened. He realized that he had a crushing grip on the bike controls and that he was quivering with fatigue.

LAURA and Marty took turns sleeping and watching, that night aboard the *Clementine*. About noon the next day Laura was at the telescope when anchor number one reappeared, now at the "prow" of X. After a few moments the one at the stern vanished.

Marty looked at the communicator that he could use any time to call the Navy. Faster-than-light travel not being practical so near a sun, it would take them at least several hours to arrive after he decided he needed them. Then he beat his fist on the table and swore. "Must be some kind of mechanism in her still operating." He went to the telescope and watched number one anchor begin its apparent slow journey sternward once again. "I don't

know. I've got to settle this."

The doppler showed X was again creeping toward Sol at about six miles an hour.

"Does it seem likely there'd be power left after two thousand years to operate such a mechanism?" Laura asked.

"I think so. Each passenger section had a hydrogen power lamp." He dug out the microfilm again. "Yeah, a small fusion lamp for electricity to light and heat the section, and run the emergency equipment for . . ." His voice trailed off, then continued in a dazed tone: "For recycling food and water."

"Marty, what is it?"

He stood up, staring at the plan. "And the only radios were in the lifeboats, and the lifeboats are gone. I wonder . . . sure. The explosion could have torn them apart, blown them away so. . ."

"What are you talking about?"

He looked again at their communicator. "A transmitter that can get through the noise between here and Pluto wouldn't be easy to jury-rig, even now. In the Old Empire days . . ."

"What?"

"Now about air —" He seemed to wake up with a start, looked at her sheepishly. "Just an idea hit me." He grinned. "I'm making another trip."

An hour later he was landing

on X for the third time, touching down near the "stern". He was riding the moving hull toward the anchor, but it was still many miles away.

The spot he had picked was near another small auxiliary airlock, upon which he began work immediately. After ascertaining that the inner door was closed, he drilled a hole in the outer door to relieve any pressure in the chamber to keep the outer door shut.

The door opening mechanism suffered from twenty-century cramp, but a vibrator tool shook it loose enough to be operated by hand. The inside of the airlock looked like nothing more than the inside of an airlock.

HE patched the hole he had made in the outer door so he would be able — he hoped — to open the inner one normally. He operated the outer door several times to make sure he could get out fast if he had to. After attaching a few extras from the bike to his suit, he said a quick and cheerful goodbye to Laura — not expecting his radio to work from inside the hull — and closed himself into the airlock. Using the vibrator again, he was able to work the control that should let whatever passed for hull atmosphere into the chamber. It came. His wrist gauge

told him pressure was building up to approximately spaceship normal, and his suit mikes began to pick up a faint hollow humming from somewhere. He very definitely kept suit and helmet sealed.

The inner door worked perfectly, testifying to the skill of the Old Empire builders. Marty found himself nearly upside down as he went through, losing his footing and his sense of heroic adventure. In return he gained the knowledge that X's artificial gravity was still at least partly operational. Righting himself, he found he was in a small anteroom banked with spacesuit lockers, now illuminated only by his suit lights but showing no other signs of damage. There was a door in each of the other walls.

He moved to try the one at his right. First drawing his blaster, he hesitated a moment, then slid it back into its holster. Swallowing, he eased the door open to find only another empty compartment, about the size of an average room and stripped of everything down to the bare deck and bulkheads.

Another door led him into a narrow passage where a few overhead lights burned dimly. Trying to watch over his shoulder and ahead at the same time, he followed the hall to a winding stair and began to climb, moving with

all the silence possible in a spacesuit.

The stair brought him out onto a long gallery overlooking what could only be the main corridor of X, a passage twenty yards wide and three decks high; it narrowed away to a point in the dim-lit distance.

A man came out of a doorway across the corridor, a deck below Marty.

He was an old man and may have been nearsighted, for he seemed unaware of the spacesuited figure gripping a railing and staring down at him. The old man wore a sort of tunic intricately embroidered with threads of different colors, and well tailored to his thin figure, leaving his legs and feet bare. He stood for a moment peering down the long corridor, while Marty stared down momentarily frozen in shock.

Marty pulled back two slow steps from the railing, to where he stood mostly in shadow. Turning his head to follow the old man's gaze, he noticed that the forcefield where the anchors traveled was visible running in a sunken strip down the center of the corridor. When the interstellar ship of which X was once a part had been in normal use, the strip might have been covered with a moving walkway of some kind.

THE old man turned his attention to a tank where grew a mass of plants with flat, dark green leaves. He touched a leaf, then turned a valve that doled water into the tank from a thin pipe. Similar valves were clustered on the bulkhead behind the old man, and pipes ran from them to many other plant-filled tanks set at intervals down the corridor. "For oxygen," Marty said aloud in an almost calm voice, and was startled at the sound in his helmet. His helmet airspeaker was not on, so of course the old man did not hear him. The old man pulled a red berry from one of the plants and ate it absently.

Marty made a move with his chin to turn on his speaker, but did not complete it. He half lifted his arms to wave, but fear of the not-understood held him, made him back up slowly into the shadows at the rear of the gallery. Turning his head to the right he could see the near end of the corridor, and an anchor there, not sunken in space but raised almost out of the forcefield on a framework at the end of the strip.

Near the stair he had ascended was a half-open door, leading into darkness. Marty realized he had turned off his suit lights without consciously knowing it. Moving carefully so the old man would not see, he lit one and

probed the darkness beyond the door cautiously. The room he entered was the first of a small suite that had once been a passenger cabin. The furniture was simple, but it was the first of any kind that he had seen aboard X. Garments hanging in one corner were similar to the old man's tunic, although no two were alike exactly. Marty fingered the fabric with one armored hand, holding it close to his faceplate. He nodded to himself; it seemed to be the kind of stuff produced by fiber recycling machinery, and he doubted very much that it was anywhere near two thousand years old.

Marty emerged from the doorway of the little apartment, stood in shadow with his suit lights out, looking around; the old man had disappeared. He remembered that the old man had gazed down the infinite-looking corridor as if expecting something. There was nothing new in sight that way. He turned up the gain of one of his suit mikes and focused it in that direction.

Many human voices were singing, somewhere down there, miles away. He started, and tried to interpret what he heard in some other way, but with an eerie thrill became convinced that his first impression was correct. While he studied a plan of going back to his bike and heading in that di-



rection, he grew aware that the singing was getting louder. And therefore no doubt closer.

HE leaned back against the bulkhead in the shadow at the rear of the gallery. His suit, dark-colored for space work far from Sol, would be practically invisible from the lighted corridor below, while he could see down with little difficulty. Part of his mind urged him to go back to Laura, to call the Navy, that these unknown people could be dangerous to him. But he had to wait and see more of them. He grinned wryly as he realized he was not going to get any salvage out of X after all.

Sweating in spite of his suit's coolers, he listened to the singing grow rapidly louder in his helmet. Male and female voices rose and fell in an intricate melody, sometimes blending, sometimes chanting separate parts. The language was unknown to him.

Suddenly the people were in sight, first only as a faint dot of color in the distance. As they drew nearer he could see that they walked in a long neat column eight abreast, four on each side of the central strip of forcefield. Men and women, apparently teamed according to no fixed rule of age or sex or size — except that he saw no oldsters or young children.

The people sang and leaned forward as they walked, pulling their weight on heavy ropes that were intricately decorated, like their clothing and that of the old man who had now stepped out of his doorway again to greet them. A few other oldsters of both sexes appeared near him to stand and wait. Through a briefly opened door Marty caught a glimpse of a well-lighted room holding machines he recognized as looms only because of the half-finished cloth they held. He shook his head wonderingly.

All at once the walkers were very near; hundreds of people pulling on ropes that led to a multiple whiffletree made of twisted metal pipe, that rode over the central trench. The whiffletree and the space anchor to which it was fastened were pulled past Marty — or rather the spot from which he watched was carried past the fixed anchor by the slow, human-powered thrust of X toward Sol.

Behind the anchor came a small group of children, from about the age of ten up to puberty. They pulled on small ropes, drawing a cart that held what looked like containers for food and water. At the extreme rear of the procession marched a man in the prime of life, tall and athletic, wearing a magnificent head-dress.

ABOUT the time he drew even with Marty, this man stopped suddenly (young and old alike walked steadily at the same fast pace) and uttered a sharp command. Instantly the pulling and singing ceased. Several men nearest the whiffletree moved in and loosed it from the anchor with quick precision. Others held the slackened ropes clear as the enormous inertia of X's mass carried the end of the forcefield strip toward the anchor, which now jammed against the framework holding anchor number two, forcing the framework back where there had seemed to be no room.

A thick forcefield pad now became visible to Marty behind the framework, expanding steadily as it absorbed the energy of the powerful stress between ship and anchor. Conduits of some kind, Marty saw, led away from the pad, possibly to where energy might be stored for use when it came time to start X creeping toward the sun again. A woman in a headdress now mounted the framework and released anchor number two, to drop into space "below" the hull and bind X fast to the place where it was now held by anchor number one. A crew of men came forward and began to raise anchor number one . . .

He found himself descending

the stair, retracing his steps to the airlock. Behind him the voices of the people were raised in a steady recitation that might have been a prayer. Feeling somewhat as if he moved in a dream, he made no particular attempt at caution, but he met no one. He tried to think, to understand what he had witnessed. Vaguely, comprehension came.

Outside, he said: "I'm out all right, Laura. I want to look at something at the other end and I'll come home." He scarcely heard what she said in reply, but realized that her answer had been almost instantaneous; she must have been listening steadily for his call all the time. He felt better.

The bike shot him thirty miles down the dream-like length of X toward Sol in a few minutes. A lot faster than the people inside do their traveling, he thought . . . and Sol was dim ahead.

Almost recklessly he broke into X again, through an airlock near the prow. At this end of the forcefield strip hung a gigantic block and tackle that would give a vast mechanical advantage to a few hundred people pulling against an anchor, when it came time for them to start the massive hull moving toward Sol once more.

He looked in almost unnoticed at a nursery, small children in the care of a few women. He

thought one of the babies saw him and laughed at him as he watched through a hole in a bulkhead where a conduit had once passed.

"WHAT is it?" asked Laura impatiently as he stepped exhausted out of the shower room aboard the *Clem*, wrapping a robe around him. He could see his shock suddenly mirrored in her face.

"People," he said, sitting down. "Alive over there. Earth people. Humans."

"You're all right?"

"Sure. It's just — God!" He told her about it briefly. "They must be descended from the survivors of the accident, whatever it was. Physically there's no reason why they couldn't live when you come to think of it — even reproduce up to a limited number. Plants for oxygen — I bet their air's as good as ours. Recycling equipment for food and water, and the hydrogen power lamp still working to run it, and to give them light and gravity . . . they have about everything they need. Everything but a space-drive." He leaned back with a sigh and closed his eyes. It was hard for him to stop talking to her.

She was silent for a little, trying to assimilate it all. "But if they have hydrogen power

couldn't they have rigged something?" she finally asked. "Some kind of a drive, even if it was slow? Just one push and they'd keep moving."

Marty thought it over. "Moving a little faster won't help them." He sat up and opened his eyes again. "And they'd have a lot less work to do every day. I imagine too large a dose of leisure time could be fatal to all of them."

"Somehow they had the will to keep going, and the intelligence to find a way, to evolve a system of life that worked for them, that kept them from going wild and killing each other. And their children, and their grandchildren, and after that . . ." Slowly he stood up. She followed him into the control room, where they stood watching the image of X that was still focused on the telescope screen.

"All those years," Laura whispered. "All that time."

"Do you realize what they're doing?" he asked softly. "They're not just surviving, turned inward on weaving and designing and music."

"In a few hours they're going to get up and start another day's work. They're going to pull anchor number one back to the front of their ship and lower it. That's their morning job. Then someone left in the rear will raise

anchor number two. Then the main group will start pulling against number one, as I saw them doing a little while ago, and their ship will begin to move toward Sol. Every day they go through this they move about thirty miles closer to home.

"Honey, these people are walking home and pulling their ship with them. It must be a religion with them by now, or something very near it..." He put an arm around Laura.

"MARTY... how long would it take them?"

"Space is big," he said in a flat voice, as if quoting something he had been required to memorize.

After a few moments he continued. "I said just moving a little faster won't help them. Let's say they've traveled thirty miles a day for two thousand years. That's — somewhere near twenty-two million miles. Almost enough to get from Mars to Earth at their nearest approach. But they've got a long way to go to reach the neighborhood of Mars' orbit. We're well out beyond Pluto here. Practically speaking, they're just about where they started from." He smiled wanly. "Really they're not far from home, for an interstellar

ship. They had their accident almost on the doorstep of their own solar system, and they've been walking toward the threshold ever since."

Laura went to the communicator and began to set it up for the call that would bring the Navy within a few hours. She paused. "How long would it take them now," she asked, "to get somewhere near Earth?"

"Hell would freeze over. But they can't know that any more, or maybe they still know it and it just doesn't bother them. They must just go on, tugging at that damned anchor day after day, year after year, with maybe a holiday now and then... I don't know how they do it. They work and sing and feel they're accomplishing something... and really, they are, you know. They have a goal and they are moving toward it. I wonder what they say of Earth, how they think about it."

Slowly Laura continued to set up the communicator.

Marty watched her. "Are you sure?" he pleaded suddenly. "What are we doing to them?"

But she had already sent the call.

For better or worse, the long voyage was almost over.

— FRED SABERHAGEN



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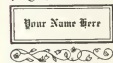
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