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SPACE PRIZE

[Readers have come to like these little vignettes about the eternal skirmishing between Jock Mactavish and the long-suffering Kennedy. As usual, justice prevails in the end].

The abandoned ship was rotating slowly about her axis, ports drifting almost imperceptibly out of brilliant sunshine into the almost total darkness of the dim space-light. Jock Mactavish chuckled as he gazed through the port of his old trader.

“Me luck’s in this day, laddie!” he said. “A gift from heaven it is.”

I smiled. “You’re worse than the old pirates — ”

He turned hurt eyes on me, his wrinkled face screwed up. “Yon ship is worth a million. She’ll be listed and there’ll be a reward.” He examined me seriously. “Always help folk, laddie, me mother said! An’ won’t I be helpin’ to report this ship an’ get her salvaged?”

The prow of the space liner was slowly coming into view, revealing high gold letters. Mactavish screwed up his eyes, striving to decipher them. Suddenly he grunted.

“Yon ship is the Helopolis, lost this twelve months!”

His excitement had increased. I could distinguish the ship’s name, now. The Helopolis was a mighty vessel — such a prize as no buccaneer of old would have found upon the seas.

Jock Mactavish turned his ancient trader in a slow arc. His daughter Jill came from the radio cabin adjoining. She looked out of the port, then at Jock.

“There’s another blip on the screen, dad,” she said. “Distant, but approaching fast.”

He patted her shoulder. “Never fear, lass. We’ve found the Helopolis an’ by the saints I’ll see ’tis us who collect the prize money ! Radio Mars for details. If the Helopolis ain’t listed, have a relay to Earth.”

Jill raised her brows, disappearing, and I gazed at Jock in astonishment. A relay to Earth would cost a pretty packet. He seemed to guess my thoughts.

“The prize we’d get for a big ship like this warrants the vast expense,” he said.

We prepared the trader’s space tug— a leaky can that I felt would be sorely taxed even in chugging the short distance across to the Helopolis. We had it ready when a silver spear glinted high overhead, coming in a long curve towards us. Mactavish eyed it. His face grew red. He puffed out his cheeks.

“Trouble always follows the honest,” he stated regretfully.

I studied the silvery ship drifting silently down. “You know her?”

Jock said a hard word. “Know her! It’s Captain Kennedy’s ship, laddie, none other. ’Tis that schemin’, crooked, lyin’ Kennedy mon, rascal that he is ! ”

He got out of the space tug, muttering. The silvery ship came to rest a mile above us. A sleek, new space tug drifted down from it. Grumbling to himself, Jock manipulated the air-lock controls. The space tug drifted in. The doors closed, and a tall man lowered himself to the deck. Jock swore under his breath, but beamed.

“Cap’n Kennedy! Me pleasure at seein’ ye knows no bounds! ’Tis a happy mon I am, Kennedy ! ”

Captain Kennedy frowned. Many years Jock’s junior, he knew that he had reason to suspect Jock’s greeting.

“Just thought I’d look in to see if you wanted any help with the prize.” He jerked a thumb towards the Helopolis. “She’s a big ship.”

Jock patted his shoulder. “Help, Cap’n! Nay, mon, I wouldn’a be troubling ye!”

Kennedy looked displeased. “I could at least radio verification for you, Mactavish.”

Jock shook his head. “Nay, mon. My gal Jill can do that.”

I saw a gleam enter Kennedy’s eyes. “You haven’t radioed yet?” he asked quickly.

The dismay on Jock’s face showed he had realised his error. “Ye wouldn’a try to trick me, Cap’n?” he said soberly. “Ye wouldn’a hold a grudge against an honest old trader?” He scratched his chin. “In short, Cap’n, ye wouldn’a try to get the Helopolis for yourself?”

Kennedy’s face shone with triumph. “Remember Pluto!” he said. His voice was nasty. “Remember Cephenid II? Remember the time you sold me all them dud radios?”

Jock was visibly hurt. “They wasn’t dud,” he stated. “Ye should have known they wouldn’a work on a planet where there was no transmitter ! ”*

Kennedy stuck a finger in Jock’s chest. “You won’t trick me again, Mactavish ! ” he declared. “I win this time — and you don’t get the Helopolis ! ”

He swore. Jock looked over his shoulder quickly. “Sssh, Cap’n! My gal Jill may be listenin’. Ye’d not want her to be learnin’ bad words ! ”

Kennedy snorted and turned on a heel. Jock halted him just before he entered his space tug.

“Ye’ll not be goin’ across to the Helopolis, Cap’n? Ye’ll not be tryin’ to trick an old mon like meself?”

One leg through the hatch of his tug, Kennedy glared down. “You know you’re beaten, Mactavish! My radio man heard your daughter asking for an Earth relay. I can work Earth direct .” He let that sink in. “What’s more, I can get across to the Helopolis while you’re sticking gum on the leaks in your tin-can yonder!” He gestured at Mactavish’s ancient and battered space tug.

Jock shook his head sadly. “Ye’re rash, Cap’n. Ye wouldn’a find me crossin’ to the Helopolis that quick for a fortune.” He drew in his cheeks and made a gesture across his throat. “Driftin’ ships is dangerous, Cap’n. Suppose the Helopolis is radioactive. Suppose — ”

Kennedy laughed loudly. “We can test for that, Mactavish.”

“Suppose there’s ’orrible diseases,” Jock continued doggedly. “Nay, Cap’n, I wouldn’a board her, if I was you.”

Kennedy began to lower himself from sight. “You’ll need to think up a better trick than that to keep me out, Mactavish,” he called.

The hatch closed. Jock manipulated the air-lock controls. When Kennedy’s tug was in free space and gaining speed, Jock shook his grey head.

“That Kennedy mon bears me malice,” he said sadly. “He only came to see if we’d reported. ’Tis a bad mon that he is, an’ holdin’ me innocent past against me.”

He gazed dejectedly across at the Helopolis.

Jill pointed through the port. She had the same blue eyes as Jock, and when she smiled that was something worth seeing. I had a special kind of interest in Jill — and she had

told me that she had that same kind of interest in me.

“Noticed that speck drifting round the Helopolis ?” she asked.

I nodded. “Probably a lifeboat. It must have failed and been in orbit round the big ship ever since.”

The silvery mote glinted high above the parent ship. We watched it for a few moments.

“Wonder why the Helopolis became derelict,” I said at last.

Jill shook her head and her curls bobbed. “We’ve got no detailed report yet.”

Mactavish came out of the control room. The grime and dust clinging to him showed that he had been in the holds. He carried a rusty cable.

“Let’s go get that lifeboat in tow,” he suggested. “Maybe there’s duplicates of the Helopolis’s papers in it. ’Tis likely if the cap’n tried to get away.”

His face was glum. I guessed why. Kennedy had us beaten. If the Helopolis was listed as an Earth ship, Kennedy could bang a report straight to her owners while Mactavish was trying to fix up a relay. Mactavish’s ship transmitter was a junk heap. And if it came to reporting in person, Kennedy could leave Jock’s old ship standing.

We donned spacesuits and took out the tug, Jill staying behind. The lifeboat bore the name Helopolis and was in a slow orbit round the parent ship. We got it in tow and gently drew it away towards Jock’s vessel.

“Likely enough there may be a bit of a reward for the ship’s papers,” Jock said sadly over the intercom.

When we were near Mactavish’s ship Jock looked back. He pointed and his face was red behind his helmet.

“That Kennedy mon is on the drifter, laddie ! ” was all he said.

I looked back. Captain Kennedy was in the entrance lock of the Helopolis. He waved mockingly, as if able to see our faces.

We moored the lifeboat outside and entered Jock’s ship. I wondered whether Kennedy had already got the inner lock open and entered the Helopolis.

As we removed our spacesuits Jill came from the radio room. “Captain Kennedy wishes to speak to you,” she said.

Jock sighed deeply. “’Tis abuse that he wishes to pour on me grey head, lass,” he murmured.

We entered the radio room. He called, and Kennedy’s voice came back strongly.

“That you, Mactavish?”

“None other, Cap’n Kennedy.”

Kennedy laughed. “I’m on the Helopolis!”

“So we have observed, Cap’n.”

“What’s more, we’ll soon have the inner airlock open!” The laugh came again, nastily. “That finishes you, Mactavish! You’ll get nothing out of this!” Kennedy paused. “Think I didn’t see you taking the lifeboat in, Mactavish? That will do you no good, either! If there are papers in the lifeboat, they’ll only be the duplicate copies. The ship’s papers will be in the Helopolis. I can get them to Earth while you’re tying your ship together with new string ! ”

I saw Jock’s face fall. “’Tis a hard man ye are, Cap’n,” he declared. “Never bear malice, me mother said.” Kennedy interjected a word that made Jock wag a finger at the loudspeaker. “Tut, tut, Cap’n,” he said. “Remember my gal Jill is listenin’!”

Kennedy snorted audibly. “You won’t talk yourself out of this, Mactavish ! ”

Mactavish sighed. “Did I ever wish ye anything but well, Kennedy mon?”

There was a long silence, and I wondered if Kennedy had turned off his suit radio, which I assumed was being relayed from his ship. Then his voice sounded again.

“There’s a reward for these papers, Mactavish ! The report has just come through. A big reward. There was a bit of a mystery about the Helopolis. The owners want her papers badly ! ”

A spark showed in Jock’s eyes. “A big reward, Cap’n?”

“A hundred thousand credits ! ”

I looked at Jock. There were tears in his eyes. ‘‘A hundred thousand credits'.” he murmured.

Kennedy laughed nastily and switched off.

I went to see if Jill had fixed up the radio relay. It would be a roundabout working, but Jock's transmitter was too old to contact Earth direct.

She sighed. "Dad promised me a special wedding present, if this came off."

"Wedding presents have to be shared," I said.

She smiled. "It would be."

She returned to the transmitter. It was scarcely more powerful than the ship-to-ship equipment Jock used. Half an hour passed, and I saw that it was no use. Jill shook her head.

"Kennedy may even have got into the Helopolis by now," she said dispiritedly.

Finally I returned to Jack's cabin. He stood dejectedly watching a blue glimmer that played round the derelict's lock.

"The Cap'n is more than half way in, bad luck to him," he said.

I watched Kennedy and his men for a few minutes. Kennedy had all the equipment and help that Jock Mactavish lacked.

"He's a bad man, is that Kennedy," Jock stated at last. "But I ain't the kind to bear malice."

A new note was in his voice, and I glanced at him. A glint was in his eyes.

"I'll be gettin' Jill to contact Kennedy," he said.

I followed him back into the radio room. It was a long time before Kennedy's voice came.

"They tell me you want to parley, Mactavish." His tone was suspicious.

"I do, Cap'n, I do." Jock sat down heavily on the rickety stool by the panel. "'Tis in the kindness of me heart that is born pity for ye, Cap'n — "

Kennedy said a rude word. "Come to the point — if you've got one, Mactavish ! "

Jock raised his eyes towards where heaven could be. "Ye're a hard mon, Kennedy, but I won't hold it against ye. Out o' the generosity of me heart I wants to make an offer to ye."

The loudspeaker rang with laughter. “That’s choice ! ”

Jock sighed loudly. “’Tis a generous mon I am, like me mother always said. Stay out of the Helopolis, Cap’n, and radio Earth for me, an’ I’ll give ye one-quarter of the reward.”

“You’re daft!” Kennedy’s patience seemed to be going. “I’m entering the Helopolis, taking the ship’s papers, and going straight back to Earth! I shall have all the reward — and there won’t be any split!”

Jock’s eyes were cast down. “I’ll give ye one-third of the reward, Cap’n. I’ll forget them unkind words.”

Kennedy swore, so roundly that Jock switched off hastily. “’Tis useless talking to the mon,” he said sadly.

He left the radio room and drew in the Helopolis's lifeboat, making her secure. Then he turned his old tramp slowly, and set a course Earthwards. His acceleration was the gentlest thing in space, but rivets and plates twanged and squeaked.

“’Tis useless talking to such a mon as Kennedy,” he declared again, when the course was set and the old ship in steady acceleration.

Almost an hour had passed when the ship-to-ship radio buzzed. Mactavish switched it on.

“This is Captain Kennedy.” The voice was loud and clear. “I’m in the Helopolis. I can leave you a month behind, yet, Mactavish ! ”

“Have ye found the ship’s papers?” Jock asked.

“I have!”

“There’s copies in the lifeboat we salvaged. I observed ’em through the cockpit window. I’m off quietly to Earth to take ’em in.”

I wondered whether Jock was growing weak-minded. Kennedy could overtake us without difficulty.

“When you get to Earth your papers will be valueless, Mactavish!” Kennedy declared. The triumph made his voice hard. “I’ll already have delivered the duplicates ! ”

Jock looked sad. “Ye’re a hasty mon, Cap’n. ’Tis a bad thing! Ye tricked me, and ye

rushed straight out to the Helopolis. But I didn’a hold it against ye.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then Kennedy laughed. I noticed a slight hint of unease in the sound.

“You’re crazy!” he said.

“Not that crazy as ye, Cap’n. Ain’t ye never heard o’ Venusian measles?”

"Venusian measles!" Kennedy’s voice was astonished.

“Aye.” Jock sighed. “’Tis a harmless complaint for a strong man like yeself, Cap’n. But easily fatal for people who bin aboard ship too long, on short rations. The Helopolis was on her way back from exploration. She called at Venus for water.” Jock paused. “I pleaded with ye not to enter, Cap’n. If ye hadn’t rushed that quick to the Helopolis ye’d have heard the report.”

“So what?” Kennedy seemed to have collected himself. “I can still leave you a million miles behind! ”

“Maybe, Cap’n, maybe. But haste will do ye no good. There’s a rule, just as the radio said, as ye’d have heard if ye’d waited—”

“A rule?” Panic was in Kennedy’s voice.

“Yes, Cap’n.” Jock smiled. “Venusian measles be that catchin’, Cap’n, that there’s a six month quarantine.”

A gasp came from the loudspeaker.

“Yes, Cap’n, six months,” Jock repeated. “Not so much as a scrap o’ paper will be let out o’ the Helopolis during that time.”

Kennedy blasphemed. “You’ve been in the lifeboat — you’ll have to wait six months too — ! ”

“Not I,” Jock declared. “I ain’t been in her! What’s more, ’tis a small vessel she is. They’ll have her disinfected an’ open within the hour.” He sighed. “They can’t disinfect ships with folks in ’em, Cap’n.”

As the full force of his words became clear to Kennedy, Kennedy began to swear. Jock Mactavish frowned, compressed his lips, and leaned towards the microphone.

“Tut, tut, mon,” he said. “Me gal Jill is listenin’.” He struck up the switch, and turned

round in silence. “Can’t understand it,” he said. “’Tis strange, but that Kennedy mon always seems to think I done him some injustice. An’ didn’a I offer him a quarter — nay, a third? ’Tis a bad mon he is, an’ I wouldn’a be one of his men, cooped up in the Helopolis with ’im for six months, not for twice a hundred thousand credits …”