

DANGER IN THE VOID

By Charles E. Fritch

Silvia secretly planned to divorce George when they reached Arcturus. But a space journey can alter a careful plan—or hatch a worse one!

The trouble started when the *Arcturus Queen* was four billion miles out of Earth, heading for the star after which it was named. It pulled clear of the solar system using conventional drive, then switched into subspace. A few minutes later the ship shuddered perceptibly, and an authoritative voice came reassuringly from the public address system.

"Passengers will please remain in their seats. We are temporarily cutting the subspace drive due to mechanical difficulties which have developed. There is no cause for alarm."

The message was repeated and George said, "What do you suppose is the matter?"

"How should I know," Silvia snapped. "I'm not a space mechanic. Why don't you find out if you're so interested."

He glared at her. "I was just wondering. You don't have to get so disagreeable. But then, why should now be any different?"

She smiled at that, though her blood raced and her fingers itched to make red ribbons of his face. "I've got plenty of reason to be disagreeable—"

"Okay, okay," he said; "let's not go through that again." He got up. "I'm going up to the observation platform." And he went down the aisle between the rows of seats and disappeared through a door at the farthest end.

She glared after him. That was always his way, running out on an argument. Well, when this trip was over, there would be no more running away.

A man dropped into the seat beside her.

"This seat's taken," she said automatically, and then realized the man must have known, since all seats were reserved.

"I know," the man said. "I'd like to talk to you."

She studied him for a moment. He had a rather common face, one with no particularly outstanding features, a face that would be difficult to remember, she thought. He wore a plain business suit, with a conventional white shirt and an unobtrusive tie. He did not appear the wolfish type to her, but rather the ordinary businessman you might see hanging onto helibus straps anyplace on Earth.

"You want to talk to me?" she said carefully. "About what?"

"Your divorce," the man said simply.

"My divorce? But—" She stopped. She was about to say, "But how did you know?" when it suddenly occurred to her that George might have hired this man to find out if she were planning one of those rapid Arcturan separations. She hadn't thought to wonder if he suspected she was planning one. If he knew about her divorce plans, he might take counter measures just for spite; with Arcturan divorce regulations as they were, that would be bad.

She said, "I'm not divorced, Mr...."

"Jones," the man supplied, smiling. "I know that, Mrs. Bennet, but I also know that you're going to Arcturus to obtain one. I'd like to talk to you about that, confidentially of course."

She was certain of it now. He knew her name and spoke about a divorce no one but she knew of. "I'm sorry," she said coldly, turning her head away to indicate that as far as she was concerned

the interview was at an end, "I gave no one to understand that. I'm accompanying my husband on a business trip. Now, if you'll please—"

"Nevertheless," the man insisted, "your intentions are plain, perhaps not to others or even your husband—but to us, very clear. Let me be frank, Mrs. Bennet. I represent an organization which can be of great benefit to you, providing you help us by accepting our standard plan."

"Your organization?" she questioned.

The man waved a vague hand. "The organization is of necessity nameless. However, it is quite effective. In fact, the only way you've heard of us, without realizing it, is through the effects we produce for our clients."

"What sort of—effects?"

"I promised to be frank, Mrs. Bennet. I shall. Your husband is an android, and you hate him for that reason and for others."

Silvia gasped. "How did you know? That he's an android, I mean?"

The man smiled. "Our organization has access to a great deal of information; it's an integral part of our business, this information, serving as a springboard for contacting prospective clients like you."

"You mean," she said testily, "you'd like to help me get a divorce?" She smiled, adding, "For a fee, naturally."

The man shook his head no. "Something more permanent. We'd like to make a widow of you."

For a moment Silvia sat paralyzed, thinking she had not heard right. After awhile, she said, "You'd like to what?"

"You were carefully studied," the man went on, "and we know the idea of your husband's death is not repugnant to you; that's why I'm suggesting the idea simply, without any cat-and-mouse tactics. Your husband has insurance amounting to slightly less than one hundred thousand credits; our fee will be one-tenth of that plus one-tenth of any other monies which may accrue as a result of his death."

Silvia sat in shocked silence, not knowing what to say. "You're crazy," she managed finally. "I'll call the officers—"

"Who wouldn't believe you because the story is fantastic," the man pointed out, certain of himself. "Only our clients and potential clients know we are in existence, for not one of our—er—operations has been discovered. Think it over, Mrs. Bennet. Even though Arcturan divorces can be quick, they aren't always painless. It's like war with them, just as everything is, and wars can be lost. Our way is more certain; you're assured of your husband's estate and nine-tenths of all insurance money. I'll be around when you change your mind."

He got up and walked down the aisle in back of her. Silvia didn't look to follow him. She was thinking, *when* I change my mind; the man was that sure of it, was he? Or was that just to put her in a positive frame of mind, making her think it was not a question of yes or no, but when. She had quarrels with George, sure, and sometimes she even felt she hated him—but the idea of murder had not entered her mind. Mentally she added, *at least until now!* She shook her head—no, it was out of the question.

She had to admit to herself, though, now that she *was* thinking of it, that she would miss the easy living being married to George entailed, even with any alimony she might receive. He was the android version of the old Horatio Alger story, though very few persons knew or even suspected George was not human. The World Congress had passed equalizing laws for androids just as they had for the various races, with the difference that it worked for androids since they had no outward mark of being different from the select group.

While not wealthy, they had lived well, with George trying in his simple fashion to please her. She thought once she had loved him, for after all he was a rather likable person. He had told her of his being a non-human and had proposed in almost the same breath, and it had shocked her at first the way any normal woman would be shocked at being told such a thing. But George was on his way to becoming somebody in the business world, and after going mentally over the pros and cons of the thing she had decided she could do much worse. There were times during the two years of marriage, however, when she wasn't even certain of that.

She had considered the possibility of forcing him after the divorce to give her some of his real estate or investments in return for not disclosing his secret; for while technically there was supposed to be no ill will toward androids there was an instinctive repulsion on the part of many humans for someone who was not of their kind, and George's business contacts would inevitably suffer if the knowledge got out. It was not blackmail, she rationalized—she disliked the unlawful sound of the word—but a business deal in which she supplied silence in return for his money. It was the least he could do, she thought, after taking up two years of her life.

But murder was another thing, a totally different thing that had entered her mind only briefly during arguments and then not seriously. Even blackmail would be lily-white compared to it. She had never actually entertained the idea for any length of time, but now she considered it—not seriously even now, she told herself hastily, but merely as an intellectual diversion.

Android or not, as far as the courts were concerned, it was murder just as though the victim were a human. But the case might never reach the courts, for the "organization" would handle all homicidal details, she remembered, and they were probably professionals in the art. Strange, no one had discovered the organization, but that probably testified to its ability. They could probably kill someone, even George, and no one would ever know....

She shook her head in mild disdain, wondering at the sudden flood of criminal thoughts started by the stranger. She reminded herself that she was going to Arcturus to divorce her husband, not to kill him. She wondered disinterestedly if he were sulking up there on the observation platform.

The loudspeaker crackled and a feminine voice said, "The mechanical difficulties have been located and are being repaired. It will be approximately thirty minutes, Earth rating, before we enter subspace again. Meanwhile, the lounge is open for those wishing to patronize it. May we suggest a cocktail, followed by a dinner from any of the planets of any system. The view from the observation platform—"

The voice droned on, telling of the swimming pool, the three-dimensional (off-gravity) tennis rooms, and other diversions

designed to get passengers' minds off the fact that they were temporarily stalled in open space.

George appeared in the doorway at one end of the aisle and walked toward her. She gave a small gasp as she saw the stranger come through the doorway behind him. They came down the aisle, and George dropped into his seat. The stranger looked questioningly at her before he passed. She shook her head no.

"There's a good view from the observation platform," George said, as though making an effort to be conversational. "Now's the time to see it, when the ship's in normal space. They've got a large transparent dome, like half a bubble, and when you look up it seems as though you're out there in space, floating."

"Really?" she said drily. "I'm not exactly a tourist, you know. I *have* been on observation platforms before."

For a moment he looked at her as though wondering if there were anything he could say that wouldn't bring out a disagreeable word. "Silvia, I wish—" he began.

"All right, all right," she interrupted wearily. "If there's anything I've said to injure your poor sensitive feelings, I apologize. But please don't give me that lost sheep-dog look; I can't stand it."

He started to say something, then changed his mind at the futility of it and fell silent. She regarded him from the corner of her vision for a moment, feeling strangely sympathetic toward him. It made her feel something of a heel when he fell silently accusing like that, and she didn't like the feeling. If only he'd rant and rave at her, stand on his own two feet and maybe even beat her once in a while. She wouldn't like that, but at least it would be better than this

outwardly placid pacificism. She suspected his attitude stemmed from an inferior complex due to his being android; he could spin the world on its tail, corner all the credits in the solar system, but still he could not escape the fact of his artificial birth. That fact was her weapon, and he knew it and was afraid of it.

After awhile, he said slowly, "I'm going to get a divorce, Silvia."

She looked at him swiftly, her eyes taking in each facet of his features to see if he were jesting. She even wondered for a moment if she had heard correctly.

"I'm going to get a divorce on Arcturus," he repeated, not looking at her. "I've been thinking it over for the past several months. Finally, I decided it would be the best thing for both of us. I hope you won't contest it; I don't think I'd like one of those running battles."

Silvia sat stunned by the revelation. This was to have been her surprise party, not his, for under Arcturan divorce regulations the member initiating the action had the distinct advantage, especially when the other was unprepared; the war-conditioned star-system had developed this marital blitzkrieg to satisfy the sporting instincts of its people and to attract the curiosity-seeking Earth trade. She had figured it as a surprise to him, knowing he would be shocked by its suddenness and take no action against her demands for what would normally constitute an excessive amount of alimony.

"I thought I'd better tell you," he said, almost apologetically, "even if it does work to my disadvantage." He got up. "If you'd care to discuss it further, I'll be in the bar."

In shocked silence, Silvia watched her husband retreat down the aisle. It was so typical of him to tell her, but the thought of him doing something like this at all was incredible. More than that, it was unbearable. She felt anger surge within her to realize that she'd been beaten to the punch, even if the romantic fool had confessed his intentions. Slowly, she could sense her plans wavering, becoming insecure, and panic gripped her. She'd had it all planned, all of it, working out the details with secret enthusiasm, never suspecting George was discontented enough to take action himself.

She still had a good chance, of course, but not nearly as good a one as before. The two years she had been married to him would be an eternity compared to what compensation she might receive now, if she received anything at all. Perhaps she could make up to him before they got to Arcturus, convince him she was repentant, that she wanted him to remain with her. The thought of kowtowing before him, putting her pride on the auction block, sickened her, though. Besides, he would easily see through the subterfuge; though weak, he was not a fool. Inwardly, she cursed, her mind a frantic jumble of thoughts. There was nothing she could do, nothing except hope for the best. Unless—

The stranger appeared with the thought concerning him. He dropped into the seat beside her.

"Have you reconsidered?" he asked her quietly.

It was murder, she knew, and yet George was only an android, something that was manufactured artificially in a laboratory in great liquid-filled tanks; that somehow made it different, made it something like putting a machine out of commission rather than destroying a life.

She wet her lips. "In the eyes of the law," she said, "it's murder, you know."

"All the laws in the universe," the man returned gravely, "will not make an android human, Mrs. Bennet. There is a faction which gives our organization a bonus each time an android is destroyed, so you can see you're not alone in this."

She didn't look at him. "How would you do it?"

"Efficiently," he replied vaguely, "in a way I cannot yet disclose. Satisfaction, however, is guaranteed."

"Ten percent of the insurance money is the total fee?"

"Ten percent of *all* insurance monies," he corrected, "which is not necessarily the same thing." He drew a paper from his coat, opened it and handed her a pen.

"I have to sign something?" she asked. "But won't that incriminate me?"

"You promise to pay the ten percent *in consideration of services rendered*," the man explained. "The services are, of course, not stated."

She took the pen and signed before she could talk herself out of it.

"When will it be?"

Carefully, he folded the document and returned it to his coat. "Before we reach Arcturus," the man said, getting up. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Bennet. Glad to be of service to you." And he walked away.

She nodded vaguely and then began considering what she had done. George was an android, she told herself again, only an android. But how could you tell an android from a human? Certainly not outwardly. Blood chemistry was different, but the blood was red just the same. The skin was a different composition, yet it felt and looked like human skin. The personality and the character had human flaws in them. What, then, was the difference? The answer came: an android was not human because he was an android, which by definition was not human.

This reasoning tended to confuse her, and she tried to push the thoughts from her mind. It was done, and that was all that mattered, she told herself. Pangs of conscience might plague her now, but afterward the soothing balm of money would ease the pain. They'd never gotten along, so what difference did it make.

She forced her thoughts away from that and wondered how they'd do it. She hoped suddenly that it wouldn't be violent, and then she recalled that a double indemnity clause would give her twice the hundred thousand—less the ten percent, of course, for services rendered. At least, she hoped he wouldn't suffer. He'd suffered enough during his lifetime, just for being an android.

It must have been horrible, she thought, having to go through life knowing you're less than human, or at least in having people think that. Even if humans accepted you as an equal (which they didn't, despite any laws), you'd have to live with the knowledge that you evolved from an artificially produced embryo under conditions simulating normal birth. Artificial growth, she thought disgustedly, like the hydroponic production of vegetables. She felt a sudden sorrow for him, a sympathy that was as far from pity as it had ever

been. Perhaps it was even for his own good, she tried to rationalize, to do this. And yet she was still not certain.

George came down the aisle toward her, and she looked away hastily. She felt the seat depress beside her.

"The subspace drive will be ready in a few minutes more," he said. "Then we'll really be on our way to Arcturus."

"Yes," she said quietly, not looking at him. She wanted to say something sarcastic, something to make him squirm, something that would give an aura of normality to her actions. Yet the words stuck in her throat, refusing to come. He has only a few moments, she told herself, let them be pleasant.

She was surprised that the thought put her in a bad light, almost admitting that it was her fault that they didn't get along; yet it was difficult to be patient with someone who always seemed to be thinking grave thoughts, as though constantly reminding himself he was an inferior.

But there was a time, she remembered, when he had not been grave. When they had first met, for example, and during the courtship that had followed. A smile touched her lips as she thought about the little things, the picnics and the sudden drenching rainstorms that inevitably came after the ants were finished with their food, the 'copter trips over the scenic wonderlands of Earth, the first accidental brushings of their hands that had led to a kiss and then to another. But that was before she had known he was an android.

She felt suddenly ashamed that the word "android" could mean so much.

"George?" She reached out and touched his hand. It felt warm and human.

He turned, bewilderment in those android human-looking eyes. He smiled at her, rather nervously, she thought. "Yes?"

"Nothing," she said, "nothing at all." She drew her hand away and stared straight ahead.

It was wrong, she thought suddenly, it was the wrongest thing she had ever done in her life. She knew that with sudden clarity. All the money in the universe would not be worth the life of this—this *human* beside her. Yes, that was it, android or not, he was as human as anyone she had ever known.

The loudspeaker hummed briefly and a voice said, "In thirty seconds we will enter subspace. All passengers will remain seated until the changeover is complete."

The voice repeated the message, and Silvia thought frantically, we'll be on our way to Arcturus and somewhere along the line the stranger will kill George!

She leaped up.

"Sit down," George cried, pushing at her. "We're going into subspace."

"I've got to see somebody," she said, struggling.

"It can wait," George insisted.

She went limp, as she heard the whine of the motors deep down within the spaceship. "Yes," she said, "yes, I suppose it will." But

not too long. She didn't know when, or even how, but each moment might be George's last.

She braced herself involuntarily, as the whine rose to the threshold of inaudibility. A sudden rumbling came. The spaceship shook, the walls twisting as though grasped by a giant's hand. The room tilted precariously. A woman screamed.

"Something's gone wrong," George shouted. He grabbed Silvia's hand.

"Attention all passengers," a frantic voice came from the loudspeaker, "prepare to abandon ship. Put on emergency spacesuits and go to lifecraft assigned you. There is no immediate cause for alarm. There is time enough for all to reach safety, if instructions are obeyed. Above all, remain calm. Calls for help are going out—"

Silvia was dimly aware that George had pulled her spacesuit from the overhead locker and was trying to stuff her into it. Thank goodness, she thought, it was like a miracle this happening. Now, neither of them would go to Arcturus and the stranger's plans would be delayed until she had time to cancel them.

"I'm okay," she insisted, fumbling with the rest of her suit. "Put yours on."

"We're going to be killed!" a man shouted near them. He scrambled down the aisle toward the exit. George hit him, and the man staggered, looking like a small boy punished for breaking a window. Then he began sobbing and someone led him away.

The ship shuddered again, and the walls protested with the grating of metal. Silvia staggered, but her husband's arm shot out to steady her.

A voice from the loudspeaker said, "Attention, all passengers. Prepare to abandon ship. The following persons will proceed to emergency exit one. Please be orderly. There is enough time and enough room." He read off a list of six names.

"I hope we're together," George said. "I—I've changed my mind about something."

Silvia felt a surge of pleasure. He wasn't going to get the divorce after all. She didn't stop to analyze her feeling, but she hoped it wasn't selfish.

"The following passengers," the loudspeaker announced "will go to emergency exit two."

George listened carefully and at their names said, "That's us." He took her by the arm. "Better put your helmet in place. There might be a leak."

She nodded, flipping it over her head the way he did, placing the faceplate open so she could talk without using the radio. The way he seemed concerned over her made her feel ashamed she had plotted his death, and yet at the same time it made her feel glad that they had come to some silent understanding in time.

He led the way down the aisle and into the corridor that led to exit two. They passed into the lifecraft, a miniature spaceship, and sat down to wait. There were four others, three men and one woman. The pilot came in last, helmet off, and sat at the controls.

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