

# THE BIG NIGHT

*A Novelet of the Spaceways*

**By Henry Kuttner**

# THE BIG NIGHT

Writing under the pseudonym Hudson Hastings.

*When the outmoded space-ship "La Cucaracha"  
battles against the inroads of space transmission,  
Logger Hilton must choose between a bright future  
or a daring venture for a lost cause!*

# CHAPTER I

## *Last of the Hyper Ships*

She came lumbering up out of the ecliptic plane of the planets like a wallowing space-beast, her jet tubes scarred and stained, a molten streak across her middle where Venus's turgid atmosphere had scarred her, and every ancient spot-weld in her fat body threatened to rip apart the moment she hit stress again.

The skipper was drunk in his cabin, his maudlin voice echoing through the compartments as he bewailed the unsympathetic harshness of the Interplanetary Trade Commission.

There was a mongrel crew from a dozen worlds, half of them shanghaied. Logger Hilton, the mate, was trying to make sense out of the tattered charts, and *La Cucaracha*, her engines quaking at the suicidal thought, was plunging ahead through space into the Big Night.

In the control room a signal light flared. Hilton grabbed a mike.

“Repair crew!” he yelled. “Get out on the skin and check jet A-six. Move!”

He turned back to his charts, chewing his lip and glancing at the pilot, a tiny, inhuman Selenite, with his arachnoid multiple limbs and fragile-seeming body. Ts'ss—that was his name, or approximated it—was wearing the awkward audio-converter mask that could make his sub-sonic voice audible to human ears, but, unlike Hilton, he wasn't wearing space-armor. No Lunarian ever needed protection against deep space. In their million years on the

Moon, they had got used to airlessness. Nor did the ship's atmosphere bother Ts'ss. He simply didn't trouble to breathe it.

"Blast you, take it easy!" Hilton said. "Want to tear off our hide?"

Through the mask the Selenite's faceted eyes glittered at the mate.

"No, sir. I'm going as slowly as I can on jet fuel. As soon as I know the warp formulae, things'll ease up a bit."

"Ride it! Ride it—without jets!"

"We need the acceleration to switch over to warp, sir."

"Never mind," Hilton said. "I've got it now. Somebody must have been breeding fruit-flies all over these charts. Here's the dope." He dictated a few equations that Ts'ss' photographic memory assimilated at once.

A distant howling came from far off.

"That's the skipper, I suppose," Hilton said. "I'll be back in a minute. Get into hyper as soon as you can, or we're apt to fold up like an accordion."

"Yes, sir. Ah—Mr. Hilton?"

"Well?"

"You might look at the fire extinguisher in the Cap'n's room."

"What for?" Hilton asked.

Several of the Selenite's multiple limbs pantomimed the action of drinking. Hilton grimaced, rose, and fought the acceleration down the companionway. He shot a glance at the visio-screens and saw

they were past Jupiter already, which was a relief. Going through the giant planet's gravity-pull wouldn't have helped *La Cucaracha's* aching bones. But they were safely past now. Safely! He grinned wryly as he opened the captain's door and went in.

Captain Sam Danvers was standing on his bunk, making a speech to an imaginary Interplanetary Trade Commission. He was a big man, or rather he had been once, but now the flesh had shrunk and he was beginning to stoop a little. The skin of his wrinkled face was nearly black with space-tan. A stubble of gray hair stood up angrily.

Somehow, though, he looked like Logger Hilton. Both were deep-space men. Hilton was thirty years younger, but he, too, had the same dark tan and the same look in his blue eyes. There's an old saying that when you go out into the Big Night, beyond Pluto's orbit, that enormous emptiness gets into you and looks out through your eyes. Hilton had that. So did Captain Danvers.

Otherwise—Hilton was huge and heavy where Danvers was a little frail now, and the mate's broad chest bulged his white tunic. He hadn't had time yet to change from dress uniform, though he knew that even this cellulose fabric couldn't take the dirt of a space-run without showing it. Not on *La Cucaracha*, anyway.

But this would be his last trip on the old tub.

Captain Danvers interrupted his speech to ask Hilton what the devil he wanted. The mate saluted.

"Routine inspection, sir," he observed, and took down a fire extinguisher from the wall. Danvers sprang from the bunk, but

Hilton moved too fast. Before the captain reached him, Hilton had emptied the tank down the nearest disposal vent.

“Old juice,” he explained. “I’ll refill her.”

“Listen, Mr. Hilton,” Danvers said, swaying slightly and stabbing a long forefinger at the mate’s nose. “If you think I had whisky in there, you’re crazy.”

“Sure,” Hilton said. “I’m crazy as a loon, skipper. How about some caffeine?”

Danvers weaved to the disposal port and peered down it vaguely.

“Caffeine. Huh? Look, if you haven’t got sense enough to take *La Cucaracha* into hyper, you ought to resign.”

“Sure, sure. But in hyper it won’t take long to get to Fria. You’ll have to handle the agent there.”

“Christie? I—I guess so.” Danvers sank down on the bunk and held his head. “I guess I just got mad, Logger. ITC—what do they know about it? Why, we opened that trading post on Sirius Thirty.”

“Look, skipper, when you came aboard you were so high you forgot to tell me about it,” Hilton said. “You just said we’d changed our course and to head for Fria. How come?”

“Interplanetary Trade Commission,” Danvers growled. “They had their crew checking over *La Cucaracha*.”

“I know. Routine inspection.”

“Well, those fat slobs have the brass-bound nerve to tell me my ship’s unsafe! That the gravity-drag from Sirius is too strong—and that we couldn’t go to Sirius Thirty!”

“Could be they’re right,” Hilton said thoughtfully. “We had trouble landing on Venus.”

“She’s old.” Danvers voice was defensive. “But what of it? I’ve taken *La Cucaracha* around Betelgeuse and plenty closer to Sirius than Sirius Thirty. The old lady’s got what it takes. They built atomic engines in those days.”

“They’re not building them now,” Hilton said, and the skipper turned purple.

“Transmission of matter!” he snarled. “What kind of a crazy set-up is that? You get in a little machine on Earth, pull a switch, and there you are on Venus or Bar Canopus or—or Purgatory, if you like! I shipped on a hyper-ship when I was thirteen, Logger. I grew up on hyper-ships. They’re solid. They’re dependable. They’ll take you where you want to go. Hang it, it isn’t safe to space-travel without an atmosphere around you, even if it’s only in a suit.”

“That reminds me,” Hilton said. “Where’s yours?”

“Ah, I was too hot. The refrigerating unit’s haywire.”

The mate found the lightweight armor in a closet and deftly began to repair the broken switch.

“You don’t need to keep the helmet closed, but you’d better wear the suit,” he said absently. “I’ve issued orders to the crew. All but Ts’ss, and he doesn’t need any protection.”

Danvers looked up. “How’s she running?” he asked quickly.

“Well, she could use an overhaul,” Hilton said. “I want to get into hyper-space fast. This straight running is a strain. I’m afraid of landing, too.”

“Uh. Okay, there’ll be an overhaul when we get back—*if* we make a profit. You know how much we made this last trip. Tell you what—you supervise the job and take a bigger cut for it.”

Hilton’s fingers slowed on the switch. He didn’t look around.

“I’ll be looking for a new berth,” he said. “Sorry, skipper. But I won’t be aboard after this voyage.”

There was silence behind him. Hilton grimaced and began to work again on the spacesuit. He heard Danvers say:

“You won’t find many hyper-ships needing mates these days.”

“I know. But I’ve got engineering training. Maybe they would use me on the matter-transmitters. Or as an outposter—a trader.”

“Oh, for the love of Pete! Logger, what are you talking about? A—*trader*? A filthy outposter? You’re a hyper-ship man!”

“In twenty years there won’t be a hyper-ship running,” Hilton said.

“You’re a liar. There’ll be one.”

“She’ll fall apart in a coupla of months!” Hilton said angrily. “I’m not going to argue. What are we after on Fria, the fungus?”

After a pause Danvers answered.

“What else is there on Fria? Sure, the fungus. It’s pushing the season a little. We’re not due there for three weeks Earth-time, but Christie always keeps a supply on hand. And that big hotel chain



will pay us the regular cut. Blamed if I know why people eat that garbage, but they pay twenty bucks a plate for it.”

“It could mean a profit, then,” Hilton said. “Provided we land on Fria without falling apart.” He tossed the repaired suit on the bunk beside Danvers. “There you are, skipper. I’d better get back to controls. We’ll be hitting hyper pretty soon.”

Danvers leaned over and touched a button that opened the deadlight. He stared at the star-screen.

“You won’t get this on a matter-transmitter,” he said slowly. “Look at it, Logger.”

Hilton leaned forward and looked across the Captain’s shoulder. The void blazed. To one side a great arc of Jupiter’s titan bulk glared coldly bright. Several of the moons were riding in the screen’s field, and an asteroid or two caught Jupiter’s light in their tenuous atmospheres and hung like shining veiled miniature worlds against that blazing backdrop. And through and beyond the shining stars and moons and planets showed the Big Night, the black emptiness that beats like an ocean on the rim of the Solar System.

“So it’s pretty,” Hilton said. “But it’s cold, too.”

“Maybe. Maybe it is. But I like it. Well, get a job as a trader, you jackass. I’ll stick to *La Cucaracha*. I know I can trust the old lady.”

For answer the old lady jumped violently and gave a wallowing lurch.

## CHAPTER II

### *Bad News*

Hilton instantly exploded out of the cabin. The ship was bucking hard. Behind him the mate heard Danvers shouting something about incompetent pilots, but he knew it probably wasn't the Selenite's fault. He was in the control cabin while *La Cucaracha* was still shuddering on the downswing of the last jump. Ts'ss was a tornado of motion, his multiple legs scrabbling frantically at a dozen instruments.

"I'll call the shot!" Hilton snapped, and Ts'ss instantly concentrated on the incredibly complicated controls that were guiding the ship into hyper.

The mate was at the auxiliary board. He jerked down levers.

"Hyper stations!" he shouted. "Close helmets! Grab the braces, you sun-jumpers! Here we go!"

A needle swung wildly across a gauge, hovering at the mark. Hilton dropped into a seat, sliding his arms under the curved braces and hooking his elbows around them. His ankles found similar supports beneath him. The visor screens blurred and shimmered with crawling colors, flicking back and forth, on and off, as *La Cucaracha* fought the see-saw between hyper and normal space.

Hilton tried another mike. "Captain Danvers. Hyper stations. All right?"

“Yeah, I’m in my suit,” Danvers’ voice said. “Can you take it? Need me? What’s wrong with Ts’sss?”

“The vocor at my board blew out, Cap’n,” Ts’sss said. “I couldn’t reach the auxiliary.”

“We must need an overhaul bad,” Danvers said, and cut off.

Hilton grinned. “We need a rebuilding job,” he muttered, and let his fingers hang over the control buttons, ready in case Ts’sss slipped.

But the Selenite was like a precision machine; he never slipped. The old *Cucaracha* shook in every brace. The atomic engines channeled fantastic amounts of energy into the dimensional gap. Then, suddenly, the see-saw balanced for an instant, and in that split-second the ship slid across its power-bridge and was no longer matter. It no longer existed, in the three-dimensional plane. To an observer, it would have vanished. But to an observer in hyper-space, it would have sprung into existence from white nothingness.

Except that there *were* no hyper-spatial observers. In fact, there wasn’t anything in hyper—it was, as some scientist had once observed, just stuff, and nobody knew what the stuff was. It was possible to find out some of hyper’s properties, but you couldn’t go much farther than that. It was white, and it must have been energy, of a sort, for it flowed like an inconceivably powerful tide, carrying ships with it at speeds that would have destroyed the crew in normal space. Now, in the grip of the hyper current, *La Cucaracha* was racing toward the Big Night at a velocity that would take it past Pluto’s orbit in a matter of seconds.

But you couldn't see Pluto. You had to work blind here, with instruments. And if you got on the wrong level, it was just too bad—for you!

Hastily Hilton checked the readings. This was Hyper C-758-R. That was right. On different dimensional levels of hyper, the flow ran in various directions. Coming back, they'd alter their atomic structure to ride Hyper M-75-L, which rushed from Fria toward Earth and beyond it.

“That's that,” Hilton said, relaxing and reaching for a cigarette. “No meteors, no stress-strain problems—just drift till we get close to Fria. Then we drop out of hyper, and probably fall apart.”

An annunciator clicked. Somebody said:

“Mr. Hilton, there's some trouble.”

“There is. Okay, Wiggins. What now?”

“One of the new men. He was out skinside making repairs.”

“You had plenty of time to get back inside,” snapped Hilton, who didn't feel quite as sure of that as he sounded. “I called hyper stations.”

“Yes, sir. But this fella's new. Looks like he never rode a hyper-ship before. Anyhow, his leg's broken. He's in sick bay.”

Hilton thought for a moment. *La Cucaracha* was understaffed anyway. Few good men would willingly ship on such an antique.

“I'll come down,” he said, and nodded at Ts'ss. Then he went along the companionway, glancing in at the skipper, who had gone to sleep. He used the handholds to pull himself along, for there was

no accelerative gravity in hyper. In sick bay he found the surgeon, who doubled in brass as cook, finishing a traction splint on a pale, sweating youngster who was alternately swearing feebly and groaning.

“What’s the matter with him?” Hilton asked.

Bruno, the sawbones, gave a casual soft salute. “Simple fracture. I’m giving him a walker-splint, so he’ll be able to get around. And he shot his cookies, so he can’t be used to hyper.”

“Looks like it,” Hilton said, studying the patient. The boy opened his eyes, glared at Hilton.

“I was shanghaied!” he yelled. “I’ll sue you for all you’re worth!”

The first officer was unperturbed.

“I’m not the skipper, I’m mate,” Hilton said. “And I can tell you right now that we’re not worth much. Ever hear about discipline?”

“I was shanghaied!”

“I know it. That’s the only way we can get a full crew to sign articles on *La Cucaracha*. I mentioned discipline. We don’t bother much with it here. Just the same, you’d better call me Mister when people are around. Now shut up and relax. Give him a sedative, Bruno.”

“No! I want to send a spacegram!”

“We’re in hyper. You can’t. What’s your name?”

“Saxon. Luther Saxon. I’m one of the consulting engineers on Transmat.”

“The matter-transmission gang? What were you doing around the space-docks?”

Saxon gulped. “Well—uh—I go out with the technical crews to supervise new installations. We’d just finished a Venusian transmission station. I went out for a few drinks—that was all! A few drinks, and—”

“You went to the wrong place,” Hilton said, amused. “Some crimp gave you a Mickey. Your name’s on the articles, anyhow, so you’re stuck, unless you jump ship. You can send a message from Fria, but it’d take a thousand years to reach Venus or Earth. Better stick around, and you can ride back with us.”

“On this crate? It isn’t safe. She’s so old I’ve got the jitters every time I take a deep breath.”

“Well, stop breathing,” Hilton said curtly. *La Cucaracha* was an old tramp, of course, but he had shipped on her for a good many years. It was all right for this Transmat man to talk; the Transmat crews never ran any risks.

“Ever been on a hyper-ship before?” he asked.

“Naturally,” Saxon said. “As a passenger! We have to get to a planet before we can install a transmission station, don’t we?”

“Uh-huh.” Hilton studied the scowling face on the pillow. “You’re not a passenger now, though.”

“My leg’s broken.”

“You got an engineering degree?”

Saxon hesitated and finally nodded.

“All right, you’ll be assistant pilot. You won’t have to walk much to do that. The pilot’ll tell you what to do. You can earn your mess that way.”

Saxon sputtered protests.

“One thing,” Hilton said. “Better not tell the skipper you’re a Transmat man. He’d hang you over one of the jets. Send him for’rd when he’s fixed up, Bruno.”

“Yessir,” Bruno said, grinning faintly. An old deep-space man, he didn’t like Transmat either.

Hilton pulled himself back to the control room. He sat down and watched the white visoscreens. Most of Ts’ss’ many arms were idle. This was routine now.

“You’re getting an assistant,” Hilton said after a while. “Train him fast. That’ll give us all a break. If that fat-headed Callistan pilot hadn’t jumped on Venus, we’d be set.”

“This is a short voyage,” Ts’ss said. “It’s a fast hyper-flow on this level.”

“Yeah. This new guy. Don’t tell the skipper, but he’s a Transmat man.”

Ts’ss laughed a little.

“That will pass, too,” he said. “We’re an old race, Mr. Hilton. Earthmen are babies compared to the Selenites. Hyper-ships are fading out, and eventually Transmat will fade out too, when something else comes.”

“We won’t fade,” Hilton said, rather surprised to find himself defending the skipper’s philosophy. “*Your* people haven’t—you Selenites.”

“Some of us are left, that’s true,” Ts’ss said softly. “Not many. The great days of the Selenite Empire passed very long ago. But there are still a few Selenites left, like me.”

“You keep going, don’t you? You can’t kill off a—a race.”

“Not easily. Not at once. But you can, eventually. And you can kill a tradition, too, though it may take a long time. But you know what the end will be.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hilton said. “You talk too much.”

Ts’ss bent again above the controls. *La Cucaracha* fled on through the white hyper-flow, riding as smoothly as the day she had been launched.

But when they reached Fria, it would be rough space and high gravity. Hilton grimaced.

He thought: So what? This is just another voyage. The fate of the universe doesn’t depend on it. Nothing depends on it, except, maybe, whether we make enough profit to have the old lady overhauled. And that won’t matter to me for it’s my last voyage into the Big Night.

He watched the screens. He could not see it, but he knew that it hung beyond the universal whiteness, in a plane invisible to his eyes. The little sparks of worlds and suns glowed in its immensity, but never brightened it. It was too vast, too implacable. And even the giant suns would be quenched in its ocean, in the end. As



everything else would be quenched, as everything moved on the tides of time into that huge darkness.

That was progress. A wave was born and gathered itself and grew—and broke. A newer wave was behind it. And the old one slipped back and was lost forever. A few foam-flecks and bubbles remained, like Ts'ss, remnant of the giant wave of the ancient Selenite Empire.

The Empire was gone. It had fought and ruled a hundred worlds, in its day. But, in the end, the Big Night had conquered and swallowed it.

As it would swallow the last hyper-ship eventually. . . .

They hit Fria six days later, Earth time. And hit was the word. One of Ts'ss' chitin-covered arms was snapped off by the impact, but he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't feel pain, and he could grow another limb in a few weeks. The crew, strapped to their landing braces, survived with minor bruises.

Luther Saxon, the Transmat man, was in the auxiliary pilot's seat—he had enough specialized engineering training so that he learned the ropes fast—and he acquired a blue bump on his forehead, but that was all. *La Cucaracha* had come out of hyper with a jolt that strained her fat old carcass to the limit, and the atmosphere and gravity of Fria was the penultimate straw. Seams ripped, a jet went out, and new molten streaks appeared on the white-hot hull.

The crew had been expecting liberty. There was no time for that. Hilton told off working gangs to relieve each other at six-hour intervals, and he said, rather casually, that Twilight was out of

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

