

THE IMPOSSIBLE PIRATE

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

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Lieutenant Jeffries blinked at his superior. "I appreciate the compliment," he said dryly. "For which thanks. But what happens if I don't produce?"

His superior, Captain Edwards of the Solar Police, smiled vaguely. "I have a dual purpose," he said. "First-off, you need a vacation of sorts. Knowing you as I do, I know that sheer vacation would bring about seventeen kinds of psychoneuroses, some mental aberrations, and possible revolt. However, this job is unattached."

"Unattached?" gasped Jeffries.

"Uh-huh. You have six months in which to track down, and/or procure evidence which will result in the identification, arrest, and conviction of the man known as Black Morgan, the Pirate."

"I ... ah—?"

"This is your only order. You will not be called upon to do anything else for six months. If at the end of that time you bring about such evidence, et cetera, you will be promptly promoted. If you do not, we will not hold it against you, for all of us have tried and all of us have failed. I'll not punish a man for failing to do that which I have been unable to do. You're an excellent officer, Jeffries, and you've earned a rest. You are now on unattached duty, and can command anything that your job requires, providing your weekly report to this office justifies the expense."

Jeffries smiled weakly. "Frankly, you expect me to fail?"

Captain Edwards nodded. "I do. But the junketing around will give you a bit of a rest and the seeking for this character will keep your mind alert. So, Lieutenant Jeffries, go out and catch me Black Morgan, the Pirate!"

Jeffries grinned. "And meanwhile I shall also make a landing on the mythical planet Vulcan, locate the Gegenschein, and bring back a covey of Voimaids with their equally mythical pet, the Hydrae."

Edwards laughed. "Yup," he said, still chuckling. "Now scat, because I have work to do."

Jeffries nodded and saluted genially. "I'm it," he said. Then he turned and left the office.

Captain Edwards looked after the leaving officer and nodded paternally. Jeffries was an excellent officer. He was loyal, ambitious, and zealous. Cases assigned to him came in after a reasonable length of time, and they were sealed shut and glued down with all the necessary evidence. Those cases that were not to go to court, complete, were those in which the criminal preferred to shoot it out, and Lieutenant Jeffries was both brave and an excellent shot—as well as being a good strategist. He'd been working too hard, and as Edwards said, a real vacation would have been boring.

The will-o'-the-wisp known as Black Morgan, the Pirate, would give him a rest.

Jeffries went home to pack. Black Morgan was a space pirate and the place to look for him was in space. That space piracy was

impossible for divers reasons seemed to make little difference to Black Morgan. He did it.

Lieutenant Jeffries made his plans, knowing the facts. First was to encounter Black Morgan. Theorizing how it would be possible to commit piracy on a ship traveling at twenty-five hundred miles per second, running at 3-Gs constant acceleration would do no good. It had been agreed impossible. Yet Black Morgan did it.

So Jeffries must first encounter the villain and then take after him. With but six months, Jeffries could not even begin to inspect the corners of the solar system that *hadn't* been covered before.

But unlike straight hunting, in which the hunter must locate his quarry, when hunting rats, you bait rattraps and let the rat come to you.

Accordingly, Lieutenant Jeffries made a personal call to the Office of Shipping and requested confidential data on all shipments of high value, and then picked out the first. To add to the certainty, Jeffries called upon the editor of a sensation-seeking news agent and disclosed the fact that he, Lieutenant Jeffries, was being sent on the *Martian Queen* to protect a shipment of radiosodium.

Then, when the time came, Lieutenant Jeffries went boldly to the space line terminal and embarked.

The first part of the trip was uneventful. At 3-Gs, the ship's velocity mounted swiftly as the hours passed under the constant acceleration. Jeffries watched the crew and the passengers idly, because all of them had been thoroughly investigated before the ship's take-off. They were citizens about which there could be no doubt, and therefore anything but a cursory watch was unnecessary.

Jeffries divided his time between the passengers and the Chief Signal Officer, Jones, who willingly gave him whatever information he needed.

At one time, Lieutenant Jeffries asked Jones why space piracy was considered so impossible.

"You mean Black Morgan," smiled Jones. "Well, space piracy isn't impossible excepting the way he is supposed to do it. Piracy near either terminal might go off. But when we're rattling through space near mid-course at about two thousand miles per second, how could it be done?"

"Don't follow," objected Jeffries.

"First, 3-Gs is about all that people can stand over any long period. You can take five sitting down, and about eight lying on a pressure mattress, and I've heard of men taking fifteen while immersed in a pressure-pack that equals the specific gravity of the human body. But taking even 5-Gs for any length of time will kill. Even three is a strain for men who have been raised under one."

"Yes?" prompted Jeffries.

"It's the timing that would stop him," said Jones. "You can't possibly lie await in space until we come into detector range because detector range is about a million miles. At one thousand miles per second, that's offering you one thousand seconds from extreme range to zero range and another thousand from zero range to extreme range on the other side—on the way out. Two thousand seconds is about thirty-three minutes. To match our speed in that time would require an acceleration of about twenty-five hundred feet per second, which is approximately 75-Gs. Impossible! Plus

the fact that he would have to lie in space within a million mile radius of our course."

"Supposing he picked up your trail close to Terra?"

Jones smiled. "If he could detect us, we'd detect him," laughed Jones.

"Supposing he had a better detector."

"We're at the theoretical limit of sensitivity now," said Jones. "And we've been there for years. The noise level, thermal agitation in the set itself, and a horde of other things limit the ultimate sensitivity of any detector. And don't mention noise-eliminators. They aren't. You can't stop electrons from rubbing one another and that's that!"

"But—?"

"We—as he may—also use both pulse-type detectors and aperiodic receivers. People would have known that he was following them."

"Are you certain?"

Jones laughed. "Look, Lieutenant Jeffries, we're convoyed. There were two Solar Guard spacecraft that took off as we did, for convoy duty. Their job was to stick close by us all the way to Jupiter, right down to the landing on Callisto. Now, they'd follow anything that they saw suspicious. That's first. Secondly, we're at about three-quarters of the way to turnover now—and neither of the convoys are visible on the detector nor audible in the aperiodic receiver. If, Lieutenant Jeffries, two Guard ships, bearing the best in instrument and personnel, cannot stay within a million miles of us when they know our predicted course, how can you expect a pirate to barge in upon us when we're ramming space above two

thousand miles per second? Detecting at these distances and at these velocities brings about a situation somewhat similar to Heisenberg's Uncertainty."

"Which is far above my policeman's mind," said Jeffries.

"You can detect where the spacecraft *was* when the transmitted pulse reached it and was echoed at X seconds ago. In order to know where it is, in truth, you must assume a velocity which you must get from the same gear. To assume the velocity, you must know exactly how far the ship traveled between pulses, which because of the fact that the pulses are transmitted different distances, is slightly difficult, especially when the doppler is changing."

"O.K.," smiled Jeffries. "So piracy is impossible. Then how does Black Morgan do it?"

"You know what I think?" said Jones.

"I'm a mind reader, of course," grinned Jeffries.

"Well, I wouldn't put it above certain blackguard spacecraft operators to pirate their own ships and then put up a large tale about Black Morgan. Does anybody ever really know—?"

"There have been authentic reports, made by reliable witnesses."

"O.K.," grunted Jones. "Then you tell me how it is done!"

"Me?" laughed Jeffries. "I'm hoping that Black Morgan will tell me in person."

Lieutenant Jeffries, although his very appearance was "policeman," did not act the part on this trip. He was the vacationer, the tourist.

He danced well, considering his bulk, drank moderately, spoke quietly and intelligently, and made friends readily. He was always handy with his camera when something interesting went on, and he borrowed the spacecraft's darkroom to prepare the little tri-dimensional images of his fellow passengers.

In the latter, Jeffries was well-liked because he managed to flub all shots that were unflattering. Either he overexposed the block, or he miscalculated the development time, or he was forced to apologize for his clumsy fingers in the dark. At any rate, no pictures emerged from any shot that might be viewed with the owner's distaste.

He discussed his project openly, and there was many an argument over dinner. He thought, correctly, that people of honest lives would be interested in the thoughts and methods of a policeman and he talked openly. He had been a zealous policeman, and his store of incidents seemed unlimited, and unlike many, these tales were not all told with Lieutenant Jeffries as hero. In order to avoid the personal pronoun, he often told stories about himself in the third person, giving credit to some unknown member of the force.

And so by the time that the *Martian Queen* reached turnover, Lieutenant Jeffries was well-liked. He enjoyed this thoroughly, though in his spare moments he hoped avidly for Black Morgan.

And, of course, Black Morgan was inevitable. The ship and its cargo had been well publicized, as had been his intent. It was a set-up generated for Black Morgan, and any pirate who thought enough of himself to take on that name would never deny the challenge.

Black Morgan came a few hours after turnover. The ship's personnel and passengers had—ritualistically—watched the

heavens revolve about their ship and had enjoyed the captain's dinner immediately afterwards. The skipper had treated them with stories of his own and had explained that it had been the original intention to serve the dinner during the turnover, but all pilots were not as capable as the one they had now, and the turnover had been known to be rough at times—and no space line liked to have the job of removing spilled soup from fifty evening gowns, let alone the bad publicity.

The dinner was finished, and the dancing was in full swing when the alarm bells rang loud and clear above the pleasant strains of the music.

The acceleration dropped immediately to 1-G which gave several people an internal stomach-wrangle similar to that not enjoyed by the stopping of a high-speed elevator.

And there, a half mile from the *Martian Queen*, ran another ship. It was black and chromium and deadly looking because of a triple-turret of heavy rifles that led the *Martian Queen* by exactly enough to make a perfect hit. Marksman Jeffries knew it, and so did everybody who looked.

Signal Officer Jones nudged Jeffries. "There he is," he said bitterly.

"No myth, anyway," grunted Jeffries.

"Nope."

"How'd he come up?"

Jones growled in his throat. "I'll never know," he said sadly. "One moment, the area was clean. Next moment, the celestial globe displayed a large ship, the detectors went crazy, and here he was!"

"Here he *is*, you mean," came a heavy reply, and everybody turned to see the menacing figure standing in the room, heavy automatics in either hand. "I thank you for lining up, ladies and gentlemen. It makes things so much easier. As you see, I've your captain under one of these. I'll not bother shooting the first one that makes an offside move. My first shot will kill the captain. My second will kill the first officer. I'll have whatever valuables are handy, and then I'll have that shipment of radiosodium."



"You'll ..." started Captain Phillips.

"I'll kill you if you don't," gritted the pirate.

And that was that. Black Morgan knew what he was about, and he did it neatly and quickly. The valuables went into a sack and then they were all herded into a cargo hold and locked in.

Gravity went off completely, leaving them floundering in the room. The heavy shipment of radiosodium went out with only inertia to offer resistance.

An hour later, they forced the door of the cargo hold and the ship took up operations again. But Black Morgan was no longer in sight. The detector recorder indicated a receding target that must have been the leaving pirate craft, but that was all. Despite all arguments, Black Morgan had come up, pirated the craft at two-thousand, three hundred miles per second, under 3-Gs' deceleration from turnover, one hour and twelve minutes previous.

Yes, it was impossible and everybody knew that matching such constants in space could not be done, but Black Morgan had done it.

There was no merriment for the rest of the trip.

Back on Terra again, Lieutenant Jeffries found that he was in disgrace. His landing was followed almost immediately by an official order, and with sheer discouragement, Jeffries went to see Captain Edwards.

"That was a fine display," snapped his superior.

"But—"

"Look, Jeffries. You were sent forth to do a job. Anything you wanted we'd furnish. But you went out with a brass band and a challenge, and you were taken up and beaten. Not only that, but we lost a small fortune in radiosodium."

"I'd hoped to—"

"Look, Jeffries, a mistake is a mistake. You laid a trap, and you also got some sort of evidence, I presume. That's fine. But you also laid yourself wide open to criticism. It's the people who are howling—the people and the officials of the space lines."

"But I—"

"You didn't catch Black Morgan," grunted Edwards sourly. "And what do you know about him?"

"He came up behind us at a velocity that apparently exceeded the speed of light, caught us, robbed us, and then left quietly."

"Exceeded the speed of light?" scoffed Captain Edwards.

"According to the recorder, he did."

"Yeah, that we know," grunted Edwards. "He is always *supposed* to. The detector's repetition-rate is about one every ten seconds, permitting ranges up to a million miles. The close-in detector runs one per second, and Black Morgan comes in from maximum range to close-in range between pulses. He hits once or twice on the close-in range—all of which gives definite evidence that he exceeds the speed of light. And he is instantly maneuverable! So he comes up behind you at a thousand times your velocity and slows down to match you in microseconds. This ain't possible—and everybody knows it!"

"Maybe he knows the answer," said Jeffries doggedly.

"Black Morgan has been doing that trick for eight years," snapped Captain Edwards. "During which time every scientist in the system has been seeking a means of copying it in some manner. Now don't tell me that one man can think up a method of space drive that the

rest of the scientific world cannot even conceive as possible? Method—hell. They won't even permit its being possible, let alone finding a method. Now—you're it."

"I'm—it?"

Captain Edwards nodded solemnly. "I gave you this jaunt as a vacation. You boggled it. I'd not have minded failure. But the service can't stand having one of its men making monkeys out of everybody. Mere failure was to be expected. But you advertised for it, wanted it, took it, and then added the ignominy of having the space line lose a half a million dollars worth of radiosodium."

"So what am I going to get now?"

"Look," grunted Edwards, "I'm forced into this. I'm going to issue an official report that you are on the trail of Black Morgan and that the loss of the radiosodium is only temporary. You'll be placed officially on the case and this time, Jeffries, you'll either collect Black Morgan or you'll find yourself in disgrace. Now go out and get him or you'll lose your shirt!"

It was bad, admitted Jeffries. But it got worse as the weeks wore on. To avoid making futile reports, Jeffries kept on the move, and every time that he took to space, Black Morgan hounded him.

The pirate held up the *Callisto Clipper* and took only personal valuables. He pirated a million dollars worth of borts—black tool-diamonds—from the *Venus Girl* that Jeffries knew nothing about until he read it in the paper in connection with his own name—mentioned as protector! Black Morgan breached the *Brunnhilde of Mars* for the sole purpose of pirating all the liquor and stores aboard. He stopped the *Lunar Lady* to get a replacement for his

own celestial globe, leaving the ship without a detector for the rest of the ship, for Black Morgan took not only the spares, but the operating equipment as well.

And each time he appeared, Lieutenant Jeffries was the brunt of Black Morgan's perverted sense of humor. He stole Jeffries' shoes once and mailed them back to Terran Headquarters. He took the policeman's cigarette lighter and returned it—engraved with a taunting message from himself to the "Pride of the Solar Police." And Jeffries rode the space lines to get away from himself but found Black Morgan hounding him.

The lieutenant ignored repeated demands for action, dropping official letters in the wastebasket because he knew what they contained. He avoided his favorite haunts. He sought out of the way places, hoping to learn something about that huge black spacecraft that came up from behind at the speed of light and matched velocity in microseconds. He sought the counsel of scientists who claimed it impossible. He read the rosters of the ships of all ports, and he sought the manufacturers of spacecraft, hoping to discover one that might have made the pirate's ship. None had—or anything resembling that description.

For Jeffries took pictures for some time before he abandoned his camera in dismay. The fun he'd had with it now seemed flat and odious. He sold it in disgust in a small secondhand store on Mars. He sold his personal belongings to get money, for his requests for funds were being viewed with scorn, and a personal appearance with a request meant more scathing remarks on his inefficiency. To avoid facing his failure, Jeffries spent his own money. He changed his appearance because the papers printed his picture as a failure every time there was piracy.

Black Morgan, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. He said so. Holding the entire ship's body at the point of his guns, Black Morgan taunted Lieutenant Jeffries: "I congratulate you, lieutenant," he said.

"You—!"

"Careful. I dislike profanity. I prefer this chase, Lieutenant Jeffries. I'd have taken only what I needed, but you gave me new life. Now I'm stealing for the fun of it—and to watch you combing space for a ship that—impossibly—can not be! Would you like to join me, lieutenant?"

Jeffries snarled, and the ship rang with the sound of Black Morgan's raucous laughter.

That, of course, hit the headlines. And the next time Black Morgan came, he said: "Ex-Lieutenant Jeffries! Pleased to meet you! Ensign Jeffries, I'd promote you, not reduce you in rank. Join me?"

And again that laughter.

It haunted the policeman's sleep. Jeffries set up trap after trap to locate the source of the pirate's information. For it was obvious that Black Morgan was following him around from planet to planet for the sole purpose of taunting him. When Jeffries sat in a restaurant, he wondered whether the man at the next table was Black Morgan in plain clothing, for the pirate wore fancy dress and a mask for his depredations. He watched men with him in hotel and on the street; in streetcar and drugstore. And when he took to space again, Black Morgan would be there to taunt him.

Using his own spacecraft, Jeffries paced the space lines ships, and found that keeping track of one was impossible. Even taking off at

the same instant and following their course, known to him, he lost them after a few hours. He tried to put himself in the pirate's shoes, but lacked the ability to contact any spacecraft in the depths of space.

Here the taunts were not direct. After landing, he was informed again and again that Black Morgan had done this or had said that for his benefit.

He became known as a curse. No ship would take off with him even near—and often they took him to Venus when a ship was running to Mars with a valuable cargo. Black Morgan, he discovered, was not multiple. The pirate either hit his ship or the moneyed one, but never both.

But he was a marked man, hounded by the pirate. Eventually he became known regardless of his appearance, and he was denied passage, or even the knowledge of course, since his presence was asking for piracy—unless there was value going elsewhere. But aside from twice when they actually did send Jeffries with the valuables, thus fooling Black Morgan, the space lines decided that not having him at all was safer and cheaper in the long run.

Jeffries was—piracy-prone!

Ultimately he was asked for his resignation, and he gave it. He was through!

He sat in his apartment for days after that. Just sat there, thinking. He had been set to catch a pirate, and the pirate had been uncatchable. Jeffries had even tried the trick of putting himself in the pirate's place, hoping to follow a ship as Black Morgan had,

and thus gain some idea of how it could be done. That, too, had failed.

Everywhere was negative evidence. Rated "Inconclusive" by all men who studied evidence as a means of extracting fact. Ex-Lieutenant Jeffries was no scientist: he was a policeman. He worked with hard facts always, and every case had its hidden clues of concrete fact. They all pointed out who the criminal was; seldom did they point conclusively to all possible suspects and point out who the criminal was not, save one. Therefore Jeffries was not experienced in coping with reams of negative evidence.

But he knew that he had nothing but negative evidence upon which to work. So, blunderingly, he went to work on the long, arduous process of elimination.

He wrote down his facts:

Black Morgan's ship was capable of exceeding the speed of light according to data. This was claimed impossible by all who knew about it and studied it.

Black Morgan, unerringly, was able to intercept a spacecraft traveling at twenty-five hundred miles per second.

Black Morgan was capable of coming up at a speed exceeding light, and decelerating to match the velocity of the ship in a matter of milliseconds. This would produce untold decelerative gravities in the ship—no man could hope to live and it was doubtful that any machine could withstand that treatment. At least, any machine of the size of a spaceship.

Black Morgan owned a large spacecraft of marked design. No spacecraft construction company had made it, and the construction

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