

THE STROLLER

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

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All sorts of things come in on a space freighter. Even in the old days grocers were always finding twenty-foot pythons curled cozily inside bunches of bananas from South America; and what sort of undesired stowaways do you suppose you get when you have a cargo of tongarus from south Venus, agatized Fyella corymbs from the district around Aphrodition, hand-painted lumigraphs on goor fiber made in Marsport prefecture, and golden rhnx jewelry from the canal centers?

George Saunders, supercargo of the *S.S. Triton*, gave his wife a warm kiss on the cheek.

"For Pete's sake," he hissed into her ear, "act like you're glad to see me, can't you? The Old Man's watching us."

Marta Saunders hesitated a moment and then threw her plump body into her husband's arms.

"Oooh, Georgie!" she squealed. "You sweet old thing! It's so wonderful to see you again!"

"That's enough," George rumbled warningly. He was swaying a little from the impact. "Don't want to overdo it. Let's get out of here."

They started over to the parking area of the spaceport, where their 'copter was.

"What's the matter?" Marta demanded as soon as they were out of earshot of the ship. "What do you care what the captain thinks about us?"

"Listen, Marta, the old fool's been riding me ever since we left Aphrodition. Says I'm the most incompetent supercargo he's ever had. Just before we docked today, he said he thought he'd take it up with the union. If he does, you know what'll happen. Pynx said the last time that if he got one more complaint about me he'd take the case to the executive board. I'd lose my license, sure."

"Oh." Marta seemed unwillingly impressed. She got an atomizer out of her handcase and began spraying quick-drying cosmi-lac over the skin of her face and neck. "But what happened?" she asked an instant later when the cosmetic had set. "Why's he so down on you?"

For a moment the fine-etched lines of irritation and petulance faded from George Saunders' face, to be replaced by an expression of honest perplexity.

"Marta, I—wait, here's the 'copter. I'll tell you about it after we get in. And for the love of heaven, don't drop any pop bottles out of the window the way you did the last time I was in port. Having the air police after us would be the last straw, as far as my nerves are concerned."

He slid into the driver's seat. Marta got two bottles of pop out of the refrigerator, shoved straws into their necks, pulled a shelf out of the paneling to hold one bottle at a convenient level

under George's nose, and began drinking out of the other herself.

"Well?" she asked after a couple of swallows.

George drank from his bottle before replying.

"It's the darnedest thing. I remember beginning to load number two and three holds at Aphrodition, and I remember telling the longshore leaderman to have the hatch covers put on again when the holds were filled, but there're six or eight hours in there during the loading I don't remember a single thing about. They're totally gone.

"Well, the way the ship handled at the take-off from Aphrodition, the Old Man thought there must be something wrong, and when we were out in space he went in for a look. Wow! I can see, sort of, why he's sore. Those holds look like somebody'd stirred the things in 'em up with a big stick. About a third of the cargo's ruined. The tongarus have leaked all over those blasted lumigraphs, and—Well, the insurance company is going to raise blue murder, and the owners won't like it one little bit."

George licked his thin lips.

"What I want to know," he burst out, "is what *happened* to me? I must have told the longshoremen to load the holds like that, but—When we were two days out of Venus, I asked Sparks (he's had a pre-medical course, and he's saving up the tuition for medical school) to look me over. He gave me all the tests, dozens of them, and finally told me there wasn't a thing wrong with me mentally or physically except that I needed more rest.

Rest, bushwah! I've been sleeping ten hours a night, and I wake up tireder than when I went to bed."

Marta studied him.

"You do look sort of tired," she observed. "Maybe you need some vitor-ray treatments."

George ignored this comment.

"Of course, the Old Man's not such a bad guy," he said. "He never said anything about that time I missed the ship at Marsport."

"You mean that time you were so drunk on soma? One of the times."

George gave an irritated shrug.

"Never mind that," he snapped. "I mentioned it because I asked him to have dinner with us on Thursday, the day before we sail, and I want you to have a real old-fashioned home-cooked meal for him. Maybe I can soften him up. Have something nice for him. None of this complete meal stuff out of the freezer—have something good. Out of cans."

"You mean like my canned crab and mushroom casserole?"

"Um-hum. Have that. And what's that dessert you make with the canned peaches and the soma? pêche flambée, or something. He might like that."

George set the 'copter down neatly on the roof of their apartment house.

"Remember," he said, "I've got to make a good impression on him. Flatter him as much as you can, but use your head about it. And if you get any kind of a chance to tell him about how reliable I usually am, do it."

The days moved on toward Thursday. George continued to complain of fatigue, and on Tuesday night Marta woke up shrieking with a vague and horrible nightmare, but it was attributed to indigestion; after a dose of antiacid, she went back to sleep. On Wednesday she had her hallucination.

She was putting a bunch of old digests and tabloids away in the closet in the living room when she came across the jacket George had used four or five years ago when he went grouch hunting.

"George!" she called. "Oh, George! Can I throw your old gray jacket away? It's full of moth holes."

"What are you yelling at me for?" George asked irritably from behind her. He had been sitting in his study, which was only about five feet distant from the closet, drinking soma. "I'm right here."

Marta came out of the closet and stared at him. One hand went to her heart. The pallor of her heavy, sagging face showed through her thick face lacquer as a muddy gray.

"Wha—I saw you go into the kitchen!" she said. "You were wearing your brown suit. I was looking right at you, and you walked the length of the living room and went into the kitchen and closed the door behind you. That's why I yelled at you. You

were wearing your brown suit. You've got the blue one on now. You were wearing your brown suit!"

"Shut up!" George said passionately. "Are you trying to drive me crazy? I've been sitting right here all the time. What do you mean, you saw me walk into the kitchen? You couldn't have. I've been sitting right here all the time."

"But I saw you! You were wearing your brown suit."

"You imagined it!" her husband shrieked at her. "It's your imagination. You shut up. What are you trying to do, get me so nervous the Old Man will think I'm ready for the loony bin? You imagined it!"

Marta looked at him. She had to lick her lips twice before she could answer.

"Yes. Yes, of course. That must be it. I imagined it."

George spent the rest of the day drinking soma and holding his hands up before his eyes to see if they had stopped shaking. Marta got a five-suit deck of cards out of the closet and played solitaire. None of her games came out, but she was too distraught to realize that she had left two of the cards inside their box.

Surprisingly, both George and Marta slept well. They awakened far more cheerful than they had been the night before. Even their pre-breakfast snapping at each other lacked its usual note of bitter sincerity. When Marta left the apartment and started out to do her shopping, she was humming under her breath.

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