

# THE STAR LORD

Boyd Ellanby



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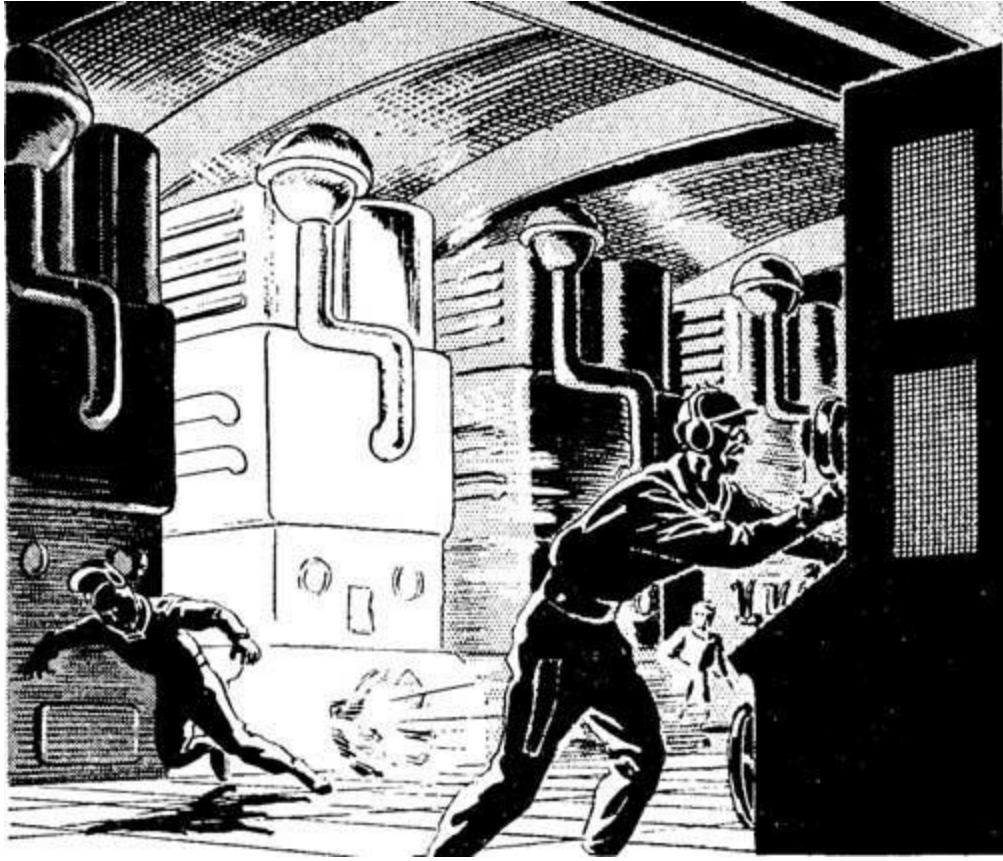
*By Boyd Ellanby*

*To some passengers a maiden voyage was a pleasure cruise; to others it meant a hope for new life. Only the Captain knew of its danger!*



THE *Star Lord* waited, poised for her maiden voyage. The gigantic silvery spindle, still cradled in its scaffoldings, towered upwards against the artificial sky of Satellite Y.

The passengers were beginning to come on board before Captain Josiah Evans had finished checking the reports of his responsible officers. The ship was ready for space, now, and there was nothing more he could do until takeoff. With long, deliberate steps he walked to his cabin, closed the door, and in the privacy he had come to regard as the greatest luxury life had to offer him, he sank into his chair and reached for the post-bag which had been delivered by the morning's rocket ferry from earth.



There were no personal letters for him. He rarely received any and never really expected any, for his career had always been more important to him than personal ties. Shoving aside the official documents, he picked up the small brown parcel, slit the pliofilm covering with his pocket knife, and inspected the red leather cover with its simple title: *Ley's Rockets and Space Ships*. At the bottom of the cover was a date: May 1, 2421, Volume 456. In the nearly five hundred years since the publication of Volume one, which listed all the earth's rocket ships on half of one page, the annual edition of this book, regularly edited and brought up to date, had become the spaceman's bible.

Captain Evans was annoyed to find that his hands were shaking as he leafed through the pages, and he paused a few seconds, trying to control his excitement. His black hair had begun to turn gray above his ears, and there were a few white hairs in his bushy eyebrows. But a healthy pink glowed under the skin of his well-fleshed cheeks, and the jut of his chin showed the confidence of one used to receiving immediate, unquestioning obedience. When his long fingers had stopped their trembling, he found the entry he had been looking for, and a triumphant smile lighted his heavy features as he settled deeper in his chair and read the first paragraph.

*"Star Lord: newest model in space-ships of the famed Star Line. Vital Statistics: Construction begun February 2418, on Satellite Y. Christened, October, 2420. Maiden voyage to Almazin III scheduled spring, 2421."*

He looked up at the diagram of the ship which hung on the wall at his right, then glanced at the zodiometer on his desk. May 3, late spring.

*"Powered by twenty-four total conversion Piles. Passenger capacity 1250. Crew and maintenance 250. Six life boats, capacity 1500. Captain. Josiah Evans."*

His throat swelling, he was almost choked with pride as he read the final Statistic. This, he thought was the climax of his career, the place he had been working towards all his life. It had been a long road from his lonely boyhood in a Kansas orphanage, to Captain of the earth's finest spaceship.

The *Star Lord* was the perfection of modern space craft, the creation of the

earth's most skilled designers and builders, the largest ship ever launched. Protected by every safety device the ingenuity of man had been able to contrive, she was a palace to glide among the stars.

His heart beat more rapidly as he read the next section.

*"Prediction: her maiden voyage will break all previous speed records, and regain for her backers the coveted Blue Ribbon, lost ten years ago to the Light Lines."*

No question of that, he thought. No faster ship had ever been built. But he frowned as he read the final paragraph:

*"Sidelights: Reviving a long obsolete custom, certain astrologers in London have cast the horoscope of the Star Lord and pronounced the auguries to be unfavorable. This verdict, plus the incident at the christening, has caused some head-shaking among the superstitious fringe, and some twittering about 'cosmic arrogance'. But few of the lords of the earth, we imagine, will therefore feel impelled to cancel their passages on this veritable Lord of the Stars."*

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Evans remembered that christening. High in the scaffolding he had stood on the platform with the christening party: the Secretary of Interstellar Commerce, the Ambassador from Almazin III, the Governor of Satellite Y, and President and Mrs. Laurier of Earth.

Swaying gently in the still air, the traditional bottle of champagne hung before them, suspended at the end of a long ribbon. Mrs. Laurier's eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed, as she looked at her husband for a signal. At his smile and nod she had said in a high clear voice, "I christen thee *Star Lord!*" and then reached out to grasp the bottle. Before she could touch it, somewhere above them the slender ribbon broke.

The bottle fell like a stone, plummeted straight down and crashed into a million fragments on the floor of the satellite.

An instant's shocked silence, and then a roar of voices surged up from the crowds watching below. Mrs. Laurier had put her hand to her mouth, and shivered.

"What a dreadful thing!" she whispered. "Does that mean bad luck?"

President Laurier had frowned at her, but the Secretary of Interstellar Commerce had laughed.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Laurier. There is no such thing as luck. Even without a bath of champagne, this magnificent vessel will prove that man is certainly master of the universe. She begins her life well and truly named."

The Star Line ought to abandon that silly custom of christening a new ship, thought Captain Evans. It was an archaic ceremony, utterly irrational, a foolish relic of a primitive world in which people had been so uncertain of their machines that they had had to depend on luck, and to beg good fortune of unpredictable gods.

Taking up *Ley's Space Ships* again, he began fondly to reread the page, when there was a knock at the door and a crewman entered.

"Mr. Jasperson to see you, sir."

The Captain stared, a tiny muscle in his cheek quivering.

"You know I'm not to be disturbed until after takeoff, Stacey."

"Yes, sir. But Mr. Jasperson insisted. He says he knows those rules don't apply to *him*."

Evans closed the book, laid it on his desk, and stood up. He leaned forward and spoke softly.

"Tell Mr. Jasperson—"

"Tell him what, Josiah?" boomed a voice from the opening door. "You can tell me yourself now."

Burl Jasperson was a portly little man with legs too short for his bulging body, and clothes that were too tight. His head was bald except for a fringe above the ears, and he might have been a comical figure but for the icy blue eyes that probed from under the dome of his forehead.

"What have you got to tell me? You're quite right not to let the ragtag and bobtail bother you at a time like this, but I know your old friend Burl Jasperson is always welcome."

With scarcely a pause, the Captain extended his hand.

"How are you, Burl? Won't you come in? I hope the Purser has taken care of



you properly?"

"I'm comfortable enough, thanks, and I'm looking forward to the trip. It's odd, come to think of it, that though I've been Chairman of the board of directors, and have spent some thirty years managing a fleet of space liners, yet I've never before made a trip myself. I don't like crowds of people, for one thing, and then I've been busy."

"What made you decide to go along on this one?"

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Reaching across the table, Jasperson picked up the silver carafe and poured himself a glass of water.

"Ah! Nothing like a drink of cold water! The fact is, I wanted to check up on things, make notes of possible improvements in the Star Line's service, and sample passenger reactions. Then too, I'll have the satisfaction of being present on the trip which will establish the Line's supremacy, once and for all. This crossing will make history. It means everything to us, Josiah. You know we're counting on you to break the record. We want to win back the Blue Ribbon, and we expect you to manage it for us."

"I shall do my best."

"That's the spirit I like to see. Full speed ahead!"

"Certainly—consistent with safety."

"Consistent with *reasonable* safety, of course. I know you won't let yourself be taken in by all this nonsense about the imaginary dangers of hyperspace."

"What do you mean?"

"All this nonsense about the Thakura Ripples! But then, of course you're a sensible man or we wouldn't have hired you, and I'm sure you agree with me that the *Star Lord* can deal with anything that hyperspace has to offer."

Jasperson adjusted the set of his jacket over his plump stomach while he waited for an answer, and Captain Evans stared at him.

"Is that why you're wearing a pistol?" he said dryly. "To help the ship fight her battles?"

"This?" His face reddened as he patted his bulging pockets. "Oh, it's just a habit. I don't like being without protection; I always wear a gun in one pocket

and my recorder in the other."

"You'll scarcely be in any danger on the ship, Burl. Better leave it in your cabin."

"All right. But about the Ripples—you aren't going to take them seriously, are you?"

"I wish you'd be a little more frank, Mr. Chairman. Has the Star Line suddenly lost confidence in me?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort! We've every confidence in you, of course. But I've been hearing rumors, hints that we may have to make a slow crossing, and I've been wondering. But then, I'm sure that a man of your intelligence doesn't take the Ripples any more seriously than I do."

"I don't know what gossip you have been hearing," said the Captain, hesitantly. "'Ripples' is probably a very inaccurate and inadequate name for the phenomenon. Thakura might equally well have called them rapids, falls, bumps, spaces, holes, or discontinuities."

"Then why did he choose to call them Ripples?"

"Probably because he didn't know exactly what they are. The whole problem is a very complicated one."

"Complicated nonsense, I call it. Well, we won't quarrel, my dear Josiah, but don't let them hold us back. Remember, we're out to break all records!"

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Under the artificial sky, crowds of people streamed into the administration building of Satellite Y. The jumping-off place for all rockets and ships going to and from the stars, Y-port was a world of its own, dedicated to only one purpose, the launching and berthing of ships.

It was a quiet and orderly place as a rule, and its small permanent colony of workmen and officials lived a spartan existence except for their yearly vacations on Earth. But today it seemed as if half the earth's people, friends and relatives of the passengers, had chosen to make the port a holiday spot of their own, to help celebrate the launching of the *Star Lord* on her maiden voyage. The rocket ferry between Y-port and Earth had had to triple its number of runs in the past week, and this morning's rocket had brought in the last of the passengers for Almazin III.

Alan Chase trudged wearily along with the crowd entering the building, trying to close his ears to the hundreds of chattering voices. He was tall and very thin, and his white skin clothed his bones like brittle paper. Walking was an effort, and he tried to move with an even step so he would not have to gasp for breath as he moved slowly forward with the line before the Customs desk. In his weakness, the gaiety around him seemed artificial, and the noise of voices was unendurable.

Just ahead of him in line was a young man in an obviously new suit; the pretty girl holding to his arm still had a few grains of rice shining in her hair.

"That will be all," said the Inspector. "I hope you and Mrs. Hall have a very happy honeymoon. Next!"

He gritted his teeth to stop his trembling as the Inspector reached for the passport, glanced at a notation, then looked up.

"I'll have to ask you to step in and see Dr. Willoughby, our ship's doctor. It will only take a moment, Dr. Chase."

"But I'm not infectious!"

"But there seems to be some question of fitness. In cases like yours the Star Line likes to have a final check, just to make sure you'll be able to stand the trip. We're responsible, after all. Last door on my right."

Close to exhaustion, Alan walked down the hall to the last door and stepped inside. A healthy, rugged man with prominent black eyes looked at him with a speculative glance.

"And what can I do for you?"

Holding out his passport, Alan sank down into a chair, glad of a chance to rest, while Dr. Willoughby studied the document, then looked up, the routine smile wiped off his face.

"Well! So you're Dr. Alan Chase. I've been much interested in the papers you've been publishing recently. But this is bad news, Dr. Chase. I suppose you had an independent check on the diagnosis?"

"Not even one of our freshmen could have missed it, but I had it confirmed by Simmons and von Kramm."

"Then there's no question. How did you pick it up, doctor? Neosarcoma is still rather a rare disease, and it's not supposed to be very infectious."

Alan tried to speak casually, although just looking at the rugged good health of the man opposite him made him feel weaker.

"No, it's not very infectious. But after medical school, I went into research instead of practice, and I worked on neosarcoma for nearly five years, trying to devise a competitive chemical antagonist. Then, as used to happen so often in the old days, I finally picked it up myself—a lab infection."

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The older man nodded. "Well, you're doing the right thing now in going to Almazin III. I've made some study of the disease myself, as you may know, and I entirely agree with your theory that it is caused by a virus, and kept active by radiation. Since the atomic wars, the increased radioactivity of the earth undoubtedly stimulates mitosis of the malignant cells. It feeds the disease, and kills the man. But on a planet like Almazin III where the radiation index is close to zero, the mitosis of the sarcoma cells stops abruptly, virus or no virus."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Alan. "I've read some of your papers on the subject, and the evidence sounds pretty convincing."

"It's conclusive. If you arrive in time you've nothing to worry about. I've seen men as badly off as you, with malignant growths well advanced, who migrated to Almazin III and recovered within a year. Without radioactivity to maintain it, the disease seems to be arrested immediately, and if the tissue damage has not gone too far, the tumor regresses and eventually disappears. Once you're cured, you can come back to earth and take up your work where you left off. Well, let's check you over."

The examination was brief. Dr. Willoughby initialed the passport, and offered his hand.

"You should stand the trip all right. But I'm glad you didn't put it off any longer than you did. Another two months of earth's emanations, and I'm afraid I couldn't have certified you. It's lucky for you that the *Star Lord* is the fastest ship in space. That's all, Dr. Chase. I'll be seeing you on board."

In the swiftly moving elevator cage Alan ascended the slender pylon to the

boarding platform, crowded by a group of quarreling children in charge of an indifferent nursemaid.

The Chief Steward, rustling in starched whites, stepped forward at the port, clicked his heels, and curved his thin lips into a smile.

"How do you do, sir. The Star Line wishes you a happy voyage. Will you be kind enough to choose?"

Following his nod, Alan looked down at the silver tray extended for his inspection, and then stepped back as a heavy perfume assaulted his nostrils.

"What are those?"

"Carnations, sir, for the gentlemen's coats, and rose corsages for the ladies' gowns. Compliments of the Star Line."

"But they're white!"

"Yes, sir. The white flowers, the only kind we are able to grow in Y-port, are symbols of the white light of the stars, we like to think."

"What idiot gave the Star Line that idea?" said Dr. Chase. "You know stars are all colors—white, green, yellow, blue, and even red. But white carnations are a symbol of death."

Steward Davis lowered his tray. "Then you don't care to wear one, sir?"

"Not until I have to," said Alan. "Now please call some one to show me my cabin."

"Band playing in the lounge, sir. Tea is being served in the Moon Room, and the Bar is open until just before takeoff."

"Thanks, but I've been ill. I just want to find my cabin."

"Boy!" called Steward Davis. "Show this gentleman to 31Q."

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Alan followed the pageboy through a complex of corridors, ascending spirals of stairs, down a hall, and to the door of Cabin 31Q. The boy threw open the door and Alan stepped in, then halted in shocked disbelief at sight of a white-haired old man who was just lifting a shirt from an opened suitcase.

"I am Dr. Chase. Isn't this Cabin 31Q?"

The old man beamed, his pink skin breaking into a thousand tiny wrinkles.

"That's right. 31Q it is."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Have you no powers of observation? Unpacking, of course. I was assigned to this cabin."

Staggering over to a bunk, Alan sagged back against the wall. He lifted his tired eyelids and stared at the sprightly old gentleman.

"But I was promised a cabin by myself!"

The old man looked distressed. "I'm very sorry, young man. I, too, hoped to have a cabin to my self. I learned only a few minutes ago that I was to be quartered with another passenger—evidently you. Somebody made a mistake, there's no question of that, but the Purser tells me that every bit of space is occupied, and no other arrangements can be made. Unless you want to postpone your voyage, and follow in a later ship?"

"No," said Alan. His voice had sunk to a whisper. "No, I can't do that."

"Then we'll have to make the best of it, young man," he said, picking up a pile of handkerchiefs, and putting them in the drawer he had pulled out from the wall.

"Let me introduce myself. I am Wilson Larrabee—teacher, or student, according to the point of view. Some years of my life I've spent being a professor of this or that at various universities, and the other years I've spent in travel. Whenever the bank account gets low, I offer my knowledge to the nearest university, and stay there until I pile up enough credits so I can travel again."

"Sounds a lonely sort of life, with no roots anywhere."

"Oh, no! My wife loved travelling as much as I do, and wherever she was, was home." He paused, his hand arrested in the act of hanging up his last necktie, and for a moment his face was somber. Then he finished hanging up the tie, gave it a little pat, and continued cheerfully.

"We saw most of the world, in the fifty years we had together. The last trip she made with me, to the Moon and back, was in some ways the pleasantest of all. After we returned, we started planning and saving and dreaming of making one last grand tour outside the solar system. And then—well, she was

more than seventy, and I try to think that she isn't dead, that she just started the last tour a little ahead of me. That's why I'm making this jaunt now, the one we planned on the *Star Lord*. It's lonely, in a way, but she wouldn't have wanted me to give up and stay home, just because I had to go on alone."

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Glancing at Alan's bent head, Professor Larrabee abruptly banged shut the lid of his empty suitcase and shoved it into the conveyor port in the wall to shoot it down to Luggage. Then he straightened up and rumped his white hair.

"That's done, young man. Will you join me in the Bar for a spacecap?"

"Sorry, sir. I'm very tired. I just want to rest and be quiet."

"But a frothed whiskey would help you to relax. Come along, and let me buy you a final drink before we take off for eternity."

Alan noticed with distaste the white carnation in the coat lapel of his companion. "I hardly like to think of this trip as being synonymous with eternity," he said. "You sound as though you didn't expect to come back."

"Do I? Perhaps I made an unfortunate choice of words. But do you believe in premonitions, Dr. Chase?"

"No. All premonitions stem from indigestion."

"No doubt you are right. But from the moment of boarding this ship I have been haunted by the memory of an extremely vivid story I once read."

"What kind of a story?"

"Oh, it was a scientific romance, one of those impossible flights of fancy they used to publish in my boyhood, about the marvels of future science. This was in the days before we had got outside the solar system, but I still remember the tale, for it was about a spaceship which was wrecked on its first voyage."

"But there've been hundreds of other such stories! Why should this particular one be bothering you now?"

"Well, you see," said the professor apologetically, "it's because of the name. The coincidence of names. This other ship, the one in the story—it was called the *Star Lord*."

"I wouldn't let that worry me. Surely it's a logical name for a spaceship?"