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GRANDMA PERKINS AND THE SPACE PIRATES

By JAMES McCONNELL

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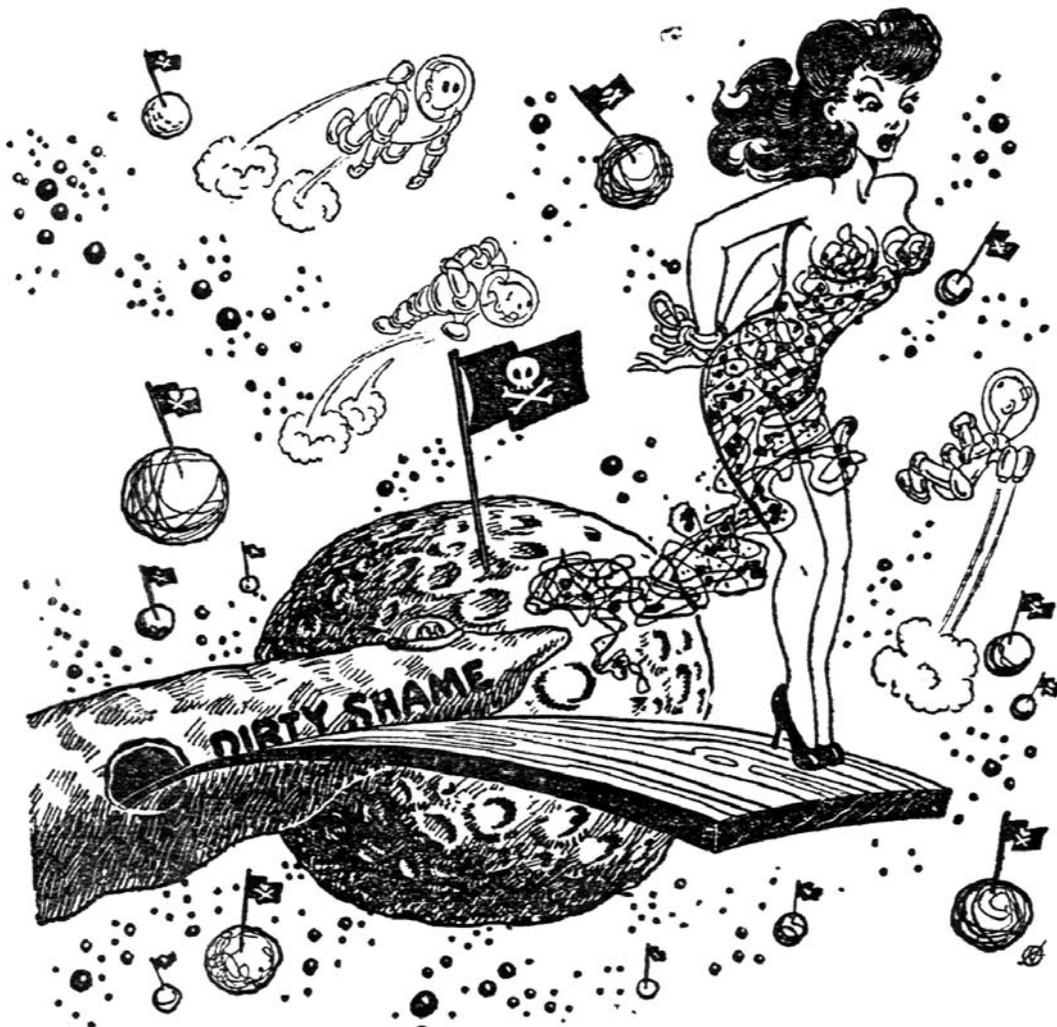
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“I CAN always get along with a man if he remembers who he is,” said Darling Toujours, the raven-haired, creamy-skinned televideo actress whose smoke-and-flame eyes lit fires in hearts all over the solar system.

She was credited with being the most beautiful woman alive and there were few who dared to contradict her when she mentioned it.

“And I can always get along with a woman if she remembers who *I* am,” replied Carlton E.



Carlton, the acid-tongued author whose biting novels had won him universal fame. He leaned his thin, bony body back into the comfort of an overstuffed chair and favored the actress with a wicked smile.

The two of them were sitting in the finest lounge of the luxury space ship *Kismet*, enjoying postprandial cocktails with Captain Homer Fogarty, the *Kismet's* rotund commanding officer. The *Kismet* was blasting through space at close to the speed of light, bound from Callisto, one of Jupiter's moons, back to Earth. But none of the two hundred Earthbound passengers were conscious of the speed at all.

Darling Toujours waved a long cigarette holder at the author. "Don't pay any attention to him, Captain. You know how writers are—always putting words in other people's mouths, and not very good ones at that."

"Do you mean not very good words or not very good mouths, my dear?" Carlton asked. The solar system's most famous actress damped her scarlet lips shut with rage. It would take someone like Carlton E. Carlton, she knew, to point out the one minor blemish in an otherwise perfect body—her slightly over-sized mouth.

She began to wish that she had never left Callisto, that she had cancelled her passage on the *Kismet* when she learned that Carlton was to be a fellow passenger. But her studio had wired her to return to Earth immediately to make a new series of three dimensional video films. And the *Kismet* was the only first class space ship flying to Earth for two weeks. So she had kept her ticket in spite of Carlton.

"I must say that I think Miss Toujours has the prettiest mouth I've ever seen, boomed Captain Fogarty, his voice sounding something like a cross between a foghorn and a steam whistle. And he was not merely being gallant, for many a lonely night as he flew the darkness between Earth and the many planets, he had dreamed of caressing those lips.

"And I think you are definitely a man of discriminating taste," said Darling demurely, crossing her legs and arranging her dress to expose a little more of the Toujours charms to the Captain's eye.

Carlton smiled casually at the exposed flesh. "It's all very pretty, my dear," he said smugly. "But we've seen it all before and in space you're

supposed to act like a lady, if you can act that well."

Darling Toujours drew back her hand to smack Carlton one in a very unlady-like manner when she suddenly realized that they were not alone. Her hand froze, poised elegantly in mid-air, as she turned to see a newcomer standing at the door.

THE witness to the impending slap was a withered little lady, scarcely five feet tall, with silvered hair, eyes that twinkled like a March wind, and a friendly rash of wrinkles that gave her face the kindly, weathered appearance of an old stone idol. Her slight figure was lost in volumes of black cloth draped on her in a manner that had gone out of style at least fifty years before. The little woman coughed politely.

"I beg your pardon," she told them in a sweet, high little voice. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything. If you would like to hit the gentleman, Miss Toujours, I'll be glad to come back later."

Darling Toujours opened her violet eyes wide in surprise. "Why, I was... I was... I—" The actress uttered a small, gulping sound as she recovered her poise. "Why, I was just going to pat him on the cheek for being such a nice boy. You are a nice boy, aren't you, Carlton?" She leaned forward to stroke him gently on the face. Carlton roared with laughter and the good Captain colored deeply.

"Oh," said the little old woman, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that he was your son." Carlton choked suddenly and Darling suffered from a brief fit of hysteria.

The Captain took command. "Now, look here, Madam," he sputtered. "What is it you want?"

"I really wanted to see you, Captain," she told him, her battered old shoes bringing her fully into the room with little mincing steps. "The Purser says I have to sign a contract of some kind with you, and I wanted to know how to write my name. I'm Mrs. Omar K. Perkins, but you see, I'm really Mrs. Matilda Perkins because my Omar died a few years ago. But I haven't signed my name very much since then and I'm not at all sure of which is legal." She put one bird-like little hand to her throat and clasped the cameo there almost as if it could give her support. She looked so small and so frail that Fogarty forgave her the intrusion.

"It really doesn't make much difference how you sign the thing, just so long as you sign it," he blustered. "Just a mere formality anyway. You just sign it any way you like." He paused, hoping that she would leave now that she had her information.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," she said, but made no move whatsoever to leave. Captain Fogarty gave her his hardened stare of the type which withered most people where they stood. Mrs. Perkins just smiled sweetly at him.

His rage getting out of hand, he finally blurted, "And now, Mrs. Perkins, I think you'd better be getting back to your quarters. As you know, this is a private lounge for the first class passengers."

Mrs. Perkins continued to smile at him. "Yes, I know. It's lovely, isn't it? I'll just go out this way." And before anyone could stop her, she had moved to the door to Darling Toujours' suite and had opened it, stepping inside.

"That's my room, not the door out," Darling said loudly.

"So I see," said Mrs. Perkins, staring at the opulent furnishings with avid pleasure. "It's such a pretty thing, all done up with mother-of-pearl like that, isn't it? And what a pretty lace nightie lying on the bed." Mrs. Perkins picked up the sheer, gossamer garment to examine it. "You do wear something under it, don't you?"

Darling screeched and darted for the door. She snatched the nightie away from Mrs. Perkins and rudely propelled the older woman out the door, closing it behind her. "Captain, this woman must GO!"

"I was just leaving, Miss Toujours. I hope you and your son have a very happy voyage. Good day, Captain Fogarty," she called over her shoulder as she exited. Carlton E. Carlton's shrill laughter followed her down the companionway.

MRS. PERKINS had been lying in her berth reading for less than an hour when the knock sounded at her door. She would have preferred to sit up and read, but her cabin was so small that there was no room for any other furniture besides the bed. "Come in," she called in a small voice. Johnny Weaver, steward for the cheaper cabins, poked his youthful, freckled face through the door. "Howdy, Mrs. Perkins. I

wondered if I could do anything for you? It's about ten minutes before we eat."

"Well, you can pull that big box down from the top shelf there, if you don't mind. And, I wonder, would you mind calling me Grandma? All my children do it and I miss it so." She gave him a wrinkled smile that was at once wistful and petulant.

Johnny laughed in an easy, infectious manner. "Sure thing, Grandma." He stretched his long arms up to bring down the heavy bag and found himself wondering just how it had gotten up there in the first place. He didn't remember ever putting it there for her and Grandma Perkins was obviously too frail a woman to have handled such a heavy box by herself. He put it on the floor.

As she stooped over and extracted a pair of low-heeled, black and battered shoes from the box, she asked him, "Johnny, what was that paper I signed this afternoon?"

"Oh, that? Why that was just a contract for passage, Grandma. You guaranteed to pay them so much for the flight, which you've already done, and they guaranteed that you wouldn't be put off against your will until you reached your destination."

"But why do we have to have a contract?"

Johnny leaned back, relaxing against the door. "Well, STAR—that's Stellar Transportation and Atomic Research, you know—is one of the thirteen monopolies in this part of the solar system. The "Big Thirteen," we call them. STAR charts every space flight in this neck of the woods. Well, back in the old days, when space flights were scarce, it used to be that you'd pay for a ticket from Saturn to Earth, say, and you'd get to Mars and they'd stop for fuel. Maybe somebody on Mars would offer a lot of money for your cabin. So STAR would just bump you off, refund part of your money and leave you stranded there. In order to get the monopoly, they had to promise to stop all that. And the Solar Congress makes them sign contracts guaranteeing you that they won't put you off against your wishes. Of course, they don't dare do it anymore anyway, but that's the law."

Grandma Perkins sighed. "It's such a small cabin I don't think anybody else would want it. But it's all that I could afford," she said, smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress with both hands.

"Anything else I can do for you, Grandma?"

"No, thank you, Johnny. I think I can make it up the steps to the dining room by myself."

A little while later when Johnny looked into her room to see if she had gone, the cabin was empty and the heavy box was back in place in the top cabinet.

The food that evening was not the very best, Grandma Perkins thought to herself, but that was mostly due to her seat. By the time the waiter got around to her little cranny most of it was cold. But she didn't complain. She enjoyed watching the people with the more expensive cabins parade their clothes and their manners at the Captain's table. And, it must be admitted, she was more than a trifle envious of them. Her acquaintances of the afternoon, Miss Toujours and Mr. Carlton, were seated there, Miss Toujours having the place of honor to the Captain's right.

Grandma watched them as they finished up their food and then she moved from her little table over to one of the very comfortable sofas in the main lounge. In reality she wasn't supposed to be sitting there, but she hoped that she could get away with it. The divans were so much more comfortable than her hard, narrow bed that she felt like sitting there for a long time, by herself, just thinking.

But her hopes met with disappointment. For shortly after she sat down, Darling Toujours and Carlton E. Carlton strolled over and sat down across from her, not recognizing her at first. Then Carlton spied her.

"Darling! There's that priceless little woman we met this afternoon."

"The little hag, you mean," Miss Toujours muttered under her breath, but loudly enough for Grandma Perkins to hear.

"Why, hello, Miss Toujours. And Mr. Carlton too. I hope you'll forgive me for this afternoon. I've found out who you were, you see."

"Of course we forgive you, Mrs. Jerkins," Darling said throatily, baring her teeth like a feline.

"My name is Perkins," Grandma smiled.

"I hope you don't mind, Toujours, but you know, you remind me a great deal of my grandniece, Agatha. She was undoubtedly the most lovely child I've ever seen."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Perkins," Darling purred, starting to preen just a bit. Anything could be forgiven someone who complimented her.

"Of course, Agatha never was quite bright," Grandma said as she turned her head aside as if in sorrow. "They were all set to put her in an institution when she ran off and married the lizard man in a carnival. I believe she's still appearing in the show as the bearded lady. A pity. She was so pretty, just like you."

Darling Toujours muttered a few choice words under her breath.

"But we must all make the best of things as they come. That's what Omar, my husband, used to say." Grandma paused to wipe away a small tear that had gotten lodged in one of her eyes. "That reminds me," she said finally, "I've got a three dimensional picture of Omar right here. And pictures of all my children, my ten lovely children. I brought them with me specially tonight because I thought you might want to look at them. Now, where did I put them?" Grandma opened her purse and began rummaging around in its voluminous confines.

Darling and Carlton exchanged horrified glances and then rose silently and tip toed out of the lounge.

Grandma looked up from her search.

"Oh, my, they seem to have gone."

Johnny Weaver, who had been clearing one of the nearby tables, put down a stack of dirty dishes and came over to her. "I'd like to see the pictures, Grandma."

"Oh, that's very, nice of you, Johnny, but—" she said quickly.

"Really I would, Grandma. Where are they?"

"I—" She stopped and the devilment showed in her eyes. Her withered little face pursed itself into a smile. "There aren't any pictures, Johnny. I don't carry any. I know their faces all so well I don't have to. But any time I want to get rid of somebody I just offer to show them pictures of my family. You'd be surprised how effective it is."

Johnny laughed. "Why are you going to Earth, anyway, Grandma?"

The old woman sighed. "It's a long story, Johnny, but you just sit down and I'll tell it to you."

"I can't sit down in the lounge, but I'll be glad to stand up and listen."

“Then I’ll make it a short story. You see, Johnny, I’m an old woman. I’ll be 152 this year. And ever since Omar, my husband, died a few years ago, I’ve lived from pillar to post. First with one child and then with another. They’ve all been married for decades now of course, with children and grandchildren of their own. And I guess that I just get in their way. There just isn’t much left in life for a feeble old woman like me.” She sniffled a moment or two as if to cry. Johnny, remembering the heavy box in her cabin that got moved up and down without his help, suppressed a smile on the word “feeble.”

“There aren’t many friends my age left around any more. So I’m being sent to Earth to a home full of dear, sweet old ladies my age, the money for which is being provided by my dear, sweet children—all ten of them.” Grandma dabbed a bit of a handkerchief at her eyes. “The rats,” she muttered under her breath. When she saw her companion was smiling she dropped her pretense of crying.

“To be truthful, Johnny, they’ve grown old and stodgy, all of them. And I’m sure they think I’ve lost most of my marbles. Everything I did embarrassed them, so I guess it’s for the best, but—”

Grandma Perkins never finished the sentence, for interrupting her came the horrendous clang of the *Kismet’s* general alarm, and on its heels, charging through the main salon like a rhinoceros in heat, came Captain Fogarty.

“PIRATES! PIRATES! We’re being attacked by space pirates! You there!” he shouted at Johnny. “Man your station! And you, Madam, to your quarters at once! PIRATES!” he shouted again and barged through the door again and bellowed down the hall to the main bridge.

Johnny was off like a startled rabbit, but Grandma moved with serene calmness to the door. Maybe, she thought, we’re going to have a little excitement after all.

At the door to the steps leading to her downstairs cabin she paused to think.

“If I go down and hide, I’ll miss all the fun. Of course, it’s safer, and an old woman like me shouldn’t be up and about when pirates are around, but—” A delicious smile spread over her face as she took her scruples firmly in hand and turned to follow the bellowing Captain towards the bridge.

II

THE STARship *Kismet* was the pride and joy of Stellar Transportation and Atomic Research. It was outfitted with every known safety device and the control room was masterfully planned for maximum efficiency. But the astral architect who designed her never anticipated the situation facing her at the present. The *Kismet’s* bridge was a welter of confusion.

The Senior Watch Officer was shouting at his assistant, the Navigator was cursing out the Pilot and the Gunnery Officer, whose job had been a sinecure until now, was bellowing at them all. Above the hubbub, suddenly, came the raucous voice of Captain Fogarty as he stalked onto the bridge.

“What in great space has happened to the motors? Why are we losing speed?”

The Senior Watch Officer saluted and shouted, “Engine Room reports the engines have all stopped, Sir. Don’t know why. We’re operating the lights and vents on emergency power.”

The Communications Officer spoke up. “The pirate ship reports that they’re responsible, Sir. They say they’ve got a new device that will leave us without atomic power for as long as they like.”

As if to confirm this, over the loudspeaker came a voice. “Ahoy, STAR *Kismet*. Stand by for boarders. If you don’t open up to us, we’ll blast you off the map.”

“Pirates! Attacking us! Incredible!” cried the Captain. “There are no pirates any more. What have we got a Space Patrol for? Where in blazes is the Space Patrol anyway?”

The Communications Officer gulped. “Er, ah, we got in contact with Commodore Trumble. He says his ship can get here in ten hours anyway, and for us to wait for him.”

Captain Fogarty snorted. “Fat lot of good he’ll do us. Wait for him, eh? Well, we’ll just blow that pirate out of the sky right now. Stand by the guns!”

“The guns are useless,” whined the Gunnery Officer. “The atomics that run them won’t operate at all. What will we do?”

“Ahoy, STAR *Kismet*. Open up your hatches when we arrive and let us in, or we won’t spare a man of you,” boomed the loudspeaker.

"Pirates going to board us. How nice," muttered Grandma to herself as she eavesdropped just outside the door to the bridge.

"They'll never get through the hatches alive. At least our small arms still work. We'll kill 'em all!" cried Captain Fogarty.

"We only want one of you. All the rest of you will be spared if you open up the hatches and don't try to make no trouble," came the voice over the radio.

"Tell them I'd rather all of us be killed than to let one dirty pirate on board my ship," the Captain shouted to the Communications Officer.

"Oh, my goodness. That doesn't sound very smart," Grandma said half aloud. And turning from the doorway, she crept back through the deserted passageway.

The main passenger hatch was not too far from the bridge. Grandma found it with ease, and in less than three minutes she had zipped herself into one of the emergency-use space suits stowed away beside the port. She felt awfully awkward climbing into the monstrous steel and plastic contraption, and her small body didn't quite fit the proportions of the metallic coveting. But once she had maneuvered herself into it, she felt quite at ease.

Opening the inner door to the airlock, she clanked into the little room. As the door shut behind her, she pressed the cycling button and evacuated the air from the lock.

A minute or so later she heard poundings outside the airlock and quite calmly she reached out a mailed fist and turned a switch plainly marked:

EMERGENCY LOCK

DO NOT OPERATE IN FLIGHT

The outer hatch opened almost immediately. The radio in Grandma's suit crackled with static. "What are you doing here?" demanded a voice over the suit radio.

"Pirates! I'm hiding from the pirates. They'll never find me here!" she told them in a voice she hoped sounded full of panic. "What's your name?" asked the voice.

"Darling Toujours, famous television actress," she lied quite calmly.

"That's the one, boys," said another voice. "Let's go." Catching hold of Grandma's arm, they led her out into the emptiness of free space.

HALF an hour later, after the pirate ship had blasted far enough away from the *Kismet*, the men in the control room relaxed and began to take off their space suits. One of the men who Grandma soon learned was Lamps O'Toole, the nominal leader of the pirates, stretched his brawny body to ease the crinks out of it and then rubbed his hands together. Grandma noticed that he carried a week's beard on his face, as did most of the other men.

"Well, that was a good one, eh, Snake?" said Lamps.

Snake Simpson was a wiry little man whose tough exterior in no way suggested a reptile, except, perhaps, for his eyes which sat too close to one another. "You bet, Skipper. We're full fledged pirates now, just like old Captain Blackbrood."

"You mean Blackbeard, Snake," said Lamps.

"Sure. He used to sit around broodin' up trouble all the time."

One of the other men piped up. "And to think we get the pleasurable company of the sweetest doll in the whole solar system for free besides the money."

"Aw, women are no dern good—all of them," said Snake.

"Now, Snake, that's no way to talk in front of company. You just apologize to the lady," Lamps told him. Lamps was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than Snake. Snake apologized.

"That's better. And now, Miss Toujours, maybe you'd be more comfortable without that space suit on," he said.

"Oh, no, thank you. I feel much better with it on," a small voice said over the suit's loudspeaker system.

Lamps grinned. "Oh, come now, Miss Toujours. We ain't going to hurt you. I guarantee nobody will lay a finger to you."

"But I feel much—much safer, if you know what I mean," said the voice.

"Heck. With one of them things on, you can't eat, can't sleep, can't—Well, there's lots of things you can't do with one of them things on. Besides, we all want to take a little look at you, if you

don't mind. Snake, you and Willie help the little lady out of her attire."

As the men approached her, Grandma sensed the game was up. "Okay," she told them. "I give up. I can make it by myself." She started to take the bulky covering off. She had gotten no more than the headpiece off when the truth dawned on her companions.

"Holy Smoke (or something like that)," said one of the men.

"Nippin' Nebulae," said another.

"It ain't Darling Toujours at all!" cried Lamps.

"It ain't even no woman!" cried Snake.

"I beg your pardon," said Grandma, and quite nonchalantly shed the rest of the suit and sat down in a comfortable chair. "I am Mrs. Matilda Perkins."

When he could recover his powers of speech, Lamps sputtered, "I think you owe us a sort of an explanation, lady. If you know what I mean."

"Certainly. I know exactly what you mean. It's all quite simple. When I overheard that you intended to board the *Kismet*, searching for only one person, I decided that one person had to be Darling Toujours. I guessed right off that she was the only one on board worth kidnapping and holding for ransom, so I simply let you believe that I was she and you took me. That's easy to understand, isn't it?"

"Lady, I don't know what your game is, but it better be good. Now, just why did you do this to us?" Lamps was restraining himself nobly.

"You never would have gotten inside the *Kismet* without my assistance. And even if you had, you'd never have gotten back out alive.

"Captain Fogarty's men would have cut you to ribbons. So I opened the hatch to let you in, planted myself in the way, and you got out with me before they could muster their defenses. So, you see, I saved your lives."

Grandma Perkins paused in her narrative and looked up at her audience, giving them a withered little smile. "And if you want to know why, well... I was bored on the *Kismet*, and I thought how nice it would be to run away and join a gang of cutthroat pirates."

"She's batty," moaned Snake.

"She's lost her marbles," muttered another.

"Let's toss her overboard right now," said still another.

Lamps O'Toole took the floor. "Now, wait a minute. We can't do that," he said loudly. "We got enough trouble as is. You know what would happen to us if the Space Patrol added murder to the list. They'd put the whole fleet in after us and track us and our families down to the last kid." Then he turned to the little old lady to explain.

"Look, lady—"

"My name is Mrs. Matilda Perkins. You may call me Grandma."

"Okay, Grandma, look. You really fixed us good. To begin with, we ain't really pirates. We used to operate this tub as a freighter between the Jupiter moons. But STAR got a monopoly on all Space flights, including freight, and they just froze us out. We can't operate nowhere in the solar system, unless we get their permission. And they just ain't giving permission to nobody these days." Lamps flopped into one of the control seats and lit a cigarette.

"So, when us good, honest men couldn't find any work because of STAR, and we didn't want to give up working in space, we just ups and decides to become pirates. This was our first job, and we sure did need the money we could have gotten out of Darling Toujours' studios for ransom."

Lamps sighed. "Now, we got you instead, no chance of getting the ransom money, and to top it all off, we'll be wanted for piracy by the Space Patrol."

"Well, it doesn't seem to me that you're ever going to be good pirates at this rate," Grandma told him. "You should have known better than to take a woman at her word."

"I don't suppose you got any rich relatives what would pay to get you back?" suggested Snake hopefully.

"I haven't got any rich relatives period," she said pertly. Then she added, "But my ten children might scrape up a little cash for you if you promised you wouldn't bring me back at all."

"I figured as much," Lamps said dolefully. "Lookit, Grandma, the best thing we can do is to put you off safely at the next place we stop. Unless we get you back in one piece the Space Patrol will be on our necks forever. So don't go getting any ideas about joining up with us."

"Well, the very least you could do for a poor old lady is to feed her," Grandma told him, her lower lip sticking out in a most petulant manner.

"They like to have starved me to death on that *Kismet*."

"We ain't got much fancy in the line of grub..." Lamps began.

"Just show me the way to the kitchen," said Grandma.

III

A FULL meal and three extra helpings of hot biscuits later, Grandma, Lamps and Snake were sitting around in the captain's cabin talking.

"... and that's the way it is, Grandma. When STAR froze us out of work, we just took our ship here and became pirates." Lamps stuffed one more of Grandma's biscuits into his mouth.

"But where'd you get that fancy gadget that stopped the *Kismet's* engines from running?" Grandma asked, passing the plate to Snake.

Snake took a biscuit and passed the plate back. "That's our Suggestor Ray. Professor Spindle, he invented it. He invents a lot of things. He's got a laboratory at our hideout."

"You mean laboratory, Snake. But who's Professor Spindle?" Grandma asked.

Snake wolfed the biscuit down in one mighty gulp. "He used to work for STAR until they stole a couple of his inventions and wouldn't pay him for them. So he come to work for us. He fixed up the suggestor ray in no time."

"You mean suppressor ray," muttered Lamps, his mouth full.

"That's right. We get close to another space ship and turn it on and it suggests that the engines don't work. Professor Spindle, he shedded our engines so they'd work even with it on."

"You mean shielded," said Grandma.

"That's right. He put a big shed over the engines to shed out the suggestor ray." As Snake leaned over to pick up the remaining biscuit from the plate in front of him, a locket slipped out of the neck of his shirt. Grandma saw the picture of a pretty blonde girl in it, and attached to the chain was a wedding ring. Snake noticed her looking at it. "That's my wife. We was married when we was awful young. But she up and flew the coop on me about a year after we was married. Awful pretty, she was."

"She reminds me of someone," said Grandma.

Lamps leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the desk. "You now, Grandma, you sure do bake fine biscuits. Maybe we'll stop in and see you sometimes at that old folks home and you can fix us some more. Yes, sir, you sure can cook."

Grandma Perkins saw her opening and seized upon it. "You sure could use a woman's touch on this ship. Why, this is the dirtiest ship I've ever seen, and—"

"Aw, now, Grandma. You know we never could have a female on a pirate ship. And we got to get you back to safety before the Space Patrol has us in the coop for good. And what would your ten children say—"

Lamps was saved from further explanation when the door to the cabin burst open and Willie Wicket, the youngest of the pirates, dashed in.

"Captain Lamps! There's a Space Patrol ship bearing down on our tail hell bent for leather!"

Lamps jumped to his feet, as did Snake. "Well, turn on the suppressor ray. That ought to fix it!"

"I turned on the ray and they're still coming!" wailed Willie.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Professor Spindle told us this would happen, and we didn't believe him. That must be one of the new patrol ships," Lamps moaned as he, Snake and Grandma rushed for the control room. En route Grandma was told that the newest patrol ships had a special kind of shielding that made them invulnerable to the Spindle suppressor ray.

Lamps, Snake, Willie and the rest of the crew took turns at trying to out-manuever the patrol craft, but it had far too much speed for the slower craft, and it became obvious within a few minutes that the pirate ship was doomed to be captured.

Then Grandma spoke up. "Where's that suppressor ray of yours, Lamps?"

"Over there in the corner of the control panel by the televideo set, but don't monkey with it," he told her in the middle of a stream of curses at his ancient vessel. He slammed his hands around the control board frantically trying to elude the oncoming patrol craft. Grandma ignored his warning and quickly pried off the top of the box containing the suppressor mechanism.

A brilliant burst of atomic energy lit the control room. "They're firing at us!" cried Lamps. "Man the guns, men!"

THE crew was so busy executing this order that none of them saw exactly what Grandma was doing until Willie, who was manning the radar screen, suddenly shouted, "Captain Lamps! The patrol ship's stopped!"

"Of course it's stopped," Grandma said indignantly. "I just fixed your old dingus here so it'd work right. And it's going to stay fixed until I can get you out of trouble." She crossed her arms and stared adamantly at Lamps who was so shocked he could scarcely move.

Then she pointed her finger. "Willie, you come over here and turn this televideo on and get me in touch with that patrol ship right away. We've got some things to settle."

Willie looked at Lamps for permission, but the captain of the pirate craft was still too stunned to do more than nod his head. Willie walked to the set and began to fiddle with the dials.

Snake broke the silence and asked the question they all wanted to ask. "Grandma, how come you could fix that Suggestory Ray?"

"Young man," she snapped, "I had ten children, like I told you. One of them, Franklin, my next to oldest boy, was a physicist. And you don't help put a boy through college physics without learning something about how to fiddle with electronics." Lamps felt faint.

The screen of the televideo lit up. "Hello, Patrol Ship! Hello, Patrol Ship!" Willie called over the microphone.

The chubby face of a middle aged man appeared on the screen. His cap carried enough gold braid to stock a small-sized mint. "Hello, Pirate," he cried. "This is Commodore Trumble of the Space Patrol on board the cruiser *Faultless*. What in blue blazes have you done to my ship!"

"Give me that microphone, Willie," Grandma said, taking the device away from him. She moved over to the screen. "Hello, Commodore. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate ship—" She stopped and turned to Lamps. "What is the name of this tub?" she asked.

"It's—it's the *Lulu Belle*," he said, turning his head aside as if in shame.

"That's hardly a fit name for a pirate ship," Grandma told him, turning back to the televideo. "That's a sissy name."

"That's her name, and that's what it's going to—"

Grandma ignored him. "Hello, Commodore. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate ship *Dirty Shame*."

Lamps groaned audibly.

"Are you the one they kidnapped from the *Kismet*?"

"That's right, Commodore. And now I'm ready to go back."

"What are you doing at the microphone? Who's in command of the *Dirty Shame*?" The Commodore looked near apoplexy.

"I am, for the moment," Grandma told him. Lamps groaned again, this time louder "And I want you to do me a favor. Please get Captain Fogarty on your long-distance video right away. I want to talk to him."

The Commodore screamed, "I'll do nothing of the kind! What have you done to the *Faultless*? What are those pirates doing?"

Grandma smiled at him. "Well, right now they're getting ready to blow a hole right in the side of your ship. And I don't know that I can stop them if you don't do what I say."

"What!" shouted the Commodore.

"And I don't believe your guns are working too well with your atomics out of order, so I'd suggest that you get Captain Fogarty on the video right away."

The Commodore ranted, he bellowed and he raved, but in less than a minute, Captain Fogarty's face appeared on the screen, relayed from the more powerful communications center on the *Faultless*.

"Good evening, Captain Fogarty. This is Mrs. Omar Perkins on board the pirate craft *Dirty Shame*."

Fogarty harrumped. "Oh, it's you. Well, I'm glad to see that you're safe. Did the Commodore rescue you?"

"Well, you could put it that way, I guess. Where is the *Kismet* now?" she asked.

"Heading for Earth as scheduled, if it's any of your business. Why?"

Grandma gave him a twinkling grin. "Well, I don't think you'd better land without me. So you just hold your horses till I get back aboard."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. I can't help it if one of the poorer paying passengers gets herself kidnapped. The Space Patrol has plenty of room. They can just bring you in. I've got a schedule to meet."

Grandma pretended to yawn. "I wouldn't advise your landing on Earth without me. Or landing anywhere, for that matter. You know, Stellar Transportation signed a contract with me guaranteeing that I wouldn't be put off the ship against my will and promising to deliver me to Earth this trip. If I'm not aboard when you land, that contract is broken and so is STAR'S monopoly. So you go right ahead without me. I figure I could make about a million dollars off the law suit myself if you do."

CAPTAIN FOGARTY exploded. "I...I..." he stammered, then turned away from the screen. Grandma could hear a hasty conversation between him and the *Kismet's* legal officer. In a moment he returned to the screen, a broad but very forced grin on his face. "Why, Mrs. Perkins, we wouldn't think of landing without you. Please tell Commodore Trumble that we'll be waiting for you."

"But I just might not feel like coming, Captain," Grandma said demurely.

"Tell Commodore Trumble I said he had to bring you back immediately!" blustered Fogarty. "And I hope he wrings those pirates' necks!"

Grandma put on her most pained expression. But to Lamps, Snake and the rest of the men still standing in awe, it was obvious that she was enjoying every minute of it.

"I don't think Commodore Trumble has much to say about it. You see, the pirates captured him and the entire crew of the *Faultless* just before he called you. So the pirates would be the ones who'd have to bring me back. And I'm sure they wouldn't do that unless they were sure I'd be well taken care of."

"I don't believe it!" cried Fogarty. "Trumble, say it isn't so!"

There came a slight sputtering on the circuit. "Well, Fogarty, I...well...that is, I—"

"Oh, no," moaned Fogarty.

Grandma smiled prettily. "Now, then, about my accommodations. You know that lovely mother-of-pearl suite that Miss Toujours has? Well, I think I ought to have that suite. I'm far too old to be climbing all those stairs and that other cabin was so small." She looked up a bit, as if in a blissful reverie. "Miss Toujours has to rush back to make some new pictures, and I'm sure that she wouldn't like to be delayed in space for weeks

and weeks. So you might have her leave me a set of those lacy nighties, too. They looked so nice. And I'll have to have her seat at the Captain's table too, of course. And I'd need my own private steward. Johnny Weaver will do nicely, I think. And—"

Grandma, the morose Captain and the *Kismet's* legal officer finally straightened matters out. In return for the granting of her every whim for the rest of the voyage, Grandma agreed to return to the ship and free Stellar Transportation from any liability arising from her kidnapping. She was almost glowing over it all, but it was a beaten and broken Fogarty who finally broke the video circuit some minutes later.

Turning to the crew of the *Dirty Shame*, Grandma smiled with great innocence. "Now, wasn't it nice of them to go to all that trouble over a little old lady like me," she said.

Lamps grinned. "You sure fixed them, Grandma. But what a pack of trouble you got us into with the law. What are we going to do with Trumble and the *Faultless* out there? The Space Patrol will chase us the rest of our lives for pulling a fast one like this."

Grandma snapped her fingers. "I knew there was something I had forgotten." She turned back to the video set. "Hello, Commodore Trumble," she called.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," came the booming yoke of the Commodore.

"No, not quite. There's a small matter of amnesty for the crew of the *Dirty Shame*. If you'll just make out the papers giving them a full pardon for this whole affair, everything will be just fine."

Grandma winced at the language he used in reply. On the tail of the last string of curses, he added, "I won't do it. What do you think I am, an idiot?"

"We won't discuss the subject just at the moment, Commodore. But, really, you wouldn't want the story to get out that the big, brave, fearless Commodore Trumble got himself outfoxed by a poor little innocent old lady like me, would you? Silence comes dear, as my husband used to say to me."

"I—I—"

"And I see that the boys here have got that gun pointed in your direction again. The Space Patrol wouldn't be too happy if you brought the *Faultless* back with a few big holes in her sides,

would they. And I don't know if I can stop the boys—”

The Commodore turned green, then purple, then a trifle black in the face. “I can't do it. It isn't legal. I—I haven't got the authority.”

Grandma silenced him with a wave of her hand. “Of course you have. In the case of the Space Patrol vs. Pickens and Poor, the Solar Supreme Court ruled that Patrol Commodores, while in space, have the power to grant complete amnesty to any deserving citizens who merit it. I didn't put my eldest son Wade through law school without learning something about the subject. Furthermore, in the case of Higgins vs. Abercrombie—”

“All right. I give up. You win.” The Commodore retired from the video screen, tears in his eyes.

A few hours later the *Dirty Shame* hove into sight of the *Kismet*. Grandma Perkins put on her space suit again and prepared to head back to the luxury liner, but not before she and her boys had had a small celebration, the high spot of which was another batch of fresh-baked biscuits.

Grandma then told them all good-bye and insisted on kissing each of them on their cheeks in spite of the beards. She then explained that she hated to go off and leave them like this, but that she had a contract to live up to and that she always kept her bargains. But anyway they had their pardons now and they probably wouldn't need her—much.

And it must be reported that as the tiny little figure, safe in the oversized space suit, drifted across the void that separated the two ships, more than one of the grizzled crew turned aside to wipe his eyes on a dirty sleeve.

IV

IT IS doubtful that anyone ever enjoyed a trip on the *Kismet* as much as Grandma Perkins did hers. Johnny waited on her hand and foot, she was served first at the table and she kept up a running flow of brilliant conversation. And if Captain Fogarty seemed to enjoy his meals less the latter part of the voyage than he had the first part, only the more malicious of the passengers dared to connect his loss of appetite with his new-found guest of honor.

All in all the rest of the trip was a fairly uneventful one for Grandma, save for one small incident the first night she was back on board ship. Luxuriating in her large, comfortable mother-of-pearl bed, Grandma heard a soft knocking at her door.

“Come in,” she called in a small voice.

The door opened and in stalked Darling Toujours, a suitcase under her arms.

“I've come to take my cabin back, Mrs. Perkins,” she said, a mean look in her eyes. “The only vacant one was the little hole in the wall they had you in the first part of the voyage, and I must say it isn't fit for a dog.”

“Oh, I think you'll get used to it then,” cooed Grandma.

“Well, I don't intend to be the one to do the getting used to it,” snarled the actress. “You see, my dear woman, I didn't say anything about this until you were safely on board again and we could start back for Earth, because I can't afford to be late for making my next picture.”

Grandma looked a little surprised. “Say anything about what?”

“About how I was in the passageway and saw you get into that space suit and let yourself out the airlock, Mrs. Perkins. I don't believe that constitutes being forced to leave against your will. Therefore, STAR doesn't owe you a thing more than your passage, if that, and I want my suite back.” The actress smiled triumphantly.

“But, Miss Toujours, surely no one would believe such a fantastic story like that.”

Darling Toujours began to purr softly. “Captain Fogarty would. And now, my dear, if you'll just leave, I won't have to have you put out. And you can just take off my nice lace nightie to begin with!”

“Oh, my,” said Grandma, sighing deeply but making no sign of moving. “And I was so hoping that I wouldn't have to say anything about all that business and cause you so much trouble.”

Darling Toujours looked startled. Then a distrustful look came into her eyes. “What are you talking about?” she demanded suspiciously.

“Why, on board that pirate ship I noticed that one of the men, Snake Simpson, was wearing a picture of a very pretty girl. His wife, he said, only she had run out on him many years ago. Of course, her hair was blonde, and yours is black, and you seem to have done something to your

nose in the meantime, but I'd never mistake the mouth. So large for your face, you know."

"Why, you little—" the younger woman began.

"I wouldn't tell anybody in the world about it. Unless, of course, you made trouble, Mrs. Simp—I mean, Miss Toujours."

"Nobody in the world would believe you!" snapped the actress.

Grandma gave her a beneficent smile. "Carlton E. Carlton would. By the way, my dear, I think I know now why you wear these nighties. But one does feel so naked in them, if you know what I mean. And now, if you'll please leave. This part of the ship is restricted to first class passengers."

WHEN the *Kismet* landed at the New York spaceport many days later, Grandma left the ship reluctantly, knowing that it marked the end of a great adventure for her. In protest against this, she took the little money she had with her and spent a full week of almost riotous living on the town, visiting all the nightclubs and the dives, flirting dangerously with men of 70 and 80, half her age and almost getting arrested six times.

But one bright morning, her funds exhausted, she was deposited bag and baggage on the front lawn of Melissa Muir's Home for Elderly Ladies. Grandma looked the place over dourly.

"Well, I guess there's nothing left for me to do now but retire from active life and take up painting," Grandma said to herself. And picking up some of her effects she started up the walk. Close to the front porch, however, two men stepped out from behind some shrubbery and started towards her.

"Grandma!" one of them shouted. And it was only then that she recognized Lamps and Snake, freshly shaven and with dean suits on.

"Why, Lamps O'Toole! And you, too, Snake! Whatever are you two doing at this old boneyard?" she said, hugging each in turn.

"We come to see you, Grandma," Lamps told her, bashful as a boy asking for his first date. "We had to put in to Earth for fuel, so we came by to see how you was."

Snake Simpson, plainly embarrassed at her display of affection, wriggled free from her bony embrace. "Yeah, Grandma, we come by to bring you a message from Perfessor Spindle. He still

don't know what you did to the Suggestor Ray, but he says you're a real Icy Stein."

"You mean Einstein, Snake. That's very kind of the professor."

"And we brought you a little present to show you how much we appreciate you getting us the pardons," Lamps told her, thrusting a small package into her hands. "Don't go and open it until we leave, though."

Grandma Perkins felt a little flustered by all the attention she was receiving. "Why, thank you very much, boys. I'm sure I'll like it."

The three of them stood quite still and quite silent for a moment or two. Then Lamps said, "Well, I guess we ought to be going, Grandma. It's been good seeing you, and take care of yourself."

"Yeah, bye," said Snake, holding out a grimy paw hoping to escape with just a handshake. He did.

The two burly spacemen strode rapidly down the walk and climbed into their aircar. Grandma stood transfixed until the little vehicle had climbed far out of sight. Then she opened the present.

In the box she found a delicate bit of jewelry—a solid gold locket. The medallion was shaped like a rocket ship, and along the side of it, spelled out in tiny diamonds, was the name, *Dirty Shame*. Grandma held it in her hands for a spell, then pulled out a bit of a lace handkerchief and honked loudly.

Turning around, she surveyed her new home again. And she began to think, which was always dangerous. Her conscience, catching the drift of her thoughts, became alarmed.

"Now, Matilda Perkins, you wouldn't dare—" her conscience said to her.

"Oh, you shut up," she retorted. "But it would be awfully nice...."

THE spaceship *Dirty Shame* blasted off from the spaceport in a blaze of fire and smoke. Lamps O'Toole and Snake Simpson were at the controls, and neither of them was feeling much like talking. So, for the most part as they pushed the buttons and turned the switches that headed the ship out into space, they were quiet.

After a while Snake spoke up. "We're going to miss the old dame," he ventured as they pulled clear of Earth's atmosphere.

"Keep your trap shut," growled Lamps.

"Yes, sir, if I just close my eyes, I can still see the old gal, standing there at the microfoam, giving that old Commodore the business. And you standing next to her, your mouth hanging out a mile."

Lamps gave the ship more velocity than was necessary. "Mind your own business, Snake."

"And I can hear them funny shoes of hers, clip clapping down the corridor, bringing us a batch of fresh biscuits." Snake sat bolt upright in his chair. "Lord a-massy, if I can't even smell them biscuits right now!"

Lamps let out a curse. "Now, see what you done, Snake? You got me so riled up I can smell 'em too."

Both of them stopped, sniffed long and hard, and then let out a whoop. Throwing the *Dirty Shame* into full automatic, they dashed for the kitchen.

There, stooping over, peering into the oven, was a silver-haired, little old lady.

"Grandma!" they yelled in unison. "What are you doing here!"

Giving them her richest smile, she said, "Well, boys, I didn't raise a family of ten without knowing that hungry men need good, solid food. So I.."

It took a while and it took some wile and some of the best of Grandma's talking, but finally

it was agreed by all hands that she would be allowed to remain on board, at least until they could get her back to Earth. And, in the end, the fresh batch of hot biscuits were probably her best argument.

After dinner, just before she headed to her cabin to slip off into a sound sleep, Lamps stopped her for one final question.

"Say, Grandma, I know this maybe sounds funny. But whatever in the world did you do to that suppressor ray?"

"Whatever do you mean?" answered Grandma with great innocence.

"Well, Professor Spindle, he looked at it, cussed at it, pulled it apart, said it couldn't possibly work, then all of sudden he gave a big laugh and packed the whole contraption off to his laboratory. And I just wondered..."

Grandma Perkins snickered. "Lamps," she told him, "Promise me faithfully you won't tell a soul?" Lamps nodded.

"Well, sir, you've got a great deal to learn about women. You see, there just isn't anything made that a smart woman can't fix with a hairpin."

And plopping one last biscuit into his mouth for him, she clip-clopped down the corridor and off to bed.