



# THE BURNING BRIDGE

POUL ANDERSON

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# The Burning Bridge

POUL ANDERSON

Illustrations by van Dongen

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Usually there are two “reasons” why something is done; the reason why it needs to be done, and, quite separate, the reason people want to do it. The foul-up starts when the reason-for-wanting is satisfied...and the need remains!

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THE MESSAGE WAS AN electronic shout, the most powerful and tightly-beamed short-wave transmission which men could generate, directed with all the precision which mathematics and engineering could offer. Nevertheless that pencil must scrawl broadly over the sky, and for a long time, merely hoping to write on its target. For when distances are measured in light-weeks, the smallest errors grow monstrous.

As it happened, the attempt was successful. Communications Officer Anastas Mardikian had assembled his receiver after acceleration ceased—a big thing, surrounding the flagship *Ranger* like a spiderweb trapping a fly—and had kept it hopefully tuned over a wide band. The radio beam swept through, ghostly faint from dispersion, wave length doubled by Doppler effect, ragged with cosmic noise. An elaborate system of filters and amplifiers could make it no more than barely intelligible.

But that was enough.

Mardikian burst onto the bridge. He was young, and the months had not yet devoured the glory of his first deep-space voyage. "Sir!" he yelled. "A message...I just played back the recorder...from Earth!"

Fleet Captain Joshua Coffin started. That movement, in weightlessness, spun him off the deck. He stopped himself with a practiced hand, stiffened, and rapped back: "If you haven't yet learned regulations, a week of solitary confinement may give you a chance to study them."

"I...but, sir—" The other man retreated. His uniform made a loose rainbow splash across metal and plastic. Coffin alone, of all the fleet's company, held to the black garments of a space service long extinct.

"But, sir," said Mardikian. His voice seemed to have fallen off a high cliff. "Word from Earth!"

"Only the duty officer may enter the bridge without permission," Coffin reminded him. "If you had anything urgent to tell, there is an intercom."

"I thought—" choked Mardikian. He paused, then came to the free-fall equivalent of attention. Anger glittered in his eyes. "Sorry, sir."

Coffin hung quiet a while, looking at the dark young man in the brilliant clothes. *Forget it*, he said to himself. *Times are another. You went once to e Eridani, and almost ninety years had passed when you returned. Earth was like a foreign planet. This is as good as spacemen get to be nowadays, careless, superstitious, jabbering among each other in*

*languages I don't understand. Thank God there are any recruits at all, and hope He will let there continue to be a few for what remains of your life.*

The duty officer, Hallmyer, was tall and blond and born in Lancashire; but he watched the other two with Asian eyes. No one spoke, though Mardikian breathed heavily. Stars filled the bow viewport, crowding a huge night.

Coffin sighed. "Very well," he said. "I'll let it pass this time."

After all, he reflected, a message from Earth was an event. Radio had, indeed, gone between Sol and Alpha Centauri, but that was with very special equipment. To pinpoint a handful of ships, moving at half the speed of light, and to do it so well that the comparatively small receiver Mardikian had erected would pick up the beam—Yes, the boy had some excuse for gladness.

"What was the signal?" Coffin inquired.

He expected it would only be routine, a test, so that engineers a lifetime hence could ask the returning fleet whether their transmission had registered. (If there were any engineers by then, on an Earth sinking into poverty and mysticism.)

Instead, Mardikian blurted: "Old Svoboda is dead. The new Psychologies Commissioner is Thomas... Thomson...that part didn't record clearly...anyway, he must be sympathetic to the Constitutionalists. He's rescinded the educational decree—promised more consideration to provincial mores. Come hear for yourself, sir!"

Despite himself, Coffin whistled. "But that's why the e Eridani colony was being founded," he said. His words fell flat and silly into silence.

Hallmyer said, with the alien hiss in his English that Coffin hated, for it was like the Serpent in a once noble garden:

"Apparently the colony has no more reason to be started. But how shall we consult with three thousand would-be pioneers lying in deepsleep?"

"Shall we?" Coffin did not know why—not yet—but he felt his brain move with the speed of fear. "We've undertaken to deliver them to Rustum. In the absence of definite orders from Earth, are we even allowed to consider a change of plans...since a general vote can't be taken? Better avoid possible trouble and not even mention—" He broke off. Mardikian's face had become a mask of dismay.

"But, sir!" bleated the Com officer.

A chill rose up in Coffin. "You have already told," he said.

"Yes," whispered Mardikian. "I met Coenrad de Smet, he had come over to this ship for some repair parts, and...I never thought—"

"Exactly!" growled Coffin.

The fleet numbered fifteen, more than half the interstellar ships humankind possessed. But Earth's overlords had been as anxious to get rid of the Constitutionalists (the most stubborn ones, at least; the stay-at-homes were *ipso facto* less likely to be troublesome) as that science-minded, liberty-minded

group of archaists were to escape being forcibly absorbed by modern society. Rustum, e Eridani II, was six parsecs away, forty-one years of travel, and barely habitable: but the only possible world yet discovered. A successful colony would be prestigious, and could do no harm; its failure would dispose of a thorn in the official ribs. Tying up fifteen ships for eight decades was all right too. Exploration was a dwindling activity, which interested fewer men each generation.



So Earth's government co-operated fully. It even provided speeches and music when the colonists embarked for the orbiting fleet. After which, Coffin thought, the government had doubtless grinned to itself and thanked its various heathen gods that that was over with.

“Only now,” he muttered, “it isn't.”

He free-sat in the *Ranger's* general room, a tall, bony, faintly grizzled Yankee, and waited. The austerity of the walls was broken by a few pictures. Coffin had wanted to leave them bare—since no one else would care for a view of the church where his father had preached, a hundred years ago, or be interested in a model of that catboat the boy Joshua had sailed on a bay which glittered in summers now forgotten—but even the theoretically absolute power of a fleet captain had its limits. At least the men nowadays were not making this room obscene with naked women. Though in all honesty, he wasn't sure he wouldn't rather have that than...brush-strokes on rice paper,

the suggestion of a tree, and a classic ideogram. He did not understand the new generations.

The *Ranger* skipper, Nils Kivi, was like a breath of home: a small dapper Finn who had traveled with Coffin on the first e Eridani trip. They were not exactly friends, an admiral has no intimates, but they had been young in the same decade.

*Actually, thought Coffin, most of us spacemen are anachronisms. I could talk to Goldstein or Yamato or Pereira, to quite a few on this voyage, and not meet blank surprise when I mentioned a dead actor or hummed a dead song. But of course, they are all in unaging deepsleep now. We'll stand our one-year watches in turn, and be put back in the coldvats, and have no chance to talk till journey's end.*

"It may prove to be fun," mused Kivi.

"What?" asked Coffin.

"To walk around High America again, and fish in the Emperor River, and dig up our old camp," said Kivi. "We had some fine times on Rustum, along with all the work and danger."

Coffin was startled, that his own thoughts should have been so closely followed. "Yes," he agreed, remembering strange wild dawns on the Cleft edge, "that was a pretty good five years."

Kivi sighed. "Different this time," he said. "Now that I think about it, I am not sure I do want to go back. We had so much hope then—we were discoverers, walking where men had never even laid eyes

before. Now the colonists will be the hopeful ones. We are just their transportation.”

Coffin shrugged. “We must take what is given us, and be thankful.”

“This time,” said Kivi, “I will constantly worry: suppose I come home again and find my job abolished? No more space travel at all. If that happens, I refuse to be thankful.”

*Forgive him, Coffin asked his God. It is cruel to watch the foundation of your life being gnawed away.*

Kivi’s eyes lit up, the briefest flicker. “Of course,” he said, “if we really do cancel this trip, and go straight back, we may not arrive too late. We may still find a few expeditions to new stars being organized, and get on their rosters.”

Coffin tautened. Again he was unsure why he felt an emotion: now, anger. “I shall permit no disloyalty to the purpose for which we are engaged,” he clipped.

“Oh, come off it,” said Kivi. “Be rational. I don’t know your reason for undertaking this wretched cruise. You had rank enough to turn down the assignment; no one else did. But you still want to explore as badly as I. If Earth didn’t care about us, they would not have bothered to invite us back. Let us seize the opportunity while it lasts.” He intercepted a reply by glancing at the wall chrono. “Time for our conference.” He flicked the intership switch.



A panel came to life, dividing into fourteen sections, one for each accompanying vessel. One or two faces peered from each. The craft which bore only supplies and sleeping crewmen were represented by their captains. Those which had colonists also revealed a civilian spokesman.

Coffin studied every small image in turn. The spacemen he knew, they all belonged to the Society and even those born long after him had much in common. There was a necessary minimum discipline of mind and body, and the underlying dream for which all else had been traded: new horizons under new suns. Not that spacemen indulged in such poetics; they had too much work to do.

The colonists were something else. Coffin shared things with them—predominantly North American background, scientific habit of thought, distrust of all governments. But few Constitutionists had any religion; those who did were Romish, Jewish, Buddhist, or otherwise alien to him. All were tainted with the self-indulgence of this era: they had written into their covenant that only physical necessity could justify moralizing legislation, and that free speech was limited only by personal libel. Coffin thought sometimes he would be glad to see the last of them.

“Are you all prepared?” he began. “Very well, let’s get down to business. It’s unfortunate the Com officer gossiped so loosely. He stirred up a hornet’s nest.” Coffin saw that few understood the idiom. “He made discontent which threatens this whole project, and which we must now deal with.”

Coenrad de Smet, colonist aboard the *Scout*, smiled in an irritating way he had. "You would simply have concealed the fact?" he asked.

"It would have made matters easier," said Coffin stiffly.

"In other words," said de Smet, "you know better what we might want than we do ourselves. That, sir, is the kind of arrogance we hoped to escape. No man has the right to suppress any information bearing on public affairs."

A low voice, with a touch of laughter, said through a hood: "And you accuse Captain Coffin of preaching!"

The New Englander's eyes were drawn to her. Not that he could see through the shapeless gown and mask, such as hid all the waking women; but he had met Teresa Zeleny on Earth. Hearing her now was somehow like remembering Indian summer on a wooded hilltop, a century ago.

An involuntary smile quirked his lips. "Thank you," he said. "Do you, Mr. de Smet, know what the sleeping colonists might want? Have you any right to decide for *them*? And yet we can't wake them, even the adults, to vote. There simply isn't room; if nothing else, the air regenerators couldn't supply that much oxygen. That's why I felt it best to tell no one, until we were actually at Rustum. Then those who wished could return with the fleet, I suppose."

"We could rouse them a few at a time, let them vote, and put them back to sleep," suggested Teresa Zeleny.

“It would take weeks,” said Coffin. “You, of all people, should know metabolism isn’t lightly stopped, or easily restored.”

“If you could see my face,” she said, again with a chuckle, “I would grimace amen. I’m so sick of tending inert human flesh that...well, I’m glad they’re only women and girls, because if I also had to massage and inject men I’d take a vow of chastity!”

Coffin blushed, cursed himself for blushing, and hoped she couldn’t see it over the telecircuit. He noticed Kivi grin.



Kivi provided the merciful interruption. “Your few-at-a-time proposal is pointless anyhow,” he said. “In the course of those weeks, we would pass the critical date.”

“What’s that?” asked a young girl’s voice.

“You don’t know?” said Coffin, surprised.

“Let it pass for now,” broke in Teresa. Once again, as several times before, Coffin admired her decisiveness. She cut through nonsense with a man’s speed and a woman’s practicality. “Take our word for it, June, if we don’t turn about within two months, we’ll do better to go on to Rustum. So, voting is out. We could wake a few sleepers, but those already conscious are really as adequate a statistical sample.”

Coffin nodded. She spoke for five women on her ship, who stood a year-watch caring for two hundred ninety-five asleep. The one hundred twenty

who would not be restimulated for such duty during the voyage, were children. The proportion on the other nine colonist-laden vessels was similar; the crew totaled one thousand six hundred twenty, with forty-five up and about at all times. Whether the die was cast by less than two per cent, or by four or five per cent, was hardly significant.

“Let’s recollect exactly what the message was,” said Coffin. “The educational decree which directly threatened your Constitutionalist way of life has been withdrawn. You’re no worse off now than formerly—and no better, though there’s a hint of further concessions in the future. You’re invited home again. That’s all. We have not picked up any other transmissions. It seems very little data on which to base so large a decision.”

“It’s an even bigger one, to continue,” said de Smet. He leaned forward, a bulky man, until he filled his little screen. Hardness rang in his tones. “We were able people, economically rather well off. I daresay Earth already misses our services, especially in technological fields. Your own report makes Rustum out a grim place; many of us would die there. Why should we not turn home?”

“Home,” whispered someone.

The word filled a sudden quietness, like water filling a cup, until quietness brimmed over with it. Coffin sat listening to the voice of his ship, generators, ventilators, regulators, and he began to hear a beat frequency which was *Home, home, home*.

Only his home was gone. His father’s church was torn down for an Oriental temple, and the woods

where October had burned were cleared for another tentacle of city, and the bay was enclosed to make a plankton farm. For him, only a spaceship remained, and the somehow cold hope of heaven.

A very young man said, almost to himself: "I left a girl back there."

"I had a little sub," said another. "I used to poke around the Great Barrier Reef, skindiving out the air lock or loafing on the surface. You wouldn't believe how blue the waves could be. They tell me on Rustum you can't come down off the mountain tops."

"But we'd have the whole planet to ourselves," said Teresa Zeleny.

One with a gentle scholar's face answered: "That may be precisely the trouble, my dear. Three thousand of us, counting children, totally isolated from the human mainstream. Can we hope to build a civilization? Or even maintain one?"

"Your problem, pop," said the officer beside him dryly, "is that there are no medieval manuscripts on Rustum."

"I admit it," said the scholar. "I thought it more important my children grow up able to use their minds. But if it turns out they can do so on Earth—How much chance will the first generations on Rustum have to sit down and really think, anyway?"

"Would there even be a next generation on Rustum?"

"One and a quarter gravities—I can feel it now."



“Synthetics, year after year of synthetics and hydroponics, till we can establish an ecology. I had steak on Earth, once in a while.”

“My mother couldn’t come. Too frail. But she’s paid for a hundred years of deepsleep, all she could afford...just in case I do return.”

POUL ANDERSON

“I designed skyhouses. They won’t build anything on Rustum much better than sod huts, in my lifetime.”

“Do you remember moonlight on the Grand Canyon?”

“Do you remember Beethoven’s Ninth in the Federal Concert Hall?”

“Do you remember that funny little Midlevel bar, where we all drank beer and sang *Lieder*?”

“Do you remember?”

“Do you remember?”



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