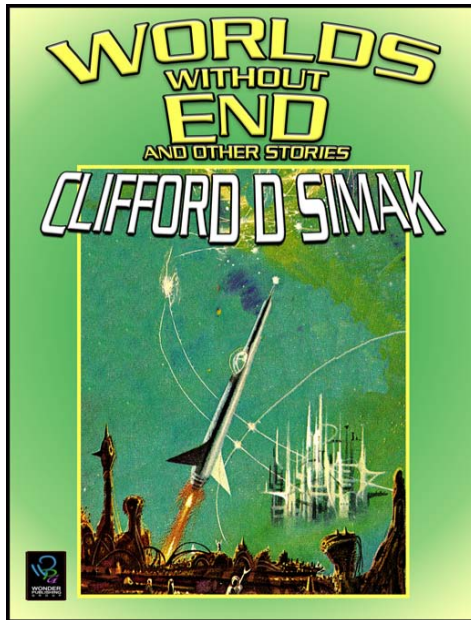


THE SHIPSHAPE MIRACLE BY CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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THE SHIPSHAPE MIRACLE

If Cheviot Sherwood ever had believed in miracles, he believed in them no longer. He had no illusions now. He knew exactly what he faced.

His life would come to an end on this uninhabited backwoods planet and there'd be none to mourn him, none to know. Not, he thought, that there would be any mourners. Although there were those who would be glad to see him, who would come running if they knew where he might be found.

These were people, very definitely, that Sherwood had no desire to see.

His great, one might say his overwhelming, desire not to see them could account in part for his present situation, since he had taken off from the last planet of record without filing pins and lacking clearance.

Since no one knew where he might have headed and since his radio was junk, there was no likelihood at all that anyone would find him—even if they looked, which would be a matter of some doubt. Probably the most that anyone would do would be to send out messages to other planets to place authorities on the alert for him.

And since his spaceship, for the lack of a certain valve for which he had no replacement, was not going anywhere, he was stuck here on this planet.

If that had been all there had been to it, it might not have been so bad. But there was a final irony that under other circumstances (if it had been happening to someone else, let's say), would have kept Sherwood in stitches of forthright merriment for hours on end at the very thought of it. But since he was the one involved, there was no merriment.

For now, when he could gain no benefit, he was potentially rich beyond even his own most greedy and most lurid dreams.

On the ridge above the camp he'd set up beside his crippled spaceship lay a strip of clay-cemented conglomerate that fairly reeked with diamonds. They lay scattered on the hillside, washed out by the weather; they were mixed liberally in the gravel of the tiny stream that wended through the valley. They could be picked up by the basket. They were of high quality, there were several, the size of human skulls, that probably were priceless.

Sherwood was of a hardy, rough and tumble breed. Once he became convinced of his situation he made the best of it. He made his camp into a home and laid in supplies—digging roots, gathering nuts, drying fish and making pemmican. If he was to be cast in the role of a Robinson Crusoe, he proposed to be comfortable.

In his spare time he gathered diamonds, dumping them in a pile outside his shack. And in the idle afternoons or the long evenings, he sat beside his campfire and sorted them out—washing them free of clinging dirt and grading them according to their size

and brilliance. The very best of them he put into a sack, designed for easy grabbing if the time should ever come when he might depart.

Not that he had any hope this would come about.

Even so, he was a man who planned against contingencies. He always tried to have some sort of loop-hole. Had this not been the case, his career would have ended long before, at any one of a dozen times or places. That it apparently had come to an end now could be attributed to a certain lack of foresight in not carrying a full complement of spare parts. Although perhaps this was understandable, since never before in the history of space flight had that particular valve which now spelled out Sherwood's doom ever misbehaved.

Perhaps it was well for him that he was not an introspective man. If he had been given to much searching thought, he might have found himself living with his past, and there were places in his past that were far from pretty.

He was lucky in many other ways, of course. The planet was not a bad one, a sort of New England planet with a rocky, tumbled terrain, forested by scrubby trees and distinctly terrestrial. He might just as easily been marooned upon a jungle planet or one of the icy planets or any of another dozen different kinds that were not tolerant of life.

So he settled in and made the best of it and didn't even bother to count off the days. For he knew what he was in for.

He counted on no miracle.

* * * *

The miracle he had not counted on came late one afternoon as he sat, cross-legged, sorting out his latest haul of priceless diamonds.

The great black ship came in from the east across the rolling hills. It whistled down across the ridges and settled to the ground a short distance from Sherwood's crippled ship and his shack.

It was no patrol vessel, although in his position, Sherwood would have welcomed even one of these. It was a kind of ship he'd never seen before. It was globular and black and it had no identifying marks on it.

He leaped to his feet and ran toward the ship. He waved his arms in welcome and whooped with his delight. He stopped a hundred feet away when he felt the first whiff of the heat that had been picked up by the vessel's hull in its plunge through atmosphere.

"Hey in there!" he yelled.

And the ship spoke to him. "You need not yell," it told him. "I can hear you well."

"Who are you?" asked Sherwood.

"I am the Ship," the voice told him.

"Quit fooling around," yelled Sherwood, "who are you?"

For the sort of answer it had given was foolishness. Of course was the ship. It was someone in the ship, talking to him through a speaker in the hull.

"I have told you," said the Ship. "I am the Ship."

"But there is someone speaking to me."

"The Ship is speaking to you."

"All right, then," said Sherwood. "If you want it that way, it's okay with me. Can you take me out of here? My radio is broken and my ship disabled."

"Perhaps I can," said the Ship. "Tell me who you are."

Sherwood hesitated for a moment, and then he told who he was, quite truthfully. For it suddenly had occurred to him that this ship was as much an outlaw as himself. It had no markings and all ships must have markings.

"You say you left your last port without proper clearance?"

"Yes," said Sherwood. "There were certain circumstances."

"And no one knows where you are? No one's looking for you?"

"How could they?" Sherwood asked.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Just anywhere," said Sherwood. "I have no preference."

* * * *

For even if they should land him somewhere where he had no wish to be, he still would have a running chance. On this planet he had no chance at all.

"All right," said the Ship. "You can come aboard."

A hatch came open in the hull and a ladder began running out.

"Just a second," Sherwood shouted. "I'll be right there."

He sprinted to the shack and grabbed his sack of the finest diamonds, then legged it for the ship. He got there almost as soon as the ladder touched the ground.

The hull still was crackling with warmth, but Sherwood swarmed up the ladder, paying no attention.

He was set for life, he thought. Unless—

And then the thought struck him that they might take the diamonds from him. They could pretend it was payment for his passage. Or they could simply take them without an excuse of any sort at all.

But it was too late now. He was almost in the hatch. To drop the sack of diamonds now would do no more than arouse suspicion and would gain him nothing.

It came of greediness, he thought. He did not need this many diamonds. Just a half dozen of the finest dropped into his pockets would have been enough. Enough to buy him another ship so he could return and get a load of them.

But he was committed now. There was nothing he could do except to see it through.

He reached the hatch and tumbled through it. There was no one waiting. The inner lock stood open and there was no one there.

He stopped to stare at the emptiness and behind him the retracting ladder rumbled softly and the hatch hissed to a close.

"Hey," he shouted, "where is everyone?"

"There is no one here," the voice said, "but me."

"All right," said Sherwood. "Where do I go to find you?"

"You have found me," said the Ship. "You are standing in me."

"You mean ... "

"I told you," said the Ship. "I said I was the Ship. That is what I am."

"But no one ... "

"You do not understand," said the Ship. "There is no need of anyone. I am myself. I am intelligent. I am part machine, part human. Rather, perhaps, at one time I was. I

have thought, in recent years, the two of us have merged so we're neither human nor machine, but something new entirely."

"You're kidding me," said Sherwood, beginning to get frightened. "There can't be such a thing."

"Consider," said the Ship, "a certain human who had worked for years to build me and who, as he finished me, found death was closing in ... "

"Let me out!" yelled Sherwood. "Let me out of here! I don't want to be rescued. I don't want ... "

"I'm afraid, Mr. Sherwood, it is rather late for that. We're already out in space."

"Out in space! We can't be! It isn't—"

"Of course it is," the Ship told him. "You expected thrust. There was no thrust. We simply lifted."

* * * *

"No ship," insisted Sherwood, "can get off a planet ... "

"You're thinking, Mr. Sherwood, of the ships built by human hands. Not of a living ship. Not of an intelligent machine. Not of what becomes possible with the merging of a man and machine."

"You mean you built yourself?"

"Of course not. Not to start with. I was built with human hands to start with. But I've redesigned myself and rebuilt myself, not once, but many times. I knew my capabilities. I knew my dreams and wishes. I made myself the kind of thing that I was capable of being—not the halfway, makeshift thing that was the best the human race could do."

"The man you spoke of," Sherwood said. "The one who was about to die ... "

"He is part of me," said the Ship. "If you must think of him as a separate entity, he, then, is talking to you. For when I say 'I', I mean both of us, for we've become as one."

"I don't get it," Sherwood told the Ship, feeling the panic coming back again.

"He built me, long ago, as a ship which would respond, not to the pushing of a lever or the pressing of a button, but to the mental commands of the man who drove me. I

was to become, in effect, an extension of that man. There was a helmet that the man would wear and he'd think into the helmet."

"I understand," said Sherwood.

"He'd think into the helmet and I was so programmed that I'd obey his thoughts. I became, in effect, a man, and the man became in effect the ship he operated."

"Nice deal," Sherwood said enthusiastically, never being one upon whom the niceties of certain advantages were ever lost.

"He finished me and he was about to die and it was a pity that such a one should die—one who had worked so hard to do what he had done. Who'd given up so much. Who never had seen space.

"No," said Sherwood, in revulsion, knowing what was coming. "No, he'd not done that."

"It was a kindness," said the Ship. "It was what he wanted. He managed it himself. He simply gave up his body. His body was a worthless hulk that was about to die. The modifications to accommodate a human brain rather than a human skull were quite elementary. And he has been happy. We have both of us been happy."

Sherwood stood without saying anything. In the silence he was listening for some sound, for any kind of tiny rattle or hum, for anything at all to tell him the ship was operating. But there was no sound and no sense of motion of any sort.

"Happy," he said. "Where would you have found happiness? What's the point of all this?"

"That," the Ship said solemnly, "is a bit hard to explain."

Sherwood stood and thought about it—the endless voyaging through space without a body—with all the desires, all the advantages, all the capabilities of a body gone forever.

"There is nothing for you to fear," said the Ship. "You need not concern yourself. We have a cabin for you. Just down the corridor, the first door to your left."

"I thank you," Sherwood said, although he was nervous still.

If he had a choice, he told himself, he'd stayed back on the planet. But since he was here, he'd have to make the best of it. And there were, he admitted to himself, certain advantages and certain possibilities that needed further thought.

* * * *

He went down the corridor and pushed on the door. It opened on the cabin. For a spaceship it looked comfortable enough. A little cramped, of course, but then all cabins were. Space is at a premium on any sort of ship.

He went in and placed his sack of diamonds on the bunk that hinged out from the wall. He sat down in the single metal chair that stood beside the bunk.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Sherwood?" asked the Ship.

"Very comfortable," he said.

It was going to be all right, he told himself. A very crazy setup, but it would be all right. Perhaps a little spooky and a bit hard to believe, but probably better, after all, than staying marooned, back there on the planet. For this would not last forever. And the planet could have been, most probably would have been, forever.

It would take a while to reach another planet, for space was rather sparsely populated in this area. There would be time to think and plan. He might be able to work out something that would be to his great advantage.

He leaned back in the chair and stretched out his legs. His brain began to click in a ceaseless scurrying back and forth, nosing from every angle all the possibilities that existed in this setup.

It was nice, he thought—the entire operation. The Ship undoubtedly had figured out some angles for itself which no human yet had thought of.

There were a lot of things to do. He'd have to learn the capabilities of the Ship and give close study to its personality, seeking out its weak points and its strength. Then he'd have to plan his strategy and be careful not to give away his thinking. He must not move until he was entirely ready.

There might be many ways to do it. There might be flattery or there might be a business proposition or there might be blackmail. He'd have to think on it and study and follow out the line of action that seemed to be the best.

He wondered at the Ship's means of operation. Anti-gravity, perhaps. Or a fusion chamber. Or perhaps some method which had not been so far considered as a source of power.

He got up from the chair and paced, three paces across the room and back, restlessly pondering odds.

Yes, he thought, it would be a nice kind of ship to have. More than likely there was nothing in all of space that could touch it in speed and maneuverability. Nothing that could overhaul it should he ever have to run. It could apparently be set down anywhere. It was probably self-repairing, for the Ship had spoken of redesigning and of rebuilding itself. With the memory of his recent situation still fresh inside his mind, this was comforting.

There must be a way to get the Ship, he told himself. There had to be a way to get it. It was something that he needed.

He could buy another ship, of course; with the diamonds in the sacking he could buy a fleet of ships. But this was the one he wanted.

* * * *

Maybe it had been pure luck this Ship had picked him up. For any other legal ship would probably turn him over to the authorities at its next port of call, but this Ship didn't seem to mind who he was or what his record might be. Any other ship that was not entirely legal would have grabbed off, not only the diamonds that he had but his discovery of the diamond field. But this particular Ship had no concern with diamonds.

What a setup, he thought. A human brain and a spaceship tied together, so closely tied together that their identities had merged. He shivered at the thought of it, for it was a gruesome thing.

Although perhaps it had not meant too much to that old man who was about to die. He had traded an aged and death-marked body for many years of life. Perhaps life as a part of a space-traveling machine was better than no life at all.

How many years, he wondered, had it been since that old man had translated himself into something else than human? A hundred? Five hundred? Perhaps even more than that.

In those years where had he been and what might he have seen?

And, most pertinent of all, what thoughts had run through and congealed and formed within his mind? What was life like for him? Not a human sort of life, of course, not a human viewpoint, but something else entirely.

Sherwood tried to imagine what it might be like, but gave up in dismay. It would necessarily be a negation of everything he lived for—all the sensual pleasure, all the dreams of gain and glory, all the neat behavior patterns he had set up for himself, all his self-made rules of conduct, and of conscience.

A miracle, he thought. As a matter of fact, there'd been two miracles. The first had been when he had been able to set his ship down without a crackup when the valve had failed. He had come in close above the planet's surface to find a place to land—and suddenly the valve went out and the engine failed and there he'd been, plunging just above the rough terrain. Then suddenly he had glimpsed a place where a landing might be just barely possible and had fought the controls madly to hit that certain spot and finally had hit it—alive.

It had been a miracle that he had made the landing; and the coming of the Ship to rescue him had been the second miracle.

The bunk dropped down flat against the wall and his sack of diamonds was dumped onto the floor.

"Hey, what goes on?" yelled Sherwood. Then he wished he had not yelled, for it was quite clear exactly what had happened. The support that held the bunk had not been snapped properly into place and had given way, letting down the bunk.

"Something wrong, Mr. Sherwood?" asked the Ship.

"No, not a thing," said Sherwood. "My bunk fell down. I guess it startled me."

He bent down to pick up the diamonds. As he did, the chair quietly and efficiently slid back against the wall, folded itself up and slid into a slight depression that exactly fitted it.

Squatted to pick up the diamonds, Sherwood watched the chair in horrified fascination, then swiftly spun around. The bunk no longer hung against the wall, also had fitted itself into another niche.

Cold fear speared into Sherwood. He rose swiftly to his feet, turning like a man at bay. He stood in a bare cubicle. With both the bunk and chair retracted, he stood within four bare walls.

He sprang toward the door and there wasn't any door. There was only wall.

He staggered back into the center of the cubicle and spun around to view each wall in turn. There was no door in any of the walls. The metal went up from floor to ceiling without a single break.

The walls began to move, closing in on him.

* * * *

He watched, incredulous, frozen, thinking that perhaps he'd imagined the moving of the walls.

But it was not imagination. Slowly, inexorably, the walls were closing in. Had he put out his arms, he could have touched them on either side of him.

"Ship!" he said, fighting to keep his voice calm.

"Yes, Mr. Sherwood."

"You are malfunctioning. The walls are closing in."

The walls began to move, closing in on him.

function. My brain grows tired and feeble. It is not the body only—the brain also has its limits. I suspected that it might, but I could not know. There was a chance, of course, that separated from the poison of a body, it might live in its bath of nutrients forever."

"No!" rasped Sherwood, his breath strangled, "No, not me!"

"Who else?" asked the Ship. "I have searched for years and you are the first who fitted."

"Fitted!" Sherwood screamed.

"Why, of course," the Ship said calmly, happily. "A man who would not be missed. No one knowing where you were. No one hunting for you. No one who will miss you. I had hunted for someone like you and had despaired of finding one. For I am humane. I would cause no one grief or sadness."

The walls kept closing in.

The Ship seemed to sigh in metallic contentment.

"Believe me, Mr. Sherwood," it said, "finding you was a very miracle."

THE END