



Turnover Point
Coppel, Alfred

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About Coppel:

Alfred Coppel, Alfredo Jose de Arana-Marini Coppel (November 9, 1921–May 30, 2004) was an American author. He was born in Oakland, California. He began his long career in 1947 and became one of the most prolific pulp writers of the 1950s and 1960s, writing for a variety of pulp magazines and later "slick" publishers. In 1974 he had a bestseller with the suspense thriller *Thirty-Four East* about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Using the pseudonym Robert Cham Gilman, he wrote a galactic empire story called *The Rebel of Rhada*. A similar story under his own name can be found in Brian Aldiss's collection *Galactic Empires*. The 1960 story "Dark December" describes the aftermath of nuclear war. Source: Wikipedia

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Pop Ganlon was no hero—he was only a spaceman. A spaceman and a father. In fact, Pop was rather no-account, even in a profession that abounded with drifters. He had made a meagre living prospecting asteroids and hauling light freight and an occasional passenger out in the Belt Region. Coffee and cakes, nothing more. Not many people knew Pop had a son in the Patrol, and even fewer knew it when the boy was blasted to a cinder in a back alley in Lower Marsport.

Pop went on eating and breathing, but his life was over after that. He hit the bottle a little harder and his ship, *The Luck*, grew rustier and tackier, and those were the only outward signs that Pop Ganlon was a living dead man. He kept on grubbing among the cold rocks and pushing *The Luck* from Marsport to Callisto and back with whatever low-mass payloads he could pick up. He might have lived out his string of years like that, obscure and alone, if it hadn't been for John Kane. Kane was Pop Ganlon's ticket to a sort of personal immortality—if there is such a thing for an old spaceman.

It was in Yakki, down-canal from Marsport, that Kane found Pop. There is a small spaceport there—a boneyard, really—for buckets whose skippers can't pay the heavy tariff imposed by the big ramp. All the wrecks nest there while waiting hopefully for a payload or a grubstake. They have all of Solis Lacus for a landing field, and if they spill it doesn't matter much. The drifting red sands soon cover up the scattered shards of dural and the slow, lonely life of Yakki goes on like before.

The Patrol was on Kane's trail and the blaster in his hand was still warm when he shoved it up against Pop Ganlon's ribs and made his proposition.

He wanted to get off Mars—out to Callisto. To Blackwater, to Ley's Landing, it didn't matter too much. Just off Mars, and quickly. His eyes had a metallic glitter and his hand was rock-steady. Pop knew he meant what he said when he told him life was cheap. Someone else's life, not Kane's.

That's how it happened that *The Luck* lifted that night from Yakki, outward bound for Ley's Landing, with Pop and Kane aboard her alone.

Sitting at the battered console of *The Luck*, Pop watched his passenger. He knew Kane, of course. Or rather, he knew of him. A killer. The kind that thrives and grows fat on the frontiers. The bulky frame, the cropped black hair, the predatory eyes that looked like two blaster muzzles. They were all familiar to Pop. Kane was all steel and meanness. The kind of carrion bird that took what others had worked for. Not big time, you

understand. In another age he'd have been a torpedo—a hireling killer. But out among the stars he was working for himself. And doing well.

Pop didn't care. His loyalty to the Patrol had stopped quite suddenly not long before—in a dark alley in Lower Marsport. This was only a job, he told himself now. A job for coffee and cakes, and maybe a grubstake to work a few more lonely rocks. Life had become a habit for Pop, even if living had ended.

"What are you staring at, Pop?" Kane's voice was like the rest of him. Harsh and cold as space itself.

"At you, I guess," Pop said, "I was wondering what you'd done—and where—and to whom."

"You're a nosey old man," Kane said. "Just get me to Ley's Landing. That's what I'm paying for, not a thing more."

Pop nodded slowly and turned back to the control board. They were above the Belt by now, and a few short hours from turnover point. The cranky drives of *The Luck* needed all his attention.

Presently he said, "We'll be turning over soon. Want to get some rest?"

Kane laughed. "No thanks, old man. I'll stay here and watch you."

Pop eyed the ready blaster and nodded again. He wondered vaguely how it would feel to die under the blast of such a weapon. It couldn't be very painful. He hoped it wasn't painful. Perhaps the boy hadn't suffered. It would be nice to be sure, he thought.

There wasn't much for Pop to remember about the boy. He'd never been one for writing many letters. But the District Patrolman had come down to Yakki and looked Pop up—afterward. He'd said the boy was a good officer. A good cop. Died doing his job, and all that sort of thing. Pop swallowed hard. His job. What had 'his job' been that night in Lower Marsport, he wondered. Had someone else finished it for him?

He remembered about that time hearing on the Mars Radio that a Triangle Post Office had been knocked over by a gunman. That might have been it. The Patrol would be after anyone knocking over EMV Triangle property. The Earth-Mars-Venus Government supported the Patrol for things like that.

Pop guided *The Luck* skillfully above the Belt, avoiding with practiced ease the few errant chunks of rock that hurtled up out of the swarms. He talked to Kane because he was starved for talk—certainly not because he was trying to play Sherlock. Pop had long ago realized that he was no mental giant. Besides, he owed the Patrol nothing. Not a damned thing.

"Made this trip often?" Pop tried to strike up a conversation with Kane. His long loneliness seemed sharper, somehow, more poignant, when he actually had someone to talk to.

"Not often. I'm no space pig." It was said with scorn.

"There's a lot to spacing, you know," Pop urged.

Kane shrugged. "I know easier ways to make a buck, old timer."

"Like how?"

"A nosey old man, like I said," Kane smiled. Somehow, the smile wasn't friendly. "Okay, Pop, since you ask. Like knocking off wacky old prospectors for their dust. Or sticking up sandcar caravans out in Syrtis. Who's the wiser? The red dust takes care of the leftovers."

Pop shook his head. "Not for me. There's the Patrol to think of."

Kane laughed. "Punks. Bell-boys. They'd better learn to shoot before they leave their school-books."

Pop Ganlon frowned slightly. "You talk big, mister."

Kane's eyes took on that metallic glitter again. He leaned forward and threw a canvas packet on the console. It spilled crisp new EMV certificates. Large ones. "I take big, too," he said.

Pop stared. Not at the money. It was more than he had ever seen in one pile before, but it wasn't that that shook him. It was the canvas packet. It was marked: *Postal Service, EMV*. Pop suddenly felt cold, as though an icy wind had touched him.

"You ... you killed a Patrolman for this," he said slowly.

"That's right, Pop," grinned Kane easily. "Burned him down in an alley in Lower Marsport. It was like taking candy from a baby... ."

Pop Ganlon swallowed hard. "Like taking candy from a ... baby. As easy as that... ."

"As easy as that, old man," Kane said.

Pop knew he was going to die then. He knew Kane would blast him right after turnover point, and he knew fear. He felt something else, too. Something that was new to him. Hate. An icy hate that left him shaken and weak.

So the boy's job hadn't been finished. It was still to do.

There was no use in dreaming of killing Kane. Pop was old. Kane was young—and a killer. Pop was alone and without weapons—save *The Luck*... .

Time passed slowly. Outside, the night of deep space keened soundlessly. The stars burned bright, alien and strange. It was time, thought Pop bleakly. Time to turn *The Luck*.

"Turnover point," he said softly.

Kane motioned with his blaster. "Get at it."

Pop began winding the flywheel. It made a whirring sound in the confined space of the tiny control room. Outside, the night began to pivot slowly.

"We have to turn end-for-end," Pop said. "That way we can decelerate on the drop into Callisto. But, of course, you know all about that, Mr. Kane."

"I told you I'm no space pig," Kane said brusquely. "I can handle a landing and maybe a takeoff, but the rest of it I leave for the boatmen. Like you, Pop."

Pop spun the flywheel in silence, listening to the soft whir. Presently, he let the wheel slow and then stop. He straightened and looked up at Kane. The blaster muzzle was six inches from his belly. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat.

"You ... you're going to kill me," Pop said. It wasn't a question. Kane smiled, showing white teeth.

"I ... I know you are," Pop said unsteadily. "But first, I want to say something to you."

"Talk, old timer," Kane said. "But not too much."

"That boy—that boy you killed in Marsport. He was my son," Pop said.

Kane's face did not change expression. "Okay. So what?"

Pop's lips twitched. "I just wanted to hear you say it." He looked at the impassive face of the killer. "You made a mistake, Mr. Kane. You shouldn't have done that to my boy."

"Is that all?"

Pop nodded slowly. "I guess that's all."

Kane grinned. "Afraid, old man?"

"I'm a space pig," Pop said. "Space takes care of its own."

"You're in a bad way, old timer," Kane said, "and you haven't much sense. I'm doing you a favor."

Pop lifted his hands in an instinctive gesture of futile protection as the blaster erupted flame.

There was a smell in the control room like burnt meat as Kane holstered his weapon and turned the old man over with a foot. Pop was a blackened mass. Kane dragged him to the valve and jettisoned the body into space.

Alone among the stars, *The Luck* moved across the velvet night. The steady beat of flame from her tubes was a tiny spark of man-made vengeance on the face of the deeps.

From her turnover point, she drove outward toward the spinning Jovian moons. For a short while she could be seen from the EMV Observatory on Callisto, but very soon she faded into the outer darkness.

Much later, the Observatory at Land's End on Triton watched her heading past the gibbous mass of Pluto—out into the interstellar fastnesses.

The thrumming of the jets was still at last. A wild-eyed thing that may once have been a man stared in horror at the fading light of the yellow star far astern.

It had taken Kane time to understand what had happened to him, and now it was too late. Space had taken care of its own. The air in *The Luck* was growing foul and the food was gone. Death hung in the fetid atmosphere of the tiny control room.

The old man—the boy—the money. They all seemed to spin in a narrowing circle. Kane wanted suddenly to shriek with laughter. A circle. The turnover circle. The full circle that the old man had made instead of the proper half-turn of a turnover. Three hundred sixty degrees instead of one hundred eighty. Three hundred sixty degrees to leave the nose of *The Luck* pointing outward toward the stars, instead of properly toward the Sun. A full circle to pile G on G until the Jovian moons were missed, and the Uranian moons and Triton, too. *Ad Astra per Ardua...*

With the last fragment of his failing sanity, Kane thought of how Pop Ganlon and the boy must be laughing. He was still thinking that as the long night closed in around him.

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