



# The Man, Ray Bradbury

## The Man

Captain Hart stood in the door of the rocket. "Why don't they come?" he said.

"Who knows?" said Martin, his lieutenant. "Do I know, Captain?"

"What kind of a place is this, anyway?" The captain lighted a cigar. He tossed the match out into the glittering meadow. The grass started to burn.

Martin moved to stamp it out with his boot.

"No," ordered Captain Hart, "let it burn. Maybe they'll come see what's happening then, the ignorant fools."

Martin shrugged and withdrew his foot from the spreading fire.

Captain Hart examined his watch. "An hour ago we landed here, and does the welcoming committee rush out with a brass band to shake our hands? No indeed! Here we ride millions of miles through space and the fine citizens of some silly town on some unknown planet ignore us!"

He snorted, tapping his watch. "Well, I'll just give them five more minutes, and then—"

"And then what?" asked Martin, ever so politely, watching the captain's jowls shake.

"We'll fly over their damned city again and scare hell out of them." His voice grew quieter. "Do you think, Martin, maybe they didn't see us land?"

"They saw us. They looked up as we flew over."

“Then why aren’t they running across the field? Are they hiding? Are they yellow?”

Martin shook his head. “No. Take these binoculars, sir. See for yourself. Everybody’s walking around. They’re not frightened. They—well, they just don’t seem to care.”

Captain Hart placed the binoculars to his tired eyes. Martin looked up and had time to observe the lines and the grooves of irritation, tiredness, nervousness there. Hart looked a million years old; he never slept, he ate little, and drove himself on, on. Now his mouth moved, aged and drear, but sharp, under the held binoculars.

“Really, Martin, I don’t know why we bother. We build rockets, we go to all the trouble of crossing space, searching for them, and this is what we get. Neglect. Look at those idiots wander about in there. Don’t they realize how big this is? The first space flight to touch their provincial land. How many times does that happen? Are they that blasé?”

Martin didn’t know.

Captain Hart gave him back the binoculars wearily. “Why do we do it, Martin? This space travel, I mean. Always on the go. Always searching. Our insides always tight, never any rest.”

“Maybe we’re looking for peace and quiet. Certainly there’s none on Earth,” said Martin.

“No, there’s not, is there?” Captain Hart was thoughtful, the fire damped down. “Not since Darwin, eh? Not since everything went by the board, everything we used to believe in, eh? Divine power and all that. And so you think maybe that’s why we’re going out to the stars, eh, Martin? Looking for our lost souls, is that it? Trying to get away from our evil planet to a good one?”

“Perhaps, sir. Certainly we’re looking for something.”

Captain Hart cleared his throat and tightened back into sharpness.

“Well, right now we’re looking for the mayor of that city there. Run in, tell them who we are, the first rocket expedition to Planet Forty-three

in Star System Three. Captain Hart sends his salutations and desires to meet the mayor. On the double!”

“Yes, sir.” Martin walked slowly across the meadow.

“Hurry!” snapped the captain.

“Yes, sir!” Martin trotted away. Then he walked again, smiling to himself.

The captain had smoked two cigars before Martin returned.

Martin stopped and looked up into the door of the rocket, swaying, seemingly unable to focus his eyes or think.

“Well?” snapped Hart. “What happened? Are they coming to welcome us?”

“No.” Martin had to lean dizzily against the ship.

“Why not?”

“It’s not important,” said Martin. “Give me a cigarette, please, Captain.” His fingers groped blindly at the rising pack, for he was looking at the golden city and blinking. He lighted one and smoked quietly for a long time.

“Say something!” cried the captain. “Aren’t they interested in our rocket?”

Martin said, “What? Oh. The rocket?” He inspected his cigarette. “No, they’re not interested. Seems we came at an inopportune time.”

“Inopportune time!”

Martin was patient. “Captain, listen. Something big happened yesterday in that city. It’s so big, so important that we’re second-rate—second fiddle. I’ve got to sit down.” He lost his balance and sat heavily, gasping for air.

The captain chewed his cigar angrily. “What happened?”

Martin lifted his head, smoke from the burning cigarette in his fingers, blowing in the wind. “Sir, yesterday, in that city, a remarkable man appeared—good, intelligent, compassionate, and infinitely wise!”

The captain glared at his lieutenant. "What's that to do with us?"

"It's hard to explain. But he was a man for whom they'd waited a long time—a million years maybe. And yesterday he walked into their city. That's why today, sir, our rocket landing means nothing."

The captain sat down violently. "Who was it? Not Ashley? He didn't arrive in his rocket before us and steal my glory, did he?" He seized Martin's arm. His face was pale and dismayed.

"Not Ashley, sir."

"Then it was Burton! I knew it. Burton stole in ahead of us and ruined my landing! You can't trust anyone anymore."

"Not Burton, either, sir," said Martin quietly.

The captain was incredulous. "There were only three rockets. We were in the lead. This man who got here ahead of us? What was his name!"

"He didn't have a name. He doesn't need one. It would be different on every planet, sir."

The captain stared at his lieutenant with hard, cynical eyes.

"Well, what did he do that was so wonderful that nobody even looks at our ship?"

"For one thing," said Martin steadily, "he healed the sick and comforted the poor. He fought hypocrisy and dirty politics and sat among the people, talking, through the day."

"Is that so wonderful?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I don't get this." The captain confronted Martin, peered into his face and eyes. "You been drinking, eh?" He was suspicious. He backed away.

"I don't understand."

Martin looked at the city. "Captain, if you don't understand, there's no way of telling you."

The captain followed his gaze. The city was quiet and beautiful and a great peace lay over it. The captain stepped forward, taking his cigar

from his lips. He squinted first at Martin, then at the golden spires of the buildings.

“You don’t mean—you can’t mean—That man you’re talking about couldn’t be—”

Martin nodded. “That’s what I mean, sir.”

The captain stood silently, not moving. He drew himself up.

“I don’t believe it,” he said at last.

At high noon Captain Hart walked briskly into the city, accompanied by Lieutenant Martin and an assistant who was carrying some electrical equipment. Every once in a while the captain laughed loudly, put his hands on his hips and shook his head.

The mayor of the town confronted him. Martin set up a tripod, screwed a box onto it, and switched on the batteries.

“Are you the mayor?” The captain jabbed a finger out.

“I am,” said the mayor.

The delicate apparatus stood between them, controlled and adjusted by Martin and the assistant. Instantaneous translations from any language were made by the box. The words sounded crisply on the mild air of the city.

“About this occurrence yesterday,” said the captain. “It occurred?”

“It did.”

“You have witnesses?”

“We have.”

“May we talk to them?”

“Talk to any of us,” said the mayor. “We are all witnesses.”

In an aside to Martin the captain said, “Mass hallucination.” To the mayor, “What did this man—this stranger—look like?”

“That would be hard to say,” said the mayor, smiling a little.

“Why would it?”

“Opinions might differ slightly.”

"I'd like your opinion, sir, anyway," said the captain. "Record this," he snapped to Martin over his shoulder. The lieutenant pressed the button of a hand recorder.

"Well," said the mayor of the city, "he was a very gentle and kind man. He was of a great and knowing intelligence."

"Yes—yes, I know, I know." The captain waved his fingers.

"Generalizations. I want something specific. What did he look like?"

"I don't believe that is important," replied the mayor.

"It's very important," said the captain sternly. "I want a description of this fellow. If I can't get it from you, I'll get it from others." To Martin, "I'm sure it must have been Burton, pulling one of his practical jokes."

Martin would not look him in the face. Martin was coldly silent. The captain snapped his fingers. "There was something or other—a healing?"

"Many healings," said the mayor.

"May I see one?"

"You may," said the mayor. "My son." He nodded at a small boy who stepped forward. "He was afflicted with a withered arm. Now, look upon it."

At this the captain laughed tolerantly. "Yes, yes. This isn't even circumstantial evidence, you know. I didn't see the boy's withered arm. I see only his arm whole and well. That's no proof. What proof have you that the boy's arm was withered yesterday and today is well?"

"My word is my proof," said the mayor simply.

"My dear man!" cried the captain. "You don't expect me to go on hearsay, do you? Oh, no!"

"I'm sorry," said the mayor, looking upon the captain with what appeared to be curiosity and pity.

"Do you have any pictures of the boy before today?" asked the captain.

After a moment a large oil portrait was carried forth, showing the son with a withered arm.

“My dear fellow!” The captain waved it away. “Anybody can paint a picture. Paintings lie. I want a photograph of the boy.”

There was no photograph. Photography was not a known art in their society.

“Well,” sighed the captain, face twitching, “let me talk to a few other citizens. We’re getting nowhere.” He pointed at a woman. “You.” She hesitated. “Yes, you; come here,” ordered the captain. “Tell me about this wonderful man you saw yesterday.”

The woman looked steadily at the captain. “He walked among us and was very fine and good.”

“What color were his eyes?”

“The color of the sun, the color of the sea, the color of a flower, the color of the mountains, the color of the night.”

“That’ll do.” The captain threw up his hands. “See, Martin? Absolutely nothing. Some charlatan wanders through whispering sweet nothings in their ears and—”

“Please, stop it,” said Martin.

The captain stepped back. “What?”

“You heard what I said,” said Martin. “I like these people. I believe what they say. You’re entitled to your opinion, but keep it to yourself, sir.”

“You can’t talk to me this way,” shouted the captain.

“I’ve had enough of your high-handedness,” replied Martin. “Leave these people alone. They’ve got something good and decent, and you come and foul up the nest and sneer at it. Well, I’ve talked to them too. I’ve gone through the city and seen their faces, and they’ve got something you’ll never have—a little simple faith, and they’ll move mountains with it. You, you’re boiled because someone stole your act, got here ahead and made you unimportant.”

“I’ll give you five seconds to finish,” remarked the captain. “I understand. You’ve been under a strain, Martin. Months of traveling in



space, nostalgia, loneliness. And now, with this thing happening, I sympathize, Martin. I overlook your petty insubordination.”

“I don’t overlook your petty tyranny,” replied Martin. “I’m stepping out. I’m staying here.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Can’t I? Try and stop me. This is what I came looking for. I didn’t know it, but this is it. This is for me. Take your filth somewhere else and foul up other nests with your doubt and your—scientific method!” He looked swiftly about. “These people have had an experience, and you can’t seem to get it through your head that it’s really happened and we were lucky enough to almost arrive in time to be in on it.

“People on Earth have talked about this man for twenty centuries after he walked through the old world. We’ve all wanted to see him and hear him, and never had the chance. And now, today, we just missed seeing him by a few hours.”

Captain Hart looked at Martin’s cheeks. “You’re crying like a baby. Stop it.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. In front of these natives we’re to keep up a front. You’re overwrought. As I said, I forgive you.”

“I don’t want your forgiveness.”

“You idiot. Can’t you see this is one of Burton’s tricks, to fool these people, to bilk them, to establish his oil and mineral concerns under a religious guise! You fool, Martin. You absolute fool! You should know Earthmen by now. They’ll do anything—blaspheme, lie, cheat, steal, kill, to get their ends. Anything is fine if it works; the true pragmatist, that’s Burton. You know him!”

The captain scoffed heavily. “Come off it, Martin, admit it, this is the sort of scaly thing Burton might carry off, polish up these citizens and pluck them when they’re ripe.”

“No,” said Martin, thinking of it.

The captain put his hands up. “That’s Burton. That’s him. That’s his dirt, that’s his criminal way. I have to admire the old dragon. Flaming in here in a blaze and a halo and a soft word and a loving touch, with a medicated salve here and a healing ray there. That’s Burton all right!” “No.” Martin’s voice was dazed. He covered his eyes. “No, I won’t believe it.”

“You don’t want to believe.” Captain Hart kept at it. “Admit it now. Admit it. It’s just the thing Burton would do. Stop daydreaming, Martin. Wake up! It’s morning. This is a real world and we’re real, dirty people—Burton the dirtiest of us all!” Martin turned away.

“There, there, Martin,” said Hart, mechanically patting the man’s back. “I understand. Quite a shock for you. I know. A rotten shame, and all that. That Burton is a rascal. You go take it easy. Let me handle this.” Martin walked off slowly toward the rocket.

Captain Hart watched him go. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned to the woman he had been questioning. “Well. Tell me some more about this man. As you were saying, madam?”

Later the officers of the rocket ship ate supper on card tables outside. The captain correlated his data to a silent Martin who sat red-eyed and brooding over his meal.

“Interviewed three dozen people, all of them full of the same milk and hogwash,” said the captain. “It’s Burton’s work all right, I’m positive. He’ll be spilling back in here tomorrow or next week to consolidate his miracles and beat us out in our contracts. I think I’ll stick on and spoil it for him.”

Martin glanced up sullenly. “I’ll kill him,” he said.

“Now, now, Martin! There, there, boy.”

“I’ll kill him—so help me, I will.”

“We’ll put an anchor on his wagon. You have to admit he’s clever. Unethical but clever.”

“He’s dirty.”

“You must promise not to do anything violent.” Captain Hart checked his figures. “According to this, there were thirty miracles of healing performed, a blind man restored to vision, a leper cured. Oh, Burton’s efficient, give him that.”

A gong sounded. A moment later a man ran up. “Captain, sir. A report! Burton’s ship is coming down. Also the Ashley ship, sir!”

“See!” Captain Hart beat the table. “Here come the jackals to the harvest! They can’t wait to feed. Wait till I confront them. I’ll make them cut me in on this feast—I will!”

Martin looked sick. He stared at the captain.

“Business, my dear boy, business,” said the captain.

Everybody looked up. Two rockets swung down out of the sky.

When the rockets landed they almost crashed.

“What’s wrong with those fools?” cried the captain, jumping up. The men ran across the meadowlands to the steaming ships. The captain arrived. The airlock door popped open on Burton’s ship.

A man fell out into their arms.

“What’s wrong?” cried Hart.

The man lay on the ground. They bent over him and he was burned, badly burned. His body was covered with wounds and scars and tissue that was inflamed and smoking. He looked up out of puffed eyes and his thick tongue moved in his split lips.

“What happened?” demanded the captain, kneeling down, shaking the man’s arm.

“Sir, sir,” whispered the dying man. “Forty-eight hours ago, back in Space Sector Seventy-nine DFS, off Planet One in this system, our ship, and Ashley’s ship, ran into a cosmic storm, sir.” Liquid ran gray from the man’s nostrils. Blood trickled from his mouth. “Wiped out. All crew. Burton dead. Ashley died an hour ago. Only three survivals.”

“Listen to me!” shouted Hart, bending over the bleeding man. “You didn’t come to this planet before this very hour?”

Silence.

“Answer me!” cried Hart.

The dying man said, “No. Storm. Burton dead two days ago. This first landing on any world in six months.”

“Are you sure?” shouted Hart, shaking violently, gripping the man in his hands. “Are you sure?”

“Sure, sure,” mouthed the dying man.

“Burton died two days ago? You’re positive?”

“Yes, yes,” whispered the man. His head fell forward. The man was dead.

The captain knelt beside the silent body. The captain’s face twitched, the muscles jerking involuntarily. The other members of the crew stood back of him looking down. Martin waited. The captain asked to be helped to his feet, finally, and this was done. They stood looking at the city. “That means—”

“That means?” said Martin.

“We’re the only ones who’ve been here,” whispered Captain Hart. “And that man—”

“What about that man, Captain?” asked Martin.

The captain’s face twitched senselessly. He looked very old indeed, and gray. His eyes were glazed. He moved forward in the dry grass.

“Come along, Martin. Come along. Hold me up; for my sake, hold me. I’m afraid I’ll fall. And hurry. We can’t waste time—”

They moved, stumbling, toward the city, in the long dry grass, in the blowing wind.

Several hours later they were sitting in the mayor’s auditorium. A thousand people had come and talked and gone. The captain had remained seated, his face haggard, listening, listening. There was so much light in the faces of those who came and testified and talked he could not bear to see them. And all the while his hands traveled, on his knees, together; on his belt, jerking and quivering.

When it was over, Captain Hart turned to the mayor and with strange eyes said:

“But you must know where he went?”

“He didn’t say where he was going,” replied the mayor.

“To one of the other nearby worlds?” demanded the captain.

“I don’t know.”

“You must know.”

“Do you see him?” asked the mayor, indicating the crowd.

The captain looked. “No.”

“Then he is probably gone,” said the mayor.

“Probably, probably!” cried the captain weakly. “I’ve made a horrible mistake, and I want to see him now. Why, it just came to me, this is a most unusual thing in history. To be in on something like this. Why, the chances are one in billions we’d arrived at one certain planet among millions of planets the day after he came! You must know where he’s gone!”

“Each finds him in his own way,” replied the mayor gently.

“You’re hiding him.” The captain’s face grew slowly ugly. Some of the old hardness returned in stages. He began to stand up.

“No,” said the mayor.

“You know where he is then?” The captain’s fingers twitched at the leather holster on his right side.

“I couldn’t tell you where he is, exactly,” said the mayor.

“I advise you to start talking,” and the captain took out a small steel gun.

“There’s no way,” said the mayor, “to tell you anything.”

“Liar!”

An expression of pity came into the mayor’s face as he looked at Hart.

“You’re very tired,” he said. “You’ve traveled a long way and you belong to a tired people who’ve been without faith a long time, and you want

to believe so much now that you're interfering with yourself. You'll only make it harder if you kill. You'll never find him that way."

"Where'd he go? He told you; you know. Come on, tell me!" The captain waved the gun.

The mayor shook his head.

"Tell me! Tell me!"

The gun cracked once, twice. The mayor fell, his arm wounded.

Martin leaped forward. "Captain!"

The gun flashed at Martin. "Don't interfere."

On the floor, holding his wounded arm, the mayor looked up. "Put down your gun. You're hurting yourself. You've never believed, and now that you think you believe, you hurt people because of it."

"I don't need you," said Hart, standing over him. "If I missed him by one day here, I'll go on to another world. And another and another. I'll miss him by half a day on the next planet, maybe, and a quarter of a day on the third planet, and two hours on the next, and an hour on the next, and half an hour on the next, and a minute on the next.

But after that, one day I'll catch up with him! Do you hear that?" He was shouting now, leaning wearily over the man on the floor. He staggered with exhaustion. "Come along, Martin." He let the gun hang in his hand.

"No," said Martin. "I'm staying here."

"You're a fool. Stay if you like. But I'm going on, with the others, as far as I can go."

The mayor looked up at Martin. "I'll be all right. Leave me. Others will tend my wounds."

"I'll be back," said Martin. "I'll walk as far as the rocket."

They walked with vicious speed through the city. One could see with what effort the captain struggled to show all the old iron, to keep himself going. When he reached the rocket he slapped the side of it with a trembling hand. He holstered his gun. He looked at Martin.

“Well, Martin?”

Martin looked at him. “Well, Captain?”

The captain’s eyes were on the sky. “Sure you won’t—come with—with me, eh?”

“No, sir.”

“It’ll be a great adventure, by God. I know I’ll find him.”

“You are set on it now, aren’t you, sir?” asked Martin.

The captain’s face quivered and his eyes closed. “Yes.”

“There’s one thing I’d like to know.”

“What?”

“Sir, when you find him—if you find him,” asked Martin, “what will you ask of him?”

“Why—” The captain faltered, opening his eyes. His hands clenched and unclenched. He puzzled a moment and then broke into a strange smile. “Why, I’ll ask him for a little—peace and quiet.” He touched the rocket. “It’s been a long time, a long, long time since—since I relaxed.”

“Did you ever just try, Captain?”

“I don’t understand,” said Hart.

“Never mind. So long, Captain.”

“Good-bye, Mr. Martin.”

The crew stood by the port. Out of their number only three were going on with Hart. Seven others were remaining behind, they said, with Martin.

Captain Hart surveyed them and uttered his verdict: “Fools!”

He, last of all, climbed into the airlock, gave a brisk salute, laughed sharply. The door slammed.

The rocket lifted into the sky on a pillar of fire.

Martin watched it go far away and vanish.

At the meadow’s edge the mayor, supported by several men, beckoned.

“He’s gone,” said Martin, walking up.

“Yes, poor man, he’s gone,” said the mayor. “And he’ll go on, planet after planet, seeking and seeking, and always and always he will be an hour late, or a half hour late, or ten minutes late, or a minute late.

And finally he will miss out by only a few seconds. And when he has visited three hundred worlds and is seventy or eighty years old he will miss out by only a fraction of a second, and then a smaller fraction of a second. And he will go on and on, thinking to find that very thing which he left behind here, on this planet, in this city—”

Martin looked steadily at the mayor.

The mayor put out his hand. “Was there ever any doubt of it?” He beckoned to the others and turned. “Come along now. We mustn’t keep him waiting.”

They walked into the city.

The end