

First Contact

September 8, 1951

[episode 47 of 50]



First Contact by Murray Leinster was published in 1945 as a novelette. It was adapted for radio by Howard Rodman and aired on Dimension X September 8, 1951. The story was also produced for X Minus One, and aired Oct 6, 1955. It is credited as introducing the concept of a universal translator into the genre of Science Fiction. The story won a retro Hugo Award for Best Novelette in 1996. It was among the stories selected in 1970 by the Science Fiction Writers of America as one of the best science fiction short stories published before the creation of the Nebula Awards. It was published in The Science Fiction Hall of Fame Volume One, 1929-1964.

First Contact is the story of a spaceship from Earth that encounters an alien ship in the uncharted depths of space, leading to a curious stale mate that may not be what it seems.

DIMENSION X
First Contact
September 8, 1951

HOST/NARRATOR: (drum roll) Adventures in Time and Space
transcribed in future tense. (cymbal crash) Dimension X - x - x
- x - x (trails off and blends with sound of repeated gong)
The National Broadcasting Company, in cooperation with Street
and Smith, publishers of Astounding Science Fiction, bring you
DIMENSION X.

music with theremin

NBC ANNOUNCER: Tonight's story, First Contact by Murray
Leinster.

musical introduction

HOST/NARRATOR: They had been in space six months now, moving
with the incredibly faster-than-light-speed of the overdrive. In
six months, they had gone from Earth outward and outward to the
crab-like nebula with the twin stars. A routine flight of
exploration and scientific research.

FX: alarm siren

DORT: Solid object about 90,000 miles away, sir.

CAPTAIN: Locate it, Dort, exactly, identify it.

DORT: A small object, sir. (pause) Captain, I've never seen
anything like this before. Whatever it is out there is coming
toward us at an incredible speed and retreating to zero just as
rapidly.

CAPTAIN: What's the mass of the object, Dort?

DORT: Well, it varies with the distance from us, sir.

CAPTAIN: Step up the scanners.

FX: blip, blip, blip

DORT: Nothing, sir. Absolutely nothing shows out there. And yet there must be something. Those alarms are foolproof.

FX: clanging alarm, blip, blip

CAPTAIN: Action stations, man all weapons, condition of extreme alert, all departments immediately.

DORT: Captain, what is it?

CAPTAIN: Dort, I ran into the same thing once before on the Earth Mars run. We were being located by another ship and their locator beam was the same frequency as ours. Every time it hit, it registered to something solid and monstrous.

DORT: But, Captain, we're the only Earth ship in 18 light years around. How?

CAPTAIN: I didn't say it was another Earth ship out there, Dort.

DORT: Another race?

CAPTAIN: That's right. There's a spaceship out there, all right. It's not manned by human beings.

musical transition

HOST/NARRATOR: It had been contemplated and speculated upon. Mathematically, it was almost a certainty that such a race existed. But in 18,000 Earth years, no human spaceship had ever encountered them. Now the situation was precipitated and somewhere outside the Earth vessel, there was an alien race. Of what shape? Of what quality? Of what psychology?

FX: clanging alarm, blip, blip, blip

DORT: It's moving, sir. Heading right for us.

CAPTAIN: At that speed, we'll be in touch in 10 minutes. Heading right for us, eh? Just what we'd do if a strange ship appeared in our hunting grounds. Friendly? Well, maybe. We'll try to contact them. We have to do that. But friendly? Thank the Lord for the blasters.

DORT: They may not be hostile, sir.

CAPTAIN: (TO DORT) They may be. That's what I'm paid for. Put on this job for, to worry about the troubles that may never happen. (OVER LOUDSPEAKER) To all hands, now hear this. A ship is approaching manned by an alien race. I'll give the signal for attack or defense if it be necessary. There'll be no move made unless I give the order. I do not wish to provoke trouble. Stand by.

FX: click

DORT: Their ship is slowing down, sir. (pause) It's stopped.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: Weapons department, report. Weapons department, report.

FX: click

WEAPONS OFFICER: Alien ship remarked. Target fixed. Weapons alert.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: Communications department, report. Communications department, report.

FX: click

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER: We're receiving a modulated short wave, sir. Frequency modulated. Apparently a signal. Not enough power to do us any harm.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: Well, try to make some sense out of it. Report any progress to me immediately.

FX: click

DORT: One thing in their favor, sir. They didn't attack immediately without question. They're trying to establish contact. That seems to indicate they're reasonable.

CAPTAIN: We'll see. We'll see. What are they doing now? Can you make out the locator screen? Bring that power up.

FX: blip, blip, blip, blip

DORT: They're doing something now, sir. There's a section of the hull opening. Probably an airlock, sir.

CAPTAIN: If they breathe air.

FX: bliiiiiiiiiiiip

ORT: They're letting something out. It's round. A bomb, sir?

WEAPONS OFFICER: Unknown object released from alien ship. Observed by weapons department and targeted.

FX: bliiiiiiiiiiiip

CAPTAIN: Stand by.

FX: click

DORT: See what they're doing, sir? They've left the object out there right where they were. And now they're withdrawing the ship.

CAPTAIN: There's no reason why that object couldn't be a bomb, Mr. Dort. Intended to let us think precisely as you're thinking right now.

DORT: I just have a hunch, sir. I think they're friendly. I think whatever it is out there is a means of communication.

CAPTAIN: You're probably right, but I won't gamble the ship on a probability.

DORT: Sir, I'd like to volunteer to go out there and look that thing over.

CAPTAIN: You understand whoever does examine it is expendable?

DORT: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: Requisition a lifeboat.

DORT: If it's all right with you, sir, I'd prefer just a suit with a drive in it. It's smaller and the arms and legs won't make me look like a bomb. And I'll carry a scanner, sir.

CAPTAIN: You may leave when you're ready.

DORT: Thank you, sir.

musical transition suspenseful

DORT: I'm all ready. Clear the lock and let me out.

FX: clank, scrape

WEAPONS OFFICER: Weapons department reporting to the captain.
Mr. Dort located. Mr. Dort is targeted.

CAPTAIN: Stand by. If that object out there is a device to capture one of our people for observation and questioning, it'll be blown out of existence, including Mr. Dork. Stand by.

musical transition suspenseful

CAPTAIN: Mr. Dort. Mr. Dort. Report.

DORT: Object, as you can see on the scanner, sir, is covered with many small horns, like the detonating horns of the obsolete mines formerly used in naval warfare.

CAPTAIN: Is that their purpose, do you assume, Mr. Dork?

DORT: I'm going to find out, sir. I'm going to grab one.

CAPTAIN: Mr. Dork.

DORT: I'm here, sir. I don't think this is a mine.

CAPTAIN: Circle it so we can see it completely through your scanner.

DORT: Deadlock, sir. Nothing to report that the scanner hasn't shown you. Oh, wait a minute, sir. A section of the outer hull seems to be opening. Do you see it?

CAPTAIN: Very good, Dork. Hold that.

DORT: I'm sure it's a communications device, sir.

CAPTAIN: It looks like it. Fix your scanner so it'll focus on that communications device. Return to the ship.

musical transition suspenseful

CAPTAIN: Communications department. Communications department. Progress report, please.

FX: click

DORT: We've established communication, sir.

CAPTAIN: Is there a psychologist on the team down there with you?

DORT: Yes, sir. Mr. Burns is working with us.

CAPTAIN: Will both of you please report to the bridge at once?

musical transition suspenseful

CAPTAIN: Well, you look tired, Dort.

DORT: We've established fairly satisfactory communication, sir. They seem to have highly developed thought patterns. We got a satisfactory translation from the machine on the fourth attempt. We can say almost anything we want to say to each other now. Of course, how much of what they tell us is the truth, we have no way of knowing.

CAPTAIN: Mr. Burns, you're the psychologist. What do you think?

BURNS: Well, I don't know, sir, they seem to be completely direct. They haven't let slip even a hint of the tenseness we know exists. They act as if they were setting up a means of communication for friendly conversation, but, well, there's an overtone that...

CAPTAIN: Yeah? Mr. Burns, I have a decision to make. On the one hand, opening contact with the friendly people of a vastly different culture could only be beneficial to us of Earth. On the other hand, if they're hostile, I ought to blast them out of existence without any other preliminaries.

DORT: But, sir, you can't!

CAPTAIN: I'm talking to you, Dort.

DORT: It's not warranted yet, sir.

CAPTAIN: (TO DORT) Yes.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: (OVER LOUDSPEAKER) Now, hear this, all departments. Hear this, all departments. This ship is on an extended alert. Provisions will be made so that personnel can have maximum rest and nourishment.

musical transition suspenseful

HOST/NARRATOR: Communication continued by means of the artificial language set up arbitrarily between the Earth men and the aliens, decoded by the mechanical decoders. Dort disobeyed orders. He lived on powerful stimulants so that he could stay with the communications machine. Talking, talking, talking to the aliens.

FX: light sound of repeated keyboard strokes and mechanical whirr throughout dialog

DORT: Other people. Other people. Are we being received?

ALIEN: We are receiving your message.

DORT: The chief of this ship wishes to speak with the chief of your ship.

ALIEN: The message is heard by the chief of this ship. The chief of this ship communicates that he will hear the message of the chief of that ship.

DORT: Go ahead, sir.

CAPTAIN: People of the other ship, I'd like to say the appropriate things about this first contact of two dissimilar civilized races and of my hopes that a friendly intercourse between the two peoples will result.

ALIEN: People of that ship, what you say is all very well, but is there any way for us to let each other go home alive?

DORT: That's all, sir. They've stopped sending.

CAPTAIN: Very direct people. Very direct.

DORT: But sir, I don't follow. I didn't know what that meant, you know, is there any way for us to let each other go home alive?

CAPTAIN: It means what it says, Dort.

DORT: Sir, what's to stop us from just cutting communication and leaving, and they can do likewise?

CAPTAIN: What's to stop us? Simply that whichever ship leaves first will be followed by the other. If they find Earth and get back to their own planet and we don't know where that planet is, Earth will be completely at their mercy. If they leave first, we'll follow them. We'll attempt to find their home planet. Dort, could you swear to any decision that the policymakers on Earth will come to?

DORT: Sir, even if they do follow us, the closer we get to home, the more of our ships and weapons they'll face. They'd never get away.

CAPTAIN: Well, how do you know that they can't communicate with their home planet without returning?

DORT: We can't, sir.

CAPTAIN: How do you know they can't?

DORT: I don't, sir.

CAPTAIN: So that's the situation. We'll sit out here, facing each other, trying to out-guess each other, until time wears us out. And we'll have to face the fact, either they destroy us or we destroy them.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: Navigation officer, attention. Navigation officer, attention. Every star map on this ship is to be prepared for instant destruction.

ALIEN: The chief of this ship wishes to know whether the chief of that ship can suggest an answer to the problem concerning us both.

DORT: Do you want me to answer that, sir?

CAPTAIN: I'll answer it myself. Tell me when to talk.

DORT: Now, sir.

CAPTAIN: I am giving that matter personal attention. Every effort will be bent to the solution of this problem. Will you consider a temporary truce in the meantime?

ALIEN: What would a truce gain? Could we trust you? Would you trust us? I suggest that we continue as we have up to this particle of time.

CAPTAIN: (TO ALIEN) I agree. (TO DORT) Sign off, Dort.

musical interlude

NARRATOR: Weeks went by, and during the weeks, the exchange of information continued without let up.

DORT: What particle of time are the people on that ship at?

ALIEN: The resting time. All rest except myself and others on alert duty.

DORT: Same on this ship.

ALIEN: You people of that ship are very similar in many ways. Do you have a family?

DORT: I have a mate.

ALIEN: I have a mate and three offspring. It is too bad for them, as well as us, to have to kill each other.

DORT: This ship can't see any way out of it. Can that ship?

ALIEN: If we could believe each ship, yes. Our chief would like it. But we can't believe you, and you are afraid that we do not tell truth, although we do. This ship would trail you home if

this ship were able to. That ship would do the same, but this ship feels sorry about it.

DORT: I believe you're a friend.

ALIEN: I share your belief and like you, but there is a possibility that you are put to make a trap for me. I will stop now and think it over.

musical interlude

FX: shuffling footsteps

CAPTAIN: Just sit down, Dort. Control yourself. We're all under tension. Doesn't do any good to pace like some caged animal.

DORT: Yes, sir.

CAPTAIN: All right. Now I've read the complete transcription of your conversations with this one alien. What does it prove, Dort?

DORT: Sir, these people are so much like us in their thinking. Well, sir, they're likable.

CAPTAIN: They're likable and they breathe oxygen. Their air is 28% oxygen instead of 20. But they could do very well on Earth. It would be a highly desirable conquest for them. Dort, I'm as set against violence as you are. I don't see any way out of this, and I think we've got to break this status quo. So if in 70 hours we don't see any other way, then I have no further choice. (pause) I'll blow them to bits.

musical interlude

FX: light sound of repeated keyboard strokes and mechanical whirr throughout dialog

ALIEN: Will that ship receive communications? Will that ship receive communications?

DORT: This ship is listening.

ALIEN: It seems to me better to communicate than to sit by the machine silently.

DORT: I would have called you, but you signed off before.

ALIEN: The problem goes around and around. I find no answer.

DORT: Perhaps we could turn our thoughts to other things.

ALIEN: The psychologist of this ship tells us that you people on that ship have a threshold of tolerance to tension. He tells us that you will be forced to take one action or another in a period of less than 100 time particles.

DORT: I have no communication on this matter.

ALIEN: Oh, this ship is not trying to extract unwilling information from that ship, a truth is mentioned in passing.

DORT: A report of this conversation will be carried to the chief of this ship.

ALIEN: It will be so. We are prepared.

DORT: If only the people of this ship could meet in direct contact with the people of that ship, it might be better.

ALIEN: We could not communicate then. The communications machine is too large to carry from place to place. In direct contact, the peoples of the two ships would be further apart than now.

DORT: That's true.

ALIEN: I am sad. Much that is pleasant has passed between us.

DORT: I am sad too.

ALIEN: We are not yet ready for each other.

DORT: We are not yet ready for each other. (SIGH)

CAPTAIN: It's hard, isn't it, Dort?

DORT: Oh, Captain, I am sorry, I didn't know you were here, sir.

CAPTAIN: I have been here for quite a while, eavesdropping, I am afraid.

DORT: It's all right, sir. Nothing can be personal in a situation like this.

CAPTAIN: That's right. How long is a hundred time particles, Dort?

DORT: Pardon, sir?

CAPTAIN: That reference he made to us not being able to stand tension is interesting. Their psychologists seem to make more out of us than we do out of them, don't they?

DORT: Yes, sir. They hit the nail right on the head.

CAPTAIN: Yes, they did. I think, Dort, we will just have to push our timetable up a bit. No further communication with the aliens under any circumstances. That's clear, isn't it?

DPRT: Yes, sir. (pause) Sir, if they know so much about our psychology, isn't it possible that remark was intended to make us act more quickly?

CAPTAIN: Probable, Dort. Probable.

DORT: But why would they do that, sir? Why?

CAPTAIN: You tell me why, Dort.

DORT: Hmh. All of a sudden I have an idea, sir. It's crazy.

CAPTAIN: It doesn't matter how crazy. I'll listen to it.

DORT: Sir, I think these people are playing some kind of a joke on us.

CAPTAIN: Joke? A joke, Dort?

DORT: Yes, sir. Over and over again I have noticed what I think is a sense of humor, a highly developed sense of humor. Do you recall when we went to all the trouble to set up a fictitious star map and then they just sent us back a mirror image of the same one? I think somehow they're playing a joke on us.

CAPTAIN: Maybe you're right. In which case, you've seen practical jokers, Dort. Their jokes aren't always funny. Sometimes they hurt people.

musical interlude

FX: clang, clang, clang, clang

CAPTAIN: (OVER LOUDSPEAKER) All departments man instant alert. All department man instant alert. Report instantly. Report instantly.

WEAPONS OFFICER: Weapons department alerted.

CAPTAIN: Target the enemy ship.

WEAPONS OFFICER: On target, sir.

CAPTAIN: Stand by.

FX: suspenseful music

CAPTAIN: Fire.

FX: exploding whoosh

DORT: They're gone, sir. Not a trace of them left. Not a tiny trace. Now we can go home.

musical interlude

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER: Communications to Captain.
Communications to Captain.

CAPTAIN: Report.

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER: Sir, I'm picking up new signals. Same frequency as the original alien signal.

CAPTAIN: That's impossible. That ship was destroyed.

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER: I'm receiving signals, sir.

CAPTAIN: Set the machine up. We'll be down there in a minute. Mr. Dort, come with me, please.

FX: light sound of repeated keyboard strokes and mechanical whirr throughout dialog

ALIEN: It's good to be on the way home.

ALIEN TWO: Yes, it is good.

ALIEN: Do you suppose we'll ever figure out what happened to the other ship?

ALIEN TWO: Never. A blinding flash and they were gone.

ALIEN: I suppose they couldn't figure a way out of the situation. An unstable people. They had no sense of humor to cope with the situation.

ALIEN TWO: They exploded themselves out of existence.

ALIEN: It seems reasonable.

ALIEN TWO: They must have had powerful weapons to destroy themselves so completely.

ALIEN: Yes, what a shame. In a way, I grew to like them.

DORT: This isn't meant for us, sir. I don't know what's happening, but I think we're overhearing a private conversation.

CAPTAIN: I understand, Dort. Be quiet, will you?

ALIEN TWO: Many things might have come out of a relationship with that people.

ALIEN: They were describing a disease they call cancer. I think it is similar to the Frohgren syndrome. We might have helped them.

ALIEN TWO: They might have helped us too. Well, too bad. We'll never find them again, I think. The odds of such a chance meeting in the vast space of the whole universe. There are no figures for such odds are there (muffled)...

CAPTAIN: Turn it up, Dort. Turn it up louder.

FX: soft static

DORT: That's all there is, sir. The signal stopped there. Sir, I don't know how, but somehow when we fired at them, we didn't

destroy them, but we did set up a condition whereby they've become invisible to us and we've become invisible to them.

FX: click

CAPTAIN: Captain, to engineering department. Halt, forward motion.

FX: click

DORT: Captain, why are we stopping?

CAPTAIN: Listen, Dort, you say they're invisible. All right, they are, but they're not destroyed because we just heard them. They're out there somewhere. Invisible.

DORT: You heard them, sir. They're heading for home. We're invisible to them too, sir.

CAPTAIN: How do you know, Dort? How do you know this whole thing isn't a setup?

DORT: Suppose that's true, Captain, you heard their conversation. They weren't talking like any monstrous people. They seem decent and warm, just as decent and warm as we are.

CAPTAIN: How do you know this conversation wasn't planned? Deliberately set up for us to hear. How do you know that, Dort?

DORT: Yes, sir, you're right. They may be out there and they may not. They may be telling the truth or they may be trying to trick us. They may be friends or they may be the most deadly enemies.

CAPTAIN: You said they had a sense of humor, Dort. Ha. What a joke to play. To deliberately set up a situation where we wouldn't know fact from fantasy, truth from lie. Wouldn't that be a joke, Dort?

DORT: But we don't know that they did that, sir.

CAPTAIN: And we don't know that they didn't. We don't know anything.

DORT: Sir, does that mean we never go home again?

CAPTAIN: I don't know. I have to think about it. I have to think about it.

musical conclusion

HOST/NARRATOR: You have just heard another adventure into the unknown world of the future, the world of-- (with echo) Dimension X - x - x - x (trails off and blends with sound of repeated gong which fades into theremin which plays throughout announcement)

NBC ANNOUNCER: Dimension X is presented each week by the National Broadcasting Company in cooperation with Street and Smith, publishers of the magazine Astounding Science Fiction. Your host was Norman Rose. Music by Albert Buhrman. Dimension X is produced by William Welsh, and directed by Fred Wiehe. First Contact, written by Murray Leinster and adapted for radio by Howard Rodman. Featured in the cast were Wendell Holmes, Bob Hastings, Brock Gordon, William Lally, and Stan Early. Your announcer, Fred Collin. Thank you for joining us.