

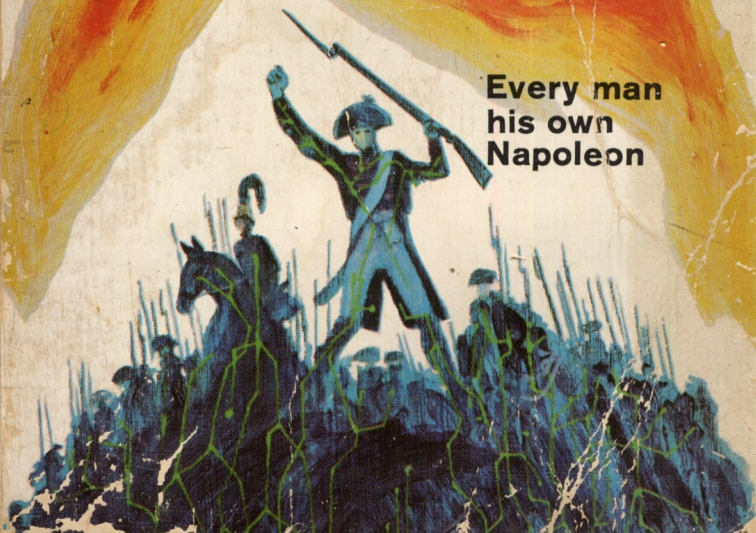
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The ELECTRIC SWORD- SWALLOWERS

by KENNETH BULMER



Every man
his own
Napoleon

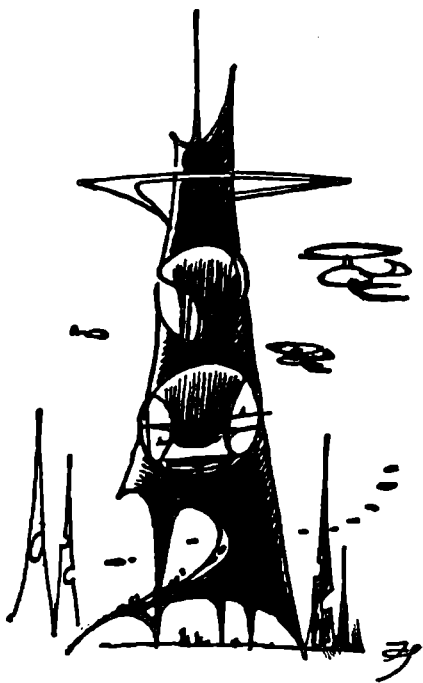


Delilah was beautiful. Delilah was sexy. And Delilah was to blame for all of Ferdie Foxlee's problems. She had let him down at the crucial moment by falling apart. Literally. And in pieces.

Her right eye popped, dangling on multicolored cables. Her right breast spun around and flew off into the distance. As her fuses blew, her smile melted in a blaze of sparks.

As an expert in ectoplasmic electronic creations, Ferdie had clearly failed. But eepee experts—even one like Ferdie—are in very high demand. So when he panicked and ran, he ran right into the waiting arms of the underworld. . . .

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



**the
ELECTRIC
SWORD-
SWALLOWERS**

by KENNETH BULMER

ACE BOOKS

**A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
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I

DELILAH EXERTS HERSELF

Slinkily, Ferdie Foxlee's Delilah reclined on the white amorous battleground of the bed. She looked more beautiful, more desirable, more satisfying than any mortal woman could hope to be. Transparently, Councillor Robert Markgrof thought all those things, which wrought him into a highly emotional state. He panted. He drooled. His pop eyes bulged lasciviously.

Looking on that bedroom scene through the polarized glass with a pleased proprietorial air, young Ferdie Foxlee nudged Madam Councillor Robert Markgrof.

"She's a bewitching piece of pulchritude if ever I made one," he observed with the loftily detached air of the true scientist.

"Look at him!" The wife of the now hastily disrobing councillor fumed like a pregnant volcano. "He never looks at me like that these days! Just wait till I get my hands on him!"

In the cavern of the bedroom, with lights discreetly shaded and purple conspiratorial shadows lending an aura of cozy amour, Delilah, her white arms uplifted, her blue eyes brilliant, her scarlet lips clingingly parted, rose seductively from the bed.

"Come to me, my pet," she cooed.

"My pet!" gobbled the madam councillor. "Ah, just you wait, Robert Markgrof! Just you wait!"

Hidden in the cramped cubbyhole behind the polized glass of her own full-length portrait of thirty years ago—and she's been no lightweight then—she glowered belligerently on Ferdie Foxlee.

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"She's all you promised the councillor, Mr. Foxlee—more! Those curves never came from dear old Earth."

"I used the latest catalogues—"

"What they're coming to back home on Earth, I can't imagine. But will she do what *I* want, hey?"

"Yes, madam councillor." Foxlee held up the control box. His lean thumb curved over a red stud. He smirked with the knowledge of a good job well done. "When I press this—"

"Har, har," growled the madam councillor coarsely. "That satyr in there will get his comeuppance. I'm going to enjoy this!"

Ferdie Foxlee's thumb caressed the stud.

"Careful, you young idiot! Don't press that until he's drunk the love potion. That's the whole idea."

"I know exactly what I'm doing," said Foxlee stiffly. "I pride myself on my flexibility."

"When I give the word. Not before."

Undergarments wafted through the bedroom's scented air like gulls seeking cliff edges. Delilah swayed and beckoned. The councillor tore his pants.

"Look at him!" The madam councillor raised pudgy fists. "He doesn't care for anything. I'm going to—I'm going to—" She panted a bit there and ruffled out her shrieking pink negligee. With the tact of a sensitive soul Foxlee looked away from her fat figure. "As soon as he drinks the love potion, press your red stud—and I'm in there!"

"The best of luck," said Ferdie Foxlee; but he said it under his breath.

Delilah swayed seductively. She lifted the thin glass with the purple love potion. Eagerly, Councillor Robert Markgrof reached for it, kicking his pants out of the way. A faint blue flicker of smoke rose from Delilah's left ear.

Ferdie Foxlee quivered. He crossed his fingers.

Delilah's left breast fell off and hit the soft carpet with a plop.

Her right breast began to spin around, full and plump

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and whizzing in circles like a Catherine wheel, shooting sparks. Coils of blue smoke wafted from her nostrils.

The councillor yelped. "Keep off!" He staggered back. The love potion flipped into the air, scattered purple liquid over white flesh and white bed sheets.

"Come to me, come to me, come to me . . ." Delilah yammered like a swing door. Her blue left eye sparked devilishly, spun out of its socket and dangled at the end of a fifteen-inch binding of varicolored cables, lashing dangerously with her wild dancing. Her arms flailed. Smoke gushed from her mouth, melting those red and ripely luscious lips, consuming her teeth.

"Help!" screamed the councillor. "Gerroff!"

Delilah climbed all over the no-longer gallant man. In a whirl of arms and legs the couple gyrated about the bedroom. Bits and pieces of Delilah fell off. Her hair frizzed out and long licking sparks shot splendidly.

"You fool!" screeched the madam councillor. "You bumble-fingered nincompoop! He didn't drink the love potion!"

Ferdie Foxlee's first thought—after he stopped himself laughing—was to get the hell out of here, but quick.

"I paid you good money to sabotage that revolting eepee sex-image!" The madam councillor's generous figure shuddered in anguish. "Oh, the shame of it all."

"I—I—" squeaked Foxlee. "It's all that confounded proto-plasm handler's fault. I'm the electronics man—"

"I don't care whose fault it is." Blood showed in madam councillor's eyes. A squashy fist struck Foxlee on the nose. He yelped and clutched that offended organ. "I'll have you run offplanet—so help me!"

"Just let me out of here."

"Poor Robert. Think how he might have been injured!"

In the bedroom Delilah's right breast, after a spectacular spinning flight across the room, struck smashingly into the full-length portrait of madam. Polarized glass cracked, split, and shattered under the pointed impact.

Delilah danced in abandon, shedding bits of herself. Her

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arms dangled from glinting wires. Smoke puffed. Her hair crackled and frizzed like an oversize sun going nova.

Seeing the shattered opening in the portrait, Foxlee put his disheveled young head down, flung up his arms like a drowning drunk and dashed desperately for liberty.

A sex image on the rampage scared all hell out of him—like the formidable madam councillor herself.

She lunged after him with a jungle-bred growl, caught his plum-colored tunic tail. She yanked. The tunic split from neck to hem. Foxlee thundered on.

"What the—! Who the—!" Markgrof crawled up on hands and knees from where he had tried to hide under the bed. "Ferdie Foxlee! So it's you! This is all your fault!" Nothing about Foxlee's abrupt appearance in his bedroom seemed to strike the councillor as incongruous. He could see one thing only and was intent on revenge. "I'll tear you apart, Foxlee! I'll run you off Curdiswane. I'll have you shot into a million pieces if you try to land on this planet again!"

He scrambled up, snatched a vase from the bedside table and hurled it at Foxlee.

That young man ducked.

The vase struck the madam councillor squarely between wind and water. She emitted a coughing grunt like a hippo colliding with a truck.

"Oh, Lor'!"

Ferdie Foxlee started for the door feeling the oven-hot breath of absolute calamity sizzling his short and curlies. This little spot of easy money furthering the old biddie's lust for her old man had turned into a mad house—and he wanted out. He wrenched the door open and hared out into the corridor.

Screeching like a goosed hyena, Delilah chased after him, her sole remaining eye fixed balefully on the rip in his tunic. To her that acted like the red flag. Foxlee yelped and scuttled for the elevators.

After Delilah ran the councillor—his arms full of ammunition—hurling books, boots, cups, and vases. Amid a shower of missiles Foxlee skidded into the elevator bank, saw the

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cars were all floors away, started for the stairs with his heart doing a tango in his throat.

Following the councillor ran the councillor's wife. Her shocking pink negligee tangled around her elephantine thighs. She was yelling something about it not being too late yet, Bobbykins, darlin'.

Hitting the treads of the stairs with feet that felt numb—like the objectionable piece of substance between his ears he liked to call a brain—Ferdie Foxlee panted down.

"Ferdie! Lover boy! I need someone like you, so strong and manly!"

"Oh, no!" gulped Foxlee. "She's really at it now."

"Come back here you criminal lunatic so I can belt you one!" roared the councillor.

"Bobbykins, remember how it was."

Out into the street the procession tore.

At nine o'clock in the evening in the planetary capital city of Curlona, with the sun just about sinking beyond the purple hills across the river, Ferdie Foxlee would have thought that few people would be about; that they'd all be at the theater or the gambling casinos, the race tracks or safely at home watching TV solidos. He should have remembered he was young Ferdie Foxlee, a man to whom things happened—after he'd set the machinery for his own destruction into motion first.

Crowds watching a military parade turned to gawk.

The brass band thundered by. Instruments squawked and squealed as Foxlee shouldered through the crowd and tangled himself up with the band. Legs and arms kicked. The trombone player catapulted head first into the base drum. The flutist booked an appointment with his surgeon in the morning. The fate of the bandmaster was beyond conjecture.

Hallooing at his heels, Delilah, Councillor Markgrof and Madam Councillor Markgrof, stampeded Ferdie Foxlee through the band as a whirlwind strikes through a line of moored yachts.

"I'll have his guts for banjo strings!"

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"I'll ship him to Bueonosmal in the black squad!"

"Darling! Why do you run away from click—splitz—fizzle."

An agonized glance back showed Delilah collapsing as her legs tried to propel her disintegrating body in two different directions. The councillor hurdled her and bore on for Foxlee with his wife yowling after him.

The last Foxlee saw of Delilah was her head taking off and landing, grinning, in the lap of the plump lady in whose honor this band parade was being held.

"My Aunt Hattie!" gasped Foxlee. "That's done it."

He stiff-armed a policeman out of the way, headed for an alleyway, his tunic flapping about him, the crowd roar a madness in his head. Others joined in the pursuit. Hard footfalls pounded after him.

"If only that sex maniac of a councillor had done his duty this evening and attended that parade instead of using it as a smoke screen to plan amours, all this wouldn't have started." Ferdie Foxlee ran with his heart and his lungs slugging it out in his chest cavity. "And that gross female vampire of a wife of his would have to hear about it and drag me into her schemes to get the old lecher after her again. Oh, oh, oh." Ferdie Foxlee was not a happy man.

"There he goes!"

Foxlee dived into a black back alley, kicked a couple of cats who left off snarling at each other to sink a claw or three into his ankles.

"Yowp!" he yelled, kicking out spasmodically.

He fell over an automated dustbin that snapped at him and barely missed taking off his arm. The loose flap of his tunic disappeared into the dustbin's maw as the jagged refuse-collection teeth clashed together.

"Whew!" He ran on, more than a trifle unsteadily, headed for an orange oblong of light at the far end.

Cowering in the shadowed corner he watched as the rout bayed past.

Quite an impressive collection of people had taken up the new sport of hunting Ferdie Foxlee. He saw bandsmen brandishing their instruments, policemen getting set to call

out the riot squads and tear gas, and onlookers who clearly considered this more fun than watching the band parade. He didn't see the Markgrofs.

The orange light threw grotesque puddles of radiance across the alley. This city of Curlona from which a rickety administration controlled the planet of Curdiswane boasted of its wide avenue and palatial modern buildings; but like almost any city since the house building bug hit the first men to crawl out of their damp caves, there could be found also sleazy quarters and dark blocks where tourists ventured with a giggle and a quiver, if at all. Ferdie Foxlee did not much care for the thought that crossed his mind. He didn't like to think that he'd come home.

A strange cooing gurgling, like a baby whale hunting breakfast, bubbled up from the alley shadows. Foxlee strained his eyes. Prepared for instant flight he wondered what on this extraterrestrial planet of Curdiswane that noise could be. Ever inquisitive, ever putting his smelling organ in where it wasn't wanted, he let his instincts guide him now—usually a fatal move.

He saw.

"Oh, no!"

He staggered back, chuckling and yet shaken by a great discomfiture. The sight of the Markgrofs, either laying into each other with all fists flying or continuing the business the disintegration of Delilah had interrupted—he couldn't tell just what they were up to—caused him a severe emotional disturbance. He had to choke back his boiling laughter. His ribs hurt. He rolled out of the shadow into that betraying orange smudgy radiance and a voice bellowed like a deprived bull:

"*Foxlee!* You double-crossed me! Now I'm going to take you apart and throw away the pieces!"

The Markgrofs, between them filling the alley with their bulk, rushed down upon the cowering form of Ferdie Foxlee. He whimpered, knowing that now was no time for heroics, and started to run again.

At his second step he plunged into the shadows.

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At his third step a hard and extraordinarily horny hand reached from that darkness, grabbed his elbow numbingly, hauled him into a slot of deeper darkness opening off the alley.

A voice—a whiskery whisky voice—husked: “In here, partner. Lie low a mite—”

“I’ve got to get offplanet—fast,” said Foxlee to the darkness.

“You’ve got a hope! Whatever you’ve done must be a right beaut. The spacefields will be shuttered tight. Keep quiet!”

But it was too late. Hard, tough voices raised authoritatively.

“You in there! Come on out. Now. I’ll give you five seconds, then we start blasting!”

II

MAD JAKE HERLIHEY

“Or, Lor!” moaned Ferdie Foxlee.

The horny grip on his elbow tightened excruciatingly.

“You idiot! They heard. C’mon.” The whisper grew menacing. “And keep quiet or I’ll slit your throat. I don’t want that lot in here.”

“Who does?” said Ferdie Foxlee, limply.

They took off fast, running silently, their shoulders brushing dank brickwork in the darkness.

Four and a half seconds later that darkness split and blazed and ripped itself to nightmare shreds under the impact of high-energy power guns. The air crackled and ionized.

“The slobs,” grunted Foxlee’s unknown rescuer. “Five seconds, they said. That blast came in under five, barely over four. What else can you expect from a crummy planet like this?”

Foxlee got his breath back.

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"You're from offplanet, then?"

"You can say that again. With all of space to wander in who'd settle down on this dirt heap?"

"Not me," said Foxlee, fervently. "Not me."

Then, because he was Ferdie Foxlee who couldn't leave well enough alone, he had to add: "Why are you risking your neck helping me?"

A coarse laugh floated from the darkness.

"Sure and why shouldn't I help a fellow unfortunate get away from those slobs? I'm a free man. I aim to get off this stinking planet and I need help . . ."

"That figures," said Ferdie Foxlee.

"Yeah, well, figure in that this is a working relationship. I've helped you; now we help each other space out."

"And who?"

"I'm called Jinx Herlihey by those who don't like me. I'm called Mad Jake Herlihey by those I bestow my favor on. And I'm called Jake by my friends. You'd best take your pick."

"I'm Ferdinand Ulcar Foxlee."

Well, it was the best he could do in answer to Herlihey's roll call of names.

"You can call me Ferdie if you like, Jake."

"Huh. C'mon. Down here. Bloated Bertha has a dive here we can lie up in tonight. We've got to figure a way offplanet soon." He chuckled. "Preferably before Bertha finds out I don't have any cash to pay her."

A thought struck Jake Herlihey.

"You got any cash?"

"I did have. But a rotten automated dustbin snapped my tunic pocket."

"Ha—that's a new one."

"I nearly lost something more precious."

"Save it. Those fancy planetary policemen will be sniffing down here. They'll soon realize they didn't even toast us back there."

Foxlee shuddered. That blast from the handguns had not been pleasant.

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Around them the night life of Curlona would be going on as usual now that the sun had set and the nip of refreshing coolness could take the heat off the day-used air. All manner of divertissements existed in Curlona. Curdiswane, as a fairly well-established planet, if not a particularly old-settled one, could boast most of the pleasures and vices of its sisters circling the star Curdis. Foxlee as an eepee electronics expert had spaced in to take up a post with Curdiswane Electroplasms straight out of training college on Earth with high hopes of a glorious and rewarding career. He'd been here a year, now, and still was regarded as an outsider.

Then, when Councillor Markgrof had ordered a super-plus sex image for his own private enjoyment, and the councillor's wife had heard of it and bribed Foxlee to fix the sex image to break down just at the right apocalyptic moment—No! Ferdie Foxlee could not go on. The memories were too fresh and searing. Only one thing was he sure of now: he was finished on Curdiswane. With Herlihey's help or without it, he had to space out—fast.

In the discreet light of the foyer to Bertha's, Ferdie Foxlee caught his first sight of his new companion.

Made conscious of his own shortcomings through all the twenty odd years of his own life, young Ferdie Foxlee could recognize hard toughness, resilience and self-reliance when he met them. Mad Jake Herlihey combined those qualities. In appearance he looked to be about forty years of age, although modern life expectancies varied widely with planet of birth, and he could have been anywhere from forty to four hundred. His square blunt face conveyed a strange impression of having been run through a canning factory ready for processing into a useful comestible. His eyes, dark green, partially hidden beneath hooded eyelids and ferociously tufted eyebrows, conveyed again that unsettling impression of intolerance, of devil-take-you, of independence. Not, most certainly, most certainly certainly, could Jake Herlihey be called a civilized man as that term would

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be understood by a citizen of the teeming ghetto-conurbations of the densely settled planets.

"In here, Ferd."

Sighing, knowing he had once again met someone who would disastrously change his life, Ferdie Foxlee followed. Herlihey wore an old suit of one-offs, and their frayed cuffs showed that he hadn't read the instructions to toss them away after use. His boots, though, were hand-cobbled, soft plastic leather, and shining with care. A man who had his priorities right, was Mad Jake Herlihey.

The doss house—Foxlee tried to find any other descriptive but could not—consisted simply of a small hall, dingy, carpeted, a few chairs and tables, and a rising complex of small cubbyholes and rooms varying in price with height and inaccessibility. Bloated Bertha met them, frowning, looking on Foxlee with some menace.

Foxlee stopped himself from chuckling. Bloated? Bertha turned out to be a tiny fragile wisp of a woman, with stringy hair, lined shrewish face, and hands that camouflaged their lean scrawniness beneath loads of large and luminous jeweled rings. Little and catty, that was the famous Bloated Bertha.

"Him?" she jerked a thumb imperiously.

"He's all right, Bertha. A friend." Herlihey acted with a front that, realizing it originated in his lack of money, nevertheless amused Foxlee. "He's clean."

"Huh. Any trouble—out."

"Sure, Bertha. You know me."

"Indeed I do, Jake Herlihey. Tomorrow, that's the last day. Either you pay me tomorrow or I get Dicey Orglon and his boys to take payment out of your hide—"

"Now, Bertha! Is that nice?"

"Dicey ain't particular about nice things. I run a doss and I guarantee safety. All that costs money."

"Sure. Sure, Bertha."

As he spoke tough roistering Jake Herlihey was backing up the stairs. With a final "humph!" and a toss of her bobbinlike head, Bertha let them go up.

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In Herlihey's room—barely large enough for his square bulk and furnished with an eye to providing as little as possible and nothing that would break in a fight—Foxlee sat on the bed and let out his breath in a great whoosh.

"I suppose we'd better figure out some plans," he began.

Herlihey shook his head, then dropped the shoe he took from under the bed. And thus brought his lips close to Foxlee's ears.

"Knock it off, Ferd. Place is bugged to hell and gone. Let's get some sleep. We'll plan come the morning—outside where we can't be overheard."

After an uncomfortable night, they smartened themselves up as best they could, drew in their belts another notch, smarmed down their hair, and descended when Herlihey figured Bloated Bertha wouldn't be in the hallway.

"If I don't have something to eat pretty soon," Foxlee said with some acerbity, "I won't need to get off Curdiswane. They can just bury me. If, that is," he finished gloomily, "they can find enough of me to put in a coffin."

"Knock it off, Ferd. I forget when I last ate."

They did not venture into the busy smarter sections of town but contented themselves with prowling around the park and riverfront environs.

Foxlee, to his own satisfaction, had summed up this man as a good companion to have around in a brawl. He wouldn't have trusted him with Delilah, though. That thought was as indigestible as their nonexistent breakfast.

"This place," grumbled Herlihey, kicking a nonautomatic waste bin at the graveled path's edge. "It's dead. Dead and dull."

"Yes." Foxlee couldn't agree more. "I've been here a year working for the planetary electropasm company. Man! Talk about a lively graveyard."

"Electroplasms? I know 'em—probably too well. The semisentients don't seem to like me, somehow. What side are you?"

"Electronics."

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Herlihey smiled. His face transformed itself wonderfully. "And you'll be studying up on the protoplasm side so you can become an eepee master one fine day."

"Well, what's wrong with ambition?"

"Nothing at all." Herlihey guffawed. "I've an ambition right now to sink my fangs into a whole double plateful of ham and eggs."

"Knock it off, Jake! My mouth's watering like Niagara."

"So you're an eepee man, hey? Me, I go for robots. They may be old-fashioned but they don't have that little bit of protoplasmic brain. That means they can't think for themselves, can't make prime decisions like a semisentient. Safer."

"You and Delilah, both." Foxlee told Herlihey of the imbroglia with the specially constructed sex image who had fallen to pieces just before the vital moment.

Herlihey held his sides. "Old Markgrof was lucky. Your Delilah could've busted loose at a most inconvenient time for him. Could have done him a serious injury. Hoo boy, young Ferd, I'm gonna like working with you."

"Yeah? Then how do we get off this dump?"

"Easy." Herlihey had obviously taken on fresh heart the moment he'd learned of Foxlee's trade. "A guy's been hanging out around the sleazy joints lately trying to hire eepee masters or assistants. I didn't take any notice of the guy—for reasons I just spelled out. But now—"

"Hold on a moment," protested Foxlee. "If you mean a character who calls himself Marshal McMahon—"

"That's the guy. Very pompous and sure of himself. Plenty of cash, and bodyguards who look real mean. Say, how come you heard of him?"

Foxlee laughed nastily.

"We were warned, at the Electroplasm Institute. He wants eepee masters all right. He's strictly illegal. Anyone taking service with him would be automatically struck off. We were warned. He's poison!"

"Yeah? Well, his cash is the same as anyone else's." Herlihey stared calculatingly at Foxlee. "Say, Ferd, how's your

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stomach this morning? Nice and full with that ham and eggs? That hot coffee? Those rich pancakes? D'you feel real good?"

"If you weren't older than me, Mad Jake, so help me, I'd knock your block off!"

Herlihey took his turn to chuckle nastily.

"It'd take a regiment like you, young Ferd. Listen. We're broke. We're done for on this crummy planet. We're hungry. You don't have any option. You've got to break your electropasm oaths and sign up with Marshal McMahon. If you don't, you're a dead duck!"

III

IN THE CONTESTS GYM

As a councillor of the city of Curlona, Robert Markgrof carried authority enough to have a troublesome insect like Ferdinand Foxlee booted offplanet with no questions asked. Jake Herlihey spotted the poster first. They'd been scrounging around the rear exit of a restaurant in the hopes of picking up discarded tidbits and parlaying them into a breakfast.

"Hey, Ferd! You've got a public."

Ferdie Foxlee looked at the poster, magnetaped to the concrete wall, and felt a hot pain knife him in the breakfastless portions of his anatomy.

"That's not fair," he said. "That's a lousy trick."

"What else do you expect from a half-civilized planet like this? You should have stayed on Solterra."

"Yes. And starved—"

"Haw, haw! Some improvement."

Crossly, Foxlee read the poster.

WANTED

FERDINAND ULCAR FOXLEE

Electropasm Electronics Assistant

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This man has broken his oaths of electroplasm integrity and is therefore proscribed according to law.
This man is dangerous.

Foxlee didn't ready any more; the rest was just the usual promise of reward for apprehension and a description.

Jake Herlihey cocked his head on one side.

"That's sure a mighty fine picture of you, Ferd."

The poster was illustrated by a full color 3-D image, bright and blatant in the morning sunshine.

Guiltily, Foxlee glanced over his shoulder. The street with its row of back exits lay bare and unpromising.

"That's off my planetary landing permit," he said gloomily. "And that's in my apartment with all the rest of my things. . . ."

"And if you go back there they'll snap you up like an asteroid miner gobbling a gold world."

"You seem to find it funny, Jake."

"Sure. I'd no idea how to bust off this dump until you came along. Now you've been publicly condemned for reneging on your eepee oaths. Fine! Now you can sign up with this character Marshal McMahon with a clear conscience."

"Clear conscience, my Aunt Hattiel!"

"Yeah, and I'll bet she's one game bird."

"Go to hell, Mad Jake!"

Herlihey laughed and poked Foxlee in the ribs.

"If you're going there I'll tag along."

After a number of elaborately casual inquiries along the various bars and amusement slots, already open and flourishing at this hour—for Curlona was nothing if not openhanded about its hard-won pleasures—they located McMahon in a contests gym.

"Hold on," snapped Foxlee, halting under the sign. "So, okay, I sign up with this chiseler McMahon. How do I explain you away?"

"Easy. I've had experience with contests. Did a bit my-

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self one time." He flexed his powerfully muscled forearms. "But it's a mug's game if you've any brains."

"So how come you gave it up?"

Herlihey ignored that in his grand manner.

"You tell 'em I'm your systems man. Hell, Ferd, I could program a fighter from here and gone. I've seen 'em. You'll find you'll need me, come to that."

About to say "Like a hole in the head," Foxlee chopped the words off. The worry over his predicament was blinding him to reality. If what Herlihey said was true, and Foxlee saw no reason to doubt that since the man was big and strong and craggy enough, then he would really need him. And, more importantly, Herlihey had saved him from that mob and had never mentioned it since. A friendship of some proportions had sprung up here already.

Displaying both his familiarity with contests gyms and his contempt for Foxlee's hesitation, Herlihey strode ahead pugnaciously, almost beating the dorobot and shoving a chunky shoulder through the swinging glass. Inside, the backs of crowding men, the arc lights focused on the small ring, the blue haze of cigar smoke, the smell of liniment and oil and blood and sweat and the sharper, acrid, penetrating smell of men's hate and fear and sadistic enjoyment blended into a physical assault on Foxlee's senses.

This morning the training was more than mere practice—a grudge fight was being battled out.

Under the massed arc lights two men leaped and struck, dodged and parried, struck and struck again. Thin lines of blood stroked their ribs, their arms, their thighs. They wore light armor about their shoulders and chests, a steel cincture and large pseudo gladiator's helmets. The eyeholes looked black and bleak.

"Kids," Herlihey said softly, after a single glance. "Fighting it out to get into the big time. Suckers. Neither one has a chance against the sort of opposition they'll face in the contests."

Their swords, thin and flexible alloy-steel with platinum-edged razor sharpness, whipped gleaming through the light.

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They whipped rather than bludgeoned. Foxlee swallowed down. He'd been to the contests once and had decided then that they were not for him. Now he saw no reason to change his mind.

The spectators roared encouragement. Typically, they urged on the man winning. Soon blood clotted the loser's arms and legs, he slowed, weakening. His blade lifted raggedly. With a final decisive swing the winner sliced the loser's legs from under him and he tumbled all asprawl. Chest heaving, sweat and blood slick over his limbs, the winner stood back.

"It won't be that easy in the big time," grunted Herlihey.

Handlers removed the loser, swabbing with antiseptic towels.

"And he won't get off scot-free like that, either."

"Scot-free," said Foxlee. "Look at the poor devil."

"That's nothing. Why, when I was—"

"Save it. That looks like our man."

In the breakup of the crowd of spectators Marshal McMahon remained with his four bodyguards strategically placed around him. He was on a strange planet. He trusted no one.

Holding one hand to his face, Foxlee waited beneath the archway leading out onto the inner courtyard where contests fighters exercised. Their oiled bodies glistened in the sunlight. Somewhere water pattered from a fountain. Herlihey, completely at home in these surroundings, spoke for a few moments to McMahon, whose bodyguards looked on with hard impassive faces. After a few moments McMahon strutted across.

"So you're the eepee electronics expert," he said in a clipped, stonelike voice. Foxlee disliked him on sight.

"He's the best, Mr. McMahon," enthused Herlihey. Foxlee inwardly writhed at the tough man's crawling; but he well understood the necessity.

"Maybe." McMahon stood paunchily, considering. His wrinkled sour face, with the prominent jawbones and harsh uncompromising eyes, betokened a man who had seen a

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great deal of life on many planets and hadn't liked what he saw. No reason, here, for Foxlee to dislike him, even though he wore shriekingly loud colors in his throwaways; but Foxlee knew just what McMahon represented and what he wanted. That had been spelled out for them at the Electroplasm Institute. With reason, Foxlee experienced this nauseated sense of his own baseness.

"You look kinda young."

Herlihey cut in. "Sure, Mr. McMahon. He's full of bright ideas fresh from Earth." Herlihey screwed his ugly face into a grimace. "The kinda ideas your customers are gonna like."

"Maybe." That, surmised Foxlee, was a favorite word of Marshal McMahon's. A single-line compendium of alternatives. "I guess you both know what I want. I run a contests circuit. The pace has been slowing down lately. Catch?"

Herlihey nodded. "When do we space out?"

"I'll need to know a lot more about you guys before we get to that. Come around this evening, after the contests—"

"What?" yelled Foxlee, outraged. "We've got to get off this dump planet, but fast!"

McMahon's sour face wrinkled into a more prunelike globe. "Your problems are yours. Say, ain't I seen your face somewhere?"

There had been a wanted poster prominently displayed at the entrance to the gym

"Why, no—" began Foxlee.

Curtly, Herlihey cut in. "Sure, Mr. McMahon. He's one of those young tearaways from Earth. Big time on the old planet, umpteen parsecs back home. You can't afford to pass up his know-how."

Foxlee caught on. "This dump is kinda slow, at that," he said, trying to put on the local argot. "I c'n fix your fighters with tricks these crummy outplanet yokels don't dream could be invented, let alone used."

"Maybe. What's the hurry?"

"The hogs have taken a dislike to us."

A crumbling of McMahon's thin lips and a complex wave

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pattern across the prune lines could have indicated a smile. "I catch. We're spacing out right after the last contest now I've got me an eepee master. You're a bonus. Come around then."

Herlihey and Foxlee exchanged resigned glances.

"You heard of Dicey Orglon?" asked Herlihey.

McMahon coughed, then nodded sharply. "Yeah. A no-good bum. Tried to muscle me first day here."

"Well, he said you were a . . ." Herlihey hesitated. Foxlee admired the act. McMahon bit. His eyes expressed all the savage indignity of a baboon tribal chief confronted with a rival.

"What'd the sobnik say?"

Herlihey rattled off a descriptive phrase that made Foxlee catch his breath and then smile admiringly behind his hand. McMahon turned a gorgeous puce.

"Sharkey, Joey—you find this Dicey Orglon and do him over. But good. Before we space out."

Two of his bodyguards—extremely mean-looking men—walked away without a word. They appeared pleased at the prospect before them. Foxlee could hardly spare a crumb of comfort for Dicey Orglon, considering what Bloated Bertha had hired him to do.

Before he left, McMahon snapped: "I like your style. Both of you be at the spaceport after the contests."

Outside, Foxlee and Herlihey headed for the shadows of the park area. They wanted romantic and outré scenery, but because of the situation they had to make do with what suited them best.

"D'you think he'll rat on us, Jake? He's going to do some checking around now."

"Nope. When he finds out what you did with Delilah he'll be more than anxious to hire you—after he quits laughing."

Suddenly Ferdie Foxlee broke into lugubrious laughter himself.

"What's so funny, Ferd?"

"We're kidding ourselves we've done a good job and or-

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ganized transport off this crummy planet and only got to stay free until this evening—but we still haven't got the price of a cup of coffee between us!"

"Haw, haw," said Mad Jake Herlihey flatly.

Foxlee wondered how Herlihey would react if he told him that he had absolutely no intention whatever of working for McMahon. He had imbibed some cynicism with his electropasm training back on Earth, but he still believed as firmly as ever that an eepee assistant owed rights and duties to the community. The devious pursuits to which eepees could be put were bad enough without adding gratuitous degeneracy to them. He hadn't been happy about Delilah, for instance, until the madam councillor had told him, threateningly, that she'd have his planetary identity card revoked if he didn't do as she wished. And look how that had turned out!

"What the hell are you giggling about, Ferd?"

"I was just thinking about Delilah, is all."

"Yeah. Well. My guts are giving me hell."

"I've been hungry before."

Herlihey snorted. "Spare me the old sob story about a hard youth. I was earning my own living by the time I was seven, scrambling about over the spaceship scrapyards. Killed my first man when I was ten: we had an argument over a tube liner he thought was his. I've had tougher times than anything you can imagine, young Ferd."

"All right then, Jake." Foxlee spoke challengingly. "So what do you do now?"

"Now?" Herlihey gestured comprehensively. "Anything. Everything. You name it, I've done it. And all over man's galaxy, too."

"You come from Earth?" Thinking it hardly likely—yet Foxlee put the question out of politeness.

"No. Varderna. For some reason they're a tough bunch of planets they've put around old Var. Derna's the hairiest of the lot." He chuckled, rubbing his jaw. "Naw, I've never even been to Earth."

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"Be my guest one day." Foxele sighed. "The sooner the better."

Across the level lawns of the park, broken by gracefully designed clumps of trees, a few people strolled taking the midmorning sunshine. Birds chirruped, by their calls certainly imported from Solterra, making Foxlee fight fiercely against a maudlin sentiment. A glinting silvery mote, catching the sunlight and darting about the strolling figures, attracted Herlihey's attention. His square blunt face took on a sudden ferocious scowl. He grabbed Foxlee's arm in a grip that hurt.

"A god-forsaken flypry!"

"What's that, eh?" jerked out Foxlee, startled, unsettled.

"Get behind those trees—fast!"

Herlihey fairly dragged Foxlee into a clump of trees whose reddish bark and long depending yellow leaves struck sharply against the leisurely tones of the grass. They cowered between the trunks, trying to make themselves small.

"A flypry," said Herlihey. He showed no fear; merely exacerbated annoyance. "You've not run against them before? They're an electropiasm, right in your line of business."

"Oh—yes, I've heard of them. Very small, lots of delicate microminiaturization. Sweet jobs—"

"Sweet jobs, hell! They're eepees—that means they can take decisions themselves, think for themselves. Not like stupid tinman robots. They'll sniff the air around you, transmit the breakdown for analysis by the city forensic computer. They can track down anyone that computer has in its tanks—put the finger on them without possibility of mistake. And we're in that stinking computer, Ferd, both of us." He snarled an oath. "And the damned thing's coming this way!"

Glinting evilly in the sunshine, the flypry arrowed straight as a bee towards their hiding place.

IV

ELECTROPLASM KNOW-HOW FROM THE PALEOLITHIC

In panicky reaction Ferdie Foxlee tried not to breathe, not to exhale the betraying gases from his lungs that would be scooped up by the flypry, analyzed, and used to betray them. Irrationally, he held his breath.

"You're an eepee electronics expert, Ferd! Can't you do something? Jigger the misbegotten thing?"

Foxlee let his breath out with a whoosh.

"With my bare hands?"

"We've got to do something. It's no good running."

"It'll be sending back an audio-visual report as well."

The silvery thing bored on with deadly intent.

"Come on, come on, Ferd! You're the one with an education. You're the electronics wizard."

"An education I fought for with these bare hands; straight out of the gutter like a snotty-nosed kid from the slums among those snooty snobs at the academy. Sure, I got myself a facsimile of an education; but it didn't do me any good when they handed out the plum jobs." Anger swelled in Ferdie Foxlee. "It's back to the Paleolithic for us, Jake!"

"Huh?"

Foxlee freed a stone from the base of a tree with his foot, picked it up. Through his civilized senses the stone felt hard and rough and atavistically satisfying in his fingers.

"Like this!"

He stepped around the tree trunk, cocked his arm, let fly. The stone hurtled harmlessly past the flypry.

"Herel! Let me! I did this sort of thing back on Varderna's dumps."

Herlihey's second stone crashed into the flypry.

The flying eepee staggered in the limpid air. It began

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to fly in erratic circles. An orange light on its head began to blink. It buzzed down the scale. It plunged into the grass and toppled over. For a few moments it quivered, thrashing among the stems. Then it lay silently. It had been less than ten feet from them.

"Whew!" said Mad Jake Herlihey.

"Thus we return to the Stone Age," said Ferdie Foxlee. "So much for the bright light of science."

"What the hell are you babbling about? The thing would've brought the hogs down on us, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, Jake, it would. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Going through the park at a brisk trot, Herlihey suddenly guffawed.

"An eepee electronics expert, young Ferd! And you are. You knew the right tool to use on that misbegotten flypry."

"There'll be others."

The agreement between them of friendship and loyalty was no longer tacit, it was explicit. Foxlee had made no real friends during his year on Curdiswane. Not that he hadn't tried. He did not make friends easily, and was suspicious of everyone; a probable heritage stemming from his dubious origins. As a consequence, through his surprise at this growing relationship with Jake Herlihey, he experienced a profound and warming feeling of pleasure. They could go places in the galaxy together, could these two.

Through the rest of the day they wandered as inconspicuously as possible. Herlihey filled his pockets, thoughtfully, with handy-sized throwing stones. He kept losing them through a hole in the one-off's pocket, and cursing.

"Follow the stones, that's all the cops need to do," remarked Foxlee with some humor.

Herlihey's reply brought a joyous smile to Foxlee's young face. They cut back through a corner of the park, looked wistfully at the dock area and the lines of coffee shops and cafes and restaurants and drugstores, and regretfully steered away from them. Towards sunset, their stomachs like hard-pressed vacuum pumps, they began cautiously to walk towards the spaceport over on the west of Curlona.

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They kept off the freeway areas. Patrol cars howled along every now and then. Hardly looking for them still; but the police would lick grim lips if they picked up two hobos like that.

McMahon's car waited at the designated spot. Foxlee shoved back a twinge of regret as he entered. Herlihey just grunted and sank down on the upholstery. The four guards, one driving, sat up front in the half bay.

From the lighted area behind the polarized glass, Marshal McMahon nodded to them.

"You're on time, I see. That augurs well for our future relationship."

"We—" began Foxlee.

McMahon lifted a ringed hand. "Most of Curlona seems to be hunting you, young man. I heard"—here he let a tidal wave wash over the prune wrinkles—"I heard about Delilah. For some reason the story has become common property. Markgrof has a red face today. But you, Herlihey, why the hogs are after you remains a mystery."

"Never did get on with them," grunted Mad Jake.

The other occupant of the car, who had remained half-reclining against the far side, now turned his head to regard the newcomers. As the six-wheeled car, with its bulbous story-and-a-half body, motored through the spacefield gates and headed across the intersecting roads leading to customs and boarding facilities, Ferdie Foxlee stared at the stranger.

Yet, was he a stranger?

Weren't those wet cynical lips, those hard damn-you eyes, that air of haunted despair and corruption, weren't they all the mark of the renegade eepee master? Weren't they what Ferdie Foxlee himself would look like in a hundred years time?

Angrily, with fear, he shook himself. Hell and gone—no!

Crouched below the level of the windows, the three unauthorized passengers were unobserved as the windows depolarized for the short trip to the waiting spaceship. Money had been laid out here to smooth the way. There

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were no hitches. The six-wheeled car halted beneath the vast dimly seen bulk of a spaceship, with lights picking out a flare of hull here, an atmosphere fin there, the treads of the manual-loading ramps, the antigrav winches that thrummed down from the ship's belly. Caught up in those fingers of antigrav power the car was hoisted into the ship bodily. Doors slid beneath them with a sigh.

McMahon wasted no time.

He scrambled out of the car energetically, elbowing his guards. They followed him up an elevator tube; the transparent walls fell away around them, revealing various levels within the ship. Foxlee had traveled only once before on a spaceship—on that first and last journey from Solterra to Curdiswane. He gawped.

"Hurry it up, there!" snapped McMahon testily. "Someone's going to get careless in this hick town. And I want to be away before the hogs get curious."

Foxlee and Herlihey were shown curtly into a small double cabin and told to stay there until summoned.

"I'm starving!" protested Herlihey. "If we're working for McMahon how's about some food?"

"You'll be called." The guard went out, ostentatiously shutting the door.

Foxlee began to wash up and to make himself presentable.

"You'll savor the meal all the more, Jake," he said, trying to convince himself.

The ship moved. They felt only the faintest suggestion of that incredibly powerful lifting. On a whisper of displaced air, gently, the ship took off from Curdiswane and headed out for the stars.

"Listen, young Ferd," Herlihey whispered, bending to loosen his boot, a trick variation to that he'd used at Bertha's. "Button your lip around here. This cabin and the rest of the places we're likely to be allowed to go will be bugged. Catch?"

Foxlee nodded. "I had not overlooked that."

An hour later, when they were well on their way, they

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were called to the dining saloon. Herlihey fell on the food like a lion upon a Christian. Foxlee was not slow in following. They ate . . .

"And now I will tell you just what your duties will be." McMahon smiled his mass displacement of prune wrinkles at them.

This blatant juxtaposition of food and duty, of payment and demand, nauseated and infuriated Foxlee. This, then, was his place in life. This the level he must expect to inhabit.

"We're en route for the stellar system of Knor. You probably won't have heard of it, for we like to keep ourselves to ourselves. We let the big interstellar cartels pass us by. We pretend to be rural, a bunch of hicks, real pioneer planets."

Foxlee felt a twinge of indigestion then—and stopped fooling himself harshly. That wasn't a touch of the tummy rumbles. What he felt was fear. McMahon wouldn't be telling them this, in this way, if he had not already figured out the end results of his statements.

"Yeah," said Herlihey, still spooning trifle. "I've heard of some of the antics hick planets get up to."

"Maybe, Herlihey, maybe. On Knorvellen I like to run things that make life comfortable for me. I don't like my routine interrupted. At the moment my passion is for the contests. And I turn an honest dollar, as well, on outplanets."

Foxlee licked his lips. Herlihey spooned trifle. McMahon toyed with a coffee cup, then added: "You'll work for me and do what I want, else you'll wind up tied to the stick of a single tube headed out to nowhere. Catch?"

"What about the eepee master?" asked Herlihey.

Foxlee didn't follow the drift of the question for a moment; then he smiled to himself. Mad Jake Herlihey didn't intend to be strapped to the stick of a single tube. And Ferdie Foxlee felt enough of certainty to think that the tough adventurer wouldn't let that happen to his newfound comrade, either.

"Szankiren is in a different class from you two."

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"So if he's that good how come you need us?"

The prune wrinkles shifted shape.

"What I do concerns myself. I need you just so long as you obey me. Szankiren can use an electronics assistant—fresh out of Solterra with the newest Earth ideas or not. He'll tell you what to do."

"When do we start?"

"I have to call in at Kilsona on Knorvarday. That's a relatively new planet the S.C.S. recently hauled into the Knor system. That brings our total up to fifteen."

Marshal McMahon spoke about his home stellar system with the habitual pride of any member of a growing sun-worshipping congregation of new planets. With the spread of humanity through the galaxy, fresh planets were being transported by the Solterranean Construction Service from their unlivable orbits around useless suns to be slotted into orbits within the golden areas around good G-type stars so that men and women could make new homes there. The idea of a perfectly good planet—even if it should be temporarily ice-covered or scorched to near melting point—being left to rot circling a star beneath which men could not live, proved every year more of an anathema to the dedicated members of S.C.S. Solar systems proliferated in planetary numbers. Fifteen planets inhabitable by man circling a sun were a low total compared with most of the older and better-established suns in mankind's portion of the galaxy.

"I've a few contracts to sew up on Knorvarday," went on McMahon in that stonelike voice. "They've elected a mad king to run their economy and, curse them, they're rich. Very rich. Wealth just flows from the ground there as fast as they uncover it."

"A privately owned planet?"

"Yes. Like mine!"

Herlihey sighed gently. "One day, that's for me. My own planet. Herlihey's World. Call myself king, or president, maybe emperor, even. Get a few good joes there, helping me run the place, automate, lots of eepees and robots. Then I

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could lie in the sun all day and live the good life. Sure, that's for me."

"All this idiot King Napoleon wants to do is play soldiers."

"That's his privilege, surely? Nothing wrong with that, is there, provided he doesn't hurt anyone?"

"Kid's stuff. Now me, I take an interest in the contests. I've the biggest stadium this side of Barnaby's Planet. The prize money can set a man up for life. We get visitors from all over—that's where the hick planet routine comes in. They go for that in a big way."

Once again McMahon moved his prune face around in a whirl of crinkled lines.

"And," said Foxlee, foolishly. "You want eepees for the contests, and you know what the co-ords of Altimus think of that."

McMahon turned a congested face on him.

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, sobnik! I know what I'm doing. As for the co-ords—they'd do better sticking to their job in the galaxy and not trying to run everything else. The Regnants are bad enough without them."

No one wished to continue that line of conversation. Almost nothing was known of the co-ords of Altimus apart from the earliest reasons for their existence, and they'd come about from the conflicting mass of useless lines of scientific research pursued regardless of humanity's needs towards the close of that frenetic twentieth century. When corporations could dictate unlimited research with unlimited funds merely to insure greater profits for the few, and to hell with the ecology of the earth and the side effects that were disregarded even when seen, it was clearly time for clearer-headed ideas to prevail. Humanity's conscience had set up the co-ords of Altimus. Now they lived on their planet somewhere in the galaxy and tried to bring order out of the chaos through their interdisciplinary methods. Their's was a thankless job at the best of times. Usually it was never the best of times.

Curtly finishing the conversation and the meal, McMahon rose and left the dining saloon. Herlihey lifted an eyebrow

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at Foxlee. For the rest of the journey to Knor it was like that. The consciousness of the ever-present bug, the knowledge that they could not speak freely, the fear that any hastily scrawled communication on a scrap of paper would be monitored, contributed to the stifling atmosphere.

Ferdie Foxlee felt a genuine sense of relief when the announcement of planetfall came up. They slanted in to land at Kilsona on Knorvarday. Below them on a frozen plain the battle of Stalingrad was being fought out.

V

MAYHEM ON THE WAR-GAMES PLANET

Herlihey and Foxlee stood in the airlock. At their side, a guard with a handgun with the holster flap unsnapped lounged watchfully. The spaceport dozed in the sunshine. Handlers were loading freight.

Herlihey called down to a youngster in shirtsleeves who whistled cheerfully to himself as he worked.

"Hey, mac! How did it turn out?"

Over the northern horizon the distant mutter of big guns tremored the air.

"Huh?" The handler broke off whistling to look up.

"Who won?"

The handler laughed. "Like always. The Russkies. Old Nap can't quite get von Paulus up to snuff. It's always the same. You can't even lay any bets these days."

Foxlee barely listened to the conversation. He stared over the freight sheds to a rim of distant purple hills. They lay to the east. Up north the ground lay frozen beneath a white weather-directed sheet of snow and ice. Up there the guns thundered and the spandaus and schmeissers chattered and burped. Russian and Nazi clashed in the spiky ruins of Stalingrad. Tigers prowled the debris and panzers tried to pick off Soviet machine gunners embedded in the frozen rubble. No, he didn't want to go there.

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If they could just break free from McMahon's ship and get into those hills . . .

His fortunes had changed disastrously since he had been thankful to take the crummy job on crummy Curdiswane. Then he had been a regular if lowly member of the Electroplasm Guild. Now he was a renegade. What would happen to him if he was caught before he could explain coherently he shuddered to think.

Still, there had been nothing else for it. Young Ferdie Foxlee was once again facing starvation and ruin, circumstances over which he had previously won out.

The handler wanted to talk.

"Last week old Nap had another go at Gettysburg. He couldn't manage it, though. Hancock always seems to get onto Cemetery Ridge come four. And Hood don't seem able to get his men up onto Little Round Top before Warren twigs what's going on. That's about it. Just like Shaurangor the fortnight before. The Iron Division always seem to be able to bring their power guns down from their antigrav sledges to stop the Clonies' personnel bubbles from debouching." The handler shook his head. "Still, old Nap did manage Fontenoy coupla months ago. Always figured he would. I won a thousand on that little dust up. Spent it all now, of course."

Foxlee felt a weird sense of disorientation.

"Gettysburg? Shaurangor? Fontenoy? Stalingrad? But they happened thousands of years ago."

"Don't you believe it, buster. They're happening all the time, right here on Knorvarday."

Slowly, Herlihey said: "I'd like a crack at Senlac Hill—"

"Well," said the handler, spitting on his hands and swinging back to his robot conveyer that chingled a red light for his decision. "You've come to the right planet!"

"Old wars and battles of long ago," said Herlihey, with a strange far-off expression.

"You can keep 'em," snapped Foxlee. "How do we get off—"

The guard straightened.

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"You don't, pal. You stay put. You try to walk down that ramp and I crisp you, see? Orders."

The sense of recurring frustration spurred Foxlee. He tried to sound casual.

"Who said anything about leaving the ship? I've a job with McMahon now. Say, who's the eepee master around here?"

The guard shrugged indifferently.

The handler, having got his equipment back to loading automatically again, glanced up. He smiled. He could not have heard the guard's remarks; or perhaps he had and knew when to mind his own business.

"The eepee master? That's Doc Ruygens. A grand old guy. What he don't know about semisentients hasn't been written." He grimaced. "I wish old Nap could figure a way to sidle a few out here. This robotic equipment drives me nuts."

"Ruygens?" Foxlee shook his head.

"Old Nap outfitted him with a spanking new laboratory complex right in the shadow of the palace—"

"Palace!" snorted Herlihey. "This Old Nap, is he some kind of nut?"

The guard shifted around, clearly getting set to cut this conversation short. Foxlee danced with impatience. He had to dig this information from the cheerful handler; and Mad Jake Herlihey kept on butting in.

"You heard what McMahon said," he flashed irritably. "He said this King Napoleon was mad. Now, can you tell—"

"Mad!" yelled the handler. His young face showed signs of apoplexy. "You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, friend! If these stupid robots didn't need constant watching I'd come up there and punch your head in!"

Seizing the opportunity Foxlee advanced to the edge of the airlock. He put on a ferocious grin which made him look as though he sat in some mystical dentist's chair.

"Don't bother! I'll come down! And my pal here—"

That was as far as he got. His plan crumbled like angel cake.

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"Hold it, mac!" The guard moved forward, blocked the exit. He patted his holster. "Keep away from that edge. You oughta know better'n that."

"Can't I settle an argument like a gentleman?"

The guard snorted. "Gentleman? There isn't one of them within twenty parsecs!"

Ferdie Foxlee, fuming, had to allow that the guard was right. His quickly hatched idea of escape had been blighted before the eggshell had fully cracked.

So there had to be another way. He yawned.

"I dunno what you're getting hot under the collar for, pal. I told you, we work for McMahon now." He stretched. "C'mon, Jake. I could stand a beer."

They wandered back into the ship. The guard remained at his post by the airlock. As soon as he was lost to view around the corridor angle, Foxlee hastened forward eagerly.

"Ruygens," he said. "We've got to get to him. Remember that name, Jake."

"Why?"

"Why? For gosh sakes! You know why. So we can escape from McMahon."

"I said *why*, Ferd, and I meant it. We've joined up with McMahon. It could be a cushy number. I can program fighters so dirty they could win the contests. Hell, Ferd, we could even get one of your eepees into the galactic finals. What d'ye think of that, hey?"

"I think you're crazy! You know—"

"And you know it's been done. Kandinsky and Trube did it, back twenty or so years ago. Their boy looked pretty good, bled real pretty, talked a blue streak—"

"Yes. And what happened to them?"

Herlihey brushed that aside. "So the fool eepee blew a fuse or something, and started to smoke from his head at the press conference. It'd be your job to make our boy so good no one could tell he wasn't a human being!"

"Oh, Jake, if you want to spend the rest of your life on a penal asteroid—"

"They don't use them any more, do they?"

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"I dunno. They'll probably run your brains through a scrambler and turn you out going to Sunday School in short pants. It's against the laws, it's against the edicts of the co-ords of Altimus, and it's against the oaths of the Electroplasm Guild."

Herlihey put his fists on his hips, stopped, and glared at Foxlee.

"You're in no position to worry about any of that, Ferd! Your hide's gonna be hung out to dry by all of them if they catch you."

"If they do. And McMahon's not to be trusted!"

Abruptly, Herlihey flicked a hand to his lips and stared about worriedly. In the heat of the argument both men had forgotten the omnipresent bugging devices.

"Hell! Anyway, McMahon's off ship right now. Let's hope this corridor was clear."

"Come on, Jake. I'm not going to argue any more. If you're with me, okay. If not, it was nice knowing you—as they say." And Ferdie Foxlee strode purposefully towards the bridge of the ship.

After a moment Herlihey, whose tufty eyebrows seemed more angrily defiant than ever, followed.

The spaceship stood an anchor watch on the spacefield. Foxlee and Herlihey were able to make their way forward without molestation. After a moment Herlihey took the lead, saying: "Don't you know your way about a ship yet, young Ferd?"

Foxlee backed out of a female's only shower room, cursing. "How do I know which flaming door is which?"

"So how come you think you can—can you know what?"

"I can. I'm supposed to be an electronics expert, aren't I? Well, then."

Just before they reached the bridge annex, Herlihey halted. "You sure, Ferd? I mean, this is a job, grub, shelter. There might be some loot in it for us, if we handle the angles right."

"I'm sure."

In the annex the bulk of the equipment lay ranked against

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bulkheads and curved hull walls. The controls for this equipment, grouped centrally in the bridge itself, could be operated without unnecessary clutter. The control cabin contained the brains, the annex the reciprocal muscles.

Ferdie Foxlee, summoning up all his hoarded electronic education and training, studied the layout.

"Something satisfactory," he said, musing.

"Well," whispered Herlihey. "You'd better get on with it. McMahon will be back soon."

Foxlee found the damage control report panel. Inputs from sensors scattered throughout the ship clumped into terminal boards. Outputs went straight through the bulkhead up to the control cabin's pretty colored lights on the bridge fascia. At the side of that box the damage control box showed input leads from the bridge and outputs to the various items of equipment designed to deal with emergencies.

Ferdie Foxlee chuckled nastily.

The various monitor switches could be channeled easily enough. He produced the screwdriver without which he felt naked and set to work. He switched leads. He disconnected, for example, the fire alarm from section 57A and reconnected the CO2 alarm. He repositioned the warning sequences on the automated response equipment. He made a beautiful botch of the whole damage control system.

Finally, he turned to Herlihey with a nasty smile.

"It's Paleolithic time again, Jake."

"Huh?"

"The laundry for shipboard use. That's right by the airlock according to this circuit diagram. Lend me one of those rocks—or have you any left?"

Sheepishly, for Herlihey that meant he looked more fierce than ever, the big man took a stone from his pocket. "I kept this last one. The rest fell outta that damn hole. Well, hell, young Ferd, I figured it's all we have just in case—"

"Sure. Bash that connection there, right?"

"Right."

And Mad Jake Herlihey bashed with a right goodwill.

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Somewhere up in the control cabin an alarm bell began to shrill.

Ferdie Foxlee smiled with the satisfaction of a good job well done.

"Let's go. To the airlock. Or—are you coming?"

Plainly on that blunt experience-ravaged face the conflict in Jake Herlihey's mind reflected his dilemma.

"By all the scarlet stinkfrows in Sakkerhokkey! I'll tag along, young Ferd, just to stop you getting into more trouble! Well, get on with it, then!"

Chuckling with light-headed relief, Foxlee hared off down the corridor. Herlihey, grumbling and grunting like a midnight guard turning out on Christmas Eve, trundled along after him. They reached the turning in the corridor and hid in the nearest closet, among a robot vacuum cleaner that clucked and tried to wrap its hosepipe around their legs.

Herlihey cuffed it into submission. They waited four heartbeats. In a waft of smoke and flame from the bend the guard stumbled towards them, coughing, his face green, yelling.

"Fire! Fire in the laundry! The sprinklers aren't working. It'll set the whole ship ablaze!"

"As if I'd care!" rapped Foxlee. They waited until the guard staggered past. Bits of his uniform showed burns and scorches, evidence of why he had been late arriving. He stumbled away towards the bridge, coughing.

Taking a deep breath, Foxlee leaped for the smoke.

Herlihey bundled after him, took his elbow, hurdled him the last ten feet. They clattered out onto the airlock ledge, blinked in the sunshine, took a gasping breath, and dived for the waiting earth of Knorvarday.

VI

UNEXPECTED WELCOME

Sitting in a rudimentary drainage ditch on the edge of the spacefield and peering through a screen of prickly bushes, they watched as Marshal McMahon's spaceship showed off what she could do.

Smoke and flames gushed from the airlock.

Pseudopods extended and retracted from her cargo handling holds, and much precious treasure gathered by McMahon tumbled out as the bays opened and the antigravs switched off and on. One of the jettisonable atmosphere fins proved it was jettisonable. It fell with a resounding crash onto a pile of merchandise waiting for loading, scattering yelling handlers and making the robots blink their orange lights for instructions. All manner of smoke signals, rockets, searchlights and distress flares burst from the ship.

"Whew!" said Herlihey with deep respect. "I underestimated you, young Ferd."

Foxlee just watched with the profound satisfaction of a superb artist luxuriating in his latest creation.

Fire tenders, meat wagons, personnel rescue floats, all the complex spacefield emergency services sirened across the spacefield heading for the ship.

It really was lovely. Ferdie Foxlee thought of McMahon and what that man had wanted done, and he savored the good feeling that drowned all moral problems in simple primitive reactions. Life should be so good!

Although, Ferdie Foxlee had to admit, Mad Jake had wanted part of that business. But, to be fair, proof came in deeds not words; and here was Mad Jake with him now. In all the brouhaha of the field they were able to skip over the perimeter fence (a sketchy affair of barbed wire only), avoid detection, and set off walking circumspectly for Kilsona.

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"So we find this character Doc Ruygens. So what then?"

"All the options are open to us." Foxlee felt good. "We can earn ourselves a crust and then decide what to do. You've been—"

"Yeah." Walking along the tarmac road, Herlihey looked grim and withdrawn. In the distance the towers and roofs of Kilsona slowly neared. The sun shone. "Sure, I've been around. And I don't have much to show for it, do I?"

"As to that, we've about got the same. Surely there's something you can do?"

"I've done just about all there is to be done. I'm not all that old; but I'm feeling tired and decrepit. I thought maybe we were onto a good thing, back there with that creep McMahon, fixing the contests."

"I've a lot of studying to do. I must bone up on my protoplasm side. Electronics—well, I can handle that."

"Stone age marvels!"

"Some. This Doc Ruygens . . ." Foxlee swallowed, nerv-ing himself. "If he can offer me a job and he doesn't want you—we do something else."

"Now, wait a minute, young Ferd—"

"My mind's made up."

Herlihey didn't say anything for some time. But he walked with a straighter spine.

They hid in a ditch as the familiar six-wheeled two-storied car flashed by, dust sizzling from its tires.

Haw, haw," said Herlihey coarsely. "I'd kinda like to see his face."

"That would be interesting. D'you think he'll stay on-planet, try to find us?"

"Nope, shouldn't think so. He had that broken-down Szan-kiren broken to heel."

"Broken is right," said Foxlee shortly. He thought of that hideous comparison he had involuntarily made between himself a hundred years from now and the renegade eepee master.

"I don't see why any eepee master should come to that."

"When you've seen a bit more of the galaxy, Ferd, you'll

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understand better that very often men come to being what they are through no fault of their own. Life isn't all a bed of stars."

Ferdie Foxlee shivered. They walked into town in silence.

The society into which they had plunged on this new planet of Knorvarday they hoped would be a familiar one, similar in structure to other societies manipulated by mankind on thousands of inhabited worlds, and therefore capable of manipulation by them. Some new worlds set up the most weird societies. A spot of the outré here and there might be a fine thing in the abstract; but in the here and now, when a living had to be earned, the hard practicalities of day-to-day life dictated how a man behaved.

They received one or two hard stares from passersby and only then realized just what a pair of scarecrows they must look.

"The fuzz will haul us up, young Ferd, sure as we're walking with old clothes—"

A whining hiss was their only warning. Before Herlihey had finished talking, a hover patrol car flicked through the air down between two twenty-story buildings and hovered on its skirts on the roadway before them, its antigravs cutting out with a muffled thump. The transparent hood lifted.

"Hey!"

"Here we go!" said Mad Jake Herlihey, bitterly.

He lifted a foot, turned, started to run off in the opposite direction. Slow to react, Foxlee knew Herlihey expected him to follow. But he could not move. He struggled. His feet were clamped to the pavement.

He opened his mouth to yell and nothing came out past his rigid jaws and distended cheeks.

Mad Jake Herlihey stood in a running position a foot off the ground. Rigid, fixed, he slowly settled down to the pavement, still in that grotesque motionless pose of violent action.

A Stasis Field Fixer. A Stafix—just about the ultimate in riot control methods.

Helplessly, Ferdie Foxlee watched as the two patrolmen

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descended from their hovercar. The Stafix in the hand of the younger officer gleamed in that mocking sunshine.

Both policemen wore smart light-blue uniforms with red tabs and cuffs. A profusion of gold braids fell about their shoulders. They did not, as far as Foxlee could see, carry regulation sidearms. He had expected a modern shiny M.-S.A. Bull's-eye at the least. That was a smart, efficient, horrible little gun.

The elder of the two had an open frank face with mild blue eyes beneath grizzled eyebrows, and a rotund body that strained the impeccable cut of his uniform. He looked puzzled as he approached. Then his face cleared.

"It's all right, John. Switch off. They're offworlders."

The younger policeman, blond, husky, with athlete's shoulders and a face that suggested that he might soon need depilatories, switched off the Stafix. He looked anxious.

"You two all right?" he asked. "No harm done?"

Herlihey staggered and then regained his balance. He looked murderous.

"This is just great!" he burst out. "Here we are walking along minding our own business and Pow! Wham! a couple of the fuzz nip down ready to beat us up for breathing."

"Oh, come on," said the sergeant. His eyes twinkled. "You started to run. I apologize for young John, here. He thought you might be from that ship out at the spacefield. We've had to keep a sharp eye on them. Troublemakers."

"Oh?" said Foxlee, cautiously. He perked up. He said mildly. "We're offworlders, sure. But we're looking for a job—"

"Fine! That's great. We need plenty of new people here." The sergeant eyed them keenly. "I can see you'll be all right. Look, it's our policy not to have people walking about the streets looking, well, looking below their best. Jump in. We'll soon fix you up."

"Do what?" demanded Mad Jake truculently.

He walked over to Foxlee, who nudged him in the ribs. "Slow down, Jake! I don't think these guys want to take

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you like the hogs usually do: kicking and screaming. They seem friendly. Play along."

"We don't have much option, do we?"

They entered the patrol car which whined off; the young policeman, John, switched on the antigravs and the car whistled up into the air. They went caroming among the pygmy skyscrapers until they slanted down over a shorter, squarer building with wide loading bays and ample parking space. Many vehicles filled the parking bays. The police car fitted neatly in and they all alighted.

"Through here, gentlemen," said the sergeant, indicating the main entrance.

Inside they found a supermarket and a department store on various floors, connected by glistening transparent anti-grav tubes, plus all varieties of outfitters, sporting goods stores, and a whole melange of consumer goods outlets. Herlihey looked puzzled.

"What's going on?"

"Along here, gentlemen."

They stopped before a counter and display racks containing a bewildering variety of men's clothing.

"I'm sorry we've only robotic service equipment." The sergeant spread his hands. "But Old Nap likes to keep all the eepees for you know what. And good luck to him, say I." He chuckled.

"Me, too," chimed in John. "I won a nice packet on Fontenoy. Spent it all now, though."

"Of course," said the sergeant as the robot service clerk rolled up.

"May I attend to your wants, sir?"

"The best for these two gentlemen. Oh, they don't have credit cards yet. Here." The sergeant took out a billfold and flipped a scarlet credit card across. The robot inserted it into his chest, buzzed, clicked, flashed a few lights, and burped it back.

"Debit the city council, sir. Very good."

The sergeant caught sight of John's face.

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"Soon as you make sergeant, you'll have a city council credit card, too, my lad."

"Yes."

Bewildered, waiting for the joker, the ax, the guillotine, Foxlee and Herlihey chose clothes. At the policeman's insistence they chose the best. They handled the fabrics, their fingers slick on quality, in a daze.

Herlihey chose a brilliant orange tunic, blue trousers, keeping his own carefully tended boots. He wound a white cummerbund around his waist and turned sideways to study himself critically in a full-length mirror. He looked pleased, although clearly he didn't believe what was happening.

Sharing that frame of mind, Foxlee chose a yellow tunic and dark-fawn slacks, and to them added a pair of boots similar to Herlihey's. Not bench-made, they were still handsome and fitted like the skin of a banana.

"Good, good!" enthused the sergeant. "We'll have the rest of your purchases sent along to your hotel—"

"We haven't checked in yet," said Herlihey flatly.

"The Waterloo, the best there is. I'll fix it right away."

"Oh, sergeant, must you use that word?" John looked comically offended. The sergeant laughed.

"Just because the best hotel's called the Waterloo doesn't mean we mustn't use the name, does it? I know Old Nap always rigs that one. But then, he's entitled to, isn't he, with a name he's got that more or less makes it okay?"

"It's the only battle he does rig, I'll grant you that. But, for the sake of Tommy Atkins, Blucher and his Prussians did get there on time."

"Where'd be the fun of doing it like that?"

"Well, you take Stalingrad today. Now if the Rumanians hadn't—"

While Foxlee and Herlihey chose clothes and more clothes, the two patrolmen argued about the current battle and the state of the bets. They agreed that no one would take a single chance on the Nazis any more. It couldn't be done. "Same as an old Wellington. Old Nap always wins without Blucher."

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"One day," said the sergeant darkly. "One day old beaky will do it, you'll see."

"Well—you have a go, then!"

"I might, young John, I might just do that!"

"Are they all a bunch of nuts?" whispered Herlihey.

"Nutty enough to give us all this!"

"We'll get the bill, you'll see, Ferd. They'll make us pay."

The sergeant caught the end of that.

"Bill? Don't worry about that. The city council will take care of it. Old Nap believes in everyone having a fair share of the good things of life. We may be a hick planet; but we know what's what."

"Yes," said Foxlee, politely. "Thank you."

"You get settled in at the hotel, we'll run you along there now. We're not off duty for a couple of hours yet. I'm mighty pleased we were able to help a couple of off-worlders while we were on shift. Makes the job worthwhile."

"I'll say," said young John.

"And then we'll see about that job. What's your line?"

"Electroplasm electronics assistant. I thought Dr. Ruygens—"

Two voices interrupted Foxlee.

Herlihey, muffled, expostulated: "Not assistant, you dope! Make it sound big!"

And the sergeant, overjoyed: "An eepee man! Now that's wonderful! Terrific! Just wait until old Nap hears about this; he'll be tickled pink!"

Young John beamed at the good news.

"Forget the hotel." The sergeant hustled them out radiating enthusiasm and energy and good humor. "I'm going to take you right over to Doc Ruygens now! What a day this has turned out to be!"

VII

DOC RUYGENS AND ALETA

To say that Dr. Ruygen's laboratory complex lay in the shadow of the palace turned out to be an euphemism of the order of some of those ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. There the most important character had to be painted as the largest person in the picture, irrespective of distance, so that a god or king who was obviously part of the background showed four times as large as the soldiers or fellaheen milling in the foreground. He might have been in their shadow; but he bulked the larger.

Craning his head to see all there was to see in his usual inquisitive way, Ferdie Foxlee quite took the grand and imposing series of buildings, with tall towers, arching spans of roofs glistening in the sun, and golden domes, to be the palace. The smaller conglomeration of buildings, evidently hastily thrown up out of temporary construction materials at the side of this gorgeous mass, he thus took to be the laboratory.

He had to admit to a twinge of disappointment.

Then, when he saw the direction in which the police sergeant was leading off, he looked again.

The truth awed him.

This mad king Napoleon, then, lived in his palace which was the little huddle of prefabs, alongside all that grandeur of modern architecture with its massive resources in floor space and nuclear reactors and halls of learning, which clearly must be the laboratory complex.

Being the man he was, Ferdie Foxlee perked up.

They walked through endless shining halls, ascended antigrav elevator tubes, came out to a complex of individual laboratories, each as large as the one in which Foxlee had trained at the institute. The lavish expenditure of money and resources here spoke eloquently of a dedication to sci-

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entific pursuit. When Ferdie Foxlee considered that that pursuit, evident in the title of the director here, was the production and research into electroplasms, he felt a warm glow of homecoming. He could belong here, with no difficulty at all.

Mad Jake Herlihey looked about, puzzled, cautious, growing suspicious.

"It must cost a hell of a packet to run all this," he whispered.

"Sure. And all on eepees!"

In the quietness of these halls and laboratories, the omnipresent mutterings of the guns of Stalingrad were lost, as though they belonged to another world. Come to think of it, they did . . .

A short, fussy, white-whiskered man wearing a white tunic with ball and fiber point pen ink splodges on it, his hair in a ruff of irritability, his eyes screwed up in fury, burst out of a room leading off from the lobby. He was shouting over his shoulder.

"If old Nap wants two thousand Spartans by next week then he'll have to forego the work of those Carthaginian elephants! Doc Ruygens can't be expected to handle all this extra work load! He'll have a nervous breakdown!"

A girl's voice, light and quick and bubbling with laughter, floated out after the electric-spitting little man. That voice ran tremors up Foxlee's spine.

"Oh, really, Wundle! You treat Doc like he's a china doll! Don't you understand he's tougher than any of us?"

"Blind. That's your trouble, Aleta. Blind. And there's nothing worse than those who won't see!"

Tinkling laughter was chopped by the closing door.

Wundle, brushing a despairing hand through his white fuzz, turned and ran full tilt into the sergeant.

"Whoa, there, Doc! Where's the fire?"

"Fire? What fire? Oh, you mean the one out at the spaceport."

Ferdie Foxlee hid his sudden fierce smile.

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The doctor peered up at the stolid bulk of the policeman. He harrumphed.

"Oh, it's you, sergeant."

"Yep. And you'll never guess in ten thousand parsecs who this gentleman is. Ha! I'm going to enjoy this!"

Foxlee began to feel like the over-dressed little boy asked to play the piano at the concert, watched by rows of intolerant, dotting faces of parents.

"Well?" snapped Wundle, hopping mad. "What are you grinning for like a pink-nosed Churi-churi baboon for? Who is he, then, hey?"

"This, Doc Wundle, is Ferdinand Foxlee, an electropasm electronics man!"

Wundle reacted about as Foxlee was expecting people on Knorvarday to react when electropasm matters were mentioned.

After the little doctor had got over his seizure of delight and had left off wringing Foxlee's hand, he calmed down enough to speak coherently. "Now you've been sent to us by the kind fates themselves! Poor Doc Ruygens is overworking so he can't sleep at nights. And I daren't give him much more dope. That brazen hussy Miss Aleta in there thinks it's all some kind of joke especially put on for her enjoyment."

"She sounded as though she was enjoying something," said Ferdie Foxlee.

Herlihey stood aside, silent, watching, skeptical.

"Well, come along, come along!" bumbled Wundle, fairly hauling Foxlee along. "Doc Ruygens will want to meet you right away. Now maybe old Nap might get his Spartans, after all."

"Marathon?" asked Foxlee, giving in.

Doctor Wundle favored him with an odd look. "I see you're a bit of a joker, Mr. Foxlee. Even the primary schools teach that the Spartans did not arrive in time to help Miltiades defeat the Persians. A vital battle, Mr. Foxlee, decisive for world history, Solterran hstory, and thus our history."

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"Uh, yes," said Foxlee, groping at wisps of education gulped down alongside his eepee training. "I meant Thermopylae, of course."

"You don't, Mr. Foxlee. Old Nap did Thermopylae couple of years ago. If he'd content himself with that again, it would be all right. There were only Leonidas and three hundred Spartans there. Now he wants hundreds more."

"What's he doing, then, Doc?" asked the sergeant with evident interest. "Don't tell me it's Troy again?"

"No. He's fixed on doing Sphacteria. The Lacedaemonians were aboard ships and the Athenians on shore—Spartan shore. It was a strange turn around."

"Sphacteria . . ." The sergeant screwed his face up. "Got it. Oh, yes, fascinating affair, armored men in the water grabbing hold of ships. Say, the betting will be haywire on that one." He pursed his lips. "Has old Nap done it before?"

"Never, as far as I know. But I'm inclined to lay six to four on the Athenians."

"Old Nap will take the Spartans, I suppose?"

"Yes. I've no idea what special arrangements will be made. All I'm concerned about is seeing that Doc Ruysgens stays fit—and Mr. Foxlee here is my answer to that."

They had reached a laboratory door which revealed an unexpectedly small room beyond. Here, more strongly than ever, Foxlee caught the familiar nostalgic odors and sensations of eepee creation. On a wide stained table down the center of the room stood rows of glass jars, each one containing its scrap of protoplasmic matter that would be fitted to the microminiaturized computer serving as the mundane brain of an electroplasm. Against the wall stood racks of electroplasm computer controls. Lights glinted from copper and platinum. A riotous profusion of color-coded cables dangled. On the operating couch lay the recumbent form of a semisentient. Foxlee stared, feeling his fingers itch.

The eepee on the couch was in the form of a young man, strong-limbed, deep-chested, his synthiflesh and dermal production, however, looking decidedly sketchy to Foxlee's practiced eye.

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The man about to insert the brain into the skull case looked up, not frowning, not smiling, not really seeing them as individuals, his mind obviously intent on the task in hand. Then he must have picked the face he knew best from the ruck.

"Now, now, Wundle. Why d'you have to bother me now? Is it another of your dratted pills?"

"Better than that, my dear doctor!"

Wundle led off with his spiel, not forgetting to add a meed of praise to the police sergeant for his prompt action. Critically, Foxlee watched. This Doc Ruygens looked a spidery old guy, lean, edgy, lined-of-face, and delicate of feature and limb. Yet, he remembered what that unseen girl had said; there was in this eepee master the steely center of self-preservation. By contrast with Szankiren, the renegade eepee master, Doc Ruygens appeared resplendent, the epitome of those things for which Ferdie Foxlee had trained and in which he fervently believed.

With a delicate precision of his instruments; that displayed a surety of touch eloquent of years of dedicated work, Ruygens slipped the brain into its pan. He moved with a sure steady purpose that made Foxlee stare enviously. Then, when the brain was securely lodged—and only then—Doc Ruygens broke off from work to come forward, stripping off his rubber plastic gloves to shake hands. He gripped hard and firmly. Foxlee felt the secret pressure of the Electropasm Guild. Reciprocally, although in the form of pressure of an electronics assistant, he returned that secret sign.

"Good," beamed Ruygens. "If you're to join me I'm glad to have a young man from Earth. There is plenty of work to be done on Knorvarday."

"How the?" expostulated Wundle. "I didn't say he came from Earth. Do you, Mr. Foxlee?"

Foxlee smiled. "Yes." He didn't elaborate. Secret handshakes were just that, secret.

The conversation became general then. The policemen excused themselves and left, very pleased, to finish out their duty stint. They moved, when the police had gone, into

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a comfortably furnished room opening off the small laboratory where Ruygens ordered up refreshments. Foxlee almost lost sight of Herlihey. The rough tough adventurer felt out of it, that was clear; but there was something about him that obscurely worried Foxlee.

Later they were taken on a conducted tour of the laboratory complex, an experience that impressed Foxlee. Here, eepes could be created to suit a thousand different roles in society. Wundle expressed himself as pleased, overjoyed, that the colonist ship just in had brought two such distinguished passengers.

"Colonist ship?" said Foxlee, vaguely.

Herlihey nudged him.

"The other ship on the field," he said, softly, sourly. "You're getting on so well, don't foul it up now."

So that explained their easy acceptance here—or did it? Wasn't there another kind of atmosphere here on this planet different from anything Foxlee had experienced before, different, also, from anything that Herlihey had bumped into in his wide roving around the galaxy?

"All this must have cost a tremendous amount in planetary resources," said Foxlee, changing the subject.

"Oh, yes. But we're a rich planet. Every day, it seems, we discover some new source of wealth." Wundle spoke with enthusiasm. "And old Nap likes to share it."

"He finds it—convenient." Ruygens spoke in so different a tone that Foxlee glanced at him sharply, not understanding.

Then, as though catching himself, Ruygens went on: "Can you start tomorrow, Mr. Foxlee?"

"Why, yes—"

"I think it would be a good idea if you were taken on a tour of one of the battlefields. Let me see. Stalingrad would be pointless at this juncture. Yes, we have two others running at this time: guest encounters for offworlders. They love to come here. I think Gan'gdishnor would be suitable. A small local battle we've set up a couple of hundred miles away, surrounded by force-field protections. Be-

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tween the Lesmi and the Shan-ran. We handle battles out of other planetary histories besides Earth's, you know."

He turned sharply on Herlihey. "Your friend, Mr. Herlihey . . ."

Taking a deep breath, Foxlee got out his prepared speech.

"Mr. Herlihey is a warrior programmer. He is essential to my work, Doctor Ruygens."

Over Mad Jake's *sotto voce* rumble of "Contests programmer," Ruygens voiced his acceptance. He did not appear bothered. He seemed to take a casual concurrence with Foxlee's words that clearly indicated he was slipping back to inner thoughts of his own. Wundle stood up vigorously.

Miss Aleta walked in, smiling, laughing, rumpling Wundle's white fuzz. "So this is the new wonderboy!" she said, sizing Foxlee up frankly.

"Yes, and he's going to see Gan'gdishnor right now."

"Fine. I'll tag along."

Ferdie Foxlee closed his mouth.

What a girl! Alive, bubbling with spirit that spilled over friendship and energy to all those around her, she radiated all the things Foxlee thought most desirable in those dream girls of his that remained forever beyond attainment. But she was here and now, in the flesh, laughing, wearing a semitransparent blouse of some white silky material, and a mini of a dark blue that roiled with liquid greens and oranges. Her dark hair shone beneath the lights. Her face—Foxlee blinked. For a moment he could see nothing in all the galaxy but her face, laughing up at him, surrounded by a glowing halo of light that cut them off from mere mundane mortals, just those two, together.

"Come on then, Mr. Foxlee!" She danced out ahead of them. Herlihey grunted.

Into Foxlee's unwilling ear he breathed: "Stop gawping, Ferd! Anyone'd think you'd never seen a cute chick before."

"Cute chick nothing!" Foxlee felt outrage. "She's—she's—"

"Yeah," said cynical Mad Jake. "So we stay here now, that's for certain. You're done for, young Ferd."

Seated in an antigrav flier beside Herlihey, Foxlee watched

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entranced as Aleta manipulated the controls with casual competence. Her lissome body moved him with a physical ache.

"I'm the eepee protoplasm assistant," she said lightly. "Chang Yang, our electronics boy, took off some time ago. We'll be working together, Mr. Foxlee. You're needed around here, believe me. Doc Ruygens is plenty tough—to phrase it like that—but he's still human." She added fervently. "More than human."

Foxlee gulped and nodded.

Below them the smiling sun-drenched countryside whipped past as they headed due south, away from Stalingrad, to soar over the uprearing black walls of the force field and glide at monitor height over the battlefied of Gan'g-dishnor. Down there aliens from Lesmi and Shan-ran fought out that old battle. Power guns flamed. Gouts of energy fountained up. Despite the warm proximity of Aleta, Foxlee craned over to see. Armored colossi reared and collapsed as bolts of energy struck them. They fired as they collapsed into primeval atoms. Foxlee saw the tiny figures of aliens running and firing, dodging those ravenous fangs of energy. The ground writhed.

"That's a hell of a dust-up!" said Herlihey. The tough adventurer stared in fascination. "That's hell!"

The flier curved away. Higher up the dots of observation fliers showed where the offworlders who had commissioned the holocaust below watched. Somewhere the two generals commanding the opposing armies issued their orders and tried to break the pattern set up by the original battle so long ago.

Foxlee saw lines of men—aliens really—moving forward, tipped with flame, to be engulfed by return sheets of fire from bunkers and armored fighting vehicles. That was a blood bath down there.

"Who won?" asked Herlihey.

Aleta did not answer. Something about the rigidity of her pose alarmed Foxlee. He leaned forward.

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"Hey!" yelled Herlihey.

"We're going down!" said Aleta. "The antigravs must have been affected; they've got all kinds of weapons down there."

"Someone takes us for an enemy!" yelled Foxlee. "Oh, no!"

Like a moth clutched by flame from the sky the flier plunged down. All below them the earth gouted flame and smoke, writhed in torture. The churned-up madhouse reached up for them. In scarlet and black, in fire and thunder, the flier skidded into the middle of the battle of Gan'g-dishnor.

In that holocaust five million souls had perished.

VIII

THE HAIRY ACTION SPECIALIST

The flier hit, tipped end for end, bounced, and gonged brazenly. Only the one-G artificial gravity economically provided as a by-product of the antigravity engines saved them from smearing themselves in red paste all over the flier.

She skidded half a mile on her nose. A fin caught; before ripping off, it twisted them in a ground loop. They nose-dived smack into an armored bunker.

The noise, the vibration, the shuddering stopped.

Ferdie Foxlee thought he might breathe again.

Then fresh bedlam burst about him.

The rear end of the flier vaporized in a stinking cloud of roiling atomized metal and melted plastics. A cruel ruddy glow beat down. Heat wafted at them like the breath of a million devils.

"Out!" yelled Herlihey.

He grabbed Aleta around the waist, kicked the bucket seat out of the way, smashed his free shoulder into the door panel. The panel smashed outwards. Noise, heat, smoke, shattered inwards.

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Ferdie Foxlee swallowed once, gulped down hard, then started after Herlihey.

Outside on the churned mud the noise pounded insanely at him. He did not think he could take much more of this. His head threatened to split from the inside. Already his cheeks and mouth felt numb, rigid, the back of his head echoing with pain.

"Down here!"

Foxlee could not hear what Herlihey shouted, only grasp at the shapes his mouth made. Obediently he dived down after the blunt adventurer who, with the girl half-insensible over his shoulder, burrowed through shattered metal slabs and splintered ferro-concrete towards the bunker mouth. Most of the top of the dome-shaped bunker had been sheared off clean; glass glinted there, the fused remnants from inconceivable heat. A jagged beam overhung the entrance. Herlihey slung Aleta half towards Foxlee who caught her ankles. Ducking his head, stumbling forward in the inferno, somehow he staggered after Herlihey beneath the beam and into the zigzag-shaped entrance to the bunker.

Once they tottered past the second baffle wall the level of noise reduced and they could hear each other speak again.

"This isn't funny anymore, young Ferd."

"Is—is she all right?"

Herlihey put the girl down in the far corner on a heap of piled sacks. He dragged the clean uniforms from the half-made bodies of a clump of aliens at the gun periscopes, spread them into a comfortable bed. Aleta's head lolled back. The sheer speed and truculence of the whole affair had knocked her dizzy.

"She'll be all right, as of now. But if we don't get out of here . . ."

Herlihey broke off as the bunker shook. Bits of crumbled concrete drifted down through the smoky air.

"We can't last long like this. We're right in the middle of no-man's-land."

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"Can the bunker take it?"

"I guess so. It's been hit at least three times. The battle's seesawed across here." Herlihey gestured at the clump of out-of-action eepees.

"I don't recognize—" began Foxlee.

"Lesmi," said Herlihey curtly. "I was out that part of the galaxy once. I'm pretty sure the Shan-ran wore dark green, very smart. But, the hell of it is, Ferd, although I heard a lot about their old war when I was there, I can't recall just who won."

"Oh, that's great! Now we don't know which way to run!"

Foxlee bent over a discarded webbing harness. He picked up the aluminum water bottle, shook it, snorted disgustedly. "Empty!"

"Hell, Ferd, you didn't expect them to give eepees real water in their canteens, did you?"

"My aunt Hattie! You seem to be enjoying all this, Jake. Yet you said it wasn't funny—so how come?"

"You're the eepee expert. And here we are surrounded by eepees bent on knocking hell out of each other, and you've been acting all the time like they were real human beings fighting! You should have seen your face when you spotted that heap of corpses!"

"It's—it's not decent—"

"They're machines, Ferd. You know that."

Both men ducked as the bunker shook again.

"Machines with enough protoplasmic brain to give them the capacity of individual decision, although—"

His instincts could not be overcome.

There in the near-morgue of the bunker, Ferdie Foxlee began to strip down one of the semisentients masquerading as a soldier of Lesmi. He found that concussive shock had put the microminiaturized computer out of action; but the protoplasmic inner brain, the controlling intelligence, such as it was, remained quiescent, as good as new and quite incapable now of registering just what was happening.

"I see that," he said, sitting back on his haunches. "The body is messed up and the computer will need to be un-

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scrambled—that's simple electronics. But the protoplasm is still good; it could be fitted into another eepee now and integrated and carry on as though nothing had happened."

"Humane, at the least," grunted Herlihey.

Foxlee glanced across sharply. Some of his fear had lessened within the comparative safety of the bunker. He thought he detected sarcasm in Herlihey's tone; but he chose not to pursue that. There were far too many people in the galaxy ready to condemn the use of semisentients, crying that men should employ robots only, for him to want to add Mad Jake to their number.

And hadn't Mad Jake said he didn't get on with eepees?

"Well," he said tartly. "You're the hairy action specialist. What do we do now?"

Herlihey looked into an intact periscope lens before replying. He applied his right eye to the padded eyepiece and panned the instrument around. Up above their heads, outside on the roof-portion remaining, the periscope would be turning seeking targets.

"It's not so much a question of what we do now, Ferd, as what those guys of Shan-ran will let us . . ."

"Guys?"

Herlihey grunted. "Just think of them as targets, in the good old shoot-what-moves school. That way you won't outrage your sensibilities."

"I've had to strip fully functioning eepees before now, Jake. I know they're not human. I do not endow them with anthropomorphic characteristics. Do you?"

Foxlee thought Herlihey would jump on him. Then the chunky man relaxed. He made his lips stretch into a smile.

"Nope. But you forget something. They've been programmed to become soldiers for Shan-ran. They're gonna shoot anything they see in front of them."

"I know that!" The bunker shook in the displaced air from a nearby blast. Herlihey went back to his periscope. His shoulders stiffened.

"I thought so. They're smart, well-trained. You can only

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catch a quick glimpse, then they're gone. But they're moving in on us."

Herlihey nodded. "Grab the girl, see if she can run. Walking will be no good. And she'll have to take off that white blouse thing, or smear it with mud. Same with your yellow and my orange. Neutral color. Less chance of being spotted."

As he spoke Mad Jake depressed firing studs below the periscope. Sometimes he obtained the light indicating a weapon had fired; more often the light remained dead.

"I knocked a few over. The rest pulled back. It's given us a chance. Now they'll bring down mortar fire. We must be out of here—"

A gargantuan crash blustered from the entrance. Smoke roiled in. Aleta rolled over and tried to sit up, coughing, her eyes streaming.

"What—what's going—oh!"

"Hold up, girl!" snapped Herlihey. "You're gonna be okay. They'll have spotted what happened to us and call off the war."

"Five million," Aleta choked. "All dead."

"Yeah," said Herlihey dryly. "And half of 'em are after our blood."

"Hold on, Jake!" Foxlee's young face showed a pugnacious thrust about the jaw. "Give her a chance."

Aleta put a hand on Foxlee's arm. "Can'gdishnor lasted two months' time, Lesmi. We couldn't field five million." She licked her lips. "We reconstructed a corner of the battlefield. About three thousand or so . . ."

"They'll be enough," said Mad Jake.

The smoke drifted flatly. A buzz-saw sound vibrated at the entrance. Through the shifting lights shapes moved there.

Mad Jake Herlihey did not hesitate.

In a long fluid sweep of action he snatched up one of the discarded energy weapons lying by the pile of corpses and triggered a blast at the entrance. Dark green clad forms pitched inside. Synthetic flesh shriveled away from

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steel-alloy skeletons. The stench of burning rubber and melting plastic choked in the stifling air.

Return fire belched from the shadows. A glob of concrete exploded by Foxlee's head, dribbled down the wall, boiling. He yelped and dived out of the way.

"Grab a gun, Ferdi!"

Foxlee picked up one of the power guns. Bulky of barrel and curved of stock, it fitted ill in his hands. He had no idea how to make it fire, not seeing any sign of a trigger.

He swung it helplessly.

"We're trapped!" he shouted.

More green-clad forms burst in to be crisped by the tongue of orange fire from Herlihey's weapon.

"There's an emergency exit," said Aleta. She had drawn herself up, her face pale but tightly held with a contempt for epees and guns that amazed Foxlee. She snatched up a weapon, indicated by a curt flick of a thumb the safety, and by pressing the firing stud and adding to Herlihey's fire, how the thing operated.

"Lead on, girl!" commanded Herlihey.

"What a mess, what a mess!" said Foxlee. He jammed his thumb pushing up the safety and swore. Then he was able to pour his own lethal stream of orange fire into the pressing alien bodies in the entrance.

Aleta led them towards the rear of the bunker. In the roof a hole with iron rungs leading up pointed a way out. She went first, her body curved and lithe against the metal rungs. Foxlee sweated, waiting to climb after her.

At the top she could not open the cover and Foxlee reached up past her, pressing against her body, helped her raise the metal plate. It fell back with a clang lost in the uproar. They scrambled out. Herlihey slapped the metal cover back.

"That won't hold them," gasped Aleta.

"No. Come on."

They rolled down a shattered concrete apron and top-

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pled into mud. All the world about them exploded in fire and violence and pseudo death.

"Rub mud over you," Herlihey told them. He stripped off his white cummerbund. "Can't even surrender," he said, bitterly. "What a waste of resources all this is."

"Only because we're caught in it!" flashed Aleta tartly.

They splashed through muddy water, toiled through earth churned into quagmires. They passed brewed-up tanks, shattered bunkers, unending piles of corpses whose abandoned postures imitated death so chillingly.

"You're going towards the Lesmi side," said Herlihey.

"Yes. They won. The Shan—"

"Of course. I remember now. Big joke. The Shan-ran."

She nodded. "They ran."

A shadow flicked from the blaze of explosions in the sky. They ducked into a complex of shell holes. The attacking aircraft—small, single-seater with primitive motive power and atmosphere wings in place of antigravs—swooshed over them, dropping napalm. The bombs hit off-center and fountained in orange fire and black smoke. The wind blew the filthy mass away from them. Through the insanity of technological warfare fought by primitives they stumbled on, catching themselves on barbed-wire, toppling into stagnant holes filled with mud, scraping against rusted ferrous reinforcements to razed block houses.

Caught in the midst of a battlefield they staggered on. Foxlee felt that his whole body had been dipped in liquid lead.

Shells burst near them. The tortured earth heaved convulsively. A blast knocked them sprawling. Wiping blood from his lip where his teeth had closed, Foxlee crawled across mud to Herlihey. Aleta lay panting, her arms over her head, her body filthy and lax, her blouse torn.

"Back to the Paleolithic?" gasped Foxlee. Bitterness ricked his lips back. "This is way beyond that."

"Yeah, Ferd. This is what your eepees can do—" Mad Jake broke off, hoisted his gun, and, leaning on his elbow, triggered a long burst. Green shapes flopped back into the

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next shell hole. "But they had to be programmed first. And you tried to tell me fixing the contests was illegal!"

"That's different. How the hell do we get out of this?"

They ducked their faces into the mud as hissing fragments spattered past. Foxlee blew out a foaming breath of blood and mud. He didn't like the way Aleta lay, lax and twisted. He'd barely met the girl, and yet he felt a profound sense of responsibility towards her and this feeling, for a young man like Ferdie Foxlee, towards anything other than electroplasmic matters came as a distinct shock to his persona.

He did not feel the shell fragment that caromed from his head, leaving a bloodied furrow through his hair. He did not feel it at all.

The last thing he remembered was seeing a line of advancing figures, dark against shell explosions, driving down on him with fire tipping their tanks.

IX

AN EAR IS BITTEN

Mad Jake Herlihey was making out fine with a red-headed chick from the computer programmers office. Her figure made Foxlee whistle as Herlihey bounded into his hospital bedroom, towing Sandra, beaming, bearing chocolates and dates and other items he considered a convalescent male needed—like a bottle of Scotch. Sandra smiled and sat discreetly and had sense enough not to chatter.

She did say, though: "And Jake fought off those rampaging Shan-ran eepes and carried you and Miss Aleta in. He's a real hero!"

"They're looking after me all right," confirmed Mad Jake. "As they damned well can afford to," he added. Foxlee cocked an eye at him.

"What's eating you, Jake?"

"Oh, nothing. Forget it, young Ferd. You'll soon be up and about. All you had was a crack on the head."

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He'd been told in a vague way what had happened, and now Sandra confirmed it. He had no idea how long he had been in the hospital, but sight of the tufty-eyebrowed chunky man made him itch to get out of bed. Sandra, too, when he thought of Aleta, made him want to—want to what? He'd never been shy about women, had Ferdie Foxlee; but he had to acknowledge that Aleta was not another Sandra, not a girl who would say yes without a second careless thought.

"What's going on these days?"

"They did Sphacteria," said Herlihey, after all. "Just a bit of it, and that mad King Nap didn't get his Carthaginian elephants. Now they're working on Fizzchulan."

"Fizzchulan?"

"Bunch of guys had ordered it. Spaced in from Takkat. Seems they knocked hell out of the Shurilala there years ago. All armored suits and jet packs and rocket projectiles. I'm helping program some of the fighters." He glanced at Sandra. "It's an interesting job. The losers always seem to want to refight the battles and see how they did lose and how they might have won. Not those hard-edged guys from Takkat, though."

"Aleta?"

"Huh. While you're skulking in bed she's setting up the protoplasmic side. Doc Ruygens really needs you, Ferd. Although, all this—" Herlihey gestured vaguely.

"You're not happy?"

Mad Jake chuckled and grabbed an armful of Sandra.

"Sure! They pay me good. But—but there are—" Again he hesitated. Again there was that baffling blind between them.

The next day Ferdie Foxlee was allowed up. He felt a trifle weak and woozy; but a simple knock on the skull, as Herlihey had said, wouldn't put a man out of action for long with the modern healing techniques available.

"Mind you, Ferd," Dr. Wundle told him severely, "when that battle was fought your wound would have been fatal. You've something to be thankful for."

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"Like hell I have!" snapped Foxlee. "I didn't ask to be dumped into the middle of a war!"

"Who has?" asked Wundle with ironclad logic.

That afternoon Ferdie Foxlee began to work in the electropiasm electronics laboratories. He found everything that could possibly be needed by eepee workers, a lavish provision of facilities, and a standard of efficiency and work load that he saw, with a little mental hoisting of socks, would demand every atom of skill and craft in him. A good position this might be and one into which he had fallen with a sweet-violet syndrome, but it would be no sinecure.

Rumors swept the laboratories from time to time. Always they centered around the moment when this mad King Napoleon would do Waterloo again. Some obsession with that battle festered in Kilsona.

Briskly, Doc Ruygens gave Foxlee his orders.

"You'll be working with Aleta. You'll handle all decisions and production problems on the eepees up until they reach me for final coordination. Now we have Jake Herlihey helping on indoctrination we can obtain a much better put-through." Ruygens looked tired and strained, and his mouth held a downward skew. "Next job is a mixed bag for Alamein. That's a favorite. The terra formers are out to the northern site now, clearing the mess Stalingrad left and providing a desert background. The weather boys are hiking the temperature. It's got to be good."

"Don't you ever keep any eepees in stock, Doc?" asked Foxlee. The familiar mode of address here on Knorvarday suited him, although he had been many times in the past reprimanded for too casual address to his superiors. "I mean, Panzer grenadiers, and Guards Brigade and various Indian regiments—can't you keep them on the shelf and use when necessary?"

"I wish we could, Ferd. But you know even the tiny scrap of protoplasm in an eepee's brain needs exercise, needs use to keep it fresh. And, anyhow, we'd never produce enough. D'you know how many men are needed in all these battles old Nap fights over?"

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"Far too many for your health, Doc!" interrupted Wundle. "Aleta wants young Ferd—right away!"

"Oh, all right; then. Run along. One day I might get to doing something more . . ." Ruygens paused. He eyed Wundle. "Never mind."

"There's something on Doc's mind, Wundle," observed Foxlee as they left.

"Yes. Aleta's waiting."

Her name was Aleta Puichon-Alembert Karmandy of Persinmorain and Oshravish in Gorgonville-Aleptic, which was why everyone called her Aleta.

Struggling with an eepee that insisted on standing up and waving its fool arms, she turned as Foxlee entered, her face wrathful, her dark hair stranded over her forehead, her eyes alight with the effort of conquering the mindless hunk of machinery.

"Ferdie! Get his heap of old iron off me, will you!"

He gripped the eepee at the base of its neck, tucked experienced fingers under its crotch and heaved. He sat the eepee down and tumbled the buried switch behind the right ear. The semisentient went rigid.

"They're 99 percent electronics," he said. Overpoweringly aware of this girl's presence, he tried to act as he would in the company of any bright bird, and found that impossible. "I figure protoplasm gets too high a rating."

She laughed, brushing her hair back, radiant.

"Don't give me that old argument, young Ferdie! I've been handling protoplasm and electronics myself. I'm glad you're here—but stay in line!"

He bowed. "Chastened, I'm sure."

She laughed delightedly again and then, with a quick and spontaneous leap onto the rarefied heights of the relationship plateau they were to inhabit, mocked him with: "I wish I'd seen Delilah."

"Jake told you? The sobnik!"

"Oh, surely not. But, still and all, that poor slob Markgrof could have done himself a serious mischief . . ."

When they'd finished laughing they turned to the re-

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cumbent semisentient and began to sort out its cross-circuits. Working with this girl, Ferdie Foxlee told himself, was going to be A-Okay.

The wealth of Knorvarday seemed unlimited. Every week fresh supplies spaced in. Ruygens bought complete sub-assemblies and his laboratories put them together in the combinations needed for the current battles. They did Alamein. Then they spent a frantic week patching up four-armed Gathians for a recreation of Third Photan when the Solterrans just held on to the planet against the Splotchies's dedicated Honor Division. After that they did Holomensur, Hattin, Zama—where old Nap at last got his elephants—Pultowa, Châlons and Mons. And all the time various splendid personages from offplanet spaced in to take command in or to watch the battles of their choice.

Significantly, no French Revolution, no Napoleonic nor Peninsular battles figured on their agenda.

The staff employed in the purely routine demands of repair and maintenance proved adequate. Cheerful men and women who did a good job, bet on the battles, lived life to the full, spent all their winnings—of course—they were indispensable to the eepee scientists.

They did Yuangprang, the Bulge, Marston Moor, the Alamo, the Heights of Quebec, and Plassey.

"That's cutting it fine, isn't it?" asked Foxlee.

Aleta smiled. "Everything starts for old Nap around Valmy time. Finishes Waterloo. When we do that one again, if we ever do, there'll be some changes."

"Yeah." He looked at her, crisp in her white overalls, her dark hair shining, and he felt the thump of blood through every corner of his being. Now he could just imagine her, her lips clingingly parted, her breasts heaving, her eyes opening wide in passion for him alone—Hell and bevond! Was he thinking of that eepee trollop Delilah or a flesh-and-blood woman?

She laughed at the discomfiture in his face.

The work went on. He saw a fair amount of Jake Herlihey and Sandra. They spent a few riotous evenings on the town.

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Of McMahon they seldom spoke; that dark evil man—as he must perforce remain in Foxlee's estimation—had spaced on to his planet of Knorvellen, orbiting, as it happened, on a Trojan point in Varday's orbit around Knor.

"We'd have been on a good thing there, too, Ferd," said Herlihey.

"Yeah, and illegal."

"Maybe so. But what's so all-fired important about fighting old battles with overgrown tin soldiers? If you ask me, there ought to be a change around here and soon—"

Sandra bent her head close and bit Herlihey on the ear.

He reared back, clapping a hand to his ear, guggling with surprise.

"You scatty tinsel-prinzell! What d'ya do that for?"

She laughed at him, moving her breasts inside her decolletage. Around them the restaurant they had chosen for this night out hummed and buzzed unconcernedly.

"I thought you might not like the taste of boot leather, Jake, lover."

They soothed him down. They drank imported champagne—although it had never seen that place on Solterra called France—and they danced to tapes spaced in on the last starship. They had a wonderful time. But, at the end, Ferdie Foxlee had to mooch off alone to the hotel, leaving Herlihey and Sandra to round off the evening in the most suitable way together.

Aleta had said she was too busy to take a night off.

He went back to the lab where night lay in the corners and lights shining from scattered dimmed windows threw a ghostly illusion of a fantasy scene setting. He walked moodily up the corridor. There were those circuit diagrams to be worked on, to get a Roman Legionary to hurl his pilum with accuracy and force. Up to now the eepees had been erratic, and Foxlee had felt his expertise challenged in insuring that the pilum should be flung in the correct manner, so that it would stick into a barbarian's shield and bend and hang down and thus do its properly designed job. Too many of the eepees just tried to hit their enemy's head.

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He passed the half-open door to Wundle's night room where the Doc would often lie awake, reading, waiting for the time he could bully Doc Ruygens into turning in himself. A murmur of voices halted him.

Ruygens was saying: "I know, Wundle, I know. But I'm worried about Aleta."

"It's just a simple normal youthful exhibition of calf love, Doc. You know what kids are like. Sex is one thing, nothing to it these days, just there to be used and enjoyed."

"Why can't they use eepees? There's no messy emotional involvements there."

"So Ferdie's got a crush on Aleta. He's reacting in the obvious and simply understood way because that's the way it is. It's just the same with Herlihey and Sandra; he's a roughneck sort of chap—guy—and knows precisely what he's doing. Ferdie's just acting out the postures of his age."

"So you say. But I don't like the effect it's having on the work. I've just been to see her. She's up there in her lab just sitting when there's a whole lot of work to be done. She said she was thinking about ganglions and disparate nerve endings. Hal I know the sort of endings she was thinking about."

Wundle chuckled.

Ferdie Foxlee felt ten times a dozen kinds of fool and walked on quickly. He knew the old tag. But—was he really in love with Aleta? Somehow, he tried to hope that he wasn't, for the sake of his health; although palpitating with the strangest fancies that he was.

He went quietly up to her lab; but she had gone. The bottled scraps of protoplasm floated in their eternal dreams. The place looked ghostly and unnerving. He went quickly to bed and dreamed he and Aleta were fighting the archangels as they tried to force them out of the gates of the Garden of Eden. He switched off the flaming swords of the archangels and the eepees ran off, crying, to Doc Ruygens for more programming.

The very next day Mad Jake cornered him in his own laboratory. He wore an intense expression, and he looked

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as though he was seven months pregenant and had just been roller-coasted down the big dipper.

"What the hell's up, Jake?"

"Like I told you, young Ferd, nothing in this man's life is what it appears to be."

"What's that mean?"

"Think a minute. We arrived here, penniless, ragged, scarecrows. We were taken in, fed, clothed, given good jobs . . ."

"They need people here."

"Sure. But this is a greedy and selfish place, Ferd. All they do is play soldiers all day. There are planets in the galaxy crying out for help. Even here, and more especially on Knorvellen, the people are hard done by. The masters, that mad King Nap, they grind them down by kindness; pane and circensis, Ferd. Milk and honey and don't think what you're doing with your life."

Foxlee looked at him sharply. "What's happened?"

"I've been speaking to—to a friend. There is a faction who want to take over here, turn the place upside down, bring in a bit of fresh air. Playing soldiers is no man's way of leading a proper dignified life, Ferd!"

"I could give you an argument on that."

"There's a meeting tonight. We're going. And don't say anything, as you value your life!"

X

MEETINGS IN SPACE AND AT THE AQUASPHERE POOL

The people at the meeting surprised Ferdie Foxlee.

Herlihey had taken him out to the spaceport in a hired cab and they'd gone at once aboard a small anonymous spacetender. As they entered the lounge the little ship leaped from Kilsona spaceport and went into a middle period orbit about the planet.

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"No one is going to spy on us up here," said Doc Ruygens. Sandra and Aleta nodded with satisfaction.

Foxlee saw McMahon there, and Szankiren, and a half-dozen other men whose hard, professional, man-of-the-galaxy faces gave notice that they were here on business.

Ferdie Foxlee felt confused. All these people—all involved in a plot against old Nap and his toy-soldier empire? Somehow, when he contrasted Szenkiren and Ruygens, it didn't make sense. It didn't make sense to compare Aleta with the overpainted women who accompanied the galactic men of business.

But as he listened he found himself forced to an understanding that these people all desired one thing in common: they all wanted the power that possession of the wealthy planet of Knorvarday would bring.

Oh, he had to admit that they wanted that power for different reasons.

McMahon, now, was simply jealous of the prosperity of Varday by comparison with his own planet of Vellen. The businessmen wanted to open up the planet, to bring in their trades and professions, to make money from investments and industry. And Ruygens, now, he wanted to make his eepees useful to the community at large. All these desires seemed to Foxlee simple, naive, not worthy of discussion and, yet, he could not deny their importance—with the exception of McMahon, whom he decided he would not deal with if he could avoid it.

McMahon favored Herlihey and Foxlee with a prune-wrinkling glance. "You had a fair game with my ship. If I'd caught you that day you wouldn't be here now. Still, as it's turned out the way it has, I'll overlook that. You two can be useful to us."

Foxlee stopped Herlihey from making a tart retort.

Sandra, holding Herlihey's arm, pulled him across to the bar. The ship went onto automatics. The air of business sharpened. The man with the mahogany-hued face, with the strong chin and restless hands, with the stamp of absolute authority about his person, addressed them. He was called

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the Lerhd Ravrados and the others obviously acquiesced in his appointment as their leader. He wore black, an updated version of what Foxlee recognized to be a Spanish Grandee's costume. It suited his dark strength.

"Our plans are going well. I welcome the new members with us today. Soon all Knorvarday will be ours. The Knor system will soon follow. The weak central government on Vavlang will be unable to stop us."

"Them," huffed McMahon in his stone voice. "I'd like to string up every one of 'em." His prune wrinkles shifted. "They fined me a cool million over that contest I ran—and the sobnik of an eepoe lost, too!" He glared at his eepoe master. Szankiren glanced indifferently at the bulkhead.

"We were lucky not to go to prison," he said dully.

"Prison! I'd like to see them try—"

"The central government is weak," interrupted the Lerhd Ravrados sharply. "But they still wield enough power to stop us. They will not be allowed to do so. Our plans envisage their total destruction."

Ferdie Foxlee listened to all this as though he was sitting watching a tenth-rate tri-di. Hell, they weren't for real, were they?

"I want to get my eepoes out into the galaxy," said Ruygens in his tired old-man's voice. "I'm tired of playing soldiers."

Szankiren, speaking volubly for that silent man, said with an evil bitterness: "At least you still have your self-respect. The Guild—" He could not go on.

"You do all right with me," said the stone voice. "Keep your thoughts to yourself."

"The people of Varday are living in a fool's paradise," said Aleta with breathless conviction. "They do a minimum of work, they live like kings, they bet on the battles. They are lotus eaters. They have forgotten what life is all about."

Foxlee felt like a man with no pants who has strayed inadvertently into a nunnery.

He held his thoughts in to himself.

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The Lerhd Ravrados summed it up for them. "We will use the plan suggested by Ruygens. Waterloo. When we turn his own weapons against him, that insane profligate Napoleon will topple. By destroying the entire Knor system government, both public and private, at one stroke we take all."

The others showed their approval.

After that there was general conversation, drinking, love-making. Foxlee ignored Aleta. She seemed hell-bent on her own destruction, and right now she fussed around Doc Ruygens. That eepee master looked old and frail, abruptly revealing the true nature of the illness that had been so worrying Doc Wundlé. And, thought Foxlee sourly, why wasn't that fussy little man here, too?"

The Geriatrics people would have to see to Ruygens before long, that was for sure.

When the ship plowed back through atmosphere and landed at Kilsona spaceport, Ferdie Foxlee still felt the dazed disbelief strong on him.

"So McMahon was your friend you've been talking to!" he said savagely to Herlihey when they were safely in their hotel room. "My God, Jake! Don't you see what kind of people they are?"

"Aleta, too?"

"That's not fair!"

"She's a big girl, or hadn't you noticed? If Doc Ruygens wants this dump changed, then the girl goes along, too. And they're right. Hell, Ferd, this is just a playground for grown-up kids!"

"There's more to it than that," said Foxlee, with blind stubbornness.

"Well, you're in it now, Ferd. There's no going back for you. The hogs would shoot you down just like any of the others."

"On Varday?"

"On anywhere if their precious security is threatened."

"I could go and see old Nap."

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Herlihey shook his head. "I wouldn't advise it. Look, Ferd. We've been pals. Why foul it up now?"

"This maybe just a little hick planet and this intended revolution just a tiny uproar in the galaxy; but it's you and me, our lives at stake. You're just as dead killed in a stupid brouhaha as in a real live interstellar war!"

"Precisely. There is real danger here. If you want to *stay* alive just play it along."

"By their rules?"

"By the rules that let you hang onto your own life."

"They're just a bunch of clowns."

"Clowns who hold the power of life and death over us. And there's Aleta."

There was nothing much left that Ferdie Foxlee could say and remain friends with this man. He was acute enough to recognize that he would need friends in the days to come. He made that accommodation with what he laughingly called his conscience in a mood of bleak despair.

Work went on as usual in the electropasm laboratories. No one spoke to Foxlee of that strange meeting. And he, being Ferdie Foxlee, tussled to keep his own mouth shut.

Curiously, very few people ever saw old Nap. He remained shut up in his prefab palace dreaming of battles of long ago. Aleta told Foxlee that old Nap had his own personal collection of warriors of different ages and different planets. Made of tin and an inch high, they were, she'd said, priceless. Some even had the original paint still intact, thousands of years old.

"There's more to it than merely collecting mania. There's love and pride and a curious affection for the little people. So men were blind and sometimes cruel and always ignorant in those old days; but they were men. Men who could rise to the great occasion, lay down their lives for what they believed in. Go willingly to death for a friend. So they are old-fashioned and modern age laughs at them for blindness and obsession and holds them in contempt for their notions of what comprises glory. And women hate

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them, now. But—but there was a glory, a panache, a wonder about them.”

“You can speak like that when you’re planning to destroy—”

She flashed back at him. “I’m not talking about the mess on this planet. Using eepees as toy soldiers when they could be used in hundreds of different ways for the benefit of mankind—that’s what I’m against.”

Foxlee had to leave it there. He agreed with her; but he didn’t like her proclaimed methods, not the company she kept.

With the hurtful logic of the rejected he palled up with a friend of Sandra’s, a co-worker on the computer programming staff. At first he had no real interest in Teresa. Her figure was neat but not—like Sandra’s—gaudy. Her silvery-white hair, platinum and gleaming, contrasted pleasingly with the tanned bronze of her face. She kissed very sweetly. They took to going swimming together in Kilsona’s Aquasphere Pool. Here no one wore costumes, those outdated reminders of a prurient age that could see only shame in healthy bodies exposed to sunlight, and the flashing limbs and hair of the bathers, the splashing waves they made, the laughter and horseplay contributed a little to break Foxlee’s mood. Hell! Here he was, well-fed, well-dressed, a good job and a smashing bird; why couldn’t he get back to the old Ferdie Foxlee, him of the light laugh and the giggle? Because a solar system government was to be torn down? Once bunch of politicians replaced by another? So who cared about that! Because a bird he’d fancied didn’t reciprocate? He eyed Teresa as she poised to dive in. His Aunt Hattie! Teresa was luscious; and she liked him, really did, he knew that well enough.

So?

He jumped in after Teresa, grabbed her all squirming and slippery in the water, kissed her fiercely, feeling her good against him.

“Really, Ferdiel You’re a right tear away, aren’t you?”

“I used to be, sweetie. I used to be.”

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This was no answer to his problems; but it was an as-suagement.

Teresa introduced him to the Reverend Ruth Zoehle, who dried herself off on a hot-air vendor, turning her splendid body this way and that, the little golden religious object swinging at the end of its golden chain between her full matronly breasts. She smiled warmly and held out her hand. As they shook hands Foxlee felt some quick light pressure; but it was not an Electroplasm Guild sign and before he could respond in any way, right or wrong, it had vanished and she was stepping out of the hot-air vendor and suggesting they all went and had something to drink.

The Aquasphere Pool boasted four bars and four restaurants. Heading for a restaurant out of deference to whatever outré religious body Ruth Zoehle might hold allegiance to, Foxlee felt a twinge of amusement as she said: "I meant a real drink, my dear Ferdie. I am in need of a long vodka and lime at this moment."

Sitting in cane loungers they watched the scene. The strangeness of it all overpowered Foxlee. Was all this a product of a decadent society set up on a new planet by a toy-soldier-mad autocrat? Or was this the expected scene of responsible people at play themselves?

From that first meeting with Ruth Zoehle he felt the power of her personality. Chronologically he did not know how old she was; but she looked to be about thirty-five Terran. And her round open face with the brown ringleted hair, the full, almost pouting lips, the liquid glance of intelligence in her dark eyes, made him conscious of his own youthful bumbling naiveté. Yet she never gave him any cause to think that; always she was polite and helpful and, somehow, capable of appeal.

A man strolled up. The first sight of him Foxlee had was the thick and extraordinarily profuse mat of hair over his chest and abdomen. His muscles shone from the pool water. His head—squarish, hard, unnaturally bald—held his face as though anxious not to lose it. His features betrayed dedication to a cause an ordinary man might not comprehend.

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His mouth, which now smiled in greeting, could tighten to a slit of righteous fury.

Ruth Zoehle smiled and waved an arm in introduction.

"Martin Axelrod. No," she shook her head, smiling, at Foxlee's unasked question. "He is not a religious like me. He has other complexities of mind."

"So you're the damned eepee pervert!" were Axelrod's first words to Ferdie Foxlee.

Foxlee let go the hand he had a moment before been shaking. He sat up straight in the lounge.

"How's that?"

"That's why we're here on Knorvarday. To try to bring some sense to you." He put his whole philosophy in a nutshell, a philosophy Foxlee had heard before and was to hear again. "Man! Why don't you content yourself with robots? Why do you pervert nature with your foul electropasmic monsters?"

"Well, that is, uh. . . ." Ferdie Foxlee felt like the man who puts his foot on the antigrav unit that isn't there. He glanced across at Teresa, who sat back to drink her vodka and lime, saw the way her breasts trembled, he saw the sunshine lying smooth and satiny across her skin—and some nut wanted to argue about eepees! The outrage hit Foxlee then. He stood up.

"Teresa, shall we take another dip?"

She nodded quickly, finished her drink, and rose.

Ruth Zoehle put a hand on her wrist.

"Tell Ferdie not to take it to heart. Martin means well—too well, I sometimes think. He is very zealous." She smiled, crinkling her eyes against the sun. "Go and have your swim now."

Bashing against the water, flailing with arms and legs he tried to drive through the water faster than that tenacious liquid would allow, Foxlee worked off the anger in him. The galaxy grew all sorts, God alone knew, but to bump into one like that, just when all his defenses were down!

Teresa swam up beneath him and grasped his legs, hauled

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him down. He went under without taking a full lungful of air and so came up coughing and spitting water. Teresa laughed at him. He swam for her and, like a lithe brown sea creature, she crawled for the far bank, her platinum hair an electric brilliance in the sunshine. He chased her all over the grass recreation area, leaping reclining sun-bathers, barely avoiding toddlers. Up the ladder to the high-dive board they went, then down, down, into the water, back to the bank and across the sandpits, where they staggered and gasped and lurched their way across the shifting surface. This time when he caught her he'd have no scruples about what to do. They were both shrieking with laughter now, between their gasps, as they ran. Onlookers laughed and cheered one or the other on, according to their fancy and their sex.

When at last her staggering steps tripped her and she collapsed, winded, onto the sand, he leaped on top of her and held her down. They were both laughing so much and trying to get gasping breaths down into their lungs that for a space all they could do was lie there, spluttering like lit fuses.

"I've got to get you away somewhere, fast," said Ferdie Foxlee at last.

"Oh?"

"You've asked for it and you're going to get it."

"What Martin said—don't take too much notice of it. He's a nice person. So is Ruth. I met her first day she was here. She's—calm and sweet and unflurried. Martin's—"

"Martin's a boor and don't waste time, woman!"

"But that's just what he isn't! He's outspoken, direct. He believes what he believes, like you believe what you believe."

"I believe in administering medicine to you, now."

"You can't, not here." She jumped up. Foxlee raced after her. When they found the right place the medicine proved very palatable.

That evening he worked late at the bench testing out a new circuit that would enable selected epees to free fall after their dropping plane had unloaded them and to de-

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lay ripping their chute until two thousand feet up. The height decisions were tricky. If the eepee cracked his chute too high the ground gunners might have buried what was left of him, had both been human.

Herlihey walked in. He looked grim.

"You've just had a near miss, young Ferd! I had to do some fancy talking. McMahon was all for knocking you off right away, but I convinced them you're the man for the job. You, Ferd, are going to set up the confrontation when we get rid of the government punks and take over. You!"

XI

THE IRON DUKE CONFRONTS NAPOLEON

"I do wish you wouldn't keep doing that, Jake! That must be the third time you've burst in with decision-shattering announcements!"

"I told you I'd keep an eye out for you, didn't I?"

Foxlee thought of that ghastly experience on the corpse-laden battlefield of Gan'gdishnor and remained silent. Since meeting Mad Jake Herlihey his life had whirled through strange phases and adventures and quasi adventures quite unlooked for by the bucolic electropiasm electronics assistant who had set out from Solterra for Curdiswane so long ago.

Since the affair with Martin Axelrod he had worked with a half-bitter, half-humorous attack on problems that had not, as that panacea usually could, helped him to get to terms with himself and life again.

"What do you mean, I'm the one?"

"Just that. Ravrados and McMahon both agree. Doc Ruygens won't do, he's too close to the idiot Nap, and Aleta wouldn't carry conviction."

"So what do I do?"

Herlihey chuckled. "McMahon figures on getting rid of

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us two, Ferdie my boy. He hasn't forgotten his ship and what we did to her, despite what he says."

"What do I do?"

"So we'll play along with McMahan and then I've a sweet little plan to slice us some of the cake. Then we skip clear and clean. Catch?"

"I'll catch your fool head between my knees and manicure your nose in a minute, Mad Jake! My Aunt Hattie, what a chisel-picker you are! For the last time, what do I do?"

"You fight the battle of Waterloo."

Ferdie Foxlee danced with impotent rage.

"You great clown! If you think that's funny— They talk about Waterloo around here like it was death."

"And like it was the answer to our problems."

"They've put the mockers on Waterloo. And no wonder with old Nap's name."

"So he rigs the battle so's he can win! Something about Blucher getting shot at Ligny instead of his horse and Gneisenau making a muck of it as everyone knew he would. Right?"

Foxlee made a face. "More or less. Since there's been all this mystery about Waterloo, I've done all the reading I can about it and the campaign in the library here—"

Herlihey snorted. "A whole library, millions of tapes and microfiches and books, all dealing with soldiers and uniforms and the history of warfare. Now if all those informational sources were devoted to useful items—"

"The city library's just as big," protested Foxlee.

"Yes, yes. Well, young Ferd, the word's out that old Nap is doing Waterloo again. On the request of the Vavlang government—which owes nominal authority down to the Knor system and up to the Interstellar Federation—and they're coming over in a body to watch. You—"

"So that's when Ravrados intends to topple the government. That fits."

"Listen. Waterloo just happens to be the most useful battle, in size and simplicity—"

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"Simplicity!" said Ferdie Foxlee. "Hal"

"—and emotive content for old Nap to take a hand in it himself. Ravrados got a fire-eater on the government to urge Nap to do the battle and then the Lerhd removed said fire-eater with neat promptitude. Now you know no one really wants to take the part of Wellington, although they talk big and claim they'd like a crack at old beaky."

"That follows. They wouldn't want to upset old Nap."

"Precisely. This young fire-eater got Nap to agree to do the battle he passionately believes in; but the young fool might have managed to win. And that would have been disastrous."

"It would?"

"Of course, you ape. The idea is simple and classic. Nap wins the battle of Waterloo as always, steamrollers over the watching bigwigs from the government, we get rid of them and him at the same time for allowing such a dreadful thing to happen. *Quod Erat Mortuarium!*"

"I dunno." Foxlee sounded doubtful. "Suppose the guy Ravredos and McMahon put in as Wellington manages to win? I know that's well-night impossible, but just suppose?"

Herlihey chuckled knowingly. "The fire-eater is a really famous soldier, young as he is, and a brilliant tactician. There was little chance of his winning and he knew it; that's what fascinated him about the contest. But Ravrados had him removed just in case. He's being that careful about the whole business. No, young Ferd, the guy we're putting in just won't be able to win the battle of Waterloo!"

"Well . . ." began Ferdie Foxlee. Then he paused. Someone had just metaphorically kicked him in the stomach with a large and incredibly heavy blackeyed clodhopper. "Oh, no! You wouldn't!"

"Yes, me old fruit. You!"

"Oh, Lor'," moaned Ferdie Foxlee.

Mad Jake Herlihey laughed with coarse amusement. "Brace up, lad! It's going to be a piece of cake!"

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"But why me? Why not one of Ravrados's men or McMahon's cronies?"

"Act your age, Ferd. Old Nap doesn't trust any of them! He'd sniff something was wrong. Nope, my lad, you're the only obvious choice. You're here, in the Kilsona labs; you'll be working on the preparations. He'll welcome finding someone willing to take him on, now that he's committed himself to it. It's like a King Charles' Head with him you know. You're just perfect for the part!"

Weakly, Ferdie Foxlee tried to cheer up.

"Where's me cocked hat, then?" he said, hollowly.

Laughing, confident, bold and carefree, Mad Jake Herlihey slapped him on the back.

"That's more like it. Remember, this is only one little potty planet in a hick solar system with only fifteen inhabited planets. It's not an interstellar incident!"

"Maybe. But I could get a nasty—"

"Generals never get killed, Ferd. Didn't you know?"

"They used to in those days."

"It's important to us. That's what you want to think about. We're gonna do all right out of this!"

The effort to take comfort from Herlihey's words made Foxlee tired and stupid. He slept ill that night, lying awake, restless. So one group of corrupt politicians were to be replaced by another. It happened all the time. Truth to tell, he ought to be taking a thrill of excitement about being caught up in high affairs of state, for all that he was so contemptuous of the size of the planetary system involved.

The last thing he thought about before drifting off into an exhausted sleep was of the police sergeant and young John helping them on the day of their arrival here.

Sharp the next morning Doc Ruygens sent for him and said: "I've informed old Nap that you'll be happy to take Wellington. You understand? Jake has explained it all?"

Foxlee nodded.

"He wants to see you now. Now just breathe slow and steady, answer when spoken to, and say nothing out of

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turn. I don't want my life's work spoiled because you couldn't keep a civil tongue in your head."

Aleta walked in pushing an antigrav floater on which an eepee rested. The semisentient stared with empty eye sockets at its brain, which waited installation, lying on the rack over its head. She put a hand on Foxlee's arm.

"Ferdie, dear. This is the big moment. We've waited a long time for this." She smiled. "And to think it came with Waterloo, of all things!"

"Whose, though?" said Foxlee morosely and took himself off to meet old Nap.

In a flood of sunshine pouring through a flung-open casement at the end of a long paneled room in the prefabs stood waiting for him, Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of the French.

Doc Ruygens shuffled past that imposing figure. He ignored it. He led Foxlee into a darkened corner of the room where a lab bench rested against the wall. In an antigrav chair floating at the side of the bench sat a thing. It was a bottle. In the bottle floated a brain. From the brain tendrils reached out to voice diaphragms and ear lobes and sensory equipment. Spidery articulated arms, lifted under sensory equipment direction, waved at Ruygens and Foxlee. The voice from the diaphragm rustled.

"Ah, Doc! And this must be The Duke! I'm all ready."

"It won't take a minute, Nap," began Ruygens.

"Ah," said that rustly voice, "I really think, Doc, that as I'm to be myself again, you'd best call me majesty, or sire. Don't you think that would be appropriate?"

"Most appropriate, sire. This is the best body we have, all maintained and polished back into perfect condition. Foxlee, here, can help me."

"What, what?" stuttered Ferdie Foxlee.

Ruygens nodded impatiently. "Go and fetch the eepee body over here, Ferdie. And handle it carefully!"

The body looked impressive. Clad in the familiar green undress coat of a colonel of the *chasseurs à cheval* with the white waistcoat and breeches, the body looked young-

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er and fitter than the real body Napoleon had worn at the real Waterloo. Ruygens joined Foxlee.

"Stop gawping, boy! Didn't you know about old Nap?" Dumbly, Foxlee shook his head.

Helping with the body, Ruygens said: "He was involved in a ghastly accident. We managed to save his brain. Since then he has to use a mechanical body."

"But he's like an electropiasm himself!"

"Not quite. He has all his own brain left. He's not a scrap of protoplasm. But eepee techniques have enabled him to live—and live well."

The body was certainly very fine. The face, which normally would be only a plastic mask in which eye holes and earlobes broke the smooth surface, was here a fully featured and detailed face—a familiar face. Working with deft expertise Ruygens and Foxlee transferred old Nap's brain. The operation was carried out in much the same way one would replace a black box on a spaceship.

Napoleon Bonaparte stood up, flexed his thick legs, stuck a hand down his waistcoat, and smiled serenely.

"Thank you, Doc. I'm beginning to feel the part already. Why my parents called me Napoleon I'll never understand; but I understand this!"

He led the way towards the far end of the room and there, when they had passed through the electronically valved door, Foxlee found a diorama of Waterloo. He stood looking on the picture. He knew that those thousands of detailed little figures, each barely an inch high, would be worth untold sums of money if ever old Nap chose to sell them. Not that he ever would, for, of course, they were not mere possessions to be bought and sold. They were a part of his life, of his outer life for fun and enjoyment and of his inner life for deep satisfaction.

From his study Foxlee could tell that the diorama represented the climax of the battle. The time would be about a few minutes after half past seven. All along the crest of the ridge before Mont-Saint-Jean the red-coated British stood under the cannon fire. Between Hougoumont to the

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west and La Haye Sainte in the center two vast columns of blue-clad men advanced up the slope.

Venturing, Ferdie Foxlee said: "I see you have the Old Guard distinctly divided into two columns in echelon. There's an argument that they were in two parallel columns of companies."

The plastic-flesh face smiled. "You have made a study of the battle, then, young man?"

"Yes." At Ruygen's frowning nod, he added: "Sire."

Napoleon spread his hands. "If you are to be The Duke, I do not think you should call me sire."

"No, uh—" Foxlee glissaded over that. "Haven't you put the Prussians a little close in—for the time?"

"Ah! The Prussians! Had they not arrived I should have had the Young Guard free! Then you would have seen!"

Critically, Foxlee looked over the little figures, at the burning farm, the drifts of white cotton-wool, the shattered limbers, the stragglers.

"You think their support would have sustained the Old Guard under the attack of the Guards—that is, the British Guards?"

Again Napoleon spread his hands; he looked farly foxy. "Possibly. That devil Colonel Colborne destroyed the left flank of the Old Guard—*my* Old Guard—with his Fifty-second. Sir John Moore wrought well there."

That left Foxlee. He hadn't gone back as far as Coruña or Shorncliffe; but he did know what the old British army owed to Sir John Moore.

"Pickett almost did it with his fifteen thousand, though," he said. "Even against Hancock and II Corps. They nearly made the charge that would've changed—"

"Give me Lobau, his VI Corps, and Duhesme and the Young Guard. That is all I ask. I admit the usual rules of reconstructed battles."

"Grouchy?"

Foxlee could have used a nuclear bomb with much the same result.

"Do not speak that name in my presencel"

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Foxlee opened his lips. Hell and all, de Grouchy had obeyed orders that were unclear. He hadn't, perhaps, used his head as a real soldier; that his absence during the battle with the infantry of Vandamme and Gerard—quite apart from the two cavalry corps of Exelmans and Pajol—had played a major part in the defeat could not be denied. But a great deal of the fault in Grouchy's failure to hold off the Prussians rested with old Nap himself.

That thought made Foxlee close his mouth. Old Nap. It wasn't the real eighteen fifteen Napoleon who stood here. He'd been getting worked up in this galactic space age, talking to the brain of a man encased in an eepee body. Hell and beyond! Ferdie Foxlee—they had him going!

"Charges have been made that clearly reversed the obvious trend of the battle. It's the same in life. You think fate is pressing you one way irredeemably, and then surging out of nowhere comes a happening that saves you, or hurls you into a new orbit."

No doubt old Nap was thinking of the accident that had deprived him of a human body. Ferdie Foxlee thought of Delilah and that strong horny hand that had reached from the alley darkness and hauled him to safety—and to the wildnesses culminating in this present idiocy of considering re-fighting ancient battles to change the destiny of a solar system.

Ruygens brisked around old Nap, checking his joints and articulations, registering his reactions, making sure the eepee body was functioning perfectly.

"We couldn't use Shiloh, or Chancellorsville or Gettysburg," old Nap was rumbling on, "fascinating though they are. We needed a relatively small battle, about two miles across and only a couple of thousand yards deep, and lasting just the one day." He chuckled, almost a sigh. "There just isn't any other battle quite like Waterloo."

"Oh, come now—" protested Doc Ruygens.

"Yes, yes, I know there are many other small battles of one day. But this one—this is special."

Thanks to this man's parents, surmised Foxlee.

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Little was left to be said; or too much. Old Nap shook hands, the plastic warm and fleshlike in Foxlee's fingers.

"Good-bye for now, we will meet again on the field of Waterloo. By the way, the date is 18 June. Most proper."

XII

A HOLIDAY

During the days that followed Ferdie Foxlee was flung by Doc Ruygens alongside Aleta into the task of outfitting and training by electronic circuits the armies that would be needed. He tried to see as much as he could of Teresa in that time, in all senses; but the work demanded long hours and unremitting effort.

As Ruygens said: "Nap started this section of the campaign with 25,000 men and Wellington had a force of Anglo-Dutch of 90,000. We're not using Prussians. At the time of the morning of 18 June, Wellington had about 67,655 men—I know that 'about' sounds odd there—with 156 guns. Nap had 71,947 men with 246 guns. There have been arguments; but the figures are about right."

"We've got to provide all those?" asked Foxlee, aghast.

Ruygens shook his head. "No. Well, we'll try to do so. But less than 24,000 were British—about 30,000 British and German—on Wellington's side and most of the others ran away."

"Huh," sniffed Aleta. "We have plenty of skeletons with standard plastic coating in stock. If Ferdie here can pull the lead out of his pants and forget platinum hair he might be able to keep his electronics up to my protoplasm supplies."

Foxlee blinked. Jealous? He smiled to himself. The minx. He started the work feeling very happy indeed—then he'd get to thinking just what the work was he was doing and why, and get all solemn and moody again.

They tackled the job on a scientific basis. Because old

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Nap was old Nap this battle was to be done in grand style. There would be no apportioning ratios of men to represent squadrons and companies. Every man there was to be represented by an eepee. The assistants they called in to do routine jobs proved indispensable now; they could not have handled all those numbers by themselves.

Contrary to his own sour prognostications, Foxlee became interested. Herlihey laughed at him as that blunt man composed teaching tapes that would tell an eepee how to load, aim and fire a Brown Bess, how to use the bayonet.

"Hell, Jakel! It's not fair of old Nap to cut the Prussians out! The whole point of it is that Wellington had agreed with Blucher that if the Prussians could get to Waterloo he'd fight. If Blucher couldn't come, he wouldn't fight. There was no luck about it at all; it was an arrangement.

"Yeah, maybe. But don't convince old Nap of that. For one thing, think how many more eepees we'd have to produce."

Foxlee groaned.

"And, for another, you, Ferdie Foxlee, have got to lose the battle."

Despite that dark and somehow shaming thought, Foxlee went at the work hard. They produced rank after rank of eepees, shining with plastic, oiled and slick, their scraps of protoplasmic brain blank and waiting for Herlihey and the other programmers to indoctrinate those simple virgin inhuman minds with the knowledge of an early nineteenth-century infantryman, or cavalryman, or artilleryman.

Using nylon and artificial fibers dyed brilliant colors, the seamstresses and tailors made uniform after uniform, loading them with masses of gorgeous braids and laces and aiguillettes. Row after row of the French bell-topped shakos ranked on shelves. The neat "belgic" cap of the British army looked somehow more grim and businesslike alongside. The magnificent bearskins of the French Guard nodded splendidly. And helmets—dragoons, cuirassiers, carabinieri. Lancers' czapkas. Hussars' busbys. The best of all, the Tarleton helmets of the Royal Horse Artillery. All the splendor

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of war—carried on before mud and camouflage and khaki took over—glowed through the workrooms. The long out-fitting halls looked a blaze of glory. Thankfully, Foxlee could take it all just as that, knowing that the glory could be confined where it belonged, in the imagination, and that no blood would be shed. There was nothing of the hideous grotesqueness of real war here; all the aspects of war that had appealed to the finer sensibilities of mankind through the centuries could be paraded and delighted in with no harm to anyone. Quite the reverse.

Or so Ferdie Foxlee judged.

The uniform specialists advised consulting ancient references. "Hussars' busbys," said one, a girl who felt she could have been a tri-di star if she'd met the right producer before her waist vanished. "Had the British adopted the busby by then, or were they still wearing the mirliton? Anyway, there weren't any French hussars at Waterloo, were there?"

Foxlee chuckled. "They were all with you-know-who-we-mustn't-talk-about, haring off to Gembloux."

"So that's why," said Doc Ruygens. "I'd often wondered."

"Wasn't it the Red Lancers of the Guard?" put in Aleta, sarcastically.

Half the time, so Ferdie Foxlee told himself with comical helplessness, these people of Kilsona or Knorvarday, the mock-war planet, didn't seem to care what they did, and the other half took a ferocious professional interest in their mad king's hobby. The planet—or that part of it Foxlee had visited—was clearly obsessed with the craze.

Foxlee went back to his hotel that night, leaving the sleeping ranks of guardsmen and chasseurs and light bobs and riflemen and infantry of the line stiffly alone in their gorgeous finery to the silence of the laboratory. The cozy warmth of fatigue cradled his body. They were approaching their target figures well ahead of time and Doc Ruygens had evinced surprise at Foxlee's clear determination to manufacture a simulacrum of every man who had fought

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at Waterloo to the best of the knowledge of their historico-research teams. No one, of course, knew more about the subject than old Nap.

Before he went to a deep dreamless sleep Foxlee reviewed his position. With shocking lack of responsibility he abruptly realized that he was far more bound up with the coming battle on its own terms—the pseudo glamour of it all, the shock of charge and countercharge, the welling smoke, the wild huzzas, the glint of cuirass and sword—than he was with the deeper and far more sinister second purpose for the battle's recreation.

They had forged far enough ahead of production and programming schedule that Doc Ruygens declared a holiday.

They all took a trip out to see how the terra formers were coming along with the terrain. Already Mont-Saint-Jean stood facing La Belle Alliance with the road running down into the little valley between them, with the farmhouse of La Haye Sainte some 250 yards in advance of the ridge. The road running down southwards opening out from the first north-south road was almost complete, with the farmhouse of Chateau Hougomont just to the east of it, slightly in advance of a line across to La Haye Sainte. Bulldozers and excavators were busy scooping out the famous sunken road that ran along the top of the ridge from west to east, where The Duke—where Ferdie Foxleel—took position.

Their antigrav flier coasted all over the eepee and robot and human workers preparing the site of the battle. Foxlee felt a shiver up his spine. This was an eerie experience. Soon those fields below, that valley, those roads, would be choked by men and horses locked in unimaginable combat.

That was part of it, of course; to render the unimaginable comprehensive.

"So they prepare the crucible in which the evil of this planet will be ground to powder," said Ruygens softly.

"Then we'll be free to take the eepees into the galaxy," nodded Aleta. "I can scarcely wait."

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Herlihey prodded Foxlee in the kidney. "And you're the guy who, by losing a battle, gains a planet!"

"Suppose I win?" asked Ferdie Foxlee, not altogether irrepressibly, not altogether in fun.

"You could try, Ferdie. It would make it seem more convincing. But you can't. The odds are too high."

"I don't like losing."

"Come now," said Ruygens, in his aloof tired way. "It's not a question of losing. Jake's told you. You'll really be winning." He coughed, attracting a startled glance from Aleta. "Like Aleta, I can't wait to get clear of this place. Old Nap's had me under his thumb too long."

"You could always leave . . ."

"Hal! You don't know old Nap. He wants an eepee master and I'm the best in fifty parsecs." He coughed again. Aleta leaned back from the controls, her face worried.

"Are you all right, Doc?"

"Of course I am! Don't do a Wundle on me. Just overwork, that's all. When Waterloo's been lost and won we'll be free. Free!"

"Roll on the day," breathed Aleta, sending the flier winging back to Kilsona.

Foxlee thought of the police sergeant and John. A brain living in a bottle, a planet of happy people living an easy life surrounded by luxury, working at what they wanted—that cargo handler at the spaceport had evidently been entirely fulfilled by his job—pleasant conversation; and against all that he had to set the grimmer desires and objections of good people like Ruygens and Aleta, who knew what they were talking about, knew what they wanted.

He could not puzzle it out yet; he could only plan for Waterloo.

"Still and all," he said, consciously taking his part. "I wouldn't have accepted battle that day at all if Blucher hadn't promised a corps in support. Old Nap's not playing it fair, he's loading the dice too heavily!"

"Hark at old beaky," chaffed Mad Jake. And so the happy holiday party antigraved into Kilsona.

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The pulsing, happy, brilliant nightlife of the city flowed about them. Restaurants catered for refined tastes, amusement centers purveyed all kinds of emotional and intellectual nourishment, a chess congress was in full swing—"that other war game," as the people of the mock-war planet put it—theaters, both live and animated by superhumanly brilliant epees, proliferated. The ball game was between the Kilsona Killers and the Vavlen Avengers, all square in the seventh and all bets open. A motor speedway track looped coils of light across the rooftops, and above that the rocket jockeys slid their fragile shells in complicated patternings of liquid fire.

"What a sight!" said Ferdie Foxlee.

"If a grenadier of the Old Guard could have seen that little lot, he'd have crossed himself and believed himself in Hell itself," remarked Aleta, lightly.

No one of them could rid their minds of the obsessive subject.

Telecast news items covered the planetfall and disembarkation of the government representatives from Knorvavlang. Practically the whole government was there. Weak that rule might be; but its upholders knew when and how to have themselves a good time. Now, at the expense of old Nap on Knorvarday, they intended to have a ball.

Among those dignitaries being welcomed by old Nap's prime minister—an office holder of advanced years old Nap kept on out of sympathy—Foxlee saw the Lerhd Ravrados, dark and smiling and secret.

"So that explains his interest," commented Foxlee.

"We've handled this beautifully," said Ruygens. They were sitting in a discreet bar with the telefax near to them, leaving the more gaudy attractions raving psychedelically away around the L-shaped bar and, thankfully, out of sight. "Not a whisper of the change impending can have got out. The Regnants—"

"Them!" said Herlihey disgustedly. He swallowed his Scotch at a gulp. "They think their morals are so high and mighty!"

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They're too good for the likes of us! By all the scarlet stinkfrows in Sakkerhokkey! I'd like to—"

"By all the what what's in where?" gaped Aleta. She held up her hand and giggled disbelievingly.

"I'd like to rub their noses in all the sweet rackets they've stopped!" Herlihey plowed on. "They claim to be dedicated to helping the galaxy; but I figure the Regnancy's number one aid program is themselves!"

"You'd get an argument on that in some quarters, Jake."

"Keep the orange-cloaked stiffies out of this, that's what I say. We've enough to do holding out against the local Interstellar Federation—and they're pig-scared of the Regnancy."

"With reason." Ruygens sipped gently, his old face worn. "I admire the work the co-ords of Altimus do. They are dedicated in an entirely different way from the Claver brothers of the Regnancy. The co-ords seek to, as far as I can make out, to subdue man's unruly instincts for self-destruction and self-aggrandizement and forge them into instruments for our salvation in the Galaxy."

"Big words, Doc," said Herlihey. "If they sniff around what's going on here, we could be in big trouble."

"They can take care of their own," put in Foxlee.

"Well," said Aleta briskly, rising. "I'm for bed. We've got that battery—Mercer's; isn't it?—to put together tomorrow."

No incongruity manifested itself as these interstellar citizens of a star-flung galaxy discussed arranging nine-pound horse-drawn field guns: muzzle-loaders firing inefficient black powder with one hell of a puff of smoke. When science has given humanity the powers of robotic and electropasmic authority then whims and dreams become realities.

Ferdie Foxlee wondered what Aleta would say if he offered to accompany her to bed. He desisted. He had a date with Teresa on this day off. For a fleeting moment he regretted that. Then Teresa walked in with her lithe swing. Sandra jumped up with a great smile. Herlihey chuckled. Aleta stuck her nose in the air and marched off. What reason, if there was one, for the exclusion of Teresa

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van Shurilofroise from the secret plot escaped Foxlee. But he was glad she was not involved.

"Hi, Ferdie! How's it coming along?"

"Forget that," said Herlihey, flicking his fingers for another round of drinks. "We're gonna paint this old town red, white, and sky-blue-pink tonight!"

"How can one forget it?" Teresa dimpled. "I'll confess. I know it's silly, but I've put a month's doh-ray-me on the line for Ferdie. I could have put all the cash in Kilsona—"

"You people just toss money around," complained Herlihey. "I don't understand you. That's down the drain. Old Nap will cut Ferdie to pieces."

"What's money for, then?" demanded Teresa.

"They must have thought you were insane," Sandra told her friend savagely. "Old Nap always wins."

"Perhaps he won't, this time." Teresa ran a hand through her platinum hair and rolled her eyes at Ferdie. The others laughed. "Maybe this time a pure woman will give strength to his good right arm."

"Strength somewhere, Teresa," said Herlihey with a leer.

They made a night of it. As though unwilling to leave the young people—Herlihey acted the age of those with whom he happened to be—Doc Ruygens stayed with them on their meteoric passage through the bars of Kilsona. Everyone was keying up to the jamboree. This was where Ruygens proved how right about him Aleta was; he drank along with them and danced and had fun and his tired old face did not change.

In a psychedelic parlor with oil-swarming colors fish-tailing about them in emeralds and oranges and indigos and sunset-yellows, with music seeping from the walls and inserting its insistent beat into every interstice of their bodies and minds, dancing and dancing, Teresa and Foxlee bumped into Ruth Zoehle and Martin Axelrod.

Ruth made unmistakable signs of wanting to parley.

Reluctantly, a little mystified and resentful, Foxlee followed the minister and Axelrod out into the hall. Here the music beat not quite loud enough to drown conversation.

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"We've been looking for you, Teresa." Ruth's smile mirrored the other girl's beauty and yet, in its own secret way, held depths of perception denied to most people.

"Well, you've found us," said Foxlee ungraciously.

"And what a chase you've led us! That Mad Jake is one raring ravel!" Axelrod puffed out his lips. His bald head glistened. He wore a simple evening kit of electric blue relieved by yellow. Ruth wore a sheath dress of white synthisilk that made her the most lascivious minister Foxlee had ever encountered.

Beside these two, the drab little numbers worn by Foxlee and Teresa were as moths beside flame butterflies.

"I'm sure we'd love to have you join our party," said Teresa, with her directness that could unsettle. "Doc Ruygens—"

"We wish to talk with you all. Will you persuade your friends to come to my church? You know where it is."

"Now?"

"Now."

Teresa went off to try to fetch the others. Foxlee felt all his own murderous, unsatisfying, reckless thoughts coalesce into a numbing chunk in his mind. "That's done it," he said gauntly to himself. "Now something's come up and it's me for the chopper!"

XIII

MASKS OR FACES?

The church of which the Reverend Ruth Zoehle was pastor owed to no name apart from its common patronymic. The building consisted of an enigmatic oval room within an oval metal-alloy structure. There were no altars, no idols, no candles, no incense, no mumbo jumbo of any description. The smooth polished floor reflected deep gleams from shaded wall fluorescents. Teresa had told Foxlee where the church had come from. It had spaced in aboard a star-

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ship owned by this church and had been lowered on stilts of antigravitic power onto a hired space in one corner of the Wendover park. He felt an unnatural sense of awe. Full happy laughter would be a part of this place and this atmosphere; giggles would be adolescent and intrusively redundant.

The calmness and coolness of the place soaked into Foxlee. He felt the harsh tremors of his immediately past experiences abating. Herlihey remained subdued.

"What is this all about, please?" asked Ruygens.

"We came to this planet as messengers of a force that asks a question." Ruth Zoehle spoke quietly. On her face a wrapt look of power impressed her auditors with her absolute sincerity. "We believe in the sanctity of human life."

"So do we all."

"You say you do; but you manufacture electroplasms."

"Not that again!"

"Please, doctor. Let me pose this question. It is important for the human race."

"Vital," said Axelrod in his cutting way. "You will recall when they began experimneting with the genetic code almost as soon as they understood there was such a thing."

Ruygens nodded stiffly, still annoyed. "Sometime in the latter half of the twentieth century—by that time reckoning."

"They postulated things we have since succeeded in doing, a lot of other wild theories that never fruited, and they missed much of what we have accomplished."

"The concept of eepees would have baffled them," put in Foxlee.

"Some of them. Some had greater powers of prophecy."

"They used to argue," said Ruth, as though mindful of everyone's rights, "about what they called test-tube babies. They had strange moral codes in those days. They killed and maimed and destroyed in many ways; yet they preached man's goodness to man. When a doctor fertilized a woman unable to have a normally conceived baby by extrauterine methods, he was denounced for interfering with nature and contravening God's edicts."

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"Yeah," said Herlihey, who was beginning to remember he was Mad Jake. "A bunch of ignorant barbarian jerks."

"True. Through no fault of their own." Ruth smiled. "They mixed up the ideas of nature and man, of God and man. Many nations refused to practice any form of birth control, and you know the mess that caused. Other richer countries carried on far-reaching experiments in science—all the sciences which existed then were blooming. Of course, they had no knowledge of our modern sciences, of googologics, for example, just as we can have no clear conception of the sciences in our future."

"And?" said Ruygens impatiently.

"Just as the moralists, the liberals, the intellectuals, the activists, the militants, could not grasp just what science was really all about—even scientists could not see the full picture—so today we have a similar confrontation. They said that to produce a human being in vitro, out of the womb—in a test tube as the mass media for the half-educated had it—was a sin against God's laws. They could not explain what they meant. They tried to; but every time they tried to argue their points, they—"

"They put their feet in their mouths," said Herlihey, fingering his ear.

Ruth favored him with a smile. Herlihey's own big smile froze.

"They were still superstition-ridden, demon-driven, priest-possessed." She gestured. "Many people who thought of themselves as the guardians of humanity resolutely turned their faces against what science was all about. They refused to see any progress; science, they claimed, had back-fired. They pointed to the mistakes of technology: pollution, nuclear threat, evil drug peddling, traffic congestion. They could quote alarming facts and figures to prove that humanity was headed up a dead end. They saw no future."

Foxlee had read about those times. He shivered. "I'm glad I wasn't alive then."

"Oh, I don't know," said Teresa. "They did some wonder-

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ful things. Why—they were the first ones to space out to their satellite. If you're talking about Solterra, that is."

"I am," Ruth said, nodding. "They did wonderful things. But the cancer of disbelief threatened all they achieved."

"You tell us this for a reason," said Ruygens.

"Yes. I want to make it crystal clear that I do not share the atavistic, backward-looking, no-hope attitudes of those old people who tried—who tried to keep a watch on the doomsday they foresaw. Science did outrun their capability to handle it and its findings; but their answer was to cripple science instead of using science more intensively to answer the questions it raised. Computers helped to do that, in the end; although they hated computers worse than almost anything else at the beginning."

"That's always puzzled me," said Foxlee. "I mean, the old robots make a mistake now and then; but safeguards taken properly insure no permanent damage. Computers help to make life livable."

"Yes. But man's natural reaction is to destroy what he cannot understand."

Foxlee, suddenly, acutely, saw what he must say. He was standing near Ruth Zoehle and he could not for a moment ignore the white flame her sheath dress threw into the corner of his eye. He took a breath.

"You're trying to tell us that you wish to destroy epees not because you don't understand them; but for another reason because you—because you—" He halted, fumbling for words he, as an epee assistant, could probably never comprehend.

"Don't you think it just as evil to create a mechanical skeletal man-form and then to give a piece of protoplasmic brain intelligence enough to control that quasi-human form, as it is to do what all those old ignorant savage scientists tried to so?"

"That doesn't add up—" protested Ruygens quickly.

"Oh, but it does. Isn't that piece of protoplasm just as much a part of humanity as the unborn fetus?"

"But we agreed that so-called test-tube babies were per-

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fectly within the scope of humanity's activities provided they were treated as human beings!"

"Surely," said Foxlee. "The answer to the problem was direct. Any scientist creating a fetus outside a woman's womb had to accept parental responsibility for the child. With all the childcare officers they had floating about in those days with notebooks and ballpoints at the ready, no doctor or scientist was going to create a human being for whom he would be responsible if he didn't intend to honor that responsibility. There were some real hairy cases before the docs and back-room boys got the message."

Slowly, Ruygens said: "That is true. But men are peculiar animals. Abraham was obediently ready to sacrifice his son Isaac. Other planets show similar stories of child sacrifice. The love-hate between father and son can not be overlooked."

Foxlee had the distinct impression that Ruth Zoehle had been losing the thread of what she had wanted to tell them and, with a pleased little smirk, surmised she handled more compliant audiences as a rule.

Teresa said: "But the Abraham-Isaac story was in explanation of primitive man's disavowal of human sacrifice. It was a step in civilization and progress. The Greeks had fine plays about it. . . ."

"And as for rules for robots," said Sandra, harking back to Foxlee's point about childcare. "Someone in the first half of that ridiculous twentieth century dreamed up some laws of robotics that wouldn't stand up to the first strain imposed on them. Ludicrous ideas, they had then. Imagine trying to handle some of the problems we programmers have had with robots indoctrinated with those lunatic laws!"

Foxlee had to smile. Ruth Zoehle had been so calm, so much in control, so subtly imperious in her own church, so confident that she could chastise them morally and intellectually over their involvement with eepes, and now here they were carrying on a sprightly little open-ended argument over her own ground—as though she had been merely one of their number.

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Yes, he had to smile. Even this church no longer wrought in him the notion that a giggle would be out of place.

Axelrod brought matters to a head.

"It's no good you trying to squirm out of it!" he said with bitter fury. "You're vile, using poor damned things, half-protoplasm, half-electric, treating them like slaves, using them as cannon fodder on this foul planet. Don't you think they have feelings? Don't you think that pathetic scrap of brain you permit them can't feel? Can't dream? Can't suffer?"

One thing Ferdie Foxlee would allow Doc Ruygens: the old boy might be worn out one minute when it suited him and tough as the light bobs of the Fifty-second at another; but he knew when to put on the regal scientist act in face of hobbledehoy ignoramuses.

"You seem to me, Mr. Axelrod, to be in an analogous position to those politicians of the twentieth century we have just been discussing when scientists tried to explain what was happening in the world, when they tried to understand a piece of scientific investigation. You do not have the vocabulary, let alone the understanding, to comprehend the difference between a living, intelligent, feeling human being, and the tiny scrap of protoplasm lodged in the microminiaturized computer in an eepee's brain. Did you think that the eepee masters would not have exhausted every possible avenue of investigation before they committed themselves? Do you think you are the only ones with moral values, with a sense of responsibility, ethics? Why do you assume you are God's answer to the problems of mankind? Eepees have enabled man to free himself for good. Robots helped towards that end. Why do you wish to plunge mankind back into a dark age of ignorance and back-breaking toil? I bid you good evening, sir."

And Doc Ruygens, eepee master, turned and left the church of no name.

"Oh, no!" Ruth Zoehle's cry tore in agony from her. She tottered and thinking she would fall Foxlee put a quick

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sympathetic arm about her waist. He felt the firm softness of her body beneath the synthisilk.

"Why are they always so sure, like that?" she whispered. "There is the tragedy, the danger, the blind pride. They are so sure they know. They hurtle us on into the darkness of continual maniacal progress and reck nothing of the peril along the way."

"As to that," said Foxlee, uncomfortable for this woman's apparent suffering, conscious of her body against him. "If Doc thought he was wrong he'd change."

Then Ferdie Foxlee thought of the plan that would underlie the ordinary happy pursuit of refighting the battle of Waterloo, and he shuddered, deeply, wondering just how much of a fool he was being in himself.

"They don't," she said, barely able to speak. "Nothing changes them until the evidences of their own recklessness forces on them mutilated people, poisoned cities, piles of corpses—the death of worlds."

Diffidently, Sandra said: "Doc doesn't like the use of his eepees for this playing at soldiers, Ruth. He's—" She checked herself and then rushed on: "He's going to do something about that."

"Oh!" demanded Axelrod belligerently.

"You can go and boil your head," said Mad Jake Herlihey, with exquisite politeness.

The evening had fallen apart.

Teresa tugged Ferdie Foxlee's arm.

He moved his hand against the synthiclad silk waist and Ruth Zoehle straightened, breathing deeply. She put a hand to her head. Then she smiled on Ferdie Foxlee. "I had hoped . . . But Martin . . . Martin is so impetuous. Yet what he says is true."

"Uh, I'm sorry, Ruth," bumbled bumbling Ferdie Foxlee. He took his hand away.

"Thank you, Ferdie. Now, I think—"

"Too right!" boomed Mad Jake. "And I can stand a drink. Come on girls. Come on, Ferd. Let's go."

They left the Reverend Ruth Zoehle standing there in

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the calmness of her church, with Martin Axelrod angry and disturbed by her side.

The rest of the evening of that holiday day off they finished up in a strange subdued mood. With Teresa along they could not talk of their deeper plans. Strangely, Foxlee missed Aleta, her sharp acidity, her mocking lightness. He felt he needed that now instead of the healthy good sweetness of Teresa.

Through the cross-currents of ideas and ideals tormenting with his own feelings of half-educated inferiority the erratic notions he had of trying to be a reasonably good citizen of the galaxy, he kept having the strange notion that he, Ferdie Foxlee, whizz kid of the eepee electronics circuit, was being had for a Charlie. He kept looking for the ledge on which to hang his habitual good giggle or three. In this dark stranding of demand and desire and order, he could find no obvious giggle-worthy points.

That made him even more annoyed. He was wise enough to know that a laugh can be found anywhere. He bid the surprised Teresa good night as she and Sandra were about to follow Herlihey into a bar.

"Not tonight, Josephine," he said. "Sorry."

"But, Ferdie—why?"

"If you don't know, then a million miles of computer tape will never tell you, sweetie. I still want your luscious body, never fear; but not tonight."

He took Teresa home to the flatlet she shared with Sandra and then mooched on up to the eepee laboratory. The night hung glowing with man-made illumination. The stars shone out there somewhere, lost in the blaze.

Inside the long halls he stared at the row after row, rank after rank, of motionless eepees. Blank, smooth, pierced only with eye holes and ear lobes, the emotionless faces starbed back at him. He walked down the ranks, fascinated and repelled. Outside in Kilsona everybody was having a good time. Lightness and warmth and gaiety pervaded the city, the whole planet, making talk of wars seem grotesque and obscene. What had The Duke said? "If you

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had seen but one day of war, you would pray to Almighty God that you might never see such a thing again." Well. The real victor of Waterloo had said that, the man who had beaten Napoleon with or without the help of the Prussians. Why did he keep harping on that? The help of one man for another? The help Mad Jake Herlihey had extended to him? The help he wanted to extend to—to whom? To the galaxy? Hardly, that coruscating concatenation of stars lumbered on its own unfathomable way well enough without him. To Doc Ruygens? To Aleta? To Mad Jake? To Ruth Zoehle?

To McMahan?

They played at wars here on Knorvarday with model soldiers. There was no harm in that. It provided an outlet for passion, a vent for atavistic impulses, it harmed no one. But now there were other forces at work beneath the surface, forces that wanted to tear down the life of Knorvarday and bring in—bring in the very things Ruth Zoehle had been talking about.

She had been arguing at one angle, and diametrically opposite to that he was being urged to take a path he had been told was the right and only path, and yet, and yet . . .

He found himself standing before a grenadier of the guard, smart in tall bearskin with its copper plate, his blue coat turned back to display a very eighteenth century expanse of white waistcoat and white breeches, the white leggings tall buttoned. This was a simulacrum of that small handful who had made their last pitiful stand when all about them flew in rack and ruin and the battle had been lost. There was no truth in that old romantic legend of their classical retort; they had been swept up with the rest in that last flying chaos; but they had been the flower. And now Foxlee saw a change about this eepee.

Instead of a blank shining mask where his face should have been, this eepee boasted a nose, and a mouth, eyebrows, and the fierce, huge, extravagant, romantic moustache of an *ancien* of the Guard.

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Foxlee started as that fierce swarthy face glared down at him.

He swung startled eyes along the ranks. Some eepes had had faces framed onto their masks, some had not. All those who had were privates, guardsmen, none was an officer, a sergeant. He heard a slight sound of breathing, the chink of an instrument.

Aleta stood before a chasseur of the Guard, carefully scribing a face onto the plastic, molding the nose, as Foxlee stood silently breathing and watching, pasting on that enormous, romantic, ridiculous moustache.

She heard him then, and turned, and did not move.

He shook his head.

"Why, Aleta? Why?"

She moved away, stood looking at her handiwork. She moved her fingers, flexing them, not looking at Foxlee.

"We make them," she said at last. "We give them a skeleton and flesh . . . a body. We give them a brain, of sorts. We tell them what to do, how to march, to drill. Our tapes and electronic teaching programs indoctrinate the ability to load their muskets and to fire them, to wield their bayonets. We make them into pseudo men, facsimiles that will respond adequately when a musket ball cracks against an alloy thigh bone, that will double up when a bayonet rips plastic from their bellies." She turned to stare at him, emptily.

"I don't know why I've been doing it."

"I know why," said Ferdie Foxlee. He picked up a scribner from her tool kit. "D'you mind if I join you?"

XIV

THE DUCHESS OF RICHMOND'S BALL

The dark blue—almost black—cocked hat that surmounted the stand of the Duke of Wellington's clothes seemed, to the abruptly dry-mouthed Ferdie Foxlee, to brood down

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overpoweringly in the dressing room. Mad Jake threw the casements wide, overriding their electronic controls, chuckling, full of bright good humor, offering hearty breakfasts, letting the streaming sunshine pour in.

"I don't know what you've been up to, young Ferd; but today's the fifteenth of June. In theory old Nap's been urging his men up into a patriotic fervor. With a left and a right wing, and a reserve, they've crossed the frontier and are heading for the weak juncture of the Prussian and British forces, with Brussels lying beyond them ripe for capture." Herlihey scratched his chin. "Nap wrote out a cracking Order of the Day. By tonight he'll be in a position to strike where he wills, concentrated, and old Blucher and you will be scurrying about like—"

"All that's theory," said Foxlee, staring at the dressing stand and The Duke's clothes. "All the eepees are still under cover. We don't want any rain actually to fall on them, do we?"

"Not unnecessarily. What are you staring at?"

"That confounded cocked hat . . ."

In the famous cocked hat he would wear, a simulacrum of the one worn by The Duke at Waterloo, had been installed a complex, highly sophisticated, microminiaturized signals center, with radio channels in and out on all the wavebands. Resonant circuits carried to his ears and enabled him to speak as he changed the channel to various subordinate eepee commanders and directly to old Nap. He had thought the notion neat of carrying a radio signals center around in a nineteenth century general's cocked hat. Now the conceit frazzled at him.

"Old Nap's not really going to give the Duchess of Richmond's ball tonight, is he?"

"Sure. Why not. His bottle's been transferred to an eepee of Rawdon Crawley—well, hell, Ferd, that's good for a giggle!—and he intends to liven things up."

"He wants both sides of his bread buttered."

"Well, you can't run a reconstruct of Waterloo without

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running the Duchess of Richmond's ball, now can you? I mean, in all fairness?"

"That means we'll be up to three o'clock in the morning of the sixteenth." Foxlee yawned and began to dress in his sober fawn tunic and slacks. "Oh, well."

Since the confrontation with Ruth Zoehle and Martin Axelrod, and that strange midnight ritual of forming faces on the blankly shining haunting masks of the Old Guard epees, much work had been put in and now everything was ready. Foxlee had driven his assistants on to completion of every man on the field they could account for. The terrain had been terra-formed and the rain was programmed for the morrow when his men, in theory, fought Quatre Bras and Blucher fell back at Ligny.

"I intend to try to win, Jake."

"Sure, Ferd, sure. That'll make it look good."

"If you'd told me, a year ago, I'd be handling model soldiers and fighting war games, I'd have called you a nut—if I'd known you then."

"If you hadn't met me, think what you'd be missing."

"Ha!"

"Ingrate!"

"Let's go get breakfast."

Aleta went to the ball as Rebecca. This mixture of fact and fiction delighted Foxlee, even as he mingled with the guests and tried a few steps of dances he had been too preoccupied to bother to learn through the hypnotapes old Nap had thoughtfully provided. As The Duke, he found himself elevated to a strange and, to him, uncomfortable position. He stretched in the brilliant scarlet uniform. Around him real men and women danced and drank and talked, dressed in the gorgeous clothes of the opening years of Solterra's nineteenth century; the women displayed acres of bare shoulders and bosom, the men in scarlet uniforms, blue and gold, crisply styled and cut, redolent of the heady atmosphere of romance and the golden call of historical glory. He, Ferdie Foxlee, was here, and he didn't believe it.

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The government representatives from Vavlang were there as a part of their enjoyment of old Nan's hospitality. Many people, from all walks of life, crowded the brilliant floor beneath the lanterns. The music soaked into the atmosphere, fans waved, jewels winked and sparkled, men laughed, wine flowed. Every man was a hero, every woman a goddess. Doc Ruygens, resplendent in the scarlet of the Coldstream, insisted on the girl who called herself Amelia not playing her part but instead joining in the fun.

A tall, powerfully built, incredibly handsome man in scarlet officer's uniform, sauntered up the shining floor to Foxlee. People stood back for him.

"I was wrong, Your Grace," he said, with a slight half-mocking bow. "I had not thought we should meet before the time and place I stipulated."

"Huh?" said acute Ferdie Foxlee.

"That's Rawdon Crawley!" whispered Ruygens.

"Oh—uh—pleased to see you could make it," bumbled Ferdie Foxlee. The onlookers laughed. Foxlee felt a fool.

"Listen, my people," said old Nap, and the music died and the dancers paused. "I thought you might be amused by a communication I received today. It was sent gratuitously. From an insignificant planet orbiting an insignificant star; they have heavy industry and robots but could use some epees." He produced an interstellar letter-form from his pocket and read from it. "Well, I won't read it all. It calls me a fascist pimp for trying to determine the origins and cures for violence, for dealing in blood and warfare and the agony of spirit such things bring. A fascist pimp. Fine, strong, amusing words addressed to a man who gave years of his life fighting fascism. Who tries to understand the motives beneath the minds of men that drive them to acts of barbarism."

"What cretinous idiot could send a letter like that?" demanded Doc Wundle. He looked shocked and flustered.

"A youngster who calls himself a senior college student, from New Nippon. His own intolerance and blindness are matched only by those he rightly condemns."

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"New Nippon?" said Jake Herlihey. "Weren't they the lot who rampaged through an interstellar area butchering—?"

"Right," nodded old Nap. "And now they're ashamed of what they did, or not ashamed but only annoyed they were defeated. Violence! How do adolescents know how I react to violence! Surely, my war games should tell them that, clearly. When I opened up this planet, out of fun, a sense of historical congruity I called myself a king—I did not choose to call myself emperor!"

A movement in the watching crowd attracted Foxlee's eyes. Dressed in a dark civilian suit of 1815 Marshal McMahon stared calculatingly at old Nap. Foxlee felt a psychic shock. This was not 1815. He lived in an interstellar civilization flung across the galaxy. Once again he thought of the police sergeant and young John. He turned soberly to old Nap, gorgeous in his uniform and the eepee body of Rawdon Crawley.

"I give you fair warning," he said slowly. "I shall do my damndest to beat you on the 18th!"

McMahon put a hand to his mouth, smiling darkly, pleased.

"That is your privilege, young man—I mean, Your Grace."

"You have loaded the dice against me by depriving my left flank of the Prussians. But they arrived late; they were driven off; they did not affect the main course of the battle. The Duke would have won had they not appeared."

"Now hold on!" old Nap looked perplexed, his plastic eepee face perfectly flexing its facial muscles.

"The Prussians made a cock-up of their marching orders. They were driven out of Planchenoit, they didn't hold it permanently until after the attack of the whole English line. They actually fired on the British left wing causing casualties and only desisted when the British fired back. You watch out, I'll thrash you, Napoleon, so help me!"

A murmur of shocked surprise rose from the guests. Ferdie Foxlee knew he'd overdone it—as usual.

Old Nap smiled. "Great! I like the idea. I shall beat

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you—I must, with Lobau and Duhesme free. But I'm glad to know you're going to make it a real ding-dong. Now, all"—he turned to the ballroom barn, smiling, clapping his hands—"on with the ball!"

The music burst out into a gay waltz and the dancers swirled across the floor beneath the lanterns.

Ferdie Foxlee swallowed the lump like a cannonball that had lodged in his throat. His limbs trembled a little, annoying him with his own weakness; but, hell's balls, if they wanted a man to carry out a part they must expect a spot of identification syndrome to crop up. Mustn't they?

"We are an unimportant planet enjoying our pleasures," said old Nap. "It is only a game."

"That's all he knows!" whispered Herlihey. The tough exterior of the adventurer belied his tone; he was worried.

"I shall of course help the people of New Nippon with eepees; I am sure suitable arrangements can be made. If they are underdeveloped, we can assist them." Old Nap brisked up, grabbed Aleta in the guise of Rebecca, and pranced off into the twirling dancers.

"Doesn't all this make you feel like a voyeur?" asked Doc Ruygens, walking up, savage, his lined face grim.

"Maybe. But if you're not harming anyone—where's the damage?"

"Listen, Doc," cut in Foxlee. "Did you hear old Nap say he was going to send eepees to help those people where that kid wrote that nasty letter? Doesn't—"

"My mind is made up. Ravrados tells me everything is finalized. When old Nap rolls over your final positions on the ridge, Ferdie, he will signal his men and they'll take over, spring the coup. The new government will change all this, I can tell you."

Dubiously, Herlihey said: "I suppose the final arrangements have been made about the Vavlang government crooks? They'll be clumped by Mont-Saint-Jean okay?"

"Of course. The view of the battle is far more interesting and alive from the English positions than the French, that is generally acknowledged. These big-time politicians know

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how to organize their own pleasures. And should they decide to use an antigrav flier they'll find none available. That's been attended to."

Foxlee said: "And my escape is also organized?"

"Yeah," said Herlihey. "I've seen to that. McMahon won't double-cross me, old fruit, never you fret!"

The ball remained as vivacious as ever for old Nap had given instructions that reality was not to be simulated to the extent of the officers gradually leaving to join their regiments. Foxlee, somehow, could not put his heart in it. Teresa—as just a charming lady with bared shoulders and trailing gown—found him unwilling to dance. Something was missing.

"By the way," Herlihey said later on, drinking happily. "Did I tell you that old Nap had another interstellar communication?" He chuckled. "From Curdiswane. Instigated by the Markgrofs, you can bet. They demanded your extradition as a wanted criminal. Breaking the electroplasm oaths, like."

Foxlee knew he should feel anxiety; yet he could not.

"So when do I space out ready for the high jump?"

"You don't. Old Nap told them to go boil their heads. I'd given him the true version of the Delilah story. He suggested they check the veracity of their councillors. I don't think any Curdiswane government people will be spacing in to Knorvarday for the war games."

"Well, no one will, will they, after the 18th?" said Doc Ruygens.

The way he said it chilled Ferdie Foxlee.

Yet, there was no way back now. Teresa smiled at him. Aleta floated past in the arms of an eepee dressed in the semblance of a figure of fiction from a nineteenth century Solterran novel. He shook his head. Fantasy? No. On the 18th the fate of a world, of a solar system, would be settled.

Marshal McMahon sauntered by, saturninely allowing the prune wrinkles to roil around: a guest here welcomed by

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old Nap because the planet was en fete, even if some surveillance was kept on him. Szankiren, his renegade eepee master, hovered near, dressed inconspicuously. Szankiren's identity had been marked by the story that he was McMahon's personal physician.

"Did you find Szankiren's semisentient brains suitable, Ruygens?"

"Eminently. I could have wished Szankiren had not—" Ruygens changed that. "The Old Guard has been officered by the adapted brains. I also installed a number in the Middle and Young Guard, just to be on the safe side."

"So many eepees were needed there was no problem there," said Foxlee curtly. "This is a full scale battle; not a corner of the field as we've done before. Everything worked for you, didn't it, McMahon? Old Nap had to buy in completed subassemblies to make up the numbers required. Does it make you feel good?"

"Ferdl!" rumbled Mad Jake Herlihey warningly.

A disturbance among the dancers, a whirling displacement of bodies swaying to the music, a current of shock and excitement, wafted Teresa to Foxlee. She looked wrought up, thrilled, extraordinarily alive.

"They're here!" she told the group around the pseudo Duke of Wellington. "A lot of them; more than have been together in any one place for years!"

"Who?" demanded McMahon in his stone voice.

"Why—co-ords from Altimus! And some Regnants, too!"

"What!"

"It's true. They've spaced in, a whole retinue of them. They've come to see the war games. They have business with the battle of Waterloo!"

"Co-ords of Altimus! The most powerful body in the galaxy! Here!" Doc Ruygens looked flustered.

Mad Jake Herlihey whistled.

"What—" began Ferdie Foxlee vaguely.

"It makes no difference!" The Lerhd Ravrados stood before them, dark and savage and frighteningly determined.

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"Regnants, co-ords—they may have the powers they claim and do what is whispered of them. But they are not going to stop us now! No one, nothing, is going to stop us now!"

XV

"UP GUARDS AND ATOM!"

Waterloo did more than any other battle I know of towards the true object of all battles—the peace of the world.

Wellington

Ferdie Foxlee sat his electroplasm horse on the ridge of Mont-Saint-Jean and shivered.

The rain had fallen all night and the fog lying low was just dispersing. Soon the sun—the sun Knor—would flash out to dry those fields of green plastic corn. They would play this drama out by the book. But by which book? No battle in all history had had more written about it than Waterloo—not even that first tragic interstellar conflict between Earth and Shurilala and Takkat, called the TEST wars, the Triple Earth, Shurilala, Takkat Wars. Now they waited for half past eleven, the approximate time the first gun had boomed out.

Sitting on his eepee simulacrum of Copenhagen, Ferdie Foxlee cocked an eye downslope to the north, away from the valley of coming conflict and the farm of La Belle Alliance, just to the south of which Napoleon stood surrounded by the solid ranks of his Guard, back towards the city of Kilsona which everyone thought of this day as Brussels. Long scarlet-clad ranks waited there in perfect silence.

Perched in a glass enclosure raised on stilts, the observers could oversee the whole battle. They had powerful glasses up there. The TV screens would show them intimate details of the scene transmitted from the hundreds of TV

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cameras mounted in epees, in horses, in limbers, secreted in trees and the buildings of La Haye Sainte and Hougoumont. No detail would be missed.

The TV producers of this spectacle could mix in whatever showed most interest, bring instantly before the eyes of the whole planet and by interplanetary and interstellar communications transmit the program on any channel and to any solar system taking it in.

They followed the book, for was not this part of the way war games must begin?

Foxlee held his men on the reverse slope, with his batteries posted on the crest and a spray of skirmishers below. On the opposite slopes the whole vast array of Napoleon's army lay spread out before him. It glinted and shone as the sun broke through. Color, bravery, panache, the whole glory of counterfeit war extended itself in those brilliant combinations of semisentients wherein the folly and brutality of war could be hidden beneath the fact that no one would get hurt, that it was all in play. Foxlee looked at the observers. They would get hurt. This whole vast congregation of wealth and science and planning had been assembled for their destruction.

And with them were co-ords from Altimus! The impiety of what he was lending himself to shook Ferdie Foxlee. It was like planning to destroy Old Mother Earth herself.

When Napoleon rode through his troops and their tumultuous shouts rang out, he withdrew the Dutch-Belgians in Hougoumont, who showed unmistakably the effect on them, replacing them with detachments of the Guards. By the book.

Everywhere on the French slopes were lines of serried infantry, steel-clad cuirassiers with glittering helmets, scarlet-clad lancers, and in reserve the dark and menacing masses of the Guard. Foxlee wondered why one spoke of the French Guard and the English Guards. An affectation?

Or was it because the Guard guarded one man?

Old Nap's voice crackled over the set in Foxlee's cocked hat.

"Well, young man. Are you ready?"

Foxlee swallowed. If he said: "There is a plot to kill all the Vavlang government and the co-ords and the Regnants when you win, so you must lose," wouldn't old Nap react with scorn and contempt for so transparent a ruse? And wouldn't McMahon, or Ravrados, listening on the net, strike him down before he could speak again?

He said: "You'd better get Reille's corps off against Hougoumont, then. Macdonnell will hold it. I built him myself, so I know."

The flash of a gun, the scarlet tongue of flame, the puff of smoke. The long rushing advance of the French skirmishers, the smashing onslaught of Reille's 6,000 men. Twelve thousand would be sucked into that conflict. All day it would go on. In burning buildings, shot at and bayoneted, the light companies of the Guards would hold on. Foxlee turned his attention to the next part of the field.

By the book. Well, *almost* by the book.

On came the great 16,000 men attack by D'Erlon's corps, moving in four divisions in echelon with intervals of 400 paces, accompanied by 30 light guns. Seventy-two guns smashed a pathway for the huge onslaught. Scarlet-clad epees from Picton's division fell and crumpled. The lines closed up. The green-clad epees in the sand pit, the Ninety-fifth Rifles, fired on the French left. The struggle reached the crest of the ridge—and the English fired and fired again and then, with a ruffianly string of curses from Picton himself, leaped forward, less than 3,000 of them, hurled the French to ruin downslope.

Whether or not the electropasm simulating Picton was shot or not made no difference, a remote control threw his switch and he pitched from his horse. That rusty old top hat—an anachronistic touch—went rolling away.

At that moment Foxlee, who had seen the Dutch-Belgian brigade break and scatter back through the English lines, halted them. He watched as Lord Uxbridge threw his Union and Household Brigades into the counter attack.

The Lifeguards and the Dragoon Guards, with the Blues,

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simply smashed the French cuirassiers into ruin. Foxlee shuddered. Hell . . . if they had been men out there . . .

Once, they *had* been men . . .

The Scotland for Ever charge went in, the Scots Greys and the Ninety-second. Confusions, uproar, the programmed chaos of battle rose over the field. The British Cavalry, about 2,000 swords, smashed an entire infantry corps, put 40 guns out of action, took 3,000 prisoners and seized two eagles. After that—according to the book—the British Cavalry here were a spent force. And no wonder.

Old Nap's voice crackled over the radio.

"Nicely done, young man. Now you must face my cavalry."

"Yes."

"What is happening to your rear? I do not see the masses of red-coated men running off—the Dutch-Belgians, the Nassauers—the blue coats; what's going on?"

"You're fighting a battle, emperor. You figure out the angles."

"Puns, yet."

Baring and his sturdy Hanoverians still held La Haye Sainte. The King's German Legion would be turned out only when all their ammunition had been exhausted, just before the last final and decisive attack. Obviously, the attacks were all aimed at being the last final; trouble was, Foxlee's English epees kept shooting down Boney's French epees. In the confusion, the shouts, the smoke, the roar and smash of battle, Ferdie Foxlee—who? oh, you mean the Duke of Wellington—awaited the dramatic onslaught of Ney's cavalry masses.

Out there one man, old Nap, was hugely enjoying himself throwing his electroplasms forward trying to break through the British lines. For The Duke the task of holding those overpowering masses pressed ever more starkly. How could he expect to hold out? But if he did not the ruin would be complete and all hell would break out among the stars. That, Ravrados or no, was for sure. Why, the Interstellar Federation might decide to sterilize completely

a planet like Knorvarday which allowed co-ords and Regnants to be massacred! They would—for sure!

Marshal Ney hurled his cuirassiers forward.

Thousands of eepee men and horses in a welter of tossing plumes, glinting breastplates, thunder of hooves, roaring forward in living avalanches of destruction to engulf the lonely British squares. Living? Eepees?

The Duke shook himself. His artillery fired on the charging cavalry until the very last minute and then the artillerymen skipped inside the squares. Volley firing, controlled, precise, murderous, cut the French cavalry to ribbons. They receded down the slope. Again and again Ney led them on. Horses were shot under him. Still he flung those 15,000 horsemen at the British squares.

All the careful work in the laboratory in reproducing those 32 squadrons of cuirassiers, 6 of carabineers, 19 of the Light Cavalry of the Guard plus the Red Lancers of the Guard was now being undone as the zigzag volleys smote them. As they recoiled so the British Cavalry charged them and the Royal Artillery smote them with fire and steel.

The French return-fire cut down huge swathes of The Duke's men. The cavalry charges afforded some macabre respite from the guns.

Here an incident had taken place that The Duke could now alter, change from the immutable book. Lord Uxbridge had asked the colonel of a gorgeously dressed regiment of the Duke of Cumberland's (Hanoverian) Hussars to charge in support of the British cavalry. The colonel had declined, saying that his men owned their own horses and would not care to expose them to damage. The Duke—Ferdie Foxlee—now flung them in headlong to further the rout.

Foxlee remembered that he had programmed the British soldiers, when the French cavalry came on again, to say: "Here come these fools again." As they had indeed.

Thirteen charges Ney put in. Surely, if old Nap had not wished them he would have halted them, ill or not?

Both Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte burned, the smoke flat and treacly against the ground, where everywhere lay

the dead and wounded. Sunlight glittered on bavonet and helmet, flags fluttered, the guns spoke and spoke again, trumpets pealed. The insanity of battle blustered in this alien air. Napoleon had tried infantry, cavalry and artillery and nothing had broken that stubborn British defense. Now all he had left were the Guard and with them Lobau's corpse. These he must use now in the last and finally final attack that would smash clean through The Duke's center and tumble him into ruin against the Forest of Soignies. After that, Brussels would be his. The Prussians would melt away. The Austrians and the Russians would sue for peace. Napoleon, emperor of the French, would once again bestride the continent of Europe, its despot and its dictator!

Foxlee called old Nap.

"You threw away the book," he said, "when you deprived me of the Prussian diversion on your right flank."

"So?"

Ferdie Foxlee, once again Ferdie Foxlee, laughed. "So now I'm throwing away the book!"

He called in the supports, he called in his flanks, Vivian and Vandaleur, Chasse, Clinton, Brunswick-Lüneburg. He brought forward the Dutch-Belgians who had run away, whom he had prevented from running away.

"I could have called in Prince Frederick of the Netherlands and his 18,000 from Hal, only as they didn't take part in the battle, guarding the Mons road to Brussels, we didn't make electroplasms of them . . ."

"Foxlee! What—? What are you playing at?"

"Rearranging history. Rearranging it back to what it was, using the same means you use to alter it!"

Old Nap's growl shook through the radio net.

"My Guard will smash you, young man! You haven't a hope in hell!"

"I never did have, Nap. I was born without hope. But I'm going to stop your damned Guard if it's the last thing I do!"

"So be it, then! Now you will see! *En Avant!*"

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They led out, those veterans of Austerlitz and Marengo and a hundred other fields. They did not know what defeat was. The glow of victory sparkled from their bayonets. Their assault had never been withstood.

Magnificent in their imposing bearskins, their bayonets all aslant, their colors flying and their drums beating the *pas de charge*, they advanced irresistibly across the valley and up the slope. The dark mass surged on in confident headlong advance.

Foxlee called in Hill's division from the right and Adam's brigade—O vital brigade!—was brought to the center. This was the culminating moment of the battle.

The massed columns reached the crest of the slope. They crossed the ridge. Nothing met their eyes but the dense wall of smoke and the madly working gunners of the horse artillery battery, slamming the case shot into them. Feeling weak at the knees, sweating, Ferdie Foxlee said:

"Up Guards and atom!"

Then, giggling, he said: "Stand up, Guards."

The ranks of the British Guards stood up, dressed, faced front. Against them poured a fantastic sight. Through the smoke roared a huge mass of men, close columns of the Guard, hundreds in front, close-packed, drums sounding, shouting "*Vive l'Empereur!*" Impetuously, uncheckably, earth-shakingly, they came on.

Along the whole front the confrontation hung.

Then the muskets of the English Guards spoke, and spoke again, and along their grim ranks livid tongues of fire flashed out. The tremendous volleys laced the mass of the Guard. Still they came on. Many more than at the old original field of Waterloo; nothing, it now seemed, could halt their victorious progress.

John Colborne, through Ferdie Foxlee's direction, gave his immortal order to the veteran Fifty-second. The regiment swung its right shoulder forward, flanking the Guard. Again and again they smashed their volleys into the mass.

The sight sent a thrill of horror through Foxlee. This was like some giant prehistoric beast snuffling at the gates of

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civilization. Smoke and flame boiled from the close-packed ranks of men. Of men? Of electroplasms!

Still the contest hung as the ranks swayed back and forth.

Now old Nap brought out his bludgeon stroke for victory! Against Foxlee's weakened left center he flung Lobau.

The infantry gained rapidly up the slope, passing alongside the desperately struggling Guard. They would punch clean through the thin lines of cavalry holding the front here, swing to outflank the Guards. This, then, was old Nap's secret weapon, the reason for his chuckle of confidence. Despair clutched Ferdie Foxlee. He had gambled, and he had lost. He looked down on those bent heads, those leveled bayonets, and he saw the blankly shining eepee masks. But he still had his own remnants, those men who had, in the original battle, run away.

These he swiftly hurled against Lobau's flank, pushing him in to his left, crushing him up against the mass of the Guard. Now the whole French attack had been clumped together. And it writhed. Eddies and currents surged in that overpowering mass. The men were pressed so closely together they could scarce move their arms.

Volley after volley of musketry smashed in upon them.

The Fifty-second, the Guards, the remnants, charged.

Down from the slope smashed the thin red lines.

The eepees, unprogrammed, acting now out of the impulses frantically pulsing from their tiny scraps of protoplasmic brain functioning integrally with their microminaturized computers, reacted with the training as nineteenth-century soldiers of the Old Guard and of the French infantry they had been given willy-nilly.

The shouts went up, the shouts from men and women watching, and not from the electroplasms.

"They are mingled!"

And, terribly, shockingly, horribly:

"The Guard gives way!"

Down from the ridge boiled the rout.

Flying helter skelter the remnants of that brave host fled.

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Colors cast away, muskets flung down, bearskins tossed to the winds, the eepees ran.

"No!" yelled old Nap's voice in Foxlee's ear. "No! No! It isn't so. I win! I always win!"

"The poor devils of eepees have been trained to react as men would in these circumstances. You can't blame them for running!"

Somewhere in that flying rout raced the special eepees programmed by Szankiren. Now they would never be carried by victorious force of arms into the position where they could shoot down the defenseless government of Vavlang, and with them the co-ords of Altimus and the Regnants. At least, whatever else he had done, Ferdie Foxlee had averted an interstellar incident that would have thrown this section of the galaxy into an uproar besides which this battle of Waterloo could only appear miniscule. Add to that that he had prevented old Nap from being tried by the High Court of the Interstellar Federation for crimes that bated the breath, then he hadn't done too badly.

Ferdie Foxlee, being who he was, began to perk up.

Fliers shot down from their observation positions over the field. Foxlee drew himself up. The smoke and roil of combat receded over the ground cumbered by eepee corpses who would be retreaded and reprogrammed in the laboratories for future battles. Gettysburg, now—he fancied that . . .

From the glass box high on its stilts the great men descended. Old Nap stepped out of the flier, still wrathful; but, somehow, brightly smiling, as though a weight he had carried overlong had been dispersed by a master physician.

And then they were all about him, clapping him on the shoulder, shouting congratulations in his ears, pumping his hand. They were all there. All, that is, except Ravrados and McMahon and Szankiren. They would be aboard a spaceship on their hurried and guilty way back to Knorvellen.

"All right, young man," said old Nap at last. "I'll grant you that history proves itself. The English would have won, I think given the circumstances."

"I think you have always won before because no one

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cared to defeat you," said one of the co-ords. He looked just like a normal man, which astounded Ferdie Foxlee.

Doc Ruygens, Mad Jake Herlihey, Aleta, Sandra, Teresa, they all crowded around. Foxlee smiled on them.

"It's all right," he said with forceful meaning. "I shall say nothing. Rest assured."

Teresa looked astonished; the others looked—looked relieved? As they might. But, they looked happy, somehow, as though a weight had been lifted from them too.

The co-ord said simply: "We find the business of guiding a galaxy that does not want our help reasonably arduous. There are solar systems who wish to go to war, which each other. The Regnants try to stop them, as well, which is a credit to the Regnancy. But we find that a journey to the war-games planet, Knorvarday, and the sight of a battle as it might truly be, convinces them of the folly of war far more effectively. That is why we are here."

He gestured to a group of men—of aliens—deep in discussion a few yards off. "There you see a quarrel being settled with words. They have seen all this obscenity and they are now wiser men. The galaxy is indebted to you, Nap, and to your war-games planet."

Pulling Foxlee aside, Herlihey said: "I guess this place isn't as bad as we thought."

"I shall be able to use my eepees to help people on other worlds, as old Nap has promised," said Ruygens. He still looked dazed. "But the wider impressions of their use here I cannot overlook. The co-ords, after all, cannot be wrong."

"Any man can be wrong," grunted Mad Jake.

"But are the co-ords men?"

One of those remote personages was saying now: "Perhaps you would arrange a more unpleasant affair fairly soon, Nap? We have a sticky problem with a related group of solar systems. We wish to show them what war is. Lots of fake blood this time, oozing from your clever eepees?"

Old Nap turned to Ruygens. "You can fix that, Doc?"

Numbly, Doc Ruygens nodded.

Ferdie Foxlee looked on Aleta and on Teresa. He felt

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good. He looked out on the field of Waterloo, and the evidence of a conflict that had shaped the destiny of more worlds than that of Solterra alone.

"We'd better switch the eepees off," he said. "Before they do themselves a serious mischief."

Somewhere down there the Tenth Hussars were flashing their sabers in the waning sunlight.

"Well," said Ferdie Foxlee. "All I can say is, it was a damned close-run thing!"