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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2

No. 7

1959

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Short Novels :

OCCUPATION : WARRIOR..... James White 5

War had been outlawed but serious disagreements among the galactic worlds were settled by picked armies —of cowards! When Earth was involved Major Dermot decided to do something about it.

THE SUN CREATOR.....Nelson Sherwood 59

'Mable' had been designed to turn a planet into a Sun but accidentally the machine became lost on a civilised world—with the mechanism triggered!

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Edited by JOHN CARNELL.

Cover and Illustrations by LEWIS

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THE EDITOR'S SPACE

Ever since the birth of magazine science fiction in 1926 readers of this particular type of literature have felt the need to write to other enthusiasts about their favourite brand of reading pleasure. In fact, it was from the enthusiasm of those early letter writers that science fiction fandom grew, local clubs all over the world were eventually formed, and World Conventions finally organised.

One acknowledged enthusiast every reader must know is the editor of his favourite magazine, and in our case, to paraphrase Perry Como's celebrated song, "We get letters—stacks and stacks of letters." Of advice, criticism, or, as in most cases, just plain friendship between science fictioners.

However, as you realise, we publish three magazines in the genre each with a different style and approach. *New Worlds* leans towards the psychological and more thought-provoking type of story; *Science Fantasy* has the emphasis on fantasy without the scientific background; and *Science Fiction Adventures* is a straight action-adventure magazine devoted to the future. Not all our readers buy the three as much depends upon their individual preference, but a majority seem to purchase at least two. Consequently, letters inevitably discuss more than one magazine and items of specific interest are inextricably mixed up.

The point being—if you want a letter column in *Science Fiction Adventures* will you separate your comments or address them expressly for this magazine? We will publish the most interesting in each issue providing there is space for them.

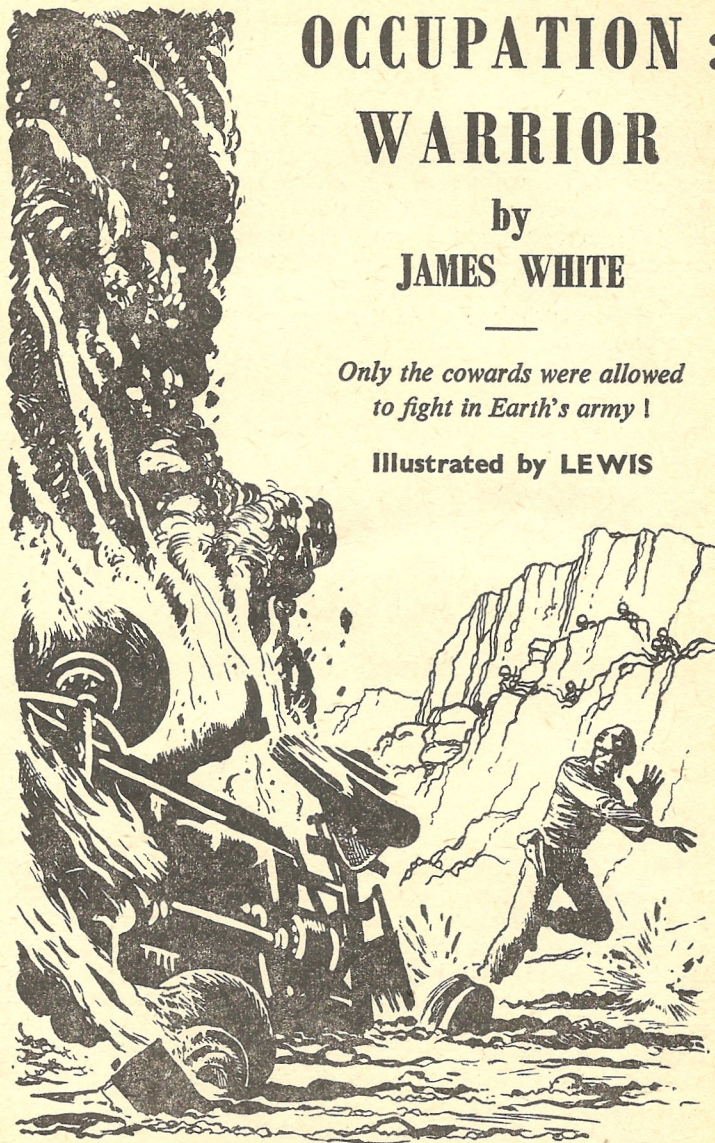
—John Carnell

OCCUPATION : WARRIOR

by
JAMES WHITE

*Only the cowards were allowed
to fight in Earth's army !*

Illustrated by LEWIS



During the past five years Belfast author James White has concentrated on the long novelette and short novel and proved that such stories are the best medium for both writer and reader. In the following fast-moving story he presents a unique solution for warring races—let the armies be composed of picked cowards from each side ! Then bring psychology to bear and the war will peter out. Perhaps . . .

OCCUPATION : WARRIOR

by JAMES WHITE

Chapter I

From his position six paces front and centre of the men who were drawn up in open column of threes behind him, Dermot watched the slow approach of the closed ground-car out of the corner of his eye. Driven by a bored looking Earth-human in Guard green it contained two large, caterpillar-like life-forms—the warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing, multi-pedal and furred beings who inhabited the planet Kelgia. Because they required no other body covering their insignias of rank took the form of dyed patches of colour on their sleek, silver-grey pelts.

So this, thought Dermot, is the enemy !

Slowly, inexorably, the vehicle bore down on him. Dermod's mouth felt suddenly dry. It was nearly time for him to act, and he was hoping desperately that his act would be convincing.

In the rigid lines of men behind him tension was mounting also. At any moment now there would be a supposedly spontaneous and uncontrolled demonstration of hatred against the crawler officers in the groundcar. There always was such a demonstration, Dermod thought with a grimace of distaste ; it was designed to impress the enemy with the fine, fighting ardour of men who were in reality nothing but a bunch of cowards, weaklings and big-mouthed braggarts. But if these men could convince the crawler officers of their bravery then they would not be picked to fight in the coming war, because given the chance an enemy picks the weakest opponents to fight against and not the strongest.

The groundcar was so close now that Dermod could see dust streaks on the bubble canopy. Now was the time, he thought, and started his lips to quivering and allowed a rapidly increasing tremor to shake his arms and shoulders. In the old days he had been one of the leaders in his Drama Group. His face would be pale now, he knew, and well beaded with sweat. Dermod reached the climax just as the car drew level with him and he slumped bonelessly to the ground.

His action surprised the men behind him as much as the enemy officers because the demonstration got off to a late and very ragged start. But the first few isolated shouts built up quickly into general uproar, then Dermod's world—viewed through slitted eyes at groundlevel—became a maelstrom of dust, stamping feet and sheer organic noise.

Dermod allowed the shouting, fist-waving men to surge around and over him for a few seconds, then he fought his way upright and joined them in hurling abuse at the enemy. The effect he wanted to produce was of an officer who could faint at the mere sight of the enemy even before hostilities began, but he did not want to overplay the role . . .

Half an hour later Dermod was summoned to the camp administration building and shown into an office which contained a green-uniformed officer seated behind a large, cluttered desk. The Guardsman indicated a chair.

"Major Dermod," he said briskly, "you have been chosen to fight in the coming war. What is more, your display of funk out there so impressed the Kelgian inspection team that they took you without even consulting your dossier. However, it is my duty at the moment to instruct you regarding the rules of conduct for the coming war.

"As the subject will be of necessity a somewhat blood-thirsty one," he added, smiling sardonically, "please try not to embarrass me by fainting again . . ."

As the meaning of the other's words sank in Dermod had to fight to keep the flood of relief and sheer jubilation he felt from showing in his face. *He was in!* Instead he tried to look shocked and apprehensive, the way any ordinary Earth soldier would look after being given such news.

The site of operations, the Guardsman explained, would be the usual one and the number of combatants had been fixed. No reinforcements would be allowed to make up losses in Humans or Kelgians, and in the unlikely event of an extended war only food supplies and replacements for war material already in use would be allowed. There would be no medical facilities except those furnished on request by the Guard.

The weapons allowed the Human side were chemically-powered rifles and pistols firing solid projectiles, and grenades. The Kelgian equipment would be basically similar but of a more advanced type firing explosive bullets . . .

Dermod half-rose out of his chair at that point, mouth open to protest. The thought of what an explosive bullet could do to a man gave him a suddenly unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. He stammered, "But . . . but . . ."

"We consider," the officer continued firmly, "that the physiological disadvantages of the Kelgian life-form makes an advantage in fire-power only fair. You were about to say?"

"Only that you might have given them something more—well—humane."

"That is a word which does not apply in these circumstances," said the other coldly. "If acting humanely was your primary concern, the whole miserable bunch of you should have decided to stay at home. Now, do you have any other questions?"

Dermod had, but it would have been a dead give-away if the cowardly, frightened personality he was trying to portray had asked them. But he might be able to ask a few.

"The planet we'll be using has several large islands," Dermod said timidly, "I was wondering—"

"If you'd be allowed to play around with boats," the Guardsman broke in. "Well the answer is no. This will be strictly a land war."

"How about air support?"

The Guard officer shook his head again. "No fighter or bomber aircraft. A few light reconnaissance machines perhaps, if you can find anyone fool enough to fly them. Also, there will be no artillery, bombardment rockets or any other type of long-range weapon. You've started a big war this time and we mean to see that it is made as bloody and unpleasant as possible for each and every one of you."

"Any other questions? No? Then goodbye."

Inwardly seething, Dermod left the building where every look directed at his uniform was one of contempt, or scorn, or sardonic amusement. He was heartily sick of turning the other cheek to these sarcastic and sour-faced tyrants in Guard green; it was humiliating, infuriating and intensely frustrating, and this last session had been the worst yet. The only thing which stopped Dermod from taking a swing at one of those hateful faces—a very unwise thing to do in any case—was the thought that his days of submission to them would soon be over.

The first step in a bold and far-reaching plan had been successfully taken this afternoon when the man who called himself Major Jonathan Dermod had been picked for combat. The next step would be harder, because that same Major Dermod would somehow have to win a war. But the third and final stage would be the simplest of all, Dermod thought; nobody has to *help* an avalanche downhill . . .

All around him the mighty Guard helicopters were dropping like great angry insects onto the landing areas. Others already down were disgorging long flat cases of rifles, and stores personnel busied themselves checking and carrying under the watchful eyes of tight-lipped Guardsmen with lading bills in their hands. Dermod swore under his breath in sheer helplessness as he watched. The men doing the fetching and carrying were those who had *not* been picked for combat, and these non-combatants would have all the hard work of getting the Seventeenth Earth Expeditionary Force ready for departure three weeks hence while the Combat men would be on leave

until embarkation time. All of which was a nice illustration of how the outwardly benevolent Guard did its dirty work.

By rights the Combat men should have been kept hard at it, instead of being free to worry for three solid weeks about what was going to happen to them in the coming war.

It had not been like this in the old days, Dermod knew, and the choking ache of yearning caught once more at his chest and throat. In his mind the roar of the freight helicopters became the thunder of a thousand heavy bombers darkening a sky white-splattered with flak, or the Jovian rumblings of a massed artillery barrage. His association channels widened suddenly, his mind slid back to that distant, half-legendary past when life was bright and full and exciting.

The slipstream howled through the rents blown in his cockpit canopy by the enemy tail gunner, and a smear of oil on his goggles made it hard to see the instrument panel of the little fighter plane. But the big red button atop the control column was under his thumb and the only thing that mattered was the expanding image of the bomber centring his gunsight, seemingly pinned there by his eight white lines of tracer. His cannon fire bit, gouged and bludgeoned its way through the enemy's fuselage. Control surfaces tore free, shredded away, and a sudden glare of orange fire marked the end as fuel and bomb load let go together. The tiny plane rocked and shuddered as it ran into the expanding sphere of the explosion, then Dermod found himself being jolted about on the bucket seat in an even more cramped interior while he shouted instructions to his crew through the din and dust and hot oil smell of a tank engagement. Earth and stones fountained skywards around his ponderous mount, flying rock and shrapnel whanged off its armoured flanks and the cannon-shells of a ground-strafting aircraft tore up a furrow scant yards away from its churning metal treads. His machine-gunner was hammering away at the aircraft now, and all of Creation seemed to be made up of peal after peal of thunder and clouds of sharp-smelling blue smoke. And Dermod was striding the bridge of his heavy battleship while broadside after broadside crashed out and all around him was spread the most beautiful and inspiring sight of all, the tremendous, irresistible might of a naval task force deploying to meet the enemy . . .

War, thought Dermod sadly as his mind returned reluctantly to the here and now, *had been fun in those days.*

When he returned to his quarters Dermod tried to make himself rest for a few hours, but it was no use. He felt an urgent need to talk over plans with the General again, especially *the* plan. But most of all he thought that he wanted a friendly hand on his shoulder and a confident voice to reassure him that what he planned to do would ultimately end in the greatest good for the largest number of intelligent beings. The General, unfortunately, who was a very reassuring person indeed, was on Kelgia at the moment picking the worst caterpillars he could find to fight against, and he would not be back on Earth for at least a week.

Abruptly coming to a decision, Dermod changed his uniform for civilian-style lounging overalls ; he would submerge his doubts and uncertainties in work. For he knew that among the poor, confused but tradition-loving minority which comprised the lowest social strata in present-day Earth culture he was unique, possessing as he did knowledge of military tactics and strategy normally restricted to student Galactics. Further, he knew that the manner in which the coming war was fought depended on the morale of his men and, the Guard being what it was, Dermod knew that he personally would have to do his utmost to see that that morale remained reasonably intact until embarkation time. After that . . . well, he had a few ideas which he was keeping to himself.

Dermod left the camp area and drove to the town which lay a few miles away. It was dusk and the streets were crowded with civilians, sensation-hunting Galactics and a liberal sprinkling of soldiers whose broad white belts proclaimed the fact that they had been picked for combat. At least one admiring female was attached to every uniform in sight so temporarily there was no morale problem there, Dermod thought. He parked and made for the nearest bar.

There were several combatants in the place, he saw as he took a table and worked the menu console briefly for a drink, most of them at the centre of noisy, excited groups. But at the table next to him sat a lieutenant with a preoccupied expression listening with great care to the words of an overweight and over-loud civilian who was buying him drinks. Dermod couldn't help eavesdropping.

" . . . It was when we were fighting the Brelthi a few years back," the fat man was reminiscing loudly. " A small affair compared to this, you understand, but hot while it lasted.

Those Brelthi octopoids are so big and awkward, you see, that the Guard allowed them anti-gravity belts—only one per being, of course, and the amount of lift pre-set—to give them more mobility. Well, what do you think the so-and-sos did? They started pooling belts—some of them doing without while others, wearing three or four of the things, took off and tried to pot at us from a couple of hundred feet up in the air. . . ! But we'd have won even then if the lousy Guardsmen hadn't . . ."

Looking at this veteran of the Brelthi-Earth incident Dermod decided that he was one of those worthless types who always manage to live through a war without actually fighting in it. Either that or he was a very low and dirty form of life indeed, because the point of his narrative had begun to shift subtly, and in a direction which Dermod did not like.

" . . . But if you want my advice, friend, you grab yourself a nice safe job at Headquarters—you can usually find a spot in Catering if you're smart—and sit tight in it. The General Staff are just as anxious about their hides as anyone, and you can be sure that they'll run the war from a safe place." He paused and hunched himself closer, then dropped his voice meaningly. "I shouldn't be saying this, you know, but if you can't wangle anything like I mentioned and the going gets really sticky, well, I heard that if you contact the Guard and . . ."

"May I buy you a drink, Soldier?" Dermod cut in quickly at that point, indicating the Lieutenant's two-thirds empty glass and dialling for two of the same. To the fat man he said harshly, "I heard what you've been saying to the Lieutenant here, and I'm ashamed of you! He's going to *fight* this war, aren't you, soldier, and if the rest of the Earth force looks as tough and competent as he does it won't be a long one!" Furiously, he added, "What are you anyway, an undercover Guardsman? You certainly talk like one!"

The fat man protested indignantly at this insinuation until the Lieutenant, still looking rather startled at the idea of anyone thinking him tough and competent, told him to go away. When his drink popped into sight before him he smiled faintly at Dermod and said "Thank you."

Chapter II

The Lieutenant was an imposing sight, Dermot thought ; his tall, rather spare figure was well-suited to the maroon and grey uniform that had been designed for the Earth Expeditionary Force, and with the glittering, thigh-length boots and broad white belt—a hand-down from the traditional webbing worn with oldtime battledress—he made a splendid picture. Only the face surmounting that trim uniform was not soldierly and that bore, to express it in the kindest terms possible, a look of extreme anxiety. Again Dermot cursed the fat man under his breath, then in an effort to undo some of the damage the other's big mouth had wrought he said aloud, "Forget what that yellow slob's been telling you. You're going to fight, soldier, and what is more, you're going to win—this time things will be different.

"I'd like to talk to you for a bit," Dermot went on in tones of one who is asking a great honour. "Not for long, though, as I expect there's a girl or two waiting for a good-looking fellow like you and I wouldn't want—"

"No girls," the Lieutenant interrupted. "You see I'm married . . . just recently . . . and I, she . . ." He choked off into silence, his features working with emotion. For an awful moment Dermot thought he was going to burst into tears.

Dermot could see the whole pitiful picture. Young man picked for Combat, scared ; young wife scared, forbids him to go. Dilemma. He quarrels, leaves to find courage in euphoriacs. *No guts, no backbone, no nothing*, Dermot thought disgustedly. And he was expected to fight a war with material like this !

Oh, *damn* the Guardsmen . . . !

For the Guard was motivated, they claimed, by a great and noble ideal ; the granting of the maximum amount of freedom to every individual entity of every Galactic race. A being was free to engage in any activity whatsoever providing such activities did not infringe on the freedom of other beings. And if two groups of entities felt so strongly that their differences could be settled only by war, why then, the Guard arranged a war for them !

But life, the Guard proclaimed piously, was precious, and if it was to be lost at all then it must be lives of the least worth. With special teams from both sides picking out the worst

soldiers in their opponent's forces—the Guardsmen obligingly put complete psychological dossiers at the disposal of these teams, in the interests, they stated, of fairness—this desire was achieved. Stated simply it meant that the best soldiers never got a chance to fight, that training such soldiers was therefore a waste of time, and that the individuals who did become soldiers and who were later picked to fight were the dregs of the dregs.

The reasons for a man joining the army these days, Dermod thought bitterly, ran the gamut from hysterical or weak-minded patriotism to the simple desire for a uniform with which to increase the chance of success in amatory adventures. If a soldier wasn't a moral louse then he was a psychological wreck.

But the Lieutenant could not help being what he was, and he was, after all, one of the officers on whom Dermod would have to depend in the weeks to come. A little psychological first-aid was indicated here, and quickly. Dermod ignored the imminent water-works and began to speak quietly, confidently and apparently casually about the coming hostilities. And gradually the other began to look less sorry for himself; he began putting in comments of his own and to show more and more interest. Too much interest, perhaps, because he grew suddenly suspicious.

Interrupting Dermod with a jerky wave of his hand, he said, "You keep saying that this war will be different, that the whole campaign won't just fall apart, as it usually does, into an unresolved and inglorious mess—a piece of farcical entertainment for the amusement of the Guardsmen! You keep telling me this over and over. How do you *know*? Who are you anyway . . .?" The Lieutenant stopped short at that point, his eyes lost their alcoholic dullness and became bright and penetrating. He said, "I've seen you somewhere, and recently. Yes! You . . . you're the Major who passed out when the crawler officers came by . . .!"

Dermod felt himself tightening up. This was bad, very, very bad. The Lieutenant might lack many qualities but his intelligence and powers of observation were certainly not at fault. And his voice had been growing steadily louder, and this—the story of the Major-Who-Fainted coming dressed as a civilian to give pep-talks to Combat men—was the sort of gossip which would spread around . . .

No smallest inkling of The Plan must become apparent until the war had actually begun. Everything depended on that. Somehow the Lieutenant had to be shut up.

" . . . You," the other was continuing derisively, "are a fine one to talk about—"

"Silence !"

Dermod spoke quietly, but the rasp of authority was suddenly in his voice. "Listen to me, and when you answer keep your voice down !"

It was a desperate risk he was taking, but there was nothing else he could do. He would have to tell a little—just enough to insure the other's silence—in order to keep the Lieutenant from blabbing a lot of apparently senseless information which could, if it reached the ears of the wrong people, be pieced together to reveal The Plan in its entirety. He said curtly, "I fainted—rather, I *appeared*, to faint—deliberately. Consider, please, the implication behind that statement—if you're not too drunk, that is. When you have you will realise why this conversation must be kept secret, because you'll know that if the Guard even suspected what I have done"

Deliberately he left the sentence unfinished.

But the Lieutenant wasn't too drunk. Surprise and anger at Dermod's suddenly abrupt manner gave place to dawning comprehension. "You must have pulled a faint because you *wanted* to be picked to fight !" he said excitedly, and straight-away began jumping to wrong conclusions to follow his single right one. "And from what you've been saying, the way you seem so confident about everything, there must be others who have done the same thing . . . !"

"You've got it," Dermod said quickly. "Now keep it to yourself. Another drink, soldier?"

The Lieutenant stood up, very straight, very proud, very serious. He said, "I don't think I will. It might make me talk too much tonight and give me a fuzzy head in the morning. From tomorrow on" His eyes shone and he seemed to be listening to the distant sound of bugles. ". . . . I want to be in top condition. I think I'll go home. Goodnight, sir."

His hand jerked spasmodically at his side in the beginnings of a salute before he remembered that Dermod was supposed to be a civilian, then he wheeled and marched out.

Dermod had a pleasant feeling of accomplishment as he rose and followed the Lieutenant out. He had allowed the man to think that there were others on the Earth side like Dermod, but that was the sort of misunderstanding which could help morale so he had let it pass. Mostly, however, he had succeeded in making one frightened man in uniform into a determined and enthusiastic soldier.

As Dermod left the bar, however, the reaction set in. Maybe it was the sight of a Guardsman stalking like a dark green spectre through the noisy, excited crowd, or perhaps it was seeing so many Galactics in the streets. The Earth-human Galactics—their proper designation was Galactic Citizens—regularly visited the settlements where their poor relations gathered because they thought the inhabitants romantic, swashbuckling figures who lived dangerous and colourful lives. The thought that an overwhelming majority of Earth's population was made up of these spineless and degenerate intellectuals filled Dermod with shame and disgust, the more so because he had once counted himself to be one of them. But mainly Dermod felt low because of a growing conviction that he was a single and very puny force trying to move the classic immovable object.

He had to remind himself repeatedly that the object *wasn't* immovable, only very, very big. And that it was so delicately balanced that a very small force indeed, if properly applied, would send it toppling.

Not only on Earth but on practically every other world in the Galactic Union the set-up was essentially the same. At the bottom of the social scale were the malcontents, who were generally neither too ethical nor well-educated, and grouped into settlements which varied in size from a large town to tracts of territory which took up a respectable slice of a continent. And they were intensely, almost fanatically, proud of their glorious past. Because they believed that only among themselves was to be found the drive, idealism and sheer ruggedness of character that had typified the race in the past, they thought of themselves alone as being truly representative of their respective species.

However, in the case of Earth, which was a fairly average one, over ninety-five percent of the population consisted of Galactic Citizens. Apart from a small proportion of scientists and medical men, who admittedly did useful work, they were nothing but a great mass of ineffectual, pleasure-loving

aesthetes who did not feel strongly about anything, least of all who ran things in the Galaxy. The Galactics, therefore, together with their human and non-human equivalents on the other planets of the Union could be discounted as an effective force, which left only the Guard to be dealt with.

Dermod smiled mirthlessly to himself. *Only the Guard . . . !*

The force whose word was law in the Galaxy was not stupid. Where the Galactics were concerned their control was practically non-existent, there being little likelihood of revolt from that quarter. In the settlements, however, the undercover and uniformed Guardsmen swarmed like flies. All over the Galaxy the settlements were trouble spots, potential foci for revolt, and the Guard knew it and took what it thought were the necessary precautions. But this time, Dermod was sure, the trouble piling up was more than even they could handle.

Straightening his shoulders Dermod threw off the last vestiges of his fit of depression ; he had work to do. Turning into another bar he surveyed the place quickly. Two Combat NCOs were at a table discussing something in worried undertones. Dermod went across to them and sat down. He said, " May I buy you a drink, fellows . . . ? "

It was in this and many other ways that Dermod got to know a sizeable number of his men during the succeeding three weeks. He was not impressed. But he believed himself a good enough psychologist to think that his talks with them had done some good—his subject at the Galactics university, before the accident which had allowed him to make a clean break with his former life, had been History and Psychology. It was as if the restless young man of those days had possessed a precognitive faculty, because he could not have chosen a better combination of subjects to prepare him for the task which lay ahead.

Then all at once, with the embarkation of the Earth Expeditionary Force, the task was no longer of the future but of the immediate and urgent present.

Wafted upwards on the ghostly blue pillars of their pressor beams the twenty-seven Guard transports carrying the combatants and their equipment left Earth. Ten short days later—during which Dermod bullied, exhorted and shamelessly tricked the officers under him into accepting his new and alarming ideas on waging war—they were dropping onto War Planet Three, the world which had been set apart as being

most suitable for use in wars between the warm-blooded oxygen-breathers of the Galaxy. But it was another two days before the emptied transports took off and the last of the Guard propagandists, who had insisted on travelling with the Earth force, left for their own base some five hundred miles away. Only then did Dermod breathe easy and, with the knowledge that no part of The Plan had been discovered by the Guardsmen, begin the opening moves of stage two.

He had at least four weeks in which to do pretty much as he pleased—that was the time normally taken for the officers and men to settle in, get used to their weapons and generally coax themselves into something approaching a fighting mood. Or conversely, that unfortunately large number of men who had taken seriously the demoralising stories of the propagandists planned ways of deserting. At the end of this period another Guard psychologist would come around with more unsettling talk, Dermod knew, and then the war would finally get under way.

That was the *usual* way the thing was done . . .

Chapter III

On the first day free of Guard interference Dermod carried out a general inspection of the men. It was a deadly serious occasion, but as he slowly paced along the rigid lines of men he could not help feeling amused at the perplexity and sheer astonishment in the eyes which met his own. They all knew him, of course, to be the Major who had fainted at Enemy's Inspection—why now was he strutting around with a Colonel's insignia on his collar? And why was this recipient of such amazingly rapid promotion carrying out the inspection with only two NCOs attending him instead of a tail of junior officers? Why, for that matter, was there not a single commissioned officer to be seen on the whole parade ground . . . ?

When Dermod had the men stood easy and mounted the small podium to address them it would have been the understatement of all time to say that he had their undivided attention. He stood silent for a few minutes, looking at them and hefting the microphone he carried from hand to hand, then he spoke :

“You men are curious about me,” he began quietly, “and with reason. Well, I'm not going to satisfy it. That job I'll

leave to your officers for later this evening. Let it suffice to say that there have been certain things going on which had to be kept from the Guardsmen for a while, but now the need for secrecy where you men are concerned is gone. What I am now going to talk about is your enemy, his physical make-up, weapons and the most efficient methods of killing him. I will also touch on the tactics and strategic principles which will insure our winning this war."

Quite a few mouths dropped open at this cool assumption that they could accomplish something which had not been done for centuries. Dermod ignored them and continued :

"In a straight fight between a crawler and one of us there simply would be no contest," he said. "The Kelgians are nothing but great shapeless sacks of tegument and fur suffused with blood and other fluid matter, with no skeletal structure to speak of. A deep wound anywhere on their bodies if not treated quickly by special medical equipment causes them to bleed to death fairly quickly. We on the other hand are tough, which is why the Guard in an effort to even things up have given them explosive and us solid projectile ammunition. Even with this advantage in fire-power, however, I am still convinced that there will be no contest . . ."

They were not liking this part of it, not one little bit. He was forcing them to think in terms of a possible gory end for themselves. Hastily Dermod moved onto a slightly less morbid point, thinking bitterly as he spoke of the other Commanders throughout history who had harangued their men before battle : Henry at Agincourt, Montgomery at El Alamein, Claudius before the climactic battle which was to give him all of Britain. Those men had inspired such love, loyalty or idealistic fervour that their followers would willingly have given their lives for their superiors.

But these days it was not ideals a Commander stressed, nor did he exhort his men to Death or Glory. He promised instead to take good care of them ; he guaranteed not Glory, but Safety.

". . . Make no mistake about it, men," Dermod went on, "the strategy I have in mind is going to cost lives, enemy lives. Where the safety of you men and myself is concerned—I intend to fight this war in front with you and not from the base here—there is a saying I have which covers the situation : We can't live forever, but we'll have a damned good try !

"Oh yes, you will be safe, men," he continued in a grim tone. "But safety does not lie in avoiding decisive contact with the enemy, in running away or in deserting. It lies in being able to kill your enemy before he can kill you ; efficiently, quickly and with the minimum of fuss. You must fall on him while he's least expecting it—at feeding time, while he's asleep, and especially when he's thoroughly convinced that you're nowhere within a hundred miles of him. You must rise out of the very ground he's walking on and slay him before he even knows that he is being threatened. Look there !"

At a signal from Dermod the missing officers began moving onto the parade ground in a straggling single file, and immediately a howl of laughter went up from the men. But their usually resplendent and immaculately tailored officers continued to slouch past, out of step, crouching slightly and with heads moving restlessly from side to side. They were a ludicrous sight with their blackened faces, their shapeless, drab yet oddly familiar uniforms whose outlines were made vague by haphazard blotches of brown and green and dull yellow paint, not to mention the grimy netting draped from their helmets and the odd scraps of vegetation sticking to it. The only thing clean and shining were the rifles they carried.

Watching, Dermod gave himself a small pat on the back. His address to the men, up to now anyway, had not been the wheedling, cajolling and over-flattering kind that they had been expecting. Instead it had been so short and to the point that it had left most of them feeling stunned. But now was the psychological moment for a little comedy relief, the time to relax the tensions which had been built up and at the same time to teach a very important lesson . . .

The ragged file of officers spread out into line abreast and walked a few yards into the scrub which bordered the parade ground, then quietly, incredibly, they disappeared. The laughter died as if it had been switched off.

"I've very little more to say to you," Dermod resumed conversationally. "Not next month or next week, but tomorrow, you will begin learning how to become invisible—how to kill and how to be safe from the enemy. You will take those pretty uniforms you're wearing and rip off all the fancy work, and chop off those elegant boots below the calf—and if any of you spit and polish experts try to keep a shine on what's left I'll personally skin him alive. Then you'll daub

paint and sew rags and hang greenery on yourselves until I won't know whether any one of you is a tree or just a bump in the ground of this God-forsaken planet. In short you'll learn the art of camouflage. And when the Guard psychologist comes round a month from now with his lying, unsettling talk, you will be well on the way towards winning the war.

"Because the enemy will not expect us to act so quickly, you see. They will still be busy just working up courage for a fight. So you will have the advantages of surprise, of tactics and fighting methods that are a complete departure from recent tradition as well as the purely physical advantage—"

Someone started to cheer then and it was taken up. Dermot broke off, surprise and a mixture of other emotions silencing him momentarily. His every word had been calculated, a psychological push-button, but he had not expected such a strong response so quickly. He felt pleased yet at the same time contemptuous of these men who could be swayed so easily, and he was angry with himself for no good reason at all. Suddenly he bellowed, "*Silence !*"

When they had quietened down he went on, "As I was about to say, this purely physical advantage is of least importance. You are no longer human against caterpillar—you must sink all your softer emotions and instincts for the duration and become cold, merciless and efficient killers. From this day on you transcend the purely physical in that your job is a training and a philosophy and a way of life. You are such that no other race in the entire Galaxy will stand before you, for your occupation is . . . Warrior.

"And the cheering," he added, "will keep until you've won the war. Dismiss !

But they cheered their fool heads off anyway.

General Prentiss was waiting for him when he returned to the Operations Room. The General had done nothing since leaving Earth beyond conferring on Dermot the brevet rank of Colonel as had been previously arranged so that he would be the ranking officer on active service. Though possessed of a keen brain he neither was nor looked the part of a soldier, having risen to his position through politics. But it was Prentiss, when he had first met Dermot and realised the potentialities of the other's unique talents, who had put to him the first rough outlines of what was later to become The Plan.

Returning Dermod's salute casually, the General said, "I was listening to you, Colonel, and you have them practically eating out of your hand." He smiled slyly. "Now what?"

Dermod felt a brief resurgence of the awkwardness he sometimes felt before this small, podgy man with the restless eyes who was the political and military leader of all the non-Galactics population of Earth. He would have been happier if Earth's leader had been made of sterner stuff, but supposed that the Guardsmen took good care to see that the strong-minded individuals did not rise to positions of power. But he wished the General would be less ingratiating towards his subordinates, and not smile so much, and generally act more like a General . . .

Hastily pushing such thoughts out of his mind as being unjust and unworthy, Dermod replied, "Next we will have a Signal Victory. Nothing big, you understand—it may be only a clash between patrols—but it must be decisive enough to convince the men that they are unbeatable. If they firmly believe that, then they *are* unbeatable. What I had in mind was something like this . . ."

"Sounds all right," said the General when Dermod had finished. He got to his feet, smiled his sly smile again and left. Dermod, who had been about to suggest that the General go over some of the longer-term plans with him, shook his head irritably, then went over and locked the door. He settled down for a long, uninterrupted think.

War Planet Three—nobody thought enough of it to give it a proper name, though it had several improper ones—was one of several uninhabited worlds set aside by the Guard for the business of conflict on the purely physical level. The others had environments suited to chlorine-breathing life-form, or underwater species, or even forms of life which lived by the direct conversion of solar-energy. But Three was suitable, just barely, for warm-blooded oxygen-breathers so it was here that the Guard had dumped the Earth-humans and Kelgians to fight their war.

The planet had nothing at all to recommend it beyond its atmosphere. The single vast, diamond-shaped continent which lay along its equator was nothing but a monotonous expanse of near-desert broken by low, barren mountains and criss-crossed by ravines and gullies and dried-up river-beds. The few islands which made up the rest of the planet's land mass were simply smaller editions of the one and only conti-

ment. Yet vegetation grew with surprising profusion on this bleak terrain—thick, coarse-leaved plants that carpeted the surface with brown and dull green and sickly yellow. But the plant-life was unable to support any animal species above a couple of inches in size, nor was it profuse enough to keep down the dust.

This, then, was the battleground.

A little over two hundred miles eastwards lay the Kelgian base, and approximately five hundred miles due North was the small establishment maintained by the Guard. All of the area in between was simply a vague blur to Dermod at the moment, a very hazy battleground indeed. Until he could draw accurate maps and obtain detailed photographs of the intervening territory there was very little he could do.

Having decided that no planning was possible until such details were available, Dermod decided to call it a day.

Chapter IV

Next morning the campaign got under way. Formed up in four battalions of roughly two thousand men each, with Bandsmen and their reproducers positioned at intervals along the lines, the Earth Expeditionary Force marched smartly out of the Base. The four columns gradually drew apart as they headed for their separate areas of operation until they were hidden by the dust of the supply trucks tailing them. Dermod stopped watching them at that point and returned for consultations with his Air Arm.

This consisted of Lieutenants Dowling, Clifton and Briggs together with about thirty maintenance men. The latter were included in the two thousand or so supply, transport and clerical personnel which Dermod had decided would be absolutely hopeless as fighting men—they were the cowardly cowards as opposed to the potentially brave cowards who had just left, though even they would be given the same training when their duties allowed it. The three Lieutenants, on the other hand, were special, hand-picked cowards.

All three possessed the type of personality which functioned best when alone, all at one time or another had owned helicopters and so were not afraid of height, and all were individuals who developed enthusiasm quickly and were easily led. Lieutenant Clifton, the man Dermod had encountered in the

bar on the night after he was picked for combat, was particularly impressionable and he had been made the leader.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Dermod said when they had filed in. "I don't want to hang around here any longer than necessary so we'll keep this brief.

"While we were landing in the transports," he began briskly, "I had you men at the viewports photographing the terrain, and although some of the results were good they only give a rough idea of the surface of the continent we are at present occupying. Now I require the *fine* details—every mountain, pass, hole in the ground, or bush. This data is of vital importance if I am to formulate tactics that will ensure the irreducible minimum of casualties on our side. I suggest also that you do your mapping in the early morning or late afternoon, when longer shadows will give a truer idea of surface contours." He paused then, and made his tone at once serious and faintly apologetic as he went on. "You men have a lonely, hard, at the same time boring job, but you are three of the most important people in the whole force. On your work depends our whole future strategy.

"Your first assignment is to map the territory between here and the enemy base but without—I repeat, *without*—going near that base. We do not want them to suspect that we've already commenced operations against them.

"That is all," Dermod ended, smiling, "except that I want Lieutenant Clifton to fly me out to the heads of the four columns. The rest of you tag along and practise your formation flying for the general edification of your ground-bound brothers. Thank you, gentlemen. Dismiss."

Dermod flew out to the four battalions, now spread over thirty miles of territory, and said a few words of encouragement to the officers in charge. The visits were not strictly necessary but Dermod had promised that he would fight with and lead his men, and he did not want to give a bad impression by staying at the base. While Clifton and himself were thus engaged the other two aircraft performed clumsy aerobatics at an extremely safe height. The hypno-tapes which the flyers had taken gave complete knowledge of how to operate their machines—but knowledge was not skill, that only came with practise. At the conclusion of his visits Dermod signalled the planes to form a V-formation and they headed in the direction of the enemy base.

An arrowhead of jets screaming and thundering towards the enemy lines would have been much more stimulating to the eyes of the men below, Dermot thought sadly, but even in these three small aircraft there was powerful symbolism.

From two thousand feet Dermot thought that his command did not look like anything much. Each column had been allocated three half-treads—for scouting ahead and on each flank—and twelve balloon-tyred trucks for supply duties. The scouts were in their proper positions even though there was no chance of the crawlers attacking so soon, but Dermot had wanted his officers to learn good habits early. The number of supply vehicles had been nicely calculated to allow proper service without giving surplus space for the lazy types to hitch rides ; he wanted everybody to be as hard and fit as possible.

And the battalions themselves were no longer orderly columns of marching men, they had become like chopped-up worms with little eddies and patches of men either pacing or motionless behind them. Training had begun and the combatants were already learning how to shoot, how to throw rocks—they were still too butterfingers to be allowed to practise with real grenades—and how to attain the invisibility of the perfect chameleon. Dermot had had the idea of sending each company forward in turn with instructions to ambush their marching comrades, and this seemed to be working out very well indeed : it taught the marchers to be observant and the ambushers to be quick in concealing themselves, because they had to run fast to get ahead of the column and in the heat of the afternoon they did not feel like running too far.

Dermot watched until the units of his command shrank and disappeared over the horizon behind him, then he turned his attention forward.

Immediately on his return to base Dermot called up the General, because during the flight a disquieting thought had occurred to him. He said, " Sir, we were allowed three aircraft for our use. What did the crawlers get extra ? "

" How should I know," said the General, and laughed. " Possibly anti-aircraft guns. Are you worried ? "

" No, sir," said Dermot shortly, and rang off.

He was angered at the other's light-hearted dismissal of the matter. Couldn't the General see that if it *was* A-A guns, those same guns could also be used as ground artillery ? But it would hardly be anti-aircraft weapons, Dermot told himself ; that

would be too straightforward a solution for the Guard. For the Guardsmen were fair, fiendishly fair, and Dermod was now sure that if they had not told the Earth side what they were giving the Kelgians to balance the three aircraft, then neither had they told the enemy that the Earth forces possessed those aircraft. Dermod resolved to keep his possession of the planes a secret for as long as was possible.

But as he retired that night he could not help wondering what surprise the crawlers would spring on them. It quite ruined his sleep.

Two days later Lieutenant Clifton returned from a flight fairly stuttering with excitement. When Dermod had him calmed down he reported that he had observed an enemy column leaving the Kelgian base. Their direction of movement was not towards the Earth forces, but inclined southwards by an angle of about forty degrees. He had not been near enough to get an accurate idea of their numbers or composition but . . .

Dermod cut him short at that point, making no attempt to hide the anger he felt : " You were ordered not to go near that base !"

Pride and the confident expectation of a pat on the back changed to growing dismay as Clifton said hurriedly, " It was a navigational error, sir. But I stayed west of them all the time, in the sun. And the updraught from a mountain let me stay there with my engine shut off so they didn't even hear me. I could have glided there all day—"

" How close exactly were you ?"

" Six, maybe seven, miles."

At a distance of six miles and his machine hovering silently in the glare of the sun, Dermod thought that it was next to impossible that Clifton had been spotted. As he thought of the Lieutenant simultaneously holding his plane in that updraught, keeping it between the sun and his objective and somehow managing to keep that objective under observation through his glasses, Dermod found his anger evaporating. Clifton had displayed considerable cleverness and initiative. But at the moment he looked as one momentarily expecting the wrath of God to descend on him. Dermod smiled suddenly and said, " Relax, Clifton. You did the wrong thing but used your head to turn it to our advantage. I like that. Do you think you can do it again ?"

Clifton nodded eagerly. "It's very mountainous and there are always up-currents just before sunset."

"Good. Then you will keep that enemy column under observation at that time every day, and report their movements to me wherever I am. But," Dermod concluded with great emphasis, "if there's the slightest risk of your being seen, pull out at once. Understood? Very good, Clifton, dismiss."

When the Lieutenant had gone Dermod settled back to think. So the crawlers had sent out a column, the numbers and composition of which was still unknown. Dermod could, however, make a good guess at the type of beings making it up, as well as the reasons for their commander sending them out so soon. If Dermod had been the usual type of Earth officer he would have been doing something similar at the moment.

In every army these days there was a proportion who, besides being just no good themselves, exerted a very bad influence on the others—the bad apples in a barrel of already over-ripe fruit. While the training and general morale-boosting of the others went on in and around the base, these individuals were usually sent out on some mission of small importance—such as scavenging for material abandoned in previous wars—to get them out of the way. Usually they hid out or deserted and their commanders considered them small loss. But Dermod had done the reverse to this, keeping his bad apples at base and his best men in the field from the start where, if things worked out as he hoped, his best would soon make contact with the worst of the enemy . . .

After a second report from Clifton next day, Dermod angled his first and second battalions southward to head them off—though as yet his men knew nothing of the enemy force. Training continued steadily and without pause. On the third day out from the base it began to lose the aspect of being a new, exciting game to the men as muscles and joints protested against such highly unusual exercise. From the fourth to the sixth day the effects of their training were beginning to show in their quicker responses to orders, their great physical stamina and their increased self-confidence, but they were becoming so stiff and weary that they were about ready to mutiny.

But Dermod kept hounding them. When a party from the third battalion found, while scavenging, a crate of peculiar, alien-shaped brackets he decided that whatever they had been

used for once they would make perfect entrenching tools now, so to the training syllabus was added instruction on how to dig a foxhole actually while under fire from an enemy—by pushing a mound of earth up in front and using this rough cover to dig in deeper. The men did not object too much to the exertion or dirtiness of the process, but the soil in the area was crawling with insect life which seemed to be all teeth.

The personnel in the scout cars were definitely the most comfortable men in the whole army, until one of them found a wrecked and half-buried oil tanker from some previous conflict. Dermod salvaged enough scrap metal from it to armour the cabs of his scout cars against everything but a hand-grenade lobbed in at close range. But the driving cabs became unbearably hot at midday and just bearably so for the rest of the time between dawn and sunset, so the result was that the drivers felt ten times safer, performed their jobs much more efficiently because of this and grew as murderously angry as everyone else.

By the ninth day they were all so tired, sore and irate that they were ready to fight with each other. But on that day Dermod had lined up for them a small force of the enemy . . .

Chapter V

On the face of it the whole plan looked so easy—Clifton insisted that it possessed Classic Simplicity—that Dermod felt a little ashamed of it. He had had the crawler column under such close observation for the past six days that he could almost tell the direction and distance they would travel to within a couple of miles and a few degrees of arc. As well as knowing the enemy's mind he also knew every hill, gully and potentially useful patch of vegetation in the area where he had decided the first clash would take place. So the trap he set—using the men of the second battalion and positioning them in the underbrush along both slopes of a valley which the enemy column was almost certain to use—was fool-proof, and as well as possessing the element of surprise his men outnumbered the crawlers by about six to one !

But to make absolutely certain, to be *sure* the enemy used this valley and not the slightly more difficult pass to the south or the dried-up riverbed to the northeast, the trap had to be baited.

Dermod gave a lot of thought to the type of person who would best fill the role of cheese in the mouse-trap. Everything hinged on this first blow at the enemy being successful. Finally he decided that the only person whose abilities and understanding of the situation he could be absolutely sure of was himself.

So that was why, on the ninth day after leaving Base and two hours before noon, Dermod and the Sergeant driver of the scout-car which was concealed some distance behind them lay motionless in the undergrowth watching the approach of the crawler column. The Sergeant, a man called Davis, kept up a continual and luridly derogatory criticism in whispers : the Kelgians were like unprintable snails, they made his skin crawl the way they humped themselves along, and how such slow-moving, awkward and generally loathsome creatures had the nerve to think they could fight Humans was beyond the Sergeant.

Dermod let him continue unchecked, knowing that Davis was merely trying to reassure himself by negating the importance of the enemy, until the crawlers were within two hundred yards of them. At that distance the enemy column, which had resembled nothing so much as a sluggish river of mercury rolling towards him, was beginning to show as separate, silver-furred entities ; and the low, eerie humming which, to a form of life which undulated on its stomach was probably the equivalent of a rousing quick march, was plain enough to make his scalp prickle.

Dermod said, " Quiet, Davis. Back to the car ! "

With Dermod in the observer's seat Davis sent the scout-car charging out of its concealment and into full view of the enemy. He halted it momentarily as if taken by surprise, then turned and made off in the direction of the valley where Dermod had set his trap. Looking through the rear observation slit a few seconds later, Dermod confidently expected to see the crawlers in hot pursuit of what they must think was a lone enemy scout-car taken by surprise. But instead it was the crawlers who were surprised apparently, and frightened. Instead of giving chase the sudden appearance of the car had thrown them into confusion—they were milling about in disorder and some of them had even begun to move back . . . !

Dermod swore. " Outside, quick ! " he ordered. " Lie down and pretend to tinker with the engine, pretend we're in trouble.

No, better still," he amended hastily as Davis was dropping to the ground beside him, "spill some oil on the bushes there and set fire to it . . ."

A few seconds later Dermod could not see the Kelgians for yellow, greasy smoke—Davis certainly had not spared the oil! But the crawlers had at last caught onto the idea that the Earth scout-car was in trouble. Bullets began whining at them through the smoke to explode somewhere far ahead. Then two hit the side of the armoured cab above them, loosening one of the sections of plating.

"Inside!" Dermod shouted. But the Sergeant had anticipated him and if Dermod had been a split-second slower Davis would have been away without him.

The explosive bullets were bursting all around them now, pelting the sides of the car with an erratic hail of flying earth, rock-fragments and shrapnel. But the direct hits were the worst—the noise of exploding projectiles expending their force against the metal of the cab jarred his brain like a physical blow. He was tossed about in his seat like a rag doll by the jolting of the car, the cab interior was stifling hot and the place reeked of fuel from a sprung oil line somewhere.

In an odd, objective corner of his mind he wondered how he could have been such a fool to think this sort of thing pleasantly exciting, while at the same time he used his foot to kick Davis's off the accelerator so that they would not outpace the enemy. The Sergeant's instructions had been to keep just beyond grenade range and to handle his vehicle in a manner which would suggest to the enemy that he was alone and panic-stricken. Because he really was panic-stricken by this time Davis tended to ignore the first half of his instructions while unconsciously obeying the second half to the letter. So this vicious game of footsie continued until the slopes of the valley where Dermod's men were posted went jerking past the observation slits, and still the scout-car fled.

All of the enemy column had to be inside the valley before the trap was sprung; Dermod had stressed that part repeatedly. Now he wished that he had not been so definite in the matter.

For the constant stream of explosive bullets was picking and tearing at the armour plating surrounding the cab, and the damage being done to unarmoured sections of the vehicle could only be imagined. The smell of fuel was so strong now that it hung like a choking, stinking fog. Then suddenly there was a

sharp *clang*. Something metallic screeched across the back of his bucket seat, a violent tug at his shoulder-padding slewed him round and simultaneously something else tore a line of fire across his cheek. Bright, glaring sunlight flooded into the driving cab where sunlight had no right to be, and the fact of the gaping hole which had just been blown in the protective plating had barely registered in Dermod's noise-numbered brain when a sickening vibration shook the vehicle. With a scream of stripped gears it ground to a halt.

Davis, his mouth wide open and face contorted was clawing at the door handle. Dermod shouted at him to stay inside, but couldn't even hear his own voice above the noise, and grabbed his arm just as he succeeded in getting it open. An explosive bullet caught the Sergeant full in the face, his whole head burst into bloody jam and he fell back inside. Dermod let go his arm hastily and slammed the door shut again.

But the cab's interior was getting hotter and hotter despite the air blowing through the great tear in the plating. Dermod's feet were burning, the floor was beginning to glow red and fire shone through the sprung seams. He would have to get out of here, and risk the crawler bullets—the alternative was to be burned alive. He yanked frantically at the door handle. For a heart-stopping second it stuck, then Dermod tumbled out and wriggled and rolled frenziedly away from the scout-car. He was only a matter of yards away from it when the fuel tanks caught and it went up with a roar.

As he rolled away from the blistering heat a new sound battered at his senses, the thunder of nearly two thousand rifles crashing out as one. He lay still then while the Human rifle fire gradually slackened off and the peculiar mewing, bubbling noises which came from no human throat had also died away. Then slowly he rolled onto his back and sat up.

Singly and in tumbled heaps the crawler column lay like so many bulging, shapeless sacks that leaked bright pink—crawler blood was an improbably pastel shade compared with Human—and excited groups of his men surrounded them. He would have to order the crawler dead buried, Dermod thought tiredly, and their transport camouflaged for future use by himself. Most important those deadly, explosive-projectile rifles would have to be cached away safely, and men trained to use them. No smallest trace of what had happened

here must be left for possible discovery by the Guard. And he would have to say a few congratulatory words to his men.

All at once Dermod felt an intense aversion towards doing any of those things. He wanted only to get away from this place, and the memory of Davis's head. He wanted to go back to Base and surround himself with books and maps and the theoretical problems of war, because the practical side of it had turned out so much less pleasant than he had expected. But he had his duty to perform, he told himself as he climbed slowly to his feet and walked away from the burning scout-car, he had a war to win.

The victorious Second marched back to base and were joined there within a few days by the others. Training continued with undiminished intensity in the vicinity of the base, the only difference being that the men wore their spare full dress uniforms of maroon and grey instead of the new combat garb—the Guard psychologist was expected daily and Dermod did not want him to notice anything too unusual. For the Guardsmen had sharp eyes and there were enough inconsistencies for him to spot even as things were.

And the Guard psychologist did spot something wrong, something terribly, inexplicably wrong from his point of view. He came bursting into the Operations Room, then occupied by the General, a Lieut-Colonel (Supply) called Simons and Dermod, and he was in a towering rage.

Apparently he had just finished addressing the men, having given them the usual guff about his organisation being both benevolent and at the same time champions of the ideal of maximum freedom for the individual, and that while the Guard would naturally allow them to make war if they wanted to, it felt grave concern over the fact that so many promising young men were intent on getting themselves killed. He had dwelt at length and in gory detail, as only Guard psychologists knew how, on the manner of death which could overtake them if they persisted in their folly. He had appealed to them to take instead the intelligent, more civilised course and continue to live instead of dying horribly in screaming agony . . .

Normally a quarter of those present could be expected to desert after an address like that, the Guardsman knew, and the rest would be so demoralised that the war would simply peter out in a matter of weeks. But this time he wasn't getting through to them at all. And when he had tried to tackle some

of them individually they either laughed at him or walked away !

Dermod cursed under his breath when he heard that part of it. He had told the men over and over how to behave when the Guard psychologist was talking to them. But the men of the Second had been blooded in battle—they strutted about the base like conquering heroes—and the men of the other battalions were begging Dermod to lead them to similar or even greater glories. There was scarcely a man in the whole base who looked or acted like the coward which he in fact was.

But they could have tried harder, Dermod thought angrily as he listened to the Guardsman's tirade.

“ . . . Just what is happening here, anyway ? ” the psychologist was shouting. “ Those men have become *fanatics* ! That's the only word to describe them. I don't like that, it's not our policy to allow— ”

“ You were late in visiting us, ” the General interrupted slyly, “ so I presume you spoke to the crawlers first. How many of them did you get to desert ? ”

“ None of *our* men will desert, ” Lieut-Colonel Simons put in boastfully, “ so that means we'll start the war with a numerical advantage. We'll eat them up ! ”

Simons was in charge of catering and supplies—being a senior officer possessed of several well-developed neuroses, which included panic reaction to sudden noise, the inability to sleep outdoors and the impossibility of sleeping at all without a light in his bedroom, that was the only duty he was capable of handling—and had never been off the base. But he, too, had been caught up in the martial fervour currently suffusing the place. Dermod swore again. Both Simons and the General had been told that they must eat humble pie with the Guardsman—also grovel, lick his boots and scurry at his beck and call—so that he would take himself off as soon as possible and let them get on with the war in peace. Instead of that they were actually *baiting* the psychologist !

And by their stupid, unthinking boastfulness they were jeopardising the whole Plan . . .

Dermod mumbled something hastily to the General, excused himself and left the room. In the outer offices were Clifton and two NCOs. He told them exactly what he wanted done, then waited the ten minutes necessary for their astonish-

ment to abate sufficiently so that they could do it. There might be no need for the precautions he was taking, but from the way the meeting next door was being mishandled . . . He shook his head and angrily re-entered.

" . . . Somebody or something has infected these men with delusions of heroism," the Guardsman was saying in tones equally mixed with anger and contempt. " Well, we'll see how that delusion stands up when the Kelgians start blowing chunks out of their bodies with explosive bullets and—"

" They'll stand, don't worry !" Simons broke in again, so carried away with excitement that his voice had gone falsetto. " We licked them once and we'll—"

" *Simons !*" Dermod barked suddenly, unable to contain himself any longer. " Shut you're blasted trap !"

The Guardsman looked startled, then suddenly thoughtful. Finally he stood up and said quietly, " The whole situation here is wrong. From a slip just made by the Lieut-Colonel I've learned that you have fought an engagement with the Kelgians which even their commander does not know about ! Yet I am convinced that it occurred from the high morale of the men here. Also, I do not know of any army where a Major can tell a Lieut-Colonel to shut up. So until these points are cleared up I am calling this war off. The necessary transports will be sent for just as soon as my copter takes me back to Guard Base—"

The General and Simons both started to protest, their faces pale with the realisation of where their over-confidence and loose talk had landed them. Dermod took a grim delight in watching them stew in their own juice. It was General Prentiss who became coherent first :

" But you can't do that ! The rules say that if you don't dissuade a certain proportion of us from fighting then the war can go on without interference from the Guard until one or both forces decide to—"

" What I see here," the Guardsman cut in, " smacks of a well-planned and extensive conspiracy, so the rules can go hang. We made 'em so we can break 'em. Good-day, gentlemen."

Dermod had unobtrusively placed his elbow on the outer office buzzer when he saw how events were shaping. Now he got up quickly and held open the door for the Guardsman. He smiled when the psychologist stopped dead in the doorway, then turned and said stiffly, " Very dramatic. What does it mean ?"

Closing the door again on the six men wearing combat garb, purposeful looks and rifles carried at the port who formed a threatening semi-circle outside it, Dermod said awkwardly, "I've never done this before, so don't know the formula. You're under arrest. Now I think I'm required to disarm you."

The Guardsman actually smiled. Indicating the caduceus on his collar, he said, "The Med and Psych branch don't carry arms, except as protection against non-intelligent carnivorous life-forms." He gave a meaningful look that took in the base and everyone in it and added sardonically, "My mistake."

The General and Simons were looking utterly stunned by Dermod's action. He left them that way and trailed by the guard detail, conducted the psychologist out of the building. As they were crossing the parade ground the Guardsman's copter—useless so far as Dermod was concerned because he had no hypno-tapes on how to handle it—was being wheeled out of sight, and Clifton's aircraft took off . . .

Next day the Earth Expeditionary Force was on the move again.

Chapter VI

Dermod had addressed them very briefly while they had been drawn up in marching order just before leaving. He had said that the Second Battalion had covered itself with glory already, but only because they had been the ones nearest to that crawler column—it could have been any one of the four. They all had been given equal training and now everyone would get a chance to use it on the enemy. He wasn't going to exhort them to fight, or coax or flatter them into it, or even use full-blown phrases about their duty to their planet and that he expected every man to do that duty. As men of Earth, some of the few left who were still conscious of their world's glorious, pre-Space Age traditions, he did not expect them to fight. As beings who in the past had been the greatest race of warriors ever known, he knew they would.

He had added that the heroic Sergeant Davis had been the only casualty so far, and that if they all remembered everything they had been taught and kept cool when situations arose which seemed to be dangerous for them, then it was quite conceivable that Davis would be the only casualty. That

was the way he and, he was sure, everybody else wanted it. Dermod had ended sternly with the warning that if any stupid over-excitabile idiot did something silly and got himself shot then he would personally strangle him with his own two hands.

They had marched out then, cheering, and Dermod had taken off with Lieutenant Briggs to check on the disposition of scout cars and flanking parties. Clifton had not returned, of course, and as the shadows of Dermod's plane flickered back and forth across the columns of marching men two thousand feet below he wondered if he would ever see the Lieutenant again. He was depending on Clifton for a really vital mission, and if the flyer was dead, if his mangled or charred body was even now lying amid the wreckage of his machine somewhere en route to the Guard base, Dermod did not know what he was going to do. When Briggs set him down beside his scout-car nobody had any idea just how unsure of himself their commander was feeling.

Dermod pulled himself into the unprotected back of the scout-car and banged on the cab plating for the driver to start. The car moved off with a lurch which sent Dermod flopping into the vacant seat beside the Guardsman. He had decided to take the psychologist along rather than risk holding him prisoner at the base where some of the impressionable types might have been talked into letting him go. At the moment the Guardsman was watching everything with an intense, almost clinical curiosity. His eyes had an absent look, as if in his mind he was already working on a paper about all this for one of his professional journals.

Suddenly the psychologist spoke :

"How did you do it, Major—I mean Colonel?" he said sardonically. "I've heard some of your men talking about you, and you're nothing less than a legendary figure. And I'm interested in this great battle you won . . ."

"It wasn't a great battle," Dermod said irritably. He was feeling strangely dissatisfied with himself and anxious about Clifton, not to mention the fact that he was worried sick about the effects of recent events on The Plan. And the General was acting like a frightened old woman and not backing him up at all—Dermod's arrest of the Guardsman, the only move he could have made in the circumstances, had scared the General nearly to death. But as Dermod continued he had

his feelings enough under control to keep his voice pitched too low for the driver to overhear him. He said, "We outnumbered them nearly six to one and we took them by surprise. It was a victory, but not a battle."

"Call it what you like," said the Guardsman, "my chief concern is the casualty list. There were two hundred and fifty-three beings in that column you ambushed—I found that out at the Kelgian base—and that life-form is easily damaged as you know. What percentage was killed, and where are the prisoners?"

"There were no prisoners."

"You . . . you killed them all?"

Dermod nodded.

For the rest of the day the Guardsman did not speak. His face was pale and he did not look at all well, and he sat as far away from Dermod as he possibly could.

The Guardsman remained untalkative for the four days which followed, during which Briggs and Dowling kept the crawler base under aerial surveillance. They reported that the enemy was scattered in groups of five hundred or so in the hills which surrounded their base, apparently engaged in general training manoeuvres. Except for the evening of the second day when they had set fire to a sizeable area of vegetation—very likely through carelessness with their explosive bullets—there was nothing unusual in the reports.

It had been on that same evening that Dermod had decided it was no longer necessary to hide his possession of aircraft from the enemy, because Dowling had returned from his flight with two bullet holes in his wing-tip. Dowling, pasty-faced with fear, had told Dermod on landing that if those bullets had connected with a structural member instead of going through the fabric without exploding they might have wrecked the plane and he would have been killed. His colleague Briggs was present at the time and agreed with him. Both informed Dermod that they would not fly again.

It had taken three hours and all of Dermod's powers of persuasion to make them change their minds, and when they did it was only on condition that they did their observing well beyond the range of crawler fire. Reports on bulk movements of the enemy continued to be accurate but in the finer details—specifically data on what it was the crawlers had been given to balance his three aircraft—Dermod knew nothing. If only he had Clifton . . .

All his plans and operations so carefully being worked out in advance were like structures raised on sand if Clifton had been unsuccessful. Yet he had to keep on, knowing all the time that at any moment a Guard warfleet could come screaming down to wreck everything.

And gradually he was coming to hate the General for a weak-willed, frightened old woman: Prentiss was continually ordering him to send the Guard prisoner back to the Earth base, obviously to arrange some sort of deal with him. He was beginning to hate himself also for his part in this great and noble crusade to release the Galaxy from the tyranny of the Guard, because he more than suspected that the bulk of the population were just too apathetic to care one way or the other. But most of all he hated what he was doing to his men.

Dermod was in the state of mind where he did not know whether he wanted a soft shoulder or a whipping boy when on the fifth day the Guardsman decided to re-open conversation—almost at the point where he had previously left off.

He said quietly, "You must understand, Colonel, that we Guardsmen get around a lot. In our perhaps peculiar view nearly all forms of intelligent life are of equal worth, so that the death of so many Kelgians affects me as strongly—or to be completely honest, very nearly as strongly—as the slaughter of an equal number of Earth-humans. Why was it necessary to kill them all, do you contemplate doing the same thing again, and how do you manage to sleep nights?"

"Taking your questions in reverse order," said Dermod heavily, "First, none of your business. Second: I plan to attack the enemy again, and often. Finally, it was not necessary to kill all of them, but the safest course was to do so. Furthermore, I could not have stopped—"

"I know, I know," the Guardsman interrupted. "I've heard all about Davis and yourself and the exploit in the scout-car. But could you not have given orders to take prisoners instead of simply butchering two hundred and fifty—"

"I could not!" Dermod cut in angrily. "Put yourself in my position for a moment. If I had ordered that the column be ambushed but not all of its members killed—that only the crawlers who resisted strongly were to be killed and the others who appeared to be demoralised or frightened were to be

taken prisoner—and remember that you forbid us the use of Translators, or even radio for communications between ourselves—I would have been introducing a multiplicity of objectives into the operation, which invariably causes confusion. Some of the crawlers being taken prisoner would have misunderstood what we were trying to do and panicked, or even tried to rally, and a large number of humans would have been killed or injured.

“I can’t allow that to happen to my men,” Dermod ended grimly, “because if they sustained casualties in anything but very small numbers they would take to their heels. The only way to make soldiers of them was to train them to fight with safety. That means few or no prisoners I’m afraid.”

“You certainly have your problems,” the Guardsman said in tones oozing with mock sympathy. He was silent for several minutes while the car bounced and lurched across a dried-up river bed and ploughed through the scrub on the other side. Then he asked suddenly, “Do you realise what you’re doing?”

Dermod sighed. He said tiredly, “Yes. I am taking men who are lacking in all the finer qualities—courage, self-discipline, unselfishness, a code of ethics—and encouraging them to get used to and like the killing. And as you know yourself it is the cowards, weaklings and bullies who, once they have been shown how, make the most vicious and sadistic killers. That was demonstrated at the ambush . . .”

“You must feel real proud of yourself,” said the Guardsman drily, “to have accomplished so much.”

Dermod regarded him levelly for several seconds, then said, “What do you think?”

The Guardsman looked thoughtful. “A couple of minutes ago I would have said yes, you do, to that. Now I’m not sure what I think . . .” He trailed off into silence and remained that way for the rest of the afternoon.

Chapter VII

Two days later Dermod’s army was traversing the rising ground below the foothills of the ring of mountains which surrounded the crawler base, and his plan was to contact—and eliminate a sizable portion of—the enemy on the day following. He was forced to direct operations from the

ground now, the terrain being impossible for landing aircraft. Dowling and Briggs had to drop their reports to him on the way to the spot a few miles back which they used as a landing ground. For reasons of fuel economy Dermod no longer allowed them to return to the Earth base after each flight, so that the only contact he had with the General was through the supply trucks, which meant a two-day delay in each direction. Not that that mattered, because Prentiss was still jittering about his temerity in arresting one of the all-powerful Guardsmen, and his messages were no help to Dermod at all.

There was still no news of Clifton.

It was while they were moving off after the midday meal that Dermod said, "If you would tell me what it was you gave the crawlers to balance out against our three aircraft, I could alter my strategy accordingly and perhaps save a number of lives."

"Human or Kelgian?" asked the Guardsman derisively.

"Human, of course."

The other shook his head. He indicated the marching men, the music, everything, with a wave of his hand. Each Bandsman's equipment had been programmed for the same piece—not the rousing, cheerful and light-hearted marches of their training period but a slower theme which used a nice blend of muffled drums and distant bugles, what Dermod called eve of battle music. The men were drab, black-faced apparitions hung with grenades and rifles—some of them the awkward-looking type which had been captured at the ambush, with the curled stock designed for crawler appendages—and their every movement told of complete self-confidence and even eagerness to do battle. "Look at them," the Guardsman said, "every one a hero! Or maybe hysteric is a more accurate description—a weak-willed individual temporarily overwhelmed by his own delusions. A few nice, gory casualties might shock them back to reality. That is why I won't tell what the little surprise is the Kelgians have waiting for you, or even how close you were once to discovering what it was yourself. What I am hoping is that when the heroism of the hysteric meets the courage of the cornered rat plus the X-factor I've been speaking about, this war will end shortly afterwards."

"You hope for a lot," said Dermod angrily.

"I'm hoping," the Guardsman corrected him gravely, "for a miracle."

"Listen," said Dermod, suddenly impatient, "and I'll tell you exactly what I have planned for tomorrow. Just so that your disappointment won't be too great when the miracle doesn't come off . . ." He went on quickly to say that there was a long, steep-sided valley about fifteen miles ahead and running almost due north and south. His air observations had shown that there were three training groups of crawlers, two small and one fairly large and totalling about nine hundred beings, occupying it at the present moment. The mountainous country would allow him to bring his forces quite close to the valley without being seen, but to be doubly certain of retaining the element of surprise he was going to rest the men from mid-afternoon to dusk, then have them take up their positions during the night.

The men of the First and Third battalions would take up positions at the north end of the valley and, soon after dawn, would begin to advance along it. The first group of crawlers they would meet would number only a couple of hundred, and if they did not wipe these out completely the survivors would fall back on the second group which was also a small one. The remnants of these two groups, by this time fleeing in panic, would run into the third and final bunch and infect them. The result should be a general stampede towards the south end of the valley where, among the rocks and criss-crossing ravines at a point where the valley widened out, the Second battalion would be waiting for them.

And just to help things along, detachments of the Fourth would be stationed at intervals along the high ground on each side of the valley to snipe at the fleeing crawlers and to drop grenades on any who tried to climb out of the valley at the very few points where this was possible. The Fourth battalion would also deal with any look-outs which the enemy might have posted above the valley, though Dermod thought that they would have little to do in this respect as the crawlers would not be expecting contact with the enemy for weeks to come.

" . . . The only point where we might meet resistance is with the third and largest group of the enemy," Dermod concluded. "But I don't expect it—especially not since Dowling identifies them as the bunch which set fire to their range at weapon practice ! We shouldn't have much trouble taking a group as stupid and careless as that."

"I suppose not," said the Guardsman.

Dermod looked at the psychologist sharply. The other's tone had been completely flat and emotionless, his face totally devoid of expression as he had said the words. Had Dermod said something of importance, and was the Guardsman trying to hide the fact? Or was he merely staging abnormal reactions to make Dermod feel unsure of himself and so undermine his self-confidence? The last was more likely the correct assumption, he thought.

"They won't all be killed of course," Dermod said, deliberately getting in a thrust at what he had learned was one of the Guardsman's sensitive spots. "I'm hoping a few will escape to spread alarm and despondency among the rest of the crawler forces, and so make our succeeding battles that much easier."

The Guardsman was silent for a long time, then he said seriously, "Kelgia is a highly civilised, cultured and scientifically advanced world, ninety-seven percent of whose population are galactic citizens. Your enemy are only the Kelgian equivalents of yourselves, of course, but they have feelings and emotions which can be understood and shared by you. Their system of marriage and familial relationships are exactly the same, for instance, which when you consider it deeply enough shows how near us they are. Does the thought of taking the lives of so many of these intelligent beings not affect you?"

Dermod said shortly, "War's a dirty business."

"Oh, so you admit that now, do you?" said the Guardsman sarcastically, then suddenly he shot out, "But did you always think that? Or did you think that war was something thrilling, exciting, romantic?"

Dermod did not reply.

"You are a highly unusual and talented man, Colonel Dermod," the psychologist went on in more thoughtful tones. "In fact I would say that you aren't what you pretend to be at all, that somehow you managed to switch identities with the real Dermod . . ."

All at once Dermod's mind was rushing back to that section of space and time where a jetliner, its aerodynamic stability destroyed by an explosion in one of the power plants, was tumbling seawards. There had been a slight, rather timid individual called Jonathon Dermod in the seat next to him

who had talked interestingly and excitedly about joining an officer's training school. The young man had been killed when the ship hit the sea and for some reason—perhaps it was with the idea of contacting his next of kin—he had taken the other's identification plaque. But when he discovered that there was no next of kin and that none of the other survivors had known him previously, he had taken Dermod's identity along with the plaque. Now he felt himself tensing at the thought that this Guardsman was so near to guessing his secret.

But then, he reminded himself sharply, what difference could that make now. He was in too deep.

" . . . I see I am correct," the Guardsman, who had been watching him closely, said. " From what I have seen of your abilities I would say that you were once a bright but lazy young man studying for his Galactic Citizenship who became bored with such dry and difficult subjects as extra-terrestrial history, sociology and ethics—as well as the subjects which must be mastered if a Citizen is to meet with and understand the alien and at times visually horrifying entities making up our civilisation—and turned to the history of Earth for escapist reading. You had access to books and records ordinarily denied to all but students as being unsane, but instead of evaluating them properly you began to actually live in them, have day-dreams about them, and so on.

" This sort of mildly insane behaviour would not have mattered in an ordinary man," the psychologist went on. " But you were a potential Citizen possessing very dangerous knowledge and the ability, gained from your psychology and sociology classes, to guide and influence large masses of people. In the end I would say that the inhabitants of the settlements appealed to your romantic ideas in the same way as had the fact and fictional records of the past, and joining their army was the final act of stupidity.

" But now that you've discovered killing civilised beings is neither thrilling nor romantic why not demonstrate your sanity—your *humanity*, I should say—and call the whole thing off ?"

For a moment Dermod felt his purpose begin to waver. Why, he asked himself, should he subject himself to physical danger and increasing mental discomfort in his desperate attempts to salvage The Plan ? Especially when the General

had taken cold feet and sounded as if he was ready to scrap it himself. The way the Guardsman told it, calling the whole thing off seemed the sane and logical thing to do. But then, he reminded himself abruptly, this was a Guardsman talking, and Guardsmen could talk anybody into anything given enough time.

"You're wasting your breath," said Dermod. He leaned out of the car and bellowed the order to halt. As it passed back along the line the Bandsmen's reproducers fell silent one by one and the quiet became filled with the sounds of scuffling feet and low-voiced conversation as the men began clustering around the supply trucks. In the near-silence the Guardsman's voice sounded unnaturally loud.

"But *why* . . . ?"

"Because," said Dermod quietly, "I consider everything you say worthless. You're a hypocrit, the whole Guard is nothing but a pack of hypocritical, supercilious tyrants who—"

"Tyrants !" the Guardsman burst out. "But you're *free*, man ! Freer than at any other time in all of history. You do exactly as you please. You can ride to Hell on horseback if you want to—we'll even supply the horses—so long as you don't insist on taking others with you who do not really want to go. That is something we don't tolerate—"

"What happens when we want to fight a war ?" said Dermod sourly. "The Enemy's Inspection insures that only those of least ability fight, Guard psychologists ruin the morale of these and the whole thing becomes a farce in which we're made to look ridiculous. Do you call that freedom ?"

"We are scrupulously fair about it," the Guardsman insisted quickly. "You have to admit that. Besides, our chief purpose in these wars—if we can't avert them altogether—is a twofold one ; to see that as few people as possible are killed and to argue or scare some sense into the combatants. There is nothing like the threat of death to shock minds into sanity and give them a truer sense of value, especially the weak-willed, over-impressionable type who have got caught up by somebody else's sense of injustice or wounded pride so that they think they want to fight a war over it. And we usually find that the man whose pride has suffered is someone who will be nowhere near the front when the fighting starts . . ."

Dermod waved his hand irritably for silence. He said, "We, and our opposite numbers on other planets and of other species, are a persecuted minority which you are obviously

bent on wiping out because we are proud, stubborn, independent and a source of annoyance to you because of these qualities—”

“You’re all wet !” the Guardsman broke in vehemently. “Any one of you can become a Galactic Citizen provided he studies and shows himself capable of mixing, without friction, with extra-terrestrials.”

“Very few of us consider the effort worth the goal,” Dermod said drily. He had the other rattled now, which fact pleased him very much. He terminated the discussion by climbing out of the car and walking rapidly back towards the main body of his column.

But he had not ended it. The Guardsman was at his heels, fighting to draw enough breath both to keep up with his pace and talk at the same time, and he kept plugging away. Dermod had to admit that if nothing else he was a tryer.

A large proportion of the Galactics on Earth did tend towards degeneracy, the Guardsman admitted freely, but that was because the cream of Earth’s galactic citizens left the planet while still young and generations of inbreeding had further lowered the quality of the stay-at-home. But at least they did not have to be continually watched in case they caused trouble, and among them were some of the Galaxy’s great creative thinkers. The majority of Citizens, however—not only on Earth but all over the Galaxy—were averse to performing the necessarily unpleasant jobs connected with law enforcement, he explained ; they were so sensitive, intelligent and pacifically inclined that to all but a few of them the very thought of taking action, even police action, was abhorrent. But entities did occasionally go off the beam, both singly and in large groups, and corrective action had to be taken to preserve the peace. That was why the Guard . . .

At that point Dermod halted for a few words with his Lieutenant of Bandsmen regarding the music to be played during tomorrow’s fighting. The Lieutenant, a thin-faced, intense and very earnest young man, was in favour of the Mars movement from Holst’s Planet Suite. Dermod said no, he wanted something noisier, less subtle and with plenty of percussion. The Chief Bandsman suggested Tchiakovsky’s 1812. Dermod said that that was better, but that the cathedral bells would sound a bit out of place. What had they by Wagner in stock . . . ?

The Guardsman kept breaking in every chance he got, and when Dermod moved along to say a few words of encouragement or crack a joke with groups of men who were now lying about wherever they could find shade, he continued talking. And he sounded so logical, so persuasive, so damnably *right* !

The present war had been caused by a so-called trading mission composed of non-Citizens from Earth. By rights, the Guardsman affirmed, no-one who was not a Galactic Citizen should be allowed to mix with other cultures, but forbidding interstellar travel to non-Citizens who could afford it would have been violating the Guard's prime tenet of maximum freedom for the individual. So the trade mission was allowed to go to Kelgia. The Kelgian Galactics would have nothing to do with them, naturally—they considered, and rightly, that non-Citizens tended towards avariciousness and were lacking in business ethics—and the humans were forced to trade with Kelgian non-Citizens like themselves. Misunderstandings through sheer ignorance, harsh words and a certain amount of double-dealing on both sides had resulted in a disturbance in which two humans and at least the same number of Kelgians had died, plus a fair number of injured on both sides. Feeling had run so high after that that both sides demanded a war as the only course that would satisfy them. Reluctantly the Guard had granted their wish, the psychologist said seriously, because it valued life so highly.

According to him the Guard was a body of dedicated men without whom the present galactic civilisation would fall apart. It was composed of humans because only in that species was to be found the mental toughness which could force a man to do unpleasant, even wrong, things for the greater good. Some of the things they had to do seemed harsh to those who did not understand, but . . .

Suddenly Dermod could not take any more of it.

"Sergeant !" he called abruptly, and waited while the nearby NCO jumped to his feet and came forward. "Put a guard on this man," he went on, indicating the psychologist, "and under no circumstances allow him to talk. If he insists on talking, kill him."

As the Guardsman was led away Dermod realised with amazement that he had meant every word of what he had just said, and that he was literally shaking with anger. He turned to find a shady spot where he, too, could rest until

sundown, but he found it impossible to sleep. Every time he emptied his mind of the myriad details connected with the campaign and closed his eyes he saw the tumbled, flaccid bodies of two hundred and fifty-three Kelgians, and wondering how it would have felt if they had been human dead. And he saw the beautiful, simple thing that was The Plan. Supposing he was successful and won this war, the General would then take over again. What sort of a mess would that shallow, weak-willed old woman make of things then . . . ?

And all the time the voice of that accursed Guardsman kept gibbering silently in his brain. On and on and on, coaxing, arguing, demanding. And this time Dermod could do nothing to shut it up.

Chapter VIII

By dawn next morning Dermod and his Second Battalion were strung out across the mouth of the valley, and presumably his other units were in position also by this time. Slightly forward of the main line and concealed behind the safest cover there was available were four small special duty parties. These were composed of men who had shown most aptitude in handling the captured enemy weapons, and Dermod was hoping that these men with their explosive projectile rifles would be the answer to whatever surprise weapon it was that the Kelgians possessed. Behind Dermod the valley widened out into a saucer-shaped basin with steep, unclimbable sides, then narrowed sharply into another valley which was little more than a ravine on the other side.

Dermod had the Guardsman with him again, but the psychologist's whole bearing now was one of utter hopelessness. And he had not said a word for the past three hours. It was simply as a means of passing time, and to keep from thinking too much, that Dermod spoke :

"Another thing I don't like about you people," he said, "is your manner. And to be the ruling clique of the Galaxy you're a singularly sour-faced, sarcastic and angry-eyed bunch. Don't you ever laugh?"

For a moment he thought the other would make an angry retort, but then his shoulders slumped dejectedly. Dully, he said, "You must realise that we're very frustrated men. There are some people and things which we would dearly

love to spank, and we're not allowed to. Also there are some of us who feel guilty over past sins."

"I can imagine," said Dermod.

"You can't," said the Guardsman, and the conversation stopped right there.

As it grew lighter Dermod looked more and more frequently at his watch, his ears alert to catch the first sound that would tell him that the First and Third had started their attack from the other end of the valley. But the first sound he heard was of aircraft engines !

Cursing, Dermod looked wildly around. He had given strict orders to Briggs and Dowling to stay away from this area today, to divert interest from this valley by concentrating their attention on a crawler group fifty miles away. And now one of the stupid fools had turned up at the worst possible moment. Suddenly the aircraft's motor cut out and Dermod saw it come gliding in over the rocky edge of the basin. The fool was trying to *land* . . . !

Then abruptly Dermod was up and running. He had seen the plane's registration number. Clifton's.

There was only one flat stretch in the basin and it was strewn with large and small rocks, and how Clifton avoided them as he touched down and rolled forward was a miracle. Flaps full down, rocking madly and with the brakes already beginning to check its speed, Clifton's aircraft travelled nearly fifty yards before disaster struck. A projecting rock tore away the port landing wheel, it slewed around and went into a cartwheel which ripped off both wings and ground the tail section into ruin. The fuselage and engine, upside down now and moving backwards, kept on skidding and bouncing until friction with the ground dragged it to a halt.

Dermod was still ten yards from the wreck when Clifton came out to meet him on his hands and knees.

"You lucky so-and-so ! What *happened* man ? Did you get to the Guard base ? Are you hurt . . . ?" Dermod babbled, pulling the Lieutenant to his feet and shaking him in sheer excitement. "Tell me quick !"

Slurring his words slightly because he was still a bit dazed, Clifton made his report. By stripping down his machine and carrying all the reserve fuel containers he could cram into the passenger's cockpit he had reached the five-hundred miles distant Guard base as ordered. There he had acted and talked

exactly as Dermod had told him, and the Guardsmen had fallen for it hook, line and sinker. They had even given him some of their gadgetry to take back with him—a radio and a Translator for the Guardsman who was still supposed to be at the Earth base—and told him what a smart fellow he was for seeing things their way. Headwinds and engine trouble on the way back forced him to land two days march from the Earth base, and then he had to take a truck back to his grounded plane with fuel and spares, hence the delay.

But on his way here he had stopped over at the base for some food, and purely by accident discovered that the General was no longer there ! The other officers knew about it and had continued to send Dermod orders left behind by General Prentiss for that purpose, and had succeeded in concealing his absence from the men. The General had left a week ago—just the day after Dermod had left, in fact. That was why Clifton had risked both his own neck and Dermod's plans for surprising the crawlers by his crash landing. What were they going to do ?

“How did he leave ?” asked Dermod sharply.

“In a one-man, unarmed scoutship supplied by us,” put in the Guardsman, who had just come up. “We secretly gave the commanders of each of the belligerents such a vessel, just in case things got too unpleasant or boring for them and they wanted to go home. This is normal procedure, the desertion of the supreme commander has a bad effect on the morale of the combatants, which in turn shortens the war . . .”

“We'll win the war, with or without the General,” Dermod cut in, speaking quickly to Clifton. “But at the moment I haven't time to thank you properly for what you've done—there will be a battle here any minute. Find some good cover right away and stay in it.” To the Guardsman he said viciously, “You think of everything, don't you ?”

Whatever the other said in reply was drowned by the crash of rifle fire which came rolling thunderously down the valley. Dermod sprinted back to his position, the Guardsman pounding close behind. The attack had begun.

Magnified and distorted as they were by the steep walls of the valley, Dermod could still pick out and analyse the separate sounds of individual weapons : the short, sharp *crack* of Earth rifles, the slower boom of grenades and the flat, double-report of crawler guns—one made by the weapon and the

other by its bullet exploding on the target. After the first few minutes the volume of firing diminished considerably, which was what he had expected. What Dermod did not expect, however, was for the Guardsman to choose this time to renew his arguments . . .

" . . . The General's taken cold feet at you arresting me," he was shouting. "He's got out from under it all, and I'll bet you anything you like that he's blamed everything on you ! Now's your chance to call the whole thing off. We both know that you can beat the Kelgians, why kill thousands of them just to prove it ?" When Dermod seemed not to be taking any notice of him, the psychologist's voice thickened with sheer, impotent fury. "You blood-thirsty maniac, you . . . you butcher, *why* . . . ?"

"I am not bent solely on massacring Kelgians," said Dermod coldly. "In fact I hope a lot of them escape to tell what will happen here, so that when I use the Translator sent you via Clifton by your colleagues to call on their high command to surrender unconditionally, they will be too terror-stricken to do otherwise but agree. And my winning this war is but a step—a very necessary one, I admit—in a much greater plan . . ."

Two thin, wispy stems of smoke rose from somewhere further up the valley and burst into gaudy bloom ; signal rockets, one orange and one blue. Orange following blue signified that the enemy was attacking from an unexpected quarter, and blue after orange that the Earth forces was outnumbered. Both rockets going up together was a meaningless signal. Dermod, who knew the exact placing and numbers of all the Kelgian forces, decided that one of his men must have let them off out of sheer excitement. But he couldn't help worrying a little even so . . .

" . . . My winning this war," Dermod continued a trifle absently, "would have been enough. Nobody has ever accomplished that much for hundreds of years, and the fact that humans had won over extra-terrestrials in a Guard-controlled war would make the Guard's position untenable—beings all over the Galaxy would be convinced that the Guardsmen, who were also human, had assisted the Earth forces. The result would be a wave of anger and rebellion which would end the tyranny of the Guard for good.

"Or can you see a flaw in that plan ?"

It was obvious from the Guardsman's face that he could not. "Our one weak spot," he said, then appealingly, "but we had to be strictly fair—we were outnumbered so greatly. And to maintain that reputation we had to lean over backwards, behave more harshly than was strictly necessary sometimes, towards members of our own species . . ."

The firing was definitely closer now, and far up the valley Dermot thought he could make out traces of smoke. He said, "When I was forced to arrest you to keep you from stopping the war I thought the whole plan might fizzle out. But Lieutenant Clifton made it to your base with the story that you were negotiating with both sides for a cease fire—a rather ticklish job which might be ruined if anyone other than yourself butted in on it. They swallowed that and sent him back with their blessing, believing that he was one of the smarter types who had decided to aid you by carrying your hands-off message.

"Now when we march the disarmed Kelgian forces back to our base, their belief that you helped us win will be made a certainty by seeing you riding alongside me in the command car. Naturally you will not be allowed access to a Translator to explain, and by the time the people at your base find out what has been going on they will not be believed."

Dermot looked from the utterly defeated and impotent Guardsman to the tiny, undulating shapes of the distant and soon to be defeated enemy which were beginning to emerge from the haze of smoke. This was his hour of glory, the successful end of perhaps the greatest crusade in history was only minutes away. But he felt only anger, impatience, dissatisfaction and gnawing self-doubt. He wished fervently that he could get the whole thing over with and go home. Or did he wish that, for if the campaign was finished he would have nothing to fill his mind and keep him from thinking too deeply on the consequences of what he had done . . . ?

Chapter IX

Signal rockets climbed skywards and burst, soiling the pure blue with daubs of orange, green and yellow smoke. There were seven of them, their pattern and sequence completely meaningless, and these were followed in erratic succession by

five more. Dragging his field glasses out of their case Dermod wondered fulminatingly if his men guarding the valley slopes had decided to have a fireworks display . . . !

Or, he thought with sudden foreboding, were those non-sense signals indicative of panic ?

But his glasses showed only a steady stream of crawlers rounding the distant bend in the valley, and behind them a thickening haze of smoke. Dermod could hear Bandsmen through the shooting and knew that his First and Third had advanced along the valley as planned, having stampeded the two smaller enemy groups into the large one, which was now in full retreat also. There was nothing visible to cause alarm . . .

Suddenly he caught his breath. From somewhere amid the heaving mass of crawlers a spear of flame shot upwards to wash against the valley rim momentarily and then spill backwards down the slope. Where it had passed it left furiously burning vegetation and clouds of oily smoke.

Flame-throwers !

In the instant he identified the crawler surprise weapon Dermod was up and running towards his special duty men, though every instinct in him screamed for him to go the other way. To his three groups equipped with crawler rifles he could only tell the truth, ignore the strained attitudes and suddenly pale faces and give what advice and encouragement he could. The enemy had flame-throwers, he told them ; a short range weapon much less terrible than it looked. But explosive bullets outranged this weapon so that his special duty men must concentrate all their fire on entities using flame-throwers—they would know them by the tanks strapped to their backs—and leave all others to the Earth-type rifles of their comrades. When Dermod returned to his position the crawler bullets were already banging off the ground around him. He shouted, "Hold your fire men, wait until they're closer . . . !" Then viciously aside to the Guardsman, "You gave them flame-throwers, and you call *me* inhuman . . . !"

Dermod wasn't listening to the Guardsman's reply, he was more horribly, abysmally afraid than he had believed it possible for a human being to be. And underlying that was another fear, the gnawing, corroding, soul-destroying fear that what he was doing was *wrong*, criminally, insanely wrong. If only there was some way of pulling out so that he would have time to think it all out again. But the sides of the basin were

too steep to climb easily and the only other escape route was the ravine which was too narrow to let his men get away quickly—either way he would lose all but a fraction of them, because once the Crawlers saw the Earth forces in retreat they would rally and take the offensive. Dermod swore silently, reminding himself that it was *his* force that had the enemy on the run at the moment, that *he* possessed the initiative . . . ?

“ . . . And we are not, therefore, inhumane,” the Guardsman was protesting when Dermod heard him again. “Those things are tricky to work, and you had observer planes. We expected that the Kelgians would be afraid to use them in case they blew up and that you, once you got to know about them, would refuse to face them. Not even a hero likes to face a flame-thrower. But things went wrong ; your observer spotted a flame-thrower being used and reported it as an accidental setting fire to a rifle range, and the Kelgians—either through fear of them or because they knew they were being observed—stopped using them.

“Now, however, they are desperate.”

Dermod shook his head violently, as if by sheer physical movement he could shake some order into his mind. The enemy was now within rifle range, but obscured by the smoke which blew down the valley from their rear. Dermod licked his lips. They were rushing headlong into his ambush, the forces he had so carefully set in motion were now out of control, and that was wrong. He had not thought enough about the pain and fear and killing, or about the long-term consequences, or about anything at all except his stupid, juvenile urge to play soldier. He needed time, and time had run out. But he must do something, he must at least *try* . . .

The first sound he made was an unintelligible croak scarcely heard above the firing. Dermod swallowed and tried again ; “Men, listen to me ! Hold your fi—”

The long crash of the first volley drowned him out. Tensed up to fever pitch and with their ears ringing with the sound of gunfire from up the valley they had mis-heard and misunderstood his order. The Bandsmen joined in then with “Ride of the Valkyries” at maximum volume and the riflemen settled down to rapid fire-at-will. Dermod had chosen it finally for three reasons ; it was a stirring piece, the gunfire would not sound quite so frightening to his men if they mistook some of it for over-enthusiastic percussion and the cries of the wounded

—a very demoralising sound, he had read—would be blotted out.

He was very much afraid that there would be a lot of wounded this time.

The rifle fire of the Second was taking terrible toll—the narrow floor of the valley seemed to be carpeted with enemy casualties—but still they came on, pushing around and over the bodies on the ground until they, too, became similar obstructions to those who came behind. Despite the withering fire of his men and the fantastic pile-up of bodies at the mouth of the valley they kept on coming, fleeing in blind panic from the advancing First and Third. The men of the Second who were strung out across the valley mouth could not kill them fast enough.

Beside him the Guardsman was being sick.

Dermod shook his shoulder savagely. "We've got to stop this !" he yelled through the din. "Help me, there's a Translator in Clifton's plane . . ."

At that moment Dermod's eyes spotted a crawler squirming its way across the bodies of its comrades, its progress hampered by the heavy tank strapped to its back and the long-nozzled pipe clasped in its forward eating appendages. Fire vomited suddenly from the nozzle and a patch of vegetation close to the special duty group near Dermod burst into flames. The volume of firing diminished abruptly, it being no longer possible to clearly see the targets. Dermod shouted for the special duty men to stay in their positions, but his vocal chords were no match for Wagner and they probably would not have obeyed him anyway.

He saw them rise and run back towards the main force, saw another gout of liquid hell engulf two of them and watched in sick horror as one of them, a living torch, tottered a few steps before crashing to the burning ground. He, unfortunately, had been unable to make himself heard above Wagner.

Driven from the rear the crawlers poured through the screen of smoke and rolled over the middle of the Second's line, then streamed on towards the ravine at the other side of the basin. Dermod could do nothing to stop them. He didn't *want* to stop them now, because apart from everything else his control of his men was practically non-existent and they were rapidly becoming a disorganised rabble on the verge of panic themselves.

"The wreck, quickly !" Dermod shouted, dragging at the Guardsman. "Help me with the Translator . . . !" He didn't try to read the expression on the other's face, he was too busy searching through the smoke for the spot where Clifton's plane had come down. Suddenly he saw it.

By this time the crawler vanguard were actually at the mouth of the ravine. The flame-thrower expert who had been the cause of their break-through was still in their midst when a lucky shot from one of the surviving special duty men connected with its storage tank. The tank went up with a roar and flung liquid fire over a radius of fifty yards, igniting the tanks of two other flame-thrower operators and incinerating crawlers and humans alike in one vast lake of fire.

At the middle of which was Clifton's plane.

The mouth of the ravine was now a raging, impassable inferno. But the crawlers kept on coming, milling about in indecision before their hoped-for way of escape, then divided and sought to climb the rim of the basin. But crawler physiology was not suited to rock climbing so they turned inwards again. The basin was rapidly filling with crawlers.

Then the exultant First and Third, in hot pursuit of the last of the crawlers, came charging in. They had had it easy up to now, no crawler having stopped its flight long enough to direct a flame-thrower back at them, although they had passed an unusual amount of burning ground. They soon found out what it was like, but like the crawlers preceding them they could not go back because of the press of their own men behind. The inside of the basin was fast becoming a bloody shambles, with crawlers retreating from what seemed like a locally developing attack by humans only to run into another group of humans who fled thinking they were attacking. Blistering heat and oily black and yellow smoke filled the basin. Dermod could see men crouching and firing in all directions ; they coughed and choked, their eyes streamed so that they could hardly see and they fired at every shadow which moved in the poisonous fog rolling around them. Maybe half the time they guessed right and shot at a crawler instead of one of their own. And weaker now that so many Bandsmen had perished beside them in the ravine, but still blaring out above the din of battle, *Die Valkyrie* went on and on . . .

Somehow he had to get a nucleus of organisation around him before everybody killed everybody else off, he told himself feverishly. The Translator had been destroyed in the ravine fire, but if he could make his own men obey him that would be something, at least. If only he could stop that ghastly music !

There must be only one reproducer left in operation now, Dermod judged from the way the echoes bounced back and forth from the slopes, and it was somewhere close by. With the Guardsman he began to search desperately, coughing and choking, stumbling into patches of burning vegetation and crawling on, beating at his smouldering clothes as he went. Bullets cut the air around him and tore and gouged at the ground. When he came to the crouched, quivering figures wearing a Bandsman's pack he wanted to cry with sheer relief.

Viciously he yanked out the music tape and switched it to Public Address. "Men, this is Colonel Dermod . . ." he croaked, and the ghastly, distorted voice roared out over the basin. But that was as far as he got, because a stray Earth bullet smashed into the reproducer mechanism.

"You're change of heart comes a little late," the Guardsman yelled. His left arm hung limp in a uniform sleeve which was just a bloody rag and his face was chalky with horror, shock and pain. Dermod could not meet his eyes. "I hope you're satisfied."

Dermod bowed his head.

"Even though you now realise your error," the Guardsman continued wildly, "the damage is done. Humans are tougher than Kelgians, so they will come out on top even from this shambles here—and the Kelgians will surrender. Your war is won, the influence of the Guard will shortly be gone and we can look forward to galactic civilisation falling apart into a mass of single, mutually antagonistic worlds. You've done it, God help you. And us."

From his depths of guilt and self-loathing some odd portion of Dermod's mind noted the fact that the Guardsman was not talking so loud, yet he was making himself heard without difficulty. That was curious, Dermod thought, and looked up.

Gradually the firing had slackened all over the basin, and a few minutes after he realised that fact it stopped altogether—even the crawlers had stopped shooting. Through the

clearing smoke Dermod could see humans and Kelgians in isolated groups still clutching their weapons, tense, strained and every one of them looking up.

And vast, dark shadows were sliding in over the rim of the basin, despite the fact of the sun being still high in the sky. Dermod looked up to a sky darkened by the monster shapes of descending Guard transports and felt so profoundly thankful that he could not say a word, and he only half heard the Guardsman babbling excitedly about General Prentiss having taken fright and blabbing to Guard Headquarters on Earth and them immediately sending ships to cope with the situation . . .

" . . . And I suppose you're wondering what will happen to you," the Guardsman ended, " when I tell them all about your conspiracy ?"

Dermod shook his head dully. " I hope they shoot me," he said. He meant it, too ; the way he felt about himself at the moment that would have been a reward rather than a punishment.

" You won't get off as easy as that," the psychologist said, and there was a trace of something that was almost compassion tinging the sternness of his tone. " I know exactly what will happen to you. The Guard does not destroy when it can salvage . . . "

A close-spaced series of loud plops sounded from all around them and the ground was suddenly covered with wide damp patches which steamed faintly. The Guardsman looked up, then said appreciatively, " Gas-bombs, good ! They're putting everybody to sleep rather than risk further casualties . . . But I was engaged in telling your fortune, Colonel," he continued. " The first job will be to clear up the dangerous situation you have created here and, though there is enough high-powered help in the fleet upstairs, you will probably be allowed to help in that. But even when that is settled, you—and that fellow Clifton, and a few others among your men who feel bad over the things they have done—will decide that you have not yet made amends. You will spend the rest of your lives trying to make sure that a similar situation does not arise again. Your former friends will hate you for this and the Galactics, while properly appreciative of the job you are doing, will feel uncomfortable near you.

"You will be frustrated by the apathy of some beings," the Guardsman went on, his words somewhat slurred now because the anaesthetic gas was beginning to take effect, "angered and impatient at the thoughtless cruelty and stupidity of others, and you will never completely get over your own feeling of guilt from your past sins. Altogether you will be a pretty sour-faced, sarcastic and unpleasant fellow . . ."

Dermod was never sure later whether it was the psychologist or himself who went to sleep first. He only remembered feeling briefly and tiredly startled at the last words he heard before his mind dived into unconsciousness.

" . . . But then, people expect that of a Guardsman . . ."

—James White

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THE SUN CREATOR

by
NELSON SHERWOOD

Illustrated by LEWIS

Following up his fast-paced story "Galactic Galapagos" in our last issue, Nelson Sherwood now mixes all the necessary ingredients for another first-class suspense story centred on an alien planet. This time, however, the 'enemy' is not of the animal and insect world, but a man-made object set to explode and annihilate a planet !

THE SUN CREATOR

by NELSON SHERWOOD

Chapter 1

Mabel was a black-enamelled metal box exactly ten feet square resting on eight compressed rubber wheels. She had fifty-three dials and meters inset at eye-level on her forward side and a welded-shut inspection hatch in her rear. She fitted snugly into a flexible plastic basket stowed in conspicuous isolation in the after end of the Starship *Roland Queue's* Number One hold. Across her stomach in red fluorescent letters were the words : KEEP AWAY.

Mabel had been designed to perform one specific job. She had been designed to convert a planet into a sun. And she could do it, too, easily.

The *Roland Queue* ran into the fringe of an uncharted galactic storm, a sinuous arm of charged particles which threw her electronic equipment into chaos and interfered with her stardrive so that she bucked and leaped under spasmodic fluctuations like an untamed bronco. Some of the younger members of the crew were being spacesick.

Gerald Ryneveld scowled at his screens, seeing the progress of the storm charted in writhing lines of green fire. His broad face with the high cheekbones and black piercing eyes showed little other expression; his hands were twisted into two gripping fists in the small of his back.

"Not charted!" he growled to Jerry Somers, his first mate. "And dear old Mabel sitting on her fat rump back there. Anything on radar?"

"Nothing, skip. Instruments gone haywire."

"We've got to get Mabel through to that cocky youngster Gittins—I'll be the laughing stock of GRP otherwise."

Both men staggered as the *Roland Queue* swayed drunkenly and the lights flickered violently. A frantic call from the intercom was drowned by the shriek of tortured metal from aft.

"Skip—engines burned out under overload!" The Engineer's words were hurried; but under perfect control.

Ryneveld knew now that he wasn't going to get through to Gittins—Mabel or no Mabel. He straightened himself and gave the necessary orders.

The *Roland Queue* somersaulted on her stubby fins and steadied under the thrust of her atomics. Within her unlovely shell forty-five men and two boys clung to what supports came to hand and waited out the struggle between their puny craft and the unthinkable powerful, unthinkable ancient forces which pirouetted between the stars.

Captain Ryneveld stared at Jerry Somers and saw his mate's coarse black hair stir, lift and then dance weirdly upon his head. Somers paled, then stabbed a finger at the screen.

"We're in luck, skip," he said, his words ragged. "We might be able to sit down on that."

On the screen a solar system was indicated and a planet had already been selected as the nearest celestial object and an image blown up for visual inspection. Ryneveld made up his mind at once.

"Put us down there, at once. We've no time to search for others, even if our stardrive wasn't shot to hell."

Momentarily they shot free of the magnetic clutches of the storm. Somers' hair dropped limply to his scalp. The screens functioned correctly, and the story they told was one of incredible luck—the planet towards which the *Roland Queue* was thrusting under all the impetus her atomics could give her appeared Terran-sized, Terran-conditioned from what the spectrometers said and, perhaps most important of all, bathed in the rays from a G-2 sun.

Then the storm lashed a last tail around them and they were blinded, deafened and shaken like kittens in a box on their way to be drowned.

When finally the *Roland Queue* shot free of the last of the storm and angled down towards the succour offered by the unknown planet, all the crew were in the last stages of exhaustion. Ryneveld staggered personally to the communications office and sent off the message to GRP which told them of his failure and of the probable future of Mabel. As he regained the control position, Jerry Somers straightened up from an identcyb.

"Just spotted a ship, skipper. Swinging round on the planet's limb. Lost her. And no record of her in the identcyb."

"No record? Impossible." Then Ryneveld brushed that aside as unimportant. "I've got to get this ship down in one piece, without activating Mabel."

"Shouldn't be any fear of that. GRP techs have to break open that welded hatch and—"

"I know. I know, Jerry. I still don't like the idea of riding down with—*that*—hanging round my neck."

Somers grunted sympathetically and then both men concentrated on the business of putting the ship down on a planet which, until an hour or so ago, they hadn't known existed. As they swept in their hull began to heat up. They weren't a surveying expedition; the *Roland Queue* was simply a space freighter, so they couldn't run any tests of atmosphere, gravity, solar activity or any of the other experiments that a pioneer exploration ship would have performed.

Ryneveld excited Somers' admiration as he took the *Roland Queue* in under deft, smooth, competent handling. Perfunctorily on their screens they saw the planet's wide brown and green tropical and sub-tropical belts pass beneath them. Then

they were angling over the brilliance of a vast polar ice cap. Beyond that Ryneveld could see the blue glitter of an ocean and the brown crumpled paper of islands lying in that ocean.

"We won't make it!" Somers said glacially.

"We will—" Ryneveld couldn't have said whether he was speaking the truth or lying. Tension gripped them. Sweat started out on Ryneveld's hands—and then in a long furrowing of snow and a fountain of intolerable flame, they were down.

Silence crashed back stunningly on the world.

And Mabel in her plastic meshwork basket went quietly on waiting for the time when she would be called on to perform her special kind of job.

Larry Shackleton gunned his expensive rockony recklessly across the opposing team's front and slashed a deft, stabbing downward curve with his force-gun that sent the puck gyrating wildly towards a team mate. Larry Shackleton slid his rockony under the opposition's captain and, grazing perilously near the touch antigrav markers, took the return pass and flicked the puck into the net.

He danced his rockony out into the centre of the illuminated area, surrounded on all six sides with the banked white faces of a record crowd. He waved his force gun over his head, acknowledging the thunderous applause, giving them all a sight of his famous grin that was regularly featured on the society tridi reels at least twice a week.

"Shack, Shack, Shack," they were chanting. He'd done it again, slammed home the winning goal which put Earth in the semi-finals against Eridanus. As the final whistle blew, Shackleton brought his rockony towards the pits and climbed off the barrel body.

Rhodes, his personal mechanic, clucked at the heat boiling from the tubes.

"You'll fry your pants one of these days, Shack," Rhodes said grumpily. "And look at that anti-grav motor—anyone'd think you'd set down on Jupiter—"

"All right, all right, you old hen," Shackleton laughed, turning his profile towards the screaming girls in a nearby grandstand. "We won, didn't we?"

"Yes—and you nearly spilled on the last deal. You went under their captain and nearly outside the line."

"So? I made the goal—I meant to take it, too."

"Larry Shackleton?" A new voice brought Shackleton's head round. Coming from the tunnel leading to the pits a man's outline was dark and Shackleton, for the moment blinded by the intense illumination in the playing area, could see nothing of his face.

"Yes?" he said with little curiosity. Probably someone for an autograph, or pictures or even a tridi interview on the spot of his latest victory. His teammates were making a devil of a row in the pits alongside. Pretty soon they'd call on their captain and then they could hit the town and take over the bright lights for the night.

"I'm George Jukovsky—I've asked the manager to keep everyone out of your pit for five minutes, Mr. Shackleton."

"What for?" Shackleton paused in unlacing his padded body protection. "Jukovsky? You're my father's legal eagle, aren't you?"

"Yes—that is, I was." Jukovsky's voice was perfectly steady. Shackleton could now make out the other's formal grey topcoat and the gleam of prominent contact lenses. The inevitable brief-case was held in an impeccably pigskin-gloved hand.

"Was? You mean, you've quit?"

"I'm sorry to have to break the news to you now, Mister Shackleton; your father died this morning on his way here from the Moon. His body is being brought to his home on Ischia. I had some trouble finding you—"

"Dad dead? But that's imposs—" Shackleton gripped down savagely on his tongue, holding back the spouting words of denial, of challenge to whatever fate had done this; and, with that holding back, holding back also the pain and sorrow and remorse.

"Trouble finding me?" he said at last. "I should think all Earth knew where to find me this afternoon."

Jukovsky said: "I am not in the habit of following polo matches, Mr. Shackleton." His tone was even—with an edge. "Neither was your father. He built up Galactic Re-Planning with his blood," he finished with asperity.

Shackleton was an easy-going playboy who liked the feel of money running through his fingers. He was the first to admit that—because he felt there was nothing to be ashamed of in it. But he didn't like the idea of a musty lawyer snuffling around him with sermons about what his own father had done—

especially when the legal eagle snuffed hard on the heels of the news of his father's death.

"I suppose you mean by that remark," Shackleton said icily, "that I don't measure up to my father. And by implication you insinuate that I fritter away the money he sweated blood to make. All right, Mr. Jukovsky, you can go now. I'll decide whether or not to retain you in my employ."

Jukovsky held out one imploring hand. "But, Mr. Shackleton, you misunderstand me! Indeed, yes, you do. I had no intention of impugning your way of life—"

"That's enough," Shackleton said disgustedly. "Get out of it. And send in the people waiting."

"Yes, sir." The lawyer ducked his head and vanished down the corridor, leaving Shackleton looking after him with a face that had set like a rock. His chin thrust out quite without his own volition until Rhodes, standing quietly and composedly all this time, said almost aloud: "Strewth! Living image of his old dad, he is, when he gets that 'damn-you-all-to-hell' expression on his ugly mug."

"What was that?" Shackleton asked absently.

"Nothing, Shack," Rhodes answered hurriedly.

Then they were surrounded by players, managers, mechanics, reporters, cameras and microphones and whirled back again into that spotlighted, artificial world of interstellar sport that was like a skin to Shackleton.

Chapter II

Within half an hour Shackleton was fidgeting, fretful and impatient to crawl clear of this oozing slice of life that appeared suddenly to him to be the colossal sham it was. Commercial sport was seldom a pretty spectacle—and even his amateur status made little difference. Anyway, it was nonsensical to leave now—his father wouldn't get in to Ischia for a few hours yet, and it would only take him a half hour to shoot across there in his personal jet.

And he didn't want to hang around the gloomy old castle on Ischia. Too many memories. But this squawking crowd was scraping his nerves too fine.

Abruptly he snatched off the garlands of flowers round his neck, flung them beneath the trampling feet of tridi camera operators and walked out. He shouted a brief word to the manager and to Rhodes, who at once followed him.

"I'm coming with you, Shack. Don't try to stop me." Rhodes' big creased face was serious. Shackleton saw the look in his mechanic's eye, swallowed angrily—he didn't have time for sentimentality—and snorted out a fierce: "Okay."

They found Shackleton's personal jet in the parking lot. Within minutes they were airborne, integrated with the main metropolitan flow of traffic and routed outwards on an intercontinental lane. The mechanic flicked on the tridi. Among the rest of the news—usual propaganda about the 'parboiled war,' as the columnists had it, with the civilisations of the Memphian Confederation and the Empire of N'Gona, which wasn't news at all, really—mixed in on various new handouts, was the polo triumph gained by Earth and the newsmen's natural tie in, the death of the Terran captain's father in the hour of victory. It made wonderful copy.

Shackleton said: "Turn that thing off, Rusty."

Rhodes reached out at once, and then paused. Shackleton sat up. A heavy, authority-laden voice broke across the commercial chatter.

"Attention Mr. L. Shackleton of Galactic Re-Planning, Ltd. Will Mr. Larry Shackleton, now head of Galactic Re-Planning go at once to his London office or if that is impossible, contact them immediately. This is an emergency." The voice went into its chatter again. Shackleton flicked the set off, tuned in his personal phone and dialled his father's office number.

A human operator answered—a fad of old Rock Shackleton—and the connection was made at once. They had been expecting him. Speeding at three hundred miles an hour through the darkening skies above the chains of city lights below, Shackleton spoke directly to the group of sober-faced men gathered in an office building two hundred miles away.

He recognised only one man. The faces were pretty small on the plane's screen and reception wasn't as clear as it should have been considering the money he'd paid for the equipment. Suddenly, looking at the six men sitting round the table, all staring at him, a tremor of apprehension shook Shackleton. The thought occurred to him, surprisingly late, that they must want him for something special. Very special. You didn't get Earth-wide hookups on tridi for small change.

"Turnbull—what's the problem?" Shackleton picked out the man he knew and attacked at once.

Turnbull, the city office manager, opened his mouth. He shut it again as a neat, dapper, rapier-like man in Space Navy blacks said smoothly: "I'm Admiral Despard, Mr. Shackleton. I'd prefer you to drop in here as soon as you can. It's a matter of some importance."

"I'm on my way to Ischia to see my father's body," Shackleton said shortly. "Sorry."

"But, Mr. Shackleton—" Turnbull wailed.

Despard showed his white teeth, brilliant against the blackness of his moustache. "I can't tell you what we have to discuss ; but I do assure you that, if you knew, you'd be over here as though you had a stardrive in your pants. You'd be sweating a bit, too."

"Maybe I would, Admiral. But as it happens I don't know. If you must see me I suggest you use some of the taxpayers' money and hop a ship to Ischia. I'll be waiting." With that Shackleton broke the connection.

He had an irrational feeling that he'd done the wrong thing. To hell with Despard ! And Shackleton fell to thinking about his father, and the times they'd had together—and, acidly, of the times they'd planned to spend together and somehow hadn't got around to. Suppose it was because he'd always some polo interstellar to play off. And his father was building up GRP into a Galactic force. The stiff-necked old martinet always said there'd be plenty of time for Larry to learn the trade—only Rock Shackleton had died before handing over the threads of business to his son. Life promised to be busy, interesting and full of pitfalls to Larry Shackleton in the very near future.

He came slanting down to the rock of Ischia, dark against the pallor of the sea. Away to the east the bay of Naples set a solid band of light across all the horizon and the weather control station on the slopes of the Mount Vesuvius spat globules of fire at regular intervals.

Shackleton stepped down from his jet, rubbed his thighs stiffly, and straightened up to stare into the face of Admiral Despard. In the flesh, and face to face, the Admiral was a formidable spectacle.

"I suggest you step inside, Mr. Shackleton. It seems that I spent the taxpayers' money well to get here before you."

Shackleton did not reply. Somehow, inexplicably, he felt wet behind the ears. He went through the stone archway with

the arrow slits and stamped into the main hall. Here the old-fashioned panel-wall heating and lighting had been switched on and the room was comfortably warm. Synthifur rugs strewed the floor and a meal had been laid on a self-service side table. The same six men were waiting, with Jukovsky standing self-consciously a pace to the rear.

"Please make yourselves at home, gentlemen," Shackleton said. He decided not to play it tough and clever any more. Let them say their story first. The housekeeper and the butler were both human—old Rock Shackleton's fads were somewhat extreme—and very soon the visitors relaxed, glasses in their hands. Shackleton turned to Despard.

"Well, Admiral?"

"Very well. I'll come to the point." Despard leaned forward and produced a thin black cigar. He pointed with it. "You, Mr. Shackleton have just suffered a severe shock. I am sorry. However, we have big trouble on our hands in the Galaxy and it will be necessary for you to delegate some pretty wide powers to me. You are aware of Mabel?"

"Who's she?" asked Shackleton. "The Emperor of N'Gona's latest?"

"Not at all, dammit!" Despard roared suddenly, as though goaded beyond endurance. He turned disgustedly to Turnbull.

"Here, Turnbull, you tell him."

Turnbull adjusted his necktie nervously.

"Mabel is a Mark Two Sun Creator, Mr. Shackleton. Your father secured government permission for the limited use of a single model in the replanning of the Jason system. We were going to explode a planet we'd bought cheaply from a dying system—create a new sun—make inhabitable at least ten fresh worlds—a truly wonderful conception—unfortunately—"

"Unfortunately," Despard cut in, his cigar jabbing, "your company bungled the job. Instead of taking Mabel out to the Jason system your clumsy man drops down on Greensleeves." Despard stood up savagely and began to stride up and down the wide room. His eyes burned like live coals. "My God! That planet, of all he had to choose from! I'd like to put my hands round the neck of your Mr. Ryneveld and slowly choke him till his eyes popped out like ripe—" He shook his head, suddenly, like a boxer recovering from a crippling blow. "Oh, hell, what's the use of that! Mr. Shackleton, I need to use your men and your ships and equipment. The Navy will be in command, however."

"Why?" Shackleton demanded. "If my company's booped, I'll put it right."

"I don't think you understand the situation."

"At least, I'm keeping calm about it."

"That's what I mean. If you understood you might not be so damned cool."

"Thank you. Now suppose you tell me the score."

"I suggest, instead, that we cut out this play-acting and get aboard your salvage ship *Roamer*."

"I'm not play-acting, Admiral. I'm not shifting until I've seen my father to a decent burial."

"I'm sorry about that, Shackleton. You'll have to delegate that responsibility. You have a younger sister, I believe, and, unpleasant though it may be, she will—"

Despard choked off as Shackleton gripped him by the neck. A torrent of rage filled his whole brain; the dapper admiral's face was veiled by a swaying red curtain.

"You hardhearted, foul, callous—" Shackleton was dragged from the admiral by his aides. He stood, shaking, his hands still clutching together. Despard, his mouth twisted into a lopsided, strange, smile, propped himself up with one hand against a table. The other hand massaged his neck tenderly.

"You have strong fingers, Mr. Shackleton." Despard's voice hardened. "All right. We'll take this little scene for an official acceptance on your part. Andvord, take Mr. Shackleton aboard *Active* and rendezvous with me off Greensleeves. I'll be aboard GRP starship *Roamer* and will signal you coordinates later."

Shackleton, his face white and strained with a sickening realisation of what he had done, attempted to interrupt. Despard waved him to silence.

"Captain Andvord will take charge of you from now on, Mr. Shackleton. Andvord—get him out of here—fast!"

"Aye aye, sir!" Captain Andvord touched Shackleton's arm. He threw off the hand—and looked into the muzzle of a gun. Shackleton smiled.

"If you insist—" he began, and lashed out with his leg. Just let him catch that captain on the shin—down him—then to deal with Despard . . .

Then the lights went out for Larry Shackleton.

Chapter III

The naval communications rating looked across at Captain Andvord and said with a disciplined lack of feeling : "No readings at all, sir."

"No readings !" Andvord said unbelievably. "There must be some readings."

"Nothing readable, sir. All mixed up, as though the planet was covered with anti-radar gear, sir."

Admiral Despard, looking less than life-size in his civilian sports jacket and slacks, walked across the deck from the picture window where he had been talking to George Jukovsky. He looked worried. He jabbed his thin black cigar at Andvord as though it were a sword.

"What's the trouble, Andy?"

"We're not getting any readings, sir. The planet seems to wash out all electronic signals."

"Hmm. That makes things awkward."

After this profound remark, Despard turned away and walked back to the direct observation window. Jukovsky was about to take up the thread of their interrupted conversation when Larry Shackleton came swiftly through the control room door. The lawyer turned on his heel and walked away. Despard, a cynical grin breaking over his face, waited until Shackleton was up to him, and then said : "Feeling more civilised this morning, Mr. Shackleton?"

Shackleton rubbed the back of his head and looked straight into Despard's eyes. He'd remembered nothing since the blow which had knocked him out in the castle on Ischia, till he'd awoken aboard the *Roamer* well on her way towards the planet called, for obscure reasons, Greensleeves. Now they were there, with the planet's browns and greens and blues speckling a vast segment of the view, with her limb just flushing with the new day, and he still hadn't caught up with the march of events. How long it had taken them to arrive he didn't know. All he did know was that he wanted to place his knuckles against Despard's jaw—with a few thousand foot-pounds of energy driving them.

Instead, on Despard's query, he said : "I'm feeling fine. I hope you're beginning to wonder what you'll do on half-pay for the rest of your life—if the court-martial doesn't break you, that is."

Despard laughed. "Look, sonny," he said insultingly. "You're mixed up in the big world now, the Galaxy where men do things that matter; not the pettifogging little demi-monde of your polo games."

"Perhaps if you told me just what the score was I'd co-operate." That remark surprised Shackleton. Was there anything in what Despard—and Jukovsky, for that matter—had said? Was life different from a polo match?

"Mr. Shackleton," said Despard, waving his cigar towards the window. "Down there you have a planet, which, for reasons I can't remember, is called Greensleeves. On it live approximately one hundred million people—Terrans, citizens of Memphis and a troublesome minority of N'Gonans. Oh, and the native people as well, of course. The Memphian Confederation and the Empire of N'Gona would like to own this world—a very simple and laudable ambition, don't you think?"

"Go on," grunted Shackleton, in no mood for pleasantries.

"Somewhere around this sun are a number of other brand new, fresh, half unexplored planets. None of them suitable for continuous human occupation; but all capable of being worked and of producing extremely valuable products. You have to have a base to work them from. Greensleeves is that base, Mr. Shackleton, make no mistake about that. And the race who has this planet—ergo—has the system."

"GRP could do a good job of face-lifting here, it looks to me," Shackleton said, his father's keenness at the prospect of a job coming out in him.

Despard smiled gently. "That's one very good reason why your company gets no authority to work here. We don't want to make this system a paradise—until Earth is in possession—do we, now?"

"I see," said Shackleton. Simple, sordid, and human. That's how the Galaxy was pushed around all the time.

"And into the middle of a delicate situation like that, with N'Gona pushing to take over because of their 'oppressed minority' and Memphis grumbling and mumbling about preventive occupation—your company, in the person of Captain Gerald Ryneveld, drops Mabel smack on the button. Pretty, yes?"

Shackleton began to see what all the fuss had been about. He looked through the direct view port without replying, seeing

the planet below, partially covered by cloud formations, the vivid blue of oceans catching the sun reflection as the terminator crawled past and the hint of a glistening polar cap.

"Well," he said at last. "I'll apologise for making a scene. I still think you were a louse for taking me like that. My father . . . My father—well, that can only happen once, thank God."

"I'm sincerely sorry," Despard said. Shackleton, turning to stare keenly at him, felt he meant it. He stuck out a hand. Despard took it, smiling. The black cigar was flicked into a somersault and disappeared into Despard's breast pocket.

"Why don't you smoke that damn thing?"

"I don't smoke. Bad for the wind. Fetish."

"Oh. All right then. What about the *Roland Queue*?"

"We'll have to find her and take Mabel out."

Shackleton looked around the control room. "Well what are we waiting for?"

Despard took a short turn up and down the space before the wide direct vision window. He pulled out the cigar and began to jab at Shackleton with it. "Radar and radio don't work" he said. "That storm Ryneveld reported must extend over the planet—everything's out."

"Hell—that means we can't find the ship?"

"Well, not exactly. We don't have our electronic search gear, so we've sent for more men and other forms of equipment. Jets, copters, sledges, that sort of thing. It's going to be a tough, long and heartbreaking job."

"Count me in."

"Certainly," Despard smiled and beckoned Shackleton over to the control panel. Here naval ratings were busily at work trying to bring order out of the confusion that even Shackleton's inexperienced eye could see was rife over all the board.

"How's it coming?" Despard asked brusquely.

"Not good, sir," a signals officer replied, shaking his head. "There's enough left of the tail end of that storm to blank out this planet's electronic fireworks for a century to come. The *Roland Queue* was forced down by the main section, this disturbing effect has only recently moved over the planet."

"What beats me," Captain Andvord added, walking up and smiling tiredly at Despard. "Is why that storm wasn't charted. Hell's bells, they stay in the same place for scores of years, by our standards—and yet no-one ever put this beauty on a map."

"The Galaxy is a big place," Despard said. "Even back on a single planet, like the Earth, after hundreds of years' navigation, sailors were still running into uncharted rocks."

"Life is certainly a big thing," Shackleton said. There was a lot more behind that remark than the others got.

"Message coming in from *Active*, sir," a rating called.

They all crowded to the picture window and Shackleton waited impatiently whilst the rating read the blips and bleeps of light from the cruiser. A reversal to light-blinking Morse code as a means of communication—it seemed ludicrous. And yet, one glance at the communications panel told of the hopeless confusion there, with the storm's electronic fingers smearing all sense out of radio signals.

"*Strange spaceship orbiting for planetfall,*" read off the signalman. "*Request instructions.*"

Despard said instantly: "Shadow. Do not, repeat, not interfere. Fire only if fired upon."

The signalman got busy with his lamp and the officers walked back to the control panel.

"Who do you think that was?" Shackleton asked.

"Probably a N'Gonan ship carrying contraband arms to their people here. No explanation for the word 'strange' can otherwise exist. An identcyb has all known spacecraft on record."

"Then why interfere?"

The admiral twiddled his cigar. "Because they've no right to run arms, and because Mabel is down there waiting for someone to find her."

"Well," Shackleton said practically, "what are we waiting for?"

"For that equipment I mentioned," Despard said. The admiral was clearly a much worried man. Shackleton wondered just how much more there was to the overall picture that Despard hadn't revealed. Whatever it was, all they could do now was get down over the surface of Greensleeves and hope to find the *Roland Queue* and Mabel before someone else. Some-

one with N'Gonan sympathies for example, could find her and raise stink enough to ruin Earth's chances of taking over the planet—or, rather, Shackleton rephrased that—of being the major collaborating party with the planet's natives.

Some hours later Shackleton climbed into a rugged salvage space suit, about three times as large as standard issue and ten times as awkward, and practiced with the extensible leg and arm pincers and tools. By the time the little ship in which they had left the *Rodmer* was below the planetary cloud belt and the blue sea and brown islands opened out beneath them, he felt confident of handling the suit in normal working conditions. He stowed it in the rear storage compartment with the others and went forward to sit beside Captain Andvord.

Beneath them the planet sped past, a glistening picture under the level rays of the sun. A few white sails dotted the ocean and once an intercontinental stratoplane passed far above. Nearer, and they could see their own shadow skipping ahead of them. They curved round the planet, following a parallel, and gradually rose again until they were slanting back towards space.

"Picked up all we wanted to know on a single run," Andvord said with satisfaction. "Check complete on air, humidity, gravity, bacteria—the lot."

"But this is an inhabited planet—" began Shackleton.

"Sure." Andvord chuckled. "Sure. But sometimes inhabited planets turn out to be one-way trips. You live on the surface and before you know it—bingo!—you've caught something that prevents you ever leaving the place."

Shackleton digested that in silence. They had a rendezvous with three scouts that had arrived just before their little ship left the *Rodmer*. Little time was wasted. The scouts picked up their information and orders, then scattered to carry out the preliminary visual search of the probable area of impact.

"We think they landed somewhere within the Antarctic Circle. But just where we don't know, their last message was blurred and distorted." Andvord sent the little scout heading directly southward. "But we've got to find them. Before any nosey officials become curious."

To Shackleton, sitting peering ahead at the strange white wastes that lay at the pole of this planet, the job did not appear easy. A fever of tension gripped him and he began to realise what he was mixed up in.

Chapter IV

Chief Baron Harlan, of the N'Gonan Diplomatic Corps had been called as soon as it had been definitely established that a Terran ship had crashed on Greensleeves. Harlan was a small-statured man, who suffered from ulcers and bad feet, and who had a temper that flared into the ultra-violet if anyone crossed him in any way. Except, that is, his superiors, to whom he was the soul of deference. He looked forward to the day when he would have no superiors to be polite to.

He stood, shivering slightly in spite of the electrically warmed clothing supplied by the Service Corps, supervising the dismantling of the *Roland Queue*. The Terran ship looked like some beetle carelessly stepped upon. Snow had banked up against one side. Tractors and snowploughs were hard at work digging her free, to the obvious displeasure of Harlan.

"Hurry it up!" he bellowed, the vapour from his mouth freezing and falling as ice almost as soon as he had spoken. "Get those men moving, Sergeant. We must have this Earth ship dismantled before her friends come looking."

The sergeant shouted an acknowledgement, and ran towards his men, waving his arms. His clothing was little better than theirs, and theirs was appalling. They were shivering and already a dozen had fallen out with frostbite.

Around them the peaks of snow-covered mountains thrust upwards from the hidden continent. Something under a mile off to the northward, an arm of the sea formed a narrow bay and here the ice had packed up twenty feet thick.

The *Roland Queue* steadily vanished as the N'Gonans cut her into sections, loaded them upon huge temporary sledges and dragged them across the snow. They had worn a smooth and slippery path in the snow from the site of the crash to the arm of frozen sea and here the ice was blasted away, huge sections lying like cut wedding cake asprawl on the pack, leaving a black hole where water gleamed darkly.

Into that ice-girt hole they were dumping the remains of the *Roland Queue*.

Baron Harlan cocked an eye towards the lookouts posted along the high ground. Each man had a signalling mirror and instructions to report at once if any native aircraft were sighted. If the inhabitants caught him like this his career would be finished. And that wouldn't fit in with his plans at all.

He raged down among his men, stung by the sense of impending discovery. They were all-but slave labour, hastily conscripted and flung into uniform—he didn't even know what service they belonged to—and were poor workers. He was too conscious of his position to work himself with the shovelling and cutting ; more than once his hands itched to grasp a flame-cutter and show these louts how. The sergeant approached him.

"The men need rest, your excellency. They've been working without a break—"

"Silence !" Harlan snapped. "No rest until this Earth ship is hidden from Terran probes. They could find it easily if we tried to camouflage it with snow ; but under the water and the ice—ha ! They'll never find it. Get back to work—and drive the men harder !" The sergeant went back.

Hours later, with frost-bite and exhaustion casualties accounting for nearly half his force, Harlan saw the last of the ship disappear beneath the ice. They tiredly shoved some of the larger pieces of ice into the hole—losing a tractor which skidded and went down the hole with a clattering shower of ice chips—and trekked to their own ship hidden in the mountains.

The loss of the tractor was negligible. Harlan gloated over his success. Now he could handle this world as it should be handled—with the iron stick. He looked at the object of all this cunning and work and sacrifice. Neatly slung in the N'Gonan ship's hold, the black box bulked with a somehow menacing air. He shivered suddenly.

Harlan shrugged himself.

"It's only a mechanical contrivance," he told himself in annoyance at his weakness.

He didn't know, of course, that its name was Mabel.

Harlan went through to the cell block where the Terran prisoners were being held. It had been the most stupendous slice of luck that a N'Gonan ship had happened to spot the Terran ship's crash, and just as fortunate that it had not itself crashed. He'd come in a N'Gonan Space Service ship at once, as soon as he'd heard what the Earth ship had been carrying.

"Hey, monkey face—when do we get out of here ?"

The raucous voice brought Harlan's head up in anger. He glared at the Terran prisoners, the thirty-nine men and two boys who had survived.

"You won't be so unco-operative when we've finished with you," he said. "I want your captain."

Gerald Ryneveld, complete with a black eye and an arm in a rough sling, stepped forward. "Well?" he said quietly.

"I ask you for the last time, captain. Will you tell me if it is safe to open the inspection hatch on this infernal machine?"

"I can't tell you that," Ryneveld said tiredly. His cheeks were hollowed and his high cheekbones seemed to stand out like a woman's skirts. "You'll just have to open it and chance it."

"That is impossible, and you know it." Harlan stamped a foot and beckoned to guards. "Take this man to my cabin. I will question him more closely there." They all knew what that meant.

Precisely on the words an alarm bonged somewhere in the vitals of the ship. Baron Harlan arrived on the bridge in time to see the vessel's captain painstakingly plotting by visual means the course of a ship passing over them.

"Terran," the captain said brusquely. "Scout. Obviously looking for their downed ship. Orders?"

Harlan hesitated. "She can't spot us with radar and she can't send a radio message if she does see us. I think we'd be safe to shoot her down, captain."

"Very good, your excellency."

The captain spoke into the intercom and shortly thereafter two self-guided missiles rose from the N'Gonan ship and Baron Harlan was edified by the pleasing spectacle of one Terran scout being blown to smithereens. Altogether this had been a most gratifying episode.

Although this planet of Greensleeves was most inconveniently covered by a blanket of electronic interference, that trouble had its useful points, taking the large view. And the Terran captain would very soon tell him if it was safe to open up that mechanical box of tricks. He caught himself shuddering again at the thought of the power lurking in the metal cube.

These premonitory feelings of dread were stupid, morale sapping and quite unpleasant. He must stop them.

He wondered what the Terrans called it, knowing their fondness for nicknames. Sun Creator Mark Two was the name stencilled on the black enamel. He shook his head and went after the information he meant to have from the Earth captain.

He didn't even know *why* Mabel was called Mabel.

The customs rocket curved up from the surface of Green-sleeves trailing a white plume until it left the atmosphere. There was something purposeful about the handling of the rocket coming in alongside the *Roamer*.

"You'll have to do the talking, Shackleton," Despard said. "This is strictly a civilian business. You know the line."

"All right. But you'd better stop your men from 'aye-ayeing, sir' and bowing and scraping."

Despard flushed. Then his eyes twinkled.

"Touche," he said softly. He turned to give the necessary orders as the customs rocket matched velocities and the inspecting officers came through the airlock.

The inhabitants were efficient. They examined the *Roamer's* papers and log, asked searching questions, and were persuaded by Shackleton that they weren't smuggling or gun-running. He remembered the ship they'd seen diving into the atmosphere, reported by *Active*, and the abortive attempt at shadowing.

"Then what, Mr. Shackleton, are you doing here?" the leading customsman asked quite pleasantly. Shackleton didn't miss the gleam in his eye. Shackleton put on his tridi smile, raised his voice in the direction of the cabin door where Rhodes was waiting with his mechanic's stolidity.

"You've heard of my father's death, yes? Well, I'm here to investigate into—yes, Rhodes, what is it?"

The mechanic had hurried into the compartment, a yellow signal flimsy in his beefy hand.

"Request for you to play against Sirius, Larry. They've got that toughie full-back you had that run-in with in the interstellar at Paphos, remember?"

Shackleton repressed a grin: Rhodes' acting was perfect. "Sorry," he said regretfully. "I wish I could." The man grunted something and went out.

The leading customsman said: "You are *the* Larry Shackleton? I didn't realise, news doesn't travel so fast here—you will forgive me, I am sure. Perhaps we could arrange for a demonstration game, you might be so good as to play—"

Shackleton made some vague promises, cracked on the pressure, talking with a big smile and walking the officers towards the airlock. When they were gone, Despard said:

"Very neat. *The* Larry Shackleton. Whoo-boy!"

Before Shackleton could fling back the obscene retort he was desperately trying to think up, Despard stalked across the deck towards the communications officer.

"Right, enough of this play acting. No news from Scout Four? No, of course not. Damn this storm." Despard, suddenly seemed to have resumed his air of tension and nervous strain. A great deal rested on his dapper shoulders.

"Can't we send out another search—" began Shackleton.

"They're down, or blown up, or something nasty," Despard said. "Our job is to find the *Roland Queue*. If we lose a scout and fifteen men doing it, well, that's just too bad." He jabbed his cigar viciously into his pocket. "Oh, damn this storm all to hell! And damn Mabel, too," he added.

Which sort of rounded off that conversation.

Three planetary revolutions later they came to the unwelcome conclusion they weren't going to find the *Roland Queue*. Although only the trailing skirts of the electronic storm were covering the planet, allowing full use of their stardrive and internal electrical equipment, any attempt to operate radar or radio was completely washed out. No man-made electrical field could remain in being outside an extremely small focal point. Then the *Roamer's* GRP captain came up with a first-class idea. Shackleton heard the man out, whooped with joy, shouted for Rhodes and raced to find Despard.

The admiral was in the bathing section. He'd had the art-grav switched off and lay on his back blissfully contemplating nothing in the middle of the compartment. Shackleton clung to the doorway, momentarily upset by the distortion of orientation. Despard, turning like a sluggish log, looked across, smiled wearily, and paddled across to the floor. He flicked on the art-grav, sagged at the knees, then straightened up and walked briskly into the corridor.

"Takes a man ten years to learn how to do that," Despard said casually. "Doesn't help me find one lousy ship on a planet one little bit." He sounded very fatigued and dispirited. Shackleton suddenly got a powerful feeling that this idea would help the little admiral—and he was glad.

"Captain Rede has thought up a gimmick that will help—I think," Shackleton said. "Radar is out of use along with vision and radio. He thinks he can build up from the equipment we have aboard a form of echo-sounder using ultrasonics. Like the old Asdic or a bat. Only it'll have to be very ultra-high and he can build in a selector to pick out metal from back ground echoes. It's a thought, anyway," Shackleton finished lamely as Despard's face grew blacker and blacker.

Admiral Despard gripped Shackleton by the wrist. The dapper black moustache had wilted of late, and now the sailor's face held a look of thunder. He breathed heavily, and then said, as though he would like to spit fire : " Why didn't one of my officers think of this ? Of course it's the solution—well, probably—we must try it at once." He snatched up his clothes and, pulling them on anyhow, pushed past Rhodes and went up the passage, talking animatedly with Shackleton.

Chapter V

Captain Rede was as good as his word. The old salvage skipper was used to dreaming up impossible but workable devices for all manner of crackpot ideas. He eventually produced an instrument that would emit ultrasonics in a controlled pattern and record the echo. A cybernetic computer coupled in and he was also able to give distance. That wasn't important—the pressing need was to discover where the ship was.

Shackleton went out with the first scout, and returned, empty handed but still confident. That breezy sense of finding the *Roland Queue* on the next scout held up well, and then gradually faded as the others reported failure, wilted at the edges and then, abruptly, reverted to black despair. Shackleton lost heart.

" For me, I don't care if Mabel does go up !" he said disgustedly.

" After we're well away," Despard growled.

" Let's go, then," Shackleton said, and then realised just what he *had* said. He clamped his jaws down so that the muscles bulged. Then he said : " I didn't mean that. What I mean is—oh, hell, I'm all-fired on this !"

" Aren't we all ?"

Rhodes came in, his big face grim, and slumped down on a sling-seat. George Jukovsky, who had been keeping well out of Shackleton's way, followed Rhodes and began to read a magazine, using it as a cover. Captain Rede, skipper of the *Roamer* wandered into the lounge, looked about, and then began to leaf idly through the library reels.

Shackleton looked at them, and his eyes narrowed.

" What is this, a deputation ?" he enquired nastily.

Captain Rede swung away from the library shelves and answered. His face was pinched with strain. "Yes, sir, this is a deputation."

Despard, sitting beside Shackleton, went very quiet. Shackleton said: "Very well. Speak out."

"The position is quite simple, sir. Representations have been made to me that we're just wasting time hanging around here, we'll never find the *Roland Queue* now, and there is a growing chance that Mabel will blow up and kill us all."

"Nonsense!" began Shackleton—and then stopped. He cocked an enquiring eye at Captain Rede. "What chance is there of Mabel blowing up?" he asked carefully.

Rede looked uncomfortable. "I don't know," he said reluctantly. "In theory she should be safe until her controls are activated. Gittins knows all about them. But I understand that there is an outside chance of her blowing spontaneously. Don't forget, Sun Creators are pretty new. We don't know a lot about them. Personally, I'd estimate we have a fifty-fifty chance. Of course, that lessens the longer we stay here."

"I see," Shackleton said. What the blazes did he do now? He turned to Despard and the little admiral stroked his moustache, produced his cigar, waved it and said: "Right, Captain Rede. You can tell whoever is making these representations that we're staying here until the *Roland Queue* is found—or until we're blown to glory. Clear enough?"

Captain Rede went brick red. Rhodes caught Shackleton's eye and grinned. Rede said: "I'm afraid that won't satisfy the men. We're not gold-laced Navy, you know—"

The row might have been quite instructive. It was chopped off cleanly by a signalman's entrance. He handed Despard a signal and went out. Despard looked up, smiling.

"We must close our ranks, gentlemen. The natives are knocking on our door again."

This time it wasn't as easy to foist off the inhabitants of Greensleeves. It was their planet. They wanted to know what the Terran salvage ship was doing, hanging in space at their back door. Liquor was produced and cigars filled the canned air with smoke. But diplomacy broke down. The customs men departed with the threat to *Roamer* to be clear of the planet or berthed in a spaceport, in twelve hours.

Despard stared after their departing visitors and swore heartily. "Don't think I'm worried by them," he told Shackleton and Captain Rede. "We may have to shift

berth in twelve hours ; but we'll carry on a search during that time."

"How can you expect to find one little ship in all that icy waste without proper equipment?" demanded Rede.

"We will," Despard said doggedly.

To Shackleton, preparing to ride out with Captain Andvord on the last scout, there was desperation in the admiral's attitude. The scout dropped from the *Roamer*, in a wide arc across the antarctic regions. Looking beneath them, Shackleton saw white upthrust mountains, long dazzling stretches of icy barrens, nothing of any use in the hunt for a ship. She could have ploughed under the snow and been covered ; but then Rede's echo-sounder would pick her out. Of course, if she was covered by ice they'd get an echo from that. They were cutting between two mountains now, and before them an arm of the sea poked an exploratory finger, covered with pack ice with a few smallish bergs lying at all angles from the end of a glacier—Shackleton blinked.

He pointed. "Where's the glacier?"

"I don't see it," Andvord answered. The scout angled in that direction, air screaming over her wings. Below, the snow-covered ground was churned up, the pack broken and upthrust, and already a fresh fall was blurring the outlines. It looked very dirty down there.

"Another day and every landmark will change," Andvord said. "Get that damned contraption of Rede's going full blast."

"If she's under the ice—" Shackleton broke off. The idea was simple ; but any ship the size of the *Roland Queue* dropping through the pack ice would have ruptured it for miles. By the results of sheer heat alone they should have spotted her. It was quite obviously impossible for the ship to have fallen through the ice below, which, they could see from the edges of the upturned sections as they circled round, was at least ten feet thick. She *couldn't* be under that ice . . .

"Echo, sir !" The rating shouted it, the words bouncing around inside the little scout's cabin. Andvord dipped a wing and brought them round again. "Echo, sir. Metal, positive."

"Found her !" Shackleton thumped fist into palm. "Under the ice—how deep?" he enquired sharply.

"Hundred feet underwater, sir." The rating had taken the second echo from the ice echo to get that figure. Andvord

dropped a red stain marker and then they climbed for the *Roamer*. After that everything was a hazy blur to Shackleton. He came back to his senses when he was standing on the ice peering down into a narrow hole they had just blasted, with black water ominously visible below, and heard himself saying : " Let me go down there."

He realised just what sort of fool he was as soon as the words were out of his mouth. To go down into that black pit leading into the netherworld—he shuddered, and then swung his arms and went back into the ship to be shoe-horned into one of the big salvage type suits. They had to sled him across, he was almost helpless in the suit under gravity. Rede had a crane working on the lip of the ice and Shackleton was hooked on and dropped swiftly beneath the water. He heard its plopping gurgle as it closed over his helmet and he said into his telephone : " I'm on my way."

" Comfortable ?" That was Despard.

" Sure. Suit's okay—nice and warm. All black outside—ouch !"

" What—"

" Switched on my helmet light. Reflection from the ice nearly blinded me. Can't see a thing."

Shackleton blinked, tears running from his eyes. In the suit he was safe enough ; but it was still a dangerous operation—and the *Roland Queue* might not be the ship below. His feet hit something hard and immediately he began to sag over on his side.

" Stop !" he shouted and scrambled his feet somehow into a metal flange to support himself. He'd have to be careful about this ; he had some buoyancy from the water but he could topple over far too easily. He crabbed down a rounded bulk of metal. His helmet light told him he was on a spaceship. Ahead, the hull stopped sharply. He found the answer in the jagged edges of metal, bisecting the hull.

" This is a spaceship, all right," he reported. " But she's been cut up. Deliberately."

" This fresh snow up here has obliterated tracks to tell us a story," Despard said. " Someone found her and dumped her with a very good chance we wouldn't find her. I don't think you'll find Mabel aboard."

" I'd come to the same conclusion," Shackleton said. " But I'd better check. Why should the inhabitants do this and then try to chase us away ? They wanting trouble ?"

"You just check for Mabel and leave the brainwork to the Navy," Despard said heavily.

Clawing down into the guts of the ship, thankful he had no air hose to worry about and hauling frequently on the crane line, he got into the section to find ripped out plastic supports. Mabel had gone, sure enough. Outside, he asked to be hoisted to the surface and then, quickly :

"Hold it ! I spy a tractor ! Lower away—"

He hauled himself across to the vehicle, seeing the broken track flailed round the cabin, crushing it, and the newness of the mechanism indicating that it had been down the hole only a short time—if anything were needed to prove that it had fallen down there at the same time as the *Roland Queue*. He saw the markings. He reported them in bitter words.

"N'Gonan !" Despard said.

"The plot thickens," Shackleton said. "We've found the *Roland Queue*—but where Mabel is is anyone's guess."

"I don't think so," Despard said. Shackleton didn't like the sound of the little admiral's voice. He was hoisted to the surface and quickly divested himself of the big suit and went through to the *Roamer's* cabin. With a double whisky in his hand he walked over to Rusty.

"Glad that's over. Tell me, Rusty, what chance is there that the crew will mutiny ?"

The question's very suddenness took Rhodes aback. Then he grinned and shook his head. "I don't know. They're pretty worried about Mabel—they've heard some scare stories. If they hadn't heard Mabel wasn't below they'd have taken over the ship by now, I'd imagine."

"What about the Navy ?"

"GRP is stronger than the Navy aboard *Roamer*. They'd have been off before *Active* could intervene."

"Thanks. I'm getting a personal interest in this thing now, Rusty. I want to find Mabel."

"A noble sentiment," came Despard's sharp voice from the door. Shackleton swung round. Despard went on : "We're on our way to Rififi, the capital of the major continental mass, and quite a smart city. Good spaceship berths, too." He smiled nastily. "Also, the N'Gonan Embassy has a Lohengrin-type castle there."

Shackleton said : "You expect to find Mabel there ?"

"Probably. It's as good a chance as any, and we have to berth in before twelve hours are up, remember ? And, the

Navy feels that Earth has some responsibility to this planet. After all," Despard pulled his cigar out, then pushed it back into his pocket irresolutely. "After all, it isn't exactly a friendly gesture to dump an infernal machine that can turn your planet into a sun on your planet, is it, now? There's been argument that we should just forget Mabel and keep quiet—but I couldn't stand for that."

"Nor me," Shackleton said warmly. "Who had—?"

"Never mind who. After we lost that scout I had a long directive in. T.S.S. *Active* is paying a courtesy call to Riffi, we'll meet her there. She can give us any armed assistance we may need. We're after Mabel—and I mean to get her back!"

Chapter VI

Captain Gerald Ryneveld's high cheekbones were bloodied, and his intense black eyes were dull. Baron Harlan stepped back, panting, and lowered his hand to his side. The fingers stung with force of his blows.

"I have finished toying with you, Captain," he said with a calm which surprised him—this Terran's obstinacy might stand between him and the promotion that was his due—"And so I turn you over to the police. They will find out more about this Mabel, as you ludicrously call it. They are not as soft-hearted as I am."

Here in the vaults of the Embassy at Riffi he felt far more in command of the situation than he had on the ice, salvaging this sun-creator. But he still didn't know whether he could open it safely, or transport it on sub-space drive, or, in fact, do anything with it apart from carrying it about this planet. And the uncertainty was very wearing on the nerves. Despite himself, every time he thought of Mabel—why had they called it Mabel?—a shudder he could not repress ran over him. When he was Supremo he would have earned that position by the things he had done.

This planet of Greensleeves belonged to him—and the rest of this solar system with it! Belonged by right of conquest, of cunning, of diplomacy. And Headquarters back on N'Gona would see it that way, too. As soon as he'd disposed of the Memphian conspiracy and tumbled the stupid Terrans out, the system would be N'Gona's—and his!

Captain Ryneveld was dragged out and Harlan, with a conscious effort to ignore the brooding bulk of Mabel in the vaults, went briskly upstairs to his wine. He was sipping the first delicious tongue-tantalising sample when the message arrived.

Chief Baron Harlan read the message and it was as though he had sat down in a bath of ice cold water.

For a long, horrible, empty minute, he thought that this was the end for him, too.

And then sanity came back. He breathed so heavily that his fleshy nostrils whitened, and a twinge from his ulcers doubled him up, making him start, which reminded him he was standing on his bad feet and they were aching.

He sat down and read the message again.

It had been brought in by a diplomatic courier from one of the unregistered N'Gonan foreign service spaceships and was brutally plain.

Your report on Terran Sun Creator Mark One received and noted. Instructions. You will explode Sun Creator on receipt of these instructions. End.

"Why?" The question tormented him. He had reported his finding as a matter of routine—and as another example of his efficiency. Now the home government wanted this planet destroyed and a sun created in its stead. Baron Harlan was very perplexed—and mortally frightened.

If he exploded Mabel—he'd go up in the holocaust.

And that, most certainly, didn't fit in with any conceivable plans at all that he could envisage.

He sat hunched up in his chair, feeling his ulcers twinge, drinking wine and planning what he could do to avert the collapse of long scheming.

Captain Gerald Ryneveld was a highly intelligent man—but even a moron would have known what to do in the present circumstances. Looking around him in the dank dungeon with its sweating stone walls and their load of shining modern appliances, Ryneveld made up his mind.

The first torturer advanced, the blank professional look on his face far more frightening than any blood-thirsty and juvenile leer could ever have been. These men had a job to do. They did it, scientifically, with all the super gadgets of science. That by the time they had finished their work the victim was a gibbering idiot or a mindless moron was just an incidental.

Ryneveld swallowed and said hastily : " I'll talk. Take me to Baron Harlan."

The first torturer's blank face reflected nothing. Only the faintest shadow of regret lay in the limpid clarity of the eyes. For one awful instant Ryneveld thought that he would be ignored and that these men would continue their job regardless. Then the torturer indicated to an assistant that the bonds should be released.

Ryneveld felt weak and limp from reaction. He stumbled and almost fell when they cut him down.

They took him through corridors to Harlan's room. The N'Gonan's had their own ideas of efficiency and smartness ; to Ryneveld much of what he saw was meaningless but all of it was nebulously frightening. He would not have liked to have been lost in this gloomy castle, and to have wandered around confused amongst the super-scientific wizardry he could sense on either hand.

Chief Baron Harlan remained seated when Ryneveld was brought in. The Terran looked distraught, and his discoloured eye caused the N'Gonan some relished satisfaction.

" Well, captain ?"

" I'll talk," Ryneveld said promptly. " What exactly do you want to know ?"

" That is better. And you know well enough what I want. I want to open that infernal machine of yours ! Now. Tell me. Is it safe to open that welded hatch ?"

" As far as I know, yes. Our engineers would have had to open it when they received it to set it in motion." Ryneveld had silently disowned Mabel. He was calling her ' it ' now, like a N'Gonan referred to a ship. He felt soiled, as though he had failed. But—hell—those machines . . .

" All right. You will be in the room when the machine is opened. Should you be wrong, then you will be the first to suffer."

" Logically, if Mabel can be opened for inspection and final adjustment then there must be a delay mechanism."

" Of course, we will begin at once."

The procession filed out of the room. Ryneveld tried not to think what would happen once Mabel had been activated.

The *Rodmer* came down in the commercial berths of Rififi and was met by smiling customs men who were anxious for the famous Larry Shackleton to play an exhibition game in their

magnificent new plaza. Larry had some difficulty in getting rid of them. He was more than worried about the possibility that Mabel would detonate unexpectedly and blow this planet into a solar furnace. He was more than worried—he was scared white.

And yet, naturally, he concealed that. Despard still had his usual jaunty air of confidence ; yet his black moods were more frequent now. Only Rhodes kept perennially cheerful.

They hired a ground car and cruised slowly past the official residence of the N'Gonan ambassador. The place was just as Despard had described it. A Lohengrin-type castle. Armed guards stood in sentry boxes strategically placed, and Shackleton knew that they were merely the facade of power, that behind them were the electronic eyes, the spy rays, the super-charged barriers. Although, come to think of it, this storm fringe might have put a number of the castle's defences out of action. Raking towards the clouds from the rear sections of the Embassy, Shackleton could see the slim spire of a spaceship, obviously the Ambassador's private craft, berthed here on diplomatic grounds.

"I'm sure they've got Mabel," Despard said. "I can feel it in my bones."

Shackleton didn't laugh scornfully. This little admiral had a certain something that most mortal men did not possess. Shackleton felt confident that Mabel was in that gloomy building. They cruised round some more, studying the layout, then they went back to the *Rodmer*.

At the discussion which followed it was quite obvious that all their minds were obsessed by the titanic powers lurking in the black metal box called Mabel. She was the sort of nightmare that compounded bad dreams. You just couldn't sit easily, talking equably, knowing that on the same planet was a *thing* that could snuff you—and the planet—into energy. The discussion petered out. Shackleton noted with surprise the shaking hands and red-rimmed eyes of some crew-officers.

They had to get Mabel, and get her fast.

A small party left in one of the *Rodmer's* lifeboats and swooped low over the N'Gonan embassy. As though by pre-arranged signal, precisely as the little airboat skimmed past the embassy outer wall, her spy-rays working busily, the silver spaceship coughed a gout of fire, rose slowly, then vanished in a streak of flame towards the clouds.

No-one in the airboat needed to be told what that meant.

The coincidence of their being there at the time of takeoff didn't mean a thing. What mattered was that Mabel was in that spaceship, streaking for space and N'Gona.

The airboat bucketed wildly as the pilot threw her round, heading back for the city ship berths. Shackleton glanced back once at the embassy, and thought he could see a wisp of smoke rising sluggishly from a tower. He wasn't sure about it. Then the boat had swooped dangerously between two skyscrapers, diving under flyovers, and tying knots in traffic control.

By the time they were back at their berth half the Rififi police force was on their tail. They slammed the boat at the airlock, the seals clamped and Captain Rede, who had been warned of their arrival a second before they landed, hurrying towards the lock was swept aside by Despard and Shackleton racing for the control room.

The *Roamer* swept into space exactly fourteen and a half minutes after the N'Gonan ship.

"If only we had radio we could signal *Active*," Despard grumbled.

"If only we had radio would mean this whole mess wouldn't have begun," Shackleton said nastily.

All their nerves were fine drawn.

They left the atmosphere and went bull-headed into space. Their detectors were useless. Radar was silent. They went out and up and in the general direction the N'Gonan ship had taken with respect to the planet—and hoped.

"I guess they'll have avoided the storm," Despard said thoughtfully. "They'll try to run round the edges of it. Lucky for us it's not concentrated over the planet."

"Just so we get radar working," someone else said in a voice like a prayer.

The tension in the control room was like a viscous mud, filling every cranny and stifling their breathing.

The *Roamer*, although an ugly salvage ship, was fast. They burst free of the storm's ragged clutches, and saw with the wonder almost of a primitive's the screens and radar and detectors come alive. The ship was filled with the miniscule hum of vibrant electronic equipment. Her fingers and ears and eyes reached out once again into the emptiness of space—it was like a rebirth.

"There she is!" Despard's face reminded Shackleton of a hunter's. The little admiral peered forward intently as the

Terran ship picked up on the N'Gonan. "Not long now. And we can settle Mabel once and for all."

Shackleton began to wonder if the GRP crew would decide they wanted nothing of the N'Gonan ship and Mabel.

It would be just like a blind slap from fate if they decided to mutiny now. The thought might have occurred to Despard. As the *Roamer* overhauled the alien, Shackleton saw the dapper admiral check his belt gun and then stride up and down the control cabin, his black cigar twirling in his fingers. Suddenly, strangely, Shackleton smiled at him.

Space contracted between the two ships and a short, bitter exchange of verbal insult crackled from radio to radio. Shackleton had no time to comment on the uses to which the radio was put once it had been resumed. He was too busy rushing with other spacesuit-clad men from one airlock to the other, their shoulder tubes trailing a wake of fire.

They were met by N'Gonan's hefty charges, determined to prevent the entry of Terrans into their ship. The scrimmage was soon over. Diplomatic corps N'Gonans were no match at all for Terran Space Navy personnel. The interlocked mass of Earthmen and N'Gonans swayed back into the airlock, through and along the main corridor to the control room. There, Admiral Despard, neat and smiling, apologised to the N'Gonan Ambassador.

"You see, your excellency," he said sauevly. "We know you have Earth property on board—" he added with a haste that emphasised the mockery. "Of course, without your excellency's knowledge, naturally." Despard was too wily a bird to start an interstellar incident.

"I don't know what you're talking about and I wish to proceed at once." The Ambassador was pale, and, Shackleton saw with an eye for details, he was nervous and sweating, as though mortally afraid of something. "I am Chief Baron Harlan, and I claim diplomatic immunity to any military force. You have no right whatsoever to board my ship. I shall report the whole matter—"

Despard cut him off contemptuously.

"Where's Mabel?"

"Mabel? I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. You found the wreck of the *Roland Queue* and inside her you found Mabel. So you dumped the ship

under the ice, knowing that without radar we wouldn't detect her, and you took Mabel back to the Embassy. The N'Gonans would give a lot for a working model of Mabel. Oh, sure, I know you've got similar devices—but it would be very awkward for Earth if an Earthian sun creator were found on Greensleeves. And you may have other ideas for her use. So, hand Mabel over, quick !”

“I haven't got her ! That is, I never had. I don't know what you're talking about ; but I promise you, you'll be sorry for this outrage when I inform the Earth Ambassador—”

Shackleton stepped forward to Despard's side. He stared at the alien, seeing the man's fleshy nostrils quiver and the shake in his hands.

“What's frightening you, N'Gonan?” Shackleton demanded.

Harlan did not at once reply. His eyes glanced furtively around the control room of his ship ; he was a very much upset alien. In that room the N'Gonans were standing in the stiff attitudes of those who have firearms pointed at them, and that stamp of fear was imprinted on every alien face.

“Something's up,” Shackleton said, his voice shrill. “They've fixed Mabel ! She's going to blow !”

“Steady !” Despard gripped Shackleton's arm. He swung on Harlan. “All right. Talk. Or else you'll all come back with us to Greensleeves.”

“No !” The word was forced from Harlan like a gasp from a man kicked in the stomach. “No ! I can't go back there.”

“You can't, eh ? What happened to the crew of the *Roland Queue* ? Did you kill them off ?”

Harlan went pale, rather, his face went grey—it was already devoid of blood. “I didn't kill them,” he said shakily.

“They are quite safe.”

“You say so. Until Mabel blows,” Captain Rede put in hotly. Ryneveld had been a pal of his. “What've you done to Gerald Ryneveld, eh ?” He stepped forward.

“All right !” Despard's words came out punched and emphatic. “Hold it !”

But he was too late. Strain, pent-up fear of Mabel, suddenly broken by a maudlin thought of Ryneveld, had burst in Captain Rede. He leaped forward and before he could be stopped had landed three punishing blows on Baron Harlan. The alien reeled back, shouting, and then Captain Rede had been restrained. He struggled momentarily, panting, in the arms of the guards. Then he laughed, shook his head, and

said : " Sorry, Admiral. Just didn't like the sight of the greasy so-and-so."

" Get a grip on yourself, captain." Despard spoke harshly. Everyone in the cabin was held in a chain of circumstance. The N'Gonans could do nothing through fear of the Terrans' weapons and yet something else was causing them acute terror—and the Terrans were beginning to feel that chill breath of some unknown danger. Shackleton, his own words still ringing in his mind, summed it up.

" Tell me where Mabel is, alien, or we'll blow you and your crew to pieces."

Chapter VII

Of course, looking at it coldly, academically, it was melodramatic, acting to the gods—but it worked. On the class-conscious and caste-ridden N'Gonans, where whims were unbreakable laws to inferiors, such a threat had meaning, held values even the Terrans could not place on it. Harlan broke.

When he had gabbled out his information—Mabel was on Greensleeves, in the Rififian Embassy set to explode in four hours time—he sagged back, a purple ridge around the whiteness of his lips. And he knew, quite without fear or regret or any other sort of feeling, that his career was finished. Now that it had happened, fatalistically, he took it for granted and had no wonder—he was a ruined man, and very shortly he would be dead.

And, of course, all those with him would be dead, too.

The same thoughts occurred to Shackleton.

" It's our fault that this happened, Despard," he said rapidly. " So GRP will have to sort it out—and, GRP is me. Since my old man died I've done quite a bit of thinking in between dashing about the Galaxy and I've come to the conclusion that there are other things in life besides polo—I had an idea there were, anyway," he finished with a little wry smile.

Despard took his meaning perfectly.

The dapper admiral's smile was warm. " I guess you know what you're doing, Shackleton—but don't blame me if you get your nose dirty."

" I won't. Order me a lifeboat, will you ?" he asked Captain Rede.

Now that he had made up his mind he felt very calm. Of course, he hadn't met the real fear yet, it was all a trifle remote, in the future ; when he did he might funk out. That had to be dealt with when it arose.

They went back to the *Roamer* and Shackleton spoke to the techs aboard.

"It's a lot easier to switch Mabel off when she's on a delayed charge than it is to switch her on," a snub-nosed tech said professionally. "All you have to do is flick the switch marked 'OFF'—that cuts off all activity deeper inside."

"Easy," Shackleton said. He grinned. He felt like he used to feel when he was dressing for a game—all loose-limbed and trembly and iron-filings inside, and all cheerful casualness and high-morale outside. But he still didn't feel afraid. Just tensed-up.

"Goodbye and good luck," Despard said, sticking out his hand.

"Thanks. I'll turn up, don't worry."

Others crowded forward around the lock of the little airboat. Shackleton frowned. He glanced at his watch and tapped it with one finger.

"I've got exactly three hours and thirty-five minutes to get down there, Rusty," he said severely. "So don't mess around, there's a good chap. Climb out of the boat. You're not coming."

"You don't think I'd let—"

"Get out."

"Now, look, Larry—"

"Out."

Rhodes got out, grumbling and Shackleton slid into the seat and began to close the hatch. Then he stopped and looked up.

"You're like a mother hen, Rusty—I'll come back okay—and this outing is a one man jaunt."

Then he was blazing a meteoric path across the stars, pulverising space and reaching out and across into the storm and fighting its last dying anger as he settled down onto Greensleeves. To save time after the journey he had dropped into the vacant spaceship berth in the rear of the N'Gonan embassy. And then suddenly, without warning after the casualness and frippery of his departure from the ship—he felt fear.

He had to fight that fear and that demanded time ; but there was no time and so he swallowed down hard and climbed nimbly out of the little ship and stood with one hand in his pocket, looking across at the rear quarters of this fantastic castle. He felt very self-conscious—and that helped. It helped to remind him that what he felt like didn't really matter at all and that what did matter, intensely, was that Mabel should not be allowed to explode and accomplish her destiny.

At least, not when he was around to take part in it.

He began to walk slowly across the miniature space field. The N'gonans lived high and the field was edged with gay lighting and strange exotic blooms, with little pagodas and odd, somehow irrelevant little buildings. Over everything lay a pall of silence so that the distant hum of the city floated in clearly, like some far-off bee murmur.

Shackleton looked for the sentry boxes that must be here, parallels of those lining the front of the castle.

He had already worked out that Harlan, in deliberately setting Mabel to explode and then leaving the planet to its fate, would not care in the slightest degree for the lives not only of the inhabitants but of any of his own men, caution dictated he should leave someone behind on guard.

On the heels of the first fear-free thought he had had since landing, Shackleton raced for the shelter of a clump of exotic and sweet-smelling blooms that, as far as he was concerned, could be as out of season as red roses at Christmas.

The N'Gonans for all their savagery were a scientific race. Ahead of him there would be spy rays, electronic alarms, all the paraphernalia of an atomic-age police system. Then, crouching in the shrubbery, he saw through that ; this planet was in the grip of an interstellar storm which had the power of crippling radio and radar and all the super-scientific gadgetry opposed to him. Harlan would have left men, men he intended to sacrifice, and it would be against men that Shackleton must fight.

At once he felt better. He pushed the thought of Mabel, sitting waiting, out of his mind—or as far as such a thought could be pushed—and studied the layout. Directly ahead, in line with the airboat, a long retaining wall crowned with terra cotta flower pots shut off most of the view. About a hundred yards along to his right was an iron-grilled gateway. He

walked fast but quietly and, just before he reached the gate, heard the bass rumble of voices.

He had no idea how long had elapsed since his landing ; maybe the guards were not suspicious, maybe anything ; but now they were coming to investigate. Shackleton froze.

"That won't be his high and mighty holiness back yet," one heavy voice said, the beaten sarcasm of the underdog evident in every syllable. "Krantor, come on man !"

"I'm coming. Why they should all go off and leave us to guard this mausoleum, I don't know !"

Shackleton, listening, tensed up. So only a few men had been left to guard Mabel. They wouldn't know what they were guarding, of course ; but they would still shoot fast and accurately if they found him.

The iron gate squealed as it opened. Heavy footsteps rang on the concrete of the apron. Shackleton took out his handgun, feeling the metal warm and slick with oil in his fingers.

"Did you see the pilot ?"

"No, Krantor. I was too busy making sure you weren't cheating—"

The two men went into an acrimonious discussion of their relative gambling honesty. Two men ? Maybe. Maybe more.

Shackleton had gone through enough experience in the time since he had last played polo to insure him to the idea that it might—one day—be necessary for him to kill another human being. When that entity was an alien, a N'Gonan, the thought was even less difficult to conceive.

But it was still murder.

The gun was heavy in his fingers. He was lurking in the undergrowth, skulking, waiting to kill men who, in an hour or so, would be violently extinguished in the holocaust of a Sun Creator performing its one useful function. That put things in perspective.

If he didn't put these men out of action, then they would be permanently dealt with by far greater forces.

The N'Gonans were short, stocky men, drably clad in uniforms that fitted where they touched. Shackleton deliberately avoided too close a scrutiny of their faces. His attention, anyway, was taken up with the stubby guns they carried casually slung over their shoulders.

The distant sound of the city thinned in Shackleton's ears. He was aware of the blood pumping leadenly through his arteries and veins, a slow pulse that fitted the mood of close and cloying waiting lying all across the spaceport and the bright gardens and the Lohengrin castle.

Through all this he watched the two aliens and could feel—*feel*!—the hidden heartbeat of Mabel, ticking steadily away into the future and carrying along with her all the destinies of every single individual on this world. Under the thrust of this imperative, Shackleton stood up and held the gun steadily. He opened his mouth to shout, to command these aliens to drop their weapons and thus to give them a chance.

“Drop that gun—Earthman!”

Shackleton's reaction was entirely automatic, fruit of years of experience on the wildly bucking rockony on the polo field. He whirled, dropped on one knee, fired, and then dived headlong for the shelter of the bush-shrouded wall.

His pretty little bloom-covered shrub erupted into smoke and flame. Ashes flew, stinging his cheek. Intense heat blasted at his closed eyelids. The light was intolerable, and he gasped, tears squeezing down under his eyelids and steaming on his face.

He had to open his eyes, had to face the glare and flame, had to see just where the aliens were. He had to *see*!

The N'Gonan who had walked through the gate after his comrades no longer existed. The Terran's blast had been aimed true. Now the others were shooting, wildly, spraying the area; Shackleton could feel the savage breath of their weapons about him. He forced one eye open and swivelled. He had the two aliens clearly in sight against the finned and rocket-studded stern of his own ship. He angled the gun—and fired.

His airboat was unharmed, the range of these hand guns was short; but the two gambling aliens vanished. Shackleton swallowed and walked slowly forward. Reaction took him only briefly and he realised confusedly that his reflexes had led him on, past this fracas, to the reason why he was here at all. He had to get to Mabel—fast!

On this planet, quite near him, was a machine which was set to turn this planet into a sun in—in just about an hour's time! Shackleton felt the cords in his throat thicken. He licked his lips which had gone dry and sour. He began to walk rapidly away from his airboat across the deserted launching site.

Ahead were flights of stairs, windows and the giddy perspective of the castle, seen with much of the gilding, visible in glory from the road, in reverse and shabby. Any door seemed as good as another. He went in the first that opened, struck by the silence, the air of emptiness, the faint clattering echo of his own lonely footfalls.

Inside the place was in darkness, relieved only by fitful gleams from forgotten lamps. He went along a grimy corridor searching for the door described by Harlan leading to the vaults where Mabel lay waiting.

As he passed an open window there came an abrupt shattering roar. He froze. He stopped breathing, keyed up, and then let his breath out with a shaky sigh. High in the air, clearly visible through the window, a vapour trail wisped away against the blue.

Hell ! That had scared him ! He went on again, swallowing, determined to find Mabel and switch her off. Then he'd kick her metal flank for good measure.

He found the door and plunged downwards. He flashed the electric torch he had brought, aware of its narrow beam against the encroaching blackness around.

Dampness rose up to cling against his clothing. Sounds chinked from below. The clattering clang of iron on iron. The scuff of boots. Cautious, he crept down another flight, peered round a crumbling stonework corner.

Iron bars. Men. Guttering flames from dying lanterns. Harlan's men must have switched off the power before they left. Then Shackleton recognised one man, a high-cheekboned individual he had seen on occasion talking respectfully to his father. The man had an arm in a sling. He must be Captain Ryneveld.

Shackleton walked out, towards the barred space. The Earth men looked at him as though he were wearing horns.

"Captain Ryneveld ?" Shackleton said sharply.

Ryneveld strained against the bars.

"Yes ?" Then : "By God ! Young Shackleton !"

"Take it easy—" Shackleton began; but all his efforts were lost under the swamping barrage of question and shouted enquiry that rolled from the imprisoned men. He laughed, shakily, and held up his hands.

"Quiet ! Quiet ! I'll get you out of there as soon as I've dealt with Mabel."

And then Shackleton received the great test, the final examination that would admit him into the fraternity of the stars.

Ryneveld reached out a hand like the grab of a dredger and took Shackleton's arm into a clutch like that of a man holding onto a spinning ship. The salvage captain's eyes were blood-shot and Shackleton could see little purple ridges of flesh running in nauseous humps along his face.

"Mabel?" Ryneveld chuckled. "Sure—I know all about Mabel." His voice was whispering, with a penetrating shiver to it that horrified Shackleton. "Sure, I'll tell you all about Mabel—anything at all you want to know. I told Baron Harlan all about her—so there's no harm in telling you, is there?"

Shackleton tried to free his captive arm. He might as well have tried to draw Excalibur. He saw at once that Ryneveld had been tortured—was mad. He cursed himself for not seeing it before, for allowing himself to be drawn close against the bars. He pulled away, hoping that the other men would help him, trying not to think what would happen if he didn't get free of this madman before Mabel was due.

"I'll see about her now," he said, forcing a fake calmness of fear and loathing into his voice. "Just let me go and I'll put her right."

"But you can't!" Ryneveld chuckled insanely. "She's set to blow—and Harlan booby-trapped the controls!"

Captain Ryneveld released Shackleton's arm, flung him away from the bars contemptuously. In one blinding flash of clarity, Shackleton saw that Ryneveld was not mad at all—only driven so close to the edge of fear and the final degradation of self-admitted failure that he could react in no other way. After the storm had driven his ship and Mabel to seek refuge on this planet a train of circumstances had begun which had led inexorably to this moment. But that men should use the possible destruction of a planet as a bargaining point—that they should wish so much to have power that they would stoop to any dirty trick and to any filthy deed—nauseated Shackleton. He wanted no part of it—and yet, it was his responsibility, devolved on him through his father's death—and, in the final judgement, whatever happened could be laid at his door.

"Booby-trapped?" he said through stiff lips. "Well, okay. Just hold on a minute. What sort of booby trap? Individual? The whole thing goes up? What?"

"I believe," Ryneveld said tiredly, his eyelids flickering with fatigue, "I believe it's a separate bomb set to rip up the person who tries to shut off Mabel's mechanism. We couldn't get out—otherwise we might—"

"All right." Shackleton didn't want anyone else trying to talk him into sense or out of it. He just wanted to get this thing over with. "All right. So I'm going to get you out of this cage and then I'll shut off Mabel and when the booby-bomb goes off you can check that Mabel is inactive. It might get me before I can do the job."

"Remote control—?" began Ryneveld.

"No time." Shackleton hadn't checked his watch since he'd met the captured Terrans. Now he glanced at it. His mind went blank, fuzzy, as though caught in the suction of a jet. "Hell," he said distinctly. "Well—you'd better take me along to Mabel right away. We've only got four minutes."

After that there was a nightmare passage of time in which he used his handgun to blast away the bars and the men inside boiled out like a frothing gush of water from a broken dam. They must have passed through sick stages of despair, madness and frustration leading to complete insanity, cooped up unable to stop the devilish machine from ticking their lives away. Now they all rushed headlong towards the blank, impersonal, black metal bulk of Mabel. She was waiting for them in an alcove off the prison. A single lantern flickered weirdly, sending highlights glancing from her polish. She looked like some pagan temple idol of a mechanistic barbarism. Involuntarily they all stopped, hesitating—with two minutes to go.

Ryneveld laid a shaking hand against Shackleton's arm.

"If—" he stopped, licked his lips. Then : "I'll do it." He moved forward convulsively. Motivations flowed through him—fear, hatred of N'Gona, hatred of himself for failing in his job : but, most of all, blind anger at the storm which had caused all this. And as Captain Gerald Ryneveld stepped with outstretched hands towards Mabel a single spit-bolt of energy flamed briefly from the wall high up. He fell cut into two. There was a charred smell of incinerated flesh in the dank underground room.

"What can we do ?" someone yelled.

"Nothing." That was Shackleton. He saw at a glance the fiendish cleverness of Harlan. They broke some spy ray by their mere presence and triggered the energy gun. They could

not even get to Mabel to turn her off! And, thinking that, and realising that the end was with him, he looked with pain-distended eyes at his wrist-watch.

The time had passed.

Mabel should have blown up three minutes ago.

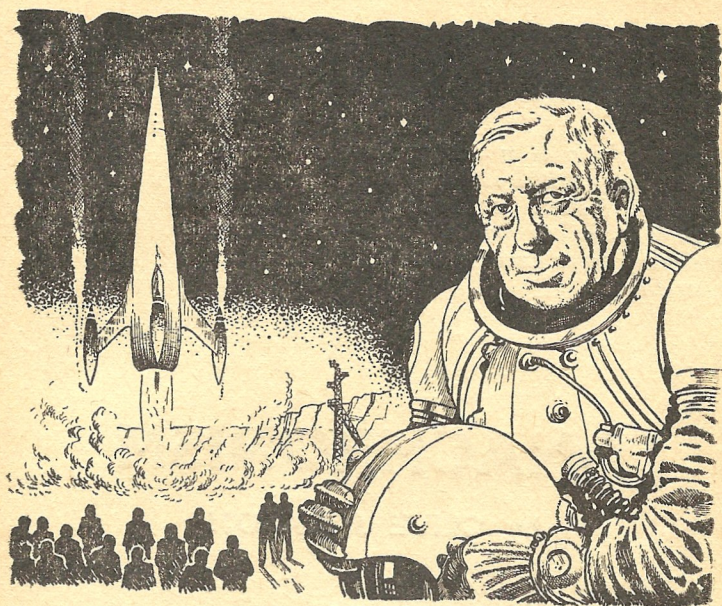
And, of course, thinking about it, the answer was very simple. Poor Ryneveld need never have died. The cause of his first failure had cancelled the debt—too late to benefit him. Shackleton shook his head, tiredly, and went away from that barbaric shrine where a monstrous machine seemed to be exerting a mocking sway over fallible human subjects.

He would call Despard and Captain Rede and tell them. They would see at a glance, once it had happened, that if no fields could be generated whilst the storm was blanketing out external electro-magnetic currents, then obviously, Mabel, needing a field to contain the release of energy if the small mass of a planet was not to blow away in a nova, would simply not function. They'd have to defuse her—if she were moved out of the storm's interference she'd blow at once.

Larry Shackleton knew, walking slowly up towards the ship waiting to take him back to his galactic responsibilities that he was just beginning. When his father had died he had immediately shouldered all responsibility—and this time he'd been lucky.

As for Baron Harlan—well, he had discovered that Mabel was called Mabel. But he never did know why. If he'd been with Larry Shackleton at that moment he would have realised that Mabel, like all women, was quite unpredictable.

—Nelson Sherwood



ANACHRONISM

by
CLIVE JACKSON

*Safety devices didn't apply to
the obsolete rocket-drive
or the men who blasted skywards*

Illustrated by LEWIS

Clive Jackson is a comparative newcomer to the ranks of British science fiction writing but he first made his mark on the tough and highly competitive American market so we can expect to see many more exciting stories from him in the near future.

ANACHRONISM

by CLIVE JACKSON

There is no weather on Mars, only the thin, cold wind that never stops blowing ; neither are there any storms, except the rolling clouds of red dust that sweep across the deserts of the equatorial belt. Thus, when the inhabitants of Syrtis Colony heard the mutter of distant thunder, they variously smiled or frowned or philosophically shrugged ; but all, unless they were very new residents indeed, knew what it was.

Those who had no work, or could think of an excuse for not doing any, began to make their way out of the city towards the old rocket field at the edge of the desert. People on foot or on scooters ; trakjeeps, sandcats, vehicles of all kinds loaded with truant children looking like koala bears with their fur parkas and their respirator masks and their bright, excited eyes.

In a moment the thunder grew to an intolerable sound like a continuous explosion, battering against the bubble-thin domes of the city, shaking the dust from the rose-red minarets

of the Martian ruins nearby. Then the ship came, riding down out of the hard, violet sky on its pillar of white fire.

The crowd at the edge of the field watched the spectacular arrival, the enormous confusion of flame and dust as the rocket neared the ground, marvelling at the quaint lines of her ogive nose, her multiplicity of raked fins. They rammed their gloved fists over their ears and turned to laugh soundlessly at each other as the incredible booming of the rocket shook their insides and made their jaws ache. They held their breath as the pilot poised his ship with its jets splashing off the red-hot concrete while he felt for a foothold on this world with the splayed pads of his shock-absorber gear. They sighed in unison as he cut the power and the rocket settled back on its tail and then the silence beat upon their eardrums almost as loudly as the vast sound which had preceded it.

Like most old, rare things, *Old Smokey* was a sight to be kept carefully in the memory. She was the last rocket in commercial service, an anachronism at a time when "space-ship" meant a magnesium alloy sphere floating on an electro-gravitic field and navigated infallibly by a small, black box.

Her master was an anachronism too, the last licensed rocket pilot to jockey his ship to a planetfall by the skill of his hand and eye. And now the entry hatch near the nose of the rocket swung open and out popped the head and shoulders of John Justin Justice, his white hair blowing wildly around his respirator mask and his ancient cap rammed down to his ears.

He pulled his mask down under his chin and bellowed a jovial halloo to the crowd, which began to surge across the cracked concrete apron towards the rocket. An electric derrick sprouted from the hull just above the hatchway, Captain Justice reached up and grabbed the hook in one massive fist, then stepped off the hatch and was lowered the two hundred-odd feet to the ground without the help of a bosun's chair. He was a swashbuckler, a man several times larger than life and it pleased him to live up to this reputation.

He reached the ground amid a confusion of children who shouted and jumped as he began to produce handfuls of sweets and chocolate bars from the pouches of his old service-pattern space suit. Then the adults crowded round to greet him and shake his hand and it was some minutes before a tall

young man, who had stood somewhat aloof from the crowd, was able to step forward and introduce himself.

"Captain Justice?" he said; "My name is Phipps. May I have a few words with you, please? It's important."

"You may, Mr. Phipps, if you don't mind coming to the operations block with me."

"Let me drive you, Captain; I have a trakjeep here."

"Very kind of you, Mr. Phipps. I won't keep you a moment."

But it was a good ten minutes before Captain Justice could get away from his friends and admirers and was seated beside Phipps in the trakjeep.

"They won't let me land at the new space drome, y'see," he explained, as they jolted along the perimeter track of the rocket field. His eyes bristled with disgust. "Space drome—bah! Sounds like a blasted skatin' rink!"

Phipps' eyes crinkled above his respirator. "I heard you were something of a reactionary, Captain."

"Reactionary? Me? Certainly not! Just can't stand the idea of space travel degeneratin' into a sort of electronic ballet with a lot of pale young men floating about in light alloy footballs. Isn't one of 'em could stand more than two g's without bustin' a gut. Space drome, indeed!"

"Let's face it, Captain; those 'pale young men' are soon going to the stars. You could never get as far in your rocket."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it, Phipps. I'd never see Earth again, of course; be an old man when I reached Proxima. But *Old Smokey* would take me there, all right. Sometimes I think . . . Never mind. What did you want to speak to me about, Mr. Phipps? State your business, young feller!"

Phipps looked at him for a moment without replying. His respirator hid his expression but Justice caught an impression of regret, perhaps even of pity, in his blue eyes.

"First," said Phipps, "you'd better see my credentials."

He fished a leather-covered pass book and several other documents from an inside pocket and flipped them on to the Captain's lap.

Justice leafed through them with a sickening premonition of trouble—not the kind of trouble he was used to handling. He raised his eyebrows. "Interplanetary Navigation Commission. So you're a civil servant, Mr. Phipps?"

"Yes, I am. More particularly, an Inspector of the Space Registration Board."

"And your business with me, sir?"

"A matter of routine," began Phipps; and then, with a sudden gesture of disgust, he brought the vehicle to a halt and turned to face Captain Justice. "No," he said; "not routine at all. To put it bluntly, Captain, the Board has been—er—apprised of certain facts regarding you and your vessel which it is my duty to investigate."

Justice looked at him stonily. "Drive on, Inspector; we can't talk here, in these damned masks."

When they removed their respirators in the air-conditioned lobby of the operations block, Captain Justice took his first opportunity to study the face of the S.R.B. man and found it a good deal more purposeful than he had expected: the firmness of the mouth and chin were at variance with the blonde, almost childish soft hair. Whereas Justice had put his age at a little over twenty, he now added at least ten years to that estimate.

"I think we'll be undisturbed here," said Phipps, ushering the Captain into an empty Customs office. He indicated a pair of armchairs, rather than the more formal desk, and said, "Before I start asking a lot of questions, Captain, I'd like to give you *my* view of this situation. To be quite frank, I don't—"

"Your views, Mr. Phipps, are of no interest to me," interrupted Justice. "I know why you're here, I know who it was that—what was the word you used?—'Apprised'? Yes. I know who apprised the Board of me and I know why he did it. The only thing I don't understand is why you people had to be *told* about me."

"The Board, though you may not believe me, Captain, is overworked and undermanned. I certainly had no idea there was a chemical-fuelled rocket still in service until I was detailed for this job three weeks ago. I don't think anyone else had, either. However, as you implied, the previous events which led up to my trip to Mars don't concern me. Shall I begin?"

"Ask your questions, Inspector."

"First of all, you yourself. How old are you, Captain?"

"You know dam' well how old I am; fifty-one. Don't ask questions to which you already know the answers, Mr. Phipps—I shall get impatient!"

"Believe me, Captain, nobody likes this sort of investigation less than I do, but I must—"

"Of course. Only doing your job. Rude of me. Please continue."

"Thank you. Well, you are fifty-one. You know the regulations, as laid down in the Space Navigation Act of 1992?"

"I do. But let me tell you, I'm a dam' sight more fit than any of these young—"

"Please, Captain. When did you last have a medical inspection?"

"Couple of months ago. I have a regular check-over every six months. I'm not a fool, Mr. Phipps."

"I meant an S.R.B. medical; the last one we have a record of was twelve years ago."

Justice sighed. "Your records are correct, Inspector."

"I was afraid they were, Captain. Now, the regulation crew of a Regulus Class freighter is—was, rather!—eight men, excluding stewards if carried. How many have you in your crew, Captain?"

"Crew, Mr. Phipps?" laughed Justice, bitterly, "*I'm* the crew of *Old Smokey*. Anyway, she'd never let anyone else run her but me."

The S.R.B. man was flabbergasted. "But—I was told to expect a reduction below the usual crew strength but—Captain, how *can* one man fly a ship that size?"

"It was a case of necessity being the mother of invention, Mr. Phipps. I've run all the essential controls up to the pilot console, installed more automatics, refined the vernier trim, installed my own system of data presentation. I can assure you that any experienced pilot—any experienced *rocket* pilot, I should say—could handle my ship. Mind you, I seldom find the time hanging heavily on my hands!"

"I'm bound to say, Captain, that you are the most experienced rocket pilot I have ever come across in one package."

"Thank you. I suppose it's something to have the respect of one's executioner."

"Not executioner, Captain. I assure you that I'm here to do my best for you."

"The fact that you are here at all, Mr. Phipps—go on, please."

"Very well. The modifications to your ship and equipment—are any of them S.R.B.-approved?"

"I doubt if the Board ever considered the necessity for one-man crews, Inspector. However, I have incorporated a great many S.R.B. mods., although the only one I can call to mind at the moment was on the refuse disposal chute. Apparently it was thought possible under certain conditions to dislocate one's thumb on the handle."

"I see. You know the regulations—?"

"Concerning non-S.R.B.-approved modifications? Yes, Mr. Phipps. And now, if there's nothing else, I'd like to carry on with my debriefing and off-loading arrangements. I was going to file my flight plan for departure but I imagine that won't be necessary now."

Phipps spread his hands. "I should assume an indefinite delay if I were you, Captain."

Captain Justice spent the afternoon pottering about *Old Smokey*, carrying out routine after-flight maintenance, replenishing fuel and stores, preparing his ship for a long stay planetside. From time to time he stuck his head out of the entry hatch and spat, finding a bitter taste coming to his mouth as he handled the convenient controls and checked through the clustered looms of coloured pipes and cables that were as familiar as the lines on the palms of his hands.

People—more people than usual—found time to drop by the old rocket field that afternoon; the word, somehow, had got around. All of them had the wit to offer him neither money nor pity. For some of them the Captain would rummage in a locker and come up with a present, little luxuries or necessities unobtainable on Mars for which he always seemed to find room. He was in the habit of grumbling about these presents, saying that one day the obscene overload would drag him into the unmentionable sun but anyone who saw his pleasure in the giving of them could tell that he never meant what he said.

When the small, wan sun reached the horizon he battened the hatches, put the remainder of his presents into a battered old holdall and plodded moodily into the city to deliver them.

When he reached Charles' Bar two hours later, however, his gloom had lifted somewhat owing to the number and variety of drinks which he had been forced, out of common courtesy, to accept at each call he had made. At this early

hour there were few people in the bar but Phipps was there, seated in a corner booth with two glasses and something in a tall, frosted jug on the table. Justice nodded to him and walked up to the bar where he was greeted with Gallic enthusiasm by Charles, uncrowned king of all bartenders on four planets and a dozen moons.

The Captain slid a large cardboard box across the bar and watched with poorly-concealed glee while Charles snapped the wire that bound it. "Seem to remember hearin' you say that you can't get that stuff," he growled. "Unholy weight it is, too!"

"Angostura bitters! Mon Capitan, you are the veritable benefactor of mankind! These twelve small bottles dispensed, a drop 'ere, a drop there, with the skill that only I, Charles, possess, will bring delight of the palate to thousands of people."

"Well, make 'em last, Charles; it doesn't look as though I'll be bringing you any more."

"Ah no, Captain. It is a matter of impossibility for a man of your stature to be confined to one small planet. Of this I am sure." Charles turned and ran his eye over the bottles behind his bar. "And now," he said, "allow me to create for you a drink you will never forget—a drink made possible only by your so-generous gift."

Charles, like all exceptional barmen, was something of a showman and made the simple act of mixing a drink a delight to watch.

"I do not fill your glass with a mess of fruit and vegetables," he commented. "Neither do I insult your palate with ice, which was invented by the Americans to dilute their abominable Martinis. Et voila!"

It was tawny-amber coloured in a plain crystal glass. The Captain tasted it and it was indeed a masterpiece and, after a long moment, he said so.

"And what is it called?" he asked.

"I shall call it *Old Smokey*," decided Charles. "And no one else will taste it but yourself. It is yours, Captain—personally!"

"Thank you, Charles, I am honoured."

"Au contraire—it is *I* who am honoured, mon Capitan."

When he had been given another *Old Smokey*, Justice excused himself and went over to Phipps, who was looking impatient.

"I see you have your own poison," remarked the inspector, "so I won't offer you any of this cactus-juice."

"Charles just invented this," explained Justice, "specially for me. Why the devil do people have to be so blasted *good* to me? They've been doing it all day!"

"Does it embarrass you, Captain?"

"Of course not! Well, yes it does, I suppose. What's more, it gives me the impression that they're all sorry for me."

"Which, of course, you can't stand. But perhaps their motive isn't so much pity as the desire to repay in some small way all the favours you've done for them."

"What favours?"

"Oh, I've had my ears open today. I think I'm the most hated man in the solar system, barring Leopold Dilg himself, as far as the residents of Syrtis Colony are concerned."

"Ah, so you know the story?"

"Yes. Thirty years ago you and Dilg were rivals—rocket piloting, business, girls; rivals in everything. You ran rings around him until he cracked up trying to beat you on the Mercury run. He retired behind a desk, nursing his grievances. Now he heads Interworld, which heads the Cartel, and he's decided to break you."

"Hm. You work quickly, Mr. Phipps, and my private life is a good deal more public than I thought. Well, you must realise that your only course of action is to put your seals on my ship, write your report and get off this planet before I start to take it apart."

"Muddled thinking, Captain, based on the premise that the Regulations are inflexible. They aren't; but whether I can bend them far enough to fit you is another matter—you're a big man!"

Justice shook his head. "No dice, Inspector. Don't you realise that Dilg will victimise *you* if you try to help me? And, even if you did manage to keep *Old Smokey* and me orbiting, do you think Dilg will leave it at that? The man's built his career on coercion; he'd apply pressure in the right places and I'd never get another cargo. The cartel is everywhere." He stood up and his white teeth flashed amid his tanned face. "You've got a job to do, son," he said. "Go ahead and do it and then go away and forget all about me."

He crammed his old cap on to his head, hefted his holdall and stomped out of the bar, not looking back.

Captain Justice's last call was at a house rather more prosperous-looking than most in Syrtis Colony. The door was opened by a creature six and a half feet tall who possessed a cerebral index approximating to that of a gorilla and a face to match. The mouth widened into a terrifying parody of a grin ; the Captain's huge fist was enveloped in one even larger and pumped violently up and down.

"Hullo, Ben," smiled Justice, "good to see you."

"Uh !" replied the big man enthusiastically. He released Justice's hand, which had become quite numb, and bellowed over his shoulder, "It's da Cap'n !"

"Justice !" boomed a female voice and Dora Kelly swept forward to greet him. She was a slim and elegant woman of indeterminate age and indefatigable good nature, but her voice did not accord with her appearance, since it had all the soft harmony of a regimental sergeant major's and quite as extensive a vocabulary. She was known generally as Madam Kelly and her establishment was, in its own way, quite as famous as Charles' bar.

"Dora !" said the Captain, "you're a sight for sore eyes !"

"So are you, you old reprobate," replied that lady. "Come here and give us a kiss, sweetie."

"Got something for you and the girls," Justice said, dipping into his holdall. "Hope it's the right smell," he added doubtfully.

"Perfume !" cried Dora. "Aren't you a bloody wonder ?" She kissed him again. Big Ben, who had been watching with the close attention of the very stupid, beamed with pleasure.

Dora turned and yelled, "Girls ! Get down here on the double and see what Captain Justice has brought you. Move yourselves !" She turned to the Captain and said, "The house is closed tonight, sweetie—I'm throwing the biggest god-damned party you ever saw, and you're the guest of honour !"

The party at Madam Kelly's was something that is still looked back upon with awe by those who were privileged to be there. It was a party that needed no nursing ; it just grew naturally, without a sour note or an empty glass until, by 2 a.m. the noise could be heard from one side of the dome to the other. By 4 a.m. it was a sustained roar which rendered sleep impossible for any citizens who were not fortunate enough to be personally involved. At 4.10 a.m. the Chief of Syrtis.

Colony's small police force heard the sudden change of pitch which betokened trouble and pressed his riot button.

A massed phlanx of some twenty Interworld pilots, all fighting drunk from the party they had organised in opposition, had decided to gate-crash. The ensuing battle was short, joyful and decisive. Captain Justice, Big Ben and those of Madam Kelly's male guests who were still able to see, had just disposed of the shattered rearguard of the gate-crashers when the police arrived. It was unfortunate that their uniforms so much resembled those of the Interworld men and still more unfortunate that Dora Kelly was too late to prevent Captain Justice from hurling the Chief of Police into the ornamental fountain.

When the riot wagon had departed, with the Captain's battered face peering wildly through the bars, she surveyed the ruins of her house with a wistful smile. "Some—party!" she said.

Late the following evening Justice was sitting in the dark, in his cell in Syrtis Colony's suddenly overcrowded gaol, when he heard footsteps in the corridor. The lock hummed softly and Inspector Phipps was framed in the doorway, the hood of his parka thrown back and the light shining through his soft blonde hair. There were no warders with him.

The Captain got to his feet and said, "I told them I didn't want any visitors, Inspector. Still less do I feel like talking to you!"

Phipps' voice was unnaturally loud but strong with authority "This is official business, Captain Justice. You'll come with me, please."

"I haven't the slightest intention of going anywhere with you, Phipps. Put your seals on my ship if you must and scuttle back to your desk to write your report, but leave me alone!"

Phipps switched on the cell light. In the hard glare from the plain white walls his young face was strained but his level stare did not falter. "Remember, Captain, that I'm a representative of the United Government and can command the support of any local authorities in the execution of my duties. Now, are you coming or must I reluctantly have you brought?"

Justice shrugged wearily. "Don't seem to have any fight left in me." He shook his head. "Must be getting old."

He picked up his respirator, stuck his ancient cap on to his head and walked out of the cell. Phipps, tight-lipped, fell in behind him.

A police armadillo was waiting for them; they climbed in and Phipps told the driver, "The old rocket field." The half-track lurched forward; Justice maintained a stiff silence. After a moment Phipps said, "I want you to show me the non-S.R.B.-approved mods you've done on your controls. If we can get some of them approved, remove others, have the ship put into some sort of order for a C. of S. inspection—"

"Stop it, Inspector!" interrupted Justice. For the first time Phipps heard a hint of mental agony in the Captain's voice. "I've already told you—I can't win against Dilg's tactics."

"Have it your way, Captain," replied Phipps. "However, I have to examine your ship, so have the courtesy to let me do my job, even if you won't accept my help."

They left the armadillo at the edge of the concrete apron and walked out to the ship. Justice looked up at her tall, clean lines with a heavy heart. He could see a light in the cabin; Phipps had asked for a service gantry and external supplies. They rode the crew lift in silence. Phipps was cold and detached, an official on duty; Justice was in no mood for any sort of conversation. In the pilot compartment he sat down on the acceleration couch and pulled off his breathing mask. "Help yourself, Mr. Phipps," he said. "Ask any questions you like."

"Let's have a dry run," said Phipps briskly; "Take me through your pre-flight checks and take-off procedure. I want to see how you fly this machine single-handed."

"As you wish," replied Justice, stretching himself on the g-couch and swinging the console into position in front of him. His hands began to move over the keys and buttons in the long-familiar routine and, as the red lights on the tell-tale panel changed one by one to green, the ship began slowly to wake to life.

"Hull seal—external supplies—power, compressed air, nitrogen—internal power—run up gyros."

The muttering of valves, the hiss of gases, the rising whine of gyroscopes began to be heard.

"Air conditioner — regenerator — dehumidifier — oxygen, helium. Fire detectors — collision alarm — hull pressure warning."

Phipps, standing behind the Captain, followed every move with intent eyes. There was a faint gleam of sweat on his unlined forehead.

"Fuel contents—check, check, check, check—all tanks full. Autopilot — nav aids — radio-altimeter — proximity meter — antennae and scanners."

The electronic displays added their soft glow to the subdued lighting in the cabin, ghostly green traces running back and forth across their faces.

"Pre-flight checks complete," reported Justice.

"Take-off procedure," ordered Phipps.

Justice flipped the transmitter switch. "NA137 on Pad 4 to Syrtis Tower," he said. "Permission to start warm-up. Test run only—repeat test run."

"Syrtis Tower to—" The thin voice of the controller was cut off as Phipps reached over and cut the receiver.

"Tower to *Old Smokey*" he said, almost in a whisper. "Permission to take-off—repeat take-off."

Justice twisted on his couch to look into the inspector's steady eyes.

"Lift her gently, Captain," said Phipps; "I've got no g-couch."

The gruelling pressure of the rocket's thrust was lifted at last, the wail of the turbines stilled. In the quiet cabin, Captain Justice unsnapped his harness and floated clear of his couch. He twisted with easy familiarity in the zero gravity to settle beside Phipps, who was spreadeagled on the deck plates, a smear of bright blood at the corner of his mouth.

As the Captain felt for his pulse the inspector opened his eyes and smiled. "I should have got on the floor more quickly," he said. "Not your fault, Captain."

He coughed and the small droplets of blood from his mouth drifted across the cabin.

"Please open the star ports."

Justice moved to the console; with a soft whirr of electric motors the shutters slid away from the navigation ports.

"Depolarise the screens," murmured Phipps, and the Captain obeyed. The stars shone in profusion through the unprotected ports.

Phipps smiled. "Thank you. I've always wanted to see them like that."

For a while then he was quiet, drinking in the glory of the stars with an almost desperate concentration. When he spoke again, his voice was weaker. "Look how the floor of heaven is . . . is inlaid . . ."

"Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold."

"Ah, yes, you would know it—" He coughed and, for a few seconds, was taut with agony. Then in sudden fear he cried, "Your hand—give me your hand!"

Captain Justice realised that Phipps could no longer see the stars. He went quickly to the dying man and took one of his hands in both his own.

"This is not goodbye," he said gently. "Do you believe that, my friend?"

"Yes. We'll meet again, John. In my end is . . . is my . . . beginning."

The Inspector's hand seemed suddenly smaller and very still. Justice placed it carefully on the breast and folded the other over it, blinking back the easy tears of the great-hearted.

Before he covered the star ports, he gently closed his friend's eyes. Then he strapped himself again to his couch and began to set the controls that would turn *Old Smokey's* nose towards the star Alpha in the constellation of Centaurus.

—Clive Jackson

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