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SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY

35c

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NEW

Volume 5

February, 1958

Number 4

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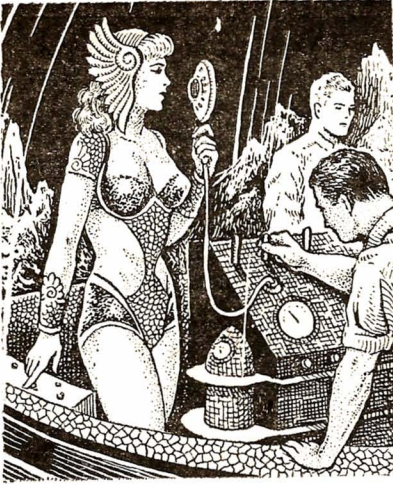
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Cover by *Emsb*

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SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY, February, 1958, published February, May, August and November, by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 35c; yearly subscription \$1.40. Entire contents copyright 1957 by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self addressed envelopes to insure return if not accepted, and while reasonable care will be extended in handling them, it is understood that they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in U. S. A.



CHIP ON THE SHOULDER

Novelet

by Charles L.
Fontenay

It was vitally important that the Allerdicians be convinced that Earth had abandoned its warlike ways. Then the delegation met the men of Allerdice, and the first thing they saw was a brawl...

EVAN KILGRU, psycho-sociologist for the Earthship *Ambassador*, was passing by the closed door of the spacemen's wardroom when he was halted by sounds of conflict inside. There was the noise of scuffling, the crash of a falling piece of furniture and the low, eager voices of spacemen cheering on the combatants.

Evan said a dirty word under his breath and pushed open the double doors. The fighters, both husky men, were shirtless and squared off in the center of the room; a half dozen off-duty spacemen stood around them.

Evan recognized the men who were fighting: Lower Jetman Chirki Boerging, the ship's recorder, and Topblast Spaceman Sulli Devlin, the gunnery crew chief. And Boerging was an officer.

Chirki tossed back his long blond hair, blew aside the ends of his flowing mustache and moved in cautiously. Sulli backed away, circling, his fists ready.

"Mister Boerging" barked Evan with as much authority as his rather high voice could command.

The two men stiffened and turned to face him. Their audience began to disperse as quietly as possible.

"Mister Boerging, what sort of discipline is this?" demanded Evan. "Officers do *not* fight with enlisted spacemen."

Chirki grinned and began to pull on his shirt. There was a cut on one of his leathery cheeks that bled slightly, and a puffiness below one blue eye. Sulli stood like a ramrod, breathing hard, awaiting permission to relax.

"Just a friendly disagreement," said Chirki. "Sulli thought the pie stank. The chief messman's a little fellow, so I took up for him."

"Spaceman Devlin, you may go," said Evan. "Since Mister Boerging obviously instigated this disgraceful brawl, you won't be disciplined this

time; but don't let it happen again."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said Sulli, relaxing. He picked up his shirt and left the wardroom.

Evan cast a critical eye over Chirki, who was still smiling unrepentantly. Evan sighed. He outranked Chirki; all the other officers did. Chirki was the lowest ranking officer aboard, and as a result he drew all the nuisance assignments, like mess officer, in addition to his primary duties as recorder. But Chirki was not far removed from a civilian in length of service, and he remained a civilian at heart. He was woefully lacking in respect to his superiors, and he insisted on fraternizing with the enlisted personnel.

"It's lucky I stopped by," said Evan. "The Allerdician delegation is due in a few minutes, and you're expected to be present. You better get cleaned up."

CHIRKI went into the kitchen and reappeared a few minutes later. There was still a puffiness to his eye, but he looked presentable.

"Another thing," said Evan as they left the wardroom. "This is a hell of a time for a fist fight; you know how important it is for us to convince the Allerdicians we're peaceful people."

Chirki snorted. "We'd better act natural and let them know we're normal human beings."

"You leave the psycho-sociology to me, my lad," snapped Evan, nettled. "It's my job."

They walked down the corridor toward the officers' wardroom. As they passed a port, Evan stopped and peered out. "Here they come," he said.

"Welcoming delegation or internment crew?" asked Chirki.

A puzzled frown creased Evan's brow. "It's hard to say. They look more like a bunch of boys shuffling home from school."

Chirki moved to Evan's side.

The spherical Earthship rested in an improvised cradle between two tapered

ships from worlds of nearby stars, like a ping-pong ball between a pair of up-ended cigars. The purple sun of the planet Allerdice shone impartially on all three, casting their shadows toward the blocky buildings and square towers of Ficia, capital city of Allerdice.

There were four men in the approaching Allerdician group, their long shadows stretching back toward the city. They were informally, almost roughly clad in tunics, short capes, knee-length trousers and shoes that flared at their tops.

The two lead men were pushing and hauling at each other, occasionally pausing to scuffle while the other two men stopped and waited patiently. At one point, one of them tripped the other, who sprawled in the dust of the spaceport. The fallen one arose and chased his tormenter around the other two men in a circle several times.

At last the squabbling group disappeared under the curve of the hull. Evan turned away from the port with a non-plussed shake of his head. "That can't be the official delegation!"

But it was.

CAPTAIN PAAVO VIDSON and the other officers of the *Ambassador* were seated around the big table in the officers' wardroom. Paavo nodded at Evan and Chirki as they entered.

It would have been difficult from the expressions and monosyllabic conversation of the *Ambassador's* officers to determine whether they were awaiting doom or deliverance. They didn't know, themselves.

In the center of the table, a coffee-pot bubbled with an assuredness that was sadly misplaced in such a gathering. Upper Jetman Fetter, who outranked only Chirki, was gravely refilling the cups, a task he thankfully turned over to Chirki.

"Mister Kilgru," said Chirki solemnly as he poured the captain's coffee, "has been chastising me for a

friendly bout with one of my inferiors."

"I didn't know you had inferiors, Chirki," remarked Fetter unkindly.

"In rank," elaborated Chirki. "And no sooner am I chastised than he peeks out the port at the approaching Allerdician dignitaries, and what do you think? They're having a bout, too, and it doesn't look so friendly."

"Get off my back, Chirki," said Evan without rancor. "If you can't have faith in psycho-sociology now, where are we?"

"In a hell of a fix, either way," answered Chirki bluntly. "Psycho-sociology sure did a neat job on Earth, didn't it?"

THAT HIT a sore spot.

"Politicians did that!" retorted Evan angrily. "And you know it!"

Politicians or psycho-sociologists, someone had certainly "done a neat job" on Earth. After centuries of peace and unification—during which it had colonized planets of a hundred star systems and established a far-flung commercial empire—the civilization of Earth had exploded suddenly into war, like a nova. All the ferocity that had been leashed for so many generations seemed to surge to the fore at once, blasting the Lunar base, the colonies of the Solar System and, most of all, Earth itself, in a fury of flame and passion.

Terrestrial civilization had tottered in that holocaust. Space travel had been one of the first casualties, and the star colonies soon quarantined the seething Solar System. Earth, the mother of man, was left alone, to destroy herself if she chose.

Earth had not destroyed herself, but it had taken three centuries for terrestrial humankind to climb back from the wreckage of that war and begin once again to seek the stars. Working from what records had been saved, Earthmen sought once again to

establish contact with their former colonies in other star systems.

It was a difficult, ticklish business, trying to get established once more as a responsible partner in the stable interstellar civilization, so soon after such a barbarous exhibition as a planetary war. One by one, the worlds of the nearer star systems accepted Earth again, albeit some maintained suspicious reservations. Allerdice was the farthest yet that Earthmen had gone suing for recognition—and recognition by Allerdice was most important of all.

THE DOOR to the wardroom opened, and Sulli Devlin entered. Somehow, Sulli had managed to change to dress scarlet in the short interval since the altercation in the spacemen's wardroom. The only mark of the battle on him was a swollen lip. Sulli stood straight as a spear beside the open door, his rock-like jaw thrust out. "The Allerdician delegation, sirs," he announced.

There was the squawl of opposing voices in the corridor outside, and the Allerdician delegation progressed jerkily into the wardroom. The two leaders, who were doing all the afguing, were a Laurel-and-Hardy pair of opposites. The rotund one wore a fringe of beard, the tall one was stooped, lugubrious and lantern-jawed. Apparently quite unembarrassed at being ushered into the presence of the Earthmen, they continued their argument at the tops of their respective voices.

"As representatives of Earth..." began Paavo soberly, arising and holding out his hand. He stopped, mouth open.

The roly-poly Allerdician pushed the other away violently and advanced toward Paavo, his whiskers wagging. The tall one, recovering his balance with remarkable quickness, leaped after the short one, grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him back. They

stood face-to-face, shouting at each other, ignoring the Earthmen.

Paavo looked helplessly at Evan. Evan shrugged. Chirki grinned.

"The language is a variant of English," Evan shouted above the din. "I can't understand it, though; they're talking too fast."

The two Allerdicians were pushing each other, vigorously and in turn, like angry children. Their companions stood gravely behind them, apparently unconcerned.

"Switch on the recorder," ordered Paavo belatedly. "We ought to have a record of this for deciphering."

As Chirki obeyed, the tall Allerdician backed away from his opponent. The first word the recorder got was the word he shouted.

"*Lasseryer!*" was the way it came out later on tape.

The round one's face lit up with an expression of pure joy.

"*Lasseryer!*" he snapped back, and bored in, slugging.

It was quite a fight for a few minutes. At last, the tall one got the fat one down and sat on him. Through it all, the Earthmen gaped, reluctant to interfere as long as the other two Allerdicians seemed so calm about it.

They arose from the floor, brushing off their rumpled clothing. Then, to the Earthmen's surprise, the tall one—the winner of the scuffle—backed away and bowed low to his defeated opponent. The fat one nodded briefly, and marched triumphantly forward to greet Paavo, not with a handshake, but an upraised palm and a ridiculous wiggle of the fingers.

At Evan's nudge, Paavo replied in kind, and the conference was on.

2

THERE WAS some difficulty achieving mutual understanding, at first; but this was a field in

which Evan was an acknowledged expert. After playing back some of the Allerdicians' words on tape several times, he got the hang of their language and was able to act as an interpreter.

The fat Allerdician, it developed, was Lobtent, representative of Villib, the *itfizen* of Allerdice. There was a formal exchange of amenities—a little to the surprise of Evan, after the Allerdicians' original uncouthness. Then the conference got down to business with breathtaking suddenness.

Lobtent evidently had received detailed instructions. When Paavo had explained Earth's interest in gaining Allerdician recognition as a peaceful member of the galactic community, Lobtent leaned back in his chair, protruded his cheeks and patted his stomach.

"Let us be quite honest, Captain," he said. The term he used was "Earth visitor," but Evan discreetly interpreted it to Paavo as "captain." "You of Earth know that Allerdice, as head of the fifteen worlds of the Allerdician Union, is the most powerful force in the galaxy today. You know that Allerdice, in agreement with other planets of the Union, holds to the policy of occupying barbarous worlds and prohibiting them from space flight until they have been reeducated.

"When you ask that Allerdice recognize Earth, what you are asking is that Allerdice do not occupy Earth, and strip Earth of the potentiality for wars against other worlds. Is that not correct?"

Evan was shocked at this bald statement of fact. Paavo looked stunned when the psycho-sociologist translated.

"We ask that Allerdice recognize Earth as a peaceful world," replied Paavo stiffly. "Earth would resist any unjustified occupation."

"Resistance would be unavailing against the fleet of fifteen worlds," said Lobtent. "The worlds in Earth's sector would not assist Earth against

Allerdice. Earth must prove to Allerdice it is a peaceful world."

"Space!" exploded Paavo, ignoring Evan's frantic gestures. At the exclamation, Lobbert and the tall Allerdician exchanged knowing nods. "What must Earth do to prove its peaceful intentions? You have Earth's word; if you doubt it, why haven't you sent a peaceful inspection delegation to Earth?"

"*Earth* sues for recognition, not Allerdice," answered Lobbert brusquely. "So Earth sends representatives to Allerdice. Do you not understand now?"

"No, I don't," said Paavo, swallowing his anger and rubbing his arm where Evan had pinched it frantically.

"You represent Earth here," said Lobbert. "We of Allerdice have a psycho-sociological tradition. We can tell from your actions whether the world from which you come has a reasonable chance to peace."

IN ESSENCE, that ended the conference. After formal goodbyes, the Allerdician delegation left. The voices of their two leaders rose in argument as they vanished down the corridor.

"Of all the bald insolence!" raged Paavo. "They fight right in front of us, and then have the nerve to doubt that *we're* peaceful people!"

"Like I told Evan, Captain," said Chirki with a smile. "We ought to..."

"Shut *up!*" roared Paavo. "Evan, what about it?"

"I don't know," replied Evan thoughtfully. "Most of the records we had on Allerdice were destroyed, and they've developed for three centuries since then, anyhow. We know the planet was settled under the auspices of a group of psycho-sociologists led by Kentu Allerdice, and our advance information is that they have a civilization of the highest, most stable type..."

"Stable!" erupted Paavo. "When a diplomatic delegation yaks and squab-

bles right in front of us? Even comes to blows? How stable is that?"

"Well, I don't know," repeated Evan. "They may be testing us, or that may have been a deliberate insult. If it was an insult, they still may be testing us. There are a couple of inconsistencies about them that puzzle me. One of them was that word '*lasseryer*' they hollered at each other."

"Obviously an insult," said Paavo. "It brought on a fight."

"Maybe. That's the most logical explanation. But did you notice that the tall one won the fight? It looked as though they were fighting over which one was to have the honor of being the spokesman to us. But the tall one won, yet the fat one, Lobbert, took over as spokesman."

"An insult to us," conjectured Paavo. "The fat one lost, and had to suffer the indignity of speaking to the lowly Earthmen."

Evan smiled. "Don't let your sense of our inferiority influence your opinion."

"Inferiority?" snarled Paavo. "To them?"

"*We're* the ones who came here asking recognition," Evan reminded. "But Lobbert was a little too triumphant about his position as spokesman for your theory to make sense. I think the key to the whole business is in that expression, '*lasseryer*,' and I'm going to try to break it down."

"If it isn't an insult, what do you think it is?" asked Paavo.

"I haven't the slightest idea. Whatever it is, it sure gets action."

"YOU SEEMED to understand their language pretty well, after you got started."

"Yes, it's English, changed by long dissociation from the source—and I expect the source language on Earth has changed, too. I follow it partly from context. But chasing down the semantics of a single word is a harder propo-

sition. They've switched the sounds of some similar letters, like 'p' and 'b' and 'v.' and in some cases the words have changed to things that sound only vaguely like the originals. I rather suspect 'Lobbent' used to be 'Robert'—an ancient English name—and I'm almost sure 'Villib' was once 'Phillip.' But '*lasseryer*' could be an entirely new word they've invented here."

"Well, aside from that, we seem to be guinea pigs," said Paavo, leaning back and clasping his hands together. "How do you suggest we react?"

"Frankly, sir, I'm scared. Without knowing more about the Allerdicians, I don't know how they'll interpret anything we do."

"Why not just act natural?" suggested Chirki. "Or have I brought that up before?"

"Natural?" repeated Evan. "They're going to interpret from our actions whether Earth is peaceful or still warlike. How do any of us act differently now in our personal reactions than our fathers did when Earth was tangled up in a vicious war? I'm frank to say I don't know, and I'm a psycho-sociologist. They'll probably be looking for little things. Our psycho-sociology hasn't progressed far enough yet to get into such fine differentiations of human reactions."

"Well," argued Chirki, "if they're such fine psycho-sociologists, wouldn't you think they'd interpret our natural actions correctly? After all, Earth *is* peaceful, isn't it?"

"I'm scared," said Evan again. "One wrong move could put Earth under military occupation. I wish we could just hang around the ship and not have to deal with the Allerdicians at all."

"Well, we can't," said Paavo. "You've got to take a guard tomorrow and deliver our written proposal to their what's-it... Villib."

"Great space!" exclaimed Evan, appalled at being forced into action so soon. "Couldn't you have given that to their delegation?"

"I'm afraid this is outside your psycho-sociological jurisdiction," said Paavo. "My orders were that it be delivered to the head man of Allerdice, personally. But, as psycho-sociologist, you'll be in charge of the delivery and responsible for the behavior of the men who go with you."

"Yes, sir," said Evan unhappily. "If I must, I suppose I must."

"And you'd better work like hell to figure out the right pitch for these people," Paavo warned. "Earth knows Allerdice's general attitude, but nobody realized they were quite so direct about it. If we don't get that recognition in a few days, we're going to make a run for it to warn Earth of Allerdice's plans for occupation."

"But that would mean certain war with Allerdice!" protested Evan frantically.

"I can't take chances," said Paavo. "If there's to be war, we don't want Earth to be caught by surprise."

3

EVAN STOOD erect in the crimson morning of Allerdice and snapped sharp instructions to the half dozen men assigned to accompany him into the city of Ficia. He had picked them carefully, for stability and intelligence, and Sulli Devlin was the top enlisted spaceman of the group. Evan had not particularly wanted Chirki Beorging along, but Chirki's title of "recorder" meant actually that he was the expedition's historian, and he was expected to be on the spot for such an occasion.

The men were resplendent in the scarlet-and-silver full-dress uniforms of Earth's Space Navy—crash helmets with cocked plumes, tunics with full sleeves gathered at the wrists, baggy trousers gathered at the ankles, space boots. On the shoulders of Evan's uniform were the braided epaulets of an

Upper Wingman, a rank on a par with that of the *Ambassador's* executive officer. He felt uncomfortable in full dress, as he always did. Evan was rather chubby.

A hundred and fifty yards away, there was a bustle of activity as the crew of one of the other two ships prepared for blastoff. Vehicles rumbled, men shouted and metal clanked against metal. Underlying all the commotion was the throbbing whine of the other-world ship's powerful dynamos.

"We have to be careful," Evan was warning the attentive group. "Whatever these people do, we can't react, until we're sure what they mean. If they hiss at us, we can't get angry, because that may be their way of applauding us. And let the women alone!"

A solitary figure in short pants, with a long feather curling from a ridiculous cap, trudged across the spaceport toward them. He was a skinny little man, with square-rimmed spectacles on his nose.

"I'm Lusser," he introduced himself in a squeaky voice, wagging his fingers. "I've come to conduct you to Villib. *Lasseryer*?"

The word was a question, spoken almost hopefully, not the wrathful expletives the others had used. Evan hesitated. Should he reply in kind, with the same word? It might mean something like "Let's go." On the other hand, it might mean something that would get him in trouble if he repeated it. Yesterday the word had been used, and the man to whom it was addressed had attacked its user.

"I'm Evan Kilgru," Evan said slowly and distinctly, wagging his own fingers back. "We look forward with pleasure to an audience with your *itfizen*, and we are honored that such a distinguished gentleman will conduct us."

UNACCOUNTABLY, Lusser looked disappointed. But he led the way

across the spaceport, Evan and Chirki at his heels and the small detachment of brightly-uniformed men marching in formation behind them.

"I think you were a little bit rigid in your instructions to the men," said Chirki as they walked. "I still think the best course is to act natural."

"Look, Chirki," said Evan patiently, "we don't know what '*natural*' is to these people. They proved that with their performance yesterday. What they did must have been natural to them, but we wouldn't do it, and we don't know what it means. By the same token, we don't know how they are going to interpret whatever we do."

"Wasn't Allerdice settled by psycho-sociologists?" demanded Chirki. "You're a psycho-sociologist. You ought to be able to estimate how they look at things."

"Well...there are different schools of psycho-sociology," said Evan reluctantly. "This Kentu Allerdice, who led the First Allerdician colony, belonged to a school that is extinct now on Earth. They believed healthy notions were guaranteed by letting off steam now and then."

"Well, for Pete's sake, let's let off a little steam, then," said Chirki. "That's obviously what those characters were doing in the wardroom yesterday."

"What does *lasseryer* mean, and would it mean anything different to them if we said it?" countered Evan. "In the ancient American West you could call a man an illegitimate child if he was your friend, but if he was a stranger he'd shoot hell out of you for it. Letting off steam can be dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. Besides, their psycho-sociological theories could have changed a lot in a few centuries."

The city of Ficia was clean, but Evan was not impressed with its beauty. Most of the buildings were square and unadorned, and there was no conformity in the pattern of their construction such as, say, in the beauti-

fully planned cities of Sirius XV.

They evidently were out before the morning rush hour. There were few people on the streets through which they marched, and most buildings were closed. The people they passed stared at them curiously, shouted after them incomprehensibly or just laughed.

THEIR AUDIENCE with Villib, in a garden-surrounded structure that appeared to be something in the nature of a palace, was brief, pleasant and to the point. Evan and Chirki, conducted in by Lusser while the enlisted spacemen waited in an adjoining patio, were refreshed with drinks of some sort of semi-sweet fruit juice. Evan handed over the draft of the recognition agreement they hoped Villib would sign. Villib glanced over it, laid it aside and bade them a courteous farewell.

Evidently, the Allerdicians meant what they said. The Earthmen were on trial, and the paper would not be signed until they had proved themselves.

Maybe Villib had passed word to the populace when they left, or maybe it was just that the streets were getting crowded by the time they started back to the ship. Whatever it was, their return soon began to take on strongly nightmarish aspects.

From the first, it seemed to Evan that the shouts of bystanders as they passed were louder and more offensive. He thought he might be imagining this, though, because of his own nervousness.

But when pedestrians began to move into the Earthmen's little marching column, that was something definitely new and ominous. They were marching two abreast, Evan walking beside Lusser at the head of the group. At first some of the pedestrians just walked down between the ranks, gaining evident enjoyment from the action. Then a few of them began to wind in and out between the men, almost tripping some of them on a couple of occasions.

The Earthmen marched onward, grimly. Evan counted the blocks as

they walked. They were still a good quarter of a mile from the spaceport when two Allerdicians, anticipating the line of their march, stood grinning square in the path of the double column.

Without a word, Evan led his men around them. Lusser fell back, and for a moment Evan thought he would protest to their interceptors. But, seeing them moving on, Lusser ran after them, caught up with them and rejoined Evan. He looked at Evan curiously, but said nothing.

It got worse before it got better—if it could be said to have gotten better at all. Half a block beyond this incident, a group of Allerdicians blocked the sidewalk completely. There was no way around them without going out into the street, and vehicular traffic was too heavy for that.

Evan halted his men when they reached the group, anticipating trouble. The Allerdicians were too obviously watching them for the sidewalk block to be accidental.

A burly Allerdician detached himself from the group and stepped up to Evan. He towered a head above Evan. He spat to one side and snapped: "*Lasseryer!*"

Evan's heart sank. There was that key word again, and he had no idea how to reply to it. "I'd appreciate your letting us by," he said courteously but firmly, wagging his fingers hopefully at the Allerdician. "We're anxious to reach the spaceport."

"*LASSERYER!*" yelled the Allerdician in his face.

The volume of it almost knocked Evan down. He staggered slightly. Then, for want of something better to do, he shook his head decisively and made as if to step by the man.

THE ALLERDICIAN seized him by the shoulders and ripped the braided epaulets off with one powerful wrench. Evan's plumed helmet fell to the sidewalk with a clatter.

As though it were a signal, the other Allerdicians descended on Chirki and the enlisted spacemen with a howl. Their hands ripped the colorful uniforms of the Earthmen. The Earthmen were torn out of formation, their clothing pulled awry by their attackers. Half a scarlet tunic flew out of the melee and descended on one of the interested onlookers who were stopping their cars to watch.

Just in time, Evan heard Sulli's enraged bawl, amplified by Chirki's joyous shout and angry squawls from the other men. He pulled himself from the mauling grasp of the big Allerdician.

"Tention!" he cried above the hubbub. "Don't resist, men! Dammit, don't resist, I say! They're trying to test us; for Earth's sake, don't resist!"

His frantic yells brought a sudden subsidence in the semi-brawl. Earthmen and Allerdicians paused, their surprised faces turning toward him. The Earthmen straightened their shoulders, striving for military bearing despite their tattered uniforms. The Allerdicians still held them, by arms, legs, collars.

Before hostilities could be resumed, Lusser stepped up to the big Allerdician who had manhandled Evan.

"*Lasseryer!*" he growled, drawing himself to his full height—which wasn't very much.

"*Lasseryer!*" shouted the other Allerdician in glee, and laid Lusser out on the sidewalk with a single blow to the stomach.

A dead hush fell over the scene as the Allerdicians waited for Lusser to recover consciousness. They moved away from the tattered, angry Earthmen and stood solemnly in groups, watching the crumpled form on the sidewalk.

After a few moments, Lusser opened his eyes slowly, groaned, shook his head and arose unsteadily. He hesitated, looking around, then advanced on his attacker in a brisk, businesslike

fashion. But the fight was not resumed. The two men retired to one side and talked earnestly in a low voice, while the other Allerdicians murmured quietly among themselves.

There was no block across the sidewalk now, and Evan was tempted to resume his march. But he decided to wait on Lusser. There was no way of telling what the Allerdicians' reactions would be if he tried to get out of there.

LUSSER broke off his conversation and returned to Evan.

"We shall go to your ship now," he said officiously.

Dubiously, Evan gave the command to march. They moved off in formation. The Allerdicians made no move to interfere.

Whatever had happened, the word seemed to have gotten around. They were not molested again as they proceeded down the street. Evan was unable to contain his curiosity.

"What did you say to that fellow?" he asked Lusser. "He knocked you down, but you evidently talked him out of doing anything more."

"I took responsibility for you and the other Earthmen," said Lusser with something of contempt in his voice. "I told him you are under my command; I explained to him that you knew no better."

"No better than what?"

"We of Allerdice do not like uniforms and marching," said Lusser.

They marched on into the spaceport. Even knew the men were furious, and he didn't blame them. The trouble was that the Allerdicians were on top. Maybe it was part of their social set-up to attack visitors with impunity; but maybe if the visitors fought back, that would prove to them that Earthmen weren't peaceful, as they claimed, but were quick-tempered and warlike.

Evan's shoulders sagged. On them he felt the heavy responsibility of warding off the military occupation of Earth by soldiers from a foreign world.

Maybe, if Lusser was right, they would be soldiers without uniforms and soldiers who didn't march in formation, but Evan would be willing to bet his psycho-sociology diploma they'd be well armed.

4

“**B**Y SATURN, Paavo,” Evan told the captain, “there’ll be no more marching, and we’d better require that any men who leave the spaceport go out of uniform. As I said before, I wish we could just hole up inside the ship.”

“But you don’t think we can?” said Paavo.

“No. They’re studying us to determine if Earth is peaceful, and they can’t study us if we’re not circulating around to be studied. And they don’t give a hang whether we let them figure us out or not.”

“All right,” said Paavo. “If you want the men to circulate, I’ll permit it, as long as there aren’t too many out at a time. Whatever you have in mind, though, Evan, you’d better pull it off fast. If we don’t get favorable action out of Allerdice in three days, we’re blasting out of here.”

Evan was shocked. “Three days! That’s pretty short notice, Paavo. I’m not sure that *any* good psycho-sociologist could be expected to determine a world’s attitude from the actions of such a small group in so little time.”

“Maybe not, but you have to look at my side of it. If Earth isn’t warned of Allerdician plans for occupation, I’m responsible.”

“And if it’s going to be war with Allerdice, instead of peace, I’m responsible,” interrupted Evan. “That’s my job on this expedition.”

“Right, but I’m still captain. And this is the chance I can’t take: they may decide from our actions that Earth *isn’t* peaceful. If and when they do,

this ship won’t have a chance of getting off of Allerdice.”

He gestured dismissal. Evan sighed and left Paavo’s cubbyhole of an office.

He conceded the justice of Paavo’s concern. The captain was in a tight spot. But he didn’t see how Paavo could reasonably expect the Allerdicians to decide the Earthmen were peaceful in three days, when he seemed to feel they wouldn’t decide the Earthmen were warlike in the same space of time.

The trouble was that Evan didn’t have any sort of plan at all. The Allerdicians’ mental processes were still as unknown to him as they had been at the beginning. All he could do was turn a few men loose in the city and trust to luck.

EVAN DESCENDED from the control deck through the navigation to the upper centerdeck. Chirki Beorging was sitting in a chair outside the enlisted wardroom, tilted back comfortably against the wall.

“Say, Evan,” called Chirki as Evan started past him toward the companionway down to the mid-centerdeck.

Evan stopped.

“Have you tried to figure out what these Allerdicians are like from history?” asked Chirki.

“Psycho-sociology is based partly on the study of historical factors,” Evan reminded him. “But we don’t know enough about the Allerdicians’ history to draw any conclusions.”

“You know the history of Kentu Allerdice, who led the original settlers of the planet,” said Chirki, pulling at his long mustache. “Or you should. If you don’t, I do; he was a troublemaker.”

“That helps. It looks like all the Allerdicians are,” retorted Evan, and started on.

“Well, I have a suggestion to make,” said Chirki, raising his voice.

Evan paused at the top of the com-

panionway. "What is it?" he asked in a pained voice.

"I expect the Allerdicians are civilized enough to write," said Chirki with a huge grin. "Maybe they'd let you look at their own histories of themselves."

Evan snorted and moved on. At the moment, he had another recourse in mind.

Going down to the lower centerdeck, Evan went out through the ship's big circular port and walked down the long ramp. He crossed the spaceport to the tall other-world ship that still rested there, identified himself to the swarthy guard and asked to see the captain.

Captain Nov-Kim of the Decembian ship *Grik* received Evan in a tiny cunicle off the control deck high in the nose of the ship. He spoke a broken variety of the Allerdicians' version of English, indicating that it was far from his native tongue, but Evan was able to understand him.

Evan outlined the problem facing the Earthmen.

"Your people obviously have had contact with the Allerdicians for some time," said Evan. "We need your help. Perhaps you can tell us something of their mental processes."

Nov-Kim smiled.

"You may not know," he said. "Decembu is world of Allerdician Union. Why we help you? We like to know also if Earth is peaceful. We let you prove this to Allerdice."

"At least," persisted Evan, "tell me what they mean by that word '*Lasseryer*'."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Decembian. "I know tricks of psycho men. That word is key word. I not tell you that."

Morosely, Evan made his way back to the *Ambassador*.

A KEY WORD. That agreed with Evan's estimate. What in space could it mean?

He had tried his semantics tests to it to no avail, but he tried them again.

L was a sound without any close variants, although *R* and *N* were similar. Since it was the initial sound, the chances were it was not a variant. The two *R*s, too, probably were accurate renditions, although the first *R* might be an *N*, or, less likely, an *L*. The final *R* *could* be an *N*. The *S*s could only be *Z*, *ZH* or *TH* if they were not original sounds. Possibly, the first *R* and/or the *Y* should be slurred.

Evan tried *lazzeryer*, *latherer*, *lassenyen*, *lazzelyer*. He swore softly. The trouble was, there was no context to help in interpretation. The best he could get was "*lassoer*," which meant nothing.

It might be an Allerdician word without English roots.

As a matter of fact, Chirki's suggestion had some merit, he thought. He did not expect to pick up any really helpful information from Allerdician history.

But . . . textbooks on Allerdician psycho-sociology might be something else!

Evan determined to visit the library in Ficia, if there was one, the very next day.

5

A DOZEN men—a third of the crew—were given liberty the next day. Paavo's order also specified that officers were free to go into the city of Ficia at any time they were not on duty. No uniforms, the order said—and no trouble!

Evan, who would have been a free agent under the circumstances anyhow, made inquiries and headed toward Ficia's public library.

Late that afternoon, he walked slowly and despondently back toward the ship. Discouraged at the results of his research, he was disturbingly conscious that a dozen spacemen and several officers had been circulating among the people of Ficia all day, flaunting their reactions for all to see.

He worried over the conclusions the Allerdician psycho-sociologists might draw from them. He worried that one or more of the Earthmen might be pushed beyond endurance and start a fight that would be disastrous to their hopes.

At a street intersection, he fell in with Sulli Devlin, and they walked together.

"Having any luck, sir?" asked Sulli.

"I'm afraid not," admitted Evan. "I sank up to my ears in Allerdician history, but I couldn't find anything of great value. It's true the Allerdicians have maintained peace here and on the neighboring worlds, but all I can find is the facts, without any insight into the reasons."

"Mister Beorging said you were going to look into their psycho-sociological textbooks. You found nothing there, either?"

Evan laughed shortly. "That section of the library was sealed off to me. The Allerdicians aren't dumb enough to tip their hand that way. They've seen to it that we'll work it out for ourselves."

"Meaning no disrespect, sir," said Sulli, "I thought all psycho-sociologists studied out of the same textbook."

"No," answered Evan with a smile, "I'm afraid not. There are almost as many schools of psycho-sociology as there are church sects. It's far from an exact science. I know a good deal about the original theories of Kentu Allerdice and his school, but I don't know the direction of their development here."

They walked on in silence for a few moments.

"I ran across Russell today," volunteered Sulli. "I got the impression from him the Allerdicians like us pretty well."

"Russell?" repeated Evan, trying to place the name. He knew none of the member of the *Ambassador's* crew by that name.

"You know, sir, that character with

the eyeglasses who acted as our guide. I can't think of his real name, but it sounds like 'Russell.'"

"Lusser," Evan informed him. "It probably is a derivation from 'Russell'..."

He stopped, his mouth falling open.

"By Sirius, Sulli!" he exclaimed. "That's it! Let's get back to the ship!"

WITH THE puzzled Sulli in tow, Evan started off at a fast walk. They rounded the next corner and walked straight into trouble. Chirki Beorging had been pushed too far.

About fifty feet from the intersection, Chirki and two other spacemen were ranged defiantly before half a dozen Allerdicians.

From the hunch of Chirki's shoulders, he was about to wade in.

"Mister Beorging!" shouted Sulli, and the big man half turned toward them. They hurried up.

"What is it, Chirki?" asked Evan.

"These fellows won't let us by, Evan," growled Chirki. His brows were knit and his face was like a thundercloud. "They keep yelling *lasseryer* at us, and when we try to go around them, they push us back. They won't even let us turn around and go back the way we came."

As if to emphasize his words, one Allerdician moved in close and pushed Chirki violently. Chirki staggered against Evan.

"*Lasseryer!*" shouted the Allerdician.

Chirki turned, his fists clenched.

"Wait, sir!" cried Sulli. "Don't forget the instructions. We've got to keep our heads, sir!"

"That order is countermanded," said Evan coolly. "Slug him, Mister Beorging!"

Chirki froze, surprise written on his face. "What was that?" he demanded incredulously.

"Five Earthmen against six Allerdicians is even up," said Evan, rolling up

his sleeves, "I said give it to him, Chirki."

With a shout of pure joy, Chirki laid the Allerdician out on the sidewalk with a single blow. Sulli's gratified roar sounded like the bellow of a bull as he and Evan joined the fray.

What followed was a very satisfactory free-for-all. There were other Allerdicians in the vicinity, and quite a few of them got into it before the Earthmen were battered into submission.

EVAN KILGRU and Chirki Beorging stood before Captain Paavo Vidson of the *Ambassador*, as near at attention as their aching backs would permit. The clothes of both were in tatters. Chirki sported a beautiful shiner and Evan, less apt at combat, was almost unrecognizable with a face puffed all out of shape.

"By Saturn, Evan, I'd courtmartial both of you, except for one thing," said Paavo sternly.

Evan grinned, as well as he could. "Our reprieve must have come through rather quickly, sir," he ventured.

"Reprieve? You could call it that." Paavo pulled a paper from his desk drawer and studied it. "Villib signed Allerdician recognition of Earth. It came while you belligerent idiots were being escorted here under arrest."

"Yes, sir. That was the reprieve to which I was referring. I thought we might have to sample the brig for a few days before he decided we were right fellows."

Paavo leaned back and studied him quizzically.

"You seem blasted sure of yourself," he commented. "Maybe you can tell me just what psycho-sociological gimmick causes Villib to decide Earth's a peaceful within an hour after you and our other noble thugs have just sent a round dozen of his citizens to the hospital."

"Yes, sir," replied Evan happily. "The Allerdicians still follow the basic

psycho-sociological concepts of the colony's founder, Kentu Allerdice. They believe that man, being a combative animal by nature, builds up powerful emotional tensions which, if not alleviated, can override his judgment and logic. They look upon war, among other phenomena, as the result of a psychosis which is created by the continual building up of such tensions under the rigid restraints required by civilized cooperation."

"Savages fight wars," remarked Paavo.

"Brief ones, on a small scale," said Evan. "Ansd if you don't think savages are bothered by civilized restraints, you ought to study the tight taboo system of most savages tribes."

"Point accepted," said Paavo. "Go on."

"**W**ELL, TO prevent these tensions from building to the psychosis level, the Allerdicians have accepted a means of relieving these tensions into the structure of their society. It's sort of a means of blowing off steam. The idea is, if your neighbor just irritates the hell out of you, you holler '*lasseryer*' at him. If he agrees, you slug it out, and anything goes short of mayhem. The beauty of it is that, after all your combative instincts have been beaten out of you, you get together with the other fellow and settle your disputes reasonably.

"When we demonstrated to the Allerdicians that Earthmen could be goaded into . . . ah . . . relieving our emotional tensions in the same manner, they decided Earth could be trusted reasonably to keep the peace with other worlds. All they wanted for proof was to get us into a good fist fight."

"So that's the explanation for that performance the Allerdician delegation put on here at the ship?" suggested Paavo.

"Yes, sir. Lobtent was the official spokesman, but the other Allerdician

didn't approve of his method of approach. So he challenged Lobtent, whipped him in a scuffle, got all the irritation out of his system by direct action and then yielded to the inevitable—and Lobtent did things his own way after all. That's their whole idea."

"So Chirki was right, then?" murmured Paavo.

"Chirki, sir?"

"Chirki was the one who wanted to act natural," Paavo reminded him. "He seems to have been a better psychosociologist than you, Evan."

"No, sir, it isn't quite that simple," replied Evan, with a sidelong smile at Chirki. Since they had fought side by side, Evan had decided the big man wasn't such a bad fellow after all. "Psycho-sociology isn't a matter of guesswork. No, sir, Sulli was the one who tipped me to the solution."

"Sulli?"

"Yes, sir. My difficulties in understanding the Allerdician language were that the original English had been changed by sight alterations of some of the sounds in many words. That applied particularly to the key word *lasseryer*, because it was out of context."

"I don't see how Sulli could help," said Paavo. "He's no linguist."

"That's just it, sir. Not being a linguist, he had difficulty remembering the Allerdician version of words and

tended to lapse back into the English from which they were derived. When that happened with the name *Lusser*—which was a derivation of *Russell*—it dawned on me."

Paavo leaned back and stared at him quizzically.

"We seem to have come out of this all right," he said slowly. "Allerdice has recognized Earth and we don't have to worry about military occupation. The men who were with you are happy about their brawl, and the rest of the men are happy at the prospect of getting into one of their own. But, Evan, the devious ways of psychosociology still escape me. How in space could you get any sense out of *that* sort of thing?"

"Simple, sir," answered Evan with a grin. "*Lusser* is close enough to *lasseryer* in its construction for the alterations to be parallel."

"But what does *lasseryer* mean?" persisted Paavo.

"When two small boys who are strangers to each other chance to meet in an alley, what's the first thing one of them is likely to say to the other?" countered Evan.

"It's been a long time since I was a boy," said Paavo reflectively. "What do they say to each other, Evan?"

Evan smiled through split lips.

"*'Wrestle you!'*" he answered.