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# SCIENCE FICTION *Quarterly*

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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# LAST STAND OF A SPACE GRENADIER

Offhand, you'd say this was a real oldtime space-opera, from the title, wouldn't you? Well, you can trust Mr. Grinnell not to make such an obvious follow-through. In a sense, you might call the story space-opera, true — but on the other hand . .

**by David Grinnell**

*(illustrated by Paul Orban)*



**I** HAVE JUST finished disconnecting my television set. It's a fine 30" screen job, this year's model, and in perfect condition. If you want to buy it, I will sell it for far below what it would cost you anywhere. I am not interested in owning one anymore, and if you do not have any

children in your house, you can buy my set at a real bargain.

I have a fourteen-year-old boy of my own. He used to enjoy the television shows, particularly a certain science-fiction adventure serial, but he will have to confine his entertainment to reading now. He doesn't mind too

much, because he is a voracious reader of science-fiction magazines, too.

Several days ago, I was sitting at home reading a book and my boy Edward was sitting at the cleared dinner table hunched over a pulp magazine. Suddenly he gave a snort, said, "Huh!" and sort of looked up with an odd grin on his face.

"What's the joke?" I asked, out of curiosity. I am a reporter for the *Daily Argus* and by nature I always ask questions. Ed just grinned, came over with the magazine and showed it to me. It was a copy of a popular science-fiction monthly, and he had folded it back to the department called the Fantasy Legion.

The Fantasy Legion is one of those coupon-clipping clubs that some of these pulps run. You clip a coupon and they send you a colorful membership-card, and perhaps a lapel-pin. Usually it ends there, but science-fiction fans are different—as I know from having one in my house. These fans write letters and get to meet each other and really make branches and clubs out of these organizations. Thus the Fantasy Legion actually has about two dozen clubs that meet and correspond around the country, and it is just as serious about itself as the Boy Scouts.

What made Ed smirk was a little item that the Commanding Secretary (the editor, you realize) of the Fantasy Legion had printed at the head of his column that month. It seems that he had to expel two members "for attempting to undermine the Legion on behalf of a competing organization." This is taking a club like that real seriously.

"Do you know these two boys?" I asked Ed.

"Sure," he said. "Joe and Frank are nice guys. They're active members of the Space Grenadiers, and they were doing just what the editor said. They were joining up in the Fantasy Legion clubs and trying to talk the

members into making them over into Space Grenadier branches. In fact they joined my club, right here in this city."

"They're nice, you say? What's nice about trying to undermine your own club?" I asked.

Ed just laughed. "Aw, pop, it's all in fun. Joe and Frank just take themselves too seriously. Most of the guys belong to all the organizations at the same time. I do, myself." He reached into his pocket and pulled out an assortment of papers and junk, from which he separated three or four cards. I saw that he was a full-fledged legionnaire of the Fantasy Legion; a cadet of the Space Grenadiers; a patrolman of the Cosmic Guard; and a fellow of the National Fantasy Fellowship.

I turned over the Space Grenadiers card. It was issued by the Space Grenadiers TV Hour, sponsored every night between 5:30 and 6 P.M. by a well-known cereal company. The bearer pledged himself to abide by the code of the Grenadiers—which seemed to be a plagiarism of the Boy Scout Code with cosmic trappings—and also the bearer agreed to follow the program daily.

"Joe and Frank have organized a real branch of this club, and they were working very hard to get new members. I guess the Fantasy Legion got worried about it. But they're really nice guys; I haven't joined their club, but they belong to mine—or did until this happened."

I returned the cards to him and went back to my book. However, I am a reporter, and when I went into the office next day, I took my son's magazine along and wrote a little story about it, taking a facetious air and making it all out to be a funny item. The editor liked it, put a gag leader on it, and it found a small spot on the third page. Something like "Treason Runs Rampant in Interplanetary Circles!" You know.

**T**HAT WOULD have been that, except that a day or so later, I was down at the city hospital when a boy was brought in suffering from amnesia. He was a nice-looking fifteen-year-old, well-dressed, but with an apparent total loss of memory. They identified him by a card in his wallet. The name on it was Frank Wainer, and the card was a Space Grenadiers membership-card, certifying the bearer as a full-fledged Grenadier. I remembered his name as that of one of the two boys involved in the Fantasy Legion expulsion.

I saw the boy and it was puzzling. There were no bruises on him, nothing to indicate accident. His parents were there, but he simply did not recognize them. He sat quietly, resigned, and unresponsive. I talked to his folks, and they said he had been acting worried the past month or so; he had been restless nights, but last night he had slept soundly. He had seemed dazed when he woke up, started to school, and had been found on the streets a few hours later in this condition.

I got the editor to assign me to this case, because I had an inside track, apparently. I got my son to give me the address of the other chap, Joe Aitkens, who had been kicked out of the Fantasy Legion, and I showed up at the Aitkens house about half past three. I found him home, as I had figured, for his school hours were the same as my son's. His parents, fortunately, were not at home; I didn't want to get the boy into any home trouble, and they would certainly have thought it strange for a newspaper-reporter to be querying their son.

At first, Joe was reluctant to talk. He was about my own son's height, a year older, but he knew Ed and liked him. It didn't take me long to establish the fact that the two boys were a lot alike. They were both science-fiction fans, and that must be the ticket. After I had told him I was Ed's father, and that I just wanted to talk to him

about the Space Grenadiers and about Frank, he seemed to warm up slightly.

It was obvious that the boy was cagy. He said there wasn't anything the matter. They were very serious about their club; they thought the TV serial was "swell"; they wanted to earn themselves special "Commander" cards in the organization. He explained to me that you began as a cadet, that you filled out certain questionnaires about your science-knowledge, or else started a club, or did something special, and they would advance you to trooper, and then to grenadier, and finally to commander. He and Frank were in the Grenadier class. He admitted that he didn't know of anybody in the Commander class, and what had been exciting him was the possibility of being the first to make it, and therefore being mentioned on the TV program.

But it was also obvious that he was concealing something from me. Several times he would start an answer, stop, rethink his sentence, and start over. He claimed he didn't know what caused Frank's breakdown. He claimed, after hesitation, that it must have been schoolwork.

**I** DIDN'T press the boy further. That evening I sat with Ed and watched the Space Grenadiers program. It was exciting, interesting. It concerned the adventures of a handsome young man who was a captain in some future war against Martians, or Jovians, or something. Strictly the Buck Rogers-Flash Gordon technique, brought up to date with TV trappings and spectacular effects. Throughout it I was annoyed by constant flashes of light which seemed to keep on occurring in the background. Ed explained to me that these were supposed to be meteor flashes. "They go on all the time in space, pop," he said.

"They do, eh?" I answered. They almost gave me a headache, and I wondered how meteors could flash in

airlessness. You have to allow television-producers a certain poetic license, I suppose.

On a hunch, the next day I went down to the city hospital again and checked their records. They had had six cases of breakdowns in the last four months involving boys between thirteen and seventeen. One was a case of a boy who had gone unconscious and remained in that state for almost a month, when he pulled out of it. He was still in the hospital, but they expected a full recovery. Two others were temporary amnesia cases. One had been removed to an asylum; two were dead.

As best I could, I checked up on each of these boys, those in the hospital, those released, those dead. In five of the six cases, the boy had been a member of the Space Grenadiers. The sixth case, I guess, may just have been accidental.

Now I was really worried. As a father, frightened. I went around to see Joe Aitkens again. I caught him just home from school. This time I was not easy on the boy. I confronted him with the evidence. He admitted that he knew two of the mental cases, one of them a dead one. It was those two who had caused Frank and himself to redouble their efforts to build up the Space Grenadiers club, and led to their trouble with the Fantasy Legion.

I didn't see the connection. "Why did you pick on the Fantasy Legion members? Couldn't you just convince boys on the street?"

Joe looked away from me. "We needed recruits in a hurry, but they had to have the right outlook. They had to be a certain kind of imaginative guy, already active fans. We couldn't afford to wait."

I was getting a bit angry. This was deadly serious, and there was something damnably wrong here. I restrained my temper, became confidential. I explained to Joe that he should

remember that boys of his age were not alone, that they could always call on the adult world for assistance, and if there was a real need for it, they would always be able to find understanding somewhere. I said that the Space Grenadiers program was put out, written by, acted by adults. That if there was something fishy, it must be something that could be better handled by adults. Joe almost broke down and cried then; it was clear to me that he'd been carrying a heavy burden on his conscience—doubled since Frank's breakdown.

Finally he let loose. He told me about the Space Grenadiers and himself. I don't believe he expected me to believe him, but I did.

**H**E'D BEEN watching the Space Grenadiers Hour ever since it started, which was about a year ago. He was a real fan, never read anything save science-fiction, had no friends other than fans. He said he believed in science-fiction, by which he meant that he believed in space-flight, in other worlds and their inhabitants, in the reality of those things. Naturally the TV show was a source of great fascination, or near-reality.

"I started dreaming science-fiction about three months ago. I don't think I was aware of it for a while until I realized I had been having the same dream every night for a week. The dream was this:

"I would be standing by a port window in a spaceship. I knew it was a spaceship, in the way you know things in dreams. I would watch the stars, and I would watch the flickering meteor lights, and I saw all sorts of space-battles going on. There was a war in space, and I was watching it from a transport-ship.

"I never could look around me; I never remember seeing the inside of the ship I was on. But I knew, like you do in dreams, what was around me. I knew I was standing in a crowd of



guys like myself. I knew they were looking over my shoulder, jamming me in. I couldn't move, we were packed so tight. I knew we were recruits, waiting for our turn to go into battle."

Joe stopped, put a hand to his head, looked a little sick. I waited silently, sitting on a chair before him. I felt worried for him, worried for Ed, sort of frightened. After a moment, Joe continued.

"I had this same dream every night. It was always like that. There were battles going on, spaceships exploding, rays, and always meteor-flashes. And I was always pushed tightly against that port, surrounded by recruits, waiting, waiting to be called.

"This dream never stopped. It has been going on now for maybe three months. But I learned more. Gradually the pressure eased up. I realized that some of the men behind me were going off on duty. I realized that one night my call would be come soon."

"What sort of duty? What were you expected to do when you were called?" I asked softly.

Joe looked at me with pain in his eyes. He whispered slowly, "Kamikaze piloting. Space grenadiers for real. We were waiting to be sent out in atomic-bomb-loaded rocket ships to crash them into enemy ships, or enemy planets. We were going to sacrifice ourselves, just like the Japanese suicide pilots did; that's what we were waiting for."

I sat back, cold chills down my spine. "Now wait a minute. You *knew* this; couldn't you do anything to stop it?"

Joe looked at me; now that he had stated his worry, he became frank. "Look, I talked it over with Frank. He had been having the same dream—the exact, same dream. We studied it, analyzed it. We came to the same conclusion. We had to find substitutes. If we could convince *them* that we were good recruiting-agents, maybe they wouldn't send us out when our call came."

"*They? Them?* What do you mean? Who are you talking about?"

**J**OE SWALLOWED. "Look, sir, you have got to understand. We couldn't be having the same dreams if there wasn't something real behind it. We knew about those guys who had the nervous breakdowns. There were some in other cities, too; we know from the fan magazines and correspondence. They were all Space Grenadiers. What Frank and I figured out was this:

"We decided that there is *really* a war going on somewhere in space. Not in this system, we don't think, because we could never identify any of the planets we saw in our dreams. Now, in this war, the people that are fighting it use recruits from other worlds—worlds they probably consider backward from their science-viewpoint, worlds like Earth. They don't seem to need us physically—maybe our bodies wouldn't survive—but they do need our minds. They need minds to direct these suicide, atomic-bomb rockets that they shoot at each other. The same as the Japanese Kamikazes, where a fellow would pilot his own bomb-loaded plane into a U. S. battleship, kill himself as a patriotic duty. Only these people don't feel like killing themselves if they can get someone else to do it.

"So this Space Grenadiers program

is sort of backed by them, though I don't know how you could prove it. Maybe the guys that write and direct it are being moved by dreams or something; they probably don't know what they are doing. Anyway, we *do* know that certain fellows who watch it regularly start to dream this dream, and some of them come to a terrible end. We think, Frank and I, that when they get their breakdown, or go crazy, or drop dead, is the night they get their call and are sent out on a suicide-mission. Maybe their brain can survive the shock; sometimes it does, most often it doesn't.

"But anyway that's the way it works. Of course it doesn't have that effect on most of its watchers. Maybe nothing happens to 99% of the kids that watch it; they need only certain kinds of minds, science-fiction minds, specially imaginative, like me and Frank and your son Ed. So that's when Frank figured out that if we would get the Fantasy Legion members here to become interested in the Space

Grenadiers program, we'd be bringing *Them* a lot of special high-type recruits. Maybe then they'd let us go—or anyway figure we were of some real value to them.

"But it didn't work. Frank must have got his..." and then Joe broke down and cried. He was scared through and through. I don't blame him; I'm scared through and through myself.

I don't know what you can do about it. I wrote to the TV station and I wrote to the cereal company that "sponsors" it, but I'm realist enough to know they aren't going to pay any attention to crank letters. I'm just a reporter on a newspaper; I don't have any special influence and I only have enough money to support my family—none to become a crusader.

I have disconnected my own TV set, and you can buy it from me cheap. If you want a good set in perfect condition, write me. But I won't sell it to you if you have any children.

