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SPECIAL APTITUDE

by R. H. HARDWICK

illustrated by ORBAN

The dread Invaders from an unknown world beyond the stars demanded a quota of Earthmen as their tribute. Why did they want them? — Did they use them as food?

FREDRIC Peters wondered, at the strangest times, if perhaps the coming of the Invaders hadn't brought about too great a change in his life. Before the alien space-ships had come and taken over the Earth he had been just an average man, a good engineer with a good job. Of course, he was still a good engineer and he had an even better job. Fredric Peters' trouble was of a different and more serious nature. His trouble was *women*.

"It's terrifying, isn't it, Fredric?" the girl said, her voice low and tremulous.

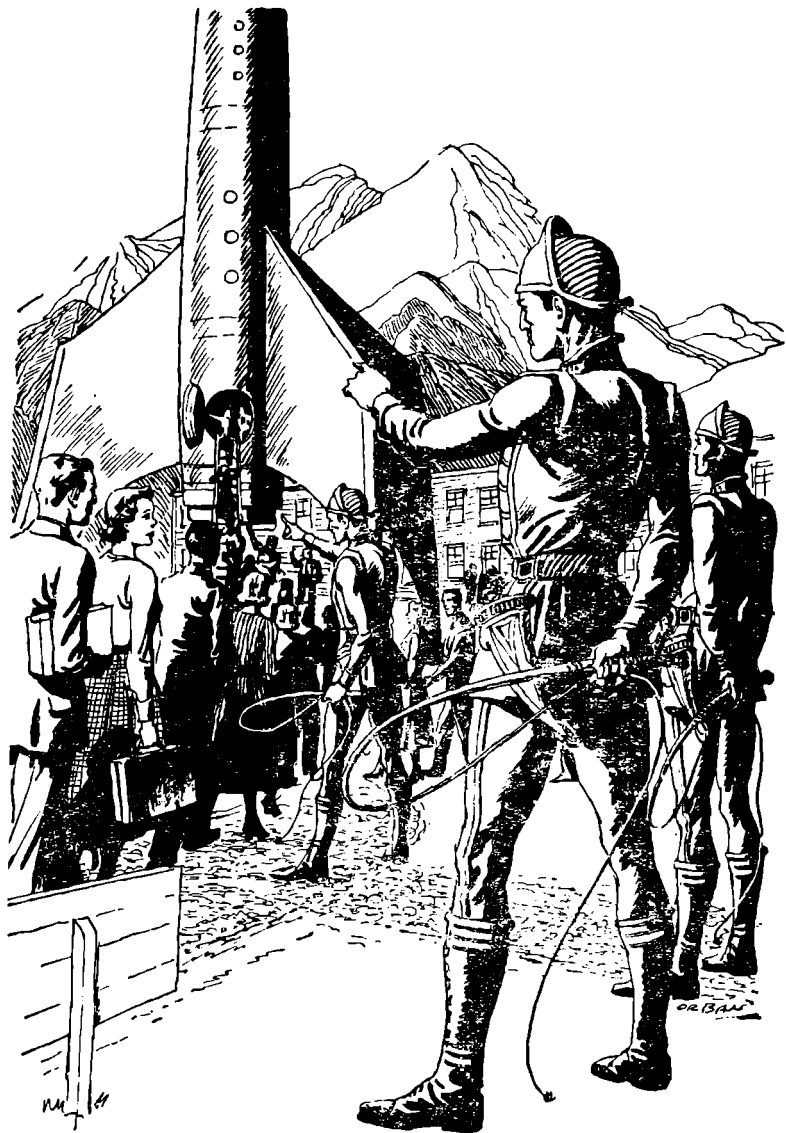
"Eh? What did you say, Anna?" he said, the web of his

thoughts broken too abruptly.

The girl turned, the orange glow of the crumbling embers smoldering in her green eyes. "The name's Shirley," she said. Then she turned her eyes up toward the broad skylight of the penthouse. "Up there. It's terrifying." She gave a little shudder and picked up her cocktail glass.

Fredric let his arm glide round her waist. "Just that," he said, "or what's *up* there?"

They were silent for a while, seated on the thick bearskin rug before the great fireplace of Fredric's penthouse apartment, gazing up at the night. The black void, limitless, blinking stupidly with



cold, dry pinpricks of starlight. Was it from one of these, one of these he could see, that the Invaders had come, Fredric wondered. How long ago had it been? Five years? Seven..?

He felt the girl shiver and draw closer to him. It *was* terrifying, when you got right down to it. He recalled that first day when the huge, ungainly-looking ships had suddenly appeared all around the globe. All defenses—rockets, a t o m i c s, everything—had proven powerless against the invaders. Theirs had been a bloodless victory. They allowed Earth to pour out its arsenals impotently, had hovered in the stunned silence of the aftermath, and, finally, had made their demands.

It was not the demands themselves that caused the initial disbelief, but rather the way in which they were presented. There had been no landing party from the strange fleet as had been anticipated by the World Defense Council of the U. N. The demands had been presented by *thought*. Suddenly, thoughts crystalized in the minds of millions of per-

sons—men and women—simultaneously. Engineers and draftsmen went straight to their drawing boards, detailed plans for replacement parts for the hovering fleet clear in their minds. Production men waited at their doors for these plans. Farmers began growing huge quantities of vegetables with a high phosphorus content.

And certain men of unquestioned integrity began assembling the machinery for the strangest conscription in human history. That was the final, and most terrifying, of the Invaders' demands—their demand for human beings.

"What do they do with the numbers, Fredric?" Shirley asked. 'Numbers' were what the people had come to be called whose numbers were drawn in the draft.

"Well, in the U. S. District, they take them out in busses to the Mohave Desert. Out there there's a big concrete building, something like a prison, with thousands of padded rooms in it. They put them in the rooms, one number to the room, and lock them in. The busses go back to the city

and the next time they take numbers out—" he shrugged—"the building is completely empty and waiting."

"It's—it's *horrible!*" she said. "But what happens to them after that?"

Fredric took his briar from the coffee table, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, and slowly sucked the flame of a match down into the bowl. He shook the match out thoughtfully and tossed it into the embers. Aromatic blue smoke billowed up around his face. "No one knows. At least, no one is *certain*. It seems obvious to me that the Invader ships come down and pick them up. After that, your guess is as good—or as *bad*—as mine."

"Fix me another drink, Fredric. It gives me the willies just thinking about it!"

He took her glass, drained his own, and got up to make fresh martinis. "It's something that's hanging over all of us, honey. Our numbers could be called, well, tomorrow."

He made it sound so impending that the girl shuddered. Fredric handed her the drink and resumed his seat before the fire. This had been

the key to the change that took place in Fredric Peters after the Invaders had come. This was the thing that had changed a mild, temperate young man into a satyr of the wildest sort. His attitude became fatalistic, his philosophy one of live-it-up-now-for-tomorrow-y o u r-number-might-be-drawn.

He had taken a penthouse atop the city's swankiest hotel. Every dime he made went directly into his current expenses. Every night he had a different girl. On many occasions he narrowly averted disaster when he inadvertently made dates with two or more for the same time. On most mornings at his office, it would be ten or eleven o'clock before he could rouse himself from the lethargy caused by the previous night's activities and get down to work.

But it was living, Fredric reasoned, regardless of the costs.

He finished his martini, idly stirred the embers in the fireplace, and took the girl's hands in his own. "One never knows what tomorrow brings, Shirley," he said. "That's why we have to live now, while we

can. *Really* live." He looked at her with such intensity from the depths of his blue eyes that, almost hypnotically, she drew nearer.

"Now, Shirley, *now...*" he whispered hoarsely as she came quickly into the circle of his arms.

"**A**S usual, you look like the very devil," Billy Coates said as Fredric slumped at his desk.

That sums it up perfectly, Fredric thought, because I feel like hell. After he had seen Shirley out of the apartment the previous night at 1:00 a.m., with a moist kiss and murmured promises to call, Jan, of all people, had called from the lobby below. The rest of the night had been filled with tearful entreaties, declarations of undying love, and everything except sleep. Seven o'clock found the beautiful redhead at last asleep and Fredric staggering to the shower.

He tried to ignore Coates, but his friend would not go away, instead, perching himself jauntily on the edge of Fredric's desk.

"There's another drawing today," Billy Coates said. "A *big* one. Notification will be tomorrow."

Fredric looked up. "I didn't feel it. How do you know?"

"I doubt if you could feel much of anything right now," he laughed, looking at the heavily-bagged eyes of his friend. "Actually, I didn't feel it either. I think the Invaders are directing the thoughts more now. Causes less confusion that way. This was in the morning paper. I suppose they're shooting the draft thoughts direct to the Drawings Committee."

Fredric fished his briar from the side pocket of his jacket with shaking fingers. "Well, what the hell, the odds are still good."

"Maybe so," Coates said, "But I understand they're going in for certain trades this time. Maybe engineers," he added with a leer, which, though it was meant to, did not distract from his own nervousness.

"The way I feel, I'd just as soon see my number come up this time," Fredric said, dropping his face into cupped

hands. He looked up again. "If they want certain trades, then that proves they're not *eating* them, doesn't it?"

The theory that the numbers were used as food for the Invaders had gained much momentum of late.

"Maybe. M a y b e not," Coates said.

"You think maybe engineers taste better than bookkeepers?" Fredric snapped.

"Wouldn't be knowing," Coates smiled. "Haven't tasted a bookkeeper lately."

Fredric groaned and headed for the automatic coffee machine.

"Tough night, huh?" Coates asked sympathetically.

"One of the toughest," Fredric said. "Habit's a funny thing. I believe I was better off the way I was living before those damned space freaks came here!"

"Everybody was, not just you."

"I don't mean the involuntary part. I mean the changes I made *myself*. That damned penthouse! All those—those *women!*"

Coates looked startled, then began to laugh. "Well, sir, I

thought I'd heard everything!"

Coates meandered back to his own office and Fredric set about his work. It was at the coffee dispenser—his fourth trip—that Anna accosted him.

"You haven't forgotten our date tonight, have you Freddie baby?" she gave him a meaningful look, one that would have curled his toenails in days gone by. "I'll be at your place at eight, lover-boy," she smiled and walked away. Fredric watched the retreating figure with no show of enthusiasm.

THE day dragged on, with Fredric feeling progressively better, at least physically. He rode the subway home and his manservant, Suki, opened the door for him.

"*Kon-ban-wa*, Fredric-san," the Japanese hissed, smiling.

"Huh?" Fredric said. "Oh, hi, Suki. Say, Miss uh—well, whats-her-name, is coming here tonight. Better fix something to eat for about eight-thirty. You can have the evening off after that."

The servant nodded and departed. Fredric slumped into

his chair before the fireplace. It had been freezing cold in the subway and on the street and the blaze caressed him comfortingly. Suki came in silently and deposited a glass in Fredric's hand. Mechanically, he sipped the highball. He still felt tired from the night before and here he was starting out again. Vaguely, he looked up through the skylight. The winter sky was darkening rapidly. High above he saw the familiar streak-path of an Invader ship. As he watched it, thoughts of the day's drawing crept through his mind. The numbers were already drawn. Who were they? Maybe one was he, Fredric Peters. Why not?

"Hello, sweet. All alone and lonely?" a voice said near his right ear. He turned. Shirley stood behind him. Quickly, he looked past her at the little ship's clock in the bookcase. Seven-twenty. He had to get rid of her, and in a hurry.

"How did you get in? I mean—" he started.

"Don't you remember the key you gave me? Last night?" She said the last two words reverently and leaned over to

kiss him. Fredric drew back, surprised himself by his own action.

"Shirley, baby! I've got work to do! Lots and lots of work!"

"You wouldn't be giving me the brush, would you Freddie boy? Not after what you said last night?" her eyes snapped.

"After what I said—" he picked up his drink and swallowed hard. All he wanted was to lie down, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to have your number come up. That was more like it. More up-to-date. Why wouldn't she go away and leave him alone!

"Suki! Suki! Show Miss— Shirley to the door!"

"Bring me a drink, Suki," she said. "This poor darling needs attention." She sat on the bearskin rug at his feet and caressed his hands. Fredric wanted to pull away.

I'll go into a monastery, he said to himself, vehemently. I wonder if there's still such a thing as a monastery? Well, if not, I'll start one!

"You're frowning, baby," Shirley cooed. "Here, let me rub your forehead."

Suki appeared, padded

across the room, and delivered the drink to her. Fredric thought he should arrange a code with Suki, whereby on a certain signal he could have him put knockout drops in any particular person's drink. Yes, he'd have to talk to Suki about that first thing in the morning.

He took another swallow of his highball, hardly aware that Shirley had led him to the oversized sofa and was now cradling his head in her lap and leaning over to kiss away his troubles. It must have been a double, or a triple, that Suki had mixed him. He felt vague, detached.

Then, from somewhere, came the sound of bells. Eight bells. *Eight bells!* It was the ship's clock in the bookcase! Eight bells—eight o'clock! *Anna!*

Another bell rang as he rose quickly to a sitting position, Shirley's arms about him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a smiling Suki padding across to the apartment door.

"*Suki! Wait!*" Fredric bel-
lowed, but the Japanese had
already turned the latch, and
now in the doorway stood

Anna, extreme surprise registering on her face at the sight of Fredric in another woman's arms.

The look of surprise proved to be fleeting, for somehow the lamp from the hall table was suddenly sailing through the air with deadly accuracy. It caught Fredric flush on his right temple. For the next few minutes, existence to Fredric Peters consisted solely of vague—but unmistakable—assorted screams, curses, Japanese entreaties, crashes, and thumps.

It was frightful, almost as though it were a nightmare. Gradually, awareness returned. Halfway across the room his eyes encountered the supine figure of Suki, a large knot standing out on his forehead and the fire-tongs lying significantly by his side. Further away, near the kitchen door, Anna and Shirley were battling it out, pulling hair, kicking, biting, scratching, and letting loose a stream of words such as Fredric hadn't heard since his Army service.

The telephone rang and Fredric absently picked it up. "Hello?" he said.

"Fredric? Is that you, Fredric?" there was a pause. "What's that awful racket I hear?" Suddenly, he recognized Jan's voice.

"It's—it's—it's the *television!* Yes! The *television!*"

"Not the words *I'm* hearing! *That's* not television!" The phone slammed down on the other end of the line. Despairing, Fredric poured himself another drink, a straight one. There's *got* to be a monastery, he thought.

Jan arrived at the open apartment door before he could finish pouring the drink. She had the fire-tongs off the the floor before he could put the glass down, and had laid them violently against the side of his still-throbbing head before he could protest or put a hand up in his defense. That was all for Fredric Peters for that night.

GETTING to work next morning was the most painful thing Fredric had been called on to do for some time. He would not have gone at all had not Billy Coates telephoned him.

"It's the drawing, Fred.

You've got to be here. You know the law, all prospective numbers have to be at their assigned locations unless under actual hospital care."

He took a cab rather than the usual subway ride.

"Great guns!" Billy Coates exclaimed when his friend hove into view. "What hit *you?*"

"I've had it, Billy. I've had it! It all caught up to me last night. I'm joining a monastery if I can find one. I'm through with women—*all* women! Forever!"

With that he took out his formerly-beloved address and phone number book and began tearing it into tiny shreds.

"Hey!" Coates shouted. "Give me a break!" He grabbed for the book.

"Excuse me," said a well-modulated voice from behind them. They turned. "You *are* Fredric Peters," the man standing before them said, and turning, "and you, sir, are William Coates?"

They nodded.

"I'm from the Committee. Your numbers have been drawn. You'll have to come with me, now."

IT was a large, oddly shaped room suffused with pale metallic blue light. Fredric had no notion of time since the rough bus ride out to the building in the desert. He could vaguely remember being herded out of the building after an interval, his own mind seeming to drive him, along with thousands of others, into the open side of a huge ship. Then, oblivion. Distantly, as if from a great depth beneath the floor, came a powerful, steady, rumble.

"Fred? You okay?"

He looked up at the sound of his own name. It was Billy, seated on the floor not half a dozen feet away. He was smiling weakly.

"Well, it looks as if we'll have our answers now, whether we want them or not, huh?" Coates said. Fredric nodded.

He looked about him. There were several hundred other persons in the huge room with them; some conscious, some asleep. Then, across from where he sat, he suddenly saw a familiar face. It was Shirley! His eyes widened. There, not two feet from her, was Anna! *And Jan!*

"I'm picking up some thoughts, Fred," Coates said. "Are you getting them?"

He was getting them... *aptitude... project behind schedule... ability... r u s h... aptitude...* It was the Invaders, somewhere in the ship talking among themselves, random thoughts leaking out.

"Maybe if we concentrate we can get a line on what they want with us, or where we're going," Fredric said.

"Maybe Billy Coates said, but Fredric noticed he was looking about the room strangely, a look of puzzlement on his face. "You noticed anything about the *others* in here, Fred?"

Fredric straightened and followed his friend's stare. "No. No, except that I recognized some of the girls over there... *girls!*"

A thought forcibly broke through his consciousness. *Attention! Your attention! We are preparing for descent. All passengers will lie prone on the deck until further advised. Repeat...* It was the ship commander.

THE countryside was fantastically beautiful. Fredric surveyed it in amazement as they streamed down the gangplank toward the carpet-like grass of the landing field. In the distance, beyond a grove of spatulate-leaved blue trees, he espied a crystalline lake. To the right of the field was what appeared to be an ultra-plush hotel. To the left hundreds of children played in an immense playground.

His amazed staring was interrupted by sudden roaring laughter from Billy Coates.

"What's funny?" Fredric demanded.

"You! That's what's funny! You remember what we noticed aboard the ship?"

Fredric thought back. "They were all—all women, but us," he said slowly.

Coates nodded, still laughing, "And you remember those thoughts we picked up about a project, and *aptitude*?"

Fredric nodded, puzzled.

Coates, tears streaming down his face, went on, "And you remember what you swore off of just before our numbers came up?" Again Fredric nodded, anxiously.

"Well, take a look!" Coates pointed toward a large signboard at the edge of the field, then went off into uncontrollable laughter.

Fredric stared at it as the throng moved past him and his friend, going down the gangplank. He found the English translation halfway down the board. It read! *Welcome to Lor J. Project: Galaxy Repopulation. Item: Homo Sapiens. Stud Farm No. 9, District IV.*

Distantly, above the milling crowd from the ship and the laughter of Billy Coates, he heard the expectant whistles and cat-calls of hundreds of females from the direction of the hotel.

THE END
