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THE CHILDREN OF THON

by Irving E. Cox Jr.

ALL NEW
STORIES

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Feature Novelet

THE CHILDREN OF THON

by Irving E. Cox, Jr. 8

Dirrul had been told that the key to the mystery of Thon lay in the special meanings that these people had for the terms they used. And that it would be fatal to employ his own meanings for Thonian words — as he discovered!



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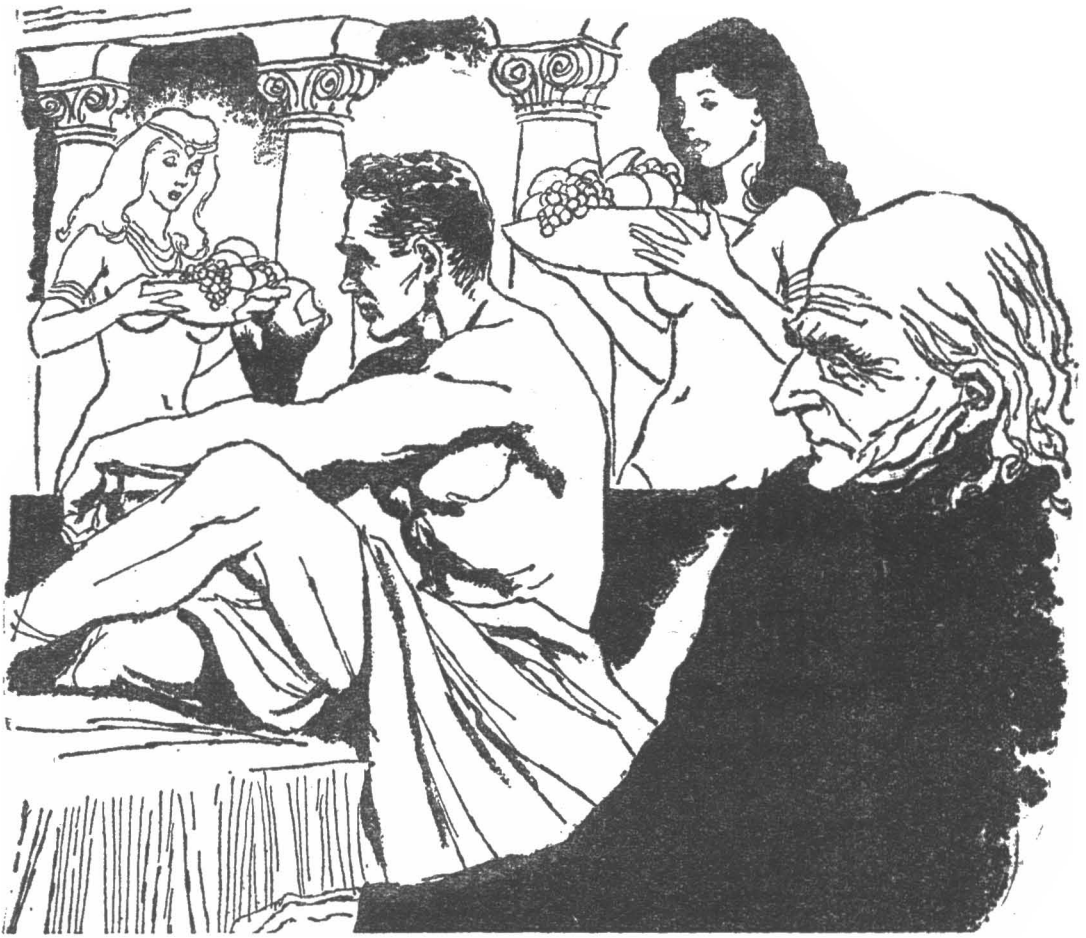
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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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A relay-team of beautiful women took the torch from Dirrul's hand, to carry it across the field . . .



The mystery of Thon didn't seem to be too baffling; Dirrul had to uncover one traitor, that was all. And it was apparent where to look for that traitor — until Dirrul suddenly realized that he had completely overlooked one essential factor. But now it was too late . . .

THE CHILDREN OF THON

Novelet of Worlds to Come

by Irving E. Cox, Jr.

(illustrated by Don Sibley)

AS HIS SHIP moved out of the Orinian Cluster, Eddie Dirrul relaxed in his Cloud-foam chair, setting the robot-navigator for Agron. He was returning from his first assignment, the clarification of the Orinian commercial franchise, and he looked forward with intense pleas-

ure to making his report at the Air-command headquarters.

The saucer shape of the Galaxy glowed on the screen of the electronic star-map over his control board. Dirrul looked up at it and felt the familiar surge of pride. Someday, perhaps, he would take this symbol of the Rational Potential as a matter of course, the way many of the older ones did; but now he was still too new at the job. Space-pilot Dirrul, diplomat of the Planetary Union! He rolled the title on his tongue, savoring the pleasure.

Suddenly the robot-navigator snapped into neutral and Dirrul's ship throbbed with the insistent buzz of the alarm. The star-map telescoped to an enlargement of a space-sector on his port bow. The shimmering field of microscopic light reflected the silent violence of an air battle. Three darting, viciously-armed Space-dragons were attacking the lumbering bulk of a tourist cruiser.

Dirrul's own ship was an adaptation of the Space-dragon design, the fastest armed fighter in the Galaxy, to which the essential safety devices of the Agronians—and certain of their luxuries—had been added. On manual control, Dirrul's ship reached the scene of battle before the robot tele-ray had completed transmission of the alarm to Air-command headquarters.

The battered cruiser bore the insignia of the Thonian Packet Line, one of the registered excursion franchises of the Planetary Union. The attacking Space-dragons were Vininese, light years outside their own territory. The situation had all the makings of a nasty Intergalactic incident, for the Vininese Confederacy and the Planetary Union had been technically at peace for a quarter of a century, the Galaxy split between them. Even in the face of such aggression, the space police might have felt constrained to wait for instructions from Agron. But Dirrul was a space-pilot and the organization of the Air-command was,

by intention, so nebulous that the individual space pilot acted upon his own initiative.

With external armament blazing, Dirrul's ship spun toward the battle, cutting out one of the three Space-dragons. For the moment, initial surprise worked for him; he centered his sights on the ship and pulled the detonator. As the probing rays met and crossed on the surface of cold metal, the Space-dragon blazed briefly with white heat before it disappeared in a dark streak of collapsed atoms, electronless hydrogen nuclei.

Dirrul expected the other two Space-dragons to turn on him, and he was ready for the wracking contest of maneuver that would follow. To his surprise, the fighting-ships made an awkward, last-minute attempt to disintegrate the tourist cruiser. Both fired at once. Their beams met in space, harmlessly neutralizing each other. Then the Vininese Space-dragons turned tail and fled.

Instinctively, Dirrul wanted to pursue them; rationally, he knew it was more important to bring help to the shattered cruiser, on the slim chance that some of the passengers might still be alive. Avoiding the jagged holes torn in the third class cabins at the rear of the cruiser, Dirrul grappled his ship to the control room blister. Through the transparent dome he saw the pilot slumped over his control-board, his head smashed; but on the floor behind him a wounded cabin boy was crawling weakly toward the tele-ray emergency alarm. There was still air in the cruiser, then.

DIRRUL sealed the exit-chambers together and the machinery ground the locks open. He plunged into the cruiser. Aside from the cabin boy, there were two other first-class passengers alive. He carried all three into his ship, and cut the cruiser adrift, disintegrating it because the hulk was

too badly smashed for him to tow it back to Agron.

The cabin boy and one passenger were only superficially wounded, suffering largely from emotional shock. Dirrul administered a sleep-hypnotic, and put them to bed. The third victim was badly hurt. Dirrul carried him into his robot hospital-chamber, and fastened the plasma-feeder tubes into his veins, sealing the more obvious injuries with the sani-plastic caps. Normally, the treatment could have been expected to keep him alive until Dirrul delivered him to an emergency hospital on Agron.

Dirrul identified the cabin boy as Agronian, and the slim, blue-skinned, four-armed passenger as a tourist from Marginon; but the third man was a stranger. He bore a rough biological resemblance to Dirrul himself—but he was eight feet tall, magnificently built, and his skin was so transparent that his yellow veins and a pale gray web of nerves were clearly visible. He wore gem-encrusted blue sandals, and a skirted, yellow garment bound tight to his waist by a scarlet sash and flung loosely across one shoulder, so that much of his chest was exposed.

As the plasma-feeder pulsed fluid into his blood stream, the tall stranger opened his eyes and tried to rise, but could not.

"Take it easy," Dirrul said. "You'll be all right when I get you to Agron."

"You are Agronian?" The stranger's voice was a hoarse whisper, and he spoke very slowly, like a child feeling his way with an unfamiliar tongue.

"Yes; Space-pilot Dirrul."

The wounded man became very excited. "I have got through, then! You will bring help."

"Of course; but you can talk later. Now—"

"No; my time is ended." The tall man felt his chest. "My hurt is within here. Much broken and great pain." Vaguely he gestured toward the plas-

ma-feeder. "Your blood-food is not ours; it will do me no good."

"Tell me the chemistry," Dirrul said quickly. "I'll alter the formula."

"I do not know it. My people have not been catalogued by your scientists; it was the wish of our priests." Suddenly the tall man fell back against the Cloud-foam cushion, his face twisting with pain. "I am of Thon," he whispered. "The Space-dragons of Vinin tried to destroy the tourist ship because I was aboard; that I know. I would have gone to Agron to tell our need, to beg for help. They learned of it in some way. But you—you are a space-pilot. You take my message for me. You say to the Agronians—"

A spasm of pain shook the handsome Thonian, and he closed his eyes for a moment. When he spoke again his breath was coming faintly, in desperate gasps. "Go help my people!" Clumsily he tore a ring from his finger and pressed it into Dirrul's hand. "They—they will know you from this." His head slumped on his chest and he died.

The planet of Thon! If the Vininese were attempting to subvert its culture, Dirrul knew he must act at once. The Thonian sun-system was an independent unit within the Galactic territory of the Planetary Union. Relatively speaking, the sun was young; Thon, its only inhabited planet, was primitive, vigorous, immensely wealthy. Like every other planet in the Galaxy, Thon was protected by the Nuclear Beams of the Planetary Union; but beyond that the Thonians, by choice, had little contact with the higher technology of other peoples. Tourists were permitted to visit in the capital city, and the Thonian government-monopoly engaged in a one-way trade, but steadfastly refused to import either goods or ideas from other areas of the Planetary Union. The Governing Council would not force the issue, for a basic law of the Union

was that every people had a right to develop its concept of the Rational Potential in its own way.

Yet if the Vininese were infiltrating Thon, perhaps already bringing in their debilitating and enslaving wave-transmitters, the Planetary Union would be forced to intervene to save the Thonians. Not obviously, of course; the Governing Council could never sanction any violation of the Rational Potential, whatever the cause. It would be a job for some space-pilot of the Air-command.

SINCE HE was within a few hours of Thon, Dirrul knew that he should go to the Thonian capital and initiate the investigation. Later, if he found ground for suspicion, he might need help; but the important factor, as he interpreted it, was the element of time. If once the Vininese succeeded in establishing a transmitter on Thon, the planet was lost.

As a matter of routine, Dirrul began to teleray his decision to Air-command headquarters. Surprisingly, the transmitter went dead in his hand, and the cold emotionless voice of Colonel Marlan cut in, "Send nothing further, Space-pilot Dirrul. Report at once to headquarters."

"But that means the loss of two days, maybe three!"

"You must have preparation; without it you can do nothing. It's the chance we have to take. We're reasonably sure there is no transmitter on Thon now but our own, and we have no information that any Vininese space-fleet is moving into our territory. We've anticipated them; they're not ready to act yet; and tactically the Vininese are incapable of altering plans to meet an emergency situation. We still have a limited time on our side, Dirrul. We must use it wisely."

Thirty-six space hours later, Dirrul's ship landed at the Air-command port on Agron. Cadet trainees took

over his passengers, to record their stories of the Vininese attack on the tourist cruiser. Because the Air-command was handling the investigation—rather than the Thonian Packet Line or the Excursion Insurance Monopoly—Dirrul realized that the incident would be handled carefully, to satisfy the survivors without publicity. There would be no diplomatic representation made to Vinin. Obviously, then, the Air-command was taking a serious view of the episode; that could only mean they had more information than Colonel Marlan had implied.

Dirrul bathed at the space-pilot reception lounge, and put on a dress uniform. Skin-tight, conservatively cut, it was a quiet gray, totally devoid of insignia except for the gold rocket-spheres stamped into the twin points of the collar. It was the sort of uniform that would pass entirely unnoticed among the spectacularly-dressed crowds in the Agronian capital. Such lack of ostentation was symbolic of the function of the Air-command, the unsung judicial, military, and diplomatic arm of the government of the Planetary Union. Originally planned by the philosophers of the Union, and still directed by the faculty of the Ad-air University, the air-command was carefully recruited, exhaustively trained, deliberately indisciplined, functioning beyond the verbalization of the law in order to preserve the spirit of it.

A young cadet admitted Dirrul to the office of Colonel Marlan. The Colonel was a vigorous, gray-haired man, well past the prime of life. His title was honorary, primarily useful as a matter of convention, since it was the Colonel who signed the release for any information that the Air-command chose to publicize; and the position was annually elective. The Colonel's real job was that of Dean of the Graduate School in Psycho-biology at the Ad-air University. He greeted Dirrul warmly, motioning him into the

Cloud-foam lounge beside the desk.

"I'VE ALREADY briefed myself with your robot-log," the Colonel explained. "Now let me fill in the background for you."

"The Vininese are making a play for Thon?"

"We're not sure, Dirrul. You understand the arrangement about the Beams. We've given the device to any people who ask for it, including the Vininese, with no strings attached. No planet has ever been coerced into joining the Planetary Union, and three or four sun-systems in our half of the Galaxy have chosen to be independent. Thon is one, and very probably the Thonian hierarchy made their decision wisely. Thon is a very young planet; by our standards, the Thonians are a primitive people, centuries behind the kind of culture the Earth-people have given us with the Rational Potential. If we were to force our concepts and our technology upon them too rapidly, their adjustment might be impossible; we would destroy them instead of helping them. We have built the Beam stations on Thon in order to protect the planet from Vininese enslavement; but there our penetration ceases. It is in the agreement, and we will never violate it."

"But if the Vininese erect a wave-transmitter on Thon—"

"It is up to us to make sure they don't. Now this adventure of yours, Dirrul—the Thonian who was coming here for help—it has been duplicated on three other occasions, with similar results. Twice we have had interrupted teleray messages from Thon requesting our assistance."

"And we've done nothing?"

"All we could. The Governing Council has requested permission to send an Ambassador; so far, the Thonians have not replied. We've done nothing out of the ordinary. Recently we've had rumors of unrest

among the Thonian barbarians. So far as we know, the request for help may have come from them; Vininese agents may be formenting the trouble—which is what I strongly suspect. But our hands are tied, unless the whole people ask for our intervention. This may simply be a Thonian revolution. If it is, we can't intervene; the Thonians must learn to solve the problem of war for themselves. The Rational Potential cannot be imposed from the outside; it comes only from a self-conscious understanding."

"The Vininese are dabbling on Thon," Dirrul declared firmly. "They were Vininese ships that attacked the tourist cruiser."

"Circumstantially, we have a case," the Colonel admitted. "Someone on Thon wants our help; but the messages never get through. They try coming to us in person, and the tourist-cruisers are destroyed by Vininese Space-dragons. However, the Thonian government has not officially requested our assistance; and our own commercial travelers consistently report nothing amiss on Thon. For all we know, this may simply be an instance of Vininese piracy, which can be settled through ordinary diplomatic channels once we're sure that's all it is."

The Colonel folded his hands on his desk, and looked Dirrul in the eye. "I want you to go to Thon."

"I was hoping you'd give me the job," Dirrul said.

"The Air-command doesn't give assignments," Colonel Marlan replied quickly and with disapproval. "You're new with us, Dirrul, and I dare say you must still learn our ways."

"A question of semantics," Dirrul said. "What I meant was, I hoped you'd consider allowing me to—"

"I don't do the considering, my friend; you do that for yourself. You know the problem; you understand yourself better than I do. If you feel that you can accomplish what needs

to be done, take charge of the situation. Otherwise, we'll canvass the other space-pilots in port until we find our man."

"Thank you, sir."

"Sir?" the Colonel repeated, frowning. "More semantic difficulty, I suppose? My friend, *sir* implies a relationship of inferiors to superiors; it is highly inappropriate to a space-pilot."

Then he smiled. "I've arranged for you to go to Thon as the replacement-agent for Agron Metals. They hold the largest trading franchise with the Thonians, and as agent you'll be most likely to be accepted without question by the Thonian government. But remember, Dirrul, many of the facilities you have in the Union as a space-pilot will not be available on Thon.

"You'll be on your own entirely. Even in an emergency, we can't give you much help. It's the kind of situation that calls for quick thinking and mature reaction to unpredictable stimuli."

The Colonel pushed back his chair and shook hands again. "You'll go in the regular agent's lux-yacht; I believe he's expected to land on Thon within the next two space-days; that doesn't leave you much time. I'd suggest you check with Dr. Kramer on Thonian linguistics; and fill in a background on the history of the people, too, if you can."

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DIRRUL LEFT the Colonel's office under the impression that he should make careful preparation for his mission to Thon; but when he turned the question over in his mind he found nothing to prepare for. A prob-

lem existed—perhaps. Yet, as it was stated, there were too many unknowns. The question might have been reduced to algebraics—but the solution would have been algebraic as well, with an infinity of possible variants. The only tangible fact he possessed was the ring given him by the dying Thonian, an ornament intricately wrought in soft gold; and quite meaningless. Nonetheless, it might prove useful. Dirrul slipped it over the knuckles of his index finger.

He waited for Dr. Kramer outside the lecture room. The little, fat professor was overjoyed to see him, since it was Kramer who had nursed Dirrul through the explosive period of his training as a space-pilot cadet. They went to the University lounge to talk. Kramer listened patiently while Dirrul explained what he knew of the situation on Thon. Then, folding his tiny hands over the pouch of his stomach, the professor said, "Like so many other problems, this one can be reduced to a question of language."

Dirrul laughed. "If you could, you'd describe the universe as a law of semantics, wouldn't you?"

"And what else is it, Edward? Does a thing or an idea exist if it cannot be described? When you describe, you communicate. When you communicate, you use some form of language—a term, a number, a symbol, an equation. Therefore, language is the prime-mover in all things; the Earthmen taught us that when they gave us the concept of the Rational Potential."

"That all sounds very pretty in a lecture, Dr. Kramer. Let's apply it specifically to Thon."

"The Thonians, Edward, are a primitive people. Your superior knowledge and techniques could transform you into a species of God on Thon, but you will be among a race of beautiful children. To save them from the Vininese you must learn to understand them, as they understand themselves. Take a hypno-teacher on your

ship with you and, before you land, learn two things: first, their language; second, their history. When you finally understand the problem there and go about solving it, state your solution in their terminology—Thonian words with Thonian meanings.”

“It doesn’t sound hard, Dr. Kramer.”

“On the contrary, it’s the most difficult thing an intelligent person can try to do. It means you have to think from their point of view, rather than your own. They may have a term for *space*—to cite one example. Even in your own thinking, you cannot translate their symbol into a meaning you have when *you* use the term. With more abstract and emotive words, the difficulty multiplies. Don’t forget it. If you do, your mission will end in failure and tragedy—tragedy both for yourself and for the children of Thon.”

“You’re still talking generalities, Dr. Kramer.”

“No, Edward! I’m being entirely specific, if you understand what I mean. You’ll discover that for yourself before this is over, I expect. Remember, on Thon you’re dealing with a primitive society about which our general records are very incomplete, because these people have not permitted us to study their ways. In such a situation one truism usually applies. A man who speaks with meanings that are evident pattern-growths from his own past may be a mediocrity, a saint, or a bitter personal enemy. But one thing he cannot be is a traitor to himself or his heritage.”

Smiling, the professor fingered the food-selector dial on their table. “Now let’s put aside your business for a moment, Edward. They’ve developed a wonderful new Safe-sweet confection here; I want you to try it.” Dr. Kramer pushed a button; the slot shot open and the delicacy slid out on the table before them.

DIRRUL departed for Thon at sunset. He set out from the hidden Air-command spaceport on the University campus. It was Colonel Marlan’s idea for him to leave in secret, since it was probable that Vininese agents were on Agron, and it would be creating obstacles to permit Vinin to learn that a space-pilot was being sent to Thon.

Dirrul exchanged his quiet space-pilot’s uniform for the glittering, jeweled scarlet worn by the commercial traveler. He carried complete, painstakingly-forged papers identifying him as an Agent, First Class, of Agron Metals, Inc.

“Bear one fact in mind,” Colonel Marlan said as he shook hands with Dirrul. “Under no conditions are you to interfere in the local affairs of Thon. You are there to find a Vininese agent, if any, and to bring him back here—preferably alive. If you need help, we’ll send you what we’re permitted to, legally; don’t count on much.”

Dirrul shut the airlock and set the robot-navigator for Thon. As the luxury yacht soared beyond the Agronian stratosphere, he clamped the helmet of the hypno-teacher over his head, and relaxed in the comfort of the Cloud-foam lounge.

He mastered the Thonian language first; then he put the reels of history and legend into the machine.

Thon, he learned, was a very young planet, the outermost satellite of a brilliant sun, and the only inhabited planet in its system. The Thonian civilization had evolved less than fifty thousand years past the portal of primitive self-awareness. Thon was immensely rich in countless raw materials, but only a small part of the planet close to the equator was inhabited; the rest was given over to jungle, towering mountain ranges, and slowly-receding glacial caps.

The center of Thonian civilization was on the shore of a salt sea, called the Thundering Water; it was an agricultural economy clustering around the capital city of Walthea. Beyond the Praelonium of Walthea—apparently a synonym for Kingdom—were a number of unorganized, warlike tribes of barbarians, more or less constantly at war with the Waltheans. All Thonians were of one racial stock, with a common religion and language; their conflict seemed cast in the pattern of the classic struggle between the haves and the havenots. The Waltheans held off the barbarians in a variety of ways: some tribes were bribed to keep the peace, others were pacified with grants of citizenship status, but the great majority were kept in check by Walthean border guards. Every able-bodied male in the Praelonium was liable for periodic military service.

The Thonians lived simply; the material development of their science was negligible. In abstract sciences, however—mathematics, law and philosophy—they were surprisingly mature. Any man on the street felt fully-qualified to express an opinion. The Thonians took immense pride in literacy. They scorned luxury and any form of art which struck them as ornate or purely decorative. They were passionately serious in most things—as a result of which they had no forms of amusement, no drunkenness, no record of immorality—and, apparently, no sense of humor.

DIRRUL landed at the Walthean spaceport late in the afternoon. It was a fenced enclosure located south of the capital city, the low, white buildings of which lay close to the shore of the Thundering Water. There were no industries on Thon, except for the distant jungle mines maintained by Agron Metals, and the air was crystal-clear. Glittering in the

bright, orange-yellow sunlight, the city was like a string of jewels cradled on the yellow velvet of the turf, and set off by the glaring green of the sea.

The spaceport had been built by Agronians when the Planetary Union first set up Nuclear Beams on Thon, and the square tower of the Transmitter Building stood at one corner of the port next to the Thonian Customs House. At first, both the field and the Transmitter had been manned by Agronian volunteers; but in recent months they had been entirely replaced by locally trained Thonian crews, at the specific request of the Thonian government.

It was a policy futilely opposed by the Air-command. Thon intended to prohibit all import of outside knowledge and invention, which was their privilege. Yet, the government was inconsistent enough to believe that Thonians could be taught to service the spaceport and the Transmitter—without at the same time being exposed to other technology of the Planetary Union. It wouldn't work; Dirrul knew that. The Thonians wanted to build a dam against too-sudden progress, but they had deliberately weakened its foundations. The inevitable clash of cultures was predictable; it might be very ugly when it came.

There was a great deal of activity on the field. A large Thonian Packet Line tourist cruiser had just landed, and the passengers were being gently herded into the customs logia. Further on, five huge freighters were being loaded by the Agron Metals conveyor, and a sixth was warming up its ancient atomic-powered motors, preparing for departure. Amid such confusion, Dirrul expected to land without fanfare; but apparently the agent for Agron Metals was something of a personage in Walthea.

As soon as he presented his papers at the customs counter, there was an excited scurrying among the inspec-

tors; a delegation of officials came from a reception-room to greet Dirrul and escort him to a waiting, flower-decked wagon which was drawn by six massive, fur-skinned beasts of burden. The Thonians resembled the man Dirrul had taken from the smashed tourist cruiser. Transparent-skinned, they were all eight or nine feet tall and beautifully formed, dressed in loose, sheet-like garments that left the upper parts of their bodies nearly naked. A dignified, elderly man took Dirrul's hand as he climbed into the wagon, introducing himself as the Chief Thonar of Thon; the others in the delegation were the Conthonars, a kind of advisory council to the ruler. The carriage moved along a dirt road toward the city of Walthea, among spectators who lined the stone walks.

"You're new here," the Chief Thonar said. "Does that mean that Agent Halman will not be returning to Walthea?"

"I'm simply substituting while he takes a vacation leave."

"It probably puzzles you, then, that the entire government should turn out for your reception; but I'm rather anxious for the people to know that we thoroughly approve the agreement with Agron Metals."

"You've met opposition?"

"From the priesthood, yes. They're basically conservative, and they stand in the way of progress in the name of the past. Frankly, sir, the largest part of our revenue derives from the metals franchise; we can't afford to lose it. So that my people may understand what we owe to you, I have started the ancient Games again, in the name of Agron Metals."

"The Games?"

"Various athletic competitions. The opening festival is scheduled for tonight, to coincide with your arrival. The priests have been preaching against it ever since I made the an-

nouncement a week ago; they contend the Games are barbaric and anti-religious, because in ancient times they were replaced by the more sophisticated rituals in the worship of Thon. The cruder elements and the savagery, of course, I have no intention of reviving; but the pageantry will be a good thing for Thon. We're inclined to take things too seriously; we have to learn to relax and laugh. As nearly as I can judge, the people are with me. Let the priests rave; the Thonians enjoy a spectacle—particularly when it costs them nothing."

DIRRUL studied the elderly Chief Thonar as he talked, and found that he liked him. The ruler had none of the pompous bombast Dirrul had encountered in other primitive societies. He seemed entirely honest, intelligent, and level-headed. Dirrul made a mental note that he would probably be able to call upon the Chief Thonar for help if he found evidence of a Vininese conspiracy on Thon.

At a crowded intersection in the heart of Walthea, their wagon of state was held up by a mob. Across the heads of the throng, Dirrul saw a black-robed Thonian standing on the pedestal of a carved, marble statue and exhorting the crowd. Black, Dirrul had learned, was the traditional color of the priesthood. The priest had been fulminating against foreign influence, against exploitation by Agron and the Planetary Union.

His latest words rang out in the embarrassing quiet, "Smash their space-ships; root out the terrifying Transmitter-God they have built on our soil! Only then will the people of Thon find again the goodness of the Great Thon Himself!"

The wagon of the Chief Thonar moved on in the hushed silence. Dirrul clenched his fists. The Vininese were here; there was little doubt of it now. The priests were spreading their

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propaganda for them. Yes, pull down the Transmitter and call it a foreign God; and when it was gone, the Vininese could move in with their shattering brand of slavery. One thing seemed clear: the agent of Vinin would be found among the priesthood. It narrowed the unknowns in Dirrul's problem considerably.

"Please accept my apologies for what you have just heard," the Chief Thonar said. "If you wish, I can have the priest arrested and held for questioning; but it will do no good."

"Of course not," Dirrul said quickly; by all means he must not allow his suspicion to run ahead of the accumulation of evidence.

"This is simply a part of the general friction between the government and religion. The priests of Thon are nearly autonomous. They have their own courts, their own law, their own force of police. Their hold on the people is such that I can't crush them with direct action without destroying the government, and throwing all Walthea into chaos—easy pickings for the barbarians. We must temporize and compromise and argue; slowly, I think, we will make progress toward understanding and common purpose."

Dirrul decided he not only liked the Chief Thonar, but admired him; in a hesitant way, the ruler seemed to be groping toward a vague concept of the Rational Potential as he attempted to solve his own problems of state.

With considerable ceremony the Chief Thonar and his satellite Conthonars delivered Dirrul to the tourist hotel in Walthea, where the Agron Metals Agent had his office and apartment. But Dirrul was not left long alone. He barely had time to bathe and change into the gaudy dress uniform of the commercial agent before another delegation called to escort him to the palace for the banquet that would signal the opening of the Games.



IT WAS DUSK, and the marble-walled palace was lighted by stately rows of orange flares, held aloft in brackets of hand-wrought gold. The stone banquettables were spread on an open porch overlooking a yellow lawn that sloped gently toward the shore of the Thundering Water. Flares on tall, wooden posts lined the slope, lighting it with a flickering brilliance.

Most of the nobility of the Praelonium, and the upper hierarchy of the priesthood, had gathered for the banquet. On the yellow field outside were scattered groups of naked youths and maidens, most of them practicing the various skills in which they would compete when the Games began. A group of musicians, clothed in green, was assembled on a platform at one end of the porch; but the chatter of the throng was so loud Dirrul could not hear what they were playing. Which was just as well, he conceded, having heard recordings of the peculiarly shrill and dissonant music favored by the Thonians.

Servants moved among the crowd with trays of drinks, served in heavy platinum goblets. Dirrul took one, anticipating the sweet mixture of pressed fruit pulp which the Thonians traditionally served to their guests. But the harsh, raw flame of alcohol bit violently at his throat. Gasping for breath, Dirrul realized that the sociology of the people he had learned from the hypno-teacher hadn't been altogether accurate. Yet it was seldom that the records were mistaken—unless the facts originally stamped upon the disks had altered with the passage of time.

A moment later two towering nobles passed him, and he caught a tantalizing fragment of their conversation. "I was only assigned forty slaves after the last barbarian attack," one had said to the other, "and it is ridiculous for me to try to run the plantation at Goli with so few."

"These things take time to straighten out," was the reply. "It is still a new system. I have fifteen good men I can let you have for—um—shall we say three hundred pounds of Crinolin spice?"

"Three hundred pounds! I paid through the nose for that stuff to be smuggled in. By the black of Thon, you drive an Agronian bargain!"

Dirrul's head swam. The whole history of Thon, as he had absorbed it, was false. Quite openly, the people enjoyed drunkenness, slavery, and smuggled spice—yet the hypno-reels had taught him that the Thonians were intensely serious, stuffily moral, and proud of their deliberate isolation from luxury!

A BLARING discord of wind-instruments summoned the guests to the overflowing tables. Dirrul, as agent for Agron Metals, was assigned the seat of honor to the right of the Chief Thonar. On his other side sat a thin, cruel-faced, very old man in the black robes of the priesthood. He was the Anthon of Thon, chief priest of the monotheistic religion of the planet.

Young slave-girls brought food and drink to the tables. They were clothed in the filmy gauze which Dirrul recognized as a product of Agronian mills, even though the Thonian government officially banned such imports. Much of the food, and all of the spices on the table, had been imported from the Planetary Union.

Many of the nobles were already drunk, but neither the Anthon nor the Chief Thonar did more than sip the fiery liquid in their platinum mugs.

Both men ate in a brooding silence, with neither relish nor pleasure.

During the third course the Chief Thonar pushed aside his plate and whispered to Dirrul, "You see here another phase of my problem. We have our laws against imports. My nobles suggest them and pretend to enforce them. Yet they circumvent the ban for their own pleasure—and I am forced to do so, too, if I hope to keep in harmony with them. On the one hand, my aristocracy is learning to practice the basest sort of hypocrisy; while, on the other, the priests demand more austerity than we have ever practiced before. It is sometimes hard to bring about a compromise."

As the banquet ended, a second blast of wind-instruments signaled the start of the Games. The naked athletes lined up on the yellow field; the guests hitched their cushioned couches to the edge of the porch. In the name of Agron Metals, Dirrul was asked to ignite a specially-prepared flare, which flamed blue and red and yellow in alternating waves. A relay-team of beautiful women took it from his hand and carried the torch across the field, plunging it into the Thundering Water. The cheering arose from the assembled athletes, and the contests began.

The festivities continued for hours in the balmy night air. The nobles drank and gambled and toyed with the slave-girls, who came to sit on their couches with them. The final contest was a vicious, unorganized battle—involving perhaps a thousand men—for the possession of a metal trophy set atop a greased pyramid in the center of the field. Carried on the shoulders of half a dozen naked maidens, the victor followed the blaring musicians around the field, pausing at the banquet table to salute the Chief Thonar, who presented a medal which the young man hung around his neck.

The orange flares on the field were extinguished, and the crowds began to

depart. One by one the Chief Thonar's guests pulled themselves to their feet and staggered drunkenly toward the street.

To the banquet Dirrul had intentionally worn the gold ring which he had been given by the dying Thonian, on the chance that someone might see it and perhaps identify it. As the crowd thinned rapidly, he gave the ring to the Chief Thonar, while the Anthon looked on with veiled eyes. The elderly ruler examined it deliberately, and then shook his head.

"It may be Thonian workmanship," he conceded, "but the symbols mean nothing to me." He showed the ring to the high priest. "Is this one of your religious charms?"

The priest examined the ring for a moment, and then returned it to Dirrul haughtily. "The priesthood of Thon has no charms and no incantations. The ornament might be barbarian. I understand one or two of the backward tribes have developed tribal idols of their own."

AS DIRRUL turned to depart, the thin, wrinkled hand of the Anthon closed tight on his arm. "So soon you must leave us?" the high priest asked in a smooth, insinuating voice. "Your wine-cup is still full."

"I have no taste for it."

"No? But is that not the chief element of the culture your people would bring to Thon? On many occasions I have spent an evening observing how tourists from the Planetary Union spend their leisure hours."

Dirrul smiled—he hoped disarmingly. "Intoxication is a habit developed by many races; I have never heard it classified as a culture."

"I had forgotten. You have brought us something else as well: trade-treaties and the new Transmitter-God. You pretend to help us, while you steal the resources of our soil in exchange for nothing."

"The trade-agreements are settled,

I believe, by the government rather than the priesthood. As for the Transmitter, it is a device—a weapon of defense—and nothing more."

"From what do you defend us?"

"Outside aggression, so that you may work out your own destiny in your own way. At the time we first came to Thon, we explained that the Galactic War had developed two ultimate weapons. One is the wave-transmitter of the Vininese; with it they can master a planet forever by destroying every individual's ability for rational thought. The other weapon is the Nuclear Beam developed by the Agronian scientists. The Beam-Transmitter can throw a stratospheric shell around any planet. No object made of metal—no spaceship, for example—can penetrate it. The Beam gives you the ability to isolate yourselves at will. No foreign space-fleet can threaten your planet, because you can destroy it merely by turning the dial of your Beam."

"If this Confederacy of Vinin exists—and I say 'if' deliberately, sir, since I have seen no evidence of that except what you Agronians choose to tell us—but if there is such a threat to our security, why should they attack Thon? We are an isolated sun-system, far within the territory of your Planetary Union. What reason would the Vininese have for attacking us?"

"Your resources; the slave-work of your people; your uncounted wealth."

The Anthon stood up, twisting his black cloak around him. "You talk like a politician, sir; I was under the impression you came here as a commercial agent. Possibly the thing you really fear is that the Vininese Confederacy may offer us more than empty baubles for the privilege of trading with Thon. May I bid you good evening?"

The priest stalked out of the banquet hall.

The Chief Thonar had been standing

in the background during Dirrul's talk with the Anthon. He came forward, now, shaking his head sadly.

"I thought it better not to interfere," he apologized. "The Anthon is a very dangerous man when he is aroused, and nothing I could have said would have made him any calmer. Well, one day—let us hope!—Thon will take him to the Great Rest, and we can replace him with a younger, more progressive man."

DIRRUL walked thoughtfully back to his hotel apartment, through the black and silent streets of Walthea. By every apparent circumstance, the high priest of Thon was the subverted voice of Vinin. Yet, it was conceivable that the Anthon was no more than a valuable dupe—a screen for the real agent of Vinin. There was even a slim possibility that the high priest had expressed his own reasoned opinion.

A nagging doubt that he had somehow missed an obvious point persisted in Dirrul's mind. It was unformulated, except as a series of questions. Why had the hypno-teacher lied? Why had the aristocracy suddenly begun to indulge in lasciviousness and strong drink? What had abruptly sapped the stamina of the society to the point where smuggling and slavery had become open vices? To the point where even the Chief Thonar was forced to accept the lower standards or lose his grip on the government?

Dirrul found the reception-room of the tourist-hotel dark and empty, except for the huge Thonian clerk sleeping behind the desk. But as he approached his own apartment, he heard muffled noises and he saw a faint, flickering light.

Stealthily he pushed open the panel door. A woman gasped with fright and turned to face him. She was very young and very beautiful, wearing only the loose and wildly-seductive black garment of a Thonian priestess. Dirrul's

traveling-bags were open at her feet, the contents scattered over the thick carpet.

"Who sent you? What do you want?" he demanded, moving toward her slowly. She stared at him, her eyes cold and bright in the wavering light of the flare she had put in the bracket beside his bed. "What do you think you'll find?" he repeated.

She conquered her fear quickly. "Everything is in order," she answered. "Too good, as if you expected me to question your papers. You are not the Metals Agent."

She moved her arm a little beneath the folds of her robe. "Go back to those who sent you; tell them we want none of your kind here!"

Her hand swept out then, smashing the flare out of the bracket and plunging the room into darkness. Dirrul moved to prevent her escape, but she was an eight foot woman with Amazonian strength. Her clenched fist struck his jaw, jolting him back against the wall. He heard the soft pounding of her sandaled feet in the corridor, and attempted to pursue her; but he lost her in the dark streets of Walthea.

Early the next morning Dirrul was awakened by a deafening clatter of drums. From the window of his apartment, he saw palace heralds parading the dusty streets behind corps of drummers. At intervals they paused to read and post a government proclamation. When a group stopped outside the hotel, Dirrul heard their booming voices clearly.

"The northern barbarians have united and are attacking the frontier. Already the border fortresses have fallen. This day the Praelonium of Walthea proclaims the military call for all males in Class A. By the grace of Thon, victory will be ours."

DIRRUL dressed quickly and went outside. The streets of Walthea were thronged with chaotic, eddying mobs, stirred and somewhat frightened,

but uncertain what to do. On nearly every corner, priests clattered the holy cymbals and cried exhortations on two recurrent themes: "Throw out the foreigners!" and "Destroy the barbarians; this time no truce, only annihilation."

The dust rose in yellow clouds from the street, beaten into miniature whirlwinds by the churning wheels of passing war chariots as the various military units assembled before the villas of the commanding nobles. Choked and sweating, Dirrul went into a corner lounge and ordered a Thonian fruit-pulp drink.

The attendant sized him up critically, and then bent close to whisper, "We've something stronger, my friend. Right off the spaceship it is, too."

Dirrul accepted the prohibited hospitality. Since the lounge was empty, the huge attendant sat down to talk.

"A lot of excitement we're having this morning," he said. "But it will pass; it always does. The barbarians have been attacking our borders as long as I can remember; nothing ever comes of it, except maybe higher taxes—and not even that, now, since we've got Agron Metals to foot the bills."

Dirrul sipped the raw liquor slowly, listening carefully to the Thonian's friendly gossip. It was the first contact he had had with the common man of Walthea, and he might learn much of the popular point of view. He discovered that the barbarian attacks had become more frequent within the past year, and more successful. The priests constantly called for war; but the Chief Thonar somehow always managed to patch together a peace of sorts at the last minute.

It seemed to be common knowledge that outright conflict would be disastrous, because the various Walthean army corps were responsible only to their individual commanders, drawn entirely from the nobility; and it was notoriously impossible for any of the

nobles to work together for extended periods of time. So long as the Chief Thonar appeased, satisfied, or amused the aristocracy, his power was intact; but without the support of the noble Conthonars he could do nothing.

A new fervor shook the milling crowd outside the little shop. They suddenly seemed to have found a leader; sluggishly they were moving in one direction, shouting in unison. Dirrul paid the attendant and went to see what remained orderly, while the procession of priests leading the mob toward the spaceport. Banging their cymbals over the swirling dust, they chanted discordantly, "Burn the Transmitter! Destroy the foreign God!"

The threat of violence, however, was entirely spectacle and show. The mob remained orderly, while the procession of priests lined them up along the fence of the spaceport. The chanting ceased; the cymbals fell silent; a priest of high rank mounted an improvised podium and delivered a stylized lecture on the virtues of spartan morality. When it was over the crowd broke up.

IN THE CONFUSION, a slovenly, stooped beggar suddenly seized Dirrul's arm and drew him into the shelter of a doorway.

"You are the Metals Agent?" the beggar asked breathlessly.

"Yes; from Agron."

"Go back! Tell them they must annex Thon. Tomorrow it may be too late. Tell them—"

A band of armed police surrounded them, dragging the beggar away. The police wore wide, black armbands, indicating that they were the constabulary of the Thonian priesthood. The Anthon himself rode behind them on a large, fur-skinned beast of war.

As the beggar was carried away, he saluted Dirrul sardonically, and said, "Accept my apologies, sir, that you

should have been disturbed by a barbarian spy on such a peaceful morning in our capital. We shall make an example of this beggar. We cannot allow our tourists and commercial travelers to be frightened by the petty vermin of our planet, or we might lose the revenue you bring us." The high priest saluted again, and rode off through the mob.

Dirrul walked toward the palace, his decision made. The situation was too explosive for him to wait any longer for direct evidence that the high priest was himself the agent of Vinin. It was clear that the priest meant to destroy the Transmitter; it was equally clear that he had not intended Dirrul to hear what the beggar had to say, and it had seemed very important. Perhaps the priest was himself guiltless; but knowingly or not he spoke for Vinin, and Thon had to be protected from his folly.

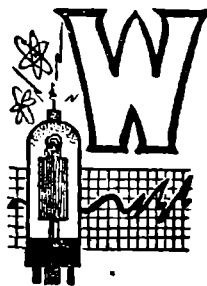
If the increased chaos, the co-ordinated attack of the barbarians, and the violence of the priesthood were engineered by Vinin, it could only mean that the Vininese attack on Thon was very close. They could bring in neither their wave-transmitter nor their space-fleet, however, as long as the Nuclear Beams functioned. The important thing, then, was to see to that; their internal problems, the Thonians could settle for themselves.

If the crews maintaining the Beam-Transmitter had still been Agronian, Dirrul's task would have been simple. As it was, he would have to work through the Chief Thonar. Fortunately, the ruler seemed both wise and perceptive; he would listen to reason.

As he considered possible arguments to make to the Chief Thonar, a brilliant subterfuge occurred to Dirrul. The Beam-Transmitter must be secretly dismantled and moved. The ray could then be turned on and left on. No Vininese ship—and no other, for that matter—could land on Thon, and the planet would be safe. But if the

Vininese agent, whoever he might be, assumed the Transmitter was located at its original site, it was there he would go to destroy it; and it was there Dirrul could trap him.

4



WITH VERY little difficulty, considering the situation which had suddenly developed on the frontier, Dirrul gained an audience with the Chief Thonar. The elderly ruler

listened calmly while Dirrul made his proposal.

"For a commercial agent," the Chief Thonar said gently, "you have a remarkable grasp of political relationships."

"Where Vinin is involved, we are all forewarned," Dirrul said smoothly. "The Galactic War is still fresh in our minds."

"For a moment I thought you might be an agent from Agron, one of those legendary figures they call a space-pilot. How dearly I would love to meet one!"

"More legend than fact," Dirrul said. "I've grown up in the Planetary Union, and have still to meet one myself."

The Chief Thonar sighed. "You're right, of course. Now let me be sure that I understand what you want me to do. I am to dismantle the Transmitter in secret, and—" He paused and looked up suddenly. "Yes, my dear? Can I help you?"

A deep, musical voice said, "Oh, I'm so glad the Transmitter is to be destroyed! I couldn't help overhearing, sir."

Dirrul whirled. A priestess had entered the room behind them, moving toward the sheltered alcove where the Chief Thonar held audience. She was

the same woman Dirrul had surprised rifling his room the night before; he was sure of it. Yet when he looked her in the face, she stared back boldly, with no indication that she recognized him.

"I come from the Anthon," the girl said. "He has just taken a barbarian spy, masquerading as a beggar; he wants you to come and read the information the man gave before—" There was a catch in her voice, and she looked away quickly. "—before he died."

Dirrul was bewildered by the reaction of the priestess. She could be caught in the process of robbing his room, and still face him before the Chief Thonar with no sign of fear. Yet the death of an unknown beggar, an enemy spy, seemed to cause her uncontrollable grief.

"Perhaps it is important," the ruler agreed. "I'll come at once." As the priestess turned to depart, he called after her, "My dear, this business of dismantling the Transmitter—for the moment, it must be a secret between us. No one is to know about it; no one at all."

"I quite understand," she replied, with a formal and stately nod of her head.

To Dirrul the Chief Thonar said, when they were alone again, "You can rest easy about any Vininese invasion; I promise you the Transmitter will be relocated by nightfall. I will personally see to it that the mechanism is turned on, and it will not go off again until I have your assurance that every Vininese agent on Thon has been removed."

"Have you selected a site for the Transmitter?"

The Chief Thonar hesitated briefly. "Why—why, yes. The Games will be postponed because of this trouble on the frontier. I'll put the Transmitter in the field behind the palace." The ruler arose, adjusting the folds of

his robe. "Now, if you will forgive me, I must at least pay my respects to the Anthon, and listen to his information."

DIRRUL ate a quick meal at the lounge near the palace; then he pushed through the sweating mob to the spaceport. As an ordinary precaution he would have to send a teleray to the commercial exchange on Agron, advising the cancellation of all commercial flights to Thon, since the Beam-Transmitter would seal off the planet within a few hours. In the original agreement made with the Thonian government, only one teleray was to be allowed on Thon, since the device was classified as an undesirable invention. That single teleray was maintained at the spaceport, for the benefit of tourists and commercial agents.

Dirrul went into the booth and found the teleray badly in need of repair. It was what he should have anticipated in such a forgotten outpost, so far from maintenance-crews. The stabilization-beam was slightly unbalanced, and the clear-circuit was crossed. He began to make minor adjustments so that he could put through his message; and abruptly the receiver picked up another call. The voice was garbled by the crossed circuit, but the language was clearly Vininese; in a brief interval of clarity he heard a frightening half-sentence, "*...an Agronian Agent in Walthea, of probable space-pilot status, and the Vininese attack must be made at once before an Agronian immobilization-fleet can...*"

The box went dead, and cold sweat covered Dirrul's forehead. This was the evidence he needed: another teleray was illegally operating on Thon; there were devices which could locate it. He must explain to the Chief Thonar at once what the message implied, and get emergency-permission to import the necessary tracers.

He made his own call, and hurried through the Customs Building toward the city. The mob outside the spaceport was thicker than ever, massive, sweating beings towering two feet and more above Dirrul. He was lost, like a child caught in a swirling throng of adults. The only way he could move ahead was by clinging close to the house walls, and moving along them with his shoulders pressed against the stone.

Suddenly, at an intersection, the mob parted for a moment; Dirrul was surrounded by a band of men, roughly garbed in animal skins. A heavy fist struck the back of his head, and he collapsed quietly.

DIRRUL'S mind cleared slowly. As the black mist rolled away, he found that he was strapped to a kind of gold-embossed saddle on the back of one of the fur-skinned Thonian riding-animals. His beast was one of several, moving in single-file, caravan-fashion, through a lush, wild countryside. The shrubs and grasses were the bright yellow of typical Thonian vegetation; tremendous, tree-like growths towered above the twisting trail, blotting out the fading afternoon sunlight.

Dirrul was tied in such a way that he could see very little; but occasional glimpses of his captors made it clear that he had fallen into the hands of Thonian barbarians. They were all huge, rough, black-bearded men, garbed in odiferous robes made from animal-skins. *W e a p o n - b e l t s* were strapped around their waists. They carried full complements of long, iron knives and spiked, metal spheres, fastened at the end of linked chains. Ornamented, metal-faced shields were strapped to their saddles.

And these men had kidnapped him in broad daylight from the streets of Walthea—at a time when the capital was aroused to war against the barbarians! The thing didn't ring true

with the facts as Dirrul understood them. If a beggar had been taken that morning and executed as a barbarian spy, how had these men escaped with impunity? Obviously, someone in Walthea was in league with the barbarians; just as obviously it would be the agent of Vinin.

But it was the priesthood Dirrul suspected; and it was the high priest who had ordered the arrest of the beggar.

Suddenly Dirrul perceived the relationship. The only evidence he had that the beggar was a barbarian was the statement of the priestess; and she was repeating what the high priest had told her to say. The beggar could have been representing any group of Thonians; an intelligent segment of the aristocracy, perhaps, who had discovered the Vininese conspiracy and needed Agronian assistance to prevent it.

The Vininese were working through the priesthood to arouse the Waltheans to war; at the same time they were backing the barbarian conquest. Hadn't the attendant in the eating-lounge said that the border-attacks had become more frequent in recent months? It was the familiar Vininese policy to create chaos—revolution and violence and instability—and then step in to bring order. And slavery to Vinin.

The caravan wound through a gray-stoned mountain pass and emerged on a long, yellow plateau. A group of slovenly huts and tents were clustered around a narrow mountain stream. Beyond them, thousands of men sat around evening camp fires, while others were in a deserted part of the plain practicing the skills of war. Far in the distance, indistinct in the gathering blue mist of night, Dirrul saw the stone towers of a captured border-fortress.

They took him from his animal and, binding his hands and feet again, dragged him into one of the filthy

huts. In the center of the camp, in front of a hut larger than the rest, Dirrul saw the last element of proof that he needed: a battered, improvised teleray machine fastened to a crude, metal box that housed the transmission machinery. Three tall Thonians sat on the ground in front of the teleray, adjusting dials and circuits, and listening intently with antiquated receptors clamped to their ears.

THE DOOR of the hut was locked shut. Dirrul was thrown on the dirt floor and left alone. Slowly he managed to roll close to one wall and, using it as a support, he shoved himself into a sitting position. A long gash in the wall-planking gave him a restricted view of the camp. He could see the teleray, a row of dirty tents, and a narrow strip of yellow field below the fortress.

The teleray indicated that this barbarian camp was the location of the Vininese power on Thon. It could only have been from here that the message was sent which Dirrul had accidentally intercepted. Yet, as he studied the machine and watched its Thonian operators, it puzzled him. If the teleray had been set up by Vinin, why had the job been so amateurish? The device, even from a distance, looked as if it had been patched together from odds and ends and discards—the sort of thing which a beginning-student at the Ad-air University might have made as a hobby project. It was remarkable that it served its purpose at all.

Nonetheless Dirrul was sure he had found what he was seeking. Shortly the Agent of Vinin would come to the prison hut. He might talk to Dirrul; or he might not. The Vininese seldom allowed themselves either relaxation or triumph. Dirrul would simply be disposed of quietly. He doubted that the full camp of barbarians were aware they were the shock-troops of Vinin; perhaps not many of the leaders knew

who gave them their orders, or why. The Agent, then, would have to remove Dirrul without fuss or display. The probable weapon would be a sudden blast from a disintegrator beam—fast and relatively painless. Even the Vininese did not go in for torture, unless it suited their purposes.

Dirrul laughed bitterly; the laugh was tinged with irony when he thought of Dr. Kramer, and the professor's insistence that the problem was a question of semantics. How could the science of meaning extricate Dirrul from this particular situation? Possibly on the night before, when he had talked to the Anthon of Thon, Dirrul might have framed the dialogue differently. Yet he was sure the results would have been substantially the same. Even then he had suspected the priest; closer attention to semantics would only have made him entirely certain.

As the sun set, the barbarian camp stirred sluggishly into activity. Through the crevice in the wall, Dirrul saw the men forming into companies, adjusting weapons, mounting their beasts of war. There was little noise or confusion as they prepared for their attack on Walthea. The various groups worked in harmony; they seemed well-disciplined. It was strange that so much intense purpose and energy was to be channeled into a victory for Vinin.

An animal galloped across Dirrul's line of vision; a woman dismounted. He recognized the priestess who had searched his room. It was the last link he needed to reconstruct the tie-up between Anthon and the barbarians. Academically, perhaps, it was satisfying to discover that he had been right; but it was a dry and frustrating kind of satisfaction.

The priestess went into the large hut briefly. When she came out, she walked toward Dirrul's prison. She carried a weapon in her hand. The pale light glinted on the barrel; Dirrul recognized the multiple-unit disin-

tegrator which was commonplace throughout the Galaxy. This particular model had probably been made in Vinin. So the Thonian priestess had been dispatched to remove him, Dirrul thought—with something of regret, because he had rather looked forward to meeting the Vininese agent face to face. Vaguely, at the back of his mind, he had clung to a slim thread of hope, that by reason he might dissuade the agent from his purpose. It had been known to happen before. Perhaps the agent had delegated the priestess to the task for precisely that reason.

THE PRIESTESS came into Dirrul's hut, shutting the door and lighting the single bracket-flare that hung beside it. In the orange light she turned to face Dirrul, holding the weapon steadily in her hand. Outside the noise and shouting reached a climax; the barbarian army had begun to march. The soft clatter of their swords on metal shields made a background patter, like muffled drumbeats, for the girl's talk.

"I gave you a warning," she said emotionlessly.

Dirrul made no reply, staring at her intently, trying to penetrate the shell of her personality, probing for weak points. Even now he found it quite impossible to accept either defeat or death as inevitable. There was still a possibility for escape, if he could find it; Thon was still not lost.

She bent over and cut the rope that bound his legs.

"Stand up," she ordered. "I cannot say what I must to a man who grovels at my feet."

He leaned against the wall, flexing the muscles in his legs to restore circulation. "My hands are tied, too," he said softly.

"Later. I have no intention of killing you; that would be much too easy a way out. No; we want to send you back. Back to your own people. Say to them, for us, that we want nothing

of yours; none of your ways and none of your things. They can punish you for your failure in their own way."

She stepped back a little, looking down at the barrel of her gun. "This means nothing to you or your people, but I must still say it because it is what I believe—what we all believe. We are not barbarians; we are the people of Thon. We believe in freedom and in justice and in liberty. That is the kind of world we mean to have, when we have smashed this sham you have set up in Walthea. Tell your people that when you go back to them."

Dirrul had wondered if he could appeal to her with the logic of the Rational Potential—for what else was it but an extension of a belief in freedom and justice and liberty? He realized now that it would be fruitless. She was too certain of the internal truth of her own convictions. And her words made sense, as words; there was no counter-argument that he could make her understand in her own terms. She was duped by Vinin; he knew that. Here, of course, was the opportunity for a semantic solution to the problem, but how could he make it when her meanings were already fixed? In truth he could say nothing except what she had already said herself; it was the philosophy of his own world. The tragedy was that she had accepted the emptiness of Vininese meanings, without recognizing the slavery they concealed.

She broke open a pocketknife and moved toward him. "You will ride with us tonight. When Walthea falls, we will put you on a spaceship and send you home. Don't come back; we will not be this considerate next time."

She bent to cut the cords that bound his hands. Suddenly she gasped, as her knife bit into the rope and freed him. She stood up to look into his eyes, her mouth wide with shock, her hands shaking.

Dirrul had no idea what had upset her, but it was the split-second he needed. He kicked the disintegrator

out of her hand, and threw his weight against her. Grunting in pain, she collapsed, her head striking the wall. She lay still.

Dirrul snatched down the flare and extinguished it before he stole out of the hut. The camp was a turmoil of moving men and animals. Clinging close to the shadows, he crept toward a deserted corral. The tremendous animals of Thon were docile creatures, entirely voiceless. Stealthily he led one away from the others; stealthily he mounted into the saddle, clinging close to the gold pommel.

5



AT THE EDGE of the encroaching forest, he stopped and looked back across the yellow plateau, now turning copper-colored in the moonlight. The barbarian army had assembled under the wall of the captured border fortress; in organized ranks they were moving forward, on a broad road that led down through the foothills. Far ahead, on the edge of the horizon, he saw a pall of black smoke, turning dull red in the reflection of the flames burning beneath it.

Dirrul hoped desperately that the Chief Thonar would find the means of turning back the invasion; perhaps the flood of events would force the nobles to unite and fight in unison. But whatever were the final results, Dirrul had no authority to interfere in the local fighting. His only legitimate purpose was to see to it that the conflict remained local. To do so, he had to reach Walthea as quickly as he could, and make certain that, if the barbarians took the capital, the Beam-Transmitter would not be destroyed.

In a general way, he knew the di-

rection he should take. The barbarian attack had been referred to as trouble on the northern frontier; Walthea, then, would be somewhere to the south. He had a further clue to go on. From the time he had regained consciousness that afternoon, the caravan had been moving steadily upward into the foothills. To return to Walthea he would have to follow a route that descended to sea-level. Nor could the distance be great. He had been kidnapped shortly before midday; by sunset the barbarian caravan had reached the frontier camp.

Aside from the unknown geography of Thon, Dirrul had one other obstacle to face. The invading barbarians were moving forward very rapidly, spreading out across the Praelonium of Walthea like an expanding fan. Throughout the night, he had to move with extreme caution, frequently hiding in abandoned cottages or behind outcroppings of rock to escape barbarian patrols. He lost valuable time, but the contacts with the invaders were a help, too, for the spearhead of their attack was focused upon Walthea; as long as the invading army was close, Dirrul knew he was moving in the right direction.

IT WAS NOT until dawn that Dirrul came within sight of the capital city. There was severe fighting going on in the outskirts; long arms of flame rose high against the brightening sky. Only scattered marauders had entered the city proper. The area near the spaceport was entirely quiet.

Dirrul entered Walthea from the west, abandoning his riding-animal and walking on foot. Bands of Walthean soldiers patrolled the dusty streets, but when they saw his commercial agent's uniform, they allowed him to pass unchallenged.

The barbarian attack had, of course, been timed to reach Walthea at the same time the Vininese spacefleet was

approaching the stratosphere, preparing to land. As the city defenses slowly crumbled, the Vininese agent would have to perform his last act of betrayal—the Beam-Transmitter would have to be immobilized, at least for the period of time necessary for the Vininese to make a landing.

Since the Beam-Transmitter had been relocated in the palace field, Dirrul considered that Thon was sealed off temporarily and safe, for the moment, from invasion. But only the Chief Thonar and his crew of Thonian technicians knew that. The priestess had overheard enough of the plan to believe that the Transmitter was to be dismantled; she would have reported as much to the Anthon. Yet, to be thorough, the high priest would have to make sure of that himself.

The important thing for Dirrul to do, then, was to keep watch on the old Transmitter-site, at the spaceport. There the priest would come to perform his final villainy; and there Dirrul would achieve the purpose of his mission to Thon. Afterwards, whether the barbarians or the Waltheans were victorious in the local war, Dirrul could convince them of the danger they had escaped by presenting the direct evidence of the Anthon's confession.

Dirrul pushed through the soldiers and the weapons of war that cluttered the city streets. Already there was sporadic street-fighting here and there, as bands of Walthean citizens turned on their own soldiers. A feeling of panic and terror spread like a dark shadow over the city. The climax of internal chaos was almost at hand, and Dirrul knew it was only a matter of minutes before the Vininese fleet would swing in through the clouds.

Dirrul passed the dramatically plain Temple of Thon. The massive, gold-faced doors were open, and flickering light cast weird shadows across the stone portico. Soldiers and barbarians

were fighting in front of the building. As Dirrul worked his way past them, clinging to the shadows, a band of priests burst out of the Temple, led by the Anthon himself.

This was it, Dirrul thought grimly. The Anthon would now proclaim a holy pilgrimage, or a festival of sacrifice, or whatever emotive phrase seemed most appropriate to the tragedy, and lead the citizens upon the Beam-Transmitter to destroy it in the name of Thon—and for the glory of Vinin.

But Dirrul's calculations suddenly went wrong. The Anthon stood at the top of the Temple steps, brandishing a glittering blade above his head, and crying to his followers, "Throw back the barbarian! Defend the city of your fathers!"

The priests moved down after him into the fighting mob; and the mob fell back. At the forefront of the attack Dirrul saw the high priest, plying his massive weapon in all directions, and screaming with frantic fervor to his followers. The barbarians seemed unwilling to tangle with him directly; none opposed his sword; all fell back as he approached. Then, above the heads of the throng, Dirrul saw the priestess, riding a beast of war.

"No harm to him!" she cried. "No harm! He must be taken alive, unhurt—or not taken at all!"

The whole Thonian problem, as Dirrul had understood it, was jolted loose, then, smashed into fragments of initial evidence. He had built a wonderful house of supposition, but it was made out of empty words and misinterpreted circumstance. He saw the real truth; and he was shaken with terror.

Thon was lost! Lost through his own blindness and incompetence!

And Dr. Kramer had been right. Semantics would have solved the problem hours ago, if Dirrul had understood what the professor had meant.

DIRRUL turned and fled toward the playing-field behind the palace. He had no time to see the Chief Thonar; no time to pay even lip-service to the forms of legal intervention. The planet of Thon was at stake. There was still one chance that he might keep the Beam-Transmitter functioning, even at the cost of his own life. It would only take a few minutes, because the Vininese fleet would be very close now. If the fleet were destroyed, Thon would have a day—perhaps even two—of grace; in that time the whole Planetary Union could come to the rescue of the Thonians.

Barbarians were fighting in front of the palace. Dirrul ran toward the rear, scaling the low wall, and darting toward the machine that glinted in the dawn light. The palace doors burst open, and he heard sandaled feet pounding on the turf behind him. Panting, he reached the Transmitter. The wires were dead and lifeless. He snapped the dials, as strong arms reached out and pulled him away.

Struggling and cursing, they carried him into the palace and dropped him on the polished floor of the audience alcove. Dirrul sprang to his feet, and found himself ringed by towering barbarians, who carried naked swords in their hands.

"Fools!" he cried. "The Nuclear-Beam must be on, don't you understand? I'm not trying to prevent your revolution. But the Vininese are approaching Thon. They bring you nothing but slavery and degeneration!"

"As you say," one of the barbarians answered quietly, "the Beams must be turned on; and did you not do that yourself only a moment ago?"

"No. Something went wrong! The machine was still dead when you dragged me away!"

The barbarians parted and the priestess came to face Dirrul. Her black robe was torn and soiled; her face was smeared with the grime of

battle, but in her eyes was an excited fire of triumph.

"I had you brought here to hear my apologies," she said gravely.

"There is no time! The Beams—"

"Now you will hear me out; my men will see to that."

She smiled a little, wiping some of the grime from her cheek. "We mistook you for a Vininese agent, just as you mistook our purposes. As I told you before, we are not barbarians. We are the younger generation of Thon; the children of Thon. Some of us are of the nobility; some are artisans; some scholars and priests. We had no patience with the decision of the government that Thon should restrict the science and the knowledge which the planetary Union was willing to teach us. We tried to present our case through legitimate channels, and no one would hear us. We were the young, they said; it was proper for us to wait for the wisdom of years to settle on our shoulders."

"I sympathize thoroughly," Dirrul said, clenching his teeth on the words so that he would speak with what, he hoped, was a tone of reasonableness. "But there is time for polite talk later. Right now, we—"

"**O**NE BY ONE," the priestess went on quietly, "those of us who spoke out were destroyed. Eventually we fled to the hills and organized the barbarian tribes of the north for revolution. Later, we found that men from Vinin were here, measuring the value of our resources, influencing the gullible with their gaudy lies. We stole books from the tourists and tried to learn enough of your science to communicate the truth to you. With odds and ends, and scraps of discarded machinery that we could pick up at the spaceport, we built our own teleray—but it only functioned once or twice as a transmitter of messages."

"Then that's why your calls for

help," Dirrul put in, "were always interrupted."

"How hard we tried to get through to Agron! We didn't dare use the teleray at the spaceport. And the other good one—well, you know where it is, and it was of no value to us. Our machine did receive wonderfully, however, on all of the closed beams. We were able to listen in on most of the plans for the Vininese invasion; that's how we came to suspect that you were a Vininese agent."

"But I'm not; you can't believe that now! And all the time we're wasting here, while the Beam-Transmitter on the field—"

"There are Vininese spies on Agron," she went on serenely. "Always before, when a new Metals agent came to Thon, they would send their agent here a description of his traits and character, so that it would be easier to conceal from him the facts of our unrest. But when you came, there was no message. The only logical explanation seemed to be that you were a Vininese agent yourself."

"I searched your room; your papers were too perfect, and Vinin is always so thorough about everything! I was absolutely convinced the next morning when I found that you were arranging with the Chief Thonar to dismantle the Transmitter. Consequently, I had you kidnapped. After we took Walthea, we intended to send you back to Vinin, and the thoroughgoing punishment they would devise for an agent who had failed."

"Surely, you know differently now!"

"Yes; I saw the ring you had on your finger, when I went to untie your hands last night. We couldn't get through to Agron with the teleray; so we sent volunteers on the tourist cruisers. It was very dangerous, because each of them had to smuggle himself out of Thon, and the spaceport was always well-guarded. Each of them wore a gold ring made exactly

like yours. The idea was for the Agronians who came to help us to bring one of the rings with them. We would know, then, that they were not Vininese pretending to be our friends. We can't tell a Vininese apart from an Agronian; very few people in the Galaxy can. We had to be sure, because the fate of Thon depended upon it."

"Again, a question of semantics," Dirrul said bitterly. "Last night you told me the truth; I was too blind to see it!"

"When I talked of freedom and liberty and justice?" the priestess asked. "But, naturally. We Thonians are still children. Our language has not yet grown up. The meanings of our words are still few in number, and more or less specific. We can only say what we mean; we haven't yet developed the syntax for misdirection and propaganda."

"Now have you finished?" he asked.

"Except for one small thing."

"Let it wait. The Vininese spacefleet has not yet landed. There is still time to repair the Beam-Transmitter and—"

"I SAID THERE was one more thing. We were always quite aware that the Beam-Transmitter of Agron would have to be temporarily destroyed before the Vininese could successfully attack Thon. While we were reading our stolen books and learning how to build a teleray, we also built a Nuclear Beam-Transmitter. As you know, your scientists published all the data as widely as they could, because they intended the device to become a defensive weapon for all people, everywhere. Our Transmitter is located in the hills; it has been transmitting continually since our attack began last night. Early this morning the nuclometer registered a heavy drain of power; I rather imagine the Vininese spacefleet was caught in the stratosphere of Thon. If this had happened to any other people, I'd say the

disaster might teach them a lesson."

"But not the Vininese," Dirrul agreed; then he smiled, and the pounding tension in his muscles began to relax. "It seems to me that all I've been on Thon is superfluous baggage. From the beginning, you've had your own problem pretty well in hand, and you've done a magnificent job of solving it for yourselves."

"Not entirely superfluous," she said. "You were a kind of catalysis that set off the reaction. You see, while we mistook you for a Vininese, it was perfectly clear to the real agent of Vinin that you were an Agronian, and probably an Agronian space-pilot."

"How? Every official angle was covered—"

"But you wore our ring. The Vininese agent had captured our volunteers before; he knew what it meant. You panicked him into calling for the invasion weeks ahead of schedule; and nothing could have suited our purposes better. Of course you'll want to take your prisoner back to Agron?"

"It's the usual policy," Dirrul explained. "Our psychiatrists will try to readjust the warped mind and the inverted standards. Much of the time they succeed, even with the difficult cases."

The priestess gestured to her band of barbarians. "Bring him in," she asked. "In our case, I hope your treatment is a success, because he could be an invaluable help to us in building a sane and rational society here on Thon. Tell your people that Thon will join the Planetary Union, if you will have us. Say that we have learned the futility of trying to blot out the material facts of progress, or building ourselves to the future by clinging to the customs of the past. The important thing is not the fact of progress or invention or discovery; it is the way in which the people learn to adjust to it. Thon has the philosophy, the ethic, the moral standard; one day you will be proud of our partnership."

She took Dirrul's hand and held it warmly. "I know what I say is true because I speak for my own generation—for the children of Thon. We are the future of our planet; we belong to your world."

THREE HOURS later Dirrul's luxury yacht soared up from the spaceport, its robot navigator set for the Aircomand headquarters on Agron. Bound and shackled in the hospital compartment of the ship was the agent of Vinin, who would have betrayed Thon. He cried in furious anger, and tore at his chains with frustration; even a sedative did nothing to quiet him.

Dirrul studied the face of the prisoner thoughtfully, remembering what Dr. Kramer had said, "*A man who speaks with meanings that are evident pattern-growths from his own past may be a mediocrity, a saint, or a bitter personal enemy. But one thing he cannot be is a traitor to himself or his heritage.*"

Reluctantly, Dirrul admitted to himself that the semantic-solution to the problem had been abundantly clear during the palace-banquet, but he had missed the point. He had not interpreted words from the Thonian's point of view, but only from his own. The high priest had spoken out in bitterness against the Nuclear-Beam and the technological progress it symbolized; but the priest spoke in pride, from his conservative experience-background as a religious leader of a primitive people. And the Chief Thonar had seemed admirable and progressive, because the sentiment he expressed was that of the civilization which Dirrul knew himself.

But the high priest had been an honest man.

And it was the Chief Thonar who writhed in the prisoner's chains—the gentle, cultured, far-sighted ruler of Thon, threatened with insecurity by the disaffection of his nobles and the

revolt of the younger generation. To hold his hereditary grasp upon the power of government, he had been willing to betray Thon even to the slavery of Vinin.

The motive was understandable; in an abstract sense, Dirrul could even sympathize. He still found it possible to admire the Chief Thonar as a per-

son. Like the priestess who had led the revolution, Dirrul fervently hoped the psychiatrists of Agron could remake the ruler's mind and send him back to Thon, whole and sound. A man of vision was always a valuable asset to his people.

