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THE NIGHT BEFORE THE BATTLE

by J. T. McINTOSH

THE NIGHT before the battle...

It wasn't a new situation. It had happened a million times before. Sometimes there had been camp-fires and bivouacs; sometimes trenches swept by machine-gun fire; sometimes the father and mother of all air raids all through the night to soften up the sleepless troops for the onslaught at dawn.

This time it was two space navies that were all set to batter each other to death—the Terran Navy and the Colonist Fleet. The Terran Navy was far from Earth. The Colonists were fighting desperately on their own doorstep.

And this, as everybody knew, was the deciding battle. The last battle.

Yet in a way it was neither the deciding battle nor the last battle, because the outcome was not in doubt. It would go like all the other battles that the Terran Navy had won, right from the Solar System itself where the Colonies first rashly attacked the far outposts, right back to Lavendis

itself. The Colonists had no secret weapon. The Colonists were going to be crushed—and serve them right. Who started it, anyway?

So it wasn't the deciding battle—not when the issue was already decided.

And the Colonists had a desperate plan, a crazy, suicidal plan, that ensured it wouldn't be quite the last battle. There was a way to fight on, to have something to fight with, even after this latest and greatest defeat. For the Colonists knew as well as everybody else that it was going to be defeat.

On Earth all that was known was that a major naval engagement was due about now, might already have taken place. Man had long outdistanced tortoise-slow radio waves in his rat race through the galaxy.

Naturally there was worry on Earth, but not about the outcome. People there were anxious, as always in war, about sons, husbands, fathers, boy-friends, brothers. Even a great

victory meant empty places, sorrow, grief. Sometimes it seemed that utter defeat would be preferable to more glorious, expensive, bloody victory...but only to the women, of course.

On the *Chesapeake*, the Terran flagship, there was some surprisingly academic discussion.

"I make it an even chance," said one of the navigators, "that we'll be dead tomorrow night or alive in fifty years."

"Call yourself a mathematician?" another navigator sneered. "What about auto accidents?"

"Swallowed up in the variables," said the first navigator calmly. "I guess Buster will go all out for complete annihilation of the Colonists. That'll mean that only about half of the whole force will be left. But since Buster's in this scrapheap himself, we should have a slightly better than even chance of being around afterwards. Enough to take care of the factor of auto accidents when we get back."

"I don't see, said a junior officer, "why we don't just swoop in and blow the Lavendis Capitol to blazes, with Bloody Mary and all."

"You'll learn, boy, you'll learn," sighed an engineer captain. "Any weapon a ship mounts she has to carry, right? Any power it uses she has to carry too, right? What chance has a ship got against a land-based Mark XI Cunliffe drawing power from half a planet? No, it's got to be ships against ships first. Knock out the naval cover, then—"

"Maybe we won't have to fight," said the doctor hopefully. "Don't forget Five by Five."

A chorus of derisive noises showed what the company thought of Five by Five.

"Knock out the naval cover," said the engineer captain patiently, "and then—"

"For Chrissake," said a voice of

wrath, "how can we play poker in the middle of a debating society? By instinct?"

"What else did you ever use?" somebody asked.

In the throbbing heat of the sultry night of City One, on Lavendis, Ann Horley came downstairs in a sweater and shorts. "I guess I'd better go," she said, trying to smile.

Her father pulled his glasses down so that he could see her properly. "You're not going like that?"

She grimaced. "Why should I put on my smartest clothes to die in?"

"Don't be bitter about it, Ann," said Horley gently. "It has to be this way."

"Like hell it has!" Bill shouted, jumping up. "I say it's crazy. It's more than flesh and blood can stand."

Horley was calm—weary, his eyes pools of horror, but calm. "It's a simple problem, Bill. One of you has to die in the next few hours. If it's you, only Ann is left to carry on the fight. But if you're left instead—"

"Then we can fight one more battle, with any sardine-cans and old oil-tanks we can rustle up and use as fighting ships," said Bill bitterly.

"Bill, don't make it any more difficult than it is already," Ann begged. "The First Citizen's right. The women are in this as much as the men. But I don't want to talk about it. I'd better just go."

The three of them had nothing in common to suggest they were father, son and daughter. Senator Horley, who rated about Number Three in the Colonies, was tall, lean and cadaverous, with burning eyes that showed that when he felt a thing he felt it deeply, sincerely and obstinately. Bill, who was twenty-three, a navigator in the Colonist Fleet when he wasn't simply a farmer, was stocky, good-looking, an ordinary young man who didn't feel anything very deeply except the necessity for a lot of fun in life and the acquaintance of

a large number of healthy young women without too many inhibitions. Ann was small, very serious and wistful for a girl of her physical attractions, an idealist and a lover of Truth.

"We won't see you again," Horley said as flatly as he could.

"I tell you it's crazy!" Bill shouted. "How can I let Ann go and stay behind myself? It's against human nature!"

"I voted for the plan," said Horley quietly. "Better go, Ann. It won't help if we all break down."

"Break down!" Bill sneered. "You'll never break down. You voted for Ann to die. You—"

"Bill, don't talk to Dad like that," Ann said sharply, for her. She sighed. "Yes, I'll stop talking about going and do it. Goodby."

Without another glance at either of them she went out.

"Dad, isn't there another way?" Bill said urgently.

Horley shook his head.

"Suppose we surrender?"

"Don't let me ever hear you say that word again. We've got to be free, Bill. Dying free is better than living as Earth's slaves."

"I don't know about that," said Bill mutinously. "Me, I'd rather be alive and a slave than dead and forgotten. I'd rather Ann was alive, even as some Terran captain's mistress, than—"

"You don't understand."

"No, I don't," said Bill bluntly. "We fought, sure. Now we're beaten. The sensible thing is to take the best terms we can get. Earth didn't want to fight. We did. Suppose we surrender? They won't murder us all. They won't put us in prison. In five years—"

"It wouldn't be any good," said Horley wearily. "It would all have to happen again. Son, Colonies always fight the mother country sooner or

later. New settlements, new worlds have got to have independence or die. If we surrender, we die. If we lose, we die. There's no future for you or me or Ann or Lavendis or the Colonies unless sooner or later we beat the Terran Navy."

"We never will. You know that."

"I know it. But if we give in now it comes to the same thing."

Bill shook his head hopelessly. "You're a fanatic," he said.

"Yes," sighed Horley. "I guess I am."

One man had every intention of averting the battle.

His name was Canterbury, and he wasn't a bishop, he was a diplomat. Being a diplomat, he naturally wanted to stop the battle if he could. Diplomacy is robbery without violence. If you can get what you want without fighting for it, why fight? If you can't get it, why fight anyway?

He landed by helicopter on Lavendis, about six miles from City One, with Captain Russell of the Terran Navy. There was no flag of truce, no all-out attack to clear a bridgehead. They just landed quietly, casually, discreetly, by night.

As he landed, Canterbury was thinking, too, that it was inevitable that colonies should always fight the mother country, only his reasons were slightly different. Within a few years the aims, temperament and constitution of the colonists were always so different from those of the parent country that no real dispute was necessary. The two groups fought simply because they were different.

The fact that he and Russell were able to land just six miles from City One and walk openly to enemy HQ, in uniform, illustrated his point. Discipline in a colony was never worth a damn. Pioneers went out to new settlements because they hated disci-

pline, because they thought they were as good as any man and wouldn't take orders from anybody, by God.

"I don't think much of their discipline, sir, do you?" Russell said.

Russell was a nice boy, polite, friendly, not particularly bright. He addressed Canterbury as 'sir' not because he had to—the diplomat had only a courtesy rank in the navy which neither of them remembered, offhand—but because Canterbury was twenty-five years older than Russell.

Canterbury grunted, most of his attention occupied in hoping they'd be captured soon and wouldn't have to walk all the way into City One. It was all very well for the captain to skip along like a six-year-old. Canterbury, who was well aware he was known on the *Chesapeake* as Five by Five, weighed 247 pounds on Earth and 281 on Lavendis. To say he was no athlete was an understatement.

Though it was night, the clear, cloudless night of South Lavendis, it was boiling hot as usual and their uniforms weren't any more comfortable in the heat than uniforms ever are. In the dark they saw a couple of kids wearing nothing at all and envied them. The children stared at the uniforms, stuck their thumbs in their mouths and looked puzzled.

Canterbury was cheered at the sight of them. Two kids as young as that wouldn't be allowed to roam far from home.

"What are they doing running about like that at night?" Russell wondered. "Don't these Lavenders look after their kids?"

"Day's too hot for them," Canterbury grunted. "They sleep in the morning and early afternoon." This was not by any means Five by Five's first visit to Lavendis.

To his relief he saw they were entering the outskirts of City One. And within a few minutes they were

stopped by a nondescript group of characters whom they took to be militia.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" their leader inquired. "What's the fancy dress for?"

"Don't you recognize the uniform of the Terran Navy?" Russell asked incredulously.

Evidently they hadn't, or hadn't believed it if they had. Jaws dropped, and one or two hands dropped towards guns that weren't there. The leader had a gun, however, and lost no time in bringing it up.

"This is a diplomatic mission," Canterbury said. "My name's Canterbury. I want to see Senator Horley. Please take me to him."

It took some time to get things sorted out. The night before the bloodiest naval battle in history, the battle which was to decide the future of the galaxy, the Colonists didn't expect to find a diplomatic mission wandering around openly five miles from their HQ.

They didn't know whether to be friendly or scowl at them. Typically, they blamed somebody else for the fact that they'd been able to land and go about unchallenged.

Russell, who was a nice fellow, settled the matter by pointing out that the magazine of the leader's gun was the wrong size and asked him please not to fire it or they'd all be blown to bits. As this was clearly a friendly warning, the militia didn't spit on the Terrans and call them dirty names. They put them in a car, to Canterbury's satisfaction, and took them to see Senator Horley.

Russell was left outside and Canterbury saw Horley alone. That suited him excellently. Russell was only along to show that Canterbury's mission was at least semi-official—that his visit wasn't some kind of hoax.

Canterbury knew Horley. Although he was a militant individualist, he

was more reasonable than most Colonist leaders, which was why Canterbury had elected to approach him and not Jenson or Bloody Mary.

"You must be mad," Horley said wonderingly. "Diplomatic mission, you say? You're not fool enough to think you're going to get away alive?"

Canterbury deposited his 281 pounds in a deep armchair. "Let me put a case, Horley," he said. "As you see, we have landed easily despite your so-called defenses. Do you think it would be any more difficult for a small group to land and execute Bloody Mary?"

Horley went white and choked incoherently. The words wouldn't come, partly because he couldn't make up his mind what he was most angry about. Eventually he picked one of the lesser things.

"You mustn't refer to the First Citizen like that," he said breathlessly.

"Very well," said Canterbury. "I'll put it plainly and politely. Hold us and we execute the First Citizen. And don't say we can't do it. You know we can."

Horley saw the point. Unless the two men were given safe conduct, Earth would see that Bloody Mary was assassinated in reprisal. Earth kept her word. The two-man mission was safe.

"Now that we've established that," Canterbury said, "perhaps we can get on. I'm here to accept your surrender."

Horley laughed bitterly. "There's going to be no surrender," he said. "You think we can fight only one last battle. You're wrong. After tomorrow we'll fight on."

Canterbury noted with satisfaction that he fully accepted the fact that the Colonists would be decisively defeated the next day. It's always best when you can reach agreement on fundamentals.

"How can you fight on?" Canterbury asked mildly.

"You don't expect me to tell you?"

"I don't need you to tell me. I know about your plan of crewing your ships with women, keeping your remaining naval personnel in reserve."

Horley drew a shocked, incredulous breath.

"The question is," Canterbury said, "are you going to be mad enough to do it? Bloody Mary's idea, of course. But—"

"You must not call her Bloody Mary!" Horley shouted.

"Sorry. Her Excellency. Are you really going to do it, Horley?"

"Come with me," Horley said. "I'll show you."

Canterbury hadn't expected this. If he allowed Horley to take him around and show him things, the initiative might pass from his hands into Horley's. "I'll take your word for it," he said.

But Horley was determined. Reluctantly Five by Five hoisted himself out of the armchair again. He hoped there wasn't going to be much walking about.

There was nothing whatever to be seen, though a wild, rich pattern of sound made it clear there were hundreds of people around engaged on a thousand jobs.

"Darkness shield," Horley commented.

Someone clicked a switch. Captain Russell gasped. Canterbury confined himself to raising his eyebrows.

A vast, circular plain that must have been thirty miles across was alive with light and industry. The scene might have come straight from an early science-fiction movie. There were hundreds of ships, and all over the plain they saw scores of cars, tractors and trucks tracing patterns in the dusty base of the valley.

There were far more women than men about. Women of all ages from

eighteen to eighty. Middle-aged women in dark overalls. Teenage girls in shorts. Old women in old fashioned frocks. Young matrons in slacks.

The few men seemed all to be directing or instructing. Only twenty yards from Canterbury, Russell, Horley and the three guards, two male gunners were drilling fifty girls in the use of a Mark VII Cunliffe from one of the ships. All these girls were young—it seemed that the rapid reflexes of the younger women were to be used in attack.

"They won't be ace gunners by tomorrow," Horley said. "But they'll destroy their own number in Terran Navy ships. You'll only have a quarter of your fleet left."

"And you'll have none," said Russell. He went on incredulously: "You people are crazy. Plumb crazy. After the battle, you'll have nothing. Nothing even to make peace for. Certainly nothing to fight with. Nothing—"

"Look, captain," said Horley.

They followed his pointing finger and saw a ship surrounded by piles of equipment which wasn't being put in, as might have been expected, but taken out. The ship itself was nothing but a shell.

"Suicide ships," said Horley. "Sure, they haven't a chance. They haven't even got fuel to get back and land. But each of them will account for a Terran Navy ship. A fully manned ship, five hundred officers and men, destroyed by a shell worked by seventy women. It's a good bargain."

"It's a crazy bargain," began the captain. But then he caught Canterbury's eye, remembered he had instructions to do as little talking as possible, and shut his mouth.

The gun-drill broke up. As the fifty girls turned away, another fifty took their places.

Horley beckoned, and a pretty brunette came over. She brightened at sight of him, but started violently

when she saw the two Terran Navy uniforms.

"This is a diplomatic mission, Ann," said Horley, as she joined them. "Come to accept our surrender."

The girl looked at Canterbury. "You seem kind," she said, naively surprised. "I thought—"

"You thought all Terrans were some kind of wolves?" He shook his head.

"I'm some kind of wolf," Russell murmured, "and you're exactly the kind of prey I've been looking for."

She looked at him, startled. He saw she was even younger than he had thought. A more unsophisticated approach was needed.

He held out his hand. "I'm Captain Russell," he said in his friendliest manner. "Steve Russell."

"And I'm Ann Horley—"

"Horley?"

Canterbury looked at the Senator. He nodded.

Russell burst out: "You mean you're sentencing your own daughter to death? Well, of all the—"

"Captain," said Canterbury warningly, and Russell subsided. He was still holding Ann's hand. Perhaps he had forgotten.

"You see," said Horley significantly, "we're determined."

"Oh yes," said Canterbury, "I know that." He turned to Ann and Russell guiltily let her hand go. "Don't worry, Ann. You may not have to go through with it."

Ann looked quickly, hopefully at Horley, but he shook his head wearily. "The situation isn't any different."

"Do you think you're justified in demanding such a sacrifice?" Canterbury asked mildly. "What do girls like Ann know about Earth, and the issues involved?"

"One day I want to see Earth," said Ann.

"Maybe that could be arranged."

said the captain daringly.

Canterbury nodded, prepared to go along with this. "Maybe it could."

Now it was Horley who was at a loss. "What are you talking about?" he demanded. "What are you trying to do? Sabotage our morale?"

"I have a daughter Ann's age," said Canterbury.

"So have I," retorted Horley.

"You mean you had. Ann's as good as dead. Tomorrow about this time I'll have a daughter and you won't."

"But my son will be left," Horley exclaimed fiercely. "To fight. To die, if necessary."

Ann turned away. "I must go," she said. Russell looked after her small, trim figure with more than casual interest.

"You patriots," Canterbury sighed.

"Whatever happens," said Horley grimly, "there'll be nothing for you. Either we'll win in the end or we'll make you kill us all."

They were on their way back to City One. Horley, Canterbury and one guard were in one car, Russell and the other two in another.

Canterbury wasn't displeased at the way things were building up. He knew that there was a tremendous emotional wave of determination in the Colonies to have no truck with anything but victory or utter defeat. He had approached Horley knowing Horley strongly held this point of view. Unless Horley could be swayed, Canterbury's mission was a failure.

"Horley," said Canterbury, "what do the Colonies want?"

"Independence."

"What does that mean?"

"Freedom."

"In a minute," said Canterbury thoughtfully, "I'm going to lose my temper with you. And that's something that hardly ever happens. Will you kindly tell me in what respect the Colonies, before they stabbed us in the back, were dependent? What

prevented them being free?"

Horley stared at him. "All policy was controlled from Earth."

"True. Doesn't it seem a good idea that policy should be controlled from somewhere?"

"You're playing with words," said Horley. "The Colonies were controlled by Earth, for Earth. Like America before she broke off from England. Ruled without being consulted, without representation. Everything we suggested was turned down—"

"As far as I remember," Canterbury observed, "the only major suggestion the Colonies made about Colonial affairs which was turned down concerned the settlement of Alpha Seven. And you know what happened there."

Horley was silent for a moment.

The Colonies had insisted on settling Alpha Seven. Earth had said no, the planet was a poor risk. The Colonies had gone ahead anyway, without support from Earth.

What followed was one of those typical disasters for which each side blames the other. When the settlement failed, Earth said "I told you so." The Colonies said Earth had done everything possible to make the scheme fail. Much bitterness was generated, with each side honestly convinced the entire responsibility for the million lives lost rested solely with the other.

Canterbury made use of the silence to think. Not for an instant must Horley be allowed to suspect that his mission was to make peace on any terms. They must argue, haggled. With the air of making enormous concessions, he would offer terms the Colonies couldn't possibly accept, and then give way point by point, magnanimously.

This was the night before a battle which must not be allowed to take place.

Canterbury was glad now he had

seen the battle fleet's preparations. Horley had shown him the scene on the plain to convince him of the Colonies' implacable determination to fight right to the end. But Canterbury intended to use it to gain better armistice terms than he could have hoped for.

Horley still hadn't spoken when the car stopped. Canterbury frowned. They were in a square, and a small crowd was gathered.

"This isn't your house," he said.

"No," said Horley. "You've got something to say. You'd better say it to the First Citizen."

Canterbury swore under his breath. He had hoped to reach agreement with Horley before going any higher. He had been able to talk fairly calmly with Horley. Negotiations with Bloody Mary wouldn't go nearly as easily.

When they got out of the car Horley was recognized—then, with a shout of incredulity, the Terran Navy uniform. "Shoot the bastard!" somebody yelled and the guards had to be pretty quick in ushering them into the Capitol before the crowd rushed.

There was no sign of the other car. Russell wasn't to be honored, apparently, with a sight of the First Citizen.

Though it was now late evening, Bloody Mary was still so busy she couldn't see them at once.

The situation was typical of the Colonies, Canterbury told himself resignedly. No discipline. No prerogative. No class distinctions. Everybody as good as everybody else.

Organized chaos.

In the Colonies, everybody was free. Everybody had his rights. Bloody Mary might be First Citizen, but she had to hold herself ready to discuss anything with anybody. Otherwise, how would anybody know how free he was?

So the ambassador trying to give the Colonies a chance of survival had to wait outside.

Two lines from a W.S. Gilbert lyric began to jingle in Canterbury's brain:

*When every one is somebody,
Then no one's anybody!*

There was one consolation. Whoever was holding them up probably wasn't enjoying his interview with the First Citizen.

Bloody Mary had been Mary O'Reilly when she came out from Earth twenty-five years before. She'd been dazzlingly beautiful then.

In the Colonies nobody had minded her promiscuity, her blazing temper, her impetuosity. She had fought her way to the top and stayed there.

Like many people who leave their own country, or their own world, for another, she was more passionately Colonist in her sympathies than any native-born Colonist. It was pretty certain that she'd been responsible for the Colonies' original attack without warning, and just as certain that she was behind the desperate plan of saving the remnants of the Colonist Navy by sacrificing all the women who could fight.

At last Canterbury and Horley were shown into the Presence.

She was still handsome, though her ultra-revealing gown should have been left to someone younger. Her hair was as red as ever, and her voice musical as well as powerful as she roared: "Well, Canterbury, what the hell do you want?"

"Sanity," he said quietly.

She looked past him at Horley. "What does he want?" she demanded impatiently.

"I don't know. I brought him to you so that—"

"I can see you brought him to me. Why didn't you have him shot?"

"There were certain threats that—"

She cut him off with a gesture and

turned back to Canterbury. "Spit it out," she said.

The circumstances were not propitious. Being a very experienced diplomat, Canterbury was well aware that the answer one gets generally depends on the circumstances of the asking.

He temporized, hoping for something to happen, anything. "I'm not dangerous," he said. "Need we have these guards?"

Bloody Mary stabbed the air with her forefinger, and the guards went out.

And something happened, though it was anything but what Canterbury wanted.

A bullet buried itself in the wall beside his ear.

Bloody Mary swung round, bellowing like a bull. The shot had come from the window, and it had obviously been meant for Canterbury.

Her attitude, as usual, was unequivocal. She didn't mind Canterbury being shot—indeed, she was perfectly willing to do it herself. But to have some member of the mob outside who had seen the hated uniform take matters into his own hands, prowl in the grounds of the Capitol and shoot an ambassador in the very presence of the First Citizen herself, was utterly intolerable.

She threw herself in front of Canterbury. Another shot, deflected at the last moment, whipped away a strand of her red hair. She bellowed again.

Then the guards, who had hardly had time to close the door behind them, were running across the room. Two of them climbed through the window after the would-be assassin.

"It wouldn't do any good shooting you now," Bloody Mary said dispassionately, turning her large, naked back on the window and ignoring the shouts in the gardens outside. "Guess we'd better wait now till they catch him before we get back to business."

They caught him all right, a man Canterbury had never seen before. He cringed as Bloody Mary ranted at him, saying that any shooting that was going to be done, she'd do herself.

Canterbury felt rather light-headed. He wasn't used to being shot at.

"He's just a crazy fool," said Bloody Mary at last. "We'll keep him locked up until you go, or until we shoot you ourselves. Take him away. Now let's get back to business. Why did you come?"

With a flash of insight Canterbury realized the attempt on his life had been a blessing. Bloody Mary had saved his life. When you save a man's life, you generally have a friendly feeling towards him. Her truculence wasn't by any means gone, but she seemed quite amiable by comparison. Horley, too, was friendlier. It was obviously a good thing for an ambassador to get himself shot at if he could arrange it.

"It's a long time since I've tasted Lavendis sherry," he hinted.

That, too, was a good move. Bloody Mary roared with laughter and yelled for sherry. They sat down and drank.

"It must be surrender," said Canterbury. "I'm sorry about that, but nothing else can avert the battle. However, I can guarantee generous terms."

"Terms!" Bloody Mary shouted, her vast bosom swelling terrifyingly.

"This is excellent sherry," said Canterbury enthusiastically. He laid down his glass. "Let me do a little crystal-gazing. If this battle takes place, the Terran Navy will be left with about three hundred ships. You will have—well, only you know what your reserves are. And *whether we resume the campaign or not*, the Colonies must die."

"Whether you resume...?" said Horley incredulously.

"Is there any question of it?" Bloody Mary demanded.

Canterbury shrugged. "I must remind you yet again—you attacked us. With your women gone, the Colonies must die. We should probably let you die. And later, recolonize more wisely."

"Die?" exploded Bloody Mary. "Why should we die? We have the children. Thousands of children."

"Yes," said Canterbury politely. "Horley, you're something of a mathematician. You know how many immigrants there used to be from Earth—stopped since the war, of course. You know how many war casualties there have been, and how many more there will be tomorrow. Assume the Terran Navy destroys your fleet and then goes home. Will the Colonies survive?"

There was a long pause.

"This is one of your red herrings, Canterbury," said Bloody Mary. "There's no question of the Terran Navy just... just going away."

"There wouldn't be if you were in command," Canterbury agreed. "Victory or death. But we don't work the same way. Let me tell you what could happen. I don't say it will... After the battle we go home. You crawl out of your holes and realize that to survive, the Colonies must regroup. One big settlement here and elsewhere. Not a tired remnant on Holopan, a few scattered villages on Carambay, a lost city on Hollis and a few exhausted outposts on all the other Colonist planets. That's no way to survive. You've got to bring the survivors here. Right, Horley?"

Horley said nothing.

"I never heard such nonsense," Bloody Mary retorted. "We don't need any immigrants. We can double our population in ten years. We—"

"That's today," said Canterbury. "Tonight, before the battle. I'm talking about after the battle. When you count your losses after the battle, after we've gone back to Earth, you'll find you have to draw in all the out-

posts and try to form one small colony. Probably here. And in about five years, when this must have happened, the Terran Navy could come back. No series of battles all the way from the Solar System to Lavendis this time. One minor battle with what's left of your fleet, and the Colonies are ours. Or—"

Bloody Mary jumped up. "You're trying to talk me into something," she accused.

"Obviously."

"You won't withdraw."

"That's the bit that gets you, isn't it? I thought it might be. Fighting to the death is all very well. But when you make a great sacrifice, the greatest sacrifice, to go on fighting, and the enemy quietly goes away... can't you realize the Colonies just aren't important to Earth?"

"We've always known that," said Horley bitterly.

"So you attacked us just to make yourselves important?"

"Can that," said Bloody Mary impatiently. "Canterbury, do you really mean that the Terran Navy won't follow up? It isn't possible that you're weaker than we thought—that you think you might lose the battle?"

Canterbury smiled. "The most certain thing in this uncertain existence," he said, "is that we'd destroy you to the last man—or woman. Haven't you studied the reports of all the previous engagements?"

"Come to the point," said Bloody Mary.

"Surrender, and all we'll demand is a system of control to make sure no Earth-Colonies war ever happens again."

"We get independence?"

"Depends what you mean. In a way you always had it. In another you never will."

"Damn your riddles. What do you mean?"

"You need people from Earth. Until you don't, how can you be inde-

pendent?"

Bloody Mary sat down. "You don't want reparations?"

"You're bankrupt. What could we take?"

She jumped up again. "We can fight for years yet!" she roared.

"Please," said Canterbury wearily. "Surrender is impossible."

"Even if you get what you want?"

She frowned. "There's something about this I don't understand," she said.

Canterbury had known she was shrewd enough and had been afraid of this. However he went about it she was bound to smell a rat. Earth could have ended the fighting long ago on the Colonies' terms. It had become a war which could only end in overwhelming defeat for somebody—not in a friendly armistice. Why should Earth suddenly offer reasonable terms?

"All right," he said, with the air of a man admitting something he'd hoped to conceal. "I'll tell you. We're near civil war at home. The United Nations are more disunited than ever. Don't you realize how lucky you've been? You've been losing a war. The Colonies have been welded closer with every defeat. We've been winning. Know what makes allies quarrel? Being successful, always winning, and the war not being over."

"So that's it," said Horley quietly.

"Don't think it's going to do you any good. We can still crush the Colonies. But I want peace now, because unless we get it right now there might be civil war on Earth."

It sounded reasonable. It ought to. Canterbury had worked hard on the story, tailoring it so that it was a commonsense explanation of a desire for armistice without giving the Colonies any hope of victory.

"Oh well," said Bloody Mary. "We'd better hear you, anyway. Horley, get Jenson out of bed. He'll have to be here."

And Canterbury knew he had won.

It would be some time before Earth and the Colonies could be friendly again, would trust each other again. But what happened on the *Chesapeake* showed that in some circumstances friendly relations could be reestablished at once.

A lot of people had to give their permission before Ann Horley was allowed to go back with the Terran Navy flagship. Canterbury pushed the plan through, however, because Ann would look good in the newsreels and it was in Canterbury's interests to get the war forgotten as quickly as possible.

Ann was the only girl on board, and would have been a sensation if she'd been Bloody Mary herself. Being eighteen and pretty and a number of other things she was more than sensational. Captain Russell, who considered he had a prior claim, didn't make any secret of his opinion that the Navy was altogether too friendly towards Ann, and that Ann was altogether too kind to the Navy.

"I can't help it," Ann said once, when she and Russell were with Canterbury in his tiny cabin. "Everybody's been so wonderful... the surrender terms were so magnanimous, my father could hardly believe it, and since then—"

"Yes, the peace terms were magnanimous all right," Russell agreed, with a slightly puzzled glance at Canterbury. "I must say I didn't quite see... You didn't really tell them we were on the brink of civil war at home, sir, did you?"

Canterbury nodded comfortably. He was nothing, nobody on board the flagship now, which suited him very well. He spent most of every day sleeping. His exertions on *Lavendis* had quite tired him out.

"What did you want to do a thing like that for?" Russell asked. "It isn't so. It almost looks as if you

wanted to put the Colonists in the best bargaining position you could."

"So I did," Canterbury agreed. "Otherwise they'd never have made peace."

"Well, I guess you know your own business."

"Of course he does," said Ann warmly. "This way, we can be friends soon. If Earth had been tough with us, there'd have been bitterness for a long time."

"I guess so."

When they had gone, Canterbury lay back and smiled happily at the ceiling. He had never been a man to make unnecessary disclosures—even to show how clever he had been.

Ann was right—a bitter peace sowed the seeds for further conflict. But that wasn't why he had been so magnanimous.

It was a good thing that people in a colony never had time to read. Never had time to study history. Never had time to think. They were always too busy being individualists and pioneers, too busy building and fighting and being free.

Nobody in the Colonies knew how

a strong empire broke up. Canterbury knew: A weaker enemy makes a rash, premature challenge. The empire strikes back and defeats the enemy decisively. This happens again and again, and each time the empire wins. But each time the empire (Roman, Napoleonic or Terran) is weakened, and each time the enemy, if it's a strong enemy, gets tougher and more resolute.

No, the Colonies hadn't been going to win the great battle which never took place. Empires never lose big battles. It's in the comparatively minor skirmishes afterwards that Goliath falls to David.

Then everybody ever afterwards says "Who'd have thought it?" Not realizing, of course, that it isn't the comparatively minor final engagement which breaks the empire.

It's the long series of great victories.

Canterbury's eyes closed. One of these days he'd have to go on a slimming course and see if he could lose about fifty pounds. He really was getting fat.

Presently he began to snore.