

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the
only
conqueror

by . . . Norman Arkawy

In that grim tomorrow, dominated by hate and rage, there could be only one shining path to victory.

PETER KOROVITCH studied the menu carefully for a moment. Then he snapped it shut and ordered his usual lunch—a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea.

He looked casually around the little lunchroom at the other late diners, speculating as to the nature of their work and why they had delayed their midday meal until two-thirty in the afternoon. Of one thing he was certain. None of them was, like himself, a fugitive patriot.

At the far end of the counter a short man with graying hair and silver-rimmed eyeglasses sat hunched into a brown leather jacket, wolfing a sandwich held in grimed, work-roughened hands. Two seats nearer, a thin youngster waited for an order of herring and baked potatoes. While he waited he nibbled daintily at a slice of pumpernickel.

Next to him a dark-haired girl, about twenty-five, was having a hamburger and coffee. She would have been pretty, Peter decided, if her hair had been combed properly and if she did not have the typical pasty complexion of an office worker.

Norman Arkawy has written many stories of the human spirit, unconquerable as star flame, in the gulfs between the planets. But there's an even steadier glow of understanding triumphant in this moving story of war's aftermath on Earth. It takes a prophetic pen to depict so boldly history in the making.

Abruptly the counter girl slid his sandwich and tea in front of him. With a sigh Peter took his last fourteen ORs from his pocket and tossed twelve of them on the counter.

"I'm sorry, sir," the counter girl said, "but new prices are in effect today. That'll be thirteen rubles, please."

Peter sighed in disgusted resignation and handed her another ruble. He looked mournfully at the solitary bill remaining in his hand, the black-stamped OCCUPATION CURRENCY defacing the portrait of Nikolay Lenin. *Poor Nikolay*, Peter thought. *Poor Peter!* He folded the bill neatly into a small square and tucked it into his pocket.

He picked up his sandwich and bit into it. He ate slowly, savoring the taste and texture of the food, and telling himself that this particular sandwich must be a feast which he would long remember. He had no idea when he would eat again.

"Damned Americans!" he said. It was meant to be a whisper—a completely inaudible, muttered whisper. But the words rang loudly in the tiny lunchroom.

Peter was just as surprised at the sound of his voice as were the other people grouped along the counter. Momentary fear panicked him, and he could not swallow the bread and cheese which filled his mouth. He sat rigidly on the stool.

"It's all right," the pasty-faced

girl said. "You're among friends." She smiled at him—bravely but without much conviction.

The gray-haired man glanced nervously over his hunched shoulder through the glass front of the restaurant. He looked up Probiloff Street to the two MPs standing on the corner.

The thin boy turned to Peter, his eyes gleaming with a startling intensity. "Take heart, comrade," he urged. "Have patience. It won't be long now."

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I have a short wave set," he confided. "With it I pick up the government's broadcasts from Siberia. Do not fear, comrade. They have not forgotten us! The Americans will be driven from our homeland by the end of the year!"

"I know," Peter scoffed, his composure returning along with his cynicism. "But by then I'll have long since starved to death!"

The thin boy's gaze traveled the full length of Peter's husky body. "You don't look undernourished to me, comrade," he jibed, a little enviously. Then, in a more serious tone, he repeated: "Have patience."

"Patience!" The short man leaned over the counter, frowning pugnaciously. "For eight years we've been told to exercise patience. When the war started a decade ago they said it would all be over in six months. Then, when the Americans invaded, they told us: 'Be patient. The Americans

will be driven out of Russia just as were all the other invaders before them.' Now, eight years later, they still tell us to be patient!"

"The government knows what it's doing!" the thin youngster insisted. "Our leaders have to consider the war in its global aspects—not just how it affects us here at home. And the reports from overseas are very encouraging."

He laughed scornfully. "The American soldiers may parade in our streets, but while they strut about like so many roosters our armies are conquering one outpost after another all over the world. They are preparing for the big push. When the time is right they will launch an offensive and liberate the homeland. Then the war will be won! And the time is near, comrades. Ah!" he sighed fervently. "You should have heard the broadcast last night!"

Peter laughed derisively. "Ah!" he mimicked, "but the broadcasts don't put money in my pocket or food in my stomach."

"They do not!" the gray-haired man echoed. "While our great leaders keep telling us how soon they are going to liberate us from the Americans my children go to the American school and get filled with Yankee propaganda! My own children are already more American than some of those soldiers out there." He flung out his arm toward the street in a gesture of impatience.

"Do not worry, papa," the

young man said smugly, "they will be re-educated after the liberation."

Peter could not conceal his contempt for the cocky youngster's optimism. How much longer would the occupation last? How long was a lifetime?

He finished his lunch in silence and pushed the dishes away. He longed for a cigarette, but realized it would be quite as sensible to wish for champagne and caviar. A slight, rueful smile accompanied his thoughts.

"Anything else, comrade?" the counter girl called to him from her seat by the window.

"Yes, please," Peter quipped, "a few hundred rubles on rye."

The girl did not appear to think the remark amusing. She turned back to the glass front of the restaurant and resumed her watch upon the street for unwelcome visitors.

"You have no money?" the girl with the pale cheeks asked gently. "Don't you have a job?"

Peter shook his head. A sardonic smile touched his lips. "The firm I was with went out of business last week. And there aren't many openings for men in my profession any more."

"What kind of work do you do?" the girl asked innocently.

"My last employment," he said, trying to sound casual, "was with the Fighters for Liberty."

The thin young man almost spilled his tea. "The guerillas?" he gasped.

Peter nodded grimly. "That's right. And you may as well know that the 'lies' the Americans have been telling you about the destruction of the Fighters are not lies at all. They happen to be true. So I'm out of work and—" He broke off with a laugh. "Do you think the Americans would be able to find some work for me to do in my particular field of specialization?"

The young man laughed too, but the man in the brown jacket fidgeted uneasily with his wrist-watch. In the corner of the window the counter girl swung about again and stared steadily at Peter with a new respect.

"What are you going to do now?" the pale girl asked.

"Do?" Peter shrugged. "Who knows? I'll have to get me some identification papers first. Then maybe I'll find some nice peaceful occupation—" his voice became thick and bitter. "Perhaps I can become a houseboy in the American officers' quarters!"

"You have no papers?" The girl did not attempt to hide her concern.

"You're an utter fool!" the young man exclaimed. There was no trace of laughter in his voice now, only contempt. "Why did you come here if you haven't any papers? Don't you know that this town is crawling with soldiers?"

Peter shrugged. "A man must eat. Besides," he said sadly, "there comes a time when you can run

no further; when you must stop running."

The girl's smile was comforting. She no longer seemed to be frightened. "I will help you, comrade," she said. "I have the confidence and respect of a person who can arrange such things. And, comrade—do not hate the Americans so. They are not all bad."

"They are detestable barbarians!" Peter said, a bitter hatred in his stare. "They destroyed Moscow and Kiev and Leningrad and Minsk."

"It is the war," the girl said gently. "Our bombs brought destruction to their cities, too. But you and I as individuals did not drop the bombs and the American soldiers over here are not responsible for their country's attack on us. It is just the war."

Peter shook his head vehemently. He turned his face away to hide tears of frustration and rage.

"They have been here for eight years," the girl went on, "and they have not done anything terrible to us. We are no worse off than before, when our own troops were here."

"Yes, but there is a great difference between enduring hardship for the good of our own people and making the same sacrifices to help the enemy!"

"But hate is self-destructive."

The thin boy looked at the girl suspiciously. "You had better be careful how you talk, comrade," he warned. "Soon the Americans will

be driven out. When the liberation comes we will know how to deal with collaborators!"

The girl's pale face grew even whiter, but her reply was cut off abruptly by the counter girl's warning cry: "Here come some American soldiers—with cigarettes!"

Once more genuine alarm seized the girl. She grabbed Peter's arm and tugged urgently. "You have no papers," she exclaimed. "Quick! Into the kitchen!"

Peter moved fast. He descended from his stool and hurried toward the back of the restaurant. But just as he reached the end of the counter the door of the lunchroom opened and two burly MPs stepped inside.

Peter froze. Hopeless resignation drained him of all energy, and he dropped despairfully onto the last stool and sat very still. Lifeless, except for the wild thumping of his pulse, he waited.

The Americans closed the door firmly behind them and stood with their legs spread apart, and their arms folded across their chests like two colossi guarding a roomful of frightened conspirators. Slowly, they surveyed the room, their eyes pausing momentarily on each seated individual as they traveled the full length of the counter. There was not a sound to be heard in the place.

The face of one of the soldiers broadened in a grin. "I don't think the Russkys like us, Joe."

His companion grunted and

moved to the counter. The first soldier followed. They ordered coffee.

Peter stared down at his hands. They were intertwined on the counter before him, the knuckles of his fingers white where they had gripped each other in tight restraint. He waited, and listened to the Americans' loud voices.

"Hey!" the first soldier said, "this babe's not a bad looker, Joe." He moved nearer to the white-faced girl. "How about it, honey... just you and me?" He winked at her, a wide grin on his lips.

"Lay off it, Fred!" his companion said.

Fred swung about, the grin still on his face. "Why, Joe? Friendliness is the least these Russky dames can show us conquering heroes!" He turned back to the girl.

Joe seized his arm and jerked him away. "I told you to knock it off! Now you listen to me and you'll stay out of trouble! You damn replacements from the States come over here and right away you think you're oriental despots or somethin'!"

Fred's face grew hard. "I haven't been in the States in six years," he said bitterly. "You know that!"

"All right," Joe conceded, "Brazil then. That's from the States as far as I'm concerned! You guys come over here expecting to sit on a raised platform and have oriental dancing girls wait on you hand and foot. You'd think you

were undisputed conquerors, demanding the spoils of conquest!

"Well, bud, the war isn't over and we haven't conquered anybody. You'd better not forget it! We're on occupation duty here, and our orders—"

"Aw, you make me sick! Why haven't you got yourself assigned to I and E, or the chaplain's office?"

Joe grinned. "You'll see the light, Freddie boy. You'd better, or you'll get yourself shipped out so fast your pants'll be scorched by the jets."

"Don't get the idea *that* worries me!" Fred boasted.

"Oh? Where would you like to be sent—the Siberian front, the Congo, North Canada? Or maybe the Mexican beachhead. They got all the comforts of home down there! Wise up, bud. You're on the best duty in this man's army."

Peter watched the two soldiers lounging against the counter. He listened to their heated conversation and felt only contempt for the American debating society that called itself an army. A long-dormant sense of pride in the martial perfection of the Red Army expanded within him. It gave him a giddy feeling. He had no doubt, at that moment, of the ultimate victory of his homeland's forces.

He was sure that the American soldiers were too busy arguing to be concerned if an inconspicuous civilian, having finished his meal, should decide to leave the lunch-

room. Once they got into one of their interminable discussions the bumbling fools would not even notice Marshal Malov if he sat down next to them! Peter permitted himself the luxury of an unseen sneer. He slid off his stool and walked to the door—slowly, casually.

His hand had just barely touched the doorknob when the American named Fred called out to him. Peter dropped his hand to his side, and turned in bitter resignation.

"Come here, Russky!"

Peter went over to the Americans. He felt empty, defeated. He had reached the end of eight years of fighting and running away, and now it was over. He was trapped.

He looked up into the big blond American's face, and he saw his own hatred and revulsion mirrored in the MP's eyes.

"Where do you think you're going, Russky? Don't you know it's not polite to walk out until we say it's okay?"

"Leave him alone, Fred," the one called Joe said.

"Let's see your papers," Fred demanded, ignoring his friend's warning.

"I said knock it off!" Joe was angry. "Drink your goddamn coffee and keep your mouth shut!"

He gestured Peter toward the stool at his side, away from Fred. He smiled apologetically and offered him a cigarette.

Peter hesitated. He wanted the cigarette—wanted it so badly his throat felt parched. But one does

not accept friendly offerings from a hated enemy.

"Go on," Joe urged in Russian, "have one."

Peter looked into the American's eyes—clear, unhating eyes that seemed to speak a mysterious language he could not understand. A conflict of emotions tormented him. He longed for the cigarette, but he could accept nothing from the murderous hands of an American. To a true patriot, such a surrender would be practically as bad as collaborating.

But the cigarette was tempting, with the firm white cylinder of tobacco protruding from a crisp pack, and he decided to accept it. He salved his conscience by telling himself that it was only prudent for him not to offend the MP by refusing.

Silently, he took the cigarette. The American struck a match and they lit up. Peter inhaled the smoke hungrily. He smoked rapidly, nervously, not knowing when his respite would end, but anticipating disaster at any moment. They had him. He was a prisoner.

"Relax," Joe said. "You're among friends." His smile was easy and ingenuous, almost naive. No, not naive. "It's all right," he said quietly. "Some of these newcomers don't understand, but I know how it is. I have a brother back in the States."

HANK ROBERTSON studied the menu carefully, then closed it and

ordered his usual lunch—ham on rye and coffee. He looked around the little luncheonette at the other diners and wondered, in an off-hand way, what each of them did to make a living. The thought angered him. What, it really meant, were they assigned to do by the commies?

The waitress placed his order in front of him. Hank tossed four ODs on the counter.

"I'm sorry, sir," the waitress said, "but the new prices are in effect today. That'll be six dollars, please."

Hank cursed softly and handed her two more dollars. The extra charge left him only seven dollars for the rest of the week—and that meant no lunch on Saturday.

He looked mournfully at the money he held in his hand. A black stamp of Russian letters defaced the portrait of George Washington. *Poor George*, Hank thought. *Poor Hank!* He wished he were out there somewhere—in the fight like his brother Joe.

"Damned Russians!" he said angrily. The words rang out loudly in the small luncheonette.

Momentary panic seized Hank. He glanced nervously over his shoulder through the glass front of the restaurant, and up Main Street to the two MPs standing on the corner.

"It's all right," someone said quietly. "You're among friends."

Hank turned to the speaker—a jolly-faced man in a threadbare

suit that was several sizes too small for him.

"It won't be long now, pal," the man said. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I have a short-wave set," he confided, "and I pick up the government's broadcasts from Rio." A confident smile of assurance shone earnestly in his eyes. "Don't worry, pal. They haven't forgotten us! And, according to what they say, the Russians will be kicked out by the end of the year."

"Kicked out?" Hank muttered. "That's not enough! We ought to kill 'em. Every one of them."

"YOU REMIND me of Hank," Joe said to Peter. "Of course, I haven't seen him for ten years. But still, as soon as I saw you, I said to myself, 'He looks like Hank.'"

Peter's blank stare of pretended interest could not hide his obvious failure to comprehend. Joe laughed softly, as at some private, unspoken joke.

"You would have liked him," he said.

A flicker of interest passed evanescently across Peter's face. He quickly disciplined his emotions, and his face set again in hard lines. "He was an American, your brother?"

Joe's humorless laugh puzzled the Russian. "You mean like me—or like Freddie here?" He did not wait for an answer. "Y'know," he reminisced sadly, "the last time I saw Hank was just before I ship-

ped out. The Russian bombers had already done a pretty good job, and our folks—" He lowered his eyes and swallowed an unmanly human emotion.

"We were both so full of hate we could taste it. There was only one thing we wanted to live for—to kill Russians. We swore we'd kill every Russian we could. That's the Hank I remember. There once must have been another Hank—a loving Hank. But all I can remember is the hating."

Joe lit another cigarette. He tossed his pack on the counter and motioned to Peter to help himself. "I wonder how Hank feels about it now," he continued. "Just like you, I suppose."

"And how do you 'suppose' I feel?" Peter asked boldly, his voice tinged with scorn.

"As for me," Joe said quietly, ignoring the Russian's remark, "I don't hate any more."

His clear, unwavering eyes looked straight into Peter's, and Peter felt some of the hardness in his own eyes chip away. It frightened him, this strange power in the American's eyes. He turned away and gazed down at the floor.

"So?" he said, trying to sound cynical but failing completely and for the first time. The damn American was casting a spell over him! What *was* it he saw in the other's eyes?

"What's the sense of hating," Joe said. "Should we hate a river when there's a flood, or the rain

which swells it and turns it from a life-giver to a destroyer? Should we hate the sun when we have a drought? And when we know the danger, and still we carelessly allow the river to sweep us away or the sun to burn us, should we hate ourselves?"

Confused, Peter looked up once more into the American's eyes. He recognized now the power—the tremendous power—that burned there with such a calm intensity. And through his confusion, Peter began to understand what that power signified.