

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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THE PEACEMAKERS

BY GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

LIKE ALL Pentagon offices, this one was comfortably air-conditioned. Nevertheless the sweat was running down young Commander Baker's face long before he'd finished reading his presentation. To keep his voice steady and go on reading as he watched revulsion and even horror gather in the eyes of his listeners wasn't easy—especially as all the other officers around the long table were his seniors.

Only the weather-beaten face of the Chief of Naval Operations, at the far end of the table, remained expressionless as Baker plowed grimly on to the last sentence:

"It is submitted that the military characteristics of weapon XC-34, as described in this presentation, are directly applicable to the situation which has developed in the Middle East and offer a satisfactory solution thereof."

Baker sat down, mopping his streaming forehead.

"Satisfactory!" barked the vice-ad-

miral who sat at the CNO's right. "It's sheer madness! Commander, do you realize what you're suggesting? To attack a city containing more than a hundred thousand civilians with such a weapon would blacken the good name of our country throughout the civilized world!"

Several heads nodded in quick agreement.

The CNO's eyes, weary and red-rimmed with lack of sleep, flicked round the table. No one else seemed to have anything to add to the vice-admiral's assertion.

The CNO said quietly:

"I'm afraid the good name of our country—and its influence in this troubled world—won't be helped much if two hundred Americans and Europeans, including women and children, are butchered while an American fleet lies helplessly offshore."

"We can land the Marines from the fleet," the vice-admiral retorted.

"They would have to fight their

way through more than a mile of narrow streets to reach the hotel where these folks have taken refuge," the CNO pointed out. "We'd have to provide close air support from the carriers. The Marines will suffer severe losses, even so; the townspeople are roused to fighting frenzy, and they've been well supplied with weapons by our Eastern bloc friends who stirred up this mess in the first place. The gutters would be running ankle-deep in blood by the time the Marines reached the hotel—and there's no assurance they'd get there in time. So far, the police have held the mob back. Would they go on doing so if we landed Marines? I doubt it. So we'd gain nothing except the undying hatred of the whole Moslem world. We'd be making the Eastern bloc a present of the Middle East on a silver platter. We've been over this before, gentlemen—all day yesterday. Time's running out. Do any of you have any new suggestions?"

Nobody did.

"Then the time's come for decision," snapped the CNO. "Commander Baker, how long will it take you to deliver the required quantity of weapon XC-34 at Patuxent Naval Air Station?"

"Four hours, sir. All preparations have been made," Baker answered.

"Wait, Jack!" cried the vice-admiral, rank forgotten in his anxiety. "Don't go to the President and the Secretary of Defense with this frightful proposal until you've thought it over once more. This is something the American conscience just won't stomach. Even suggesting it could cost you your commission."

"Thanks, Fred," the CNO said with a small wry smile. "It's good of you to think of me. But I've no intention of taking this matter up with the President and the Secdef. An hour ago, the Secretary sent the Joint Chiefs of Staff a Presidential directive to take all feasible measures to rescue these beleaguered folks. My

colleagues have designated me as executive agent of the JCS to carry out such measures to that end as may appear feasible. So for the time being, the responsibility is mine, and I'm in a position to give orders which will be carried out before they are likely to be questioned by higher authority. Get your munitions on their way to Patuxent, Commander. Aircraft will be waiting to take you to the Fleet."

"Aye, aye, sir," cried Baker, eyes aglow. The echo of his quick footsteps died away down the long corridor.

"Thirty hours—maybe thirty-six," said the CNO. "Let's pray Baker gets to the Fleet in time. Meanwhile, gentlemen, there's to be no talk of this to anyone, except as necessary to carry out my orders. I want maximum security precautions."

"God help you, Jack," muttered the vice-admiral. "You've assumed a terrible responsibility."

"That's what I'm wearing four stars for," the CNO snapped.

Mahmoud bin Yusuf brandished his Tommy-gun over his head and screamed "Death to the infidels! Down with the blood-sucking imperialists! Kill! Kill!"

He was jammed against the barricade by the pressure of the mob behind him. The barricade was made of paving stones hastily pried from the streets and from the sidewalks around the hotel. The stones were hard. They hurt Mahmoud's skinny chest as the screaming crowd surged against him. Mahmoud didn't mind. It was a fine thing to be the possessor of a Tommy-gun and four magazines of ball ammunition, and to be here in the very front rank of the holy crusade that would rid his native city, once and for all, of the accursed foreigners who thought themselves the lords of the world.

"Kill!" shrieked Mahmoud, and behind him a thousand voices echoed his cry.

The policemen behind the barricade fingered their rifles nervously and stared at the crowd. Nobody had tried to climb over the barricade yet. There were enough policemen who still looked as though they had the nerve to start shooting if that were tried. But a green-turbaned mullah, standing on a pile of stones, was howling maledictions at the policemen and threatening them with the vengeance of Allah and the fires of eternal damnation if they did not stand aside and permit the manifest will of Allah to be carried out. The policemen didn't look as though they enjoyed what the mullah was saying.

By tomorrow, perhaps, they wouldn't be there any more. And then—

Mahmoud bin Yusuf licked his lips as he thought of the killing and maiming—the dragging of bodies face down through the streets—and of the fair-skinned women who cowered now in hiding behind the sand-bagged windows of the hotel, there in its green park with more policemen guarding the verandah. On that same verandah, the infidels had once enjoyed themselves and ordered bus-boy Mahmoud bin Yusuf around like a mangy dog. Only last week a girl with red hair and very white shoulders had laughed at Mahmoud when he dropped a tray of cocktails because he was staring at her shoulders instead of watching where he was going. She was in the hotel now. Mahmoud had seen her before the police put the sand-bags at the windows. She was to be his share of the loot. Comrade Idris had promised that it should be so.

"Kill!" howled Mahmoud excitedly. "Why don't we kill the policemen now?"

"None of that!" cried a sharp voice. A man in khaki shirt and shorts grabbed Mahmoud by the shoulder and spun him around. His thin face was twisted with an anger from which Mahmoud recoiled. "How many times do I have to say it?" he snarled.

"There'll be no killing of policemen. The police are our brothers."

"But, Comrade Idris—" Mahmoud began.

"But nothing, you fool!" the other interrupted. "The police will be with us in due time." He grinned wolfishly. "We have plenty of time. Now that we've cut off the water supply to the hotel. Also—"

A clatter of distant explosions in the sky interrupted. From the upturned faces of the mob rose a howl of hatred. Far aloft, a plane was winging over the city. Well below it, black puff-balls marked the futile efforts of the anti-aircraft guns which had arrived with the rest of the weapons the red-flagged ships had brought.

"The guns cannot reach the accursed plane!" someone cried angrily.

"No matter," retorted Idris. "It's only taking pictures as usual. Much good pictures will do the miserable Americans out there on the sea."

"But suppose," ventured Mahmoud anxiously, "other planes come bearing bombs?"

"Yes, what then?" cried several others. The mob had forgotten their frenzy for the moment as anxiety for their skins came to the fore.

"Must I forever be repeating myself?" Idris demanded. "They don't dare use bombs. In the first place they don't believe in shedding blood; in the second, our great friends have warned them to leave us alone; and finally, if they attacked this Moslem city every Moslem from Marrakesh to Bandung would rise in arms against them. Now let us go and refresh ourselves. There is food for all at the usual places. We have frightened the police enough for this time. Tonight perhaps they will be gone. Away with you!"

Several other voices immediately took up the cry—the crowd was skillfully hustled out of the narrow street into the square beyond.

It would be good to eat, thought

Mahmoud, and there would surely be enough so that he could take some home to his wife Fatima and little Sayyid. Then he could come back in plenty of time for tonight—

He licked his lips again as he thought about tonight and the girl with the white shoulders.

From the bridge of the great carrier, the shadowy shapes of the planes on the vast flight-deck seemed to move in sinister silence, like nocturnal birds of prey condemned to stalk their quarry afoot despite their outspread wings. The signal lights of the flight-deck crew whirled, twinkled, waved as the bombers were wheeled slowly into position.

Commander Baker felt his stomach muscles tighten,

These were the planes of the low-level attack squadron—the planes whose bomb bays were already loaded with weapon XC-34. They had flown to a well-guarded friendly airfield that afternoon to transfer the weapons from the cargo planes which had brought them from Patuxent. Now they were back aboard again, refueled and ready to take off for their strike mission.

Baker had just come up to the bridge after briefing the air crews of the squadron on the technical handling of XC-34. He could still see their set faces as they had streamed out of the briefing room afterward, shouldering their flight gear. They had not looked at Baker as they passed him. As though he were somehow—unclean.

At Baker's elbow the Commander, Air Group, spoke briskly, his tone that of a man who is determined to demonstrate that no calamity can shake his poise. He had been Baker's classmate at Annapolis.

"The flare-planes are on their way," he said. "Thirty knots over the bow's ideal for the bombers. Another five minutes—"

"Damn it, Pete," cut in Baker, "why

can't I go along?"

"Because, as I've told you," the other answered, "I'd have to unload a man who has a necessary job. The AD's a nice plane, but there's no room for useless bodies."

"But I'm the one who knows—"

"You're the one who brought us these things," cut in the CAG. "Okay. You briefed the squadron. I asked you particularly whether the weapons could be handled by any well-briefed bomber crew. You said yes. Now let my boys get on with the dirty work by themselves. They'll feel maybe a little better."

He turned away as the captain of the carrier came over from huddling with the navigator at the chart-board.

"Position's about right, CAG," the skipper said. "We'd better get on with it."

"I suppose so, sir," said the CAG. He seemed to choke on the last syllable.

"Pri-flight," said the captain into a flexible mouthpiece.

"Pri-flight. Henderson," answered a muted voice.

"Strike schedule 18-11. Prepare to launch aircraft."

The order was repeated. A moment later a bull-horn down on the flight deck began barking. Two of the winged shadows moved toward the forward catapults. Now they were in position. The blast screens rose behind them.

The night air trembled with the roar of engines as the pilots revved up. The roar died to a vibrant murmur.

"Pri-flight to captain," said a squawk box. "Ready to launch."

Baker's eyes were fixed on the baton of the catapult officer, a vertical bar of light held aloft between the two planes.

Somewhere a voice said: "Launch!"

The vertical light-bar moved back and forth. Suddenly it swung down and forward as the engine-roar rose again. The shadowy wings leaped

ahead along the deck—the giant plane raced toward the carrier's blunt bow, out and up into the night.

Baker watched the second plane follow. Two more were already moving toward the catapults. There would be twelve in all.

He watched them all take off. If only he could be with them—with these youngsters who hated him for what they were doing.

"That's all," said the CAG morosely. "I hope you're as happy tomorrow as you are now."

Baker didn't answer. One of the plane-guard helicopters settled down on the deck. Beyond it, the other was coming in.

"Dear God," whispered Baker. "Please. Not for me. For all of us."

Above the descending 'copter, a bright star seemed to wink in the dark vault of heaven. Reassurance—or mockery? "Turns for twenty-two knots," the captain was saying. "Now we sweat it out."

There was no yelling in the mouth of the narrow street tonight.

The mob gathered in silence, as their leaders had bidden them. Time enough for yelling afterward.

Mahmoud bin Yusuf clutched his Tommy-gun and waited.

The word had passed from mouth to mouth that half the police had already deserted their posts and others were leaving. Soon—soon—

"Be still!" came Idris' warning. "They may drop a flare or two, as they did last night. But don't start giving tongue. Wait for my word."

As though to punctuate the order, there was a burst of brilliant white light high aloft—another—another—

Mahmoud could see the faces of the men near him very clearly in the ghastly radiance. Some snarled. Some looked frightened. Rabbits, thought Mahmoud. Hasn't Comrade Idris told you there's nothing to be afraid of—?

"Two planes! Three!" cried somebody. "More—a couple over there!"

There was an edge of panic in the man's voice.

Then suddenly the sky was filled with hundreds of flares—flares that drifted slowly earthward, so that all the city was starkly illumined by their searching radiance. Above the flares, the whining rumble of jet engines—many engines.

Near-by a Tommygun rattled as its owner fired upward into the pitiless light.

"Take cover!" Who raised the cry, Mahmoud didn't know, but it seemed a good idea. *Something was going to happen.* The Americans weren't doing all this just to take pictures. Mahmoud found himself running. Anywhere to get away from this light.

Engines again.

More engines—big engines—flying very low and coming fast.

The roar of those engines rose until nothing else could be heard. To the terror of light was added the terror of overwhelming sound. Now the sound was overhead. Dark shadows flashed between Mahmoud and the descending flares. Dark shadows which left flickers of fire behind them: fire, and the splitting crack of sharp explosions—

Bombs. Comrade Idris had said there would be no bombs.

Mahmoud, trying to keep running, cannoned into a man who cursed him—another fell over him as he stumbled. He got to his feet. He was still alive. Not very big bombs, then. All around him something kept going "pop-pop-pop"—not like a Tommy-gun, more like the breaking of many little dry sticks. The roar overhead had lessened—Mahmoud, panting, took refuge behind one of the stone lions of the fountain in the center of the square.

He didn't feel like running any more. Whatever was going to happen to him would happen anyway. He sat down on one of the stone lion's paws,

his Tommy-gun across his knees. He'd just wait here awhile. Funny. A lot of others seemed to have the same idea. All over the square he could see men sitting down—some were even lying prone on the pavement. A few wandered aimlessly, as though they didn't quite know where they were going. A jeep appeared from one of the side streets, started to cross the square, banged into a stone post and stopped with a great crunching of metal. A man got out, stood staring at the wrecked jeep for an instant, then sat down beside it. He looked like Comrade Idris. He lifted his head—he was Comrade Idris.

The planes were coming back. More fire-flickers and sharp explosions. Bombs again. Comrade Idris had said there would be no bombs.

Comrade Idris was a liar and a traitor. There were bombs, and everybody was dead. Or dying.

Mahmoud bin Yusuf lifted himself to his feet, staggered toward the jeep. Idris' chin was on his chest. He did not lift his head as Mahmoud placed the muzzle of the Tommygun against his ear and pulled the trigger.

Then Mahmoud sat down and waited for death.

The sound in the sky died. The flares died too.

After a while there were men with queer, mis-shapen heads—men who moved purposefully, with weapons in their hands—Mahmoud wanted to ask them who they were, but it didn't seem worthwhile. He sat where he was, beside the dead Idris. Presently he closed his eyes.

The telephone was ringing. Woodward tried to pretend he didn't hear it. Maybe it would stop and he could go back to sleep. One of the perils of being Paris correspondent for the Amalgamated Press was the visiting Nivemen—he'd been up too late with one contingent already. The phone kept on ringing.

"All right, all right," Woodward

grabbed for the phone. "Woodward," he barked.

"This is Captain Schofield, Naval Attache at the Embassy, said a voice.

Woodward was instantly wide awake. Schofield wouldn't call at this hour unless there was a good reason.

"Oh, hello, Captain. Glad to hear from you."

"You'll be gladder," Schofield promised. "A Navy plane is leaving Orly at 0400 hours exactly. That gives you just time to make it. An Embassy car's on the way to get you."

"Hey!" protested Woodward. "I've got a big story coming up—"

"Not as big as the one you'll get where you're going," Schofield assured him.

"Where's that?"

"Can't tell you on the phone. Take my word for it, will you?"

"Right," agreed Woodward. "I'll be out in front when the car gets here."

"Bring hot weather clothes," advised Schofield, and hung up. "That takes care of Amalgamated, the New York Courier-Gazette, United Broadcasting and three French papers," he muttered to himself. "I must say your real newsman has some kind of instinct that tells him not to waste time arguing in a case like this."

He rechecked the names on his list. If his colleagues in London, Rome and Berne had done as well, there'd be a star-studded galaxy of correspondents gathering aboard the fleet flagship sometime this forenoon.

The little minesweeper nosed in toward the dock.

The sun, high in the sky, b'azed down on the white buildings of the city and on the heads of the correspondents gathered in the bows ready to go ashore. On the dock, half-a-dozen naval officers in white shirts and shorts and a couple of Marine officers in sun-tans waited, along with several darker-skinned men wearing white suits and red tarbooshes.

Behind them, a cordon of police

were holding back a considerable crowd of people who seemed mildly interested in what was going on but not at all excited.

"Hey!" cried Woodward suddenly. "Look at all the guns!"

He was pointing toward two lighters which lay at anchor a little way offshore. They were heaped high with weapons of all kinds—rifles, Tommy-guns, machine-guns, bazookas and mortars.

"We've had fifteen hundred Marines and five hundred bluejackets working all night and most of the forenoon gathering that collection," a Navy lieutenant said. "Town's pretty well clean of shooting-irons by now."

Cameras snapped and buzzed. Questions clamored.

"How'd you do it without anybody getting killed?"— "What're you going to do with all that hardware?"— "What goes on here, anyway?"

"Hold your horses, gentlemen, please!" begged the lieutenant. "The Admiral wants you to see the town and the people first. Then he'll tell you all about it, and Commander Baker'll fill you in on details. After that you can talk to the folks that were in the hotel, if the medic's let you. All right—gangway's down. This way, gentlemen."

Mahmoud bin Yusuf, again in the forefront of a crowd, watched the correspondents come down the slanting brow with a strange detached interest that had neither hatred nor even resentment mixed with it. These were infidels, foreign imperialists—what else did Comrade Idris used to call them? No matter. Mahmoud was too tired to do much thinking. He couldn't quite remember what had happened to his Tommy-gun either. Maybe he wouldn't need it any more. Somehow it seemed more important to think about getting a job and looking after Fatima and little Sayyid. When he got over being so tired. Right now he was satisfied just to stand there and look. He didn't see

Comrade Idris anywhere. There was something wrong about Comrade Idris—he was no good—what was it? Mahmoud wasn't sure, but he had a feeling he'd remember presently. He grinned at a policeman, and after a moment the policeman grinned back.

"I've given you the bare bones of the story, gentlemen," said Commander Baker. "Just to sum up—the Army Chemical Corps and the Naval Research Laboratory have been working on this gas for years. I'll give the Army most of the credit. They've had the faith to plug along when the going was tough. It was just chance that gave us the first opportunity to use it. The objective was to get a chemical agent which would incapacitate human beings for any considerable exertion—like fighting, say—but would be temporary in its action, leave no harmful after-effects, and be sufficiently persistent and penetrating so that it would last long enough to pacify any kind of disturbance and get at people inside ordinary buildings and other shelters. This was a tall order, and I'm afraid the technical details will remain pretty highly classified for quite a while. But you have seen the results. For days the people of this town—many of 'em, a n y w a y—were out in the street screaming for blood. Quite a few of those who didn't like what was going on were killed or hurt. The whole thing seems to've been cooked up by agitators, after the Eastern bloc arms shipments arrived. The government didn't dare peep—they didn't even send troops from the capital. They were afraid for their lives. That was the state of affairs up to sundown yesterday. You've been given the details of our air operations last night—timing, number of planes used and all the rest. You see what the townsfolk are like now. On the basis of our experiments, we expect they'll be a little dazed and won't quite coordinate for another day or so. Then they'll be all right."

"And you say nobody was hurt at all last night?" asked the UBC Correspondent.

"I didn't quite say that," Baker answered. "There were a few broken bones, cuts and bruises from dazed drivers hitting walls or running off roadways. There was a little promiscuous shooting, too, and a few wounds as a result. One man was killed—somebody emptied a Tommy-gun into his head. You'll have to ask Intelligence about him. Another fellow broke his leg by falling into a cistern. Our medical people are taking care of the casualties, and we'll leave a medical staff here for a couple of weeks after we pull out the Marines—which will be tomorrow or next day. We don't expect any further trouble."

"You're flying out the folks who were in the hotel before the Marines leave, aren't you?" asked the man from the London Beacon.

"They seem to want to go," Baker answered. "And it's just as well for them to have a thorough check-up in Italy. They got some of the gas, too, of course. That's one of the nice points about XC-34—if you have to include your friends, it doesn't hurt 'em. Which is more than can be said for most modern weapons."

"Can you tell us anything about the gas-masks the Marines were wearing?" the Beacon man persisted.

"Sorry," denied Baker. "All I can say is they're special masks which we

brought along with the weapons. The longer it is before anyone else figures out how to make a mask that'll be proof against XC-34, the happier we all should be. We may need to use it again—now that it's proved itself to be a stopper but not a killer."

"What this means is, gas warfare's become respectable. Right?" Woodward asked.

"It ought to be," said Baker simply.

"What I'd like to know," Woodward went on, "is the name of the man who had the iron-clad courage to order you to go ahead and use gas against a civilian population before he knew for certain what would happen. That man should have the Congressional Medal of Honor for sheer guts, considering the unshakable prejudice against gas warfare that has become imbedded in the public mind."

"He should indeed," said Baker.

"He should indeed. The prejudice you speak of has held back the development of gases like our XC-34 for too many years, and it wouldn't have been used even when we'd proved it by every conceivable test except for one man's courage. I'd like to tell you his name, gentlemen, but the privilege of doing him honor belongs at a much higher level."

"Maybe even higher than the one you're thinking of, Commander," said Woodward. "Do you remember Who it was that said, Blessed are the peacemakers?"

Among Our Contributors

FORREST J. ACKERMAN —

should need no introduction to anyone interested in Science Fiction, identified with the field, as he has been, for so many years.

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guest of honor at the recent Detroit World Science Fiction Convention and author of several SF novels, has been making an enviable name for himself, in recent years, in both this and the Mystery field. His *PERISH BY THE SWORD*, winner of Macmillan's "Cock Robin" Award, has been widely praised.

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prominent military analyst and historian, makes his first appearance (we believe) in this field with the present story.

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