

ALL STORIES NEW

Galaxy

MAGAZINE



AUGUST, 1963 • VOL. 21, NO. 6

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- HOT PLANET 6
by Hal Clement
- THE PROBLEM MAKERS 46
by Robert P. Hoskins

SHORT STORIES

- EARTHBOUND 44
by Lester del Rey
- THE PAIN PEDDLERS 88
by Robert Silverberg
- THE BIRDS OF LORRANE 184
by Bill Doede

NON-FACT ARTICLE

- THE GREAT NEBRASKA SEA 31
by Allen Danzig

SERIAL — Conclusion

- HERE GATHER THE STARS 99
by Clifford D. Simak

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

- FOR YOUR INFORMATION 82
by Willy Ley

FEATURES

- THE EDITOR'S PAGE 4
by Frederik Pohl
- GALAXY'S BOOKSHELF 180
by Theodore Sturgeon

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GALAXY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. 50¢ per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) \$2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere \$3.50. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. Copyright, New York 1963, by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U. S. A.

By The Guinn Co., Inc. N. Y.

Title Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Cover by PEDERSON illustrating HOT PLANET

THE
PROBLEM
MAKERS

By **ROBERT HOSKINS**

Illustrated by **MACK**

They had only one mission in the Galaxy, with its infinite problems — make more of 'em!

CLOUDS obscured the three moons as the men slipped into the village. They eased the double-bitted axes out of their belts and felt their way through the almost unrelieved blackness until their hands met the soft yieldings of the door hangings. Waiting until the whisper of leather gliding over the ground stopped, telling him everyone was in position, Luke Royceton drew in a deep breath, then suddenly screamed:

"Aiiieeee!"

At his banshee signal, the other men took up the cry. Somebody kicked the banked coals of the cooking fire into life and stuck in a handful of twisted grass torches, then moved from man to man, handing them out. The men screamed again, touched their torches to the overhanging of the huts, then tore down the hangings and leaped through the doors, torches flaming a path.

The interiors of the huts leaped to life. Forms hurtled by the men and into the night as the pitch-caulked thatching blazed into an inferno. The rightful inhabitants of the huts crashed into the tall grass of the surrounding plains, the sounds of their passage quickly dying away as fear

lent wing to their rapidly fleeing heels.

The fires quickly burned through the thatching, sending little fingers of flame dancing along the lashed saplings that supported the roofs. Luke took one last look around the interior of his hut and started to leave, when he spotted something wriggling under a pile of skins.

Crossing the room in three strides, he tore away the coverings and grabbed the native child by the scruff of its neck. He wheeled on one heel and retraced his passage. He got out of the door just as the saplings gave up the ghost and the fiery mass crashed to the ground.

Luke whistled and wiped sweat from his brow. The bronze head of the axe caught and reflected the fires from its myriad beaten facets. Using the head, he beat out several sparks that had landed on his clothes, then turned his attention to the child who still dangled from his other hand.

The child's eyes were rolled nearly into his head with his fright. Luke grinned, baring his teeth. He brought the child up until their noses were less than an inch apart. The fetid smell of the child's breath made him choke. Yelping, the child twisted free and ran after its already-departed parents.

Luke laughed and turned his attention to his team.

The men were all out now, watching the huts crack under the intense heat within. One shuddered, then collapsed inward, sending up choking clouds of dust as it smothered the flames. After a moment, Luke whistled. Half of the men melted into the grass and followed the natives, while the others gathered around him, squatting and resting their axes on the ground. Luke waited until the others returned to report no further sign of the villagers, then he squatted himself, and accepted a canteen from someone. He drank his fill, gasped, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and handed the canteen back.

"It's hot," he said, conversationally.

"It'll be hotter before we're done," said one of the team. They were all dressed in rough-cured skins and leather moccasins. The axes were the only tool they carried. Faces thick with war paint and grime, it was impossible to tell them from natives.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Luke. Disclaimers came from the various members of the group. "Good." He stood up and stretched. "Well, gentlemen, shall we be on our way?"

"Might as well."

Luke took his axe, twisted the

unfinished handle a quarter-turn in his socket, then held the head to his lips. "Team B," he said. "Mission accomplished." He twisted the handle back and slipped the axe into his belt. A few moments later, the soft chatter of rotors cut through the air, and a copter dropped into the clearing by the cooking fire.

The team mounted by the dying glow of the fires. As soon as the last man was in, the door swung shut and the copter took off into the night.

SAM CARTER eased the scratchy material of the ruffed collar away from his neck, then shot his cuffs to return them to the socially acceptable half-inch showing beyond his jacket sleeve. He sighed, placed his hands on his knees and glanced for the umpteenth time at the armored soldiers guarding the door between the anteroom and Prince Kahl's private chambers. The afternoon sun dipped below the level of the high window-slits, sending shadows scampering up the walls.

Sam had been waiting since noon. His stomach was repeating its rumbled protests against that interrupted meal. Prince Kahl had sent word that Sam might wait upon his pleasure; quieting misgivings, Carter had rushed to do just that.

He sighed again, and stifled a yawn. From the corner of his eye, he watched the shadow line marching up the wall. When it touched the cobwebby corner of the ceiling, a slave came in and lighted a pair of oil lamps. The soot-heavy smoke they gave off quickly had Sam wishing the room had been left in darkness.

Another interminable hour passed, during which he several times repeated the operation with collar and cuffs, all the while envying the guards their ability to remain in one position like frozen statues, seemingly carved from the living rock of the palace. At last, just when he had resigned himself to the probability of spending the night in the anteroom, the inner door swung open and a chamberlain beckoned.

"Prince Kahl will grant you a moment now."

Sam bowed his thanks, and followed the man into Kahl's chambers.

"Ah, my friend from the southern kingdoms!"

Prince Kahl was a lean, saturnine individual, uncomfortably aware that the prime of life was slipping through his grasp while his father obstinately held onto the throne. It was Kahl's considered opinion that the old man had lived long enough. It rankled him to realize that he had held the same opinions as a

youth barely out of his teens. The thirty intervening years had been spent devising and trying methods to assure his succession; unfortunately his father had twenty years before that to safeguard his own rule.

"How go the southern kingdoms, my friend?" Kahl waved a particularly enticing fruit as Carter stopped short, a dozen paces away.

"Tolerably well, your graciousness." He neglected to add that it had been nearly a year since he had visited the supposed lands of his birth. Kahl was fully aware how long Carter had been kept cooling his heels. Palace protocol dictated how long foreign visitors might be kept waiting. But even visiting royalty could not hope for an audience in less than a month's time. In his role as ambassador, Carter was happy that a year was all he had been kept waiting.

"YOUR lord and master's gifts were received," said Kahl. "You may inform him of my royal gratitude."

"My humble thanks, your graciousness." Sam's mouth watered as Kahl polished off the one fruit and selected another from a platter born by a manservant. Despite his now-long stay on the planet, Sam still could not understand why women were given no

role at all in society, even as slaves.

"Not at all, not at all," said Kahl. "Now tell me. What is it that brought you so far from your home lands to grace my humble presence?"

"The usual business of politic, your graciousness," said Sam, growing weary of the necessity to repeat the title with every reply to Kahl's words. He also wished for a chair, despite the fact that he had been sitting all afternoon. He felt like a naughty schoolchild, standing always in the man's presence. "Trade treaties, mutual armament pacts, the like."

"Ummm, so. You've discussed them with my ministers?"

"They have permitted me this honor and, if I may be so bold, found a great deal to our mutual liking. Our countries are indeed far separated, and the journey between arduous. I find much in your provinces in the way of technology and armaments that we totally lack. By the same token, I have thought of a few inconsequential things which might serve to ease your royal burdens, if but brought from my lands."

"Possible, possible," said Kahl. "Of course, I have a large college of tinkerers and mechanics who probably would have produced the little toys you speak of in

their own good time. But why duplicate effort, eh? They are lazy dolts who grumble at my royal largesse as it is." He chortled lustily, although Sam could see nothing even remotely humorous in his statement. But he was well-schooled in the idiocies of diplomacy; he laughed dutifully.

"But come!" said Kahl. "Enough of childish prattle! You carry another load in your thoughts, my southern friend. Have out with it!"

"Your graciousness?"

"You needn't pretend," he said, chortling again. "My ministers are like the winds. They cannot keep a single thing to themselves, but instead need spread it over the far reaches of the entire world. You've been talking — foolishly perhaps — but I have perceived a certain sense within your nonsense, and I must confess that your words have aroused my interest. You have a plan to see me king. Now out with it, lest I make you a gift of you to my torturer. He can remove anything — including stubborn vocal cords!"

"You do me undeserved honor, graciousness," said Sam.

"Undoubtedly. And you begin to weary me."

"Very well." Sam sighed. "I must admit that my tongue is too loose for my own general welfare.

It is true that I once thought of something mildly amusing while passing long evening hours with one of your ministers. But it was mere idle dreaming, no more."

"You prattle long, southerner." Kahl's eyelids lowered suspiciously. He picked up a silver knife and began paring his nails, scattering the shavings suggestively in Sam's direction. "Perhaps you do not want to see me king?"

"There is none so deserving of the honor as you," said Sam. "But while you laugh at the utter childishness of my ideas, please remember that you insisted . . ."

THE Ehrlan delegate to the Central Worlds Conference was well past the entrance to the Park when the pudgy little man caught up with him, sides heaving from the unaccustomed strain of running.

"Citizen Lund!" he cried, panting. "Please wait!"

Lund turned and eyed the little man suspiciously. The fellow was a stranger, and therefore automatically under suspicion. "Yes?"

"A moment of your valuable time, Citizen. Please? I assure you, you have nothing to fear from me. I am not a Yanoian." The name spat out acidly.

"Indeed?" said Lund. "And just who, then, are you?" There was a vague sensation of familiar-

ity troubling the back of his mind. The omnipresent watchdog in his subconscious pounced instantly on the feeling, magnifying it, turning it inside out and shaking it around, but drawing no satisfaction from the act.

"A friend, Citizen. You must believe that. I can't explain further right now — time is too precious." He grabbed Lund's arm and started tugging him back towards the Park entrance. "Please? I beg you, come."

"Oh—very well." He gave in ungraciously, following the man until they were just inside the Park. Then Lund stopped, digging his heels into the gravel of the walk. The man looked back at him.

"Please, Citizen!" he urged. "We don't have much time!"

"So far as I'm concerned, you don't have any time at all, unless you tell me right now who you are and what this is all about."

"Not here!" he cried, aghast, as he glanced nervously around at the many people entering and leaving the Park. A pair of Conference monitors stopped just outside the gate, fingering their stun-beamers as they eyed the actions of the two men. They started to move into the violable hundred-foot circle this side of the gate. The little man moved quickly, grabbing Lund again and forcibly pulling him

beyond the protection of the monitors. Their skins tingled as they went through the shimmering haze of the force screen. The monitors stopped just in time to avoid touching the screen, while Lund and the little man hurried down a path that wound into a copse of widdy trees from Lund's own homeworld, Ehrla.

The widdy tendrils stopped their aimless flowing through the trees and curved down and around the two men, tips melting into the ground and tendrils broadening into wide blades that sheltered and shielded the pair from possible watchers.

"Now!" said Lund, shaking the other man's hand from his angrily. "Perhaps you will do me the honor of telling me who you are and just what in the name of the Seven Holy Suns this idiocy is all about?"

"A matter of the gravest urgency, Citizen! You must not present your plans for redistribution of Sector protectorates to this Conference!"

"What?" Lund stared at him in disbelief. "And just how did you learn of the plans I intend to present to the Conference — I *will* present, at this afternoon session? Something smacks of treachery!"

"Never mind how I learned, Citizen. The important thing is the Yano delegation also knows!

They plan to scuttle you before you have a chance to speak. After that, they'll cut you into little pieces and devour you!"

"You're insane, man!" Lund started to reach for the widdy tendrils.

"Don't! You must not present your plans to the Conference, Citizen."

A new tone had crept into the man's voice: a strength that belied the pudginess and general clownishness of the figure. Lund turned slowly, and found himself staring at a stunner, the winking red of the telltale showing that it was set to lethal bands.

"Wha . . ." He gulped his adam's apple back down into his throat. "How did you get that into the Park? The force screens aren't supposed to pass weapons."

"There are ways, Citizen," the man said, grinning. No longer did he seem clownish. "Many so-called impossible things are quite simple, if only you have access to the proper people and controls."

"What do you really want?" Lund tried to hide his fright, but he was uncomfortably certain that it was radiating out from him, broadcasting to the entire world that Citizen Lund was scared silly.

"I told you, Citizen. You must not present your plans to the Conference."

"But why?" he wailed, in frustration. "Give me a logical reason!"

"The greater good, Citizen." With those cryptic words, the man pressed the stud of the beamer. Lund gasped, as a giant hand closed around his heart, then collapsed to the ground in a strange dying parody of slow motion. Just before the clouds of eternity shut away his vision, he at last recognized the man.

Himself!

II

JOHAN REILLY was tired, intensely tired, beyond any feeling of exhaustion he had ever known.

The clock in his desk chimed once. He sighed and picked up his lecture notes, stuffing them into a scarred and battered case that he had been carrying since his student days at the Academy. He cast one weary glance around the cluttered office, then steeled himself into a passable imitation of military carriage as he left for the lecture hall.

The Cadet Sergeant-Major outside his door leaped to attention only a little less quickly than his regular service counterpart. Reilly returned their salutes and fell in behind them.

The lecture hall — gymnasi-

um, really; the Academy was perennially overcrowded — was crowded, as usual. The eager young cadets filled the fifty rows of backless benches, while the overflow squatted and stood at the rear until it was impossible for a midget to find room to thread his way through the crowd. Reilly's class was well-tended for its honest popularity, not just because it was compulsory. There were many "compulsory" lectures in the curriculum that counted themselves proud to find half their audience in attendance.

Reilly stopped in the wings of the stage, listening for a moment to the comfortable discordances of the student band tuning their instruments. The regular service non-com peered through the hangings, catching the bandmaster's eye. The tuning stopped, and the band swung into a medley of old Academy drinking songs. Reilly smiled, as he remembered happier days when he had participated lustily in the drinking that went along with such music.

From the drinking songs, the band struck up the National Anthem. The noise the cadets made in rising nearly drowned out the music. After the last strains had been permitted to fade away, the bandmaster raised his baton once more and the opening bars of

Hail to the Chief! filled the hall. The Sergeants-Major stepped out onto the stage, Reilly following, case clasped loosely between elbow and side.

They passed in front of the half-dozen visitors and moved to either side of the podium, turning until they were facing each other, the regular service man on the right. They snapped into a salute, followed by the entire audience. Reilly lay his case on the podium, turned and bowed to the visitors, then faced the audience again and returned the salute.

Immediately two thousand arms dropped to their owners' sides and the cadets resumed their seats.

Reilly unzipped his case and drew out his notes.

He arranged them carefully on the podium, although he knew that at no time during the next hour would he so much as glance at them again. The case stowed away under the podium, he took a deep breath and placed his hands flat on the podium's surface. Technicians in the control booth over the far end of the hall trained parabolic mikes on his lips, waiting for him to begin the lecture as he had begun hundreds of other preceding lectures, before audiences much like this. The faces might change; the uniforms were the same, and so were the underlying feelings of the

wearers of the uniforms, year in and year out.

"The greater good for the greater number!"

The cadets let out a mutual sigh, none aware that breath had been held.

"A motto, gentlemen: merely a motto. Like *Ad Astra per Aspera*, *E Pluribus Unum* or *Through These Portals Pass the Most Wonderful Customers in the Galaxy*." An appreciative titter ran through the audience.

"But what is a motto?" continued Reilly, warming to his subject, overly familiar though it was. "It's more than just a snappy way of stringing words together. It has a meaning. Often the meaning, such as in the commercial example I just gave, is on the frivolous side. But more often there is something intently serious behind a motto. *Ad Astra* — 'To the Stars.' For centuries this has been almost a religion for men, as our ancestors broke the bonds of a single planet and spread out into the galaxy. Libraries have been written of the heartbreaks and joys, the sorrows and jubilations that have been found in the far reaches of space.

"*E Pluribus Unum* — 'United We Stand.' Even older and, if possible, dearer to the hearts of men. Our very government is based on the essential concept

contained in these three words from the past.

"'The greater good for the greater number'. If government runs on one motto, then civilization is based on this!"

TEAM B was dead on its feet when the copter finally returned to Base with the first rosy glow of dawn lightening the horizon. They stumbled to the ground, as sorry a looking group as Luke Royceton had ever seen. Their masquerade of grime and war paints was nearly obscured by an honest layer of general dirt. They filed into wardrobe and stripped off their clothes, leaving them in ragged piles on the floor. Then they hit the showers, luxuriating under the needle sprays and the caress of soap sliding over their skin.

The discarded costumes were gone when they emerged, feeling closer to human, twenty minutes later. In place of the animal hides were shorts, doublets and the calf-length boots of Base-centered personnel.

All were more than happy to be back in uniform.

Luke stopped outside wardrobe for a moment, then started towards Headquarters, a building distinguished from the dozen other prefabs of Base only by the pennant flying from the peak. The buildings were arranged in

an irregular circle around the copter field, nestled in the most hidden valley of the planet's single range of hills high enough to be graced with the name of mountains. The highest peak in the range, visible over the one directly behind Headquarters, toward barely a thousand feet.

On a world less primitive, the range would never have served its present duty.

The world was primitive, however. Man had advanced but a few faltering steps beyond the level of the cave. Ecology had estimated the native human population not to exceed three million people over the entire globe, and cheerfully admitted that their estimate was made with every benefit of doubt given to the natives. Quite possibly not even half that number roamed the vast plains of the temperate zones, or bred in the opulence of the equatorial jungles. As yet, population pressures had not driven men into the colder climes of the north and south. None had been spotted more than five hundred miles from the equator.

Luke checked in with the Orderly Room before reporting on to the debriefing room. He slumped onto a couch and propped his feet on a low coffee table. The other four team commanders were there ahead of him. One

brought him a cup of coffee. He accepted it with thanks, and inhaled the bitter smell of the brew before draining half of it. The fiery liquid burned into his stomach and scorched away some of the tensions built up during the night.

"Rough night, Luke?" asked Andy Singer, sitting next to him.

"The roughest. We hit seventeen villages between sunset and sunrise."

"That is a load. My team only hit seven. But you were working the big river stretch, weren't you?" Luke nodded, as he sipped again at his coffee. "I thought so. We were lucky. We had the west plains. There isn't too much water over there, couple little creeks and a few holes. These locals don't stray too far from water."

"**W**E hit half a dozen good-sized places," said Luke. "One of them must have had thirty-five families. For a minute, I thought we were going to have to kill a few of them, but it ended up okay. Nobody hurt, except for one of my boys who stayed a second too long in a hut." He chuckled. "Got the seat of his pants burned off — a new kid, just out from the Academy. The rest of the night, he was the fastest man I had."

"Proves what I said about

water. Biggest place I hit had seven houses, and most of them only had two or three."

Luke started to say something more, but just then the door opened and the Base Commandant came in. The Team commanders stood up respectfully, but none had the energy to properly snap to attention. He smiled as he mounted the low platform to the front of the room.

"At ease, gentlemen." Gratefully, the commanders sat back down and resumed their earlier positions of comfort. The Commandant poured himself a glass of water from a ready pitcher and drank it, then gave his full attention to the room.

"First, gentlemen, let me congratulate you on a successful night's operation. I congratulate all of you, but particularly Commander Royceton and Team B. They rolled up the enviable total of seventeen villages destroyed."

Luke flushed, feeling like a fresh-out-of-Academy Cadet as the others raised their coffee cups in his direction.

"None of you spent the evening slacking, of course," continued the Commandant. He was a middle-aged man; the empty sleeve pinned to his shoulder told why he had been booted out of field duty while men twenty years his senior were still leading teams. "Total score for the night:

fifty-seven villages. Commander Royceton merely had more fertile area to work in. As we move out from the Base I know you will all have equal opportunities to prove your prowess with the torch." An appreciative murmur ran through the little group.

"Now I know you're all tired, gentlemen, and anxious to hit the sack. I won't keep you much longer. I just want to emphasize the importance of our mission on this world. Many of your men don't like making these raids on the natives. They would rather be roaming the far starlanes, putting down pirates and other glorious deeds of derring-do. But you men are not cadets; there isn't a one of you without twenty years field service time. You know the real glory comes from satisfaction in a job well done. It is up to you to transfer that feeling of satisfaction to the malcontents within your ranks. Tonight you go out again; and you will continue to do so until every single village on this planet has been razed to the ground! If so much as one single village is permitted to escape, then we have failed. I do not like failure; you do not like failure. Working together, we can see to it that failure as a word disappears from the language. I thank you, gentlemen. Dismissed." He stepped down and strode rapidly from the

room. Behind him the audience rose and burst into talk.

III

SAM CARTER moaned silently. He tried for the hundredth time since the journey began to shift his legs into a position where the insides would not be rubbed raw by the rough hair of his horse-like mount. He resolved for the dozenth time that one of the "inventions" he would import from the southern provinces would be a good, comfortable saddle.

Another would be silk; the rough fabrics worn by Kahl's subjects were a fair substitute for the mount's hide.

"Ho, southerner!" Prince Kahl wheeled his mount back from the head of the column and waited until Sam had caught up, then he fell in beside him. "How goes it? Does my second favorite mount suit you well?"

"Very well indeed, graciousness," said Sam. "I cannot in honesty recall when I've had a more—*ouch!*—instructive ride!"

"Good!" Kahl leaned over and slapped him on the shoulder. "You'll be glad to know we've but three more hours to go before reaching the summer palaces."

"Only, uh, three more hours?" The sinking sensation in Sam's stomach had nothing at all to do

with the undulating motion of his beast. "Ah, that is good news, your graciousness. We'll be there almost before we know it."

Sam wished Kahl would go away and leave him to his misery, but the prince seemed disposed to talk. "I think there will be many surprised faces in my father's court tonight. Eh, southerner?" He chuckled, and then burst into raucous laughter as he considered the idea further. "And to think, it will all be perfectly legal! You have the papers safe, my friend?"

"Yes, your graciousness," said Sam, sighing and patting his saddlebags.

"Good! Don't lose them—I'd hate to see you missing your head!" He laughed again, while Sam's stomach turned several more flipflops. "The sight of blood always did make me sick."

There were sixteen men in the mounted party, including a dozen of Kahl's private guard, the captain of the troop and the High Priest of the Sun God, the nation's officially sponsored religion. The High Priest was a little old man, bent over more from age than from the discomforts of the journey. Originally Sam had planned for one more member, but that had become unnecessary when he learned that the High Priest was also President of the Royal College



of Chirurgeons. The latter role was even more important to his plans than the former. Now all that worried Sam was the possibility that the priest might not live to the end of the journey. He was inflicted with a hacking cough that sent chills racing up and down Sam's spine every time he went into a fit.

Kahl grew weary of bantering small talk with a man really fit to come up with witty replies. He wheeled his horse again and dropped back to the end of the column for a moment, saying something to the High Priest, then he spurred his mount back to the head of the line, falling into his original position beside the Captain of the Guard. The two men were soon lost in reminiscences that had bored Sam to tears, every time he had been an unwilling audience.

ANOTHER hour passed miserably, while the sun mounted to the zenith and began the long summer afternoon drop back down to the horizon. The members of the Guard and Kahl pulled short, stubby loaves of bread and cheese from their saddle bags and munched as they road on, washing the food down with vigorous pulls at the wineskins that took the place of water canteens on the planet. Sam had first thought the constant imbib-

ing of alcohol to be a national vice. Then he ran tests on half a dozen waterholes. Thereafter he drank wine himself.

Now, however, he was completely without an appetite. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that the priest was in the same boat. Suddenly, without knowing why, he pulled his mount up and waited until the priest caught up with him, then fell in at the end of the column.

"How goes it, Reverence?"

The priest looked up, watery eyes registering surprise at his company. "Oh, southerner." He broke into one of his coughing spasms. "Ahhh, not well, southerner. Not well at all. The Sun God does not ride with me this day—not that he's deserted me, you understand: he never rides with me. The Sun God has more sense than a foolish old man who should be staying home in the comfort of his apartments, not galivanting around the countryside like a frisky kitten."

"I wish he had imparted some of his wisdom to me," said Sam. "I confess I feel as you look, Reverence. No disrespect intended, believe me. It's just that the ardors of this journey have taken much toll from both of us. And I swear, by the Sun God himself, you are bearing up much better than I."

"A man who has traveled as

long and as far as you talking this, southerner?"

"It's the way you travel, Reverence. The greatest part of my journey was by ship." It had been; Sam merely neglected to specify that it was a spaceship. "Ocean travel has its own peculiar discomforts, but for myself, I'll take it every time."

"Tell me, southerner," said the priest, "why do you make this trip?"

"Prince Kahl wished it," he replied.

"Ah, but there is more to this than lies on the surface. Why should Kahl bring you, a stranger and a subject of another house, along on a venture that may well 'cast the future course of events for this entire nation?"

"Prince Kahl seems to feel that, ah, I might, because of my experiences in other lands, serve him in some minor capacity of usefulness." Sam chose his words with care. The old man was entirely too observant for his liking.

"Kahl is an astute man," said the priest. "However, he is also a hungry man, and such a man on the verge of starvation will eat things that in more normal circumstances he would pass up without so much as a first look. Ideas are much like food, southerner."

"The philosophers of my country have a saying, Reverence.

'Man does not live by bread alone.'

"Much wisdom is afloat in the world, disguised in strange ways." With that, the priest went into another coughing spell, after which he refused to pick up the threads of the conversation. Carter gave up, and spurred his mount back to his original place in the column.

THE rest of the trip passed in, for Sam, self-commiseration. The lower the sun sank, the hotter the temperature seemed to climb. Several times he found himself with wineskin raised to lips. The native beverage was little stronger than the plain water he would have preferred, but even so he found himself more than a little tipsy by the time they crested a low range of hills and saw the summer palaces nestled by the side of a lake in the valley below.

The column dismounted in an inner courtyard, and Kahl, Carter and the High Priest strode past the protesting chamberlain into the King's private apartments. The King was lying on a couch, eating fruits served by a manservant and listening to poetry being read to him. He looked up when the trio came in.

"My son! This is indeed an unexpected honor. What brings you from the city on a day so hot

as this one?" He smiled, but his eyes were sharp.

"Greetings, Father," said Kahl, bowing low. "I bring you important news from the Council of Priests. Reverence!"

"Your Most Graciousness." The old man was already nearly doubled over. When he bowed, Sam half expected to hear his forehead crack the tiles of the floor.

"Well, Reverence?" The king accepted another fruit and sucked on it, keeping a watchful eye on his son. *He suspects something!* Sam thought.

The High Priest produced a scroll from his robes and ceremoniously broke the seal. Unrolled, it was short for the dynamite it contained.

"Your Most Gracious Person," he read. "The Council of Priests, meet and determined in the Holy Temple of the Sun God this fifth day of the seventh moon of the fifty-first year of the reign of Obar, King, announce to all and sundry within the domains of Obar, King, that he has incurred the wrath and displeasure of the Holy God, the Sun God, and henceforth from this day shall be no more be known as Obar, King, but as father of Kahl, King."

He let the scroll snap back into its cylinder, bowed again, then handed the scroll to Obar.

"Your graciousness." Then he turned to Kahl. "Your Most Graciousness." One final return to Obar. "One more message from the Council, your graciousness. They hope you will accept their eternal pleasure and gratitude for the excellence of your reign."

ALL during the reading, Obar had been staring at the High Priest, a ghost smile half-crinkling the corners of his mouth. The half-eaten fruit now fell to the pavement with a sodden *plop!* He licked his lips.

"This . . . This is some sort of a joke?"

"No joke, Father," said Kahl, a little too heartily for Sam's liking.

"But how?" Obar shook his head. "How dare you?"

"I'm merely exercising my duty to our subjects, Father. You've grown old. You're no longer capable of carrying out the duties of king."

"No." He refused to believe. "You . . . you have no right. *I* am king! How can you . . . How can you just walk in here and tell me that I'm not? What gives you this right?"

"The same source that made you king in the first place," said Kahl. "The Sun God."

"Nonsense! There is no Sun God!"

The High Priest gasped and

covered his eyes. "*Blasphemy!*" "*Guards!*" Obar pried himself up. "*Guards! Arrest these maniacs!*"

Feet clumped outside, then turned into the chamber. Sam relaxed, unaware that he had been holding his breath, knowing that his plans were going through after all. The men who came in were the same who had escorted them from the city, Kahl's own private guards.

The captain turned to Kahl and bowed low. "You called, Your Most Graciousness?"

"Yes. Take this blithering idiot away."

The captain bowed again, and gestured. Two of his men grabbed the former king by the arms and carried him away, screaming.

"Ho, southerner!" Kahl sat down on his father's couch and gestured. The manservants had been cowering in the background; they came forward now and touched their foreheads to the ground. Kahl took a fruit and bit into it, letting the juice trickle down his chin.

"It worked," said Kahl, swallowing. "By the Sun God, it worked!" He slapped his knee. "I confess, southerner, when first I heard your plans, I thought you daft indeed. But it worked! I'm king!"

"I felt certain it would," said

Sam, carefully omitting the title of respect. It passed unnoticed. More sure of himself, he continued, "After all, the idea was inherent in the very structure and strictures of your government. Your divine position comes from the Sun God. He should be able to remove it as easily as he grants it."

"True," said Kahl. "Howsomever, there shall be some changes made in that respect, once I have consolidated my position. Oh, I delude myself not in thinking that the battle is over, my friend. But the hardest part has been won."

"I've been thinking," said Sam, slowly.

"Well, keep it not to yourself!" said Kahl. "If any more of your ideas prove as useful to me as the last, then you have a glorious future indeed."

"My thoughts are, I'm afraid, roaming rather far afield. But take them for what they might be worth. You are king of this nation now, Kahl; and a very able king you shall be. Why limit the benefits of your rule to this one nation? Why not let the rest of the world know the joys of your rule?"

"Ummm?" He squinted, one eye closed. "You think it might work out?"

"Why not?" *And the Sun God help us all!* he added to himself.

IV

THE chambers were crowded as the delegates, alternates and just plain onlookers poured in for the afternoon session of the Central Worlds Conference. Two hours before the meeting was due to begin, an astute member of the press, long used to such functions, observed that there would undoubtedly be a record broken before the day was over. And it was easy to see why: all eyes were trained on the spot low in the tiers with the Ehrlan pennant floating overhead.

As yet, the central figure of all the interest had not arrived, although the rest of the Ehrlans were already in their seats and looking anxiously up the aisles towards the bank of elevators. An elevator would open from time to time, to disgorge a few late arrivals. But the man they expected was not yet among them. Below, on the chamber floor, the presiding secretary was mounting to the rostrum and arranging his papers.

"Where the devil can he be!" said Citizen Everett to Citizen Sterm, the second ranking member of the delegation.

"God only knows! You don't suppose something has . . . happened?"

"How could it, here in the heart of the city? He only had

to come one block from the hotel. You've been watching too many thrillers, Citizen—I hope!"

"Well, we have to do *something*. The session will be starting in a few minutes. If he isn't here, someone else will have to make the presentation."

"Who?"

"I don't know. How about you, Citizen?"

"Now, wait a minute!" said Everett. "What's the matter with you, Citizen? You're the logical choice. You rank second in the group."

"I wouldn't dare," admitted Sterm. "What if I should bobble things?, I'd never be able to live it down. I wouldn't even dare go home. My wife is Lund's half-sister, you know."

"I'd forgotten. But somebody has to do it, if he doesn't get here. This is the only opportunity we'll have this decade. If we have to wait another ten years, we may as well forget the matter altogether."

"We can't do that!" protested Sterm. "We've worked too long and too hard on this plan. It's the only fair solution anyway. The other worlds will never accept anything else."

"Some of them may not want to accept this one, when they hear all of the details. You must admit, we haven't been too easy on some of your fellow members.

They . . . Here comes Arko. Maybe he found out something."

A junior member of the delegation came panting down the aisle, shaking his head when he saw the others' eyes on him. "Sorry, Citizens," he said, as soon as he was within the Ehrlan area. "He left the hotel over an hour ago. No one has seen a sign of him since."

"Well, that tears it," said Evrett, just as the presiding secretary struck his gavel on the little wooden block, announcing the opening of the session. "Who has the copy of the plans?"

"Here," said Sterm, digging the papers from his case.

"I'll make the presentation myself . . ."

"Just a minute, Citizen!" said Arko. "Look! Here he comes now!"

They all turned and looked at the pudgy figure ambling slowly down the aisle, nodding to greetings that came from all sides. The missing man smiled and shook hands with a couple of the onlookers, before entering the area and taking his seat at the head of the delegation.

"Citizen Lund!" cried Sterm, as though speaking to a wayward child. "Where in the name of the Seven Suns have you been?"

"Why, it's a beautiful day, Citizens," explained Lund. "I thought

I'd take a stroll in the Park. There's quite a large Ehrlan section, you know. Makes one quite homesick to hear the singing flowers serenading the passerby. I can't wait to get back home again."

"If you hadn't shown up, none of use would have had the nerve to go home!"

"Why, Citizen Sterm!" Lund seemed amused by some private joke. "Whatever made you think I wouldn't be here? This is an important day for Ehrla, remember?"

"How could we forget?" said Evrett.

The presiding secretary fiddled with his bank of microphones for a moment, in the manner of presiding secretaries throughout history since the invention of the public address system, then turned hopelessly to the technicians. A man came forward, made a simple adjustment, then retreated. The Secretary cleared his throat, sipped at a glass of water and spoke.

"The fourth session of the Nineteenth Conference of the Central Worlds is open for business. The afternoon session will be devoted to the presentation and discussion of proposals by the membership. The Recording Secretary will call the roll of delegations."

A short stubby man with five

o'clock shadow came forward and leaned into the bank of microphones, and yelled: "Accryllia!"

Across the chamber a man stood up, holding his delegation's microphone. "The grand and sovereign system of Accryllia, long known throughout the galaxy for the excellence of its citrus fruit, the beauty of its maidens, the virtue of its honorable young men . . . the grand and sovereign state of Accryllia passes."

"Antares!"

"Antares passes."

"Bodancer!"

"The system of Bodancer passes."

"Buddington!"

"Mr. Secretary, the proud system of Buddington yields to Ehrla!"

"Ehrla!"

CITIZEN Lund stood up, unclipped the mike from the railing, smiled around at a few more wellwishers and launched into his speech. "Mr. Secretary! Ehrla wishes to thank the proud and ancient system of Buddington for relinquishing its rightful order in these proceedings, so that Ehrla may present a plan that the citizens of Ehrla feel certain will meet with the full approval of this meeting.

"For hundreds of years, the various peoples represented here

today have been rightly concerned with the problems of new star systems being developed, new races being assimilated into the federation of free and lawful worlds. These new worlds need guidance, a guidance that only long experience can provide."

Evvrett looked at Sterm, uneasily. "What is this?" he whispered. "He isn't presenting the plan like this, I hope? He'll alienate half the delegations."

"I don't know what he's doing," said Sterm. "I only hope he knows."

"In the past," continued Lund, "the various and varied members of this honored organization have provided the same guidance in wise and infinitely proper manner. It is the hope of Ehrla that they will continue to do so in the future. Therefore the ancient and honorable system of Ehrla proposes, to this effect, that the members of this organization continue as they have in the past."

Pandemonium was breaking out in scattered sections of the chamber as various delegations realized that they were being snookered by the Ehrlans. Voices rose up here and there, trying to drown out Lund's words. Monitors moved up and down the aisles, trying to quell the disturbances.

"Therefore," said Lund, "Ehrla, to the implementation of its plan,

announces to this organization that this day they have annexed the systems of Phelimina, Trepidard and Scolatia."

He sat down and turned to the rest of his delegation. "Gentlemen," he said, smiling, as he handed a sealed envelope to Stern, "my resignation."

REILLY slumped in his chair with a sigh. The lecture had gone well, but it had ended not a moment too soon to suit him.

"I'm growing old," he said, unaware he was speaking out loud.

"Pardon, sir?" The regular service Sergeant-Major closed the door and brought over his cup of coffee. "Did you say something, sir?"

"What?" Reilly blinked. "Oh, nothing. Nothing at all, Sergeant. Just an old man muttering to himself."

"Begging the general's pardon, sir, I don't think you're an old man at all. At least, no older than myself." He cocked his head. "Although, to be perfectly honest with both of us, sir, there are times when I just can't seem to keep up with these children they keep sending us nowadays."

"We're both ready for retirement, Sergeant. Old work horses, ready to be turned out to pasture. I guess this will be the last class I see through these old doors. I've submitted my resigna-

tion, you know." Reilly moodily regarded his coffee.

"Yessir, I knew. The rest of the faculty knows too. And if I might be so bold as to say so, sir, we'll all be sorry to see you go. It won't be the same Academy without General Reilly glarin' a bit at us all."

"Glaring a bit, is it, Sergeant?" He glared now, then broke down into a smile. "I suppose I do at that. Do the cadets still call me Old Stoneface?"

"Not within my hearing, sir." He grinned. "But you know cadets. You were one yourself. I suppose it'd be as difficult to stop cadets from tagging their teachers with nicknames as it'd be to ride a star bareback."

Reilly sighed, and swiveled his chair until he could see through the one cluttered window. The parade ground stretched away beneath, the system pennant fluttered briskly in the stiff breeze. Into his view marched a battalion of Cadets. Much the same scene had repeated itself daily during the thirty years he had occupied the office. "The faces change."

"Sir?"

"The faces change, Sergeant. How many thousands of boys have come through these doors? The uniform never changes, though. And I suppose that's really the most important thing,

in its essence — the uniform and the tradition.”

“That it is, sir.”

Reilly chuckled. “You know, Sergeant, I never considered myself a particularly sentimental man. Still, the faster the years fly by, the dearer old memories become. The clearer, too. I can recall things that happened when I was a boy much easier than I can remember what I had for breakfast this morning. And I know that’s a sign of old age.”

He picked up his coffee and made a face when he found it cold. “Sergeant, as two old men sharing the past, how about having a cup of something a bit stronger than this watery brew with me?”

“Sir! I really don’t think . . .”

“Oh, bother regulations, Sergeant! I’m speaking as a man now, not as a general. I’d deem it an honor.”

“Then I’d be proud to, sir.”

HE sat down in the visitor’s chair while Reilly opened the bottom drawer of his desk and drew out a bottle and two very dusty glasses. He blew into them, set them on the edge of the desk and poured generous measures of the amber liquid. The sergeant accepted his with a bow of his head. They raised their glasses.

“To yesterday, Sergeant.”

“To yesterday, sir. And may these days be as memorable to those who will be remembering fifty years from now.”

“And those days fifty years further.” They touched glasses, then tossed off the contents, wincing as the whiskey cut its way down. A soft ball of fire exploded in Reilly’s midsection. He sighed, capped the bottle and stowed it and the glasses away.

A short rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the door; the Cadet Sergeant-Major opened it and stuck his head through. “Sir?”

“Yes, Sergeant?”

“Six gentlemen to see you, sir.”

“What?” He glanced at his memo pad. A notation warned him six prospective cadets were due to come in. It was not standard procedure for him to interview candidates, but all six were the sons of Academy graduates killed in the line of duty. “Give me five minutes, Sergeant, then show them in.”

“Very good, sir.” He withdrew and closed the door.

“Well, Sergeant,” said Reilly, turning to the regular service man. “Perhaps these are the lads who will be doing that reminiscing fifty years from now.”

“Quite possible, sir.” He stood up and came to attention. “Do I have the general’s permission, sir?”

"Dismissed, Sergeant."

Sighing, Reilly swiveled his chair again and watched the drillers on the parade ground until the short rat-a-tat-tat sounded again. He turned around in time to face the gangling teenagers trooping through the door.

"Messrs. Whyte, Phillips, Garrett, Gordon, Kaslov and Poirot, sir," announced the Cadet Sergeant-Major before withdrawing again.

"Come in, gentlemen, come in." Reilly stood up. "Find yourselves a seat. Just pile those magazines on the chair, sir. I think three of you will fit admirably on that couch. You others can draw up those chairs by the water cooler. Yes, that's it." He shook hands all around, and then sat down again.

"Now then, your names once more, please?" He fixed them firmly in his mind as each boy introduced himself in turn. "Ah, yes. And I, of course, am General Reilly, Commandant of the Academy."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Kaslov?"

"Would that be *the* General Reilly? Of the Deneb Crisis?"

"I see my fame has proceeded me, gentlemen. Yes, I am that Reilly. Please, don't let the fact scare you. I assure you, I don't bite off the head of a boy until he is in uniform. Then, gentle-

men, you are fair game from then on.

"Now, then," he said. "Are there many other questions before I give you my sales pitch? Yes, Mr. Kaslov?"

"Sir," the boy said, hesitantly, "I believe you knew my grandfather. Sub-Colonel Kaslov? He served with you during the Deneb Crisis."

"Of course!" said Reilly. "Martin Kaslov; I should have recognized the name immediately. He was my Team leader. And his son was fresh out of the Academy; I remember very well. So you might become third generation Academy material, eh? Good, good. We're always glad to have someone whose roots are deep in Academy tradition. That's why I'm particularly happy to have all six of you gentlemen here this afternoon. I understand you attended my lecture?"

ALL six nodded; one raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Whyte?"

"Sir, I heard your lecture, but, frankly, I didn't get very much out of it. I mean, you talked a great deal about the service and so forth, but it just didn't make much sense to me. It was just like Pop — my dad used to talk when I was a kid. I don't suppose it made much sense then, but kids don't under-

stand anyway. But now I'm old enough to enter the Academy myself. I think I should know more about it, what it means, what it stands for. Uh, do I make myself clear?"

"As lucid as a mountain spring on a bright morning, Mr. Whyte. I only regret my own words were not as concise." He smiled. The other boys laughed while Whyte flushed.

"But you have expressed a very important point," continued Reilly. "I don't want a man coming in here who doesn't know what the Academy stands for. We have a long tradition, but we mean more than just words carved over a marble arch. 'The Greater Good for the Greater Number.' There are hundreds of years and hundreds of thousands of lives lived and died behind those seven words. From Earth's first colony in the Centauri system to the latest native intelligence charted in the Crab Nebula, those seven words have wrapped up an entire philosophy and dictated the means of living by it.

"But what do the words actually mean? I think, Mr. Whyte, that is the crux of your question. Indeed, that is the crux of the structure on which the Academy is founded. Oh, it's easy to say that the words mean what they say, because they do. That and

no more. But how to explain them so that someone who doesn't *know* will know? In a sense, I've been trying to do that ever since my first girl friend threw me over as an incurable romantic when she learned that I intended to enter the Academy. For many people, I'm afraid there is no explanation. They are incapable of understanding, no matter how hard we try. But I don't think you gentlemen are in that class. Otherwise you would not be here at all.

"The obvious place to begin is the beginning. 'The greater good.' Not the greatest, mind you—the greater. There are those who quibble over words; they are responsible for this particular delineation. It would be idealistic to try for the greatest in all things. Despite his thousands of years of development, man is still a long ways from being an ideal creature. There are certain things that remain beyond his capabilities. In certain isolated incidents, the course we follow does produce the greatest good possible. But they are isolated.

"The same reasoning follows the choice of 'The Greater Number.' Only our limitations prevent us from seeing to it that every world in the galaxy is the best of all possible worlds, insofar as the peculiarities of a particular world permit. We do our best, and take

pride in the fact that that best is better than anyone else's.

"But so much for numerical values. You most want to hear what we *do*. And that can best be summed up in one word: everything, Everything, and yet that, too, has its limitations. Impossibilities are beyond even us. Improbabilities are given a fair chance. We are constantly seeking out courses of action that will benefit not the individual but the race. And in some instances, not even a race, when there are many races involved in a particular manner. The methods we follow, the actions we take in a particular instance, may sometimes seem cruel and unreasoning . . ."

V

THE families were on the move, away from their comfortable homes under the everlasting warmth of the sun. Luke Royceton shifted his weight in the copter and trained the glasses on a column of dust rising three miles to the west and ten thousand feet below.

"It's okay, Harry," he said to the pilot. "They've swung back north again."

"Right, Luke," the pilot replied. "Scout report just in says there's a real big outfit about eighty miles settling down

around a lake. Shall we hit them?"

"We the closest?"

"Singer's forty miles the other side of them, but he's tied up chasing some mavericks."

"Let's go then."

Luke holstered his glasses and slid down into the cargo hold. The rest of the team were taking advantage of the lull in activity to catch up on their relaxation. They had been constantly on the go since the migrations had begun in earnest two months earlier. Luke kibitzed a card game for a few minutes, then announced: "Action coming up in about twenty minutes. Grab something to eat and run a check on your costumes."

The copter dropped to tree-top level five miles from the lake and came to ground four miles further on. The team piled out, stretched the tensions of the long ride out of their bodies, then started out through head-high dwarf trees that separated their landing spot from the lake. They wound through the trees and over a low, rolling series of hills. The cover stopped suddenly, two hundred yards from the beach.

"Big family is right!" said Luke softly, gripping his axe.

There were nearly fifty huts in various stages of construction along the beach. Twice that number of adult males were working

on them, while the women were bringing in armloads of grass for thatching. The children were waist-deep in the lake with fishing spears. A still wriggling pile on the beach testified to their prowess.

Luke glanced over the dozen members of his team, shaking his head. "I don't know," he said. "Those are pretty hefty odds."

"What's to worry about, Luke?" asked one of the men. "You don't expect those characters to put up a fight, do you?"

"God only knows. They just might take it in their heads to do that. From looks of things, either this outfit has been traveling far or else several villages have combined forces. If it's the last, then I'm plenty worried."

"So what do we do? Go back and yell for reinforcements?"

"Not yet. Not until we try these babies ourselves. Everybody got his courage screwed up?" There were soft murmurs of assent from each man. "Make torches." Two men faded away and returned a moment later with arms full of the same grass the villagers were using. Half the team set to work, twisting them into torches and tying them with short lengths of a twine-like vine they had brought along from the equatorial jungles. The torches were passed out, and Luke took a deep breath: "Let's go!"

THE team leaped to their feet and broke from the cover, screaming their banshee cry. The natives dropped what they were doing and wheeled around, then froze in their tracks at the sight of the wildly painted devils tearing down the beach. The two hundred yards separating them halved, then halved again before the natives broke out of their stupor. One of the workers placed his fingers between his teeth and whistled. The children ran in from the lake, tossing their spears to the nearest adult, man or woman.

By the time the team was among them, axes whistling through the air and smashing the walls of the huts, the villagers were armed and fighting back.

"We've got troubles!" yelled Luke, bringing his axe down to break several spears being jabbed at him. The spears were too short to make good throwing weapons, so the natives were using them just as they would in going after fish. One got through Luke's guard; he choked back a cry of pain as the broad stone head went into his flesh and was twisted. He pulled away, yanking the shaft out of the native's hand.

Two of the team had managed to get close enough to the cooking fires to light their torches. They used them now as shields, until the grass burned down to

the handles. One then tossed his into the large pile of thatching material, while the other stuck his into the unplastered wall of the nearest hut. The thatching blazed up quickly, forcing the natives away from the heat. Most of the team now had their backs to the nearest wall; none had escaped the jabbing spears. One man was completely encircled by the natives. Suddenly his axe was wrenched from his grasp. They picked him up, legs flailing wildly in the air, carried him over and threw him onto the fire.

"Let's get out of here!" screamed Luke, surprising those around him by suddenly leaping forward and grabbing two of them, forcing them off balance. He called on every ounce of strength he possessed to run through the gauntlet of spears. From the corner of his eye, he could see one other man break loose, only to be recaptured a dozen feet farther on.

By some miracle, Luke outdistanced those pursuing him, crashing into the cover. The natives followed a few yards, then gave up the chase, heading back to the easier sport on the beach.

Luke tripped over an exposed root and crashed to the ground. He tried to get up again, but his injured arm refused to support him. Closing his eyes, he waited for the fatal blow to fall.

Several minutes passed, during which Luke recited every prayer he had ever heard, to every conceivable deity in the pantheon. At the end of that time, he realized that he wasn't going to die after all—at least, not here and now. Rolling over onto his good arm, he sat up and got his back against a tree. From the beach came screams of terror, growing fainter as he listened and finally dying away altogether. Bracing his good arm against a tree, he worked himself up, got himself oriented and started back towards the copter.

The pilot threw away his cigarette and dropped out of the door to the cargo hold when Luke came limping into view.

"My God, man! What happened?"

"I . . . made a mistake." He let himself be helped into the copter and took the mike, reporting the disaster on the beach to the Commandant back at Base. Then he let the pilot bandage his wounds.

"ELEVEN men dead," he said bitterly.

"Don't take it so hard, Luke," said Andy Singer. The team Commanders were back in the debriefing room again. All had commiserated with Luke on the tragedy; none had been able to convince him that it had not been his fault.



"Eleven men dead," he repeated, no matter what they said.

The commandant came in and they rose. "At ease, gentlemen," he said, as he mounted the platform. He stared at them for a thirty-second eternity.

"Ours is not an easy task." His words broke the tension; all sighed.

"There has been a tragic accident, gentlemen. Good men have died. Men just as good have died on a thousand planets in a thousand different ways. Sometimes they died because of an error; sometimes the death was unavoidable. But for whatever reason, they did not die in vain!

"This is a young planet," he continued. "In many ways, it's as near to paradise as any of us will ever see. Man is a young race here — young in development. Yet almost before he has a chance to prove himself, he has found himself in a backwater, stymied as it were by the very paradise qualities which attract us. Life is easy here, too easy. He doesn't have to exert himself. He lives much like his ancestors did, ten thousand years ago.

"There is no future in standing still. Whether he likes it or not, man must develop, must give the future generations a chance for their place in the sun. Despite sentimentality, anything that gives them that chance is good.

Therefore, I repeat: eleven men died here yesterday. *They did not die in vain!*"

"Time for a break, I think," said Reilly, pressing a button. The door opened and the cadet Sergeant-Major stuck his head in.

"Sir?"

"Coffee, Sergeant. That will be suitable, gentlemen?" The boys nodded and the cadet withdrew.

"While we're waiting, are there any more questions?"

One of the boys hesitantly raised his hand.

"Mr. Phillips?"

"Sir, why is so much of the activity by the agents carried out in secrecy? It all seems rather underhanded to me."

"By the very nature of themselves, what we do must be carried out secretly. Even when we act openly, it is in secret . . ."

IN the distance a bell tolled the supper hour. In the palace, pageboys wandered the corridors, knocking on apartment doors rousing the occupants. Carter combed out his beard, frowning at the liberal sprinkling of gray hairs in it, donned his cloak and set out for the dining hall. He shivered as a chill wind swept down the drafty corridors, and reminded himself to speak to Kahl again about returning to

the capital city. Anything would be better than this.

The dining hall was crowded, as usual, with supplicants who had bribed their way to the royal tables. Most of them had wasted their money. The chamberlain had stuck them away in far corners where they would be able to do nothing but stare at the man they wanted to see. Not that it would have done them any good to speak to the king. Kahl found the petty details of his office tiring. More and more he had been shoving them onto the willing shoulders of Carter.

The chamberlain met him at the door with a copy of the seating arrangements. Carter read down the list, pausing here and there at familiar names—most of them pests who had long ago worn out his patience. He pursed his lips and touched a name with his finger.

"This Ivra. Fisherman, it says. He the one with the daughter Kahl wants?"

"Yes." Like most of the royal retinue, the chamberlain was uncomfortable in Carter's presence. The man had no title, no office. But he was undeniably the most powerful person in the realm after the king himself — some placed his eminence even ahead of the king's. "Shall I place him at the royal table?"

"No. It wouldn't do any good.

But tell him to come see me tomorrow—no. Make that three days from now. He can't have his daughter unviolated, but I think we can make him happy to have her at all."

He handed the list back and made his way to the royal table, nodding to acquaintances and enemies. The problem of the fisherman bothered him. Carter was unaware of the fact, but he carried a strong puritanical conscience, the legacy of unknown forebears of years back. He disapproved of Kahl's unrestrained love life and did whatever he could to ease the disruptions it caused in the normal flow of subject-ruler relations.

He stopped at the royal table and clapped a uniformed officer on the shoulder. "Marshal Zants! A pleasure to see you back at court. I read your report. I know His Most Graciousness will be pleased at your eastern successes."

"Thank you, sir." The marshal inclined his head. "And I see you have had your own successes. Much has changed during the two years of my campaign."

"We all live, Marshal," said Carter. "We all grow a little older. It's the natural course of life. A man who stands still in one position all the time wouldn't make a good runner, now would he?"

"Indeed not. I suppose you

wouldn't be interested in a commission under me? What things we could do together!"

"I'm honored that you think of me so kindly, but I'm afraid my peculiar talents don't run in the military manner, Marshal."

"Ah, but what a strategist you would make, sir."

"Oh?" He grinned. "Then our enemies should be happy to have me in the capital, not on the field."

HE reached his seat just in time to touch trousers to it and rise again when Kahl came in, whispering something in the ear of a courtesan. The girl laughed hysterically, then went to the woman's table as servants started bringing in the first course. Kahl grunted as he sat down and rubbed his belly. He leaned over towards Carter.

"I'm getting fat, southerner. Fat and old."

"A little exercise would do us all good."

Kahl laughed. "That's what I like about you, Carter. Not for you the mealy-mouthed compliments. When you think something, you come right out and say it. I wish more of my ministers had your courage."

"A few tried it," said Carter. "As I remember it, you had their ears cut off and made them eat them."

"Yes, but I gave them a choice as to how they were prepared, didn't I?" He roared, and the rest of the room roared with him, although no one more than six feet from the head of the royal table could possibly have known the jest.

Kahl fell to slurping his soup, while Carter did his best to hide his distaste at the man's table manners. For that matter, there was not a person in the hall he would have invited to the most informal dinner in his own apartments. Table manners were something else he had been trying to introduce, but as yet they were his most notorious failure.

"Ahhh!" The king wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. While one servant removed the soup and another brought up the platter of meats and fish, he leaned over again. "Now, then, Carter. I've been meaning to speak to you all day. Been busy, though. Inhuman the number of demands on my time. Not that I mind of course. The penalties of the crown, and all that. But I really have been meaning to talk to you. How's that pet tinkerer of yours coming along?"

"Which one would that be? I've got most of the college working, you know."

"The one working on that steam gadget you've been telling me about. You know, the one to

make work easier. Not that I can see why a man should have his work made easy. Does the people good to sweat a bit."

"Economically, though, to have one man able to do the work of half a dozen is very good. Just think of how it'll enrich the treasuries. Besides, the work isn't any easier on them: they just produce more."

"Yes, yes. You've explained that all before. But how is it going?"

"Quite well. I think another few weeks will bring very promising results. Some of the others are coming along well, too. The armory is turning out a hundred of the improved crossbows a day, now. I took Marshal Zants through the armory and his eyes positively glowed with excitement. He promises new and greater victories in his next campaign."

"OH?" Kahl was chewing on the leg of a bird. "He's been doing pretty good as it is, hasn't he?"

"Much better than I would have thought," Carter admitted. "The problems of waging a war completely off from contact with home are great. Lines of supply, communication — these are all vital to the successful campaign. I've got a few ideas on these subjects, too. After all, there is a

limit to how much may be withdrawn from an occupied area — if you still want to have that area useful to you in the future. A very wise man in my country once said that an army travels on its stomach. The plans Zants has been discussing with me for his next campaign call for a very large army."

"You know," said Kahl, "at the rate we're going, it won't be long before your country is part of my country."

"I'm afraid that'll take a while yet." He laughed. "Although there has never been a nation in history with so much territory under its direct rule. Your name will live as the monarch of this country alone, no matter what you might do on your own."

Events were moving fast on the planet — almost faster than Carter wanted. Already the lands under Kahl's rule amounted to nearly fifty per cent of the known areas of the world. At the rate things were snowballing, it wouldn't be long before his primary objective of planetary unification were achieved — thousands of years ahead of time, if events had been permitted to follow their natural course.

Of course, there would be delays and setbacks all along the way. Subsidiary objectives would always be getting in the way, must always be considered along

with other plans. But even so, things were off to a good start. Although he might not live to see the complete fruition of all of his plans, Carter knew that this world was well on its way towards galactic citizenship.

"There's a great deal of satisfaction in being a power behind the throne." Reilly grinned. "However, if any of you have a particular yen toward such power, it's only fair to tell you now that our screening is the most thorough ever devised. And it is constantly being improved. No man is ever placed in a position where his weaknesses might prove the better of him.

"This is not to say that a man might not find himself in a position where he will be called on to do more than his utmost. It's surprising just how much a man can do, when he finds out he has no other choice . . ."

VI

THE counterfeit Lund reached the bank of elevators a half-dozen running paces ahead of the just-coming-to-life audience. He gestured, and the operator closed the door in their faces.

During the long descent to the street, Lund stripped off his clothes and did things to his face while the operator shoved the

discarded costume into an access panel. Then he gave the now-slim little man a boost up through the roof of the cage and let himself be helped up.

"Thank God for tradition," the man who had been known as Lund said when he helped the other man up. Stripping off his uniform jacket and reversing it changed the other's appearance. The elevator slowed automatically for the ground floor. Word had been flashed down from the Conference hall, but when the waiting monitors surged into the opening elevator before it had quite eased to a stop, they found nothing at all.

Overhead, the two men threaded their way through a maze of cables and onto the roof of the next cab. It dropped under them, then stopped halfway between floors while they climbed down. The new operator eyed them, but said nothing while they brushed each other off. At a signal from the small man, the cab continued its interrupted drop, letting them out on the sub-surface shopping level.

The corridors of the level were full of running figures, most of them heading towards the elevator banks. No one paid the newly arrived pair any attention at all, although the powder-blue uniforms of the monitors predominated.

The two men strode briskly down the corridor until they came to a side passage lined with small shops that featured the specialized products of the various members of the Conference. They stopped in front of one displaying gadgets from Ehrla, then entered while the counterfeit Lund purchased a perpetual razor, having it giftwrapped. Then they wandered further, acting now like the average sightseer, until they reached a florist's shop set in an alcove at the end of the passage.

They entered, saw that there were no other customers, nodded to the salesman and continued on to the back.

"Dale!" The waiting pair leaped to their feet and spoke as one. "We thought you weren't going to make it!"

"I didn't think so myself," said Dale Vernon, the slim little man. "If Dic hadn't been there right on schedule, there'd be nothing left of me but a few bloody shreds. Those people were mad!" His voice showed respect for the strength of their emotions. "What's the news?"

"The Park monitors found the real Lund about twenty minutes ago."

"Good timing. Any sooner, and the fun upstairs would have been different."

"And you know who is scream-

ing for the dissolving of the Conference."

"So soon?"

"They, uh, you might say had an inside lead as to what was going to happen."

"It's a little early to tell," added the other man, "but apparently the operation was a success. The proper wheels have been set in motion, at least. We'll have to keep applying grease from time to time in the next forty-eight hours, but I think we can forget about the Ehrlan problem — during this conference, at least. Ten years from now, they'll have an entirely different set of plans for the reformation of the galaxy. And we'll have to come up with an entirely different way of crossing them."

"Do-gooders!" snorted the first man.

"You must admit, they have the best of intentions," said Vernon.

"But intentions aren't enough," added the other. "Man is an imperfect creature at best, and his best is a rare occurrence indeed. We have to deal with practicalities. Perfection is beyond us, and we'd be idiots to try and enforce it. That's the basic difference between us and the Ehrlans — we know what we can and can't do. They know only what they would like to do. And that makes

them the most dangerous force loose in the galaxy today."

"**T**O sum it up," said Reilly, getting up and going to the window, "ours is not a life of glory and fame." Another battalion marched out onto the field below and began the familiar maneuvers. "We work hard and receive little thanks—if, indeed, we receive any thanks at all. The life is strenuous. The work is demanding. And over all of us rides

the constant specter of failure, for we are not perfect. Nor do we want to be.

"It is a lonely life for some: it is a short life for others. But for all of us, it's something more." He turned and faced the boys again. "It is the chance to be something more than just a man, for a man is a selfish creature. And it is the most rewarding life I know.

"Any questions, gentlemen?"

— ROBERT HOSKINS