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**SCIENCE  
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**STORIES**

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# the smoke of last rites

by GEORGE W MAKI

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*The Terrans were determined to make an example of Klarin's son — even though no native could have committed this murder...*

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THE OLD-ONE muttered,  
"Poor Klarin."

He stepped carefully on rubbery legs from the stone hut which was his palace; he was naked except for a loin-cloth. A single, long arm sprouted from his chest. He raised a gnarly hand to shade

his eyes from the hot reddish sun. The little village seemed deserted and lonely, for his people were keeping to their huts in fear and sorrow. He heard the awful pounding from over in the valley where the Terrans were camped.

Each blow was like a knife thrust into his heart. The Terrans were building a temporary stage. Tonight, immediately after sunfall, the Plovians would be forced to witness *Terran Justice*. A public execution to set an example the Terran leader, Mr. Oliver, had said.

"Poor Klarin," mumbled the Old-One, blinking away moistness from eye slits. He was a stooped bean-pole on wobbly legs. His bald head shook as if it were too large and heavy for the rest of his body. Right now, his chameleon-like skin was a mixture of the reddish sun and the green sky.

The pounding continued, the sounds being carried by a breeze from that direction, blowing past the village toward the Black Forest. He wondered if it disturbed the

Bleezers stalking game or searching bark juices of the black trees. Perhaps not. The only thing that excited the animal—which resembled a tiger except for its twice-tiger-size—was a freshly-broken tree limb that exuded the bark juice.

It was about the only way it could get at the stuff. And it was a good thing, too, for even the scent was enough to drive the Bleezers half crazy.

**H**OWEVER, the Plovians knew how to cope with these creatures, something they couldn't do with those, the Terrans in the valley. There was no way of fighting weapons that hurled pellets capable of slicing a person in two.

Such wouldn't be used on Klarin, though. Too quick and undramatic to make enough impression on the Plovians. Mr. Oliver felt that the electronic-chair, which created a ball of fire and smoke, leaving no trace of its victim, would be most impressive. Something the Plovians wouldn't forget in a long time.

The Old-One dug out a long-stemmed pipe from the blue pouch hanging from his

neck. He placed the stem between discolored teeth, then took from the pouch a handful of dry leaves. Not as good as the ceremonial tobacco, which was flavored, and certainly not as good as Terran tobacco. The latter was difficult to obtain.

He used a Terran stick match to light his pipe, then started off towards the shallow valley, puffing out clouds of smelly smoke, and coughing a few times at first. Some day, he hoped they'd be able to bargain with the Terrans and lay in an ample supply of their *good* tobacco. Or, better yet, maybe the Plovians could raise their own.

But this was no time to be thinking of tobacco when he had far more important things to consider. He had to think of what he was going to say and do in order to save his son from death...

**H**E STOOD at the rim of the valley, puffing on his pipe and gazing down at the Terran camp. A huge, plastic structure housing some fifty Terrans, scientists and explorers, according to Mr.

Oliver. But sometimes the Old-One had his doubts.

The pounding was quite loud here, and he could see the men hurrying about the platform they were building not far from the camp, nearer the slope which was dotted with blue-stones that were half as tall as the men.

Mr. Oliver would be down there directing the operations. The Old-One would go there then, in spite of the orders to stay away until summoned around sunfall.

He was about to start down when he heard the noise. It was a low growl that seemed to come from behind somewhere. The first thing he thought of was Bleezers. He turned around slowly, but saw nothing.

His eyes searched past blue-stones and thickets of striped spade leaves. He knew it would be almost impossible to spot a Bleezer in there because of the blending colors, orange being predominate.

The Old-One knocked out his pipe and put it away. He walked over to a large blue-stone and leaned against it. His slit eyes were still search-

ing. Finally he saw movement; immediately, he made his skin change color to stone blue. It was generally assumed that the far-sighted Bleezer would only see a fuzzy blend of colors. The assumption had been handed down from forefathers. It had never been questioned, since the chameleon device had never failed to trick the Bleezers.

**T**HE HUGE Bleezer, looking almost pretty with its orange stripes, came into view. Its large head swung from side to side as it apparently searched for something to eat. Once it looked right at the Old-One as if the animal might be seeing him. The Plovian felt his spine tingle for an instant. Then he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the Bleezer turn around and disappear into the thickets leading towards the Black Forest.

The Old-One started down the long slope then, his skin changing back to its original color. When he reached bottom, he headed straight for the platform. A fat man grabbed his arm tightly.

"Please, Mr. Oliver," the Old-One said. "You are hurting me..."

Mr. Oliver released his grip. "You were told to stay away until we came for you!"

"It is about my son..." There was sadness and pleading on the Old-One's face. "I have come to beg of you to reconsider..."

"Your son was judged guilty!"

"But he didn't kill the Terran, Sir."

"That your son was seen entering Crandal's quarters, is evidence enough."

**T**HE OLD-ONE protested, "Klarin only came to beg tobacco for his pipe."

"That's just the point," Mr. Oliver said. "Poor Crandal's tobacco allotment was stolen by your son. We found it in his room."

"For that I am ashamed," said the Old-One, lowering his head. He wasn't exactly proud of the boy of fifteen summers, who had taken to Terran ways, craving their tobacco, speaking their language. Especially Terran slang and swear words. The boy was inclined to be

*happy-go-lucky*, to use one of their expressions. And not least of all, mischievous. Impish.

Still the boy was his own flesh and blood. He loved Klarin; Klarin must not die.

"When poor Crandal took after your son, he was ambushed and brutally slain. That makes your son a murderer," Mr. Oliver said. "Now we are going to make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

The Old-One thought for a long moment. "Mr. Oliver, has it ever occurred to you that we are equipped with only one arm? That to kill someone would be quite a task..."

"A surprise attack with a proper weapon would do the trick easily enough," the fat man said. "From the marks on Crandal's body, I would say the boy used one of your hooks that you gather fire logs with."

"But you didn't find such a weapon."

"Easy enough to get rid of." He glanced over his shoulder towards the platform. The pounding had stopped. It ap-

peared as though the workmen were through. He said, "Now, get back to the village and stay there till we come for you!"

"I want to see my son..."

"You'll see him later," Mr. Oliver snapped. "Now, git!"

The Old-One hesitated. "Would you grant me one wish, then?"

"Depends."

"Please get it over with while it is still daylight." He turned then, and trudged sadly away...

**D**RESSED in their blue loincloths and pouches of the same color dangling from their necks, the Plovians filed down into the valley. Two hundred grim-faced men followed the Old-One down past the blue-stones to where the fat man waited.

Mr. Oliver said to the Old-One: "You will arrange your people on the far slope opposite our men."

"We shall sit on the blue-stones," the Old-One said.

That was satisfactory to Mr. Oliver, and the Old-One directed his followers then. He watched as they filed past

slowly, each bowing reverently towards the Old-One, then seating himself on one of the stones. They clung to skin colors of the sun, which was slowly dipping towards the horizon and not visible down here, except for the reddish cast on everything. Before the march, the Old-One had given them certain instructions, which included bringing along their ceremonial pipes.

After they had seated themselves as if in a large amphitheatre, the Old-One spoke to Mr. Oliver.

"I beg of you to reconsider, Sir," he said pleadingly. "Klarin is my *only* son..."

"Nothing you can say now," said Mr. Oliver, "will change anything. The decree is final!"

"Please, Mr. Oliver..."

**T**WO HUSKY Terrans then moved in upon the fat man's orders, and escorted the Old-One to a vacant blue-stone. He sat down on its flat surface and glanced around at his people. They were talking quite noisily.

His gaze went down to the platform, swept past the entire Terran population standing

there on the other side. His eyes followed up the opposite slope towards the village and the Black Forest and the falling sun, seeing only the red-dishness.

Finally his eyes fell back on the platform. Three Terrans lugged an odd-looking, high-backed chair onto the center of the stage and departed. Mr. Oliver had told him about the electronic chair and what it would do. The Old-One shuddered at the thought.

A sudden silence came over everyone as two Terrans led Klarin up steps and over to the chair. His arm was lashed to his body. The boy was sobbing softly. Sight of him sent pain shooting through the Old-One.

The gangling boy cringed once as his bare leg brushed against metal of the chair. Then he was staring down at it and shaking visibly. Looking up, his eyes sought out the Old-One seated out there on the slope. When their eyes met, young Klarin tried to fake bravery.

A forced smile broke out on his lips, and a hint of impishness that didn't quite take.

His tongue flicked out and licked dry lips. He seemed to be fighting for self-control, his shoulders twisting and his feet shuffling awkwardly. He tried to speak but only cracked sounds came out.

The Old-One felt the terrible heaviness inside of him as he saw the boy's lips quiver and the smile faded away to be replaced by the old fear. He shifted uneasily on the blue-stone.

Mr. Oliver came on stage then, and made a short speech. He concluded with: "You may now have five minutes for prayer and meditation—then we shall proceed..."

**T**HE OLD-ONE stared at the electronic chair. His son would be strapped to it and given sedation so that he wouldn't feel anything, Mr. Oliver had said.

Energy would flash through the air from elaborate equipment over in the camp. The receptor dish the Terrans were now putting in place on a rod projecting up from the back of the chair, would funnel horrible death-rays into Klarin.

He would glow reddish for

an instant, then burst into a dazzling ball of white fire. A puff of dark smoke would shoot skyward. There would be nothing left but a charred spot on the stage. The Old-One felt a shiver up his spine.

His eyes shifted to the villagers and met their questioning glances. He had briefed them on how they were to act. They were waiting now, ready...

He nodded and got off the blue-stone, then hurried to the stage. He climbed the steps to Klarin's side. No one tried to stop him, although sudden conversation broke out in the Terran section. Mr. Oliver had to quiet them, at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the Plovian.

There was silence except for the whispering breeze, which he quickly determined was still blowing towards the village. Towards the Black Forest. He noted, too, the beautiful reddishness of the sky beyond, near the horizon, and he knew it was sun-fall.

**A**ND EVERY Plovian knew that sun-fall meant feeding time in the Black Forest.

Several thousand hungry Bleezers roamed and tossed their noses into the winds to catch any scents drifting in. It wouldn't take much to send the whole lot of them on a wild and furious rampage. And any human they might see, wouldn't stand a chance, just as it must have happened in the case of Crandal.

A thin smile played on the Old-One's lips. He spoke to Klarin. "Everything is going to be all right, son..." He saw the boy's eye slits widen with a ray of hope, and the boy smiled and stood silent, watching his father.

The Old-One turned to the villagers and bowed. It was the signal for them to bring out their *Trukos*. The ceremonial pipes had extra large bowls that were already filled with flavored dry leaves. Flavored with an extra, strong dosage of bark juices from the black trees. The smoke would be dark and its aroma potent.

They changed skin color then, and lit their pipes while the Terrans watched in amusement and great ignorance.

So began the *smoke-of-last-rites*...