

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the
soldier
from
the
stars

by . . . Poul Anderson

**It was an old pattern of history
—the loss of human freedom, the
foundations of culture destroyed.
But man will always build anew.**

IT WAS EARLY morning, local time, when I felt the plane tilt forward and start the long swoop down. I stirred uncomfortably, stretching stiffened muscles and blinking open sandy eyelids. You don't sleep well when you are burdened with such knowledge as ours.

Not that I had much responsibility. I was only a guard for Samuels and Langford; throughout the whole business, I was little except an observer. But maybe I had a chance to observe more than anyone else, which is why I am writing this for those who will come after us.

There were a good dozen others crowded into the plane, Secret Service men and brawny soldiers with loaded rifles between their knees. But they were an empty gesture, and we all knew it. Taruz of Thashtivar had said sardonically that the envoys might have one guard apiece if it would make them happier. That was me.

Samuels moved in the seat next to mine. The clear pale dawnlight came through a window and touched his hair with a white halo. His face looked old and gray, not like

When the author of THE HELPING HAND—a shining landmark in recent science fiction—goes on a story-teller's holiday where armies of the future clash by night the world of today seems prosaic and remote. Poul Anderson has written many memorable stories, but seldom has he sent the entertainment meter soaring with characterization so vigorous, exciting and adroit.

the famous statesman and American plenipotentiary he was supposed to be. But then, we all felt small on that cold morning.

He tried to smile. "Hello, Hill-
yer," he said to me. "Have a good
night's rest?"

"Hardly, sir. Just dozing."

"I wish I could have done as
much," Samuels sighed. "Oh,
well."

Dr. Langford pushed his nose
against the window. "I always did
want to see the Azores," he re-
marked. "But I never thought it
would be under such circum-
stances."

He looked more human, less
chilled and bloodless, than the rest
of us. His keen eagle features were
curved into a humorless grin, and
the grizzled bush of hair as dis-
ordered as ever.

You may have heard of Dr. Lang-
ford, the physicist who was led
through cybernetics into biology,
neurology, psychology, and more
understanding of history than most
professors in that field. He was the
best suited man in the country to
act as Samuels' scientific advisor,
though I wondered what good that
would be.

I caught a glimpse of the island
lifting before us, and then the plane
was jouncing to a halt on the hastily
enlarged airfield. Beyond its shacks
I could see the little tile-roofed
town, and a steep rise of land to-
ward a sallow sky. There are only
a few thousand people on Flores.

Our guards got out ahead of us,

the soldiers forming a wary ring
about the door while the Secret
Service men conferred with the
Portuguese officials.

Langford chuckled. "Stupid sort
of thing," he declared. "If Taruz
wished to wipe us out, those boys
wouldn't make any more difference
than putting two extra flies under
a descending swatter."

"There are the Russians," an-
swered Samuels wearily. "They
might try, even though this is neu-
tral ground." He took off his glasses
and rubbed his eyes. "I wouldn't
trust anyone in this place where you
can buy power over all the earth.
I'm not even sure that I could be
trusted."

We came out into a cool salt
wind and the flustered presence of
a small Portuguese colonel. I look-
ed around the field. Several other
big planes were sitting at one end.
I noticed British and French insig-
nia and the Red Star, and moved
a furtive hand to the comforting
drag of the gun beneath my arm-
pit. Even as we stood there, receiv-
ing voluble greetings in a highly
individual English, another speck
grew in the sky, circled, and rolled
to a landing. Egyptian!

The eagles gather, I thought.

"Eef you hentlemen weel to
bbreak your fast weeth me, please,"
said the colonel. "Deescussions are
not to be for a many hours yet."

We followed him off the field.
A rickety official car took us to a
house which may have been com-
mandeered for the occasion, where

a very decent breakfast was served—none of the usual Continental *café complaint* this time.

I didn't have much appetite, but slowed away a sizeable amount, not knowing when the energy might be needed. There was little talk, and it shied clear of the reason we were here. Langford alone came close to the truth when he asked: "How many nations will be represented?"

"Twenty-three," said the colonel. "A beeg congress, eh, what?"

"Of course," said Langford, "bidders will be working together—"

"Gentlemen, please!" The colonel looked distressed. "Eet ees altogether far from my province."

That was a joke, but I suppose he had his orders. In offering Taruz the island site, Portugal had gone to extreme lengths to emphasize her neutrality. She would not be in the bidding—where would the money have come from?—and she would not permit conferences between delegates outside of Taruz' stronghold.

I went into the garden afterward with Samuels and Langford. The envoy was nervously chewing on a dead stogie, and the scientist was littering the ground with cigarette stubs; his own hands were yellow from nicotine. Being that rare animal, a non-smoker, I concentrated on keeping an eye out for assassins, but I couldn't avoid hearing their conversation.

"Are you sure the British won't throw in with us?" asked Langford.

"Not at first, anyway," said Samuels. "Sir Wilfred represents the entire Commonwealth, you know; that's no small financial backing, what with the Canadian dollar being worth more than ours and all. It'd be quite a feather in his cap, and an answer to all the people yelling about American domination if he got Taruz' services exclusively for Her Majesty."

Samuels shrugged. "Frankly, I'd just as soon he did. We have nothing to fear from the British, and it'd be a huge saving to us if they paid Taruz. But of course, you know what our own nationalists would scream." He added soberly: "The important thing is to keep Russia from getting those units."

"I don't like it," said Langford. "Read your history and see what happened to all the world powers once they started hiring mercenaries."

"What choice have we?" shrugged Samuels. "It so happens that these mercenaries can lick any army on Earth."

"I still wish they'd stayed away," said Langford.

"I don't know. All right, so we pay them an enormous sum; but then we're safe forever—for many years, at least. We can relax the militarization which is ruining our whole tradition; we won't have to fear our cities being destroyed, we won't have to listen to those who'd strangle the Bill of Rights in a paranoid spy hunt—no, if Taruz can be trusted, and I think he can,

this may be the greatest thing that ever happened to humanity."

"It's conventional to say that a certain Jewish carpenter was more important than any soldier before or since," answered Langford tartly. "I'm not a religious man, but there's truth in conventions."

After that, the talk declined. There was nothing they could say, after all. And Samuels was right, I thought; what choice did we have?

I went over the incredible background of the last three months. The giant ships soaring majestically around the world, hovering above every capital, swamping local radios with a broadcast in seven major languages.

"We are the free companions of Thashtivar, General Taruz commanding, and we seek employment—" The arrogant invitation to us to do our worst, and the explosion of everything from BB guns to hydrogen bombs leaving those shining metal forms untouched, the failure of poison gas and radioactive dust and airborne virus.

I was thinking too of the three demonstrations, spotted around the world and open to all who cared to see. In one a good-sized uninhabited island had vanished in flame while all Earth's seismographs trembled, in another our guns and engines had simply quit operating, and in a third men and animals had fallen unconscious before some invisible force in a radius of miles and lain so for hours.

It was a science as far beyond

ours as ours is beyond the bow and arrow, a science which crossed the space between the stars, and it was at the disposal of the highest bidder for any defensive or offensive use he had in mind.

They must have studied us for a long time, hovering out in space or descending secretly; the perfection of their knowledge about us showed that the very study methods transcended anything we could imagine. Taruz' announcement had even revealed considerable financial shrewdness. He would only consider payment in dollars, pounds sterling, or Swiss francs, the rate of exchange not to be the official one but that prevailing in Tangier—one of the few really free money markets. He and his men must be allowed to spend their pay in any way they saw fit; no sale would be forced, but the contracting government might not forbid it.

"Why not the UN?" Langford's question was one which had been asked many times, in anguish, by all men who loved their race. "He could have gone to the UN, offered them—"

"Offered them what?" asked Samuels. "The UN has no army, and who would vote to pay him to set up one? He's not interested in teaching us his own science—probably a good idea, considering how uncivilized we are. He's a soldier, with his soldiering to sell."

"I know." Langford's face was grim. "I'm only saying what I wish he had done. But I don't suppose

we could expect any other planet to hold a race of saints. They have as much right to be greedy and callous and short-sighted as we."

"What puzzles me," said Samuels, "is why there are such mercenaries at all between the stars. I should think a culture that far along would have outgrown—"

"I can only guess," said Langford, "but I think that there is no Galactic Union or Empire or whatever—no reason for one. A whole planet at that level of technology would be self-sufficient, little or no cause to trade; distances are too great, and the various races too alien to each other, to need or want a central government.

"But disputes may arise—relatively minor things, not worth risking an entire world for; so their petty wars are fought by hired soldiers, safely out in interstellar space. Insofar as comparison is possible, I imagine Taruz' culture is rather like that of the Italian city-states during the Renaissance.

"And because of temporary peace or something, he's out of work, so he came to this barbaric fringe of the Galaxy for any job he could pick up. With his earnings, he can buy portable wealth to take back home and exchange for his own kind of money."

The slow hours passed.

II

Our little colonel took us up to the hill. It was a jouncy ride over

a road that seemed to be one long rut; at the top we could look across a metallic curve of ocean to the edge of the world. But we were more interested in the Thashtivarian camp.

The six great spaceships towered enormously above us, blinding bright in the sun. They clustered near the center of a circle formed by small, squat structures which I heard humming as we approached: generators for the protective force-field, I imagined. Within, there were two long, featureless buildings like outsize Quonset huts.

At each generator, a soldier lounged, holding a slim-barreled object that must be a gun. The free companions didn't bother with standing at attention, but there was alertness in their eyes. Overhead hovered a smaller craft, on guard.

"I think—" Langford rubbed his chin. "I think control of gravity, some means of artificially warping space and creating a gravitational field as desired, would explain both their ships and their defenses. The force screen is a potential barrier. Then they can also damp electrical and chemical reactions, perhaps by use of the same principle— A lot of good that does us! We haven't the faintest idea about gravity control."

Portuguese soldiers formed a wider ring near the base of the hill, and were escorting the envoys to the camp entrance. They'd enforce neutrality if they had to shoot all of us. Officially, of course, Por-

tugal was in NATO, but that uneasy alliance had virtually collapsed, like everything else.

Other men were getting out of their cars. I recognized Sir Wilfred Martin of Britain, and Andre Lafarge of France, and Yakov Dmitrovich of the Soviet Union. The rest were strange to me, though I knew that some king-sized wheels were here today. My eyes were more on the Thashtivarians.

There weren't more than a few thousand of them. That fact had pretty well calmed most fears that they were out to conquer Earth. They could have whipped all our armies in the field, but the sheer task of administration would have been too much for that small number.

I noticed that they were about half female—natural enough, on the long lonely voyages they made, and a woman could handle one of their weapons as easily as a man. No children, and they all looked young, though probably they had some longevity system. A handsome race, startlingly human-like. The main difference was in the straight deep-blue hair, the pointed chin slanting down from high cheekbones, the oblique light eyes, and the yellow skin—not any of the brownish tints of Mongoloid humans, but a dully glowing gold.

They wore tight-fitting pants, soft shoes, loose tunics under metal breastplates, ridged helmets, and short cloaks, all in colorful hues. When they spoke, it was in a

throaty purring language. All of them looked hard, toughened down to the very guts.

We were a muttering, unhappy throng as we stood at the invisible gate. A Thashtivarian officer approached us and bowed very slightly.

"*Bon jour, messieurs,*" he said in excellent French. It had been announced that that language would be used at the parley. My year at the Sorbonne was one reason I was chosen for this trip. "Please come with me."

He led us into one of the huts. It was a single hall, bare save for long soft benches and a row of guards. There were no windows, but the material itself seemed to give off light and the air stayed fresh. At the farther end, facing the benches, was a dais with a kind of throne on it.

We were courteously shown our places, the delegates of the great powers at the front. There was a miserable time in which we shuffled portfolios and avoided each other's eyes. Then a door opened itself at the end of the hall and General Taruz came in.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, walking with a liteness that came near insolence. He was very plainly dressed apart from the seven-pointed gold star on his cuirass. His face was long and lean and straight-boned, the eyes pale blue, the lips thin. It was the coldest face I have ever seen.

He sat down on the throne and

crossed his legs, smiling a trifle. The stillness that followed hurt my eardrums.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said at last. "I trust you have had a pleasant journey. Not to waste any more of your valuable time, let us get down to business at once."

Taruz made a bridge of his fingers. "I will repeat my terms to make sure they are understood. The Free Company offers its services for ten years to the nation making the highest bid. Payment may be made in not more than three annual installments. At the end of ten years, the contracting nation has the option of renewing for another ten at the same price, subject to adjustments in case its currency has depreciated meanwhile. If it does not take up the option, the rest may bid again. I do not think we will be on Earth for more than twenty years.

"Our services consist of defending whatever sites you choose and of assisting in any wars you may wage. We will not try to make policy for you; our part is but to serve in these capacities, though I may offer advice to be accepted or rejected as you desire. We will do our best, within the limitations imposed by our numbers and powers; however, I retain command of my forces and all orders to them will go through me.

"I believe that is the substance of the formal contract we will make. Are there any questions?"

"Yes!" A Pole stood up. He was

clearly frightened, I knew that he was a cat's paw for his Russian bosses, but he spat out what he had to ask. "How do we know you will keep your word?"

For a moment, I think we all expected annihilation. Then Taruz smiled wider, completely unruffled. "A natural question, sir. I cannot give you references, since the nearest planet of my civilization is a good thousand light-years away, but I assure you that the Thashtivarian Company has always given satisfaction and that we never violate a contract. I am afraid you will just have to take my word. If you are suspicious, you need not bid today."

The Pole sat down, gulping in a dry throat.

"Now, gentlemen, what am I offered?" Taruz lounged back, not trying to excite us like a human auctioneer. He knew he had us strung close to breaking already.

There was another silence. Then Sir Wilfred got slowly up. "On behalf of Her Majesty's government and the British Commonwealth of Nations," he said, "I beg of you, sir, not to set men against each other in this fashion. The United Nations—"

Taruz frowned. For a wild instant, I thought of drawing my gun and killing him. But it would do no good, no good at all; in fact, he was probably shielded.

Sir Wilfred saw he was beaten and turned gray. "Very well, sir,"

he said. "One hundred million pounds."

Samuels whistled. But actually, I thought, it was a ridiculously low offer. Two hundred eighty million dollars—no, less than that in Tangier—you couldn't fight even a battle for that sum nowadays.

Andre Lafarge rose, shakily. "One hundred and fifty billion francs!" he cried.

"In the accepted currencies, please," said Taruz.

"That is . . . I will say 500 million dollars . . . m'sieur." He had to swallow hard to get his pride down.

"This is a capitalist plot!" exclaimed Dmitrovich. "Your very methods are those of the degraded money-grubbing warmonger."

"Have you a bid to make, or a lecture?" asked Taruz coldly.

"Three billion Swiss francs!" At least Dmitrovich wouldn't use that foul word "dollars." I made it about 750 megabucks.

A dark man in uniform got up. "From Egypt," whispered Samuels to me, "on behalf of the Arab League—"

I needn't go through the next couple of hours. They were a nightmare, with distorted faces and gibbering voices and the destiny of our world tumbling like a football around the chamber; over the whole mess hovered the chill smile of Taruz, an image of Satan.

The lesser nations were soon squeezed out. France stayed longer than I had expected; her govern-

ment must have made the desperate decision to declare all her money freely convertible. Through it all, Samuels didn't say a word. He was a good poker player.

When Russia, throwing in with the other Iron Curtain countries, offered some four billion dollars, I knew the crisis was on us.

Samuels got up. "My country," he drawled—odd how calm he was, all of a sudden—"bids four billion, one hundred million dollars!"

Wow! The taxpayers weren't going to like that at all. But what price freedom?

Dmitrovich snarled, and raised us a hundred million dollars.

Samuels caught the eye of Sir Wilfred, who nodded imperceptibly. His next bid was on behalf of both us and the Commonwealth: five billion.

Dmitrovich, white and sweating: that much, plus a hundred million more.

The Italians joined their previous bid to ours.

Dmitrovich cursed. I didn't blame him. Six billion!

Langford leaned over to me. "Here's where we separate the men from the boys," he whispered. But his own face was wet.

Samuels offered six and a half. "This is encirclement!" gasped Dmitrovich. "The aggressors are leaguuing against the peace-loving peoples of the world!" He turned around and faced us all. "I warn you, the Soviet Union and the people's democratic republics consider

this clear proof of aggressive intent."

"Do you bid, sir?" asked Taruz.

"I . . . do. Yes. Twenty-five billion Swiss francs," said Dmitrovich.

That made over six billion dollars. The Soviets would have to make their own currency convertible . . . no, wait! With 'Taruz' help, they could overrun the world and pay him from its loot.

Samuels realized as much, I could see. His hands trembled. "Seven billion dollars!"

Eight, nine, ten—how long would it go on?

France joined us. So did the other Western nations, one by one. *Yeah, I thought, the Swiss and the Swedes and everybody else who stayed away were playing it real*

I was watching Dmitrovich close-smart.

ly now. After fifteen billion, he seemed to reach some kind of decision. More likely, his government's instructions had decided something for him. He raised us nearly five billion right away. He kept on raising that much, each time around.

Samuels turned white. I didn't get it at first, but Langford explained it to me: "They've given up hope of outbidding us. Now they're just staying in to raise the price we must pay."

At fifty billion dollars, that price looked ruinous.

And if we dropped out, the Soviets still had their aim of world

conquest to pay for them. I wondered if we might not be driven to such a course ourselves. Or was there this much money in the world?

"One hundred billion dollars!"

That ended it. Dmitrovich gathered his portfolio, nodded curtly, and stalked out with his satellites.

I don't remember very well just what happened next. I have a confused impression of people milling about, and talking, and being afraid.

Taruz was conferring with Samuels, and I caught a fragment of what he said: "—I hope you will be satisfied, sir. This conference has been an admirable example of diplomacy, not so? Open covenants openly arrived at—"

I thought his sense of humor rather fiendish, but maybe we deserved it.

What I do remember is Langford drawing me aside. He was very pale, and spoke fast. "We'd better get going," he said. "We'd better start for home right away. This means war."

He was right. We were still in mid-Atlantic, escorted by one of the Thashtivarian ships, when our radio brought the news that suicide air detachments had H-bombed America.

III

We passed over what had been Washington. There wasn't much to see through the dust and smoke

which still roiled miles high. The suburban rim was a tangle of shards, and beyond it there was fire.

Samuels bowed his head and wept.

We landed in Richmond, and a platoon of Marines surrounded us at once. The radio code had told us that what remained of our government was holed up here. I recalled that this city had been the capital of the Confederacy—if Taruz knew, how he must be grinning!

His ships were already there, posted in the sky above us, and I gathered that a force-field would be switched on over the town at the first alarm.

As we drove to meet the President, I saw that the streets were almost empty, except for a few wrecked cars and sprawled corpses which no one had yet had time to clean up. The spectacle, and the smashed windows and scarred walls, told me what a murderous stampede had run through the town the day before.

People had fled, blind and wild with fear, and those who remained were now huddled behind locked doors. There was likely to be starvation before long, because it would be impossible to restore essential services to a whole country gone lunatic.

A guard at the door of our new capitol tried to keep me out. I flashed my badge at him in the best movie manner, and shoved him

aside. Nobody had told me to quit watching Samuels and Langford. He let me by, which shouldn't have happened; but something in his eyes showed me how stunned he was. I felt an inward emptiness myself, and I hadn't lived through the last several hours here.

There was a long, time-mellowed conference room, and in it sat the leaders of the nation. The President had had the foresight to leave Washington with the Cabinet and chief staff officers as soon as he got word Taruz was on our side. Most of Congress must have gone up—in *hot air*, said a ghastly imp within me—and such as had also left didn't know where we were. The rabble-rousers were good riddance, I thought, and the rest might seem superfluous with the whole country necessarily under martial law. But there had been fine and honest men among them who would be sorely missed.

It was to Taruz that my eyes went first. He sat imperturbably beside the President, and in all the desolation around us his wild alien form looked only natural. There was a world map spread out in front of him.

The President nodded at us. "Good day, gentlemen," he said tonelessly. "I hope you're not too tired to get right down to work. We need every brain we have."

"What's the situation?" asked Langford.

Samuels had collapsed into a heap on one of the chairs, staring

at nothing, but the scientist was inhumanly composed.

"Well, the Soviets have struck," said the President. "Obviously they hope to overcome us, throw us into complete confusion, before we can get organized enough to make much of General Taruz' help. Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, Detroit—they're gone."

As he moved his head, I saw how deep the lines in his face had become, almost overnight. "Clearly, they hope to bottle us up by wrecking our main seaports and industrial centers," he went on. "They're rolling in Europe and Korea. We've sent raids against Vladivostok and certain bases in the Urals, but don't yet know if they've succeeded."

"Why not Moscow?" snapped someone, a Cabinet secretary. "Blow those devils to hell, like they— Oh, God." He buried his face in his hands; later I found out that his family was gone with Washington.

"Surely you don't think their headquarters are still in Moscow," said the Chief of Staff. "I don't know where the Politburo is now."

"I think that information might be obtained," said Taruz quietly. His English was as good as his French.

"Eh?" We all wheeled about to look at him.

"Of course," he nodded. "Small one-man scoutboats, flying low with invisibility screens and telepathic receptors. I need only know ap-

proximately where they are to find them within . . . two weeks at the most. After that, one bomb—" He shrugged.

"That," said the President slowly, "kind of changes the picture."

"For what?" The Secretary of Labor leaned over the table and shook his fists at Taruz. "Why did you come here? Why did you want your, your blood money—from anyone who had it? You murdering devil, none of this would have happened if—"

"That's enough!" snapped the President. "We're faced with a fact. It's too late for recriminations." But he didn't apologize to Taruz.

The soldier took it in good part. "This war will be won," Taruz said. "It may take a little time, since my company is not large, but it can be won. However, there is the question of terms. You will note in the contract that the Free Companions do not have to act until the first payment has been made."

"Payment!" screamed the Secretary of Labor. "At a time like this you talk of payment—!"

The President nodded at two MP's, who led the weeping man out. Then he sighed.

"I understand your position, General," he said. "You owe us nothing, except in terms of a morality which seems to be unknown to you. But there are practical difficulties. The offices of the Treasury Department are gone—"

"You will write me a check for

thirty-three point three billion dollars," said Taruz coldly. "I shall have to ask that my quartermaster general be given powers in your Treasury Department to assure that the check is made good and that inflation does not rob us of full value."

"But—" The President shut up. It was appalling, to give the right to levy taxes away to a creature from space, with all the police powers implied, but Taruz had us and he knew it. There could be no argument now.

"Yes," said the President. "Please send your . . . man . . . to confer with our Secretary."

"Internal reorganization will also be necessary," declared Taruz. "There is no point in taxing and controlling prices if the taxpayers, merchants, and consumers cannot be located. I will appoint a couple of men to work with your officials."

The President lifted his head. "These concessions are only for the duration of the emergency," he stated.

"Of course," said Taruz smoothly. "And now shall we turn to the military problem?"

The next few weeks were a fever-dream. Like most people, I guarded my sanity by not reading many of the confused dispatches which came from all over our smoking globe, but simply concentrated on my work. That was with Langford at half a dozen cities, getting tracker shells into production.

We had given up on long-range missiles—the Thashtivarian ships handled such jobs better—but our armies in the field needed artillery missiles which could home on the target.

Officially I was still Langford's bodyguard; in practice, as soon as he found I had a degree in physics (which had given me a certain specialized usefulness in the Secret Service), he drafted me to be his assistant. Our job was trouble-shooting in both the organizational and technical lines.

Still, I did follow the broad development of the struggle—more so than most, because Samuels had arranged for Langford to be kept abreast of even confidential information, which he passed on to me. During that frightful summer, I knew that Army units stationed within the country had managed to restore a degree of order. There were more raids on us, but the bombs exploded harmlessly against Thashtivarian force screens, and only unimportant, unprotected Atlanta went to hell—by mistake, I imagine.

With Thashtivarian help, the Communists were soon bounced out of Korea and Japan. The Nationalist Chinese assault from Formosa to the mainland was also successful because a spaceship accompanied their army. Energy beams methodically melted the tracks of the trans-Siberian railway, thus cutting the Soviets off from their own eastern territory.

A few raids on the gigantic prison camps, weapons dropped to the convicts, and we had the Siberian Commune set up and fighting with us. We let the Vietminh overrun Indo-China, and then isolated them for future reference.

In Europe, our forces were driven back to the Pyrenees and the English Channel, but there they stayed. It was bitter fighting. A few space-ships roved about, annihilating Russian forces wherever they could be found. But even such immense power was spread so thin that our men bore the brunt of the war.

Within one month, the head of the Soviet monster had been cut off. Taruz' scouts hunted down and killed the leaders, and located all the factories and military bases for his ships to destroy. But there were still millions of armed men, living off the country and fighting with a desperation that would have been called heroic if they had been ours. Even with Thasbtivarian help, it would be a long haul.

"There was quite a conference in Richmond about strategy," remarked Langford one night. We were in a dingy hotel room overlooking Pittsburgh. The city was dimmed out, merely to conserve power, and it made the red glow of the great mills seem malignant in the sky. "The President was for negotiating terms with the scattered Red armies, but Taruz was for forcing them all to surrender unconditionally. He finally won his point."

"How?" I asked. I sprawled on

the bed, too bone-weary to look at his drawn face. It seemed like forever since I had had a good night's sleep.

"By pointing out that his company wasn't going to be on Earth indefinitely, and that we had better make damn sure of a final peace while we still have this much strength." Langford pulled off a shoe, and it dropped to the floor with a hollow sound. "I suppose he's right. He always seems to be right. But I don't like it, somehow."

"Just why do you rate all this top-secret information?" I inquired.

"Samuels pulled for me. He said he wanted a . . . an impartial observer. What's happening is too big to be grasped by any human mind, and most of our leaders are too busy with immediate problems to think beyond them. He thought maybe I could spot the significant trends and warn him of them."

"Have you?"

"I don't know. If I just had to sit and think. But I've got my own immediate job to do. There's something, call it a hunch, I don't know, but I have an idea that somehow we're sacrificing our long-range interests for expediency."

"What else can we do?"

"Search me." He shrugged skinny shoulders and climbed into bed. "History tells us that no good comes of hiring mercenaries, but you know what Shaw said: 'The only thing we learn from history

is that we learn nothing from history.' "

After a while I got to sleep.

IV

World War Three did not end; it fizzled out, bit by bit, through the next two years. In the first winter, it was plain that Soviet Russia had been smashed; but ridding the world of Communism was a long and bloody business. It was men with flamethrowers crawling through Indo-Chinese jungles, it was a bayonet charge up Yugoslavian hills, it was an artillery spotter dying to let his unit know where one tank was.

Taruz' forces were only of limited value in this small-scale war which spotted the world like pox. He could destroy or immobilize a regiment, but against guerrillas he could offer little except protection for the American base.

Martial law was lifted here at home on the first New Year's Day, and a specially chosen Congress met the day after. They were not a pretty sight; you couldn't expect them to be, after what the nation had gone through. Public contempt for their wrangling while millions of Americans starved did much to undermine our tradition of constitutional government.

Nobody said a word against the Thashtivarians, in spite of what they cost us. They were the heroes of the day. Wherever one of their haughty golden-skinned men ap-

peared, a crowd would gather to cheer. A rage for their type of dress swept through the land, and women took to tinting their complexions amber and dying their hair blue. The aliens were always correct and reserved among Americans, even when they visited our night clubs where they were pretty lavish spenders.

I saw a less pleasant side of them in Russia, when Langford and I took a trip there in the late winter to study conditions. It was in Podolsk, near Moscow. There was muddy snow in the streets, and a raw wet wind melted it off the roofs, drip, drip, drip, like tears. A spaceship had landed and the Thashtivarians were out after loot. I smelled smoke in the air, and saw dead men in the gutters.

A soldier went by with an armful of tapestries and icons from some church; another was wrenching a gold ring from the finger of an old woman who cried and huddled into her long black dress. Maybe it had been her wedding ring. A third alien was leading a nice-looking girl off, she had a bruise on her cheek and followed him mechanically. Our races were enough alike for such attraction, though there could not be issue from it. I felt sick.

Still, such incidents were rare, and in accordance with the Thashtivarians' customs. Underneath all their technology, they were barbarians, like German tribesmen armed with Roman weapons. And they did

not operate slave camps, nor exterminate whole populations, nor kill more helpless civilians than they had to. Our nation, the first to use atomic bombs and jellied gasoline, should not cast the first stone.

By the end of that year, things had settled down in the Americas. Europe and Asia were still chaos, but mile by mile peace and order were being restored. American boys were drafted and sent out, and many did not come back. But at home the work of reconstruction went on steadily and a hectic, rather unhealthy gaiety flourished where it could.

There wasn't much spending, though; Taruz' rigidly enforced economic program saw to that. People went about in sleazy clothes and waited in long queues for cigarettes and meat. They grumbled about the ferocious taxes, but at least there was no further inflation.

The Big Strike that fall raised a hullabaloo. It started with the coal miners, who saw all their painfully made gains swallowed in taxes, demanding higher pay, but it spread like a grass fire. For a week the country was almost paralyzed. Then the President declared martial law again and called out the Army. Soldiers whose comrades were dying for lack of supplies were not sympathetic to the strikers.

Langford told me that Taruz had gotten the President to do it, and mumbled something ominous about precedents.

For a while it looked like civil

war. There was, indeed, open rioting here and there. But the President made a series of television appeals, and the Thashtivarians used their catalepsy beams, and the whole business caved in. Workers were sullen, but they went back to their jobs. Martial law was not lifted, but Congress continued to sit.

Shortly thereafter, Taruz himself, who had always remained in the background, appeared on a well-known news commentator's show. I watched it closely. He was a fine actor. He had dropped his usual arrogance, and said he was only serving his own people, whose interests were the same as ours. A plain and truthful statement of what his army meant to us in terms of safety, a few "human interest" remarks about his kiddies at home, a hint or two about the wonders to be expected when his influence got us in on Galactic civilization and commerce—and he had America in his hand.

There was one offhand saying of his which got Langford started on another round of worries. In proof of his own far-sighted humanitarianism, Taruz explained that he was investing most of his company's pay in large American corporations doing vital reconstruction work.

The money wasn't being taken out of the world, it was staying right here in the good old U.S.A. Why, you needed only to look at the next new building or the next big rubble-clearing bulldozer to see the

benefits you were getting from it.

"The big industrialists will love him for that," said Langford wryly, "especially since all his money is tax free. That's written into the contract, you know. Fine print. And the people are conditioned to follow the businessmen's lead. Also, I happen to know that he's hired the three biggest public-relations outfits in the country to put himself over."

"Well, what of it?" I said. "It serves his own interests, sure, he makes a whopping profit, but it serves us too. Suppose he simply used the money to buy our machinery and oil and whatnot, and shipped it out into space. Where'd we be then? As it is, we get the use of the stuff."

"And he gets the control of it," said Langford. "Money is power, especially in so rigidly frozen an economy as ours now is."

"General Motors or General Taruz—does it matter who owns title to the machines?" I persisted. "It's not you or me or Joe Smith in either case."

"There's a hell of a big difference," said Langford. "But never mind. The pattern is beginning to emerge, but so far I don't see just what to do about it."

The United Nations met in Stockholm about Christmas time, and went into an interminable debate over revising the charter. I think even the delegates knew by then that the UN had become a pious mummery. Without universal

disarmament and an international army to enforce peace, it could only handle secondary matters.

The smaller countries were eager for such an arrangement, and the United States, the only remaining world power, could have brought it about with one word. Samuels stumped hard for the idea prior to the meeting, but then he died—heart attack—and the man we did send was as stiff-necked as the Russians had ever been. Even had Samuels lived, there would probably have been no difference.

America was in no mood to surrender her authority. You heard a lot of talk about not being able to trust any foreign country because sooner or later, it would turn on you. We had paid a bitter price for dominion, and would not sell it for peanuts.

What we did do was make the new Russian Republic disarm and renounce war—something tried in Japan after World War Two. The newly liberated countries of Europe were too hungry and enfeebled to matter.

About that time I was able to quit working for the government, something I'd wanted for a long time. The old atmosphere of witch hunting before the war had been bad enough. But because I'd liked my work and believed in its importance I'd kept my mouth shut and stayed in. But now the new tight-lipped, puritanical notion that we alone could save civilization was just too much.

Langford retired too, to accept a professorship at M.I.T., without giving up all his connections in Richmond. I got a position with an electronics firm in Boston, so we still saw a lot of each other. The next year I got married and began to settle down into the not uncomfortable creeping-up of middle age.

In the third year, the last Communist army surrendered, but there was no celebration because war was not yet ended. Order had to be restored to lands running wild with a dozen fanatic new creeds, whipped on by hunger and despair. We were fighting Neonihilists in the Balkans and Whiteslayers in Africa and Christomosems in Southwest Asia. Taruz was a big help, but I wondered if it would ever end.

At least, I was free to wonder.

V

Langford glanced up from his newspaper as I came into his home. "Hello, there," he said. "Seen the latest?"

"The new war?" I asked, for the struggle between Portugal and South Africa had just begun, when the semi-fascist government of the latter tried to take over Portuguese Angola.

"No. The editorial. 'Any war, anywhere, may become another world conflagration. It is past time that we, for our own safety, laid down the law to nations which seem to know no law.'"

"That's an old idea," I said, easing myself into a chair.

"Yes, but this is a conservative and influential paper. The idea is beginning to spread."

I sighed. "What's so bad about it? A *Pax Americana* may not be the sort of thing I dreamed of once, but it's better than nothing."

"But what will we gain? Safety at the price of mounting guard on an entire planet . . . read your Roman history."

"Rome could have lasted if it had been a little smarter," I said. "Suppose they'd conquered Germany, Arabia, and southern Russia while they were in their heyday. That was where all their enemies eventually came from. The Empire might be with us yet."

"Yes," said Langford. "I'm afraid that something similar is about to happen. I never did like the Romans."

The natives of Angola, who knew very well what would happen to them under South African rule, rallied behind Portugal and licked the hell out of the invaders. Then India came in on Portugal's side, alleging mistreatment of Indian minorities—true enough, but an old excuse. They just wanted territory, Goa as the price of help and chunks of Africa as loot. This inspired uprisings in Spanish Morocco. One thing led to another, and Spain marched on Portugal.

Being more closely tied to the latter, we got involved, and from our Iberian bases soon quelled the

Falangists. Then we proceeded to write the peace without consulting either Portugal or India. Such was our national temper at the time. Can you blame us after all we had suffered?

Taruz accepted the third installment of his pay and continued to serve us. Economic controls remained in effect, to keep inflation from depreciating his money, but things looked up a bit for the average taxpayer. You began to see some new cars and some clothes that were not shoddy. Langford showed me certain reports: Taruz was not only operating shrewdly as a major stockholder in established corporations, he was founding his own.

"But isn't that against the anti-trust laws?" I asked.

"If so, nobody is prosecuting," answered Langford. "Nobody is saying a word. We're too dependent on him by now."

He nodded grimly, and left me.

I noticed sentiment for the *Pax Americana* growing day by day. It seemed the only logical course to insure that we would not again be laid in ashes. Right now we were invincible; best to consolidate that position while we could.

There would be a new President this year. The incumbent party selected James, a previously obscure man—dynamic type, good speaker, good record as governor and senator, but nothing spectacular.

"Smoke-filled back rooms, eh?"

I asked Langford. "How did he get

picked? There were more obvious candidates."

"Money will do a lot," said Langford, "and I don't mean crude bribery—I mean influence, lobbying, publicity. Taruz has money."

"You mean this is . . . Taruz' man?"

"Of course. Why not? The Thashtivarians have a vested interest in us. It's up to them to preserve it. Not that James is their puppet; he just agrees with them on important issues, and thinks along predictable lines. That's all which is necessary."

I voted against James, mostly because Langford had disquieted me. But I was in the minority.

"I think," said Langford the night of the election, "it's time for me to stop croaking doom and start doing something."

"What?" I asked. "You claim Taruz is putting us in his pocket, and maybe you're right, but how do you make the average man see it?"

"I write a book," said Langford.

"I give the facts and figures. They're all available, nothing is classified. It's just that no one else has waded through that mess of data and seen its meaning. I'll have SEC reports to show how much he owns and how much more he controls, the Congressional Record to show laws that are being ignored and new laws passed in his favor, the lobbyist registry to show how many hired agents he has, the assembled news releases and white

papers to show how bit by bit he's gotten virtual command of the military—

"Oh, yes. A few thousand people will actually read the book, and they'll get alarmed and convince the rest."

"You could—get into trouble," I said.

"It might be fun," he grinned. "It just might be."

Having reached a decision, Langford looked happier and healthier than I'd seen him for a long time. "The Thashtivarians *can't* conquer us. There aren't enough of them, as was pointed out long ago. So simple a thing as a world-wide sit-down strike could get rid of them, merely by making Earth unprofitable."

He got a year's leave of absence from the Institute and went down to Richmond to gather his facts. I had to stay where I was.

The year passed, beginning with sporadic war over the world but material conditions rapidly improving at home. Some of the most irritating government controls were lifted, which made people think we were getting somewhere.

Taruz appeared again on TV and remarked that he thought we were far enough ahead now to start thinking about raising wages. Within a month, a bill permitting that had become law. In the general excitement and cheering, few of us seemed to notice that Taruz, the alien, the hired soldier, had in effect told us what we could do.

The news from abroad remained bad. China and India didn't like us, and said so. They formed an alliance. Some sharp questions were being asked in the British House of Commons, and Argentina was getting downright insulting. A lot of talk arose abroad about allying against a United States whose hand was increasingly heavy.

That it was. We had to have bases, and we had to requisition supplies, and all too often we had to dictate internal policy. There was no help for it, if we were to survive in an ugly world. But our satellites and protectorates didn't like it. I think only the fear of Taruz prevented a general war against us.

That fear was breaking down, though. It was being pointed out that the Thashtivarians couldn't be everywhere at once, that the destruction of the thinly spread American forces would leave them virtually without an employer and ready to bargain, that—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Only later did it occur to me how much of that talk must have been started by Taruz' own pawns.

In September, hell broke loose again. An H-bomb rubbed out most of Chicago. Its force screens had been turned off long ago in the confidence that there would be no more raids. The blame was laid on the Sino-Indian alliance. They denied it, and to this day I'm not sure if they might not have told the truth. But two million dead Amer-

icans left us in no mood to listen. We went into all-out war again.

My factory shifted back to military production, and I worked pretty hard for two years. Protection was given to all our major cities, of course, and the civilian population was organized in a quasi-military manner, so things went smoothly and efficiently at home. The Thash-tivarians labored hard for our side, and the Alliance surrendered in a few months. The war dragged on because by that time nobody in this country argued against the *Pax* idea, and it had to be stuffed down the rebellious throat of an unwilling planet.

It was. In two years, no country on Earth but us had any armed forces except local police. Every government was our puppet, and our garrisons and inspectors were everywhere. We still called our pro-consuls "Ambassadors in chief" and our occupying armies "protective alliances."

But nobody was fooled or intended to be fooled. This could not be worked by democratic means, so a Constitutional amendment went through which virtually scrapped the Constitution. Congress retained certain powers, but the balance was now with the executive.

I waited for the secret police and the marching uniforms, but they didn't come. There was still a wide latitude of free speech, provided you didn't criticize the fundamentals or the top leaders. There were comparatively few political

arrests, and little if any brutality in such cases.

As dictatorships go, this was a gentle one. And it showed considerable statesmanship in many ways, such as the international currency reforms, increased freedom of travel, and work to rehabilitate the devastated parts of the world.

It wasn't Utopia, but I wondered if it might not be better than we deserved.

VI

Langford had been called back to government service during the war—Intelligence this time—and for a while after, so I didn't see him for nearly three years. Then he came back to resume his professorship, and I went around to welcome him home.

We sat by the fire, with no other lights, sipping a good red wine and speaking slowly. The flames glowed, and danced, and whispered at us in thin dry voices; shadows moved huge in the corners, here and there lifting from an old picture or a dark massive piece of furniture. Outside, a winter wind muttered at the door. It was good, and snug, and very human.

"Did you see much of Taruz during the war?" I asked.

"Yes," said Langford. The red light wove across his hawk face with an oddly gentle effect. "Sometimes we worked together pretty closely. He knew what I thought, but didn't care as long as

my actions remained loyal—in fact, I think he rather likes me. He's not such a bad sort. Not a fiend at all; just a smart adventurer."

"I suppose your book will never be written, though," I said.

"Hardly." Langford's laugh was small and sad. "Not because it's forbidden, but because it's too late. The Thashtivarians could not have conquered Earth, but—*divide and rule!*—they got us to conquer it for them."

"And now they own us, who own the world," I murmured.

"Not that simple. It's more accurate to say that they hold the reins. You'll see a gradual change in the next decade or so, shifting more and more of the power over to them, but it won't be obtrusive. Taruz is too clever for that."

"And what will he do with us?"

"Rule us. What else? I don't believe he's power-mad. I think he and his immediate successors will be rather easy-going and tolerant. What reason would they have to be otherwise? Ruling Earth is a profitable business. It means big estates and luxurious homes and lots of human servants and general high living—not ideological tyranny of the Hitler-Stalin sort."

He added after a moment: "Another shipload of Thashtivarian immigrants arrived last week. There must be a million of them here by now. But there won't ever be any great number, because they'll be the aristocracy, and an aristocracy must be kept small."

"You don't sound as bitter about it as you once did," I said.

"What's the use of being bitter about an accomplished fact? As a scientist, I've learned to live with facts. And to get moral about it, Taruz is no more than mankind had coming. A united world could have laughed at him. A peaceful world would never have hired him."

"The real situation was different," I protested. "You can't condemn your whole race just because Taruz arrived at an unlucky moment."

"True enough. But even with that setup, the free world could have stayed free. We might have averted war altogether by making it clear in advance that if we hired Taruz our only orders to him would be to get the hell off Earth."

"Or maybe we should have turned his services over to one of the small, neutral but democratic nations. Or if all this sounds too unrealistic, we had a chance to unite all our race at the Stockholm meeting. World government, a human world army, and Taruz would have been superfluous. He wouldn't even have tried to take over then, knowing it would never pay."

"But we had to be clever, and realistic. We had to look out for Number One. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice!*" Langford laughed harshly.

"Can't we do something, even now?" I wondered.

"No," we can't. Who's interest-

ed? Ask yourself, Hillyer. You have a family, a good job, a nice home, security and a chance for advancement. Does the fact that someday you'll be saying 'sir' to every Thashtivarian warrant throwing all that away to die on the barricades?"

I shook my head.

"It could be worse," went on Langford. "Taruz played his cards ruthlessly. His poker chips were human lives in the millions, but now that he's here to stay we'll get *some* benefits. No more war, which means a gigantic economic surplus of which man will get at least part; maybe, eventually, no more poverty. Perhaps we can learn a lot of their science, especially when they start getting lazy and training human technicians to man their machines for them. We lost our freedom because we couldn't get together as a race. Now the unity is forced on us, and it will last."

"But we *have* lost our freedom," I said. "The decisions may be wiser from now on, but they'll be made for us. Enter that on the debit side."

"Quite so. That's a fact we'll have to live with for centuries."

Langford stared into the fire, and a little smile played about his mouth. "It's an old pattern of history. Rome, Roman Britain—the hired soldiers were called in to help and ended by taking over. But there's another part of the pattern too. Conquerors are culturally assimilated, like the Normans in England; or they decay and can be overthrown at last, like the Hyksos in Egypt. Mankind can wait for one thing or another to happen. Our many-greats grandchildren will be united *and* free. It's up to us to start laying the foundation for them. *Right now.*"

He drained his glass and set it down.

