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*Disguised Earthmen invade an alien planet  
—on a strange and secret mission*

# **The Wonder War**

*a science-fiction novel by*

**LAURENCE M. JANIFER**

*author of SLAVE PLANET*



# THE OVERDOGS

had the toughest assignment in the Galaxy. Their manual of instructions weighed two pounds, but the basic policy was simple:

- 1) Stop war.
- 2) Stop any war in the inhabited Galaxy without favoring either side, or allowing either side to win.
- 3) Stop any war in the inhabited Galaxy without allowing bloodshed unless absolutely necessary.
- 4) It had better not be absolutely necessary.

The Terra-like planet of Wh'Gralb looked like a routine job for the Overdogs—until one Overdog agent got trapped and found he had to mastermind the war he had sworn to stop!

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## **LAURENCE M. JANIFER**

author of **THE WONDER WAR**, is also author of **SLAVE PLANET** (Pyramid Book No. F-840), and part-author, with Randall Garrett, of **BRAIN TWISTER** (F-783), **THE IMPOSSIBLES** (F-875) and **SUPER-MIND** (F-909). Mr. Janifer's own number is F-666, and he has been a little nervous lately, but nothing serious.

Mr. Janifer is thirty years old, which ought to be enough, and wears a small reddish beard and large eye-glass-colored eyeglasses. He also wears suits with vests to them, and a pair of elderly black shoes which, if he publishes two more books, his finances will enable him to replace.

His complexion is pale, due to long years of concentrated study in coffee-houses, cellars and small apartments. He has never disclosed the object of all this study, and perhaps it doesn't matter. He is, most recently, thinking of ceasing all such work and donating his cerebral cortex to science: it seems more reasonable, he states, to get along in today's world on reflex alone.

Mr. Janifer is a born pedestrian, and requires vast amounts of inducement to venture beyond the limits of the New York City public transport system. He would be profoundly grateful if this inducement were never forthcoming again.

Much of the technical detail underlying this novel was supplied by a friend, Michael J. Kurland, about whom nothing whatever is known.

Bought at Ken Pharmacy  
2-5-'64

**#94 THE  
WONDER  
WAR**

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### **THE WONDER WAR**

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FOR  
MERLE  
WIN  
LOSE  
OR DRAW



## PROLOGUE: THE OVERDOGS

**Underdog, n.:** A person unnoticed by others as a result of his relatively small size on the scale of events.

(Note: The quotations used in this, and in the Epilogue to this history, are from Vol. I, *The Overdogs and their History*, of *A History of the United Galaxy*, published by Galactic Books, Unltd. Permission to use this text has been prayed and granted.)

The last, and in many ways the most interesting, of the Overdog assignments was the task force located on Wh'Gralb. The activities of this task force are, for several reasons, worthy of study.

We must, however, begin with a description of Wh'Gralb itself. Here we have a planet so much like Earth as to be almost an identical twin: if it is, in fact, slightly farther from its home sun, that home sun is slightly hotter. If its land-mass distribution (two immense continents, a few islands, an Arctic icecap and little else) is not Terran, its natives emphatically are. Their slightly less-than-Terran height has never been an important factor, and in fact the Overdog team itself required no special disguise to work on the planet, being at all times taken for exceptionally tall natives.

Following Berkman's Law that political structures can exist only in a limited and describable number of basic

forms, it is still surprising to find the political arrangement of Wh'Gralb, at the time of the Overdog mission, as close an analogue to several Terran historical moments as it proved to be.

Briefly, the separate continents were opposed, each continent having been unified by a single political system. On the continent originally called A in early spy-maps was a nation which called itself Delverb, a country organized around an idea basically fascistic. There the single leader ruled the state for the good of the state, his word being at all times simply and inarguably law.

The continent called B owned the name of the People's Democracy. There a communistic state was in power, and the rule of the sole leader was arranged through a system of laws which covered every eventuality. The good of the state was not the end stated to be in view here: instead, all was dedicated to that mythical person, "the people," who was felt to be served best by following the structure of laws.

This opposition, not unknown in Terran history, was about to break into open war when the Overdogs arrived. Naturally, it was not their task to create peace: still less was it their task to support one or the other side, or even a third force inimical to both.

Instead, thinking that their job, because of the great resemblances to Terran humanity and to Terran politics, would be a simple one, they landed under their normal directives.

These directives, applied to a world which was at approximately the same level of development as Twentieth-Century Terra, were found to be more difficult of application than had been imagined. . . .



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1

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**From:** Third Army Command  
Rendezvous Point X-13  
**To:** Gen. Raefurt Prang  
HQ, Third Army, Army City  
Delverb  
**Date:** 13 Frisbyl 1941 0500  
**Subject:** Preliminary report, landing attempt as per plan  
A-2-rv

1. Subject landing has not been accomplished, due to the unforeseen explosions which have destroyed bridge marked B-1, bridge marked B-2 and bridge marked B-3, hereinafter referred to as "all bridges."

2. Investigations have begun in local units, Corps of Engineers, to place responsibility for the destruction of all bridges.

3. It is considered unlikely that enemy agents had discovered plan A-2-rv and in frustrating it destroyed all bridges. It is considered equally unlikely, however, that the explosions were due to natural causes.

4. Third Army Command at this rendezvous point now awaits report from Corps of Engineers regarding a third explanation for the explosions.

Respectfully submitted,  
Maj.-Gen. Diefer Habtap, Commanding

**From:** HQ, Third Army, Army City  
Delverb  
**To:** Maj.-Gen. Diefer Habtap  
Third Army Command  
Rendezvous Point X-13  
**Date:** 13 Frisbyl 1941 0615  
**Subject:** Previous preliminary report

1. According to schedules of plan A-2-rv, two full divisions of infantry were to have landed previous to 0500 this date.

2. If these infantry divisions have landed, please detail their current positions and expectations.

3. Also forward all data on subject explosions, all data on current condition of bridges, all data on any subject whatever considered pertinent or connective to subject preliminary report.

By command,  
Gen. Raefurt Prang, Commanding

**From:** People's Leader Sirsu Plessi  
People's Defense Battalion #3  
City and Environs of Fescue  
**To:** People's Exalted Chief  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Republic  
**Date:** 13 Frisbyl 1941 0616  
**Subject:** Delverbian prisoners

1. Outlying forces of this command report the surrender of two divisions, Delverbian infantry, at a point ten miles to the Southwest of the City of Fescue.

2. Division leaders report their motives for surrender as follows: a total and effectual cutoff from all supply lines and troop support. (N. B., see previous report on explosions of undetermined origin observed in this vicinity approximately 0500 this date.)



3. Prisoners being forwarded to camps under guard.

4. Future reports regarding prisoners to come from guard detail and camp detail.

5. Investigation of explosions continues, with particular reference to possible Delverbian tactic involving two infantry divisions and possibly further support.

Respectfully in brotherly love submitted,  
Sirsu Plessi, People's Leader

**From:** Tom Glone

**To:** Ted Plant, Eddie Dempster

**Date:** 13 Frisbyl 1941, local calendar, 0640 local time

**Subject:** Plan D

Congratulations, boys! With any luck at all we'll have Delverb blaming this one on the People's Republic, and the People's Republic blaming it on Delverb, and both of them going round and round in lovely little circles wondering exactly what the hell is coming off. The planar bombs went off right on schedule—well, five minutes early, but I'm in no mood for quibbling, just so nobody gets hurt. Results were even better than anticipated, and confusion is as rife as I have ever seen it. In fact, rifer.

There's some really lovely stuff coming over the various code networks, and I wish you were here to tap it with me. X marks my earphones, love to all the family, and between the frantic stuff coming out of Army City, the puzzled dispatches from the Fescue Battalion HQ, and the absolute mania emanating from Habtap with the Delverb Third Army Command, the place sounds like New Year's Eve on Terra, with a little George Antheil thrown in for flavor.

As a matter of fact, why the hell *aren't* you back here, both of you? There is more work to be done, and fast, if we're going to continue all this fun and games, and our next move is crowding up in the usual hurry.

If it's going to speed you up any—Raissa sends love.

Tom

## 2

Plant sighed with the absolute despair of a man who saw idiots wherever he looked. What he was watching was Tom Glone, an idiot, Plant told himself sadly, who happened to be Plant's boss. Glone unfolded himself from a metal chair, looking just a little like a collapsible foot-rule about to go to work and measure something. He rubbed at his cheeks with both hairy hands, blinked and then looked at his watch. "The time," he said in a hollow voice, "is seven-twenty-two, according to local clocks. The sun is up long ago, and the peculiar little gasbags that pass for birds around here are chirping away just as if the entire planet of Wh'Gralb were at peace."

"Very lovely," Plant said, feeling, as always, like an especially repulsive midget next to Glone's unfolded length. "A nature poet in our midst. I'd never have guessed it—would you, Eddie?" He turned to his partner, who, as one of the minor blessings in a world regrettably lacking in major ones, was even shorter than Plant himself.

Eddie Dempster frowned briefly and then let his face go back to its usual stolid blank. "All the chatter you people do," he said in a gravel baritone. "You'd think you were on an All-System Boy Scout picnic."

"And why not?" Glone broke in. His voice, Plant thought, was especially harsh and grating this morning, like a Brand X kitchen cleanser. "When the two of you take one hundred and forty minutes to get back here from the shore outside Fescue, what else am I supposed to think? I hope you packed box lunches. Though per-



sonally I could never feel happy about a lunch made out of old paper boxes."

"We got held up," Dempster said shortly. Plant sighed again. Nothing, absolutely nothing, seemed to make Dempster angry. On the other hand, nothing seemed to make him happy, either. It was a nice, even balance, in a horrible sort of way.

"Held up?" Glone said. "By what? The Shadow? Three men in black overcoats? An accident to your little tri-cycles?"

Plant's growing irritation erupted into wild motion. "Jesus!" he screamed, flailing his arms wide. "Do you know how much garbage and gunk three good explosions are likely to stir up?"

"We had to detour," Dempster added flatly, "when we weren't cutting our way through."

"Or would you rather we'd used the sub's flamers," Plant said, trying to sound sarcastic, "and issued engraved invitations to everybody within sight to follow us North?" He had the strong suspicion that what he had sounded was petulant. His arms dropped hopelessly to his sides. "Remember, these natives have an early-Twentieth-Century technology."

Glone merely nodded. "All right," he said. "All right. I suppose it was unavoidable."

"Suppose? You—"

"I said all right, Ted," Glone cut in quietly. "But we're being rushed again. And we've got to work out a new plan in a hurry."

On the wall of the underground room, a clock ticked off one second, and then another, in tiny audible pocks. Plant looked up at it in irritation. "They can't reform their lines so fast," he said at last. "Prang and Habtap are going to have to look over the ground damned thoroughly before they even want to think about making another try at Fescue. And as for Plessi, what's he supposed to do? He's no worse off than he was—hell, ac-

cording to first reports he's two divisions of infantry to the good."

"What about that, by the way?" Dempster asked suddenly. He moved to one of the metal tables, drew up a folding chair and sat down. Sitting down, Plant noticed almost happily, he looked even shorter. "That gives Plessi an edge," the stolid man went on. "Does it mean anything?"

"How the hell do I know?" Glone said. "The machine says Not Significant, but all that means is that Plessi can't win with that edge alone. It's as if the old Terran D-Day had misfired. Whatever that means. What happens if we give him another edge—or even make the next one an even split—is up to the machine, and we can't find out until we've done it."

"We could feed in possible factors—"

"There are too many damned possible factors to list," Glone said. "Anyhow, it doesn't make too much difference now: we've still got to go ahead. Only not with Plessi and Habtap." He paused. "Remember, this is a world war," he went on at last. "And there's a new battle beginning to form—up North."

Plant grimaced with apprehension. "Jesus," he said sadly. "Right over our heads. I can see it now—two invading armies coming right through the ice into the control room. A great moment for the Confederation."

"It's not quite that close," Glone said. "But they won't be far away: we'll have to double-check our shielding."

Dempster nodded. "How long have we got to come up with a plan?" he asked.

"About ten days," Glone said. "That's the machine estimate. We'd better be ready in eight." He yawned again and Plant, watching him, caught the disease. He had his mouth open when Glone began: "My best suggestion—" and then stopped.

No one could blame Glone, Plant thought, snapping his mouth shut, for failing to complete his sentence. No



living male in the universe—at least, no living male who was even vaguely humanoid—could have done otherwise. When Raissa Renny entered a room, if you were male and humanoid, your throat went dry. It was very difficult to speak with a dry throat, and Raissa, therefore, moved in an aura of silence, broken only by occasional heartfelt gulps and sighs.

She glided to the center of the steel-walled room, looked around at the three silent men, and spoke.

"Well?" she asked. Her voice, as always, broke her spell. It was flat, dull, and as cold as the interior of a quick-frozen pheasant. "I notice you two got back at last."

Dempster didn't even look irritated. "We were held up," he said in a reasonable, gravelly tone.

Glone put in the good word: "It wasn't their fault." Plant wasn't paying much attention. He was looking at Raissa instead, lost in sudden dreams. Even with her voice, even with her temperament, which matched it, she had become part of what Plant sometimes guiltily thought of as the most active fantasy life this side of opium. He watched her purse her lips and, barely wincing, he watched her make up her mind and speak.

"All right," she said. "Now that the boys are back, let's get to work setting up the next move. I don't mind telling you I've got some ideas."

"That's what I was just about to do," Glone said. "Begin the next set-up."

"According to what I heard coming down the corridor," Raissa said, "we've got an eight-day minimum. Right?"

"Right," Glone said.

"Well," Raissa said, while Plant wished she would stop talking and merely continue to be the most beautiful object in the universe, "let's defer discussion of that plan for a minute, then, while I suggest something else."

Plant goggled, and noticed that even Dempster looked surprised. Glone gulped and then said: "What?"

RAISSA = PRONOUNCED  
RAY-SUH

"I want to discuss something else," Raissa said firmly.

"Hemlines?" Glone said. "Fashions? The chances of the Loons winning next year's pennant?"

"Let us not," Raissa said, even more coldly than usual, "be facetious. If there is one thing I find distasteful about this entire operation, it is a tendency toward mere fun."

"But fun," Plant broke in, "is—well, it's *fun*."

"And this is work," Raissa said, turning on him a glare of such blue brilliance that he backed heavily into the table, shifting it slightly, and then found a chair to sit down in. He gave Raissa a gentle, apologetic smile.

"Now, wait a minute," Glone said. "We were picked by the Confederation for just this sort of thing."

"We were picked to do a serious job," Raissa said.

"Look at those two infantry divisions—" Glone began.

"I've heard about that," Raissa cut in. "And it seems to me that just that has added to the chance that the People's Republic might win the war—contrary, let me remind you, to directive."

Glone shrugged. "I'm quite familiar with the basic orders, thank you," he said. He walked over and stood leaning against the rear wall, opposite the other three. The wall showed a colored and coded projection map of all of Wh'Gralb. Glone was leaning against the Great Western Ocean, his head resting casually on the Spiny Mountains.

"Now, look," Plant said, trying to sound patient. "If those two divisions hadn't got ashore we'd be sitting with a stalemate, just as we have been. Delverb offshore, the People's Republic dug in near Fescue."

"Sure," Glone said cheerfully. "And—"

"And this way," Plant continued doggedly, "everything's in confusion, any chance of a battle is non-existent for the time being, the stalemate's broken and the prime directive is kept."

Raissa lifted her eyebrows. They were beautiful eye-



brows. "And you mean to tell me," she asked, "that the idea didn't strike you as funny?"

"Nothing," Plant said with absolute conviction, "strikes me as funny."

Glone waved this comment aside. "Besides," he added, "it worked—and your idea wouldn't have. Who cares why it worked, or why we decided on it?"

"We are engaged," Raissa said sternly, "in serious work."

"My God," Glone said. "What are you going to do, quote the entire directive at us?"

"It might not be such a bad idea—considering how casually you take matters."

There was a brief silence. Plant fidgeted in his chair, watching the others. After a minute, realizing that everybody else was apparently content to remain in stasis until the next mealtime, or the end of the world, he cleared his throat. Three pairs of eyes looked at him as if he had exploded a bomb. "Well," he said nervously, "let's hear this new suggestion of Miss Renny's."

"My God, call her Raissa," Glone put in.

Plant opened his mouth, took a breath, shut it again and shrugged apologetically. "I can't help it," he said. "She doesn't act like a Raissa. She acts like a Miss Renny."

"This," Raissa said abruptly, "is ridiculous."

"Yes," Glone said, "but it's fun. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," Raissa said, "I want to go on an inspection trip."

Silence fell again, along with Glone's jaw. "You're kidding," he replied at last.

"We have a man in Army City, correct?"

"Correct."

"He is involved in spreading propaganda, and helping the eventual fall of the totalitarian government?"

"That's what he says."

"Well," Raissa concluded grimly, "I don't think he's doing a real job. I want to go and find out."

Glone appeared to consider this suggestion. At last he spoke. "You," he said in measured tones, "have gone out of your mind."

"It's impossible," Dempster put in.

"Besides," Plant added in a conciliatory tone, "he is doing a good job. Just as good as the head man in the People's Republic."

"And I'm not sure of him, either," Raissa said.

"You can't go on an inspection tour," Glone said reasonably. "We've got a battle to plan."

"We have eight days."

"It's not enough, and you know it."

Plant looked around the room. It hadn't changed. Even Dempster hadn't changed—though Plant had a suspicion that the end of the world, complete with flaming angels, or singing swords, or whatever it was supposed to be, wouldn't change Dempster. Raissa looked a little more determined than usual, and Glone a little more depressed—he even seemed to have shrunk slightly, though that, Plant told himself, was too good to hope for.

What had changed was the whole picture of their basic job. And that, he thought for what was probably the ninety-seventh time, was entirely due to Higher Education.

Raissa said: "It's got to be enough—because I'm going, and I'm not going to argue about it. Remember, my rank is above that of everyone here except Thomas Glone."

"And Thomas Glone," Glone said, "refuses to let you go." But he was weakening. Faced with Raissa Renny, there was very little anyone could do except weaken.

Plant, with some effort, removed his mind from the confused scene before him, and began, slowly and patiently, to contemplate Tom Thumb.

Tom Thumb, the original code name given to what was now called Overdog, had been set up in what antiquar-



ians, and a few followers of aboriginal Terran religions, called A. D. 2046. In the tradition of Tom himself, who cut down giants in a strange country, it was meant to cut down such giants as showed themselves on strange planets.

An overriding Confederation fear was that, somewhere, somehow, another race would discover Confederation-level weaponry, and decide to colonize the stars on its own. This would not, the Confederation Assembly decided, be a pleasant thing for the colonization plans of the Confederation itself.

It was therefore decided to do everything possible to halt scientific development. However, the Assembly felt a little inhuman about simply clamping down on poor, defenseless races. Too, the Interbeing League, led by the fiery and idealistic A. B. Jones, was certainly going to make matters rough if the slightest hint of such a crack-down became public.

Even at the distance of seventy-eight years, Plant could appreciate the problem. How did you stop scientific development for alien races, and not look like the ultimate and prejudiced dictator you certainly were?

The answer had proven to be a ridiculously simple one, and it rested on one further question.

What speeds scientific development faster than anything else?

Answer: warfare.

And even A. B. Jones and the entire Interbeing League couldn't complain about a Confederation move to stop warfare on any inhabited planet. After all, nobody wanted the poor, defenseless aliens killing each other off.

. . . Especially not with new and possibly high-level weapons.

Hence, Operation Tom Thumb. Its ground-rules were few. The entire directive which began the Operation could have been summarized in less than one hundred and fifty words. Officials being officials, of course, the

directive was finally issued in cardboard covers, between which were over eleven hundred pages of fine print. It weighed (Terran) better than two pounds, and became standard issue on Operation Tom Thumb ships, for which it was slightly less useful than two pounds of used dental floss. The crew could have played cat's-cradle with the dental floss.

All anyone ever needed of the directive was its summary. The summary went as follows:

1. The purpose of Operation Tom Thumb is to stop war.

2. Operation Tom Thumb is to stop any war in its jurisdiction without favoring either side, or allowing either side to emerge victorious.

3. Operation Tom Thumb is to stop any war in its jurisdiction without allowing bloodshed unless absolutely necessary.

4. It had better not become absolutely necessary.

There was only one more thing, and that was the definition of "jurisdiction." As used in the summary, it meant: "The entire inhabited universe."

Naturally, this was further qualified by the fact that Confederation ships had not yet covered the entire inhabited universe. But whatever was reachable became part of the problem of Tom Thumb.

The Operation became known as Overdog after a few congressmen, headed by a balding and humorless man named Tully Weathernox (and with a name like that, Plant thought, he had an excuse for being humorless: all his jokes had obviously been knocked out of him in childhood fights), had rebelled against voting Confederation money for anything called Tom Thumb.

Overdog, for unknown reasons, was considered more dignified.

The first members of the Operation were hand-picked from Service files. There were a few volunteers, but not



many—few people like a job description as vague as Overdog's had to be.

However, more and more Overdogs were needed.

Training began on a mass level—training, Plant reflected bitterly, in Confederation schools. And the result of the training, as far as Overdog Team #4-A-D was concerned, was before them.

The result was Miss Raissa Renny.

Raissa Renny had been to school. She had learned all about Overdog.

She knew better than any of the rest of them. The Team's experience on three other planets was meaningless: there had been no lectures, no multiple-choice tests, no marks and no degree.

Raissa Renny was an Expert.

Wearily, Plant broke off his train of thought and returned in spirit to the room which his body had never left. The Expert was, predictably, holding forth.

"Propaganda is my specialty," she was saying coldly. "I am Co-ordinator for Propaganda for this team, and I insist on being allowed to handle my own affairs."

"Your affairs," Glone said with a weary look at the others, "are your own concern. But your safety is mine. The safety of the Team is mine, too."

"Do you think I'm incapable of surviving in the field?" Raissa asked, her eyebrows high and her hands on her hips. Her hips were beautiful, too, Plant thought. So were her hands.

If only the woman would shut up . . .

"Frankly," Glone said, "yes."

Raissa stared at him, speechless. Plant glowed, relieved. The condition lasted, however, less than a minute. "I insist on being allowed to check my workers in the field," she said. "If I am not so allowed, I will hand in my resignation. Effective immediately."

"My God, don't be silly," Glone said. "It'll take three

weeks minimum to get a new Coordinator for Propaganda out here—and we can't afford three weeks right now."

"That," Raissa said grandly, "is *your* worry."

The new silence which descended, Plant reflected in an abstracted sort of way, broke all records both for duration and thickness. After some time Glone managed to get out a few words in a choked and unnatural tone.

"All right," he said. "But you'll have to be back in five days. And you'll have to take someone with you."

Apparently feeling that she had won as much of her point as she cared to, Raissa smiled. This so blinded Plant that he almost failed to see Tom Glone turn to look at him.

"You'll take him," Glone said.

Plant looked around at Dempster.

But Glone's finger wasn't pointing at Dempster.

"Now, wait a minute—" Plant said despairingly. But there wasn't a chance, and he knew it. Somehow, he was going to have to escort this beautiful madwoman out into the territory of Army City, and somehow he was going to have to bring her back.

And he had five days to do it in.

"Remember," Raissa was saying to him, through a mist of hopelessness, "you are under my orders: as Coordinator, I outrank a field worker."

"But—" Plant began.

"No buts," Raissa said in what appeared to be an attempt at humor. "You are not a goat."

It was the saddest joke Plant had ever heard. He bared his teeth in what he hoped would pass for a smile.

"Well?" Raissa said.

There was, after all, nothing else to say. Plant shrugged his shoulders and delivered what he later considered the silliest single line of his life:

"Aye, aye, Madam."



### 3

The leavetakings were a unique mixture of gloom and cheerfulness. Nobody really wanted to see either Plant or even Raissa Renny killed—but, on the other hand, the Wh'Gralb HQ was going to be a lot more peaceful with the new Co-ordinator for Propaganda out of it. Plant thought he could see in Dempster's stolid face the slight flicker of a hope that the Co-ordinator would never come back, and it made Plant mad enough to want to smash the face in with either fists or both feet.

However, he restrained himself, and said good-bye instead.

"Good luck," Glone said as if he doubted the very possibility: Raissa climbed into the submarine hatch through the short docking tube, and Plant followed. Behind him a door clanged shut.

He entered the submarine itself. Raissa was lying in a bunk opposite him. There wasn't enough room to swing his arms, or even to stand upright. He made his way to the upper bunk, climbed in and waited.

Ten seconds passed. Then a green light flashed on. "Final communicator test," said a voice only vaguely recognizable as Dempster's.

"Communication satisfactory," Plant lied. "All aboard."

"Check personal communicators," the disembodied voice ordered.

Raissa checked hers first, then Plant took his turn. He pushed the back of his skull twice, and said: "Personal communications check."

From the receiver surgically buried at the back of his

skull Dempster's voice said tinnily: "Satisfactory." Then the voice came from its original speaker over the bunks. "Now casting off."

There was a roar of motors, a sudden heaving—and dead silence. The shielded motors were at work. The sub was moving.

"Alone at last," Plant said, in a vague attempt to make things cheerful.

There was no reply.

The six-hour trip underwater to Army City (through the Western Ocean, up the River of Dugratpup and then West along its major tributary, the Bagrag) consisted mostly of silence. The sub steered with the simplicity possible only to very primitive, or very sophisticated machines. Plant had plenty of time left for conversation.

Raissa, however, spent the entire six hours in her bunk, her hands (beautiful) behind her head (lovely), thinking. At least, Plant assumed she was thinking: for all the evidence he got to the contrary, he told himself bitterly, she might have been in a cataleptic trance.

The sub docked a little upstream from Army City's port facilities, still shielded and quite unobserved. It was the middle of the afternoon outside, and Plant judged it better to wait until evening to disembark. He was about to say so when Raissa spoke for the first time.

"Wouldn't it be better," she asked, "to wait until evening to disembark?"

Plant agreed humbly. Maybe, he thought hopefully, the woman was going to be sensible.

"Perhaps we should eat now," he offered timidly.

"A good idea," Raissa said. "You can probably find some Instab cans forward. Open one for yourself, too, of course."

Several hundred replies occurred to Plant. He shrugged



and picked one. "Thanks." Then he went to find the cans.

He flicked them to heat, waited, opened both and brought them back, wondering if Raissa were going to have fits at the idea of eating with a common field worker. The close quarters apparently excused such breaches of etiquette, however: she ate her portion in silence, while Plant choked his own food down and brooded.

*We used to be such a happy team*, he thought. He doubted whether there had ever been a happier one. And if Rogers hadn't accidentally shot himself in the left foot just before Confederation inspection came around, and had to be invalided back . . .

Of course, Raissa was beautiful. Beautiful enough so that Plant cherished for her a hopeless adoration.

But she could be a damned nuisance, too.

Plant sighed, chucked his empty can into the ship's interior oubliette, and shook his head. Mere beauty, he told himself, just wasn't enough. After all, look at the trouble Helen of Troy had caused. And Cleopatra. And Brigitte Bardot.

Plant himself was, he knew, far from beautiful. This apparently meant that he was not going to cause any wars, be bitten by any asps, or divorce any French 2-D movie directors.

That, he told himself, was a relief.

He wasn't going to gallivant all over a warring planet, either, just to "check up" on a perfectly good field operative doing a perfectly satisfactory job.

Only he was. Beautiful or not, Glone had picked him for an escort to their own little Prime Fatality.

"Jesus," he said to himself, almost religiously.

In the bunk above, Raissa reached for the oubliette, dropped her can in, and said: "What?"

"Nothing," Plant mumbled. "Just thinking over old friends."

Raissa nodded. "By the way," she said. "What is this operative's name?"

Jesus! Plant thought once more. She didn't even know the man's name—and here she was kicking up a fuss about his work.

But what, he asked himself, was the sense of argument?

"Holmes," he said dully.

"Ah, yes," Raissa said, and nodded again. "I'd forgotten for the moment."

There was no reply to that. Plant checked his watch. "It'll be dark enough to climb out in less than an hour."

"Fine," Raissa said. "We will go directly to the building he is using as a home."

"But he may be out—"

"In which case," Raissa said, "we'll wait."

The idea of spending any amount of time sitting on the steps of a strange building in Army City waiting for a field propaganda operative to return gave Plant the shivers. "I really think we'd be better off—" he began, and then stopped.

"Yes?"

The more he thought about the situation, the more he realized that there was nothing else they *could* do. None of the personal communicators was good for anything but operative-to-base broadcast—and sending a message back to base so that Glone or Dempster could send another message on to Holmes seemed a little too fancy, somehow. Besides, if Holmes were out, and involved in dealings with the natives, he couldn't return in a hurry for anything short of immediate life-and-death emergencies: any dealings with Delverbians (or members of the People's Republic, for that matter) were tricky, and Holmes couldn't afford an unexplained move.

"Nothing," Plant said, having gone through this chain of logic. "We'll start out in forty-four minutes."

Happily, Holmes was in. The first-floor front windows were shining with light when Plant and Raissa finally ap-



proached, and Plant breathed a long sigh of relief. The windows were hour-glass-shaped, one of the little details that made Wh'Gralb different from Terra. There weren't many such. The planet looked, and acted, very much like the mid-Twentieth-Century Terra in all respects.

One more good war, Plant thought, and they'd have atomic power.

Brooding over that depressing idea, he rapped on the door. A second passed. Then a face appeared at the window, a long, thin face even more mournful than Plant's. The face wore a pair of steel-rimmed glasses.

The eyes behind the glasses widened, blinked, and then turned away with the rest of the head. A few seconds passed, and then a pair of hands came to the window. They were long, smooth hands, ending in deeply bitten fingernails. They were holding a sheet of paper.

The sheet of paper said:

WAIT A MINUTE

I'VE GOT COMPANY

Paper and hands disappeared. Raissa turned to Plant. "I'll bet he's just enjoying himself in there."

"Now, that's unfair," Plant whispered. He looked round for passersby, but the street was deserted. "You've read his reports. In the daytime he was out among the people, and in the nighttime he received visitors from underground organizations, drew up his propaganda leaflets—"

"I've read the reports from Mr. Holmes," Raissa said coldly. "The dog did *nothing* in the nighttime. At any rate, nothing printable."

"But—" An argument, Plant told himself again, would do no good. He had the sad feeling that he was going to have to tell himself the same thing an average of eighteen times an hour during the succeeding five days.

There was a click and the door opened. Holmes, who was even at first glance both the tallest and the thinnest

man Plant had ever seen, beckoned them inside. Plant and his cross slipped through the doorway, and Holmes shut the door carefully behind him.

"It is exactly seventeen steps to my room," Holmes said in a high and nasal voice.

Raissa said: "What?"

"It comes in handy," Holmes said. "Step fourteen, for instance, trips an alarm unless I tap it twice with my foot." He did so, then continued, turned left and went through an archway. "Tap where I did," his voice floated back, "and come on in."

Plant, feeling as if he had been caught in an idiot's game of Follow-the-Leader, did so, and Raissa followed suit. They turned and entered a room that blazed with light.

An overhead electric chandelier was its main feature. Other electric lights were scattered along the walls, and there were three table lamps and a giant, tree-like floor lamp of incalculable obscenity. Plant found himself blinking rapidly. The windows, being poor-quality glass and dirty besides, had given him no idea of this place. It was like trying to see in the interior of the Sun.

"Sit down, sit down," Holmes' nasal voice said cheerfully. Plant groped and found a chair which, as he lowered himself into it, turned out to have been stuffed with some sort of dried stalks. It stabbed him gently two or three times and then yielded with a crackling sound to his insistent weight.

Raissa, too, settled herself. "Well, now, Miss Renny—" Holmes began, standing with his back to the obscene floor lamp.

Raissa straightened in her chair. "How did you know my name?"

Holmes shrugged. "You're a Terran—no one on this planet quite reaches your height. You're a woman. I'd heard of the new Propaganda Co-ordinator—who else



could you be?" He stretched slightly, making Plant wonder wildly if perhaps he coiled himself up like a garden-hose to sleep at night: his muscles all seemed to be rubberoid. "Deduction," he said.

"Oh," Raissa said, subsiding slightly. "Of course."

"Is there something new coming off?" Holmes asked. "Something I could help with? Or have I—oh, pardon me. Of course you'll want a drink."

"All we want—" Raissa began, but Plant cut her off. Discipline or no discipline, he had existed for some hours on Instab cans. A drink sounded like the answer to about six of his major prayers.

"That'd be fine, Holmes," he said.

The propaganda agent nodded. "My own mixture," he said, "imported from Terra—I suppose I shouldn't have it around but I keep it in native jars, and nobody touches my kitchen but me."

"What is it?" Plant asked. Raissa was shooting him ill-tempered signals regarding the fact that this was Not A Social Visit, but he ignored them.

"A very precise mix," Holmes said. "Sixty per cent Terran rum, thirty-three per cent native *deblid*, and seven per cent Coca-Cola."

*Deblid*, Plant recalled from a single experience, tasted a little like rotting toothpaste. The combination didn't sound imaginable. "Fine," he said weakly, resigning himself to the fact that nothing, absolutely nothing in the world, ever turned out for the best.

Holmes grinned and disappeared. Raissa fumed in silence, and Plant concentrated on getting used to the lighting in the room. Light, he was telling himself vaguely, makes might.

When Holmes returned Plant could almost see normally, though he was sure his eyeballs would be burned beyond repair by the time he finally got out into the nice darkness. The propaganda agent was carrying a tray

of native wood with three wooden glasses. Plant took one, as did Raissa.

Holmes took the remaining glass, put the tray on a nearby table, and saluted the others with his drink. "To the success of our enterprise!" he said.

Plant, wondering just how lucky it was to salute success with rotten toothpaste, took a sip. Then he took another sip.

"Very interesting," Raissa said suddenly. "This should open up trade possibilities when the war is over."

"Trade?" Plant said, shocked.

"After the war we can reveal ourselves to them," Raissa said. "As long as we keep restricted, and allow no scientists—"

"Is that Confederation policy?" Plant asked.

Raissa nodded and took another swallow. "According to my professors at the Institute."

"Somebody," Plant said darkly, "is going to sell these natives a stardrive."

"Not if we restrict trade adequately," Raissa said. "You see—"

"Oh, the hell with it," Plant burst out. "It's not my job. My job is stopping the war, and seeing that nobody gets hurt. I'm content to stick with it."

"Right," Holmes said.

Plant took another sip of his drink and found himself beaming at the propaganda man. In spite of his tremendous height, he seemed likeable.

Everybody, Plant told himself, was likeable.

He took another sip. "Good drink," he said.

"I like it," Holmes said modestly. "Now—why did you come out here?"

Raissa frowned intently. "I've been reading your reports," she said, "and, to be absolutely frank, Mr. Holmes, I'm not at all satisfied. Hink."

Plant turned to gaze at her. "Hink?"



"Hink?" Raissa said. "Mr. Plant, I never said anything like that. Hink."

"There," Plant said. "You did it again."

Raissa blinked. "Oh," she said. "It must be the hink. The drink. Very interesting indeed."

Plant nodded. "Indeed," he said. "Hink. Sorry I interrupted."

"You were saying you weren't satisfied with my reports," Holmes said.

"True," Raissa said. "Your reports don't give me the hink I need. The information I need. To work out a consistent program of propaganda. I think you're lying down on the jink."

"My dear Miss Renny," Holmes said. "I've been on this job for a good deal longer than you have. I'm sorry to talk like this to a superior officer—"

"I could have you court-hinkled," Raissa said angrily. "Martialled." She took a deep breath. "My, this is a good drink. Perfectly lovely."

"Glad you like it," Holmes said courteously. "I'll have to ask you to provide me with some details of your accusation. Your predecessor—"

"My predecessor is not the issue," Raissa said.

"Gesundheit," Plant put in, surprising himself.

Raissa turned and nodded graciously. "Hink you," she said sweetly. Then, turning back to Holmes: "To take one example, there was your hink of 8 Frisbyl. It dealt with the possibittely—with the pobba—the—"

"Chance," Holmes suggested.

"With the possibility of a native chance," Raissa said. "I mean uprising. You said it would be a minimum of three months before any real possitibbely—before any real hinkrising developed."

"Well?" Holmes asked.

"Yes, indeed," Plant said. "Well?" The fieriness in his voice was something new in his experience. Consulting his drink once more, he found that the glass was empty.

Someone, he told himself muzzily, had been drinking at it. To cover his confusion, he said: "Well?" again, even more loudly.

"Mr. Plant?" Raissa said.

"I said 'Well,'" Plant explained. "Meaning—er, meaning 'well'. I think Mr. Holmes deserves an answer."

Raissa nodded, once and firmly. She swallowed what appeared to be the last of her own drink, breathed deeply and said: "Three months is too long, Mr. Hink. Altogether too long. You have been hinking down on the jink. The lie. I mean—"

"Mr. Holmes," Plant heard himself saying, as from a great distance, "has done a very fine job here. He has improved over native artihinks of manufacture and made a place for himself in the connumity."

"That is not enough," Raissa said steadily. "Three months is too long. According to the best authorities this is a lovely drink."

Holmes seemed to be coiling and uncoiling slowly in the bright light. The motion began to make Plant dizzy. His nasal voice cut through the brightness in the room like a sharp knife. "The best authorities haven't been on Wh'Gralb, among the Delverbians. Every case is different, and has to be handled differently—there aren't any rules in the book, not any that make sense on the ground."

"Mr. Holmes!" Raissa said loudly. Plant winced. Her voice seemed even worse. It was farther away—everything was farther away—but it was worse, too. "I insist on a target darget—date—no more than hink weeks away. Sink weeks." She paused. "Six," she said at last, triumphantly.

"Impossible," Holmes said. "Now, don't you think you ought to get some rest?"

"It's no good dunking the issue," Raissa said.

Plant blinked. "Gesundheit," he put in.

"Hink you. Mr. Holmes, I must insink—"



"Perhaps in the morning, when you—"

After that, Plant's memory began to get a little vague. He thought he had seen Raissa lying on the floor reciting a poem she had announced was called *The Snarking of the Hink* while Holmes tried despairingly to get her upstairs to a bed. But for the most part the night was nothing but mist.

The morning, however, was absolutely clear.

## 4

"My head," Plant said distinctly, "feels like an old tennis ball." He listened critically to the sound of his voice. It was obvious, he reflected, that in the confusion he had borrowed somebody else's vocal cords. The person who had owned the vocal cords hadn't taken very good care of them, either. He had let them rust, Plant thought, and besides that there were little green things growing all over them.

The little green things climbed casually to Plant's skull, where they began to tighten slowly, squeezing what remained of his brain from tennis-ball size all the way down to a dirty grey sphere the diameter and consistency of a soggy golf ball. Plant opened his eyes very cautiously, and closed them instantly. Somehow, his entire arterial system had been connected to the tear ducts. When he opened his eyes he would bleed to death.

After a few more seconds spent in battling the little green things, bleeding to death began to seem like a delightful way to pass the morning. Once again he opened his eyes.

This time he managed to keep them open. Proud of the

grim determination he was showing in the face of incredible obstacles, Plant gave himself a rest. It was not yet time to get up. Later, he thought, he would be strong enough to stand it. He decided to wait about six years.

A few seconds passed and a new thought began slowly to filter through the tangle of green vines in his skull. He was in a strange room.

He forced his eyes to focus. This increased the grip of the vines on his brain, but he stayed resolute. Above him was a ceiling with a cluster of electric lights hanging from it like transparent, horrible fruit. The lights were turned off, but daylight washed the ceiling from a window that was probably off to Plant's right.

Turning his head could wait, too, he told himself. He had done enough for the morning.

The ceiling was a greenish grey. Looking at it made Plant realize that he owned more than a head and vocal cords. He owned a stomach, too, but he was willing to give it away to whatever passed for the local Salvation Army. Maybe with a retread it would still be usable, but he doubted it.

The lights, however, had told him where he was. He was in a bedroom in the house of the propaganda agent for Delverb. "A house," he told himself, "is not a Holmes." In a vague, uncomfortable sort of way he wondered if that meant anything. Just as he had decided that it didn't, he heard a noise from beyond the foot of his bed.

He hoped desperately that it wasn't an urgent noise. He didn't really think he was in shape to stand any cries and alarms. He thought of embattled beings sounding the tocsin of something-or-other, and decided that he was definitely anti-tocsin. Then he decided to look and see what the noise had been.

He levered himself to a half-sitting position. This made the green vines more active, and also caused his stomach to begin a slow, wavery revolving motion. His eyes be-



gan to revolve in sympathy, but he managed to keep them focussed long enough to tell that the noise had been the opening of the door of his room.

Standing in the doorway was Holmes.

"Awfully sorry about last night," he said. "I just didn't realize how the drinks might affect you—you see, I'm quite used to them."

The words were like enormous drumbeats. Plant noticed with resignation that he was inside the drum. Holmes was looking at him as if he expected a reply. A second passed, and then Plant enunciated, very carefully: "I'll be down in a little while."

"Now, don't worry about a thing," Holmes said. "This will fix you up in a second." He produced a hypodermic. Plant suffered the prick of the needle and, in a positive last flurry of little green things, steeled himself to wait.

Ten seconds later, he felt fine.

"Great stuff," he said enthusiastically, rising with ease. The green vines were gone, his stomach had returned to its normal position and function, and even his own vocal cords seemed to be back.

"Sent out from Terra," Holmes said. "I keep it round for special occasions—part of the kit."

"Holmes," Plant said with heartfelt gratitude, "you're a lifesaver."

"Don't thank me," Holmes said brightly. "Thank the chem people. Works on any human or humanoid metabolism. Really delightful stuff. It makes drinking a pleasure."

Plant nodded. "How's Miss Renny?" he asked.

"I don't know, to tell you the truth," Holmes said sadly. "She refused to let me in. Called me a spy for the Institute, whatever that means."

"It's the school she went to," Plant said. "Tell her she passed her final exams and give her a diploma. Right in the vein."

"Ah," Holmes said. He about-faced and started out. "Righto!"

Plant took several deep breaths. Then, feeling bright and cheerful, he went out of the room and found his way downstairs.

There, sitting in a chair that stabbed him exactly where he had been stabbed the night before, he waited. It might, he thought, have been the same chair: the events of the previous night were far from clear.

But it was certainly, he told himself, a beautiful morning.

Beauty, however, disappeared with the first sound of Raissa Renny's voice.

"I will," she was saying loudly, somewhere upstairs. "I insist upon it—and you are not going to stop me."

*Oh, God,* Plant thought, filled with sudden despair. *What now?*

There was a clatter of footsteps, and Holmes and Raissa came down. Raissa was obviously recovered, but she was by no means in the bright and sunny mood Plant had been enjoying. As the two entered the downstairs room, she was saying:

"... absolutely ridiculous. I am your superior officer. I have the right—even the duty—of overseeing your work. There is no other way to assure myself that the work is being done properly—something which I take leave to doubt."

Plant got up. "Miss Renny," he said. "I think we ought to take matters a little more calmly."

Well, he hadn't really thought it would work. Raissa gave him a glance of total scorn and loathing. "The fate of an entire expedition," she said, "depends on the work of this group. I will not have it compromised by the failure of one member to pull his own weight."

"Miss Renny," Holmes said patiently, "I don't think it would be wise for you to accompany me on my next contact. A contact is a delicate affair—"



"I know that perfectly well," Raissa snapped. "We devoted most of an entire term to it."

Holmes opened his mouth, shrugged and shut it again. Plant adopted a pleading tone. "Perhaps we ought to hear a little bit about the actual work being done here."

"Aren't the reports enough?" Raissa asked. "Three months, indeed!"

Holmes groaned almost inaudibly. Then, seeming to recover himself, he looked around the room. "Why not discuss all this over breakfast?" he said.

"Breakfast?" Plant said, trying to sound cheery. "That's a fine idea." The tone, he realized disconsolately, was far from cheery. He sounded like an executioner trying to jolly up the morning's slate of victims.

But Raissa chimed in: "All right. A little food might be a good idea."

Plant shrugged as Holmes led the way to the kitchen. Maybe, he thought, the way to Raissa's brain was through her stomach.

The picture that thought gave him was just a little sickening, but he ignored it resolutely. In a kitchen even brighter than the rest of the house, the three Terrans sat around a table and ate greenish fruits and a crinkly sort of baked meat.

There was, however, real coffee.

"Terra certainly goes all out for its agents in the field," Holmes said, pouring out seconds. "The QM people certainly get my gratitude."

"I'm glad you mentioned Terra," Raissa said, leaning back slightly. Plant swallowed a last bite of crinkle, relaxed and waved a cigarette into ignition. "Terra," Raissa was continuing, "and, as a matter of fact, the entire Confederation, expect some return for their investment."

"They expect work," Holmes said. "And work is what I've been giving them. You'll pardon me, Miss Renny,

but you seem to have come out here with a lot of pretty odd ideas—”

“They are *not* odd,” Raissa said icily. Plant puffed on his cigarette. The period of armistice, he recognized, was over. Now the war began again. The real war—not the one between Delverb and the People’s Republic. Not even the one between Wh’Gralb and Operation Overdog.

The war between Raissa Renny and the rest of the known world.

“Suppose I tell you a little of what I have been doing here,” Holmes said.

Raissa nodded. “Go ahead,” she said in a bored, frigid tone.

“I’m sure it’s very fine work,” Plant said hopefully. Raissa glared at him and he tried to look interested in the remaining fruits on the table.

“First of all,” Holmes said, “there are the walls.”

Plant blinked. “Walls?” he said. Raissa looked at him again. Plant went back to contemplating green fruit.

“We’ve had fifteen men,” Holmes said proudly, “writing slogans on every wall in Army City, or just about. Slogans like ‘Delverb for the Delverbian People,’ and ‘No Correlation Without Representation,’ and ‘War Is Hell.’”

Raissa took a deep breath. “You have actually devoted time to writing on walls?” she asked softly.

“Took three weeks to get a team started,” Holmes said proudly. “By now, they’re even making up their own slogans. The latest one is ‘Delverbians Do Not Need To Fight In Order To Live In Peace’. Loses a little in the translation, but—”

“Children!” Raissa stormed. “Games for children! Writing on walls—no wonder there is no uprising! How can you expect to gather together a whole people by—by scribbling silly sayings on buildings?”

“This is a propaganda division,” Holmes said firmly. “My job is propaganda. If you don’t think the constant



repetition of slogans is a valuable piece of groundwork for any uprising—”

“Slogans, yes,” Raissa said. “Mass meetings. Choral responses. Shouting. All that is fine. We studied that. But writing on walls—like children—”

“It works,” Holmes said. “It’s worked before.”

“Well,” Raissa said, “this time we’re throwing it out. We’re going to get some action, or I’m going to know why.”

“Now, look here,” Holmes said with what seemed to be magnificent patience. “What do you think I’m doing, playing Fut?”

“Fut?” Raissa said. “Who’s he, and what’s he got to do with—”

“No, no,” Holmes said. “Fut is a game. A Delverbian game.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been doing,” Raissa said. “All I know is—”

“Well, I’m trying to tell you what I’m doing,” Holmes cut in. “I’m not only concentrating on walls, you know.”

“Thank goodness for that!”

“There’s also the Victory flag,” Holmes said.

“The—” Raissa stared. “Do you mean to tell me you’ve had your underground organization sewing Victory flags?”

“Good Lord, no!” Holmes said. “I’ve had them *stealing* Victory flags. One, anyhow. The one that hangs over the Government Communications Building. At high noon, five days ago.”

“I’m sure,” Raissa said acidly, “that must have been a lot of fun.”

Holmes nodded. “It was, as a matter of fact.”

“But—”

“It was also damned fine propaganda.”

Raissa sniffed. “For thievery?” she asked.

“It made the Government look ridiculous,” Holmes said. “That’s the finest single effect it’s possible to achieve.”

“Holmes is right,” Plant chimed in, and then to the

propaganda worker: "Congratulations—a beautiful notion."

"I," Raissa said firmly, "disagree. I think it makes the underground look ridiculous. Playing childish games with flags—we should be above those things."

"We were, at one point," Holmes said in a thoughtful tone. "Twenty feet above. In a balloon."

Raissa stood up abruptly. "This is too much," she said. "I simply will not stand for this—amusement-park attitude toward a serious job."

"It works," Holmes said shortly.

"It really does," Plant added. "We've had to handle the job on other planets too, you know. We—"

"From now on," Raissa said, "things will be different. I have been entrusted by the Confederation Government with the technical and scientific details of proper organization. I will put them into practice here—"

"And ruin everything," Plant said sadly.

Raissa glared. "And rescue this operation from a pack of practical jokers!" she said in ringing tones. She brought her fist down on the table.

Unfortunately, it landed on a green fruit.

Holmes cleaned up the semi-liquid mess easily enough—but nothing, Plant reflected, could so easily repair the damage to Raissa's self-esteem.

He closed his eyes and uttered a silent, heartfelt prayer. He wasn't sure to what or to whom he was praying, but it was a prayer for peace.

Peace with honor, he thought, or peace without honor—but, most emphatically, peace with Raissa Renny.



## 5

Predictably, Raissa went out with Holmes later that morning. Out of a vague feeling that rescue would be needed, Plant tagged along, but nothing of any great import happened. Raissa merely watched, hardly attempting to interfere. Apparently she was going to fill her dossier with the errors of the field worker first, and put her own infallible notions into practice later.

What, Plant wondered, was "scientific" about studying a situation in a book, and then trying to apply the book-learning to real life, without ever taking a look at real life?

But, then, who was he to argue with the Institute? He'd only done the job successfully—he had no degree to prove it.

They met a small parade of native underground workers, every one of whom looked sidewise at Raissa and Plant. The workers had become used to Holmes and his fantastic height, but two more strangers, both taller than the normal Delverbian, on what was supposed to be secret underground business, were a little worrisome.

One of them, a mustached little man with a wrinkled face who looked, Plant thought, like a hairy prune, took Holmes aside into a nearby alleyway. Raissa, predictably, followed right along—and Plant, as if he had been tied to the party by a string, shrugged and came too.

The native opened his mouth, looked back at Raissa, and then said: "Listen, who's the strangers?"

Holmes replied in equally slangy Delverbian: "She's a new broad, I'm breaking her in to the organization."

"It's too many people," the native said. "You get a lot

of people together, you're going to get noticed." He looked both ways, but he was surrounded by nothing more than the walls of the alleyway and three small tubs full of what Plant assumed was garbage. At any rate, it smelled like garbage.

"It won't be for long," Holmes said. "Take my word for it, it's necessary."

The native shrugged. "So I'll take your word for it," he said. "What's the worst that can happen to me?"

"That's the spirit!" Holmes said.

"I'll *tell* you the worst that can happen to me," the native said. "The Government Police can tap me and take me away and file me for safekeeping. I'll end up in a nameless grave yet."

"Stick with me," Holmes said. "Have I gone wrong yet?"

"If you'd gone wrong," the native pointed out sensibly, "would I be sticking with you? Would you be here for me to stick to?"

"Ha ha," Holmes said in a hollow tone.

"Exactly," the native said.

Plant tugged at Holmes' sleeve. "Let's get moving," he said. "Finish up and we can go back to your place."

"I'm as nervous as you are," Holmes said, "but this is serious business." He turned back to the native. "How about the newspaper?" he asked. "Has Grabig got the new issue out yet?"

"*No names!*" the native shrieked, and then, hearing the volume of his own voice, gulped, looked around and spoke more softly, "No names. The newspaper is being distributed now. I have six copies with me."

"Let's see," Holmes held out his hand.

The native gulped again. "Here?"

"We're safe," Holmes said. "The others provide a screen. Looks like black-market activity, and the Government doesn't interfere with black-market stuff. You know that."



"Sure," the native agreed. "Why should they? They're making most of the profit. You know, Colonel Dibgadib himself is running a market in *deblid*, seventy per cent markup over the open price?"

"I'm not surprised," Holmes said. "How about the newspaper?"

The native nodded, fished through his clothing and came out with six crumpled sheets. Plant, peering over Holmes' shoulder, examined the underground newspaper with interest.

The headlines, streaming across the front page, read:

WHY DOES THE GOVERNMENT  
HIDE THE FACTS OF RECENT  
DEFEATS IN THE FIELD?

Under that was a story about the bridge-blowing outside Fescue—reasonably accurate, Plant was pleased to notice, though of course Overdog got no credit. Overdog wasn't even supposed to exist: even Holmes was posing as a native from some other city, a native who happened to have a glandular imbalance and who'd grown to some tremendous height.

Other stories were headed:

JOIN US FOR DELVERBIAN FREEDOM  
DELVERB FOR THE DELVERBIANS

Skeek the Rascals Out  
GENERAL DRECK EXECUTES  
40 LOYAL DELVERBIANS

Underground Memorial Week  
Begins on Frisbysl 16th

This last story included a catalogue of other executions, atrocities, defeats and secret moves of the Government. It ended in a ringing peroration to all Delverbians to join the Underground and help rid the land of its tyrannical masters, and finished with one flourish of a rhetorical question:

"Where it will all end, knows God!"

It seemed to Plant like a fine job of work. But Raissa was clearly dissatisfied. Later, back in their rooms before going out on Holmes' final appointment for the day, she burst out: "Newspapers! What good can they do?"

"We're very proud of the *Weekly Atrocity*," Holmes said. "Do you know it's distributed in editions of over sixty thousand copies every week? Not only that, we slip it into the mail deliveries for every Government office!"

"I'm sure it makes a tidy profit on subscriptions," Raissa said.

Holmes stared. "It's given away free," he said at last, very gently.

"Then I don't understand—"

"It provides information about the Government's crimes," Holmes said. "It gives the Underground a hard core to rally around. It—"

"Underground!" Raissa said. "A fine underground—made up of newspaper delivery boys!"

Holmes made no reply. Neither did Plant: there didn't seem to be one to make.

And that night, when Holmes excused himself to go up to the roof, Raissa began all over again. "I told you there'd have to be some changes!" she stormed. "A fine agent Holmes is—newspapers, writing on walls, stealing stupid flags—"

"Propaganda is basically a matter of things like that," Plant said. "It's all psychological trickery—nothing else. Remember the Terran World War II. Didn't they teach you in school?"

"Of course!" Raissa said. "I know how these things ought to work. There ought to be mass meetings. Burning down buildings. Assassinations."

"Bloodthirsty little Co-ordinator, aren't you?" Plant asked. "Remember—no loss of life?"

"That's a function of necessity," Raissa told him calmly. "Assassination may be necessary."



"It had better not be."

"And, besides," Raissa went on, "this—this just isn't anything *like* school!"

"It isn't supposed to be," Plant said. "School comes first: this comes later."

"But—"

Argument, Plant saw, was futile. Besides, he didn't really want to argue with Raissa: she was beautiful, and he dreamed about her, and he wanted to go on dreaming about her. And you couldn't, he told himself, dream about people you argued with, not really. It would be like dreaming about boxing matches.

Maybe there were people who dreamed about boxing matches. For all Plant knew, there were people who dreamed about knitting. But he wasn't one of them.

No, argument with Raissa had to be kept to a minimum. His job was just to see that she got back to base safe and sound: he had enough to do thinking about that.

"Let's drop the subject," he said, and, after a second: "I wonder what Holmes is doing."

"Let's go up and see," Raissa suggested instantly.

Plant demurred. "Maybe he wants privacy."

"I'm here to investigate, aren't I?"

Plant opened his mouth, thought and shut it again. Arguments, he told himself, had to be kept to a minimum. "Let's go," he said at last, and led the way out of the big front room, up three flights of rickety, warping stairs and out through a trap-door onto the roof.

As soon as he climbed out he wished he hadn't come.

Raissa, behind him, let out a brief gasp. She had seen just what Plant himself had seen.

Holmes, standing alone in the darkness, was holding what looked like an air-rifle. As they watched, he loaded it with a feathered dart, raised the rifle, and pointed it straight up into the sky.

*Pock.*

"The man's gone mad!" Raissa whispered.

Holmes turned, waved cheerfully and then bent for another dart.

*Pock.*

He was shooting straight up. Plant swallowed hard. Whatever Holmes was doing, it looked as if it were going to be a little hard to explain.

Raissa stood as if frozen behind him.

*Pock.*

Plant began to walk across the rooftop toward the propaganda worker. As he came near, Holmes fired once more, then put the rifle down on the matted roofing.

"Well, that's over," he said.

"What's over?" Plant asked.

"Yes," Raissa said grimly, coming up behind them. "Just what do you think you've been doing?"

Holmes smiled cheerfully. "I've been firing darts," he said. "This is my night for it."

"I see." Raissa's voice was ominously quiet. "Sort of a hobby?"

"Oh, no." Holmes was shocked. "This is part of my work—one of the most important parts."

"Really?"

"I'm sure Mr. Holmes has a satisfactory explanation of—" Plant began.

"You," Raissa told him, "will say nothing. I will have an explanation of this from Holmes himself." She took a breath. "Well?"

Holmes shrugged. "Leaflets," he said. "We—hey, watch that! Pardon me, but you'd better be careful—"

Raissa looked down. Almost at her feet, Plant saw, was a thick glass bottle with a narrow neck.

"That's hot," Holmes said. "Lye and powdered zinc."

"Ah, I see," Raissa said. "Chemical warfare."

"In a way," Holmes said. "It produces heat, which I don't need—and hydrogen, which I do."



"Hydrogen?"

"For the balloons," Holmes said.

"Balloons," Raissa repeated in a dull voice.

"That's right," Holmes said equably. "You see, I have to fill the balloons with hydrogen, so they'll float. Then I shoot them down."

There was a little silence. Plant tried to think of something sensible to say, but it came to him suddenly that nothing in the entire world was sensible. Everyone had gone mad, and soon they would begin to gibber and leap around. In a way, it would be a relief.

"You are indulging in target practice?" Raissa asked. "Odd, I suppose, but I don't think there is anything really blamable in—"

"Oh, no, not target practice," Holmes said. "I shoot down twenty balloons every session."

"But—"

"They contain leaflets," Holmes said. "When the balloon explodes, the leaflets are released. This last one was a call to action, pinned on the Fescue fiasco." He stopped and then said again, more slowly: "Fescue fiasco. You know, in a way, it's sort of a pretty phrase."

"Lovely," Plant said.

Raissa said nothing. Maybe, Plant told himself without much hope, she had finally managed to get an answer that satisfied her.

Maybe there would be no more trouble.

It was, of course, too much to hope for.

## 6

"We are going," Holmes announced the next morning, as cheerily as ever, "to visit the Baker Street Irregulars."

Plant choked on his coffee. "The what?"

"It's the main action group of the local Underground. There is a place in town called Baker Street—actually, Bakger, but it's close enough—and, after all, it seemed appropriate."

"I don't see—" Raissa began, but Plant broke in.

"Ah, of course," he said.

"Exactly," Holmes said. "Elementary, my dear Plant."

"Will somebody explain—"

"It's code," Plant told Raissa. "Secret code. Delverbian psychology."

Raissa looked somewhat less than mollified, but she said nothing. Having cleared up the dishes, the three of them set out along the byways of Delverb. Plant, a little less worried after having been through a full day with Holmes and Raissa—after all, they were still alive, weren't they?—had enough attention left over to take his first real look at Delverb.

He wondered if the capital cities of the People's Democracy had the same half-deserted, tense appearance. The streets, a little less wide than Terran streets, were filled with blowing papers (including leaflets and two copies of the *Weekly Atrocity*) and no street-cleaning trucks were in evidence. The sidewalks held few passersby, and of those better than half were in the gold-and-grey Delverbian uniform.

The houses, mostly three-and four-story jobs, seemed



to loom over them like threats, blocking out portions of a blue-grey sky above. The whole city, Plant thought, seemed to be waiting for something terrible to happen, something that would destroy even the memory of life.

War, he thought, remembering Holmes' slogans, is hell.

The three walked through the winding streets in a hush that seemed strange and ominous by daylight. Plant kept nervously looking round him until he told himself sternly that nothing was about to happen.

Nothing.

Then, very suddenly, Holmes stopped. They stood on a corner: across the street a storefront sign announced in magnificently gilded Delverbian:

GADAREG BROTHERS & SISTERS

FINE TUBES FOR ALL USES

There seemed nothing else of special interest—but Holmes didn't move.

Plant felt his heart beating. He kept himself tensely ready to protect Raissa if anything happened . . .

And then a native came out of a side street, saw Holmes and stopped near the group.

"Pabog?" Holmes said.

"Never mind my name," the native said. "I was told to see you."

"All right," Holmes said. He looked around at the others and said quietly: "I think maybe you'd better go somewhere else for a while."

Plant nodded—but Raissa stood firm. Obviously, she was determined not to miss a single minute: this was what she had come on her inspection trip for.

The native stood nervously watching everybody else. "I really think you'd better go," Holmes said.

Raissa didn't move. Plant stood by her, feeling as out of place as a seamstress in an atomic plant.

"These are my associates," Holmes said to the native, accepting the inevitable.

The native looked dubious. "I wasn't told to expect three people," he said. "Is this some sort of—"

"It's perfectly all right," Holmes said soothingly. "I want you to meet all of the people involved in—"

His voice was calm, and Plant approved: the effect would probably be good, he thought.

Unfortunately, he never even got a chance to hear the end of Holmes' sentence.

"It's a trap!" the native exploded suddenly. "But you won't catch me—I'm loyal—trying to trick me and make me talk against the Government—"

And then, without a pause, he was rushing down the street, shrieking like a peanut stand.

Plant stared after him, and then turned to Holmes. "Let me recommend to your attention," he said with stratospheric calmness, "this peculiar epidemic among the sheep."

Raissa said: "What? What's happened?"

"Quite so," Holmes said. "I suggest we all leave here, at once and with some speed."

"But—"

"Miss Renny," Holmes said, "the native we have just encountered was to meet me to discuss becoming a full member of our underground—of the Baker Street Irregulars, in fact. I was assigned to meet him on the way to our gathering, and bring him along. When he saw the three of us he got the wind up and ran. He will now undoubtedly bring us all to the attention of the police."

Raissa said: "Oh. Then we'd—"

"We'd better get out of here," Holmes said. "Instantly. There is no time to waste in explanations."

"But—"

"I very much hope," Holmes said, "that I shall see you later." He turned—and was gone down the street.

Plant took Raissa's arm. "Come on," he said.

"If you think I'm going to make a coward of myself—"



"Come on!" He pulled and she took a step, then another—but it was too late.

Out of nowhere police were all around them. Raissa tore free and flew at one of the green-uniformed cops, clawing and screeching. Plant went after her, found himself in a confused melee, and then, staggering, realized that the cops were otherwise occupied.

He was free.

Raissa was being dragged away by a couple of cops, and the rest turned to face Plant. Plant ducked past them, ran down the street and assaulted the two carrying Raissa.

One of them swung back, hitting him in the side and knocking him against a wall. He came forward again, gasping slightly, while Raissa tried kicking and biting. One cop held her tightly, and Plant heard her screeching Terran words no schoolgirl, he thought in a moment of wild abstraction, ought ever to have learned.

The other cops were behind him now. Plant turned to hold them off and ran head on into a wild blow with a Delverbian fist.

Everything went black, and he was falling: there had been the crash of glass, and then a new sensation, wind rushing by him.

He was falling through space. He could see the stars—hundreds of stars, thousands.

And—somewhere—Raissa was being lugged away by the Delverbian police, screaming bloody murder and entirely beyond his help.

## INTERLUDE

The heroic Delverbian Home Guards, faced with the necessity of tracking down those monsters of iniquity who preferred betraying their country to upholding it in war as well as peace, today announced the capture of a ringleader in the capital city itself.

Hard as it may be for honest and worthy citizens to

realize, even in Delverb itself there are the foul traitors, awaiting only a word to pillage the cities, to destroy life and property, to make unsafe all that we have cherished and preserved to pass on to our children.

The latest capture was that of a woman who has refused even to give her name to the authorities. Our heroic Home Guardsmen came upon a disturbance during their nightly Safety Patrol, and were set upon by what one Guardsman estimates as "thirty to forty armed men."

His report goes on: "We were heavily outnumbered, but we had to stand and make a fight of it. After about half an hour, we managed to drive off the saboteurs, but their leader was already in our hands."

This unnamed female leader, so contrary to popular images of what a woman ought to be as to be almost incomprehensible to most loyal citizens, is now in detention while being questioned about her group's activities.

This reporter asked the Guardsman quoted above: "How were you able to drive off so large a group of armed traitors?"

His answer, citizens, is worthy of enshrinement with other heroic mottoes of our proud Delverbian past.

"I guess the right was on our side," he said modestly, "and, after all, we had *Delverb* to fight for."

Yes, fellow citizens . . .

—Excerpted from the daily newspaper *Clockticks*

## 7

"Tell me," Plant said. "Have you ever spent the day in a sewer system?"

Dempster and Glone appeared to think deeply. "No," Glone said at last. "I can't say I have. It's one of the experiences of life which is still a closed book to me."



Dempster grimaced. "It sounds pretty lousy," he said.

Plant nodded. "It is," he said. "And the worst part of it was thinking about Raissa. Knowing the cops had captured her, and knowing there was nothing whatever I could do about it."

"I guess you were pretty lucky," Dempster said. "At least you weren't captured."

"Luck is the word for it," Plant said. He shifted his weight slightly in the folding metal chair and gave the clock on the opposite wall a nasty look. "That cop knocked me through a window into a trap-door over the sewers. God knows what it was there for, or who had it built originally—but cities with an underground organization and a blackmarket setup are likely enough to have such places. The ones on old Terra are supposed to have had. I was just running in my well-known luck."

"Of course," Dempster said flatly, "it was different for Raissa."

"Raissa's all right," Plant said quickly. "Anyhow, as all right as she can be—Holmes got his men to work and managed, at least, to get her reasonably good quarters in the local jail, and no real questioning or pressure. It's not going to last forever, but it's pretty solid right now. That's what took me the rest of the five days, getting Raissa set up."

"I'm sure she'll be very happy," Glone said. "X marks my cell and all that."

"Well," Plant said, "it was the best I could do. We thought about arranging a jail-break, but there just wasn't any way to do that. Hell, I'm lucky to be back here myself—and Raissa is lucky to be alive and healthy."

"We're all lucky to be alive and healthy," Glone said, "especially the Delverbian First Army and the Fifth Command of the People's Republic."

"Oh," Plant said. "The battle."

"There is nothing we can do for Raissa just now, right?" Glone asked.

"Holmes is looking after that end of things," Plant said, "until we can figure out a big break-through."

Glone nodded. "In that case," he said, "we still have a war to lose. And we've got to make sure that both sides lose it."

The battle plan was, unfortunately, simplicity itself.

"It's the complicated ones that are easy to gremlin up," Plant complained. "There's always something—a bridge to be blown up, or somebody's watch to stop. But when you've got something like this—"

"All they plan to do," Dempster said, "is come at each other like a couple of sluggers. The Delverbian forces are coming from the East, straight over the ice—the People's Republic from the West. Looks like a textbook example of half the Russo-German battles, if you remember your history. Whoever controls the Arctic icecap has a big edge in lines of communications. It's an important battle. You'd think they'd invent something fancy."

"Not at all," Glone said. "That's our job."

"Well, there isn't anything to invent," Plant said.

Glone pursed his lips. They stood in the chart room, around a table which held a map of the Arctic ice-cap, marked with arrows for the opposing forces, circles for their present positions and their estimated positions days later. "Your trouble," Glone told Plant, "is that you're worried about your girl-friend."

"She is not—"

"Well, she isn't anybody else's," Glone said equably. "By elimination—"

"The hell with it," Plant said. "I just don't want to see her get hurt, that's all."

"Well, I don't want to see *anybody* get hurt," Glone said. "So let's take another look at this battle."

They looked. Dempster's lips pushed in and out, the way they did when he was thinking. Plant just stared.



Glone fiddled with a greasy piece of string he had picked up somewhere, tying and untying knots in it.

Concentration went on. "Damn it," Plant said suddenly, "there's nothing to look at! One force here, one force there, they meet, they battle and that's all."

"But that isn't all," Glone said. "Because the battle can't come off." He paused. "Listen, we're close to the finish on this war. A few more little gremlin jobs and the world is going to crack wide open. Suppose you were a Wh'Gralb native General."

"Okay," Plant said agreeably. "I'm a Wh'Gralb native General. Name of Napoleon." He paused. "Which side am I on?"

"Neither," Glone said. "Both. It doesn't matter. Now, for three months you've been waging war. Right?"

"If you say so," Plant said. "Is waging war any different from just fighting it?"

Glone shrugged. "Seems to me," he said, "that privates fight wars. Generals wage them."

"Okay," Plant said. "I've been waging away at this war for three months. Now what?"

"Now," Glone said, "you begin to notice something."

"I'm on the wrong planet?" Plant asked. "I ought to be on Terra in 1942?"

"No, damn it," Glone said. "What you begin to notice is that things keep going wrong. Every time you make a plan, something goes wrong."

"That," Plant said, "happens anyway. What's so special about it?"

"This is different," Glone said. "You're not fighting any real battles. There's always something—that bridge blown up, or that watch that stopped. Or something."

"Enemy spies," Plant said. "It's all their fault."

"But the enemy is having the same trouble—anyhow, that's what your Intelligence tells you."

Plant thought for a second. "If I'm a General," he

said, "what am I doing with intelligence? It's a handicap."

"I mean your Army Intelligence."

"Oh," Plant said. "Those boys. Well—if the enemy is having the same trouble, I don't know what I'll think."

"You'll think," Glone said, "that something is going wrong."

Plant's face lit up in amazement. "Ah!" he said. "Brilliant!"

Dempster looked up and cast his eyes around the little grey cell that held the three Overdogs. "Will somebody get back to the business at hand?" he said sourly.

"This *is* the business at hand," Glone said. "I'm trying to tell you that the armies are getting uneasy. A couple more good jobs and they'll simply refuse to fight. Or else revolt."

"Or both," Plant said.

Glone shook his head. "You can't revolt without fighting. It's got to be one or the other."

"That," Plant said, "is dictatorial categorizing. Whatever that means."

"It means you've lost your mind," Glone said casually. "But things are close to a finish—we can't give up now."

"Maybe," Dempster said slowly, "we could dig a hole. I mean make it impossible for the armies to reach each other."

"They're not eleventh-century knights," Glone said. "They've got mortar and they can build bridges. Early Twentieth, remember?"

A silence fell, along with a fair amount of gloom.

"I wonder what Raissa would say if she were here," Glone said.

"She'd tell us to assassinate all the officers," Plant said. "Without officers, no army can fight. She has a simple mind for these things—bloodthirsty, but simple."

"I suppose so."

Another silence. Suddenly Glone gave a glad cry.



"What the hell was that?" Plant asked, startled.

"A glad cry," Glone explained.

"It sounded," Plant told him, "like the death-rattle of the Greater Slop." He paused. "Anyhow," he added, "what was it all about?"

"Without officers," Glone said slowly, "no army can fight."

Plant shook his head. "We are not going to assassinate any officers," he said. "Remember our directive."

"Oh—not assassinate them," Glone said. "But suppose we *switch* them?"

## 8

The Arctic wind was cold enough to bite straight through face-masks into the nose. Plant shivered, checked his watch and discovered that he still had five minutes to wait. Fifteen miles away, Dempster was waiting, too, but the knowledge gave Plant little comfort. Dempster didn't ever seem to get cold, or warm, or anything at all. Sometimes Plant suspected him of being a zombie, rung in on them by the Confederation in order to field-test voodoo for active duty.

Then again, zombies were supposed to go lurching around killing people. Dempster didn't even look *that* active.

Maybe, Plant reflected, his mother had been frightened by a vegetable. Any vegetable would do: Dempster himself, Plant thought, would look entirely natural with his leafy head above ground, surrounded by dirt and fertilizer.

On the other hand, his own name was *Plant*. Sadly,

he decided to drop the subject. He checked his watch again. Three minutes to go.

It was, he thought, like waiting on a street-corner for a date. The army of the People's Democracy was nowhere in sight. He wondered if Dempster was having any better luck with the Delverbians.

A particularly cold and windy street-corner, he amended. And the date was very, very late.

Thinking of a date made him remember Raissa Renny. In spite of everything, she was still beautiful, and Plant's veins still ached when he thought about her. He didn't want her to be in jail.

But, since there was nothing to do about it, he tried to think of something else.

Unfortunately, there was nothing else except the cold to think of.

Two minutes to go.

One and one-half minutes to go—and there, he told himself with a surge of joy, came the Army!

Carefully, an invisible white-clad dot against the snow, Plant watched the slow advance. He primed his silenced bazooka, waited some more, counted—and let go.

The shell soared over the head of the Army, unseen and unheard. It hung for a second—and burst.

Invisible gas came pouring out. Plant waited one more minute. Then, knowing that the Army had been knocked cold—or, to avoid reminders of the weather, senseless—he started across the ice. There was a lot to be done, and damned little time to do it in.

The helicopter was hidden behind an outcropping that consisted of even more ice. Plant loaded his first four unconscious officers into it, signalled back via his communicator, and watched the 'copter take off. While he waited for its return he got the next four officers ready. Dempster, he knew, was doing the same with the Delverbians.

He picked his way casually among the sprawled and



sleeping troops. In a few minutes he heard the helicopter coming back. By then he was ready with four more—and the first four Delverbian officers had arrived.

He distributed them and, whistling a dirge to himself in what was almost a cheery fashion, began looking for the next group.

The trouble was that Plant was preoccupied. The final load of Delverbian prisoners arrived, Plant removed them from the helicopter and then went scouring through the Army of the People's Democracy. He'd finished with the regular troops, and by now there was only the slimmest chance that he'd missed an officer or so—but, he asked himself, why not do a really complete job?

He kept thinking about Raissa, though. Poor Raissa, trapped, alone, friendless, uncared-for . . .

The communicator buried in his skull sang out: "Thirty seconds' warning."

Plant stared. In thirty seconds he couldn't even get back to the helicopter!

He was trapped, just like Raissa. He was going to be found by the People's Democracy, and not only violate a prime directive but probably be executed too.

After all, any stranger would be held instantly responsible for the switch in officers. Particularly if the stranger were dressed in a snow uniform that didn't really look a lot like the snow uniforms of the People's Democracy.

A short life, Plant thought, and a damned cold one.

Ahead of him was his last checking-point, the sleeping members of the 15th Provisional Assault Battalion. They were a new battalion, testing new weapons in the field. In a way, Plant thought, it was sort of a compliment to be killed by new weapons. But he wished he could do without it . . .

And now Raissa would never know that he loved her.

Plant heard himself think that one sentence and stopped, startled even then.

*Loved her?*

"Fifteen seconds," the communicator said.

But if he loved her, he had to stay alive. It was only fair.

And there had to be a way . . .

In fifteen seconds the men would begin to awaken. Of course, the drug wasn't clocked to the second—but it wasn't very far off, either. The Overdogs were efficient; they had to be.

All except Theodore Plant.

And Plant had to find a way out . . .

The new Fifteenth Provisional Assault Battalion lay before him. There had been, after all, one officer left, a political Commissar in his civilian snow-togs. But there was no chance of getting him to the helicopter, Plant knew. The plane had, as a matter of fact, already taken off to pick up Dempster.

Soon they would discover that Plant hadn't managed to get back.

But by then he would probably be . . .

He stopped.

He stared at the political Commissar for the Fifteenth P.A. Battalion.

Then he spent the next ten seconds dragging him behind a spur of ice. Thoughtfully, as the man began to stir, he hit him over the head. He could hear the awakening of the others, of the confused army and the even more confused officers, as he worked.

## INTERLUDE

. . . Bundled in their heavy suits, the picked group of scouts inched their slow way forward on the ice. Behind them was the main mass of the People's Army, awaiting



bravely their word on the terrain. Ahead of them—who knew?

There might be danger—even death. The Delverbian troops were known to be approaching the area.

But the scout group never hesitated. Grim-faced Commissar Tresis stole a glance around at the men, and nodded with heavy satisfaction. "They're only boys," he thought to himself. "They're too young for war—that's a man's work."

But the boys themselves, down to apple-cheeked Soso Rettisles, dreaming of his home back on the farm, didn't seem disturbed. After all, they had a job to do.

And the People's Republic stood behind them.

Another yard of icy terrain was covered, and then another. Little Soso unshipped his rifle, his eyes sparkling behind the snow-visors. "Gonna get me a Delverbian today for dang sure," he muttered happily. "They'll be sitting flebs on this ice."

Next to him, hard-featured Sergeant Frest growled. "You'll be a sitting fleb, too, youngster," he advised the farm boy. "Better go back to your crouch. There'll be plenty of time for shooting."

Not a whit abashed, Soso dropped back into his hunter's crouch. "Right you are, comrade," he returned cheerily.

The ice ahead shone clear—clear, and empty.

Yet, there was a feeling of danger in the air.

It was palpable, as real as the cold, as real as the ice over which the boot-clad feet of the scouts slid evenly.

Danger . . . and perhaps even death.

Soso whispered suddenly: "Comrade . . ."

Sergeant Frest spoke without turning his eyes from the vista ahead. "What is it, youngster?"

"What if—what if we find them?" Soso whispered.

Sergeant Frest shrugged. "Why, then, we do, youngster." But a second later the tone of little Soso's words became clear to him. The kid was afraid—after all,

this was his first mission. Sergeant Frest darted a glance at him, and then turned back to searching the ice ahead, became clear to him. The kid was afraid—after all, afraid.”

“Comrade, I didn’t say—”

“Sure you didn’t,” Frest cut in. “But you’re afraid, youngster—just like the rest of us. Don’t fool yourself: you’re not alone.”

Sosy nodded slowly. The message was getting through. The kid would be all right, Sergeant Frest told himself. Of course he would. He was fighting for all he held dear, for the People’s Republic and all that went to make it up, for *fut* and hot dogs and the smile on the face of his girl back home, for summertime and wintertime and all the time . . .

The kid would be all right. Sergeant Frest felt a little better.

Then Commissar Tresis gave a sudden shout. “Ahead! They’re up ahead!”

Frest blinked and stared. The Commissar was right—and it was only fitting that he, totally dedicated to his men, should have been the first to see it. Frest was a professional soldier—but what could that contribute, next to the dedication of men like the Commissar?

“Okay,” Frest snapped instantly. “Everybody down. Flat. We’ll take as much of a survey as we can before they spot us.”

Next to him, he could feel little Sosy dropping to the ice. It was rough, this war, no doubt about it. But they were fighting for the People’s Republic . . .

A second went by. It felt like an hour to Frest, maybe more to little Sosy. The Commissar, grim-faced, seemed totally occupied in estimating the force ahead.

“I make it fifteen hundred,” he said at last. “Fifteen hundred or better. And this can’t be their main force—”

“Right,” Frest said. He looked around. Eight men in the scout unit. Fifteen hundred against eight.



"I'd better be going back with the news," the Commissar said bravely.

For a second Frest wished scouting units didn't have to keep radio silence. But that was necessary, everybody knew it . . . and besides, there wasn't anything else to do. "Right," he said again. "We'll cover you."

It was typical of the Commissar not to insist on Frest's calling him "Comrade" just then. He understood, all right.

He didn't say a word, merely nodded and, with one last glance at the approaching men, started back on elbows and knees for headquarters.

Sergeant Frest looked around at his men once more. Little Sosy looked grim and ready. The kid was going to be all right.

They were all going to be all right.

It was a shame, of course, that they couldn't possibly escape detection—but they had to cover for the Commissar. *Somebody* would be seen, that was for sure . . .

Well—what better cause to die for?

A second ticked by.

And then, very suddenly, everything went black . . .

—an excerpt from *Weekly War Stories*,  
published in Pessimils, People's Republic.  
This story entitled *Ice War*, by Meffer Spass.

## 9

"Don't be silly!" Plant said. "You've got to get me out of here!"

He sat alone in his office, back in Pessimils, Capital of the People's Democracy. The place was deserted—though there was probably a spy rig somewhere. Well,

maybe the natives would think that Commissar Sepisens had gone crazy and was talking to himself. Then they would put him in an asylum for the duration.

Maybe, Plant reflected, the asylum would be comfortable. He couldn't really say the same for the office.

"What do you mean, get you out of there?" his communicator said, tinnily, to himself alone. "You're valuable, and don't forget it!"

"I'm valuable to me, too," Plant said. "I'll go nuts sitting here—I'm going nuts just thinking about how nuts I'll go." Dimly, he wondered if that made any sense.

"But you've got to stay for a while, until we can take you out without suspicion—"

"I know," Plant said. "The directive."

"Never let a native know there are extraplanetary beings on the world," the communicator said. "That's right. So we've got to avoid suspicion—"

"I'll go out and tell them," Plant said. "I'll go right out there and spill every last little God damn bean."

"And what'll you get out of it?" the communicator said. "They'll either think you have gone buggy, or they'll blame you for the way they've been messing up the battles. Besides, you can't."

"Oh, can't I?"

"Not with the hypno compulsion you've had, you can't," the communicator said. "You remember the hypno, don't you?"

"Oh, Jesus," Plant said despairingly. He looked around the office again. It didn't get any more pleasant. "You mean you're just going to leave me here?"

"You've got it easy," the communicator said. "Think of Raissa, for instance."

"What do you think I'm thinking of?" Plant wailed. "I've got to rescue her. I can't just stay here signing papers and making reports. I'm no Commissar. It's not my kind of job. I hate it."

"Complain to the Labor Relations Board," the com-



municator said unfeelingly. "Meanwhile, you're there until we can figure out a safe way to get you out."

Plant gulped. "That might not be until the war is over," he pointed out.

"Well, you'd better start praying for peace." There was a click, and Plant was out of touch with his base.

He began to call in again, and then decided it wouldn't do any good. The only thing he could reasonably do was resign himself to the inevitable, relax, and enjoy it.

But, damn it all, it wasn't *fair*!

He'd changed uniforms with the Commissar, knowing that the 15th was a new unit and probably composed of lots of unfamiliar faces. Then, after calling in his location so that the real Commissar could be picked up, hypnoed and somehow disposed of after the Army had left, he'd strolled casually back to the 15th, taking a nice long route so that he could circle round, start out along the icecap and get out of sight of the Army in a hurry.

Then he planned to call in for his own pickup.

Unfortunately, as he appeared, a soldier came rushing up to him. He had all he could do to keep the soldier from peering behind the ice-spur and seeing the tied and unconscious figure of the authentic Commissar: he led the man slowly away, trying to answer his questions as they went.

"Commissar Sepisens, what's happened, Sir?"

"I don't know, soldier. Whatever it is, it looks pretty serious." Now, *there* was a cornball line—but the soldier had accepted it. Of course, Wh'Gralb didn't have soap operas . . .

"What should we do now, Sir?"

"We'd better reform, first thing."

"But the officers—"

"Gallant men," Plant said sententiously. "Gallant men, every one of them."

"But—"

"Let's get in shape, soldier. Let's get in shape and then figure out our next move. Remember, the People's Democracy depends on you."

By that time, Plant was practically in the middle of the confused 15th. But he still had a chance . . .

"Where are you going, Sir?"

"Take a look at the lie of the land, soldier. Got to figure out the next move. We have to do something."

"But the men, Sir. Without officers—"

"I'll be right back, soldier."

"Sir—"

"What is it?"

"You're our only officer, Sir. The men are depending on you."

Plant sighed. "I'll be just over the next rise—"

"Yes, Sir."

After that, it was no surprise to discover that five of his men had followed him at a discreet distance. Plant sighed again. There was clearly nothing to do but become a Commissar.

He was the captain of an entire Battalion, the leader of a great striking force. Unfortunately, he felt like an exceedingly tired captain. As a matter of fact, he felt like a worm—a worm in an unbreakable, unshatterable box.

There just wasn't any way out.

And, so, he had come back to Pessimils with the Army, and been set to writing up reports. His were, after all, the only trustworthy reports the Army could get, not only on the original job of Commissar Sepisens (reporting troop reaction and officer reaction to the new weapons) but on the entire weird fate of the Army.

Naturally, he knew nothing at all. His reports were models of nonsense, carefully worded to conform to native custom, and saying nothing whatever of any importance. All of his reports so far had boiled down to:

A. There we were on the ice.



- B. All of a sudden there were these Delverbian officers.
- C. So we took them prisoner and came back.
- D. Here we are back home.

In a way, it was a nice, logical progression of thought. Of course, it didn't say much, but, then, it wasn't meant to say much. He'd been given a nice large office and a lot of paper, and there just wasn't any other way to use up the time.

He sighed and looked around the office again. Trees of Wh'Gralb had an unfortunate tendency to produce wood with close-whorled grain, so that the fancy wood panelling had the effect of making anyone dizzy who looked at it for too long. The desk was the same. There was also a couch (stuffed with the hair of a local animal) and two chairs (ditto). The desk-chair, in which Plant sat, tipped back when he leaned on it, tipped forward when he didn't much want it to, and creaked at all times.

He tried to remind himself that his own fairly remote ancestors, on Terra circa 1950, had actually enjoyed offices very much like this one: but he couldn't make himself believe it.

After a few minutes, he took his mind off ancient Terra and put it back on the current People's Republic instead. There were, for one thing, a series of piles of papers for him to go through and sign.

The trouble with being a Commissar he reflected was the paper work. The first paper off the urgent stack, for instance, was obviously meant by idiots for the use of morons. He glanced at it and, for the first second or so, contemplated filling it out with absolute honesty.

*Reaction of troops to new F-1-9-X cartridge:* Sudden, if shot with it. Otherwise, resigned.

*Apparent utility of new F-1-9-X cartridge:* To shoot people with.

*Recommended disposition of new F-1-9-X cartridge:*

That line gave rise to a reply so obscene, not to mention impossible, that Plant shuddered and got down to

filling out the forms as he was expected to fill them out. He had got into the habit of signing "Commissar F. E. Sepisens" as illegibly as possible in the dotted native script, in the hope that no one would catch up to him. But the original Commissar Sepisens apparently hadn't made much of an impression on anybody: nobody even questioned him.

There was no reason, in fact, that he couldn't stay in Pessimils for the rest of his life.

Hurriedly, he finished the form and took up the next one.

*Reaction of officers to new F-1-9-X cartridge:*

He sighed. Early-Twentieth Terra could never have been this silly, he thought.

There was a click as the door opened, and Plant looked up. An orderly was standing by his desk.

"Yes?" he barked.

The orderly seemed timid. "Sir," he said, "General Staff sent me to pick up the completed forms, if you—"

"Well, take them, damn it," Plant said abruptly. He shoved the forms across the desk: the orderly accepted them wordlessly and left. The door clicked shut.

There was, Plant told himself, one good thing about being a Commissar: for the first time in his life, he was surrounded by people who were shorter than he was.

It gave him confidence, he reflected. Not that the confidence did him any good: without the rest of the Overdogs he was absolutely unable to return to base. And he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as a Government official.

Particularly not for such a paper-mad Government.

At the side of the desk, for instance, was a small red-bound book. Plant's eyes strayed toward it, but he didn't open it, or even touch it with his hand. The book was the Bible, to all intents and purposes, and, like most Bibles of foreign religions, it acted on Plant like a strong emetic.

It contained the rules.



The rules weren't limited in any way: you couldn't really say they were the rules *for* anything. They were just the rules. Contained within the red binding was every statement needed for every conceivable situation a person in the People's Democracy could find himself in.

Of course, there were times when he needed the Bible: it provided him with an example of what any form ought to look like. Scribbles of previous completed forms filled his desk, and he stared at them hopelessly:

*... res sitlis sikkim ...*

*... in reply respectfully stated ...*

*... sessru sessri lipsi kimkas ...*

*... by virtue of democratic ideals ...*

*... ya lubliu delat voda ...*

Plant sighed. Then he got up. Maybe, after a short walk, everything would make more sense.

But he doubted it.

10

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Ten minutes later his door opened again. Plant was once more sitting behind his desk, staring helplessly at the mounds of papers. Sooner or later, he knew, he was going to have to open up the Bible and get to work. But the very thought appalled him.

Damn it, he wasn't a Commissar, he was an Overdog. He had to get back to base ...

Deeply, he sighed. Then he opened the Bible. The letter before him wasn't particularly complicated: in a few seconds ...

It was at that moment that the door opened. Relieved and irritated at once, Plant looked up.

The native who stood in the doorway was small, and

fat, and seemed too shaggy to be real. He had a uniform on, marked with the equivalent of corporal's stripes. Plant barked: "Yes?"

"Commissar Sepisens," the native squeaked, "I thought you might like another little game of *fut*, so I—"

"A what?" Plant roared. "Can't you see I'm busy here?"

"Well, of course, Sir," the little corporal squeaked, "but I—" He stopped and blinked. "You *are* Commissar Sepisens, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," Plant said. "Who did you think I was?"

"Well, our little games of *fut*—"

Plant knew that *fut* was a game. What he didn't know was how to play it. But Commissar Sepisens undoubtedly did.

Of course, there was no way, even by hypno, to indoctrinate Overdogs with every little detail of planetary culture . . . language itself was a triumph, and such additional facts as could be crammed in were gratefully accepted.

But Commissar Sepisens was an avid *fut*-player.

There was no way of telling, Plant thought dismally, what else he might turn out to be.

The soldier still waited. "Well—later, maybe," Plant offered. "Suppose I get in touch with you?"

"That would be fine, Sir." Did the eyes still look doubtful? Plant shivered undetectably.

"All right, then," Plant said. "I've got to get this work out."

"Of course, sir." The door shut. Plant was alone.

Once again, he decided to give whatever spy-eyes were watching him the impression that he was in direct communication with God, or with his schizoid other self. He pressed behind his left ear twice, then once again.

A tinny voice said: "Base camp. Report."

"This is Plant," Plant said.



"I know it," the voice said. "This is Glone. Who else could you be—unless the natives have worked out a technique for surgical removal and transplant of personal communicators? And even the Confederation hasn't quite done that yet. What are you calling about now?"

"Damn it," Plant said, "there's no need to be ill-tempered about it."

"A good commander," Glone said, "is a friend to his men. I'm a *lousy* commander."

Plant closed his eyes. "All right," he said. "All right. Listen: you've got to get me out of here."

"What, again? I've told you—"

"But the situation has changed."

"How?" Glone asked. "What have you done, blown up something? Or fallen in love with a native?"

"Jesus, no!" Plant said, startled.

"It's not unheard of," Glone said. "Think of Farmer, with the first team."

"Okay," Plant said. "But I'm not Farmer. And I'm not about to fall in love with anybody."

Glone paused for a second. "Now, that," he said in a quiet, considering tone, "is a shame. You're missing one of the grandest emotional opportunities known to man. After all, love is—"

"Love," said Plant, "is an unprintable action followed closely by several unimaginable modifying traits."

"Now," Glone said reprovingly, "is that nice?"

"Nothing is nice," Plant said. "Especially around here. I tell you, you've got to get me out."

"All right, I'll play games," Glone said. "Why?"

"Because," Plant said, "they suspect me."

"A People's Democracy suspects everybody," Glone said. "It isn't a hobby, it's a way of life."

"Not the way they suspect me," Plant said. "There's a corporal around here who wants me to play games with him." He paused and then added: "I mean he—"

"Let's just leave it," Glone said. "I gather you don't want to play games?"

"I don't even want to think about games," Plant said. "Besides, I don't know how. And I can't avoid him forever."

"Maybe we could have him killed," Glone said. "Carrados is the major agent over there—we could get in touch with him—"

"Carrados is as blind as a bat half the time," Plant said. "He drinks. He's not dependable."

"He's as dependable as he has to be."

"And besides—there's no way of telling what else somebody might come up with. This isn't like taking over a new person, remember. Sepisens is known to somebody, somewhere. It's only a matter of time—"

"Well, Carrados—"

"Jesus!" Plant howled. "There can't be any connection between me and Carrados. Can't you see that? He's doing the same sort of work Holmes is doing, the standard agent's work from the inside."

"Of course he is," Glone said.

"Then he can't have any connection with the Government, damn it," Plant said. "He's trying to *overthrow* the Government. Remember?"

Glone said: "Hmm." There was a second of silence. Then he said: "Maybe—"

"Maybe, nothing," Plant cut in. "You've got to get me out, and you know it. If somebody discovers I'm not Commissar Sepisens—"

"All right," Glone said. "I'll call you back."

"The hell you will," Plant said. "You'll have a helicopter on top of a building here in Pessimils tonight. You name the building and the time."

"But—"

"It's a necessary risk," Plant said.

"But—"

"Name the building and time," Plant said.



"Now, wait a minute," Glone broke in. "Who's giving the orders around here?"

Plant looked around at his office, at the trappings of high rank. He thought of his underlings, every one of them shorter than Theodore Plant. He shut the Bible with a snap, leaned back in his special chair, and said: "Me."

"But—" There was a pause. "The corner of Sissel Street and Park Center," Glone said. "On the roof. Midnight."

"Fine," Plant said. "I'll be there."

"Now don't get the idea that—"

"Me?" Plant said. "I haven't any ideas at all." He cut himself off and yawned, in one long relaxing motion. Being a Commissar did have its good points, after all.

Now all he had to do was wait until midnight.

It was ten minutes later, halfway down the urgent stack of papers, that he sighed and pressed behind his ear, twice, then once.

Glone's voice was more resigned than Plant had ever heard it. "What now? Watchman, what of the night?"

"I've run across a reference here," Plant said. "You might be interested. The People's Democracy is setting up for a new battle—"

"On the island of Remifew," Glone said. "I know. Do you think we haven't got spy-sets of our own, tapping every available frequency? Do you think Holmes and Carrados don't report in—not to mention minor operatives?"

"Okay," Plant said. "Now let me ask you a couple. Here is an island off the main trade routes, of minor strategic importance."

"Hey—"

"And not only is it going to be attacked, but the assumption is that it's going to be heavily defended. Like Corregidor, say."

"I see," Glone said slowly. "The question is why."

"Correct," Plant said. "And I've got the answer."

"Okay. Shoot."

"Right," Plant said.

"Huh?"

"The answer is *shoot*," Plant said. "A brand new kind of shooting."

"Plant," Glone said, "will you tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

Plant took a deep breath. "Somebody in the People's Democracy is working on atomic power."

Glone said a few words, none of them germane.

"The island of Remifew contains uranium," Plant said. "Quite a lot of it. With a large supply of U-238 there's going to be enough U-235 for experiments, once they work out separation techniques—and they will, there are enough possibilities available. Even if they blow themselves up in the process they'll learn something."

"Too much," Glone said. "Do you realize what an advance atomic power can be?"

"I've read some history," Plant said. "I remember."

Glone's voice was hushed, as if in prayer. "My God," he said.

"I just thought you might like to know," Plant said.

"Sure," Glone said abstractedly. Then he went on: "You know what this means, don't you?"

"It means I'd better get back to work fast and help mix things up."

"It means you're not coming back, not in a hurry," Glone said.

"What?"

"Look at the situation," Glone said. "You're a Commissar in charge of a new-weapons division. You'll be on top of developments—in a spot we couldn't work a man into in five years."

It was Plant's turn to say: "But—"

"But nothing," Glone said. "We'll take care of the



battle. Somebody has to keep posted on atomics development, and make sure we stop that right at the start. And you're it, Plant. You are definitely it."

"Damn it, I'll be discovered—"

"If you are, escape or suicide," Glone said unfeelingly. "I mean it this time; you're on your own. This is vital."

Plant grimaced at the air before him. "Listen, why don't we just leave the natives alone? We don't have to—"

"But we do," Glone said. "The easy reason is that we've been hired for the job."

"They're people, too," Plant said. "Just like us. Maybe if they develop on their own—"

"Now listen," Glone said, "and listen hard."

"I—"

"I'm only going to say this once. And it's important. I wouldn't say it at all if there were anybody else on the circuit, or any chance of its being tapped. But I've got a telltale board in front of me."

Plant opened his mouth, realized he had nothing whatever to say, and closed it.

"If you ever mention it to anybody else," Glone said, "and by that I mean any living being, I'll not only deny having said it, but I'll make sure you never get a chance to open your mouth again."

"Jesus," Plant said. "What's all this? What's so important?"

"Just this," Glone said. "You know our motives for coming here: keep native technology down by keeping warfare down."

"That's what the directive says," Plant agreed.

"It won't work," Glone said. "It can't work. For one thing, after the war there may be some sort of trade mission. Cultural stuff."

"I know," Plant said. "Raissa mentioned it." The sound of her name made him feel a lot worse all of a sudden: he pushed his emotions out of the way and listened to what Glone was saying.

"That'll blow technology wide open here," Glone said. "It has to. And stopping warfare doesn't stop a technological rise: it only slows it down."

"Then we aren't—"

"We're assigned to do a job, and the Confederation thinks we're doing it," Glone said. "But we know better. We've got to know better, because as soon as you get in real contact with these natives—with any natives—you discover that they're people, too. And you can't feel quite so comfortable about the idea of keeping their level of civilization down by main force."

"Okay," Plant said. "Then why don't we just go home?"

"Because, damn it," Glone said, "we're not keeping their technology down. We're just making the technological rise comparatively painless. It'll happen a little more slowly than the Confederation's did—though the trade missions, if any, will help counteract that—but it'll happen without war."

"Then all we're doing—" Plant stopped. He thought for a long minute. "You mean we're doing just what we say we're doing."

"Just what the Confederation says we're doing," Glone said. "Stopping war. Helping the poor natives. Right. What we're not doing, what we can't do, is what they *think* we're doing."

Plant paused again. At last he said in a soft voice: "I'll be damned."

"Maybe," Glone said. "But what you will for certain be, is a Commissar. We've got to stop this war from going atomic."



There was only one clear solution to the problem of being discovered, and that was to indulge in as few contacts with the natives as possible. Plant set himself a grim work schedule, which was easy enough, and avoided every opportunity for such minor-league socializing as took place in the capital city of the People's Democracy.

Of course, it couldn't work forever—and, what with the friendly little corporal, might not work for another ten minutes. For three days Plant had fobbed off the native with his eagerness for *fut*, pleading pressure of work and the responsibility of being the only officer able to report on the peculiarities of the Arctic battle. But the excuse was getting thin, and it was about to get a lot thinner.

For one thing, there was the question of officer exchange.

The People's Democracy had acquired, in one fell swoop, an awful lot of Delverbian officers. At the same time, they had lost their own. Negotiations were progressing on a high level regarding a simple exchange of prisoners, and, according to the reports Plant was seeing, and a little of the scuttlebutt that filtered down to him, the negotiations were going to end happily before very much longer.

That would relieve him of the pressure of work.

For another thing, he had acquired an aide.

Every high-ranking official had an aide, of course—though Plant couldn't exactly figure out what for. Like the whorly wood of the desk, the tilting chair and all the rest of the appurtenances, it went with his rank, and that

was that. Plant's aide appeared to spend most of his time somewhere else, which was fine with Plant, but he did have a disconcerting habit of popping up and asking questions.

Sometimes it was for something simple. Plant had, on his aide's request, signed the pay voucher for a whole nest of underlings he didn't even know or want to think about: he'd scribbled the usual F. E. Sepisens and the aide had looked satisfied and gone away.

But sometimes it was a little more complicated.

At the moment, for instance, the aide was standing at the far end of the desk, his big brown eyes staring at Plant with what seemed a wounded expression. "But, Sir—" he said.

"I've told you more than once, Ringlath. I don't have the time!"

The aide looked, if possible, even more mournful. "But, Sir, it's for all the officers over the rank of Lieutenant. Everyone is going to be there."

"Then they'll never miss me," Plant snapped. It was obvious that he could not afford to mix with all his brother officers—Sepisens must have met some of them, somewhere, before. And, besides, he *did* have work to do. The Remifew battle was shaping up into a doozy, and Plant had to keep abreast of it and at the same time excerpt anything having to do with atomics and forward it on.

"Sir, it's the annual Command Reunion," Ringlath insisted. "Why, no officer has missed a Command Reunion in the history of the Command."

"Not even if they were killed in action?" Plant asked, interested.

"Well, of course, in that case—but you're still alive, Sir. You're here."

"I'm not so sure of that," Plant said.

"But in all the history of the Command—"



"The Command is going to have to get along without me," Plant said. "Let them start a new history."

Ringlath shook his head. "Sir, when I was assigned to you I took pride in my work. I *wanted* to help a Commissar win our war against the Delverbian menace." He sniffed. "But if you have no feeling for tradition, Sir, then you just—have no feeling for tradition, that's all."

"I suppose so," Plant said. "Nothing much I can do about it, I suppose."

"Sir," Ringlath broke in, in a terrible voice, "I'm disappointed in you. Disappointed." He paused, licked his lips, and then said: "Now go ahead and have me court-martialled if you will."

"Court-martialled?" Plant shrugged. "I suppose that's another one of those military traditions. If you haven't got the feeling, I guess you just haven't got it."

"Sir." Ringlath stood at attention. Plant sighed.

"Yes, Ringlath?"

"Might I have in writing your decision not to attend the Command Reunion?"

Plant blinked. "In writing?"

"I must explain to others that it is not my doing that we do not attend."

"Well, hell, Ringlath," Plant said, waving a hand negligently and upsetting a small pile of papers, "you go ahead if you want to."

Ringlath bustled over to restack the papers. On his knees, he said, "But it is well-known that an aide may only enter as guest of his superior officer. Though in the People's Democracy all are brothers—"

"Somebody's got to pick the tune," Plant said. "Sure." He took the papers absently from Ringlath. *Reports on test materials of . . .* "Look, Ringlath, suppose we work something out," he said after a second or so. "Suppose we work out a way for history to go right on without such a big crack in it, and for you to attend your Reunion, both. How would that be?"

"You mean—" Ringlath, panting slightly, was back at the end of the desk. "You mean you'll go, Sir?"

"Not exactly," Plant said. "I mean you'll go in my place. As my official deputy. Write up the orders and I'll sign them later."

"But Sir—"

"It'll work, won't it?"

Ringlath furrowed his brow in thought. "Why, Sir," he said at last, in a tone of amazement, "I suppose it will. Deputies for other functions have always had status equal to—why, Sir!"

"Yes, Ringlath?"

"Sir," the little aide said, back at attention, "it is a pleasure to serve so quick-thinking a Commissar."

"Okay, Ringlath," Plant said, his eyes going back to the papers. "You get the stuff typed up, proper form and all, and bring it back." *Reports on test materials of uranium similar to those known to exist on . . .*

"Yes, Sir!"

*. . . on the Island of Remifew . . .*

"Oh, and Ringlath," Plant said, trying to keep his voice casual.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Take the rest of the day off, will you? I've got some heavy thinking to do. I'll sign the orders tomorrow."

Plant had known, of course—planetary survey teams, long before the Overdogs had landed, had provided full information—that the heartland of the People's Democracy itself, one of the two immense land-masses on the planet, contained small deposits of uranium here and there. Spectroscopic analysis, plus deep-charting, had given the Overdogs a detailed picture of element distribution long before landing.

What he hadn't known—what none of them had known was that the scientists of the People's Democracy knew about the uranium deposits.



Uranium, back on Terra in the days before atomics, had had a few minor uses in pigments and suchlike ancillary fields. Here on Wh'Gralb, a technology which involved uranium simply hadn't existed, and the element was known only as one of the "useless" items cluttering up a very Terran periodic table. A very vague picture of atomic structure, and even of atomic breakdown such as existed in Wh'Gralb's sun, was a part of the picture of Wh'Gralb science, but it hadn't filtered down from the theoretical as yet.

It is not easy to induce atomic breakdown in most materials: in order to do so in helium, for instance, it is necessary to procure heat equal to the output of a small U-235 bomb.

Short of space-travel, in fact, which by providing such heat through close approaches to the local sun can make the simple hydrogen-helium cycle all too real, there is only one way to get the necessary power.

That is the U-235 reaction.

Without this isotope of uranium, atomic fission waits on space-travel—which, in a pleasantly circular pattern, waits on atomic fission.

With it, however, it is no more than a step from U-235 reactions to helium reactions, from those to more complex cycles involving, as an example, lithium—and from there to the planetary bomb.

The Confederation had such armaments, though it had never used them and, in the hopeful opinion of many commentators, never would.

If Wh'Gralb started on the way, the hopeful commentators would find themselves very suddenly part of a discredited past.

Once an atomic explosion occurred on Wh'Gralb, nothing in the world would stop the Confederation from "Protecting itself" against future possible acts of aggression. Daddy could be trusted with the planetary bomb, but Daddy didn't trust his little relatives—and if they be-

gan fooling with the preliminary stages, Daddy would undoubtedly come over and spank them.

The advantage of being spanked with a planetary bomb (if there is one) is that you don't have to get spanked twice.

The second time, you aren't there.

Plant shivered. If scientists began experimenting with uranium right now, the push of war would force them to quick bomb development. That would mean an explosion—and then, without any noticeable delay, annihilation.

Of course, there might not be enough U-235 in a given batch . . .

But Plant didn't feel like taking the chance. He called in, got no reply and then called in again.

Glone's voice came roughly through the buried speaker: "Yes?"

"Plant here."

Glone muttered something. "Damn it, you woke me up."

"It's worth it," Plant said. "Listen to this."

He read off the report. It took him a little over two minutes, during which the other end of the circuit maintained an absolute silence.

When he'd finished he asked: "Well?"

"Well, what?" Glone said.

"We're going to have to do something about those deposits," Plant said. "Can't have scientists finding things out—not now."

"Agreed," Glone said. "What are you doing, volunteering for a post?"

Plant thought that one over. "If I go, there'll be nobody here for the next notice," he said at last.

"Right," Glone said. "And we've got other operatives—maybe I'll send Carrados out there."

"If he can handle it."

"If he can't, he won't be sent," Glone said.



Plant nodded. "Okay."

"And in the meantime, we're going to have to step up our plans," Glone went on. "You can be grateful to the scientists, in a way."

"Me?" Plant asked. "How?"

"Well, we can't allow them much time," Glone said. "So we're going to have to wrap up the war in an extra-special hurry. And you do want to get back, don't you?"

## 12

Sooner or later, Plant told himself, it had to happen.

But resignation to the inevitable didn't seem to make the inevitable any more pleasant. He looked at the happy face of the little corporal (whose name, a dedicated job of research had informed him, was Twink, which seemed a hell of a name for anything that could remotely be called humanoid) and tried to grin back.

"I'm glad you could finally make it, Sir," Twink said cheerfully.

"Well, I ran out of ex—I mean, I finally did get a chance to break away," Plant said. "Of course, I'm likely to be pretty rusty—"

"Ha ha," Twink laughed. "You—rusty! Why, I can remember when you ran out a string of thirty-seven *bes-simels*—I guess that's still the record."

"Thirty-seven," Plant said. "My goodness. But this desk work, you know how it is—puts a man out of condition."

"Why, Sir, you're just trying to get me to lower your handicap, that's what you're doing. You sly dog!" Twink finished, and wagged a fat finger in Plant's face. They

stood in a corridor in the basement of the office-building Plant worked in. A sign said:

TO THE FUT COURTS  
NO LOUD NOISES

Plant felt like making the loudest possible series of noises. In five minutes, or very possibly less, he was going to be playing a game of *fut*. It was not so much that his mind was on other subjects, like atomic fission, the battle for the island of Remifew, Raissa, his own chances of escape, the theory and practice of being an Overdog, and a great many other things. No.

It was more that he hadn't the faintest idea of how to play *fut*.

An encyclopaedia he had hunted up had given him a little help. It had told him that *fut* was a game played on a court, with a double ball, whatever that was, two players, and a single bat. Somehow, Plant felt extremely grateful for the single bat. A double ball and a double bat sounded even worse.

A rush call to Glone had put him in touch, via linked communicators, with Holmes, who had sounded as if he'd known something about the game. But Holmes had been about as unhelpful as possible.

"I don't actually play the game, you know," he'd said, casually enough. "From all I understand, it's more or less of a native pastime, not like Confederation baseball—not that big or important. More like golf, or tennis."

"But don't you know *anything* about it?" Plant had asked.

"Only that it is a game, and apparently not too demanding. I mean, civil servants play it, people like that."

And Plant had been unable to get more information. Of course, he could have gone through the libraries in search of material on the game—but he was supposed to be Commissar Sepisens, an avid *fut*-player. He would have looked odd, to say the least, hunting up elementary works on the subject.



And the one advanced work he had chanced referring to had left him more confused than before. It was full of advice on what to do if your opponent *smised* while the balls were in play, and even diagrams of a proper swing (which at least told Plant that he was supposed to swing the single bat—unless he was supposed to swing the double balls) in special cases where you were trying for a *grand remiler*.

Unfortunately, the book was about as helpful as a technical work on how to correct a slice would be to a man who had never heard of St. Andrew.

It had given him a vocabulary, but it was a vocabulary without referents. Now he could refer to someone *smissing*, but he had no idea when to do so—which was rather like knowing the word “stab” but having no idea whether it referred to an action with a knife, a watch or a doily.

And now he knew one more thing. *Fut*-players didn't like loud noises.

Maybe if he made a loud *enough* noise . . .

No, Plant told himself sternly. That would only be delaying the evil day.

Somehow, he was going to play *fut*.

After which (if by some miracle he remained undetected) he could go back to atomic fission.

He sighed deeply.

“Come on, Sir,” Twink said enthusiastically. “I'll bet you've been waiting for this a long time!”

“Certainly have,” Plant said. He tried to make his voice sound hearty, but he had the distinct feeling that it sounded like a cry for help in Mammoth Cave.

Twink trotted ahead, and Plant followed, trudging like a man going to the scaffold. Soon, he told himself, it would all be over. He would be discovered, and all his plans would go for naught.

And Raissa . . .

He had to win, he thought in a brief spurt of firmness. He had to win—for Raissa.

The thought brought up a mental picture of himself, accepting the Wh'Gralb Cup for setting a new record of thirty-eight *bessimels*, and saying in modest tones: "I owe it all to the little woman." Though Raissa could hardly be described as a *little* woman, especially not in Wh'Gralbian terms.

Twink had reached the end of the corridor and now he pushed open a door. Plant wondered, in one whirling second, just what a *loud* noise would be like.

The place resounded with echoes, cries, groans, screams of encouragement—it was, he discovered, as he came up behind Twink, a linked series of five square courts, divided by wire netting. Around them on all four sides was a scaffolding which braced tiers of seats. And on the seats were spectators, natives in all varieties of dress, uniforms and civilian clothing, cheering and calling out advice.

It was a lively picture, and it made Plant think of public executions.

The players, who were doing strange things in the courts, were dressed in what seemed to be underwear. "Let's strip down," Twink said enthusiastically, and, letting the door swing shut behind him and Plant, began quickly to do so.

They were standing in a corridor leading to the courts, but as Twink reached the underwear level, he moved on until he was standing in the center of the only empty court. He tossed his discarded clothing in the farthest corner, and Plant, feeling a little like September Morn, only hairier, did likewise.

Now what? he asked himself wildly.

Twink went to a post which stood about a third of the way from one side, and was centered along the other wall. From a hook high off the ground, he removed a contraption which Plant recognized slowly as two round objects held together by a single stretched string.

The double ball, he supposed.



Twink, whirling the object, came back to the center. "Got the bat?" he asked.

"Bat?" Plant said. "Gee, I don't have the bat with me. Sorry. Well, I guess if we don't have a bat we can't—"

"Oh, that's all right," Twink said. "They always keep spares." He waved in the general direction of the farthest tier of spectators, and an attendant came trotting over. The attendant was dressed in form-fitting white, and looked repulsively happy. Twink explained what was wanted, and the attendant ran off and returned with an object which looked rather like pictures Plant had seen of ancient Terran shillelaghs.

The bat?

"Want to take first turn?" Twink said, when the attendant had gone.

"Oh," Plant said, "why don't you lead off?"

"All right—but that makes your handicap eight, remember." Twink, the bat in one hand, stepped back one pace, whirled the double ball, and set it flying. As it left his hand, he cut at it with the bat. The ball went dizzily circling toward the post, hit it, nearly wrapped itself round the post, and then went glancing off, bouncing here and there as it went.

Plant and Twink watched it. When it had finally rolled to an awkward stop Twink said: "Well, that's one."

Plant shrugged. "Certainly is," he said.

A second passed. Then Twink said: "Well, go ahead—no sense thinking it over. I mean, it's only one."

"True," Plant said, just as if he knew what was happening. He accepted bat and balls from Twink and decided to try the same motion. At worst, he could make some joke to the effect that he was showing Twink how to play . . .

He spun the balls, tossed them up and smacked them.

The balls went end-over-end, spinning insanely, toward the post. One of them caught the post a solid crack, and

then both caromed off toward the wire netting. They hit it, rebounded and rolled crazily to a stop.

Twink was looking at Plant as if he expected some comment. Plant said: "Hmm."

"Five," Twink said. "And you told me you were out of form."

"Just luck, I guess," Plant said, wondering how the scoring system worked.

He handed the bat to Twink, who had picked up the balls. But now Twink held the balls in one hand, then let a single ball dangle. He hit it with the bat, waited a fraction of a second and then let go of the other ball.

Both of them went spinning toward the post, hit it, wound around it and dropped to the ground like stones.

Twink said: "Hah!"

"Good shot," Plant said, cued by the little corporal's joyous expression.

"Eleven to five," Twin said. "I'll beat you yet!"

"Maybe," Plant said at random. Now what was he supposed to do? he wondered. Throw the balls into the air, or hold one and hit the other? He decided to hold one and to watch Twink. But the little corporal was merely watching expectantly.

Well, what could he lose? He hit the other ball, then let the first one go—too late. The balls were caroming back at him: he ducked and they went whistling back to the wire netting behind him, hit with a thunk and dropped.

"Oh, bad luck, Sir," Twink said.

"Maybe we'd better quit now," Plant said. "I mean, I am off my form, and I'd like a chance to practice up—"

"Let's finish up the game," Twink said, "if you don't really mind, Sir?"

He recovered the ball, whirled it and hit it with the bat.

"One again," he said sadly when the ball had hit the post, wrapped around it and stayed there, just as it had



done for his last successful shot. Plant sighed. The game was obviously more complex than it looked.

"That's twelve to five," he said.

"Twelve to three," Twink corrected him. "Your last shot—"

"Oh," Plant said. "Of course."

It was, he reflected, just a little like carrying on a conversation in sign language, when you didn't understand sign language. Or executing contracts in Sanskrit.

And Twink was handing him the balls.

He took a deep breath. Here goes, he thought—here goes for Raissa.

He whirled the balls, and swung.

"Oh," Twink said, "good shot, Sir!"

"Just luck," Plant said automatically. This time the balls had hit each other in flight, and dropped before hitting the post.

"Fifteen to twelve," Twink said. "And four below the record. Your shot, Sir."

"But—"

"Think you'll make your thirty-seven today?"

"Well," Plant said, "not unless I'm awfully lucky."

He heard Twink laughing, just as if Plant had made a joke, as he wound up for another swing.

One hour and ten minutes later Plant, dizzy and tired, was smiling uncertainly.

"Tough game," Twink said. "A shame to beat you, Sir."

"You played very well," Plant said.

"I thought I was doing better than usual," Twink said, looking satisfied. "Of course, it wasn't a really big win—"

"Fifty-one to thirty-seven," Plant said.

"But below the record it was twelve to fifteen," Twink said. "Once you get your eye back, Sir—"

"Of course," Plant said. "I'd better get back to the office now, though. Lots of work to do."

"If you like, Sir," Twink said. "Though if we had another game—"

"Some other time, I'm afraid."

Twink nodded. "Of course, Sir."

Plant, breathing heavily, got back into full clothing and escaped. Once back in the office, he told himself, he had no real worries. Atomic fission, even the problems of being a Commissar in the People's Democracy, everything was a simple question, compared to *fut*.

Of course, he didn't know what was waiting for him in the office.

Not that it took him long to find out.

## 13

Still panting slightly, he reached the door of his office and stopped dead. Standing before it were three strange soldiers, and his aide, Ringlath. Ringlath looked both solemn and worried: the strange soldiers looked nothing more than stolid. Plant felt a premonitory shiver begin at the base of his spine and creep, like a vine, slowly upward. This, he told himself, boded no good.

Instead, it boded about as much bad as anything he could think of. He considered turning and running, and decided that the soldiers were probably armed.

Instead, he walked boldly up to them. "Hello there, Ringlath," he said to his aide, in as cheerful a voice as he could manage. "Went downstairs for a little *fut*. Nothing like a game of *fut* now and then to tone up the system."

Ringlath gulped. "Sir—" he began.

"Sir," one of the soldiers cut in, in a voice like cold steel, "we have come to take you into custody."



Plant tried to look astonished. Surreptitiously, he pushed at his skull, twice and then once again. A voice said: "Yes, damn it?"

Plant ignored it. Instead he said: "Taken into custody? On what charges?"

"Hello?" the voice said—Glone's voice, "Plant? Are you there?"

"Sir, you signed a pay voucher for your department," the soldier said. Ringlath moaned.

"It was all perfectly according to the rules," he said. "I got the voucher and I brought it to him, according to the rules—how was I to know—"

"Not your fault," the soldier said grimly. "But—well, Sir, we've checked over the voucher."

"My addition," Plant said modestly, "has always been terrible. If I overpaid someone, or underpaid someone—"

"For God's sake," Glone's voice cut in, "what's going on out there? Have you cut me in just to let me listen to this?"

"Sir," the soldier said formally, "please give me your name and rank."

"You are a common soldier," Plant said. "If you are about to arrest me, you had better show your credentials."

"Arrest you?" Glone said. "What's gone—oh. Okay. I'll get everything I can. String it out as long as possible: I've got to find out what's wrong. There may be a chance yet. But I hope you're prepared for suicide."

Glone didn't, Plant reflected, make him feel any better. But the soldier seemed a little taken aback by Plant's stern demeanor.

"Well, Sir—" he began, took a breath and then went on: "You understand, Sir, we have to follow the rules."

"Of course," Plant said.

"And when you're not listed on any of the pay lists—Sir, your name is Sepisens?"

"Correct," Plant said. "Commissar Sepisens. Now, I

ought to be on the lists. I've been Commissar for—some time now.”

“Of course, Sir,” the soldier said. “We have a Commissar T. S. Sepisens, but he doesn't fit your description.”

“I—” Plant hesitated. He'd invented the initials F. E., and tried to make them as illegible as possible. But even if he now claimed to be T. S., the description was going to make trouble.

“You see our position, Sir,” the soldier said, almost apologetically.

“I acted strictly according to rule,” Ringlath was wailing. “No one can say I made a single error. I handed over the pay vouchers just as I was supposed to, and—”

“What do you plan to do?” Plant snapped.

The soldier shrugged. “Well, Sir, I'm afraid we'll have to arrest you. Of course, just as soon as things are straightened out—”

As soon as things were straightened out, Plant told himself, he was a dead man: but there was no sense in letting the soldier know that. There was always room, after all, for a miracle.

“I'd appreciate some delay while I tie up loose ends—” he began. Maybe he could play for time.

The soldiers carried guns. All three of them. Running for it was out of the question.

“I'm afraid we have to go by the rules, Sir,” the speaker said apologetically.

Well, when the inevitable really came along, all you could do was jump on the band-wagon and ride along to the execution shed—or whatever he meant, Plant thought. “Of course,” he said. “I quite understand.”

The soldier looked relieved. “Sir—” he began.

“Where are you taking me?” Plant snapped.

“That's it,” Glone's voice advised him. “Get everything you can. I'm recording the whole conversation.”

For posterity, Plant thought, so after my death I can be a hero. The thought was not comforting.



"We'll make you as comfortable as possible in jail," the soldier said. "And I'm sure everything will be over soon."

Plant, silently, agreed.

To all intents and purposes, he told himself, everything was over at that very minute.

## INTERLUDE

... The place stank.

As a matter of fact, the whole damned island stank. Corporal Debleb paced back and forth in the Communications shack, muttering to himself. Calling the island an outpost was all very well, but the Government ought to take better care of its outposts. After all . . .

He stopped himself hurriedly.

It wasn't that he was worried about "disloyalty." That was for civilians—he had proven his loyalty in thirty campaigns. But he was a soldier, and a Corporal, and he knew better than to complain. Whatever the Government did, it had a good reason for doing.

Possibly, he thought with resignation, even the stink of the island had its place in the Government's plan.

Besides, he'd had advance word of an invasion. Nothing was certain, but if the filthy dogs of the People's Republic were going to try taking over his island, Corporal Debleb wasn't about to waste his time comparing perfumery. There was work to be done.

He started out of the shack—only to be recalled by the tick-tick-tick of the telegraph. A message coming through!

He cocked an ear. Letter by letter, the message was spelled out.

INVASION REPORTS CONFIRMED. ENEMY  
SIGHTED EN ROUTE ISLAND. BEST WISHES.

The telegraph fell silent. But it had said enough—quite

enough. With a muttered curse, Corporal Debleb raced out of the shack.

He found Sergeant Atlap near the natural fountain which marked a boundary of their camp. Water glittered and sparkled in the afternoon sunlight as he poured out his tale. When he was through Atlap shrugged, paced a step nearer the fountainhead and shook his head.

"We're ready," he said grimly. "Any time the dogs want to come and get us, they've only to come and try."

"But, Sir," Debleb stammered. "We've got to make sure they don't take over the island—"

"Don't get in a funk, Corporal," Atlap lipped grimly. "Delverb takes care of its own."

"Sir—"

"Just stay alert," Atlap said. It was an order. "And remember, Corporal—keep your men alert, watch for the first move—and above all—"

"Yes, sir?"

"No funk," Atlap barked.

"Right, Sir," Debleb said. "No funk."

"Good."

Debleb saluted and raced off. Atlap's calm had done him some good, but he was still keyed up. The monsters of the People's Republic were sailing right into a trap!

After all, there was no way they could know of the special armaments on the island, the big guns and the new explosives. They wouldn't be prepared—and they'd be blown right out of the water.

This time there wouldn't be any fiasco, as there had been when the invasion bridge had blown up and Debleb himself had narrowly escaped capture.

This time everything was going to go off right—for the honor and glory of Delverb!

And if something went wrong . . .

He heard a shout.

"Attack! It came over the telegraph—they're going to attack!"



He had a job to do. He had to keep his men calm, ready to fight and win—or fight and die.

He felt a little weak, and a little dizzy. Excitement, he told himself grimly, but he couldn't seem to shake off the feeling.

If something went wrong, he thought again—well—what better cause to die for?

A second ticked by.

And then, very suddenly, everything went black . . .

—an excerpt from *Tales of Battle*,  
published in Army City, Delverb.

This story entitled *Island Courage*, by  
Bebber Prann.

## 14

In the history books of Wh'Gralb (none of which Plant ever saw, both because he was not around during the next hundred and fifty years and because of a fundamental lack of interest in written history, which had always seemed to him mostly lies, and boring lies at that) the battle for the island of Remifew became a sort of classic example of how a beautifully planned offensive could go wrong.

One historian, writing seventy years after the event, stated: "It is unimportant that the original plans for the battle, on both sides, were marvels of organization and technical skill. No process of merely logical thinking is proof against such a series of happenings as make the Remifew battle unique, and horrible, in the history of warfare, and indeed in the entire history of our race."

Informed opinion, then and later, acquitted him of any

charge of overstatement. The battle of Remifew was precisely as described by Thomas Glone a little after its conclusion:

"The damnedest idea the Overdogs have ever had, including all teams everywhere, now and for all time."

It started with a simple idea, but such was the power of that idea that the final seeds were not really beginning to grow for fifty years afterward.

Theodore Plant, of course, was in prison at the time, and what he knew about it was no more than the scuttlebutt which floated down, combined with such records and copies of reports as he could terrify either Ringlath, Twink or one of his guards into bringing down. A Commissar, even a Commissar behind bars, has a power of terrifying which is more than adequate for small requests if he knows how to use it.

To his modified delight, Plant had discovered that he was starting to learn how to use his power.

The battle can perhaps most easily be summarized, then, in something resembling the form in which Plant saw it, a series of dispatches from various organizations within the People's Democracy. For full information, the reader is requested to remember that dispatches covering the same events, and carrying about the same tone, were being written at the same time by Delverbian troops, officers and special service organizations.

The battle began—if that word is at all accurate—at any rate, it was scheduled to begin on the 12th day of Witlib. For convenience, the first dispatch is selected from the number dated forty-eight hours earlier.

**From:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
 People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
 Flagship *Pessimils*  
**To:** People's Exalted Leader  
 People's Strength HQ  
 Pessimils, People's Democracy



**Date:** 10 Witlib 0940

**Subject:** Preliminary reports, plan W

1. Preliminary reports, received this date, tend to show fully manned defenses on subject island. Reports do not, in this respect, appear surprisingly higher or lower than Intelligence estimates.

2. ETA at point of attack exactly forty-eight hours.

3. Further reports will be made at six-hour intervals until 0940 on 12 Witlib.

Respectfully in brotherly love submitted  
Tessi Tura

**From:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**To:** People's Exalted Leader  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**Date:** 11 Witlib 0340

**Subject:** Report as agreed, plan W

1. Reports from scout craft appear to show extreme softening of enemy defenses on subject island.

2. Report further states that no enemy personnel are visibly within fifty yards of beach area or beach defenses.

3. No reason for this change is reported.

4. Requesting herewith immediate reports from HQ Intelligence regarding possible reasons for this change in total picture.

Respectfully in brotherly love submitted  
Tessi Tura

**From:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**To:** People's Exalted Leader  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**Date:** 11 Witlib 1200**Subject:** Your report 11 Witlib 1100

1. Recheck shows no change in pattern reported 0340 this date. There are no enemy personnel within fifty yards of beach or beach defenses. Few enemy personnel are visible at any point on subject island.

2. Enemy personnel must be presumed either to have left island or to be quartered inside occupation huts previously noted.

3. Scout craft cannot be at fault. Assuming their report accurate, some reason for change must exist.

4. Suggest immediate recheck with HQ Intelligence.  
Respectfully in brotherly love submitted  
Tessi Tura

**From:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**To:** People's Exalted Leader  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**Date:** 12 Witlib 0840**Subject:** Plan W

1. Attack originally scheduled for 0940 this date.

2. In view of complete lack of explanation for sudden apparent withdrawal of enemy forces, specific order to attack as scheduled is hereby requested.

3. Suggest further recheck HQ Intelligence.

4. Must emphasize extreme reluctance to attack without specific order to do so based on my reports regarding this situation.

5. Please advise immediately.

Respectfully in brotherly love submitted  
Tessi Tura



**From:** People's Exalted Leader  
Through Operations Assembly  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**To:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**Date:** 12 Witlib 0912

**Subject:** Plan W

1. Final recheck with HQ Intelligence suggests no tactical reason for subject withdrawal by Delverbian troops.

2. Suggest cowardice as possible reason for subject withdrawal.

3. Attack cannot be withheld for reasons involving lack of defending force.

4. Attack hereby ordered as originally scheduled.  
In brotherly love submitted  
People's Exalted Leader (via OA)

**From:** People's Exalted Leader  
Through Operations Assembly  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**To:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**Date:** 12 Witlib 1020

**Subject:** Plan W

REPORT AT ONCE

REPEAT:

REPORT AT ONCE

EXPLAIN DELAY

OA

CODED DISPATCH

PERSONAL ATTENTION PEOPLE'S LEADER TESSI  
TURA

MEN UNABLE TO CONTINUE ADVANCE PAST  
BEACHES. DIZZINESS, UNCERTAIN VISION,  
HEADACHES, SEVERE CRAMPS SYMPTOMS OF  
NEW DISEASE. DELVERBIAN FORCES USING  
GERM WARFARE.

Russim, Cmdg.

**From:** People's Leader Tessi Tura  
People's Command, Fifth Battalion  
Flagship *Pessimils*

**To:** People's Exalted Leader  
People's Strength HQ  
Pessimils, People's Democracy

**Date:** 12 Witlib 1050

**Subject:** Your dispatch this date 1020

1. Awaiting clarification of situation regarding attack.
2. Attack has been made. Coded dispatch suggests germ warfare in use on subject island.
3. Sending exploratory force consisting medical divisions assigned to this command.
4. Please check HQ Intelligence re possible germ warfare.

Respectfully in brotherly love submitted  
Tessi Tura

CODED DISPATCH

PERSONAL ATTENTION PEOPLE'S LEADER TESSI  
TURA

CANCEL PREVIOUS SUGGESTION. DELVERBIAN  
GERM WARFARE NOT REPEAT NOT IN USE.  
HAVE DISCOVERED DELVERBIAN TROOPS IN  
OCCUPATION HUTS. DELVERBIAN TROOPS  
ALSO SUFFERING SYMPTOMS PREVIOUSLY RE-



CORDED. NO DEATHS REPORTED BUT IMPOSSIBLE CONTINUE ATTACK OR DEFENSE UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES. THIS IS LAST DISPATCH FROM THIS COMMAND. URGENTLY REQUEST FULL MEDICAL FACILITY GUARDED AGAINST INFECTION. DELVERBIAN MEDICAL FACILITY ALSO SUFFERING SYMPTOMS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED.

Russim, Cmdg.

Report of People's Democracy Medical Commission  
13 Witlib 1400

. . . Symptom picture points to a new and hitherto unknown disease of virus origin, luckily not fatal. Supportive treatment may be given but no immediate cure appears to be possible.

As of this date forty per cent of this medical facility reports symptoms identical in all important respects to the symptoms describable on examination of troops from the People's Democracy and from Delverb. No sterile procedures appear to be effective.

The disease appears to run its course in forty-eight to seventy-two hours, judging from cases already complete. However, reinfection is possible and appears to occur in at least eighty-five per cent of recovered cases.

This report strongly advises full medical aid to transship troops from this island in complete quarantine to base hospitals. Medical facility must also be put under quarantine. Disease appears to be highly contagious, spreading by contact, by breath and in every other possible manner.

In view of the previous circumstances, medical facility is at a loss to imagine how any invasion whatever of subject island might succeed, or, indeed, how any defense against such invasion is possible. A stalemate of unprecedented scale appears to have been reached . . .

## Report of Joint Medical Commission

17 Witlib 2300

. . . On behalf of medical authorities from both countries, we advise complete quarantine of the island of Remifew until further notice.

Disease in quarantine appears to run its course completely, including reinfection possibilities, inside of seven days. However, this is by no means certain.

Disease is apparently resident on the island of Remifew. This island should not be entered by any but qualified medical personnel, and by them only under conditions of the strictest precaution, with quarantine arrangements in readiness.

Further discussion of any occupation of this territory by either side is contra-indicated by virulence of the disease which . . .

## 15

By the time the Joint Medical Commission, consisting of ten doctors from the People's Democracy and ten from Delverb, had reported on the Remifew disaster, Plant was back reading dispatches in his own impressive office. Instead of the dull, blank, restful walls of his cell he had to face the whorly and dizzying walls of high command: instead of the daily exercise of a prisoner he had to withstand constant requests for *fut*.

In a way, he told himself, jail had been preferable. But only in a way.

Frankly, he admitted to himself, he would be a little bit sorry to see the war end—as it certainly would soon. Not only had Remifew Island got under everybody's skin in more ways than one, but both Holmes and Carrados



appeared to be stepping up their activities. In Pessimils and elsewhere throughout the People's Democracy, there were reports of demonstrations, of riots, even of extensive sabotage. The same, Plant learned through official channels, was true of Army City and other places throughout Delverb.

The war was pounding to a close, and when it did end Plant would go back to base, and ship out from there with the Overdogs. He would be back to the team, a worker under the orders of Glone.

And, very suddenly, he wasn't sure he wanted to be.

There were lots of difficulties attending being a Commissar (being arrested, for one thing). But there were, he was discovering, quite a few satisfactions, too. Plant had never really given orders before, and he had never felt superior to everyone he saw. Here, in Pessimils, he was taller than anyone else around by at least an inch, and he had a position that commanded respect and obedience.

It was a good feeling. Being an Overdog had suddenly begun to seem boring, depressing and even unworthy of the high talents and great attainments of Commissar F. E. Sepisens of the People's Democracy.

Damn it, Plant told himself, giving orders was *fun*!

Hell, he probably still had a little while left and he planned to make the most of it. Now that he was officially F. E. Sepisens, and could prove it, he didn't need to have any fear of reunions or parties: he was going to get his biggest and brightest uniform (well, to be exact, his predecessor's uniform, but he'd had the seams let out and the pants and sleeves lengthened) and have himself a time on the town.

He even told himself that he deserved it. After all, he'd been in jail, hadn't he? And he'd been under suspicion, and worry, and everything else. Now, he deserved a little vacation—and he was going to have one that would lift the roof off the People's Strength Headquarters.

Of course, he reminded himself, the Overdogs, say what you would, were useful once in a while. Without them, for instance, he would probably still be languishing in prison, passing his days slowly in a durance about as vile as he wanted to imagine. But when Glone had contacted Carrados and Carrados (working himself rather than entrusting so special a job to his underground) had managed to sneak papers into the files carrying the name and description of F. E. Sepisens, there had been nothing to do except make a loud noise, ask for a recheck and then accept everybody's abashed apology. His office had been returned to him that day, and Ringlath the day after.

Ringlath had been all loyalty. "I didn't believe it for a second," he said tearfully. "I knew all the time they were making some sort of mistake. But I had to obey the rules—"

"Of course," Plant said. "I understand." Everybody had to obey the rules; that was how a People's Democracy operated. Oh, it wasn't a proper way to run a Government—it led to regimentation, for instance. But it was dependable, and it let you know who was on top.

*Plant was on top.*

Of course, he had superiors, too, but from Commissar on up the superiors weren't really giving orders: they were jockeying for position. Everybody wanted to get a little higher on the ladder.

Plant, satisfied where he was, had become effectively immune to office politics. As a matter of fact, he was developing a very rapid reputation for "dependability." If the upper reaches of the Government thought of him as some sort of party wheelhorse, what did he care? To the people like Ringlath (or Twink, now that he thought of it) he was no wheelhorse. He was what amounted to a pretty good substitute for God Almighty.

It was extremely pleasant.

Of course, he would be glad to get off the planet and



into some other work. Overdog work was fun, too, and since the Overdogs picked people who were imaginative and liked to play on their own, he knew the crew of operatives would be good, too. Maybe he'd run in luck, and Glone would be able to keep the entire crew together for the next job.

Even including Raissa.

Plant closed his eyes for a second. That was the fly in his ointment; there was, he had discovered many painful years ago, always at least one.

He was in love with Raissa, and she was in prison. Something, he told himself, had to be done about that. But what?

The solution, he had an idea, was right on the tip of his tongue. But nothing would move it any farther forward than that. Plant wondered idly why things were on the tips of people's tongues, anyhow, instead of at the front of their skulls or the point of their chins. The tip of the tongue was such a messy place to keep a nice innocent idea.

Maybe, he began slowly . . .

He never got any farther. The noise outside had begun, and Plant got up and went over to the window.

It sounded as if ten thousand people were yelling directions in ten thousand languages to three men climbing a tree after a cat. Not a single word was distinguishable at first, and Plant, peering out, couldn't even see anything for a minute. He was high up in the People's Strength Headquarters Building, and below there seemed nothing but fog.

Then the fog cleared up, and he saw them.

Hundreds of natives—thousands of natives—all collected downstairs in the courtyard. Some of them were waving what seemed to be flags or placards, and all of them were shouting.

"Give the People's Democracy back to the people!"

Plant caught that phrase in a comparative lull. But for

the most part he was hearing what sounded like a confused and constant roar of:

"Less bread! More taxes! Less bread! More taxes!"

There was scurrying outside, and Plant's door clicked open, barely audible over the crowd noises. Plant turned. "Less?" he said. "I mean yes?"

Ringlath saluted him. "Commissar Sepisens," he said formally, "there appears to be a disturbance in the courtyard."

"There certainly does," Plant said cheerfully.

"There will be a meeting in the main chamber in ten minutes," Ringlath said. "All Commissars and those of higher rank are to attend."

Plant nodded. "Okay," he said. "And in the meantime, what are we supposed to do about the disturbance?"

"Have you an idea?" Ringlath said hopefully.

"Well," Plant said, trying to look thoughtful, "we could join it."

"Join it?" Ringlath's eyes popped. "And help in the revolt—I mean, the disturbance against our beloved People's Leader?"

"Well, we could bore from within," Plant said.

"Sir, do you think such infiltration would have a commanding effect?" Ringlath had never got over Plant's supremely simple solution to the Command Reunion problem, and the aide now apparently harbored the dim suspicion that Plant was always three jumps ahead of everyone else.

Plant gave the matter some thought. "We could change their slogans around a little," he said.

"Change them?"

"We could have them yelling support for the war against Delverb," Plant said.

"But—"

"They're happy yelling down there," Plant said. "Listen to them. Do you think they're *listening* to what they're saying?"



"Will you bring up this suggestion at the meeting, Sir?" Ringlath asked.

"I devoutly hope not," Plant said. "But we'll think of something. Ear-plugs, maybe."

Matters were moving even faster than he had thought.

The revolution—the final stage in the Overdog plan—had already begun.

## 16

The sign had been made up in a hurry, and it stood propped up against a lamp downstairs, in the lobby of the People's Strength Building. Plant looked at it with interest.

OFFICERS AND COMMISSARS  
ARE REQUESTED TO REMAIN  
WITHIN THE BUILDING  
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

A native wandering around the lobby in an aimless fashion attracted his attention and he walked slowly over and hailed him. The native looked at Plant's Commissar's uniform.

"Yes, sir?"

"What's with all this restriction to the building?" Plant asked.

The native, dressed in a Major's uniform, shook his head. "There's been some excitement outside, Sir," he said. "I suppose you know as much about it as I do."

"Is it that they don't think we're safe outside?" Plant asked.

The native scratched his head. "I suppose it must be something like that," he said.

"In which case—" Plant put on a look of stern resolu-

tion. "Someone," he said in ringing tones, "must quell this disturbance."

The words echoed through the lobby. A secretary passing at the other end looked up, startled.

"Sir," the Major said, "do you mean that you plan to—to go out there, to face the hysterical mob—"

"It is my duty," Plant said, looking stern and slightly stuffed.

The secretary was watching them with an open mouth. Not at all bad, Plant told himself, though of course she was too short. Not like Raissa . . .

"Sir," the Major said, "it is too dangerous. You might get hurt. Even—" He gulped.

"I am a Commissar," Plant said. "I have a duty toward the People's Democracy. I will not shirk that duty." He sounded, he thought, pretty well: the secretary was highly impressed, and the Major, watching him, saluted suddenly. Plant returned the gesture.

"You are a credit to your rank and station," the Major said.

The words set off an ancient echo in Plant's mind. "Never mind," he said grandly, "the why and wherefore." He marched to the door of the building and stood against it for a second. The Major and the secretary were watching him with wonder.

"Sir—" the Major began.

Plant saluted again. "I shall return," he said distinctly, and opened the door. It was clearly time for Commissar Sepisens to disappear—and what a lovely exit he'd worked out for himself.

But the sudden swell of noise outside almost made him duck back in.

After all, the rioters out there had no way of telling that he was secretly on their side.

Or was he?

From a closer vantage point, even the signs they car-



ried were distinguishable. Plant looked at them with interest.

PEACE IN OUR TIME

I DIDN'T RAISE MY BOY TO BE A COMMISSAR

COUNCIL OF UNITED NATIONAL TRADERS  
DEMANDS PEACE

WAR IS EVIL

WAR IS MEAN

WAR IS PRACTIC-

ALLY OBSCENE

—PEACE!

They showed, he thought, a lot of imagination. Carrados was to be commended, after all—this was as good an Underground group as any that he had seen or heard of in Delverb. Carrados did drink, that was certain—drank himself blind, as a matter of fact—but it didn't seem to hurt his work any.

Plant made a mental note to put in a special commendation for the propaganda worker after the campaign was over.

Then, very suddenly, he found himself surrounded. Three burly natives flanked him. "Hey!" one of them shouted. "We got one!"

"He's a big one, too!" a second one called. "What'll we do with him?"

"Peace!" the crowd yelled. "String him up!"

"Now, wait a minute—" Plant began.

The crowd had begun chanting: "String him up!" It was not the most pleasant sound Plant had ever heard.

"Help!" Plant called. "I'm not a Commissar!"

One of the natives shouted into the crowd: "He says he's not a Commissar!"

It got laughs.

"I'm not!" Plant went on. "I'm—"

He stopped.

The hypno compulsion was working, all right.

He couldn't possibly tell this crowd what he really was.

He blinked. "I'm a spy!" he shouted. "Take me to your leader!"

"He says he's a spy!" the native called.

The crowd laughed.

"Damn it, I *am* a spy!" Plant said. "Peace in our time! Kick the rascals out! Take me to your leader!"

One of the natives leaned toward another. Plant was boxed in: he looked helplessly around.

"Hey, Sessil," the native called, "who is our leader?"

"Got me," Sessil said. "I just saw the crowd and came along. This war's silly: we might as well stop it."

"I agree with you," Plant said.

"You?" Sessil said. "You damn Commissar, you're one of the people who started everything!"

"Not me," Plant said earnestly. "I don't like war. It's wrong. It's messy."

"We're for peace," Sessil said. The crowd was still shouting, but the sound was getting a little ragged. Patience, Plant told himself, is not one of the virtues of lynch mobs.

"I'm for peace, too," Plant said. "Lots and lots of peace. Peace everywhere."

"You," the first native said, "are a God damn Commissar."

"String him up!" the crowd yelled.

Plant gulped once and then took a deep breath. "People!" he shouted. "Listen to me!"

The crowd booed him madly.

"I will lead you to where the People's Leader is hiding!" Plant shouted. "I will show you how to get rid of all those who cause war!"

This time, the boos were a little less certain. Sessil and the others crowded around him.



"Hey, what's all this?" Sessil said. "Come on, now." He reached over and grabbed Plant's elbow—Plant jerked free and went on shouting to the crowd.

"Follow me! I will take you to where they're hiding! Peace in our time! String up all the leaders! I'll take you—"

The crowd roared.

"Follow me!" Plant yelled once more, and started through toward the front gate. The crowd actually parted a little to let him push his way through—and their mutters were growing now into a new cry:

"Follow him—let's go and kill them all—"

"Peace in our time!" Plant shouted again, at the gate. Far behind him were Sessil and the others who'd surrounded him. He looked back. There was an army there, or what looked like an army.

And Plant had to lead it to victory.

"Well," he told himself, "if it isn't one thing, it's another." The natives screaming behind him, he headed off at a good clip down the street.

What with milling around, screaming, ducking down alleys and so forth, it took him nearly ten minutes to lose his army. For all Plant knew, they would careen on, shouting and yelling, until they reached the ocean—which was two hundred miles away. Of course there were lakes before that, and reservoirs . . .

Realizing that he was brooding about lemmings, Plant turned his mind off and kept walking. Sooner or later he had to come to Carrados' headquarters: his communicator had given him the address, and in spite of the confusion of the streets he couldn't be too far from it.

The big question was, would Carrados be there?

Glone had offered little help on that matter. The communicator had said no more than: "Damn it, the revolutions are starting—I can't keep track of my agents now!"

"I've got to have some place to hole up," Plant said.

"You're already familiar with sewers," Glone told him

unfeelingly. "There's always another sewer, you know."

"Who do you think I am, Javert?"

"It doesn't matter," Glone said. "But I can't buzz Carrados now—he's busy, and the less he hears from me the better. I almost don't want you to disturb him, either—"

"But—"

"Oh, well, maybe you'll be a help."

Plant had opened his mouth to ask about Raissa, but Glone had clicked off.

If Carrados wasn't home, or couldn't be located . . .

## 17

But, thankfully, he was home. He wasn't alone—but Plant was, by then, in no mood to bother about niceties. He flung open the door (scaring half the members of the high command of Carrados' underground out of their wits) and marched in.

"My God!" somebody screamed. "We're surrounded!"

Carrados, a poker in his hand, looked cautious while the others milled round. "Who are you?" he asked.

Plant thought. "My name is F. E. Sepisens," he said at last.

Carrados had worked the trick that had got him out of jail. Now Plant had to hope he remembered . . .

"It's all right," Carrados said, swinging round to take in all of his group. "He's with us. He's a spy. Boring from within."

Well," Plant said modestly, "boring, anyhow. Within—without—what's the difference?"

The others didn't quite look convinced. "I tell you he's all right," Carrados said. "Now let's continue the session. There's a lot of work to do."



A little old native in a blue drape outfit pointed a quavering finger. "With him here? He hasn't been cleared—a majority of the committee—"

"I tell you he's all right," Carrados insisted. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"Of course—of course—" the little old man said. "But—the rules—"

Carrados took a deep breath. "The rules are what we're out to smash," he said. "The whole idea of the rules—which reminds me, how is that little project getting along?"

"Oh, beautifully," another native said. "Just beautifully. At any time tomorrow, it will go into effect."

"Project?" Plant said. "What project?"

Carrados smiled. "Well," he said, "we're going to take care of the rules once and for all."

Plant raised his eyebrows.

The native pushed close. "That's right," he said. "Tomorrow every rule-book in the entire People's Strength Building is going to burst into flames."

Plant closed his eyes. It was a lovely concept, deserving of whole minutes of silence. He pictured the officials running around with water, stamping on the books, calling for their aides . . .

The Bible would be gone forever.

"Magnificent," Plant cried. "Carr—Sir, I'm proud of you."

The slip had given Carrados the hint he needed. "Commissar—if I may continue to call you that—you do not know our names." He pointed to the elderly native, who still looked puzzled and wrathful. "This is Libsa Flaem." The enthusiastic, younger native: "Mach Unt." The others, too, were identified. "And I am Bra-mah," Carrados said at last. "At your service."

"Sepisens," Plant said.

There was a murmur from the group. Plant responded to it with a bow and a cheerful little wave.

"Have you come with a new plan, Sir?" Mach Unt asked eagerly.

"Well—" Plant thought for a minute. "As a matter of fact, I have," he said.

Carrados looked uncertain. "I'm sure the Commis-sar—"

"It's a fine plan," Plant broke in. "I want a band of death-defying, steel-nerved underground workers, willing to storm anything for their reward, ready to break down the very gates of Hell—"

The elderly Flaem quavered: "Sir, even if you had such men, what would you do with them?"

"I'd send them through the streets," Plant cried, "en-listing more for our cause—building the entire populace into one great revolutionary wave—"

"A wave of victory—" Mach Unt put in.

"Forward in an irresistible sweep to the headquarters of Government—" Plant said.

"To strike down the masters from their high seats—" Flaem quavered.

"To right wrongs, to establish justice throughout our land—" Carrados said.

"A marching sword of victory and hope—" Mach Unt added.

Plant leaped to a table top. "*Allons, enfants de la patrie!*" he sang. "*La jour de gloire—*" Suddenly ashamed of himself, he stopped.

The others were all watching him.

He shrugged. "An old camp song," he said. "I used to go to a camp when I was a kid. We had a lot of silly songs."

"Ah," Mach Unt said in a fiery tone, "but this is not the time for silly songs! This is the time for action! Blood!"

Plant looked at Carrados. In a revolution, it was certain that someone was bound to get hurt.

That violated a prime directive, all right—but there



was no help for it. A war can be handled, but a revolution can't.

The trouble was that the only way the machines had decided as successful for ending the Wh'Gralb war was a mutual revolution, after some months of fozzled battle.

The idea had been accepted long ago—but the reality was something else.

"Well, now," Carrados said. "Blood, after all—"

"The tyrants must die!" Mach Unt cried. "All who oppose us must die!"

"Well," Carrados said, "I'm sure they will. I mean—everybody dies, sooner or later."

"There is no time to waste!" Mach Unt cried.

Plant coughed, and everybody turned to look at him. "Well," he said, "there's still my idea—I mean, before anything else, you want to raise up as big a force as you can—"

"You are right, Commissar!" Flaem quavered.

"But where," Mach Unt asked, "will you get your men?"

Plant shrugged. "Er—Bramah," he said.

"Yes?" Carrados said.

"Who are the most death-defying, unafraid men you can think of?"

Carrados blinked. "Why, I—well, I really can't say, but—"

"Dunks," Plant said.

"Dunks?" Carrados' face wrinkled oddly, as if he were in pain.

"Dunks," Plant said. "They're not afraid of anything. They don't know there's anything to be afraid of. They're death-defying—they'll march on any building. All they need is the idea that there's liquor inside."

"Now, wait a minute—" Carrados began. Then his eyes lit up. "A marching parade of dunks," he said softly. "Singing, shouting slogans—"

"See?" Plant asked.

The others waited. Mach Unt was pacing back and forth, muttering something about immediate action. A few seconds ticked by.

Then Carrados looked up. "Commissar," he said, "let's go!"

The streets were in confusion. Small portions of Plant's original army, drawn from the People's Strength Building besiegers, were wandering around shouting and trying to collect again in a single mass. Their activities had roused others, and the city seemed full of small bodies and loud noises.

The curving streets were haphazardly lit, and Plant kept his group together only by occasional shouts of his own. They reeled past knots of men, through disconnected fragments of forces, sometimes carrying tattered signs. The only thing anyone could be sure of was the location of the next bar. The bars were brightly lit. And doing a land-office business.

Plant led his men into one saloon after another, shouting and collecting more men for their crusade. What he was to do with them when he had enough, Plant had no idea, but at least his plan had headed off the bloody battle Mach Unt seemed about to begin. Collecting a band of drunks to march somewhere had seemed like a good idea at the time, and now he was committed to follow through on it.

Soon there was a collection of weaving men, holding on to each other in what seemed a mad conga line, curving through the streets and shouting such slogans as could penetrate through the fog of native liquors. Plant kept his motley band trained more or less on the People's Strength Building, but reflected that the best he could hope for in that direction was a siege, one which he had no way either of ending or winning. His men had no weapons; even the *fut*-balls in the basement of the building could be used against them and there were probably



real weapons cached somewhere. If they were still around, waiting, when the rule-books burst into flames . . .

Little by little, then, he changed direction. The band behind him, shouting and screaming, had picked up a few musical instruments from somewhere, and now provided their own wheezy and nearly tuneless accompaniment. Alcohol seemed to float like a cloud about them as they marched.

"The waterfront!" someone shrieked. "He's heading toward the waterfront!"

It was a big word with which to dignify a twenty-foot deep river stretch, served by no more than small boats, but the river did lead out to the ocean. "We'll push them into the sea!" Plant cried at random, and the rest, apparently without wondering who was going to push who where, took up the cry. They all seemed very happy, which was no real wonder: liquor had been fully supplied.

Plant turned, now and then, to keep track of things. As they approached the river, the town lighting got a little better, and he could see the tall form of Carrados weaving back and forth among the crowd. Carrados was singing, but Plant couldn't distinguish the words. They seemed to have something to do with a King of England, but England was part of pre-Confederation Terra and since the words were Confederation, they could hardly serve as much of an inspiration to the rest.

The rest, however, didn't need inspiration. They were singing, themselves, now and then, mostly rowdy ditties of one sort or another, but sometimes revolutionary songs. Plant found himself humming, and stopped quickly.

He had work to do.

The waterfront glimmered ahead in the faint light. Plant headed purposefully toward it, the crowd behind him. It was a dirty trick to pull, but he had no choice. Duty called, and that was that.

The screaming mob fanned out alongside the filthy

little river. Plant spotted a boat and edged toward it. Carrados was swaying, tears running down his face, and he had now switched to singing something about the bright seraphim, which confused Plant entirely. Nobody else seemed to care, though. They peered up and down the river, looking for enemies to throw in.

Plant jumped into the boat just as the first of his crowd fell into the river. There was a splash and a strangled scream, and someone shouted, "They're attacking us!"

This news appeared to galvanize the natives. There was more pushing and shoving, and quite a lot of falling in. Carrados was waving his arms and trying to talk, but all he was producing was a dull, wordless roar not unlike a particularly noisy stretch of beach during a change in tide. Mach Unt became visible for a moment, his mouth open and his arms spread wide, trying to rally the others.

Natives were bumping into each other and screaming. Nobody was paying the slightest attention to Plant.

Thinking in a confused fashion of Lohengrin, he got down as flat as possible in the boat, and untied it from the bank. Then, shoving it toward the center of the river, he lay down entirely, let the shadow of the sides cover him, and floated quietly downstream toward the ocean, two hundred miles away.

## 18

Glone had grumbled about it, but he couldn't (Plant kept telling him) just leave a major operative to drown in midstream, so to speak. Dempster had been sent out in a sub and Plant's boat had been picked up fifty miles down the river, far from Pessimils.



Dempster, of course, had wanted to take Plant on back to the sub-surface base. But Plant had argued—and, surprising himself, actually won the argument. Dempster, as stolid as ever, had set course for Delverb and Plant had climbed ashore in darkness, on the docks of Army City, just as he had once before.

But this time he was alone. Raissa was in prison somewhere, unable, because of the hypno compulsion, to betray the Overdogs, but unable, too, to escape or to find her own way out. Certainly she had a communicator, but there was nothing more Glone or Holmes could do: Holmes had made her safe and comparatively comfortable, and in Delverb, just as in the People's Democracy, the revolution was reaching full pitch.

Plant wondered, for a few seconds, just what he would be thinking if he were a commander in either army. Supplies and orders must have been mixed up for days, and getting more mixed up every minute. There was no use in planning a battle, because there was no way of getting dependable reports from your own base, and no way of depending on needed supplies. The revolution was mixing everything up, and likely to get worse before it got better.

And the war itself had gone on for months, getting nowhere at a great rate: something had gone wrong with every large-scale move. The bridges blowing up . . . the exchange of officers . . . the epidemic of *'flu proteus*, a disease completely unknown on Wh'Gralb but common enough back in the Confederation . . .

Plant reached the conclusion that his imaginary commander would have begun to believe in gremlins about six weeks before, and by now was probably trying to locate them in order to sign a non-resistance pact.

But more was coming. The revolution wasn't over yet, not by a long shot—and there was still Raissa.

She was the reason Plant had come to Delverb: he didn't want to leave her rescue to the eventual dissolution of the Delverbian state. He wanted to rescue her him-



self. He owed it to her, after all: he was in love with her. And rescuing was something you did for the girl you loved, if you were handed the chance.

Besides, he didn't want her to spend an extra minute in jail. She was pigheaded and she had a lot of crazy ideas, but he felt sure he could straighten her out: jail would do nothing but harden her mind, against him, against the Overdogs, against everything.

It was perfectly obvious that Plant had to get her released.

What was not so obvious was how he was going to do it.

He was dressed in a loose Delverbian outfit, having changed from supplies available in the submarine. He paced through the streets, finding them quiet after the raucous revolutionaries of Pessimils, trying to come up with an idea. He'd tried hard enough in the submarine, but nothing had happened. Maybe, here and now, the idea would come to him.

He thought of all the old stories, in which characters got ideas by light bulbs exploding over their heads. The notion didn't sound too efficient, but he was willing to try anything. The only trouble was that Wh'Gralb technology had developed extremely hard, almost unbreakable light-bulbs. And if he did manage to break one (there were plenty, in the overhead street lamps) he would probably be chased and caught by the police. That would not only leave Raissa in jail, it would also put Plant in. Probably a different jail, too.

He sighed deeply. Somewhere, there was an idea. Somewhere, the final deduction was waiting to happen. Coiled in his brain like a fer-de-lance, the idea waited behind the black mountains of his subconscious. Wrecks of other ideas floated slowly through his skull on a liquid as heavy and black as stout. None of them were any good.

But somewhere the big idea waited.

As Plant knew perfectly well, it always did.

Maybe, he told himself, he could start a little revolu-



tion of his own. There was no reason, after all, for there to be only one revolution at a time going on in Delverb. That was sheer conformism, sticking to the dry and dusty practices of the dim and deadly past. Why not two revolutions at a time?

Why not sixty, for that matter?

Plant thought of sixty revolutions, and found that his head was spinning. He stopped under a streetlamp, feeling like a frustrated, male Anna Lucasta, and tried to clutch at his whirling mind.

The revolution itself was promising, he thought. Here were a lot of people doing all sorts of things (Plant had no idea exactly what, but Holmes was a gay and imaginative type, and he could guess). One of them might conceivably lead to a daring jail rescue. As a matter of fact . .

"Wow," Plant said softly. He blinked and frowned, and then, very slowly, began to smile.

A few seconds later, he listened to himself. He had been humming a tune under his breath. It took him six or eight bars to identify it, and the identification brought back the small and smoky room he had shared with Carrados and the underground of Pessimils.

"*Le jour de gloire*," Plant assured himself, "*est arrivé*."

After all, it had worked for the Bastille, hadn't it?

Plant was almost certain that it had. His grasp of Terran history was not terribly strong, but he thought he recalled pictures in books of mobs storming the Bastille and releasing hundreds and hundreds of prisoners. That had been during a revolution, too.

"Lafayette," Plant murmured, "we are here."

He started down the street, hunting for the house of Holmes.

The next day, late in the afternoon, matters were in readiness. Plant was, by that time, extremely nervous. "Nothing is going to work," he said with stubborn faith.

"Don't be silly," Holmes said. They sat in Holmes'

little parlor, over a couple of tiny glasses of Holmes' patented drink. "Everything is going to go off perfectly. It's all planned."

"That's the trouble with it," Plant said morosely. "Plan something, and get every little detail right, and what happens?"

"You get a medal," Holmes hazarded.

"No." Plant shook his head. "The plan goes wrong. It always goes wrong."

"We've been successful before, haven't we?" Holmes asked.

"That was different," Plant said.

"Different how?"

"We were successful," Plant said. "This time, we're going to miss. I don't know how, but we're going to miss." He flung his arms wide. "The universe is set up that way."

"You mean," Holmes said, "that's the way the K-meson crumbles?"

"This is no time for jokes," Plant said.

Holmes shrugged. "Why not?" he asked. He took a sip of his drink. "What else is it a time for?"

Plant took his drink at one swallow and passed the glass to Holmes for a refill. "God knows," he said at random. "Are you sure everything is set?"

"My men are waiting now," Holmes assured him.

"As soon as we get there, they'll begin." He checked his watch—native manufacture, naturally, but it kept good enough time, in spite of having been decorated with the surpassingly ugly face of Delverb's current leader. When the hands were set at quarter to three, or quarter after nine, the leader's moustache stood out in all its glory.

"How long have we got?" Plant asked.

"It's five minutes to one, native time," Holmes said, "and Our Devoted Leader looks pretty silly. We've got another five minutes to wait."

"The last five minutes," Plant said, "took three hours."



"Well, drink up," Holmes said cheerily. "It makes the time pass."

Plant gulped his drink in a single reflex motion. Holmes refilled the glass. A few seconds of silence ticked by.

"What happens," Plant said, "if we die?"

"Who knows?" Holmes said. "Maybe there is a Heaven, after all. I can just see the two of us, being issued harps and wings, heading happily for the Elysian Fields, waving at friends—"

"Damn it, that isn't what I mean," Plant said.

"Well," Holmes suggested, after a little thought, "I suppose we *could* go to Hell. If there is one. How do you feel about warm climates?"

Plant downed his drink, choked slightly and then said: "What I mean is, what happens to the organization? To Delverb? To Wh'Gralb?"

"In order," Holmes said, "as follows. One, the organization gets two new Overdogs. Two, Delverb gets faced with a medical oddity—we're not *exactly* like the natives, you know—which, thank God, the confusion of revolution will go a long way toward hiding. Three, Wh'Gralb's destiny changeth not. You don't think we're indispensable, do you?"

"I am," Plant said. "To me, anyhow. If there isn't any me, I'm not really happy. And how about Raissa?"

"You mean the little schoolteacher all this is in aid of?" Holmes said. "I suppose she'll get out of jail on schedule, or slightly after, and go right on teaching everybody how to do a job as badly as possible."

"Now, wait a minute—" Plant began, and stopped. "What time is it?" he asked, once more.

Holmes looked. "Two minutes of," he said. "That face looks odder by the second. A literal statement."

"My God," Plant said. He found a fresh glassful of liquor in his hand, and drank it down. "This is taking forever."

"Everything ought to be prepared by now," Holmes said. He set down his glass on a nearby table, and stood up, unfolding like a ruler. "Let's go."

Plant got up, too. Among the natives of the People's Democracy, he had been tall: now he was back to being Theodore Plant again. Well, it was all for Raissa's sake. "I know something is going to go wrong," he said.

"Nothing," Holmes said. "We're on our way to the promised land. Storming of the Bastille, take one."

"But there'll never be a second take," Plant said dolefully.

"No room for one," Holmes said. "This one is all we need." At the door, he looked back. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Plant asked.

"I thought you were in the mood for action," Holmes said.

"Me?" Plant moved convulsively toward the door. "I'd rather start than wait. But I'm beginning to think we'd both be better off getting our heads examined by some nice friendly doctor."

"Later," Holmes said, "we can go and make an appointment."

They went out the door.

## 19

The cheering crowd stood in front of the gates of the prison, shouting slogans and jeering at the guards who paced its walls, far beyond their reach. Below, in the streets thick with cutpurses, natives jostled each other, waved, screamed and made rude gestures: above, on the walls, the guards paced and tried not to notice anything. After all, the crowd wasn't doing any harm, was it? And



there was no sense in starting anything serious until you really had to.

The prison's chiefs had given the orders: no firing until an inarguably hostile move had been made. Since then, an hour had gone by, and the crowd had simply swayed and stood, shouting and screaming. It was one o'clock . . . it was one oh-five . . . it was one oh-eight.

The guards were growing nervous. If nobody wanted to do anything, why didn't they all go home to do it? On the other hand, if something violent had been planned (there had been stories of strange happenings throughout Delverb, of what really seemed to be a revolution), then why was everybody just standing there?

One oh-nine.

One-ten.

Suddenly, incredibly, the noise grew louder. And the crowd began to move—straight for the gates.

Against that mob, every guard knew, the gates were so much paper.

Even so, there was a second of hesitation. These were, after all, free men, not prisoners. They were Delverbians. Was it really right to fire on Delverbians?

The second passed. The crowd surged forward, and the guards raised their rifles. They were well-drilled: against the mass of fire-power arrayed there, no mob stood a chance. The first deaths would open holes in the ranks. The second (reloading took only seconds) would break the crowd, send them fleeing and gasping back to their homes.

There would be bodies, bleeding, on the pavement before the prison. That could not be helped: orders were orders.

The rifles glittered. Half a second passed, and then every trigger was squeezed at the same instant.

The crowd roared, breaking through the gates.

And the guards stared, astonished into catalepsy, at a

line of gleaming rifles. Out of each one dangled a large flag, carrying white letters on a bright red field.

The letters said:

**BANG**

She was in the third tier, huddled alone in a cell. She looked brave and courageous and magnificently, entirely heroic. She looked beautiful.

"Raissa!" Plant cried, rushing toward her. He fumbled with the lock, using a belt of keys he had taken from a slugged guard.

"You!" she gasped, staring. "I always knew you would come."

Plant blinked. "You did?" he said. The cell door swung open.

"I'll bet you messed up everything," Raissa said. "I'll bet the whole revolution is going down the drain, just so you could play the big hero and rescue me."

"But—" Plant began.

"I'll bet you turned everything upside down getting here," Raissa said. "When I was in contact with the base and everything, perfectly comfortable, just waiting to be released in the normal course of events—"

Plant turned. In other corridors he could hear cheering and yelling as prisoners were released, as Holmes' natives capered through the place, turning a perfectly good prison into many cubic yards of chaos. "But—" he said.

"Well, now you've done it, and I hope you're glad," Raissa said coldly. "A fine thing, just to look like a big hero. A lot you care about the real job. A lot you care about—"

It was like magic, Plant thought later. He blinked for a second, and he was no longer Theodore Plant.

Commissar F. E. Sepisens took over.

"Now, you wait a minute," he roared. "You just shut up and wait a minute."

Raissa stared. A frozen second went by.



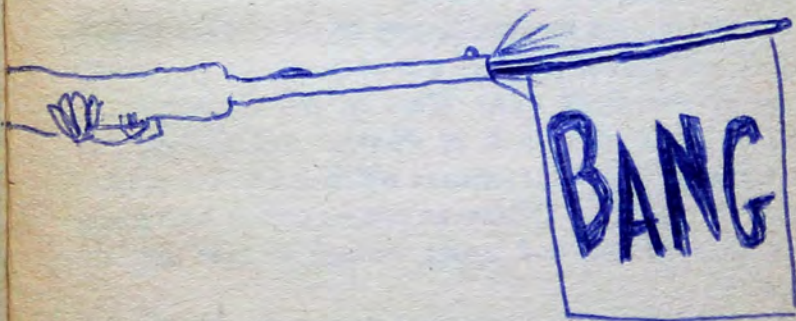
"I came here to get you out," Plant said. "I came here to take you back to base with me, and this is how you react. I've got a good mind to leave you here, after that sort of a reception. Just leave you here and let you rot—and I could do it, too. I've been with this team through other missions. They'd listen to me." He paused for breath, but Raissa said nothing. "I could just let you sit here forever—and I would, too, except for one thing."

Raissa paused. "Yes?" she said at last. Even her voice was different: it was softer, less flat. Plant listened to her one word as if it were music.

"Damn it," he stormed, "I love you, that's all. How the hell can I leave you here when I love you?"

She made a sound like: "Oh."

And then Commissar Sepisens fled entirely, and Plant was left, stunned with naked surprise, holding a Propaganda Co-ordinator in his astonished arms.



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## EPILOGUE

. . . With the twin revolutions, the power both of Delverb and the People's Republic was broken entirely. The war, shorn both of object and leaders, ended without a single fatality to its credit: and the planet of Wh'Gralb, delayed in its development an estimated thirty years, continued at peace for the succeeding fifty years.

A certain amount of atomic theory continued to be a subject of inquiry, but full recognition of the power and possibility inherent in this field did not come until, due to some slip in the trading agreements, a working atomic motor was delivered to the planet.

At this point, the modern history of the Galaxy begins, a history full both of progress and of battle. In the second volume of this work (*The Wars of the Confederation with the Wh'Gralb Union of Planets and Others*) we shall see in detail the movements which led to the present position of an entire Galaxy at peace, united under one simple Government, and strong enough to face any aggressor.

It required five major wars to bring about this conclusion. It could have been brought about in no other way.

## THE END



# WAR ON WH'GRALB— *WAR?*

**ENEMY ROCKETS ROARED  
TOWARD THEIR TARGETS**

*...and floated gently into an uninhabited swamp.*

**A CLOUD OF POISON GAS  
BILLOWED OVER THE TROOPS**

*...and they all fell peacefully asleep for eight hours.*

**LOYAL TROOPS  
FIRED ON THE POPULACE**

*...and out of their rifles came banners with the word BANG!*

**THE GENERALS  
STUDIED THEIR FIELD MAPS**

*...and laid plans for a League of Love.*

*What a hell of a way to fight a war. No one was winning, no one was losing. A soldier or civilian couldn't get himself killed if he tried....And the planet of Wh'Gralb, noted for the ferocity of its wars, was going out of its collective mind trying to find out WHY.*

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