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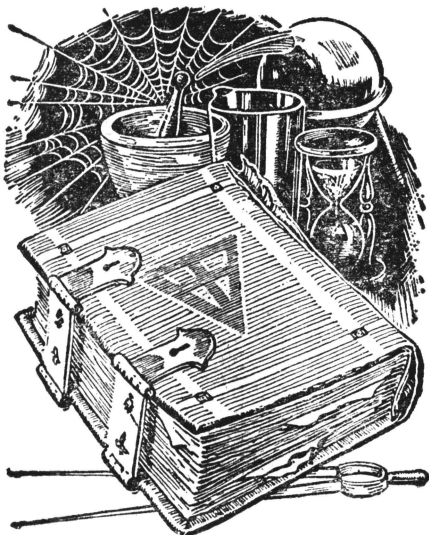
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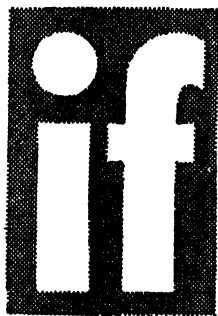
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A HOLE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

THAT looks very like a Fred Pohl story title, doesn't it? It happens not to be, however, but instead the name of an extra-ordinary book by Willard Bascom, published by Doubleday at \$4.95.

Bascom is the head of the Mohole Project, which intends to drill a hole right through the earth's crust into the mantle to see if they can't bring up a core. They'll drill where the crust is thinnest, and that happens to be under some miles of sea-water. You have to be crazy in some very special way even to think of such a thing, and that's Bascom.

The book includes an account of the organization from which this heady idea sprang: AMSOC. AMSOC had its beginnings somewhere in the inner circle of the Office of Naval Research, which guides the Navy's basic research program and keeps up contacts with universities and private laboratories. One hot summer day in '52, two of these broad-spectrum geniuses tried to organize a huge pile of incoming proposals and suggestions for research, by putting them in a few neat piles. When they were finished, desks, tables, chairs and floor were covered with neat piles—each one paper deep. They then gathered them together into one pile and

sweatily looked at each other, and at that moment the organization got its name: the American Miscellaneous Society.

To this day the now respectable deep-drilling project has the cable address AMSOC, Washington, D.C., and its letterhead bears the figure of a geophysicist ram-pan on his fields of action—earth, air, fire and water.

Right at the start the organization (which has no membership rolls, dues, officers, bylaws or meetings) was efficiently organized into five divisions: Etceterology, Phenomenology, Calamitology, Generalogy and Triviology. These men got together at brainstorming sessions which would take the breath away from E. E. Smith. Once, just for kicks, they conceived a plan to bring water to California by hauling, with tug-boats, an Antarctic iceberg (the Arctic ones are salty) 600 feet thick and 10 miles long from Little America and (because of prevailing currents) around Hawaii so that it could be moored in the Channel Islands near Los Angeles. They worked the project out in such detail that it looked not only feasible but perhaps too efficient: it might well change the climate too much.

Yet project Mohole is now a serious, practical endeavor,

for all its wild letterhead; and in telling about it, Bascom briefs you in everything connected with it—the creation of the earth, the origins of life, the structure of stars, the natural history of the ocean and the land and the atmosphere. There's drilling, as it is, and as it's going to have to be before they're through; ships, navigation, explosives, buoys and anchors—why, the man's a whole corps of specialists all by himself.

THERE'S one sharp and timely point connected with this whole astonishing effort. Last September a letter appeared in a New York paper, pouncing on an article a few days before headed **SOVIET CONSIDERS FIVE EARTH PROBES**. The letter was written by this same Bascom, and, even admitting that it's his own pony he's riding, I think you'll agree he has something to say.

On August 24, he reports, he was invited to show pictures and to lecture on Project Mohole before the scientists of the Soviet research ship *Vityaz*. He did so. He says they were warmly congratulatory and seemed surprised by the scale of the U.S. deep sea operations. He says they spoke vaguely about a Russian effort on land in the near future.

So along comes this Sept. 10 release from Moscow describ-

ing a monster five-pronged Soviet mantle-drilling project: one in the Caspian, four on land: In Karelia, the Ural Mountains, the Caucasus and the Kuriles.

Bascom goes on to say that though scientists all over welcome the competition—it makes more work get done—the fact remains that this “scientific Olympics,” as he calls it, isn't altogether just a jolly game. Bascom, who certainly should know, says we have the initial advantage. On land we have drilled to 25,000 feet, the Soviets about 17,000. Project Mohole's test drilling in water, totaling 11,700 feet, is nearly 100 times their record. “Nevertheless,” Bascom writes, “I am concerned that another hare and tortoise race will develop... Although they have a long way to go, they have accepted the conditions of the race... We must... be wary that even in areas where they are not superior, propaganda may make them seem so. We must run, and win, and tell the world we have won.”

This department couldn't agree more; and it seems time to remind the world that at Sputnik time, and at Russian H-bomb time, and even at astronaut time, sleepy people were stumbling about, bleating that no one had warned them.

Well, about this one Bascom has issued the warning. Let's see what happens. **END**

THE YILLIAN WAY

I

JAME Retief, vice-consul and third secretary in the Diplomatic Corps, followed the senior members of the terrestrial mission across the tarmac and into the gloom of the reception building. The gray-skinned Yill guide who had met the arriving embassy at the foot of the ramp hurried away. The councillor, two first secretaries and the senior attaches gathered around the ambassador, their ornate uniforms bright in the vast dun-colored room.

Ten minutes passed. Retief strolled across to the nearest door and looked through the glass panel at the room beyond. Several dozen Yill

lounged in deep couches, sipping lavender drinks from slender glass tubes. Black-tunicked servants moved about inconspicuously, offering trays. A party of brightly-dressed Yill moved toward the entrance doors. One of the party, a tall male, made to step before another, who raised a hand languidly, fist clenched. The first Yill stepped back and placed his hands on top of his head. Both Yill were smiling and chatting as they passed through the doors.

Retief turned away to rejoin the Terrestrial delegation waiting beside a mound of crates made of rough greenish wood stacked on the bare concrete floor.

As Retief came up, Amba-

The ceremonious protocol of the Yills was impressive, colorful — and, in the long run, deadly!

sador Spradley glanced at his finger watch and spoke to the man beside him.

"Ben, are you quite certain our arrival time was made clear?"

Second Secretary Magnan nodded emphatically. "I stressed the point, Mr. Ambassador. I communicated with Mr. T' Cai-Cai just before the lighter broke orbit, and I specifically—"

"I hope you didn't appear truculent, Mr. Magnan," the ambassador said sharply.

"No indeed, Mr. Ambassador. I merely—"

"You're sure there's no VIP room here?" The ambassador glanced around the cavernous room. "Curious that not even chairs have been provided."

"If you'd care to sit on one of these crates—"

"Certainly not." The ambassador looked at his watch again and cleared his throat.

"I may as well make use of these few moments to outline our approach for the more junior members of the staff; it's vital that the entire mission work in harmony in the presentation of the image. We Terrestrials are a kindly, peace-loving race." The ambassador smiled in a kindly, peace-loving way.

"We seek only a reasonable division of spheres of influence with the Yill." He spread his hands, looking reasonable.

"We are a people of high culture, ethical, sincere." The

smile was replaced abruptly by pursed lips.

"We'll start by asking for the entire Sirenian System, and settle for half. We'll establish a foothold on all the choicer worlds. And, with shrewd handling, in a century we'll be in a position to assert a wider claim."

The ambassador glanced around. "If there are no questions—"

RETIEF stepped forward. "It's my understanding, Mr. Ambassador, that we hold the prior claim to the Sirenian System. Did I understand your Excellency to say that we're ready to concede half of it to the Yill without a struggle?"

Ambassador Spradley looked up at Retief, blinking. The younger man loomed over him. Beside him, Magnan cleared his throat in the silence.

"Vice-Consul Retief merely means—"

"I can interpret Mr. Retief's remark," the ambassador snapped. He assumed a fatherly expression.

"Young man, you're new to the Service. You haven't yet learned the team play, the give-and-take of diplomacy. I shall expect you to observe closely the work of the experienced negotiators of the mission. You must learn the importance of subtlety."

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan said, "I think the reception

committee is arriving." He pointed. Half a dozen tall, short-necked Yill were entering through a side door. The leading Yill hesitated as another stepped in his path. He raised a fist, and the other moved aside, touching the top of his head perfunctorily with both hands. The group started across the room toward the Terrestrials. Retief watched as a slender alien came forward and spoke passable Terran in a reedy voice.

"I am P'Toi. Come this way..." He turned, and the group moved toward the door, the ambassador leading. As he reached for the door, the interpreter darted ahead and shouldered him aside. The other Yill stopped, waiting.

The ambassador almost glared, then remembered the image. He smiled and beckoned the Yill ahead. They milled uncertainly, muttering in the native tongue, then passed through the door.

The Terran party followed.

"—give a great deal to know what they're saying," Retief overheard as he came up.

"Our interpreter has forged to the van," the ambassador said. "I can only assume he'll appear when needed."

"A pity we have to rely on a native interpreter," someone said.

"Had I known we'd meet this rather uncouth reception," the ambassador said stiffly, "I would have audited the language personally, of

course, during the voyage out."

"Oh, no criticism intended, of course, Mr. Ambassador."

"Heavens," Magnan put in. "Who would have thought—"

Retief moved up behind the ambassador.

"Mr. Ambassador," he said, "I—"

"Later, young man," the ambassador snapped. He beckoned to the first councillor, and the two moved off, heads together.

Outside, a bluish sun gleamed in a dark sky. Retief watched his breath form a frosty cloud in the chill air. A broad doughnut-wheeled vehicle was drawn up to the platform. The Yill gestured the Terran party to the gaping door at the rear, then stood back, waiting.

Retief looked curiously at the gray-painted van. The legend written on its side in alien symbols seemed to read "egg nog."

THE ambassador entered the vehicle, the other Terrestrials following. It was as bare of seats as the Terminal building. What appeared to be a defunct electronic chassis lay in the center of the floor.

Retief glanced back. The Yill were talking excitedly. None of them entered the car. The door was closed, and the Terrans braced themselves under the low roof as the engine started up with a whine of worn tubos.

The van moved off. It was an uncomfortable ride. Retief put out an arm as the vehicle rounded a corner, just catching the ambassador as he staggered, off-balance. The ambassador glared at him, settled his heavy tri-corner hat and stood stiffly until the car lurched again.

Retief stooped, attempting to see out through the single dusty window. They seemed to be in a wide street lined with low buildings.

They passed through a massive gate, up a ramp, and stopped. The door opened. Retief looked out at a blank gray facade, broken by tiny windows at irregular intervals. A scarlet vehicle was drawn up ahead, the Yill reception committee emerging from it. Through its wide windows Retief saw rich upholstery and caught a glimpse of glasses clamped to a tiny bar.

P'Toi, the Yill interpreter, came forward, gestured to a small door. Magnan opened it, waiting for the ambassador.

As he stepped to it, a Yill thrust himself ahead and hesitated. Ambassador Spradley drew himself up, glaring. Then he twisted his mouth into a frozen smile and stepped aside.

The Yill looked at each other, then filed through the door.

Retief was the last to enter. As he stepped inside, a black-clad servant slipped

past him, pulled the lid from a large box by the door and dropped in a paper tray heaped with refuse. There were alien symbols in flaking paint on the box. They seemed, Retief noticed, to spell "egg nog."

II

THE shrill pipes and whining reeds had been warming up for an hour when Retief emerged from his cubicle and descended the stairs to the banquet hall.

Standing by the open doors, he lit a slender cigar and watched through narrowed eyes as obsequious servants in black flitted along the low wide corridor, carrying laden trays into the broad room, arranging settings on a great four-sided table forming a hollow square that almost filled the room. Rich brocades were spread across the center of the side nearest the door, flanked by heavily decorated white cloths. Beyond, plain white extended to the far side, where metal dishes were arranged on the bare table top.

A richly dressed Yill approached, stepped aside to allow a servant to pass and entered the room.

Retief turned at the sound of Terran voices behind him. The ambassador came up, trailed by two diplomats. He glanced at Retief, adjusted his ruff and looked into the banquet hall.

"Apparently we're to be kept waiting again," he muttered. "After having been informed at the outset that the Yill have no intention of yielding an inch, one almost wonders..."

"Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "Have you noticed—"

"However," Ambassador Spradley said, eyeing Retief, "a seasoned diplomatist must take these little snubs in stride. In the end—Ah, there, Magnan." He turned away, talking.

Somewhere a gong clanged.

In a moment, the corridor was filled with chattering Yill who moved past the group of Terrestrials into the banquet hall. P'Toi, the Yill interpreter, came up and raised a hand.

"Waitt heere..."

More Yill filed into the dining room to take their places. A pair of helmeted guards approached, waving the Terrestrials back. An immense gray-jowled Yill waddled to the doors and passed through, followed by more guards.

"The Chief of State," Retief heard Magnan say. "The Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau."

"I have yet to present my credentials," Ambassador Spradley said. "One expects some latitude in the observances of protocol, but I confess..." He wagged his head.

The Yill interpreter spoke up.

"You now whill lhie on

yourr intesstinss, and creep to fesstive board there." He pointed across the room.

"Intestines?" Ambassador Spradley looked about wildly.

"Mr. P'Toi means our stomachs, I wouldn't wonder," Magnan said. "He just wants us to lie down and crawl to our seats, Mr. Ambassador."

"What the devil are you grinning at, you idiot?" the ambassador snapped.

MAGNAN'S face fell.

Spradley glanced down at the medals across his paunch.

"This is... I've never..."

"Homage to godss," the interpreter said.

"Oh. Oh, religion," someone said.

"Well, if it's a matter of religious beliefs..." The ambassador looked dubiously around.

"Golly, it's only a couple of hundred feet," Magnan offered.

Retief stepped up to P'Toi.

"His Excellency the Terrestrial Ambassador will not crawl," he said clearly.

"Here, young man! I said nothing—"

"Not to crawl?" The interpreter wore an unreadable Yill expression.

"It is against our religion," Retief said.

"Againstst?"

"We are votaries of the Snake Goddess," Retief said. "It is a sacrilege to crawl." He brushed past the in-

terpreter and marched toward the distant table.

The others followed.

Puffing, the ambassador came to Retief's side as they approached the dozen empty stools on the far side of the square opposite the brocaded position of the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau.

"Mr. Retief, kindly see me after this affair," he hissed. "In the meantime, I hope you will restrain any further rash impulses. Let me remind you *I am chief of mission here.*"

Magnan came up from behind.

"Let me add my congratulations, Retief," he said. "That was fast thinking—"

"Are you out of your mind, Magnan?" the ambassador barked. "I am extremely displeased!"

"Why," Magnan stuttered, "I was speaking sarcastically, of course, Mr. Ambassador. Didn't you notice the kind of shocked little gasp I gave when he did it?"

The Terrestrials took their places, Retief at the end. The table before them was of bare green wood, with an array of shallow pewter dishes.

Some of the Yill at the table were in plain gray, others in black. All eyed them silently. There was a constant stir among them as one or another rose and disappeared and others sat down. The pipes and reeds were shrilling furiously, and the susurrations of Yillian conversation from the other

tables rose ever higher in competition.

A tall Yill in black was at the ambassador's side now. The nearby Yill fell silent as he began ladling a whitish soup into the largest of the bowls before the Terrestrial envoy. The interpreter hovered, watching.

"That's quite enough," Ambassador Spradley said, as the bowl overflowed. The Yill servant rolled his eyes, dribbled more of the soup into the bowl.

"Kindly serve the other members of my staff," the ambassador said. The interpreter said something in a low voice. The servant moved hesitantly to the next stool and ladled more soup.

RETIEF watched, listening to the whispers around him. The Yill at the table were craning now to watch. The soup ladler was ladling rapidly, rolling his eyes sideways. He came to Retief, reached out with the full ladle for the bowl.

"No," Retief said.

The ladler hesitated.

"None for me," Retief said.

The interpreter came up and motioned to the servant, who reached again, ladle brimming.

"I ... DON'T ... LIKE ... IT!" Retief said, his voice distinct in the sudden hush. He stared at the interpreter, who stared back, then waved the servant away.

"Mr. Retief!" a voice hissed.

Retief looked down at the table. The ambassador was leaning forward, glaring at him, his face a mottled crimson.

"I'm warning you, Mr. Retief," he said hoarsely. "I've eaten sheep's eyes in the Sudan, ka swe in Burma, hundred-year *cug* on Mars and everything else that has been placed before me in the course of my diplomatic career. And, by the holy relics of Saint Ignatz, you'll do the same!" He snatched up a spoon-like utensil and dipped it into his bowl.

"Don't eat that, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said.

The ambassador stared, eyes wide. He opened his mouth, guided the spoon toward it—

Retief stood, gripped the table under its edge and heaved. The immense wooden slab rose and tilted, dishes sliding. It crashed to the floor with a ponderous slam.

Whitish soup splattered across the terrazzo. A couple of odd bowls rolled across the room. Cries rang out from the Yill, mingling with a strangled yell from Ambassador Spradley.

Retief walked past the wild-eyed members of the mission to the sputtering chief. "Mr. Ambassador," he said. "I'd like—"

"You'd like! I'll break you, you young hoodlum! Do you realize—"

"Pleass..." The interpreter stood at Retief's side.

"My apologies," Ambassador Spradley said, mopping his forehead. "My profound apologies."

"Be quiet," Retief said.

"Wha—what?"

"Don't apologize," Retief said. P'Toi was beckoning.

"Pleasse, arll come."

Retief turned and followed him.

The portion of the table they were ushered to was covered with an embroidered white cloth, set with thin porcelain dishes. The Yill already seated there rose, amid babbling, and moved down the table. The black-clad Yill at the end table closed ranks to fill the vacant seats. Retief sat down and found Magnan at his side.

"What's going on here?" the second secretary said angrily.

"They were giving us dog food," Retief said. "I overheard a Yill. They seated us at the bottom of the servants' table—"

"You mean you know their language?"

"I learned it on the way out. Enough, at least."

The music burst out with a clangorous fanfare, and a throng of jugglers, dancers and acrobats poured into the center of the hollow square, frantically juggling, dancing and back-flipping. Black-clad servants swarmed suddenly, heaping mounds of fragrant

food on the plates of Yill and Terrestrials alike, pouring a pale purple liquor into slender glasses. Retief sampled the Yill food. It was delicious.

Conversation was impossible in the din. He watched the gaudy display and ate heartily.

III

RETIEF leaned back, grateful for the lull in the music. The last of the dishes were whisked away, and more glasses filled. The exhausted entertainers stopped to pick up the thick square coins the diners threw.

Retief sighed. It had been a rare feast.

"Retief," Magnan said in the comparative quiet, "what were you saying about dog food as the music came up?"

Retief looked at him. "Haven't you noticed the pattern, Mr. Magnan? The series of deliberate affronts?"

"Deliberate affronts! Just a minute, Retief. They're uncouth, yes, crowding into doorways and that sort of thing..." He looked at Retief uncertainly.

"They herded us into a baggage warehouse at the terminal. Then they hauled us here in a garbage truck—"

"Garbage truck!"

"Only symbolic, of course. They ushered us in the tradesman's entrance, and assigned us cubicles in the servants'

wing. Then we were seated with the coolie class sweepers at the bottom of the table."

"You must be... I mean, we're the Terrestrial delegation! Surely these Yill must realize our power."

"Precisely, Mr. Magnan. But—"

With a clang of cymbals the musicians launched a renewed assault. Six tall, helmeted Yill sprang into the center of the floor and paired off in a wild performance, half dance, half combat. Magnan pulled at Retief's arm, his mouth moving.

Retief shook his head. No one could talk against a Yill orchestra in full cry. He sampled a bright red wine and watched the show.

There was a flurry of action, and two of the dancers stumbled and collapsed, their partner-opponents whirling away to pair off again, describe the elaborate pre-combat ritual, and abruptly set to, dulled sabres clashing—and two more Yill were down, stunned. It was a violent dance.

Retief watched, the drink forgotten.

The last two Yill approached and retreated, whirled, bobbed and spun, fainted and postured—and on the instant, clashed, straining chest-to-chest—then broke apart, heavy weapons chopping, parrying, as the music mounted to a frenzy.

Evenly matched, the two



hacked, thrust, blow for blow, across the floor, then back, defense forgotten, slugging it out.

And then one was slipping, going down, helmet awry. The other, a giant, muscular Yill, spun away, whirled in a mad skirl of pipes as coins showered—then froze before a gaudy table, raised the sabre and slammed it down in a resounding blow across the gay cloth before a lace and bow-bedecked Yill in the same instant that the music stopped.

In utter silence the dancer-fighter stared across the table at the seated Yill.

With a shout, the Yill leaped up, raised a clenched fist. The dancer bowed his head, spread his hands on his helmet.

Retief took a deep gulp of a pale yellow liqueur and leaned forward to watch. The beribboned Yill waved a hand negligently, spilled a handful of coins across the table and sat down.

The challenger spun away in a screeching shrill of music. Retief caught his eye for an instant as he passed.

And then the dancer stood rigid before the brocaded table—and the music stopped off short as the sabre slammed down before a heavy Yill in ornate metallic coils. The challenged Yill rose and raised a fist. The other ducked his head, put his hands on his helmet. Coins rolled. The dancer moved on.

Twice more the dancer struck the table in ritualistic challenge, exchanged gestures, bent his neck and passed on. He circled the broad floor, sabre twirling, arms darting in an intricate symbolism. The orchestra blared shrilly, unmuffled now by the surf-roar of conversation. The Yill, Retief noticed suddenly, were sitting silent, watching. The dancer was closer now, and then he was before Retief, poised, towering, sabre above his head.

The music cut, and in the startling instantaneous silence, the heavy sabre whipped over and down with an explosive concussion that set dishes dancing on the table-top.

THE Yill's eyes held on Retief's. In the silence, Magnan tittered drunkenly. Retief pushed back his stool.

"Steady, my boy," Ambassador Spradley called. Retief stood, the Yill topping his six foot three by an inch. In a motion almost too quick to follow, Retief reached for the sabre, twitched it from the Yill's grip, swung it in a whistling cut. The Yill ducked, sprang back, snatched up a sabre dropped by another dancer.

"Someone stop the madman!" Spradley howled.

Retief leaped across the table, sending fragile dishes spinning.

The other danced back, and

only then did the orchestra spring to life with a screech and a mad tattoo of high-pitched drums.

Making no attempt to following the weaving pattern of the Yill bolero, Retief pressed the other, fending off vicious cuts with the blunt weapon, chopping back relentlessly. Left hand on hip, Retief matched blow for blow, driving the other back.

Abruptly, the Yill abandoned the double role. Dancing forgotten, he settled down in earnest, cutting, thrusting, parrying; and now the two stood toe to toe, sabres clashing in a lightning exchange. The Yill gave a step, two, then rallied, drove Retief back, back—

And the Yill stumbled. His sabre clattered, and Retief dropped his point as the other wavered past him and crashed to the floor.

The orchestra fell silent in a descending wail of reeds. Retief drew a deep breath and wiped his forehead.

"Come back here, you young fool!" Spradley called hoarsely.

Retief hefted the sabre, turned, eyed the brocade-draped table. He started across the floor. The Yill sat as if paralyzed.

"Retief, no!" Spradley yelled.

Retief walked directly to the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau, stopped, raised the sabre.

"Not the chief of state,"

someone in the Terrestrial mission groaned.

Retief whipped the sabre down. The dull blade split the cloth and clove the hardwood table. There was utter silence.

The Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau rose, seven feet of obese gray Yill. Broad face expressionless to any Terran eyes, he raised a fist like a jewel-studded ham.

Retief stood rigid for a long moment. Then, gracefully, he inclined his head, placed his finger tips on his temples.

Behind him, there was a clatter as Ambassador Spradley collapsed. Then the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau cried out and reached across the table to embrace the Terrestrial, and the orchestra went mad.

Gray hands helped Retief across the table, stools were pushed aside to make room at F'Kau-Kau-Kau's side. Retief sat, took a tall flagon of coal-black brandy pressed on him by his neighbor, clashed glasses with The Admirable and drank.

IV

RETIEF turned at the touch on his shoulder.

"The Ambassador wants to speak to you, Retief," Mag-nan said.

Retief looked across to where Ambassador Spradley sat glowering behind the plain tablecloth.

"Under the circumstances,"
by Keith Laumer

Retief said, "you'd better ask him to come over here."

"The ambassador?" Magnan's voice cracked.

"Never mind the protocol," Retief said. "The situation is still delicate." Magnan went away.

"The feast ends," F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. "Now you and I, Retief, must straddle the Council Stool."

"I'll be honored, Admirable," Retief said. "I must inform my colleagues."

"Colleagues?" F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. "It is for chiefs to parley. Who shall speak for a king while he yet has tongue for talk?"

"The Yill way is wise," Retief said.

F'Kau-Kau-Kau emptied a squat tumbler of pink beer. "I will treat with you, Retief, as viceroy, since as you say your king is old and the space between worlds is far. But there shall be no scheming underlings privy to our dealings." He grinned a Yill grin. "Afterwards we shall carouse, Retief. The Council Stool is hard and the waiting handmaidens delectable. This makes for quick agreement."

Retief smiled. "The king is wise."

"Of course, a being prefers wenches of his own kind," F'Kau-Kau-Kau said. He belched. "The Ministry of Culture has imported several Terry—excuse me, Retief—Terrestrial joy-girls, said to be top-notch specimens. At

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least they have very fat watchamacallits."

"The king is most considerate," Retief said.

"Let us to it then, Retief. I may hazard a fling with one of your Terries, myself. I fancy an occasional perversion." F'Kau-Kau-Kau dug an elbow into Retief's side and bellowed with laughter.

Ambassador Spradley hurried to intercept Retief as he crossed to the door at F'Kau-Kau-Kau's side.

"Retief, kindly excuse yourself. I wish a word with you." His voice was icy. Magnan stood behind him, goggling.

"Mr. Ambassador, forgive my apparent rudeness," Retief said. "I don't have time to explain now—"

"R u d e n e s s!" Spradley barked. "Don't have time, eh? Let me tell you—"

"Lower your voice, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said.

Spradley quivered, mouth open, speechless.

"If you'll sit down and wait quietly," Retief said, "I think—"

"You think!" Spradley spluttered.

"**SILENCE!**" Retief said.

Spradley looked up at Retief's face. He stared for a moment into Retief's gray eyes, closed his mouth and swallowed.

"The Yill seem to have gotten the impression I'm in charge," Retief said. "We'll have to keep it up."

"But—but—" Spradley stuttered. Then he straightened. "That is the last straw," he whispered hoarsely. "I am the Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. Magnan has told me that we've been studiedly insulted, repeatedly, since the moment of our arrival. Kept waiting in baggage rooms, transported in refuse lorries, herded about with servants, offered swill at table. Now I and my senior staff, are left cooling our heels, without so much as an audience while this—this multiple Kau person hobnobs with—with—"

Spradley's voice broke. "I may have been a trifle hasty, Retief, in attempting to restrain you. Blaspheming the native gods and dumping the banquet table are rather extreme measures, but your resentment was perhaps partially justified. I am prepared to be lenient with you." He fixed a choleric eye on Retief.

"I am walking out of this meeting, Mr. Retief. I'll take no more of these deliberate personal—"

"That's enough," Retief snapped. "You're keeping the king waiting. Get back to your chair and sit there until I come back."

Spradley's face purpled.

"One more word, and I'll silence you forcibly," Retief said.

Magnan found his voice.

"What are you going to do, Retief?"

"I'm going to handle the negotiation," Retief said. He handed Magnan his empty glass. "Now go sit down and work on the Image."

AT his desk in the VIP suite aboard the orbiting Corps vessel, Ambassador Spradley pursed his lips and looked severely at Vice-Consul Retief.

"Further," he said, "you have displayed a complete lack of understanding of Corps discipline, the respect due a senior agent, even the basic courtesies. Your aggravated displays of temper, ill-timed outbursts of violence and almost incredible arrogance in the assumption of authority make your further retention as an officer-agent of the Diplomatic Corps impossible. It will therefore be my unhappy duty to recommend your immediate—"

There was a muted buzz from the communicator. The ambassador cleared his throat.

"Well?"

"A signal from Sector HQ, Mr. Ambassador," a voice said.

"Well, read it," Spradley snapped. "Skip the preliminaries."

"Congratulations on the unprecedented success of your mission. The articles of agreement transmitted by you embody a most favorable resolution of the difficult

Sirenian situation, and will form the basis of continued amicable relations between the Terrestrial States and the Yill Empire. To you and your staff, full credit is due for a job well done. Signed, Deputy Assistant Secretary—”

Spradley cut off the voice impatiently.

He shuffled papers, eyed Retief sharply.

“Superficially, of course, an uninitiated observer might leap to the conclusion that the—ah—results that were produced in spite of these... ah... irregularities justify the latter.” The Ambassador smiled a sad, wise smile. “This is far from the case,” he said. “I—”

The communicator burped softly.

“Confound it!” Spradley muttered. “Yes?”

“Mr. T’Cai-Cai has arrived,” the voice said. “Shall I—”

“Send him in at once.” Spradley glanced at Retief. “Only a two-syllable man, but I shall attempt to correct these false impressions, make some amends...”

The two Terrestrials waited silently until the Yill Protocol chief tapped at the door.

“I hope,” the ambassador said, “that you will resist the impulse to take advantage of your unusual position.” He looked at the door. “Come in.”

T’Cai-Cai stepped into the
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room, glanced at Spradley, turned to greet Retief in voluble Yill. He rounded the desk to the ambassador’s chair, motioned him from it and sat down.

“I have a surprise for you, Retief,” he said, in Ter-ran. “I myself have made use of the teaching machine you so kindly lent us.”

“That’s fine, T’Cai-Cai,” Retief said. “I’m sure Mr. Spradley will be interested in hearing what we have to say.”

“Never mind,” the Yill said. “I am here only socially.” He looked around the room.

“So plainly you decorate your chamber. But it has a certain austere charm.” He laughed a Yill laugh.

“Oh, you are a strange breed, you Terrestrials. You surprised us all. You know, one hears such outlandish stories. I tell you in confidence, we had expected you to be overpushes.”

“Pushovers,” Spradley said, tonelessly.

“Such restraint! What pleasure you gave to those of us, like myself of course, who appreciated your grasp of protocol. Such finesse! How subtly you appeared to ignore each overture, while neatly avoiding actual contamination. I can tell you, there were those who thought—poor fools—that you had no grasp of etiquette. How gratified we were, we profession-

als, who could appreciate your virtuosity—when you placed matters on a comfortable basis by spurning the cats'-meat. It was sheer pleasure then, waiting, to see what form your compliment would take."

The Yill offered orange cigars, stuffed one in his nostril.

"I confess even I had not hoped that you would honor our Admirable so signally. Oh, it is a pleasure to deal with fellow professionals, who understand the meaning of protocol!"

Ambassador Spradley made a choking sound.

"This fellow has caught a chill," T'Cai-Cai said. He eyed Spradley dubiously. "Step back, my man. I am highly susceptible.

"There is one bit of busi-

ness I shall take pleasure in attending to, my dear Retief," T'Cai-Cai went on. He drew a large paper from his reticule. "The Admirable is determined than none other than yourself shall be accredited here. I have here my government's exequatur confirming you as Terrestrial consul-general to Yill. We shall look forward to your prompt return."

Retief looked at Spradley.

"I'm sure the Corps will agree," he said.

"Then I shall be going," T'Cai-Cai said. He stood up. "Hurry back to us, Retief. There is much that I would show you of Yill."

"I'll hurry," Retief said and, with a Yill wink: "Together we shall see many high and splendid things!"

by Keith Laumer

END

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