

Dallas McCord Reynolds



COMBAT

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By MACK REYNOLDS

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Phone:02188-299295

Email:saptarsheeprakashan@gmail.com

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Henry Kuran answered a nod here and there, a called out greeting from a desk an aisle removed from the one along which he was progressing, finally made the far end of the room. He knocked at the door and pushed his way through before waiting a response.

There were three desks here. He didn't recognize two of the girls who looked up at his entry. One of them began to say something, but then Betty, whose desk dominated the entry to the inner sanctum, grinned a welcome at him and said, "Hank! How was Peru? We've been expecting you."

"Full of Incas," he grinned back. "Incas, Russkies and Chinks. A poor capitalist *conquistador* doesn't have a chance. Is the boss inside?"

"He's waiting for you, Hank. See you later."

Hank said, "Um-m-m," and when the door clicked in response to the button Betty touched, pushed his way into the inner office.

Morton Twombly, chief of the department, came to his feet, shook hands abruptly and motioned the other to a chair.

"How're things in Peru, Henry?" His voice didn't express too much real interest.

Hank said, "We were on the phone just a week ago, Mr. Twombly. It's about the same. No, the devil it is. The Chinese have just run in their new People's Car. They look something like our jeep station-wagons did fifteen years ago."

Twombly stirred in irritation. "I've heard about them."

Hank took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and polished his rimless glasses. He said evenly, "They sell for just under two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred dollars?" Twombly twisted his face. "They can't transport them from China for that."

"Here we go again," Hank sighed. "They also can't sell pressure cookers for a dollar apiece, nor cameras with f.2 lenses for five bucks. Not to speak of the fact that the Czechs can't sell shoes for fifty cents a pair and, of course, the Russkies can't sell premium gasoline for five cents a gallon."

Twombly muttered, "They undercut our prices faster than we can vote through new subsidies. Where's it going to end Henry?"

"I don't know. Perhaps we should have thought a lot more about it ten or fifteen years ago when the best men our universities could turn out went into advertising, show business and sales—while the best men the Russkies and Chinese could turn out were going into science and industry." As a man who worked in the field Hank Kuran occasionally got bitter about these things, and didn't mind this opportunity of sounding off at the chief.

Hank added, "The height of achievement over there is to be elected to the Academy of Sciences. Our young people call scientists egg-heads, and their height of achievement is to become a TV singer or a movie star."

Morton Twombly shot his best field man a quick glance. "You sound as though you need a vacation, Henry."

Henry Kuran laughed. "Don't mind me, chief. I got into a hassle with the Hungarians last week and I'm in a bad frame of mind."

Twombly said, "Well, we didn't bring you back to Washington for a trade conference."

"I gathered that from your wire. What *am* I here for?"

Twombly pushed his chair back and came to his feet. It occurred to Hank Kuran that his chief had aged considerably since the forming of this department nearly ten years ago. The thought went through his mind, *a general in the cold war. A general who's been in action for a decade, has never won more than a skirmish and is currently in full retreat.*

Morton Twombly said, "I'm not sure I know. Come along."

They left the office by a back door and Hank was in unknown territory. Silently his chief led him through busy corridors, each one identical to the last, each sterile and cold in spite of the bustling. They came to a marine guarded door, were passed through, once again obviously expected.

The inner office contained but one desk occupied by a youthfully brisk army major. He gave Hank a one-two of the eyes and said, "Mr. Hennessey is expecting you, sir. This is Mr. Kuran?"

"That's correct," Twombly said. "I won't be needed." He turned to Hank Kuran. "I'll see you later, Henry." He shook hands.

Hank frowned at him. "You sound as though I'm being sent off to Siberia, or something."

The major looked up sharply, "What was that?"

Twombly made a motion with his hand, negatively. "Nothing. A joke. I'll see you later, Henry." He turned and left.

The major opened another door and ushered Hank into a room two or three times the size of Twombly's office. Hank formed a silent whistle and then suddenly knew where he was. This was the sanctum sanctorum of Sheridan Hennessey. Sheridan Hennessey, right arm, hatchetman, *alter ego*, one man brain trust—of two presidents in succession.

And there he was, seated in a heavy armchair. Hank had known of his illness, that the other had only recently risen from his hospital bed and against doctor's orders. But somehow he hadn't expected to see him this wasted. TV and newsreel cameramen had been kind.

However, the waste had not as yet extended to either eyes or voice. Sheridan Hennessey bit out, "That'll be all, Roy," and the major left them.

"Sit down," Hennessey said. "You're Henry Kuran. That's not a Russian name is it?"

Hank found a chair. "It was Kuranchov. My father Americanized it when he was married." He added, "About once every six months some Department of Justice or C.I.A. joker runs into the fact that my name was originally Russian and I'm investigated all over again."

Hennessey said, "But your Russian is perfect?"

"Yes, sir. My mother was English-Irish, but we lived in a community with quite a few Russian born emigrants. I learned the language."

"Good, Mr. Kuran, how would you like to die for your country?"

Hank Kuran looked at him for a long moment. He said slowly, "I'm thirty-two years old, healthy and reasonably adjusted and happy. I'd hate it."

The sick man snorted. "That's exactly the right answer. I don't trust heroes. Now, how much have you heard about the extraterrestrials?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You haven't heard the news broadcasts the past couple of days? How the devil could you have missed them?" Hennessey was scowling sourly at him.

Hank Kuran didn't know what the other was talking about. "Two days ago I was in the town of Machu Picchu in the Andes trying to peddle some mining equipment to the Peruvians. Peddle it, hell. I was practically trying to give it away, but it was still even-steven that the Hungarians would undersell me. Then I got a hurry-up wire from Morton Twombly to return to Washington soonest. I flew here in an Air Force jet. I haven't heard any news for two days or more."

"I'll have the major get you all the material we have to date and you can read it on the plane to England."

"Plane to England?" Hank said blankly. "Look, I'm in the Department of Economic Development of Neutral Nations, specializing in South America. What would I be doing in England?" He had an uneasy feeling of being crowded, and a suspicion that this was far from the first time Sheridan Hennessey had ridden roughshod over subordinates.

"First step on the way to Moscow," Hennessey snapped. "The major will give you details later. Let me brief you. The extraterrestrials landed a couple of days ago on Red Square in some sort of spaceship. Our Russkie friends clamped down a censorship on news. No photos at all as yet and all news releases have come from Tass."

Hank Kuran was bug-eying him.

Hennessey said, "I know. Most of the time I don't believe it myself. The extraterrestrials represent what the Russkies are calling a Galactic Confederation. So far as we can figure out, there is some sort of league, United Planets, or whatever you want to call it, of other star systems which have achieved a certain level of scientific development."

"Well ... well, why haven't they shown up before?"

"Possibly they have, through the ages. If so, they kept their presence secret, checked on our development and left." Hennessey snorted his indignation. "See here, Kuran, I have no details. All of our information comes from Tass, and you can imagine how inadequate that is. Now shut up while I tell you what little I do know."

Henry Kuran settled back into his chair, feeling limp. He'd had too many curves thrown at him in the past few minutes to assimilate.

"They evidently keep hands off until a planet develops interplanetary exploration and atomic power. And, of course, during the past few years our Russkie pals have not only set up a base on the Moon but have sent off their various expeditions to Venus and Mars."

"None of them made it," Hank said.

"Evidently they didn't have to. At any rate, the plenipotentiaries from the Galactic Confederation have arrived."

"Wanting what, sir?" Hank said.

"Wanting nothing but to help." Hennessey said. "Stop interrupting. Our time is limited. You're going to have to be on a jet for London in half an hour."

He noticed Hank Kuran's expression, and shook his head. "No, it's not farfetched. These other intelligent life forms must be familiar with what it takes to progress to the point of interplanetary travel. It takes species aggressiveness—besides intelligence. And they must have sense enough not to want the wrong kind of aggressiveness exploding into the stars. They don't want an equivalent of Attila bursting over the borders of the Roman Empire. They want to channel us, and they're willing to help, to direct our comparatively new science into paths that won't conflict with them. They want to bring us peacefully into their society of advanced life forms."

Sheridan Hennessey allowed himself a rueful grimace. "That makes quite a speech, doesn't it? At any rate, that's the situation."

"Well, where do I come into this? I'm afraid I'm on the bewildered side."

"Yes. Well, damn it, they've landed in Moscow. They've evidently assumed the Soviet complex—the Soviet Union, China and the satellites—are the world's dominant power. Our conflicts, our controversies, are probably of little, if any, interest to them. Inadvertently, they've put a weapon in the hands of the Soviets that could well end this cold war we've been waging for more than twenty-five years now."

The president's right-hand man looked off into a corner of the room, unseeingly. "For more than a decade it's been a bloodless combat that we've been waging against the Russkies. The military machines, equally capable of complete destruction of the other, have been stymied. Finally it's boiled down to an attempt to influence the neutrals, India, Africa, South America, to attempt to bring them into one camp or the other. Thus far, we've been able to contain them in spite of their recent successes. But given the prestige of being selected the dominant world power by the

extraterrestrials and in possession of the science and industrial know-how from the stars, they'll have won the cold war over night."

His old eyes flared. "You want to know where you come in, eh? Fine. Your job is to get to these Galactic Confederation emissaries and put a bug in their bonnet. Get over to them that there's more than one major viewpoint on this planet. Get them to investigate our side of the matter."

"Get to them how? If the Russkies—"

Hennessey was tired. The flash of spirit was fading. He lifted a thin hand. "One of my assistants is crossing the Atlantic with you. He'll give you the details."

"But why *me*? I'm strictly a—"

"You're an unknown in Europe. Never connected with espionage. You speak Russian like a native. Morton Twombly says you're his best man. Your records show that you can think on your feet, and that's what we need above all."

Hank Kuran said flatly, "You might have asked for volunteers."

"We did. You, you and you. The old army game," Hennessey said wearily. "Mr. Kuran, we're in the clutch. We can lose, forever—right now. Right in the next month or so. Consider yourself a soldier being thrown into the most important engagement the world has ever seen—combating the growth of the Soviets. We can't afford such luxuries as asking for volunteers. Now do you get it?"

Hank Kuran could feel impotent anger rising inside him. He was off balance. "I get it, but I don't like it."

"None of us do," Sheridan Hennessey said sourly. "Do you think any of us do?" He must have pressed a button.

From behind them the major's voice said briskly, "Will you come this way, Mr. Kuran?"

In the limousine, on the way out to the airport, the bright, impossibly cleanly shaven C.I.A. man said, "You've never been behind the Iron Curtain before, have you Kuran?"

"No," Hank said. "I thought that term was passé. Look, aren't we even going to my hotel for my things?"

The second C.I.A. man, the older one, said, "All your gear will be waiting for you in London. They'll be sure there's nothing in it to tip off the KGB if they go through your bags."

The younger one said, "We're not sure, things are moving fast, but we suspect that that term, Iron Curtain, applies again."

"Then how am I going to get in?" Hank said irritably. "I've had no background for this cloak and dagger stuff."

The older C.I.A. man said, "We understand the KGB has increased security measures but they haven't cut out all travel on the part of non-Communists."

The other one said, "Probably because the Russkies don't want to tip off the spacemen that they're being isolated from the western countries. It would be too conspicuous if suddenly all western travelers disappeared."

They were passing over the Potomac, to the right and below them Hank Kuran could make out the twin Pentagons, symbols of a military that had at long last by its very efficiency eliminated itself. War had finally progressed to the point where even a minor nation, such as Cuba or Portugal, could completely destroy the whole planet. Eliminated wasn't quite the word. In spite of their sterility, the military machines still claimed their million masses of men, still drained a third of the products of the world's industry.

One of the C.I.A. men was saying urgently, "So we're going to send you in as a tourist. As inconspicuous a tourist as we can make you. For fifteen years the Russkies have boomed their tourist trade—all for propaganda, of course. Now they're in no position to turn this tourist flood off. If the aliens got wind of it, they'd smell a rat."

Hank Kuran brought his attention back to them. "All right. So you get me to Moscow as a tourist. What do I do then? I keep telling you jokers that I don't know a thing about espionage. I don't know a secret code from judo."

"That's one reason the chief picked you. Not only do the Russkies have nothing on you in their files—neither do our own people. You're safe from betrayal. There are exactly six people who know your mission and only one of them is in Moscow."

"Who's he?"

The C.I.A. man shook his head. "You'll never meet him. But he's making the arrangements for you to contact the underground."

Hank Kuran turned in his seat. "What underground? In Moscow?"

The bright, pink faced C.I.A. man chuckled and began to say something but the older one cut him off. "Let me, Jimmy." He continued to Hank. "Actually, we don't know nearly as much as we should about it, but a Soviet underground is there and getting stronger. You've heard of the *stilyagi* and the *metrofanushka*?"

Hank nodded. "Moscow's equivalent to the juvenile delinquents, or the Teddy Boys, as the British call them."

"Not only in Moscow, they're everywhere in urban Russia. At any rate, our underground friends operate within the *stilyagi*, the so-called jet-set, using them as protective coloring."

"This is new to me," Hank said. "And I don't quite get it."

"It's clever enough. Suppose you're out late some night on an underground job and the police pick you up. They find out you're a juvenile delinquent, figure you've been out getting drunk, and toss you into jail for a week. It's better than winding up in front of a firing squad as a counterrevolutionary, or a Trotskyite, or whatever they're currently calling anybody they shoot."

The chauffeur rapped on the glass that divided their seat from his, and motioned ahead.

"Here's the airport," Jimmy said. "We'll drive right over to the plane. Hid your face with your hat, just for luck."

"Wait a minute, now," Hank said. "Listen, how do I contact these beat generation characters?"

"You don't. They contact you."

"How."

"That's up to them. Maybe they won't at all; they're plenty careful." Jimmy snorted without humor. "It must be getting to be an instinct with Russians by this time. Nihilists, Anarchists, Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, now anti-Communists. Survival of the fittest. By this time the Russian underground must consist of members that have bred true as revolutionists. There've been Russian undergrounds for twenty generations."

"Hardly long enough to affect genetics," the older one said wryly.

Hank said, "Let's stop being witty. I still haven't a clue as to how Sheridan Hennessey expects me to get to these Galactic Confederation people—or things, or whatever you call them."

"They evidently are humanoid," Jimmy said. "Look more or less human. And stop worrying, we've got several hours to explain things while we cross the Atlantic. You don't step into character until you enter the offices of Progressive Tours, in London."

The door of Progressive Tours, Ltd. 100 Rochester Row, was invitingly open. Hank Kuran entered, looked around the small room. He inwardly winced at the appearance of the girl behind the counter. What was it about Commies outside their own countries that they drew such crackpots into their camp? Heavy lenses, horn rimmed to make them more conspicuous, wild hair, mawkish tweeds, and dirty fingernails to top it off.

She said, "What can I do for you, Comrade?"

"Not *Comrade*," Hank said mildly. "I'm an American."

"What did you want?" she said coolly.

Hank indicated the travel folder he was carrying. "I'd like to take this tour to Leningrad and Moscow. I've been reading propaganda for and against Russia as long as I've been able to read and I've finally decided I want to see for myself. Can I get the tour that leaves tomorrow?"

She became businesslike as was within her ability. "There is no country in the world as easy to visit as the Soviet Union, Mr—"

"Stevenson," Hank Kuran said. "Henry Stevenson."

"Stevenson. Fill out these two forms, leave your passport and two photos and we'll have everything ready in the morning. The *Baltika* leaves at twelve. The visa will cost ten shillings. What class do you wish to travel?"

"The cheapest." *And least conspicuous*, Hank added under his breath.

"Third class comes to fifty-five guineas. The tour lasts eighteen days including the time it takes to get to Leningrad. You have ten days in Russia."

"I know, I read the folder. Are there any other Americans on the tour?"

A voice behind him said, "At least one other."

Hank turned. She was somewhere in her late twenties, he estimated. And if her clothes, voice and appearance were any criterion he'd put her in the middle-middle class with a bachelor's degree in something or other, unmarried and with the aggressiveness he didn't like in American girls after living the better part of eight years in Latin countries.

On top of that she was one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen, in a quick, red headed, almost puckish sort of way.

Hank tried to keep from displaying his admiration too openly. "American?" he said.

"That's right." She took in his five-foot ten, his not quite ruffled hair, his worried eyes behind their rimless lenses, darkish tinted for the Peruvian sun. She evidently gave him up as not worth the effort and turned to the fright behind the counter.

"I came to pick up my tickets."

"Oh, yes, Miss...."

"Moore."

The fright fiddled with the papers on an untidy heap before her. "Oh, yes. Miss Charity Moore."

"Charity?" Hank said.

She turned to him. "Do you mind? I have two sisters named Honor and Hope. My people were the Seventh Day Adventists. It wasn't my fault." Her voice was pleasant—but nature had granted that; it wasn't particularly friendly—through her own inclinations.

Hank cleared his throat and went back to his forms. The visa questionnaire was in both Russian and English. The first line wanted, *Surname, first name and patronymic*.

To get the conversation going again, Hank said, "What does patronymic mean?"

Charity Moore looked up from her own business and said, less antagonism in her voice, "That's the name you inherited from your father."

"Of course, thanks." He went back to his forms. Under *what type of work do you do*, Hank wrote, *Capitalist in a small sort of way. Auto Agency owner*.

He took the forms back to the counter with his passport. Charity Moore was putting her tickets, suitcase labels and a sheaf of tour instructions into her pocketbook.

Hank said, "Look, we're going to be on a tour together, what do you say to a drink?"

She considered that, prettily, "Well ... well, of course. Why not?"

Hank said to the fright, "There wouldn't be a nice bar around would there?"

"Down the street three blocks and to your left is Dirty Dick's." She added scornfully, "All the tourists go there."

"Then we shouldn't make an exception," Hank said. "Miss Moore, my arm."

On the way over she said, "Are you excited about going to the Soviet Union?"

"I wouldn't say excited. Curious, though."

"You don't sound very sympathetic to them."

"To Russia?" Hank said. "Why should I be? Personally, I believe in democracy."

"So do I," she said, her voice clipped. "I think we ought to try it some day."

"Come again?"

"So far as I can see, we pay lip service to democracy, that's about all."

Hank grinned inwardly. He'd already figured that during this tour he'd be thrown into contact with characters running in shade from gentle pink to flaming red. His position demanded that he remain inconspicuous, as *average* an American tourist as possible. Flaring political arguments weren't going to help this, but, on the other hand to avoid them entirely would be apt to make him more conspicuous than ever.

"How do you mean?" he said now.

"We have two political parties in our country without an iota of difference between them. Every four years they present candidates and give us a choice. What difference does it make which one of the two we choose if they both stand for the same thing? This is democracy?"

Hank said mildly, "Well, it's better than sticking up just one candidate and saying, which one of this one do you choose? Look, let's steer clear of politics and religion, eh? Otherwise this'll never turn out to be a beautiful friendship."

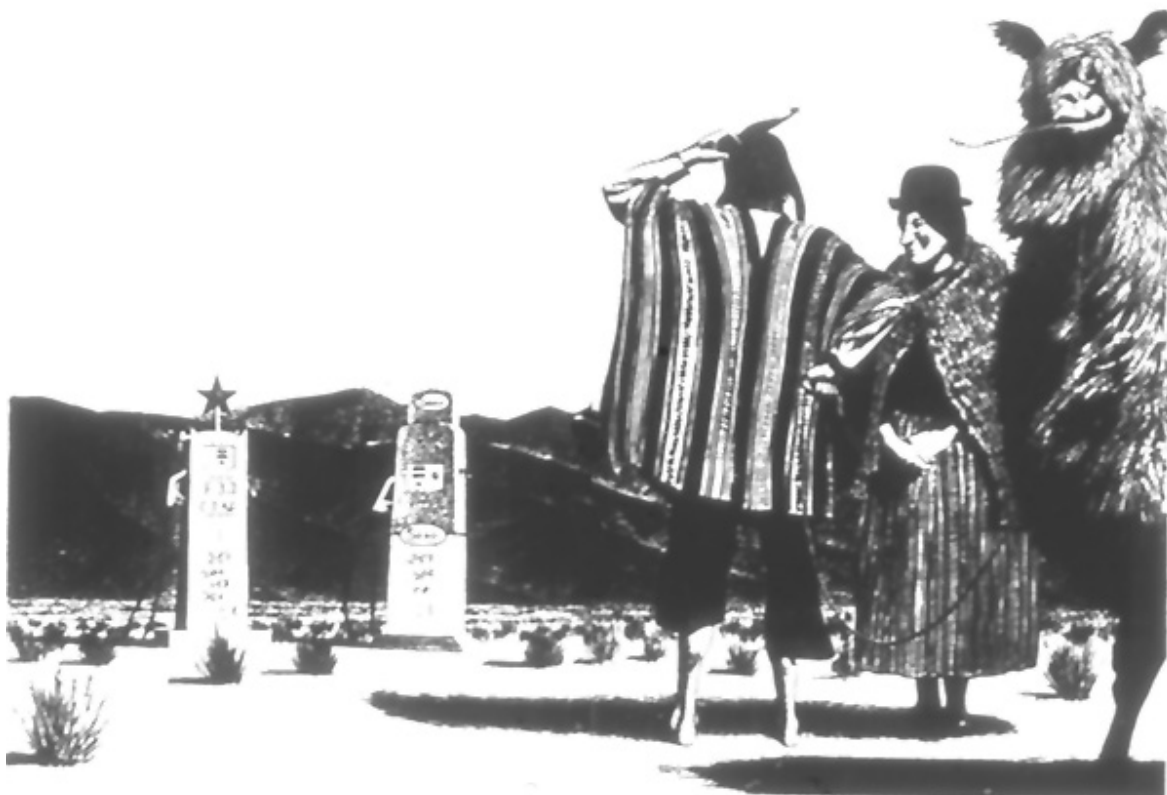
Charity Moore's face portrayed resignation.

Hank said, "I'm Hank, what do they call you besides Charity?"

"Everybody but my parents call me Chair. You spell it C-H-A-R but pronounce it like Chair, like you sit in."

"That's better," Hank said. "Let's see. There it is, Dirty Dick's. Crummy looking joint. You want to go in?"

"Yes," Char said. "I've read about it. An old coaching house. One of the oldest pubs in London. Dickens wrote a poem about it."



The pub's bar extended along the right wall, as they entered. To the left was a sandwich counter with a dozen or so stools. It was too early to eat, they stood at the ancient bar and Hank said to her, "Ale?" and when she nodded, to the bartender, "Two Worthingtons."

While they were being drawn, Hank turned back to the girl, noticing all over again how impossibly pretty she was. It was disconcerting. He said, "How come Russia? You'd look more in place on a beach in Biarritz or the Lido."

Char said, "Ever since I was about ten years of age I've been reading about the Russian people starving to death and having to work six months before making enough money to buy a pair of shoes. So I've decided to see how starving, barefooted people managed to build the largest industrial nation in the world."

"Here we go again," Hank said, taking up his glass. He toasted her silently before saying, "The United States is still the largest single industrial nation in the world."

"Perhaps as late as 1965, but not today," she said definitely.

"Russia, plus the satellites and China has a gross national product greater than the free world's but no single nation produces more than the United States. What are you laughing at?"

"I love the way the West plasters itself so nicely with high flown labels. The *free world*. Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, South Africa—just what is your definition of *free*?"

Hank had her placed now. A college radical. One of the tens of thousands who discover, usually somewhere along in the sophomore year, that all is not perfect in the land of their birth and begin looking around for answers. Ten to one she wasn't a Commie and would probably never become one—but meanwhile she got a certain amount of kicks trying to upset ideological applecarts.

For the sake of staying in character, Hank said mildly, "Look here, are you a Communist?"

She banged her glass down on the bar with enough force that the bartender looked over worriedly. "Did it ever occur to you that even though the Soviet Union might be wrong—if it is wrong—that doesn't mean that the United States is right? You remind me of that ... that *politician*, whatever his name was, when I was a girl. Anybody who disagreed with him was automatically a Communist."

"McCarthy," Hank said. "I'm sorry, so you're not a Communist."

She took up her glass again, still in a huff. "I didn't say I wasn't. That's my business."

The turboelectric ship *Baltika* turned out to be the pride of the U.S.S.R. Baltic State Steamship Company. In fact, she turned out to be the whole fleet. Like the rest of the world, the Soviet complex had taken to the air so far as passenger travel was concerned and already the *Baltika* was a left-over from yesteryear. For some reason the C.I.A. thought there might be less observation on the part of the KGB if Hank approached Moscow indirectly, that is by sea and from Leningrad. It was going to take an extra four or five days, but, if he got through, the squandered time would have been worth it.

An English speaking steward took up Hank's bag at the gangplank and hustled him through to his quarters. His cabin was forward and four flights down into the bowels of the ship. There were four berths in all, two of them already had bags on them. Hank put his hand in his pocket for a shilling.

The steward grinned and said, "No tipping. This is a Soviet ship."

Hank looked after him.

A newcomer entered the cabin, still drying his hands on a towel. "Greetings," he said. "Evidently we're fellow passengers for the duration." He hung the towel on a rack, reached out a hand. "Rodriguez," he said. "You can call me Paco, if you want. Did you ever meet an Argentine that wasn't named Paco?"

Hank shook the hand. "I don't know if I ever met an Argentine before. You speak English well."

"Harvard," Paco said. He stretched widely. "Did you spot those Russian girls in the crew? Blond, every one blond." He grinned. "Not much time to operate with them—but enough."

A voice behind them, heavy with British accent said, "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

He was as ebony as a negro can get and as nattily dressed as only Savile Row can turn out a man. He said, "My name is Loo Motlamelle." He looked at them expressionlessly for a moment.

Paco put out his hand briskly for a shake. "Rodriquez," he said. "Call me Paco. I suppose we're all Moscow bound."

Loo Motlamelle seemed relieved at his acceptance, clasped Paco's hand, then Hank's.

Hank shook his head as the three of them began to unpack to the extent it was desirable for the short trip. "The classless society. I wonder what First Class cabins look like. Here we are, jammed three in a telephone booth sized room."

Paco chuckled, "My friend, you don't know the half of it. There are *five* classes on this ship. Needless to say, this is Tourist B, the last."

"And we'll probably be fed borsht and black bread the whole trip," Hank growled.

Loo Motlamelle said mildly, "I hear the food is very good."

Paco stood up from his luggage, put his hands on his hips, "Gentlemen, do you realize there is no lock on the door of this cabin?"

"The crime rate is said to be negligible in the Soviet countries," Loo said.

Paco put up his hands in despair. "That isn't the point. Suppose one of us wishes to bring a lady friend into the cabin for ... a drink. How can he lock the door so as not to be interrupted?"

Hank was chuckling. "What did you take this trip for, Paco? An investigation into the mores of the Soviets—female flavor?"

Paco went back to his bag. "Actually, I suppose I am one of the many. Going to the new world to see whether or not it is worth switching alliances from the old."

A distant finger of cold traced designs in Henry Kuran's belly. He had never heard the United States referred to as the Old World before. It had a strange, disturbing quality.

Loo, who was now reclined on his bunk, said, "That's approximately the same reason I visit the Soviet Union."

Hank said quietly, "Who's sending you, Paco? Or are you on your own?"

"No, my North American friend. My lips are sealed but I represent a rather influential group. All is not jest, even though I find life the easier if one laughs often and with joy."

Hank closed his bag and slid it under his bunk. "Well, you should have had this influential group pony up a little more money so you could have gone deluxe class."

Paco looked at him strangely. "That is the point. We are not interested in a red-carpet tour during which the very best would be trotted out for propaganda purposes. I choose to see the New World as humbly as is possible."

"And me," Loo said. "We evidently are in much the same position."

Hank brought himself into character. "Well, lesson number one. Did you notice the teeth in that steward's face? Steel. Bright, gleaming steel, instead of gold."

Loo shrugged hugely. "This is the day of science. Iron rusts, it's true, but I assume that the Soviet dentists utilize some method of preventing corrosion."

"Otherwise," Paco murmured reasonably, "I imagine the Russians expectorate a good deal of rusty spittal."

"I don't know why I keep getting into these arguments," Hank said. "I'm just going for a look-see myself. But frankly, I don't trust a Russian any farther than I can throw one."

"How many Russians have you met?" Loo said mildly. "Or are your opinions formed solely by what you have read in American publications?"

Hank frowned at him. "You seem to be a little on the anti-American side."

"I'm not," Loo said. "But not pro-American either. I find much that is ridiculous in the propaganda of both the Soviets and the West."

"Gentlemen," Paco said, "the conversation is fascinating, but I must leave you. The ladies, crowding the decks above, know not that my presence graces this ship. It shall be necessary that I enlighten them. *Adios amigos!*"

The *Baltika* displaced eight thousand four hundred ninety-six tons and had accommodations for three hundred thirty passengers. Of these, Hank Kuran estimated, approximately half were Scandinavians or British being transported between London, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Helsinki on the small liner's way to Leningrad.

Of the tourists, some seventy-five or so, Hank estimated that all but half a dozen were convinced that Russian skunks didn't stink, in spite of the fact that thus far they'd never been there to have a whiff. The few such as Loo Motlamelle, who was evidently the son of some African paramount chief, and Paco Rodriguez, had also never been to Russia but at least had open minds.

Far from black bread and borscht, he found the food excellent. The first morning they found caviar by the pound nestled in bowls of ice, as part of breakfast. He said across the table to Paco, "Propaganda. I wonder how many people in Russia eat caviar."

Paco spooned a heavy dip of it onto his bread and grinned back. "This type of propaganda I can appreciate. You Yankees should try it."

Char was also eating at the other side of the community type table. She said, "How many Americans eat as well as the passengers on United States Lines ships?"

It was as good an opportunity as any for Hank to place his character in the eyes of his fellow Progressive Tours pilgrims. His need was to establish himself as a moderately square tourist on his way to take a look-see at highly publicized Russia. Originally, the C.I.A. men had wanted him to be slightly pro-Soviet, but he hadn't been sure he could handle that convincingly enough. More comfortable would be a role as an averagely anti-Russian tourist—not fanatically so, but averagely. If there

were any KGB men aboard, he wanted to dissolve into mediocrity so far as they were concerned.

Hank said now, mild indignation in his voice. "Do you contend that the average Russian eats as well as the average American?"

Char took a long moment to finish the bite she had in her mouth. She shrugged prettily. "How would I know? I've never been to the Soviet Union." She paused for a moment before adding, "However, I've done a certain amount of traveling and I can truthfully say that the worst slums I have ever seen in any country that can be considered civilized were in the Harlem district and the lower East Side of New York."

All eyes were turned to him now, so Hank said, "It's a big country and there are exceptions. But on the average the United States has the highest standard of living in the world."

Paco said interestedly, "What do you use for a basis of measurement, my friend? Such things as the number of television sets and movie theaters? To balance such statistics, I understand that per capita your country has the fewest number of legitimate theaters of any of—I use Miss Moore's term—the civilized countries."

A Londoner, two down from Hank, laughed nastily. "Maybe schooling is the way he measures. I read in the *Express* the other day that even after Yankees get out of college they can't read proper. All they learn is driving cars and dancing and togetherness—wotever that it."

Hank grinned inwardly and thought, *You don't sound as though you read any too well yourself, my friend*. Aloud he said, "Very well, in a couple of days we'll be in the promised land, I contend that free enterprise performs the greatest good for the greatest number."

"Free enterprise," somebody down the table snorted. "That means the freedom for the capitalists to pry somebody else out of the greatest part of what he produces."

By the time they'd reached Leningrad aside from Paco and Loo, his cabinmates, Hank had built an Iron Curtain all of his own between himself and the other members of the Progressive Tours trip. Which was the way he wanted it. He could foresee a period when having friends might be a handicap when and if he needed to drift away from the main body for any length of time.

Actually, the discussions he ran into were on the juvenile side. Hank Kuran hadn't spent eight years of his life as a field man working against the Soviet countries in the economic sphere without running into every argument both pro and con in the continuing battle between Capitalism and Communism. Now he chuckled to himself at getting into tiffs over the virtues of Russian black bread versus American white, or whether Soviet jets were faster than those of the United States.

With Char Moore, though she tolerated Hank's company, in fact, seemed to prefer it to that of whatever other males were aboard, it was continually a matter of

rubbing fur the wrong way. She was ready to battle it out on any phase of politics, international affairs or West versus East.

But it was the visitors from space that actually dominated the conversation of the ship—crew, tourists, business travelers, or whoever. Information was still limited, and Taas the sole source. Daily there were multilingual radio broadcasts tuned in by the *Baltika* but largely they added little to the actual information on the extraterrestrials. It was mostly Soviet back-patting on the significance of the fact that the Galactic Confederation emissaries had landed in the Soviet complex rather than among the Western countries.

Hank learned little that he hadn't already known. The Kremlin had all but laughingly declined a suggestion on the part of Switzerland that the extraterrestrials be referred to that all but defunct United Nations. The delegates from the Galactic Confederation had chose to land in Moscow. In Moscow they should remain until they desired to go elsewhere. The Soviet implication was that the alien emissaries had no desire, intention nor reason to visit other sections of Earth. They had contacted the dominant world power and could complete their business within the Kremlin walls.

Leningrad came as only a mild surprise to Henry Kuran. With his knowledge of Russian and his position in Morton Twombly's department, he had kept up with the Soviet progress though the years.

As early as the middle 1950s unbiased travelers to the U.S.S.R. had commented in detail upon the explosion of production in the country. By the end of the decade such books as Gunther's "Inside Russia Today" had dwelt upon the ultra-cleanliness of the cities, the mushrooming of apartment houses, the easing of the restrictions of Stalin's day—or at least the beginning of it.

He actually hadn't expected peasant clad, half starved Russians furtively shooting glances at their neighbors for fear of the secret police. Nor a black bread and cabbage diet. Nor long lines of the politically suspect being hauled off to Siberia. But on the other hand he was unprepared for the prosperity he did find.



Not that this was any paradise, worker's or otherwise. But it still came as a mild surprise. Henry Kuran couldn't remember so far back that he hadn't had his daily dose of anti-Russianism. Not unless it was for the brief respite during the Second World War when for a couple of years the Red Army had been composed of heroes and Stalin had overnight become benevolent old Uncle Joe.

There weren't as many cars on the streets as in American cities, but there were more than he had expected nor were they 1955 model Packards. So far as he could see, they were approximately the same cars as were being turned out in Western Europe.

Public transportation, he admitted, was superior to that found in the Western capitals. Obviously, it would have to be, without automobiles, buses, streetcars and subways would have to carry the brunt of traffic. However, it was the spotless efficiency of public transportation that set him back.

The shops were still short of the pinnacles touched by Western capitals. They weren't empty of goods, luxury goods as well as necessities, but they weren't

overflowing with the endless quantities, the hundred-shadings of quality and fashion that you expected in the States.

But what struck nearest to him was the fact that the people in the streets were not broken spirited depressed, humorless drudges. In fact, why not admit it, they looked about the same as people in the streets anywhere else. Some laughed, some looked troubled. Children ran and played. Lovers held hands and looked into each other's eyes. Some reeled under an overload of vodka. Some hurried along, business bent. Some dawdled, window shopped, or strolled along for the air. Some read books or newspapers as they shuffled, radar directed, and unconscious of the world about them.

They were only a day and half in Leningrad. They saw the Hermitage, comparable to the Louvre and far and above any art museum in America. They saw the famous subway—which deserved its fame. They were ushered through a couple of square miles of the Elektrosile electrical equipment works, claimed ostentatiously by the to be the largest in the world. They ate in restaurants as good as any Hank Kuran had been able to afford at home and stayed one night at the Astoria Hotel.

At least, Hank had the satisfaction of grumbling about the plumbing.

Paco and Loo, the only single bachelors on the tour besides himself, were again quartered with him at the Astoria.

Paco said, "My friend, there I agree with you completely. America has the best plumbing in the world. And the most."

Hank was pulling off his shoes after an arch-breaking day of sightseeing. "Well, I'm glad I've finally found some field where it's agreeable that the West is superior to the Russkies."

Loo was stretched out on his bed, in stocking feet, gazing at the ceiling which towered at least fifteen feet above him. He said "In the town where I was born, there were three bathrooms, one in the home of the missionary, one in the home of the commissioner, and one in my father's palace." He looked up at Hank. "Or is my country considered part of the Western World?"

Paco laughed. "Come to think of it, I doubt if one third the rural homes of Argentina have bathrooms. Hank, my friend, I am afraid Loo is right. You use the word *West* too broadly. All the capitalist world is not so advanced as the United States. You have been very lucky, you Yankees."

Hank sank into one of the huge, Victorian era armchairs. "Luck has nothing to do with it. America is rich because private enterprise *works*."

"Of course," Paco pursued humorously, "the fact that your country floats on a sea of oil, has some of the richest forest land in the world, is blessed with some of the greatest mineral deposits anywhere and millions of acres of unbelievably fertile land has nothing to do with it."

"I get your point," Hank said. "The United States was handed the wealth of the world on a platter. But that's only part of it."

"Yes," Loo agreed. "Also to be considered is the fact that for more than a hundred years you have never had a serious war, serious, that is, in that your land was not invaded, your industries destroyed."

"That's to our credit. We're a peace loving people."

Loo laughed abruptly. "You should tell that to the American Indians."

Hank scowled over at him. "What'd you mean by that Loo? That has all the elements of a nasty crack."

"Or tell it to the Mexicans. Isn't that where you got your whole South-west?"

Hank looked from Loo to Paco and back.

Paco brought out cigarettes and tossed one to each of the others. "Aren't these long Russian cigarettes the end? I heard somebody say that by the time the smoke got through all the filter, you'd lost the habit." He looked over at Hank. "Easy my friend, easy. On a trip like this it would be impossible not to continually be comparing East and West, dwelling continually on politics, the pros and cons of both sides. All of us are continually assimilating what we hear and see. Among other things, I note that on the newsstands there are no publications from western lands. Why? Because still, after fifty years, our Communist bureaucracy dare not allow its people to read what they will. I note, too, that the shops on 25th October Avenue are not all directed toward the Russian man on the street, unless he is paid unbelievably more than we have heard. Sable coats? Jewelery? Luxurious furniture? I begin to suspect that our Soviet friends are not quite so classless as Mr. Marx had in mind when he and Mr. Engels worked out the rough framework of the society of the future."

Loo said seriously, "Oh, there are a great many things of that type to notice here in the Soviet Union."

Hank had to grin. "Well, I'm glad you jokers still have open minds."

Paco wagged a finger negatively at him. "We've had open minds all along, my friend. It is yours that seems closed. In spite of the fact that I spent four years in your country I sometimes confess I don't understand you Americans. I think you are too immersed in your TV programs, your movies and your light fiction."

"I can feel myself being saddled up again," Hank complained. "All set for another riding."

Loo laughed softly, his perfect white teeth gleaming in his black face.

Paco said, "You seem to have the fictional *good guys and bad guys* outlook. And, in this world of controversy, you assume that you are the good guys, the heroes, and since that is so then the Soviets must be the bad guys. And, as in the movies, everything the good guys do is fine and everything the bad guys do, is evil. I sometimes think that if the Russians had developed a cure for cancer first you Americans would have refused to use it."

Hank had had enough. He said, "Look, Paco, there are two hundred million Americans. For you, or anyone else, to come along and try to lump that many people neatly together is pure silliness. You'll find every type of person that exists in the

world in any country. The very tops of intelligence, and submorons living in institutions; the most highly educated of scientists, and men who didn't finish grammar school; you'll find saints, and gangsters; infant prodigies and juvenile delinquents; and millions upon millions of just plain ordinary people much like the people of Argentina, or England, or France or whatever. True enough, among all our two hundred million there are some mighty prejudiced people, some mighty backward ones, and some downright foolish ones. But if you think the United States got to the position she's in today through the efforts of a whole people who are foolish, then you're obviously pretty far off the beam yourself."

Paco was looking at him narrowly. "Accepted, friend Hank, and I apologize. That's quite the most effective outburst I've heard from you in this week we've known each other. It occurs to me that perhaps you are other than I first thought."

Oh, oh. Hank backtracked. He said, "Good grief, let's drop it."

Paco said, "Well, just to change the subject, gentlemen, there is one thing above all that I noted here in Leningrad."

"What was that?" Loo said.

"It's the only town I've ever seen where I felt an urge to kiss a cop," Paco said soulfully. "Did you notice? Half the traffic police in town are cute little blondes."

Loo rolled over. "A fascinating observation, but personally I am going to take a nap. Tonight it's the Red Arrow Express to Moscow and rest might be in order, particularly if the train has square wheels, burns wood and stops and repairs bridges all along the way, as I'm sure Hank believes."

Hank reached down, got hold of one of his shoes and heaved it.

"Missed!" Loo grinned.

The Red Arrow Express had round wheels, burned Diesel fuel and made the trip between Leningrad and Moscow overnight. In one respect, it was the most unique train ride Hank Kuran had ever had. The track contained not a single curve from the one city to the other. Its engineers must have laid the roadbed out with a ruler.

The cars like the rest of public transportation, were as comfortable as any Hank knew. Traveling second class, as the Progressive Tours pilgrims did, involved four people in a compartment for the night, with one exception. At the end of the car was a smaller compartment containing two bunks only.

The Intourist guide who had shepherded them around Leningrad took them to the train, saw them all safely aboard, told them another Intourist employee would pick them up at the station in Moscow.

It was late. Hank was assigned the two-bunk compartment. He put his glasses on the tiny window table, sat on the edge of the lower and began to pull off his shoes. He didn't look up when the door opened until a voice said, icebergs dominating the tone, "Just what are you doing in here?"

Hank blinked up at her. "Hello, Char. What?"

Char Moore snapped, "I said, what are you doing in my compartment?"

"Yours? Sorry, the conductor just assigned me here. Evidently there's been some mistake."

"I suggest you rectify it, Mr. Stevenson."

Out in the corridor a voice, heavy with Britishisms, complained plaintively, "Did you ever hear the loik? They put men and women into the same compartment. Oim expected to sleep with a loidy in the bunk under me."

Hank cleared his throat, didn't allow himself the luxury of a smile. He said, "I'll see what I can do, Char. Seems to me I did read somewhere that the Russkies see nothing wrong in putting strangers in the same sleeping compartment."

Char Moore stood there, saying nothing but breathing deeply enough to express American womanhood insulted.

"All right, all right," he said, retying his shoes and retrieving his glasses. "I didn't engineer this." He went looking for the conductor.

He was back, yawning by this time, fifteen minutes later. Char Moore was sitting on the side of the bottom bunk, sipping a glass of tea that she'd bought for a few kopecks from the portress. She looked up coolly as he entered, but her voice was more pleasant. "Get everything fixed?"

Hank said, "What bunk do you want, upper or lower?"

"That's not funny."

"It's not supposed to be." Hank pulled his bag from under the bunk and from it drew pajamas and his dressing gown. "Check with the rest of the tour if you want. The conductor couldn't care less. We were evidently assigned compartments by Intourist and where we were assigned we'll sleep. Either that or you can stand in the corridor all night. I'll be damned if I will."

"You don't have to swear," Char bit out testily. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I just told you what I was going to do." Taking up his things he opened the door. "I'll change in the men's dressing room."

"I'll lock the door," Char Moore snapped.

Hank grinned at her. "I'll bet that if you do the conductor either has a passkey or will break it down for me."

When he returned in slippers, nightrobe and pajamas, Char was in the upper berth, staring angrily at the compartment ceiling. There were no hooks or other facilities for hanging or storing clothes. She must have put all of her things back into her bag. Hank grinned inwardly, carefully folded his own pants and jacket over his suitcase before climbing into the bunk.

"Don't snore, do you?" he said conversationally.

No answer.

"Or walk in your sleep?"

"You're not funny, Mr. Stevenson."

"That's what I like about this country," Hank said. "Progressive. Way ahead of the West. Shucks, modesty is a reactionary capitalistic anachronism. Shove 'em all into bed together, that's what I always say." He laughed.

"Oh, shut up," Char said. But then she laughed, too. "Actually, I suppose there's nothing wrong with it. We are rather Victorian about such things in the States."

Hank groaned. "There you are. If a railroad company at home suggested you spend the night in a compartment with a strange man, you'd sue them. But here in the promised land it's O.K."

After a short silence Char said, "Hank, why do you dislike the Soviet Union so much?"

"Why? Because I'm an American!"

She said so softly as to be almost inaudible, "I've known you for a week now. Somehow you don't really seem to be the type who would make that inadequate a statement."

Hank said "Look, Char. There's a cold war going on between the United States and her allies and the Soviet complex. I'm on our side. It's going to be one or the other."

"No it isn't, Hank. If it ever breaks out into hot war, it's going to be both. That is, unless the extraterrestrials add some new elements to the whole disgusting situation."

"Let's put it another way. Why are you so pro-Soviet?"

She raised herself on one elbow and scowled down over the edge of her bunk at him. Inside, Hank turned over twice to see the unbound red hair, the serious green eyes. Imagine looking at that face over the breakfast table for the rest of your life. The hell with South American senioritas.

Char said earnestly, "I'm not. Confound it, Hank, can't the world get any further than this cowboys and Indians relationship between nations? Our science and industry has finally developed to the point where the world could be a paradise. We've solved all the problems of production. We've conquered all the major diseases. We have the wonders of eternity before us—and look at us."

"Tell that to the Russkies and their pals. They're out for the works."

"Well, haven't we been?"

"The United States isn't trying to take over the world."

"No? Possibly not in the old sense of the word, but aren't we trying desperately to sponsor our type of government and social system everywhere? Frankly, I'm neither pro-West nor pro-Soviet. I think they're both wrong."

"Fine," Hank said. "What is your answer?"

She remained silent for a long time. Finally, "I don't claim to have an answer. But the world is changing like crazy. Science, technology, industrial production, education, population all are mushrooming. For us to claim that sweeping and basic changes aren't taking place in the Western nations is just nonsense. Our own country's

institutions barely resemble the ones we had when you and I were children. And certainly the Soviet Union has changed and is changing from what it was thirty or forty years ago."

"Listen, Char," Hank said in irritation, "you still haven't come up with any sort of an answer to the cold war."

"I told you I hadn't any. All I say is that I'm sick of it. I can't remember so far back that there wasn't a cold war. And the more I consider it the sillier it looks. Currently the United States and her allies spend between a third and a half of their gross national product on the military—ha! the military!—and in fighting the Soviet complex in international trade."

"Well," Hank said, "I'm sick of it, too, and I haven't any answer either, but I'll be darned if I've heard the Russkies propose one. And just between you and me, if I had to choose between living Soviet style and our style, I'd choose ours any day."

Char said nothing.

Hank added flatly, "Who knows, maybe the coming of these Galactic Confederation characters will bring it all to a head."

She said nothing further and in ten minutes the soft sounds of her breathing had deepened to the point that Hank Kuran knew she slept. He lay there another half hour in the full knowledge that probably the most desirable woman he'd ever met was sleeping less than three feet away from him.

Leningrad had cushioned the first impression of Moscow for Henry Kuran. Although, if anything, living standards and civic beauty were even higher here in the capital city of world Communism.

They pulled into the Leningradsky Station on Komsomolskaya Square in the early morning to be met by Intourist guides and buses.

Hank sat next to Char Moore still feeling on the argumentative side after their discussion of the night before. He motioned with his head at some excavation work going on next to the station. "There you are. Women doing manual labor."

Char said, "I'm from the Western states, it doesn't impress me. Have you ever seen fruit pickers, potato diggers, or just about any type of itinerant harvest workers? There is no harder work and women, and children for that matter, do half of it at home."

He looked at the husky, rawboned women laborers working shoulder to shoulder with the men. "I still don't like it."

Char shrugged. "Who does? The sooner we devise machines to do all the drudgery the better off the world will be."

To his surprise, Hank found Moscow one of the most beautiful cities he had ever observed. Certainly the downtown area in the vicinity of the Kremlin compared favorably with any.

The buses whisked them down through Lermontovskaya Square, down Kirov Street to Novaya and then turned right. The Intourist guide made with a running

commentary. There was the famous Bolshoi Theater and there Sverdlova Square, a Soviet cultural center.

Hank didn't know it then but they were avoiding Red Square. They circled it, one block away, and pulled onto Gorky Street and before a Victorian period building.

"The Grand Hotel," the guide announced, "where you will stay during your Moscow visit."

Half a dozen porters began manhandling their bags from the top of the bus. They were ushered into the lobby and assigned rooms. Russian hotel lobbies were a thing apart. No souvenir stands, no bellhops, no signs saying *To the Bar*, *To the Barber Shop* or to anything else. A hotel was a hotel, period.

Hank trailed Loo and Paco and three porters to the second floor and to the room they were assigned in common. Like the Astoria's rooms, in Leningrad, it was king-sized. In fact, it could easily have been divided into three chambers. There were four full sized beds, six arm chairs, two sofas, two vanity tables, a monstrous desk—and one wash bowl which gurgled when you ran water.

Paco, hands on hips, stared around. "A dance hall," he said. "Gentlemen, this room hasn't changed since some Grand Duke stayed in it before the revolution."

Loo, who had assumed his usual prone position on one of the beds, said, "From what I've heard about Moscow housing, you could get an average family in this amount of space."

Hank was stuffing clothes into a dresser drawer. "Now who's making with anti-Soviet comments?"

Paco laughed at him. "Have you ever seen some of the housing in the Harlem district in New York? You can rent a bed in a room that has possibly ten beds, for an eight-hour period. When your eight hours are up you roll out and somebody else rolls in. The beds are kept warm, three shifts every twenty-four hours."

Hank shook his head and muttered, "They call me Dobbin, I've been ridden so much."

Paco laughed and rubbed his hands together happily. "It's still early. We have nothing to do until lunch time. I suggest we sally forth and take a look at Russian womanhood. One never knows."

Loo said, "As an alternative, I suggest we rest until lunch."

Paco snorted. "A rightest-Trotskyite wrecker, and an imperialist war-monger to boot."

Loo said, dead panned, "Smile when you say that stranger."

Hank said, "Hey, wait a minute."

He went down the room to the far window and bug-eyed. One block away, at the end of Gorky Street, was Red Square. St. Basil's Cathedral at the far end, and unbelievable candy-cane construction of fanciful spirals, and every-colored turrets; the red marble mausoleum, Mecca of world Communism, housing the prophet Lenin

and his two disciples; the long drab length of the GUM department store opposite. But it wasn't these.

There on the square, nestled in the corner between St. Basil's and the mausoleum, squatted what Henry Kuran had never really expected to see, in spite of his assignment, in spite of news broadcasts, in spite of everything to the contrary. Boomerang shaped, resting on short stilts, six of them in all, a baby blue in color—an impossibly beautiful baby blue.

The spaceship.

Paco stood at one shoulder, Loo at the other.

For once there was no humor in Paco's words. "There it is," he said. "Our visitors from the stars."

"Possibly our teachers from the stars," Hank said huskily.

"Or our judges." Loo's voice was flat.

They stood there for another five minutes in silence. Loo said finally, "Undoubtedly our Intourist guides will take us nearer, if that's allowed, later during our stay. Meanwhile, my friends, I shall rest up for the occasion."

"Let's take our quick look at the city," Paco said to Hank. "Once the Intourist people take over they'll run our feet off. Frankly, I have little interest in where the first shot of the revolution was fired, the latest tractor factory, or where Rasputin got it in the neck. There are more important things."

"We know," Loo said from the bed. "Women."

"Right!"

Hank was wondering whether or not to leave the room. The *Stilyagi* were to contact him. Where? When? Obviously, he'd need their help. He had no idea whatsoever on how to penetrate to the Interplanetary emissaries.



He spoke Russian. Fine. So what? Could he simply march up to the spacecraft and knock on the door? Or would he make himself dangerously conspicuous by just getting any closer than he now was to the craft?

As he stood now, he felt he was comparatively safe. He was sure the Russkies had marked him down as a rather ordinary American. Heavens knows, he'd worked hard enough at the role. A simple, average tourist, a little on the square side, and not even particularly articulate.

However, he wasn't going to accomplish much by remaining here in this room. He doubted that the *Stilyagi* would get in touch with him either by phone or simply knocking at the door.

"O.K., Paco," he said. "Let's go. In search of the pin-up girl—Moscow style."

They walked down to the lobby and started for the door.

One of the Intourist guides who had brought them from the railroad station stood to one side of the stairs. "Going for a walk, gentlemen? I suggest you stroll up Gorky Street, it's the main shopping center."

Paco said, "How about going over into Red Square to see the spaceship?"

The guide shrugged. "I don't believe the guards will allow you to get too near. It would be undesirable to bother the Galactic delegates to the Soviet Union."

That was one way of wording it, Hank thought glumly. *The Galactic delegates to the Soviet Union*. Not to the Earth, but to the Soviet Union. He wondered what the neutrals in such countries as India were thinking.

But at least there were no restrictions on Paco and him.

They strolled up Gorky Street, jam packed with fellow pedestrians. Shoppers, window-shoppers, men on the prowl for girls, girls on the prowl for men, Ivan and his

wife taking the baby for a stroll, street cleaners at the endless job of keeping Moscow's streets the neatest in the world.

Paco pointed out this to Hank, Hank pointed out that to Paco. Somehow it seemed more than a visit to a western European nation. This was Moscow. This was the head of the Soviet snake.

And then Hank had to laugh inwardly at himself as two youngsters, running along playing tag in a grown-up world of long legs and stolid pace, all but tripped him up. Head of a snake it might be, but Moscow's people looked astonishingly like those of Portland, Maine or Portland, Oregon.

"How do you like those two, coming now?" Paco said.

Those two coming now consisted of two better than averagely dressed girls who would run somewhere in their early twenties. A little too much make-up by western standards, and clumsily applied.

"Blondes," Paco said soulfully.

"They're all blondes here," Hank said.

"Wonderful, isn't it?"

The girls smiled at them in passing and Paco turned to look after, but they didn't stop. Hank and Paco went on.

It didn't take Hank long to get onto Paco's system. It was beautifully simple. He merely smiled widely at every girl that went by. If she smiled back, he stopped and tried to start a conversation with her.

He got quite a few rebuffs but—Hank remembered an old joke—on the other hand he got quite a bit of response.

Before they had completed a block and a half of strolling, they were standing on a corner, trying to talk with two of Moscow's younger set—female variety. Here again, Paco was a wonder. His languages were evidently Spanish, English and French but he was in there pitching with a language the full vocabulary of which consisted of *Da* and *Neit* so far as he was concerned.

Hank stood back a little, smiling, trying to stay in character, but in amused dismay at the other's aggressive abilities.

Paco said, "Listen, I think I can get these two to come up to the room. Which one do you like?"

Hank said, "If they'll come up to the room, then they're professionals."

Paco grinned at him. "I'm a professional, too. A lawyer by trade. It's just a matter of different professions."

A middle-aged pedestrian, passing by, said to the girls in Russian, "Have you no shame before the foreign tourists?"

They didn't bother to answer. Paco went back to his attempt to make a deal with the taller of the two.

The smaller, who sported astonishingly big and blue eyes, said to Hank in Russian, "You're too good to associate with *metrofanushka* girls?"

Hank frowned puzzlement. "I don't speak Russian," he said.

She laughed lightly, almost a giggle, and, in the same low voice her partner was using on Paco, said, "I think you do, Mr. Kuran. In the afternoon, tomorrow, avoid whatever tour the Intourist people wish to take you on and wander about Sovietska Park." She giggled some more. The world-wide epitome of a girl being picked up on the street.

Hank took her in more closely. Possibly twenty-five years of age. The skirt she was wearing was probably Russian, it looked sturdy and durable, but the sweater was one of the new American fabrics. Her shoes were probably western too, the latest flared heel effect. A typical *stilyagi* or *metrofanushka* girl, he assumed. Except for one thing—her eyes were cool and alert, intelligent beyond those of a street pickup.

Paco said, "What do you think, Hank? This one will come back to the hotel with me."

"Romeo, Romeo," Hank sighed, "wherefore do thou think thou art?"

Paco shrugged. "What's the difference? Buenos Aires, New York, Moscow. Women are women."

"And men are evidently men," Hank said. "You do what you want."

"O.K., friend. Do you mind staying out of the room for a time?"

"Don't worry about me, but you'll have to get rid of Loo, and he hasn't had his eighteen hours sleep yet today."

Paco had his girl by the arm. "I'll roll him into the hall. He'll never wake up."

Hank's girl made a moue at him, shrugged as though laughing off the fact that she had been rejected, and disappeared into the crowds. Hank stuck his hands in his pockets and went on with his stroll.

The contact with the underground had been made.

Maintaining his front as an American tourist he wandered into several stores, picked up some amber brooches at a bargain rate, fingered through various books in English in an international bookshop. That was one thing that hit hard. The bookshops were packed. Prices were remarkably low and people were buying. In fact, he'd never seen a country so full of people reading and studying. The park benches were loaded with them, they read as the rode on streetcar and bus, they read as they walked along the street. He had an uneasy feeling that the jet-set kids were a small minority, that the juvenile delinquent problem here wasn't a fraction what it was in the West.

He'd expected to be followed. In fact, that had puzzled him when he first was given this unwanted assignment by Sheridan Hennessey. How was he going to contact this so-called underground if he was watched the way he had been led to believe Westerners were?

But he recalled their conducted tour of the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. The Intourist guide had started off with twenty-five persons and had clucked over them like a hen all afternoon. In spite of her frantic efforts to keep them together,

however, she returned to the Astoria Hotel that evening with eight missing—including Hank and Loo who had wandered off to get a beer.

The idea of the KGB putting tails on the tens of thousands of tourists that swarmed Moscow and Leningrad, became a little on the ridiculous side. Besides, what secret does a tourist know, or what secrets could he discover?

At any rate, Hank found no interference in his wanderings. He deliberately avoided Red Square and its spaceship, taking no chances on bringing himself to attention. Short of that locality, he wandered freely.

At noon they ate at the Grand and the Intourist guide outlined the afternoon program which involved a general sightseeing tour ranging from the University to the Park of Rest and Culture, Moscow's equivalent of Coney Island.

Loo said, "That all sounds very tiring, do we have time for a nap before leaving?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Motlamelle," the guide told him.

Paco shook his head. "I've seen a university, and I've seen a sport stadium and I've seen statues and monuments. I'll sit this one out."

"I think I'll lie this one out," Loo said. He complained plaintively to Hank. "You know what happened to me this morning, just as I was napping up in our room?"

"Yes," Hank said, "I was with our Argentine Casanova when he picked her up."

Hank took the conducted tour with the rest. If he was going to beg off the next day, he'd be less conspicuous tagging along on this one. Besides it gave him the lay of the land.

And he took the morning trip the next day, the automobile factories on the outskirts of town. It had been possibly fifteen years since Hank had been through Detroit but he doubted greatly that automation had developed as far in his own country as it seemed to have here. Or, perhaps, this was merely a showplace. But he drew himself up at that thought. That was one attitude the Western world couldn't afford—deprecating Soviet progress. This was the very thing that had led to such shocks as the launching of the early Sputniks. Underestimate your adversary and sooner or later you paid for it.

The Soviets had at long last built up a productive machine as great as any. Possibly greater. In sheer tonnage they were turning out more gross national product than the West. This was no time to be underestimating them.

All this was a double interest to a field man in Morton Twombly's department, working against the Soviets in international trade. He was beginning to understand at least one of the reasons why the Commies could sell their products at such ridiculously low prices. Automation beyond that of the West. In the Soviet complex the labor unions were in no position to block the introduction of ultra-efficient methods, and featherbedding was unheard of. If a Russian worker's job was *automated* out from under him, he shifted to a new plant, a new job, and possibly

even learned a new trade. The American worker's union, to the contrary, did its best to save the job.

Hank Kuran remembered reading, a few months earlier, of a British textile company which had attempted to introduce a whole line of new automation equipment. The unions had struck, and the company had to give up the project. What happened to the machinery? It was sold to China!

Following the orders of his underground contact, he begged out of the afternoon tour, as did half a dozen of the others. Sightseeing was as hard on the feet in Moscow as anywhere else.

After lunch he looked up Sovietska Park on his tourist map of the city. It was handy enough. A few blocks up Gorky Street.

It turned out to be typical. Well done so far as fountains, monuments and gardens were concerned. Well equipped with park benches. In the early afternoon it was by no means empty, but, on the other hand not nearly so filled as he'd noticed the parks to be the evening before.

Hank stopped at one of the numerous cold drink stands where for a few kopecks you could get raspberry syrup fizzed up with soda water. While he sipped it, a teen-ager came up beside him and said in passable English, "Excuse me, are you a tourist? Do you speak English?"

This had happened before. Another kid practicing his school language.

"That's right," Hank said.

The boy said, "You aren't a ham, are you?" He brought some cards from an inner pocket. "I'm UA3-KAR."

For a moment Hank looked at him blankly, and then he recognized the amateur radio call cards the other was displaying. "Oh, a *ham*. Well, no, but I have a cousin who is."

Two more youngsters came up. "What's his call?"

Hank didn't remember that. They all adjourned to a park bench and little though he knew about the subject, international amateur radio was discussed in detail. In fifteen minutes he was hemmed in by a dozen or so and had about decided he'd better make his excuses and circulate around making himself available to the *stilyagi* outfit. He was searching for an excuse to shake them when the one sitting next to him reverted to Russian.

"We're clear now, Henry Kuran."

Hank said, "I'll be damned. I hadn't any idea—"

The other brushed aside trivialities. Looking at him more closely, Hank could see he was older than first estimate. Possibly twenty-two or so. Darker than most of the others, heavy-set, sharp and impatient.

"You can call me Georgi," he said. "These others will prevent outsiders from bothering us. Now then, we've been told you Americans want some assistance. What? And why should we give it to you?"

Hank said, worriedly, "Haven't you some place we could go? Where I could meet one of your higher-ups? This is important."

"Otherwise, I wouldn't be here," Georgi said impatiently. "For that matter there is no higher-up. We don't have ranks; we're a working democracy. And I'm afraid the day of the secret room in some cellar is past. With housing what it is, if there was an empty cellar in Moscow a family would move in. And remember, all buildings are State owned and operated. I'm afraid you'll have to tell your story here. Now, what is it you want?"

"I want an opportunity to meet the Galactic Confederation emissaries."

"Why?"

"To give them our side, the Western side, of the ... well, the controversy between us and the Soviet complex. We want an opportunity to have our say before they make any permanent treaties."

Georgi considered that. "We thought it was probably something similar," he muttered. "What do you think it will accomplish?"

"At least a delaying action. If the extraterrestrials throw their weight, their scientific progress, into the balance on the side of the Soviet complex, the West will have lost the cold war. Every neutral in the world will jump on the bandwagon. International trade, sources of raw materials, will be a thing of the past. Without a shot being fired, we'd become second-rate powers overnight."

Georgi said nothing for a long moment. A new youngster had drifted up to the group but one of those on the outskirts growled something at him and he went off again. Evidently, Hank decided, all of this dozen-odd cluster of youngsters were connected with the jet-set underground.

"All right, you want us to help you in the conflict between the Soviet government and the West," Georgi said. "Why should we?"

Hank frowned at him. "You're the anti-government movement. You're revolutionists and want to overthrow the Soviet government."

The other said impatiently, "Don't read something into our organization that isn't here. We don't exist for your benefit, but our own."

"But you wish to overthrow the Soviets and establish a democratic—"

Georgi was wagging an impatient hand. "That word democratic has been so misused this past half century that it's become all but meaningless. Look here, we wish to overthrow the present Soviet government, but that doesn't mean we expect to establish one modeled to yours. We're Russians. Our problems are Russian ones. Most of them you aren't familiar with—any more than we're familiar with your American ones."

"However, you want to destroy the Soviets," Hank pursued.

"Yes," Georgi growled, "but that doesn't necessarily mean that we wish *you* to win this cold war, as the term goes. That is, just because we're opposed to the Soviet government doesn't mean we like yours. But you make a point. If the Galactic

Confederation gives all-out support to the Soviet bureaucracy it might strengthen it to the point where they could remain in office indefinitely."

Hank pressed the advantage. "Right. You'd never overthrow them then."

"On the other hand," Georgi muttered uncomfortably, "we're not interested in giving you Americans an opportunity that would enable you to collapse the whole fabric of this country and its allies."

"Look here," Hank said. "In the States we seem to know surprisingly little about your movement. Just what *do* you expect to accomplish?"

"To make it brief, we wish to enjoy the product of the sacrifices of the past fifty years. If you recall your Marx"—he twisted his face here in wry amusement—"the idea was that the State was to wither away once Socialism was established. Instead of withering away, it has become increasingly strong. This was explained by the early Bolsheviks in a fairly reasonable manner. Socialism presupposes a highly industrialized economy. It's not possible in a primitive nor even a feudalistic society. So our Communist bureaucracy remained in the saddle through a period of transition. The task was to industrialize the Soviet countries in a matter of decades where it had taken the Capitalist nations a century or two."

Georgi shrugged. "I've never heard of a governing class giving up its once acquired power of its own accord, no matter how incompetent they might be."

Hank said, "I wouldn't call the Soviet government incompetent."

"Then you'd be wrong," the other said. "Progress had been made but often in spite of the bureaucracy, not because of it. In the early days it wasn't so obvious, but as we develop the rule of the political bureaucrat becomes increasingly a hindrance. Politicians can't operate industries and they can't supervise laboratories. To the extent our scientist and technicians are interfered with by politicians, to that extent we are held up in our progress. Surely you've heard of the Lysenko matter?"

"He was the one who evolved the anti-Mendelian theory of genetics, fifteen or twenty years ago."

"Correct," Georgi snorted. "Acquired characteristics could be handed down by heredity. It took the Academy of Agricultural Science at least a decade to dispose of him. Why? Because his theories fitted into Stalin's political beliefs." The underground spokesman snorted again.

Hank had the feeling they were drifting from the subject. "Then you want to overthrow the Communist bureaucracy?"

"Yes, but that is only part of the story. Overthrowing it without something to replace the bureaucracy is a negative approach. We have no interest in a return to Czarist Russia, even if that were possible, and it isn't. We want to profit by what has happened in these years of ultra-sacrifice, not to destroy everything. The day of rule by politicians is antiquated, we look forward to the future." He seemed to switch subjects. "Do you remember Djilas' book which he wrote in one of Tito's prisons, 'The New Class'?"

"Vaguely. I read the reviews. It was a best seller in the States some time ago."

Georgi made with his characteristic snort. "It was a best seller here—in underground circles. At any rate, that explains much. Our bureaucracy, no matter what its ideals might have been to begin with, has developed into a new class of its own. Russia sacrifices to surpass the West—but our bureaucrats don't. In Lenin's day the commissar was paid the same as the average worker, but today we have bureaucrats as wealthy as Western millionaires."

Hank said, "Of course, these are your problems. I don't pretend to have too clear a picture of them. However, it seems to me we have a mutual enemy. Right at this moment it appears that they are to receive some support that will strengthen them. I suggest you co-operate with me in hopes they'll be thwarted."

For the first time a near smile appeared on the young Russian's face. "A ludicrous situation. We have here a Russian revolutionary organization devoted to the *withering away* the Russian Communist State. To gain its ends, it co-operates with a Capitalist country's agent." His grin broadened. "I suspect that neither Nicolai Lenin nor Karl Marx ever pictured such contingencies."

Hank said, "I wouldn't know I'm not up on my Marxism. I'm afraid that when I went to school academic circles weren't inclined in that direction." He returned the Russian's wry smile.

Which only set the other off again. "Academic circles!" he snorted. "Sterile in both our countries. All professors of economics in the Soviet countries are Marxists. On the other hand, no American professor would admit to this. Coincidence? Suppose an American teacher was a convinced Marxist. Would he openly and honestly teach his beliefs? Suppose a Russian wasn't? Would he?" Georgi slapped his knee with a heavy hand and stood up. "I'll speak to various others. We'll let you know."

Hank said, "Wait. How long is this going to take? And *can* you help me if you want to? Where are these extraterrestrials?"

Georgi looked down at him. "They're in the Kremlin. How closely guarded we don't know, but we can find out."

"The Kremlin," Hank said. "I was hoping they stayed in their own ship."

"Rumor has it that they're quartered in the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets*, the Great Kremlin Palace. We'll contact you later—perhaps." He stuck his hands in his pockets and strode away, in all appearance just one more pedestrian without anywhere in particular to go.

One of the younger boys, the ham who had first approached Hank, smiled and said, "Perhaps we can talk a bit more of radio?"

"Yeah," Hank muttered, "Swell."

The next development came sooner than Henry Kuran had expected. In fact, before the others returned from their afternoon tour of the city. Hank was sprawled in one of the king-sized easy-chairs, turning what little he had to work on over in his mind. The principal decisions to make were, first, how long to wait on the assistance

of the *stilyagi*, and, if that wasn't forthcoming, what steps to take on his own. The second prospect stumped him. He hadn't the vaguest idea what he could accomplish singly.

He wasn't even sure where the space aliens were. *The Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets*, Georgi had said. But was that correct, and, if so, where was the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets* and how did you get into it? For that matter, how did you get inside the Kremlin walls?

Under his breath he cursed Sheridan Hennessey. Why had he allowed himself to be dragooned into this? By all criteria it was the desperate clutching of a drowning man for a straw. He had no way to know, for instance, if he did reach the space emissaries, that he could even communicate with them.

He caught himself wishing he was back in Peru arguing with hesitant South Americans over the relative values of American and Soviet complex commodities—and then he laughed at himself.

There was a knock at the door.

Hank came wearily to his feet, crossed and opened it.

She still wore too much make-up, the American sweater and the flared heel shoes. And her eyes were still cool and alert. She slid past him, let her eyes go around the room quickly. "You are alone?" she said in Russian, but it was more a statement than question.

Hank closed the door behind them. He scowled at her, put a finger to his lips and then went through an involved pantomime to indicate looking for a microphone. He raised his eyebrows at her.

She laughed and shook her head. "No microphones."

"How do you know?"

"We know. We have contacts here in the hotel. If the KGB had to put microphones in the rooms of every tourist in Moscow, they'd have to increase their number by ten times. In spite of your western ideas to the contrary, it just isn't done. There are exceptions, of course, but there has to be some reason for it."

"Perhaps I'm an exception." Hank didn't like this at all. The C.I.A. men had been of the opinion that the KGB was once again thoroughly checking on every foreigner.

"If the KGB is already onto you, Henry Kuran, then you might as well give up. Your mission is already a failure."

"I suppose so. Will you have a chair? Can I offer you a drink? My roommate has a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka which he brought from the boat."

There was an amused light in her eyes even as she shook her head. "Your friend Paco is quite a man—so I understand. But no, I am here for business." She took one of the armchairs and Hank sank into another opposite her.



"The committee has decided to assist you to the point they can."

"Fine." Hank leaned forward.

"Tomorrow your Progressive Tours group is to have a conducted tour of the Kremlin museum, Ivan the Great's Tower, and the Assumption Cathedral."

"In the *Kremlin*?"

She was impatient. "The Kremlin is considerably larger than most Westerners seem to realize. Originally it was the whole city. The Kremlin walls are more than two kilometers long. In them are a great deal more than just government offices. Among other things, the Kremlin has one of the greatest museums and probably the largest in the world."

"What I meant was, with the space emissaries there, will tours still be held?"

"They *are* being held. It would be too conspicuous to stop them even if there was any reason to." She frowned and shook her head. "Just because you will be inside the Kremlin walls doesn't mean that you will be sitting in the lap of the extraterrestrials. They are probably well guarded in the palace. We don't know to what extent."

Hank said, "Then how can you help me?"

"Only in a limited way." She pulled a folder paper from her purse. "Here is a map of the Kremlin, and here one of the Palace. Both of these date from Czarist days but such things as the general layout of the Kremlin and the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets* do not change of course."

"Do you know where the extraterrestrials are?"

"We're not sure. The palace was built in the Seventeenth Century and was popular with various czars. It has been a museum for some time. We suspect that the Galactic Confederation delegates are housed in the *Sobstvennaya Plovina* which used to be the private apartments of Nicolas the First. It is quite definite that the conferences are being held in the *Gheorghievskaya sala*; it's the largest and most impressive room in the Kremlin."

Hank stared at the two maps feeling a degree of dismay.

She said impatiently, "We can help you more than this. One of the regular guide-guards at the facade which leads to the main entrance of the palace is a member of our group. Here are your instructions."

They spent another fifteen minutes going over the details, then she shot a quick glance at her watch and came to her feet. "Is everything clear ... comrade?"

Hank frowned slightly at the use of the word, then understood. "I think so, and thanks ... comrade." He, as well as she, meant the term in its original sense.

He followed her to the door but before his hand touched the knob, it opened inwardly. Paco stood there, and behind him in the corridor was Char Moore.

The girl turned to Hank quickly, reached up and kissed him on the mouth and said, in English, "Good-bye, dollink." She winked at Paco, swept past Char and was gone.

Paco looked after her appreciatively, back at Hank and said, "Ah, ha. You are quite a dog after all, eh?"

Char Moore's face was blank. She mumbled something to the effect of, "See you later," directed seemingly to both of them, and went on to her room.

Hank said, "Damn!"

Paco closed the door behind him. "What's the matter, my friend?" he grinned. "Are you attempting to play two games at once?"

The morning tour was devoted to Red Square and the Kremlin. Immediately after breakfast they formed a column with two or three other tourist parties and were marched briskly to where Gorky Street debouched into Red Square. First destination was the mausoleum, backed against the Kremlin wall, which centered that square and served as a combined Vatican, Lhasa and Mecca of the Soviet complex. Built of dark red porphyry, it was the nearest thing to a really ultramodern building Hank had seen in Moscow.

As foreign tourists they were taken to the head of the line which already stretched around the Kremlin back into Mokhovaya Street along the western wall. A line of thousands.

Once the doors opened the line moved quickly. They filed in, two by two, down some steps, along a corridor which was suddenly cool as though refrigerated. Paco, standing next to Hank, said from the side of his mouth, "Now we know the secret of the embalming. I wonder if they're hanging on meathooks."

The line emerged suddenly into a room in the center of which were three glass chambers. The three bodies, the prophet and his two leading disciples flanking him. Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev. On their faces, Hank decided, you could read much of their character. Lenin, the idealist and scholar. Stalin, utterly ruthless organization man. Khrushchev, energetic manager of what the first two had built.

They were in the burial room no more than two minutes, filed out by an opposite door. In the light of the square again, Paco grinned at him. "Nick and Joe didn't look so good, but Nikita is standing up pretty well."

Trailing back and forth across Red Square had its ludicrous elements. The guide pointed out this and that. But all the time his charges had their eyes glued to the spaceship, settled there at the far end of the square near St. Basil's. In a way it seemed no more alien than so much else here. Certainly no more alien to the world Hank knew than the fantastic St. Basil's Cathedral.

A spaceship from the stars, though. You still had to shake your head in effort to achieve clarity; to realize the significance of it. A spaceship with emissaries from a Galactic Confederation.

How simple if it had only landed in Washington, London or even Paris or Rome, instead of here.

They avoided getting very near it, although the Russians weren't being ostentatious about their guarding. There was a roped off area about the craft and twenty or so guards, not overly armed, drifting about within the enclosure. But the local citizenry was evidently well disciplined. There were no huge crowds hanging on the ropes waiting for a glimpse of the interplanetary celebrities.

Nevertheless, the Intourist guide went out of his way to avoid bringing his charges too near. They retraced their steps back to Manezhnaya Square from which they had originally started to see the mausoleum, and then turned left through Alexandrovski Sad, the Alexander Park which ran along the west side of the Kremlin to the Borovikski Gate, on the Moskva River side of the fortress.

Paco said, "After this tour I'm in favor of us all signing a petition that our guide be awarded a medal, *Hero of Intourist*. You realize that thus far he has lost only two of us today?"

Some of the others didn't like his levity. They were about to enter the Communist shrine and wisecracking was hardly in order. Paco Rodriguez couldn't have cared less, being Paco Rodriguez.

The *stilyagi* girl had been correct about the Kremlin being an overgrown museum. Government buildings it evidently contained, but above all it provided gold topped cathedrals, fabulous palaces converted to art galleries and displays of the jeweled wealth of yesteryear and the tombs of a dozen czars including that of Ivan the Terrible.

They trailed into the Orushezhnaya Palace, through the ornate entrance hall displaying its early arms and banners.

Paco encouraged the harassed guard happily. "You're doing fine. You've had us out for more than two hours. We started with twenty-five in this group and still have twenty-one. Par for the course. What happens to a tourist who wanders absently around in the Kremlin and turns up in the head man's office?"

The guide smiled wanly. "And over here we have the thrones of the Empress Elizabeth and Czar Paul."

Unobtrusively, Hank dropped toward the tail of the group. He spent a long time peering at two silver panthers, gifts of the first Queen Elizabeth of England to Boris Godunov. The Progressive Tours assembly passed on into the next room.

A guard standing next to the case said, "Mr. Kuran?"

Without looking up, Hank nodded.

"Follow me, slowly."

No one from the Progressive Tours group was in sight. Hank wandered after the guard, looking into display cases as he went. Finally the other turned a corner into an empty and comparatively narrow corridor. He stopped and waited for the American.

"You're Kuran?" he asked anxiously in Russian.

"That's right."

"You're not afraid?"

"No. Let's go." Inwardly Hank growled, *Of course I'm afraid. Do I look like a confounded hero?* What was it Sheridan Hennessey had said? This was combat, combat cold-war style, but still combat. Of course he was afraid. Had there ever in the history of combat been a participant who had gone into it unafraid?

They walked briskly along the corridor. The guard said, "You have studied your maps?"

"Yes."

"I can take you only so far without exposing myself. Then you are on your own. You must know your maps or you are lost. These old palaces ramble—"

"I know," Hank said impatiently. "Brief me as we go along. Just for luck."

"Very well. We leave Orushezhnaya Palace by this minor doorway. Across there, to our right, is the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets*, the Great Kremlin Palace. It's there the Central Executive Committee meets, and the Assembly. The same hall used to be the czar's throne room in the old days. On the nearer side, on the ground floor, are the *Sobstvennaya Plovina*, the former private apartments of Nicholas First. The extraterrestrials are there."

"You're sure? The others weren't sure."

"That's where they are."

"How can we get to them?"

"*We* can't. Possibly *you* can. I can take you only so far. The front entrance is strongly guarded, we are going to have to enter the Great Palace from the rear, through the Teremni Palace. You remember your maps?"

"I think so."

They strode rapidly from the museum through a major courtyard. Hank to the right and a step behind the uniformed guard.

The other was saying, "The Teremni preceded the Great Palace. One of its walls was used to become the rear of the later structure. We can enter it fairly freely."

They entered through another smaller doorway a hundred feet or more from the main entrance, climbed a short marble stairway and turned right down an ornate corridor, tapestry hung. They passed occasionally other uniformed guards, none of whom paid them any attention.

They passed through three joined rooms, each heavily furnished in Seventeenth Century style, each thick with icons. The guide brought them up abruptly at a small door.

He said, an air almost of defiance in his tone, "I go no further. Through this door and you are in the Great Palace, in the bathroom of the apartments of Catherine Second. You remember your maps?"

"Yes," Hank said.

"I hope so." The guard hesitated. "You are armed?"

"No. We were afraid that my things might be thoroughly searched. Had a gun been found on me, my mission would have been over then and there."

The guard produced a heavy military revolver, offered it butt foremost.

But Hank shook his head. "Thanks. But if it comes to the point where I'd need a gun—I've already failed. I'm here to talk, not to shoot."

The guard nodded. "Perhaps you're right. Now, I repeat. On the other side of this door is the bathroom of the Czarina's apartments. Beyond it is her *paradnaya divannaya*, her dressing room and beyond that the *Ekaterininskaya sala*, the throne room of Catherine Second. It is probable that there will be nobody in any of these rooms. Beyond that, I do not know."

He ended abruptly with "Good luck," turned and scurried away.

"Thanks," Hank Kuran said after him. He turned and tried the door-knob. Inwardly he thought, *All right Henry Kuran. Hennessey said you had a reputation for being able to think on your feet. Start thinking. Thus far all you've been called on to do is exchange low-level banter with a bevy of pro-commie critics of the United States. Now the chips are down.*

The apartments of the long dead czarina were empty. He pushed through them and into the corridor beyond.

And came to a quick halt.

Halfway down the hall, Loo Motlamelle crouched over a uniformed, crumpled body. He looked up at Hank Kuran's approach, startled, a fighting man at bay. His lips thinned back over his teeth. A black thumb did something to the weapon he held in his hand.

Hank said throatily, "Is he dead?"

Loo shook his head, his eyes coldly wary. "No. I slugged him."

Hank said, "What are you doing here?"

Loo came erect. "It occurs to me that I'm evidently doing the same thing you are."

But the dull metal gun in his hand was negligently at the ready and his eyes were cold, cold. It came to Hank that banjos on the levee were very far away.

This lithe fighting man said tightly, "You know where we are? Exactly where we are? I'm not sure."

Hank said, "In the hall outside the *Sobstvennaya Plovina* of the *Bolshoi Kremlevski Dvorets*. The czar's private apartments. And how did you get here?"

"The hard way," Loo said softly. His eyes darted up and down the corridor. "I can't figure out why there aren't more guards. I don't like this. You're armed?"

"No," Hank said.

Loo grinned down at his own weapon. "One of us is probably making a mistake but we both seem to have gotten this far. By the way, I'm Inter-Commonwealth Security. You're C.I.A., aren't you? Talk fast, Hank, we're either a team from now on, or I've got to do something about you."

"Special mission for the President," Hank said. "Why didn't we spot each other sooner?"

Loo grinned again in deprecation. "Evidently because we're both good operatives. If I've got this right, the extraterrestrials are somewhere in here."

Hank started down the corridor. There was no time to go into the whys and wherefores of Loo's mission. It must be approximately the same as his own. "There are some private apartments in this direction," he said over his shoulder. "They must be quartered—"

A door off the corridor opened and a tall, thin, ludicrously garbed man—

Hank pulled himself up quickly, both mentally and physically. It was no man. It was almost a man—but no.

Loo's weapon was already at the alert.

The newcomer unhurriedly looked from one of them to the other. Then down at the Russian guard sprawled on the floor behind them.

He said in Russian, "Always violence. The sadness of violence. When faced with crisis, threaten violence if outpointed. Your race has much to learn." He switched to English. "But this is probably your language, isn't it?"

Loo gaped at him. The man from space was almost as dark complected as the Negro.

The extraterrestrial stepped to one side and indicated the room behind him "Please enter, I assume you've come looking for us."

They entered the ornate bedroom.

The extraterrestrial said, "Is the man dead?"

Loo said, "No. Merely stunned."

"He needs no assistance?"

"Nothing could help him for half an hour or more. Then he'll probably have a severe headache."

The extraterrestrial had even the ability to achieve a dry quality in his voice. "I am surprised at your forbearance." He took a chair before a baroque desk. "Undoubtedly you have gone through a great deal to penetrate to this point. I am a member of the interplanetary delegation. What is it that you want?"

Hank looked at Loo, received a slight nod, and went into his speech. The space alien made no attempt to interrupt.

When Hank had finished, the extraterrestrial turned his eyes to Loo. "And you?"

Loo said, "I represent the British Commonwealth rather than the United States, but my purpose in contacting you was identical. Her Majesty's government is anxious to consult with you before you make any binding agreements with the Soviet complex."

The alien turned his eyes from one to the other. His face, Hank decided, had a Lincolnesque quality, so ugly as to be beautiful in its infinite sadness.

"You must think us incredibly naive," he said.

Hank scowled. He had adjusted quickly to the space ambassador's *otherness*, both of dress and physical qualities, but there was an irritating something—He put his finger on it. He felt as he had, some decades ago, when brought before his grammar school principal for an infraction of school discipline.

Hank said, "We haven't had too much time to think. We've been desperate."

The alien said, "You have gone to considerable trouble. I can even admire your resolution. You will be interested to know that tomorrow we take ship to Peiping."

"Peiping?" Loo said blankly.

"Following two weeks there we proceed to Washington and following that to London. What led your governments to believe that the Soviet nations were to receive all our attention, and your own none at all?"

Hank blurted, "But you landed *here*. You made no contact with us."

"The size of our expedition is limited. We could hardly do everything at once. The Soviet complex, as you call it, is the largest government and the most advanced on Earth. Obviously, this was our first stop." His eyes went to Hank's. "You're an American. Do you know why you have fallen behind in the march of progress?"

"I'm not sure we have," Hank said flatly. "Do you mean in comparison with the Soviet complex?"

"Exactly. And if you don't realize it, then you've blinded yourself. You've fallen behind in a score of fields because a decade or so ago, in your years between 1957 and 1960, you made a disastrous decision. In alarm at Russian progress, you adopted a campaign of combating Russian science. You began educating your young people to combat Russian progress."

"We had to!"

The alien grunted. "To the contrary, what you should have done was try to excel Russian science, technology and industry. Had you done that you might have continued to be the world's leading nation, until, at least, some sort of world unity had been achieved. By deciding to *combat* Russian progress you became a retarding force, a deliberate drag on the development of your species, seeking to cripple and restrain rather than to grow and develop. The way to win a race is not to trip up your opponent, but to run faster and harder than he."

Hank stared at him.

The space alien came to his feet. "I am busy. Your missions, I assume, have been successfully completed. You have seen one of our group. Melodramatically, you have warned us against your enemy. Your superiors should be gratified. And now I shall summon a guide to return you to your hotels."

A great deal went out of Hank Kuran. Until now the tenseness had been greater than he had ever remembered in life. Now he was limp. In response, he nodded.

Loo sighed, returned the weapon which he had until now held in his hand to a shoulder holster. "Yes," he said, meaninglessly. He turned and looked at Hank Kuran wryly. "I have spent the better part of my life learning to be an ultra-efficient security operative. I suspect that my job has just become obsolete."

"I have an idea that perhaps mine is too," Hank said.

In the morning, the Progressive Tours group was scheduled to visit a co-operative farm, specializing in poultry, on the outskirts of Moscow. While the bus was loading Hank stopped off at the Grand Hotel's Intourist desk.

"Can I send a cable to the United States?"

The chipper Intourist girl said "But of course." She handed him a form.

He wrote quickly:

SHERIDAN HENNESSEY

WASHINGTON, D. C.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

MORE SATISFACTORILY
THAN EXPECTED.

HENRY KURAN

The girl checked it quickly. "But your name is Henry Stevenson."

"That," Hank said, "was back when I was a cloak and dagger man."

She blinked and looked after him as he walked out and climbed aboard the tourist bus. He found an empty seat next to Char Moore and settled into it.

Char said evenly, "Ah, today you have time from your amorous pursuits to join the rest of us."

He raised an eyebrow at her. Jealousy? His chances were evidently better than he had ever suspected. "I meant to tell you about that," he said, "the first time we're by ourselves."

"Hm-m-m," she said. Then, "We've been in Russia for several days now. What do you think of it?"

Hank said, "I think it's pretty good. And I have a sneaking suspicion that in another ten years, when a few changes will have evolved, she'll be better still."

She looked at him blankly. "You *do*? Frankly, I've been somewhat disappointed."

"Sure. But wait'll you see *our* country in ten years. You know, Char, this world of ours has just got started."