

Triplanetary

Written by
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TRIPPLANETARY

Novels Of Science Fiction

By

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Edward Elmer Smith

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BOOK ONE

DAWN

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I. ARISIA AND EDDORE

Two thousand million or so years ago two galaxies were colliding; or, rather, were passing through each other. A couple of hundreds of millions of years either way do not matter, since at least that much time was required for the inter-passage. At about that same time—within the same plus-or-minus ten percent margin of error, it is believed—practically all of the suns of both those galaxies became possessed of planets.

There is much evidence to support the belief that it was not merely a coincidence that so many planets came into being at about the same time as the galactic inter-passage. Another school of thought holds that it was pure coincidence; that all suns have planets as naturally and as inevitably as cats have kittens.

Be that as it may, Arisian records are clear upon the point that before the two galaxies began to coalesce, there were never more than three solar systems present in either; and usually only one. Thus, when the sun of the planet upon which their race originated grew old and cool, the Arisians were hard put to it to preserve their culture, since they had to work against time in solving the engineering problems associated with moving a planet from an older to a younger sun.

Since nothing material was destroyed when the Eddorians were forced into the next plane of existence, their historical records also have become available. Those records—folios and tapes and playable discs of platinum alloy, resistant indefinitely even to Eddore's noxious atmosphere—agree with those of the Arisians upon this point. Immediately before the Coalescence began there was one, and only one, planetary solar system in the Second

Galaxy; and, until the advent of Eddore, the Second Galaxy was entirely devoid of intelligent life.

Thus for millions upon untold millions of years the two races, each the sole intelligent life of a galaxy, perhaps of an entire space-time continuum, remained completely in ignorance of each other. Both were already ancient at the time of the Coalescence. The only other respect in which the two were similar, however, was in the possession of minds of power.

Since Arisia was Earth-like in composition, atmosphere, and climate, the Arisians were at that time distinctly humanoid. The Eddorians were not. Eddore was and is large and dense; its liquid a poisonous, sludgy syrup; its atmosphere a foul and corrosive fog. Eddore was and is unique; so different from any other world of either galaxy that its very existence was inexplicable until its own records revealed the fact that it did not originate in normal space-time at all, but came to our universe from some alien and horribly different other.

As differed the planets, so differed the peoples. The Arisians went through the usual stages of savagery and barbarism on the way to Civilization. The Age of Stone. The Ages of Bronze, of Iron, of Steel, and of Electricity. Indeed, it is probable that it is because the Arisians went through these various stages that all subsequent Civilizations have done so, since the spores which burgeoned into life upon the cooling surfaces of all the planets of the commingling galaxies were Arisian, not Eddorian, in origin. Eddorian spores, while undoubtedly present, must have been so alien that they could not develop in any one of the environments, widely variant although they are, existing naturally or coming naturally into being in normal space and time.

The Arisians—especially after atomic energy freed them from physical labor—devoted themselves more and ever more intensively to the exploration of the limitless possibilities of the mind.

Even before the Coalescence, then, the Arisians had need neither of space-ships nor of telescopes. By power of mind alone they watched the lenticular aggregation of stars which was much later to be known to Tellurian astronomers as Lundmark's Nebula approach their own galaxy. They observed attentively and minutely and with high elation the occurrence of mathematical impossibility; for the chance of two galaxies ever meeting in direct, central, equatorial-plane impact and of passing completely through each other is an infinitesimal of such a high order as to be, even mathematically, practically indistinguishable from zero.

They observed the birth of numberless planets, recording minutely in their perfect memories every detail of everything that happened; in the hope that, as ages passed, either they or their descendants would be able to develop a symbology and a methodology capable of explaining the then inexplicable phenomenon. Carefree, busy, absorbedly intent, the Arisian mentalities roamed throughout space—until one of them struck an Eddorian mind.

While any Eddorian could, if it chose, assume the form of a man, they were in no sense man-like. Nor, since the term implies a softness and a lack of organization, can they be described as being amoeboid. They were both versatile and variant. Each Eddorian changed, not only its shape, but also its texture, in accordance with the requirements of the moment. Each produced—

extruded—members whenever and wherever it needed them; members uniquely appropriate to the task then in work. If hardness was indicated, the members were hard; if softness, they were soft. Small or large, rigid or flexible; joined or tentacular—all one. Filaments or cables; fingers or feet; needles or mauls—equally simple. One thought and the body fitted the job.

They were asexual: sexless to a degree unapproached by any form of Tellurian life higher than the yeasts. They were not merely hermaphroditic, nor androgynous, nor parthenogenetic. They were completely without sex. They were also, to all intents and purposes and except for death by violence, immortal. For each Eddorian, as its mind approached the stagnation of saturation after a lifetime of millions of years, simply divided into two new-old beings. New in capacity and in zest; old in ability and in power, since each of the two "children" possessed in toto the knowledges and the memories of their one "parent."

And if it is difficult to describe in words the physical aspects of the Eddorians, it is virtually impossible to write or to draw, in any symbology of Civilization, a true picture of an Eddorian's—*any* Eddorian's—mind. They were intolerant, domineering, rapacious, insatiable, cold, callous, and brutal. They were keen, capable, persevering, analytical, and efficient. They had no trace of any of the softer emotions or sensibilities possessed by races adherent to Civilization. No Eddorian ever had anything even remotely resembling a sense of humor.

While not essentially bloodthirsty—that is, not loving bloodshed for its own sweet sake—they were no more averse to blood-letting than they were in favor of it. Any amount of killing which would or which might advance an Eddorian toward his goal was

commendable; useless slaughter was frowned upon, not because it was slaughter, but because it was useless—and hence inefficient.

And, instead of the multiplicity of goals sought by the various entities of any race of Civilization, each and every Eddorian had only one. The same one: power. *Power!* P-O-W-E-R!!

Since Eddore was peopled originally by various races, perhaps as similar to each other as are the various human races of Earth, it is understandable that the early history of the planet—while it was still in its own space, that is—was one of continuous and ages-long war. And, since war always was and probably always will be linked solidly to technological advancement, the race now known simply as "The Eddorians" became technologists supreme. All other races disappeared. So did all other forms of life, however lowly, which interfered in any way with the Masters of the Planet.

Then, all racial opposition liquidated and overmastering lust as unquenched as ever, the surviving Eddorians fought among themselves: "push-button" wars employing engines of destruction against which the only possible defense was a fantastic thickness of planetary bedrock.

Finally, unable either to kill or to enslave each other, the comparatively few survivors made a peace of sorts. Since their own space was practically barren of planetary systems, they would move their planet from space to space until they found one which so teemed with planets that each living Eddorian could become the sole Master of an ever increasing number of worlds. This was a program very much worthwhile, promising as it did an outlet for even the recognizedly insatiable Eddorian craving for power. Therefore the Eddorians, for the first time in their prodigiously

long history of fanatical non-cooperation, decided to pool their resources of mind and of material and to work as a group.

Union of a sort was accomplished eventually; neither peaceably nor without highly lethal friction. They knew that a democracy, by its very nature, was inefficient; hence a democratic form of government was not even considered. An efficient government must of necessity be dictatorial. Nor were they all exactly alike or of exactly equal ability; perfect identity of any two such complex structures was in fact impossible, and any difference, however slight, was ample justification for stratification in such a society as theirs.

Thus one of them, fractionally more powerful and more ruthless than the rest, became the All-Highest—His Ultimate Supremacy—and a group of about a dozen others, only infinitesimally weaker, became his Council; a cabinet which was later to become known as the Innermost Circle. The tally of this cabinet varied somewhat from age to age; increasing by one when a member divided, decreasing by one when a jealous fellow or an envious underling managed to perpetrate a successful assassination.

And thus, at long last, the Eddorians began really to work together. There resulted, among other things, the hyper-spatial tube and the fully inertialess drive—the drive which was, millions of years later, to be given to Civilization by an Arisian operating under the name of Bergenholm. Another result, which occurred shortly after the galactic inter-passage had begun, was the eruption into normal space of the planet Eddore.

"I must now decide whether to make this space our permanent headquarters or to search farther," the All-Highest radiated harshly to his Council. "On the one hand, it will take some time

for even those planets which have already formed to cool. Still more will be required for life to develop sufficiently to form a part of the empire which we have planned or to occupy our abilities to any great degree. On the other, we have already spent millions of years in surveying hundreds of millions of continua, without having found anywhere such a profusion of planets as will, in all probability, soon fill both of these galaxies. There may also be certain advantages inherent in the fact that these planets are not yet populated. As life develops, we can mold it as we please. Krongenes, what are your findings in regard to the planetary possibilities of other spaces?"

The term "Krongenes" was not, in the accepted sense, a name. Or, rather, it was more than a name. It was a key-thought, in mental shorthand; a condensation and abbreviation of the life-pattern or ego of that particular Eddorian.

"Not at all promising, Your Supremacy," Krongenes replied promptly. "No space within reach of my instruments has more than a small fraction of the inhabitable worlds which will presently exist in this one."

"Very well. Have any of you others any valid objections to the establishment of our empire here in this space? If so, give me your thought now."

No objecting thoughts appeared, since none of the monsters then knew anything of Arisia or of the Arisians. Indeed, even if they had known, it is highly improbable that any objection would have been raised. First, because no Eddorian, from the All-Highest down, could conceive or would under any circumstances admit that any race, anywhere, had ever approached or ever would approach the Eddorians in any quality whatever; and second,

because, as is routine in all dictatorships, disagreement with the All-Highest did not operate to lengthen the span of life.

"Very well. We will now confer as to ... but hold! That thought is not one of ours! Who are you, stranger, to dare to intrude thus upon a conference of the Innermost Circle?"

"I am Enphilistor, a younger student, of the planet Arisia." This name, too, was a symbol. Nor was the young Arisian yet a Watchman, as he and so many of his fellows were so soon to become, for before Eddore's arrival Arisia had had no need of Watchmen. "I am not intruding, as you know. I have not touched any one of your minds; have not read any one of your thoughts. I have been waiting for you to notice my presence, so that we could become acquainted with each other. A surprising development, truly—we have thought for many cycles of time that we were the only highly advanced life in this universe...."

"Be silent, worm, in the presence of the Masters. Land your ship and surrender, and your planet will be allowed to serve us. Refuse, or even hesitate, and every individual of your race shall die."

"Worm? Masters? Land my ship?" The young Arisian's thought was pure curiosity, with no tinge of fear, dismay, or awe. "Surrender? Serve you? I seem to be receiving your thought without ambiguity, but your meaning is entirely...."

"Address me as 'Your Supremacy'," the All-Highest directed, coldly. "Land now or die now—this is your last warning."

"Your Supremacy? Certainly, if that is the customary form. But as to landing—and warning—and dying—surely you do not think that I am present in the flesh? And can it be possible that you are actually so aberrant as to believe that you can kill me—or even the

youngest Arisian infant? What a peculiar—what an *extraordinary*—psychology!"

"Die, then, worm, if you must have it so!" the All-Highest snarled, and launched a mental bolt whose energies were calculated to slay any living thing.

Enphilistor, however, parried the vicious attack without apparent effort. His manner did not change. He did not strike back.

The Eddorian then drove in with an analyzing probe, only to be surprised again—the Arisian's thought could not be traced! And Enphilistor, while warding off the raging Eddorian, directed a quiet thought as though he were addressing someone close by his side:

"Come in, please, one or more of the Elders. There is a situation here which I am not qualified to handle."

"We, the Elders of Arisia in fusion, are here." A grave, deeply resonant pseudo-voice filled the Eddorians' minds; each perceived in three-dimensional fidelity an aged, white-bearded human face. "You of Eddore have been expected. The course of action which we must take has been determined long since. You will forget this incident completely. For cycles upon cycles of time to come no Eddorian shall know that we Arisians exist."

Even before the thought was issued the fused Elders had gone quietly and smoothly to work. The Eddorians forgot utterly the incident which had just happened. Not one of them retained in his conscious mind any inkling that Eddore did not possess the only intelligent life in space.

And upon distant Arisia a full meeting of minds was held.

"But why didn't you simply kill them?" Enphilistor asked. "Such action would be distasteful in the extreme, of course—almost impossible—but even I can perceive...." He paused, overcome by his thought.

"That which you perceive, youth, is but a very small fraction of the whole. We did not attempt to slay them because we could not have done so. Not because of squeamishness, as you intimate, but from sheer inability. The Eddorian tenacity of life is a thing far beyond your present understanding; to have attempted to kill them would have rendered it impossible to make them forget us. We must have time ... cycles and cycles of time." The fusion broke off, pondered for minutes, then addressed the group as a whole:

"We, the Elder Thinkers, have not shared fully with you our visualization of the Cosmic All, because until the Eddorians actually appeared there was always the possibility that our findings might have been in error. Now, however, there is no doubt. The Civilization which has been pictured as developing peacefully upon all the teeming planets of two galaxies will not now of itself come into being. We of Arisia should be able to bring it eventually to full fruition, but the task will be long and difficult.

"The Eddorians' minds are of tremendous latent power. Were they to know of us now, it is practically certain that they would be able to develop powers and mechanisms by the use of which they would negate our every effort—they would hurl us out of this, our native space and time. We must have time ... given time, we shall succeed. There shall be Lenses ... and entities of Civilization worthy in every respect to wear them. But we of Arisia alone will never be able to conquer the Eddorians. Indeed, while this is not

yet certain, the probability is exceedingly great that despite our utmost efforts at self-development our descendants will have to breed, from some people to evolve upon a planet not yet in existence, an entirely new race—a race tremendously more capable than ours—to succeed us as Guardians of Civilization."

Centuries passed. Millenia. Cosmic and geologic ages. Planets cooled to solidity and stability. Life formed and grew and developed. And as life evolved it was subjected to, and strongly if subtly affected by, the diametrically opposed forces of Arisia and Eddore.

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II. THE FALL OF ATLANTIS

1. EDDORE

"Members of the innermost circle, wherever you are and whatever you may be doing, tune in!" the All-Highest broadcast. "Analysis of the data furnished by the survey just completed shows that in general the Great Plan is progressing satisfactorily. There seem to be only four planets which our delegates have not been or may not be able to control properly: Sol III, Rigel IV, Velantia III, and Palain VII. All four, you will observe, are in the other galaxy. No trouble whatever has developed in our own.

"Of these four, the first requires drastic and immediate personal attention. Its people, in the brief interval since our previous general survey, have developed nuclear energy and have fallen into a cultural pattern which does not conform in any respect to the basic principles laid down by us long since. Our deputies there, thinking erroneously that they could handle matters without reporting fully to or calling for help upon the next higher operating echelon, must be disciplined sharply. Failure, from whatever cause, can not be tolerated.

"Gharlane, as Master Number Two, you will assume control of Sol III immediately. This Circle now authorizes and instructs you to take whatever steps may prove necessary to restore order upon that planet. Examine carefully this data concerning the other three worlds which may very shortly become troublesome. Is it your thought that one or more others of this Circle should be assigned to work with you, to be sure that these untoward developments are suppressed?"

"It is not, Your Supremacy," that worthy decided, after a time of study. "Since the peoples in question are as yet of low intelligence; since one form of flesh at a time is all that will have to be energized; and since the techniques will be essentially similar; I can handle all four more efficiently alone than with the help or cooperation of others. If I read this data correctly, there will be need of only the most elementary precaution in the employment of mental force, since of the four races, only the Velantians have even a rudimentary knowledge of its uses. Right?"

"We so read the data." Surprisingly enough, the Innermost Circle agreed unanimously.

"Go, then. When finished, report in full."

"I go, All-Highest. I shall render a complete and conclusive report."

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2. ARISIA

"We, the Elder Thinkers in fusion, are spreading in public view, for study and full discussion, a visualization of the relationships existing and to exist between Civilization and its irreconcilable and implacable foe. Several of our younger members, particularly Eukonidor, who has just attained Watchmanship, have requested instruction in this matter. Being as yet immature, their visualizations do not show clearly why Nedanillor, Kriedigan, Drounli, and Brolenteen, either singly or in fusion, have in the past performed certain acts and have not performed certain others; or that the future actions of those Moulders of Civilization will be similarly constrained.

"This visualization, while more complex, more complete, and more detailed than the one set up by our forefathers at the time of

the Coalescence, agrees with it in every essential. The five basics remain unchanged. First: the Eddorians can be overcome only by mental force. Second: the magnitude of the required force is such that its only possible generator is such an organization as the Galactic Patrol toward which we have been and are working. Third: since no Arisian or any fusion of Arisians will ever be able to spear-head that force, it was and is necessary to develop a race of mentality sufficient to perform that task. Fourth: this new race, having been instrumental in removing the menace of Eddore, will as a matter of course displace the Arisians as Guardians of Civilization. Fifth: the Eddorians must not become informed of us until such a time as it will be physically, mathematically impossible for them to construct any effective counter-devices."

"A cheerless outlook, truly," came a somber thought.

"Not so, daughter. A little reflection will show you that your present thinking is loose and turbid. When that time comes, every Arisian will be ready for the change. We know the way. We do not know to what that way leads; but the Arisian purpose in this phase of existence—this space-time continuum—will have been fulfilled and we will go eagerly and joyfully on to the next. Are there any more questions?"

There were none.

"Study this material, then, each of you, with exceeding care. It may be that some one of you, even a child, will perceive some facet of the truth which we have missed or have not examined fully; some fact or implication which may be made to operate to shorten the time of conflict or to lessen the number of budding Civilizations whose destruction seems to us at present to be sheerly unavoidable."

Hours passed. Days. No criticisms or suggestions were offered.

"We take it, then, that this visualization is the fullest and most accurate one possible for the massed intellect of Arisia to construct from the information available at the moment. The Moulders therefore, after describing briefly what they have already done, will inform us as to what they deem it necessary to do in the near future."

"We have observed, and at times have guided, the evolution of intelligent life upon many planets," the fusion began. "We have, to the best of our ability, directed the energies of these entities into the channels of Civilization; we have adhered consistently to the policy of steering as many different races as possible toward the intellectual level necessary for the effective use of the Lens, without which the proposed Galactic Patrol cannot come into being."

"For many cycles of time we have been working as individuals with the four strongest races, from one of which will be developed the people who will one day replace us as Guardians of Civilization. Blood lines have been established. We have encouraged matings which concentrate traits of strength and dissipate those of weakness. While no very great departure from the norm, either physically or mentally, will take place until after the penultimates have been allowed to meet and to mate, a definite general improvement of each race has been unavoidable."

"Thus the Eddorians have already interested themselves in our budding Civilization upon the planet Tellus, and it is inevitable that they will very shortly interfere with our work upon the other three. These four young Civilizations must be allowed to fall. It is to warn every Arisian against well-meant but inconsidered action

that this conference was called. We ourselves will operate through forms of flesh of no higher intelligence than, and indistinguishable from, the natives of the planets affected. No traceable connection will exist between those forms and us. No other Arisians will operate within extreme range of any one of those four planets; they will from now on be given the same status as has been so long accorded Eddore itself. The Eddorians must not learn of us until after it is too late for them to act effectively upon that knowledge. Any chance bit of information obtained by any Eddorian must be obliterated at once. It is to guard against and to negate such accidental disclosures that our Watchmen have been trained."

"But if all of our Civilizations go down...." Eukonidor began to protest.

"Study will show you, youth, that the general level of mind, and hence of strength, is rising," the fused Elders interrupted. "The trend is ever upward; each peak and valley being higher than its predecessor. When the indicated level has been reached—the level at which the efficient use of the Lens will become possible—we will not only allow ourselves to become known to them; we will engage them at every point."

"One factor remains obscure." A Thinker broke the ensuing silence. "In this visualization I do not perceive anything to preclude the possibility that the Eddorians may at any time visualize us. Granted that the Elders of long ago did not merely visualize the Eddorians, but perceived them in time-space surveys; that they and subsequent Elders were able to maintain the status quo; and that the Eddorian way of thought is essentially mechanistic, rather than philosophic, in nature. There is still a

possibility that the enemy may be able to deduce us by processes of logic alone. This thought is particularly disturbing to me at the present time because a rigid statistical analysis of the occurrences upon those four planets shows that they cannot possibly have been due to chance. With such an analysis as a starting point, a mind of even moderate ability could visualize us practically in toto. I assume, however, that this possibility has been taken into consideration, and suggest that the membership be informed."

"The point is well taken. The possibility exists. While the probability is very great that such an analysis will not be made until after we have declared ourselves, it is not a certainty. Immediately upon deducing our existence, however, the Eddorians would begin to build against us, upon the four planets and elsewhere. Since there is only one effective counter-structure possible, and since we Elders have long been alert to detect the first indications of that particular activity, we know that the situation remains unchanged. If it changes, we will call at once another full meeting of minds. Are there any other matters of moment...? If not, this conference will dissolve."

3. ATLANTIS

Ariponides, recently elected Faros of Atlantis for his third five-year term, stood at a window of his office atop the towering Farostery. His hands were clasped loosely behind his back. He did not really see the tremendous expanse of quiet ocean, nor the bustling harbor, nor the metropolis spread out so magnificently and so busily beneath him. He stood there, motionless, until a subtle vibration warned him that visitors were approaching his door.

"Come in, gentlemen.... Please be seated." He sat down at one end of a table molded of transparent plastic. "Psychologist Talmonides, Statesman Cleto, Minister Philamon, Minister Marxes and Officer Artomenes, I have asked you to come here personally because I have every reason to believe that the shielding of this room is proof against eavesdroppers; a thing which can no longer be said of our supposedly private television channels. We must discuss, and if possible come to some decision concerning, the state in which our nation now finds itself.

"Each of us knows within himself exactly what he is. Of our own powers, we cannot surely know each others' inward selves. The tools and techniques of psychology, however, are potent and exact; and Talmonides, after exhaustive and rigorous examination of each one of us, has certified that no taint of disloyalty exists among us."

"Which certification is not worth a damn," the burly Officer declared. "What assurance do we have that Talmonides himself is not one of the ringleaders? Mind you, I have no reason to believe that he is not completely loyal. In fact, since he has been one of my best friends for over twenty years, I believe implicitly that he is. Nevertheless the plain fact is, Aripontides, that all the precautions you have taken, and any you can take, are and will be useless insofar as definite knowledge is concerned. The real truth is and will remain unknown."

"You are right," the Psychologist conceded. "And, such being the case, perhaps I should withdraw from the meeting."

"That wouldn't help, either." Artomenes shook his head. "Any competent plotter would be prepared for this, as for any other contingency. One of us others would be the real operator."

"And the fact that our Officer is the one who is splitting hairs so finely could be taken to indicate which one of us the real operator could be," Marxes pointed out, cuttingly.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Aripontides protested. "While absolute certainty is of course impossible to any finite mind, you all know how Talmonides was tested; you know that in his case there is no reasonable doubt. Such chance as exists, however, must be taken, for if we do not trust each other fully in this undertaking, failure is inevitable. With this word of warning I will get on with my report.

"This worldwide frenzy of unrest followed closely upon the controlled liberation of atomic energy and may be—probably is—traceable to it. It is in no part due to imperialistic aims or acts on the part of Atlantis. This fact cannot be stressed too strongly. We never have been and are not now interested in Empire. It is true that the other nations began as Atlantean colonies, but no attempt was ever made to hold any one of them in colonial status against the wish of its electorate. All nations were and are sister states. We gain or lose together. Atlantis, the parent, was and is a clearing-house, a co-ordinator of effort, but has never claimed or sought authority to rule; all decisions being based upon free debate and free and secret ballot.

"But now! Parties and factions everywhere, even in old Atlantis. Every nation is torn by internal dissensions and strife. Nor is this all. Uighar as a nation is insensately jealous of the Islands of the South, who in turn are jealous of Maya. Maya of Bantu, Bantu of Ekopt, Ekopt of Norheim, and Norheim of Uighar. A vicious circle, worsened by other jealousies and hatreds intercrossing everywhere. Each fears that some other is about to try to seize control of the entire world; and there seems to be spreading

rapidly the utterly baseless belief that Atlantis itself is about to reduce all other nations of Earth to vassalage.

"This is a bald statement of the present condition of the world as I see it. Since I can see no other course possible within the constituted framework of our democratic government, I recommend that we continue our present activities, such as the international treaties and agreements upon which we are now at work, intensifying our effort wherever possible. We will now hear from Statesman Cleto."

"You have outlined the situation clearly enough, Faros. My thought, however, is that the principal cause of the trouble is the coming into being of this multiplicity of political parties, particularly those composed principally of crackpots and extremists. The connection with atomic energy is clear: since the atomic bomb gives a small group of people the power to destroy the world, they reason that it thereby confers upon them the authority to dictate to the world. My recommendation is merely a special case of yours; that every effort be made to influence the electorates of Norheim and of Uighar into supporting an effective international control of atomic energy."

"You have your data tabulated in symbolics?" asked Talmonides, from his seat at the keyboard of a calculating machine.

"Yes. Here they are."

"Thanks."

"Minister Philamon," the Faros announced.

"As I see it—as any intelligent man should be able to see it—the principal contribution of atomic energy to this worldwide chaos

was the complete demoralization of labor," the gray-haired Minister of Trade stated, flatly. "Output per man-hour should have gone up at least twenty percent, in which case prices would automatically have come down. Instead, short-sighted guilds imposed drastic curbs on production, and now seem to be surprised that as production falls and hourly wages rise, prices also rise and real income drops. Only one course is possible, gentlemen; labor *must* be made to listen to reason. This feather-bedding, this protected loafing, this...."

"I protest!" Marxes, Minister of Work, leaped to his feet. "The blame lies squarely with the capitalists. Their greed, their rapacity, their exploitation of...."

"One moment, please!" Aripontides rapped the table sharply. "It is highly significant of the deplorable condition of the times that two Ministers of State should speak as you two have just spoken. I take it that neither of you has anything new to contribute to this symposium?"

Both claimed the floor, but both were refused it by vote.

"Hand your tabulated data to Talmonides," the Faros directed. "Officer Artomenes?"

"You, our Faros, have more than intimated that our defense program, for which I am primarily responsible, has been largely to blame for what has happened," the grizzled warrior began. "In part, perhaps it was—one must be blind indeed not to see the connection, and biased indeed not to admit it. But what should I have done, knowing that there is no practical defense against the atomic bomb? Every nation has them, and is manufacturing more and more. Every nation is infested with the agents of every other.

Should I have tried to keep Atlantis toothless in a world bristling with fangs? And could I—or anyone else—have succeeded in doing so?"

"Probably not. No criticism was intended; we must deal with the situation as it actually exists. Your recommendations, please?"

"I have thought this thing over day and night, and can see no solution which can be made acceptable to our—or to any real—democracy. Nevertheless, I have one recommendation to make. We all know that Norheim and Uighar are the sore spots—particularly Norheim. We have more bombs as of now than both of them together. We know that Uighar's super-sonic jobs are ready. We don't know exactly what Norheim has, since they cut my Intelligence line a while back, but I'm sending over another operative—my best man, too—tonight. If he finds out that we have enough advantage in speed, and I'm pretty sure that we have, I say hit both Norheim and Uighar right then, while we can, before they hit us. And hit them hard—pulverize them. Then set up a world government strong enough to knock out any nation—including Atlantis—that will not cooperate with it. This course of action is flagrantly against all international law and all the principles of democracy, I know; and even it might not work. It is, however, as far as I can see, the only course which *can* work."

"You—we all—perceive its weaknesses." The Faros thought for minutes. "You cannot be sure that your Intelligence has located all of the danger points, and many of them must be so far underground as to be safe from even our heaviest missiles. We all, including you, believe that the Psychologist is right in holding that the reaction of the other nations to such action would be both unfavorable and violent. Your report, please, Talmonides."

"I have already put my data into the integrator." The Psychologist punched a button and the mechanism began to whirl and to click. "I have only one new fact of any importance; the name of one of the higher-ups and its corollary implication that there may be some degree of cooperation between Norheim and Uighar...."

He broke off as the machine stopped clicking and ejected its report.

"Look at that graph—up ten points in seven days!" Talmonides pointed a finger. "The situation is deteriorating faster and faster. The conclusion is unavoidable—you can see yourselves that this summation line is fast approaching unity—that the outbreaks will become uncontrollable in approximately eight days. With one slight exception—here—you will notice that the lines of organization and purpose are as random as ever. In spite of this conclusive integration I would be tempted to believe that this seeming lack of coherence was due to insufficient data—that back of this whole movement there is a carefully-set-up and completely-integrated plan—except for the fact that the factions and the nations are so evenly matched. But the data are sufficient. It is shown conclusively that no one of the other nations can possibly win, even by totally destroying Atlantis. They would merely destroy each other and our entire Civilization. According to this forecast, in arriving at which the data furnished by our Officer were prime determinants, that will surely be the outcome unless remedial measures be taken at once. You are of course sure of your facts, Artomenes?"

"I am sure. But you said you had a name, and that it indicated a Norheim-Uighar hookup. What is that name?"

"An old friend of yours...."

"Lo Sung!" The words as spoken were a curse of fury.

"None other. And, unfortunately, there is as yet no course of action indicated which is at all promising of success."

"Use mine, then!" Artomenes jumped up and banged the table with his fist. "Let me send two flights of rockets over right now that will blow Uigharstoy and Norgrad into radioactive dust and make a thousand square miles around each of them uninhabitable for ten thousand years! If that's the only way they can learn anything, let them learn!"

"Sit down, Officer," Aripontides directed, quietly. "That course, as you have already pointed out, is indefensible. It violates every Prime Basic of our Civilization. Moreover, it would be entirely futile, since this resultant makes it clear that every nation on Earth would be destroyed within the day."

"What, then?" Artomenes demanded, bitterly. "Sit still here and let them annihilate us?"

"Not necessarily. It is to formulate plans that we are here. Talmonides will by now have decided, upon the basis of our pooled knowledge, what must be done."

"The outlook is not good: not good at all," the Psychologist announced, gloomily. "The only course of action which carries any promise whatever of success—and its probability is only point one eight—is the one recommended by the Faros, modified slightly to include Artomenes' suggestion of sending his best operative on the indicated mission. For highest morale, by the way, the Faros should also interview this agent before he sets out. Ordinarily I would not advocate a course of action having so little likelihood of success; but since it is simply a continuation and intensification of

what we are already doing, I do not see how we can adopt any other."

"Are we agreed?" Aripónides asked, after a short silence.

They were agreed. Four of the conferees filed out and a brisk young man strode in. Although he did not look at the Faros his eyes asked questions.

"Reporting for orders, sir." He saluted the Officer punctiliously.

"At ease, sir." Artomenes returned the salute. "You were called here for a word from the Faros. Sir, I present Captain Phryges."

"Not orders, son ... no." Aripónides' right hand rested in greeting upon the captain's left shoulder, wise old eyes probed deeply into gold-flecked, tawny eyes of youth; the Faros saw, without really noticing, a flaming thatch of red-bronze-auburn hair. "I asked you here to wish you well; not only for myself, but for all our nation and perhaps for our entire race. While everything in my being rebels against an unprovoked and unannounced assault, we may be compelled to choose between our Officer's plan of campaign and the destruction of Civilization. Since you already know the vital importance of your mission, I need not enlarge upon it. But I want you to know fully, Captain Phryges, that all Atlantis flies with you this night."

"Th ... thank you, sir." Phryges gulped twice to steady his voice. "I'll do my best, sir."

And later, in a wingless craft flying toward the airfield, young Phryges broke a long silence. "So *that* is the Faros ... I like him, Officer ... I have never seen him close up before ... there's

something about him.... He isn't like my father, much, but it seems as though I have known him for a thousand years!"

"Hm ... m ... m. Peculiar. You two are a lot alike, at that, even though you don't look anything like each other. ... Can't put a finger on exactly what it is, but it's there." Although Artomenes nor any other of his time could place it, the resemblance was indeed there. It was in and back of the eyes; it was the "look of eagles" which was long later to become associated with the wearers of Arisia's Lens. "But here we are, and your ship's ready. Luck, son."

"Thanks, sir. But one more thing. If it should—if I don't get back—will you see that my wife and the baby are...?"

"I will, son. They will leave for North Maya tomorrow morning. They will live, whether you and I do or not. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Thanks. Goodbye."

The ship was a tremendous flying wing. A standard commercial job. Empty—passengers, even crewmen, were never subjected to the brutal accelerations regularly used by unmanned carriers. Phryges scanned the panel. Tiny motors were pulling tapes through the controllers. Every light showed green. Everything was set. Donning a water-proof coverall, he slid through a flexible valve into his acceleration-tank and waited.

A siren yelled briefly. Black night turned blinding white as the harnessed energies of the atom were released. For five and six-tenths seconds the sharp, hard, beryllium-bronze leading edge of the back-sweeping V sliced its way through ever-thinning air.

The vessel seemed to pause momentarily; paused and bucked viciously. She shuddered and shivered, tried to tear herself into shreds and chunks; but Phryges in his tank was unconcerned. Earlier, weaker ships went to pieces against the solid-seeming wall of atmospheric incompressibility at the velocity of sound; but this one was built solidly enough, and powered to hit that wall hard enough, to go through unharmed.

The hellish vibration ceased; the fantastic violence of the drive subsided to a mere shove; Phryges knew that the vessel had leveled off at its cruising speed of two thousand miles per hour. He emerged, spilling the least possible amount of water upon the polished steel floor. He took off his coverall and stuffed it back through the valve into the tank. He mopped and polished the floor with towels, which likewise went into the tank.

He drew on a pair of soft gloves and, by manual control, jettisoned the acceleration tank and all the apparatus which had made that unloading possible. This junk would fall into the ocean; would sink; would never be found. He examined the compartment and the hatch minutely. No scratches, no scars, no mars; no tell-tale marks or prints of any kind. Let the Norskies search. So far, so good.

Back toward the trailing edge then, to a small escape-hatch beside which was fastened a dull black ball. The anchoring devices went out first. He gasped as the air rushed out into near-vacuum, but he had been trained to take sudden and violent fluctuations in pressure. He rolled the ball out upon the hatch, where he opened it; two hinged hemispheres, each heavily padded with molded composition resembling sponge rubber. It seemed incredible that a man as big as Phryges, especially when wearing a parachute,

could be crammed into a space so small; but that lining had been molded to fit.

This ball *had* to be small. The ship, even though it was on a regularly-scheduled commercial flight, would be scanned intensively and continuously from the moment of entering Norheiman radar range. Since the ball would be invisible on any radar screen, no suspicion would be aroused; particularly since—as far as Atlantean Intelligence had been able to discover—the Norheimans had not yet succeeded in perfecting any device by the use of which a living man could bail out of a super-sonic plane.

Phryges waited—and waited—until the second hand of his watch marked the arrival of zero time. He curled up into one half of the ball; the other half closed over him and locked. The hatch opened. Ball and closely-prisoned man plummeted downward; slowing abruptly, with a horrible deceleration, to terminal velocity. Had the air been any trifle thicker the Atlantean captain would have died then and there; but that, too, had been computed accurately and Phryges lived.

And as the ball bulleted downward on a screaming slant, it *shrank*!

This, too, the Atlanteans hoped, was new—a synthetic which air-friction would erode away, molecule by molecule, so rapidly that no perceptible fragment of it would reach ground.

The casing disappeared, and the yielding porous lining. And Phryges, still at an altitude of over thirty thousand feet, kicked away the remaining fragments of his cocoon and, by judicious planning, turned himself so that he could see the ground, now dimly visible in the first dull gray of dawn. There was the highway,

paralleling his line of flight; he wouldn't miss it more than a hundred yards.

He fought down an almost overwhelming urge to pull his rip-cord too soon. He had to wait—wait until the last possible second—because parachutes were big and Norheiman radar practically swept the ground.

Low enough at last, he pulled the ring. Z-r-r-e-e-k—WHAP! The chute banged open; his harness tightened with a savage jerk, mere seconds before his hard-sprung knees took the shock of landing.

That was close—too close! He was white and shaking, but unhurt, as he gathered in the billowing, fighting sheet and rolled it, together with his harness, into a wad. He broke open a tiny ampoule, and as the drops of liquid touched it the stout fabric began to disappear. It did not burn; it simply disintegrated and vanished. In less than a minute there remained only a few steel snaps and rings, which the Atlantean buried under a meticulously-replaced circle of sod.

He was still on schedule. In less than three minutes the signals would be on the air and he would know where he was—unless the Norsks had succeeded in finding and eliminating the whole Atlantean under-cover group. He pressed a stud on a small instrument; held it down. A line burned green across the dial—flared red—vanished.

"Damn!" he breathed, explosively. The strength of the signal told him that he was within a mile or so of the hide-out—first-class computation—but the red flash warned him to keep away. Kinnexa—*it had better be Kinnexa!*—would come to him.

How? By air? Along the road? Through the woods on foot? He had no way of knowing—talking, even on a tight beam, was out of the question. He made his way to the highway and crouched behind a tree. Here she could come at him by any route of the three. Again he waited, pressing infrequently a stud of his sender.

A long, low-slung ground-car swung around the curve and Phryges' binoculars were at his eyes. It was Kinnexa—or a duplicate. At the thought he dropped his glasses and pulled his guns—blaster in right hand, air-pistol in left. But no, that wouldn't do. She'd be suspicious, too—she'd have to be—and that car probably mounted heavy stuff. If he stepped out ready for business she'd fry him, and quick. Maybe not—she might have protection—but he couldn't take the chance.

The car slowed; stopped. The girl got out, examined a front tire, straightened up, and looked down the road, straight at Phryges' hiding place. This time the binoculars brought her up to little more than arm's length. Tall, blonde, beautifully built; the slightly crooked left eyebrow. The thread-line of gold betraying a one-tooth bridge and the tiny scar on her upper lip, for both of which he had been responsible—she always did insist on playing cops-and-robbers with boys older and bigger than herself—it *was* Kinnexa! Not even Norheim's science could imitate so perfectly every personalizing characteristic of a girl he had known ever since she was knee-high to a duck!

The girl slid back into her seat and the heavy car began to move. Open-handed, Phryges stepped out into its way. The car stopped.

"Turn around. Back up to me, hands behind you," she directed, crisply.

The man, although surprised, obeyed. Not until he felt a finger exploring the short hair at the back of his neck did he realize what she was seeking—the almost imperceptible scar marking the place where she bit him when she was seven years old!

"Oh, Fry! It *is* you! *Really* you! Thank the gods! I've been ashamed of that all my life, but now...."

He whirled and caught her as she slumped, but she did not quite faint.

"Quick! Get in ... drive on ... not too fast!" she cautioned, sharply, as the tires began to scream. "The speed limit along here is seventy, and we can't be picked up."

"Easy it is, Kinny. But *give*! What's the score? Where's Kolanides? Or rather, what happened to him?"

"Dead. So are the others, I think. They put him on a psycho-bench and turned him inside out."

"But the blocks?"

"Didn't hold—over here they add such trimmings as skinning and salt to the regular psycho routine. But none of them knew anything about me, nor about how their reports were picked up, or I'd have been dead, too. But it doesn't make any difference, Fry—we're just one week too late."

"What do you mean, too late? Speed it up!" His tone was rough, but the hand he placed on her arm was gentleness itself.

"I'm telling you as fast as I can. I picked up his last report day before yesterday. They have missiles just as big and just as fast as

ours—maybe more so—and they are going to fire one at Atlantis tonight at exactly seven o'clock."

"Tonight! Holy gods!" The man's mind raced.

"Yes." Kinnexa's voice was low, uninflected. "And there was nothing in the world that I could do about it. If I approached any one of our places, or tried to use a beam strong enough to reach anywhere, I would simply have got picked up, too. I've thought and thought, but could figure out only one thing that might possibly be of any use, and I couldn't do that alone. But two of us, perhaps...."

"Go on. Brief me. Nobody ever accused you of not having a brain, and you know this whole country like the palm of your hand."

"Steal a ship. Be over the ramp at exactly Seven Pay Emma. When the lid opens, go into a full-power dive, beam Artomenes—if I had a second before they blanketed my wave—and meet their rocket head-on in their own launching-tube."

This was stark stuff, but so tense was the moment and so highly keyed up were the two that neither of them saw anything out of the ordinary in it.

"Not bad, if we can't figure out anything better. The joker being, of course, that you didn't see how you could steal a ship?"

"Exactly. I can't carry blasters. No woman in Norheim is wearing a coat or a cloak now, so I can't either. And just look at this dress! Do you see any place where I could hide even one?"

He looked, appreciatively, and she had the grace to blush.

"Can't say that I do," he admitted. "But I'd rather have one of our own ships, if we could make the approach. Could both of us make it, do you suppose?"

"Not a chance. They'd keep at least one man inside all the time. Even if we killed everybody outside, the ship would take off before we could get close enough to open the port with the outside controls."

"Probably. Go on. But first, are you sure that you're in the clear?"

"Positive." She grinned mirthlessly. "The fact that I am still alive is conclusive evidence that they didn't find out anything about me. But I don't want you to work on that idea if you can think of a better one. I've got passports and so on for you to be anything you want to be, from a tube-man up to an Ekoptian banker. Ditto for me, and for us both, as Mr. and Mrs."

"Smart girl." He thought for minutes, then shook his head. "No possible way out that I can see. The sneak-boat isn't due for a week, and from what you've said it probably won't get here. But you might make it, at that. I'll drop you somewhere...."

"You will not," she interrupted, quietly but definitely. "Which would *you* rather—go out in a blast like that one will be, beside a good Atlantean, or, after deserting him, be psychoed, skinned, salted, and—still alive—drawn and quartered?"

"Together, then, all the way," he assented. "Man and wife. Tourists—newlyweds—from some town not too far away. Pretty well fixed, to match what we're riding in. Can do?"

"Very simple." She opened a compartment and selected one of a stack of documents. "I can fix this one up in ten minutes. We'll

have to dispose of the rest of these, and a lot of other stuff, too. And you had better get out of that leather and into a suit that matches this passport photo."

"Right. Straight road for miles, and nothing in sight either way. Give me the suit and I'll change now. Keep on going or stop?"

"Better stop, I think," the girl decided. "Quicker, and we'll have to find a place to hide or bury this evidence."

While the man changed clothes, Kinnexa collected the contraband, wrapping it up in the discarded jacket. She looked up just as Phryges was adjusting his coat. She glanced at his armpits, then stared.

"Where are your blasters?" she demanded. "They ought to show, at least a little, and even I can't see a sign of them."

He showed her.

"But they're so tiny! I never saw blasters like that!"

"I've got a blaster, but it's in the tail pocket. These aren't. They're air-guns. Poisoned needles. Not worth a damn beyond a hundred feet, but deadly close up. One touch anywhere and the guy dies right then. Two seconds max."

"Nice!" She was no shrinking violet this young Atlantean spy. "You have spares, of course, and I can hide two of them easily enough in leg-holsters. Gimme, and show me how they work."

"Standard controls, pretty much like blasters. Like so." He demonstrated, and as he drove sedately down the highway the girl sewed industriously.

The day wore on, nor was it uneventful. One incident, in fact—the detailing of which would serve no useful purpose here—was of such a nature that at its end:

"Better pin-point me, don't you think, on that ramp?" Phryges asked, quietly. "Just in case you get scragged in one of these brawls and I don't?"

"Oh! Of course! Forgive me, Fry—it slipped my mind completely that you didn't know where it was. Area six; pin-point four seven three dash six oh five.

"Got it." He repeated the figures.

But neither of the Atlanteans was "scragged", and at six P.M. an allegedly honeymooning couple parked their big roadster in the garage at Norgrad Field and went through the gates. Their papers, tickets included, were in perfect order; they were as inconspicuous and as undemonstrative as newlyweds are wont to be. No more so, and no less.

Strolling idly, gazing eagerly at each new thing, they made their circuitous way toward a certain small hangar. As the girl had said, this field boasted hundreds of super-sonic fighters, so many that servicing was a round-the-clock routine. In that hangar was a sharp-nosed, stubby-V'd flyer, one of Norheim's fastest. It was serviced and ready.

It was too much to hope, of course, that the visitors could actually get into the building unchallenged. Nor did they.

"Back, you!" A guard waved them away. "Get back to the Concourse, where you belong—no visitors allowed out here!"

F-f-t! F-f-t! Phryges' air-gun broke into soft but deadly coughing. Kinnexa whirled—hands flashing down, skirt flying up—and ran. Guards tried to head her off; tried to bring their own weapons to bear. Tried—failed—died.

Phryges, too, ran; ran backward. His blaster was out now and flaming, for no living enemy remained within needle range. A rifle bullet w-h-i-n-g-e-d past his head, making him duck involuntarily and uselessly. Rifles were bad; but their hazard, too, had been considered and had been accepted.

Kinnexa reached the fighter's port, opened it, sprang in. He jumped. She fell against him. He tossed her clear, slammed and dogged the door. He looked at her then, and swore bitterly. A small, round hole marred the bridge of her nose: the back of her head was gone.

He leaped to the controls and the fleet little ship screamed skyward. He cut in transmitter and receiver, keyed and twiddled briefly. No soap. He had been afraid of that. They were already blanketing every frequency he could employ; using power through which he could not drive even a tight beam a hundred miles.

But he could still crash that missile in its tube. Or—could he? He was not afraid of other Norheiman fighters; he had a long lead and he rode one of their very fastest. But since they were already so suspicious, wouldn't they launch the bomb *before* seven o'clock? He tried vainly to coax another knot out of his wide-open engines.

With all his speed, he neared the pin-point just in time to see a trail of super-heated vapor extending up into and disappearing beyond the stratosphere. He nosed his flyer upward, locked the

missile into his sights, and leveled off. Although his ship did not have the giant rocket's acceleration, he could catch it before it got to Atlantis, since he did not need its altitude and since most of its journey would be made without power. What he could do about it after he caught it he did not know, but he'd do *something*.

He caught it; and, by a feat of piloting to be appreciated only by those who have handled planes at super-sonic speeds, he matched its course and velocity. Then, from a distance of barely a hundred feet, he poured his heaviest shells into the missile's war-head. He *couldn't* be missing! It was worse than shooting sitting ducks—it was like dynamiting fish in a bucket! Nevertheless, nothing happened. The thing wasn't fuzed for impact, then, but for time; and the activating mechanism would be shell-and shock-proof.

But there was still a way. He didn't need to call Artomenes now, even if he could get through the interference which the fast-approaching pursuers were still sending out. Atlantean observers would have lined this stuff up long since; the Officer would know exactly what was going on.

Driving ahead and downward, at maximum power, Phryges swung his ship slowly into a right-angle collision course. The fighter's needle nose struck the war-head within a foot of the Atlantean's point of aim, and as he died Phryges knew that he had accomplished his mission. Norheim's missile would not strike Atlantis, but would fall at least ten miles short, and the water there was very deep. Very, *very* deep. Atlantis would not be harmed.

It might have been better, however, if Phryges had died with Kinnexa on Norgrad Field; in which case the continent would probably have endured. As it was, while that one missile did not

reach the city, its frightful atomic charge exploded under six hundred fathoms of water, ten scant miles from Atlantis' harbor, and very close to an ancient geological fault.

Artomenes, as Phryges had surmised, had had time in which to act, and he knew much more than Phryges did about what was coming toward Atlantis. Too late, he knew that not one missile, but seven, had been launched from Norheim, and at least five from Uighar. The retaliatory rockets which were to wipe out Norgrad, Uigharstoy, and thousands of square miles of environs were on their way long before either bomb or earthquake destroyed all of the Atlantean launching ramps.

But when equilibrium was at last restored, the ocean rolled serenely where a minor continent had been.

III. THE FALL OF ROME

1. EDDORE

Like two high executives of a Tellurian corporation discussing business affairs during a chance meeting at one of their clubs, Eddore's All Highest and Gharlane, his second in command, were having the Eddorian equivalent of an after-business-hours chat.

"You did a nice job on Tellus," the All-Highest commended. "On the other three, too, of course, but Tellus was so far and away the worst of the lot that the excellence of the work stands out. When the Atlantean nations destroyed each other so thoroughly I thought that this thing called 'democracy' was done away with forever, but it seems to be mighty hard to kill. However, I take it that you have this Rome situation entirely under control?"

"Definitely. Mithradates of Pontus was mine. So were both Sulla and Marius. Through them and others I killed practically all of the brains and ability of Rome, and reduced that so-called 'democracy' to a howling, aimless mob. My Nero will end it. Rome will go on by momentum—outwardly, will even appear to grow—for a few generations, but what Nero will do can never be undone."

"Good. A difficult task, truly."

"Not difficult, exactly ... but it's so damned *steady*." Gharlane's thought was bitter. "But that's the hell of working with such short-lived races. Since each creature lives only a minute or so, they change so fast that a man can't take his mind off of them for a second. I've been wanting to take a little vacation trip back to our

old time-space, but it doesn't look as though I'll be able to do it until after they get some age and settle down."

"That won't be too long. Life-spans lengthen, you know, as races approach their norms."

"Yes. But none of the others is having half the trouble that I am. Most of them, in fact, have things coming along just about the way they want them. My four planets are raising more hell than all the rest of both galaxies put together, and I know that it isn't me—next to you, I'm the most efficient operator we've got. What I'm wondering about is why I happen to be the goat."

"Precisely because you *are* our most efficient operator." If an Eddorian can be said to smile, the All-Highest smiled. "You know, as well as I do, the findings of the Integrator."

"Yes, but I am wondering more and more as to whether to believe them unreservedly or not. Spores from an extinct life-form—suitable environments—operation of the laws of chance—Tommyrot! I am beginning to suspect that chance is being strained beyond its elastic limit, for my particular benefit, and as soon as I can find out who is doing that straining there will be one empty place in the Innermost Circle."

"Have a care, Gharlane!" All levity, all casualness disappeared. "Whom do you suspect? Whom do you accuse?"

"Nobody, as yet. The true angle never occurred to me until just now, while I have been discussing the thing with you. Nor shall I either suspect or accuse, ever. I shall determine, then I shall act."

"In defiance of *me*? Of *my* orders?" the All-Highest demanded, his short temper flaring.

"Say, rather, in support," the lieutenant shot back, unabashed. "If some one is working on me through my job, what position are you probably already in, without knowing it? Assume that I am right, that these four planets of mine got the way they are because of monkey business inside the Circle. Who would be next? And how sure are you that there isn't something similar, but not so far advanced, already aimed at you? It seems to me that serious thought is in order."

"Perhaps so.... You may be right.... There have been a few nonconformable items. Taken separately, they did not seem to be of any importance; but together, and considered in this new light...."

Thus was borne out the conclusion of the Arisian Elders that the Eddorians would not at that time deduce Arisia; and thus Eddore lost its chance to begin in time the forging of a weapon with which to oppose effectively Arisia's—Civilization's—Galactic Patrol, so soon to come into being.

If either of the two had been less suspicious, less jealous, less arrogant and domineering—in other words, had not been Eddorians—this History of Civilization might never have been written; or written very differently and by another hand.

Both were, however, Eddorians.

2. ARISIA

In the brief interval between the fall of Atlantis and the rise of Rome to the summit of her power, Eukonidor of Arisia had aged scarcely at all. He was still a youth. He was, and would be for many centuries to come, a Watchman. Although his mind was powerful enough to understand the Elders' visualization of the

course of Civilization—in fact, he had already made significant progress in his own visualization of the Cosmic All—he was not sufficiently mature to contemplate unmoved the events which, according to all Arisian visualizations, were bound to occur.

"Your feeling is but natural, Eukonidor." Drounli, the Moulder principally concerned with the planet Tellus, meshed his mind smoothly with that of the young Watchman. "We do not enjoy it ourselves, as you know. It is, however, *necessary*. In no other way can the ultimate triumph of Civilization be assured."

"But can nothing be done to alleviate...?" Eukonidor paused.

Drounli waited. "Have you any suggestions to offer?"

"None," the younger Arisian confessed. "But I thought ... you, or the Elders, so much older and stronger ... could...."

"We can not. Rome will fall. It must be allowed to fall."

"It will be Nero, then? And we can do nothing?"

"Nero. We can do little enough. Our forms of flesh—Petronius, Acte, and the others—will do whatever they can; but their powers will be exactly the same as those of other human beings of their time. They must be and will be constrained, since any show of unusual powers, either mental or physical, would be detected instantly and would be far too revealing. On the other hand, Nero—that is, Gharlane of Eddore—will be operating much more freely."

"Very much so. Practically unhampered, except in purely physical matters. But, if nothing can be done to stop it.... If Nero must be allowed to sow his seeds of ruin...."

And upon that cheerless note the conference ended.

3. ROME

"But what have you, Livius, or any of us, for that matter, got to live for?" demanded Patroclus the gladiator of his cell-mate. "We are well fed, well kept, well exercised; like horses. But, like horses, we are lower than slaves. Slaves have some freedom of action; most of us have none. We fight—fight whoever or whatever our cursed owners send us against. Those of us who live fight again; but the end is certain and comes soon. I had a wife and children once. So did you. Is there any chance, however slight, that either of us will ever know them again; or learn even whether they live or die? None. At this price, is your life worth living? Mine is not."

Livius the Bithynian, who had been staring out past the bars of the cubicle and over the smooth sand of the arena toward Nero's garlanded and purple-bannered throne, turned and studied his fellow gladiator from toe to crown. The heavily-muscled legs, the narrow waist, the sharply-tapering torso, the enormous shoulders. The leonine head, surmounted by an unkempt shock of red-bronze-auburn hair. And, lastly, the eyes—gold-flecked, tawny eyes—hard and cold now with a ferocity and a purpose not to be concealed.

"I have been more or less expecting something of this sort," Livius said then, quietly. "Nothing overt—you have builded well, Patroclus—but to one who knows gladiators as I know them there has been something in the wind for weeks past. I take it that someone swore his life for me and that I should not ask who that friend might be."

"One did. You should not."

"So be it. To my unknown sponsor, then, and to the gods, I give thanks, for I am wholly with you. Not that I have any hope. Although your tribe breeds men—from your build and hair and eyes you descend from Spartacus himself—you know that even he did not succeed. Things now are worse, infinitely worse, than they were in his day. No one who has ever plotted against Nero has had any measure of success; not even his scheming slut of a mother. All have died, in what fashions you know. Nero is vile, the basest of the base. Nevertheless, his spies are the most efficient that the world has ever known. In spite of that, I feel as you do. If I can take with me two or three of the Praetorians, I die content. But by your look, your plan is not what I thought, to storm vainly Nero's podium yonder. Have you, by any chance, some trace of hope of success?"

"More than a trace; much more." The Thracian's teeth bared in a wolfish grin. "His spies are, as you say, very good. But, this time, so are we. Just as hard and just as ruthless. Many of his spies among us have died; most, if not all, of the rest are known. They, too, shall die. Glatius, for instance. Once in a while, by the luck of the gods, a man kills a better man than he is; but Glatius has done it six times in a row, without getting a scratch. But the next time he fights, in spite of Nero's protection, Glatius dies. Word has gone out, and there are gladiators' tricks that Nero never heard of."

"Quite true. One question, and I too may begin to hope. This is not the first time that gladiators have plotted against Ahenobarbus. Before the plotters could accomplish anything, however, they found themselves matched against each other and the signal was always for death, never for mercy. Has this...?" Livius paused.

"It has not. It is that which gives me the hope I have. Nor are we gladiators alone in this. We have powerful friends at court; one of whom has for days been carrying a knife sharpened especially to slip between Nero's ribs. That he still carries that knife and that we still live are proofs enough for me that Ahenobarbus, the matricide and incendiary, has no suspicion whatever of what is going on."

(At this point Nero on his throne burst into a roar of laughter, his gross body shaking with a merriment which Petronius and Tigellinus ascribed to the death-throes of a Christian woman in the arena.)

"Is there any small thing which I should be told in order to be of greatest use?" Livius asked.

"Several. The prisons and the pits are so crowded with Christians that they die and stink, and a pestilence threatens. To mend matters, some scores of hundreds of them are to be crucified here tomorrow."

"Why not? Everyone knows that they are poisoners of wells and murderers of children, and practitioners of magic. Wizards and witches."

"True enough." Patroclus shrugged his massive shoulders. "But to get on, tomorrow night, at full dark, the remaining hundreds who have not been crucified are to be—have you ever seen sarmentitii and semaxii?"

"Once only. A gorgeous spectacle, truly, almost as thrilling as to feel a man die on your sword. Men and women, wrapped in oil-soaked garments smeared with pitch and chained to posts, make splendid torches indeed. You mean, then, that...?"

"Aye. In Caesar's own garden. When the light is brightest Nero will ride in parade. When his chariot passes the tenth torch our ally swings his knife. The Praetorians will rush around, but there will be a few moments of confusion during which we will go into action and the guards will die. At the same time others of our party will take the palace and kill every man, woman, and child adherent to Nero."

"Very nice—in theory." The Bithynian was frankly skeptical. "But just how are we going to get there? A few gladiators—such champions as Patroclus of Thrace—are at times allowed to do pretty much as they please in their free time, and hence could possibly be on hand to take part in such a brawl, but most of us will be under lock and guard."

"That too, has been arranged. Our allies near the throne and certain other nobles and citizens of Rome, who have been winning large sums by our victories, have prevailed upon our masters to give a grand banquet to *all* gladiators tomorrow night, immediately following the mass crucifixion. It is going to be held in the Claudian Grove, just across from Caesar's Gardens."

"Ah!" Livius breathed deep; his eyes flashed. "By Baal and Bacchus! By the round, high breasts of Isis! For the first time in years I begin to live! Our masters die first, then and there ... but hold—weapons?"

"Will be provided. Bystanders will have them, and armor and shields, under their cloaks. Our owners first, yes; and then the Praetorians. But note, Livius, that Tigellinus, the Commander of the Guard, is mine—mine alone. I, personally, am going to cut his heart out."

"Granted. I heard that he had your wife for a time. But you seem quite confident that you will still be alive tomorrow night. By Baal and Ishtar, I wish I could feel so! With something to live for at last, I can feel my guts turning to water—I can hear Charon's oars. Like as not, now, some toe-dancing stripling of a retiarius will entangle me in his net this very afternoon, and no mercy signal has been or will be given this day. Such is the crowd's temper, from Caesar down, that even you will get 'Pollice verso' if you fall."

"True enough. But you had better get over that feeling, if you want to live. As for me, I'm safe enough. I have made a vow to Jupiter, and he who has protected me so long will not desert me now. Any man or any thing who faces me during these games, dies."

"I hope so, sin ... but listen! The horns ... and someone is coming!"

The door behind them swung open. A lanista, or master of gladiators, laden with arms and armor, entered. The door swung to and was locked from the outside. The visitor was obviously excited, but stared wordlessly at Patroclus for seconds.

"Well, Iron-heart," he burst out finally, "aren't you even curious about what you have got to do today?"

"Not particularly," Patroclus replied, indifferently. "Except to dress to fit. Why? Something special?"

"*Extra* special. The sensation of the year. Fermius himself. Unlimited. Free choice of weapons and armor."

"Fermius!" Livius exclaimed. "Fermius the Gaul? May Athene cover you with her shield!"

"You can say that for me, too," the lanista agreed, callously. "Before I knew who was entered, like a fool, I bet a hundred

sesterces on Patroclus here, at odds of only one to two, against the field. But listen, Bronze-head. If you get the best of Fermius, I'll give you a full third of my winnings."

"Thanks. You'll collect. A good man, Fermius, and smart. I've heard a lot about him, but never saw him work. He has seen me, which isn't so good. Both heavy and fast—somewhat lighter than I am, and a bit faster. He knows that I always fight Thracian, and that I'd be a fool to try anything else against him. He fights either Thracian or Samnite depending upon the opposition. Against me his best bet would be to go Samnite. Do you know?"

"No. They didn't say. He may not decide until the last moment."

"Unlimited, against me, he'll go Samnite. He'll have to. These unlimiteds are tough, but it gives me a chance to use a new trick I've been working on. I'll take that sword there—no scabbard—and two daggers, besides my gladius. Get me a mace; the lightest real mace they've got in their armory."

"A *mace*! Fighting *Thracian*, against a *Samnite*?"

"Exactly. A mace. Am I going to fight Fermius, or do you want to do it yourself?"

The mace was brought and Patroclus banged it, with a two-handed roundhouse swing, against a stone of the wall. The head remained solid upon the shaft. Good. They waited.

Trumpets blared; the roar of the vast assemblage subsided almost to silence.

"Grand Champion Fermius versus Grand Champion Patroclus," came the raucous announcement. "Single combat. Any weapons

that either chooses to use, used in any way possible. No rest, no intermission. Enter!"

Two armored figures strode toward the center of the arena. Patroclus' armor, from towering helmet down, and including the shield, was of dully-gleaming steel, completely bare of ornament. Each piece was marred and scarred; very plainly that armor was for use and had been used. On the other hand, the Samnite half-armor of the Gaul was resplendent with the decorations affected by his race. Fermius' helmet sported three brilliantly-colored plumes, his shield and cuirass, enameled in half the colors of the spectrum, looked as though they were being worn for the first time.

Five yards apart, the gladiators stopped and wheeled to face the podium upon which Nero lolled. The buzz of conversation—the mace had excited no little comment and speculation—ceased. Patroclus heaved his ponderous weapon into the air; the Gaul whirled up his long, sharp sword. They chanted in unison:

"Ave, Caesar Imperator!
Morituri te salutant!"

The starting-flag flashed downward; and at its first sight, long before it struck the ground, both men moved. Fermius whirled and leaped; but, fast as he was, he was not quite fast enough. That mace, which had seemed so heavy in the Thracian's hands a moment before, had become miraculously maneuverable—it was hurtling through the air directly toward the middle of his body! It did not strike its goal—Patroclus hoped that he was the only one there who suspected that he had not expected it to touch his opponent—but in order to dodge the missile Fermius had to break

his stride; lost momentarily the fine co-ordination of his attack. And in that moment Patroclus struck. Struck, and struck again.

But, as has been said, Fermius was both strong and fast. The first blow, aimed backhand at his bare right leg, struck his shield instead. The left-handed stab, shield-encumbered as the left arm was, ditto. So did the next trial, a vicious forehand cut. The third of the mad flurry of swordcuts, only partially deflected by the sword which Fermius could only then get into play, sheared down and a red, a green, and a white plume floated toward the ground. The two fighters sprang apart and studied each other briefly.

From the gladiators' standpoint, this had been the veriest preliminary skirmishing. That the Gaul had lost his plumes and that his armor showed great streaks of missing enamel meant no more to either than that the Thracian's supposedly surprise attack had failed. Each knew that he faced the deadliest fighter of his world; but if that knowledge affected either man, the other could not perceive it.

But the crowd went wild. Nothing like that first terrific passage-at-arms had ever before been seen. Death, sudden and violent, had been in the air. The arena was saturated with it. Hearts had been ecstatically in throats. Each person there, man or woman, had felt the indescribable thrill of death—vicariously, safely—and every fiber of their lusts demanded more. More! Each spectator knew that one of those men would die that afternoon. None wanted, or would permit them both to live. This was to the death, and death there would be.

Women, their faces blotched and purple with emotion, shrieked and screamed. Men, stamping their feet and waving their arms, yelled and swore. And many, men and women alike, laid wagers.

"Five hundred sesterces on Fermius!" one shouted, tablet and stylus in air.

"Taken!" came an answering yell. "The Gaul is done—Patroclus all but had him there!"

"One thousand, you!" came another challenge. "Patroclus missed his chance and will never get another—a thousand on Fermius!"

"Two thousand!"

"Five thousand!"

"Ten!"

The fighters closed—swung—stabbed. Shields clanged vibrantly under the impact of fended strokes, swords whined and snarled. Back and forth—circling—giving and taking ground—for minute after endless minute that desperately furious exhibition of skill, of speed and of power and of endurance went on. And as it went on, longer and longer past the time expected by even the most optimistic, tension mounted higher and higher.

Blood flowed crimson down the Gaul's bare leg and the crowd screamed its approval. Blood trickled out of the joints of the Thracian's armor and it became a frenzied mob.

No human body could stand that pace for long. Both men were tiring fast, and slowing. With the drive of his weight and armor, Patroclus forced the Gaul to go where he wanted him to go. Then, apparently gathering his every resource for a final effort, the Thracian took one short, choppy step forward and swung straight down, with all his strength.

The blood-smeared hilt turned in his hands; the blade struck flat and broke, its length whining viciously away. Fermius, although staggered by the sheer brute force of the abortive stroke, recovered almost instantly; dropping his sword and snatching at his gladius to take advantage of the wonderful opportunity thus given him.

But that breaking had not been accidental; Patroclus made no attempt to recover his balance. Instead, he ducked past the surprised and shaken Gaul. Still stooping, he seized the mace, which everyone except he had forgotten, and swung; swung with all the totalized and synchronized power of hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, and magnificent body.

The iron head of the ponderous weapon struck the center of the Gaul's cuirass, which crunched inward like so much cardboard. Fermius seemed to leave the ground and, folded around the mace, to fly briefly through the air. As he struck the ground, Patroclus was upon him. The Gaul was probably already dead—that blow would have killed an elephant—but that made no difference. If that mob knew that Fermius was dead, they might start yelling for his life, too. Hence, by lifting his head and poising his dirk high in air, he asked of Caesar his Imperial will.

The crowd, already frantic, had gone stark mad at the blow. No thought of mercy could or did exist in that insanely bloodthirsty throng; no thought of clemency for the man who had fought such a magnificent fight. In cooler moments they would have wanted him to live, to thrill them again and yet again; but now, for almost half an hour, they had been loving the hot, the suffocating thrill of death in their throats. Now they wanted, and would have, the ultimate thrill.

"Death!" The solid structure rocked to the crescendo roar of the demand. "*Death!* DEATH!"

Nero's right thumb pressed horizontally against his chest. Every vestal was making the same sign. Pollice verso. Death. The strained and strident yelling of the mob grew even louder.

Patroclus lowered his dagger and delivered the unnecessary and unfelt thrust; and—

"Peractum est!" arose one deafening yell.

Thus the red-haired Thracian lived; and also, somewhat to his own surprise, did Livius.

"I'm glad to see you, Bronze-heart, by the white thighs of Ceres, I am!" that worthy exclaimed, when the two met, the following day. Patroclus had never seen the Bithynian so buoyant. "Pallas Athene covered you, like I asked her to. But by the red beak of Thoth and the sacred Zaimph of Tanit, it gave me the horrors when you made that throw so quick and missed it, and I went as crazy as the rest of them when you pulled the real coup. But now, curse it, I suppose that we'll all have to be on the lookout for it—or no, unlimiteds aren't common, thank Ninib the Smiter and his scarlet spears!"

"I hear you didn't do so badly, yourself," Patroclus interrupted his friend's loquacity. "I missed your first two, but I saw you take Kalendios. He's a high-rater—one of the best of the locals—and I was afraid he might snare you, but from the looks of you, you got only a couple of stabs. Nice work."

"Prayer, my boy. Prayer is the stuff. I prayed to 'em in order, and hit the jackpot with Shamash. My guts curled up again, like they belong, and I knew that the portents were all in my favor. Besides, when you were walking out to meet Fermius, did you notice that red-headed Greek posturer making passes at you?"

"Huh? Don't be a fool. I had other things to think of."

"So I figured. So did she, probably, because after a while she came around behind with a lanista and made eyes at me. I must have the next best shape to you here, I guess. What a wench! Anyway, I felt better and better, and before she left I knew that no damn retiarius that ever waved a trident could put a net past my guard. And they couldn't either. A couple more like that and I'll be a Grand Champion myself. But they're digging holes for the crosses and there's the horn that the feast is ready. This show is going to be really good."

They ate, hugely and with unmarred appetite, of the heaped food which Nero had provided. They returned to their assigned places to see crosses, standing as close together as they could be placed and each bearing a suffering Christian, filling the whole vast expanse of the arena.

And, if the truth must be told, those two men enjoyed thoroughly every moment of that long and sickeningly horrible afternoon. They were the hardest products of the hardest school the world has ever known: trained rigorously to deal out death mercilessly at command; to accept death unflinchingly at need. They should not and can not be judged by the higher, finer standards of a softer, gentler day.

The afternoon passed; evening approached. All the gladiators then in Rome assembled in the Claudian Grove, around tables creaking under their loads of food and wine. Women, too, were there in profusion; women for the taking and yearning to be taken; and the tide of revelry ran open, wide, and high. Although all ate and apparently drank with abandon, most of the wine was in fact wasted. And as the sky darkened, most of the gladiators, one by one, began to get rid of their female companions upon one pretext or another and to drift toward the road which separated the festivities from the cloaked and curious throng of lookers-on.

At full dark, a red glare flared into the sky from Caesar's garden and the gladiators, deployed now along the highway, dashed across it and seemed to wrestle briefly with cloaked figures. Then armed, more-or-less-armored men ran back to the scene of their reveling. Swords, daggers, and gladii thrust, stabbed, and cut. Tables and benches ran red; ground and grass grew slippery with blood.

The conspirators turned then and rushed toward the Emperor's brilliantly torch-lit garden. Patroclus, however, was not in the van. He had had trouble in finding a cuirass big enough for him to get into. He had been delayed further by the fact that he had had to kill three strange lanistae before he could get at his owner, the man he really wanted to slay. He was therefore some little distance behind the other gladiators when Petronius rushed up to him and seized him by the arm.

White and trembling, the noble was not now the exquisite Arbiter Elegantiae; nor the imperturbable Augustian.

"Patroclus! In the name of Bacchus, Patroclus, why do the men go there now? No signal was given—I could not get to Nero!"

"What?" the Thracian blazed. "Vulcan and his fiends! It *was* given—I heard it myself! What went wrong?"

"Everything." Petronius licked his lips. "I was standing right beside him. No one else was near enough to interfere. It was—should have been—easy. But after I got my knife out I couldn't move. It was his *eyes*, Patroclus—I swear it, by the white breasts of Venus! He has the evil eye—I couldn't move a muscle, I tell you! Then, although I didn't want to, I turned and ran!"

"How did you find *me* so quick?"

"I—I—I—don't know," the frantic Arbiter stuttered. "I ran and ran, and there you were. But what are we—you—going to do?"

Patroclus' mind raced. He believed implicitly that Jupiter guarded him personally. He believed in the other gods and goddesses of Rome. He more than half believed in the multitudinous deities of Greece, of Egypt, and even of Babylon. The other world was real and close; the evil eye only one of the many inexplicable facts of every-day life. Nevertheless, in spite of his credulity—or perhaps in part because of it—he also believed firmly in himself; in his own powers. Wherefore he soon came to a decision.

"Jupiter, ward from me Ahenobarbus' evil eye!" he called aloud, and turned.

"Where are you going?" Petronius, still shaking, demanded.

"To do the job *you* swore to do, of course—to kill that bloated toad. And then to give Tigellinus what I have owed him so long."

At full run, he soon overtook his fellows, and waded resistlessly into the fray. He was Grand Champion Patroclus, working at his trade; the hard-learned trade which he knew so well. No

Praetorian or ordinary soldier could stand before him save momentarily. He did not have all of his Thracian armor, but he had enough. Man after man faced him, and man after man died.

And Nero, sitting at ease with a beautiful boy at his right and a beautiful harlot at his left, gazed appreciatively through his emerald lens at the flaming torches; the while, with a very small fraction of his Eddorian mind, he mused upon the matter of Patroclus and Tigellinus.

Should he let the Thracian kill the Commander of his Guard? Or not? It didn't really matter, one way or the other. In fact, nothing about this whole foul planet—this ultra-microscopic, if offensive, speck of cosmic dust in the Eddorian Scheme of Things—really mattered at all. It would be mildly amusing to watch the gladiator consummate his vengeance by carving the Roman to bits. But, on the other hand, there was such a thing as pride of workmanship. Viewed in that light, the Thracian could not kill Tigellinus, because that bit of corruption had a few more jobs to do. He must descend lower and lower into unspeakable depravity, finally to cut his own throat with a razor. Although Patroclus would not know it—it was better technique not to let him know it—the Thracian's proposed vengeance would have been futility itself compared with that which the luckless Roman was to wreak on himself.

Wherefore a shrewdly-placed blow knocked the helmet from Patroclus' head and a mace crashed down, spattering his brains abroad.

Thus ended the last significant attempt to save the civilization of Rome; in a fiasco so complete that even such meticulous

historians as Tacitus and Suetonius mention it merely as a minor disturbance of Nero's garden party.

The planet Tellus circled its sun some twenty hundred times. Sixty-odd generations of men were born and died, but that was not enough. The Arisian program of genetics required more. Therefore the Elders, after due deliberation, agreed that that Civilization, too, must be allowed to fall. And Gharlane of Eddore, recalled to duty from the middle of a much-too-short vacation, found things in very bad shape indeed and went busily to work setting them to rights. He had slain one fellow-member of the Innermost Circle, but there might very well have been more than one Master involved.

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BOOK TWO

THE WORLD

WAR

IV. 1918

Sobbing furiously, Captain Ralph Kinnison wrenched at his stick—with half of his control surfaces shot away the crate was hellishly logy. He could step out, of course, the while saluting the victorious Jerries, but he wasn't on fire—yet—and hadn't been hit—yet. He ducked and flinched sidewise as another burst of bullets stitched another seam along his riddled fuselage and whanged against his dead engine. Afire? Not yet—good! Maybe he could land the heap, after all!

Slowly—oh, so sluggishly—the Spad began to level off, toward the edge of the wheatfield and that friendly, inviting ditch. If the krauts didn't get him with their next pass....

He heard a chattering beneath him—Brownings, by God!—and the expected burst did not come. He knew that he had been just about over the front when they conked his engine; it was a toss-up whether he would come down in enemy territory or not. But now, for the first time in ages, it seemed, there were machine-guns going that were not aimed at him!

His landing-gear swished against stubble and he fought with all his strength of body and of will to keep the Spad's tail down. He almost succeeded; his speed was almost spent when he began to nose over. He leaped, then, and as he struck ground he curled up and rolled—he had been a motorcycle racer for years—feeling as he did so a wash of heat: a tracer had found his gas-tank at last! Bullets were thudding into the ground; one shrieked past his head as, stooping over, folded into the smallest possible target, he galloped awkwardly toward the ditch.

The Brownings still yammered, filling the sky with cupro-nickeled lead; and while Kinnison was flinging himself full length into the protecting water and mud, he heard a tremendous crash. One of those Huns had been too intent on murder; had stayed a few seconds too long; had come a few meters too close.

The clamor of the guns stopped abruptly.

"We got one! We got one!" a yell of exultation.

"Stay down! Keep low, you boneheads!" roared a voice of authority, quite evidently a sergeant's. "Wanna get your blocks shot off? Take down them guns; we gotta get to hell out of here. Hey, you flyer! Are you O.K., or wounded, or maybe dead?"

Kinnison spat out mud until he could talk. "O.K.!" he shouted, and started to lift an eye above the low bank. He stopped, however, as whistling metal, sheeting in from the north, told him that such action would be decidedly unsafe. "But I ain't leaving this ditch right now—sounds mighty hot out there!"

"You said it, brother. It's hotter than the hinges of hell, from behind that ridge over there. But ooze down that ditch a piece, around the first bend. It's pretty well in the clear there, and besides, you'll find a ledge of rocks running straight across the flat. Cross over there and climb the hill—join us by that dead snag up there. We got to get out of here. That sausage over there must have seen this shindig and they'll blow this whole damn area off the map. Snap it up! And you, you goldbricks, get the lead out of your pants!"

Kinnison followed directions. He found the ledge and emerged, scraping thick and sticky mud from his uniform. He crawled across the little plain. An occasional bullet whined through the air,

far above him; but, as the sergeant had said, this bit of terrain was "in the clear." He climbed the hill, approached the gaunt, bare tree-trunk. He heard men moving, and cautiously announced himself.

"OK., fella," came the sergeant's deep bass. "Yeah, it's us. Shake a leg!"

"That's easy!" Kinnison laughed for the first time that day. "I'm shaking already, like a hula-hula dancer's empennage. What outfit is this, and where are we?"

"BRROOM!" The earth trembled, the air vibrated. Below and to the north, almost exactly where the machine-guns had been, an awe-inspiring cloud billowed majestically into the air; a cloud composed of smoke, vapor, pulverized earth, chunks of rock, and debris of what had been trees. Nor was it alone.

"Crack! Bang! Tweet! Boom! Wham!" Shells of all calibers, high explosive and gas, came down in droves. The landscape disappeared. The little company of Americans, in complete silence and with one mind, devoted themselves to accumulating distance. Finally, when they had to stop for breath:

"Section B, attached to the 76th Field Artillery," the sergeant answered the question as though it had just been asked. "As to where we are, somewhere between Berlin and Paris is about all I can tell you. We got hell knocked out of us yesterday, and have been running around lost ever since. They shot off a rally signal on top of this here hill, though, and we was just going to shove off when we seen the krauts chasing you."

"Thanks. I'd better rally with you, I guess—find out where we are, and what's the chance of getting back to my own outfit."

"Damn slim, I'd say. Boches are all around us here, thicker than fleas on a dog."

They approached the summit, were challenged, were accepted. They saw a gray-haired man—an old man, for such a location—seated calmly upon a rock, smoking a cigarette. His smartly-tailored uniform, which fitted perfectly his not-so-slender figure, was muddy and tattered. One leg of his breeches was torn half away, revealing a blood-soaked bandage. Although he was very evidently an officer, no insignia were visible. As Kinnison and the gunners approached, a first lieutenant—practically spic-and-span—spoke to the man on the rock.

"First thing to do is to settle the matter of rank," he announced, crisply. "I'm First Lieutenant Randolph, of...."

"Rank, eh?" The seated one grinned and spat out the butt of his cigarette. "But then, it was important to me, too, when I was a first lieutenant—about the time that you were born. Slayton, Major-General."

"Oh ... excuse me, sir...."

"Skip it. How many men you got, and what are they?"

"Seven, sir. We brought in a wire from Inf...."

"A *wire*! Hellanddamnation, why haven't you got it with you, then? Get it!"

The crestfallen officer disappeared; the general turned to Kinnison and the sergeant.

"Have you got any ammunition, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. About thirty belts."

"Thank God! We can use it, and you. As for you, Captain, I don't know...."

The wire came up. The general seized the instrument and cranked.

"Get me Spearmint ... Spearmint? Slayton—give me Weatherby.... This is Slayton ... yes, but ... No, but I want ... Hell and damnation, Weatherby, shut up and let me talk—don't you know that this wire's apt to be cut any second? We're on top of Hill Fo-wer, Niyun, Sev-en—that's right—about two hundred men; maybe three. Composite—somebody, apparently, from half the outfits in France. Too fast and too far—both flanks wide open—cut off ... Hello! Hello! Hello!" He dropped the instrument and turned to Kinnison. "You want to go back, Captain, and I need a runner—bad. Want to try to get through?"

"Yes, sir."

"First phone you come to, get Spearmint—General Weatherby. Tell him Slayton says that we're cut off, but the Germans aren't in much force nor in good position, and for God's sake to get some air and tanks in here to keep them from consolidating. Just a minute. Sergeant, what's your name?" He studied the burly non-com minutely.

"Wells, sir."

"What would you say ought to be done with the machine-guns?"

"Cover that ravine, there, first. Then set up to enfilade if they try to come up over there. Then, if I could find any more guns, I'd...."

"Enough. Second Lieutenant Wells, from now. GHQ will confirm. Take charge of all the guns we have. Report when you have made

disposition. Now, Kinnison, listen. I can probably hold out until tonight. The enemy doesn't know yet that we're here, but we are due for some action pretty quick now, and when they locate us—if there aren't too many of their own units here, too—they'll flatten this hill like a table. So tell Weatherby to throw a column in here as soon as it gets dark, and to advance Eight and Sixty, so as to consolidate this whole area. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got a compass?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pick up a tin hat and get going. A hair north of due west, about a kilometer and a half. Keep cover, because the going will be tough. Then you'll come to a road. It's a mess, but it's ours—or was, at last accounts—so the worst of it will be over. On that road, which goes south-west, about two kilometers further, you'll find a Post—you'll know it by the motorcycles and such. Phone from there. Luck!"

Bullets began to whine and the general dropped to the ground and crawled toward a coppice, bellowing orders as he went. Kinnison crawled, too, straight west, availing himself of all possible cover, until he encountered a sergeant-major reclining against the south side of a great tree.

"Cigarette, buddy?" that wight demanded.

"Sure. Take the pack. I've got another that'll last me—maybe more. But what the hell goes on here? Who ever heard of a major general getting far enough up front to get shot in the leg, and he

talks as though he were figuring on licking the whole German army. Is the old bird nuts, or what?"

"Not so you would notice it. Didn'tcha ever hear of 'Hellandamnation' Slayton? You will, buddy, you will. If Pershing doesn't give him three stars after this, he's crazier than hell. He ain't supposed to be on combat at all—he's from GHQ and can make or break anybody in the AEF. Out here on a look-see trip and couldn't get back. But you got to hand it to him—he's getting things organized in great shape. I came in with him—I'm about all that's left of them that did—just waiting for this breeze to die down, but its getting worse. We'd better duck—over there!"

Bullets whistled and stormed, breaking more twigs and branches from the already shattered, practically denuded trees. The two slid precipitately into the indicated shell-hole, into stinking mud. Wells' guns burst into action.

"Damn! I hated to do this," the sergeant grumbled, "On accounta I just got half dry."

"Wise me up," Kinnison directed. "The more I know about things, the more apt I am to get through."

"This is what is left of two battalions, and a lot of casuals. They made objective, but it turns out the outfits on their right and left couldn't, leaving their flanks right out in the open air. Orders come in by blinker to rectify the line by falling back, but by then it couldn't be done. Under observation."

Kinnison nodded. He knew what a barrage would have done to a force trying to cross such open ground in daylight.

"One man could prob'ly make it, though, if he was careful and kept his eyes wide open," the sergeant-major continued. "But you ain't got no binoculars, have you?"

"No."

"Get a pair easy enough. You saw them boots without any hobnails in 'em, sticking out from under some blankets?"

"Yes. I get you." Kinnison knew that combat officers did not wear hobnails, and usually carried binoculars. "How come so many at once?"

"Just about all the officers that got this far. Conniving, my guess is, behind old Slayton's back. Anyway, a kraut aviator spots 'em and dives. Our machine-guns got him, but not until after he heaved a bomb. Dead center. Christ, what a mess! But there's six-seven good glasses in there. I'd grab one myself, but the general would see it—he can see right through the lid of a mess-kit. Well, the boys have shut those krauts up, so I'll hunt the old man up and tell him what I found out. *Damn* this mud!"

Kinnison emerged sinuously and snaked his way to a row of blanket covered forms. He lifted a blanket and gasped: then vomited up everything, it seemed, that he had eaten for days. But he *had* to have the binoculars.

He got them.

Then, still retching, white and shaken, he crept westward; availing himself of every possible item of cover.

For some time, from a point somewhere north of his route, a machine-gun had been intermittently at work. It was close; but the very loudness of its noise, confused as it was by resounding

echoes, made it impossible to locate at all exactly the weapon's position. Kinnison crept forward inchwise; scanning every foot of visible terrain through his powerful glass. He knew by the sound that it was German. More, since what he did not know about machine-guns could have been printed in bill-poster type upon the back of his hand, he knew that it was a Maxim, Model 1907—a mean, mean gun. He deduced that it was doing plenty of damage to his fellows back on the hill, and that they had not been able to do much of anything about it. And it was beautifully hidden; even he, close as he must be, couldn't see it. But damn it, there *had* to be a....

Minute after minute, unmoving save for the traverse of his binoculars, he searched, and finally he found. A tiny plume—the veriest wisp—of vapor, rising from the surface of the brook. Steam! Steam from the cooling jacket of that Maxim 1907! And there was the tube!

Cautiously he moved around until he could trace that tube to its business end—the carefully-hidden emplacement. There it was! He couldn't maintain his westward course without them spotting him; nor could he go around far enough. And besides ... and besides that, there would be at least a patrol, if it hadn't gone up the hill already. And there were grenades available, right close....

He crept up to one of the gruesome objects he had been avoiding, and when he crept away he half-carried, half-dragged three grenades in a canvas bag. He wormed his way to a certain boulder. He straightened up, pulled three pins, swung his arm three times.

Bang! Bam! Pow! The camouflage disappeared; so did the shrubbery for yards around. Kinnison had ducked behind the rock, but he ducked still deeper as a chunk of something, its force

pretty well spent, clanged against his steel helmet. Another object thudded beside him—a leg, gray-clad and wearing a heavy field boot!

Kinnison wanted to be sick again, but he had neither the time nor the contents.

And damn! What *lousy* throwing! He had never been any good at baseball, but he supposed that he could hit a thing as big as that gun-pit—but not one of his grenades had gone in. The crew would probably be dead—from concussion, if nothing else—but the gun probably wasn't even hurt. He would have to go over there and cripple it himself.

He went—not exactly boldly—forty-five in hand. The Germans looked dead. One of them sprawled on the parapet, right in his way. He gave the body a shove, watched it roll down the slope. As it rolled, however, it came to life and yelled; and at that yell there occurred a thing at which young Kinnison's hair stood straight up inside his iron helmet. On the gray of the blasted hillside hitherto unseen gray forms moved; moved toward their howling comrade. And Kinnison, blessing for the first time in his life his inept throwing arm, hoped fervently that the Maxim was still in good working order.

A few seconds of inspection showed him that it was. The gun had practically a full belt and there was plenty more. He placed a box—he would have no Number Two to help him here—took hold of the grips, shoved off the safety, and squeezed the trip. The gun roared—what a gorgeous, what a heavenly racket that Maxim made! He traversed until he could see where the bullets were striking: then swung the stream of metal to and fro. One belt and

the Germans were completely disorganized; two belts and he could see no signs of life.

He pulled the Maxim's block and threw it away; shot the water-jacket full of holes. That gun was done. Nor had he increased his own hazard. Unless more Germans came very soon, nobody would ever know who had done what, or to whom.

He slithered away; resumed earnestly his westward course: going as fast as—sometimes a trifle faster than—caution would permit. But there were no more alarms. He crossed the dangerously open ground; sulked rapidly through the frightfully shattered wood. He reached the road, strode along it around the first bend, and stopped, appalled. He had heard of such things, but he had never seen one; and mere description has always been and always will be completely inadequate. Now he was walking right into it—the thing he was to see in nightmare for all the rest of his ninety-six years of life.

Actually, there was very little to see. The road ended abruptly. What had been a road, what had been wheatfields and farms, what had been woods, were practically indistinguishable, one from the other; were fantastically and impossibly the same. The entire area had been churned. Worse—it was as though the ground and its every surface object had been run through a gargantuan mill and spewed abroad. Splinters of wood, riven chunks of metal, a few scraps of bloody flesh. Kinnison screamed, then, and ran; ran back and around that blasted acreage. And as he ran, his mind built up pictures; pictures which became only the more vivid because of his frantic efforts to wipe them out.

That road, the night before, had been one of the world's most heavily traveled highways. Motorcycles, trucks, bicycles.

Ambulances. Kitchens. Staff-cars and other automobiles. Guns; from seventy-fives up to the big boys, whose tremendous weight drove their wide caterpillar treads inches deep into solid ground. Horses. Mules. And people—*especially* people—like himself. Solid columns of men, marching as fast as they could step—there weren't trucks enough to haul them all. That road had been crowded—jammed. Like State and Madison at noon, only more so. Over-jammed with all the personnel, all the instrumentation and incidentalia, all the weaponry, of war.

And upon that teeming, seething highway there had descended a rain of steel-encased high explosive. Possibly some gas, but probably not. The German High Command had given orders to pulverize that particular area at that particular time; and hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of German guns, in a micrometrically-synchronized symphony of firepower, had pulverized it. Just that. Literally. Precisely. No road remained; no farm, no field, no building, no tree or shrub. The bits of flesh might have come from horse or man or mule; few indeed were the scraps of metal which retained enough of their original shape to show what they had once been.

Kinnison ran—or staggered—around that obscene blot and struggled back to the road. It was shell-pocked, but passable. He hoped that the shell-holes would decrease in number as he went along, but they did not. The enemy had put this whole road out of service. And that farm, the P.C., ought to be around the next bend.

It was, but it was no longer a Post of Command. Either by directed fire—star-shell illumination—or by uncannily accurate chart-work, they had put some heavy shell exactly where they would do the most damage. The buildings were gone; the cellar in which the

P.C. had been was now a gaping crater. Parts of motorcycles and of staff cars littered the ground. Stark tree trunks—all bare of leaves, some riven of all except the largest branches, a few stripped even of bark—stood gauntly. In a crotch of one, Kinnison saw with rising horror, hung the limp and shattered naked torso of a man; blown completely out of his clothes.

Shells were—had been, right along—coming over occasionally. Big ones, but high; headed for targets well to the west. Nothing close enough to worry about. Two ambulances, a couple of hundred meters apart, were coming; working their way along the road, between the holes. The first one slowed ... stopped.

"Seen anybody—Look out! Duck!"

Kinnison had already heard that unmistakable, unforgettable screech, was already diving headlong into the nearest hole. There was a crash as though the world were falling apart. Something smote him; seemed to drive him bodily into the ground. His light went out. When he recovered consciousness he was lying upon a stretcher; two men were bending over him.

"What hit me?" he gasped. "Am I...?" He stopped. He was afraid to ask: afraid even to try to move, lest he should find that he didn't have any arms or legs.

"A wheel, and maybe some of the axle, of the other ambulance, is all," one of the men assured him. "Nothing much; you're practically as good as ever. Shoulder and arm bunged up a little and something—maybe shrapnel, though—poked you in the guts. But we've got you all fixed up, so take it easy and...."

"What we want to know is," his partner interrupted, "Is there anybody else alive up here?"

"Uh-huh," Kinnison shook his head.

"O.K. Just wanted to be sure. Lots of business back there, and it won't do any harm to have a doctor look at you."

"Get me to a 'phone, as fast as you can," Kinnison directed, in a voice which he thought was strong and full of authority, but which in fact was neither. "I've got an important message for General Weatherby, at Spearmint."

"Better tell us what it is, hadn't you?" The ambulance was now jolting along what had been the road. "They've got phones at the hospital where we're going, but you might faint or something before we get there."

Kinnison told, but fought to retain what consciousness he had. Throughout that long, rough ride he fought. He won. He himself spoke to General Weatherby—the doctors, knowing him to be a Captain of Aviation and realizing that his message should go direct, helped him telephone. He himself received the General's sizzingly sulphurous assurance that relief would be sent and that that quadruply-qualified line would be rectified that night.

Then someone jabbed him with a needle and he lapsed into a dizzy, fuzzy coma, from which he did not emerge completely for weeks. He had lucid intervals at times, but he did not, at the time or ever, know surely what was real and what was fantasy.

There were doctors, doctors, doctors; operations, operations, operations. There were hospital tents, into which quiet men were carried; from which still quieter men were removed. There was a larger hospital, built of wood. There was a machine that buzzed and white-clad men who studied films and papers. There were scraps of conversation.

"Belly wounds are bad," Kinnison thought—he was never sure—that he heard one of them say. "And such contusions and multiple and compound fractures as those don't help a bit. Prognosis unfavorable—distinctly so—but we'll soon see what we can do. Interesting case ... fascinating. What would you do, Doctor, if you were doing it?"

"I'd let it alone!" A younger, stronger voice declared, fervently. "Multiple perforations, infection, extravasation, oedema—uh-uh! I am watching, Doctor, and learning!"

Another interlude, and another. Another. And others. Until finally, orders were given which Kinnison did not hear at all.

"Adrenalin! Massage! Massage hell out of him!"

Kinnison again came to—partially to, rather—anguished in every fiber of his being. Somebody was sticking barbed arrows into every square inch of his skin; somebody else was pounding and mauling him all over, taking particular pains to pummel and to wrench at all the places where he hurt the worst. He yelled at the top of his voice; yelled and swore bitterly: "QUIT IT!" being the expurgated gist of his luridly profane protests. He did not make nearly as much noise as he supposed, but he made enough.

"Thank God!" Kinnison heard a lighter, softer voice. Surprised, he stopped swearing and tried to stare. He couldn't see very well, either, but he was pretty sure that there was a middle-aged woman there. There was, and her eyes were not dry. "He is going to live, after all!"

As the days passed, he began really to sleep, naturally and deeply.

He grew hungrier and hungrier, and they would not give him enough to eat. He was by turns sullen, angry, and morose.

In short, he was convalescent.

For Captain Ralph K. Kinnison, THE WAR was over.

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