

THE BRASS GOD

"Rising above crass materialism, the native piety of Corps diplomats, coupled with a solemn appreciation of universal spiritual values, has enriched Corps annals with no more inspiring example of the reconciliation of alien ideologies than that of Ambassador Straphanger's virtuoso performance among the Hoog. Ever humbly aware of the Great Notebook in the hand of the Big Inspector—whose E.R.'s are written on the parchment of Eternity—Straphanger penetrated the veils of ecclesiastical mystery to base a rapprochement on the firm ground of the realistic doctrine of the Universal Popularity of Sin . . ."

—Vol. II, Reel I, 480 AE (AD 2941)

The Hoogan chamberlain was tall, black-clad, high-shouldered, with an immense dome-shaped head sloping into massive shoulders, eyes like freshly shelled oysters in a leathery face and over-long, dangling arms. He turned to face the party of Terrestrial diplomats who stood clutching suitcases, dwarfed under the lofty vaulted ceiling of the vast, dark hall. Shafts of eerily colored light filtered through stained-glass loopholes high in the walls to shed a faint glow on the uneven stone floor, the drab-colored murals and hangings depicting the specialties of the seven Hoogan Hells, the mouths of dark corridors radiating from the circular chamber with helmeted and kilted Hoogan pikemen spaced between them, immobile as the gargoyles that peered from high niches.

"His Arrokanze the Bope has kraziously blaced at your disposal these cosy quarters," the chamberlain said in a deep, hollow voice. "You may now zelect rooms on the floors above and array yourselves in the karments provided—"

"Look here, Mr. Oh-Doomy-Gloom," Ambassador Straphanger cut in. "I've been thinking it over, and I've decided that my staff and I will just nip back over to our ship for the night—"

"His Arrokanze will pe eggpecting you at the fête in the Bapal Kardens in one hour's time," the Hoogan bored on. "His Arrokanze tislikes intenzely to be kept waitink."

"Oh, we're all keenly aware of the honor His Arrogance has paid us in offering accommodations here in the Papal Palace, but—"

"One hour," Oh-Doomy-Gloom repeated, his voice echoing across the hall. He turned away, the symbolic chain attached to his neck clanking as he moved. He paused, turned back.

"By the way, you are instrugted to iknore any small ah . . . indrusions. If you zee anything . . . unusual, zummon a guard at once."

"Intrusions?" Straphanger repeated querulously. "What kind of intrusions?"

"The balace," Oh-Doomy-Gloom said, "is haunted."

* * *

Four twisting turns of a stone staircase above the reception hall, Second

Secretary Magnan tip-toed at Retief's side along an echoing corridor past black, iron-bound doors and mouldy tapestries dimly visible in the light of a flambeau set in a bracket at the far end of the passage.

"Quaint beliefs these bucolics entertain," Magnan said in a tone of forced heartiness. "Haunted indeed! How silly! Ha!"

"Why are you whispering?" Retief inquired.

"Just out of respect for the Pope, of course." Magnan came to an abrupt halt, clutched Retief's sleeve. "Wha-what's that?" he pointed. Along the corridor, something small and dark slipped from the shadow of a pilaster to the shelter of a doorway.

"Probably just our imagination," Retief suggested.

"But it had big red eyes," Magnan protested.

"They're as easy to imagine as any other kind."

"I just remembered: I left my shower cap in my hold baggage. Let's go back."

Retief moved off. "It's just a few doors farther. Six, seven . . . here we are." He inserted the key Oh-Doomy-Gloom's aide had provided; the heavy door swung open with a creak that descended the scale to a low groan. Magnan hurried forward, paused to stare at the nearest wall hanging, showing a group of Hoogans suspended head-down from spikes above leaping flames, while goblins of various shapes prodded them with long barb-tipped spears.

"Curious how similar religious art is from one world to another," he commented. Inside the room, he stared around in dismay at the damp stone walls, the two spartan cots, the carved devils in the corner.

"What perfectly ghastly quarters!" He dropped his suitcase, went over to prod the nearest bunk. "Why, my spine will never endure this mattress! I'll be a physical wreck after the first night! And the draft—I'm sure to catch a chill. And . . . and . . ." He broke off, raised a shaky finger to point at the darkest corner of the narrow chamber, where a tall, bug-eyed demon carved from pale blue stone winked garnet eyes.

"Retief! Something moved over there—it was just like the devils in the pictures! All fuzzy red bristles and eyes that glow in the dark . . . !"

Retief opened his suitcase. "If you see another one, throw a shoe at it. Right now, we'd better be getting into costume; compared with an aroused Ambassador, a few devils are just friendly pets."

Half an hour later, having sponged off at the stone sink, Magnan's eyes were still rolling nervously as he adjusted the folds of his Hoogan ceremonial sarong before the tarnished, rippled mirror.

"I suppose it is just nerves," he said. "It's all the fault of that Oh-Doomy-Gloom fellow and his quaint native superstitions! I confess his remarks quite unnerved me for a moment."

Across the room, Third Secretary Retief was loading match-head sized charges into the magazine of an inconspicuous hand-gun.

"Probably just his way of warning us about the mice," he said.

Magnan turned, caught a glimpse of the gun. "Here, Retief! What's that?"

"Just a quaint native cure for spooks—if they get too noisy." He tucked the gun out of sight under the Hoogan sarong. "Just think of it as a sort of good luck charm, Mr. Magnan."

"A knife up the sleeve is an old diplomatic tradition," Magnan said doubtfully. "But a power pistol under the sarong . . ."

"I'll have it along in case something jumps out of the stonework and yells boo!" Retief said reassuringly.

Magnan sniffed, admiring himself in the dark glass.

"I was rather relieved when the Ambassador insisted on native dress for the staff instead of ceremonial nudity for tonight's affair." He turned to study the hang of the uneven hem-line that exposed his bare shins. "One of his finer moments, I fancied. He does cut an impressive figure, once his jowls get that purplish tinge. Not even Oh-Doomy-Gloom dared stand up to him. Though I do wish he'd gone just the one step further and demanded the right to wear trousers—" he broke off, his eyes on the black drapes covering the high, narrow window. The heavy cloth twitched.

"Retief!" he gasped. "There it is again!"

"Shhh," Retief watched as the curtain moved again. A tiny red-glowing head appeared at its edge, a foot above the floor; a wire-thin leg emerged, another; a body like a ball of reddish fluff came into view, its red-bead eyes on two inch stalks tilting alertly to scan the chamber. Its gaze fixed on Retief; it moved clear of the curtain, paused, then started toward him on skittery legs—

With a yell, Magnan dived for the door, flung it wide.

"Guards! Help! Goblins! Spooks!" His voice receded along the hall, mingling with the clank of accouterments, the slap of wide Hoogan feet.

The intruder hesitated at the outcry, dithered for a moment, then emitted a cry like a goosed fairy, fumbling with two of its limbs at something attached to its back. Beyond the door, Magnan's voice supplied a shrill counterpoint to the rumble of Hoogan questions.

"Then get someone who speaks Terran!" he yelled. "At this moment my associate is being savaged by the monster!"

Retief crossed quickly to the window, pulled the drapes aside and unlatched a panel, letting in a draft of damp night air.

"This way out, fellow," he said. "You'd better be going before the cops arrive."

The fluff-ball darted across the room, came to a shaky stop before Retief, made quick motions. A folded square of paper fell to the floor at Retief's feet. Then the creature sprang for the opening and was gone as Hoogan feet clumped at the door.

"Where Spism?" a heavy voice demanded in thick Terran. A conical Hoogan head in a flaring helmet swiveled to scan the room. Behind the guard, Magnan craned for a view.

"Where is the beast?" he shrilled. "It was at least four feet high, and its tusks were four inches long at the very least!"

The Hoogan advanced into the room, pointed to the open window with his broad-headed seven-foot pike.

"It was a mouse after all," Retief said. "It got away."

"You let Spism ko?"

"Shouldn't I have?" Retief inquired mildly, pocketing the folded paper.

"Spism pad imp from nether rechions; might bite Terry, get blood boisonink."

"I think you're being impertinent," Magnan said sharply, "biting Terrans is perfectly safe—"

The Hoogan turned to him, pike lowered ominously.

"You will come with me," it ordered. "The benaldy for consortink with minions of Unterworlt is poilink in oil."

"Here," Magnan said, backing. "Stand back, my man—"

The Hoogan reached for Magnan with a long, snaky hand; Retief stepped up behind him, selected a spot, and struck a sharp blow with bunched fingertips. The guard stumbled, fell past Magnan and hit chin first with a resounding slam. His pike shattered against the wall.

"Retief!" Magnan gobbled. "What are you thinking of? You've laid hands on a member of the Papal Guard!"

"I had the distinct impression this fellow hooked a toe on the rug and fell down. Didn't you notice?"

"Why, you know very well—"

"Just before he reached you, Mr. Magnan."

"Ah . . . why, yes, now that you mention it, he did trip," Magnan's tone was suddenly brisk. "Nasty fall. I rushed up to support him, but alas, too late. Poor fellow. Served him right, the brute. Shall we go through his pockets?"

"Why?"

"You're right; there isn't time. That crash was doubtless heard throughout the palace—"

A second Hoogan appeared at the open door, his helmet bearing the fanged angel indicative of officer rank. He eyed the fallen pikeman.

"You addacked this one?" he demanded.

Magnan glanced at the victim as though noticing him for the first time. "He seems to have fallen down," he observed brightly.

"Against rules to gill Hoogan," the captain said ominously.

"He . . . ah . . . broke his spear," Magnan pointed out helpfully.

"Very bad crime, defile ceremonial spear," the captain said sternly. "Require burification ceremony. Very expensive."

Magnan fumbled in a money pouch at one hip. "I'd love to contribute a little something—"

"Ten Hoogan grecredits, forget whole thing. For eggstra five dispose of body—"

The felled Hoogan stirred, mumbled, sat up.

"Ha!" the captain said. "Look like no teal. Put for another eggstra five . . ." He lifted a short, ugly club from his belt. "Finish off unfortunate victim of Terry violence."

"Stop!" Magnan yelled. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Inzult to Overseer caste briest cosd you two more grecredits. For you I mage special brice, three for five—"

"Bribery?" Magnan gasped. "Corruption?"

"Three it is," the Hoogan nodded. "How apout you?" he turned to Retief. "You sport like other Terry?"

"Look here, I'm paying you nothing!" Magnan barked. "Just assist this unfortunate chap out of here, if you please, and we'll get on with our dressing!"

"Small religious contributions fine old Hoogan gustom!" the Overseer protested. "You want to fiolate local tapoos?"

"We Terrans have a few customs of our own," Retief put in smoothly. "We feel that graft should only be paid voluntarily." He offered a note which the officer palmed deftly. The guard was on his feet now, swaying; the captain barked an order; his subordinate gathered up the spear fragments, shot Magnan a poisonous look and departed, followed by the captain.

Retief closed the door behind the departing visitors, fished out the scrap of paper dropped by the fleeing Spism, opened it out:

BY THE OGRE FOUNTAIN AT SECOND MOONRISE; WEAR A YELLOW DUNGFLOWER

Magnan, busy at the mirror again, heaved a deep sigh.

"Hardly an auspicious beginning," he commented. Then: "Heavens! It's twenty thirty! We're late!" He gave his sarong a final tug, smoothed a thinning lock across his forehead, led the way along the echoing hall and down a spiral stair to an archway debouching onto wide steps above a ragged lawn. Blue lanterns hanging in the branches of skeletal trees shed a wan radiance on the fungus-like ornamental plants, the sculptures representing souls in torment, and the wide tables laden with Terran delicacies hastily unloaded from the Corps transport for the occasion. A dozen grotesquely shaped fountains spread a fine mist and an odor of sulphur across the festive scene. Beyond the high, spike-topped wall, the ominous shape of an immense brass-colored idol reared up half a mile away, its ferocious sculptured grin glowing in the glare of spotlights, its right arm raised in the Hoogan royal salute, elbow straight out, forearm pointing upward with fingers spread, the left hand gripping the right biceps. Magnan shuddered.

"That beastly idol—it's sub-Hoogan," he commented. "Isn't that smoke coming out of its nostrils?"

Retief sniffed. "Something's burning," he agreed.

A dark figure stepped up from dense shadow at Magnan's elbow. "Only old newspapers you scent," it rumbled. "Our Hoogan Kods are uezful; they zerve as gommunity inzinerators."

"Oh-Doomy-Gloom! You startled me!" Magnan chirped. He slapped at an insect that buzzed his face. "I do hope the evening is a big success. It was so thoughtful of His Arrogance to allow the Corps to act as host tonight; such a gesture of acceptance, sort of."

"Reverze hospitality is an old Hoogan gustom," Oh-Doomy-Gloom said. "It would be a good idea to know all our old Hoogan gustoms, so as not to end up lige the last Derran Tiplomat."

"Yes, it was unfortunate about Ambassador Straphanger's predecessor getting excommunicated, and all. But really, how was he to know he was supposed to fill the Papal begging bowl with hundred-credit notes?"

"It wasn't zo much not contributink; but pourink the canned beans in spoiled the bill His Arrokanze had planted as a hint."

"A bad scene," Magnan agreed. "But I'm sure this evening will smooth everything over."

The orchestra was tuning up now; lugubrious notes groaned across the lawn. Armed Papal guards were taking up their posts, and sarong-clad diplomats were forming up a receiving line by the stone arch opening on the drive through which the dignitaries would arrive.

"I must hurry alonk now and zee to the kun emplazements," Oh-Doomy-Gloom said. "One lasd suggestion: worldly goods of course mean nothink to His Arrokanze, but the deadliest of the zinz is Stinchiness. His Arrokanze detests a tightwad." He moved off, chains clashing.

"The Ambassador's not out yet," Magnan noted nervously. "Gracious, I hope

he puts in an appearance before Pope Ai-Poppy-Googy arrives. I dread the prospect of having to engage His Arrogance in light chitchat."

"According to the Post Report, dealing with the Pope is very simple," Retief said. "Just give him everything in sight, and if that doesn't satisfy him, give him some more."

"I can see that you're getting the hang of diplomacy, Retief," Magnan said approvingly. "Still, I'm worried . . ."

"Since it's your job as Protocol Officer to soften up difficult guests," Retief said, "why not meet the Pope at the gate and try out a few racy stories on him?"

"I hardly imagine that the Chief of State of a Theocracy would react favorably to biological anecdotes," Magnan said stiffly.

"Oh, biology is a perfectly clean subject here on Hoog; but don't bring up cooking in polite conversation. According to the handbook, there's an unspoken agreement among the cultured element that the stork brings the goodies."

"Really? Heavens, and all the cookies are stamped `Made in Hong Kong'! I'll have to tell the cook to substitute blintzes. While I'm attending to that, you'd best take your post at the gate. You'll handle the first shift tonight. I'll send Stringwhistle along to relieve you in an hour."

"I could delay the Pope a few minutes for you," Retief offered, as they crossed to the gate. "Suppose I start by demanding to see his invitation—"

"None of your ill-timed japes, Retief! After the last mission's fiasco, establishing a friendly rapport with the Pope tonight could mean promotions all around."

"I think the traditional lawn party is a little too subtle for a fellow like the Pope. We should have used a simpler symbolism—like a few rounds of heavy artillery lobbed into the palace grounds."

"Hardly the diplomatic approach," Magnan sniffed. "For centuries now it's been understood that if enough diplomats go to enough parties, everything will come right in the end."

"I wonder if the Hoogans understand that tradition?"

"Certainly; after all, we're all fellow beings—brothers under the skin, as it were."

"In this case, the skin is an inch thick and tougher than armorplast. I'm not sure we can penetrate to the brotherhood layer in time to save bloodshed."

"Actually, I rather look forward to matching epigrams with His Arrogance tonight," Magnan said loftily, turning to scan the gardens. "As you know, I'm always at my sparkling best with high-ranking guests—and of course, mere size and strength fail utterly to intimidate me—" Magnan turned at a sound behind him, uttered a strangled yelp, and trampled a Hoog waiter's foot as he leaped back from the spectacle of a seven-foot-high,

six-foot-wide Hoog wrapped in cloth of gold. The monster's gilded features included one-inch nose holes, huge watery, reddish eyes and a wide mouth set in a formal grimace to display polished gold-capped teeth. Two clusters of ringed fingers gripped the hilt of an immense two-edged sword.

"Somethink smells pat!" the apparition bellowed. He leaned forward, sniffed vigorously at Magnan and snorted.

"Horriple!" he announced, elbowing Magnan aside. "Ko away, vellow! You're invested with an acute P.O.!"

"Why, Your Arrogance—it's just a touch of skin bracer back of my ear—"

"It smelts like pargain night in a choy house. Where's Ambassador Hapstrinker? I drust you have blenty of food reaty. I understant you Terries take a kreat interest in gooking." The Pope winked a damp pink eye, rammed Magnan under the ribs and guffawed comfortably.

"Oof!" Magnan said. "Why, Your Arrogance!"

The Pope was already striding toward the nearest table, his escort of armed and helmeted guards trailing behind, fingering scimitars and eyeing the diplomats suspiciously.

"I . . . I think I'll just scoot along and see to the refreshments," Magnan bleated. "Retief, you accompany His Arrogance and keep him amused until help arrives—I mean, until the Ambassador puts in an appearance!" He fled.

The Pope dipped a boneless finger into a large crystal container of cheese sauce, studied it at arm's length, sniffed it, then, with a flick of a limber wrist, splattered it across the ruffled shirt-fronts and glassy smiles of the diplomats strung out in the receiving line.

"Who are these loavers?" he demanded loudly. "Bropaply relatives, waitink around for handouts. I have the same proplem. Or had the same proplem, I should zay. Two weeks ako was Self-Denial Festival. I made the subreme sagrifize ant offered the entire lot to the anzestral spirids."

"Giving up your relatives for Lent is quite an idea," Retief said. "It could catch on."

The Pope picked up a plate of dainty sandwiches, spilled the food off, sniffed the plate, and took a small bite. "I've heard a kreat teal about Terran tishes," he said, chewing noisily. "A bit too crizp, but not bat." He took a second nip from the thin porcelain, offered it to Retief.

"Have a bite," he invited genially.

"No thanks, I filled up on a beer bottle just before Your Arrogance arrived," Retief countered. "Try the dinner plates. They're said to be an epicure's delight."

There was a sudden stir from the vicinity of the wide terrace doors. Ambitious diplomatic underlings sprang to positions of eager anticipation, delighted smiles ready. The squat figure of Career Minister Straphanger, Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Hoog,

waddled into view, stylishly decked out in a short but heavily brocaded Hoogan longhi, a brilliant red sash which all but dragged the ground, and jeweled sandals. At his side puffed a companion of almost identical build and garb, distinguished only by a mop of vivid orange hair. Magnan trailed by two yards.

"Ah, the Ampassador is twints?" the Pope inquired, moving toward the approaching pair.

"No, that's Mrs. Straphanger," Retief said. "If I were Your Arrogance I'd ditch that saucer; she's fierce when aroused."

"Ah, the edernal female, ever conzerned with food gonzervation." The Pope tossed the crust of the plate back of a flowering bush.

"Ah, there, Ampassador Strakhumper!" he bellowed. "And your charming cow! She will be litterink zoon, I trust?"

"Littering? How's that?" Straphanger stared around in confusion.

"I azzume you keep your cows pregnant?" the Pope boomed. "Or possibly thiz one is over-aged. But no matter; doubtless she was a gread producer in her day."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Straphanger snapped, bridling.

"By the way," Ai-Poppy-Googy went on, "I hate to disguss finanzas over food, zo I suggesd we deal with the proplem of an abbrobriate kift ad once. I am of gourse quite brebared to vorget the drivial misuntersdandink with the former ampassator ant agecpd any zum in egzess of one million greidits without quibblink."

"One million credits?" Straphanger babbled. "Gift?"

"Of gourse, if you wish to avoid aguirink a reputation as a piker, an egstra million would not be taken amiss."

"A million credits of Corps funds? But . . . but whatever for?"

"Ah, ah," the Pope waggled an admonitory tactile member. "No pryink into Hoogan internal matters!"

"Oh, no, indeed, Your Arrogance! I only meant . . . what's the occasion? For the gift, I mean."

"It's Tuesday."

"Oh."

The Pope nodded placidly. "Luggy you didn't throw thiz affaire on Wentsday; thad's double gifd day." He plucked a glass from a tray offered by a bearer, emptied the contents on the lawn, nipped a chip from the edge with his polished metallic teeth, munched thoughtfully.

"Lackink in flavor," he commented.

"My best crystal," Mrs. Straphanger gasped. "All the way from Brooklyn, yet,

and like a goat he's eating it!"

"A koat?" The Pope eyed her suspiciously. "I don't believe I know the term."

"It's a . . . a sort of gourmet," Straphanger improvised. Sweat was glistening on his forehead. "Known for its discriminating tastes."

"Now, about the matter of a bension," the Pope continued. "I see no need of ostentation. A mere thousand a day would suffice as a token of Corps esteem."

"A thousand what a day?" the Ambassador inquired around a frozen diplomatic grin which exposed old-fashioned removable dentures.

"Credits, of course. And then there is the matter of zupzidies to Hoogan industry; say fifty thousand a month. Don't give a thought to administration; just make the cheques payable to me personally—"

"Hoogan industry? But I was given to understand there are no industries here on Hoog—"

"That's why we require a zupzity," the Pope said blandly.

Straphanger hitched his smile in place with an effort.

"Your Arrogance, I'm here merely to establish friendly relations, to bring Hoog into the mainstream of Galactic cultural life—"

"What could be friendlier than money?" the Pope inquired in a loud, final-sounding voice.

"Well," Straphanger conceded, "we might arrange a loan—"

"An outright grant is so much simpler," the Pope pointed out.

"Of course, it would mean extra staff, to handle the administrative load." Straphanger rubbed his hands together, a speculative gleam in his eye. "Say twenty-five for a start—"

The Pope turned as a medium-sized Hoog in tight black-and-silver vestments came up, growled in his ear, waving a rubbery arm toward the house.

"What?" the Pope exploded. He swiveled on Straphanger. "You are harporink tapoo creatures! Give aid and comfort to undesirable elements? Share your substance with minions of the Opposition?"

"Your Arrogance!" Straphanger's voice quavered against the rising roar of the outraged cleric. "I don't understand! What did that fellow say?"

The Pope bawled commands in Hoogan. His escort scattered, began beating the bushes rimming the garden. The Ambassador trotting at his side, the guest of honor strode to the laden refreshment tables, began stuffing in fragile china, muttering to himself.

"Your Arrogance," Straphanger panted. "If I could just have some explanation! I'm sure it's all just a ghastly mistake! What are these men

searching for? I assure you—"

"Out of the gootnezz of my heard, I welgomed you to Hoog!" the Pope roared. "As a great gompliment to you, I abzorbed your language! I was even ready to agezept cash, the zubreme chesture! And now I find that you openly gonzort with the enemies of the Kods!"

Standing on the sidelines of the verbal fray, Retief glanced around the garden, spotted a fountain in the shape of a two-headed Hoogan dwarf with oversized teeth and belly. He moved over to it, turned and surveyed the gesticulating group at the table. There was a tug at his sandal-lace. He looked down. Two bright eyes at the ends of wire-like stalks stared up appealingly from a clump of grass. He glanced around; all eyes were on the Pope.

"Are you looking for me?" Retief asked softly.

"Right!" a squeaky voice piped. "You're a hard man to have a quiet chat with, Mr. Ahh."

"Retief."

"How do, Retief. My name's Jackspurt. The boys appointed me spokesmen to tell you Terries about what's going on. After all, I guess us Spisms got a few rights, too."

"If you can explain what's going on in this filbert factory, I'll be forever in your debt, Jackspurt. Speak your piece."

"It's the Hoogans; they don't give us a minute's peace. Talk about persecution! Do you know those psalm-singing hippos are blaming us for everything from sour milk to loss of potency? It's getting where it's not safe to take a stroll after sundown—"

"Hold on, Jackspurt. Maybe you'd better fill me in on some background. Who are you? Why are the Hoogans after you? And where did you learn to speak Terran with that flawless enunciation of consonants?"

"I used to be a mascot on a Terry trader; I stowed away when she landed here for emergency repairs. It was a good life; but after a while I got homesick for good old Hoog—you know how it is—"

"You're a native of this charming world?"

"Sure—us Spisms have been around longer than the Hoogs. And we got along for thousands of years with no trouble: the Hoogs took the surface, and we settled in nice and comfy underground. Then they got religion and it's been Hell ever since . . ."

"Hold on, Jackspurt: I always heard that religion exercised a beneficent influence on those fortunate enough to possess it."

"That depends on which side you're on."

"That's a point."

"But I haven't given you the big picture yet. These Hoogan priests launched a full-scale propaganda campaign: painted up a lot of religious art with pictures of Spisms poking pitchforks at Hoogs, and pretty soon it got so even the average Hoog in the street started jumping and making X's in the air and mumbling spells everytime one of us came up for a breath of fresh air. The next thing we knew, it was full-scale war! I'm telling you, Retief, us Spisms are in bad shape—and it's gonna get worse!"

A guard was working his way toward the ogre fountain.

"Jiggers, the gendarmes," Retief said. "You'd better get out of sight, Jackspurt. They're beating the bushes for you. Why don't we continue this later—"

The Spism whisked back under cover. "But this is important, Retief!" Jackspurt's voice emanated from the brush. "The boys are counting on me—"

"Shhh! Watch me and take your cue . . ." Mangan had turned and was eyeing Retief suspiciously. He stepped to his junior's side.

"Retief, if you're mixed up in this mix-up . . ."

"Me, Mr. Mangan? Why, I just arrived this afternoon the same time you did—"

"Mangan!" Straphanger's voice cut through the hubbub. "The Pope informs me that some sort of demonic creature was seen here on the Embassy grounds this evening! Of course we know nothing about it, but His Arrogance has drawn the unfortunate implication that we're consorting with denizens of the netherworld!" He lowered his voice as Mangan drew close. "Superstitious poppycock, but we've got to play along; you and the others spread out and go through a show of looking for this mythical imp. I'll pacify His Arrogance."

"Certainly, Mr. Ambassador. But . . . ah . . . what if we find it?"

"Then you're an even greater idiot than I suspect!" Straphanger twisted his working smile into position and turned back to the Pope.

"Retief, you start along there," Mangan indicated the front of the house. "I'll go poke about in the bushes. And whatever you do, don't turn up anything—like that ghastly creature we encountered upstairs—" A startled look spread across his face. "Good lord, Retief! Do you suppose—?"

"Not a chance. I picture something more like a medium-sized dragon."

"Still . . . perhaps I'd better mention it to the Ambassador . . ."

"And confirm the Pope's opinion? Very courageous of you. Mind if I stick around and watch?"

"On the other hand, he's a busy man," Mangan said hurriedly. "After all, why bother him with trivia?" He hurried off to take up a position near the Pope and make a show of stooping and peering among the conifer-like hedges. Retief sauntered back to the table, deserted now except for a lone

Hoogan bearer at the far end gathering empties onto a wide tray and tossing damp paper napkins into a capacious waste paper receptacle. Retief picked up an empty sandwich plate said *hsst!*; the Hoogan looked up as Retief tossed the plate. The Hoogan dropped the big paper bag and caught the tossed crockery.

"Here's some more," Retief offered helpfully. He gathered up and handed over a pair of saucers, three empty glasses and a couple of cheese sandwiches each minus one bite. "You'd better hump along now and police up behind His Arrogance," he suggested. "He's leaving a trail of saucer rims behind him; doesn't seem to like the floral design."

"You dry dell me my chop?" the Hoogan demanded truculently as Retief fumbled a spoon, let it drop to the grass just under the edge of the hanging table cloth.

"Certainly not, old boy," Retief reassured the glowering local. He stooped for the spoon, caught a glimpse of an eye peering from the shadows.

"Get in the bag," he hissed from the corner of his mouth.

"Who you talg to?" the servant ducked and stared under the table. Behind him, the paper trash container rustled softly as the Spism whisked into it.

"Just addressing a few words to the spoon god," Retief said blandly. "Bad luck to drop a spoon, you know."

"Yez?" the Hoogan said. He leaned against the table, got out a much-used toothpick and began plying it on his unpolished teeth. "You voreigners kot grazzy iteas. Efrypoty know kood lug trop sboon, bat lug trob forg."

"Back home, falling from a ten-story building is considered an inauspicious omen," Retief rambled on, watching the armed Papal Guard as they worked closer. One came over to the table, gave Retief a sharp look, thrust his head under the table, then reached to check the trash container. "How about a little refreshment?" Retief picked up a cup, dipped it full from a bowl of thick purple punch, took a step toward the warrior and seemed to trip; the sticky fluid struck the Hoogan just below the clasp holding the rainbow-hued cape, spread out in an interesting pattern across his polished breastplate. The bearer grabbed up his tray and bag and backed off hurriedly as the spluttering guard slapped limber fingers at the mess.

"Itiot! Clumpsy oaf!" he choked—

"What, boozink on duty?" a vast voice boomed. The Pope bellied past Retief, planted himself before the confused Hoogan. "The benalty is boilink in oil!" he roared. "Take him away!"

Other guardsmen closed in, grabbed their unfortunate fellow.

"That was my fault, Your Arrogance," Retief started. "I offered him—"

"You would inderfere with the Babal administration of justize?" the Pontiff bellowed, turning on Retief. "You have the demerity to sugchest that the Babal judgment is fallible?"

"Not exactly; you're just wrong," Retief said. "I spilled the punch on him."

The Pope's face purpled; his mouth worked. He swallowed.

"It's ben zo long zinze anyone contradicted me," he said mildly, "that I've vorkotten the bunishment." He waved two fingers in blessing. "You are apzolved, my zon," he said airily. "In vact, I apzolv you for the whole weekent. Have fun; it's on the house."

"Why, isn't that gracious of His Arrogance?" Magnan chirped, popping up beside the Pope. "What a pity we didn't find the demon; but I—"

"That reminds me," the Pope said ominously. He fixed an eye on Ambassador Straphanger as the senior diplomat came up. "I'm still waitink for results!"

"Look here, Your Arrogance! How can we find a demon if there's no demon here?"

"That's your broblem!"

There was a yell from the gate. Two guards were man-handling the bearer with the waste-paper bag, who jerked away, making indignant noises. The bag fell, split open, spilling garbage from the midst of which the fugitive Spism burst, sending scraps flying in every direction. With a bound, it was past the astonished guards, heading for the rear gate. More guards appeared in its path, jerking long-barreled guns from tooled holsters. A shot seared a long gouge in the deep grass, narrowly missed other Papal retainers dashing up to get a crack at the action. The Pope yelled, waving his boneless arms.

Cut off, the Spism veered, dashed for the house, was met by a squad charging out from inside. A near-miss smashed dishes on the table beside Magnan, who yelped and hit the dirt.

The Spism skittered, took evasive action, headed for the flower-decked gate letting onto the drive. The guards were all behind it now, the way clear. With a tremendous yell, Pope Ai-Poppy-Googy whipped his giant sword out and leaped to intercept the fleeing creature. As he bounded past Retief, the latter pivoted, thrust out a foot, hooked the papal leg just above a flare-topped bejeweled pink leather shoe. His Arrogance dived forward, struck medals-first, and skidded on his face under the table.

"Why, hi there," Magnan's voice piped from under the muffling canopy of the drooping table cloth. "Just a minute, and I'll scroonch over—"

The Pope roared and rose up, the table lifting with him; dishes, glasses, and food cascaded off on Magnan, crouching on the ground. With a surge, the Pontiff hurled the board aside, roared again, whirling to confront the dancing figure of Ambassador Straphanger, who flapped a napkin at the mud on the ornate canonicals of the guest of honor.

"Treason!" Ai-Poppy-Googy bellowed. "Azzazints! Murderers! Achents of the Unterworlt! Obstructors of chustist! Heretics!"

"Now, now, Your Arrogance! Don't get upset—"

"Upzet! This iz maybe a choke?" The Pope dashed the muddied cloth from Straphanger's hand, bent and snatched up his sword, waved it overhead. The Papal Guard was closing in quickly now.

"I hereby eggsgommunigate the lot of you!" he Pope yelled. "No food, no water, no bolice brotection! Alzo, you will be puplicly eggsecuted! Boys, round them up!"

Guns were suddenly leveled at the huddle of diplomats surrounding the Ambassador. Magnan yelped. Straphanger's wattles quivered.

"Ton't miss this one!" Ai-Poppy-Googy indicated Retief. "It was his foot I fell over!" A guard poked a gun into Retief's side.

"Ah, I think Your Arrogance is forgetting that Mr. Retief has a Papal dispensation," Straphanger said brightly. "Retief, if you'll just run along to my office and send out a code two-oh-three—or is it three-oh-two—or . . . anyway, a call for aitch ee ell pee—"

"He'll ko along with the rest of you scoundrels!" the Pope yelled. Half a dozen armed Hoogans were herding the remainder of the staff up to join the group now.

"Any more insite?"

"No, Your Arrostants," the captain of the guard reported. "Only a few zervants."

"Poil them in oil for azzociatink with azzazints! As for the rest of you—"

"Your Arrogance," Straphanger spoke up. "Naturally, I don't mind dying, if it's Your Arrogance's pleasure, but then we won't be able to give you the gifts and things, will we...?"

"Tamn!" Ai-Poppy-Googy threw his sword down, narrowly missing Magnan's foot. "I forgot about the gidtz!" He looked thoughtful. "Look, zuppose I make arranchmends for you to write a few chegs in your zell pefore the eggzecution?"

"Oh, I'm afraid that wouldn't do at all, Your Arrogance. I need the Embassy seal, and the check verifying machine, and the code books and—"

"Well . . . bossibly I might make an egzeption; I'll defer punishment until the cash arrives—"

"Sorry, Your Arrogance, but I wouldn't ask you to deviate from tradition just to accommodate me. No, we're all excommunicated, so I suppose we may just as well get comfortable and start starving—"

"Holt it! Don't rush me! Who's doing the eggsgommunigatink, you or me?"

"Oh, you are—"

"Brecizely! And I zay you're not eggsgommunigated!" The Pope stared around truculently. "Now about the gifd! You can deliver the two million immediatly; I juzt happened to pring an armored gar alonk—"

"TWO million? But you said one million!"

"This is touple gift day."

"But you said Wednesday was double-gift day. This is only Tuesday."

"It's now Wentsday, by Babal decree."

"But you can't—I mean, how can you . . . ?"

"Calendar Reform," Ai-Poppy-Googy said. "Lonk overdue."

"Well, I suppose it could be arranged . . ."

"Kood! I herepy grant you a Babal rebrieve. Put that toesn't inglude the resd of these untesiraples!" the Pope waved a hand. "Dake them away, poys!"

"Ah . . . I'm grateful for the pardon, I'm sure," Straphanger said, gaining confidence rapidly; "but of course I won't be able to process the paper work properly without my staff . . ."

Ai-Poppy-Googy glared with large, damp, red eyes. "All righd! Keeb them! They're all rebrieved egzebd thad one!" he aimed a finger at Retief like a gun. "I have sbezial blans for him!" The guards shifted their attention to Retief, ringing him in with aimed guns.

"Maybe His Arrogance would be just a teeny bit lenient this time," Magnan suggested, dabbing at a smear of liver paste along his bare arm, "if Mr. Retief apologized and promised never to do it again."

"Do whad akain?" the Pope demanded.

"Trip you," Magnan said. "You know, like he did just now."

"He dribbed me?" Ai-Poppy-Googy choked. "On burpose?"

"Why, ah, it must have been a mistake—" Straphanger started.

"Your Arrogance has such a keen sense of humor, I'm sure you'll see the comic aspect of it, if you just think about it," Magnan offered.

"Retief! Did you—I mean, surely you didn't—" Straphanger choked.

"Well!" Magnan said indignantly. "I was lying right there—"

"Zearch him!" the Pope bellowed. Guards jumped forward; busy hands grabbed at Retief's kilt-pockets, almost at once came upon the folded paper the Spism had dropped as it fled his room.

"Ah-hah!" the Pope pounced, opened the paper, read the message.

"A gonsbirazy!" he yelled. "Unter my fery nose! But the ironths on him!"

"I must protest!" Straphanger spoke up. "You can't go about chaining up diplomats every time a little indiscretion is committed! Leave the matter to me, Your Arrogance; I'll see that a sharp entry goes in his record—"

"The Kods will not be denied their due!" Ai-Poppy-Googy roared. "Domorrow is the Krant Vestifal of Wentstay—"

"Tomorrow's Thursday," Magnan interjected.

"Domorrow is Wentstay! Today is Wentstay! I hereby declare a whole weeg of Wentstays, plast it! Now, as I was sayink—this Derran will bartizibade in the vestifal! Zuch is the Babal will! No more arkuments!"

"Oh, he'll be taking part in a ceremony!" Straphanger said in a relieved tone. "Well, goodness, I suppose we can spare him long enough for that." He offered a small diplomatic chuckle. "The Corps is always ready to promote worship in whatever form, of course—"

"The only dru Kods are the Hookan Kods, py the Kods!" the Pope boomed. "Any more of your Derran heresy, and I'll referse my tisbenzation! Now dake thiz one to the demple and brebare him vor the rides of Wentstay! The resd of you will remain unter arresd, undil the will of the Kods is known!"

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan quavered, tugging at Straphanger's arm. "Do you think we should allow them—"

"Merely letting His Arrogance save face," Straphanger said in a confidential tone. He winked at Retief. "Don't worry, my boy; good experience for you. You'll get an inside view of the Hoogan religious concept at work."

"But—but, what if they . . . I mean, boiling in oil is so permanent . . ." Magnan persisted.

"Quiet, Magnan! I'll have no whiners in my organization!"

"Thanks for thinking of me, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "I still have my good luck charm."

"Charm?" Magnan looked blank.

"Witchgraft?" the Pope boomed. "I zuzbegted as much!" He turned a large red eye on Straphanger.

"I'll be zeeing you at the zeremony! Ton't be lade!" He eyed Retief. "Are you goming beazevully?"

"In view of the number of guns aimed at me," Retief said, "I sincerely hope so."

* * *

The cell was narrow, dark, damp, and unfurnished except for a plain table with a bottle of bitter-smelling wine and a narrow bench on which Retief sat, his wrists chained together, listening to a muffled tapping which sounded faintly from beyond the walls. It had been going on now for twelve hours, he estimated—long enough for the Hoogans to have completed their preparations for the religious ceremonies in which he was to play a part.

The tapping abruptly changed tone, sounding louder, nearer. There was a light clatter, as of pebbles tossed on the floor. A moment later, there was a

soft scraping sound, a rasping like fingernails on a blackboard; then silence.

"Retief, are you there?" a thin voice chirped through the pitch darkness.

"Sure, Jackspurt! Come on in and join the party. I'm glad to see you eluded the gendarmes."

"Those slobs! Hah! But listen, Retief, I've got bad news . . ."

"Press on, Jackspurt; I'm listening."

"This is Festival Day—and old Googy's scheduled the big all-out push for today, to tie in with the mumbo-jumbo. The Hoogs have been building this king-size fumigator for months—stacking it full of rubbish, old rags, worn-out tires, and what not. At the height of the big ceremony, they set the stuff on fire, and start the smoke-pumps going. They got a system of pipes laid out leading into the burrows, see? There won't be a safe spot for Spisms for miles around. Our boys will come stampeding out of their hideaways, some of which have been in the family for generations, and zowie! the Pope's troops lower the boom! It'll be the finish of Spisms!"

"That's a heart-rending story, Jackspurt—or it would be, if I weren't in such a heart-rending position myself at the moment—"

"Yeah, the Wednesday Rites. You scheduled for the matinee or the big evening spectacular?" Jackspurt broke off as clanking sounded from beyond the door.

"Holy Moses, Retief! Time's up! They're here! Listen, I was supposed to brief you in, like, but it took longer'n I figured tunneling through that wall, and then I got to yakking—"

A key scraped in the keyhole.

"Listen! Did you drink any of what's in the bottle?"

"No."

"Good! It's doped! When I leave, dump it! You'll have to pretend you can't talk or the jig's up! Put on a kind of zombie routine, see? Whatever they tell you—do it! If they get the idea you're putting something over, it's zkkk! for every Terry on Hoog! And remember! Keep your head down and your arms and legs tucked in—"

The lock turned with a rasp of rusty tumblers.

"Got to go! Good luck!" Jackspurt scrambled and was gone. Retief took a step, grabbed up the bottle, poured it down the three-inch hole through which his visitor had fled.

Light blazed as the heavy door swung inward. Three hooded Hoogan pikemen came into the cell, followed by a black-robed priest. Retief stood holding the empty bottle, his body concealing Jackspurt's escape route.

"How to you veel, Derry?" the priest inquired, looking Retief over. He stepped in, thumbed Retief's eyelid up, grunted, took the empty bottle from

his hand.

"Goked to the eyeprows," he stated.

"Are you zure?" a pikeman challenged. "I ton'd drust these voreigners."

"Nadurally I'm zure; the hypervasgulations of the subraoccibital whatchamagallids is dypical; a glassic gase. Dake him alonk."

Hemmed in by pikes, Retief followed along a torch-lit passage, up winding stone stairs, to emerge abruptly into blinding light and the susurrus of a multitude of voices, above which one rose like the boom of surf:

" . . . azzure you, my tear Ambassador Hipstinker, our brinzibal teity, Uk-Ruppa-Tooty, is nod only a hantzome degoration and a gonstand reminter to the bobulaze that the nexd tithe is tue—he also brotuzes oragular stadements rekularly efery Wentstay at one B.M. Of gourse, it is nod always kiven to us to undersdant whad he's dalkink apout, bud the evvegd on the beasandry is most zaludory . . ."

Squinting against the sudden sunlight, Retief made out the resplendently-robed figure of the Pope, seated under a vast parasol on a massive throne of dark wood carved with designs of intertwined serpents, flanked on the left by the Terran Ambassador and on the right by a huddle of lesser diplomats, the group ringed in by stony-faced Hoogan guards with bared scimitars.

The priest who had accompanied Retief bowed unctuously before the Papal throne. "Your Arrokanze, the Zoon-to-pe-Elefated One is here," he indicated Retief with a wave of the hand.

"Is he . . . ah . . . ?" Ai-Poppy-Googy looked inquiringly at the escort.

"A glassig gase of hypervasgulations of the thinkamapops," a pikeman spoke up.

"Poil thad one in oil," the Pope said, frowning. "He dalgs doo mudge."

"You appear a bit peaked, Retief," Straphanger commented. "I trust you slept well last night? Comfortable quarters and all that?"

Retief stared absently past the Ambassador's left ear.

"Retief, the Ambassador's addressing you," Magnan said sharply.

"Brobably he's losd in metitations," Ai-Poppy-Googy said hastily. "On with the zeremony—"

"Perhaps he's sick," Magnan said. "Here, you'd better sit down—"

"Ah-ah," Ai-Poppy-Googy held up a limber hand. "The mosd imbortand bortion of the zeremony yed remaints to pe zeleprated."

"Ah, yes, of course," Straphanger sat back. "I'd quite forgotten, Your Arrogance." He glanced around. "We'll have a magnificent view of the proceedings from here . . ."

At a prod from a Papal Guard, Retief turned—and found himself staring directly into the vast brass smile of the Hoogan idol.

* * * * *

From Retief's elevated viewpoint atop the two-hundred foot high ziggurat, the head of the god reared up another fifty feet, an immense stylized Hoogan face of polished yellow metal, the vast hand upraised beside it. The eyes were deep hollows at the back of which a sullen red glow gave an impression of malignant intelligence. The nose-holes, a yard each in diameter, drooled a thin trickle of smoke which coiled up past soot-streaked cheeks to dissipate in the clear air. The mouth which split the massive head gaped in a crocodile smile set with spade-shaped teeth with spaces between them, beyond which was visible a curve of polished esophagus agleam with leaping reflections from inner fires below.

Two lesser priests stepped forward to hang assorted ornaments on Retief's shoulders and neck. Another took up a position before him, began intoning a repetitious chant. Somewhere, drums commenced a slow tattoo. A murmur passed over the crowd packing the slopes of the ziggurat and the plaza below. Standing at ease, apparently ignoring his surroundings, Retief noted a two-foot-wide trough cut in the stone platform at his feet, deepening and slanting down as it ran to the abrupt drop-off ten yards distant. An acolyte was busy pouring oil into the hollow and spreading it with swipes of his hands.

"Just what does this phase of the ceremonial involve?" Straphanger inquired in a tone of synthetic diplomatic interest.

"Waid and zee," Ai-Poppy-Googy said shortly.

"Mr. Ambassador," Magnan whispered hoarsely. "His hands are chained!"

"Part of the ceremony, no doubt."

"And that groove," Magnan went on. "It runs from Retief right over to the edge . . . just above that horrible ig-bay outh-may . . ."

"Yes, yes, you needn't play the part of a tourist guide, Magnan. By the way," Straphanger lowered his voice, "you didn't happen to bring along a hip flask, I suppose?"

"Why, no, Mr. Ambassador. I have a nice anti-viral nasal spray, if that would help. But about that chute—"

"Warm, isn't it, Your Arrogance?" Straphanger turned to the Pope. "A bit dry, too . . ."

"You ton't lige our Hoogan weather?" the Pope asked in an ominous tone.

"No, no, it's fine. I love it when it's nice and hot and dry."

"Ah, Your Arrogance," Magnan spoke up. "Just what is it you have in mind doing with Retief?"

"Is kreat honor," the Pope said shortly.

"I'm sure we're all delighted at this opportunity for one of our group to get an inside view of the Hoogan religious philosophy," Straphanger said sharply. "Now kindly sit down and stop that infernal chattering," he added behind his hand.

The Pope was speaking quickly in Hoogan; the attendant priests urged Retief forward a step, grasped his arms and deftly placed him face-down in the oiled channel. The rattle of the drums rose to a crescendo. Flabby Hoogan hands shoved Retief forward down the steepening slope.

"Mr. Ambassador!" Magnan's voice rose to a shrill bleat. "I do believe they're feeding him to that monster!"

"Nonsense, Magnan!" Straphanger's suety voice countered. "It's all symbolic, I'm sure. And I might point out that you're hardly conducting yourself like a seasoned diplomat—"

"Stop!" Retief, sliding rapidly toward the edge, heard Magnan's yelp, the scuffle of rapid footsteps—

There was a wet splat! and bony elbows slammed against him. He twisted, caught a glimpse of Magnan's white face, open mouth and clutching hands as together they shot over the edge and out in a graceful arc toward the waiting jaws of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty.

* * *

Keep your arms and legs tucked in, Jackspurt had said; Retief had time to grit his teeth—then he was hurtling past the tombstone sized fangs, Magnan's hands still clutching his legs, dropping down into a blast of searing heat and light, then suddenly, stunningly, slamming against and through a yielding, shredding network of filaments as fine as spiderwebs. He came to a stop, rebounded, caught at a heavier cable that brushed his hand, and was clinging to a coarse rope ladder, Magnan's weight dangling from his heels.

"Bull's-eye!" a tiny voice screeched almost in his ear. "Now let's get out of here fast, before they dope out what happened!"

Retief found a foothold in the snarl of rope, reached down and hauled the rag-limp Second Secretary to his side. The heat from below was scorching, even here in the shelter of a bulge in the god's throat.

"Wha-what-bu-bu—" Magnan babbled, groping for a handhold.

"Hurry up, Retief!" Jackspurt urged. "Up here by the tonsils! It's a secret passage!"

Retief assisted Magnan in scrambling up, boosted him into the narrow, circular burrow that ran back through the solid metal. The Spism in the lead, they moved hurriedly away from the sound of priestly voices raised in puzzled inquiry, reached a set of cramped steps leading down.

"We're OK now," Jackspurt said. "Take a breather, and then we'll go down and meet the boys."

* * *

They were in a cavern, floored with rough masonry, lit by a burning wick afloat in a shallow bowl of aromatic oil. All around, twitching Spism eye-stalks stared at the intruders; the close-packed red goblin-forms of Jackspurt and his clan moved restlessly like giant fiddler crabs on some subterranean beach; behind them, tall, pale blue cousins poised on yard-long legs watched from shadowy corners; in niches and crannies in the walls, tiny green Spisms and sluggish orange forms with white spots clung, gazing. Dark purple Spisms, dangling from the ceiling like tumerous stalactites, waved their free legs hypnotically, studying the scene.

Magnan's fingers dug into Retief's arm. "G-great heavens, Retief!" he gasped out. "You—you don't suppose we've died and that my Aunt Minerva was right all along . . . ?"

"Mr. Retief, meet the boys," Jackspurt clambered up to perch on a ledge overlooking the gathering. "A lot of them are pretty shy, but they're a good-natured bunch, always a thousand laughs. When they heard you was in trouble, they all joined in to help out."

"Tell them Mr. Magnan and I said thanks," Retief said. "It was an experience we wouldn't have missed. Right, Mr. Magnan?"

"I'd certainly never miss it," Magnan swallowed audibly. "H-how is it you can talk to these hobgoblins, Retief?" he hissed. "You haven't . . . ah . . . made some sort of pact with the powers of darkness, I trust?"

"Hey, Retief," Jackspurt said. "Your friend got some kind of race prejudice or something?"

"Heavens, no," Magnan said in a strangled voice. "Some of my best friends are fiends—I mean, in our profession, one meets—"

"Mr. Magnan is just a little confused," Retief put in. "He didn't expect to be playing such an active role in today's events."

"Speaking of active, we better get you gents back to the surface fast," Jackspurt said. "The pumps will be starting up any minute now."

"Where are you going when the fumigation begins?"

"We got an escape route mapped out through the sewers that ought to bring us out in the clear a couple miles from town. We're just hoping the Hoog don't have the outfall staked out."

"Where are these smoke pumps located?" Retief asked.

"Up above—in Uk-Ruppa-Tooty's belly."

"Who's manning them?"

"A couple of priests. Why?"

"How do we get there from here?"

"Well, there's a couple passages—but we better not waste any time sight-seeing—"

"Retief, are you out of your mind?" Magnan blurted. "If the priests see us, our goose will be cooked, along with the rest of our anatomies!"

"We'll try to make it a point to see them first. Jackspurt, can you get a couple of dozen volunteers?"

"You mean to climb up in that brass god? I don't know, Retief. The fellas are pretty superstitious . . ."

"We need them to make a diversion while Mr. Magnan and I carry out the negotiation—"

"Who, me?" Magnan squeaked.

"Negotiation?" Jackspurt protested. "Jumping Jehosaphat, how can you negotiate with a Hoog?"

"Ahem," Magnan cleared his throat. "That, Mr. Jackspurt, is after all one's function as a diplomat."

"Well . . ." Jackspurt buzzed briefly to his fellows, then hopped down from his perch as a dozen Spisms of assorted sizes and colors came forward.

"We're game, Mr. Retief. Let's go!"

* * *

The dull gleam of the metal walls of the vast chamber that was the interior of the god Uk-Ruppa-Tooty loomed out of dense shadow where Retief and Magnan crouched with their hob-goblin crew. At the center of the gloomy chamber, low-caste Hoogans labored before the open door of a giant, red-glowing furnace, tossing in armloads of rubbish, old shoes, bundled magazines, and broken plastic crockery. A layer of harsh, eye-watering smoke hung in the air. Jackspurt snorted.

"Boy, when they start pumping that stuff into the burrows . . ."

"Where are the priests?" Retief inquired in a whisper.

Jackspurt pointed to a small cubicle at the top of a flight of steps. "Up there, in the control room."

Retief studied the layout. "Jackspurt, you and your men spread out around the room. Give me five minutes. Then take turns jumping out and making faces."

Jackspurt gave instructions to his crew; they faded away into the darkness.

"Maybe you'd better wait here," Retief suggested to Magnan.

"Where are you going?"

"I think I'd better have a chat with the ecclesiastics up in the prompting box."

"And leave me here alone, surrounded by these ghoulish Spisms?"

"All right, but keep it quiet or the smoke of burning diplomats will be added to the other fumes."

* * *

Fifty feet above the floor, Retief gripped narrow handholds, working his way around to the rear of the control box, through the dusty windows of which a blue-robed Hoogan priest lounged in a bored attitude, studying a scroll, while a second Hoogan, in the familiar black, stood nervously by. Suddenly the silence below was broken by a mournful wail.

"What's that!" Magnan jumped, slipped, grabbed for a secure grip on a projecting angle-iron supporting a narrow catwalk.

"Our co-workers going into action," Retief said softly. Beside the furnace door, the Hoogan workers were staring round nervously. There was another doleful moan. One of the Hoogans dropped his shovel and muttered. Retief ducked back as the blue-robed priest came to the window, peered down below, then motioned to the other, who went to the door of the tiny chamber, opened it, stepped out on the catwalk, shouted down to the workers. One answered in defiant tones. Two of the workers started toward a door dimly visible at the far side of the furnace room. The priest shouted after them; as his bellow faded and echoed, the thin hoot of a Spism sounded, like the last wail of dying hope. The priest jumped, whirled to dart back inside the control room, slipped, fell from the catwalk, grabbed frantically, caught it and held on by one hand, found himself staring directly into Magnan's startled face. He opened his mouth to roar—

Magnan whipped off his mauve cummerbund and thrust it into the gaping mouth. With a muffled grunt, the Hoogan lost his grip, fell, slammed into the heaped rubbish with a tremendous slam. The stokers fled, shouting. The lone priest flattened his face against the window, peering down into the gloom. With a quick movement, Retief gained the catwalk, stepped through the door. The priest whirled, gaped, leaped for a microphone-like device on the corner table. Retief eased the power pistol from his sarong, aimed it negligently at the priest.

"I wouldn't make any announcements just yet," he said. "The results aren't all in."

"Who are you?" The Hoogan sidled toward a corner cabinet.

"If that's where you keep your prayer books, better let them lie for a while yet."

"Loog here, berhabs you are unaware that I am His Voracity the Arjpushob Um-Moomy-Hooby, and I have gonnegtions—"

"Doubtless. And don't try for the door; I have a confederate out there who's noted for his ferocity."

Magnan came through the door, panting. Um-Moomy-Hooby backed away.

"Whad—whad to you wand?"

"I understand the god is about to utter oracular statements, as the high point of the Wednesday services," Retief said.

"Yez—I was jusd going over my sgribt. Now if you'll eggsguze me—"

"It just happens that it's the script we want to talk about. There are a couple of special announcements I'd like to see inserted—"

"Whad? Damper with holy sgribture?"

"Nothing like that; just a good word for a group of associates of ours and possibly a short commercial for the CDT—"

"Plasphemy! Herezy! Refashionism! Nefer will I pe a barty to zuch zagrileche!"

Retief clicked off the pistol's safety catch.

"—Put, on the other hant, bossiply somethink Gould pe arranced," the Archbishop said hastily. "How much did you have in mind offering?"

"I wouldn't think of attempting to bribe a man of the cloth," Retief said smoothly. "You're going to do this for the common welfare."

"Jusd whad is it you hafe in mind?"

"The first item is the campaign you've been waging against the Spisms—"

"Ah, yez! And a wontervul jop our lats hafe peen toing, doo. Uk-Ruppa-Tooty willink, zoon we will zee them stambed oud endirely, and virtue driumvant!"

"The CDT takes a dim view of genocide, I'm afraid. Now, my thought was that we could agree on a reasonable division of spheres of influence—"

"A teal with the Bowers of Tarknezz? Are you oud of your mind?"

"Now, now," Magnan put in, "a more co-operative attitude would do Your Voracity greater credit—"

"You zugchesd that the jurch should gombromize with zin?"

"Not exactly compromise," Magnan said placatingly. "Just work out a sort of peaceful coexistence plan."

"Nefer will I, as arjpishob, gome oud in vafor of dogetherness with Zatan's Imps!"

"There, there, Your Voracity; if you'd just sit down across the table from them, you'd find theseimps weren't bad fellows at all . . ."

There was a soft sound from the door. Jackspurt, a jaunty, two-foot sphere of red bristles, appeared, waving his eye-stalks exultantly. A looming blue Spism peered over his shoulder.

"Nice going, Retief!" he called. "I see you caught one. Pitch him down after the other one, and let's clear out of here. This little diversion will give us

time to get clear before the smoke starts."

"Jackspurt, do you suppose your fellows could do a fast job of shifting a few hoses around? You'll have to block off the sewers and feed the smoke off in some other direction."

"Say, that's an idea!" Jackspurt agreed. "And I think I know just the direction." He gave instructions to the big blue Spism, who hurried away.

The Archbishop had retreated to a corner, eyes goggling, his hands describing mystic passes in the air. More Spisms were crowding into the room now: tall blue ones, tiny darting green ones, sluggish purple varieties—all cocking their eye-stalks at the prelate.

"Help!" he croaked weakly. "The minions of the netherworlt are ubon me!"

Magnan drew out a chair from the table. "Just have a seat, Your Voracity," he said soothingly. "Let's just see if we can't work out a modus vivendi suitable to all parties . . ."

"Gome to terms with the Enemy? Id will mean the ent of the jurch!"

"On the contrary, Your Voracity; if you ever succeeded in eliminating the opposition, you'd be out of a job. The problem is merely to arrange matters in a civilized fashion so that everyone's interests are protected."

"You may hafe somethink there," Um-Moomy-Hooby seated himself gingerly. "Put the nevarious agtifities of these goplins musd pe kept unter sdrigd gondrol—Babal gongrol, thad is."

"Look, my boys got to make a living," Jackspurt started.

"Zellink a vew love-botions, zerdainly," the Archbishop said. "And the jurch is willink to zmile at a modest draffic in aphrodisiags, dope, and raze-drack tips. But beddling filthy menus to teen-agers, no! The zame goes vor sdealing without a lizenze, and the zale of algholic peferaches, with the eggzebtion of small amounts of broberly aged sduff for medicinal use py the glerchy, of gourse."

"OK, I think we can go along with that," Jackspurt said. "But you priests will have to lay off the propaganda from now on. I want to see Spisms getting better billing in church art."

"Oh, I think you could work out something lovely in little winged Spisms with haloes," Magnan suggested. "I think you owe it to them, Your Voracity, after all this discrimination in the past."

"Tevils with winks?" Um-Moomy-Hooby groaned. "It will blay hop with our zymbolisms—put I zubboze it can be tone."

"And you'll have to have guarantees that everything from two feet under the surface on down belongs to us," Jackspurt added. "We'll leave the surface to you, and throw in the atmosphere, just so you dedicate a few easements so we can come up and sight-see now and then."

"Thad zeems egwidaple," the Archbishop agreed. "Supchegd to vinal

approval by His Arrokanze, of gourse."

"By the way," Jackspurt asked casually, "who's next in line for the Pope's job if anything happens to Ai-Poppy-Googy?"

"As it happens, I am," Um-Moomy-Hooby said. "Why?"

"Just asking," Jackspurt said.

A loud thumping started up from the wide floor below.

"What's that?" Magnan yelled.

"The pumps," the Archbishop said. "A bity so many Spisms will tie, but it is manivesdly the will of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty . . ."

"I guess old Uk-Ruppa-Tooty had a last-minute change of heart," Jackspurt said callously. "We shifted the pipes around to feed the fumes back up into the city plumbing system. I guess there's black smoke pouring up out of every john in town by now."

"Touble-grozzer!" the Archbishop leaped up, waving his arms. "The teal's off—"

"Ah, ah, you promised, Your Voracity," Magnan chided. "And besides, Mr. Retief still has the gun."

"And now, if you'll just pick up the microphone, Your Voracity," Retief said. "I think we can initiate the era of good feeling without further delay. Just keep our role quiet, and take all the credit for yourself."

* * *

"A pity about poor Ai-Poppy-Googy falling off the ziggurat when the smoke came boiling out of Uk-Ruppa-Tooty's mouth," Ambassador Straphanger said, forking another generous helping of Hoogan chow mein onto his plate. "Still, one must confess it was a dramatic end for a churchman of his stature, shooting down the slide and disappearing into the smoke as he did."

"Yez, alrety the canonization papers are peing brepared," His newly-installed Arrogance, Pope Um-Moomy-Hooby, shot a nervous glance at the Spism seated beside him. "He'll pe the batron zaint of rehabilitated tevils, imps, and koplins."

"A pity you missed all the excitement, Magnan," Straphanger said, chewing. "And you, too, Retief. While you absented yourselves, the Hoogan philosophy underwent a veritable renaissance—helped along, I humbly assume, by my modest peace-making efforts."

"Hah!" the Pope muttered under his breath.

"Frankly, what with all the smoke, I hadn't expected the oracle's pronouncement to be quite so lucid," Straphanger went on, "to say nothing of its unprecedented generosity—"

"Chenerosity?" interrupted Um-Moomy-Hooby, his heavy features reflecting rapid mental recapitulation of his concessions.

"Why, yes, ceding all minerals rights to the formerly persecuted race here on Hoog—a charming gesture of conciliation."

"Mineralts right? Whad mineralts?"

Jacksputt, splendid in the newly tailored tunic of Chief Representative for Spismodic Affairs to the Papal court, spoke up from his place along the table set up on the palace terrace.

"Oh, he's just talking about the deposits of gold, silver, platinum, radium, and uranium, plus a few boulders of diamond, emerald, ruby, and so forth that are laying around below ground. The planet's lousy with the stuff. We'll use our easements to ferry it up to the surface where the freighters will pick it up, so we won't put you Hoogs out at all."

The Pope's alligator-hide features purpled. "You—you knew apout these mineralts?" he choked.

"Why, didn't His former Arrogance mention it to you? That was what brought the mission here; the routine minerals survey our technical people ran from space last year showed up the deposits—"

"And we built our Brincible Kod oud of prass—imborted prass at thad," the Pope said numbly.

"Too scared of a few Spisms to dig," Jackspurt said in a stage whisper.

There was a flicker of lightning in the sky to the east. Thunder rolled. A large rain-drop spattered on Straphanger's plate, followed by another.

"Oh-oh, we'd better head for cover," Jackspurt said. "I know these flash squalls; lightning out the kazoo—"

A brilliant flash cast the looming figure of the god Uk-Ruppa-Tooty into vivid silhouette against a blue-black sky. Dishes rattled on the table as sound rumbled across the sky on wooden wheels. The Pope and his guests rose hastily, as a third jagged electrical discharge ripped across the sky—and struck the giant idol full on the shoulder. A shower of sparks flew; the mighty right arm, raised in the Hoogan gesture of salute, pivoted slowly at the elbow. The yards-wide hand, seen-edge-on with the fingers extended, swung slowly in a great arc, came to rest with the extended thumb resting firmly against the snub nose. Sparks flew as the digit was welded firmly in place.

The Pope stared, then tilted his head back and looked up at the sky, long and searchingly.

"Chusd pedween us men of the worlt," he said hoarsely, "do you zubbose thad phenomenon has any sbezial zigniviganze?"

"I think if I were you, Your Arrogance, I'd watch my step," Jackspurt said in an awed tone. "And, uh, by the way, on behalf of the Spisms, I'd like to make a contribution to the Papal treasury."

"Hmmm. Have you ever thought about tagink inzdruction?" the Pope inquired. "I'm sure it could be arranged, and as for the little contribution you sboge of, dwenty bercend of the take would zuvvice . . ."

They strolled off along the corridor, deep in conversation. Ambassador Straphanger hurried away to prepare his dispatches to Sector HQ, Magnan at his heels. Retief stepped back out onto the terrace, lit up a dope-stick. Far away, Uk-Ruppa-Tooty loomed, solemnly thumbing his nose at the Papal Palace.

Cheerfully, Retief returned the salute.