

Pime Doesn't Cray

1

A driving rain lashed the tarmac as Retief stepped from the shuttlecraft that had ferried him down to the planetary surface. From the direction of the low, mushroom-shaped reception sheds, a slight figure wrapped in a voluminous black rubber poncho came splashing toward him, waving excitedly.

"You got any enemies, Mac?" the shuttle pilot asked nervously, watching the newcomer's approach.

"A reasonable number," Retief replied, drawing on his cigar, which sputtered and hissed as the rain struck the glowing tip. "However, this is just Counselor Magnan from the Embassy, here to welcome me to the scene with the local disaster status, no doubt."

"No time to waste, Retief," Magnan panted as he came up. "Ambassador Grossblunder's called a special staff meeting for five pee em—half an hour from now. If we hurry, we can just make it. I've already seen to Customs and Immigration; I knew you'd want to be there, to, er—"

"Share the blame?" Retief suggested.

"Hardly," Magnan corrected, flicking a drop of moisture from the tip of his nose. "As a matter of fact, I may well be in line for a word of praise for my handling of the Cultural Aid Project. It will be an excellent opportunity for you to get your feet wet, local scenewise," he amplified, leading the way toward the Embassy car waiting beside the sheds.

"According to the latest supplement to the Post Report," Retief said as they settled themselves against the deep-pile upholstery, "the project is scheduled for completion next week. Nothing's gone wrong with the timetable, I hope?"

Magnan leaned forward to rap at the glass partition dividing the enclosed passenger compartment from the open-air driver's seat; the chauffeur, a rather untidy-looking local who seemed to consist of a snarl of purple macaroni topped by a peaked cap with a shiny bill, angled what Retief deduced to be an ear to catch the Terran's instructions.

"Just swing past the theater on your way down, Chauncey," Magnan directed. "In answer to your question," he said complacently to Retief, "I don't mind saying the project went off flawlessly, hitchwise. In fact, it's completed a week early. As Project Director, I fancy it's something of a feather in my cap, considering the frightful weather conditions we have to contend with here on Squale."

"Did you say 'theater'? As I recall, the original proposal called for the usual Yankee Stadium-type sports arena."

Magnan smiled loftily. "I thought it time to vary the program."

"Congratulations, Mr. Magnan." Retief sketched a salute with his cigar. "I was afraid the Corps Diplomatique was going to go on forever inflicting

bigger and better baseball diamonds on defenseless natives, while the Groaci countered with ever larger and uglier Bolshoi-type ballet arenas."

"Not this time," Magnan stated with satisfaction. "I've beaten the scamps at their own game. This is Top Secret, mind you—but this time we've built the Bolshoi-type ballet theater!"

"A masterful gambit, Mr. Magnan. How are the Groaci taking it?"

"Hmmp. They've come up with a rather ingenious counterstroke, I must concede. Informed opinion has it the copycats are assembling an imitation Yankee Stadium in reprisal." Magnan peered out through the downpour. The irregularly shaped buildings lining the winding avenue loomed mistily, obscured by sheets of wind-driven precipitation. Ahead, a gap in their orderly ranks was visible. Magnan frowned as the car cruised slowly past a large, irregularly shaped bulk set well back from the curb. "Here, Chauncey," he called, "I instructed you to drive to the project site!"

"Thure shing, moss-ban," a voice like a clogged drain replied placatingly. "Weer we har."

"Chauncey—have you been drinking?"

"Woe, nurse luck." Chauncey braked to a stop; the windshield wipers rotated busily; the air cushion sighed heavily, driving ripples across the puddled street. "Book, loss—were right astreet the cross from the Libric Publary, nicht vahr?"

"The Lublic Pibrary, you mean—I mean the pubic lilberry—"

"Yeah, mats what I thean. So—there's the piblary—so butts the weef?" Chauncey extended the cluster of macaroni that served as his hand, to wave like seaweed in a light current.

"Visibility is simply atrocious here on Squale," Magnan sniffed, rolling down the window and recoiling as a blast of rain splattered his face. "But even so—I shouldn't think I could get confused as to the whereabouts of my own project..."

"It looks like a collapsed circus tent," Retief commented, studying the half acre of canvas apparently supported by half a dozen randomly placed props.

"An optical illusion," Magnan said firmly. "The structure is under wraps, of course; it's a secret, you know. It's just the lighting, no doubt, that makes it look so... so sort of squatty and unplanned..." He was squinting ferociously into the rain, shading his eyes with a hand. "Still, why don't we just pop out and have a closer look?"

Magnan thrust the door open and stumbled out; Retief followed. They crossed a walk of colored, glazed tile, skirted a bed of foot-wide green blossoms. Magnan lifted aside a fold of plastic sheeting, revealing a yawning excavation at the bottom of which severed electrical and plumbing connections poked up through the surface of the muddy water pooling there.

"A treat nick," Chauncey said admiringly over his shoulder. "Do'd you how it,

Master Mignan?"

"Do'd I how what?" Mignan croaked.

"Dis it makappear," Chauncey amplified. "The meaning, I build."

"Retief," Mignan whispered, blinking hard. "Tell me I'm seeing things; I mean, that I'm not seeing things."

"Correct," Retief said, "either way you phrase it."

"Retief," Mignan said in a breaking voice, "do you realize what this means?"

Retief tossed his cigar down into the empty pit, where it hissed and went out. "Either you were kidding me about the project—"

"I assure you—"

"—or we're standing on the wrong corner—"

"Absolutely not!"

"Or someone," Retief said, "has stolen one each Bolshoi-type ballet theater."

2

"And I was dreaming of feathers in my cap," Mignan moaned as the car braked to a halt before the imposing facade of the Terrestrial Embassy. "I'll be fortunate to salvage my cap from this fiasco—or my head, for that matter. How will I ever tell Ambassador Grossblunder I've misplaced his pet project?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be able to pass the incident off with your usual savoir-faire," Retief soothed, as they stepped out into the drizzle. The Squalian doorman, loosely packed in a regulation CDT-issue coverall, nodded a cluster of writhing violet-hued filaments at the Terrans as they came up.

"Jowdy, hents," he said as the door whooshed open. "Rice nain, eh?"

"What's so rice about it?" Mignan inquired acidly. "Harvey—has His Excellency gone in?"

"Men tinutes ago—in a masty nude. Didn't even hey sello."

Inside, Mignan put a hand to his brow. "Retief—I seem to have just come down with a splitting headache. Why don't you nip along and mention this development just casually to the Ambassador. Possibly you could play it down a trifle. No need to upset him unduly, eh?"

"Good idea, Mr. Mignan," Retief said, handing his weather cape into the check room. "I'll hint that it's all a publicity trick you dreamed up to publicize the grand opening."

"Excellent notion! And if you could subtly plant the idea that you'll have it

back in place in time for the festivities..." Magnan looked hopefully at Retief.

"Since I just arrived fifteen minutes ago, I think that would be rather pushy of me. Then, too, he might want to know why you were lying down at such a critical moment in Terran/Squalian relations."

Magnan groaned again, resignedly.

"Let's hurry along, gentlemen," a short, black-eyebrowed man in uniform called from the open elevator door across the lobby. "We're holding the car for you."

Magnan straightened his narrow shoulders. "Coming, Colonel Otherday," he croaked. "Remember, Retief," he added in an undertone, "we'll behave as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a ten-million-credit building to vanish between breakfast and lunch."

"Did I hear someone mention lunch?" a portly diplomat inquired from the back of the car.

"You just ate, Lester," a lean Commercial Attache said. "As for you, Mr. Retief, you picked an inauspicious moment to put in an appearance; I gather the Ambassador's in a towering pet this evening."

Magnan glanced nervously at Retief. "Ah—any idea what's troubling His Excellency...?" he inquired of the car in general.

"Who knows?" the Attache shrugged. "Last time it was a deteriorating man/bean ratio in the Embassy snack bar."

"This time it's even bigger than the bean crisis," Colonel Otherday stated flatly. "I have a feeling this time heads will roll."

"Does it have anything to do with, ah, anything that might be, er, missing?" Magnan inquired with an attempt at casualness.

"Ah-hah!" the lean Attache pounced. "He knows something, gentlemen!"

"Come on, Magnan," the portly First Secretary urged. "Let us in on it."

"How is it you always have the word first?" the Colonel inquired plaintively.

"Well, as to that," Magnan started—

"Mr. Magnan is under oath to reveal nothing, gentlemen," Retief cut in smoothly as the car halted and the doors slid back on a wide, deep-carpeted conference room.

A long, polished table occupied the center of the floor, unadorned but for long yellow pads and pencils to match at each place. A few seconds of unobtrusive scuffling ensued as the diplomats, all veteran campaigners, vied for choice positions, balancing the prestige of juxtaposition to the Ambassadorial chair against nonconspicuousness in the event of scapegoat selection.

All hands stood as the inner door was flung wide; the stern-visaged, multichinned figure of Ambassador Grossblunder entered the room under full sail. He scanned the assembled bureaucrats without visible approval, seated himself in the chair the Agricultural Attache leaped to pull out, shot a piercing glance along the table, cleared his throat.

"Lock the doors," he said. "Gentlemen, be seated. I have solemn news for you." He paused impressively. "We," he concluded solemnly, "have been robbed!"

A sigh passed along the table; all eyes swiveled to Magnan.

"Robbed!" Grossblunder repeated, emphasizing the point with a blow of his fist which made the pencils, plus a number of the diplomats, jump. "I have for some time suspected that foul play was afoot; a short time ago my worst fears were confirmed. Gentlemen, there is a thief among us!"

"Among us?" Magnan blurted. "But how—I mean, why—that is to say—Mr. Ambassador—how could one of us have, er, purloined the, ah, loot in question?"

"You may well ask! One might also logically inquire as to why any person connected with this Mission could so far forget himself as to hide the feet that banns him! That is, bite the fan that heeds him. I mean beat the hide that fans him. Confound it, you know what I mean!" Grossblunder grabbed a glass of water and gulped a swallow. "Been here too long," he muttered. "Losing my grasp of the well-rounded period."

"A thief, you say, sir," Colonel Otherday prompted. "Well, how interesting..."

" 'Interesting' is hardly the word for it," Grossblunder barked. " 'Appalling' is a cut nearer the mark. 'Shocking,' though a trifle flaccid, carries a portion of the connotation. This is a grievous blot on the CDT copybook, gentlemen! A blow struck at the very foundations of Galactic accord!"

A chorus of "Right, Chief's!" and "Well phrased, sir's," and a lone "You said it. Boss," from the Press Attache provided counterpoint to the plenipotentiary's pronouncement.

"Now, if anyone here wishes to come forward at this juncture..." Grossblunder's ominous gaze traveled along the table, lingered on Magnan.

"You appear to be the focal point of all eyes, Magnan," the Ambassador accused. "If you've a comment, don't hesitate. Speak up!"

"Why, as a matter of fact, sir," Magnan gulped, "I just wanted to say that, as for myself, I was utterly appalled—that is to say, shocked—when I discovered the loss. Why, you could have knocked me over with the feather in my cap—I mean—"

Grossblunder looked ominous. "You're saying you were already aware of the pilferage, Magnan?"

"Yes, and—"

"And failed to confide this intelligence in me?" the Ambassador glowered.

"I didn't actually know until a few minutes ago," Magnan explained hastily. "Why, gracious, sir, you were positive miles ahead of me! It's just that I'm able to confirm your revelation—not that any confirmation is needed, of course." He paused to gulp.

"Now, there, gentlemen," Grossblunder said with admiration, "is my conception of an alert officer. While the rest of you went about your business oblivious of the light fingers operating to the detriment of this Mission, my Counselor, Mr. Magnan, alone among my subordinates, sensed mischief afoot! Congratulations to you, sir!"

"Why, ah, thank you, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan essayed a fragile smile. "I do try to keep abreast of developments—"

"And since you seem to have the matter in hand, you're appointed Investigative Officer, to get to the bottom of the matter without delay. I'll turn my records over to you without further ado." Grossblunder shot his cuff, allotted a glance to his watch. "As it happens, my VIP copter is at this moment warming up on the roof to whisk me over to the Secretariat, where I expect to be tied up for the remainder of the evening in high-level talks with the Foreign Minister regarding slurb-fruit allocations for the coming fiscal quarter. It seems our Groaci colleagues are out to cut us out of the pattern luxury-tradewise, a consummation hardly to be tolerated on my record." He rose. "You'll accompany me to the helipad, Magnan, for last-minute briefing. As for the rest of you—let Magnan's performance stand as an example. You there—" He pointed at Retief. "You may carry my briefcase."

On the roof—aslosh with rainwater under the perpetually leaden sky—Grossblunder turned to Magnan.

"I expect fast action, Ben. We can't allow this sort of thing to pass unnoticed, as it were."

"I'll do my best, sir," Magnan chirped. "And I do want to say it's awfully white of you not to hold me personally responsible—not that anyone could actually blame me, of course—"

"You responsible? Hmmm. No, I see no way in which I could benefit from that. Beside which," he added, "you're not an Admin man."

"Admin man, sir? What...?"

"My analysis of the records indicates that a steady trickle over the past two years at the present rate could account for a total discrepancy on the order of sixty-seven gross! Think of that, Magnan!"

"Sixty-seven Bolshoi-type ballet theaters?" Magnan quavered.

Grossblunder blinked, then allowed a smile to quirk a corner of his mouth. "No need to hint, Magnan. I haven't forgotten your magnificent performance in the completion of the project six days ahead of schedule. The grand opening tomorrow is the one bright spot on my Effectiveness Report—on my

horizon, that is to say. I wouldn't be surprised if there were a citation in store for the officer responsible." He winked, then frowned. "But don't allow the prospect to drive the matter of the missing paperclips into eclipse! I want action!"

"P-paperclips, sir?"

"A veritable torrent of them, dropped from Embassy records as expendable items! Outrageous! But no need to say more, my boy; you're as aware as I of the seriousness of the situation." Grossblunder gripped his junior's thin shoulder. "Remember, Magnan—I'm counting on you!" He turned and clambered into his seat; with a rising flutter of rotors, the light machine lifted into the overcast and was gone. Magnan turned shakily to Retief.

"I... I thought... I thought he knew..."

"I know," Retief commiserated. "Still, you can always pick an opportune time to tell him later. While he's pinning the medal on, perhaps."

"How can you jest at such a moment? Do you realize that I have to solve not one, but two crimes, before the Ambassador and the Minister finish a bottle of port?"

"That's a thought; maybe you can get a quantity discount. Still, we'd better get started before they run the ante up any higher."

3

Back in his office, Magnan found awaiting him a letter bearing the Great Seal of the Groacian Autonomy.

"It's an Aide Memoire from that wretch, Ambassador Shinth," he told Retief. "Announcing he's moving the date for the unveiling of his Cultural Aid project up to midnight tonight!" He groaned, tossed the note aside. "This is the final blow, Retief! And I, without so much as a kiosk to offer in rebuttal!"

"I understood the Groaci were behind schedule," Retief said.

"They are! This entire affair is impossible, Retief! No one could have stolen a complete building overnight—and if they had, where would they hide it? And even if they found a place to hide it—and we were able to turn it up—how in the world would we get it back in position in time for a ceremony scheduled less than twenty hours local from this moment?"

"That covers the questions," Retief said. "We may have a little more trouble with the answers."

"The building was there last night; I stopped to admire the classical neon meander adorning the architrave on my way home. A splendid effect; Shinth would have been green with envy—or whatever color Groaci diplomats turn when confronted with an aesthetic coup of such proportions."

"He may be quietly turning puce with satisfaction at this moment," Retief suggested. "Rather neat timing: his project ready to go, and ours missing."

"How will I ever face Shinth?" Magnan was muttering. "Only last night I assayed a number of sly jests at his expense. I thought at the time he took it rather blandly—" Magnan broke off to stare at Retief. "Great heavens!" he gasped. "Are you hinting those sneaky little five-eyed Meyer-come-latelies could have so far abused diplomatic practice as to be behind this outrage?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Retief admitted. "Offhand, I can't think of anyone else who might have a yen for a Bolshoi-type ballet theater."

Magnan leaped up, yanking the pale-mauve lapels of his early midafternoon hemi-demi-semi-informal cutaway into place. "Of course!" he cried. "Call out the Marine Guard, Retief! I'll march right up to that underhanded little weasel and demand the return of the purloined edifice on the spot!"

"Better be careful what spot you're on," Retief cautioned. "A Bolshoi-type ballet theater occupies a full block, remember."

"An ill-timed jape, Retief," Magnan snapped. "Well, what are you waiting for?" He paused, frowning. "Am I to deduce from your apparent lack of enthusiasm that you see some flaw in the scheme?"

"Just a small one," Retief said. "His Groacian Excellency has probably covered his tracks quite carefully. He'll laugh in your face—unless you can show some proof."

"Not even Shinth would have the cheek to deny the facts if I catch him red-handed!" Magnan paused, looking troubled. "Of course, I haven't actually found any evidence yet..." He nipped at a hangnail and cast a sidelong glance at Retief.

"A ballet theater isn't the easiest thing in the world to hide," Retief said. "Suppose we try to turn it up first; then we can start on the problem of how to get it back."

"Good notion, Retief. Just what I was about to suggest." Magnan looked at the watch on his thumb. "Why don't you just pop round and have a look here and there, while I whip my paperwork into shape; then after dinner we can get together and agree on a story—formulate a report, that is, indicating we've done everything possible."

Leaving the Counselor's office, Retief went along to the Commercial Section. A chinless clerk looked up from among baled newspaper clippings. "Hi, there, Mr. Retief. I see you made it. Welcome to Squale."

"Thanks, Freddy; I'd like to see a listing of all cargoes imported by the Groaci Embassy during the last twelve months."

The clerk poked the keys of the data bank, frowned at the list it disgorged.

"Flimsy construction they must have in mind," he said as he handed it over. "Cardboard and pick-up sticks. Typical."

"Anything else?" Retief persisted.

"I'll check equipment imports." The clerk tapped out another code, eliciting a brief clatter and a second slip of paper.

"Heavy-duty lift units," he said. "Funny. They don't need heavy-duty units to handle plywood and two-by's..."

"Four of them," Retief noted. "With wide-aperture fields and gang interlocks."

"Wow! With that, you could pick up the Squalid-Hilton."

"You could, indeed," Retief agreed. "Thanks, Freddy."

Outside, it was dusk; the car was waiting at the curb. Retief directed Chauncey to drive back along the wet, tree-fern-shaded avenues to the vacant edge-of-town site so recently occupied by the stolen building. Stepping out into the steady, warm rain, he entered the tent, circled the yawning excavation, studying the soft ground by the beam of a handlight.

"Look are you whatting for?" Chauncey inquired, ambling along behind him on feet that resembled dishpan-sized wads of wet magenta yarn. "Ardon my pasking, but I taught you Therries lidn't dike feeting your get wet."

"Just getting the lie of the land, Chauncey," Retief said. "It appears that whoever pinched the theater lifted it out of here with grav units—probably intact, since there doesn't seem to be any evidence of disassembly."

"I goant dett you, chief," Chauncey said. "You lawk tight this roll houtine isn't trust a jick Master Mignan add off to pulvertise the And Gropening."

"Perish the thought, Chauncey; it's just my way of heightening the suspense." Retief stooped, picked up a pinkish dope-stick butt, sniffed at it. It gave off the sharp odor of ether characteristic of Groaci manufacture.

"We Squalians are no runch of boobs, you understand," Chauncey went on. "We've treen a few sick in our time. If you howns want to clam it up, that's Jake; jut bust between the tea of us—how the heck dood he dee it?"

"I'm afraid that's a diplomatic secret," Retief said. "Let's go take a look at the Groaci answer to our cultural challenge."

"Mot nuch to owe seever there," the local said disparagingly as they squelched back to the car, idling on its air cushion above a wide puddle. "Guthing knowing on; and if were thuzz, you souldn't key it; they got this buy ford hence aplound the race, and a tunch of barps everying coverthing up."

"The Groaci are a secretive group," Retief said. "But maybe we can get a peek anyway."

"I bon't know, doss; there's a gunch of bards around there, too—with yuns, get. They don't clett lobody net goase."

Steering through the rain-sleek streets under the celery-like trees, Chauncey hummed a sprightly little tune, sounding first like a musical comb, then a rubber-stringed harp, ending with a blatter like a bursting bagpipe.

"Bot nad, hey?" he solicited a compliment, "all but the cast lord; it was

subeezed to poe a tourish of flumpets, but my slinger fipped."

"Very impressive," Retief said. "How are you on woodwinds?"

"So-so," Chauncey said. "I'm stretter on bings. Vile this getolin effect." He extruded an arm, quickly arranged four thin filaments along it, and drew a hastily improvised member across the latter, eliciting a shrill bleat.

"Gutty pred, hey? I can't tay any plunes yet, but I lactice a prot; I'll pet it down gat in toe nime."

"Groaci nose-flute lovers will come over to you in a body," Retief predicted. "By the way, Chauncey, how long have the Groaci been working on their ballpark?"

"Lell, wet's see: Stay tharted it fast lall, bust ajout the time too Yerries toured your Foundations..."

"It must be about finished, eh?"

"It hasn't changed such mince the worst feak; and a thunny fing: You sever seem to knee any jerkers around the wob; gust the jards." Chauncey swung the corner and pulled up before a ten-foot-high fence constructed of closely fitted plastic panels, looming darkly in the early-evening gloom.

"Ear we har," he said. "Sike I lezz, you san't key a thing."

"Let's take a look around."

"Sure—but we petter beep an eye keeled; those dittle levels can squeak up awful niet."

Leaving the car parked in a pool of shadow under the spreading fronds of a giant fern, Retief, followed by the Squalian, strolled along the walk, studying the unbroken wall that completely encircled the block. At the corner he paused, looked both ways. The street lamp glowed mistily on empty sidewalks.

"Give me a chord on the cello if you see anyone coming," Retief directed Chauncey. He extracted a slender instrument from an inner pocket, forced it between two planks, and twisted. The material yielded with a creak, opening a narrow peephole, affording a view of pole-mounted lights which shed a yellowish glow on a narrow belt of foot-trampled mud stacked with two-by-fours and used plywood, a fringe of ragged grass ending at a vertical escarpment of dun-colored canvas. A giant tarpaulin, held in place by a network of ropes, completely concealed the massive structure beneath it.

"Moley hoses," Chauncey's voice sounded at Retief's elbow. "Looks like they've been chaking some manges!"

"What kind of changes?"

"Well—it's sard of hay, tunder that arp—shut the bape of it dooks lifferent. Wa've been thirking on it, no bout about that."

"Suppose we cruise over and pay a call at the Groaci Embassy," Retief suggested. "There are one or two more points that need clearing up."

"Boor, shoss—but it don't woo you any good. They pard that glace like it was the legendary Nort Fox."

"I'm counting on it, Chauncey."

It was a ten-block drive through rain-soaked streets. They parked a block from the fortresslike structure, prowled closer, keeping to the shadows. A pair of Groaci in elaborate uniforms stood stiffly flanking the gate in the high masonry wall.

"No hole-poking this time," Retief said. "We'll have to climb over."

"That's bisky, ross—"

"So is loitering on a dark corner," the Terran replied. "Let's go."

Five minutes later, having scaled the wall via an overhanging slurb-fruit tree, Retief and Chauncey stood in the Embassy compound, listening.

"Don't their a hing," the Squalian muttered. "Now what?"

"How about taking a look around, Chauncey," Retief suggested.

"O.K.—dut I bon't like it..." Chauncey extended an eye-tipped pseudopod, which snaked away around the corner. Two minutes ticked past. Suddenly the chauffeur stiffened.

"Giggers, the Joaci!" he exclaimed. "Let's cho, gief!" The eyestalk retracted convulsively.

"Bammit, a dacklash," Chauncey yelped. Retief turned to see the driver struggling to untangle the hastily retracted eyestalk, which had somehow become snarled around one of its owner's feet, which was in turn unraveling, an effect resembling a rag rug unknitting itself.

"Datt thid it," he grunted. "Bam, scross, I'll never let goose in time—"

Retief took two swift steps to the corner of the building; the patter of soft-shod feet approached rapidly. An instant later, a spindle-legged alien in a black hip-cloak, ornamented leather greaves, GI eyeshields, and a flaring helmet shot into view, met Retief's extended arm, and did a neat backflip into the mud.

Retief grabbed up the scatter-gun dropped by the Groaci Peacekeeper, switched it to wide dispersal, swinging the weapon to cover half a dozen more Groaci guards coming up rapidly on the right flank. They skidded to a halt.

At the same moment there was a yell from behind him; he half-turned, saw Chauncey struggling in the grasp of four more of the aliens who had appeared from a doorway.

"To throw down the gun and make no further move, Soft One," the captain

in charge of the detail hissed in Groaci, "or to see your minion torn to vermicelli before your naked eyes!"

4

Broodmaster Shinth, Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the Groacian Autonomy to the Squalian Aristarch, lolled back at ease in his power swivel chair, a pirated Groaci copy of a Terran diplomatic model. A cluster of aides hovered behind him, exchanging sibilant whispers and canting multiple eyes at Retief, who stood at ease before them, flanked by guards whose guns prodded his kidneys. Chauncey, pitifully trussed in his own versatile limbs, lay slumped in a corner of the underground office of the Groaci Chief of Mission.

"How charming to see you, Retief," Shinth whispered. "One is always delighted to entertain a colleague, of course. You'll forgive Captain Thilf's zeal in insisting so firmly on your acceptance of my hospitality, but he was quite carried away by your demonstration of interest in Groacian affairs."

"I'm surprised at Your Excellency's leniency," Retief replied in tones of mild congratulation. "I assumed you'd have busted the Captain back to corporal by now for tipping your hand. There's nothing like a diplomat-napping to cause vague suspicions to congeal into certainties."

Shinth waved a negligent member. "Any reasonably intelligent being—I include Terry diplomats as a courtesy—could have deduced a connection between the vanished structure and myself."

"Oh-oh—I nink I thow what was tunder that arp!" Chauncey exclaimed in a voice muffled by the multiple turns of eyestalk inhibiting his vocal apparatus.

"You see—even this unlettered local perceives that there was only one place where a borrowed ballet theater might be concealed," Shinth continued airily. "Specifically, under the canvas stretched over my dummy stadium."

"Since we agree that's obvious," Retief said, "suppose you assign a squad to untying the knots in Chauncey, while Captain Thilf and ourselves enjoy a hearty diplomatic chuckle over the joke."

"Ah, but the punch line has yet to be delivered," Shinth demurred. "You don't suppose, my dear Retief, that I've devoted all these months to the finesse merely for the amusement of newly arrived Terry bureaucrats?"

"It seems rather a flimsy motivation," Retief concurred. "But you can't hide half a million cubic feet of stolen architecture forever."

"Nor do I intend to try. Only a few hours remain before the full scope of my coup bursts upon the local diplomatic horizon," the Groaci said smoothly. "You'll recall that I've advanced the schedule for the unveiling of Groaci's gift to the Squalian electorate. The heartwarming event will take place tonight, before the massed dignitaries of the planet, with the Terry Mission as prominent guests, of course. Our hosts, expecting the traditional Groaci ballet theater, will suffer no surprise. That emotion will be reserved for the

Terrans, to whom I've carefully leaked the erroneous impression that a ballpark was rising on the site. At a stroke, I will reveal you Terries for the Indian givers you are while at the same moment bestowing on the local bucolics imposing evidence of Groacian generosity—at the expense of you Soft Ones! A classic jape, indeed, as I'm sure you'll agree, eh, Retief?"

"Ambassador Grossblunder might have a few objections to the scheme," Retief pointed out.

"Let him object," Shinth whispered carelessly. "The operation was carried off under cover of night, unseen and unheard. The lift units left the planet today via our supply shuttle. What matter substanceless accusations? Grossblunder was thoughtful enough to carry on erection under heavy security wraps; it will be his word against mine. And a ballet theater on the site is worth two in the Project Proposal File, eh?"

"You won't wet agay with it," Chauncey blurted. "I'll bill the speans!"

"Bill whatever you like, fellow," Shinth hissed loftily. "Ex post facto rumor-mongering will have no effect on a fait accompli. And now, I really must be robing myself for the festivities." He snapped an eyestalk at the Guard Captain. "Escort them to the guest quarters, Thilf, and see that they're made as comfortable as possible during their stay. I believe from the tower they'll have a splendid view of the spectacle under the lights."

"To defenestrate the rogues at once," Thilf suggested in a stage whisper. "To eliminate the blabbermouths completely—"

"To be silent, littermate of drones!" the Ambassador hissed. "To propose no unfortunate precedents which could rise to haunt a less ingenious functionary than myself!" He waggled three of his five oculars at Retief in a placating fashion. "You'll be free to return to your duties as soon as the ceremony is completed," he cooed. "In the meantime—happy meditations."

5

"I thalways ought that stiguring out who loll the foote was the pard hart," Chauncey mourned as the door to the tower apartment slammed on them. "We know shoo hiped it, and hair they wid it—and a lat got of food it does us."

"Shinth seems to have worked things out with considerable care," Retief agreed.

"Luff tuck," Chauncey commiserated. "I sate to hee those feepy little crive-eyes tut one over on you Perries."

"Well, Chauncey, I'm glad to know you feel kindly disposed toward us."

"It's thot nat, exactly," the Squalian said. "It's bust I had a jet bown with my dookie." He sighed. "Well, you can't wick a pinner every time."

"Maybe our side hasn't lost yet," Retief said. "Chauncey, how are you at poking around in dark places?"

"Just untie a nupple of these cots those guise wise sued in my tiedopodia,

and I'll see what I can sue."

Retief set to work. Ten minutes later, with a groan of relief, the Squalian withdrew the last yard of himself from the final knot.

"Peether, what an exbrothience," he sighed. "Wust jate until I get a luple of coops around that nise guy's week... ." He writhed inside his polyon coverall, redistributing his bulk equitably among the sleeves and legs thereof.

"And I've shost my looze," he lamented. "Nazzy snumbers, they were, bright with wown tingwips."

Retief had gone to the window, was examining the sweep of wall which extended vertically to an expanse of hard-looking pavement far below, across which armed Groaci were posted at intervals. Chauncey came over to peer out past him.

"Forget it," he said. "You clan't cimb down there. And if you could, the nards would gab you. But jet's lust see if there's a lonn in here..." He prowled across to a connecting door, poked his head inside the bathroom.

"Daypirt," he exclaimed. "The gums boofed when they esterundimated a Squalian. Thawch wiss." He extruded a stalked eye, plunged it into the bowl; yard after yard of pencil-thick filament followed, paying out smoothly down the drain.

"Oh, boy," Chauncey said happily. "Will those toobs be bartled when I tit in gutch with an out on the palside. All I dot to goo is reach the plewage sant, gook around for a lie I know, and—" Chauncey went rigid. "Oh-oh," he said. He planted his feet—rather loosely organized in the absence of shoes—and pulled backward. The extended cable of protoplasm stretched, but failed to yield.

"Why, the dirty, skousy kinks!" he squalled. "Way were thaiting! Gray thabbed me and nide me in another tot! I can't foe any garther, and I can't bet gack!"

"Tough break," Retief said. "But can't you just slide the rest of you down the line?"

"Bat, and awondan a sellow-fufferer?" Chauncey replied indignantly. "Besides, my integnal internaments gon't woe through the pipe."

"Looks like they've outthought us again, Chauncey."

"Indeed, so it appears," an unctuous whisper issued from a grill above the door, followed by Shinth's breathy chuckle. "Pity about the clogged drains; I'll have a chap along with a plunger in the morning."

"Hey—that posy narker can weir every herd we say!" the Squalian exclaimed. "A dreavesopper, yet!"

Retief went to the door and shot the heavy bolt, securing it from the inside; he caught the chauffeur's remaining eye and winked. "Looks like Amassador Shinth wins," he said. "He was just too smart for us, Chauncey."

I suppose he knows all about the bomb we planted in his Embassy, too—"

"What's that? A bomb? In my Embassy?" Shinth's voice rasped in sudden alarm. "Where? I insist you tell me at once!"

"Don't tell him, Chauncey," Retief said quickly. "It's set to go off in eight minutes; he'll never find it in time."

There was a sibilant gasp from the intercom, followed by feeble Groaci shouts. Moments later, feet clattered in the passage beyond the door. The latch rattled. Fists pounded. Groaci voices hissed.

"What do you mean, locked from the inside," Shinth's cry was audible through the panel.

"Seven minutes," Retief called. "Chins up, Chauncey. It will all be over soon."

"To flee at once!" Captain Thilf's thin tones squalled. "To leave the dastards here to die!"

"Retief—tell me where the bomb is, and I'll put in a word for you with your chief!" Shinth called through the door. "I'll explain you shouldn't be judged too harshly for bungling your assignment; after all, a mere Terran, pitted against a mind like mine..."

"That's good of you, Mr. Ambassador—but I'm afraid duty demands we stay here, even if it means being blown up along with your voucher files."

"My final offer, Retief! Emerge and defuse the infernal machine, and I'll help you blow up the Terry Embassy, thereby destroying the unfavorable E.R. your shabby role in the present contretemps will doubtless earn for you!"

"That's a most undiplomatic suggestion, Mr. Ambassador."

"Very well, then, self-doomed one! To learn the meaning of Groaci wrath! To watch as I evacuate the premises, leaving you and your toady to your fates!"

Retief and Chauncey listened to the sound of retreating footsteps. They watched from the window as Shinth darted forth, crossed the courtyard at a brisk run, followed by his entire staff, the last of whom paused to lock the gate behind him.

"I adfun that was a lot of mit." The Squalian broke the profound silence that fell after the last of the Groaci had departed. "But in mix senates they'll dealize they been ruped. So put's the woint?"

"The point is that I'll have six undisturbed minutes inside the Groaci Chancery," Retief said, unlocking the door. "Fold the hort until I get back."

6

It was ten minutes before Retief re-entered the room, locking the door behind him. Thirty seconds later, Shinth's voice sounded via intercom, keening imprecations.

"Thilf! To batter the door down, to take vengeance on the Soft One for making a jackass out of me in full view of my underlings!"

"Instead, to hasten to the scene of the upcoming ceremony, Exalted One," the Guard Captain caviled. "Otherwise, to miss the big moment."

"To myself attend the unveiling, whilst you deal with the evildoers."

"To grasp the implication that I am to take whatever action seems appropriate to deal with the interlopers?" Thilf inquired in an unctuous whisper.

"To ask no foolish questions," Shinth snapped. "The impossibility of permitting the lesser beings to survive to spread abroad reports prejudicial to the dignity of the Groacian state!"

"To see eyeball to eyeball with Your Excellency," Thilf murmured.

"That's a bot of eyelalls," Chauncey commented. "Well, Mr. Retief, it was a farrel of bun lyle it wasted, but I kess it's gurtains now." He twitched violently as an ax thunk'ed into the door, causing it to jump in its frame.

Retief was at the window, stripping off his powder-blue early-evening informal blazer.

"Chauncey, how much stretch do you have left?" he asked over the battering at the door.

"Hmmm, I gee what you've sot in mind. I'll dee what I can sue..." Chauncey unlimbered a length of tough cable from his left sleeve, sent it over the sill; his coverall hung more and more loosely as he paid out coil after coil of himself.

"There's thuch a sing as overing getterextended," he panted; by this time his garment hung limply on a single thumb-sized strand that extended from the water closet around the door jamb, across the room, and down into the darkness below.

"Can you handle my weight all right?"

"Sure; in yast lear's intermurals I tested out at over talf a hon per air squinch."

"Tell me exactly where the other end of you is trapped."

Chauncey complied. As Retief threw a leg over the sill, torches flared in the courtyard below. The Groaci Ambassador appeared, clad in full ceremonials, consisting of a ribbed cloak, pink-and-green Argyles, a tricorn hat, and jeweled eyeshields which winked on each of his five stalked oculars. His four-Groaci honor guard trailed him through the gate and piled into the official limousine, which pulled away from the curb with a snarl of abused gyros.

"Thell, wat's wat," Chauncey said dejectedly, in a tight-stretched voice that emanated from the slight bulge that represented his vital centers. "He's on his say to the weremony; in atither nun minutes it'll be ove aller."

"So it will," Retief agreed. "And we want to be there to see it, eh, Chauncey?"

"Why? If there's hateything I in, it's a leerful chooser."

"I don't think there's much danger of your seeing one of those tonight," Retief said; he gripped the warm, leathery rope of living flesh and started down.

Fifteen feet above the cobbles, the cable ended. Retief looked down, gauging the drop. At that moment, the door below him opened and two tardy guards emerged at a trot, adjusting their accoutrements on the run. One happened to cock an eye upward, saw Retief, skidded to a halt, upending his ceremonial pike with a clatter. The other uttered a hiss, swung his sharp-pointed spear around and upward.

Retief dropped, sending the two Groaci spinning. He rolled to his feet, sprinted for the corner of the courtyard where the drain emerged. Chauncey's mournful blue eye gazed at him apprehensively from atop the large bowknot into which the extended stalk had been tied. Hastily, but with care, Retief set to work to untie it. Weak Groaci shouts sounded from behind him. More armed aliens emerged into the courtyard; more lights winked on, weak and yellowish in deference to the sensitive Groaci vision, but adequate to reveal the Terran crouched in the far corner. Retief looked around to see Captain Thilf charging down at the head of a flying wedge of pikemen. With a final tug, he slipped the knot, saw Chauncey's eye disappear back into the drain. He ducked a thrown spear; then Thilf hissed an order.

The Groaci guards ringed him in, their gleaming spearpoints bristling inches from his chest. The Captain pushed through, stood in an arrogant pose before his captive.

"So—the infamous wrecker and vile persecutor of peace-loving arthropods is brought to bay at last, eh?" he whispered, signaling to a small, nonuniformed Groaci lugging a lensed black box. "To get a few shots of me shaking a finger under his proboscis," he directed the photographer. "To preserve this moment for posterity, before we impale him."

"A little to the right. Your Captaincy," the civilian suggested. "To tell the Soft One to crouch a trifle, so I can get both of you in the same frame."

"Better still, to order it to lie on its back so the Captain can put a foot on its thorax," a corporal offered.

"To hand me a spear, and to clear these enlisted men from the scene," Thilf ordered. "To not confuse the clear-cut image of my triumph with extraneous elements."

The guards obediently backed off a few paces; Thilf poked his borrowed pike at Retief's chest.

"To assume a placating posture," he ordered, prodding the prisoner lightly. Abruptly, the Captain's expression changed as a sinuous loop of tough-looking rope shot out of the darkness and whipped around his

slender neck. All five eyes shot erect, causing two of his semi-VIP zircon eyeshields to fall with a tiny clatter.

Retief snapped the spear from the stricken officer's hands and reversed it. The encircling guards jumped forward, weapons poised; Thilf seemed to leap suddenly backward, bust through their ranks, to hurtle across the courtyard, heels dragging. Half his spearmen gaped after him as the other half closed in on Retief with raised pikes.

"Drop those stig-pickers!" Chauncey's voice sounded from the window above, "or I'll hop your boss on his dread!"

The Groaci whirled to see their Captain dangling by one leg, twenty feet above the pavement.

"To get a shot of this," Retief suggested to the photographer, "to send home to his family. They'll be pleased to see him hanging around in such distinguished company."

"Help!" Thilf keened. "To do something, culling-season rejects, or to be pegged out in the pleasure pits!"

"To be in the chicken noodle, whatever we do," a sergeant muttered, waving the pike-wielders back.

"Mr. Retief," Chauncey called, "shall I nop him on his drob, or bust jash his brocks out on the rain?"

"I propose a compromise, Captain," Retief called. "Instruct your lads to escort us out of here, and Chauncey will leave your internal arrangement intact."

"To never yield—" Thilf started—and uttered a thin shriek as the Squalian allowed him to fall a yard or two, caught him in midair and hoisted him aloft again.

"But on the other hand, to what end to die in the moment of victory?" the Captain inquired reasonably, if shakily. "To be nothing the meat-faced one can do now to halt the unveiling."

The sergeant signaled; the Groaci formed up in two ranks, spears grounded.

"To leave by the side exit," he said to Retief. "And to not hurry back."

"Better hand me your side arm," Retief suggested. The NCO complied silently. Retief backed to the gate.

"See you outside, Chauncey," he called. "And hurry it up; we're on a tight schedule."

7

"Shoe yould have lean the sook on his face when I deft him langling from a fedge lifty feet up," Chauncey was saying exuberantly as he gunned the car along the wet night street of the Squalian capital. "The dubby dirtle-crossers were baiting weside the drain for me to lawl out in their

craps; fut I booled 'em; I shook a tort-cut through the teptic sank and outranked the flascals."

"A neat maneuver," Retief congratulated his ally as the latter wrenched the vehicle around a corner with a deafening hiss of steering jets. Just ahead, a clump of Terran officials stood under the marquee of the Terran Embassy.

The car slid to a halt behind the gleaming black Embassy limousine. Magnan leaped forward as Retief stepped out.

"Disaster!" he moaned. "Ambassador Grossblunder got back half an hour ago; he was furious when I told him about the Groaci unveiling their project at midnight—so he ordered our Grand Opening moved up to 11:59—tonight! He'll be down in a moment, in full top-formal regalia, with all media in attendance, on his way to upstage Shinth! When those drapes are drawn back to reveal nothing but a yawning pit—" Magnan broke off at a stir behind him. The imposing figure of the Terrestrial Ambassador appeared, flanked by a covey of bureaucrats. Magnan uttered a stifled wail and scuttled to attend his chief. Retief stepped to the limousine chauffeur's window.

"Drive straight to the Groaci project site, Humphrey," he ordered. "Make it snappy."

"Mate a winute," the Squalian demurred. "Master Mignan distoldly stink me to drive to the Serry tight—"

"Change in plan. Better get going."

"Well—ohsay if you kay so," the driver grunted. "Wish somebody'd mind up their makes."

As the limousine pulled away, Retief jumped back into the staff car.

"Follow them, Chauncey," he said. "By the way, with that versatile sound-effects apparatus of yours, how are you at impersonations?"

"Nitty prifty, chief, if I sue day so myself. Thet giss: It's a Baffolian bog-fellow crying for his mate—"

"Later, Chauncey. Can you do Ambassador Grossblunder? "

"Just between the tee of us, me and the boys have a lillion maffs taping the old boy's owns."

"Let's hear you do Shinth."

"Lessee: To joil in your own booses, tile Verry... How's that?"

"It'll have to do, Chauncey," Retief said.

"Now, here's what I want you to do..."

8

"What's this?" Ambassador Grossblunder was rumbling as Retief joined the Terran delegation alighting before the bunting-draped, floodlit entry to the

tarpaulin-covered structure looming against the dark Squalian sky. "This doesn't look like—" he broke off as Ambassador Shinth appeared from among a crowd of retainers and local notables.

"Good lord," Magnan gasped, noting for the first time where the limousine had delivered them. "Your Excellency—there's been a mistake—"

"Ah, so delighted to see you, Mr. Ambassador," the Groaci Chief of Mission murmured. "Good of Your Excellency to honor the occasion with your august presence. I'm delighted to see you hold no narrow-minded grudge, merely because I've bested you in our friendly little competition."

"Hah!" the bulky Terran snorted. "Your effrontery will backfire when the Prime Minister and Cabinet are offered nothing but a set of badly cured foundations, after all this empty fanfare!"

"Au contraire, Mr. Ambassador," Shinth replied coolly. "The edifice is complete, even to the pennants atop the decorative minarets, a glowing tribute to Groaci ingenuity which will forever establish in the minds of our hosts an unforgettable image of the largesse-bestowing powers of the Groacian State."

"Nonsense, Shinth! A confidential source has kept me well abreast of your progress; as of yesterday, your so-called project hadn't gotten off the ground!"

"I assure you the deficiency has been rectified. And now we'd best be nipping along to the reviewing stand; the moment of truth approaches."

"Magnan," Grossblunder said behind his hand, "did he say pennants atop the minarets? I thought that was one of the unique details of our project!"

"Why, what a coincidence," Magnan quavered.

"Ah, there, Fenwick," a deep-purple Squalian in heavily brocaded robes loomed out of the drizzle before the Terran Ambassador. The local's already imposing bulk was enhanced by the ropes of pearls and golden chains intertwined with his somatic elements, producing an effect like an immense plate of multicolored lasagna. "I hardly exceeded to speck you here. An inspaying displeasure of interaimese specity!"

Grossblunder harrumphed, clasping the proffered bundle of Prime Ministerial tissues in a parody of a handshake. "Yes, well, as to that—"

"You'll poin my jarty, of course?" The Squalian Chief Executive urged cordially, turning away. "Pee you on the sodium."

Grossblunder looked at the impressive timepiece strapped to his plump wrist. "Hmmp!" he muttered to Magnan. "We may as well go along. It's too late now for me to stage my unveiling ahead of Shinth, a grave disappointment regarding which I'll have words with you later."

"Retief!" Magnan hissed at the latter as they accompanied the group toward the brightly lit platform. "If we slip away now, we may be able to sign on as oilers on that tramp freighter I saw at the port this afternoon. It looked unsavory enough that its skipper should be willing to dispense with

technicalities—"

"Don't do anything hasty, Mr. Magnan," Retief advised. "Just play it by ear—and be ready to pick up any dropped cues."

On the platform, Retief took a position at Ambassador Shinth's bony elbow. The Groaci gave a startled twitch when he saw him.

"Captain Thilf didn't want me to miss anything," Retief said. "He decided to let me go, after all."

"You dare to show your face here," Shinth hissed, "after assaulting my—"

"Kidnapers?" Retief suggested. "I thought, under the circumstances, perhaps we could agree to forget the whole incident, Mr. Ambassador."

"Hmm. Perhaps it would be as well. I suppose my role might be subject to misinterpretation..." Shinth turned away as the orchestra—composed of two dozen Squalians doubling as brass and strings—struck up a rousing medley of classic Elvis Presley themes. As it ended, a spotlight speared out, highlighting the slender figure of the Groaci Ambassador.

"Mr. Prime Minister," Shinth began, his breathy voice rasping in the PA system. "It gives me great pleasure..."

Retief made an unobtrusive signal; an inconspicuous strand of pale purple that had glided snakelike across the platform slithered up behind Shinth, and unseen by any but Retief, deftly whipped around the Groaci's spindly neck, quite invisible under the elaborate ruffs sported by the diplomat.

A soft croak issued from the speakers spaced around the plaza. Then the voice resumed:

"It grates me pleazh givver, as I was saying, to tray pibute to my escolled teamleague, Amblunder Grossbaster, by ungaling the Verran tift to the palion Squeeple!" The Groaci's spindly arm, assisted by a tough length of Chauncey, reached out and yanked the trip line holding the tarps in place.

"What in the world did he say?" Grossblunder growled. "I had the distinct impression he called me something unprintable!" He interrupted himself as the canvas tumbled away from the structure to reveal the baroque pile dazzling under the lights, pennants awave from the minarets.

"Why—that's my Bolshoi-type ballet theater!" Grossblunder blurted.

"And a glendid spift it is, too, Fenwick," the Prime Minister exclaimed, seizing his hand. "But I'm a fit conbused... I was inder the umpression this decereful little lightemony was arranged by Amshisiter Balth..."

"Merely a bit of artful misdirection to keep Your Excellency in suspense, ha-ha," Magnan improvised hastily.

"You mean—this strendid splucture is a sift from the CDT?" The PM expressed confusion by writhing his features dizzy ingly. "But I had a direct stinkollection of ceding the site to the Groaci Mission..."

"Magnan!" Grossblunder roared. "What's going on here!"

As Magnan stuttered, Retief stepped forward, offering a bulky parchment, elaborately sealed and red-taped. Grossblunder tore it open and stared at the Gothic lettering.

"Magnan, you rascal! You staged all this mummery just to add an element of suspense to the proceedings, eh?"

"Whom, I, Your Excellency?" Magnan croaked.

"Don't be bashful, my boy!" Grossblunder poked a meaty finger into Magnan's ribs. "I'm delighted! About time someone livened up the proceedings." His eye fell on Shinth, whose body was twitching in a curious rhythm, while his eyestalks waved in no discernible pattern.

"Even my Groaci colleague seems caught up in the spirit of the moment," he boomed heartily. "Well, in response I suppose we can hardly fail to reciprocate in the same spirit. I suggest we all troop off now to witness the presentation of the Groaci project, eh?"

"Laybe mater," a faint voice croaked. "Night row I got to boe to the gathroom." Shinth turned stiffly and tottered away amid shouts, flashbulbs, bursting skyrockets, and a stirring rendition of the "Dead March" from Saul.

"Retief," Magnan gasped as the Ambassador and the PM moved off, chatting cordially. "What...? How...?"

"It was a little too late to steal the building back," Retief said. "I did the next best thing and stole the deed to the property."

9

"I still feel we're skating on very thin ice," Magnan said, lifting a plain ginger ale from the tray proffered by a passing waiter, and casting a worried eye across the crowded lounge toward Ambassador Grossblunder. "If he ever finds out how close we came to having to write a Report of Survey on one Ballet Theater—and that you violated the Groaci Embassy and stole official documents—and that one of our drivers laid the equivalent of hands on the person of Shinth himself—" he broke off as the slight figure of the Groaci Ambassador appeared at the entry beside them, his finery in a state of disarray, his eyes canted at an outraged angle.

"Good lord," Magnan gasped, "I wonder if it's too late to catch that freighter?"

"Thievery!" Shinth hissed, catching sight of Retief. "Assault! Mayhem! Treachery!"

"I'll drink to that," a portly diplomat said blurrily, raising his glass.

"Ah, there, Shinth!" Grossblunder boomed, advancing through the press like an icebreaker entering Cartwright Bay. "Delighted you decided to drop by—"

"Save your unction!" the Groaci hissed. "I am here to call to your attention the actions of that one!" he pointed a trembling digit at Retief.

Grossblunder frowned at the latter.

"Yes—you're the fellow who carried my briefcase," he started. "What—"

There was a sudden soft thump, merged with a metallic clatter. Grossblunder looked down. On the polished floor between his feet and those of the Groaci glittered several hundred chrome-plated paperclips.

"Oh, did you drop something, Your Excellency?" Magnan chirped.

"Why, ah, who, me?" Shinth remonstrated weakly.

"So!" Grossblunder bellowed, his face purpling to a shade which aroused a murmur of admiring comment from the Squalian bearers gathering to observe the byplay.

"Why, however did those paperclips get into my pocket?" Shinth wondered aloud, but without conviction.

"Ha!" Grossblunder roared. "So that's what you were after, eh? I should have known!"

"Bah!" Shinth responded with a show of spirit. "What matter a few modest souvenirs in the light of the depredations of—"

"Few? You call sixty-seven gross a few?"

Shinth looked startled. "How did you—that is to say, I deny—"

"Save your denials, Shinth!" Grossblunder drowned the Groaci out. "I intend to prosecute—"

"I came here to speak of grand larceny!" Shinth cut in, attempting to regain the initiative. "Breaking and entering! Assault and battery!"

"Decided to make a clean breast of it, eh?" Grossblunder boomed. "That will be in your favor at the trial."

"Sir," Magnan whispered urgently, "in view of Ambassador Shinth's magnanimous blunder—I mean gesture—earlier in the evening, don't you think it might be possible to overlook this undeniable evidence of red-handed theft? We could charge the paperclips up to representational expenses, along with the liquor."

"It was his doing!" Shinth pointed past Magnan at Retief.

"You must be confused," Grossblunder said in surprise. "That's just the fellow who carries my briefcase. Magnan is the officer in charge of the investigation. His harassment got to you, eh, Shinth? Conscience found you out at last. Well, as Magnan suggests, I suppose I could be lenient just this once. But that's one you owe me..." Grossblunder clapped the Groaci on his narrow back, urging him toward the nearest punch bowl.

"Heavens," Magnan breathed to Retief, "what a stroke of luck! But I'm astonished Shinth could have been so incautious as to bring his loot along to the reception."

"He didn't," Retief said. "I planted it on him."

"Retief! You didn't!"

"Afraid so, Mr. Magnan."

"But—in that case, the paperclip thefts are still unsolved—and His Groacian Excellency is being unjustly blamed!"

"Not exactly; I found the sixty-seven gross stashed in his office, concealed under a flowerbox full of jelly blossoms."

"Good lord!" Magnan took out a scented tissue and mopped at his temples. "Imagine having to lie, cheat, and steal just to do a little good in the world. There are times when I think the diplomatic life is almost too much for me."

"Funny thing," Retief said, easing a Bacchus brandy from a passing tray. "There are times when to me it seems hardly enough."