

the man with the anteater

F. PAUL WILSON

Anyone who keeps a pet anteater in a stringently limited society is obviously a crackpot. But some crackpots have highly methodical cracks in their pots . . .

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

No discussion of galactic business, of course, would be complete without mention of Interstellar Business Advisers. Armed with the tried and true maxims of a free-market economy and a number of new and daring precepts for the conduct of business on an interstellar scale, IBA played an important part in shaping the course of trade in the galaxy.

The company was founded by one Joseph Finch, a man whose figure has taken on an almost mythical air in the annals of galactic trade. The most farfetched stories concern the period before the founding of IBA, when Finch was still a resident of Earth—

excerpt from "Galactic Business: A History",
by Emmerz Fent

On a steamy summer morning, Joe and Andy, the anteater, stepped out into their backyard and surveyed their domain. Thirty-eight, slight of frame and a bit on the homely side, Joe Finch didn't exactly cut an heroic figure. But he was looked up to as a hero by many nonetheless. And there were, of course, many who thought of him as a stupid, eccentric, thick-headed, bull-headed reactionary. But they seemed to be in the minority.

You see, in a world that functions with the smoothness of a well-oiled machine, the man who insists on deciding when to shift his own gears becomes a hero of sorts. A man with few friends, who had yet to meet his wife, whose sister and brother-in-law, unable to cope with Earth any longer, were living as splinter colonists on a planet called Dasein II somewhere out in nowhere, Finch was a loner. And in a highly collectivized, planned and patented society, loners, if they can avoid being swallowed whole and digested, become heroes.

Finch was mentally running through his plan to manipulate Arthur Gordon, Chief Administrator of Earth. Gordon was either a social idealist or a power-monger—the two are not always easily distinguishable—and Finch knew from certain sources that Gordon was planning to manipulate *him*. The thing to do was to make Gordon show his hand before he was completely ready and the strike going on at the Finch House plant right now could be the perfect lever.

"Stay here, Andy," he told his pet. "And if you get hungry, help yourself." Andy scanned the dry, virtually grassless yard and trotted off in the direction of a promising mound with his huge, furry tail held straight out behind him and his agile tongue seemingly licking his snout in anticipation.

"Don't overdo it or you'll have to go back on *synthe-meat* and formic acid," Finch warned. Andy glanced over his shoulder and stuck out his tongue.

Finch went out front, started up an old transporter with the words *Finch House* printed on the sides and back, and drove off toward Pete Farnham's machine shop.

As the last of the new equipment was being loaded, Farnham turned to Finch, "You sure you want to go through with this, Joe?"

"Look, Pete," Finch said, wiping his forehead on his sleeve, "you designed this stuff so I'd be able to increase my output by about another half without increasing my overhead or labor costs."

Farnham looked annoyed. "I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the union ... it's on strike, remember? They're very unhappy about losing their overtime."

"If the union had its way," Finch growled, "I'd still be using Gutenberg presses."

"But it's against the law to cross a picket line! Why don't you just wait it out as usual or maybe bribe the union president? All hell's going to break loose if you go through with this."

Finch locked the back of the transporter with a solid *click*. "That might be just what I'm after. Besides, this is as good a time as any to challenge a rotten law. Gordon's been pushing things a bit too . . ." His voice trailed off as he saw Farnham climbing into the cab. "Where do you think you're going?"

"With you, of course," Farnham replied and hefted a length of pipe. "I spent a lot of time designing that equipment and the only way it'll ever get to prove itself is if you get to use it. Now let's get moving."

. . . the pickets/a truck in their midst /hey! /stop 'em! /get them! / Hold 'em/don't let 'em through/ stop 'em!/ Stomp 'em! /but chain and bricks and barricades and bodies give way/a face looms/flail at it./Someone fires a shot /rniiss! /The police arrive/made it! /The pickets are being held outside and the police will deal with you later . . .

Joe Finch watched the roiling crowds from atop the Earth Building. "You just can't figure people, Andy," he told the pet he had insisted on bringing with him. "They clamor for a law to be passed and then celebrate a man who breaks it."

"I believe you're oversimplifying the situation, Joe," said a voice behind him. Finch turned to see Arthur Gordon: big, graying, about sixty, the man on whose "invitation" he had come to the Earth Building. It was their first meeting and the Chief Administrator of Earth got things off on the wrong foot by calling him "Joe;" Finch believed first names were for personal friends only.

"Oh, how's that, *Arthur?*" he replied, noting the C.A.'s wince.

"Well, I mean ... it seems you've become a symbol to them—"

(My, what a phony smile you have, Arthur Gordon, Finch observed privately.)

"... a symbol of Individuality—"

(I'll bet he uses a capital "I" when he spells that word.)

"And Individuality is something each of them feels he has lost."

(Whose fault is that?)

"I imagine that some of them, deep in their hearts, actually hate you for maintaining a quality they've lost."

(I can think of a few union roughnecks who won't have to go that deep.)

"As a matter of fact—"

"Get to the point!" Finch finally interrupted. "Why did you 'invite' me here rather than have me arrested for breaking the picket law?"

Gordon's fixed smile was replaced by one of a more genuine nature. "O.K., Mr. Finch, I *will* be more to the point, although what I've been saying isn't far from it. Let's go into my office."

It was not until Finch was seated across the desk from him in the Chief Administrator's spacious main office that Gordon began to speak.

"Mr. Finch, the reason I did not have you arrested is very simple: you are the only man on this planet who can be described as a hero."

"I think you've got the wrong definition of a hero in mind, Mr. C.A. I'm not a hero . . . I've never done an heroic thing in my life. I may stand out in a crowd, but otherwise I think you're overestimating me."

Gordon frowned. "I don't think I overestimate you at all. The public is hungry for an idol and you, unwilling as you may be, are the prime candidate. In fact your unwillingness to cooperate with the idol-seekers only increases your popularity. To them you're the last of a rare species. Just look at you! You wander around with an antbear at your heels, you're making a pile of money in an industry that should have been extinct shortly after the development of *telestories*, you had a shyster lawyer wheedle a private home for you so you could raise ants for that ridiculous pet of yours and now you've taken to busting picket lines!"

"Nobody keeps me out of my own business!" Finch stated flatly and finally.

"I wonder about that," Gordon mused. "This is hardly the first strike at your plant . . . you've bargained with the union before, why did you choose to defy it this time? Planning to challenge the Picket

Law?"

"Would it do me any good to try?" Finch replied in a noncommittal tone.

"Maybe. I never liked the law . . . didn't like it when it was passed and I like it even less at the moment."

Finch cracked his knuckles. "The Picket Law is a natural consequence of legalizing the picket line. You see, a picket line makes it possible to kidney-punch anyone trying to enter the building currently 'under siege' and sooner or later you don't cross a picket line if you know what's good for you. Then, with typical political logic, crossing a picket line was declared illegal 'in order to prevent violence during strikes.' "

Gordon snorted. "I've heard all this before, Mr. Finch. And I didn't ask you here to reprimand your extralegal activities nor to discuss the Picket Law with you. Instead of having you arrested, I'd rather make a deal."

"I had a feeling you'd find some use for me."

The C.A. ignored the remark. "Look, Finch, here's the situation: we've become an incredibly complex society here on Earth; the average man feels like a cog, feels a loss of worth. Oh, I know it sounds very trite but unfortunately it's very true. We've been warned about this for centuries but it's something that's almost impossible to prevent, even when you can see it coming.

"You, however, have somehow overcome it all. You've bucked convention, legal restrictions ... even technology! You've become a symbol of the Individuality people instinctively feel they've lost and want desperately to regain. And I've found a way to give it to them!"

Finch smirked. "How? Pills?"

Gordon was not in a light mood. "No, the plan's a little more complicated than that. It's a daring plan and will frighten people at first; they'll want the end but they'll balk at the means. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless someone they admire not only endorses it but actively promotes it."

Finch shook his head as if to clear it. "Wait a minute. Let's just go back a bit. You're building up to the means and I don't even know what the end really is supposed to be." Gordon strode to a bookshelf and pulled out a huge volume. "Ever hear of Gregor Black?" he asked as he laid the book on the desk."

"Some sort of technosociologist, wasn't he?" Finch replied. "But I believe his disciples are calling him 'Noah' Black now."

"Right. His theory was that both the individual and society are best served when the individual is doing the job for which he is best suited . . . the old 'right man for the right job' maxim. He figured that not only would you achieve maximum productivity but you'd also allow the individual the personal satisfaction and sense of fulfillment that comes from doing what he can do best."

"Where is he now?" Finch asked.

Gordon had opened the volume and was flipping through the pages. "Oh, somewhere in the Ninth Quadrant, I believe."

Finch snapped his fingers. "That's right! His group was outlawed so they decided to apply for a 'splinter colony.' "

"Ninety years ago," Gordon confirmed, "they took up the government's offer to any large enough group that wanted to settle an Earth-class planet and got free, one-way transportation to the prospective utopia of their choice. Since they were registered as a splinter colony, the planet was then declared off limits to all government traffic and Black and company could do whatever they wanted with it."

"I'd love to know who dreamed up the splinter colony idea," Finch said with a smile and a shake of the head. "It's probably one of the few deals in history in which everybody gets what he wants: the government not only colonizes world after world, but it gets rid of all the local dissidents to boot. And the dissidents get their own world on which to live the way they wish."

Gordon was not listening, however. Pointing to the book on his desk, he said, "Here's the reason Black's group was outlawed: the Assessor."

"I remember the name," Finch remarked. "Gregor Black's miracle machine."

"Don't be too light with the Assessor . . . nor with old Gregor. He designed quite a machine. With the

Assessor screening a population you wouldn't have, say, a potential physicist or chemist doing menial labor because his talents and abilities were never discovered and never developed. Nor would you have incompetents in important positions because of 'connections.' It's too bad the Assessor jumbled the minds of a few of his followers during testing . . . that's why its use was outlawed."

"Jumbled, hell!" Finch snorted. "It turned a few of his faithful followers into vegetables!"

"Well, you've got to remember that `electrohypnosis'—which was the term for mind-probing in those days—was still in the experimental stages. Its use was integral to the Assessor but its control had not yet been perfected. Thus, the tragic accidents."

Finch yawned. "Just as well . . . never would have worked anyway." Gordon smiled and leaned over his desk. "Oh, but it has!" he exclaimed softly.

"You mean you've heard from Black's splinter colony? I wouldn't put too much faith in . . ."

"No, no," the C.A. interrupted, "it has worked right here on Earth!"

"Where?"

"The Rigrod Peninsula."

"So that's what all the secrecy's been about out there," mused Finch.

Gordon was enthused now: "We started a colony out there twenty-six years ago using a thousand deserted children, each about a year old. Each was 'assessed' once a year for the first twenty years and education was modified and directed for each in accordance with the Assessor's findings; we were thus able to give them twenty years of education in roughly fifteen. Six years ago they were all given the option of either going into their assigned fields or returning to the mainland."

He paused dramatically. "All stayed."

Finch affected a surprised expression. He had a few contacts in the government and knew all about the Rigrod experiment.

"And the advances in technology, the arts, the life sciences, business and hundreds of other fields in these past six years have been incredible!"

"I can see how it would work," Finch said, "but why tell me about it?"

"Because it's going to take a massive selling job to get the public to accept it and my advisers think that endorsements by popular personalities would be the best technique. You, Joe Finch, are going to help convince the public that the Assessor is the greatest thing ever to come along."

"Oh, really? Not without a little more than a spiel from you, I'm afraid."

Gordon sobered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I want to see Rigrod and see exactly what it's like. If this Assessor can do all you say it can, then I'll back you on it. But I want to see for myself."

"I'm afraid not," the C.A. frowned. "We've allowed free access of outside information into Rigrod but all outsiders have been barred. We can make no exceptions."

"Better make one this time."

"Need I remind you, Mr. Finch, that your situation in regard to the law at the moment is quite precarious?"

"I endorse nothing sight unseen," Finch stated. He was gambling now, gambling that the Finch endorsement was important enough to the C.A. to make him back down. "And besides, you've said nothing about my legal situation *after* I endorse the Assessor . . . how will I stand then?" As they say: if you're going to bluff, don't do it halfheartedly.

Gordon studied Finch with narrowed eyes and nodded slowly. "All right. All right, damnit! I'll publicly denounce the Picket Law and have the charges dropped after we go to Rigrod."

"Well, Andy," Finch said, scratching his pet's snout, "looks like we're going on a trip soon . . . and at government expense, no less."

The Rigrod Peninsula had been turned into a minor city, a tiny nation of a thousand. Order and symmetry ruled its design and new structures of unique conceptualization were on the rise. The inhabitants came out in force to meet Joe Finch. They were only physically isolated here and the figure of the crusty individualist with his ever-present ant-bear companion was immediately recognized.

He wandered through the crowd of residents commenting on this and that, answering questions and

shaking proffered hands. He was impressed. These people were friendly, articulate and every one a specialist in his or her field. But there was a subtle undercurrent here, an undercurrent he had been sure he would find.

After the tour, Gordon and Finch retired to the C.A.'s Rigrod offices. Finch was skimming through a manuscript he had found on the desk. It was called "Interstellar Business: A Theory," by Peter J. Paxton.

"This Paxton is good," he told the beaming Gordon. "His logistical concepts will revolutionize interstellar trade. Does he need a publisher?"

"Sorry, Joe," Gordon laughed, "but Rigrod is setting up its own publishing house—and it will be a *telestories* format." He was needling Finch and enjoying it.

Changing the subject, he asked, "Well, now that you've seen our little project, what do you think of it?"

Now the touchy part: to stall for time. "I don't know. There's something about this setup that bothers me."

"What could bother you about it? It's the perfect society! Utopia!"

"The whole idea of utopia makes me more than a little nervous," Finch replied. "Can you give me a week or two to think on it?"

"I'll give you a week, Finch. That should give you plenty of time to assimilate what you've seen here today. But remember, those charges still stand."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. But don't you think the endorsement would hold more weight if it wasn't so obviously apparent that we had made a deal?"

"You have a point," the C.A. admitted and paused, thinking. "Why don't we try this: I'll get the charges dropped if you give me a tentative affirmation."

"O.K., Mr. Gordon. It's a deal."

And the Chief Administrator of Earth made good his promise the very next day.

When Gordon and two other men burst into the Finch backyard, they found that he was not alone. Andy was there and so was a young, fair-haired man in his mid-twenties. Gordon instantly recognized him.

"Paxton! It figures I'd find you here! Go inside. I've something to discuss with Mr. Finch!" The young man was quite cowed by the wrathful C.A. He looked to Finch and Finch nodded toward the door.

"Do as he says. He brought a couple of his bully-boys along so we'd better humor him."

When Paxton had disappeared into the house, Finch turned to Gordon. "Now what the hell is all this about?"

"You're under arrest, Finch!" Gordon roared.

"What for?" Andy raised his head and wondered who was making all this noise on such a pleasant afternoon.

"You know very well what for, Finch ... for destroying a government project!"

"You mean the Rigrod experiment?"

"Yes! The Rigrod experiment! The whole structure of the Assessor built

society started to break down soon after your visit. You did something out there. I'm going to find out what it was. I don't care how popular you are, you're going to tell me."

"I'll tell you what I did," said Finch. "I visited the place. That's all. You were with me all the time."

"You pulled something—" Gordon began.

"Damn right I did," Finch interrupted with a snort. "I destroyed that project willfully and with malice aforethought. And I did you a favor by doing it. It was bound to happen sooner or later, you fool! You thought you were creating the perfect society by basing it on human individuality, by making the best use of individual abilities. You took care of *individuality* . . . fine! But you forgot all about *individualism*!

"It never occurred to you that many people wouldn't be happy doing 'what they can do best.' As a matter of fact, many people don't give a damn about what they can do best. They're more interested in doing what they *like* to do, what they *want* to do. There might be a musician playing at the music center tonight who could be a brilliant physicist if he wanted to be, but he likes music instead. In an Assessor built society, however, he'd be working with mathematical formulae instead of chord progressions. He'd sit around envying musicians for just so long and then he'd either rebel or go mad. When are people like you going to learn that utopia is a fool's game?"

Gordon was in a cold rage. The project, which was to be a monument to his name, was being torn to shreds by this man in front of him.

He spoke through clenched teeth: "But why didn't they rebel before you showed up? The project was working perfectly until then."

"You've had no trouble on the peninsula until now," Finch explained, "because you've been working with a biased sample. Those kids have been told all their lives that they are pioneers, that they'll be the ones to prove that man can have utopia. And so all the square pegs in the round holes—the equivalents of our hypothetical musician-physicist—keep mum on the hope that their discontent will pass . . . they don't want to destroy 'man's chance at utopia' by a hasty decision. And in keeping mum they never find out that there are others like themselves.

"Then Joe Finch comes along. And I'm not a hero, Gordon ... I'm a crackpot, an eccentric, a nut. I've known about Rigrod for over a decade, now, and spent that time building up a reputation as a rugged individualist. Many times I felt foolish but the press and the vid played right into my hands. I've been a walking publicity stunt for the last ten years. That's why my pet is an antbear instead of a dog—although I wouldn't trade Andy for anything now. I've been hoping for a chance to get to Rigrod and you gave it to me. And that was all I needed.

"Allowing someone with a reputation as a crackpot individualist to

wander through the Rigrod Peninsula is like introducing a seed crystal to a super-saturated solution: all the underlying threads of doubt and discontent start to crystallize. But don't blame me! Blame yourself and your inane theories and ambitions! You were a fool to be taken in by Black's theory, you were a fool to bring me to the project and you were a fool to think that I'd have anything at all to do with such a plan!"

Gordon finally exploded. "Arrest him!" he told the two guards who had been standing idly by.

The guards, of course, did not know anything about antbears. The antbear has been long used in the areas to which it is indigenous as a watchdog. Its forelimbs have monstrous claws which it uses for digging into termite hills but it can rear up on its hind legs and use these claws for defense. And the antbear has an uncanny ability to roar like a lion.

The two guards were quickly made aware of these facts. Andy startled them with a roar as they made their first move toward Finch. A few swipes with his claws and the guards were down and gashed and bleeding.

Andy stood beside Finch and huffed warily as his master scratched his snout. Finch turned to the livid Chief Administrator.

"Now get out of here and take your friends with you."

"All right, Finch. You've won for now. But let me warn you that your life here on Earth from now on will be hell! And don't get any ideas about getting off-planet . . . you're staying right here!"

But Joe Finch had been far ahead of the C.A. He had already sold his house, a printing firm had bought his machinery and all the properties of Finch House had been picked up by a *telestories* outfit. A handsome bribe had reserved two seats and one animal passage out from Earth on a moment's notice and Joe Finch, Peter J. Paxton and Andy were well into primary warp toward Ragna before Arthur Gordon had any idea they had left Earth.

With Finch's money and organizational experience and Paxton's business theories, Interstellar Business Advisers was born and grew with the expanding Federation. And Joe, at long last able to put aside his role of superindividualist, found a woman who loved him—and anteaters, too—and it wasn't too long before Joe junior came along. But that's another story.