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"A little object lesson, as it were!"

The God in the Box

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

In the course of his Special Patrol duties Commander John Hanson resolves the unique and poignant mystery of "toma annerson."

THIS is a story I never intended to tell. I would not even tell it now if it were not for the Zenians.

Understand that I do not dislike the Zenians. One of the best officers I ever had was a Zenian. His name was Eitel, and he served under me on the old *Tamon*, my first command. But lately the Zenians have made rather too much of the exploits of Ame Baove.

The history of the Universe gives him credit, and justly, for making the first successful exploration in space. Baove's log of that trip is a classic that every school-child knows.

But I have a number of friends who are natives of Zenia, and they fret me with their boastings.

"Well, Hanson," they say, "your Special Patrol Service has done wonderful work, largely under the officership of Earth-men. But after all, you have to admit that it was a Zenian who first mastered space!"

Perhaps it is just fractiousness of an old man, but countless repetitions of such statements, in one form or another, have irritated me to the point of action—and before going further, let me say, for the benefit of my Zenian friends, that if they care to dig deeply enough into the archives, somewhere they will find a brief report of these adventures recorded in the log of one of my old ships, the *Ertak*, now scrapped and forgotten. Except, perhaps, by some few like myself, who knew and loved her when she was one of the newest and finest ships of the Service.

I commanded the *Ertak* during practically her entire active life. Those were the days when John Hanson was not an old man, writing of brave deeds, but a youngster of half a century, or thereabouts, and full of spirit. Sometimes, when memory brings back those old days, it seems hard for me to believe that John Hanson, Commander of the *Ertak*, and old John Hanson, retired, and a spinner of ancient yarns, are one and the same—but I must get on to my story, for youth is impatient, and from "old man" to "old fool" is a short leap for a youthful mind.

THE Special Patrol Service is not all high adventure. It was not so even in the days of the *Ertak*. There was much routine patrolling, and the *Ertak* drew her full share of this type of duty. We hated it, of course, but in that Service you do what you are told and say nothing.

We were on a routine patrol, with only one possible source of interest in our orders. The wizened and sour-faced scientists the Universe acclaims so highly had figured out that a certain planet, thus far unvisited, would be passing close to the line of our patrol, and our orders read, "if feasible," to inspect this body, and if inhabited, which was doubted, to make contact.

There was a separate report, if I remember correctly, with a lot of figures. This world was not large; smaller than Earth, as a matter of fact, and its orbit brought it into conjunction with our system only once in some immemorable period of time. I suppose that record is stored away, too, if anybody is interested in it. It was largely composed of guesses, and most of them were wrong. These white-coated scientists

do a lot of wild guessing, if the facts were known.

However, she did show up at about the place they had predicted. Kincaide, my second officer, was on duty when the television disk first picked her up, and he called me promptly.

"Strobus"—that was the name the scientists had given this planet we were to look over—"Strobus is in view, sir, if you'd like to look her over," he reported. "Not close enough yet to determine anything of interest, however, even with maximum power."

I considered for a moment, scowling at the microphone.

"Very well, Mr. Kincaide," I said at length. "Set a course for her. We'll give her a glance, anyway."

"Yes, sir," replied Kincaide promptly. One of the best officers in the Service, Kincaide. Level-headed, and a straight thinker. He was a man for any emergency. I remember—but I've already told that story.

I TURNED back to my reports, and forgot all about this wandering Strobus. Then I turned in, to catch up somewhat on my sleep, for we had had some close calls in a field of meteors, and the memory of a previous disaster was still fresh in my mind. I had spent my "watch below" in the navigating room, and now I needed sleep rather badly. If the scientists really want to do something for humanity, why don't they show us how to do without food and sleep?

When, refreshed and ready for anything, I did report to the navigating room, Correy, my first officer, was on duty.

"Good morning, sir," he nodded. It was the custom, on ships I commanded, for the officers to govern themselves by Earth standards of time; we created an artificial day and night, and disregarded entirely, except in our official records, the enar and other units of the Universal time system.

"Good morning, Mr. Correy. How are we bearing?"

"Straight for our objective, sir." He glanced down at the two glowing charts that pictured our surroundings in three dimensions, to reassure himself. "She's dead ahead, and looming up quite sizeably."

"Right!" I bent over the great hooded television disk—the ponderous type we used in those days—and picked up Strobus without difficulty. The body more than filled the disk and I reduced the magnification until I could get a full view of the entire exposed surface.

Strobus, it seemed, bore a slight resemblance to one view of my own Earth. There were two very apparent polar caps, and two continents, barely connected, the two of them resembling the numeral eight in the writing of Earth-men; a numeral consisting of two circles, one above the other, and just touching.

One of the roughly circular continents was much larger than the other.

"Mr. Kincaide reported that the portions he inspected consisted entirely of fluid sir," commented Correy. "The two continents now visible have just come into view, so I presume that there are no others, unless they are concealed by the polar caps. Do you find any indications of habitation?"

"I haven't examined her closely under high magnification," I replied. "There are some signs..."

I INCREASED power, and began slowly searching the terrain of the distant body. I had not far to search before I found what I sought.

"We're in luck, Mr. Correy!" I exclaimed. "Our friend is inhabited. There is at least one sizeable city on the larger continent and ... yes, there's another! Something to break the monotony, eh? Strobos is an 'unknown' on the charts."

"Suppose we'll have trouble, sir?" asked Correy hopefully. Correy was a prime hand for a fight of any kind. A bit too hot-headed perhaps, but a man who never knew when he was beaten.

"I hope not; you know how they rant at the Base when we have to protect ourselves," I replied, not without a certain amount of bitterness. "They'd like to pacify the Universe with never a sweep of a disintegrator beam. 'Of course, Commander Hanson' some silver-sleeve will say, 'if it was absolutely vital to protect your men and your ship'—ugh! They ought to turn out for a tour of duty once in a while, and see what conditions are." I was young then, and the attitude of my conservative superiors at the Base was not at all in keeping with my own views, at times.

"You think, then, that we will have trouble, sir?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I shrugged. "The people of this Strobos know nothing of us. They will not know whether we come as friends or enemies. Naturally, they will be suspicious. It is hard to explain the use of the menore, to convey our thoughts to them."

I glanced up at the attraction meter, reflecting upon the estimated mass of the body we were approaching. By night we should be nearing her atmospheric envelope. By morning we should be setting down on her.

"We'll hope for the best, sir," said Correy innocently.

I bent more closely over the television disk, to hide my smile. I knew perfectly what the belligerent Correy meant by "the best."

THE next morning, at atmospheric speed, we settled down swiftly over the larger of the two continents, Correy giving orders to the navigating room while I divided my attention between the television disk and the altimeter, with a glance every few seconds at the surface temperature gauge. In unknown atmospheres, it is not difficult to run up a considerable surface temperature, and that is always uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous.

"The largest city seems to be nearer the other continent. You should be able to take over visually before long. Has the report on the atmosphere come through yet?"

"Not yet. Just a moment, sir." Correy spoke for a moment into his microphone and turned to me with a smile.

"Suitable for breathing," he reported. "Slight excess of oxygen, and only a trace of moisture. Hendricks just completed the analysis." Hendricks, my third officer, was as clever as a laboratory man in many ways, and a red-blooded young officer as well. That's a combination you don't come across very often.

"Good! Breathing masks are a nuisance. I believe I'd reduce speed somewhat; she's warming up. The big city I mentioned is dead ahead. Set the *Ertak* down as close as possible."

"Yes, sir!" snapped Correy, and I leaned over the television disk to examine, at very close range, the great Strobian metropolis we were so swiftly approaching.

THE buildings were all tall, and constructed of a shining substance that I could not identify, even though I could now make out the details of their architecture, which was exceedingly simple, and devoid of ornament of any kind, save an occasional pilaster or flying buttress. The streets were broad, and laid out to cut the city into lozenge-shaped sections, instead of the conventional squares. In the center of the city stood a great lozenge-shaped building with a smooth, arched roof. From every section of the city, great swarms of people were flocking in the direction of the spot toward which the *Ertak* was settling, on foot and in long, slim vehicles of some kind that apparently carried several people.

"Lots of excitement down there, Mr. Correy," I commented. "Better tell Mr. Kincaide to order up all hands, and station a double guard at the port. Have a landing force, armed with atomic pistols and bombs, and equipped with menores, as an escort."

"And the disintegrator-ray generators—you'll have them in operation, sir, just in case?"

"That might be well. But they are not to be used except in the greatest emergency, understand. Hendricks will accompany me, if it seems expeditious to leave the ship, leaving you in command here."

"Very well, sir!" I knew the arrangement didn't suit him, but he was too much the perfect officer to protest, even with a glance. And besides, at the moment, he was very busy with orders to the men in the

control room, forward, as he conned the ship to the place he had selected to set her down.

But busy as he was, he did not forget the order to tune up the disintegrator-ray generators.

WHILE the great circular door of the *Ertak* was backing out ponderously from its threaded seat, suspended by its massive gimbals, I inspected the people of this new world.

My first impression was that they were a soldiery people, for there were no jostling crowds swarming around the ship, such as might have been expected. Instead, the citizenry stood at ease in a sort of military formation of numerous small companies, each apparently in charge of an officer. These companies were arranged to form a long wide avenue, leading to the city, and down this avenue a strange procession was coming toward the ship.

I should make it clear at this point that these Strobians were, in form, very similar to Earth-men, although somewhat shorter in stature, and certainly more delicately formed. Perhaps it would be better to say they resembled the Zenians, save for this marked difference: the Strobians were exceedingly light in color, their skins being nearly translucent, and their hair a light straw color. The darkest hair I saw at any time was a pale gold, and many had hair as colorless as silver—which I should explain is a metal of Earth somewhat resembling aluminum in appearance.

The procession was coming toward the ship slowly, the marchers apparently chanting as they came, for I could see their lips moving. They were dressed in short kirtles of brilliant colors—scarlet, green, orange, purple—and wore brilliant belts suspended about their waists by straps which crossed over their breasts and passed over each shoulder.

Each marcher bore a tall staff from which flew a tiny pennon of the same color as his chief garment. At the top of each staff was a metal ornament, which at first glance I took to be the representation of a fish. As they came closer, I saw that this was not a good guess, for the device was without a tail.

THE exit port is open, sir," reported Hendricks. "The people seem far from hostile, and the air is very good. What are your orders?"

"There will be no change, I think," I said as I hurried toward the now open door. "Mr. Kincaide will be in command of the guard at the port. You and I, with a small landing force, will advance to meet this procession. Make sure that there are a number of extra menores carried by the escort; we shall need them."

"Yes, sir!" Hendricks snapped a command and the landing force fell into place behind us as we passed through the circular doorway, and out onto the rocky ground of Strobos.

The procession stopped instantly, and the chanting died to a murmur. The men forming the living wall on each side bowed their heads and made a quick sign; a peculiar gesture, as though they reached out to shake an invisible hand.

The leader of the procession, a fine-featured man with golden hair, walked forward with bowed head, chanting a single phrase over and over again in a voice as sweet as a woman's: "*Toma annerson ... toma annerson ... toma annerson....*"

"Sounds friendly enough," I whispered to Hendricks. "Hand me an extra menore; I'll see...."

The chanting stopped, and the Strobian lifted his head.

"Greetings!" he said. "You are welcome here."

I THINK nothing ever surprised me more, I stared at the man like a fool, my jaw dropping, and my eyes bulging. For the man spoke in a language of Earth; spoke it haltingly and poorly, but recognizably.

"You—you speak English?" I faltered. "Where—where did you learn to speak this language?"

The Strobian smiled, his face shining as though he saw a vision.

"Toma annerson," he intoned gravely, and extended his right hand in a greeting which Earth-men have offered each other for untold centuries!

I shook hands with him gravely, wondering if I were dreaming.

"I thank you for your welcome," I said, gathering my wits at last. "We come as friends, from worlds not unlike your own. We are glad that you meet us as friends."

"It was so ordered. *He* ordered it so and Artur is His mouthpiece in this day." The Strobian weighed every word carefully before he uttered it speaking with a solemn gravity that was most impressive.

"Artur?" I questioned him. "That is your name?"

"That is my name," he said proudly. "It came from He Who Speaks who gave it to my father many times removed."

There were many questions in my mind, but I could not be outdone in courtesy by this kindly Strobian.

"I am John Hanson," I told him, "Commander of the Special Patrol Service ship *Ertak*. This is Avery

Hendricks, my third officer."

"Much of that," said Artur slowly, "I do not understand. But I am greatly honored." He bowed again, first to me, and then to Hendricks, who was staring at me in utter amazement. "You will come with us now, to the Place?" Artur added.

I considered swiftly, and turned to Hendricks.

"This is too interesting to miss," I said in an undertone. "Send the escort back with word for Mr. Correy that these people are very friendly, and we are going on into the city. Let three men remain with us. We will keep in communication with the ship by menore."

HENDRICKS gave the necessary orders, and all our escort, save for three men, did a brisk about face and marched back to the ship. The five of us, conducted by Artur, started for the city, the rest of the procession falling in behind us. Behind the double file of the procession, the companies that had formed the living wall marched twenty abreast. Not all the companies, however, for perhaps a thousand men, in all, formed a great hollow square about the *Ertak*, a great motionless guard of honor, clad in kirtles like the pennon-bearers in the procession, save that their kirtles were longer, and pale green in color. The uniform of their officers was identical, save that it was somewhat darker in color, and set of with a narrow black belt, without shoulder straps.

We marched on and on, into the city, down the wide streets, walled with soaring buildings that shone with an iridescent lustre, toward the great domed building I had seen from the *Ertak*.

The streets were utterly deserted, and when we came close to the building I saw why. The whole populace was gathered there; they were drawn up around the building in orderly groups, with a great lane opened to the mighty entrance.

There were women waiting there, thousands of them, the most beautiful I have ever seen, and in my younger days I had eyes that were quick to note a pretty face.

Through these great silent ranks we passed majestically, and I felt very foolish and very much bewildered. Every head was bowed as though in reverence, and the chanting of the men behind us was like the singing of a hymn.

AT the head of the procession, we entered the great domed, lozenge-shaped building, and I stared around in amazement.

The structure was immense, but utterly without obstructing columns, the roof being supported by great arches buttressed to pilasters along the walls, and furnished with row after row of long benches of some

polished, close-grained red wood, so clear that it shone brilliantly.

There were four great aisles, leading from the four angles of the lozenge, and many narrower ones, to give ready access to the benches, all radiating from a raised dais in the center, and the whole building illuminated by bluish globes of light that I recognized from descriptions and visits to scientific museums, as replicas of an early form of the ethon tube.

These things I took in at a glance. It was the object upon the huge central dais that caught and held my attention.

"Hendricks!" I muttered, just loud enough to make my voice audible above the solemn chanting. "Are we dreaming?"

"No, sir!" Hendricks' eyes were starting out of his head, and I have no doubt I looked as idiotic as he did. "It's there."

On the dais was a gleaming object perhaps sixty feet long—which is a length equal to the height of about ten full-sized men. It was shaped like an elongated egg—like the metal object surmounting the staffs of the pennon-bearers!

And, unmistakably, it was a ship for navigating space.

AS we came closer, I could make out details. The ship was made of some bluish, shining metal that I took to be chromium, or some compound of chromium, and there was a small circular port in the side presented to us. Set into the blunt nose of the ship was a ring of small disks, reddish in color, and deeply pitted, whether by electrical action or oxidization, I could not determine. Around the more pointed stern were innumerable small vents, pointed rearward, and smoothly stream-lined into the body. The body of the ship fairly glistened, but it was dented and deeply scratched in a number of places, and around the stern vents the metal was a dark, iridescent blue, as though stained by heat.

The chanting stopped as we reached the dais, and I turned to our guide. He motioned that Hendricks and I were to precede him up a narrow, curving ramp that led upwards, while the three Zenians who accompanied us were to remain below. I nodded my approval of this arrangement, and slowly we made our way to the top of the great platform, while the pennon-bearers formed a close circle around its base, and the people, who had surrounded the great building filed in with military precision and took seats. In the short space of time that it took us to reach the top of the dais, the whole great building filled itself with humanity.

Artur turned to that great sea of faces and made a sweeping gesture, as of benediction.

"Toma annerson!" His voice rang out like the clear note of a bell, filling that vast auditorium. In a great wave, the assembled people seated themselves, and sat watching us, silent and motionless.

ARTUR walked to the edge of the dais, and stood for a moment as though lost in thought. Then he spoke, not in the language which I understood, but in a melodious tongue which was utterly strange. His voice was grave and tender; he spoke with a degree of feeling which stirred me even though I understood no word that he spoke. Now and again I heard one recognizable sequence of syllables, that now familiar phrase, "toma annerson."

"Wonder what that means, sir?" whispered Hendricks. "Toma annerson?' Something very special, from the way he brings it out. And do you know what we are here for, and what all this means?"

"No," I admitted. "I have some ideas, but they're too wild for utterance. We'll just go slow, and take things as they come."

As I spoke, Artur concluded his speech, and turned to us.

"John Hanson," he said softly, "our people would hear your voice."

"But—but what am I to say?" I stammered. "I don't speak their language."

"It will be enough," he muttered, "that they have heard your voice."

He stood aside, and there was nothing for me to do but walk to the edge of the platform, as he had done, and speak.

My own voice, in that hushed silence, frightened me. I would not have believed that so great a gathering could maintain such utter, deathly silence. I stammered like a school-child reciting for the first time before his class.

"People of Strobos," I said—this is as nearly as I remember it, and perhaps my actual words were even less intelligent—"we are glad to be here. The welcome accorded us overwhelms us. We have come ... we have come from worlds like your own, and ... and we have never seen a more beautiful one. Nor more kindly people. We like you, and we hope that you will like us. We won't be here long, anyway. I thank you!"

I WAS perspiring and red-faced by the time I finished, and I caught Hendricks in the very act of grinning at his commander's discomfiture. One black scowl wiped that grin off so quickly, however, that I thought I must have imagined it.

"How was that, Artur?" I asked. "All right?"

"Your words were good to hear, John Hanson," he nodded gravely. "In behalf——"

The hundreds of blue lights hung from the vaulted roof clacked suddenly and went out. Almost instantly they flashed on again—and then clicked out. A third time they left us momentarily in darkness, and, when they came on again, a murmur that was like a vast moan rose from the sea of humanity surrounding the dais. And the almost beautiful features of Artur were drawn and ghastly with pain.

"They come!" he whispered. "At this hour, they come!"

"Who, Artur?" I asked quickly. "Is there some danger?"

"Yes. A very great one. I will tell you, but first—" He strode to the edge of the dais and spoke crisply, his voice ringing out like the thin cry of military brass. The thousands in the auditorium rose in unison, and swept down the aisles toward the doors.

"Now," cried Artur, "I shall tell you the meaning of that signal. For three or four generations, we have awaited it with dread. Since the last anniversary of his coming, we have known the time was not far off. And it had to come at this moment! But this tells you nothing.

THE signal warns us that the Neens have at last made good their threat to come down upon us with their great hordes. The Neens were once men like ourselves, who would have none of Him"—and Artur glanced toward the gleaming ship upon the dais—"nor His teachings. They did not like the new order, and they wandered off, to join those outcasts who had broken His laws, and had been sent to the smaller land of this world, where it is always warm, and where there are great trees thick with moss, and the earth underfoot steams, and brings forth wriggling life. Neen, we call that land, as this larger land is called Libar.

"These men of Neen became the enemies of Libar, and of us who call ourselves Libars, and follow His ways. In that warm country they became brown, and their hair darkened. They increased more rapidly than did the Libars, and as they forgot their learning, their bodies developed in strength.

"Yet they have always envied us; envied us the beauty of our women, and of our cities. Envied us those things which He taught us to make, and which their clumsy hands cannot fashion, and which their brutish brains do not understand.

"And now they have the overwhelming strength that makes us powerless against them." His voice broke, he turned his face away, that I might not see the agony written there.

"Toma annerson!" he muttered. "Ah, toma annerson!" The words were like a prayer.

"Just a minute, Artur!" I said sharply. "What weapons have they? And what means of travel?"

He turned with a hopeless gesture.

"They have the weapons we have," he said. "Spears and knives and short spears shot from bows. And for travel they have vast numbers of monocars they have stolen from us, generation after generation."

"Monocars?" I asked, startled.

"Yes. He Who Speaks gave us that secret. Ah, He was wise; to hear His voice was to feel in touch with all the wisdom of all the air!" He made a gesture as though to include the whole universe.

THERE were a score of questions in my mind, but there was no time for them then. I snatched my menore from its clip on my belt, and adjusted it quickly. It was a huge and cumbersome thing, the menore of that day, but it worked as well as the fragile, bejeweled things of today. Maybe better. The guard posted outside the ship responded instantly.

"Commander Hanson emanating," I shot at him. "Present my compliments to Mr. Correy, and instruct him as follows: He is to withdraw the outside guard instantly, and proceed with the *Ertak* to the large domed building in the center of the city. He will bring the *Ertak* to rest at the lowest possible altitude above the building, and receive further orders at that time. Repeat these instructions."

The guard returned the orders almost word for word, and I removed the menore with a little flourish. Oh, I was young enough in those days!

"Don't worry any more, Artur," I said crisply. "I don't know who *He* was, but we'll show you some tricks you haven't seen yet! Come!"

I led the way down the ramp, Hendricks, Artur, and the three Zenians following. As we came out into the daylight, a silent shadow fell across the great avenue that ran before the entrance, and there, barely clearing the shining roof of the auditorium, was the sleek, fat bulk of the *Ertak*. Correy had wasted no time in obeying orders.

Correy could smell a fight further than any man I ever knew.

FROM her emergency landing trap, the *Ertak* let down the cable elevator, and the six of us, Hendricks, Artur, the three Zenians of the crew, and myself, were shot up into the hull. Correy was right there by the trap to greet me.

"What are the orders, sir?" he asked, staring curiously at Artur. "Is there trouble brewing?"

"I gather that there is, but we'll talk about that in a moment—in the navigating room." I introduced Artur and Correy as we hurried forward, and as soon as the door of the navigating room had closed on the three of us, I turned to Artur with a question.

"Now, where will we find the enemy, these Neens? Have you any idea?"

"Surely," nodded Artur. "They come from their own country, to the south. The frontier is the narrow strip of land that connects Libar with Neen, and since the alarm has been sounded, the enemy is already at the frontier, and the forces of my people and the enemy are already met."

"I don't know anything about the set-up," put in Correy, "but that sounds like poor management to me. Haven't you any advance guards, or spies, or outposts?"

Artur shook his head sadly.

"My people are not warlike. We who spread His teachings have tried to warn the masses, but they would not listen. The land of the Neens was far away. The Neens had never risen against the Libars. They never would. So my people reasoned."

"And you think there is fighting in progress now?" I asked. "How did the word come?"

"By phone or radio, I presume," said Artur. "We are in communication with the frontier by both methods, and the signal of the lights has been arranged for generations. In the day, all lights were to flash on three times; at night, they were to be darkened three times."

SO they had telephones and radios! It was most amazing, but my questions could wait. They would have to wait. Correy was shuffling his feet with anxiety for orders to start action.

"All right, Mr. Correy," I said. "Close the ports and ascend to a height that will enable you to navigate visually. You are sufficiently familiar with the country to understand our objective?"

"Yes, sir! Studied it coming down. It's that neck of land that separates the two continents." He picked up the microphone, and started punching buttons and snapping orders. In twenty seconds we were rushing, at maximum atmospheric speed, toward the scene of what, Artur had told us, was already a battle.

Artur proved to be correct. As we settled down over the narrow neck of land, we could see the two forces locked in frenzied combat; the Libars fighting with fine military precision, in regular companies, but outnumbered at least five to one by the mob-like masses of brown Neens.

From the north and from the south slim, long vehicles that moved with uncanny swiftness were rushing up reserve forces for both sides. There were far more monocars serving the Libars, but each car brought but

a pitifully few men. And every car shot back loaded with wounded.

"I thought you said your people weren't fighters, Artur?" I said. "They're fighting now, like trained soldiers."

"Surely. They are well trained, but they have no fighting spirit, like the enemy. Their training, it is no more than a form of amusement, a recreation, the following of custom. He taught it, and my people drill, knowing not for what they train. See! Their beautiful ranks crumple and go down before the formless rush of the Neens!"

"The disintegrator beams, sir?" asked Correy insidiously.

"No. That would be needless slaughter. Those brown hordes are witless savages. An atomic bomb, Mr. Correy. Perhaps two of them, one on either flank of the enemy. Will you give the order?"

CORREY rapped out the order, and the ship darted to the desired position for the first bomb—darted so violently that Artur was almost thrown off his feet.

"Watch!" I said, motioning to Artur to share a port with me.

The bomb fled downward, a swift black speck. It struck perhaps a half mile to the west (to adopt Earth measures and directions) of the enemy's flank.

As it struck, a circle of white shot out from the point of impact, a circle that barely touched that seething west flank. The circle paled to gray, and settled to earth. Where there had been green, rank growth, there was now no more than a dirty red crater, and the whole west flank of the enemy was fleeing wildly.

I said the whole west flank; that was not true. There were some that did not flee: that would never move again. But there was not one hundredth part of the number that would not have dissolved into dust with one sweep of the disintegrator ray through that pack of striving humanity.

"The other flank, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "And just a shade further away from the enemy. A little object lesson, as it were!"

THE battle was at a momentary standstill. The Neens and the Libars seemed, for the moment, to forget the issue; every face was turned upward. Even the faces of the runners who fled from a disaster they did not understand.

"I think one more will be enough, sir," chuckled Correy. "The beggars are ready to run for it right now."

He gave a command, and as though the microphone itself released the bomb, it dropped from the bottom of the *Ertak* and diminished swiftly as it hurtled earthward.

Again the swift spread of white that turned to gray; again the vast red crater. Again, too, a flank crumpled.

As though I could see the faces of the brown men, I saw terror strike to the heart of the Neens. The flanks were melting away, and the panic of fear spread as flame spreads on a surface of oil. Correy has a good eye for such things, and he said there were fifty thousand of the enemy massed there. If there were, in the space that it takes the heart to tick ten times, fifty thousand Neens turned their back to the enemy and fled to the safety of their own jungles.

THE Libars made no effort to pursue. They stood there, in their military formations, watching with wonderment. Then, with crisp military dispatch, they maneuvered into great long ranks, awaiting the arrival of transportation.

"And so it is finished, John Hanson," said Artur slowly, his eyes shining with a light that might almost be called holy. "My people are saved! He spoke well, as always, when He said that those who would come after Him would be our friends if we were their friends."

"We are your friends," I replied, "but tell me, who is this one of whom you speak always, but do not name? From what I have seen, I guess a great deal, but there has been no time to learn all the story. Will you tell me, now?"

"I will, if that is your wish," said Artur, "but I should prefer to tell you in the Place. It is a long story, the story of toma annerson, the story of He Who Speaks, and there are things you should see, so that you may understand that story."

"As you wish, Artur." I glanced at Correy and nodded. "Back to the city, Mr. Correy. I think we're through here."

"I believe we are, sir." He gave the orders to the operating room, and the *Ertak* swung in a great circle toward the gleaming city of the Libars. "It looked like a real row when we got here; I wouldn't have minded being down there for a few minutes myself."

"With the *Ertak* poised over your head, dropping atomic bombs?"

Correy shook his head and grinned.

"No, sir!" he admitted. "Just hand to hand, with clubs."

ARTUR and I were together in the great domed building he called "the Place." There were no others in that vast auditorium, although outside a multitude waited. Artur had expressed a wish that no one accompany me, and I could see no valid reason for refusing the request.

"First," he said, pausing beside the great shining body of the space ship upon the central dais, "let me take you back many generations, to the time when only this northern continent was inhabited, and the Libars and the Neens were one people.

"In those days, we were of less understanding than the Neens of today. There were no cities; each family lived to itself, in crude huts, tilling the ground and hunting its own food. Then, out of the sky came this." He touched, reverently, the smooth side of the space ship. "It came to earth at this very spot, and from it, presently, emerged He Who Speaks. Would you inspect the ship that brought Him here?"

"Gladly," I said, and as I spoke, Artur swung open the small circular door. A great ethon flashlight, of a type still to be seen in our larger museums, stood just inside the threshold, and aided by its beams, we entered.

I stared around in amazement. The port through which he had entered led to a narrow compartment running lengthwise of the ship: a compartment twice the length of a man, perhaps, and half the length of a man in breadth. The rest of the ship was cut off by bulkheads, each studded with control devices the uses of which I could but vaguely understand.

FORWARD was a veritable maze of instruments, mounted on three large panels, the central panel of the group containing a circular lens which apparently was the eyepiece of some type of television disk the like of which I have never seen or heard. From my hasty examination I gathered that the ship operated by both a rocket effect (an early type of propulsion which was abandoned as ineffective) and some form of attraction-repulsion apparatus, evidently functioning through the reddish, pitted disks I had observed around the nose of the ship. The lettering upon the control panels and the instruments, while nearly obliterated, was unmistakably in the same language in which Artur had addressed us.

The ship had, beyond the shadow of doubt, come from Earth!

"Artur," I said gravely, "you have shown me that which has stirred me more than anything in my life. This ship of the air came from my own world, which is called Earth."

"True," he nodded, "that is the name He gave to it: Earth. He was a young man, but He was full of kindness and wisdom. He took my people out of the fields and the forests, and He taught them the working of metals, and the making of such things as He thought were good. Other things, of which He knew, He kept secret. He had small instruments He could hold in His hand, and which roared suddenly, that would take the life of large animals at a great distance, but He did not explain these, saying that they were bad. But all the good things He made for my people, and showed them how to make others.

NOT all my people were good. Some of them hated this great one, and strove against Him. They were makers of trouble, and He sent them to the southern continent, which is called Neen. Those among my people who loved Him and served Him best, He made His friends. He taught them His language, which is this that I speak, and which has been the holy language of His priests since that day. He gave to these friends names from his own country, and they were handed down from father to son, so that I am now Artur, as my father was Artur, and his father before him, for many generations."

"Just a second," I put in. "Artur? That is not—ah! Arthur! That is the name: Arthur."

"Perhaps so," nodded the priest of this unknown Earth-child. "In many generations, a name might slightly change. But I must hasten on with my story, for outside my people become impatient.

"In the course of time, He passed away, an old man, with a beard that was whiter than the hair of our new-born children. Here, our hair grows dark with age, but His whitened like the metal of his ship that brought Him here. But He left to us His voice, and so long as His voice spoke to us on the anniversary of the day upon which He came out of the sky, the Neens believed that His power still protected His people.

"But the Neens were only awaiting the time when His voice would no longer sound in the Place. Each year their brown and savage representatives came, upon the anniversary, to listen, and each time they cowered and went back to their own kind with the word that He Who Speaks, still spoke to His people.

"But the last anniversary, no sound came forth. His voice was silenced at last; and the Neens went back rejoicing, to tell their people that at last the god of the Libars had truly died, and that His voice sounded no more in the Place."

ATENSE excitement gripped me; my hands trembled, and my voice, as I spoke to Artur, shook with emotion.

"And this voice—it came from where, Artur?" I whispered.

"From here." Sorrowfully, reverently, he lifted, from a niche in the wall, a small box of smooth, shining metal, and lifted the lid.

Curiously, I stared at the instruments revealed. In one end of the horizontal panel was a small metal membrane, which I guessed was a diaphragm. In the center of the remaining space was thrust up a heavy pole of rusty metal. Supported by tiny brackets in such fashion that it did not quite touch the pole of rusty metal, was a bright wire, which disappeared through tiny holes in the panel, on either side. Each of the brackets which supported the wire was tipped with a tiny roller, which led me to believe that the wire was of greater length than was revealed, and designed to be drawn over the upright piece of metal.

"Until the last anniversary," said Artur sadly, "when one touched this small bit of metal, here,"—he indicated a lever beside the diaphragm, which I had not noted—"this wire moved swiftly, and His voice came forth. But this anniversary, the wire did not move, and there was no voice."

"Let me see that thing a moment." There were hinges at one end of the panel, and I lifted it carefully. An intricate maze of delicate mechanism came up with it.

ONE thing I saw at a glance: the box contained a tiny, crude, but workable atomic generator. And I had been right about the wire: there was a great orderly coil of it on one spool, and the other end was attached to an empty spool. The upright of rusty metal was the pole of an electro-magnet, energized by the atomic generator.

"I think I see the trouble, Artur!" I exclaimed. One of the connections to the atomic generator was badly corroded; a portion of the metal had been entirely eaten away, probably by the electrolytic action of the two dissimilar metals. With trembling fingers I made a fresh connection, and swung down the hinged panel. "This is the lever?" I asked.

"Yes; you touch it so." Artur moved the bit of metal, and instantly the shining wire started to move, coming up through the one small hole, passing, on its rolled guides, directly over the magnet, and disappearing through the other hole, to be wound up on the take-up spool. For an instant there was no sound, save the slight grinding of the wire on its rollers, and then a bass, powerful voice spoke from the vibrating metal diaphragm:

"I am Thomas Anderson," said the voice. "I am a native of a world called Earth, and I have come through space to this other sphere. I leave this record, which I trust is imperishable, so that when others come to follow me, they may know that to Earth belongs the honor, if honor it be, of sending to this world its first visitor from the stars.

"There is no record on Earth of me nor of my ship of space, the *Adventurer*. The history of science is a history of men working under the stinging lash of criticism and scoffing; I would have none of that.

THE *Adventurer* was assembled far from the cities, in a lone place where none came to scoff or criticize. When it was finished, I took my place and sealed the port by which I had entered. The *Adventurer* spurned the Earth beneath its cradles, and in the middle of the Twenty-second century, as time is computed on Earth, man first found himself in outer space.

"I landed here by chance. My ship had shot its bolt. Perhaps I could leave, but the navigation of space is a perilous thing, and I could not be sure of singling out my native Earth. This is a happy world, and the work I am doing here is good work. Here I remain.

"And now, to you who shall hear this, my voice, in some year so far away that my bones shall be less than dust, and the mind refuses to compute the years, let me give into your charge the happiness and the welfare of these, my people. May peace and happiness be your portion. That is the wish of Earth's first orphan, Thomas Anderson."

There was a click, and then the sharp hum of the wire re-spooling itself on the original drum.

"Toma annerson," said Artur solemnly: "He Who Speaks." He offered his hand to me, and I understood, as I shook hands gravely, that this old Earth greeting had become a holy sign among these people. And I understood also the meaning of the familiar phrase, "toma annerson"; it was the time-corrupted version of that name they held holy—the name of Thomas Anderson, child of my own Earth, and explorer of space centuries before Ame Baove saw his first sun.

THERE is more I could tell of Strobos and its people, but an old man's pen grows weary.

The menace of the Neens, Artur agreed, had been settled forever. They knew now that He Who Speaks still watched over the welfare of his people. The Neens were an ignorant and a superstitious people, and the two great craters made by our atomic bombs would be grim reminders to them for many generations to come.

"You have done all that need be done, John Hanson," said Artur, his face alight with gratitude. "And now you must receive the gratitude of my people!" Before I could protest, he signalled to the men who guarded the four great entrances, and my words were lost in the instant tramp of thousands of feet marching down the broad aisles.

When they were all seated, Artur spoke to them, not in the "holy" language I understood, but in their own common tongue. I stood there by the ship, feeling like a fool, wondering what he was saying. In the end he turned to me, and motioned for me to join him, where he stood near the edge of the dais. As I did so, every person in that monstrous auditorium rose and bowed his head.

"They greet you as the successor to He Who Speaks," said Artur gently. "They are a simple folk, and you have served them well. You are a man of many duties that must soon carry you away, but first will you tell these people that you are their friend, as Toma Annerson was the friend of their fathers?"

FOR the second time that day I made a speech.

"Friends," I said, "I have heard the voice of a great countryman of mine, who is dead these countless centuries, and yet who lives today in your hearts. I am proud that the same star gave us birth." It wasn't much of a speech, but they didn't understand it, anyway. Artur translated it for them, and I think he embroidered it somewhat, for the translation took a long time.

"They worship you as the successor to Toma Anneron," whispered Artur as the people filed from the great auditorium. "Your fame here will be second only to His, for you saved, to-day, the people He called His own."

We left just as darkness was falling, and as I shot up to the hovering *Ertak*, the chant of Artur and his bright-robed fellows was the last sound of Strobos that fell upon my ears. They were intoning the praises of Thomas Anderson, man of Earth.

And so, my good Zenian friends, you learn of the first man to brave the dangers of outer space. He left no classic journal behind him as did Ame Baove, nor did he return to tell of the wonders he had found.

But he did take strong root where he fell in his clumsy craft, and if this record, supported only by the log of the *Ertak*, needs further proof, some five or six full generations from now Strobos will be close enough for doubting Zenians to visit. And they will find there, I have no least doubt, the enshrined *Adventurer*, and the memory, not only of Thomas Anderson, but of one, John Hanson, Commander (now retired) of the Special Patrol Service.

See "The Ghost World" in the April issue of *Amazing Stories*.—Ed.

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