

# Enter a Pilgrim

As John Campbell said, "The only man who makes slavery possible is the slave."

**By Gordon R. Dickson**

In the square around the bronze statue of the Cymbrian bull, the crowd was silent. The spring sky over Aalborg, Denmark was high and blue; and on the weather grayed red brick wall of the building before them a man was dying upon the triple blades, according to an alien law. The two invocers, judges and executioners of that law sat their riding beats, watching, less than two long paces from where Shane Evert stood among the crowd of humans on foot.

"My son," the older and bulkier of the two was saying to the younger in the heavy Aalaag tongue, plainly unaware that there was a human nearby who could understand him, "as I've told you repeatedly, no creature tames overnight. You've been warned that when they travel in a family the male will defend his mate, the female and male defend their young."

"But, my father," said the younger, "there was no reason. I only struck the female aside with my power-lance to keep her from being ridden down. It was a consideration I intended, not a discipline or an attack..."

Their words rumbled in Shane's ears and printed themselves in his mind. Like giants in human form, medieval and out of place, the two massive Aalaag loomed beside him, the clear sunlight shining on the green and silver metal of their armor and on the red, camel-like creatures that served them as riding animals. Their concern was with their conversation and the crowd of humans they supervised in this legal deathwatch. Only slightly did they pay attention to the man they had hung on the blades.

Mercifully, for himself as well as for the humans forced to witness his death, it happened that the Dane undergoing execution had been paralyzed by the Aalaag power-lance before he had been thrown upon the three sharp lengths of metal protruding from the wall twelve feet above the ground. The blades had pierced him while he was still unconscious; and he had passed immediately into shock. So that he was not now aware of his own dying; or of his wife, the woman for whom he had incurred the death penalty, who lay dead at the foot of the wall below him. Now he himself was almost dead. But while he was still alive all those in the square were required by Aalaag law to observe.

"...Nonetheless," the alien father was replying, "the male misunderstood. And when cattle make errors, the master is responsible. You are responsible for the death of this one and his female-which had to be, to show that we are never in error, never to be attacked by those we have conquered. But the responsibility is yours."

Under the bright sun the metal on the alien pair glittered as an ancient and primitive as the bronze statue of the bull or the blades projecting from the homely brick wall. But the watching humans would have learned long since not to be misled by appearances.

Tradition, and something like superstition among the religionless Aalaag, preserved the weapons and armor of a time already more than fifty thousand Earth years lost and gone in their history, on whatever world had given birth to these seven-foot conquerors of humanity. But their archaic dress and weaponry were only for show.

The real power did not lie in their swords and power-lances; but in the little black-and-gold rods at their belts, in the jewels of the rings on their massive forefingers, and in the tiny continually-moving orifice in the pommel of each saddle, looking eternally and restlessly left and right among the crowd.

"..Then it is true. The fault is mine," said the Aalaag son submissively. "I have wasted good cattle."

"It is true good cattle have been wasted," answered his father, "innocent cattle who originally had no intent to challenge our law. And for that I will pay a fine, because I am your father and it is to my blame that you made an error. But you will repay me five times over because your error goes deeper than mere waste of good cattle, alone."

"Deeper, my father?"

Shane kept his head utterly still within the concealing shadow of the hood to his pilgrim's cloak. The two could have no suspicion that one of the cattle of Lyt Ahn, Aalaag Governor of All Earth, stood less than a lance-length from them, able to comprehend each word they spoke. But it would be wise not to attract their attention. An Aalaag father did not ordinarily reprimand his son in public, or in the hearing of any cattle not in his household. The heavy voices rumbled on and the blood sand in Shane's ears.

"Much deeper, my son..."

The sigh of the figure on the blades before him sickened Shane. He had tried to screen it from him with one of his own private imaginings-the image he had dreamed up of a human outlaw whom no Aalaag could catch or conquer. A human who went about the world anonymously, like Shane, in pilgrim robes; but, unlike Shane, exacting vengeance from the aliens for each wrong they did to a man, woman or child. However, in the face of the bloody reality before Shane on the wall, fantasy had failed. Now, though, out of the corner of his right eye, he caught sight of something that momentarily blocked that reality from his mind, and sent a thrill of unreasonable triumph running through him.

Barely four meters or so, beyond and above both him and the riders on the two massive beasts, the sagging branch of an oak tree pushed its tip almost into the line of vision between Shane's eyes and the bladed man; and on the end of branch, among the new green leaves of the year, was a small, cocoon-like shape, already broken. From it had just recently struggled the still-crumpled shape of a butterfly that did not yet know what its wings were for.

How it managed to survive through the winter here was beyond guessing. Theoretically, the Aalaag had exterminated all insects in towns and cities. But here it was; a butterfly of Earth being born even as a man of Earth was dying-a small life for a large. The utterly disproportionate feeling of triumph sang in Shane. Here was a life that had escaped the death sentence of the alien and would live in spite of the Aalaag.-that is, if the two now watching on their great red mounts did not notice it as it waved its wings, drying them for flight.

They must not notice. Unobtrusively, lost in the crowd with his rough gray pilgrim's cloak and staff, undistinguished among the other drab humans, Shane drifted right, toward the aliens, until the branch-tip with its emerging butterfly stood squarely between him and the man on the wall.

It was superstition, magic... call it what you liked, it was the only help he could give the butterfly. The danger to small life now beginning on the branch-tip should, under any cosmic justice, be insured by the larger life now ending for the man on the wall. The one should balance out the other. Shane fixed his gaze so that it hid the further figure of the man on the blades. He bargained with fate. I will not blink, he told himself; and the butterfly will stay invisible to the Aalaag. They will see only the man...

Beside him, neither of the massive, metal-clad figures had noticed his moving. They were still talking.

"... in battle," the father was saying, "each of us is equal to more than a thousand of such as these. We would be nothing if not that. But though one be superior to a thousand, it does not follow that the thousand is without force against one. Expect nothing, therefore, and do not be disappointed. Though they are now ours, inside themselves the cattle remain what they were when we conquered them. Beasts, as yet untamed to proper love of us. Do you understand me now?"

"No, my father."

There was a burning in Shane's throat; and his eyes blurred, so that he could hardly see the butterfly, clinging tightly to its branch and yielding at last to the instinctive urge to dry its folded, damp wings at their full expanse. The wings spread, orange, brown and black-like an omen, it was that species of sub-Arctic butterfly called a "Pilgrim"-just as Shane himself was called a "pilgrim" because of the hooded robe he wore. The day three years gone by at the University of Kansas, rose in his mind. He remembered standing in the student union, among the mass of other students and faculty, listening to the broadcast that announced the Earth had been conquered, even before any of them had been fully able to grasp the fact that beings from another world had landed amongst them. He had not felt anything then except excitement, mixed perhaps with a not unpleasant apprehension.

"Someone's going to have to interpret for us to those aliens," he had told his friends, cheerfully. "Language specialist like me-we'll be busy."

But it had not be *to* the aliens; it had been *for* the aliens, for the Aalaag themselves, that interpreting had needed to be done-and he was not, Shane told himself, the stuff of which resistance fighters were made. Only... in the last two years... Almost directly over him, the voices of the elder Aalaag rumbled on.

"...To conquer is nothing," the older Aalaag was saying. "Anyone with power can conquer. We rule-which is greater art. We rule because eventually we change the very nature of our cattle."

"Change?" echoed the younger.

"Alter," said the older. "Over their generations we teach them to love us. We tame them into good kine. Beasts still, but broken to obedience. To this end we leave them their own laws, their religions, their customs. Only one thing we do not tolerate-the concept of defiance against our will. And in time they tame to this."

"But-always, my father?"

"Always, I say!" Restlessly, the father's huge riding animal shifted its weights on its hooves, crowding Shane a few inches sideways. He moved. But he kept his eyes on the butterfly. "When we first arrive, some fought us-and die. Later, some like this one on the wall here, rebel-and likewise die. Only we know that it is the heart of the beast that must at last be broken. So we teach them first the superiority of our weapons, then of our bodies and minds; finally, that of our law. At last, with nothing of their own left to cling to, their beast-hearts crack; and they follow us unthinkingly, blindly loving and trusting like newborn pups behind their dam, no longer able to dream of opposition to our will."

"And all is well?"

"All is well for my son, his son, and his son's son," said the father. "But until that good moment when the hearts of the cattle break, each small flicker of the flame of rebellion that erupts delays the coming of their final and utter love for us. Inadvertently here, you allowed that flame to flicker to life once more."

"I was in error. In the future I will avoid such mistakes."

"I shall expect no less," said the father. "And now now, the man is dead. Let us go on."

They set their riding beasts in motion and moved off. Around them, the crowd of humans sighed with the release of tension. Up on the triple blades, the victim now hung motionless. His eyes stared, as he hung there without twitch or sound. The butterfly's drying wings waved slowly between the dead face and Shane's. Without warning, the insect lifted like a colorful shadow and fluttered away, rising into the dazzle of the sunlight above the square until it was lost to the sight of Shane. A feeling of victory exploded in him. Subtract one man, he thought, half-crazily. Add, one butterfly-one small Pilgrim to defy the Aalaag.

About him the crowd was dispersing. The butterfly was gone. His feverish elation over its escape cooled and he looked about the square. The Aalaag father and son were more than halfway across it, heading toward a further exiting street. One of the few clouds in the sky moved across the face of the sun, graying and dimming the light in the square. Shane felt the coolness of a little breeze on his hands and face. Around him now, the square was almost empty. In a few seconds he would be alone with the dead man and the empty cocoon that had given up the butterfly.

He looked once more at the dead man. The face was still, but the light breeze stirred some ends of long blond hair that were hanging down. Shane shivered in the abrupt chill from the breeze and the withdrawn sun-warmth. His spirits plunged, on a sickening elevator drop into self-doubt and fear. Now that it was all over, there was a shakiness inside him, and a nausea... he had seen too many of the aliens' executions these last two years. He dared not go back to Aalaag Headquarters feeling as he did now.

He would have to inform Lyt Ahn of the incident which had delayed him in his courier duties; and in no way while telling it must he betray his natural feelings at what he had seen. The Aalaag expected their personal cattle to be like themselves-Spartan, unyielding, above taking notice of pain in themselves or others. Any one of the human cattle who allowed his emotions to become visible, would be "sick", in Aalaag terms. It would reflect on the character of an Aalaag master-if he permitted his household cattle to contain unhealthy cattle.

Shane could end up on the blades himself, for all that Lyt Ahn had always seemed to like him, personally. He

would have to get his feelings under control, and time for that was short. At best, he could steal perhaps half an hour more from his schedule in addition to what had already been spent watching the execution-and in those thirty minutes he must manage to pull himself together. He turned away, down a street behind him leading from the square, following the last of the dispersing crowd.

The street had been an avenue of small shops once, interspersed with an occasional larger store or business establishment. Physically, it had not changed. The sidewalks and the street pavement were free of cracks and litter. The windows of the stores were whole, even if the display areas behind the glass were mainly empty of goods. The Aalaag did not tolerate dirt or rubble. They had wiped out with equal efficiency and impartiality the tenement areas of large cities, and the ruins of the Parthenon and Athens; but the level of living permitted to most of their human cattle was bone-bare minimal, even for those who were able to work long hours.

A block and a half from the square, Shane found and turned in at a doorway under the now-dark shape of what had once been the lighted neon sign of a bar. He entered a large gloomy room hardly changed from the past, except that the back shelf behind the bar itself was bare of the multitude of liquor bottles which it had been designed to hold. Only small amounts of distilled liquors were allowed to be made, nowadays. People drank the local wine, or beer.

Just now the place was crowded, with men for the most part. All of them silent after the episode in the square; and all of the drinking draft ale with swift, heavy gulps from the tall, thick-walled glasses they held in their hands. Shane worked his way down to the service area in the far corner where the bartender stood, loading trays with filled glasses for the single waitress to take to the tables and booths beyond the bar.

"One," he said.

A moment later, a full glass was placed in front of him. He paid, and leaned with his elbows on the bar, his head in his hands, staring into the depths of the brown liquid.

The memory of the dead man on the blades, with his hair stirring in the wind, came back to Shane. Surely, he thought, there must be some portent in the butterfly also being called a Pilgrim? He tried to put the image of the insect between himself and the memory of the dead man, but here, away from the blue sky and sunlight, the small shape would not take form in his mind's eye. In desperation, Shane reached again for his private mental comforter-the fantasy of the man in a hooded robe who could defy all Aalaag and pay them back for what they had done. Almost he had managed to evoke it. But the Avenger image would not hold in his head. It kept being pushed aside by the memory of the man on the blades...

"*Undskyld!*" said a voice in his ear. "*Herre... Herre!*"

For a fraction of a second he heard the words only as foreign noises. In the emotion of the moment, he had slipped into thinking in English. Then the sounds translated. He looked up, into the face of the bartender. Beyond, the bar was already half empty, once more. Few people nowadays could spare more than a few minutes from the constant work required to keep themselves from going hungry-or, worse yet, keep themselves from being forced out of their jobs and into becoming legally exterminable vagabonds.

"Excuse me," said the bartender again; and this time Shane's mind was back in Denmark with the language. "Sir. But you're not drinking."

It was true. Before Shane the glass was still full. Beyond it, the bartender's face was thin and curious, watching him with the amoral curiosity of a ferret.

"I..." Shane checked himself. Almost he had started explaining who he was-which would not be safe. Few ordinary humans loved those of their own kind who had become servants in some Aalaag household.

"Disturbed by what you saw in the square, sire? It's understandable," said the bartender. His green eyes narrowed. He leaned close and whispered. "Perhaps something stronger than beer? How long since you've had some *schnapps*?"

The sense of danger snapped awake in Shane's mind. Aalborg had once been famous for its aquavit, but that was before the Aalaag came. The bartender must have spotted him as a stranger-someone possibly with money. Then suddenly he realized he did not care what the bartender had spotted, or where he had gotten a

distilled liquor. It was what Shane needed right now-something explosive to counter the violence he had just witnessed.

"It'll cost you ten," murmured the bartender.

Then monetary units was a day's wage for a killed carpenter-though only a small fraction of Shane's pay for the same hours. The Aalaag rewarded their household cattle well. Too well, in the mind of most other humans. That was one of the reasons Shane moved around the world on his master's errands, wearing the cheap and unremarkable robe of a Pilgrim.

"Yes," he said. He reached into the pouch at the cord about his waist and brought forth his money clip. The bartender drew in his breath with a little hiss.

"Sir," he said, "you don't want to flash a roll, even a roll like that, in here nowadays."

"Thanks. I..." Shane lowered the money clip below bartop level as he peeled off a bill. "Have one with me."

"Why, yes, sir," said the bartender. His eyes glinted, like the metal of the Cymbrian bull in the sunlight. "Since you can afford it..."

His thin hand reached across and swallowed the bill Shane offered him. He ducked below the counter level and came up holding two of the tall glasses, each roughly one-fifth full with a colorless liquid. Holding glasses between his body and Shane's so that they were shielded from the view of other in the bar, he passed one to Shane.

"Happier days," he said, tilted up his glass to empty it at a swallow. Shane imitated him; and the hard oiliness of the liquor flamed in his throat, taking his breath away. As he had suspected, it was a raw, illegally distilled, high-proof liquid with nothing to do with the earlier aquavit but the name it shared. Even after he had downed it, it continued to cling to and sear the lining of his throat, like sooty fire.

Shane reached automatically for the untouched glass of beer to lave the internal burning. The bartender had already taken back their two liquor glasses and moved away down the bar to serve another customer. Shane swallowed gratefully.

The thick bodied ale was gentle as water after the rough-edged moonshine. A warmth began slowly to spread through his body. The hard corner of his mind rounded; and on the heels of that soothing, without effort, came his comforting familiar daydream of the Avenger. The avenger, he told himself, had been there unnoticed in the square during the executions, and by now he was lying in wait in a spot from which he could ambush the Aalaag father and son, and still escape before police could be called. A small black and golden rod, stolen from an Aalaag arsenal, was in his hand as he stood to one side of an open window, looking down a street up which two figures in green and silver armor were riding toward him...

"Another, sir?"

It was the bartender back again. Startled, Shane glanced at his ale glass and saw that it, too, was now empty. But another shot of that liquid dynamite? Or even another glass of ale? He could risk neither. Just as in facing Lyt Ahn an hour or so from now he must be sure not to show any sign of emotion while reporting what he had been forced to witness in the square, so neither must he show the slightest sign of any drunkenness or dissipation. These, too, were weaknesses not permitted in servants of the alien, as the alien did not permit them in himself.

"No," he said, "I've got to go."

"One drink did it for you?" the bartender inclined his head. "Your lucky, sir. Some of us don't forget that easily."

The touch of a sneer in the bitterness of the other's voice flicked at Shane's already overtight nerves. A sudden sour fury boiled up in him. What did this man know of what it was like to *live* with the Aalaag, to be treaded always with that indifferent affection that was below contempt-the same sort of affection a human might give a clever pet animal-and all the while to witness scenes like those in the square, not once or twice a year, but weekly, perhaps daily?

"Listen-" he snapped; and checked himself. Almost, once more, he had nearly given away what he was and what he did.

"Yes, sir?" said the bartender, after a moment of watching him. "I'm listening."

Shane thought he read suspicion in the other's voice. That reading might only be the echo of his own inner upset, but he could not take a chance.

"Listen, he said again, dropping his voice, "why do you think I wear this outfit?"

He indicated his Pilgrim robe.

"You took a vow." The bartender's voice was dry now, remote.

"No. You don't understand..."

The unaccustomed warmth of the drink in him triggered an inspiration. The image of the butterfly slid into-and blended with-his image of the Avenger. "You think it was just a bad accident, out there in the square just now? Well, it wasn't. Not just accidental, I mean-I shouldn't say anything."

"Not an accident?" The bartender frowned; but when he spoke again, his voice, like Shane's was lowered to a more cautious note.

"Of course, the man ending on the blades-it wasn't planned to finish that way," muttered Shane, leaning toward him. "The Pilgrim-" Shane broke off. "You don't know about the Pilgrim?"

"The Pilgrim? What Pilgrim?" The bartender's face came close. Now they were both almost whispering.

"If you don't know I shouldn't say-"

"You've said quite a lot already-"

Shane reached out and touched his six-foot staff of polished oak, leaning against the bar beside him.

"This is one of the symbols of the Pilgrim," he said. "There're others. You'll see his mark one of these days and you'll know that attack on the Aalaag in the square didn't just happen by accident. That's all I can tell you."

It was a good note to leave on. Shane picked up his staff, turned quickly and went out. It was not until the door to the bar closed behind him that he relaxed. For a moment he stood breathing the cooler air of the street, letting his head clear. His hands, he saw, were trembling.

AS his head cleared, sanity returned. A cold dampness began to make itself felt on his forehead in the outside air. What had gotten into him? Risking everything just to show off to some unknown bartender? Fairy tales like the one he had just hinted at could find their way back to Aalaag wears-specifically to the ears of Lyt Ahn. If the aliens ever suspected about a human resistance movement, they would want to know a great deal more from him; in which case death on the triple blades might turn out to be something he would long for, not dread.

And yet, there had been a great feeling during the few seconds he had shared his fantasy with the bartender, almost as if it were something real. Almost as great a feeling as the triumph he had felt on seeing the butterfly survive. For a couple of moments he had come alive, almost, a part of a world holding a Pilgrim-Avenger who could defy the Aalaag. A Pilgrim who left his mark at the scene of each Aalaag crime as a promise of retribution to come. *The Pilgrim* who in the end would rouse the world to overthrow its tyrant, alien murders.

He turned about and began to walk hurriedly toward the square again, and to the street beyond it that would take him to the airport where the Aalaag courier ship would pick him up. There was an empty feeling in his stomach at the prospect of facing Lyt Ahn, but at the same time his mind was seething. If only he had been born with a more athletic body and the insensitivity to danger that made a real resistance fighter. The Aalaag thought they had exterminated all cells of human resistance two years since. The Pilgrim *could* be real. His role was a role any man really knowledgeable about the aliens could play-if he had absolutely no fear, no

imagination to make him dream nights of what the Aalaag would do to him when, as they eventually must, they caught and unmasked him.

Unhappily, Shane was not such a man. Even now, he woke sweating from nightmares in which Aalaag had caught him in some small sin, and he was about to be punished. Some men and women, Shane among them, had a horror of deliberately inflicted pain... He shuddered, grimly, fear and fury making an acid mix in his belly that shut out awareness of his surroundings.

Almost, this cauldron of inner feelings brewed an indifference to things around him that cost him his life. That and the fact that he had, on leaving the bar, instinctively pulled the hood of his robe over his head to hide his features; particularly from anyone who might identify him as having been in a place where a bartender had been told about someone called "the Pilgrim". He woke from his thoughts only at the faint rasp of dirt-stiff rags scuffing on cement pavement, behind him.

He checked and turned quickly. Not two meters behind, a man carrying a wooden knife and a wooden club studded with glass chips, his thing body wound thick with rags for armor, was creeping up on him.

Shane turned again, to run. But now, in the suddenly tomblike silence and emptiness of the street, two more such men, armed with clubs and stones, were coming out from between the buildings on either side to block his way. He was caught between the one behind and the two ahead.

His mind was suddenly icy and brilliant. He moved in one jump through a flash of fear into a feeling tight as a strung wire, like the reaction on nerves of a massive dose of stimulant. Automatically, the last two years of training took over. He flipped back his hood so that it could not block his peripheral vision, and grasped his staff with both hands a foot and a half apart in the middle, holding it up at the slant before him, and turning so as to try to keep them all in sight at once.

The three paused.

Clearly, they were feeling they had made a mistake. Seeing him with the hood over his head, and his head down, they must have taken him for a so-called praying pilgrim; one of those who bore staff and cloak as a token of nonviolent acceptance of the sinful state of the world which had brought all people under the alien yoke. They hesitated.

"All right, Pilgrim," said a tall man with reddish hair, one of the two who had come out in front of him, "throw us your pouch and you can go."

For a second, irony was like a bright metallic taste in Shane's mouth. The pouch at the cord around a pilgrim's waist contained most of what worldly goods he might own; but the three surrounding him now were "vagabonds"-*Nonservs*-individuals who either could not or would not hold the job assigned to them by the aliens. Under the Aalaag rule, such outcasts had nothing to lose. Face by three like this, almost any pilgrim, praying or not, would have given up his pouch. But Shane could no. In his pouch, besides his own possessions, were official papers of the Aalaag government that he was carrying to Lyt Ahn; and Lyt Ahn, warrior from birth and by tradition, would neither understand nor show mercy to a servant who failed to defend property he carried. Better the clubs and stones Shane faced now than the disappointment of Lyt Ahn.

"Come and get it," he said.

His voice sounded strange in his own ears. The staff he held seemed light as a bamboo pole in his grasp. Now the vagabonds were moving in on him. It was necessary to break out of the ring they were forming around him and get his back to something so that he could face them all at the same time...

There was a storefront to his left just beyond the short, gray-haired vagabond moving in on him from that direction.

Shane fainted at the tall, reddish-haired man to his right, then leaped left. The short-bodied vagabond struck at him with a club as Shane came close, but the staff in Shane's hand brushed it aside and the staff's lower end slammed home, low down on the body of the vagabond. He went down without a sound and lay huddled up. Shane hurled him, reached the storefront and turned about to face the other two.

As he turned, he saw something in the air, and ducked automatically. A rock rang against the masonry at the

edge of the glass store window, and glanced off. Shane took a step sideways to put the glass behind him on both sides.

The remaining two were by the curb, now, facing him, still spread out enough so that they blocked his escape. The reddish-haired man was scowling a little, tossing another rock in his hand. But the expanse of breakable glass behind Shane deterred him. A dead or battered human was nothing; but broken store windows meant an immediate automatic alarm to the Aalaag police; and the Aalaag were not merciful in their elimination of Nonservs.

"Last chance," said the reddish-haired man. "Give us the pouch-

As he spoke, he and his companion launched a simultaneous rush at Shane. Shane leaped to his left to take the man on that side first, and get out away from the window far enough to swing his stave freely. He brought its top end down in an overhand blow that parried the club-blow of the vagabond and struck the man himself to the ground, where he sat, clutching at an arm smashed between elbow and shoulder.

Shane pivoted to face the reddish-haired man, who was now on tiptoes, stretched up with his own heavy club swung back in both hands over his head for a crushing down-blow.

Reflexively, Shane whirled up the bottom end of his staff; and the touch, fire-hardened tip, travel at eye-blurring speed, smashed into the angle where the other man's lower jaw and neck met.

The vagabond tumbled; and lay still in the street, his head unnaturally sideways on his neck.

Shane whirled around, panting, staff ready. But the man whose arm he had smashed was already running off down the street in the direction from which Shane had just come. The other two were still down and showed no intention of getting up. The street was still.

Shane stood, snorting in great gasps of air, leaning on his staff. It was incredible. He had faced three armed men-armed at least in the same sense that he, himself was armed-and he had feared them all. He looked the fallen bodies and could hardly believe it. All his practice with the quarterstaff.. it had been for defense; and he hoped never to have to use it against even one opponent. Now, here had been three... and he had won.

He felt strangely warm, large and sure. Perhaps it came to him suddenly, this was the way the Aalaag felt. If so, there could be worse feelings. It was something lung-filling and spine-straightening to know yourself a fighter and a conqueror. Perhaps it was just this feeling he had need to have, to understand the Aalaag-he had needed to conquer, powerfully, against great odds as they did...

He felt close to rejecting all the bitterness and hate that had been building in him for the past two years. Perhaps *might* actually could make *right*. He went forward to examine the men he had downed.

They were both dead. Shane stood looking down at them. They had appeared thin enough, bundled in their rags, but it was not until he stood directly over them that he saw how bony and narrow the actually were. They were like claw-handed skeletons.

He stood, gazing down at the last one he had killed; and slowly the fresh warmth and pride within him began to leak out. He saw the stubbled sunken cheeks, the stringy neck, and the sharp angle of the jawbone jutting through the skin of the dead face against the concrete. These features jumped at his mind. The man must have been starving – literally starving. He looked at the other dead man and thought of the one who had run away. All of them must have been starving, for some days now.

With a rush, his sense of victory went out of him; and the sickening bile of bitterness rose once more in his throat. Here, he had been dreaming of himself as a warrior. A great hero-the slayer of two armed enemies. Only the weapons carried by those enemies had been sticks and stones, and the enemies themselves were half-dead men with barely the strength to use what they carried. Not Aalaag, not the powerfully-armed world conquerors challenged by his imaginary Pilgrim, but humans like himself reduced to near-animals by those who thought of these and Shane, in common, as "cattle."

The sickness flooded all through Shane. Something like a ticking time bomb in him exploded. He turned and ran for the square.



When he w got there, it was still deserted. Breathing deeply, he slowed to a wall and went across it, toward the now still body on the triple blade, and the other body at the foot of the wall. The fury was gone out of him now, and also the sickness. He felt empty, empty of everything-even of fear. It was a strange sensation to have fear missing-to have it all over with; all the sweats and nightmares of two years, all trembling on the brink of the precipice of action.

HE could not say exactly, even now, how he had finally come to step off that precipice at last. But it did not matter. Just as he knew that the fear was not gone for good. It would return. But that did not matter, either. Nothing mattered, even the end he must almost certainly come to, now. The only thing that was important was that he had finally begun to act, to do something about a world he could no longer endure as it was.

Quite calmly he walked up to the wall below the blades holding the dead man. He glanced around to see if he was observed; but there was no sign of anyone either in the square or watching form the windows that overlooked i.

He reached into his pocked for the one piece of metal he was allowed to carry. It was the key to his personal living quarters in Lyt Ahn's residence, at Denver-"warded" as all such keys had to be, so that they would not set off an alarm by disturbing the field which the Aalaag had set up over ever city and hamlet, to warn of unauthorized metal in the possessions of humans. With the tip of the key, Shane scratched a rough figure on the wall below the body; the Pilgrim and his staff.

The hard tip of the metal key bit easily through the weathered surface of the brick to the original light red color underneath. Shane turned away, putting the key back into his pouch,. The shadows of the late afternoon had already begun to fall from the buildings to hide what he had done. And the bodies would not be removed until sunrise-this by Aalaag law. By the time the figure scratched on the brick was first seen by one of the aliens he would be back among the "cattle" of Lyt Ahn's household, indistinguishable among the,

Indistinguishable, but different, from now on-in a way that the Aalaag had yet to discover. He turned and walked swiftly away down the street that would bring him to the alien courier ship that was waiting for him. The colorful flicker of a butterfly's wings-or perhaps it was just the glint of a reflection off some high window that seemed momentarily to wink with color-caught the edge of his vision. Perhaps, the thought came suddenly and warmly, it actually was the butterfly he had seen emerge from its cocoon in the square. It was good to feel that it might be the same, small, free creature.

"Enter a Pilgrim," he whispered to it triumphantly. "Fly, little brother. Fly!"