

Robert Young's latest is about three goons from Earth who bring their proven techniques to a labor dispute on Rigel II and meet with some surprisingly sophisticated resistance.

Hex Factor

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

The Alien Import Law enacted by the International Congress at the turn of the twenty-first century gave all extraterrestrial races the right to compete tariff-free on the Earth Common Market. It had seemed at the time a safe way to extend a helping hand to the "brothers of mankind," since all of the "brothers" were still in their stone ages or but recently emerged from them. How could anyone have foreseen that a bunch of bronze-age gooks like the Runes of Rigel II would develop a technology virtually overnight and produce an electricar powerpac, or minibattery, that sold for one third the price of union-made brands and that never needed to be recharged?

When the news broke, electricar owners throughout the world rejoiced. Simultaneously, four dark clouds gathered in the economic sky — one over each of the three Major powerpac companies and the fourth and darkest one of all over the United Union Building, which the Big Brotherhood had just built in Old York.

There is no better time to nip a new industry than when it is still in the bud. Accordingly, the Big Brotherhood called an emergency meeting at which it was agreed that the Runes' flagrant disregard for the poor workingman warranted employing an old-line organizer and that said organizer should be the best in the business. Enter Anthony Healy. The Big Brotherhood appointed two polygenetic professionals to assist him — one an ex-tool and die maker and practicing karate expert named Albert Zhiyomei, the other an ex-pipefitter named Adolph O'Pyzikiewicz. Healy was then directed to proceed to Rigel II, obtain a sample of "factor X" (the label applied by Earth's electrochemists to the Runes' mysterious powerpac-energizer) and to see to it that production came to a permanent halt.

Healy was glad to get the assignment. He hadn't practiced his profession since culling the scabs out of International Motors' Aldebaran IX Assembly Plant. Recently he had taken to beating his wife and kids — a sure sign that he was going stale. Rigel II turned out to be a pleasant-enough planet, white at the poles and girded by a tricolored equatorial forest. The A.P. was preprogrammed and brought the compact U.U. ship down in the middle of the Rune spaceport, or rather, in the middle of the charred clearing created by the retroblasts of the wildcat freighters that served Runeland's new industry.

Logically, the Rune powerpac factory could not be far away. After pocketing a mini-Mauser (the Runes were classified as a gentle peace-loving people, but you never could tell), Healy activated the ship's homing transmitter; then he and his two assistants disembarked and set forth on foot along a woodland road, the deepness of whose ruts indicated it to be a main thoroughfare. It was a fine day, the afternoon air brisk and bright, curlicues of forsythia-colored sky showing through the red, white and green foliage, and blue parakeets winging among the graceful branches.

Presently they came to a village, where they found a welcoming committee awaiting them. It consisted of five old men wearing bibs made out of plantainlike leaves. The rest of the villagers, wearing similar attire, were lined up on either side of the street. Healy had seen pictures of Runes, but pictures didn't do their ugliness justice. They were small and puny, purplish of pigmentation, lemur-like of eyes and rabbitlike of teeth. The women had breasts, but they were the size of prunes and looked like them.

The welcoming committee had appointed a spokesman. He stepped forward and said, "We have long expected you, O noble Earthmen. Welcome to our new industrial state."

Neither the man's command of English nor the Runes' having expected visitors from Earth surprised Healy. No matter where you went these days, you always ran across some gook who could speak your language better than you could; and as for the Runes' expecting visitors from Earth, they would have been

idiots not to have expected them, in view of the fact that they were castrating the terrestrial economy.

He had already given the village a routine glance; now he gave it a long look. Huts made out of strips of bamboolike wood and thatched with dried grass; narrow streets and squeeze-space alleys; no evidence anywhere of even so primitive a form of power as electricity...How the hell could you correlate such a nontechnological background with the sophisticated powerpac he carried in his pocket?

He pulled it out and showed it to the welcoming committee. It was 2 ½" long by 2" wide by 1" thick, perforated front and back, and its terminals were so tiny you could hardly see them. "I'm looking for where these little black boxes are made," he said.

"Why, they are made on Earth," said the spokesman.

"On *Earth!*"

"Yes, we import them from a firm called JobShopCo."

It dawned on Healy then that it was the powerpac cases, not the pacs themselves, that the spokesman was referring to. It should have dawned on him in the first place. Plastic was a good five hundred years in the Runes' future, but they could conceivably have stumbled upon a means of energizing the clay that constituted the pacs' storage units.

He tapped the powerpac with his forefinger. "Okay, you import the boxes from Earth, but you put the power in them here — right? Where?"

"Our booming young industrial factory lies deeper in the forest," said the spokesman proudly. "I will appoint a guide to show you a shortcut in order that you may arrive in plenty of time to watch the night shift in action."

Toward nightfall, the guide led the three U.U. men into a big clearing. In the center of the clearing stood a long narrow building built of bamboolike wood and thatched with dried grass. Surrounding the building at an average distance of about fifty yards were huts similar to those they had seen in the village. In the doorway of each squatted a wizened old woman smoking a long-stemmed pipe.

Labor shanties?

Healy took a harder look at the long, narrow building. Apparently it had no windows, but there was a door in its nearer end. Rising above its farther end was a primitive chimney built of blue clay.

Zhiyomei laughed deep down in his belly where his *Shitahara* muscles were. "In Japan they usta use such sheds to store night soil in."

The guide had gone into the building. Presently he came back out, followed by a no-longer-young but not-quite-old Rune with white circles painted round his eyes, attired in a plantainlike leaf smock.

"Welcome to RuneCo," he said in a little singsong voice. "I am Krench, superintendent of the first of what is to be a veritable complex of factories encircling our planet." Another Rune, similarly attired, stepped out into the dusk. "And this is Pieh, the production manager. It was he, who, while attending industrial school on Earth, had conceived the brilliant idea, and the means of implementing it, that has put our poor country on the road to technological greatness. I witnessed the descent of your ship and am highly honored that scientists should come all the way from Earth to visit our humble factory."

So if the gook wanted to think they were scientists, let him, Healy thought. Aloud, he said, "I'm Healy, this is Zhiyomei and that's O'Pyzikiewicz. How soon does the action start?"

"Presently, Dr. Healy. Owing to the nature of our technology, the factory operates only during the night; however, we have two night shifts, the first of which will commence work shortly. In a few minutes, things will begin to hum. Step into my office and make yourselves feel comfortable."

The office occupied a small area just within the door and was separated from the factory proper by a flimsy partition consisting of horizontal slats of bamboolike wood and containing a door built of the same material. Illumination came from three fat candles burning in three glass globes —probably imports from Earth —suspended from the ceiling. Counting the one behind the desk, there were four chairs, all of them made of bamboolike wood. The desk was unquestionably an Earth import, though why anyone would want to import it Healy would never know. It was circa 1950, made of heavy-gauge steel and perforated with rust holes. Arranged upon its rotted linoleum top were a number of miscellaneous items, some of

Earth origin, others indigenous: a bottle of green ink, a quill pen, a scratch pad consisting of parchmentlike leaves, a plastic tray filled with common pins of various sizes, a pencil with the letters *JobShopCo* stamped on it, a plastiglass jar filled with blue clay, an in-and-out basket woven of strips of bamboo-like wood, and an earthenware bowl filled with paper clips. The floor consisted of pure Rigel II dirt.

Hanging on the outside wall next to the door and flanked by two card racks, one filled with parchment-leaf cards, the other empty, was a time clock.

"How come no computer?" O'Pyzikiewicz asked sardonically, seating himself in the second most comfortable chair.

Healy had already sat down in the most comfortable one. Zhiyomei took possession of the third most comfortable one, and Krench retired behind his desk. The guide had remained outside.

Healy looked at the time clock. Its mechanism had been adjusted to compensate for Rigel II's slightly faster rotation, and a parchment-leaf face bearing Rune numerals had been pasted over the original. The little hand pointed to (and the big hand to)-(.

"Time to get things humming," Pieh said and, opening the door, blew a blast on a willowlike whistle that sent the parakeets screeching for miles around. He closed the door, walked across the office and let himself through the inner door into the factory proper.

A few minutes later the outer door opened and an old woman shuffled in, pulled a card from the left-hand rack, punched it, inserted it in the right-hand rack, shuffled across the office and entered the factory.

Presently a second old woman entered, punched her card and entered the factory. A third. A fourth. All of them had long noses and snaggle teeth.

"How come you don't hire no young girls, Krench," Zhiyomei demanded.

"They lack certain — ah — qualifications . Men, too seldom qualify, regardless of age. Pieh and I are exceptions."

Altogether, thirteen crones entered the office, punched the clock and went into the factory proper. Suddenly from beyond the bamboolike partition separating management from labor came a second shrill blast from Pieh's whistle. "Production is about to begin," announced the superintendent of RuneCo, and he activated an unseen mechanism behind his desk that caused the partition, door and all, to roll up into the ceiling.

The factory proper was now revealed. Torches burning in wall brackets supplied the illumination, and shadows seemed to dance up and down the long narrow room. A long table flanked with stools ran down the center, terminating before an enormous hearth in which a big bronze cauldron hung on a tripod. Piled along the right wall were dozens of cardboard cartons with the letters *JobShopCo* stamped on them. Piled along the left wall were dozens of similar cartons with the letters *RuneCo* printed on them. The floor was vintage Rigel II dirt.

Pieh was kneeling beside the cauldron, pumping a pair of primitive bellows. Twelve of the thirteen crones had seated them selves at the table, six on either side. The thirteenth was standing by the cauldron, stirring its contents with a long wooden spoon. Presently Pieh laid the bellows aside, got up, went over to the right wall and picked up one of the *JobShopCo* cartons. Carrying it over to the office end of the table, he set it on the floor, opened it and began removing the powerpac cases it contained. These he piled on the end of the table. When the carton was empty, he set it aside, produced a wooden crank, inserted it in a slot under the table edge and began to turn it. Wooden gears creaked; the table trembled. The inner section of its surface began to move.

"Henry Ford VIII should see *this* setup," O'Pyzikiewicz said.

"I'll say," said Zhiyomei.

Krench glowed. "I thought you'd be impressed. Of course, a conveyor belt is only a small step forward, but it's a step in the right direction, and it shows that RuneCo is well on the way to modernization."

Healy just looked at him.

Turning the crank with one hand, Pieh placed two powerpac cases on the belt with the other. Simultaneously, all of the crones began to hum. Hum-hum-humm. Hum-hum-hummmm. It was the weirdest noise Healy had ever heard. It sounded like a wordless incantation.

Pieh placed two more cases on the belt. The first ones were now opposite the first two crones. They separated the top and bottom sections and placed them neatly side by side. Hum-hum-hummmm. The next pair of crones had earthenware bowls filled with blue clay sitting at their elbows. They broke off chunks of the clay and packed them into the bottom sections. Hum-hum-hummmm. The next pair had earthenware bowls filled with brownish powder sitting at their elbows. They took pinches of the powder and sprinkled the clay. Hum-hum-hummmm. Meanwhile, Pieh continued to place new cases on the belt, simultaneously turning the crank.

Healy took it all in, but he wasn't buying any of it. The Runes had had plenty of time to prepare for visitors, and they had made good use of it. What he was witnessing was an artfully contrived act designed to play down the importance of the cauldron's contents. As sure as he was born, those contents constituted — or comprised — factor-X.

"Hey, Krench," Zhiyomei said, "one of your employees is sleeping on the job. That old girl down at the end there."

"Good," Krench said. "I had hoped for an opportunity to demonstrate how we of RuneCo keep our employees alert, or, as you say on Earth, 'on the ball.'"

Reaching into the plastiglass jar, he broke off a fist-sized piece of blue clay and with astonishing dexterity molded it into the shape of a Rune female. "You must understand," he said, "that the likeness does not need to be exact and that the substance employed to form it serves merely as a medium. The essential factor is the intensity of the projected malevolence." He set the little clay statue upright on the desktop and selected a tiny pin from the tray at his elbow. He sat for a moment without moving, and the painted circles round his lemur eyes took on a bluish cast. Then, with an artful thrust, he stuck the pin into one of the effigy's tiny buttocks.

From down the room came a high-pitched scream, and the old woman who had dozed off leaped from her stool and began feeling frantically of her right buttock. A moment later she produced a pin that was at least two inches long. Casting it aside, she started to sit down again, then thought better of it and remained standing.

Casually, Krench rolled the effigy into a ball and dropped it into the plastiglass jar. "If I didn't know better," Healy said, "I'd think you were a witch."

"I *am* a witch," Krench said. "As are all my production-line employees. As is Pieh. I thought that would be clear to you by this time, Dr. Healy."

"You'd like it to be clear, wouldn't you? You'd like me to think, wouldn't you, that that pin-sticking act you just put on was on the level. You'd like me to think, wouldn't you, that there's some sort of Rune Beelzebub energizing those powerpacs."

"You may think what you like, Dr. Healy. I am not even altogether certain myself as to exactly who or exactly what accomplishes the energization. I spent but little time on Earth, and learned very little during my stay. Pieh, however, learned a great deal during his, especially about science. Witchcraft hadn't been practiced among our people for centuries, but in some of us — especially among our older women — certain latent powers existed, and it was he who conceived the idea of putting them to scientific use. He theorizes that a fourth-dimensional interrelationship exists between the microcosm and the macrocosm; and that when a witch such as myself sticks pins in an effigy, his malevolence acts as a bridge between realities; and that systematized rituals, such as the one in progress now, tap a micro-macro or macro-micro energy flow. According to Pieh, a planet and a pebble, micromacrocosmically speaking, are one and the same thing."

"Sure they are," Healy said. "And it'll be a nice day tomorrow if it doesn't rain."

Meanwhile, the first pair of powerpac cases, followed by the successive pairs Pieh kept placing on the belt, had continued to move down the table. They had come opposite the fourth pair of crones, who had made intricate passes over them, the fifth pair, who had sealed the top and bottom sections together

with a black gummy paste, and were now approaching the sixth and final pair, one of whom was the old woman whose effigy Krench had stuck with a pin. The sixth operation turned out to be simplicity itself: the two crones merely picked the powerpacs up and dropped them into the cauldron.

"Aha!" Healy said. He got to his feet. "If you don't mind, Krench, I think I'll have a little look-see at what's in that kettle."

"Please do, Dr. Healy."

Entering the factory, Healy walked down the dirt floor to the hearth. The crone tending the cauldron trembled at his approach. Commandeering her wooden stirring spoon, he peered over the cauldron's rim. He saw a brackish bubbling fluid that looked like borscht and smelled like old shoes, dead fish and Romano cheese. For a moment he was disconcerted; then he reminded himself that factor-X *had* to be unconventional; otherwise, the electrochemists would have been able to reconstruct it from its effect upon the clay storage units. Taking a small all-purpose container out of his inside coat pocket, he filled it by means of the wooden spoon, tossed the spoon back to the thirteenth crone and returned to the office.

He replaced the container in his pocket and faced Krench across the latter's desk. "With your secret in my pocket, it would seem, wouldn't it, Krench, that all I have to do to put you out of business is to go back to Earth and turn it over to the union powerpac companies. But —"

"I'm afraid you don't understand, sir," Krench interrupted. "We have no secret as such — only an unorthodox method of energizing ordinary clay, which even we ourselves do not fully understand. The brew which you have taken a sample of was concocted from ancient recipes, but immersing the powerpacs in it is only the final phase of the ritual. By itself, the brew is powerless."

"But even *with* your secret," Healy went on relentlessly, "the union powerpac companies would still be out in the cold. They couldn't even begin to compete with you and your dirty scabs pricewise. Even if I got a union in here, they couldn't compete, because you'd still have no taxes to cough up, no bills to pay and no antipollution equipment to install." He brought his big bricklayer's fist down on the desktop. "And do you know what that means, Krench? It means that if you go on producing powerpacs some of our boys are going to start losing their jobs. It means that honest hard-working union men with wives and kids to support are going to have nothing coming in but unemployment insurance, layoff pay and United Union security-allowance. And all because you and your buddy Pieh got greedy all of a sudden and dipped your dirty fingers into somebody else's honeypot!" He nodded to Zhiyomei and O'Pyzikiewicz. "Let's clean house, men."

Zhiyomei got up, walked around the desk, picked up Krench by the neck and poked out the Rune's front teeth with his extended forefinger. O'Pyzikiewicz entered the factory proper, picked up Pieh, carried him down the room and threw him into the cauldron. Zhiyomei dropped Krench, followed O'Pyzikiewicz into the factory and tipped over the table, bringing production to a screeching halt and sending the production employees scattering in twelve different directions. Strictly speaking, the guide wasn't part of the action, but Healy went outside and beat him up anyway. Afterward he re-entered the office and started stomping Krench. When his boots got bloody, he joined Zhiyomei and O'Pyzikiewicz. The three men picked up the table and, using it as a battering ram, smashed both of the building's rear corner poles. The rear wall collapsed, the chimney came tumbling down, and the room sagged. Dried grass rained down into the room, some of it landing in the hearth and igniting. The flames spread swiftly, began climbing the right wall. The factory filled with smoke. Somehow Pieh managed to climb out of the cauldron and staggered through the big hole where the rear wall had been and out into the night. Screaming and shrieking, the thirteen production employees followed him.

Healy let them go. The factory was burning lustily. He and his two assistants entered the office, tore the time clock off the wall and smashed the four chairs. Then Healy tuned in the U.U. ship's homing signal on the receiver attached to his lapel. As he followed Zhiyomei and O'Pyzikiewicz out the door, he glanced over his shoulder at Krench. The Rune had one hand on the desktop and was trying to pull himself erect. "We'll be back in a month, Krench. Better not build no more factories."

Healy lifted the compact U.U. ship straight up, orbited it once and reprogrammed the A.P. for Earth. O'Pyzikiewicz broke open a quart of Cutty SynSark, and the three men made themselves comfortable in the cockpit-stateroom-lounge and began toasting the success of their mission. In the middle of the third

toast, what appeared to be an enormous steel javelin came through the starboard hull and imbedded itself in the port bulkhead. It was at least three inches in diameter and a good twenty feet long. The ship shuddered and the air pressure began to drop. Zhiyomei screamed. A moment later, a second javelin came through the port hull, skewering O'Pyzikiewicz, who was trying frantically to open the suit locker. The ship yawed. "Pins!" Zhiyomei screamed. "They're *pins!*" The third "javelin" caught him in the midriff and pinned him against the starboard bulkhead like a big bug.

"Micro-macro —" Healy began. Then he saw the fourth pin coming and tried to dodge. He didn't quite make it.