

THE HOOB MELON CRISIS

"Gentlemen," Ambassador Earlyworm said, and paused, peering in turn at the faces of each of the subordinate diplomats seated behind meticulously aligned yellow pads and needle-sharp pencils along the twelve-foot zum-wood conference table, with an ex-pression that strongly suggested he employed the appellation as a courtesy only. "Ours, fellows," he said in a tone of hearty good-fellowship as authentic as a turned aluminum Olde English beer tankard, "is a somewhat anomalous position, constituting as we do a diplomatic Mission to a world having no indigenous population, or native government to which to present credentials; thus, while I should be dismayed were the unfortunate expression 'up for grabs,' which I noted in a draft dispatch from the Political Section, to find its way into the record, it is undoubtedly true that a certain vacuum, planetary-ownershipwise, does exist here. I have accordingly taken the perfectly reasonable position that Froom 93 constitutes a portion of Terra proper, by virtue of discovery-and that as the highest ranking and only Terries on the world we indeed constitute a de facto government-with myself as king, or rather president, of course, as I am at heart a simple soul, with no aspirations to regal rank. You may therefore address me henceforth simply as 'Mr. Presi-dent,' rather than as 'Your Majesty,' as someone-I believe it was you, Magnan-let slip earlier. Though I certainly sympathize with your intention to see appropriate dignity accorded my, that is to say, 'our' regime-I believe an outward expression of humility at

this time is in order to forestall rude japes by coarse-minded liberals and anarchists."

"Sure, Your Maj-I mean Mr. Pres-or Mr. Ambassador-or whatever-" said Hy Felix, the Press Attache", a dour man of post-middle age with a baggy face and matching pants. He spoke in the cynical tone he affected as appropriate to his role as a hardened old newshound (in his youth he had edited a poultrymen's journal in Sidoris, Kansas, during its brief receiver-ship).

That's OK for the rubes back at Sector-but what about old Flith and his boys? They're pretty well settled in in what Colonel Happyfew assures me is a solid tactical position. And they claim we're invading 'New Groac'"

"A fantastic allegation!" Earlyworm barked, "which I intend to counter at once-with a most effective allegation of my own! To wit: that the presence here of Groaci personnel in any fole other than that of diplomatic emissaries, constitutes an open violation of Terran sovereignty. I have, of course, invited Ambassa-dor Flith to present his credentials to me at his earliest convenience."

"Oh, yeah? Your Maj-I mean Mr. P- Ambassa-dor," the Press Attach^ said excitedly. "What'd he say?"

"To repeat the ruffian's remarks would sully my lips," Earlyworm said glumly. "Suffice it to say that he rudely rejected my peace offering."

Flith is just a typical sticky-fingered Groaci spoil-sport, trying to grab off Froom 93 like this," Mag-nan said sourly. "The soil is no good for growing

those awful hoob melons they dote on, not sandy enough."

"Let us not allow our righteous fervor to cause us to descend to the use of racially biased epithets, Ben," Earlyworm said severely, "Next, you'll slip and refer to our Groaci colleagues as 'nasty little five-eyed sticky-fingers' in the hearing of those inimical to the Corps

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image of a benign and bigotry-free organization, dedicated to the welfare of all cooperative-that is- deserving beings, of whatever somatype, however outlandish or even grotesque."

"Not me, chief, I mean Your Majesty, or Your Excellency," Magnan spoke up briskly. "I make it a point never to let any of these alien creepies and crawlies guess what I really think of them."

"Tsk, Ben, this won't do," Earlywofm said with a 321-k (Benignly Restrained Severity). "Not only do you shilly-shally over the proper mode of address to your own sovereign, into whose actual presence you have been so graciously admitted-but inadvertently you've also revealed a streak of xenophobia most inappropriate to any of us of the profession whose unhappy duty it is to deal with these vile creatures."

"It's even worse than I expected," First Secretary Magnan whispered behind his hand to Third Secretary Relief, on his left. "I feared we'd been called here to learn of a new impasse in the talks with the Groaci anent spheres of interest here on Froom 93. But from the Ambassador's expression-a modified 927-d (View-ing with Alarm, Second Degree), I needn't remind you, Relief-it's apparent the debacle is of even more ruinous proportion than lhat-disastrous though a failure at the table would be for any of our hopes for rapid advancement. Gel sel, now, Relief, This is going to be disasler unadorned."

"I'm sel, Mr. Magnan," said Relief, puffing a vanilla dopeslick alighl. "I've got false papers all packed for a fast dodge out of the Sector, disguised as a bham-bham-fruil busker."

"Jape if you must," Magnan replied tartly. "Bui my Irained inslincls tell me lhal we are about to recieve news which will soon ring dolefully along the corridors at Sector HQ."

"You ithink They're going to cul the representational liquor allowance?" Relief asked. Magnan shuddered. "Lei's nol lei our imaginations run amok," he cau-

tioned. "But I'll wager my fig-leaf cluster to my Order of the Nib and Foolscap the Groaci are threatening to break off talks. Picture that contretemps repercussion-wise when next ER time conies along. Well, I suppose one can salvage some solace from the prospect of settling a record for time in junior grade."

"I suppose," Earlyworm said heavily, "I am not too optimistic in assuming that each of you, being hand-picked officers of the Corps Diplomatique Terres-trienne, plucked from the Groaci Desks of your respective

departments for assignment to my Mission here, are aware that for some eighteen months now, I and a team of our doughtiest verbal warriors have been locked in a vocabulary-to-vocabulary confrontation with a seasoned Groaci negotiating team under Ambas-sador Flith-one of their hardiest and most agile perorators-on the outcome of which negotiation hangs the fate of Froom 93, a most desirable world, complete with blue lagoons, white beaches, mysterious forests swarming with game, vast and fertile plains untouched by the autoplow, and minerals scarcely hinted at by the hundred-pound crystals of carbon, and the variously tinted corundums we've unearthed, to say nothing of the forty-foot ingot of .999 fine gold presented as a keepsake by Sir Nigel Froom, the discoverer of the world, to the CDT Retirement Fund, a most sentimental gesture, I'm sure you'll agree." Earlyworm employed a large, floral-patterned tissue to dab from his reddened eyes the moisture occasioned ^y the thought of the interest being compounded daily by the Fustian bank where the memento had been deposit-ed for safekeeping.

"Get ready," Magnan whispered. "Here it comesv"

"Oh, Magnan," Earlyworm spoke in tones of Lofty Kindliness (a modified 203-c). "If you've information to impart which you feel is of more value to the staff than the little announcement / have for you-pray rise, and share the intelligence with us all."

Magnan swallowed a small tennis ball which had somehow lodged in his throat and smiled a glassy

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version of a 217-f (Sublime Confidence, Enhanced by Consciousness of Virtue).

"Now, Ben," Earlyworm soothed. "I hardly think even so sickly a 217 as yours-a subtle expression, and one you've never mastered, as I've pointed out repeat-edly in my quarterly assessments of your career poten-tial, and of which due note has been taken in high places; thus your glacial advancement through the ranks-even a sickly 217, I say, hardly represents an appropriate attitude for an erring junior to assume under mild and justified rebuke. There are those, harsher than I, who might read a subtle insolence into it." The Undersecretary jotted a brisk note on the pad before him and refixed his expectant gaze on the unfortunate object thereof.

"Why, sir, I wouldn't think of openly expressing my contempt for sarcasm publicly directed by a senior at a subordinate officer," Magnan yelped. "That is, I certainly wouldn't want Your Excellency to get the idea I had any such idea."

"Better stop now before you conceal something even worse, Mr. Magnan," Retief suggested quietly.

"Shucks, Mr. Ambassador," piped up Major Faint-lady, a junior Assistant Military Attache on loan from the field, "he was just saying something about the talks being broken off by the Groaci."

"So-there's been a leak!" Earlyworm thundered. "And I might have known

you'd be at the bottom of it, Magnan-you have a well-known penchant for involve-ment in the most bizarre incidents which mar the dignity of Corps history."

"B-but," Magnan faltered, "I only said I was afraid you might have some bad news for us. Cross my heart and hope to die, I didn't say a word more."

"I thought I caught something about a cut in the representational allowance," Faintlady said in the tone of a small boy tattling on a schoolmate.

"Now, see here, Magnan!" Earlyworm rolled the words along the table like a frageeftation grenade. "If you're privy to matters outside your proper sphere of

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responsibility, particularly matters which bear directly on the success of the Mission-by affecting the welfare and morale of the entire team-I think you'd best divulge all, at once, before you give rise to suspicions that you may have intended to make unauthorized use of such data."

"Insofar as I know, sir," Magnan said weakly, "no cut in the liquor allowance is contemplated-after all, how would I know?"

"Let us not be devious, or assume masks of naivety," Earlyworm boomed. "It's common knowledge around Sector that you've participated in a number of diplomatic coups which, were it not for your equally notorious reputation for inside-dope-hoarding, would have led to your advancement to senior grade within the Corps long since. Besides-I'm not referring to anything so relatively trivial as a cut in Embassy funds. I refer, sir, to your rumor-mongering of a breakdown in the talks!"

"Gee, sir," Magnan said in a broken voice. "You mean I haven't gotten full credit for some of the near-miracles I've brought off-with some assistance from Retief, I feel impelled to point out-just because I don't gossip enough?"

"I'm not referring to gossip, Magnan. If you're in possession of firm information to the effect that the Groaci intend to withdraw from the conference table, I demand to know the details at once-so I can salvage a little face by withdrawing first."

"Say, that's an idea," the Press Attach^e said with feeling. "Then we could all get the heck back home and start having a few kicks."

"As to such irresponsible rumors, I say," Earlyworm repeated, "I demand to know whence this leak emanated!"

"Why, from Retief!" Magnan yelled and cast a reproachful glance at the latter. "He's just back from a two-day fact-finding visit to the Groaci field capital, as they call their squatters' camp, you know, sir."

"Indeed?" the Ambassador thundered the word.

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"Pray enlighten us all, Mr. Retief-what facts did you find?"

Retief rose to his feet. "There is no basis for further Terran-Groaci discussion of the question of ownership of Froom 93, Mr. Ambassador," he said.

Earlyworm glowered. "Is this unwarranted assumption your sole explanation for your failure to render the usual five-hundred-page Report of Findings?" he yelled; "This preposterous piece of manjockery will not go unnoticed," he finished in a sepulchral tone. "Consider: a mere Third Secretary-such a person should never have been entrusted with a mission of such gravity in the first instance, of course-taking it upon himself to decide that talks arranged at the highest diplomatic levels-after months of effort by senior Corps officers including myself, at cost of appropriate concessions to the Groaci as the price of their agreement to submit the matter to arbitration-should be discontinued! Such effrontery leaves me speechless."

"You're going pretty good, Mr. Ambassador," Major Faintlady encouraged.

"I trust, Retief," Earlyworm stated in a tone that denied the import of his words, "that any such frivolous notion as you've expressed was kept strictly to yourself-not a hint of any weakening of Terran resolve being allowed to leak to the Groaci."

"There was no basis for any talks in the first place," Retief said. "The Groaci were moving into Terry space and they knew it. Getting us to a conference table was half their battle-they had nothing to lose- since they had no legitimate claim-"

"So this is the rationalization of which you base this piece of meddling in great affairs."

"Ambassador Flith seemed to agree with me," Retief said.

"You gave expression to this potential breach in the solid dike of the Terran position to Flith?" Earlyworm roared. "Ambassador Flith, you may be interested to know, is not only the chief of the Groaci Mission, but a most pertinacious negotiator!"

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"He's also quite a judge of Bacchus brandy," Relief said, "Or ought to be-judging by the amount he puts away."

"So-in your cups you conceded all to this drunken enemy bureaucrat!" Earlyworm jotted a note so vigorously that his pen snapped with a sharp ping. "Damned cheap Groaci copies of quality Japanese merchandise!" he snarled and threw the fragments past Magnan's ear.

"Actually," Retief said, "we were having a little game of Drift when the point came up."

"You and this Groaci functionary played cards for a planet?" Earlyworm said, attempting a 509-C (Stunned Incredulity) which bore an unfortunate resemblance to a look of utter bafflement.

"Not quite," Retief said. "You don't play Drift with cards."

"Dice, then, sir! You diced away a virgin world, a bright star in the diadem of Terran dreams of enlight-ened economic empire."

Retief shook his head. "Flith lost," he said.

"You expect me to believe this?" Earlyworm shout-ed.

"You may as well, sir; Sector has already recorded the agreement to evacuate Froom 93 that Flith signed."

"Ah, what's a career diplomat to do?" Earlyworm inquired brokenly. "I've devoted positive hours-of off-duty tune, mind you-to evolving an ideal approach to the problem-and a mere upstart butts in and brings all my subtleties to naught."

"Still," Magnan pointed out brightly, "we do have uncontested title to the planet now."

"Drivel!" Earlyworm snarled. "Flith's alleged agree-ment will be repudiated instantly by the Groaci govern-ment! Retief has merely muddied the waters."

"Flith conceded that the Groaci had no legitimate claim," Retief said. "Since he was the one who sneaked the claim-jumping party into Froom 93 in the first place, I think Groac will have to go along."

"Bah!" Earlyworm snorted. "You expect me to lend countenance to any such contention? If that were true,

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Terran agreement to subject the matter of ownership to arbitration in the first instance would have been an act of idiocy! An idiocy in which I might be portrayed as having played a prominent role," Earlyworm subsided, aiming a baleful eye at Magnan.

"No such facile trickery will extricate you from the fruits of your folly, Retief!" he stated bleakly. "I'll fight the Flith declaration to the bitter end. Its publica-tion would mean I'd stand exposed to the public as a fatuous blunderer!"

"But surely, a teentsy little sacrifice of ego in the interest of Terra would be a small price to pay for a virgin planet," Magnan chirped, looking around for agreement, but meeting only downcast eyes, and lugubriously shaking heads.

"Ego, Magnan?" Earlyworm echoed the word like the tocsin of doom. "You refer to the ruin of a forty-year career of public service as a teentsy matter of ego? I see you've entirely abandoned hope for advance-ment, and are striking out blindly now, in an effort to drag others down with you."

"Not at all, sir," Magnan piped cheerfully, "I fully expect to reach ambassadorial rank in due course!"

"After my job, eh?" Earlyworm rumbled. "I might have suspected as much from a number of subtle indications over the years-although I've so naively trusted you as a faithful underling, making you privy to many an administrative confidence."

"Oh, I don't plan to tell, sir," Magnan spoke up briskly. "After all, a man bearing your fearful load of responsibility should surely be excused the occasional modest indiscretion."

"You refer to my beach house on Blue Lagoon, I suppose? A modest installation, designed primarily to provide a homelike atmosphere for a number of unfortunate orphans. ..."

"All female, between eighteen and twenty-five," Major Faintlady murmured. "Now, there's a charity I could get behind!"

"A base canard, Major!" Earlyworm bellowed.

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"One of my charges is well into her twenty-sixth year, though sufficiently well-preserved to have won the title Miss Installment Purchase in competition with generously endowed contenders from throughout the Arm."

"Well, it's great to see one of the kids make good, hey, Fred? I mean Mr. Early-I mean Mr. Amb-er, Pres-er, Your Imperial Highness."

"Pray allow me to call to your attention," Earlyworm said with a 315-g (Patience Grown Weary Through Long Suffering), "that the title 'Highness,' while sometimes employed in addressing secondary members of royal houses, is not appropriate in this instance. Also, 'Royal' is sufficient, adjectivewise. I do not aspire at this point to Imperial honors."

"Wow-modest to a fault," an Economic Section man murmured.

"What do you mean 'fault'?" Counsellor of Embassy Pridefall demurred sharply.

"Well, let it pass, Lenwood," Earlyworm said easily, assuming a 49-m expression (Hurts Borne Manfully).

"That 'wow' wasn't too elegant, either," Pridefall persisted. "This bunch of HQ rejects got no sense of class, Fred, I mean Mr. Majesty."

"Perchance you jape, Lenwood," Earlyworm said with a stare ten degrees cooler than the South Polar cap of the small world known as Icebox.

"Me, jape at a solemn moment like this, chief?" Pridefall said, attempting a 9a/2-r (Astonishment at Attack from an Unexpected Quarter). "I, make jokes just as you assume the purple? Heck. I guess I got better sense'n that, Your Excellency."

"So," Earlyworm steepled his rather plump fingers and gazed past them at the usually urbane Counsellor, now trying out a 29-j (Confused Modesty), coupled with a 41-f (Good Intentions Misconstrued).

"Hum. A classic 29 I might have bought," Early-worm said almost casually, "but attempting to embellish it with a 41 was too much. You destroyed credibility, and besides you never did learn how to overlay subtlety on subtlety. You end up looking like you got

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maybe a touch heartburn. But what's all this chitchat got to do with the problem at hand-to wit, how to entice Flith back to the table."

"That's going to be tough, Mr. Ambassador," Relief said. "He and his whole gang of planetnappers are due to lift off in about half an hour, homeward bound."

"Failure!" Earlyworm dealt his forehead a smack with his open palm that jarred his pince-nez loose. "I'm ruined!"

"Well, maybe not completely," Pridefall said soothingly. "The talks have broken down, but it looks like we've got the planet."

"Let us not be diverted into side issues!" the Chief of Mission roared. "I was dispatched here to carry out negotiations. No further negotiations will be possible, due to the meddling of this upstart!" He pointed a dimpled forefinger at Relief. Several bureaucrats in the line of fire leaned back uneasily, as if fearing involvement in the overkill of the ambassadorial finger.

"Son, could a fellow ask how the dickens you got rid of the five-eyed little sticky-fingers?" Major Faintlady asked Relief furtively, glancing toward the head of the table for signs of Imperial wrath at his fraternization with one on whom the official ire had descended. The Press Attache jotted a note.

"Strike that!" Earlyworm commanded the latter. "There'll be no reports of use of pejorative racial epithets emanating from any proceedings under my jurisdiction."

"What'll I change it to?" The newsman inquired plaintively.

"'Knock-kneed little claim-jumpers' is about right, I should say none but avowed anti-Terrans could construe that crisp phrase as other than merely aptly descriptive."

"OK, 'knock-kneed little five-eyed claim-jumpers' it is, chief."

"To return to the Major's question," Magnan said diffidently. "How did you get rid of the little sneaks?"

"Ah, that's the example I've hoped one of you would

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provide," Earlyworm caroled. "Quote Ben's query," he directed the Press Attache*. "You'll notice, gentlemen, that Magnan was able to make reference to our Groaci colleagues quite lucidly, in true diplomatic fashion, without reference to their optical overendowments or the well-known adhesive qualities of their digital members."

"Well, sir," Magnan glowed with pleasure and cast a sidelong 23-v toward his chief.

"What, a 23-x-directed at me?" the latter bellowed. "Ben, you've been out here too long. A 23-x-properly executed, mind you-might be useful in recruiting a female companion for an evening of decorous amuse-ment, but here-in the middle of these solemn proceedings-it's grotesque."

"Gosh, sir, it wasn't an x (Subtle Sexual Invitation), it was supposed to be more of a v, actually."

"A 23-v (Unobtrusive Recognition Between Insiders Among the Goyim)? Grossly inappropriate, Ben, considering the disparity in our respective ranks," Earlyworm reprimanded sharply.

"Sure, but why did the Groaci up-stakes and pull out?" Major Faintlady broke in, staring at Relief.

"They decided they didn't want any real estate that was infested with creepy-crawly creatures," Retief said. "Or that's what Flith said."

"You see?" Earlyworm burst out. "Whilst we Terrans scrupulously abjure the use of epithets, these clammy little opportunists thus characterize us. A gross outrage, which, I trust, will not go unnoticed in the press." Earlyworm cast a significance-loaded glance at the Press Attach[^], now busily sharpening his pencil with his front teeth, which were markedly reminiscent of those of the larger rodentia.

"You bet, Your Majesty," the former poultry report-er said, and spat damp cedar chips on the carpet. "I got a story here that'll make some .joker a clear million, with a little reworking for trideo use. A million yocks, as they used to say."

"Who?"

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"Those to whom the term 'boff was offensive, chief."

"I am not the sachem of an aboriginal tribe of Indians," Earlyworm snapped.

"Let's watch them epithets, boss," the Press Attache" retorted sharply. "Nowadays the Indians draw plenty of water on the hill, all twelve hundred that's left of 'em."

" 'Aboriginal' is hardly an epithet, Hy," Earlyworm said tartly, "nor is it your place to attempt to police my vocabulary."

"What's it mean, Your Ma-High-Mr. Pr-Hmm-?" Felix stammered.

"Simply address me as 'sir,' Hy," Earlyworm said. "Since more gracious modes of address seem beyond your modest resources."

"OK, Sir High. When did they knight you?" ,

"I shall ignore the lese-majeste implicit in what I assume you meant as a

quip, Felix. To return to your question, 'aboriginal' simply means 'native to,' or 'original inhabitant.'"

"I get it. Like us, here on Froom 93!"

"Not quite. While the first sentient beings to occupy the world, we were not born here, of course."

"Say, you're right at that, Sir High!"

"Sorry to spoil a surefire yoff or bock, for you, Hy," Relief said. "But Flith wasn't alluding to us Terries when he referred to creepy-crawlies."

"Then whom?" Earlyworm boomed.

Relief rose and took from his pocket a small packet the size of a match box. "These little fellows," he said, and opening the box allowed two flattish, inch-wide, three-inch-long caterpillars to flow over the end and out onto the polished tabletop, where they looked like strips of varicolored velvet which at once approached each other and rolled themselves into a ball.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the Ambassador, "what are those things? I hate creepy-crawlies myself!"

"They're gribble-worms," Relief explained. "A mat-ing pair. They mate for life, you know."

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"I saw no such creatures in my stroll about the Embassy environs on our arrival," Earlyworm protest-ed. "What is this talk of infestation?"

"They multiply faster than a clip-joint waiter figuring his tip," Retief said. He drew aside the heavy velour drape covering the adjacent window. Earlyworm fol-lowed his glance out across the meadow, jumped to his feet and groaned.

"Holy macaroni!" he cried. "Look at that! Must be a zillion of 'em!" The staff crowded around, commenting on the sight that met their eyes:

"Gripes! A solid blanket of 'em as far as you can see!" Major Faintlady cried.

"Jeeze! Looks like one of them handwove blankets from Hawaii with 'Mother' on it, only it ain't got 'Mother' on it!" commented Hy Felix, sagely.

"No wonder Flith pulled out. Who wants a worm farm?"

"Wonder where they came from?" Magnan said.

"They're native to Sproon 21-C," Retief said.

"The Sproon system is ten lights from here," Early-worm said. "How do you suppose they gained a foothold here?" He prodded one of the gribble-worms with his pencil. It flowed over the obstacle, and continued across the table, its vivid colors in sharp contrast with the dark, close-grained wood.

"Easy," Retief said, "I brought 'em."

"You!" Earlyworm fell back in his chair as if his knees had buckled. "You couldn't! It would take a Class III cargo hauler to transport that lot!"

"Just a breeding pair-like those-" Retief pointed to the two worms on the table.

"Why, man? To intentionally introduce a plague onto a virgin world is a heinous act indeed."

"They don't do any harm," Retief said. "I thought they'd help keep the ecological balance."

"Oh, ecology-well that's not as big as it was during its heyday back in prespace times. But still-perhaps a case could be made. ..." Earlyworm looked expect-antly at Retief.

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"They've already rid the environment of an undesir-able species," Retief said. "Or they will have in half an hour."

"So-we eject the Groaci at the cost of the contami-nation of the world with vermin! Might as well leave it to them! I don't like creepy-crawlies any better than Ambassador Flith."

"By the way, sir," Hy Felix put in, "Flith is calling himself Planetary Director Flith now."

"Why, the effrontery!" Earlyworm yelled. "But thanks to his squeamishness, he'll have to do his directing from a distance, if I'm to credit Retiefs statement."

"How about you, Your Majesty?" Felix pressed the point. "Will you rule your world in residence, or work out some remote controls-from maybe Blue Lagoon, say?"

"The idea has merit, Hy. Doubtless the children would benefit from the opportunity to witness the conduct of great affairs. But no craven, I, to flee my realm and abandon my people to their fate."

"Your p-people?" Felix quavered.

"Naturally Terra expects this day that every man will do his duty," Earlyworm intoned.

"But, chief, if you hightail it, you don't expect us to hang around and wait for the worms to move in," Felix protested.

"I have already stated, superfluously, I trust, my intention to remain at my post and, in fact-carry out my mission!" Earlyworm glared at Retief like an illtempered Pekinese. "Though," he continued, "I confess it's obscure to me what further interest Terra will have in a worm-eaten planet cast aside by the Groaci."

Retief went around the table and lifted a short, brilliantly colored cloak from a peg. He ran his fingers over the smooth velvety material and offered the garment to Earlyworm for his inspection.

"Gribble-worm hides, he said "I have a feeling they'll have commercial value."

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"A feeling, already he's got/' Earlyworm cried and dropped the cloak which fell in a jewel-bright heap, as supple as silk.

"He's right, Fred, or Sir High, I mean," the Press Attach[^] said, grabbing for the cloak.

"Brother-that's good goods," he exclaimed. "As a former stringer for the Gents' Wear Daily, I can tell you that's the equal of the best genuine Florentine velvet loomed in Hoboken! It's a surefire winner! It'll sweep the Arm! We're all made men, Your Majesty-if we play this cute."

"Heavens," Magnan cried, recoiling. "Retief, how many of these tiny creatures yielded up their pelts to create one hemi-semi-demi-informal early late midaf-ternoon cloak?"

"About five thousand," Retief said. "Lolly would know for sure. She stitched them up for me."

"Lolly? By a curious coincidence that name, though most unusual, is also borne by the eldest of my fosterlings-Miss Retail Merchandising, you'll recall," Earlyworm put in.

"By an even stranger coincidence, it's the same girl,"

Retief said. "When she heard I was to be part of your cadre here on From 93, she asked me to smuggle her aboard the Corps transport, so she could see you in action verb-to-verb and adjective-to-adjective with the foe." -

"So?"

"So I made room for her-fortunately I had a double stateroom-an administrative error, no doubt."

"Possibly, since I entrust such simple chores as the preparation of passenger manifests to Lolly herself- but I fear the poor child has no head for figures."

"With that figure, who needs a head?" Hy Felix inquired rhetorically.

"No," Magnan gasped. "I can never countenance it. Five thousand tiny lives lost to drape one back in finery! As a charter member of the Society for the Prevention of Atrocities to Vermin, Ickies and Nasties, I must protest. We

of SRWIN will rise in a body and

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boycott such purveyors of gribble-hide garments as do not themselves fall under our aegis."

"No problem, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "Not a single icky needs to die on the alter of fashion. They very obligingly shed their hides every spring. A ten-man detail could police up a million prime pelts in the next couple of hours without getting out of sight of this window."

"Well, in that case, I suppose I can extend SPAVIN'S blessing on the proposal."

"So-now we're in business, boys," Earlyworm said heartily. "The only little problem area that was troubling me a trifle, in re hanging out my shingle as King-that is, President of Froom 93-was in the area of hard currency and foreign exchange. But now we've got a red-hot export item, we're in the clear."

"Still, the place is crawling with gribble-worms," Magnan pointed out tartly. "Who wants to be king of a worm ranch?"

"Me, for one," Earlyworm stated firmly. "Don't cry 'sour grapes,' Magnan. I fully intend to elevate all of you-except possibly Retief-to noble rank as soon as convenient. How does Grand Duke Magnan sound to you-has a rather pleasant ring to the ear, eh?"

"Duke of what? Dirties? Viscount of Vermin would serve as well-or Count of Creepy-crawlies."

"You sound strangely anti-vermin for a charter member of SPAVIN," Felix barked.

"I just signed up to protest the wholesale torture of the awful things," Magnan was quick to point out. "I don't have to like them-" He cast a glance out the window at the worm-covered landscape. "Or settle down to live with them."

"It appears we have little choice, Ben," Earlyworm said gravely, "with regard to your latter point. We're stuck with the place, now that Retief has run the Groaci off."

"Maybe we can con them into taking it back," a junior Political Officer proposed brightly.

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"I presume, Chester, you mean that by an appropriate presentation of the moral issues involved the Groaci can be made to see that it would be to their credit in the interplanetary community to assume their proper role assumption-of-responsibilitywise for this worm-infested planet."

"You practically taken the words outta my mout', boss," Chester replied enthusiastically.

"A most perceptive observation, Chester," Early-worm said, bestowing a 24-w (Gracious Condescension) leavened with a hint of 7-y (Expectation of Great Thing in Due Course) on the lucky bureaucrat, at which his fellow underlings around the table were quick to bombard him with approbation, ranging from Faint-lady's 12.7-x (Knew You Had It In You, Fella) to Felix's more restrained 119-a (We're All Pulling For You, Lad), to which he responded with a shy 3-v (Modest Awareness of Virtue).

"In fact," Earlyworm interjected a Cold Return to Objectivity (91-s) into the lightning interplay of ritual grimacing: "I think it best to send a marked, that is, picked man along at once to broach the subject to Planetary Director Flith, ere he depart from the vicinity, abandoning his responsibilities in the feckless fashion of his kind."

"Aw, gee," Chester said, sliding down in his chair. Grabbing up his pencil he drew a wavy line, expressing barely suppressed negation, across the virgin surface of his long yellow pad.

"Not you, lad," the Ambassador said gently. "You're not ready for such a weighty mission just yet. But control your eagerness a little longer, I'll be entrusting you with greater things in due course."

"Well, I should think-" Magnan started in a tone of asperity.

"You're right, Ben, you've earned it," Earlyworm rumbled. "Better get cracking. You wouldn't want to arrive at their field capital just in time to watch them lift

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off, which would not only blot your copybook, but could scar your retinae."

"Well, golly, I'll hurry as fast as I can. After all, with no advance notice-"

"That's one of your most admirable traits, Ben," the Chief of Mission said feelingly: "Your instant readiness to hurl your body into the breach."

"My body?" Magnan echoed. "You make it sound like I'm already dead."

"By no means, Ben. If you succeed in conning the five-eyed little sticky-fingers into taking back this benighted pesthole, you may well live on to enjoy a halcyon retirement."

"How about Relief coming along?" Magnan pro-posed bluntly.

"I see no reason not to allow the boy the opportunity to sharpen his verbal claws." Earlyworm conceded, emitting a comradely belch.

"And take those confounded vermin with you," His Excellency added, indicating the two gribble-worms still vigorously coupling on his large yellow pad. "I see what you mean about mating for life. But don't they do anything else?"

Magnan gingerly scooped them into the match box with a muttered "excuse me," and cast a significant glance at Relief.

"I recognize that as a 13-a Significant Glance, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "But I'm sorry to say I didn't catch the exact significance."

"Come along, I'll explain later-some subjects are best not bruited about in the presence of others of questionable moral reliability." tte looked at Hy Felix as he spoke.

"Hold it right there, Magnan," Felix spoke up spiritedly. "I may not be a graduate of the CDT Institute, but I know a 2-a (That Means You, Bub) when I see one, even when it's done with a six-point deviation from the textbook standard."

"You leap to conclusions, Hy," Magnan said grand-

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ly. "What you term 'deviations' were in fact personally evolved elaborations and refinements of an essentially crude ploy." He whirled and left the room. Relief followed.

"I was superb!" Magnan caroled ecstatically later that day, as a liveried servitor removed his plate and refilled his wine glass. "Old Five-eyes never knew what hit him. He was swept away by an avalanche of one-man diplomacy, and in a trice his initial truculence had dissolved into an almost sickening eagerness to comply with the least nuance of my wishes."

"Cool, Ben," Ex-emperor Earlyworm said. "But I hope that in communicating your least nuances, you didn't overlook your major instructions."

"Your former Majesty jests," Magnan muttered, staring into the depths of his glass as if for omens.

"By no means. If that document you were sticking Embassy seals on isn't a duly signed and witnessed Treaty of Eternal Peace and Friendship between Terra and New Groac, formerly called Froom 93, set up to run for at least five years with a renewal option, your cook is goosed."

"Nay, sire, the Groaci poseur's eye-stalks-all five of them-went into a veritable danse agitans of eagerness at the thought of being allowed to retain the dignities of the office of Planetary Director. Unlike yourself, sire, who so selflessly relinquished the Imperial Purple at the call of duty."

"Don't remind me," Earlyworm snapped. "I'm having dismaying visions of Imperial honors gone a-glimmering-all in the name of probity and interbeing good-fellowship. But will those dunderheads back in the Secretary's office realize the scope of my sacrifice?"

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"Don't brood, chief," Feliz said in an irritatingly cheerful tone. "You still got plenty broads and booze stashed on Blue Lagoon."

"Ah, yes, work will be my salvation," Earlyworm said with an Attempt at Heartiness (41-d) which netted him a spontaneous round of applause from his deeply moved staff, among whom a dry eye could scarcely have been discovered by a thirsty flea.

"It's a ghastly miscarriage of justice," Mag-nan said in a broken tone to Relief as the two waited outside the heavy pseudo-teak doors of the Board of Inquiry chamber. "That sneaky Flith-I could throttle' him! After he practically kissed my hands for handing Froom to him on a platter, to stand up in there and accuse me of being an agent provocateur. And all that talk about a declaration of war-as if / told the five-eyed little sticky-fingers to free the gribble-worm on their nasty little sandball of a world."

Muffled stirrings sounded from beyond the austere doors, which opened suddenly to emit Undersecretary for ET Affairs Frederick T. Earlyworm, mopping at his brow with a large floral-patterned tissue.

"Ridiculous, requiring me to waste my valuable time in testimony in this farcical affair," he rumbled as he came up, "on the slender grounds that I once visited New Groac briefly. Hoob melons, indeed! What do I know of such matters? The Undersecretary for Agricul-tural Affairs should be sweating in the witness box, not I!"

"Gee, sir," Magnan whimpered. "I sort of hoped maybe you'd put in a word for me, I mean, seeing as how all I did was carry out your direct orders-given in front of witnesses, too."

"Indeed, Magnan? You sang a different tune, as I

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recall, at the time you were clamoring for recognition of what you characterized as your initiative in the matter, even as you strove to de-emphasize my own masterful handling of affairs. Now, it appears, your chickens have come home to roost."

"That's hardly cricket, sir," Magnan whimpered. "Can't a dedicated public servant take a chance once in a while and actually do something?"

"Ah, there are grave risks inherent in the impulse (universal among the inexperienced) to stun HQ with a daring stroke-ah, very well, if all falls out as you hope-but if you commit extreme views to writing, hoping for advancement, and you guess wrong-then you reap the whirlwind! As for your sly innuendo, regarding, er, ah, 'witnesses' is, I believe, the term you employed, as if / were somehow under indictment. Witnesses, indeed. Our former colleagues of Froom 93-or New Groac, to employ the proper terminology, are now scattered far and wide, each engrossed in his own concerns, such as heavy reporting schedules, and plans for career advancement, doubtless to the exclu-sion of impulses to travel here to Aldo at personal expense for the purpose of imputing guilt for the present crisis to a senior member of the Personnel Actions Board, particularly now, just prior to review of the Fall Promotion Lists."

"To be sure, sir," Magnan muttered. "No such thoughts crossed my mind. But since Groac now charges Terra with deliberately upsetting Groac's ecol-ogy and economy at a stroke, and since I seem to have fallen heir to the entire onus of the matter, it had occurred to me you might just point out that I was a mere First Secretary to the Mission which you headed up, and you might feel impelled, if only in defense of ambassadorial prerogative, to point out that you have ultimate responsibility. You

wouldn't want it to appear your subordinates were running the show, I'm sure."

"Bah! You're raving, Magnan! You expect me to voluntarily lay my head on the chopping block?"

"But they love you here at Sector, sir," Magnan

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wailed. "You got bumped to secretarial rank for your handling of the Froom Affair, and / didn't get so much as an Outstanding ER!"

"Such are the rewards of great achievement, my boy," Earlyworm said grandly.

"But it isn't fair," Magnan whimpered "If things go right, you get the credit. A slight disaster, and / take the blame!"

"Ben, you amaze me. What incentive would drive the humbly-ranked on to greatness if you stripped rank of its privilege? I seem to recall you once voiced aspirations to high place. Would you then deny yourself the prerogatives of the very prize you seek?"

"Try me and see," Magnan muttered.

"Bah, the poor chap's mind has cracked under the strain!" Earlyworm turned away.

The doors opened again, and a Groaci, resplendently' arrayed in a gribble-hide hip cloak, strode forth and approached the Terrans.

"To greet you, mortals," he whispered. "And to hope that you plot no further mischief against the peace and dignity of the Groacian state, lest my wrath fall against your accursed world and all its works."

"Foey, what did we ever do to you, Flith?" Magnan inquired in tones of Injured Innocence (84-r). "Besides giving you Froom 93? And a million-G gribble-hide business."

"Don't overplay it, Ben," Earlyworm cautioned. "Hold your 84 down to about a 'c' level-like mine. We might perhaps even drop back to a 79 (Incipient Misunderstanding-Not Yet Beyond Retrieval)."

"Giving me 'Froom 93,' as you so erroneously term it? Along with a million-G harvest failure, back on the home world, by the way!" Flith retorted. "To inquire if this is an attempt at the sickly humor of the con-demned? You foisted on me, personally, in the guise of a harmless gift, a plague which has destroyed the entire hoob melon crop. The hoob melon, as even you are perhaps now aware, constituting the staple of the hearty Groacian diet."

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"How did I know you'd take the harmless pets I tendered you as an earnest gesture of esteem, and turn them loose-and how was I supposed to know

the gribble-worm would find your infernal hoob melons to its taste?"

"Any being with pretensions to gourmet status is certainly aware of the hoob melon as a taste thrill nonpareil. Each handsome gourd-shaped fruit contains approximately half a gallon of a finger-licking-good pulp-a substance closely resembling, I am informed, an ancient Terran delicacy known as cornmeal mush! But now, alas," Flith mourned, "when the happy Groacian field hands pluck a plump melon and top it with a clean stroke of the machete in their time-honored fashion, anticipating a feast ready to hand, they encounter instead a writhing mass of revolting gribble-grubs-over two million per melon, our statisticians estimate. Ugh! I simply can't stand creepy-crawlies! Present company excepted of course. Farewell, mortals, or as well as possible under the circumstances."

"Say, Flith-Mr. Ambassador, that is," Earlyworm spoke up. "What's this 'mortals' business? That's OK for them." He indicated Retief, Magnan, and a goggle-eyed file clerk who had sidled over to eavesdrop. "But / am now a full Undersecretary, you know!"

"Indeed? Well, to suppose these trifling distinctions loom large on the limited horizons of such lesser beings as yourselves-but to be late for services-to have to hurry along, now, lest I disappoint the faithful."

"What do you suppose that was all about?" Early-worm inquired and tossed his sodden tissue aside.

"Here comes Thiss, Flith's former Counsellor," Magnan pointed out. "Let's ask him."

"The four Terrans converged on the rather worried-looking Groaci in plain GI eyeshields and a dowdy hip cloak with several warped ribs.

"Thiss, we were just chatting with my old colleague, former Ambassador Flith," Earlyworm said offhandedly. "He seemed not quite himself. May I ask: Is he

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quite well-up here?" Earlyworm tapped himself just above the right ear.

"No, he's not-not himself, to mean," Thiss stammered. "As for your fears that he may be suffering from a head cold-to remind you he's above all that sort of thing now, of course, Mr. Secretary."

" 'Remind?' and 'of course'? These expressions are hardly apt, Thiss. One can hardly be 'reminded' of that which comes as a surprise to one. Have you chaps developed a cure for the common cold, then?"

"No, no, to point out that His Exaltation has never devoted His valuable time to trivial so-called scientific researches."

"No, I hear he's been making it big in the garment industry, Sector-wide, cutting into traditional Terry markets, by the way-

"Nonsense, His Exaltation wouldn't stoop to petty retail commerce. He's in the wholesale end-he's a licensed realtor and has been selling

one-square-yard tracts of His world for a low, low Cr 9.99-and making a pile!"

"Of what possible use is_a square yard of Groaci sand?" Magnan demanded.

"Many possible uses. But the wisest, of course, is hoob melon culture. One melon plus two million gribble-worms thrive nicely on a tract of that size."

"No wonder they're kicking up such a fuss about the crop failure," Magnan said.

"Wrong!" Earlyworm snapped. "The important cash crop is in fact the very gribble-worms the ingrates decry!"

"To have enjoyed our chat, Soft Ones," Thiss hissed, edging away. "To be in a great hurry. It's time for my devotions. I must burn a joss stick or two at the corner shrine ..." He scuttled away.

"We're still none the wiser as to Flith's curious demeanor," Magnan sniffed.

"Obviously the fellow's mishandling of his great opportunity to make points with his Department has unsettled such wits as he had," Earlyworm declared.

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"Oh-oh-here he comes back," Magnan piped. Flith, just entering the gloomy corridor through the double doors at the far end of the ^passage, paused, while a throng of Groaci in his van clustered about him, forming a complex silhouette milling excitedly against the transpex doors.

Flith thrust through the press and hurried forward, toward the Terrans.

"Oh, Mr. Secretary," he called in a weak shout almost drowned in the excited babble of his retinue. "To be pleased to find you still loitering here." He held out what at first glance appeared to be a bundle of varicolored cigars.

"Care to make a few points upstairs by offering a modest donation-a G per stick will do-in return for a handy supply of sacred incense-personally sanctified and bearing a money-back blessing?"

"I'm no idolator," Earlyworm snapped. "Hawk your pagan merchandise elsewhere."

"To overlook that, Fred, you know not what you say-or to whom."

"Oh, yeah, I do-I'm talking to you, Flith, and I said I don't want any big juju today."

Cries of outrage rose from the motley crowd of Groaci, who, the Terrans noted, represented an agglomeration of many ranks and professions, from a former Consul-General in VIP eye-shields, and a Peace Enforcer colonel in sequined greaves, to a lowly leaf-raker-caste cart driver in hand-whittled eye-shields and a tattered hip cloak of shoddy material.

"Here, Soft Ones, to not blaspheme our Deity to his face, it ain't done," the latter hissed.

"Why not let the heathen have a blast of the old lightning right where they stand, O Flith?" the colonel rasped coldly, fingering the butt of his crater gun.

"Restraint, my children; to remind you that enlight-enment has not yet been granted to the alien cheap-skates. How about you, Ben?" Flith continued, direct-ing his pitch now at Magnan. "You and Retief ought to

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be willing to kick through with a couple G's in a good cause. From our dealings in my earlier mortal incarna-tion, to seem to recall you had a touch of sportsman-ship. To want to give you a break, actually, and let you in on the ground floor as one of our select group of early disciples."

"What's it all about, Mr. Ambassador?" Magnan inquired of the alien, who was still proffering the joss sticks.

"To state matters simply, Ben, since I saw you last on New Groac, to have decided to continue to mingle with the faithful in mortal form, while reassuming my burdens deitywise."

"Huh?" Magnan said, fingering his lower lip. "You started some kind of cult or something?"

"To have been confirmed by the Elders of the Established Church of Groac as a member of the official pantheon-a role I had temporarily relin-quished during recent millennia due to a sense of the need to re-establish the common touch-thus my hobnobbing with you mere Terries. Here-buy a few-" He thrust the incense at Magnan. "If you hurry to the portable chapel my people have set up down on the corner, you can still get in on evening devotions and start to reap the rewards of faith at once."

"Flith-you jest!" Magnan gasped. "This is blasphe-my. I'm a good Episcopalian. I don't appreciate the joke."

"The Groacian Communion is one of the biggest fund raisers in the whole High Church movement, Ben. And out on Groac, we're not one-god pikers. We've got gods for all occasions. I happen to be the God of the Harvest-that's why the hoob melon business has got me by the sneakers. A certain soreheaded element among my devotees is blaming me for the fiasco!"

"How did you talk the Elders into setting you up in the God line, Flith?" Earlyworm asked. "I've met some of your Groaci bishops-strict constructionists-- not a body to be swayed by trivial considerations."

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"To have started by cutting them in for a slice of the gribble-hide action," Flith explained.

"Sound," Earlyworm conceded.

"To have also pointed out then that as king of New Groac I ruled by divine right and appointment-a point they had no choice but to concede: divine right being a basic dogma of the church. And since I had appointed myself king, viola! The appointment constituted prima facie evidence of my godhead! Impeccable logic, eh, Fred?" Flith passed on, tucking away the unsold devotional items under his gaudy hip cloak.

"By gad, gentlemen," Earlyworm burst out, "we have to admit the beggar thinks big! That's what I call scope, career-visionwise!"

"Flith-a god-with those poor deluded nitwits worshipping him?" Magnan mused aloud.

"Careful, Ben," Earlyworm cautioned, slipping what appeared remarkably like a joss stick into his pocket. "No point in asking for a jolt of divine wrath-who are we to question the findings of duly appointed ecclesiastics?"

"What, sir-you really accept this impostor as a deity?" Magnan yelled, recoiling.

"No harm in hedging your bets," Earlyworm pointed out. "A modest outlay-just in case-will surely not raise any eyebrows in conventional ecumenical circles-if any bigmouth happens to blab, that is."

"Flith was back, looking harassed. "To have learned this titular deity business to not be all roses, mortals! To have been set upon by a delegation of apostates, crying me culpable for their petty losses in the melon market. But they're not dealing with one of your ivory-tower, cooing-dove, sweetness-and-light-type gods, that had the whole thing handed to him on a platter-just woke up one morning to find himself deified, you know- nope, boys. I came up the hard way, in the garment game! I know the angles of infighting and street-fighting, bare knuckles and knees! To have laid out two or three of the helots with well-placed right hooks-to

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be saving the old thunderbolt capacity for a real emergency."

"I'll wager they were a surprised group of supplicants for divine intervention," Magnan commented. "Say, you've got a nice mouse coming along there under your third eye from the left."

"Yep, to have let a sneaky left slip past our guard," Flith acknowledged.

"Ah, well, on to matters of loftier import," Flith said lightly, "Such as the raising of a network of suitable temples, cathedrals, et cetera, across the Sector, with full drive-in banking facilities for instant conversion."

"Conversions in a bank?" Magnan faltered.

*'Of currencies," Flith explained. "No reason to cast a would-be recruit into outer darkness just because he didn't have any hard currency or Groexco travelers checks on him, eh? After all, we're an enlightened deity. Speaking of suitable sites for churches-I stum-bled on a potentially useful premises

out at a place called Blue Lagoon. A rather cozy villa, in a modest way, inhabited by none but a handful of Terry waifs and strays. I saw to the transport of these unfortunates to more congenial surroundings-as a matter of fact, to have signed a contract with a labor recruiter from Mudball, in need of crop cultivators."

"Alas," Earlyworm mourned. "My innocent charges sold down the river into sordid lives of bondage as hoers! Flith! How could you?"

"Easy, Fred-for a fistful of moola-on the line."

"Don't grieve, Mr. Secretary," Magnan soothed. "You can always assemble a new stable of appropriate-ly endowed orphans."

"To be sure, Ben. But my standards are high-you don't run into that class of broad working at the A & W."

"Luckily, I discovered a supply of devotional sup-plies ready to hand in the vaults beneath the villa." Flith continued, ignoring the byplay. "Bacchus wines, both red and black, plus a dozen or so of aged brandy,

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to help inspire my priests, who work long hours for low salaries, plus a percentage."

"A percentage?" Magnan queried.

"Of the blame-after all, the mob has to have someone to vent its temper on."

The boardroom doors opened and a bailiff stepped out, shot a curious look at Magnan and said in a monotone, "Well, gents, time to get back inside for the rest of the fun. I guess I was supposed to say 'Oyez, oyez,' but that sounds too silly, so I skipped it."

"Quite all right, Hector," Earlyworm said kindly. "How would you assess the mood of the tribunal?"

"With a high-temperature thermometer. Some of the fellows have started to kick around a new angle- that we should have held onto Froom 93 in the first place."

"False doctrine, I assure you, Hector. No less a personage than myself assessed the world as a liability to the Terran image."

"Gosh, thanks for taking the blame, Mr. Secretary," Magnan yelped. "It might get pretty rough if that gang of boneheads decided to blame me for that foul-up, too!"

"Watch your choice of terms, Ben. I can hardly stand idly by while you characterize a panel of senior Corps diplomats as boneheads."

"Cretins, then," Magnan suggested. "Rogues, numbskulls."

"Hardly a conciliatory attitude on your part, Ben. You'd best wait here until

you've recovered your cool-I'll slip inside and put in a plea for clemency and see which way the wind is blowing." Earlyworm favored his underling with a conspiratorial wink.

"Gee, thanks, Fred-I mean, Your Majesty."

"A god, eh. . . .?" Earlyworm murmured. "Scope,

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yes, that's the word. And of course a certain balance apotheosiswise is manifestly in order. No doubt a cry will soon arise spontaneously for equitable Terran representation in the pantheon." The doors closed behind the gently smiling volunteer.

"Staked out in the sulphur pits of Yush on Groac!" Magnan cried half an hour later, reeling back from the rank of stern-faced judges who gazed down at him with expressions of mild curiosity. "You call that clemency? What would you hand down as a stiff sentence?"

"Easy, Mr. Magnan," Retief cautioned. "Don't tempt them."

"What matter the details, Retief?" Magnan groaned, holding his hands over his narrow face like the see-no-evil monkey. "I'm a ruined man. Even if I survive this ghastly ordeal, its fumes will dog my personnel file relentlessly-nevermore, do you hear, will I see my dreams of an Embassy of my own realized."

"Now, be calm, Ben," Earlyworm put in blandly. "It could have been the ice mines-or even worse, it could have been six months straightening out the voucher files at Sector!" -

"Such thoughts are scant consolation, sir, though I'm keenly sensible of your humanitarian motive in offering me a glimpse of other purgatories than that to which I'm to be consigned."

"To compose yourself, Ben," the deity Flith mur-mured. "To assure you that being as you will under my personal protection, you'll enjoy your sojourn on Groacian shores. True, to concede the sulphur pits at Yush are not the most salubrious portion of that favored world's surface-still, let your faith not falter and I, or we, will see you safely through your ordeal. To

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summon your pluck, my boy, and hang in there, sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust. You know."

"Sure, Flith, I know all that jazz-Aunt Ninny used to din it into my ears for hours on end. True, she had some other object in mind for all this unfaltering trust-she never pictured me worshipping a Groaci bureaucrat."

"Still, your Aunt Ninny was doubtless a most sensitive Terry, of high spiritual development. I'm sure she'd have quickly grasped the inevitability-the essen-tial rightness-of your embracing your new faith. After all, since the Groaci are the highest form of mortal creature, and a bureaucrat is the pinnacle of status, wordly-rolewise, is it not manifest that

in time a Groacian Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary would slip over the line into godhead, thrust by the irresistible pressure of sheer superiority and innate excellence?"

"Helped along with a healthy percentage of the gribble-hide gross," Magnan sniffed.

"Of course, to recognize the realities," Flith whispered. "To not make bishop in the Groacian Established Church without enough moxie to know how to keep the funds rolling in, to the greater glory of the gods, of course."

"The gods?" Magnan queried. "I heard they used the windfall to stock the monastery system with booze and geisha girls; and provide customized turbocads with genuine tump-hide interiors to every Groaci cleric above the rank of alter boy."

"Yes, to concede alter boys were required to tighten their collars and make do with Kawasaki 250s. And what could be more glorious for an enlightened deity like me than to see my dedicated priests welcomed to their monkish cells-"

"Which are equipped with three-inch-thick carpets and wall-to-wall music, I hear," Magnan put in tartly.

"-cells, I say," Flith continued, "by a bevy of

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dutiful hand- and tentacle-maidens bearing grails of sustaining beverage, to escort the saintly mortal to his rude and spartan couch, there to meditate on the spiritual values that have made Groac great?"

"Beats me," Magnan muttered. "I got lost back somewhere around the tentacle-maidens."

"So-shall we away?" Flith suggested. "To point out that a fast Groacian dispatch boat awaits at the port to whisk us off, me to my godly honors, you to durance vile."

"By all means, Flith!" Earlyworm boomed. "Take the rascal away--the sight of him and his hangdog look makes me nervous. A good diplomat should know how to take a licking and announce it as a great victory. Frankly, Ben, I'm a trifle surprised you haven't put a better face on the matter. If those media jackals skulking in the corridor yonder get a look at thfc expression on your face, no doubt they'll place the most prejudicial possible interpretation on the matter."

"'Underling Railroaded in Move to Cover Up Bungling in High Places,' eh," Magnan said dreamily. "I wouldn't dream of letting slip-that is of allowing any outsider to gain the groundless impression that I was a sorehead, imputing base motives to my superiors."

"Say, Magnan, can I use that?" a slender man in a soiled travel suit with an IP shoulder patch said, jotting a note on a small clipboard. "I need some kind of handle to hang this thing on. That might be just the angle to get

me that raise I've been after."

"Hmm, my boy, have you ever considered making application to the Corps?" Earlyworm inquired of the reporter. "I enjoy a certain rapport with the Chairman of the Board of Examiners. With your realistic attitude toward the great trust shared by newsmen and diplo-mats alike, I foresee a brisk future for you in the CDT, were you to opt for an appointment."

"But first I guess I got to kill the story, eh?" the IP man said, tucking away his pad.

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"Well, lad, we wouldn't want to confuse a clear-cut issue with irresponsible quotes, out of context. And of course poor Magnan's not himself. So best we limit our reportage to the bare facts of the matter-noting how nobly Terra and the CDT have made a clean breast of the matter, thereby accruing big mana galactic-opinion-wise. We goofed-very well. Magnan cheerfully pays the price, eh, Ben?"

"You bet, sir," Magnan said in a shaky treble through a smile as broad and glassy as the display window of an Armytown jewelry store. "Gee, I'm just glad the monkey's on my back."

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, mister?" the pilot of the small shuttle craft inquired of Retief, clad in jump suit and helmet, weighted with chute and oxygen equipment. "I don't like the looks o' that down there." The pilot gazed out through the transparent hatch at the broad expanse of pale and barren ground below, gullied and pitted, across which ghostly ribbons of blue flame played.

"I'm aftaid so, Jack," Retief said. "Just don't miss the pickup in twelve hours. I have a feeling there isn't going to be any time for missed connections."

"Oh, I'll be there, Retief. I hope you don't stand me up, is all. After all, that's Groac down there-and I'm in line for summary execution if those five-eyed devils catch me penetrating their air space with no permit."

Retief glanced at the astrocompass. "This is it, Jack, ta-ta."

Jack nodded and touched a lever. A section of the hatch popped up, screaming in the airstream as air buffeted the craft, hurtling at high velocity in the lower stratosphere of the planet. "Happy landings."

"Thanks," Retief said and dived over the side. The

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airstream caught him and whirled him end over end, before he assumed a free-fall spread position, back arched and arms and legs extended. After three minutes by the illuminated dial of his wrist watch, he deployed his braking chute, which opened with a sharp report and a severe jolt, slowing his rate of descent by half before being automatically jettisoned. Retief fell another thousand feet, then opened his main descent chute. Almost silently, with only a soft hiss of air through the polyon canopy and the

creak of the shrouds, he descended smoothly toward the uneven terrain below. After checking his positionometer, he used the steering vanes to adjust his course a trifle to the left and ahead, toward a point where a spot of deep black, ringed with a low crater wall, marred the yellow-white gleam of the broken ground, which seemed to rush up at him now. He saw a large yellow-painted bulldozer at work below, one of a number toiling over the ringwall like a beetle investi-gating an anthill. He caught a glimpse of a startled Groaci face staring up at him from the perch under the large umbrella which cast a black moonshadow across the hood of the machine. Retief's parachute carried him across the crest of the circular ridge, and out over the tumbled and rubbish-strewn level strip surrounding the central pit, deep within which bright blue and yellow fires glowed, tongues of pale blue flame licking up the side intermittently, to flare high in the dark sky. One such flare brushed Retief with a ghostly caress as he passed over the pit. Then he spilled the chute and landed standing up at the far edge of the fifty-foot hole in the ground. He adjusted his visor for optimum visibility, glanced around and saw a small platform which had been erected at the side of the pit a dozen feet distant from where he stood. On it, a man lay on his back, arms and legs extended, secured, Retief noted, by stout shackles. As he advanced, the soot-stained prisoner uttered a feeble cry: "Murderers! O mighty Flith, I call on you in this, my

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hour of affliction, to get me out of this one, and I'll never ask for anything again!"

"To make no rash promises regarding the future, Ben," a breathy voice sounded near at hand.

"Relax, Mr. Magnan, it's just me," Retief said. "I thought you might be wanting a short snort about now." He extracted a flask from his belt and handed it over. Magnan flopped helplessly.

"Ye gods, it actually worked! Maybe there's some-thing in it-" Magnan broke off, then resumed: "Retief, unlock these infernal cuffs, they've abraded my wrists and ankles most painfully."

"Stop struggling, Ben," the soft Groaci voice spoke again, "and you came pretty close to outright blasphe-my that time. What do you mean 'maybe'?"

Retief stopped to cut the gyves from Magnan with four quick passes with a bolt cutter laser. Magnan grabbed the flask and drank deep.

"Thank you, Flith!" he cried, choking a bit on the last swallow.

"How does Flith enter the picture?" Retief asked.

"Simple, two-way closed circuit trideo hookup for dependable round-the-clock prayer and thanksgiving service in full glorious color-what other faith can offer such up-to-the-minute service?" Magnan's breath wheezed, Retief noted. He detached a spare breathing mask from his belt and handed it over.

"Thanks, Flith-and you, too, Retief," Magnan gasped. "As the agent of

divine providence-those sulphur fumes were beginning to get to me."

There was a sudden rumble and clank, and with a rushing sound, an avalanche of football-sized objects came bounding down the slope across the pit and cascaded down into the smoking interior from which rose an odor reminiscent of roasted peanuts.

"What's all this?" Retief asked.

"The hoob melon crop-gribble-grub infested, you know; they're getting rid of the spoiled fruit by dumping it into the sacred fires."

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"What's sacred about burnt sulphur?" Retief asked.

"Ask the bishops. I just work here," Magnan snapped.

"Work? You seemed to be taking it pretty easy when I arrived."

"But you did arrive! That's just the point. My job is to nonstop pray to the gracious Flith to accept this offering of a million-G melon crop as evidence of the reverence and piety of us, his humble worshippers. I was just putting in a plug for a little personal relief, and there you were! Gads-and I was on the verge of becoming a backslider. I thought Flith had abandoned me to my fate."

"Don't backslide now: you'll go over the edge and end up among the sacrificial melons," Retief cautioned. "Do the Elders really think Flith is dumb enough to consider a zillion tons of garbage as a suitable offer-ing?"

"Garbage? Retief, you jest! Those melons were all grade A fancy number one-right up until the gribble-worms hit them. And anyway, each one is full of grubs, each of which, on maturity, would yield three square inches of prime hide. But, sad to say, they'll never grow up now. As a charter member of SPAVIN I feel, or think I ought to feel, a sharp sense of outrage at that. But what the heck, it's all in a noble cause: to the greater glory of Flith."

"No more gribble-hide trade, then?" Retief asked. "The Groaci are wiping them out?"

"By no means. For every grub dumped in the flaming sulphur pits, there are a million more, happily destroying what's left of the melons. We're all relying on Flith to pull a nifty out of his hat, to save the melons, and the hide trade, too"

"He'd better get busy-and so had we. Let's go, Mr. Magnan. Our pickup will be waiting at the north edge of the sulphur fields, in two and a half hours."

"What? Abandon my post?" Magnan cried, recoil-ing. "What will happen to my big ER in the sky then?"

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"Rather depressing, to contemplate career consid-erations pursuing us beyond the grave," Retief said.

"It's not just that," Magnan said sulkily. "Think how lonely poor Flith would get if his regular parishioners stopped reporting in."

"Last I heard, he'd collected a bevy of Groacian orphans around him over at Blue Lagoon, carrying on in the same spirit of charity established by Secretary Earlyworm," Retief pointed out.

"Indeed, mine is a beneficent deity," Magnan agreed. "But now, if you'll excuse me, Retief, I must return to my devotions."

"You're sure you wouldn't rather be whisked back to Sector for a bath and some balm for your wrists and ankles, and a good dinner and a clean bed?"

"Pah, Retief, such material considerations have dwindled to insignificance in light of the vast new spiritual insights granted me in recent days."

Retief snorted the odors of sulphur fumes, charred hoob melon, and roasted gribble-grub from his nostrils. "Kind of a penetrating stench," he observed. "Why not try the breathing mask?"

"Actually, I've rather come to like it," Magnan objected. "As an effluvium emanating from the sacrificial material duly blessed by the GEC, it of course enjoys special status, accumulation-of-meritwise."

Above, the bulldozers snorting at the brink of the rise thrust forward new cascades of condemned mel-ons, which rolled and bounded downslope, some bursting to distribute handfuls of small, blind, limbless, dead-white grubs, which almost at once assumed an ochreous tinge as the sulphur flames licked across them.

"Delicious," Magnan declared, drawing a deep lungful through his nostrils. "You may keep your tenderloins and breasts of peacock!" he cried. "I'll take some more of these marvelously tasty and deliciously crunchy toasted nid-nuts!" He picked up a well-done grub and popped it in his mouth, chewed, smiled

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blissfully, and swallowed. "Try a few, Relief, you'll soon be addicted."

Retief declined. "I think I'll just hang grimly on and make do with a three-inch tenderloin, rare, and a bottle of 'sixty-nine Beaujolais," he said. Magnan scooped up more toasted grubs and gobbled them hungrily. "As you will, Retief, but don't neglect to gather a few sample bushels of these delicacies to bring along." At that moment, starting to rise, he slipped, dropped over the edge of his platform, and hung by one clutching hand, suspended about the fiery abyss.

Retief caught Magnan's wrist and hauled him to his feet. "We'll have to figure out a method of shelling them," he said and spat a gribble-grub husk over the side. "Strangely enough, you're right: they taste like almonds and pecans mixed."

"Thanks to you, Flith, for not allowing me to perish in the fires," Magnan cried fervently.

"That wasn't Flith that pulled you up, Mr. Magnan, it was me," Retief pointed out.

"Flith chose to employ you as his agent," Magnan said, "Mysterious are the ways of Flith."

Back at the designated rendezvous spot, twelve hours later, after a fatiguing trek across the smouldering sulphur fields, Magnan and Retief watched a small Corps heli descend from the larger vessel waiting overhead. As soon as it had touched down and the hatch popped open Magnan darted forward, clutching a beret stuffed with well-done grubs he had gathered along the way.

"Why, hi there, Jack!" he greeted the pilot, "Have a tasty snack-something special, I assure you!" He proffered half a dozen peanut-sized smoked gribble-grubs on his open palm. "Just spit out the skins," he said.

"Hmm," Jack said dubiously, accepting the offering. He munched one, then another and another at an increasingly rapid rate, as a smile spread over his wide, homely face.

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"Gripes, them are A-OK, Mr. Magnan! Where'd you get real old-time corn parchies way out here? You look in pretty good shape, except for that asthma," he continued. "Tell you the truth, I din't figure you'd make it. Most guys get staked out in the sulphur pits, it's good-bye. No water, no food-

"Food in abundance, Jack-if you like corn parchies, that is."

Retief came up, bearing a large bag improvised from the opera cape Magnan had been wearing at the time of his dedication to the god Flith. He hoisted it inside the copter, assisted Magnan up, and followed him.

"Say, got any more o' them dandy crunchies?" Jack inquired, looking hopefully over his shoulder.

"About a million G's worth, I'd estimate," Retief said. "Mr. Magnan, I have a feeling Filth may yet turn a profit on the hoob melon crop, thereby recouping his position with his cultists."

"Cult, shmolt!" Magnan snapped. "Any spiritually oriented organization with an annual million G's in negotiable holdings is no mere cult!"

"Congratulations, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, "I've just had a prophetic flash. I seem to see you playing your cards just right and parlaying your findings into a three-grade rank jump, while at the same time making points on your celestial ER."

"Eh, curious, I didn't know you had the second sight, Retief."

"I don't, it was the third grub that Jack snuck from my baggage that convinced me."

"Don't worry, I'll cut you in for a slice of the action, Retief," Magnan said graciously. "After all, Flith did employ you as the agent of my

deliverance-so in a sense, I suppose it could be argued that you stand in well with Him, in spite of a certain attitude of skepticism I fancy I've noted on your part from time to time.

"From now on, count me among the believers," Retief said, selecting a particularly succulent toasted gribble-grub. "Any outfit that can turn a million-G

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crop failure into a million-G snack production has got to have something going for it."

"Ah, how gratifying, Retief," Magnan sighed. "I do believe at last you're developing the faculty for noting which side of your bread-substitute has the icky-wax on it-a skill indispensable to true high-level diplomacy!"