

## Introduction to "When in the Course"

By John F. Carr

*Of all the stories in this collection, "When in the Course" is the only one that has never before been published! But even more important than that; it occupies a strange half state between Piper's two major series, the TerroHuman Future History and his Paratime time travel series. But I'll get back to that in a moment.*

*I wasn't even aware of "When in the Course's" existence until one day about two years ago, when Jerry excitedly called me into his office. Earlier that morning we had received a package with the morning mail from Ace Books; nothing unusual there. "John, look at this!" I hurried in. "Here are two unpublished Piper manuscripts that Jim Baen found among Beam's papers. Would you take a look at them for me?"*

*Would I? Right then it would have taken a spaceship full of Slan to stop me. Midway through the third page I realized that I had "read this story before." Yes, it was in Analog: "Gunpowder God." But not quite; where was Lord Kalvan? The story, a chartered company come to claim a new world, was set in Beam's TerroHuman Future History: it took place on legendary Freya, a world mentioned throughout the early TFH stories—as far back as ULLER UPRISING—as a place where the women were even more beautiful than those of earth. Obviously, it had to be an old story, or one that Beam had carried in his head for years. But there is no denying it; except for the last half it is the story of Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen—except he's not in it and these Federation people are!*

*After a good deal of thought, it is my contention that Piper wrote "When in the Course," submitted it to John W. Campbell—who probably had fits over the central idea of parallel evolution, as any good biologist would (which means Beam probably had another ace up his sleeve as he did nothing by accident; but what?)—and therefore Campbell suggested some changes, as he was wont to do. "Beam, the story's good; why don't you set it in that Paratime series we used to run awhile back?" I have talked with both Perry Chapdelaine and George Hay, editors of the forthcoming John W. Campbell letters collection, and—when things get cleared up—they have promised me copies of the Piper/Campbell correspondence for a book on Piper I intend to do called The Piper Papers. But until then, if I can find the correspondence to explain what happened, this will have to remain H. Beam Piper's most unusual story.*

### H. Beam Piper When in the Course—

She closed her mind to the voices around her and stared at the map spread on the table between the two great candlesticks, trying to imagine herself high above everything, looking down like a bird. Here was Tarr-Hostigos, only a little mark of gold on the parchment, but she could see it all in imagination—the outer walls around the great enclosure with the sheds and stables against them; the citadel, and the inner bailey; the keep, and the watchtower, jutting up from the point of the ridge. And here, below, was the Darro, and she could see it glinting in the sunlight as it rushed south to join the Athan, and here was the town of Hostigos, and the bridge and the town-hall and the temple of Dralm, and, beyond, the farmlands and the squares of fields and the dark woods and the little villages. Oh, it must be wonderful to be a bird and fly above everything, and look down; ever since she had been a baby, she had dreamed. . .

A voice, harsher than the others, brought her back to the present she had been trying to flee.

"King Kaiphranos won't intervene? What's a king for, but to keep the peace? Great Dralm, is all Hos-Harphax afraid of Gormoth of Nostor?"

She looked from one to another of them, almost as though she were a stranger who had wandered unknowing into this windowless candlelit room. Phosg, the Speaker for the Peasants, at the foot of the table, uncomfortable in his feast-day clothes and ill at ease seated among his betters. The other

Speakers, for the artisans and the townfolk and the merchants. The landholders, and the lesser family-members. Old Chartiphon, the captain-in-chief, with his heavy frowning face and his golden beard splotched with gray like the gray lead-splotches on his gilded breastplate. Xentos, even older, with the cowl of his blue robe pushed back from his snowy head and trouble in his gentle blue eyes. And her father, Prince Ptosphes of Hostigos, with his pointed mustache and his small pointed beard and his mouth thin and grim between. How long it seemed since she had seen that mouth smiling!

Xentos was passing his hand across his face in the negative gesture.

"The King said that a prince must guard his own prince-dom," he replied. "He told me that it was Prince Ptosphes' duty to keep raiders out of his lands. And then he laughed and turned from me, and that was all."

"Did you tell him it wasn't just raiders from the Strip?" the voice that had spoken earlier demanded. "We don't care for them; I've killed a dozen with this hand!" The speaker banged it, large and hairy, on the table. "It's war! Gormoth of Nostor means to take all Hostigos, the way his grandfather took the Strip, after the traitor we don't name sold him Tarr-Dombra."

That was the part of the map her eyes had avoided—the two little rivers to the north, flowing together from east and west to form the Darro. Once the land beyond, to the crest of the mountain, had all been Hostigos, until a brother of her great-grandfather had sold the castle that guarded Dombra Pass to the prince who had then ruled Nostor, on the other side. Now the Nostori called the country between the mountain and the rivers New Nostor, and the Hostigi called it the Strip.

"Gormoth's hiring mercenaries." That was a cousin on her mother's side. "He has near ten thousand of them, beside his own soldiers, and we have a scant two thousand, counting peasants with axes and scythes."

"We have five hundred mercenaries of our own," somebody mentioned.

Chartiphon snorted in contempt. "Bandits from Sastragath; all we can trust them to do is go over to Gormoth the first chance they get. No free-captain in his right wits would take service with us, the case we're in."

"I wouldn't, if I were a free-captain," her father said wryly. "Well, you know how things are. Now, what is in your minds that we should do?" He turned to the man at the foot of the table. "Phosg, you speak first."

That was the custom, for the least to speak first. The peasant representative cleared his throat.

"Prince, my cottage is as dear to me as this great castle is to you. I will fight for mine as you would for yours."

There was a quick mutter of approval—"Well said. An example to the rest of us!"—and the others spoke. The landholders and the lesser family-members agreed. Chartiphon said only: "Fight. What else?"

"Submission to evil men is the greatest of all sins," Xentos told them. "I am a priest of Dralm, and Dralm is a god of peace, but I say, fight with Dralm's blessing."

"Rylla?" her father said.

She started slightly when she heard her name in that cold, distant tone.

"Better die in armor than live in chains," she said. "When the time comes, I will wear armor, too."

Her father nodded. "Then we are all agreed. Gormoth of Nostor may take Hostigos, but we will not live to see it, and it will be long remembered what price we made him pay for our lives." He rose. "I thank you all. At an hour past sunset, we will dine together; the servants will attend you in the meantime. Now, if you please, leave me with my daughter. Xentos, do you and Chartiphon stay."

When they had gone, he drew his poignard and struck the gong with the flat, bidding a servant bring wine.

"Won't Sarrask of Sask help us?" she asked, when they had sat down again. "If I were Sarrask, I'd rather have you as a neighbor than Gormoth of Nostor."

"Sarrask of Sask's a fool," Chartiphon declared. "He's gathering forces to join Gormoth against us. Well, when we are dead and Hostigos is Gormoth's, Sarrask's turn will come next."

"No, Sarrask is acting with wisdom," Xentos differed. "He's not joining Gormoth; he hopes to gain enough ground north of the Athan to be able to fight Gormoth off his own land. And he dare not aid us. We are under the ban of Styphon's House. Even King Kaiphranos dare not help those whom the priests of Styphon would destroy."

Chartiphon fingered the hand-guard of his long sword, on the table in front of him. Then he raised his head.

“The priests of Styphon,” he said, dragging the words out as though by main strength, “want the land in the Yellowstone Valley. They want to build a temple in Hostigos, and they want you to give them land and workers for a temple farm. I know, that would be bad, but... ”

But not as bad as what Gormoth and his ten thousand mercenaries would bring when they came over Dombra Pass.

“Too late,” Xentos said. “Styphon’s House has already made a compact with Gormoth. They will help Gormoth conquer Hostigos; Gormoth will give them the Yellow-stone Valley, and land for their farm, and the peasants he drives off their own farms will work for the priests. And all the world will see the fate of those who refuse Styphon’s House anything.” A look of pain came into his eyes. “It was on my advice, Prince, that you refused when they asked it of you.”

Her father put a hand on the old priest-counselor’s shoulder. “Blame yourself for nothing, Xentos; I’d have refused even against your advice. I swore long ago that Styphon’s House would never come into Hostigos. They build a temple. Then they demand land for a temple farm, and when they have it, they make thorn-hedges around it, and the workers on the farm never leave it and are never seen again. And they tax the ruler, and force him to tax the people until there is nothing left.”

“Yes, you’d hardly believe it,” Chartiphon said, “but they even make the peasants haul their manure to the temple farm, till they have none left for their own fields. There’s nothing too petty for them to filch, once they get into you.”

“I wonder why they want the Yellowstone,” she said. “Is there something valuable there that we don’t know about?”

“Something in the ground, that makes the water taste and smell badly,” her father said. “They’d have mines there, and our own people would be the slaves that worked them. No, even if I’d known then that it would mean war with Gormoth, I’d have refused. Better be shot with a musket than stung to death by gnats.”

Roger Barron watched the coffee-concentrate tablet dissolve, and wished somebody would start a fight. It might help morale, which needed it. Adriaan de Ruyter and Reginald Fitzurse and Lourenço Narvaes had re-turned and the two hundred foot hyper yacht was berthed again inside the thousand foot sphere of the *Stellex*. Now they were all together in the ship’s lounge, ten men and five women, and it was a worse gloom-session than six months ago, and with less reason. Adriaan was trying to point that out.

“Of course; if it had been uninhabited, we’d be able to get clear title of ownership for the whole planet. But look at the Thor Company, and the Loki Company, and the Yggdrasil Company. They were all chartered for inhabited planets, and they’re all making money.”

“But the people here are civilized!” That was Charley Clifford, the doctor, who doubled as carniculturist. He’d made that point a couple of times before. “Good Lord, you all saw those cities.”

“On only one continent,” Karl Zahanov, the space-cap-tain, said. He had a square-cut gray beard which gave him a professorial appearance to match his didactic manner. “There is no evidence of civilization on either of the other two, and one of them’s even bigger than the Eurasian landmass on Terra.”

“We didn’t see any evidence of inhabitants on the other two continents,” Reginald Fitzurse, on the couch beside him, said. He was a retired Terran Federation army officer; when he made positive statements he was certain of their correctness. “Any people whose works can’t be seen at five hundred miles with a three hundred power telescope aren’t civilized enough to mention. And I don’t think much of this civilization, as such, either. It’s confined to one river valley about the same area as the Mississippi-Missouri system in North Terra. There is nothing outside that except a small and apparently unrelated patch at the northern corner of the continent. A really high civilization spreads itself out more than that. Nancy, you saw all the photos; what do you think?”

Nancy Patterson was sitting at the table, beside Karl Zahanov. She had dark hair and eyes, and a pleasant if slightly remote face. She had been a secretary in the social science division of the University of Montevideo.

“Well, it’s premechanical,” she said. “Of course, that might be anything up to the level of say Sixteenth Century Europe. Fifth Century Pre-Atomic,” she added, for which he was glad. They used Atomic Era dating exclusively on Venus, and he always had to count on his fingers to trans-pose to Christian Era, and he usually remembered too late that there was no C. E. Year Zero. “The cities are dark when they pass into the night-shadow, except for a few gleams of what might be firelight. They are all sharply de-fined, and look as though they might be walled.”

“They are; at least some of them,” Fitzurse interrupted.

“That would indicate warfare as a serious possibility, which would mean competing national sovereignties. All the cities are surrounded by belts of farmland; each one grows its own food. That would indicate lack of large-scale powered transportation. And, of course, we detected no evidence of nuclear or electric energy, no radio-waves of any sort, and no sign of aircraft.”

“The other two continents may be completely uninhabited,” Luther Smith, the chief engineer said. He had red-dish hair and a thin, intense face. “Can’t we land on one of them and claim it, and let this civilized continent go?”

That would be Luther; he was worried about the possibility of conflict. Luther, he recalled, had protested vehemently about the quantity of arms and ammunition that had been taken aboard when they had been fitting out, four years ago. Luther was a pacifist.

“No.” Adriaan de Ruyter was positive. “With our resources, or lack thereof, we can’t float a company on Terra without an exclusive-rights charter to operate on this planet, and we can’t get that for one continent. What we will have to have is some kind of a treaty with some more or less sovereign power, guaranteeing us rights of entry and trade. Once we have that, we can get a charter. But on an inhabited planet, we must contact the inhabitants and establish friendly trade relations with at least some of them.”

“Well, if that’s what we have to do, let’s get at it,” he said. “We came out to find a Terra-type planet. We spent four years and visited six systems; now we’ve found one. We won’t get another chance. Do I hear that statement disputed?”

He didn’t. Luther Smith looked at Margaret Hale, the hyperdrive engineer; she’d told him just how many more jumps her Dillinghams were good for. Charley Clifford and Sylvia Davock were silent; both of them knew that the law of diminishing returns was rapidly overtaking both the carnivulture vats and the hydroponic gardens, and Sylvia knew how much oxygen and water was escaping irrecoverably from the recycling systems. And they all knew how long the *Stellex* herself would last. The only reason they had been able to buy her had been because her former owners could no longer get her insured.

Julio Almagro set down his drink—hydroponic potato schnapps and soda.

“Well,” he said, in a weary voice, “we can always throw it in and go back to Terra.”

He had a plump face and a black mustache; he looked soft, but under the fleshy upholstery he was hard as collapsium. He had more money in the *Stellex* than any three of the others, except Adriaan de Ruyter—and if he went back, his creditors would eat him alive.

“Most of us—I’m not speaking for myself or Roger—could stay out of jail. Some of us could even get jobs. I doubt if any of us would actually starve to death. But every cent any of us has is in this ship. If we want it back, here’s where we’ll have to get it.”

Sylvia Davock could get a job. So could Luther and Lourenço. Maybe Karl Zahanov could get command of a ship, again, though he was pretty old for that. Reginald Fitzurse would have his army pension. Nancy could get her old job back—but she had put every cent she had inherited from her mother into Stellar Explorations to escape that job.

And if he went back, there was a warrant waiting for him from the Federation Member Republic of Venus. That was standard procedure. If you got voted out of office, they indicted you for corrupt practices. There were no other kind in Venusian politics.

“All right; for the record do I hear a motion that we land on this planet?” he asked.

Almagro moved; Dave MacDonald, the scout, hunter and naturalist, seconded. Luther Smith tried to shove in an amendment forbidding hostilities against the people of the planet. That brought Fitzurse to his feet, his mouth tight under his gray mustache.

“No, You’ve all made me responsible for landing operations; I’m not taking down a landing party to

have them massacred because my hands are tied by instructions not to use firearms. I've seen that happen before. Let's vote on the motion as presented and seconded."

It passed. Zahanov wanted to know what Fitzurse wanted done first.

"We know that this is, roughly, a Terra-type planet," Fitzurse said. "We do not know, however, that it will support Terran life. Yggdrasil is inhabited, and the Terran colonists there still have to eat hydroponic vegetables and carniculture meat. For all we know, the animal life here may be silicone instead of carbon-hydrogen. The water may be deuterium-oxygen instead of hydrogen-oxygen. Or there may be fatal allergens. And Charley can tell you about some of the micro-organism possibilities.

"The first thing will be to make small-party landings, on the apparently uninhabited continents—and keep the ad-verb firmly in mind; you can't see everything through a telescope, and the woods may be full of characters who throw spears first and yell halt afterward. Then, after we have satisfied ourselves about the chemistry, biology and so forth, we will make a landing in force to contact the inhabitants. This will *not* be anywhere near that big city at the forks of the river. We will land in some isolated district where news will not be likely to leak out too quickly, and we will try to ingratiate ourselves with the people there, learn the language, and find out all we can about the customs, religion, level of technology, social organization, and, above all, the power situation. I don't mean your kind, Lourenço," he told the nuclear engineer. "I mean who rules whom and how. You agree, Roger? The actual making of contact will be your job."

He nodded. "We certainly don't want to go blundering into some royal court and wading up to our necks into some high level faction-fight without knowing what it's all about. Not in the middle of a big city. We don't have enough machine gun ammunition for that."

"Here's a place I'd had in mind." Fitzurse put on one of the projection screens. "This is three hundred power telephoto at two hundred miles."

It was a wide cultivated valley, hemmed in by mountains on three sides; two small rivers flowed in at one end from opposite directions to form a larger stream. There was a town, and something like a castle on the point of a ridge overlooking it. The distance was still too great for details, but it looked feudal—lord's castle, market-town, peasant villages, farms; self-contained and apart from everything else. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of Switzerland and the Tyrol before the Atomic Wars.

"I think so, Fitz," he said. "It looks like just the place for us to stay for a while, till we're ready to move in on the big city. Which way is north, in the picture?"

"At the top. It's on the west of the big river valley." He nodded. There was a road going north, beyond the juncture of the two smaller streams; it crossed the mountains at a pass guarded by another castle. He wondered if that were held by the lord of what he was beginning to think of as "our" valley. If not, mightn't it be held by an enemy? Better not mention that possibility in Luther Smith's hearing.

It was another road, rutted and dusty, that entered "our" valley from the east; five hundred yards up the slope, it emerged from the woods into a broad meadow. The grass beside it grew almost waist high, topped with silvery plumes that rippled ceaselessly in the wind. Real wind; not fan-stirred ship air recycled thousands of times. And there was a blue sky above, peopled with rolypoly white clouds, and a strange fragrance everywhere. It was all wonderful, after four years of the sealed steel world of the *Stellex*, and six airless, waterless, poisonous and otherwise abominable planets. But a day and a half here, and nothing...

He turned back to the camp—the seventy foot oval landing-craft, with the marquee-tent in front of it and the lorries and aircars on either side—and as he did, a couple of the others shouted his name. They had all left what they had been doing and were crowding in front of the screen tuned to the pickup on the airjeep in which Dave Mac-Donald and Arthur Muramoto were on watch.

"They have something," Reginald Fitzurse told him as he hurried over. "Mounted party—Dave calls it cavalry—about twenty, coming up the road on the other side. He has the pickup at top magnification and centered on a stretch of clear road."

Karl Zahanov was talking into the screen to the ship, telling Adriaan de Ruyter. Luther Smith was fussing with the photo reproducer on the jeep screen. Then Arthur Muramoto, who must have been using

the binoculars, gave a yell from the screen-speaker.

“I can see their dust; be along in a couple of minutes. Get set for them.”

Then, briefly, the cavalcade appeared and passed. The mounts were ungainly things, with bovine heads and short, stumpy legs; he was surprised at their speed until he remembered having seen dachshunds run. These things had the same sort of gait, their short legs blurring till they almost looked like wheels. One of the riders wore a scarlet cloak and a wide plumed hat. The others were in armor, either back-and-breast cuirasses or mail hauberks or plated brigandines, and they wore conical helmets and red-and-blue shoulder capes, and all carried long straight swords. A few had lances; the rest were armed with what looked like muskets.

Then they were out of sight, and the view shifted to another stretch of open road, and Arthur Muramoto’s voice, from the screen-speaker, estimated ten minutes till they reached it. Luther Smith began getting photoprints out of the slot at the bottom of the screen and passing them to the others. Nancy Patterson took one.

“Why, they’re *human!*”

If they weren’t, they’d pass for it. Humanoid form, of course, was to be expected in any sapient race, with variations—the hairy, dog-faced Thorans, the faunlike Lokians, the grotesque but upright and biped natives of Yggdrasil. In this case, the variation wasn’t noticeable, but Charley Clifford was a stickler.

“Humanoid,” he corrected. “Homoform, approaching tenth degree. But there’ll be all kinds of internal differences, of course.”

“You can call them cavalry if you want to, Dave; I’ll go along with it,” Fitzurse said. “They’re better than anything I ever saw.”

All the mounted warriors he had ever seen had been Eurasian barbarians of North Terra, the human debris of the Atomic Wars, against whom he had campaigned to protect the reclamation projects. He began wondering, audibly, what sort of guns they had, and if there weren’t pistol-holsters on the saddles.

“All right, watch for them!” Muramoto called, and Luther Smith went back to the screen and took the button-cord for the photoprinter.

They had a better view, this time. Details were clearer, and the riders on the short-legged, broad-tailed animals looked even more human. They were light-skinned and fair; most of them had blond or reddish beards. Almagro became excited.

“The one in the red cloak; that’s a woman!”

That could be imagination; Almagro’s ran in that direction. The prints weren’t positive evidence either way; the cloak and the wide-brimmed hat hid too much. Fitzurse was sure the guns were muzzleloaders, probably flintlocks.

“All right, we’ll give them a fire-power demonstration,” he said. “You all know the drill. Roger, you’d better take over from here.”

Lourenço Narvaes and Nancy Patterson went to the other airjeep, Nancy at the controls and Lourenço at the twin 15-mm machine guns. Everybody who wasn’t wearing a pistol put one on and everybody got a rifle except Charley Clifford, who had a portable machine gun. They formed a line in front of the camp, with the jeep on the right and Charley on the left. He and Fitzurse took their position slightly front and center. Katherine Gower, at the screen, was giving instructions to the jeep at the top of the mountain.

Then the riders came out into the meadow, bunching at first and then forming a line of their own, with the red cloak in the middle. Fitzurse raised the binoculars slung around his neck.

“Gad, it is a woman,” he said. “Beauty, too.” He started to lift the strap over his head, then let go of it and unslung his rifle. “Here they come,” he said.

The line stirred; the red-and-blue-pennoned lances came down; the musketeers rested the forestocks of their weapons on their bridle-arms. Then the woman in the red cloak flung up her right hand, held it raised for a moment, and then swung it down and forward. The line advanced, first at a walk and then at a slow slope. Half way to the camp, they were at full speed, and the woman was lifting a long pistol from her saddle-bow. He brought his rifle to his shoulder, aiming fifty feet over the heads of the charging cavalry.

“Ready!” He waited till they were a scant hundred yards away. “Three rounds; fire!”

The rifle-butt punched his shoulder, and then punched it twice again. Other rifles banged, and the light machine gun chattered, stopped, and chattered again. Then the woman in the cloak flung up her right hand, the gold mountings of her pistol glinting, and pulled her mount back onto its flat beaverlike tail. The whole line piled up backward as the airjeep rose slightly, whizzed past in front of them, and then turned. Its 15-mm's chugged and the bullets cut a swath through the grass. Then, before the woman and her troop could turn to flee, the other jeep, now directly behind them at a couple of hundred feet, fired a warning burst.

Angrily, the woman pushed her pistol back into its hol-ster, said something to a man with a drawn sword beside her, and sat staring at them defiantly.

He handed his rifle to Fitzurse, who slung it, and went forward, his right hand raised in what was a peace-sign on Terra, Thor and Loki and ought to be one here. She *was* a beauty; hardly more than a girl, he guessed. He stopped twenty feet from her, lowered his hand, and bowed. She said something in a sharp, demanding voice. He smiled at her and asked her if she'd ever thought of going into telemovies. She spoke again—different intonation, probably different language. He shook his head and replied from the *Iliad* in the original. She said something exasperated and quite possibly unladylike.

"Let's stop this foolishness," he said. Then he pointed to her and raised one finger. He pointed to the men on either side of her and raised three fingers. Then he dis-mounted from an imaginary—whatever they were—and pointed back to the striped canopy in front of the landing-craft, and pantomimed sitting down, pouring from a bottle, and drinking healths, wondering if that was one of their customs. Apparently it was; the girl smiled, jerked her chin toward her right shoulder in what looked like a nod, and spoke to the man beside her.

He and one or two others began raising objections. That convinced her that it was a good idea; kicking her feet out of the stirrups, she sprang to the ground, tossing her reins to one of the troopers, and started to unbuckle a belt on which she carried an unfemininely heavy and serviceable dagger.

"No! No!" He stopped her with a gesture and signed that she should keep the weapon, touching the butt of the 10-mm Colt-Argentine automatic on his own belt. She smiled and nodded again. That made sense; an armed host should not expect his guests to disarm.

The man to whom she had first spoken—big and brawny, with a graying yellow beard and a gilded breast-plate whose nicks and bullet-splashes showed that it wasn't ornamental—dismounted and beckoned to two musketeers, who slung their weapons and got to the ground. There was a general dismounting along the line as the girl and her three companions went over to the mar-quee.

They sat down at a trestle-table which was provided with screens and recorders and writing and sketching equipment and a blackboard. Wine, or at least fermented apple-juice, was poured. A five gallon jug of the hydroponic hard cider, to which a half-gallon of pure medical alcohol had been added, was sent out to the troopers. They'd settled the point that the biochemistry of this planet was entirely Terra-type, and any people who had gotten as far as castles, riding animals and firearms must surely have discovered fermentation somewhere along the way.

It appeared that they had. They all drank with obvious pleasure, surprised at the coolness of the drink. Evidently they hadn't gotten as far as refrigeration. Then, after everybody had drunk everybody else's health, they settled down to language-learning.

He touched himself on the breast and said, "Me." He tapped Fitzurse on the chest and said, "You," speaking to him directly. Fitzurse repeated it to Charley Clifford, who passed it on to Margaret Hale, who returned it to point of origin. He turned to the girl, touched himself again, and said:

"Me Roger Barron. You?"

"Me Rylla-dad-Hostigos," she said. "Rylla-dad-Hostigos *tsan vovaro*. Roger Barron *dom vovaron*."

That was picking it up smartly enough. There were in-troductions. The man with the graying beard and the battle-marred cuirass was Chartiphon. He didn't bother trying to remember the names of the other two; the audiovisual camera had them. They went on from there. Some of it involved moving pictures; they startled the newcomers only at first. After all, if people had things that went up off the ground and guns that kept on shooting, why shouldn't they have pictures that moved and talked like live? More was

done on the blackboard or on sketch-pads, or acted out. The girl thought it was fun. When she wasn't trying to keep an imperious expression on her face, she was lovely. She had a tilty little nose and a golden dusting of freckles across it.

Chartiphon and one of the musketeers tagged along faithfully. The third man dropped out, and he and Fitzurse began examining each other's weapons. Finally they strolled off to have a shooting-match between a 7-mm Sterberg and one of the big flintlocks.

"Place you come; where?" the girl was finally able to ask.

"Place name Terra; much far," he told her. "No word for say."

She gave one of her people's jerky nods. "Me place Hostigos." She pointed to the west and said something complicated.

"Place far?"

She grimaced and made a spread-fingered clawing gesture in front of her face. That was just what she had been trying to tell him. Then she caught up one of the seven-color pens she had learned to use and bent over a sketch-pad. First, a lance, with a red-and-blue pennon; she gave him the word for that. Then numbers. Their numeration was something like the Roman system—dashes for digits from one to four, a half-circle for five, and a circle for ten. Circle with stroke across it, fifty; circle with cross, a hundred. A lance was the unit of measurement, about ten feet, and a hundred lances were a great-lance; the prefix was *hos-*. It figured that she was about forty miles from home. One of the first blessings of Terran culture to be showered on these people would be Arabic numeration, he decided.

He took her to the other trestle-table, where the map Lourenço and Luther and Margaret Hale had been making from air photos was thumbtacked out, hoping that she knew what a map was. She did. As soon as she saw it, she clapped her hands delightedly and began babbling in excitement. After she became coherent, she began pointing things out, naming them.

The whole of "our" valley was Hostigos. So was the town beside the river; the castle on the ridge overlooking it was Tarr-Hostigos. It was her home. She went back to the other table and sat down with a pen, and this time she drew two little pictures, unmistakably if indelicately masculine and feminine. Evidently prudery wasn't one of the local shortcomings. She connected them with a horizontal line, dropped a vertical line from the female symbol, and drew another symbol like it.

"Me, Rylla," she said. Then she pointed to the male symbol above. "Ptosphes." He was something-or-other—prince, duke, lord—of Hostigos. She drew a small stylized flame around the mother-symbol and made an equally stylized sound of lamentation. These people cremated their dead; her father, Prince Ptosphes of Hostigos, was a widower.

And they'd hoped to catch some wandering peddler or something of the sort for their first contact!

He touched the mark that represented the other castle, at the mountain-pass to the north.

"This Hostigos?"

"No! Nostor!" she replied. "Belong Prince Gormoth."

She used another word, and to explain it grimaced ferociously and drew her dagger in a threatening manner. The word would be enemy. He and Reginald Fitzurse exchanged glances.

"You go Tarr-Hostigos now?" he asked.

"We go Tarr-Hostigos, make talk Prince Ptosphes."

"You, me, me people, you people, all go Tarr-Hostigos." He pointed to the contragravity vehicles. "All go up, high; go Tarr-Hostigos fast."

Her eyes widened in wonder. "Me? Go up? High?" She pointed to the sky, and then bent, looking down. "See everything, like map?" Then she turned to her bearded henchman Chartiphon and began babbling excitedly again.

As soon as Chartiphon understood what she was saying, he began protesting. Even the two musketeers joined him, and they all shouted objections. The girl shouted back at them, banging a small and shapely but very firm fist on the table. She must have been taunting them with being afraid; the objections now became indignant denials. Finally she turned to him.

"We all go Tarr-Hostigos in sky-things," she told him.

Chartiphon and the two musketeers went to break the news to the rank-and-file. For a moment, it



looked like a mutiny in the making. Then they came over, some to help get the camp things into the landing-craft and the rest leading the mounts—they were *oukry*, plural the same as *sin-gular*—to be put aboard.

It had been just as wonderful as she had imagined—everything spread out below like a map, but real instead of pictures on parchment. It had been the most wonderful thing in her whole life, and she wished that it could have gone on for hours. There had been a little trouble, at first, when they came to the castle; everybody saw the sky-things and Chartiphon's son, Harmakros, had manned the walls and fired a warning shot with one of the cannon. She had been afraid that there would be more shooting and that the—the *Terrans*—would shoot back. But the Terrans had another wonder, a little thing she could hold in her hand, that made her voice so loud that she could call down from above and everybody in Tarr-Hostigos heard her. So they had come down safely into the great enclosure in front of the citadel, and there had been no shooting.

But much excitement. Her father and Xentos and Har-makros met them in front of the main citadel gateway, acting as though somebody came down from the sky to visit them every day, she was clearly proud of how calmly they behaved, but the castle-folk went almost crazy. Harmak-ros got forty or fifty infantrymen to push them back with pikestaves and musket-butts, and the score of cavalrymen of her escort got their *oukry* unloaded and helped. Finally things got a little quiet.

She had to help her father, using the few words of the Terrans' language she had learned and the words of her language that she knew they had learned, and her father made them welcome to Tarr-Hostigos, and sent Harmak-ros off to show them to rooms in the keep.

And now, at last, she and Chartiphon and her father and Xentos were alone in her father's little work-chamber.

Chartiphon sat down heavily, and then remembered to take off his helmet and his sword-belt.

"Wine, for the love of Dralm!" he said, and when Xen-tos poured him a cup, he emptied it at a gulp. "I have never been more afraid in all my life, not even when we fought the Dazouri at Sykrys! And this crazy daughter of yours thought it was all fun!"

"But it was! Father, it was—it was—" Even in her own language, she had no words for how wonderful it had been.

"Chartiphon, our Rylla is still up in the sky," her father said, and he was truly smiling, even if it was only a wan ghost of his old smile. "Till she gets back on the ground, you'd better tell me about it."

Chartiphon thought for a moment, and then began to tell how they had seen the strangers camped by the road, and thought that they might be Nostori, and how she had taken command and arrayed the little troop for a charge. And then he went on to tell what had happened.

"What could we do?" he asked. "They held our lives between thumb and finger; they could have wiped us out in less time than I speak of it. But they wanted to parley. It is my thought that they seek to be friends."

"But what do they want of us?" her father asked. "And where do they come from?"

"As to where they come from, they say it is a place called Terra, and that it is very far. It may be that they want to trade with us, or they may be exiles seeking a home. Or they may be scouts ahead of a great army."

"In that case, we had better make friends with them quickly," Xentos said. "And hope that Gornoth of Nestor doesn't."

The smile came back to her father's face. "Tell me about these guns of theirs, Chartiphon."

"They have small ones, half as heavy as our muskets, which load ten shots at a time and fire as fast as the trigger is pulled. They have pistols that load with twelve shots. They have guns a little heavier than muskets, and guns like small cannon, that shoot very fast, *ah-ah-ah-ah-ah!* As long as the trigger is held back."

He opened his belt-pouch and got out two brass tubes, as long as one of her fingers, necked like wine-bottles. One was empty; the other had a pointed metal cork. He handed them across to her father.

"I stole these," Chartiphon admitted. "I had to; I was afraid of making them suspicious if I asked for them, and I wanted you to see them. These are what they load the guns with. The pointed thing is the bullet; the fire-seed is inside, and there must be something like a bit of flint inside, too, to make the spark. Look at the empty one; you can see where something in the gun punched it. Every time the guns fire, one of the

empty holders flies out of it, and a new one is put into the barrel. I think they use the kick of the gun to do that," he added, as though he had just thought of it.

Her father looked at the brass things and nodded. "That could be." He thought for a moment "If they would use their weapons to help us, we could laugh at Gormoth, and Sarrask wouldn't even be worth that. The question is, would they?"

"If they were here as our guests when Gormoth in-vades, they'd have to help us to defend themselves," Chartiphon said.

"I think they will help us, anyhow," she said. "I don't know what they want here, but I think they want to be our friends." She felt herself smiling. "And the one who is called Roger likes me. He doesn't *realize* it yet, but he *will*"

"Princess!" Chartiphon was shocked.

"I think Rylla likes the Terran called Roger," her father said. "It is to be seen in her face when she speaks about *him*"

And now, as her face warmed, she knew that what was to be seen on it was a blush.

"But we must learn their language," Xentos said. "We can't tell them about our troubles until we do."

"They'll learn ours first. They are very good at learning languages," Chartiphon said. "In just a short while, they were able to talk to us. Princess, tell them about the pic-tures that move and talk."

"Oh, yes!" And then she remembered the wonderful thing that Roger had given her, the silver thing that wrote like a pen, in black and red and blue and all the colors. "But let me show you this, first..."

The rooms to which they had been conducted were at the top of the keep, on the east side. The outer walls were twelve feet thick, pierced with loopholes big enough for a man to stand in and narrowing to apertures six inches by a foot. On the other side, wide arches gave onto a balcony, covered with flowering vines, above a garden in a central court. There was no window-glass, and the fireplaces had an unused look. Evidently it never got cold here.

The horde of servants who had helped install them had gaped in amazement at the contragravity skids on which they had floated their belongings up from the landing-craft, and then departed reluctantly. So, a few minutes later, had the young officer in the gilded armor—his name was Harmakros, and he was old Chartiphon's son—and now they were alone. They had a screen up and tuned to the ship; a crowd of them were in front of it, telling Adriaan de Ruyter and Lisette Krull and Sylvia Davock about the castle and their reception there.

He strolled out on the balcony and found Reginald Fitzurse and Nancy Patterson looking down into the garden.

"Well, this was much better than we expected," he said.

"Yes," Fitzurse agreed. "I thought we'd have to spend a day or so convincing some backwoods farmer that we weren't really horrible monsters. I think you made rather an impression on the young lady."

"I wish I could be a little more sure of what we've gotten into," Nancy said.

"Ah. You were another who thought we were spending too much money on armament, when we were outfitting. Beginning to wish we'd have two or three times as much to spend, now?"

She looked at him sharply. "Are you getting that, too?" she asked.

"I got that the second little Rylla formed up her troop and charged us. Around here, stranger equals enemy; hit them before they hit you."

"And this castle; these walls, and all these cannon," Nancy said. "You know, I doubt if there are more than twenty thousand people in this whole valley, and the ag-riculture, or what I saw of it from the air, is the most primitive sort. Yet there are at least two hundred soldiers, completely nonproductive, here at the castle. They wouldn't keep that many in idleness if they didn't have to."

"That's only a fraction of them," Fitzurse said. "I saw close to a thousand infantry drilling in the fields up the river, when we were coming in. And look how promptly they got the walls manned and got of that warning shot, when they sighted us."

And Prince Whoozis of Whatzit, who holds the castle at the mountain-pass; he thought of the

professionally trained manner in which Rylla handled her big dagger to convey the idea of enmity. If she'd really had him in front of her—

"I've been thinking about that. Let's don't mention it around Luther or Sylvia or Charley, it would only start another infernal argument, but all this red-carpet treatment may be on account of our potential value as allies."

"Oh, heavens, I hope not!" Nancy said. "We don't want to get mixed up in any wars."

"Not without knowing what they're all about," Fitzurse agreed.

He and the retired soldier exchanged glances past Nancy. People who want allies make treaties with them. Stellar explorations, Ltd., needed a treaty with somebody. Talk that over later in private. There was likely to be a serious division on policy.

They strolled into the big room where the screen was. Karl Zahanov was talking to de Ruyter, promising to get a relief ship-watch up as soon as possible. Charley Clifford, in the middle of a group sampling the wine the servants had left, was pontificating:

"No, we simply mustn't speak of them as 'human;' that is reserved for *Homo sapiens terra*. They're sapient beings, so we can call them people, but they are utterly alien to us, descended from a different though remarkably parallel line of evolution. We just can't call them human."

*Phooie!* He'd call them human, any day. Then another thought suddenly burgeoned within him. He'd go further than that. He'd be quite willing to call Prince Ptosphes father-in-law.

The feast had started at dusk and lasted until well past midnight. They knew, from the tests made by Sylvia Davock and Lisette Krull and Charley Clifford and Katherine Gower, that the food of the planet was edible by Terrans, without deficiencies of any essential vitamins or trace-elements. Properly cooked, it was also delicious. Now, with the sun beginning to peep levelly through the eastern loopholes, their quarters had been invaded by a posse of servant-girls with breakfast. It was an informal meal; they sat on cushions on the floor, with the bowls of steaming food and the baskets of fruit and pots of hot spicy tea in front of them. Nancy wondered if the ancestors of these people hadn't been nomads, accustomed to eating on the ground around campfires.

They were talking about a name for the planet. They'd need one to file discovery claim, and even among them-selves they couldn't go on calling it Eta Stellex II, or "this planet."

"What do the people here call it?" somebody asked.

"They don't know it is a planet," Karl Zahanov said. "I was talking—well, sketching and making signs—with this old fellow Xentos. He took me to the castle library and showed me a map of what he called 'Everything.' The south-central part of this continent, a rough circle, with sea all around it. I tried to show him what a stellar system was. I don't think he understood. We hadn't enough idea-words in common."

That would correct itself. Nancy Patterson was worried.

"Well, you know, he's some sort of a priest," she said. "On this culture-level, cosmology's part of the religion. You might have been committing all kinds of sacrilege and heresy."

Julio Almagro was watching a couple of the servant-girls, shapely and lightly-clad.

"Pity Venus is a planet already," he said. "How about Aphrodite?"

Zahanov passed his hand in front of his face in the negative gesture he was teaching himself to use.

"The Astrographic Commission won't accept Helleno-Roman names for anything outside the Sol System. They prefer names from Norse mythology, as long as they last."

Somebody mentioned that Freya was the Norse Venus. Zahanov jerked his chin at his right shoulder.

"Freya's good. The Chartered Freya Company," he said experimentally.

"We haven't been chartered, yet," Fitzurse mentioned. "We still have to get a treaty from somebody."

"I think we can get one from Ptosphes."

"Of course, there's the question of just how sovereign he is, here," Lourenço Narvaes said. "I know, he has an army, but he may be just a minor nobleman in something big"

Luther Smith wasn't thinking about that. "Look what we can give these people," he said. "Air transportation. Nuclear power. Telecast communication. Even take some of the minor things, like refrigeration, or paper and print-ing. . ."

Almagro took his eyes from the two girls—the two Freyan girls—and threw his bucket of cold water.

“If you think we’re going to transform this planet with what we have here, think again, he advised.

“We would need four or five shiploads of equipment, and fifty to a hundred technicians and engineers, just for a start. What we have is one ship that should have been junked ten years ago, Adriaan’s yacht, and a couple of million sols in debts.”

“If we get a charter, we can float a company, and then we’ll have credit,” Zahanov said.

“You can’t float a company just by waving a charter and yelling, ‘Lookit, we gotta planet!’ If Freya weren’t inhab-ited, yes. Anybody will invest in a colonization company. But there are too many restrictions to colonizing an inhab-ited planet, and investors don’t like that. What we’ll have to do is find something on this planet that can be sold on Terra at a profit after space-freight costs, and space-freight costs are murder.”

“Well, there’s this tea,” Dave MacDonald said, lifting the cup in his hand. “I had a helluva hangover, this morn-ing, and one cup yanked me right out of it. Coffee isn’t in it with this stuff.”

“Sure,” Almagro agreed. “In a couple of years, we’ll be shipping it all over the Federation—if we’re in business then. But you can’t start an interstellar company on a new luxury-item. Too chancy; the big money won’t risk it. We need something with an existing demand. Remember, the first thing we have to sell is stock.”

They were still talking about that when one of the girls came over.

“You... want... more?” she asked bashfully, in pre-cise Lingua Terra.

Nobody did. She and her companion began gathering up empty bowls and things. A little later Chartiphon’s son, Harmakros, came in. He saw Nancy Patterson first of all, and they smiled at each other. Harmakros had been es-pecially attentive to Nancy at the feast.

“You... all... sleep... good?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Roger told him, in his own language. “Sleep good. Good things for eat, this daylight; much good.”

“Much happy.” He spoke to one of the girls, and she went out. “Rylla, Xentos, come: We make talk.”

They made talk, all that day and for days to come. Mostly it was with Rylla and Xentos and Hamakros; sometimes Chartiphon and, seeming to snatch the time from an end-less press of other affairs, Ptosphes. Luther Smith and Lourenço Narvaes went back to the *Stellex* to relieve de Ruyter and the girls, and thereafter joined the language classes by screen. Words for things or acts that could be shown; thing-and-act combination words; words for ideas, and for ideas about ideas. Sentence structure, and gram-mar. It was surprising how little grammar was needed to convey meaning, and how much trouble a little knowledge of grammar could make.

The language, they found, was called Sosti; it was spo-ken all over the river-valley system to which the Freyan civilization was confined. They learned the names of the river and its tributaries, and of the cities and their rulers. There were a surprising number of princely realms and sovereignties, and this bothered Nancy Patterson. It wasn’t what the culture pattern indicated.

The civilization was an ancient one; the language was uniform, and the culture and the economy unified. These were a warlike people; the nobleman was first of all a war-rior. Then why hadn’t there been conquests and, long ago, a single empire? Apparently there never had been. Three great kingdoms existed in an area no larger than the Mis-sissippi Valley on Terra, each a loose collection of minor pryncedoms. Prince Ptosphes, for instance, was a nominal subject of King Kaiphranos, at Harphax, the big city at the forks of the river—his kingdom was called Hos-Harphax—and so were the neighboring princes of Nostor to the north and Sask to the south. There was always trouble between Ptosphes and Gormoth of Nostor, and there was talk of impending open war, which disturbed Luther Smith and Sylvia Davock. What bothered Nancy was not being able to understand the situation. These kings should long ago have established their authority in their respective king-doms, and then wars among them should have unified the whole civilization into one empire.

The language-learning gradually spread out from the big room at the top of the keep. Karl Zahanov and Adriaan de Ruyter spent a lot of time with Xentos in his study. Ar-thur Muramoto and Dave

MacDonald and Margaret Hale were usually in the shop of the castle armorer, or the black-smith, or the carpenter. Julio Almagro, a horseman on Terra, haunted the stables. Charley Clifford found a professional brother in the castle healer, who had his dispensary and surgery across from the guardroom inside the main gate. And of course Reginald Fitzurse and Chartiphon became almost inseparable.

“You know, they never invented the socket bayonet here,” Fitzurse said. “They have to mix pikemen and halberdiers with their infantry musketeers. So I just invented it for them; now every infantryman can have a musket. Trouble is, every one has to be individually fitted; it’s only an accident when you find two musket-barrels with the same outside diameter at the muzzle. Take a year and a half to get them all fitted.”

He was surprised, too, at the muskets. They were, he said, almost exactly like guns he’d seen in museums in Cape Town and Johannesburg, which had been used in the Great Trek.

“Well, that’s like the physical resemblance of the people to Terran humans,” Charley said. “You wouldn’t claim, would you, that some Boers had their ox carts fitted with Dillinghams, and trekked out here to Freya with their guns? No; if you have black powder and no percussion caps, there are only a few ways in which you can get fire to the charge in the barrel, and a flintlock’s the simplest and best way to do it. Well, environmental conditions being the same here and on Terra, the same physical structure is the most efficient for a race of sapient beings.”

Charley’s insistence on the non-humanity of Freyans was getting a trifle tiresome, especially when one is thinking, at the moment, of a tilty little nose with a dusting of golden freckles across it.

“Charley, have you found one characteristic among these people that differentiates them from us?” he asked. “Do they differ from any of us more than a full-blooded Mongoloid differs from a full-blooded Negroid or Caucasian?”

“Well, no,” Clifford gruded. “But they can’t be human! They evolved here on Freya; there’s no genetic connection at all between them and us.”

He was trying very hard to be convincing. Maybe it was Charles Clifford, M.D., whom he was really trying to convince.

They sat together in a double chair, just wide enough to be comfortably and agreeably close. Her golden head was bent over the notepad, and somehow his arm had managed to get up on her shoulder. When it had, she’d only snuggled a little closer.

“This is my name,” she said. “See; m-ih, ll-ah, Rylla.”

Two characters—they wrote from the bottom of the page up—each with a little dingbat like an accent-mark. Phonetic-syllabic; he’d been afraid of having to learn a thousand or so ideographs, or hire some scribe of questionable reliability.

“And here is yours.” She switched from blue to red for that. “See. Rrr-oh. Djjj. Eh-rrr.”

The accent-mark things were the vowels; you put them under the consonants when they preceded and over when they followed. This looked like an easy alphabet to learn.

“And here is yours, in our writing.” He did it in block capitals; time enough to go into upper and lower case when she had learned the letters. “This is R-y-l-l-a.”

She looked at it in mock-horror, and then laughed.

“That—me?” she demanded in *Lingua Terra*. “But so many letters. And it goes on its side, and the wrong way.” She made the funny clawing gesture in front of her face, which seemed to convey complete bafflement. “I will never learn this!”

“Oh, you’ve just had it, for now. Let’s take a break.”

“Take?” She made a grasping gesture. “Break?” She snapped something imaginary with her fingers. “Break what?”

“Throw it in. Time out,” he told her. “Stop this now and do something else.”

“Yes!” She jumped up and caught one of his hands in both of hers. “Let us *take a break* in the flower-and-grass place. The garden.”

“Good. Or would you rather take a ride in an aircar?” He knew what the answer to that would be. As they went out, Nancy Patterson, trying to teach Harmakros the Arabic numeration and the importance of

a figure for ab-solutely nothing at all, waved to them. Another Terro-Freyan romance sprouting; somebody else wouldn't listen to Charley Clifford.

The big policy debate started as soon as Karl Zahanov and Margaret Hale went up to relieve Luther and Laurence on ship-watch. It wasn't that Luther wanted to make trouble; he'd just come to some conclusions the correct-ness of which he was positive. That was usual with ideal-ists.

In the first place, he wanted them all to leave Tarr-Hostigos and go to Harphax. He'd heard, like everybody else, of the trouble between Ptosphes and Gormoth of Nostor, and he wanted to be out of Hostigos before a war started. Again, it would have been easy to do Luther an injustice. He wasn't a coward; he just thought all wars were wrong and he didn't want any part in one. Then, he wanted to start immediate trading operations. He and Lourenço and, by screen, Zahanov, had designed a hundred and fifty foot freighter with a wooden hull, which could be built by local labor and lifted with one of the heavy-duty contragravity generators. It looked more like a cantilever bridge than an airframe, but he estimated a five hundred ton payload and an airspeed of a hundred and fifty mph.

"We all admit we have to find something we can sell on Terra," he argued. "We won't find it sitting around here, and the best way we can learn about the products of this planet will be by trading-voyages."

Nobody denied that. What Barron couldn't see was the necessity of leaving Hostigos, especially when things were just getting good with him and Rylla. And he could see a great many objections to a move to Harphax.

"We still don't know what things are like there. We don't know what powerful established trading interests we'd come into conflict with, and neither do we know how soon this King Kaiphranos would get envious of us and try to grab our ship, not realizing that it wouldn't do him any good after he got it. We don't have that to worry about here."

"Well, can we trust Ptosphes?" Luther countered. "He's been very hospitable so far, but—"

"We can trust him," Fitzurse said. "We could wipe this whole castle garrison out at the first act of treachery, and he knows it. We couldn't defend ourselves effectively in the middle of a couple of hundred thousand people in Harphax. Trade there, yes. But keep our base here."

"We still need a treaty. I think we can get one from Ptosphes; a better treaty than we could get from Kaiphra-nos, at least now."

"Well, Kaiphranos is Ptosphes' sovereign; a treaty with a subject prince wouldn't be as good as a treaty from the king. I doubt if Ptosphes has enough sovereignty to give us a treaty the Federation Colonial Office would accept," Luther argued.

"You know why we can get a treaty from Ptosphes? He needs our help in case Gormoth of Nostor invades him. If King Kaiphranos hasn't enough sovereignty to keep his subject princes from making war on one another, he doesn't have enough sovereignty outside the city of Harphax to make a treaty with."

"That's another thing!" Luther began clamoring. "I've heard about that, too. That's why I want us to get out of here, before we get caught in the middle of a war."

There was, he had long ago learned, one infallible weapon against the idealist, and that was moral indignation.

"You mean, you want us to tell Ptosphes it was nice knowing him and thanks for everything, and then run out on him when he needs help?" he demanded. "Abandon him and his people to massacre and enslavement? Maybe you could do that and still respect yourself; be damned if I could."

"Yes: I thought I was the business-is-business guy, and Luther was the idealist," Almagro put in. "If that's ideal-ism, I'll take a plate of hash."

"And have you any idea," Fitzurse asked, "what effect a shameful desertion like that would have on our prestige? Why, no Freyan would ever trust any Terran's friendship again."

"Luther, it's our moral duty to help Ptosphes defend his country." Surprisingly, the feminine voice came from the screen-speaker. Generally Margaret Hale stayed completely out of these bickers, unless they involved the Keene-Gonzales-Dillingham Theory of Non-Einsteinian Relativity and the Dillingham hyperdrive. "You say you're opposed to war; why, if we didn't help Ptosphes, we'd be no better than

passive accomplices of this Prince Gormoth in an unprovoked war of conquest.”

Luther looked hurt and bewildered. Why, they were actually taking a lofty moral attitude toward him, instead of defending their own position. He said something, rather weakly, about what the Federation government would say.

“I’d hate to listen to what they’d say if we deserted Ptosphes, under the circumstances,” Fitzurse told him.

There was a lot more of it, mostly repetitious, with Luther’s position getting steadily weaker. In the end, Stellar Explorations, Ltd., voted to authorize Roger Barron and Reginald Fitzurse to offer Prince Ptosphes of Hostigos a bilateral offensive and defensive alliance.

“He was very happy to accept,” Barron reported, the next afternoon. “There will be a meeting with the Council of Hostigos this evening to ratify the treaty. That is a pure formality; Ptosphes is really absolute ruler here. Now here’s the situation. . .”

He showed them, on the map, the Hostigos-Nostor boundary, along the two small rivers that joined to form the Darro, and explained how the castle that guarded Dombra Pass had passed, almost a century before, to Nostor by betrayal.

“There’s been raiding and barn-burning and cattle-rust-ling on both sides ever since; that’s accepted. But lately, some outsider has made a deal with Gormoth to furnish him with money and supplies and mercenaries and guarantee the permissive support or at least the non-interference of King Kaiphranos, in return for concessions after the conquest. This outsider, Styphon, is to get this section up here, called the Yellowstone Valley—”

“Did you say Styphon?” Nancy demanded. “Why, Styphon is one of the gods these people worship. Not here in Hostigos, but other places. He’s a fire-god, or sun-god, or something like that.”

“Come to think of it, Roger”, Fitzurse interrupted, “Xentos and Ptosphes never spoke of Styphon, at all. They talked about Styphon’s House; they always used that expression.”

“That’s right; Styphon’s House,” Nancy said. “It’s some kind of a theocracy; all the top priests are in Harphax, but they have temples all over. Tell me; what’s fire-seed?”

“Fire-seed?” Fitzurse echoed. “Why, that’s gun-powder.”

“But they get it from the priests of Styphon. I thought it was some sacramental substance, maybe used in connection with their cremation rites. Are you sure?”

“It’s all I’ve been hearing about. Sore subject, here; they’re almost out of it, and can’t get any more. I’m surprised Harmakros didn’t mention it to you.”

She and Harmakros would have had other things to talk about. Then he swore at his own obtuseness.

“Now it figures!” He swore again. “The whole thing figures. Say these priests accidentally discovered gunpowder, a few centuries ago. . .”

“Bet I know how,” Charley Clifford interrupted. “Bet Styphon was originally a healer-god, like Aesculapius, and the priests were the doctors. Sulphur, saltpeter and char-coal sounds just like the sort of mess early iron-age, try-anything empirics would mix up, and then I suppose they put it on the stove and got a big surprise. After that, Styphon went out of medical practice and into the munition business.”

“Yes. Styphon’s House is the only source of gunpowder; the priests make it, keep it a temple secret, and furnish it to the kings and princes. Firearms and artillery are just good enough that nobody without powder has a chance against anybody with it. That’s why this place is cluttered up with this hodgepodge of petty sovereignties and tributary princes who don’t pay tribute and kings who can’t keep their subjects from fighting among themselves. Styphon’s House wants a lot of rival rulers they can play off against each other. Anybody doesn’t cough up with offerings to the temple, they shut the powder off on him and supply his rivals, and see what happens. I’ll bet the offerings just roll in!”

“Yellowstone Valley,” Arthur Muramoto said. “Can anybody show me where it is? I’ll take a jeep and go look at it right away.”

“Sulphur?”

“Sure; what else?”

“This is old-fashioned, country-style black powder?” Lisette Krull asked. “Well, if Arthur finds

sulphur, you can tell Ptosphes that his ammunition worries are over. Little Lisette will make him all the fire-seed he wants, and she'll eat the first batch if it won't outshoot Styphon's Best."

"Where'll you get the niter?"

"The first thing I noticed, coming down, was that every farm has a manure-pile bigger than the farmhouse. The ground under every one of them is saturated with  $\text{KNO}_3$ . Anybody want to bet on how soon the priests of Styphon will be out on the sidewalk beating a drum for pennies?"

There was an electric light at the ceiling of Ptosphes' council-chamber, with its own nuclear-conversion unit, and three more stood on the table in place of the candle-sticks. Some of the Council had never seen them before, and blinked in awe.

"Well, tell us all," Xentos was saying. "To what will we pledge ourselves?"

"We will pledge friendship and brotherhood with one another," Barron said. "We will pledge to aid one another in war. Prince Ptosphes will guarantee to the Company of Searchers Among the Stars the right to live in peace in his realm, and to buy and sell, and to buy land and erect build-ings on it, and places to land our sky-things. The Company of Searchers Among the Stars will pledge themselves to respect the rights of the people of Hostigos, and to main-tain the right of the house of Prince Ptosphes to rule in Hostigos, against enemies from without and treasons and rebellions within, and specifically against Prince Gormoth of Nostor and Prince Sarrask of Sask. And we will pledge ourselves to give weapons, as we can, to Prince Ptosphes and his people, and to make weapons and teach them how to make weapons. And we will make fire-seed, and teach the people of Hostigos to make it."

There was an instant's silence, and then the room blew up almost like a barrel of fire-seed. Everybody was shout-ing at once. Chartiphon was brandishing his sword and yelling, "Death to Gormoth! Destruction to Nostor!" Rylla ran around the table and flung her arms about his neck. Nancy Patterson and Harmakros were embracing. And Ptosphes had flung back his head and was laughing like a madman. It was the first time, now that he thought of it, that he had ever heard the Prince of Hostigos laugh. Things must have been pretty grim, up to now. Then there was a general cry of, "Wine! Wine!" Evidently there was only one way to make a treaty really official here.

"The making of fire-seed will take time," Ptosphes said, after things had quieted down a little. "The people must be taught, and the stuff to make it of must be gathered, and things to make it with prepared, and we know nothing of any of this. The priests of Styphon have kept it a secret since no man can remember."

Mark one up for Ptosphes; at least he had some faint glow of an idea of production problems.

"Well, I know what has to be done," Lisette said, "and I know what we don't have to do it with. I'll have to organ-ize the niter production, first of all. How about you, Lourenço? How soon do you think you can get the mill ready?"

Narvaes estimated a week, doubled that, and then said: "That's for about fifty pounds a day. That can be increased gradually, after we get workers trained."

Arthur Muramoto was even less optimistic about sul-phur production; he gave it a month, to be on the safe side.

"But we can't wait that long," Ptosphes objected. "Gormoth will learn of what we're doing, and he'll be across the mountains before we're ready for him."

"Don't let him find out," Fitzurse said. "Seal your fron-tiers. Haven't you done that already?"

Ptosphes wasn't exactly sure what he meant. Fitzurse told him.

"Cavalry patrols guarding every road and trail out of Hostigos; let anybody in, but let nobody out. How about this Sarrask of Sask, by the way?"

Ptosphes used some words that hadn't come up yet in the language-learning. Xentos said:

"He will attack as soon as he hears that Gormoth's army is across the rivers, but not before. At least, I don't think he will"

"Then we'll take care of him. But this Tarr-Dombra, the castle at the pass; that will have to come first. That's the key to the whole situation."

"Man, do you know about Tarr-Dombra?" Chartiphon cried. "Tarr-Dombra has never been taken.



We would have it today, if it hadn't been sold to Gormoth's grand-father by Him Whom Phadrigos Slew."

"Father," Harmakros said reprovngly. "Tarr-Dombra has never been attacked with sky-things."

"That's right," Fitzurse said. "Give me a hundred men and a week to train them and the first cloudy night we'll take it, from the top down."

"Harmakros, pick your best hundred men," Chartiphon told his son. "Men able to learn from those wiser than they are, if you have that many. The Terran war-cap-tain Reginald will teach them a new way to take castles."

"We ought to have a good fifth column, both in Nostor and Sask," he said, and then had to explain what that was.

Ptosphes seemed to question the propriety of such a way of making war. Xentos had no such scruples.

"Styphon's House is established in both," he said, "and in both, the priests of Dralm are ill-pleased, because the people have no more offerings for them, after Gormoth and Sarrask make them give offerings to Styphon's House. They look to me for advice. I will send word to them."

"We'll airdrop agents outside both Nostor and Sask cit-ies, with radios. You can give them contacts, people you trust. Then they can gather those who have been wronged or bear any grudge against the prince, and the can gather news for us, and spread tales, and get people to speak and act against Styphon's House."

For ten days, Karl Zahanov, on the ship, reported unvaryingly fair weather over the north-western part of the continent. Fitzurse and Dave MacDonald took charge of the commando training, and at all hours men in black with long pistols and sawed-off muskets and short pikemen's swords were swarming out of air-lorries onto the battle-ments of Tarr-Hostigos. Arthur Muramoto had a gang of workmen up Yellowstone Valley; Luther Smith and Lourenço Narvaes and Charley Clifford took over a grist-mill and began converting it for mixing and grinding powder. Lisette Krull, with anybody she could press into service, began organizing niter production. There already existed a small charcoal-burning industry.

There was a shortage of everything, particularly skilled help. In the town of Hostigos, only three or four pot-tinkers knew anything at all about working sheet-metal, and one of these had to be dragged to a chopping-block and threat-ened with instant beheadment before he consented even to try to make evaporating pans for the sulphur refinery. There was also trouble with the peasants about the man-ure-piles.

Barron, Fitzurse and Almagro formed a general staff, along with Ptosphes, Chartiphon and Xentos. The latter was also busy fomenting treasons and plots among his co-religionists in Nostor and Sask by radio, and the three Terran members usually found themselves called away to show some Freyan mechanic how to use a monkey-wrench, or to land a spy outside one of the enemy capitals, or jockey a landing-craft to and from the ship. Barron had taught Rylla to fly an aircar, and Nancy had given Harmakros a few flying lessons; outside of them, all the air-transport had to be flown by Terrans, and when they were doing that, they couldn't be doing anything else. Nobody got much sleep. Everybody wished that he or she had been born quintuplets.

Along with everything else, he managed to find time to learn everything that Xentos or anybody else at Tarr-Hostigos knew about the operations of Styphon's House. One item of information intrigued him. Wherever there was a temple, there was always, nearby, a large farm, enclosed with high and impenetrable thorn hedges, to which a great deal of manure was hauled, and also bags of sulphur said to be used in religious ceremonies. He flew by night to take infrared photographs of the ones both at Nostor and at Sask.

Then, on the evening of the ninth day, everybody de-cided that the age of miracles had not yet ended. Charley Clifford, who had surprised nobody more than himself by developing a talent for the work, reported that the powder-mill was in production, to the extent of fifteen pounds. A charge of it drove one of the big two-ounce musket-balls an inch and a half deeper into a block of wood than an equal charge of Styphon's Best, and fouled the bore less.

It was decided to take time out for a feast the next eve-ning. It had been a week since the last one, and feasts were important to Freyan morale. Chartiphon and Xentos wanted to open it by firing one of the bombards with the new powder, until they learned that the production being celebrated would be

equal to about one-quarter charge for one of them. They finally settled on Rylla firing a musket down the banquet-table at a dummy robed in black and red like a priest of Styphon. That last was gratifying; Hostigos had come to recognize its real enemy.

The feast was still in progress when Margaret Hale called down from the ship.

“Get ready for it tomorrow night,” she said. “Cold front moving in; heavy clouding with it.”

The feasters broke into cheers when this was translated. He noticed that Nancy Patterson was clutching Harmakros’ arm, and that her cheering was rather mechanical.

The firelight glowed brighter through the fog ahead; the guardians of Tarr-Dombra had built fires at the corners of the outside walls, and there were cressets over the gate. They were watchful, but they were watching the ground; with the wet fog swirling along the mountain-top, nothing could be seen from the watchtower, and only the lower ramparts were manned.

The aircar ahead, piloted by Nancy Patterson, hovered briefly over the tower, then moved away. After a moment, there was a faint glow, a cloth-covered flashlight. Katherine Gower, piloting the lorry in which he and twenty men were riding, brought it up over the tower. Checking the safety of his submachine gun and the sack of spare drums slung from his shoulder, he stepped down. It was a pity they had to double up on vehicles, but only a few Freyans had had any instruction on Terran firearms and none, not even Harmakros, who had only a 10-mm automatic, could be trusted with machine weapons.

In the faint glow of the covered flashlight, Harmakros showed him the head of the spiral stairway; they started down together, the man with the flashlight behind them and the rest softshoeing after. The light was uncovered after they were around the first turn. Outside, he knew, Lisette Krull and Dave MacDonald were bringing another lorry down to the top of the keep. Then they heard voices ahead.

There were a dozen Nostori soldiers in the vaulted room at the bottom of the steps, kneeling or stooping in a circle under a cresset, around a pair of dice and a handful of coins on the stone floor. They were completely unsuspecting; as one of them stooped for the dice and shook them between his hands, he slipped off the safety of the submachine gun and saw Harmakros lift the Colt-Argentine from his holster. Then, with shocking suddenness, a black-powder smoothbore bellowed somewhere outside, followed by the gibber of a submachine gun, and a dozen voices began yelling at once.

The man with the dice dropped them and snatched a long pistol from his sash, cocking it. Harmakros shot him dead at once. The rest flung their hands above their heads, clapping their palms together. One or two of them cried “Treason!” Considering the direction from whence they had been assailed, that wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. Outside, the shooting stopped; the yelling continued, and the cry of treason was being raised there, too. Dave MacDonald came through the doorway from the battle-ments, fitting a fresh drum onto his submachine gun. From the lower and outer walls, more shooting began, mostly local black powder, with a few sharp pangs of Terran smokeless.

Half a dozen of the black-clad commandomen came in from outside, and the twenty who had landed with him on the tower came crowding out of the stairway. They found the stairs to the floor below. When they got there, they found more of their force, with Reginald Fitzurse and Arthur Muramoto; they had gotten in by the balcony from the central court. They had a crowd of prisoners—fifteen or twenty men and several women. Only one man wore armor; most were in night-dress, including a portly and dignified if badly shaken gentleman who was evidently the castellan himself.

That was the end of the Battle of Tarr-Dombra. By this time, landing craft were coming in with infantry, a few of them with Fitzurse’s new bayonets on their muskets. Ptosphes was with the first one, and he was the first man off, with a big red-and-blue Hostigi flag, which he insisted on raising with his own hands before he did anything else.

“My friends,” Ptosphes was saying, when the castle was secure and they were gathered in its council-room, “you have taken Tarr-Dombra from Gormoth, a thing nobody thought possible. Now, I will give it to you, the Company of Searchers Among the Stars. And when the Nostori are driven out of the Strip, you may have such lands there as you need, to make your buildings and places to land sky-things. This will be written into the agreement which we will sign.”

“And we will make you one of the Company of Searchers Among the Stars,” Barron replied, “with a

thousand shares of common stock.” Ptosphes wasn’t quite sure what that was, but he felt that it must be a great honor. “What’ll we do with these prisoners, now?”

“Well, the captain of the castle, Phebron, is a gentle-man. He is cousin to Prince Gormoth. If you follow our customs, you will furnish oukry for himself and his family and servants and release him under pledge to pay you such ransom as you name. Any other gentlemen you will release in the same way. As to the soldiers, if they are mer-cenaries you may take them into your service, but you may not require them to fight against Gormoth as long as their captains are in his pay. If they are Gormoth’s own soldiers, you may put them to work, as long as they are given soldiers’ pay and soldierly treatment, but you may not require them to fight against anybody, and you must release them as soon as the war with Gormoth is over.”

Count Phebron—at least, he had a title a few below prince—had expected an exorbitant ransom. Instead, he was told that he would be freely released if he swore never again to bear arms against the Prince of Hostigos or the Company of Searchers Among the Stars, and to be their friend in everything saving his duty to the Prince of Nostor. He’d never heard of anything like that, and said so.

“We would rather have your friendship than any ran-som of money, Count Phebron,” Barron told him. “And it won’t cost you anything.”

The implication that neutralizing him was worth more than cash was flattering.

“But is it honorable for me to do this?” he asked.

“It is a common and an honorable practice among our people,” Fitzurse assured him, without adding that it was chiefly used in pacifying the Northern Hemisphere barbar-ians on Terra.

“He should also swear,” Ptosphes hastened to add, “that he will tell Gormoth nothing about the Teran weapons.”

“Oh, nothing of the sort; we want Gormoth to hear all about them, and about the sky-things. And he can tell Gormoth that we are making our own fire-seed and don’t have to depend on Styphon’s House for it. We’ll put the soldiers of Gormoth to work making it, and teach them how, and after the war they can return to Nostor and make fire-seed there.”

Ptosphes was shocked. As soon as Phebron was out of earshot, he exclaimed angrily:

“What god has addled your wits, Roger? I never heard of such folly, to offer to teach an enemy!”

“Nobody who can make fire-seed is our enemy, Ptosphes, because Styphon’s House will be his. If you don’t realize that yet, it will take Gormoth time to learn it, but sooner or later he will.

Daylight filtered down through a fog that hung heavy on both sides of the mountain. Nothing happened on the Nostor side, except that a few carts and a pack-train, bound for the Strip, were turned back by Hostigi soldiers. There was a little shooting down in the Strip, the scattered reports floating up faintly. By mid-afternoon, the refugees began coming up, a few at first and then crowds of them. They had carts, and pack and riding animals, but no meat-cattle. Most were armed. Some of them stopped and shook their fists and shouted curses as they passed the castle, but that was all they did. There were too many guns staring blackly at them from the walls, and they could see the gunners’ smoking matches.

Luther Smith watched them pass and go down the slope on the Nostor side. He was indignant; not because they had been driven from their homes, but because they had been allowed to keep their weapons. He said so to Barron. It wasn’t the first time, Barron reflected, that he had ob-served the ruthlessness of an idealist committed to a war to end war.

“You’ll notice, though, that they haven’t anything to eat.”

Luther hadn’t; now that it was mentioned, he shrugged.

“I don’t pity them. That land down there didn’t belong to them; they stole it from the Hostigi in the first place.”

Well, their grandfathers had. The distinction didn’t seem important to Luther. Nostori had done it, these people were Nostori, therefore they’d done it. He changed the subject by asking Luther how soon he could get work started on the contragravity ship.

A lot of angry people, with weapons and no food. They had all been advised, when evicted from the Strip, to go to the city of Nostor, and told that it was Prince Gormoth’s duty to provide for them. He doubted if Gormoth would see it that way, and even so it was a two days’ journey to the city, and they’d

be hungry before they got there. Hun-gry, and armed, in a countryside full of food.

Have to alert the fifth column by radio. Mixed among those refugees were close to a hundred Hostigi infiltrators.

That night he and Rylla took a landing-craft into Sask to land three men and their oukry a few hours' ride from the city. One was an oukry-trader, suspected dealer in stolen livestock; one was a hunter, suspected smuggler; the third was a known and convicted thief whose head, by rights, ought to be over the town gate at Hostigos. They had all been promised free pardons and rewards if they followed instructions and survived.

"The only thing I'm afraid of is that Sarrask won't believe it," he said as they lifted and turned back toward Tarr-Hostigos.

"He'll believe it. It's such a big pack of lies that nobody would stop to doubt it, and it's just what Sarrask has been waiting for," she said. "But why do you want him to attack us now? Why not just go on and finish Nostor at once?"

"And have Sarrask attack while all our soldiers are north of the mountain? We have between two and three thousand, counting those hooligans from Sastragath. Gormoth has over ten thousand, which would keep our army quite busy. And Sarrask has five thousand of his own. There is a temple of Styphon, and a powder mill, in Sask. We need more powder than we have to conquer Nostor. Rylla, Reginald has a saying: 'The long way round is the shortest road to victory.' He knows what he's talking about."

The next day started early and ended late. From before daylight all the Terrans who could be spared were piloting landing-craft and lorries, ferrying soldiers to the southern border, and by noon only the five hundred Sastragath irregulars, patrolling and pilfering in the Strip, and a hundred men under Julio Almagro at Tarr-Dombra, remained in the north. Fitzurse, Chartiphon and Prince Ptosphes went south to take command in the field.

By noon, too, the skies had cleared, and Arthur Muramoto and Adriaan de Ruyter took airjeeps, each with a hastily instructed Freyan machine-gunner, and flew reconnaissance over Nostor. They found long columns of troops, with artillery, marching south toward Dombra Pass, where an immediate invasion was evidently expected. When caught in inviting density, they were machine-gunned from the air.

The spy radio reported consternation in the city of Nostor. Count Phebron, arriving in the morning after an all day and all night ride, had told his story. He had been accused at once of having sold Tarr-Dombra to Ptosphes and thrown into prison. There were also reports of clashes between the refugees and troops.

The invasion from Sask came at noon of the second day after the taking of Tarr-Dombra. He was in the banquet-hall of Tarr-Hostigos, now converted into staff headquarters, with Rylla, Xentos, Adriaan de Ruyter and a few others, when Reginald Fitzurse appeared in the screen.

"This is it," he said. "Their cavalry crossed just above the mouth of the Darro; our pickets gave them a few shots, bolted, and radioed in, according to plan. They're headed north along the main road to Hostigos, into the ambush we have set up for them. The main army's close behind; we can't observe them because we don't want to let them see our contragravity."

He gave a wave-length combination; Sylvia Davock punched it on another screen. The pickup was in a tree, and occasionally a spray of long triangular leaves would swing in front of it. It looked down into an empty village street, with thatched and whitewashed cottages on either side. Among and between them, hidden from down the road, infantrymen crouched. A few had pikes or halberds; most of them had muskets, a number with bayonets. More would be inside, waiting to fire out of doors and windows. An anvil rang intermittently in the smithy, and a cowbell—worn by something that looked not at all like a cow—went *clank! clank-clank*. Close to the pickup somebody, in a tone of subdued fervence, was imploring somebody else to watch the point of that unprintably qualified pike.

Then they could hear the slap-thudding of many oukry feet. The infantrymen tensed, and gunlocks clicked. There were a few shots. Then three cavalrymen in blue and red sashes and shoulder-capes came tearing, one firing a pistol behind him, and passed out of view. Their pursuers, about two hundred, in

black and orange Saski sashes and the white shoulder-cape that meant mercenaries, followed.

They got to the middle of the straggling village, and then it blew up in their faces. The front of the column became a tangle of dead and wounded oukry and unseated riders. The rear kept on for a moment, pushing the middle off the road and among the houses, where they ran into pikes and the deadly novelty of bayonets. Then a howling tide of Hostigi cavalry, swinging long swords, swept in and chased the survivors down the road. There was a distant squall of musket-fire when they ran into another ambush.

“Main body’s crossed the river, now,” Fitzurse said, from his own screen. “They’re in two divisions, about a thousand infantry in each, one two miles behind the other. We’ll give you that from an airjeep.” He gave another combination, and Sylvia, at the other screen, punched it out. “Ground troops are just going to demonstrate in front of them and stop them; we’re going to let them form a battle-line and then bust it from the air.”

The jeep from which this was being picked up was grounded, out of sight of the enemy. In the foreground, the Hostigi army was deploying; none of these infantry-men had bayonets, and there was a pike or halberd between every two muskets. Field-guns—the carriages were abominably clumsy—were being run into position, and troop-sized blocks of cavalry came up and skittered off to the flanks. Then one of the guns was fired, and another. The jeep rose slightly, to get a view over the heads of the infantry; the advance force of the Saski army, approaching along the road, was forming a line across the fields on either side of it. The Hostigi infantry began firing, the men in the front rank passing back empty muskets and taking loaded ones.

“All right; here we go,” Dave MacDonald’s voice said. “Ready, Gathlon? Don’t fire till I tell you to, now, and don’t fire unless there’s something in front of your guns.”

The vehicle rose rapidly, and the landscape below swung in the screen as it made a half-circle to get on the Saski left flank. Then it came rushing down on the enemy, and Dave yelled, “Let them have it, Gathlon!”

The blocks of cavalry on the flank simply exploded in all directions, leaving a residue of a few dead men and oukry. The infantry saw what was happening and bolted, all but a few with sluggish reflexes or the optimism to try to hit an airjeep with a smoothbore flintlock. A caisson beside one of the field-pieces blew up with a bang. The cavalry at the other end of the line simply weren’t there.

By the time the jeep had turned and was approaching what had started out as a battle, two more jeeps and an aircar were at work, firing ahead of bunches of fugitives to stop them, and amplified voices were shouting offers of quarter. Whole companies were surrendering to aircraft, and Hostigi cavalry were arriving to disarm them.

“Well, that was the Battle of Whatzit,” Fitzurse said. “Nancy and Harmakros and Lisette each have a jeep; they caught the other gang, a couple of miles south, and are herding them north under arms till somebody can take their surrender. Can you leave what you’re doing and come down and give a hand?”

They began to hear firing, ahead, and Rylla, who was piloting the car, put on speed. It wasn’t fighting, though. About a thousand Saski troops had been marched into fields beside the road and were discharging their muskets to empty them before stacking them in surrender. There were two landing-craft on the ground and a third lifting out, and a couple of hundred Hostigi, some of them infantry on captured oukry, were guarding the prisoners. Some trestle-tables had been set up, and as Rylla brought the car down he could see Ptosphes and Fitzurse and Chartiphon and a number of others, among them a dozen Saski in long black and orange cloaks and gilded armor, but without swords or daggers.

There were introductions. One of the Saski was a brother of Prince Sarrask, and the rest were dukes or counts or the equivalent. They were arguing about the pledge of peace and friendship, to which the Saski objected.

“But it is a well-known and honorable usage of war, on our world,” Fitzurse was saying.

“You’re not on your world, now!” the brother of Sarrask retorted, with a belligerence the circumstances didn’t quite justify.

“I wonder about that,” one of his companions said. “A few more battles like this one and it’ll be their world. Peace and friendship with these people might be worth having.”

Ptosphes stepped aside a little. He looked as though the merry-go-round was going too fast for him.

“Roger, what are we going to do with these people?” he whispered.

“Can you trust this brother of Sarrask’s?”

“Great Dralm, no! Not even chained in a dungeon! He’s a bigger villain than Sarrask, and has twice as much wit. This war, and everything else, was his idea. All Sarrask cares for is wine and feasting and beautiful women.”

“Then he’s our boy. Long live Sarrask, Prince of Sask, vassal of King Ptosphes of Hos-Hostigos.”

The conquest of Sask turned out to be a large-scale Tarr-Dombra operation in triplicate. Charley Clifford was in charge of the taking of the temple farm, three miles south-east of the city; most of the men he had with him had been workers at the Hostigos powder mill, and it was hoped that they would know what not to do to avoid blowing the place up. Reginald Fitzurse took command of the detachment to take the temple itself, making a cryptic remark to the effect that dealing with turbulent priests was a Fitzurse tradition. The main force, led by Barron, Chartiphon and Ptosphes, took the citadel-palace in the center of the city. At all three the surprise was complete, and only at the third was there any serious fighting.

An hour after it was over, they were gathered in Sarrask’s throne-room. Ptosphes, who had by this time gotten used to the idea of being King of Hos-Hostigos, was sitting on Sarrask’s throne, one booted foot resting lightly on the golden crown of Sask. Rylla stood at his right, clutching Roger Barron’s hand but keeping a properly haughty Princess-Rylla-of-Hos-Hostigos expression on her face. The others were ranged on either side, and there were screens for Luther Smith and Adriaan de Ruyter at Tarr-Hostigos, Julio Almagro at Tarr-Dombra, and Zahanov and Margaret Hale on the *Stellex*. Prince Sarrask had been given time to dress—magnificently in cloth-of-gold—and was standing before his conqueror, his nobles about him. There was no fear in his face; only anger which had become utter fury when he saw what Ptosphes was using for a footstool.

“Is this an honorable thing, Ptosphes?” he was demanding. “To hire a gang of accursed sorcerers and witches, from Styphon only knows what place of abominations, and murder brave soldiers with many-shooting guns from sky-things? Is that a decent way to make war?”

“It’s a way to win a war, when you’ve been attacked by treachery and without warning.”

Sarrask actually became angrier, which hadn’t seemed possible.

“And what a pack of dirty lies that was!” he fairly howled. “You sent those three rogues yourself; If I had them here now, I’d kill them with my bare hands if you shot me the next moment.”

He was interrupted by a bustle at the door. Reginald Fitzurse, wearing his old Terran Federation Army tunic, with a blaze of decoration-ribbons on his breast, strode in. Behind him, soldiers frog-marched eight or ten prisoners, all in the black and red robes of Styphon’s House, hustling them to the throne and throwing them to the floor at Ptosphes’ feet. There was a gasp of horror from Sarrask and his nobles.

One of the priests picked himself up and glared at Ptosphes.

“There is still time,” he cried, “for you to humble your-self and repent!” Then he pointed at Fitzurse. “But none for him! He threatened to kill me, an archpriest, at my very altar.”

Now he knew why Reginald Fitzurse’s name had always stirred something in his memory; now he understood the remark about turbulent priests. There had been a Reginald Fitzurse, centuries ago, who, with three comrades, had slain at his very altar a turbulent priest—Thomas á Becket.

“He would have saved me the trouble. Maybe it would have been better for you if he had,” Ptosphes told the priest. Then he asked Fitzurse: “What did you find at the temple?”

“Oh, quite a treasure. Gold and silver bullion, specie, merchandise of all sorts, jewels. Five hundred fine new muskets, all alike. And ten tons of fire-seed, in twenty-pound kegs. Charley called me; he found fifty tons at the farm.”

Sarrask gave a strangled cry of rage. “You lying old scoundrel!” he shouted at the archpriest. “You told me you only had a hundred small kegs. I wish he had killed you, and taken all day about it. And where did you steal those muskets? From my own armory, I’ll wager.” He turned to Fitzurse. “You mean they have fire-seed at the farm, too? A hundred great casks of it?”

“Of course; that’s where they make it. In a day or so, we’ll be turning out about two hundred pounds a day there.”

“You mean you can make fire-seed? Just like they can?”

Nobody bothered to answer him. Ptosphes held the crown out on his toe.

“Sarrask, do you want this back?” he asked.

“What good will it do me? It’s the crown of Sask, and there is no Sask now; only Hostigos.”

They hadn’t meant to proclaim the Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos until they had Nostor as well as Sask to support the pretension. It suddenly struck Barron that now, how-ever, was the time to do it.

“Oh, no, Sarrask,” he said. “There will still be a Sask, and if you wish, you may be Prince of Sask. As a subject, of course, of his Majesty Ptosphes, King of Hos-Hostigos.”

Sarrask’s jaw went slack for a moment, then tightened. That was evidently a Hos of another color.

“And I will be sovereign here in Sask?”

“You will be obliged to furnish me troops, at need, and there will be a matter of tributes for the support of the King-dom, of course,” Ptosphes told him. “And you will never suffer Styphon’s House to take root here again.”

Sarrask laughed. “You think I’m crazy, to let these robbers come back, now that you’ve rid me of them?” he demanded. Then he looked at the crown, still dangling on Ptosphes’ toe. “At least, you might have the decency to hand it to me on the point of your sword,” he said.

“Oh, of course.” Ptosphes wasn’t wearing a sword; only a 10-mm automatic. “Chartiphon, lend me yours.”

As soon as the conquerors came home to Tarr-Hostigos, Nancy Patterson and Xentos went to work on the pro-clamation. Nancy furnished the basis for it, from the microbook library, an old document from the Second Century Pre-Atomic. There were a few words in it to which Charley Clifford took exception, but, in Sosti translation, he agreed that they’d be appropriate. And there was the matter of a new flag for Hos-Hostigos. Ptosphes wanted to use the old red flag of Hostigos, with the blue halberd-head; it had to be carefully explained that that wouldn’t do. What was finally adopted was a quarter-arc rainbow on a white field. No matter who got annexed later, he’d still be able to find his colors in the flag.

Sarrask and a score of his nobles, brought from Sask in a hastily luxurized landing-craft, gathered with the Hostigi nobility and gentry in the great hall and listened while Xen-tos read solemnly from the scroll:

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes nec-essary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . . a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should de-clare the causes which impel them to the separation. . .”

A great many of the charges against King Kaiphranos of Hos-Harphax were grossly exaggerated; well, maybe the case against George III of England had been slightly over-stated in Nancy’s original. Nobody paid too much atten-tion to that; they were in too complete agreement with the denunciations of the “rapacious priesthood of a false god,” which made up the bulk of the proclamation. Fi-nally, “we, the princes, nobles and people of Hos-Hostigos,” after declaring themselves, as they of a right ought to be, free and independent, pledged allegiance to king Ptosphes I and undying friendship to the Company of Searchers Among the Stars.

One thing, Stellar Explorations, Ltd., now had a real treaty, with a real sovereign power. That was drawn up, in triplicate and bi-lingually, and signed by all parties.

The Saski were feasted; they tasted chilled wine, and ice cream. The net day they were taken by air to Tarr-Dom-bra. They looked at the *Stellex* through a telescope, and saw a screen-view of the planet from a thousand miles; they didn’t quite believe that. But they did believe, be-cause they saw and fired it, that the powder mill was ac-tually making fire-seed, and when they returned home, loaded with presents, they found that Charley Clifford had production at the Sask mill up to a hundred and fifty pounds a day and increasing it daily.

Chartiphon was still at Sask, with five hundred Hostigi troops. One of the first things he did was empty the jails and recruit the inmates into a secret police, headed by the three disreputables from Hostigos. All Sarrask’s mercen-aries and half of his own Saski soldiers were shifted north to the Nostor border; the

rest were put to work demolish-ing the temple of Styphon. It was incredibly rich; the gold that plated the minaret alone was worth enough to pay the mercenaries for a year. Sarrask got half the loot, which completely reconciled him to losing the war and his inde-pendence and insured that Styphon's House would hate him equally with Ptosphes and the Terrans.

The hangovers from the feasting had barely evaporated before all Hostigos was demanding the immediate invasion and conquest of Nostor. After Tarr-Dombra and Sask, nothing seemed impossible, and weren't they a mighty kingdom, now? Even Ptosphes was impatient to add Nos-tor to his realm, and Xentos flew up from Sask, where he had been re-organizing the government, to add his voice. He was worried about the possibility that King Kaiphranos would mobilize to recover his lost princedoms, and that Styphon's House, infuriated but not seriously damaged by the Sask expulsion and expropriation, would preach a general holy war.

That worried Nancy Patterson, too. "We're going to have this whole civilization against us," she prophesied. "Not just King Kaiphranos and Hos-Harphax; the other two kingdoms, down the river and along the coast, too. There are temples and priests of Styphon in all of them, and they'll all be preaching a crusade against us. Roger, this isn't just politics. This is religion. Religion isn't so im-portant to us, but these people aren't rationalists; they're believers. The same mentality that existed in Europe at the time of the Crusades and the Reformation and counter-Reformation. We're the enemies of Styphon; the infidel."

Reginald Fitzurse wasn't underestimating the power of religious fanaticism, either. There was always some half-crazy messiah stirring up the Eurasian barbarians, and he knew how hard a holy war was to stop, once it started. But he also knew how dangerously low this ammunition, es-pecially for the 15-mm machine guns, was. Thousands and thousands of rounds had been wasted during the Sask Blitz, by ill-trained Freyans who had had to handle the guns because Terrans were needed to pilot the vehicles. He was trying to explain that to Ptosphes and Xentos.

"We didn't have much to start with, and we can't get any more. We haven't the means of making it, and it would take our ship a year to go to our world and back for it." He didn't bother to add that in any case they had no money to buy any. "If we fight Nostor, it will have to be with your muskets."

Just the day before, Julio Almagro had been talking about seeing if he could get one of the huge 8-bore mus-kets rifled and fitted with sights, so that he could hit some-thing with it.

Ptosphes looked hurt and puzzled; normal reaction to the discovery that the supposedly inexhaustible is close to being exhausted. Then he brightened.

"But there are the sky-things," he said. "Look at this fool of a Gormoth, massing his army in front of Dombra Pass, waiting for us to march over the mountain. Because the pass used to be the only road, he still thinks it is. He hasn't realized, yet, that the whole sky is a road now."

Mark another one up for Ptosphes. It had been quite a while after the fact, on Terra, before military, political and economic thinking had adjusted to that simple little fact.

"That's true, Ptosphes," he said. "But we haven't enough sky-things, or enough people to fly the ones we have. We'll have to train your people and teach them to fly. And we'll have to build big sky-things, that can lift a thousand soldiers at a time, and we'll first have to teach people to help us do the work. And we'll need more fire-seed than we have. All that will take time."

"It will take work, also." Rylla had been sitting quietly beside him, saying nothing until now. "It will not be done by shouting 'On to Nostor!' or boasting about how we will feast in Gormoth's palace."

"No, it won't, her father agreed. "And too many of the people think the Terrans are magicians who can do every-thing for them." He turned to Xentos. "We will have a meeting of the Council tomorrow afternoon. Roger and Reginald and the others will explain what must be done. Then, in the evening, we will have a great feast. Not only the namely men, but the leaders among the townsfolk and the common soldiers and workers and even the peasants; the ones to whom the others listen. Instead of tale-telling and drinking-songs, there will be speaking. Then they can go and inspire the others."

"We must strike quickly, that is certain," Xentos said. "There is much unrest in Nostor. We must act before it dies down."

He was right about that. The fifth column radio was call-ing for speedy invasion, too. With a fine disregard for chro-nology, they were spreading the story that Styphon's House had coerced Prince Gormoth into war with



Hostigos because Prince Ptosphes had discovered how to make his own fire-seed and was no longer dependent on them. This was uncritically accepted by the people; there was a rising tide of anticlericalism, and everybody was blaming Styphon's House for everything. Nancy was almost cha-grined at the lack of crusading spirit among the Nostori.

By this time, too, there were a large number of Strip refugees in the city of Nostor, clamoring for relief; the soup-kitchens Gormoth set up only insulted and infuriated them. Most of the land in the Strip had been tenant-farmed, and the absentee-landlord owners were, many of them, influential nobles. A few were gotten to and told that there was enough gold in the temple of Styphon to indemnify all of them.

Then there was Count Phebron. As soon as contragravity began appearing north of the mountains, it was realized that he had been telling the truth about how he had lost Tarr-Dombra. He was promptly released, and Gormoth sought his advice.

"Make peace," Phebron told his cousin bluntly. "One of these machines can wipe out a thousand men in the time it takes to drain a wine-cup. Ptosphes has made him-self a king. If you submit, he will deal as fairly with you as he did with Sarrask. If you don't, he'll put your head up over your own gate."

"Suppose I put yours there?" Gormoth was reported to have said.

"Then, in time, Ptosphes will take it down to make place for yours. He has sworn friendship with me, and vengeance is the duty of a friend."

A good idea of Gormoth's state of mind could be gotten from the fact that Phebron was not even banished from the court. Gormoth may have thought that he might need somebody with whom the now King of Hos-Hostigos had sworn friendship.

And the mercenaries, even those directly in the pay of Styphon's House, were dissatisfied. Most of them were in the Dombra Line, awaiting the attack that didn't come. They had all hoped to enrich themselves by the plunder of Hostigos, and now that hope was vanished. Not a few of them had experienced, and all had heard about, machinegun fire from the air. They were business men, and they knew bad business when they found themselves on the short end of it.

Except for the difference in language and dress, and the absence of cigar-smoke, it could have been any political rally banquet he had ever seen since he had been a teen-age illegal voter. It was a big success; the boys from the precincts came, were fed and liquored, received the Word, and went away full of party spirit. The next day, the work began.

Luther Smith now had a finely drawn set of plans for a contragravity ship. Nobody, himself least of all, expected it, when finished, to bear more than a coincidental resemblance to them. First, he had to design a jet engine that wouldn't set the ship's timbers on fire as soon as it was started. He solved that with a nuclear-electric engine and a big blower-fan from the *Stellex*. After that, he was faced with the problem of building a ship around it and the contragravity generator that would leave any room at all for payload. By this time, the estimated speed had inched down to eighty mph.

Lourenço Narvaes tried to take on the contragravity pilot training program, in the time he could spare from helping Luther on the ship and Charley Clifford at the two powder mills. He became disheartened by the total inability of any Freyan to grasp the theory of the contragravity field. Hell, they didn't even grasp the theory of gravity; things fell because down was the place for them. Rylla and Harmakros had become skilled pilots, and at a pinch they could handle a landing-craft alone. All they knew about it was that if you pushed this and pulled that, so-and-so would happen. With Nancy Patterson and, when he could find time, Dave MacDonald, to help them out of difficulties, they were able to handle it themselves, and almost all their alumni made good light-vehicle pilots. Many went on to lorries or helping on landing-craft, and a number were graduated to power equipment.

There was a lot of this. When the *Stellex* had been fitted out, it had been hoped that they would find an inhabitable but uninhabited planet; while Adriaan took a couple of them on the yacht and streaked back to Terra to file claim, the rest would dig in and make the colony self-sustaining. So they had lumbering machines and excavating and mining equipment and construction equipment and a lot of contragravity lifters of all sizes, and half a dozen big contragravity manipulators sprouting hooks and claws and grapples and pusher-arms in all directions. There was even a sawmill and a forging-hammer and a small

nuclear smelt-ing furnace. The lot of it was lightered down and put into use as soon as people could be taught to use it.

By the end of the second week, there were still very few visible and tangible accomplishments, but there were a lot of young Freyans around who could be trusted with ma-nipulators and bulldozers and things like that and wouldn't do anything utterly disastrous with or to them.

Troop morale was good. Most of the soldiers on the Strip were professionals; they thought this was a wonder-ful war—plenty to eat and drink, lots of pretty girls, and nobody taking shots at them. They knew it wouldn't last, but they were going to enjoy it while it did. The five hundred so-called cavalry from Sastragath were different. There was no looting on this side of the mountain, and they all thought that every Nostori peasant was a rich miser with a crock of gold under the hearthstone. They were getting restless, and Fitzurse was worried. He had a talk with their captain, and explained that there would be no invasion until the big sky-thing was built.

"You'll never get it finished the way you're going at it," the Sastragathi told him. "I watched those peasants you have cutting timber over here in the Strip. Why, I have at least a hundred men who could each do more lumbering work than any five of those clodhoppers."

"It seems," Fitzurse said, reporting the conversation to Barron, "that after brigandage and cattle-herding, lum-bering is the third largest industry in Sastragath. It occurs to me that we could put some of those fellows to work."

"It occurs to me," Barron said, "that we could buy cut timbers in Sastragath. Luther has his jet finished; he could build some kind of a temporary lumber-scow with it and the generator, and for a few kegs of powder we might get all the timbers we need."

After a visit to Sastragath, which was just west of north-ern Hostigos and southern Nostor, Fitzurse decided that the idea was feasible. He didn't think much of the manners and customs of the Sastragathi—the former he described as non-existent, and the latter beastly—but they did have timbers, logs up to a hundred feet long and four feet at the butt, and they could cut more as desired. They rafted it, when they had high water, into Nostor. That and the herds of zhoumy, big yak-like animals, were traded for anything they couldn't raise, make or pilfer for themselves. There was no temple of Styphon in Sastragath, and they were delighted to have fire-seed brought right to their log-stock-aded town. They couldn't understand, though, how the Hostigi were going to get the timbers out.

At first they couldn't, that is. The next day Dave MacDonald, who was in charge of lumbering, arrived with a landing-craft, Luther Smith, and three recently skilled Hostigi workmen. They unloaded the big generator, built a log frame around it and a log-raft around that, lifted it, and towed it out, detouring over southern Nostor to the alarm of the populace. There was a panic among the troops in the Dombra Line when they passed over them, too. The next raft was bigger. Its frame was built at the shipyard, it mounted the blower-jet, and it didn't have to be towed. This thing shuttled back and forth, usually car-rying a deck-load of boulders which could be dumped onto Prince Gormoth's army, for some time. Enough tim-ber to build three ships like the one under construction only cost a half ton of Styphon's Best from Sask.

Beside timbers, iron was needed. It was learned that there was a little pryncedom called Xanx, just south of Sask, where there were some bog-iron mines and a few crude furnaces and forges. Julio Almagro took one of the landing craft down and traded four kegs of powder for enough iron to load the vehicle. When he went back for another load, he was invited to dine with the prince, an elderly and rather shabby gentleman named Lykarses, who wanted to know how much he would have to give for a great-cask of fire-seed. That would be a half ton.

"Why, your Highness, I'm afraid I can't sell you that much," Almagro regretted. "King Ptosphes is at war with the Prince of Nostor, now, and he will only allow limited quantities to be shipped out of the kingdom. Now, if you were subject to King Ptosphes, of course, he would be obliged to give you all you needed for the defense of your pryncedom."

"But I'm a subject of King Kaiphranos."

"So was King Ptosphes, until very recently. I'll tell you what you do; come, with a few of your gentlemen, to Tarr-Hostigos and sign our Declaration of Independence and swear allegiance to King

Ptosphes, and then Xanx will be part of the Great Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos, and..."

"Does King Ptosphes really and truly make his own fire-seed? I'd heard that said, but it's so hard to believe—"

He went to Tar-Hostigos with five or six of his courtiers, all as elderly and shabby as himself, and when he saw the powder mill he cursed Styphon's House for almost ten minutes without repeating a single malediction. It seemed that, until now, he had believed that fire-seed was made by Styphon Himself, and that its manufacture was totally beyond any human power.

So Prince Lykarses swore allegiance and was given a pretty new rainbow flag, and a flashlight and a magnifying glass and a few other gadgets. He wanted to do his part in the war with Nostor by furnishing five hundred infantry. After he saw the shipyard, however, he agreed that fifty blacksmiths would be worth much more to the war-effort.

The contragravity ship was finished. She looked like old pictures of Noah's Ark, except that Noah's Ark hadn't had a sheet-metal jet-and-air-scoop assembly and an air-rud-der on top or a big bulge amidships for a contragravity generator. After some hesitation, she was christened *King Ptosphes*. Ptosphes was delighted, even after seeing her, which only went to show that he'd never seen a real con-tragravity ship. On her trial voyage, CGS *King Ptosphes* reached sixty-five mph, which at least made her a formi-dable competitor for oxcarts and river barges. She could carry five hundred cavalry and their mounts, or, badly crowded, two thousand infantry.

Naturally, everybody began shouting "On to Nostor!" again.

Luther Smith was one. This was a war to end war and make Freya safe for democracy and strike off the chains of theocratic despotism. Nancy was another; she wanted Nostor conquered before the crusaders began swarming in. And Reginald Fitzurse had drawn up an ambitious plan for beating the army of Nostor by detail through mobility. Only Roger Barron was against it.

"This isn't going to be any Sask Blitz," he told them. "You can't win a war on nothing but mobility; you have to have fire-power too, and we don't have that. It will take a lot of hard ground-fighting, with conventional Freyan weapons. That will mean damage to the country, and the people who'll be worst hurt by it are the ones who are most favorable to us now. Fitz, you've been quoting Clausewitz about the necessity to destroy the armed strength of the enemy; I wish you'd remember the Clausewitzian quotation everybody knows—War is a continuation of policy by other means. Policy is to add Nostor to Hos-Hostigos, without creating any more enmity than we did at Sask."

"Well, if we have to conquer Nostor with muzzle load-ers, we'd better do it while we still have powder for them," Charley Clifford said. "Powder's seventy five percent niter, and I'm not getting enough of it."

"Well, don't look at me," Lisette Krull said. "I've been having to get it a shovelful from under this manure-pile and a shovelful from under that manure-pile, and we're just running out of manure-piles."

"Well, that's the way Styphon's House got it," some-body argued.

"They didn't attempt the sort of quantity production we're in, and they didn't scatter it around the way we're doing. A whole ton and a half to this Prince Lykarses of Xanx!" Charley fairly tore his hair. "We're using up the niter they accumulated over years, faster than it can be replaced. We can't keep that up."

"Can you keep it up three months?" Adriaan de Ruyter asked.

"I suppose so. What can we do by then?"

"Send the *Stellex* to Yggdrasil and back. It's only twenty light-years away. You know what Yggdrasil produces, don't you?"

"Guano." Terra was still importing huge quantities of it, for the soil-reclamation projects in the war-ruined North-ern Hemisphere. "That's right; nitrates. What'll we use for money, though?"

"Foodstuffs," Almagro said promptly. "They still have to supply themselves by carniculture and hydroponics; Terran vegetation won't even grow in the soil. They have to process the guano before they ship it—Hey, with the processing plants they have, it'd be no trick at all to extract pure  $\text{KNO}_3$ . A shipload of pure niter would make an awful lot of fire-seed."

Everybody was happy. Charley saw his powder mills on full production. Lisette would at last get out of the barn-yards and oukry-stables. And when they called Karl Zahanov, on ship watch again, he grinned in his gray beard. In his book, planets were just places you took spaceships to and from.

Everybody was happy except the five hundred Sastragathi irregulars. The great sky-thing was built, and the promised invasion wasn't going to start at all. So they mu-tinied, fortunately when the *King Ptosphes* was available and could load a thousand mercenaries and Nostori reg-ulars. The mutiny was put down, and the mutineers dis-armed.

Their captain, forlorn without his weapons, was highly *indignant*.

"You promised us that we would be taken to Nostor; that there would be an invasion as soon as the big sky-thing was finished—"

"We promised nothing of the sort; we told you that there would not be an invasion till after it was built, and we said nothing about how long after. In any case, you have freed us from any promises to you by this mutiny. You are no longer soldiers of the King. You will be paid what is owing to you, and you will be taken back to your own country."

Barron talked to the captain privately:

"You know, I suppose, that the Sastragathi no longer need to trade with Nostor; we bring them fire-seed and everything else. Well, where you don't have to trade, you can raid." He paused, and the Sastragathi captain's eyes widened momentarily; that happy thought had not oc-curred to him before. "We will give your men their pay in fire-seed, we will give each one a good oukry, we will re-tum their arms, and we will land them in Sastragath on the Nostor border. Will that satisfy them?"

Satisfy them; it delighted them. When they were loaded, with their mounts, aboard the *King Ptosphes*, they were happily singing their folk-songs, all of which seemed to deal with the exploits of distinguished robbers.

There were six of the seventy foot landing craft; he and Rylla took one, Nancy and Harmakros took another, and the other four were handled by similar Terro-Freyan teams. The ship hauled iron from Xanx to Sastragath to trade for meat, Sastragathi hardwoods to Sask. Meat and grain and root-vegetables and fruit and casks of wine and bales of the dried blossoms from which the tea was made went up to the *Stellex*. Adriaan de Ruyter brought down his two hundred foot space-yacht *Voortrekker*, and she was berthed in an improvised and growing spaceport in the Strip. Three of the six landing-craft were also to be left behind; the berthing-space aboard the *Stellex* was thus added to cargo-capacity. Zahanov and Lourenço Narvaes and Margaret Hale and Sylvia Davock would take her on her voyage, with four young Freyans whom they had been training to do ordinary crewmen's work. They had learned considerable merely in the process of getting the cargo aboard and stowed. Finally, when the *Stellex* was crammed with every scrap of food that would go into her, there was a farewell feast and then she broke orbit and vanished into hyperspace.

Ten days later, a second and larger contragravity ship was finished. She was christened *Princess Rylla*.

While open to travel, the frontiers were closely guarded, and there were radios at most of the posts. One of these reported that a party of cavalry from Dazour, escorting two noblemen, had been halted by a patrol. The noblemen—Xentos recognized their names; they were members of the court of Prince Tabalkon of Dazour—said that they wanted to discuss pledges of friendship and trade between their sovereign and King Ptosphes. Maybe they meant that. Maybe Tabalkon wanted an embassy in Hostigos as a base for espionage and propaganda. Or maybe he was ready to launch an invasion. There had been some examples from Old Terran history of things like that.

The aircar ride to Tarr-Hostigos impressed the envoys. So did the spectacle, carefully arranged, of both the *King Ptosphes* and the *Princess Rylla* in the air, and the guard of honor of five hundred infantry, each with a long trian-gular bayonet on his musket. And, of course, the electric lights, and the chilled wine, and the screens and radios.

They began by talking about trade. They wanted iron and lumber and hides; they had textiles and wine

and grain to sell. And they inquired, with elaborate noncha-lance, if it were really true that the Hostigi made their own fire-seed, without the help of the priests of Styphon. They were shown that it was, but they were told that because of the war with Nostor, only very little could be released for export, and it was not too delicately hinted that if the Prince of Dazour brought his country into the Kingdom of Hos-Hostigos, he could have all he needed.

By this time, reports had gotten from the western border to Prince Gormoth's capital that the five hundred Sastragathi, joined by a thousand more of their countrymen, were pillaging and burning, committing all the usual atroc-ities and a few they seemed to have invented specially for the occasion. The spy radio reported that Gormoth had pulled a thousand troops out of the Dombra Line and or-dered them west.

Their column was kept under air observation, and the two envoys from Dazour were taken for a look at them and the Dombra Line. The troops on the march were not mo-lested, but the two Dazouri saw some bombing of the Dombra Line—empty oxygen cylinders packed with blasting explosive—and were horrified at the effect.

There was only one road across southern Nostor; about half way from Dombra Pass to the Sastragath border, it crossed a deep and narrow gorge on a wooden bridge. By the end of the second day, the Nostori column was within a few hours' march of it, and made camp. The next morn-ing, when they took the road again, they were under ob-servation of several aircars, including one in which Barron had the two Dazouri diplomats.

"We are going to show you something, now," he told them, when the head of the column was within two hundred yards of the bridge. "Watch this."

Then he dived and swept over the heads of the Nostori. Before any of them could do anything, he was zooming up at the bridge, and as he did, he let go his rocket-booster.

The aircar shot up to twenty thousand feet in a matter of seconds; when it was losing momentum, he turned in a wide circle and brought it down again. The bridge was blazing from one end to the other, and the road to the east of it was empty, except for a litter of discarded pikes and muskets and a few casualties who had been knocked down and trampled in the rush. Nostori soldiers, mounted and on foot, were streaming away in both directions, scat-tering as they went.

"That was an army, a moment ago," he told his passen-gers. "It may be an army again, but not for a couple of days."

"But why did you spare them?" one of the Dazouri asked. "You could have wiped them all out with the flame-weapon."

"Oh, that would have been too horrible! We would never do a thing like that," he assured them. "That is, not unless it were a case of national survival. If Hos-Hostigos were invaded by some overwhelming force—the only such enemy I can think of would be Hos-Harphax—we would find ourselves driven to use even worse weapons than that, of course. Beside, those are trained soldiers, though they don't look like it at the moment. When Prince Gormoth submits and brings Nostor into Hos-Hostigos, as he will inside a month, we will want them. Now, down there; there's the Dombra Line, again. Wait till I show you something. Here, use the binoculars. Those four big can-non, two on either side of the road. Bombards, throw three hundred pound stone balls. They're new ones, but they're probably the last of their kind that will be made. . ."

"We must go home to Dazour tomorrow," one of them said. "Prince Tabalkon must be told about this. Today, we have seen the whole world changed."

"I am glad," the other said, "that I am an old man. I will not have to live long in this changed world."

The next morning, the two Dazouri envoys got a closer view of Prince Gormoth's three hundred pounders. All four of them, with their mounts, were sitting in the outer enclosure of Tarr-Hostigos. The night before, Dave MacDonald and Harmakros, with two hundred of the commando force, had dropped onto the gun positions and held them until four Hostigi machine operators brought down contragravity manipulators and each snatched away one of the giant bombards. The whole operation cost three casualties and two hundred-odd rounds of rifle and pistol ammunition.

The two Dazouri heard the story, inspected the bom-bards, and then got into the landing-craft that was to take them back to Dazour.

Three days later, Prince Tabalkon of Dazour decided to repudiate his allegiance to Hos-Harphax and take his country into Hos-Hostigos. It took some argument to persuade him not to have the priests at the Dazour temple tied to kegs of fire-seed and blown up. Once he could get along without them, he had wanted to indulge what had long been his real feeling toward them.

On the way to Tarr-Hostigos from the discussions, Roger Barron detoured for another look at the Dombra Line. It was empty, marked only by the raw-earth scars of trenches and gun-emplacements. Swinging north along the road, he saw the army on the march toward Nostor. They were going to inform Prince Gormoth that the war was over.

A couple of days later, Count Phebron and several companions rode up the pass road to Tarr-Dombra and from there were airlifted to Tarr-Hostigos. Prince Gormoth, they said, wanted admission to Hos-Hostigos on the same terms as Prince Tabalkon. He also wanted assistance in suppressing the Sastragathi brigands who were ravaging the western part of his principedom.

Everybody was happy except Nancy Patterson, and she would have been except that she was convinced that the crusades were about to start. Kings and princes everywhere would be taking up the sword; huge armies would be marching to crush the infidel, joined at every crossroads by fresh throngs shouting "Styphon wills it!" Every day of postponement would make the final catastrophe that much more catastrophic. She said as much, one afternoon, when half a dozen of them were lounging in the room at Tarr-Dombra that had been fitted up as a bar and clubroom.

"Nancy, it isn't going to happen," he told her, a trifle impatiently. "Styphon's House is finished, even in Harphax."

"But you can't just wipe a religion out of existence over-night," she objected.

"Not a religion, no. But Styphon's House wasn't really one. A religion needs more than priests and temples. It needs believers with deep emotional faith, believers who love their religion as the people who followed Peter the Hermit loved theirs, and that Styphon's House never had. Look at the way the people of Sask, and Dazour, and Nostor, turned on them. And the Prince of Balkron, south of Dazour."

He had been one of the more recent seceders from Hos-Harphax; to prove his sincerity, he had shipped the heads of eighteen priests of Styphon, each packed in a powder-keg full of salt, to Tarr-Hostigos. Nancy had been present when they had been opened; she grimaced at the memory.

"Where Styphon's House made their mistake was right at the beginning, by over-specialization. When they discovered the niter-sulphur-charcoal combination, they thought they had everything they needed, and they adopted this policy of supplying the rulers with powder in exchange for forced-levy offerings from their subjects. The people hated them, and they were stupid enough not to care. They thought they could control the people through the princes, and their only control over the princes was based on the secret of making powder and their ability to supply or withhold it. And now the secret isn't a secret any more, and their monopoly's busted."

"What I can't see," Almagro said, "is why King Kaiphranos hasn't gone to war with us on his own account. He's just sitting and watching his kingdom break up under him."

"That's all he can do. With the annexation of Balkron, we now have forty five thousand troops, not counting Sastragathi. King Kaiphranos has, in the original principedom and city of Harphax, a total of fifteen thousand. The rest of the military strength of Hos-Harphax is controlled by the—put it in quotes—subject princes. That was Styphon's House, too. They managed to keep the kingdom divided, every prince virtually independent of the Great King, and completely independent of one another. That's why we've been making these princes who join Hos-Hostigos turn the bulk of their troops over to us. What we want is a national army, because Hos-Hostigos is going to be a nation, not a snake-pit. We can do that, because we're something new and we're making it a condition of membership. If Kaiphranos tried to do it, he'd have a civil war on his hands. I'm about half expecting him to have one, no matter what he does."

"The mercenary captains aren't taking service with Kai-phranos, any more," Reginald Fitzurse remarked. "And we have to fight them off with a club."

Quite a few free-companies, he had been hearing, were going down the river to take service in Hos-Rathon, in the delta country, and in Hos-Bleth, to the east along the coast. The mercenary business

itself wasn't too good, any more. Hos-Hostigos wanted no more of them. He thought of the many things, none of them good, that Machiavelli, out of long experience, had had to say about mercenar-ies—*They plunder you in peace and let your enemies plunder you in war. You cannot rely upon them, for they will always aspire to their own greatness. . . .* Maybe it would be a good plan to collect a lot of free-companies and use them in colonizing the other continents. He was turning that idea over in his mind when he became aware of what Nancy Patterson was saying:

“Well, gosh, I won't cry if there isn't any crusade. Then Harmakros won't be going off to war as soon as we're married.”

“Huh?” Charley Clifford almost shouted. “You mean you and Harmakros are getting married?”

“Yes, we are, in about a week.” She rose, picked up a bottle and carefully corked it. “You say one dam' word about him not being human and I'm going to smash this over your head!”

Then she set the bottle down and went out. Clifford looked at it silently until she was gone.

“I can understand her attitude, of course, but—” He shrugged. “I hope having a child by Harmakros isn't any-thing she's counting on too heavily. She won't, you know.”

“Do you know that, or is that just your professional opinion?”

Having a child by him might be something important to Rylla. They hadn't discussed it, but he suspected that it would be. The curse of overpopulation hadn't put its mark on the Freyan mind as it had on the Terran.

“Well, look, Roger,” Charley said. “Life here originated and evolved independently of life on Terra. We and the Freyans started from two different puddles of living slime, seven hundred light-years apart. You know the mecha-nism of reproduction. The sperm and the ovum are away up the structural ladder. Each contains twenty four chro-mosomes, with us; I don't know how many for the Frey-ans. Each of them contains thousands of genes. Here, for a simplified example, suppose a Terran locksmith made a lock, and a locksmith here on Freya made a key, neither knowing what the other was doing. What odds would you give against the key working in the lock? Well, that's al-most an even-money bet beside the odds against a Terran spermatozoon fertilizing a Freyan ovum, or vice versa.”

That sounded reasonable, until he began to think about it.

“Wait a minute, Charley. Every physical characteristic stems, originally, from the gene for it; that's correct, isn't it? And you, yourself, have admitted that Freyans do not possess any non-human characteristics, or lack any hu-man ones.”

“I see what you're getting at, Roger.” Charley frowned. “Superficially, it sounds convincing. But, dammit, these people. . .” Then he changed the subject by shifting to the research work he intended doing once the powder mills could run themselves and he could get back to medical work.

The third ship was finished. She was almost twice as big as the *King Ptosphe*s, and had a speed of a hundred mph. Luther Smith thought that now was the time to embark the armies of Hos-Hostigos and go to Harphax to tell King Kaiphranos that he was through. Julio Almagro was re-minded of an old Spanish proverb about the converted Moor eating pork three times a day. And even if this belligerence hadn't been so incongruous for Luther, the idea was pure nonsense. Administrative problems were already piling up faster than they could be dealt with, without cre-ating a host of new ones.

Beside, Kaiphranos would find out where he stood soon enough.

It didn't take him long. It was barely three weeks after Nancy's marriage to Harmakros before a big forty-oared barge came up the river to Balkron and an embassy from King Kaiphranos journeyed overland by oukry to Tarr-Hostigos. They brought friendly greetings from their king, who wanted to enter into alliance with the Great King of Hos-Hostigos and make agreements of peace, friendship and trade. Styphon's House, they announced, no longer existed in Hos-Harphax. The temples and farms had been seized by the Crown, and the priests expelled, but not be-fore a number had been questioned under torture. As a result of this last, King Kaiphranos now knew how to make fire-seed for himself.

Why, in the five or six centuries that Styphon's House had been battering on the kings and princes and people of the Great River valley, this simple little idea hadn't oc-curred to anybody before would be one of the perpetual mysteries. Maybe everybody had been afraid Styphon really would do something about

it.

Her father was alone at his writing-table, with piles of parchments and stacks of the soft white paper of the Terrans in front of him. For a moment, he did not hear them enter, and kept on writing. Then he raised his head and smiled at them, and picked up his poignard to strike the gong and call for wine. They sat down facing him.

"I'm not hearing any more complaints from western Nostor about Sastragathi raids," he said.

"Oh, no; that's stopped," Roger said. "I told their chief that if it didn't, there'd be no more ships with iron and powder, and we'd buy no more cattle and lumber from them. He accused us of being as bad as the priests of Sty-phon; I assured him that we were much worse. On that basis, we got along very pleasantly. Why, King Ptosphes, there is something we want to talk about."

"Why, of course, Roger." He closed his eyes and mas-saged them gently with his palms.

"What is it; this visit of King Kaiphranos? We will have to entertain him very lav-ishly, and I'm afraid he'll find Tarr-Hostigos small and mean, by his standards. You know—"

"Father," she interrupted. "Roger wants to talk to you about us getting married. Why don't you listen to him?"

Her father didn't seem greatly surprised. He poured wine for the three of them and picked up his own cup.

Then he said something which horrified her.

"You understand, Roger, that Rylla is heiress to the throne of Hos-Hostigos?"

"Why, what a thing to mention!" she cried. "But for Roger and his friends, there would be no Hos-Hostigos. There wouldn't even be a Hostigos, by now, and our flesh would be rotting from our bones in the ruins of this castle."

Her father nodded slowly, straight forward, like a Terran. "I remember it hourly, Rylla, with thankful wonder," he said. "But Roger is a subject—a *citizen*—of the Terran Federation. Would he repudiate that?"

Roger passed his hand across his face slowly. "I will make no claim on the throne," he said. "Hos-Hostigos did not exist a quarter of a year ago; who knows what it will be when your daughter succeeds you? It may be all of this world by then. It may not even be a kingdom, but a Public Thing, such as we have in the Federation. There have been great changes, and none of us can guess what greater changes will come. Why talk now of things that may hap-pen in a world the very shape of which we cannot guess?"

Her father nodded again. "Yes," he said, and tasted his wine—it would have been warm and tasteless, except for the cold maker, no, the *refrigerator*, of the Terrans. Who would drink warm wine, once they had tasted it chilled? "I suppose there is nothing impossible to those who go searching among the stars. But of course; you and my daughter must marry, if that is what you both wish."

Then he drank more wine, while they both told him how much they wanted it.

"And it will be a big, wonderful marriage," she said, "and everybody will be here, all the Princes of Hos-Hos-tigos, and all the people, and there'll be feasting and re-joicing and a happy time for everybody. . ."

When the *Stellex* had left, everybody had been busy—the war with Nostor had still been on, and there had been the annexation of Dazour and of Nostor and the other princedoms afterward, and rebuilding the bridge they had burned in front of Gornoth's soldiers, and airlifting a thou-sand Sastragathi to guard the northern border against the plains nomads, and finishing the *Princess Rylla* and build-ing the *Searcher*, and Nancy's wedding, and King Kaiphranos. . .

Then, gradually, it began to be realized that the *Stellex* was almost a month longer gone than the estimated time to and from Yggdrasil.

At first, nobody was much concerned; there might be delays in getting the cargo sold, and refining the potassium nitrate would take time. Then they began thinking of everything that could go wrong aboard the poor wheezy old *Stellex* between planets, and they began to worry.

Their main telecast station was at Tarr-Dombra, and there were a dozen young Freyans of both sexes who had learned to operate the screens; one or another of them was always on watch at the activated



but empty screen tuned to the ship's wavelength. There was a button beside it to press as soon as anything came in.

It was past two in the morning, on the hundred and thirty fifth day after the *Stellex* had broken orbit off Freya, when the girl on duty pressed it. Bells began jangling all over the castle, and some soldiers on the ramparts, who didn't know what was happening, let off a sixty pounder and began ringing the alarm-bell.

When he and Fitzurse and de Ruyter got to it, they found themselves looking through it into the astradome of the spaceship, past Karl Zahanov. There was a card in front of him, lettered, "5,000,000 Miles off Planet; 30 Sec-ond Lag."

"How did you make out?" de Ruyter wanted to know, at once; they waited for an endless half-minute and then Zahanov saw them and waved to them.

"Unbelievably well; we sold the cargo, and we have ni-ter aboard for enough powder to blow Styphon's House into orbit. And a lot of machinery and power-equipment, and some contragravity vehicles. That stuff's all second-hand; the Yggdrasil Company sold it to us from their own equipment. They didn't lose any money on it, of course," he added. "And arms and ammunition. And there are twenty three Terrans aboard, fourteen men and nine women, all skilled technicians. They're willing to work for us either for salaries or for stock."

That would be stock. It takes money to pay salaries, and after Karl's buying spree. . .

"Well, that's wonderful, Karl." It was practically incre-dible. "How much do we owe the Yggdrasil Company?"

Thirty seconds later Zahanov heard him and started ~~laughing~~.

"We still have a credit of a little under ten thousand sols on their books," he said. "I've commanded tramp freight-ers for a long time, and I never saw a cargo go quicker or bring better prices. I thought they were crazy till I tasted some of the stuff they've been eating, there. There's some kind of a micro-organism, something like a virus, that gets into the nutrients for both the hydroponics and the carniculture. Sylvia can tell you about it. Contact with Terran organic matter kills it, but it makes the food taste simply foul"

"Then we have prospects of regular trade with Yggd-rasil?" de Ruyter asked.

"We have regular trade with Yggdrasil now," Zahanov told him. "As soon as I can get another cargo aboard, I'm going back. They'll buy all the food we can ship them. In a week or so, there's another ship coming in here, Pan-Federation freighter *Callisto*. She's bringing more niter, and blasting explosives—they've started manufacturing them on Yggdrasil—and general merchandise. A lot of that's paid for, too. And a Terran Federation Army captain and ten enlisted men, to represent the Government till something permanent can be set up. It was from the Fed-eration Army that I got the arms and ammunition."

That was good. The Federation Army was authorized to furnish arms to colonies and exploitation companies; that meant that they had at least tentative recognition.

"You filed the discovery claim?"

"Yes, on the whole system, with the Army on Yggdrasil. And a photoprint of our treaty with Ptosphes, and I made first application for a charter. The Federation people there all take it as foregone that we'll be chartered, and are act-ing on that assumption. I have acknowledgements of the claim and the application, in case Adriaan starts for Terra at once and beats the ship from Yggdrasil there."

"That's possible," de Ruyter said. "The *Voortrekker's* faster than any of these Pan-Federation freighters and we're closer Terra than Yggdrasil. I'll have to wait till the *Callisto* gets in, of course. Tell me, somebody, why the devil we thought we'd have to export something to Terra when we have Yggdrasil right next door." Then he began muttering to himself about stock issues and the Banking Cartel and franchises.

They were in the bar and clubroom at Tarr-Dombra, the few of them who weren't busy showing the newcomers around or supervising work on the new spaceport. Ad-riaan de Ruyter was trying to make up a crew for the *Voortrekker*.

"I'll need two, beside myself," he was saying. "It oughtn't to be anybody who can't be spared here."

"I'm just getting this hospital system organized," Charley Clifford said. "And I have to run down to Harphax every now and then and help our noble ally chase some of the bugs out of his new powder mills. How about you, Fitz? Now that everybody has all the powder he needs, I doubt if there'll be any wars for a while."

"There are still Hos-Rathon and Hos-Bleth," Fitzurse said. "And Ptosphes has just made me commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and I have to keep an eye on our royal ally, too."

"I'll go," Margaret Hale said. "Luther and Lourenço can handle everything on the *Stellex*."

"That's good. I ought to have somebody who can help me talk to people on Terra. We have a company to organ-ize, you know. How about you, Julio?"

"Hell, I'm Minister of Industry and Economics," Almagro said. "And I have to organize cargo procurement."

"Harmakros wants to see our world," Nancy said. "He'd be handy on the ship."

"And he'd be a lot handier on Terra," de Ruyter said. "Ptosphes could appoint him ambassador; he could have a lot of influence with the Government. And he'd be wonderful publicity."

"Wait a minute." Something seemed suddenly to have occurred to her. "How long's this voyage going to take? Six months, isn't it?"

"No, that's what it would take the *Stellex*. *Voortrekker* has a lot lower mass-to-power ratio, and better Dillinghams. About four months."

"Oh, that's all right. We can go. You know, the *Voortrekker's* a lovely yacht, Adriaan, but it wouldn't make a very good maternity hospital."

"You mean to tell us—?" Charley Clifford began.

"I am a married woman, Charley," she said. "And when, in the course of human events, a couple of humans of different sexes get married—"

Charley Clifford reached for the bottle and poured him-self another drink.

"A couple of humans," he repeated. "Of two different sexes, from two different planets. That's right," he agreed.

He really seemed relieved that it was settled.

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