

King of the Hill

IT DID Col. Hal Gascoigne no good whatsoever to know that he was the only man aboard Satellite Vehicle 1. No good at all. He had stopped reminding himself of the fact some time back.

And now, as he sat sweating in the perfectly balanced air in front of the bombardier board, one of the men spoke to him again:

"Colonel, sir"

Gascoigne swung around in the seat, and the sergeant Gascoigne could almost remember the man's name Uirew him a snappy Air Force salute.

"Well?"

"Bomb one is primed, sir. Your orders?"

"My orders?" Gascoigne said wonderingly. But the man was already gone. Gascoigne couldn't actually *see* the sergeant leave the control cabin, but he was no longer in it. While he tried to remember, another voice rang in the cabin, as flat and razzzy as all voices sound on an intercom.

"Radar room. On target."

A regular, meaningless peeping. The timing circuit had cut in.

Or had it? There was nobody in the radar room. There was nobody in the bomb hold, either. There had never been anybody on board SV-I but Gascoigne, not since he had relieved Grinnell and Grinnell had flown the station up here in the first place.

Then who had that sergeant been? His name was . . . It was . . .

The hammering of the teletype blanked it out. The noise was as loud as a pom-pom in the echoing metal cave. He got up and coasted across the deck to the machine, gliding in the gravity-free cabin with the ease of a man to whom free fall is almost second nature.

The teletype was silent by the time he reached it, and at first the tape looked blank. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes. There was the message.

MNBVCXZ LKJ HGFDS PYTR AOIU EUIO QPALZM

He got out his copy of *The Well-Tempered Pogo* and checked the speeches of Grundoon the Beaver-Chile for the key letter-sequence on which the code was based. There weren't very many choices. He had the clear in ten minutes.

BOMB ONE WASHINGTON 1700 HRS TAMMANANY

There it was. That was what he had been priming the bomb for. But there should have been earlier orders, giving him the go-ahead to prime. He began to rewind the paper.

It was all blank.

And *Washington*? Why would the Joint Chiefs of Staff order him

"Colonel Gascoigne, sir."

Gascoigne jerked around and returned the salute. "What's your name?" he snapped.

"Sweeney, sir," the corporal said. Actually it didn't sound very much like Sweeney, or like anything else; it was just a noise. Yet the man's face looked familiar. "Ready with bomb two, sir."

The corporal saluted, turned, took two steps, and faded. He did not vanish, but he did not go out the door, either. He simply receded, became darker and harder to distinguish, and was no longer there. It was as though he and Gascoigne had disagreed about the effects of perspective in the glowing Earthlight, and Gascoigne had turned out to be wrong.

Numbly, he finished rewinding the paper. There was no

doubt about it. There the 'order stood, black on yellow, as plain as plain. Bomb the capital of your own country at 1700 hours. Just incidentally, bomb your own home in the process, but don't give that a second thought. Be thorough, drop two bombs; don't worry about missing by a few seconds of arc and hitting Baltimore instead, or Silver Spring, or Milford, Del. CIG will give you the coordinates, but plaster the area anyhow. That's S.O.P.

With rubbery fingers, Gascoigne began to work the keys of the teletype. Sending on the frequency of Civilian Intelligence Group, he typed:

HELP SHOUT SERIOUS REPEAT SERIOUS PERSONNEL TROUBLE
HERE STOP DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I CAN KEEP IT DOWN STOP
URGENT GASCOIGNE SV ONE STOP

Behind him, the oscillator peeped rhythmically, timing the drive on the launching rack trunnion.

"Radar room. On target."

Gascoigne did not turn. He sat before the bombardier board and sweated in the perfectly balanced air. Inside his skull, his own voice was shouting:

STOP STOP STOP

That, as we reconstructed it afterwards, is how the SV-1 affair began. It was pure luck, I suppose, that Gascoigne sent his message direct to us. Civilian Intelligence Group is rarely called into an emergency when the emergency is just being born. Usually Washington tries to do the bailing job first. Then, when Washington discovers that the boat is still sinking, it passes the bailing can to us usually with a demand that we transform it into a centrifugal pump, on the double.

We don't mind. Washington's failure to develop a government department similar in function to CIG is the reason why we're in business. The profits, of course, go to Affiliated Enterprises, Inc., the loose corporation of universities and industries which put up the money to build ULTIMAC and ULTIMAC is, in turn, the reason why Washington comes running to CIG so often.

This time, however, it did not look like the big computer was going to be of much use to us. I said as much to Joan Hadamard, our social sciences division chief, when I handed her the message.

"Urn," she said. "*Personnel* trouble? What does he mean? He hasn't got any personnel on that station."

This was no news to me. CIG provided the figures that got the SV-I into its orbit in the first place, and it was on our advice that it carried only one man. The crew of a space vessel either has to be large or it has to be a lone man; there is no intermediate choice. And SV-I wasn't big enough to carry a large crew not to carry them and keep the men from flying at each other's throats sooner or later, that is.

"He means himself," I said. "That's why I don't think this is a job for the computer. It's going to have to be played person-to-person. It's my bet that the man's responsibility-happy; that danger was always implicit in the one-man recommendation."

"The only decent solution is a full complement," Joan agreed. "Once the Pentagon can get enough money from Congress to build a big station."

"What puzzles me is, why did he call us instead of his superiors?"

"That's easy. We process his figures. He trusts us. The Pentagon thinks we're infallible, and he's caught the disease from them."

"That's bad," I said.

"I've never denied it."

"No, what I mean is that it's bad that he called us instead of going through channels. It means that the emergency is at least as bad as he says it is."

I thought about it another precious moment longer while Joan did some quick dialing. As everybody on Earth with the possible exception of a few Tibetans already knew, the man who rode SV-I rode with three hydrogen bombs immediately under his feetbombs which he could drop with great precision on any spot on the Earth. Gascoigne was, in effect, the sum total of American foreign policy; he might as well have had "Spatial Supremacy" stamped on his forehead.

"What does the Air Force say?" I asked Joan as she hung up.

"They say they're a little worried about Gascoigne. He's a very stable man, but they had to let him run a month over his normal replacement time why, they don't explain. He's been turning in badly garbled reports over the last week. They're thinking about giving him a dressing down." "Thinking! They'd better be careful with that stuff, or they'll hurt themselves. Joan, somebody's going to have to go up there. I'll arrange fast transportation, and tell Gascoigne that help is coming. Who should go?"

"I don't have a recommendation," Joan said. "Better ask the computer."

I did soon the double.

ULTIMAC said: *Hams*.

"Good luck, Peter," Joan said calmly. Too calmly.

"Yeah," I said. "Or good night."

Exactly what I expected to happen as the ferry rocket approached SV-I, I don't now recall. I had decided that I couldn't carry a squad with me. If Gascoigne was really far gone, he wouldn't allow a group of men to disembark; one man, on the other hand, he might pass. But I suppose I did expect him to put up an argument first.

Nothing happened. He did not challenge the ferry, and he didn't answer hails. Contact with the station was made through the radar automatics, and I was put off on board as routinely as though I was being let into a movie but a lot more rapidly.

The control room was dark and confusing, and at first I didn't see Gascoigne anywhere. The Earthlight coming through the observation port was brilliant, but beyond the edges of its path the darkness was almost absolute, broken only by the little stars of indicator lenses.

A faint snicking sound turned my eyes in the right direction. There was Gascoigne. He was hunched over the bombardier board, his back to me. In one hand he held a small tool resembling a ticket punch. Its jaws were nibbling steadily at a taut line of tape running between two spools; that had been the sound I'd heard. I recognized the device without any trouble; it was a programmer.

But why hadn't Gascoigne heard me come in? I hadn't tried to sneak up on him, there is no quiet way to come through an air lock anyway. But the punch went on snicking steadily.

"Colonel Gascoigne," I said. There was no answer. I took a step forward. "Colonel Gascoigne, I'm Harris of CIG. What are you doing?"

The additional step did the trick. "Stay away from me," Gascoigne growled, from somewhere way down in his chest. "I'm programming the bomb. Punching in the orders myself. Can't depend on my crew. Stay away."

"Give over for a minute. I want to talk to you."

"That's a new one," said Gascoigne, not moving. "Most of you guys were rushing to set up laughings before you even reported to me. Who the hell are you, anyhow? There's nobody on board, I know *that* well enough."

"I'm Peter Harris," I said. "From CIG you called us, remember? You asked us to send help."

"Doesn't prove a thing. Tell me something I *don't* know. Then maybe I'll believe you exist. Otherwise beat it."

"Nothing doing. Put down that punch."

Gascoigne straightened slowly and turned to look at me. "Well, you don't vanish, I'll give you that," he said. "What did you say. your name was?"

"Harris. Here's my ID card."

Gascoigne took the plastic-coated card tentatively, and then removed his glasses and polished them. The gesture itself was perfectly ordinary, and wouldn't have surprised me except that Gascoigne was not wearing glasses.

"It's hard to see in here," he complained. "Everything gets so steamed up. Hm. All right, you're real. What do you want?"

His finger touched a journal. Silently, the tape began to roll from one spool to another.

"Gascoigne, stop that thing. If you drop any bombs there'll be hell to pay. It's tense enough down below as it is. And there's no reason to bomb anybody."

"Plenty of reason," Gascoigne muttered. He turned toward the teletype, exposing to me for the first time a hip holster cradling a large, black automatic. I didn't doubt that he could draw it with fabulous rapidity, and put the bullets just where he wanted them to go. "I've got orders. There they are. See for yourself."

Cautiously, I sidled over to the teletype and looked. Except for Gascoigne's own message to CIG, and one from Joan Hadamard announcing that I was on my way, the paper was totally blank. There had been no other messages that day unless Gascoigne had changed the roll, and there was no reason why he should have. Those rolls last close to forever.

"When did this order come in?"

"This morning some time. I don't know. Sweeney!" he bawled suddenly, so loud that the paper tore in my hands. "When did that drop order come through?"

Nobody answered. But Gascoigne said almost at once, "There, you heard him."

"I didn't hear anything but you," I said, "and I'm going to stop that tape. Stand aside."

"Not a chance. Mister," Gascoigne said grimly. "The tape rides."

"Who's getting hit?"

"Washington," Gascoigne said, and passed his hand over his face. He appeared to have forgotten the imaginary spectacles.

"That's where your home is, isn't it?"

"It sure is," Gascoigne said. "It sure as hell is, Mister. Cute, isn't it?"

It was cute, all right. The Air Force boys at the Pentagon were going to be given about ten milliseconds to be sorry they'd refused to send a replacement for Gascoigne along with me. *Replace him with who? We can't send his second alternate in anything short of a week. The man has to have retraining, and the first alternate's in the hospital with a ruptured spleen. Besides, Gascoigne's the best man for the job; he's got to be bailed out somehow.*

Sure. With a psychological centrifugal pump, no doubt. In the meantime the tape kept right on running.

"You might as well stop wiping your face, and turn down the humidity instead," I said. "You've already smudged your glasses again."

"Glasses?" Gascoigne muttered. He moved slowly across the cabin, sailing upright like a sea horse, to the blank glass of a closed port. I seriously doubted that he could see his reflection in it, but maybe he didn't really want to see it. "I messed them up, all right. Thanks." He went through the polishing routine again.

A man who thinks he is wearing glasses also thinks he can't see without them. I slid to the programmer and turned off the tape. I was between the spools and Gascoigne now but I couldn't stay there forever.

"Let's talk a minute. Colonel," I said. "Surely it can't do, any harm."

Gascoigne smiled, with a sort of childish craft. "I'll talk," he said. "Just as soon as you start that tape again. I was watching you in the mirror, *before* I took my glasses off."

The liar. I hadn't made a move while he'd been looking into that porthole. His poor pitiful weak old rheumy eyes had seen every move I made while he was polishing his "glasses." I shrugged and stepped away from the programmer.

"You start it," I said. "I won't take the responsibility."

"It's orders," Gascoigne said woodenly. He started the tape running again. "It's their responsibility. What did you want to talk to me about, anyhow?"

"Colonel Gascoigne, have you ever killed anybody?"

He looked startled. "Yes, once I did," he said, almost eagerly. "I crashed a plane into a house. Killed the whole family. Walked away with nothing worse than a burned leg good as new after a couple of muscle stabilizations. That's what made me shift from piloting to weapons; that leg's not quite good enough to fly with any more."

"Tough."

He snickered suddenly, explosively. "And now look at me," he said. "I'm going to kill my *own* family in a little while. And millions of other people. Maybe the whole world."

How long was "a little while"?

"What have you got against it?" I said.

"Against what the world? Nothing. Not a damn thing. Look at me; I'm king of the hill up here. I can't complain."

He paused and licked his lips. "It was different when I was a kid," he said. "Not so dull, then. In those days you could get a real newspaper, that you could unfold for the first time yourself, and pick out what you wanted to read. Not like now, when the news comes to you predigested on a piece of paper out of your radio. That's what's the matter with it, if you ask me."

"What's the matter with what?"

"With the news that's why it's always bad these days. Everything's had something done to it. The milk is homogenized, the bread is sliced, the cars steer themselves, the phonographs will produce sounds no musical instrument could make. Too much meddling, too many people who can't keep their hands off things. Ever fire a kiln?"

"Me?" I said, startled.

"No, I didn't think so. Nobody makes pottery these days. Not by hand. And if they did, who'd buy it? They don't want something that's been made. They want something that's been Done To."

The tape kept on traveling. Down below, there was a heavy rumble, difficult to identify specifically: something heavy being shifted on tracks, or maybe a freight lock opening.

"So now you're going to Do Something to the Earth," I said slowly.

"Not me. It's orders."

"Orders from inside, Colonel Gascoigne. There's nothing on the spools." What else could I do? I didn't have time to take him through two years of psychoanalysis and bring him to his own insight. Besides, I'm not licensed to practice medicine on Earth. "I didn't want to say so, but I have to now."

"Say what?" Gascoigne said suspiciously. "That I'm crazy or something?"

"No. I didn't say that. You did," I pointed out. "But I will tell you that that stuff about not liking the world these days is baloney. Or rationalization, if you want a nicer word. You're carrying a screaming load of guilt, Colonel, whether you're aware of it or not."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you just beat it?"

"No. And you know well enough. You fell all over yourself to tell me about the family you killed in your flying accident." I gave him ten seconds of silence, and then shot the question at him as hard as I could. "*What was their name?*"

"How do I know? Sweeney or something. Anything. I don't remember."

"Sure you do. Do you think that killing your own family is going to bring the Sweeneys back to life?"

Gascoigne's mouth twisted, but he seemed to be entirely unaware of the grimace. "That's all hogwash," he said. "I never did hold with that psychological claptrap. It's you that's handing out the baloney, not me."

"Then why are you being so vituperative about it? Hogwash, claptrap, baloney you are working awfully hard to knock it down, for a man who doesn't believe in it."

"Go away," he said suddenly. "I've got my orders. I'm obeying them."

Stalemate. But there was no such thing as stalemate up here. Defeat was the word.

The tape traveled. I did not know what to do. The last bomb problem CIG had tackled had been one we had set up ourselves; we had arranged for a dud to be dropped in New York harbor, to test our own facilities for speed in determining the nature of the missile. The situation on board SV-I was completely different

Whoa. Was it? Maybe I'd hit something there.

"Colonel Gascoigne," I said slowly, "you might as well know now that it isn't going to work. Not even if you do get that bomb off."

"Yes, I can. What's to stop me?" He hooked one thumb in his belt, just above the holster, so that his fingers tips rested on the breech of the automatic.

"Your bombs. They aren't alive."

Gascoigne laughed harshly and waved at the controls. "Tell that to the counter in the bomb hold. Go ahead. There's a meter you can read, right there on the bombardier board."

"Sure," I said. "The bombs are radioactive, all right. Have you ever checked their half life?"

It was a long shot. Gascoigne was a weapons man; if it were possible to check half life on board the SV-I, he would have checked it. But I didn't think it was possible.

"What would I do that for?"

"You wouldn't, being a loyal airman. You believe what your superiors tell you. But I'm a civilian, Colonel. There's

no element in those bombs that will either fuse or fission. The half life is too long for tritium or for lithium 6, and it's too short for uranium 235 or radio-thorium. The stuff is probably strontium 90 in short, nothing but a bluff."

"By the time I finished checking that," Gascoigne said, "the bomb would be launched anyhow. And you haven't checked it, either. Try another tack."

"I don't need to. You don't have to believe me. We'll just sit here and wait for the bomb drop, and then the point will prove itself. After that, of course, you'll be court-martialed for firing a wild shot without orders. But since you're prepared to wipe out your own family, you won't mind a little thing like twenty years in the guardhouse."

Gascoigne looked at the silently rolling tape. "Sure," he said, "I've got the orders, anyhow. The same thing would happen if I didn't obey them. If nobody gets hurt, so much the better."

A sudden spasm of emotion I took it to be grief, but I could have been wrong. I shook his whole frame for a moment. Again, he did not seem to notice it. I said: "That's right. Not even your family. Of course the whole world will know the station's a bluff, but if those are the orders"

"I don't know," Gascoigne said harshly. "I don't know whether I even got any orders. I don't remember where I put them. Maybe they're not real." He looked at me confusedly, and his expression was frighteningly like that of a small boy making a confession.

"You know something?" he said. "I don't know what's real any more. I haven't been able to tell, ever since yesterday. I don't even know if you are real, or your ID card either. What do you think of that?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing! Nothing! That's my trouble. Nothing! I can't tell what's nothing and what's something. You say the bombs are duds. All right. But what if *you're* the dud, and the bombs are real? Answer me that!"

His expression was almost triumphant now.

"The bombs are duds," I said. "And you've gone and steamed up your glasses again. Why don't you turn down the humidity, so you can see for three minutes hand running?"

Gascoigne leaned far forward, so far that he was perilously close to toppling, and peered directly into my face.

"Don't give me that," he said hoarsely. "Don't give me that stuff."

I froze right where I was. Gascoigne watched my eyes for a while. Then, slowly, he put his hand on his forehead and began to wipe it downward. He smeared it over his face, in slow motion, all the way down to his chin.

Then he took the hand away and looked at it, as though it had just strangled him and he couldn't understand why. And finally he spoke.

"It isn't true," he said dully. "I'm not wearing any glasses. Haven't worn glasses since I was ten. Not since I broke my last pair playing King of the Hill."

He sat down before the bombardier board and put his head in his hands.

"You win," he said hoarsely. "I must be crazy as a loon. I don't know what I'm seeing and what I'm not. You better take this gun away. If I fired it I might even hit something."

"You're all right," I said. And I meant it; but I didn't waste any time all the same. The automatic first; then the tape. In that order, the sequence couldn't be reversed afterwards.

But the sound of the programmer's journal clicking to "Off" was as loud in that cabin as any gunshot.

"He'll be all right," I told Joan afterwards. "He pulled himself through. I wouldn't have dared to throw it at any other man that fast but he's got guts."

"Just the same," Joan said, "they'd better start rotating the station captains faster. The next man may not be so tough and what if *he's* a sleepwalker?"

I didn't say anything. I'd had my share of worries for that week.

"You did a whale of a job yourself, Peter," Joan said. "I just wish we could bank it in the machine. We might need the data later."

"Well, why can't we?"

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff say no. They don't say why. But they don't want any part of it recorded in ULTIMAC or anywhere else."

I stared at her. At first it didn't seem to make sense. And then it did and that was worse.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Joan does that mean what I think it means? Is 'Spatial Supremacy' just as bankrupt as 'Massive Retaliation' was? Is it possible that the satellite and the bombs . . . Is it possible that I was telling Gascoigne the truth about the bombs being duds?"

Joan shrugged.

"He that darkeneth counsel without wisdom," she said, "isn't earning his salary."