

GOLDEN THE SHIP WAS—OH! OH! OH!

Aggression started very far away.

War with Raumsog came about twenty years after the great cat scandal which, for a while, threatened to cut the entire planet Earth from the desperately essential santaclara drug. It was a short war and a bitter one.

Corrupt, wise, weary old Earth fought with masked weapons, since only hidden weapons could maintain so ancient a sovereignty—sovereignty which had long since lapsed into a titular paramountcy among the communities of mankind. Earth won and the others lost, because the leaders of Earth never put other considerations ahead of survival. And this time, they thought, they were finally and really threatened.

The Raumsog war was never known to the general public except for the revival of wild old legends about golden ships.

1

On Earth the lords of the Instrumentality met. The presiding chairman looked about and said, "Well, gentlemen, all of us have been bribed by Raumsog. We have all been paid off individually. I myself received six ounces of stroon in pure form. Will the rest of you show better bargains?"

Around the room, the councilors announced the amounts of their bribes.

The chairman turned to the secretary. "Enter the bribes in the record and then mark the record off-the-record."

The others nodded gravely.

"Now we must fight. Bribery is not enough. Raumsog has been threatening to attack Earth. It's been cheap enough to let him threaten, but obviously we don't mean to let him do it."

"How are you going to stop him, Lord Chairman?" growled a gloomy old member.

"Get out the golden ships?"

"Exactly that." The chairman looked deadly serious.

There was a murmurous sigh around the room. The golden ships had been used against an inhuman life-form many centuries before. They were hidden somewhere in nonspace and only a few officials of Earth knew how much reality there was to them. Even at the level of the lords of the Instrumentality the council did not know precisely what they were.

"One ship," said the chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality, "will be enough."

It was.

2

The dictator Lord Raumsog on his planet knew the difference some weeks later.

"You can't mean that," he said. "You can't mean it. There is no such ship that size. The golden ships are just a story. No one ever saw a picture of one."

"Here is a picture, my Lord," said the subordinate.

Raumsog looked at it. "It's a trick. Some piece of trick photography. They distorted the size. The dimensions are wrong. Nobody has a ship that size. You could not build it, or if you did build it, you could not operate it. There just is not any such thing—" He babbled on for a few more sentences before he realized that his men were looking at the picture and not at him.

He calmed down.

The boldest of the officers resumed speaking. "That one ship is ninety million miles long, Your Highness. It shimmers like fire, but moves so fast that we cannot approach it. But it came into the center of our fleet almost touching our ships, stayed there twenty or thirty thousandths of a second. There it was, we thought. We saw the evidence of life on board: light beams waved; they examined us and then, of course, it lapsed back into nonspace. Ninety million miles, Your Highness. Old Earth has some stings yet and we do not know what the ship is doing."

The officers stared with anxious confidence at their overlord.

Raumsog sighed. "If we must fight, we'll fight. We can destroy that too. After

all, what is size in the spaces between the stars? What difference does it make whether it is nine miles or nine million or ninety million?" He sighed again. "Yet I must say ninety million miles is an awful big size for a ship. I don't know what they are going to do with it." He did not.

3

It is strange—strange and even fearful—what the love of Earth can do to men. Tedesco, for example.

Tedesco's reputation was far-flung. Even among the Go-captains, whose thoughts were rarely on such matters, Tedesco was known for his raiment, the foppish arrangement of his mantle of office and his be-jeweled badges of authority. Tedesco was known too for his languid manner and his luxurious sybaritic living. When the message came, it found Tedesco in his usual character. He was lying on the air-draft with his brain pleasure centers plugged into the triggering current. So deeply lost in pleasure was he that the food, the women, the clothing, the books of his apartments were completely neglected and forgotten. All pleasure save the pleasure of electricity acting on the brain was forgotten.

So great was the pleasure that Tedesco had been plugged into the current for twenty hours without interruption—a manifest disobedience of the rule which set six hours as maximum pleasure.

And yet, when the message came—relayed to Tedesco's brain by the infinitesimal crystal set there for the transmittal of messages so secret that even thought was too vulnerable to interception—when the message came Tedesco struggled through layer after layer of bliss and unconsciousness.

The ships of gold—the golden ships—for Earth is in danger. Tedesco struggled. Earth is in danger. With a sigh of bliss he made the effort to press the button which turned off the current. And with a sigh of cold reality he took a look at the world about him and turned to the job at hand. Quickly he prepared to wait upon the lords of the Instrumentality.

The chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality sent out the Lord Admiral Tedesco to command the golden ship. The ship itself, larger than most stars, was an incredible monstrosity. Centuries before it had frightened away non-human aggressors from a forgotten corner of the galaxies.

The lord admiral walked back and forth on his bridge. The cabin was small, twenty feet by thirty. The control area of the ship measured nothing over a hundred feet. All the rest was a golden bubble of the feinting ship, nothing more than thin and incredibly rigid foam with tiny wires cast across it so as to give the illusion of a hard metal and strong defenses.

The ninety million miles of length were right. Nothing else was.

The ship was a gigantic dummy, the largest scarecrow ever conceived by the human mind.

Century after century it had rested in nonspace between the stars, waiting for use. Now it proceeded helpless and defenseless against a militant and crazy dictator Raumsog and his horde of hard-fighting and very real ships.

Raumsog had broken the disciplines of space. He had killed the pin-lighters. He had imprisoned the Go-captains. He had used renegades and apprentices to pillage the immense interstellar ships and had armed the captive vessels to the teeth. In a system which had not known real war, and least of all war against Earth, he had planned well.

He had bribed, he had swindled, he had propagandized. He expected Earth to fall before the threat itself. Then he launched his attack.

With the launching of the attack, Earth itself changed. Corrupt rascals became what they were in title: the leaders and the defenders of mankind.

Tedesco himself had been an elegant fop. War changed him into an aggressive captain, swinging the largest vessel of all time as though it were a tennis bat.

He cut in on the Raumsog fleet hard and fast.

Tedesco shifted his ship right, north, up, over.

He appeared before the enemy and eluded them—down, forward, right, over. He appeared before the enemy again. One successful shot from them could destroy an illusion on which the safety of mankind itself depended. It was his business not to allow them that shot. Tedesco was not a fool. He was fighting his own strange kind of war, but he could not help wondering where the real war was proceeding.

4

Prince Lovaduck had obtained his odd name because he had had a Chinese ancestor who did love ducks, ducks in their Peking form—succulent duck skins brought forth to him ancestral dreams of culinary ecstasy. His ancestress, an English lady, had said, "Lord Lovaduck, that fits you!"—and the name had been proudly taken as a family name. Lord Lovaduck had a small ship. The ship was tiny and had a very simple and threatening name: Anybody. The ship was not listed in the space register and he himself was not in the Ministry of Space Defense. The craft was attached only to the Office of Statistics and Investigation—under the listing, "vehicle"—for the Earth treasury. He had very elementary defenses. With him on the ship went one chronopathic idiot essential to his final and vital maneuvers. With him also went a monitor. The monitor, as always, sat rigid, catatonic, unthinking, unaware—except for the tape recorder of his living mind which unconsciously noted every imminent mechanical movement of the ship and was prepared to destroy Lovaduck, the chronopathic idiot, and the ship itself should they attempt to escape the authority of Earth or should they turn against Earth. The life of a monitor was a difficult one but was far better than execution for crime, its usual alternative. The monitor made no trouble. Lovaduck also had a very small collection of weapons, weapons selected with exquisite care for the atmosphere, the climate and the precise conditions of Raumsog's planet. He also had a psionic talent, a poor crazy little girl who wept, and whom the lords of the Instrumentality had cruelly refused to heal, because her talents were better in unshielded form than they would have been had she been brought into the full community of mankind. She was a class-three etiological interference.

5

Lovaduck brought his tiny ship near the atmosphere of Raumsog's planet. He had paid good money for his captaincy to this ship and he meant to recover it. Recover it he would, and handsomely, if he succeeded in his adventurous mission. The lords of the Instrumentality were the corrupt rulers of a corrupt world, but they had learned to make corruption serve their civil and military ends, and they were in no mind to put up with failures. If Lovaduck failed he might as well not come back at all. No bribery could save him from this condition. No monitor could let him escape. If he succeeded, he might be almost as rich as an Old North Australian or a stroon merchant. Lovaduck materialized his ship just long enough to hit the planet by radio. He walked across the cabin and slapped the girl. The girl became frantically excited. At the height of her excitement he slapped a helmet on her head, plugged in the ship's communication system, and flung her own peculiar emotional psionic radiations over the entire planet. She was a luck-changer. She succeeded: for a few moments, at every place on that planet, under the water and on it, in the sky and in the air, luck went wrong just a little. Quarrels did occur, accidents did happen, mischances moved just within the limits of sheer probability. They all occurred within the same minute. The uproar was reported just as Lovaduck moved his ship to another position. This was the most critical time of all. He dropped down into the atmosphere. He was immediately detected. Ravening weapons reached for him, weapons sharp enough to scorch the very air and to bring every living being on the planet into a condition of screaming alert.

No weapons possessed by Earth could defend against such an attack. Lovaduck did not defend. He seized the shoulders of his chronopathic idiot. He pinched the poor defective; the idiot fled taking the ship with him. The ship moved back three, four seconds in time to a period slightly earlier than the first detection. All the instruments on Raumsog's planet went off. There was nothing on which they could act.

Lovaduck was ready. He discharged the weapons. The weapons were not noble. The lords of the Instrumentality played at being chivalrous and did love money, but when life and death were at stake, they no longer cared much about money, or credit, or even about honor. They fought like the animals of Earth's ancient past—they fought to kill. Lovaduck had discharged a combination of organic and inorganic poisons with a high dispersion rate. Seventeen million people; nine hundred and fifty thousandths of the entire population, were to die within that night.

He slapped the chronopathic idiot again. The poor freak whimpered. The ship moved back two more seconds in time.

As he unloaded more poison, he could feel the mechanical relays reach for him. He moved to the other side of the planet, moving backward one last time, dropped a final discharge of virulent carcinogens and snapped his ship in to nonspace, into the outer reaches of nothing. Here he was far beyond the reach of Raumsog.

6

Tedesco's golden ship moved serenely toward the dying planet, Raumsog's fighters closing on it. They fired—it evaded, surprisingly agile for so immense a craft, a ship larger than any sun seen in the heavens of that part of space. But while the ships closed in their radios reported:

"The capital has blanked out."

"Raumsog himself is dead."

"There is no response from the north."

"People are dying in the relay stations."

The fleet moved, intercommunicated, and began to surrender. The golden ship appeared once more and then it disappeared, apparently forever.

7

The Lord Tedesco returned to his apartments and to the current for plugging into the centers of pleasure in his brain. But as he arranged himself on the air-jet his hand stopped on its mission to press the button which would start the current. He realized, suddenly, that he had pleasure. The contemplation of the golden ship and of what he had accomplished—alone, deceptive, without the praise of all the worlds for his solitary daring—gave even greater pleasure than that of the electric current. And he sank back on the jet of air and thought of the golden ship, and his pleasure was greater than any he had ever experienced before.

8

On Earth, the lords of the Instrumentality gracefully acknowledged that the golden ship had destroyed all life on Raumsog's planet. Homage was paid to them by the many worlds of mankind. Lovaduck, his idiot, his little girl, and the monitor were taken to hospitals. Their minds were erased of all recollection of their accomplishments.

Lovaduck himself appeared before the lords of the Instrumentality. He felt that he had served on the golden ship and he did not remember what he had done. He knew nothing of a chronopathic idiot. And he remembered nothing of his little "vehicle." Tears poured down his face when the lords of the Instrumentality gave him their highest decorations and paid him an immense sum of money. They said: "You have served well and you are discharged. The blessings and the thanks of mankind will forever rest upon you ... "

Lovaduck went back to his estates wondering that his service should have been so great. He wondered, too, in the centuries of the rest of his life, how any

man—such as himself—could be so tremendous a hero and never quite remember how it was accomplished.

9

On a very remote planet, the survivors of a Raumsog cruiser were released from internment. By special orders, direct from Earth, their memories had been disco-ordinated so that they would not reveal the pattern of defeat. An obstinate reporter kept after one spaceman. After many hours of hard drinking the survivor's answer was still the same.

"Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh! Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh!"