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The Project Gutenberg EBook of History Repeats, by George Oliver Smith

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HISTORY REPEATS

Illustrated by Martinez

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

There are—and very probably will always be—some Terrestrials who can't, and for that matter don't want, to call their souls their own....

Xanabar lays across the Spiral Arm, a sprawling sphere of influence vast, mighty, solid at the core. Only the far-flung boundary shows the slight ebb and flow of contingent cultures that may win a system or two today and lose them back tomorrow or a hundred years from now. Xanabar is the trading post of the galaxy, for only Xanabar is strong enough to stand over the trading table when belligerents meet and offer to take them both at once if they do not sheathe their swords. For this service Xanabar assesses her percentage, therefore Xanabar is rich. Her riches buy her mercenaries to enforce her doctrines. Therefore Xanabar is rotten at the under-core, for mercenaries have no god but gold.

The clatter of a hundred tongues mingled with the clink of glasses and floated through strata of smoke

from the burning weeds of a hundred planets. From one of the tables, voices rise in mild disagreement. There is a jeering laugh from one side and a roar of anger from the other. Two men rise and face one another ready to follow their insults with violence. Before the eruption can start, a mercenary steps forward on lithe feet and lightly catches the back-swung arm, a quick hand removes the poised glass before it can be thrown into the adversary's face.

"Sit!" says the mercenary in a cold voice, and they sit still glaring at one another.

"Now," says the mercenary, "settle your differences by talk. Or depart in opposite directions. This is Xanabar!"

"He lies! He brags!"

"I do not lie. They *are* barbarians. I do not brag. I *can* bring you one."

"You—"

"A wager," said the mercenary. "A wager. Xanabar can take no tax in blood." He faces one. "You claim you can do that which he says you can not." Then not waiting for a reply he faces the other, "And if he does, how much are you willing to pay?"

"How much is his life worth?"

"How much are you willing to pay?" demands the mercenary coldly.

"Five hundredweight in crystal-cut."

"An honorable sum. Do you agree?"

"Not enough—"

"For a task as easy as you claim it to be," said the mercenary, "Five hundredweight of crystal-cut seems honorable."

"But it means—"

"We in Xanabar are not interested in the details. Only in the tax. An honest wager-contract, outlanders. Otherwise I rule that your eruption here disturbed the peace."

The two outlanders look at one another; schoolboys caught fighting in the alley by a monitor who demands a bite of their apple in lieu of a visit to the principal. As if loath to touch one another they reach forward hesitantly and handshake in a quick light grip.

"Good!" glows the mercenary. He waves a hand and his fellows converge with contract-platen and etching stylus. "Now, gentlemen, please state the terms for Xanabar."

Peter Hawley strolled down a side street with a dog at his heel. It was a dog of many breeds, but not a mixture of careless parentage. Peter paused at a cross-street and looked uncertainly to left and right. "What do you make, Buregarde?"

"The noble dog says right," replied Buregarde.

"Right," said Peter turning up the street. "And stop this 'Noble dog' routine."

"Man is dog's best friend," said Buregarde. "If you'd called me something sensible, I wouldn't have looked it up. There is a statue to me in the Okeefenokee back on Earth. I am the noble dog. Pogo says so."

"I—"

"Easy Peter!" said the dog in a near-whisper.

"All right. Do we play down the chatter?"

Buregarde sat, lifted his nose and sniffed. His natural voice gave a faint whine of discontent. "I'm supposed to have a nose," he complained. "This is like trying to smell out a lone mouse in a zoological garden in midsummer."

"Why the warning?" asked Peter.

"All races smell the same when they are poised for violence," said the dog. "Trouble is that man-smell isn't pointed the way it's going, only where it's coming from."

Peter grunted. "Catch any woman-smell?"

"Just the usual whiff. Stale scent. She was here; she passed this way. But which way?"

"We can guess they made it away from the spaceport."

"Unless," said the dog taking another sniff of the air, "they're taking her back to some other spacecraft." Buregarde looked up at Peter. "Do you catch anything?"

"Just the usual mingled fright and danger, frantic despair."

"Directional?"

Peter shook his head. "No," he said. "The source is too close."

"Let's stroll up this street to the end and come back on the other side," said the dog. "Quietly."

In a saunter they went, alert and poised. A man and his dog from all appearances. But in Xanabar, the principal city of Xanabar the Empire they were huntsman and companion.

Like all cities of more than ten million souls, Xanabar had its glistening and lofty area and its slums—and what would have been a waterfront region in a seafaring city. The conditions were the same as they'd been everywhere for a few decades of thousands of years. Only the technology changes. Man's cave is stainless steel and synthetic plastic; the cave's man is swinging a better axe, and his hide is protected from the weather by stuff far more durable than his awn skin. But he's the same man with the same hackles; they just rise for a few more thousand reasons than the hackles of his ancestors.

"Got it!" said Buregarde coming to a brief point at a closed door.

"Let's go in!"

Buregarde's reply was half-snarl and half, "Look out!"

Peter whirled to catch a glimpse of a man upon him with pencil-ray coming to point. He faded down and

toward the other, almost in a fall out of the path of the pencil-ray that flicked on and began a sweep upward and in. Peter caught his balance at the same time he clutched the wrist in his right hand. Then he went on down around and over, rising on his knees to flip the other man heels high in an arc that ended with a full-length, spine-thudding body smash on the pavement. Buregarde leaped in and slashed at the hand clutching the pencil-ray, snapped his head back and forth thrice and sent the weapon flying. Then with a savage growl he set a soft mouth against the other's throat and let the man feel the pressure of his fangs.

"Easy," said Peter.

Buregarde backed away a few inches. "Easy nothing," he snapped. "This man is the noble dog's worst enemy. He wanted your blood."

"Take it easy. I want his information."

The man looked up. "Barbarian Terrestrial!" he snarled.

Peter sneered. "And this is the capital city of the glorious civilization called Xanabar? Marble palaces with nobles of the blood, and stinking alleys with human rats. Where is she?"

The stranger spat.

"Buregarde, want some red meat?"

"He'd make me upchuck. Only rodents eat their own kind."

"Just a bite?"

"Do I have to swallow?"

"No. Just slash—"

"Wait, barbarian—"

"Barbarian Terrestrial, am I? You were maybe going to invite me for tea and cakes with that pencil-ray?"

"I—"

"Talk!" snapped Peter. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Buregarde—?"

"Yes, boss. The throat or the other hand?"

"All right—for the good it'll do you. She's in there. Go on in—and we'll have two of you!"

Buregarde growled, "Three of us. And we might be hard to handle."

Peter stood up and hauled the stranger to his feet. His right hand dripped blood from the dog's teeth. Peter looked for, and found the pencil-ray smashed against the stone front of the building. He cuffed the stranger across the face, turned him around, and pointed him toward the far corner.

"I count three," he said. "If you're not out of sight by three—"

"It'll be a pleasure, Peter," said Buregarde.

The stranger loped away on a crazy run. As he turned the corner he ran face on to one of the uniformed mercenaries of Xanabar. The mercenary collared the stranger and took a quick inventory of the slashed right hand, the ripped clothing, and adding those to the frightened gallop he came back with the stranger's left arm held in a backlock.

Haughtily he demanded, "What goes on in Xanabar?"

Peter eyed the mercenary sourly. "Kidnaping and attempted murder."

"Who says such lawlessness runs rife in Xanabar?"

"I say so. Peter Hawley of the Extraterrestrial Service. I say so."

"You are mistaken, barbarian."

"I say so," said Buregarde.

"You're an animal."

"I am—and so are you."

"I'll not be insulted by an animal! I am—"

"Take it easy, Buregarde."

"Take it easy nothing. This mercenary foot-soldier forgets one thing—or maybe he doesn't know about it."

"Don't call His Excellency's Peacekeepers 'mercenaries'!" snapped the mercenary.

"Peacekeeper," chuckled the dog. "Well listen and become wise. Dog and man, man and dog, have been together for about a half-million years. Once dog helped man in war and peace, and man gave dog food and shelter. Dog helped man rise above the level of the savage, and man has helped dog rise to the level of intelligence. But dog has one advantage. None of us has been intelligent long enough to really believe that dog has a soul, and those of us who do believe that also know that dog's soul is devoted to man. Do you know about dog, Xanabian—Peacekeeper?"

"No—"

"Then don't force me to show you what kind of adversary intelligent dog can be. Mere man is a pushover!"

"Bah!"

Buregarde loped in a mad circle around the mercenary. His Excellency's Peacekeeper turned to stay facing the dog but found himself turning his back on Peter. He stepped back and to one side and reached for his heavy-duty pencil—the dog gave a low growl of warning and crouched for a leap.

"He means it—Peacekeeper," said Peter Hawley quietly. "Draw that pencil and he'll have your hand in ribbons before you can level it."

The mercenary drew in his breath.

"Whistle for help and he'll have your throat."

"I shall not permit this high handed—"

"Then stop sounding off and listen to us!" snapped Peter. "I charge the Empire of Xanabar with the crime of being indifferent to the welfare of the stranger within her gate. I charge kidnaping and attempted murder, and I charge the latter against the specimen you hold in your hand."

"An outlander!"

"Does he bring his own law to Xanabar? If he does, then so do I!"

"I arrest you all for breaking the Peace of Xanabar."

"Me, too?" asked Buregarde.

The mercenary ignored the dog's eager sally. "You are armed, Terrestrial."

"So was he."

"So am I!" snarled Buregarde showing a fine set of white fangs in the most effective gesture.

"This must cease!" thundered the mercenary. "You cannot threaten His Excellency's Peacekeepers!"

Buregarde growled, "Slip the mercenary a crystal-cut, boss. We've got a girl to find!"

"A girl? A Terrestrial girl?" asked the mercenary with his eyes opening.

"The daughter of our envoy to Lonaphite. Miss Vanessa Lewis. Last reported in her stateroom aboard the Terrestrial Spacecraft *Polaris* during landing pattern at Xanabar Citadel Spaceport."

The mercenary said, "The work of outlanders—riffraff such as this!"

"Well," snapped Peter Hawley, "do His Excellency's Peacemakers condone such goings-on?"

"We keep the Peace of Xanabar. Your charge is your word, Terrestrial."

"Terrestrial Barbarian, isn't it?"

"I arrest you—"

"Oh, stop it. For fiveweight of crystal-cut can you be bribed to haul that specimen off to jail and let me go about making my own Peace with Xanabar?"

"You accuse me of accepting bribes?"

"You re a mercenary, aren't you? Sevenweight of crystal-cut."

"Ten."

"Seven," said Peter.

"Ten," said the mercenary, "and you have one more caper coming."

"Ten," agreed Peter Hawley, "and you look the other way when I take the lid off."

"Still got it," said Buregarde, sniffing at the closed door but keeping one eye on the disappearing mercenary and his prisoner.

"I've got it, too. Still fright and concern: fear of harm, concern over what happens next."

"Strong?"

"Definitely," said Peter closing his eyes and holding his breath.

"Nothing measurable?" asked the dog after a full minute.

"No. Too bad I was never introduced to her. I have no idea of her strength of mind—wait!" Another minute went by in personal silence; Peter Hawley's concentration far too deep to be disturbed by the sounds of the city's spaceport slum by night. The dog backed away from the door and took an alert position to guard Peter while the man was immersed in his own mind. Finally Peter alerted and shook his head sadly. "I thought for a moment that she'd caught me. A fleeting thought of rescue or escape, concept of freedom, flight, safety. But wish-thinking. Not communication. Let's go in."

"Barge, or slink?" asked the dog.

"Slink."

"Have it your way," said Buregarde.

Outside, the place looked closed. The door was solid, a plastic in imitation of bronze through which neither light nor sound passed. The windows were dark. But once the door was cracked, the wave of sound came pouring out along the slit of light and filled the street with echo and re-echo.

"Slink, now," said the dog.

"So everybody makes mistakes."

Inside, a woman leaned over a low counter. "Check your weap ... say! You can't bring that animal in here!"

Buregarde said, "He isn't bringing me. I'm here because I like it."

The woman's eyes bugged. "What ... kind—?"

"I am man's best friend—the noble dog of Barbarian Terra."

"Yes ... but—"

"Oh," said Peter airily, "we're looking for a friend."

"Friend? Who is he?"

"It's a she and her name is Vanessa Lewis."

"She ain't here."

"The dame's a liar-ess, Peter. I scent her strong."

"We'll just take a look around," said Peter to the check girl.

"You'll have to check your weapons."

"I'd rather go in naked. Sorry. Not today. Weapons happen to be my business today. Come on, Buregarde."

Man and dog started along the hallway warily. Buregarde said, "Any touch?"

"Got a faint impression of alarm, danger, call out the guards."

"I scent violence," said the dog. "And—"

The door at the end of the hallway opened and a big man stepped out. "What's going on here?" he demanded flatly.

The check girl said, "He wouldn't check ..."

The big man reached for his hip pocket.

Peter said, "Take him high!" and they plunged.

Peter dove for the man's knees, Buregarde went in a three-stride lope like an accordion folding and unfolding and then arched in a long leap with his snarling fangs aimed at the man's throat. Man and dog hit him low and high before he could open his mouth, before he could free the snub pencil-ray. There was a short scrabble that ended when Buregarde lifted the man's head and whammed it down hard against the floor.

Weakly, the check girl finished her statement, "... His weapons!" and keeled over in a dead faint.

Buregarde shook himself violently and worked his jaws, licking blood from his chops. Peter looked in

through the open wall-door opposite the check counter; the racket had not been noticed by the roomful of spacemen and riffraff. The babble of a hundred tongues still went on amid the clink of glasses and the disturbing strains of Xanabian music. Smoke from a hundred semi-noxious weeds lay in strata across the room, and at a table in the far corner two men faced one another, their expressions a mixed pair. One held heavily begrudged admiration as he paid off five hundredweight of crystal-cut in the legal tender of Xanabar to the other, whose expression was greedy self-confidence. One of His Excellency's Peacekeepers presided over the exchange. Coldly he extracted a fiftyweight from the pile and folded it into the signed and completed wager-contract. For his own coffer he extracted a fiveweight and slipped it into his boot top.

Peter Hawley and Buregarde passed on, went through the far door dragging their late adversary ignominiously by the heels. Amid the lessened publicity of the distant hall, Peter checked the man and shrugged. "He may live," he said coldly, "if he doesn't bleed to death."

"You really ought to take 'em on the high side," said Buregarde, plaintively. "All I've got is my teeth to grab with. They don't bleed so bad from the ankle."

"They don't stay stopped that way either," said Peter harshly.

"You'd not be getting any praise from the Chief for that sort of brutality."

"If Xanabar weren't rotten to the core, we wouldn't be plowing through it in the first place. Now, let's get going."

"Shouldn't you call for the rest of the crew?"

"Not until I'm certain the girl's here. I'd hate to cut the city-wide search for cold evidence."

"She's here. I scent her."

"Maybe it's past tense, Buregarde. Or maybe it's another woman."

"Could be. But one thing: It is definitely Terrestrial woman." The dog sniffed again. "You get anything?"

"No more than before. It's close and they're the same set of impressions. Yet, any woman would be frantic with fear and concern."

"I ... *shhh!*" Buregarde's sharp ears lifted instinctively at a distant sound not heard by the man. With a toss of his head, the dog folded one ear back, uncovering the inner shell. Like a sonic direction finder, Buregarde turned his head and listened.

"Man," he said finally with a low growling voice. "Peter, there'll be hell to pay around here directly. He's stumbled over our recent conquest."

"Let's get cutting!"

Peter started trying doors and peering in; the dog raced on ahead of the man, sniffing deep at the bottom of each. It was the dog that found the room. He called, "Here!" and Peter raced forward just as the fellow on the stairs yelled something in his native tongue.

Peter hit the door with the heel of his foot and slammed it open by splintering the doorframe. The dog crouched low and poised; Peter slipped in and around feeling for a light-switch. From inside there was a

voiceless whimper of fright and from outside and below there came the pounding of several sets of heavy feet. Peter found the switch and flooded the room with light. The girl—whether she was Miss Vanessa Lewis or someone else, and kidnap-wise it was still a Terrestrial girl—lay trussed on the bed, a patch of surgical tape over her mouth.

"Sorry," said Peter in a voice that he hoped was soothing. He reached, freed a corner of the tape and ripped it off in a single swipe. The girl howled. Peter slapped her lightly. "Stop it!" he commanded sharply. "Vanessa Lewis?"

"Yes, but—"

"Call out the marines, Peter," snarled the dog.

"No! Bo! Back!"

Reluctantly the dog backed into the room. He crouched low, poised to spring, with his nose just beyond the doorframe.

"Four of 'em," he whimpered pleadingly. "I can get two—"

"Well, I can't get the other two unless I'm lucky," snapped Peter. "Don't be so eager to die for nothing, Buregarde."

"All this calculation," grumbled the dog sourly. "I don't call it a loss if I get two for one."

"I call it a loss if I don't get four for nothing—or the whole damned Empire of Xanabar for nothing, for that matter. We've a job to do and it ain't dying—until Miss Lewis is out of this glorious citadel."

The girl looked from one to the other. They did not need any identification; they were their own bona fides. Only man—Terrestrial Man—had intelligent dogs to work beside him. Period, question closed. Buregarde snarled at the door warningly while Peter stripped surgical tape from wrists and ankles.

Outside, someone called, "Come out or we blast!"

Buregarde snarled, "Come in and we'll cut you to bits!"

The quick flash of a pencil-ray flicked in a lance above the dog's nose: Buregarde snapped back as the lancet of light cut downward, then snapped forward for a quick look outside as the little pencil of danger flickered dark.

"Careful, Bo!"

"You call the boys," snapped the dog. "I'll—"

Something came twisting forward to hit the doorframe, it dropped just inside the doorjamb. Buregarde leaped, snapped at the thing and caught it in midair, snapped his head in a vicious shake and sent it whirling back outside again before it could be identified. The dog sunfished and landed on all four. Then the thing went off with a dull *pouf!* outside. There was a gentle flash of quick light that was smothered by a billow of smoke. Buregarde leaped into the cloud and disappeared. There was a hoarse shriek and the mad scrabble of dog-claws on the hard floor, the sound of a heavy thud, and the angry snarl of a dog

with its teeth fastened into something soft. Then there was the fast patter of dog-feet and Buregarde came around the door on a dead run, sliding side-wise to carom off the opened door into safety just as a pencil-ray flicked to follow him.

"Got him," said the dog in a satisfied tone. "That's one!"

He took his post by the doorframe again, the tip of his nose just outside. There was a consultation out there in the hallway, at which Buregarde called, "Make a wild rush for us!"

Miss Lewis said, "What are we going to do?"

"Fight it out," said Peter. "They can't win so long as we're alive now. I've got my crew on its way in a dead run, and if we make enough noise, some of His Excellency's Peacemakers will step in and demand their cut of the finances." He grinned. "How much are you worth, Miss Lewis?"

She shuddered. "I don't know how much father would pay—"

"Hit 'em low, Peter!" came Buregarde's snarl.

Three of them came in a-slant, bounced shoulders against the opened door, caught their bearings and hell was out for noon. Buregarde caught the first with a slash at the throat; they went down in a mad whirl of dog and thug, paws, tail, arms, legs and a spurt of blood. The second flicked his pencil-ray at Peter, its capsule charge faded to a mere sting before it cut into him. The third aimed a kick at the struggling dog. Vanessa Lewis snatched a box from the bureau and hurled it at the second. Peter thumbed his pencil-ray and winged the third man in the biceps. Buregarde leaped for the second man's gun hand and closed on it as the hurled box opened and scatter-shotted his face with bric-a-brac. The man with the bloody throat flailed out and caught Peter by the ankle. Peter stomped his face with his other heel. Miss Lewis picked up the table lamp and with a single motion turned off the light and finished felling the one with the ray-burned shoulder.

Buregarde dropped from the second man's wrist and crouched to spring. The man cowered back, his good arm covering his throat and his other arm hanging limp. He mouthed fright-noises in some tongue native to some star a thousand light-years across the galaxy.

Coldly, Peter stepped forward and belted him in the plexus.

"Now," he said calmly, "we shall vacate the premises!"

They went side by side, facing slightly outward, Buregarde between them and slightly ahead. "We're coming out!" called the dog. "Three Barbarians from Terra!"

Down on the dark street, they met their mercenary again. He eyed them sourly. "I see you were, in a sense, successful."

Peter Hawley faced the mercenary. "We were successful and would you like to make something of it?"

"I'm going to have to arrest you, you know."

"You'll lose an arm trying!" snapped the dog.

"There's murder been committed tonight," said His Excellency's Peacemaker. "The Peace of Xanabar has been disturbed."

"Why you chiseling crook, there's been kidnaping tonight, and—"

"I'm afraid that I shall have to ask that the young lady produce her passport," said the mercenary.
"Otherwise she's in Xanabar Citadel illegally."

Buregarde said, "Hit him low, Peter. Here come the boys."

"No!"

"Just once—for fun?"

"No. I want our money-grubbing Peacekeeper to carry a message to His Excellency. I want His Excellency to read some Terrestrial History. Once upon a time there was a place called the Byzantine Empire that laid across the trade routes. The upper crust of people used to serve the Presence of God in a golden throne whilst their underlings dealt in human slaves and procured comely concubines for the emperor; their policemen took bribes and human life was cheap. And when Byzantium fell, all the world was forced to seek a new trade route. So tell His Excellency that he'd better clean up his own foul mess, or some barbarians will clean it up for him."

"And that," said Buregarde, "goes for your dad-ratted cat!"

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