
The Helpful Hand of God

Tom Godwin



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**the helpful hand of
god**

... Can be very helpful indeed. But of course, it's long been known that God helps those who wisely help themselves....

BY TOM GODWIN

ILLUSTRATED BY BARBERIS

(From "Vogarian Revised Encyclopedia":

SAINTS: *Golden Saints, properly, Yellow Saints, a term of contempt applied by the Vogarian State Press to members of the Church Of The Golden Rule because of their opposition to the war then being planned against Alkoria. See CHURCHES.*

CHURCH, GOLDEN RULE, OF THE: *A group of reactionary fanatics who resisted State control and advocated social chaos through "Individual Freedom." They were liquidated in the Unity Purge but for two-thousand of the more able-bodied, who were sentenced to the moon mines of Belen Nine. The prison ship never arrived there and it is assumed that the condemned Saints somehow*

overpowered the guards and escaped to some remote section of the galaxy.)

Kane had observed Commander Y'Nor's bird-of-prey profile with detached interest as Y'Nor jerked his head around to glare again at the chronometer on the farther wall of the cruiser's command room.

"What's keeping Dalon?" Y'Nor demanded, transferring his glare to Kane. "Did you assure him that I have all day to waste?"

"He should be here any minute, sir," Kane answered.

"I didn't find the Saints, after others had failed for sixty years, to then sit and wait. The situation on Vogar was already very critical when we left." Y'Nor scowled at the chronometer again. "Every hour we waste waiting here will delay our return to Vogar by an hour—I presume you realize that?"

"It does sound like a logical theory," Kane agreed.

Y'Nor's face darkened dangerously. "You will—"

Quick, hard-heeled footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. The guard officer, Dalon, stepped through the doorway and saluted; his eyes like ice under his pale brows and his uniform seeming to bristle with weapons.

"The native is here, sir," he said to Y'Nor.

He turned, and made a commanding gesture. The leader of the Saints appeared; the man whose resistance Y'Nor would have to break.

A frail, white-bearded old man, scuffed uncertainly into the room in straw sandals, his faded blue eyes peering nearsightedly toward Y'Nor.

"Go to the commander's desk," Dalon ordered in his metallic tones.

The old man obeyed and stopped before Y'Nor's desk, his hands clasped together as though to hide their trembling.

"You are Brenn," Y'Nor said, "and you hold, I believe, the impressive titles of Chief Executive of the Council Of Provinces and Supreme Elder of the Churches Of The Golden Rule?"

"Yes, sir." There was a faint quaver in old Brenn's voice. "I welcome you to our world, sir, and offer you our friendship."

"I understand you can produce Elusium X fuel?"

"Yes, sir. Our Dr. Larue told me the process is within our ability. We—" He hesitated. "We know you haven't enough fuel to return to Vogar."

Y'Nor stiffened in his chair. "What makes you think that?"

"It requires a great deal of fuel to get through the Whirlpool star cluster—and even sixty years ago, the Elusium ores of Vogar were almost exhausted."

Y'Nor smiled thinly. "That reminds me—you would be one of the Saints who murdered their guards and stole a ship to get here."

"We killed no guards, sir. In fact, all of them eventually joined our church."

"Where is the ship?"

"We had to cut it up for our start in mechanization."

"I presume you know you will pay for it?"

"It was taking us to our deaths in the radium mines—but we will pay whatever you ask."

"The first installment will be one thousand units of fuel, to be produced with the greatest speed possible."

"Yes, sir. But in return"—the old man stood a little straighter and an underlying resolve was suddenly revealed—"you must recognize us as a free race."

"Free? A colony founded by escaped criminals?"

"That is not true! We committed no crime, harmed no living thing...."

The hard, cold words of Y'Nor cut off his protest:

"This world is now a Vogarian possession. Every man, woman, and child upon it is a prisoner of the Vogarian State. There will be no resistance. This cruiser's disintegrators can destroy a town within seconds, your race within hours. Do you understand what I mean?"

The visible portion of old Brenn's face turned pale. He spoke at last in the bitter tones of frightened, stubborn determination:

"I offered you our friendship; I hoped you would accept, for we are a peaceful race. I should have known that you came only to persecute and enslave us. But the hand of God will reach down to help us and—"

Y'Nor laughed, a raucous sound like the harsh caw of the Vogarian vulture, and held up a hairy fist.

"This, old man, is the hand for you to center your prayers around. I want full-scale fuel production commenced within twenty-four hours. If this is done, and if you continue to unquestioningly obey all my commands, I will for that long defer your punishment as an escaped criminal. If this is not done, I will destroy a town exactly twenty-five hours from now—and as many more as may be necessary. And you will be publicly executed as a condemned criminal and an enemy of the Vogarian State."

Y'Nor turned to Dalon. "Take him away."

Scared sheep," Y'Nor said when Brenn was gone. "Tomorrow he'll say that he prayed and his god told him what to do—which will be to save his neck by doing as I command."

"I don't know—" Kane said doubtfully. "I think you're wrong about his conscience folding so easily."

"*You* think?" Y'Nor asked. "Perhaps I should remind you that the ability to think is usually characteristic of commanders rather than sub-ensigns. You will not be asked to try to think beyond the small extent required to comprehend simple commands."

Kane sighed with weary resignation. An unexpected encounter with an Alkorian battleship had sent the Vogarian cruiser fleeing through the unexplored Whirlpool star cluster—Y'Nor and Kane the two surviving commissioned officers—with results of negative value to those most affected: the world of the Saint had been accidentally discovered and he, Kane, had risen from sub-ensign to the shakily temporary position of second-in-command.

Y'Nor spoke again:

"Since Vogarian commanders do not go out and mingle with the natives of a subject world, you will act as my representative. I'll let Brenn sweat until tomorrow, then you will go see him. In that, and in all subsequent contacts with the natives, you will keep in mind the fact that I shall hold you personally responsible for any failure of my program."

The next afternoon, two hours before the deadline, Kane went out into the sweet spring air of the world the Saints had named Sanctuary.

It was a virgin world, rich in the resources needed by Vogar, with twenty thousand Saints as the primary labor supply. It was also, he thought, a green and beautiful world; almost a familiar world. The cruiser stood at the upper edge of the town and in the late afternoon sun the little white and brown houses were touched with gold, half hidden in the deep azure shadows of the tall trees and flowering vines that bordered the gently curving streets.

Restlessness stirred within him as he looked at them. It was like going back in time to the Lost Islands, that isolated little region of Vogar that had eluded collectivization until the year he was sixteen. It had been at the same time of year, in the spring, that the State Unity forces had landed. The Lost Island villages had been drowsing in the sun that afternoon, as this town was drowsing now—

He forced the memories from his mind, and the futile restlessness they brought, and went on past a golden-spired church to a small cottage that was almost hidden in a garden of flowers and giant silver ferns.

Brenn met him at the door, his manner very courteous, his eyes dark-shadowed with weariness as though he had not slept for many hours, and invited him inside.

When they were seated in the simply-furnished room, Brenn said, "You came for my decision, sir?"

"The commander sent me for it."

Brenn folded his thin hands, which seemed to have the trembling sometimes characteristic of the aged.

"Yesterday evening when I came from the ship, I prayed for guidance and I saw that I could only abide by the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*"

"Which means," Kane asked, "that you will do what?"

"Should we of the Church be stranded upon an alien world, our fuel supply almost gone, we would ask for help. By our own Golden Rule we can do no less than give it."

"Eighteen hours ago I issued the order for full-scale, all-out fuel production. I've been up all night and day checking the operation."

Kane stared, surprised that Y'Nor should have so correctly predicted Brenn's reaction. He tried to see some change in the old man, some evidence of the personal fear that must have broken him so quickly, but there was only weariness, and a gentleness.

"So much fuel—" Brenn said. "Is Vogar still at war with Alkoria?"

Kane nodded.

"Once I saw some Alkorian prisoners of war on Vogar," Brenn said. "They are a peaceful, doglike race. They never wanted to go to war with Vogar."

Well—they still didn't want war but on Alkoria were Elusium ores and other resources that the Vogarian State had to have before it could carry out its long-frustrated ambition of galactic conquest.

"I'll go, now," Kane said, getting out of his chair, "and see what you're having done. The commander doesn't take anybody's word for anything."

Brenn called a turbo-car and driver to take him to the multi-purpose factory, which was located a short distance beyond the other side of town. The driver stopped before the factory's main office, where a plump, bald man was waiting, his scalp and glasses gleaming in the sunshine.

"I'm Dr Larue, sir," he greeted Kane. He had a face that under normal circumstance would have been genial. "Father Brenn said you were coming. I'm at your service, to show you what we're doing."

They went inside the factory, where the rush of activity was like a beehive. Machines and installations not needed for fuel production were being torn out as quickly as possible, others taking their place. The workers—he craned his neck to verify his astonished first-impression.

All of them were women.

"Father Brenn's suggestion," Larue said. "These girls are as competent as men for this kind of work and their use here permits the release of men to the outer provinces to procure the raw materials. As you know, our population is small and widely scattered—"

A crash sounded as a huge object nearby toppled and fell. Kane took an instinctive backward step, and bumped into something soft.

"Oh ... excuse me, sir!"

He turned, and had a confused vision of an apologetic smile in a pretty young face, of red curls knocked into disarray—and of amazingly short shorts and a tantalizingly wispy halter.

She recovered the notebook she had dropped and hurried on, leaving a faint cloud of perfume in her wake and a disturbing memory of curving, golden tan legs and a flat little stomach that had been exposed both north and south to the extreme limits of modesty.

"A personnel supervisor from Beachville," Larue said. "She was sunbathing when the plane arrived to pick her up and had no time to obtain other clothing. Father Brenn firmly insisted upon losing not one minute of time during this emergency."

A crane rumbled into view and its grapples seized the huge object that had fallen.

"Our central air-conditioning unit," Larue said. "It had to go."

"You're putting something else in its place, of course?"

"Oh yes. We must have more space but Father Brenn opposed the plan of building an annex as too dangerously time consuming. The only alternative is to tear out everything not absolutely essential."

Kane left shortly afterward, satisfied that the Saints were doing as Brenn had said.

He went back out in the spring sunshine where the turbo-car was still waiting for him, debated briefly with himself, and dismissed the driver. After so many weeks in the prison-like ship, it would be pleasant to walk again.

A grassy, tree-covered ridge ran like the swell of a green sea between the plant and the town. He stopped on top of it, where the town was almost hidden from view, and looked out across the wide valley. Shadows moved lazily across it as cotton-puff clouds drifted down the blue dome of the sky, great white birds like swans were soaring overhead, calling to one another in voices like the singing of violins, bringing again the memories of the Lost Islands—

"And the Vogarian lord gazed upon his world and found it good!"

He swung around, his hand dropping to his holstered blaster, and looked into the green, mocking eyes of a tawny-haired girl. She was beautiful, in the savage way that the hill leopards of Vogar were beautiful, and her hand was on a pistol in her belt.

Her eyes flickered from his blaster up to his face, bright with challenge.

"Want to try it?" she asked.

She wore a short skirt of some rough material and her knees were dusty, as though she had walked for a long way. These things he noticed only absently, his eyes going back to the bold, beautiful face. For twenty years he had been accustomed to the women of Vogar; colorless in their Party uniforms and men's haircuts, made even more drab by the masculine mannerisms they affected. Not since the spring the Lost Islands died had he seen a girl like the one before him.

"Well?" she asked. "Do you think you'll know me next time?"

He walked to her, while she watched him with catlike wariness.

"Hand me that pistol," he ordered.

"Try to take it, you Vogarian ape!"

He moved, and a moment later she was sitting on the ground, her eyes wide with dismayed surprise as he shoved the pistol in his own belt.

"Resisting a Vogarian with a deadly weapon calls for the death penalty," he said. "I suppose you know what I can do?"

She got up, defiance like a blaze about her.

"I'll tell you what you can do—you can go to hell!"

The thought came to him that there might be considerable pleasure in laying her over his knee and raising some blisters where they would do her the most good. He regretfully dismissed the idea as too undignified for even a sub-ensign and asked:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here with that pistol?"

She hesitated, then answered with insolent coolness:

"My name is Barbara Loring. I heard that you Vogarians had demanded that we agree to surrender. I came down from the hills to disagree."

"Is a resistance force meeting here?"

"Do you think you could make me tell you?"

"There are ways—but I'm not here to use them. I am not your enemy."

A little of the hostility faded from her face and she asked, "But how could a Vogarian ever not be our enemy?"

He could find no satisfactory answer to the question.

"I can tell you this," she said. "I know of no resistance organization. I can also tell you that we're not the race of cowards you think and we'll fight the instant Father Brenn gives the word."

"For one who speaks respectfully of Brenn," he said, "your recent words and actions weren't very religious and refined."

Fire flashed in the green eyes again. "Up in the Azure Mountains, where I come from, we're not very refined and we like being that way!"

"And why do you carry guns?" he asked.

"Because all along our frontier lines are rhino-stags, cliff bears, thunder hawks, and a lot of other overgrown carnivora that don't like us—that's why."

"I see." He took the pistol from his belt and held it out to her. "Go back to your mountains, where you belong, before you do something to get yourself executed."

Y'Nor, waiting impatiently in the ship, was grimly pleased by the news of Brenn's change of attitude.

"Exactly as I predicted, as you no doubt recall. How long until they can have a thousand units of fuel produced?"

"Larue estimated fourteen days at best."

Y'Nor tapped his thick fingers on his desk, scowling thoughtfully. "As little as seven extra days might force Vogar to accept the Alkorian peace terms because of lack of fuel—the natives can work twice as hard as they expected to. Tell old Brenn they will be given exactly seven days from sunrise tomorrow.

"And summon Dalon and Graver. I want them to make use of every man on the ship for a twenty-four hour guard-and-inspection system in the plant. The natives will get no opportunities for stalling or sabotage."

Brenn was writing at his book-laden table when Kane went into his cottage the next morning.

"These are called edicts," Brenn said, after greeting him, "but I possess no law-making powers and they are really only suggestions."

Brenn shoved the paper to one side. The script was somewhat different from that of Vogar.

The Vogarian inspection and guard system is no more than an expected precaution against sabotage. The Vogarians must be regarded as potential friends who now treat us with suspicion and arrogance only because they do not yet realize the sincerity of our desire to help them to any extent short of surrender—

Kane looked up from the uncompleted, surprisingly humble, edict and Brenn asked:

"Your commander, sir—he is now pleased with our actions?"

"Not exactly. He will disintegrate a town seven days from sunrise this morning if all the fuel isn't produced by then."

"Seven—only seven days?" There was startled disbelief on Brenn's face. "But how can he expect us to produce so much fuel in so short a time?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry—it's something I would have argued against if I hadn't had too much sense to try."

"Seven days—" Brenn said again. "We can only pray that God will let it be time enough."

Kane walked on to the plant. The hilltop where he had met the girl was deserted and he felt a vague disappointment.

The plant was hot without the air-conditioner, especially in the vicinity of the electronic roasters. The girls looked flushed and uncomfortable, but for the redhead who still wore her scanty sunsuit. The armed Vogarians looked incongruously out of place among the girls and were sweating profusely. Kane made a mental note to have them ordered into tropical uniforms.

He found Dalon prowling like a wolf among his guards.

"It's inconceivable that these women could ever be a menace," Dalon said, "but I'm taking no chances."

He saw Graver, the cruiser's Chief Technician; a thin, dry man who seemed to be as emotionless as the machines and electronic circuits that were his life.

"They're doing everything with astonishing competence," Graver said. "My technicians are watching like hawks, though."

Larue was not in his office. His secretary, a brown-eyed woman of strikingly intelligent appearance, said, "I'm sorry, sir—Dr. Larue had to go back to town for a few minutes. May I give him your message?"

"No, thanks," he said. "Father Brenn is probably performing that unpleasant chore right now."

Since Dalon and Graver seemed to have the situation at the plant well in hand, Kane decided to make a tour of the outer provinces where the ores were being mined. An efficient plant would be worthless if it did not receive sufficient ore.

He spent four days on the inspection tour; much longer than he had expected to be gone but made necessary by the fact that the small Elusium mines were widely scattered in rugged, roadless areas and he had to walk most of the distance. The single helicopter on Sanctuary was being used to fly the ore out but it was operating on a schedule that caused him to miss it each time.

Each mine was being worked by full day-and-night crews; in fact, by more men than necessary. The reason for that, and for the way the men silently withheld their hostility, was made apparent in a bit of conversation between two miners that he overheard one day:

"... So why all of us here when not this many are needed?"

"They say Father Brenn wanted to get all the men out of town, away from the cruiser, so there would be no trouble—and you know there would have been if we had stayed. He wants to get the cruiser on its way back to Vogar, they say, so we can get busy producing weapons to fight the Occupation force...."

He returned on the fifth evening of the allotted seven days and stopped by Brenn's cottage before going on to the ship. The old man was working in his garden, his trembling hands trying to tie up a red-flowered vine.

Kane tied it for him and he said, "Thank you, sir. Did you find the mining to be as I had said?"

"I found more than that. You know, don't you, that Y'Nor will return with the Occupation force a hundred days after leaving here?"

"Yes—I know that that is his intention."

"I understand that you're going to try to build weapons while he's gone. Don't, if you think anything of your people, let them do it. Nothing you could build in a hundred days would last a minute against a cruiser's disintegrators."

"I know," Brenn said. "We are supposed to choose between bloody, hopeless resistance and eternal slavery, aren't we? But why should either fate befall a peaceful race?"

Kane asked the logical question: "Why shouldn't it?"

"The laws of God have always been laws of justice and mercy. Not even the Vogarian State can change them."

He thought of the way the State had changed the Lost Islands in one bloody, violent afternoon. Brenn, watching his face, said:

"You are skeptical and bitter, my son—but you will learn that a harmless old man can speak with wisdom."

"No," he said. "There is neither justice nor mercy in the universe. I know from experience. A man can only choose between the lesser of two evils—and almost anything is less evil than Y'Nor when he's mad."

He went to the plant the next morning. Inside, wherever he looked, he saw girls in shorts and halters. The place seemed to be alive with partially clad women. He went to the nearest bulletin board and read Brenn's edict of four days before:

Since the excessively warm temperature of the plant causes much discomfort and thereby impairs the efficiency of all workers, and since maximum efficiency will be required to produce the fuel in the extremely short time permitted us, it is suggested that the cool sunsuits of the Beachville girls become the standard work uniform until further notice. These may be obtained for the asking in Department 5-A.

The next day's edict read:

Some have hesitated to follow yesterday's edict through a sense of modesty. This is most commendable. However, the situation is very critical, our lives depend upon the highest degree of efficiency we can attain, and a hot, miserable worker is not efficient. Your bodies are God's handwork—do not be ashamed of them.

The edict for the next day read simply, warningly:

THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

The Vogarian guards and inspectors, now in tropical uniforms, still looked out of place with their holstered weapons but their former cold arrogance was gone and the attitude of the girls had changed from polite reserve to laughing, chattering friendliness.

He found Dalon in a far corner; cornered, literally, by the red-haired personnel supervisor who was spitting like a cat as she said:

"... Then tell your commander how one of your men tried to make one of my girls and got hit with a wrench for it! Ask him whether he wants us to produce fuel or make love! Go ahead—ask him! Or let me—I'll ask him!"

"You'll have to see to it that your girls don't lead my men on." Dalon ran his finger around his collar, worry on his face. "Florence, are you trying to get me ruined?"

"Then inform your men that there is a certain commandment we all believe in and anything beyond our willingness to be friends calls for marriage first."

"*Marriage?*" Dalon spluttered the word, recovered his poise with an effort, and said stiffly, "My men are soldiers, not suitors. I want them respected as such."

He strode away without seeing Kane. The girl stared after him, fuming, and Kane went in search of Graver.

Graver and the brown-eyed secretary were in Larue's office, their heads together over a flow sheet of some kind. The secretary excused herself and when she was gone, Kane asked:

"Where's Larue?"

"Checking the catalytic processors, I think, sir." Graver answered, almost vaguely. "Mar ... his secretary was just showing me how they improvised so much of their equipment so quickly." There was a strange light in Graver's usually expressionless eyes. "It's incredible!"

"Well—the commander gave them no time to waste, you know."

"Sir? Oh ... I was referring to her intelligence, sir. It's amazing that a woman should have such a thorough knowledge of such a complex process."

Kane felt the birth pains of the first dark premonition.

"If you don't want a thorough knowledge of the interior of State prison," he said in grim warning, "you'd better get that silly look off your face and concentrate on your duties. Tell Dalon the same order applies to him. And tell Larue that the commander reminds him they now have less than forty

hours to finish the job."

He decided, again, to walk back to the ship. There was now a multitude of paths through the grass where girls had been walking to and from work. Two groups from the last shift-change were a short distance ahead of him, several of Dalon's guards and Graver's technicians among them, all of them talking and laughing.

In that area they could not be spied upon by Y'Nor with the ship's view-screen scanners and even as he watched, a tall, dark young guard put his arm around the girl walking close beside him. She twisted away from him and ran on to the next group, there to look back with a teasing toss of her head.

Kane watched both groups disappear over the hill, then followed, muttering thoughtfully. He felt he could safely assume—if anything could be said to be safe about the situation—that the lack of discipline he had just witnessed was typical of all the men. They were all young and healthy and for sixteen hours out of each day they were side by side with the almost nude, provocatively feminine, Sanctuary girls.

Their weakness was understandable. It was also very dangerous. Heads would roll if Y'Nor ever learned what was going on and it required no psychic ability to guess whose head would roll the fastest and farthest.

He would have to have it stopped, at once.

He took a short cut to Brenn's cottage, by a sleepy, shady street he had never been down before. Halfway along it was an open-air eating place of some kind, with tables placed about under the trees. There seemed to be no customers at the moment but he stopped, anyway, to take a closer look for errant guards.

A tawny head lifted at a table half hidden by a nearby tree and he looked into the surprised face of the mountain girl, Barbara.

"Well!" she said. "Come on over and let me offer you a glass of cyanide."

He walked over to her table. She was wearing a blouse and skirt similar to that of the day he had met her but the pistol was gone.

"I thought I told you to go back to your hills," he said.

"I decided it would be more fun to work in the plant and sabotage things."

"Let Y'Nor learn you said that and you'll be in a fix I can't help you out of."

"Should a Vogarian care?" But the jeering was gone as she said, "When you gave my pistol back to me—I thought it was a trick of some kind."

"I told you I wasn't your enemy."

"I know ... but it's hard for a Saint to believe any Vogarian could ever be anything else."

"It doesn't seem to be very hard for the girls in the plant," he observed glumly.

"Oh ... that's different." She made a gesture of light dismissal. "Those soldiers and technicians are good boys at heart—they haven't been brain-washed like you officers."

"That's interesting to know, I'm sure. I suppose—"

He stopped as a gray-haired woman came and set down a tray containing a sandwich and a mug. From the foamy top of the mug came the unmistakable aroma of beer.

"Do you Saints *drink*?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure. Why?"

"But your church—"

"Earth churches used to ban alcohol as sinful because it would cause a mean person to show his true character. My church is more sensible and works to change the person's character, instead."

She took a bite of the sandwich. "Cliff bear steak—it and beer go perfectly together. Shall I order you some?"

"No," he said, thinking of Y'Nor's fury if Y'Nor should learn he had had a friendly lunch with a native girl. "About your church—what kind of a church is it, anyway?"

"What its name implies. Heaven isn't for sale at the pulpit—everybody has to qualify for it by his own actions. We have to practice our belief—just looking pious and saying that we believe doesn't count."

He revised his opinion of the Saints, then asked, "But were you practicing your Golden Rule when you came to this town with a gun to shoot Vogarians?"

"For Vogarians we have a special Golden Rule that reads: *Do unto Vogarians as they have come to do unto you*. And you came here to enslave or kill us—remember?"

It could not be denied. When he did not answer she smiled at him; a smile surprisingly gentle and understanding.

"You honestly would like to be our friend, wouldn't you? The State psychiatrists didn't do a good job of brainwashing you, after all."

It was the first time since he was sixteen that anyone had spoken to him with genuine kindness. It gave him a strange feeling, a lonely sense of something rising up out of the past to mock him, and he changed the subject:

"Are the Azure Mountains the edge of your frontier?"

She nodded. "Beyond is the Emerald Plain, a great, wide plain, and beyond it are mountain ranges that have never been named or explored. I'm going into them some day and—"

Time passed with astonishing speed as he talked with the girl and it was late in the afternoon when he continued on to Brenn's cottage. He put the thoughts of her from his mind and told Brenn of the too-warm association between the girls and the Vogarians.

"But it is only friendship," Brenn said soothingly. "You can assure your commander that nothing immoral is being done."

"If he knew what was going on, it would be my neck. It has to be stopped. Write an edict—do anything that will stop it at once."

Brenn stroked his white beard thoughtfully. "I'm sorry this unforeseen situation has occurred, sir. Will you have strict orders to the same effect given your men?"

"There's a severe penalty for unauthorized fraternization. I'll see that they're well reminded of it."

"I'll write another edict, at once, forbidding the girls to speak to your men, sir."

Y'Nor was pacing the floor when Kane went to the ship, his face black and ugly with anger.

"Have you been blind?" he demanded.

Kane tried to swallow a sinking feeling, wondering just how much Y'Nor had seen, and said, "Sir?"

"My guards—my so-called guards—how long have they been strolling back from the plant in company with the native women?"

"Oh," he said, feeling a great relief that Y'Nor had not seen the true situation, "it's only that some of the out-going shifts coincide, sir, and—"

"You know, don't you, that military men march to and from duty in military formation?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are aware of the importance of discipline?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are further aware of the fact that you, Dalon, and Graver, will be guilty of treason if this lack of discipline imperils my plans in any way?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have heard of the punishment for treason?"

"Yes, sir."

He went below when the unpleasant business with Y'Nor was finally over. It was the beginning of the eight-hour sleep period for Dalon and Graver but they were still up, sitting on their bunks and staring dreamily into space. It was only belatedly, almost fuzzily, that they became aware of his glowering presence in the doorway.

"I bring you glad tidings," he said, "from the commander's own lips. The multiple-gallows at State prison is still in perfect working order, especially the first three trapdoors—"

The last day dawned, bright and sunny, and he went to see Brenn.

"I had the new edict posted immediately," Brenn said. "I hope it will undo the damage."

"Let's see it," Kane requested and Brenn handed him the handwritten original. It was:

Despite our affection for the Vogarians among us, we must not endanger them by any longer talking to them. A Vogarian military rule is now being enforced which forbids Vogarians to speak to Sanctuary girls except in the line of duty. There is a severe penalty for those who disobey this rule.

It must also be pointed out, sternly to the Sanctuary girls and respectfully to the Vogarians, that flight into the uninhabited Sanctuary mountains would result in execution for the fleeing couples if Commander Y'Nor should ever find them.

"What's this?" Kane demanded, pointing to the last paragraph.

"Why—a warning, sir."

"Warning ... it's a suggestion!"

"A suggestion?" Brenn lifted his hands in shocked protest. "But, sir, how could anyone think—"

"I, personally, wouldn't give a damn if the entire crew was too love-sick to eat. But the commander does and my future welfare, including the privilege of breathing, depends upon my retaining what passes for his good will."

"Good heavens—I shall have this edict removed from the bulletin boards at once!"

"A great idea. It should fix up everything to lock the stable door now that the horse is stolen."

He went to the plant and felt the air of resentment as soon as he stepped inside. Dalon was patrolling among his men, his haggard face becoming more haggard each time the red-haired personnel supervisor went by with her hips swinging and her head held high in hurt, aloof silence. The guards were pacing their beats in wordless quiet, Graver's technicians were speaking only in the line of duty. The girls were not talking even to one another but in the soft, melting glances they gave the Vogarians they said *We understand* in a manner more eloquent than any words.

In fact, far too eloquent. He considered the plan of having Brenn forbid the girls to look at the guards, discarded that as impractical, for a moment wildly considered ordering the guards not to look at the girls, discarded that as even more impractical, and went, muttering, to Larue's office.

Larue was at his desk, his face lined with fatigue.

"It's been a difficult job," he said, "but we'll meet the deadline."

"Good," Kane answered. "Did Brenn phone you about having that edict removed?"

"Ah—which one?"

"Which one? You mean...."

He turned and ran from the office.

A girl was removing the offending edict from the nearest bulletin board. Another, later, one proclaimed:

We must abandon as hopeless the suggestion of some that if there must be an Occupation force, we would like for it to be these men whom we have come to respect, and many of us to love. This can never be. Only Commander Y'Nor will leave the ship at Vogar, there to select his own Occupation force, while the men now among us continue directly on to the Alkorian war from which many of them will never return.

We must not resent the fact that on this, their last day among us, these men are forbidden to speak to us or to let us speak to them nor say that this is unfair when Commander Y'Nor's Occupation troops will be permitted to associate freely with us. These things are beyond our power to change. We must accept the inevitable and show only by our silent conduct the love we have for these warriors whom we shall never see again.

Kane gulped convulsively, read it again, and hurried back to Larue's office.

"How long has that last edict been up?" he demanded.

"About twelve hours."

"Then every shift has seen it?"

"Ah ... yes. Why—is something wrong with it?"

"That depends on the viewpoint. I want them removed at once. And tell that sanctified old weasel that if this last edict of his gets me hanged, which it probably will, I'll see to it that he gets the same medicine."

He went back into the plant and made his way through the bare-legged, soft-eyed girls, looking for Dalon. He overheard a guard say in low, bitter tones to another: "... *Maybe eight hours on Vogar, and we can't leave the ship, then on to the battle front for us while Y'Nor and his home guard favorites come back here and pick out their harems—*"

He found Dalon and said to him, "Watch your men. They're resentful. Some of them might even desert—and Y'Nor wasn't joking about that gallows for us last night."

"I know." Dalon ran his finger around the collar that seemed to be getting increasingly tighter for him. "I've warned them that the Occupation troops would get them in the end."

He found Graver at a dial-covered panel. The brown-eyed secretary—her eyes now darker and more appealing than ever—was just leaving, a notebook in her hand.

"Since when," Kane asked, "has it been customary for technicians to need the assistance of secretaries to read a dial?"

"But, sir, she is a very good technician, herself. Her paper work is now done and she was helping me trace a circuit that was fluctuating."

Kane peered suspiciously into Graver's expressionless face.

"Are you sure it was a circuit that was doing the fluctuating?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know that half of Dalon's guards seem to be ready to jump ship?"

"Yes, sir. But their resentment is not characteristic of my technicians."

He realized, with surprise, that that was true. And Graver, in contrast to Dalon's agitation, had the calm, purposeful air of a man who had pondered deeply upon an unpleasant future and had taken steps to prevent it.

"I have no desire to hang, sir, and I have convinced my men that it would be suicide for part of them to desert. I shall do my best to convince Dalon's guards of the same thing."

He went back through the plant, much of his confidence restored, and back to the ship.

Y'Nor was pacing the floor again, his impatience keying him to a mood more vile than ever.

"This ship will leave at exactly twenty-three fifteen, Vogar time," Y'Nor said. "Any man not on it then will be regarded as a deserter and executed as such when I return with the Occupation force."

He stopped his pacing to stare at Kane with the ominous anticipation of a spider surveying a captured fly.

"Although I can operate this ship with a minimum of two crewmen, I shall expect you to make certain that every man is on board."

Kane went back out of the ship, his confidence shaken again, and back to the plant.

Night came at last and, finally, the first shielded tank of fuel was delivered to the ship. Others followed, one by one, as the hours went by.

It was almost morning when Graver came to him and said, "My duties and those of my men are finished here, sir. Shall we go to prepare the ship for flight?"

"Yes—get busy at it," Kane answered. "Don't give the commander any excuse to get any madder than he already is."

An hour later the last of the fuel went into the last tank and was hauled away. Someone said, "That's all," and a switch clicked. A machine rumbled off into silence, followed by others. Control panels went dark. Within a minute there was not a machine running, not a panel lighted.

Dalon's whistle for Guard Assembly sounded, high and shrill. A girl's voice called to one of the guards: "Hurry back to your ship, Billy—the thunder hawks might get you if you stayed—" and broke on a sob. Another girl said, "Hush, Julia—it's not his fault."

He went out of the plant, and past Larue's office. He saw that the brown-eyed secretary was gone, her desk clean. Larue was still there, looking very tired. He did not go in. The fuel had been produced, he would never see Larue again.

He took the path that led toward town. Part of the Whirlpool star cluster was still above the horizon, a white blaze of a thousand suns, and the eastern sky was lightening with the first rays of dawn. A dozen girls were ahead of him, their voices a low murmur as they hurried back toward town. There was an undertone of tension, all of the former gaiety gone. The brief week of make-believe was over and the next Vogarians to come would truly be their enemy.

He came to the hilltop where he had met the mountain girl, thought of her with irrational longing, and suddenly she was there before him.

The pistol was again in her belt.

"You came with all the stealth of a plains ox," she said. "I could have shot you a dozen times over."

"Are we already at war?" he asked.

"We Saints have to let you Vogarians kill some of us, first—our penalty for being ethical."

"Listen to me," he said. "We tried to fight the inevitable in the Lost Islands. When the sun went down that day, half of us were dead and the rest prisoners."

"And you rose from prisoner to officer because you were too selfish to keep fighting for what was right."

"I saw them bury the ones who insisted on doing that."

"And you want us to meekly bow down, here?"

"I have no interest of any kind in this world—I'll never see it again—but I know from experience what will happen to you and your people if you try to fight. I don't want that to happen. Do you think that because a man isn't a blind chauvinist, he has to be a soulless monster?"

"No," she said in a suddenly small voice. "But I had hoped ... we were talking that day of the mountains beyond the Emerald Plain and a frontier to last for centuries ... it was just idle talk but I thought maybe that when the showdown came you would be on our side, after all."

She drew a deep breath that came a little raggedly and said with a lightness that was too forced:

"You don't mind if I have a silly sentimental fondness for my world, do you? It's the only world I have. Maybe you would understand if you could see the Azure Mountains in the spring ... but you never will, will you? Because you lied when you said you weren't my enemy and now I know you are and I"—the lightness faltered and broke—"am yours ... and the next time we meet one will have to kill the other."

She turned away, and vanished among the trees like a shadow.

He was unaware of the passage of time as he stood there on the hill that was silent with her going and remembered the day he had met her and the way the song swans had been calling. When he looked up at the sky, it was bright gold in the east and the blazing stars of the Whirlpool were fading into invisibility. He looked to the west, where the road wound its long way out of the valley, and he thought he could see her trudging up it, tiny and distant. He looked at his watch and saw he had just time enough to reach the ship before it left.

Brenn was standing by his gate, watching the dawn flame into incandescence and looking more frail and helpless than ever. The cruiser towered beyond, blotting out half the dawn sky like a sinister omen. A faint, deep hum was coming from it as the drive went into the preliminary phase that preceded take-off.

"You have only seconds left to reach the ship," Brenn said. "You have already tarried almost too long."

"You're looking at a fool," he answered, "who is going to tarry in the Azure Mountains and beyond the Emerald Plain for a hundred days. Then the Occupation men will kill him."

There was no surprise on Brenn's face but it seemed to Kane that the old man smiled in his beard. For the second time since he was sixteen, Kane heard someone speak to him with gentle understanding:

"Although you have not been of much help to my plans, your intentions were good. I was sure that in the end this would be your decision. I am well pleased with you, my son."

A whine came from the ship and the boarding ramp flicked up like a disappearing tongue. The black opening of the air lock seemed to wink, then was solid, featureless metal as the doors slid shut.

"*Bon voyage, Y'Nor!*" Kane said. "We'll be waiting for you with our bows and arrows."

"There is no one on the ship but Y'Nor," Brenn said. "Graver saw to it that the Ready lights were all going on the command room control board, then he and all the others followed my ... suggestion."

Kane remembered Graver's calmness and his statement concerning his men: "... It would be suicide for part of them to desert."

For *part* of them. But if every last one deserted—

The drives of the ship roared as Y'Nor pushed a control button and the ship lifted slowly. The roaring faltered and died as Y'Nor pushed another button which called for a crewman who was not there. The ship dropped back with a ponderous thud, careened, and fell with a force that shook the ground. It made no further sound or movement.

He stared at the silent, impotent ship, finding it hard to realize that there would be no hundred-day limit for him; that the new world, the boundless frontier—and Barbara—would be his for as long as he lived.

"Poor Commander Y'Nor," Brenn said. "The air lock is now under the ship and we shall have to dig a tunnel to rescue him."

"Don't hurry about it," Kane advised. "Let him sweat in the dark for a few days with his desk wrapped around his neck. It will do him good."

"We are a kind and harmless race, we could never do anything like that."

"Kind? I believe you. But harmless? You made monkeys out of Vogar's choicest fighting men."

"Please do not use such an uncouth expression. I was only the humble instrument of a greater Power. I only ... ah ... encouraged the natural affection between man and maid, the love that God intended them to have."

"But did you practice your Golden Rule? You saw to it that fifty young men were forced to associate day after day with hundreds of almost-naked girls. Would you really have wanted the same thing done to you if you had been in their place?"

"Would I?" There was a gleam in the old eyes that did not seem to come from the brightness of the dawn. "I, too, was once young, my son—what do *you* think?"

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