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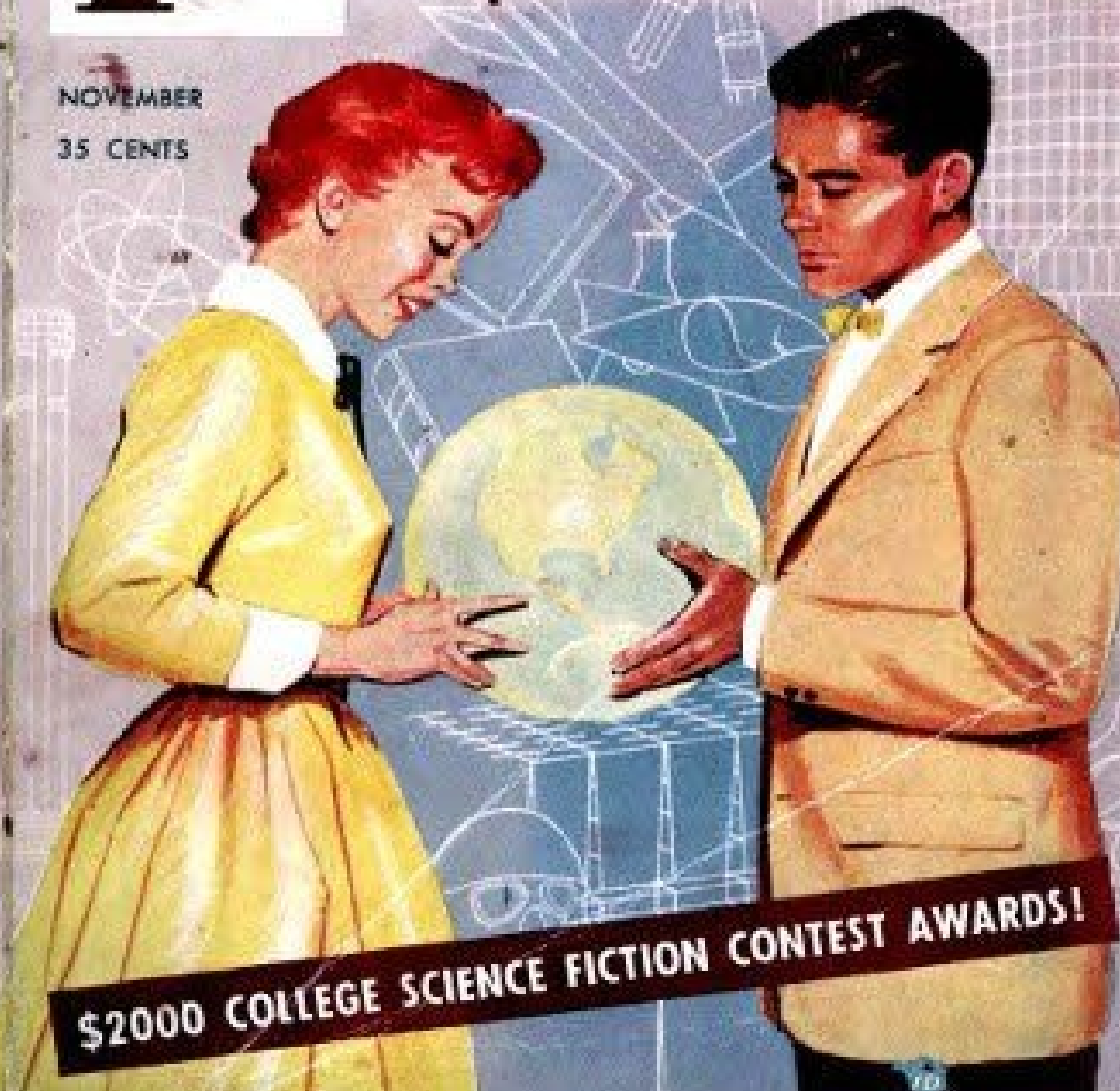
What the Youth of Today Thinks
About the America of Tomorrow!

NOVEMBER

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Stalemate, by Basil Eugene Wells

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STALEMATE

BY BASIL WELLS

Illustrated by Leo Summers

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The rules of a duel between gentlemen are quite different from the rules of war between nations. Is it because gentlemen do not fight wars, or is it that men in war cease to be gentlemen?

The bullet slapped rotted leaves and dirt into Gram Treb's eyes. He wormed backward to the bole of a small tree.

"Missed!" he shouted. He used English, the second tongue of them both. "Throw away your carbine and use rocks."

"You tasted it anyhow," Harl Neilson's shrill young voice cried. "How was the sample?"

"That leaves you two cartridges," taunted Treb. "Or is it only one?"

The sixth sense that had brought him safely through two of these bloody war duels here in space made him fling his body to the left. He rolled over once and lay huddled in a shallow depression. He knew all the tiny hollows and ridges—they were his insurance on this mile-wide island high above Earth.

Something thudded into the tree roots behind him. He hugged the ground, body flattened. His breath eased raggedly outward, and caught. The waiting—the seconds that became hours! If the grenade rolled after him, down the slope into his shelter, he was finished.

There was nothing he could do. His palms oozed sweat....

The grenade exploded. It was like a fist slammed against his skull. He was numbed for a long instant. Then he checked.

Unharméd. The depression had saved his neck this time. He wanted to shout at Neilson, tell him he was down to a lone grenade, but that was poor strategy. Now he must withdraw, make Neilson think him injured or dead, and trap him in turn.

They were the last of the belligerents here within Earth Satellite. For two months, since what would be May on Earth, they had carried on this mad duel. Of the other eighteen who had started the war in November of the preceding year, only four had survived their wounds. The United Nations' supervisory seconds had transported them to their homes in Andilia and in Baryt....

Treb wormed his way as noiselessly as possible into the undergrowth, sprawling at last in the shelter of an earthen mound thirty feet from the grenade's raw splash. He waited—and thought.

Memories can be unpleasant. He could see his comrades of the three battles as they had fallen, wounded or gray with death. Too many of them had he helped bury. He remembered the treasured photos.

The draining wound in his right forearm throbbed....

The enemy dead too. He had killed several of them—more than his share, he thought savagely. They too were young despite the ragged beards some of them cultivated.

Treb felt like an old man. And he *was* old. He was twenty-nine. He had a son also named Gram, a boy of five, and little Alse, who was two. Had little Alse's mother lived he would never have volunteered for this third United Nations' war duel.

He would have been with her in the mountain valley of Krekar working hard, and gradually erasing those other ugly episodes here on Earth Satellite One....

Minutes crawled by, lumped together into hours. Birds sang in the trees so laboriously maintained here in the satellite's disk-shaped heart. And, a hundred feet overhead, where the true deck of the man-made island in space began, other birds nested in the girders.

An ant crawled over Treb's earth-stained hand and passed under his outstretched carbine's barrel.

There was a movement in the clustering trees off to his right. Neilson had circled and was coming in from an opposite angle. Treb thumbed off the safety and waited.

An earth-colored helmet, with a trace of long pale hair around its rim, came slowly into view. Could be a dummy, Neilson was clever at rigging them to draw fire. And he had exactly two cartridges. After that it would be his three grenades, his two-foot needle-knife, that doubled as a bayonet, and the steel bow he had contrived from a strip of spring steel.

He held his fire. The trees made grenade lobbing a touchy business. And his bow was back in one of the dozens of foxholes he had spotted in both the inner and outer rings of trees.

In the fantasy stories of adventure in space that he enjoyed reading, the hero could always whip up a weird paralysis ray, a deadly, invisible robot bullet, or an intelligent gaseous ally from the void would appear. And out of scrap glass, metal and his shoestrings he could contrive a solar-powered shell that stopped any missile, deadlier than a marshmallow, cold.

In actual life he was finding it difficult enough to contrive a primitive sort of bow, a knife-lashed spear, and snares for the increasingly wary rabbits. Lack of sleep and lack of food supplies were sapping his lanky body of the whiplash swiftness and wiry strength it once possessed. Nor was the week-old wound any aid to his dulled wits....

The helmet advanced; he could almost see the twig-stuffed gray shirt's pockets, and he let his nostrils expand as he sucked in a steadying breath. Now, a yard behind the fake Andilian, he could see the moving shoulders and skull of Harl Neilson—or so his bloodshot eyes told him.

He squeezed the trigger. There was a subdued yip, and then a derisive jeer. Missed again—or had he?

"Sour rocketing, Grampaw," Neilson laughed. "Try again. And then I'm coming after you."

Only Neilson wouldn't. Unless he'd miscalculated the number of grenades, he wouldn't come charging at Treb. And he couldn't be sure of the number of cartridges Treb possessed. He was just talking to keep his nerve up.

Especially if he was wounded now. That sudden yip....

It was night again, an artificial night as artificial as the central ten-acre pool of water, the ring of flowering green trees and grasses, and the final outer ring of forest trees. It was here that the two thousand UN employees and soldiers on Earth Satellite One normally took their recreation periods.

Only the supervised war-duels, that since 1969 had been the only blood-letting permitted between nations, could long keep a Terran from visiting the green meadows and trees of this lowest of the three levels....

"I'd give half that quarter million," Neilson groaned, across the darkness, "for a cigarette."

"You mean," corrected Gram Treb, "half your ten thousand."

"It's the winner's grant or nothing, Treb. I promised Jane I'd hand it to her. Then we'll marry."

"But not if you are the loser?"

"I wouldn't—she wouldn't—it's impossible to think of asking her to share poverty and disgrace."

"I'd hardly say that. We lost our first war here on the Satellite. Baryt was obligated to cede a thousand square miles to Tarrance. Most of my ten thousand paid off my family's debts.

"Yet I married. I married Nal who had nursed me back to health. And we were happy. Until the second war with Duristan. I wanted money for her—for the children—for my impoverished valley."

Treb broke off. He backed away several feet and shifted noiselessly to a new position. Every night, and sometimes in the artificial sunlight, they talked together. But they never forgot that they were sworn foes.

"So you won it didn't you?" From his voice Neilson had shifted closer and to the left.

"Sure. And I wish I were as poor as before. For Nal was kicked to death—by the horse I should have been using—while I fought here."

Neilson made a sympathetic sound. Treb felt his lips twitch into a thin crooked

line. This is what it meant to be human. To feel sorrow for another man's misfortunes—and then kill him!

Sure, Neilson was a good sort. Only twenty-four and in love with a girl, a woman really, widow of a dead lunar explorer. And he was a clean-living sort, nothing dishonorable or hateful about him. They even honored the same God.

But tomorrow, or the next day, or a month from now, he would kill or wound Neilson. Unless, as might well happen, Neilson got to him first.

He pushed aside a thought that came more and more often of late. Why not surrender, or let Neilson capture him? He did not consider suicide—little Gram and Alse needed him—although he had not been thinking of them when he signed for this ugly miniature battle in space. His wife's death had been too vivid yet.

But, why not surrender? He had enough money. The valley people could struggle along without the machines and the dam he had hoped to grant them with victory. And Baryt could lose the island of Daafa to Andilia without crippling herself. The three hundred and fifty inhabitants could be transferred to the mainland.

Treb laughed silently, a laugh that cut off with a twinge of drawing ugly pain from his wounded forearm. He knew that he could no more surrender without a fight than he could command his breathing to stop forever. He was a man, and men cannot give up dishonorably....

"I'd like to see those two kids sometime, if you're still around, Treb." Neilson had moved again. His voice was lower but he was nearer.

"Stop around anytime, Harl." Treb moved a few feet deeper into a thicket. "We'll show you what real Baryt hospitality is."

"That's a promise, Treb."

Killing. That's what war was. So you had to kill. Or you volunteered to kill. But you didn't have to like it. All these little wars under UN supervision were needless—arbitration would serve as well. But the people, the leaders—someone—wanted blood. So ten or twelve or fifteen citizens of one nation fought an equal number of the other state's sons.

Doubtless it was an improvement over the mass bombings of innocent city

dwellers, and the horror of atomic dusts and sprays. No overwhelming army could sweep, unchecked, over a helpless neighbor. It was fairer, too, for those involved. Equal numbers of men, guns, supplies. Wealth if your side won, and a fair sum if you lost.

The United Nations saw to that. After all the avenues to peaceful settlement had been explored and turned down they finally permitted bloodshed. Much against their better judgement, perhaps.

So he could destroy likeable young Andilians like Neilson.

"Why don't you send up a rocket?" Neilson kidded, his voice coming from a changed direction again. "So I can see you."

"Anything to oblige."

Neilson was circling out around, as though to drive him into a trap or trick him. They were getting back to the primitive now. Soon it would be knives, spears, and deadfalls.

"Come on over and I'll show you Jane's picture, Treb," invited Neilson. He laughed hoarsely. "If we weren't where we are, I'd mean that."

"I know. I feel that way myself sometimes. We've been here alone too long. Hate hasn't lasted."

"Why aren't you a wrongo, Treb?" The young voice was cracked and savage. "Why'd you have to tell me about—Gram and Alse?"

Treb was backing away again, cautiously. He scented a trap. No doubt Neilson's words were sincere, at the moment, but in a second's time he could change into a cold-blooded executioner. He knew. He had seen the gentlest of men suddenly turn killer....

And then his foot struck a yielding branch and his aroused suspicion sent him lunging forward.

A heavy something fell with a sickening thud, brushing as it struck the sole of his disintegrating shoe. A cleverly rigged deadfall of small trees and rock, doubtless.

"You're slipping, Harl," he shouted.

But he could feel the sudden sweat damping his palms, and the muscles twitched unsteadily in his arms and across his stomach.



With morning he was half a mile away, in a foxhole less than sixty yards from the massive outer perimeter of the arena. Two of his snares had yielded a rabbit each, and so he was supplied for several days.

The foxhole had two entrances, both well-concealed, and he had rigged elaborate warning devices should the vicinity be approached. So he was sleeping.

His dreams were unpleasant.

In his latest dream an extremely shapely and smiling young woman with dark hair was heaving a grenade into a pit where he lay bound and helpless. The grenade swelled until it became a space ship heading directly toward the frail scout craft he piloted....

And a tiny blob of dislodged mud from the dugout spatted his face. He sat up.

Another day to hunt or be hunted. Or to lie here and try to rest and make plans. There was slight possibility that Neilson could find him here.

He gnawed at the scanty-fleshed ribs of the first rabbit, savoring the raw meaty smell and flavor. Hunger was his salt.

Now that they had lost contact with one another it might require several days to find Neilson. A wooded platter, a mile in diameter, can afford many hiding places for one creature hiding from another hunting beast.

It was time to set some of the traps he had been contriving.

There were the two nooses, attached to bent-down triggered young trees that could not be set until darkness fell again. The net, too, would need darkness to conceal the four rough pulleys, and the rocks that a tug on his rope would spill.

But the almost invisible nylon cords, set at ankle height across the paths, and the ugly little pits with their sharpened stakes set three feet below, could trip up a man and cripple him. He must put out several of those.

He had no wish to kill Neilson. If he could capture him, very good. He could go

back to Andilia and perhaps his Jane would be glad to take him. If she did not—it was worth knowing how little she really cared, was it not?

So he would try to trap the younger man and save his life.

It would be difficult. The other man had grenades, a carbine and a keen needle-knife. Perhaps, before the end, he would be forced to kill after all. But regretfully.

Treb dumped the last of the *tsaftha* antibiotic into his wound and lay back for a few more hours of rest before going out to prepare the traps.

His head was not clear. And his eyes drew together from exhaustion....



Another night and another day, and it was night again.

His traps were set and ready. All through the day he had prowled the trees, watching for some sign of Neilson. He found he was muttering to himself, hungry for the sound of spoken words.

It was nervous work. His muscles were jumping in faint spastic explosions. Neilson could have been lying in ambush in any of a hundred leafy coverts, resting there and waiting....

He had covered less than two miles of inching, crawling paths, his eyes ever alert for deadfalls, pits and spear-traps that might flash across the way to impale him.

And he had caught no sight of Neilson.

Now it was night again. Time to check on his traps. The rabbit traps as well as the human traps.

He was approaching the net. And the awareness that this furtive game of hide-and-seek might go on for weeks oppressed him. He might lie here close by the net for days without sight of Neilson. They were too evenly matched—and Neilson was younger. It was Neilson's youth against his experience.

He found the thin rope of knotted nylon and plastic scraps that led to the four balanced rocks. One stout yank and the net would jerk upward four feet and

tighten around its victim.

But, in the dim starlight from the small globes spotting the Satellite's ceiling, the path was an indistinct blur. A moving body's exact position.... And at fifty feet....

He saw Neilson—it could only be Neilson.

Moving on hands and knees, he was keeping low and to the side of the little-used trail—but within the width of the hand-patched net. And he moved slowly, probing before him with a stick or his needle-knife; Treb could not tell which.

Another two feet and he could trip the net. Neilson would be captured, alive, and the stalemate ended.

Now!

The net flung into the air, snapped tight about Neilson's thrashing body! He heard the pop of parting strands as Neilson slashed with his knife. And then he swung the butt of his carbine, twice, against the trapped man's skull.

Neilson went limp. It was finished. He could take his prisoner to the lock, summon the UN guards, and go home to the Krekar Hills. And an end to all blood-letting for him.

He set about binding tight the arms and legs of Neilson, and had barely completed his task when the prisoner groaned and struggled.

"So this is it, Treb?"

"Yes."

"You win again. And I—I lose everything."

"So?" Treb touched his pocket torch to a heap of shredded dry twigs. "What have you lost? Your health, your life? And will not the woman forget all else and love you?"

"Hah! She will laugh at me if I come near her. Defeated, and with a paltry ten thousand to offer. Better that I died than this."

"Perhaps you do not—know this woman, Harl. If she is good, she will come to you."

The growing firelight was on Neilson's bearded face. And beneath his eyes

something glistened and beaded. He laughed bitterly.

"She's not good, Treb, understand that. She's evil and money-hungry, and ambitious. But she is beautiful and I love her. I'd sell my soul and my body to possess her.

"That's why I volunteered. With the winners' grant I would have money. Prestige. Honor. There would be a thousand new opportunities for a career. And Jane could not refuse me then."

"It is wrong, Harl Neilson, to so worship a woman. Like alcohol or Venerian fire pollen—it is unnatural."

"I know. I have tried to forget, to put her memory aside. But it is like a disease. An incurable disease. I must have Jane."

Treb threw more wood on the little fire and checked over the lashings about Neilson's body.

"I am going to look at my rabbit snares," he said, "and to spring the other traps. We will eat and sleep, and in the morning try to shave and look decent before going to the locks."

Neilson let his head sag between his shoulders, and said nothing. He was leaning against a tree, his arms lashed behind him and to it.

"There is one more thing, Harl, that I wish to discuss. It is about the Paul Hubble Foundation Award. Think about it."

Treb moved off into the darkness.



The sunlight from the overhead "suns" of the Satellite revealed a greatly changed Treb. He was shaved, his hair combed and hacked off above his ears, and he was stitching the last rough patch on his dark green trouser leg.

Now he donned the trousers and went over to the bound Andilian. He cut the ropes, his carbine ready.

"Get down to the lake," he ordered. "You'll find a razor, soap and an old shirt to dry yourself with."

Harl Neilson was chunky and fair-haired, with a healthy looking red-brown skin. His eyes were wide and darkly blue. Now the wide mouth under his shapeless nose twisted into a faint grin.

"I'll try to get away," he warned. "Aren't you afraid of that?"

"I have all the guns, grenades and needle-knives, Harl. I'll shoot you if you attempt escape, of course, but I hope you'll listen to what I propose first."

Neilson slowly stripped off his ragged tunic and trousers. There was the scar of a recent bullet's path across his right shoulder blade. It was crusted with blackened blood.

"I thought I heard you two days back, Harl," said Treb.

"Just a scratch." Neilson took up the soap and waded into the nearby lake. "Start talking, Treb."

"I told you to think about Paul Hubble's Award, Harl. He's the American industrialist who opposed violence in settling any issue."

"Sure. Heard about him in the lower grades. Fifty million dollars he sunk in his worthless Peace Foundation. What about it?"

"Hear me out. Did you like what we just went through? Your friends and comrades dying—my friends dead and wounded? And all to settle some territorial dispute or to wipe out some imagined slur.

"Would you like to prevent your kid, or mine, from having to face this again?"

"Stop sounding off, Treb, and say something." Neilson scrubbed vigorously. "Of course I would—if I ever had a kid, I mean."

"We could help, Harl. By calling off the duel and making peace right here. Of course there might be new balloting—even another battle between our countries. But we would crack the theory that victory means more than humanity."

Neilson snorted. He splashed water into his eyes and over his soapy beard and hair.

"And go home penniless? To have every friend and neighbor avoid us? What's eating you? You won. You'll get the quarter of a million."

"I want you to share equally. I want our two countries to know that friendship

means more than glory."

"I don't get it. If neither side wins we get nothing."

"You forget about the Hubble Award. Two hundred thousand to each member of both sides, or their survivors, if they declare an armistice."

"I had forgotten. You'd give up fifty thousand so I could get the same two hundred thousand! You're a prince, Treb."

"But I couldn't do it. Jane would turn against me. The radio, the newswires, television and the magazines would crucify me—both of us."

"We'd ride it out. None of the participants in the twenty-two duels here in Satellite has had the courage to admit he hates war. In years to come our stand would be honored."

"It means losing Jane. I can't do it."

"You've lost her anyway, Harl, if she's the way you say. How about your three wounded buddies: Wasson, Clark, and Thomason? Badly cut up aren't they? Clark blind. Wasson with no arms."

"Couldn't they use the two hundred thousand?"

Neilson was coming ashore. A sudden resolve hardened his face, and his blue eyes were dark and angry. His jaw jutted through the sandy fairness of his dragged beard.

Treb felt his vitals knot at what he sensed in Neilson's expression. He'd gambled on the essential fairness and sympathy of the Andilian's character. But now...

"I'll do it," Neilson said tonelessly.

"I hope you'll never regret what you are doing, Harl."

"Aw, lock valves!" snarled Neilson. "Get ready to go while I finish shaving."

So that was the way it was to be. Treb turned wearily away. He went back through the screen of flowering shrubs and trees to where the coals of their fire turned gray.

The grenades and the three cartridges, his own and Neilson's, he buried in a hasty hole under a tree's sprawled roots. Afterward he tamped sod back into

place and spread leaves.

His needle-knife he laid on the turf. From his pocket he took a long strip of cloth and some of the tough nylon cords from the net. Then he let his trousers drop about his ankles and set about anchoring the needle-knife securely to his upper leg.

When he had finished the keen blade projected a foot below his knee-cap. And around it, carefully, he wound some of the cloth. He donned his battered trousers again. The concealed knife was well hidden, although it did impede the freedom of his stride.

Then he went down to rejoin Neilson.

Neilson was just finishing hacking at his hair with the short-bladed safety razor. He scowled at Treb, his eyes on the carbine that the man from Baryt yet carried.

"Not taking any chances, eh, Treb?"

"Just in case you change your mind, Harl."

"My friend—my very dear friend—Gram Treb!" Neilson laughed. "What trust—what a faith in human nature!"

"Yes, Harl. Your friend."

They left the lake behind, Neilson in advance. Directly ahead, beyond the outer ring of trees, the locks to the upper levels waited. They had less than a third of a mile to traverse.

The rusting shattered debris of a machine gun, with a spilled clutter of empty shell cases, lay just off the trail.

"Harok Dann died here," said Treb. Neilson did not turn.

"The big man, Manross, was killed by Dann's fire even as he threw the grenade," he added.

Treb was watching the broad-shouldered figure ahead.

"Shut it off, Treb, will you?" Neilson shouted, turning. "Isn't it tough enough without you yap-yapping all the way?"

Treb's lips thinned. The knife chafed his leg. Already he was limping slightly.

But they had covered more than half the distance. Once they contacted the UN guards and were through the locks he could relax....



The circular outer face of the lock was before them. And the button that summoned the guards jutted redly from a shoulder-high recess. Neilson leaned against the lock, his narrowed eyes on Treb as he reached for the button.

Treb jabbed. And he relaxed inwardly. Too late now for Neilson to attempt overpowering him and claiming the victory. He had feared such an attempt—with the lust for the woman, Jane Vanne, driving him, Neilson might have gone back on his word.

It was tough going for the kid. But he wasn't losing anything worth keeping. And hundreds of fine young lads like him might be spared going through this ordeal in space. They'd....

Neilson's fist caught him behind the ear. That split-second of inattention was proving costly. Neilson clamped the carbine barrel, wrested it away from Treb. He raised it. Treb lifted his hands.

"So now it's me at the controls," Neilson said, grinning. "Any reason why I should go through with your Hubble Award idea?"

"The guards will be here in no more than a minute, Harl. Throw the gun away and we'll go through together."

Neilson's eyes were shining. He was seeing the crowds waving crazy welcome as his space ship grounded. He was seeing the adulation of the boys, and the adoring glance of the dark-eyed girl named Jane. He was seeing the medals and the banquets and the bundles of money.

"You were crazy, Treb," he said, "to ever trust me. In war promises mean nothing. Study your history."

Treb squared his shoulders, his hands came down.

"If that's the way it is," he said, and then, "coming at you, Neilson."

Neilson flinched. It was the first time Treb had called him by his last name,

perhaps that was the reason. Or it could have been the sight of an unarmed man walking directly into his carbine's ugly muzzle.

He pressed the trigger. The unloaded weapon was silent. Treb wrenched at the gun. Neilson kicked him in the crotch. The gun came free. He brought it down at Treb's head, but at the last second before impact Treb dodged. The barrel smacked into Treb's right shoulder and broke the collar bone.

Treb came on, his left hand jabbing, and his right arm dangling. Neilson chopped at his face with the vertically held carbine, and tore a great chunk from his left cheek.

And then Treb's knee came up. The shielded razor-sharp blade sliced through his trouser. He drove the ugly little dagger into Neilson's body.

Neilson went down, squirming away from the sudden pain that tore at his vitals. The carbine went clattering.

Treb knelt beside him; tried to stanch the warm gush of red life, and cursed, soundlessly, the ambition that is mankind's greatest boon—and curse. He tore off the bloody knife.

"You won't die, Neilson," he said gravely. "Not with the surgeon and the hospital here on Earth Satellite so near. You'll live to see Andilia again.

"And about the invitation to visit us—I'm sorry you rejected it like this. But the offer still stands. When I can call you Harl again, when you are a *man*, visit us."

The lock behind them creaked and started to open.

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