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Title: Assassin

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Release Date: May 3, 2010 [EBook #32237]

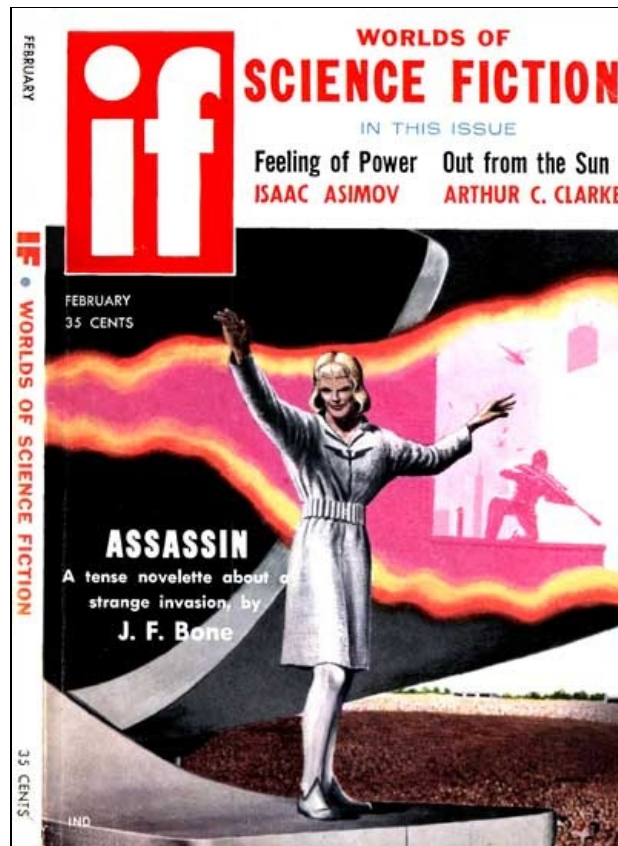
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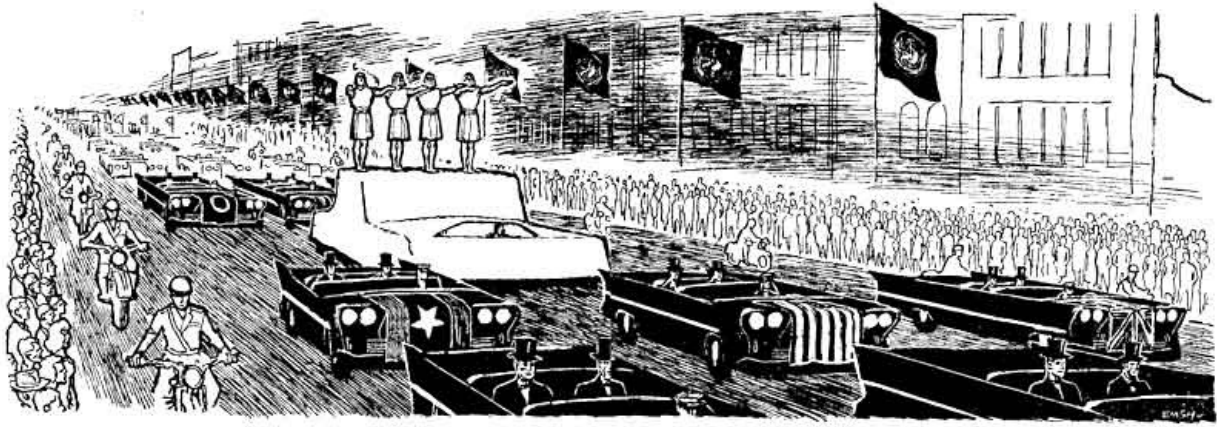
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ASSASSIN

BY J. F. BONE

Illustrated by Ed Emsh

*The aliens wooed Earth with gifts, love, patience and peace.
Who could resist them? After all, no one shoots Santa Claus!*

The rifle lay comfortably in his hands, a gleaming precision instrument that exuded a faint odor of gun oil and powder solvent. It was a perfect specimen of the gunsmith's art, a semi-automatic rifle with a telescopic sight—a precisely engineered tool that could hurl death with pinpoint accuracy for better than half a mile.

Daniel Matson eyed the weapon with bleak gray eyes, the eyes of a hunter framed in the passionless face of an executioner. His blunt hands were steady as they lifted the gun and tried a dry shot at an imaginary target. He nodded to himself. He was ready. Carefully he laid the rifle down on the mattress which covered the floor of his firing point, and looked out through the hole in the brickwork to the narrow canyon of the street below.

The crowd had thickened. It had been gathering since early morning, and the growing press of spectators had now become solid walls of people lining the street, packed tightly together on the sidewalks. Yet despite the fact that there were virtually no police, the crowd did not overflow into the streets, nor was there any of the pushing crowding impatience that once attended an assemblage of this sort. Instead there was a placid tolerance, a spirit of friendly good will, an ingenuous complaisance that grated on Matson's nerves like the screeching rasp of a file drawn across the edge of thin metal. He shivered uncontrollably. It was hard to be a free man in a world of slaves.

It was a measure of the Aztlan's triumph that only a bare half-dozen police 'copters patrolled the empty skies above the parade route. The aliens had done this—had conquered the world without firing a shot or speaking a word in anger. They had wooed Earth with understanding patience and superlative guile—and Earth had fallen into their hands like a lovesick virgin! There never had been any real opposition, and what there was had been completely ineffective. Most of those who had opposed the aliens were out of circulation, imprisoned in correctional institutions, undergoing rehabilitation. Rehabilitation! a six bit word for dehumanizing. When those poor devils finished their treatment with Aztlan brain-washing techniques, they would be just like these sheep below, with the difference that they would never be able to be anything else. But these other stupid fools crowding the sidewalks, waiting to hail their destruction—these were the ones who must be saved. They—not the martyrs of the underground, were the important part of humanity.

A police 'copter windmilled slowly down the avenue toward his hiding place, the rotating vanes and insect body of the craft starkly outlined against the jagged backdrop of the city's skyline. He laughed soundlessly as the susurrating flutter of the rotor blades beat overhead and died whispering in the distance down the long canyon of the street. His position had been chosen with care, and was invisible from air and ground alike. He had selected it months ago, and had taken considerable pains to conceal its true purpose. But after today concealment wouldn't matter. If things went as he hoped, the place might someday become a shrine. The idea amused him.

Strange, he mused, how events conspire to change a man's career. Seven years ago he had been a respected and important member of that far different sort of crowd which had welcomed the visitors from space. That was a human crowd—half afraid, wholly curious, jostling, noisy, pushing—a teeming swarm that clustered in a thick disorderly ring around the silver disc that lay in the center of the International Airport overlooking Puget Sound. Then—he could have predicted his career. And none of the predictions would have been true—for none included a man with a rifle waiting in a blind for the game to approach within range....

The Aztlan ship had landed early that July morning, dropping silently through the overcast covering International Airport. It settled gently to rest precisely in the center of the junction of the three main runways of the field, effectively tying up the transcontinental and transoceanic traffic. Fully five hundred feet in diameter, the giant ship squatted massively on the runway junction, cracking and buckling the thick concrete runways under its enormous weight.

By noon, after the first skepticism had died, and the unbelievable TV pictures had been flashed to their waiting audience, the crowd began to gather. All through that hot July morning they came, increasing by the minute as farther outlying districts poured their curious into the Airport. By early afternoon, literally hundreds of millions of eyes were watching the great ship over a world-wide network of television stations which cancelled their regular programs to give their viewers an uninterrupted view of the enigmatic craft.

By mid-morning the sun had burned off the overcast and was shining with brassy brilliance upon the squads of sweating soldiers from Fort Lewis, and more sweating squads of blue-clad police from the metropolitan area of Seattle-Tacoma. The police and soldiery quickly formed a ring around the ship and cleared a narrow lane around the periphery, and this they maintained despite the increasing pressure of the crowd.

The hours passed and nothing happened. The faint creaking and snapping sounds as the seamless hull of the vessel warmed its space-chilled metal in the warmth of the summer sun were lost in the growing impatience of the crowd. They wanted something to happen. Shouts and catcalls filled the air as more nervous individuals clamored to relieve the tension. Off to one side a small group began to clap their hands rhythmically. The little clique gained recruits, and within moments the air was riven by the thunder of thousands of palms meeting in unison. Frightened the crowd might be, but greater than fear was the desire to see what sort of creatures were inside.

Matson stood in the cleared area surrounding the ship, a position of privilege he shared with a few city and state officials and the high brass from McChord Field, Fort Lewis, and Bremerton Navy Yard. He was one of the bright young men who had chosen Government Service as a career, and who, in these days of science-consciousness had risen rapidly through ability and merit promotions to become the Director of the Office of Scientific Research while still in his early thirties. A dedicated man, trained in the bitter school of ideological survival, he understood what the alien science could mean to this world. Their knowledge would secure peace in whatever terms the possessors cared to name, and Matson intended to make sure that his nation was the one which possessed that knowledge.

He stood beside a tall scholarly looking man named Roger Thornton, who was his friend and incidentally the Commissioner of Police for the Twin City metropolitan area. To a casual eye, their positions should be reversed, for the lean ascetic Thornton looked far more like the accepted idea of a scientist than burly, thick shouldered, square faced Matson, whose every movement shouted Cop.

Matson glanced quizzically at the taller man. "Well, Roger, I wonder how long those birds inside are going to keep us waiting before we get a look at them?"

"You'd be surprised if they really were birds, wouldn't you?" Thornton asked with a faint smile. "But seriously, I hope it isn't too much longer. This mob is giving the boys a bad time." He looked anxiously at the strained line of police and soldiery. "I guess I should have ordered out the night shift and reserves instead of just the riot squad. From the looks of things they'll be needed if this crowd gets any more unruly."

Matson chuckled. "You're an alarmist," he said mildly. "As far as I can see they're doing all right. I'm not worried about them—or the crowd, for that matter. The thing that's bothering me is my feet. I've been standing on 'em for six hours and they're killing me!"

"Mine too," Thornton sighed. "Tell you what I'll do. When this is all over I'll split a bucket of hot water and a pint of arnica with you."

"It's a deal," Matson said.

As he spoke a deep musical hum came from inside the ship, and a section of the rim beside him separated along invisible lines of juncture, swinging downward to form a broad ramp leading upward to a square orifice in the rim of the ship. A bright shadowless light that seemed to come from the metal walls of the opening framed the shape of the star traveller who stood there, rigidly erect, looking over the heads of the section of the crowd before him.

A concerted gasp of awe and admiration rose from the crowd—a gasp that was echoed throughout the entire ring that surrounded the ship. There must be other openings like this one, Matson thought dully as he stared at the being from space. Behind him an Army tank rumbled

noisily on its treads as it drove through the crowd toward the ship, the long gun in its turret lifting like an alert finger to point at the figure of the alien.

The stranger didn't move from his unnaturally stiff position. His oddly luminous eyes never wavered from their fixed stare at a point far beyond the outermost fringes of the crowd. Seven feet tall, obviously masculine, he differed from mankind only in minor details. His long slender hands lacked the little finger, and his waist was abnormally small. Other than that, he was human in external appearance. A wide sleeved tunic of metallic fabric covered his upper body, gathered in at his narrow waist by a broad metal belt studded with tiny bosses. The tunic ended halfway between hip and knee, revealing powerfully muscled legs encased in silvery hose. Bright yellow hair hung to his shoulders, clipped short in a square bang across his forehead. His face was long, clean featured and extraordinarily calm—almost godlike in its repose. Matson stared, fascinated. He had the curious impression that the visitor had stepped bodily out of the Middle Ages. His dress and haircut were almost identical with that of a medieval courtier.

The starman raised his hand—his strangely luminous steel gray eyes scanned the crowd—and into Matson's mind came a wave of peaceful calm, a warm feeling of goodwill and brotherhood, an indescribable feeling of soothing relaxation. With an odd sense of shock Matson realized that he was not the only one to experience this. As far back as the farthest hangers-on near the airport gates the tenseness of the waiting crowd relaxed. The effect was amazing! Troops lowered their weapons with shamefaced smiles on their faces. Police relaxed their sweating vigilance. The crowd stirred, moving backward to give its members room. The emotion-charged atmosphere vanished as though it had never been. And a cold chill played icy fingers up the spine of Daniel Matson. He had felt the full impact of the alien's projection, and he was more frightened than he had ever been in his life!

They had been clever—damnably clever! That initial greeting with its disarming undertones of empathy and innocence had accomplished its purpose. It had emasculated Mankind's natural suspicion of strangers. And their subsequent actions—so beautifully timed—so careful to avoid the slightest hint of evil, had completed what their magnificently staged appearance had begun.

The feeling of trust had persisted. It lasted through quarantine, clearance, the public receptions, and the private meetings with scientists and the heads of government. It had persisted unabated through the entire two months they remained in the Twin City area. The aliens remained as they had been in the beginning—completely unspoiled by the interest shown in them. They remained simple, unaffected, and friendly, displaying an ingenuous innocence that demanded a corresponding faith in return.

Most of their time was spent at the University of Washington, where at their own request they were studied by curious scholars, and in return were given courses in human history and behavior. They were quite frank about their reasons for following such a course of action—according to their spokesman Ixtl they wanted to learn human ways in order to make a better impression when they visited the rest of Mankind. Matson read that blurb in an official press release and laughed cynically. Better impression, hah! They couldn't have done any better if they had an entire corps of public relations specialists assisting them! They struck exactly the right note—and how could they improve on perfection?

From the beginning they left their great ship open and unguarded while they commuted back and forth from the airport to the campus. And naturally the government quickly rectified the second error and took instant advantage of the first. A guard was posted around the ship to keep it clear of the unofficially curious, while the officially curious combed the vessel's interior with a fine tooth comb. Teams of scientists and technicians under Matson's direction swarmed through the ship, searching with the most advanced methods of human science for the secrets of the aliens.

They quickly discovered that while the star travellers might be trusting, they were not exactly fools. There was nothing about the impenetrably shielded mechanisms that gave the slightest clue as to their purpose or to the principles upon which they operated—nor were there any visible controls. The ship was as blankly uncommunicative as a brick wall.

Matson was annoyed. He had expected more than this, and his frustration drove him to watch the aliens closely. He followed them, sat in on their sessions with the scholars at the University, watched them at their frequent public appearances, and came to know them well enough to recognize the microscopic differences that made them individuals. To the casual eye they were as alike as peas in a pod, but Matson could separate Farn from Quicha, and Laz from Acana—and Ixtl—well he would have stood out from the others in any circumstances. But Matson never intruded. He was content to sit in the background and observe.

And what he saw bothered him. They gave him no reason for their appearance on Earth, and whenever the question came up Ixtl parried it adroitly. They were obviously not explorers for they displayed a startling familiarity with Earth's geography and ecology. They were possibly ambassadors, although they behaved like no ambassadors he had ever seen. They might be traders, although what they would trade only God and the aliens knew—and neither party was in a talking mood. Mysteries bothered Matson. He didn't like them. But they could keep their mystery if he could only have the technical knowledge that was concealed beneath their

beautifully shaped skulls.

At that, he had to admit that their appearance had come at precisely the right time. No one better than he knew how close Mankind had been to the final war, when the last two major antagonists on Earth were girding their human and industrial power for a final showdown. But the aliens had become a diversion. The impending war was forgotten while men waited to see what was coming next. It was obvious that the starmen had a reason for being here, and until they chose to reveal it, humanity would forget its deadly problems in anticipation of the answer to this delightful puzzle that had come to them from outer space. Matson was thankful for the breathing space, all too well aware that it might be the last that Mankind might have, but the enigma of the aliens still bothered him.

He was walking down the main corridor of the Physics Building on the University campus, wondering as he constantly did about how he could extract some useful knowledge from the aliens when a quiet voice speaking accentless English sounded behind him.

"What precisely do you wish to know, Dr. Matson?" the voice said.

Matson whirled to face the questioner, and looked into the face of Ixtl. The alien was smiling, apparently pleased at having startled him. "What gave you the idea that I wanted to know anything?" he asked.

"You did," Ixtl said. "We all have been conscious of your thoughts for many days. Forgive me for intruding, but I must. Your speculations radiate on such a broad band that we cannot help being aware of them. It has been quite difficult for us to study your customs and history with this high level background noise. We are aware of your interest, but your thoughts are so confused that we have never found questions we could answer. If you would be more specific we would be happy to give you the information which you seek."

"Oh yeah!" Matson thought.

"Of course. It would be to our advantage to have your disturbing speculations satisfied and your fears set at rest. We could accomplish more in a calmer environment. It is too bad that you do not receive as strongly as you transmit. If you did, direct mental contact would convince you that our reasons for satisfying you are good. But you need not fear us, Earthman. We intend you no harm. Indeed, we plan to help you once we learn enough to formulate a proper program."

"I do not fear you," Matson said—knowing that he lied.

"Perhaps not consciously," Ixtl said graciously, "but nevertheless fear is in you. It is too bad—and besides," he continued with a faint smile "it is very uncomfortable. Your glandular emotions are quite primitive, and very disturbing."

"I'll try to keep them under control," Matson said dryly.

"Physical control is not enough. With you there would have to be mental control as well. Unfortunately you radiate much more strongly than your fellow men, and we are unable to shut you out without exerting considerable effort that could better be employed elsewhere." The alien eyed Matson speculatively. "There you go again," he said. "Now you're angry."

Matson tried to force his mind to utter blankness, and the alien smiled at him. "It does some good—but not much," he said. "Conscious control is never perfect."

"Well then, what can I do?"

"Go away. Your range fortunately is short."

Matson looked at the alien. "Not yet," he said coldly. "I'm still looking for something."

"Our technology," Ixtl nodded. "I know. However I can assure you it will be of no help to you. You simply do not have the necessary background. Our science is based upon a completely different philosophy from yours."

To Matson the terms were contradictory.

"Not as much as you think," Ixtl continued imperturbably. "As you will find out, I was speaking quite precisely." He paused and eyed Matson thoughtfully. "It seems as though the only way to remove your disturbing presence is to show you that our technology is of no help to you. I will make a bargain with you. We shall show you our machines, and in return you will stop harassing us. We will do all in our power to make you understand; but whether you do or do not, you will promise to leave and allow us to continue our studies in peace. Is that agreeable?"

Matson swallowed the lump in his throat. Here it was—handed to him on a silver platter—and suddenly he wasn't sure that he wanted it!

"It is," he said. After all, it was all he could expect.

They met that night at the spaceship. The aliens, tall, calm and cool; Matson stocky, heavy-set and sweating. The contrast was infernally sharp, Matson thought. It was as if a primitive savage were meeting a group of nuclear physicists at Los Alamos. For some unknown reason he felt ashamed that he had forced these people to his wishes. But the aliens were pleasant about it.

They took the imposition in their usual friendly way.

"Now," Ixtl said. "Exactly what do you want to see—to know?"

"First of all, what is the principle of your space drive?"

"There are two," the alien said. "The drive that moves this ship in normal space time is derived from Lurgil's Fourth Order equations concerning the release of subatomic energy in a restricted space time continuum. Now don't protest! I know you know nothing of Lurgil, nor of Fourth Order equations. And while I can show you the mathematics, I'm afraid they will be of little help. You see, our Fourth Order is based upon a process which you would call Psychomathematics and that is something I am sure you have not yet achieved."

Matson shook his head. "I never heard of it," he admitted.

"The second drive operates in warped space time," Ixtl continued, "hyperspace in your language, and its theory is much more difficult than that of our normal drive, although its application is quite simple, merely involving apposition of congruent surfaces of hyper and normal space at stress points in the ether where high gravitational fields balance. Navigation in hyperspace is done by electronic computer—somewhat more advanced models than yours. However, I can't give you the basis behind the hyperspace drive." Ixtl smiled depreciatingly. "You see, I don't know them myself. Only a few of the most advanced minds of Aztlan can understand. We merely operate the machines."

Matson shrugged. He had expected something like this. Now they would stall him off about the machines after handing him a fast line of double-talk.

"As I said," Ixtl went on, "there is no basis for understanding. Still, if it will satisfy you, we will show you our machines—and the mathematics that created them although I doubt that you will learn anything more from them than you have from our explanation."

"I could try," Matson said grimly.

"Very well," Ixtl replied.

He led the way into the center of the ship where the seamless housings stood, the housings that had baffled some of the better minds of Earth. Matson watched while the star men proceeded to be helpful. The housings fell apart at invisible lines of juncture, revealing mechanisms of baffling simplicity, and some things that didn't look like machines at all. The aliens stripped the strange devices and Ixtl attempted to explain. They had anti-gravity, forcefields, faster than light drive, and advanced design computers that could be packed in a suitcase. There were weird devices whose components seemed to run out of sight at crazily impossible angles, other things that rotated frictionlessly, suspended in fields of pure force, and still others which his mind could not envisage even after his eyes had seen them. All about him lay the evidence of a science so advanced and alien that his brain shrank from the sight, refusing to believe such things existed. And their math was worse! It began where Einstein left off and went off at an incomprehensible tangent that involved psychology and ESP. Matson was lost after the first five seconds!

Stunned, uncomprehending and deflated, he left the ship. An impression that he was standing with his toe barely inside the door of knowledge became a conscious certainty as he walked slowly to his car. The wry thought crossed his mind that if the aliens were trying to convince him of his abysmal ignorance, they had succeeded far beyond their fondest dreams!

They certainly had! Matson thought grimly as he selected five cartridges from the box lying beside him. In fact they had succeeded too well. They had turned his deflation into antagonism, his ignorance into distrust. Like a savage, he suspected what he could not understand. But unlike the true primitive, the emotional distrust didn't interfere with his ability to reason or to draw logical inferences from the data which he accumulated. In attempting to convince, Ixtl had oversold his case.

It was shortly after he had returned to Washington, that the aliens gave the waiting world the reasons for their appearance on Earth. They were, they said, members of a very ancient highly evolved culture called Aztlan. And the Aztlans, long past the need for conquest and expansion, had turned their mighty science to the help of other, less fortunate, races in the galaxy. The aliens were, in a sense, missionaries—one of hundreds of teams travelling the star lanes to bring the benefits of Aztlan culture to less favored worlds. They were, they unblushingly admitted, altruists—interested only in helping others.

It was pure corn, Matson reflected cynically, but the world lapped it up and howled for more. After decades of cold war, lukewarm war, and sporadic outbreaks of violence, that were inevitably building to atomic destruction, men were willing to try anything that would ease the continual burden of strain and worry. To Mankind, the Aztlans' words were as refreshing as a cool breeze of hope in a desert of despair.

And the world got what it wanted.

Quite suddenly the aliens left the Northwest, and accompanied by protective squads of FBI and Secret Service began to cross the nation. Taking widely separated paths they visited cities, towns, and farms, exhibiting the greatest curiosity about the workings of human civilization. And, in turn, they were examined by hordes of hopeful humans. Everywhere they went, they spread their message of good will and hope backed by the incredibly convincing power of their telepathic minds. Behind them, they left peace and hopeful calm; before them, anticipation mounted. It rose to a crescendo in New York where the paths of the star men met.

The Aztlans invaded the United Nations. They spoke to the General Assembly and the Security Council, were interviewed by the secretariat and reporters from a hundred foreign lands. They told their story with such conviction that even the Communist bloc failed to raise an objection, which was as amazing to the majority of the delegates as the fact of the star men themselves. Altruism, it seemed, had no conflict with dialectic materialism. The aliens offered a watered-down variety of their technology to the peoples of Earth with no strings attached, and the governments of Earth accepted with open hands, much as a small boy accepts a cookie from his mother. It was impossible for men to resist the lure of something for nothing, particularly when it was offered by such people as the Aztlans. After all, Matson reflected bitterly, nobody shoots Santa Claus!

From every nation in the world came invitations to the aliens to visit their lands. The star men cheerfully accepted. They moved across Europe, Asia, and Africa—visited South America, Central America, the Middle East and Oceania. No country escaped them. They absorbed languages, learned customs, and spread good will. Everywhere they went relaxation followed in their footsteps, and throughout the world arose a realization of the essential brotherhood of man.

It took nearly three years of continual travelling before the aliens again assembled at UN headquarters to begin the second part of their promised plan—to give their science to Earth. And men waited with calm expectation for the dawn of Golden Age.

Matson's lips twisted. Fools! Blind, stupid fools! Selling their birthright for a mess of pottage! He shifted the rifle across his knees and began filling the magazine with cartridges. He felt an empty loneliness as he closed the action over the filled magazine and turned the safety to "on". There was no comforting knowledge of support and sympathy to sustain him in what he was about to do. There was no real hope that there ever would be. His was a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice that was ignored—as it had been when he visited the President of the United States....

Matson entered the White House, presented his appointment card, and was ushered past ice-eyed Secret Service men into the presidential office. It was as close as he had ever been to the Chief Executive, and he stared with polite curiosity across the width of desk which separated them.

"I wanted to see you about the Aztlan business," the President began without preamble. "You were there when their ship landed, and you are also one of the few men in the country who has seen them alone. In addition, your office will probably be handling the bulk of our requests in regard to the offer they made yesterday in the UN. You're in a favorable spot." The President smiled and shrugged. "I wanted to talk with you sooner, but business and routine play the devil with one's desires in this office.

"Now tell me," he continued, "your impression of these people."

"They're an enigma," Matson said flatly. "To tell the truth, I can't figure them out." He ran his fingers through his hair with a worried gesture. "I'm supposed to be a pretty fair physicist, and I've had quite a bit of training in the social sciences, but both the mechanisms and the psychology of these Aztlans are beyond my comprehension. All I can say for sure is that they're as far beyond us as we are beyond the cavemen. In fact, we have so little in common that I can't think of a single reason why they would want to stay here, and the fact that they do only adds to my confusion."

"But you must have learned something," the President said.

"Oh we've managed to collect data," Matson replied. "But there's a lot of difference between data and knowledge."

"I can appreciate that, but I'd still like to know what you think. Your opinion could have some weight."

Matson doubted it. His opinions were contrary to those of the majority. Still, the Chief asked for it—and he might possibly have an open mind. It was a chance worth taking.

"Well, Sir, I suppose you've heard of the so-called "wild talents" some of our own people occasionally possess?"

The President nodded.

"It is my belief," Matson continued, "that the Aztlans possess these to a far greater degree than

we do, and that their science is based upon them. They have something which they call psychomathematics, which by definition is the mathematics of the mind, and this seems to be the basis of their physical science. I saw their machines, and I must confess that their purpose baffled me until I realized that they must be mechanisms for amplifying their own natural equipment. We know little or nothing about psi phenomena, so it is no wonder I couldn't figure them out. As a matter of fact we've always treated psi as something that shouldn't be mentioned in polite scientific conversation."

The President grinned. "I always thought you boys had your blind spots."

"We do—but when we're confronted with a fact, we try to find out something about it—that is if the fact hits us hard enough, often enough."

"Well, you've been hit hard and often," the President chuckled, "What did you find out?"

"Facts," Matson said grimly, "just facts. Things that could be determined by observation and measurement. We know that the aliens are telepathic. We also know that they have a form of ESP—or perhaps a recognition of danger would be a better term—and we know its range is somewhat over a third of a mile. We know that they're telekinetic. The lack of visible controls in their ship would tell us that, even if we hadn't seen them move small objects at a distance. We know that they have eidetic memories, and that they can reason on an extremely high level. Other than that we know nothing. We don't even know their physical structure. We've tried X-ray but they're radio-opaque. We've tried using some human sensitives from the Rhine Institute, but they're unable to get anywhere. They just turn empathic in the aliens' presence, and when we get them back, they do nothing but babble about the beauty of the Aztlan soul."

"Considering the difficulties, you haven't done too badly," the President said. "I take it then, that you're convinced that they are an advanced life form. But do you think they're sincere in their attitude toward us?"

"Oh, they're sincere enough," Matson said. "The only trouble is that we don't know just what they're sincere about. You see, sir, we are in the position of a savage to whom a trader brings the luxuries of civilization. To the savage, the trader may represent purest altruism, giving away such valuable things as glass beads and machine made cloth for useless pieces of yellow rock and the skins of some native pest. The savage hasn't the slightest inkling that he's being exploited. By the time he realizes he's been had, and the yellow rock is gold and the skins are mink, he has become so dependent upon the goods for which the trader has whetted his appetite that he inevitably becomes an economic slave."

"Of course you can argue that the cloth and beads are far more valuable to the savage than the gold or mink. But in the last analysis, value is determined by the higher culture, and by that standard, the savage gets taken. And ultimately civilization moves in and the superior culture of the trader's race determines how the savage will act."

"Still, the savage has a basis for his acts. He is giving something for something—making a trade. But we're not even in that position. The aliens apparently want nothing from us. They have asked for nothing except our good will, and that isn't a tradable item."

"But they're altruists!" the President protested.

"Sir, do you think that they're insane?" Matson asked curiously. "Do they appear like fanatics to you?"

"But we can't apply our standards to them. You yourself have said that their civilization is more advanced than ours."

"Whose standards can we apply?" Matson asked. "If not ours, then whose? The only standards that we can possibly apply are our own, and in the entire history of human experience there has never been a single culture that has had a basis of pure altruism. Such a culture could not possibly exist. It would be overrun and gobbled up by its practical neighbors before it drew its first breath."

"We must assume that the culture from which these aliens come has had a practical basis in its evolutionary history. It could not have risen full blown and altruistic like Minerva from the brain of Jove. And if the culture had a practical basis in the past, it logically follows that it has a practical basis in the present. Such a survival trait as practicality would probably never be lost no matter how far the Aztlan race has evolved. Therefore, we must concede that they are practical people—people who do not give away something for nothing. But the question still remains—what do they want?"

"Whatever it is, I don't think it is anything from which we will profit. No matter how good it looks, I am convinced that cooperation with these aliens will not ultimately be to our advantage. Despite the reports of every investigative agency in this government, I cannot believe that any such thing as pure altruism exists in a sane mind. And whatever I may believe about the Aztlans, I do not think they're insane."

The President sighed. "You are a suspicious man, Matson, and perhaps you are right; but it doesn't matter what you believe—or what I believe for that matter. This government has decided to accept the help the Aztlans are so graciously offering. And until the reverse is proven, we must accept the fact that the star men *are* altruists, and work with them on that basis. You will

organize your office along those lines, and extract every gram of information that you can. Even you must admit that they have knowledge that will improve our American way of life."

Matson shook his head doggedly. "I'm afraid, Sir, if you expect Aztlan science to improve the American way of life, you are going to be disappointed. It might promote an Aztlan way of life, but the reverse is hardly possible."

"It's not my decision," the President said. "My hands are tied. Congress voted for the deal by acclamation early this morning. I couldn't veto it even if I wanted to."

"I cannot cooperate in what I believe is our destruction." Matson said in a flat voice.

"Then you have only one course," the President said. "I will be forced to accept your resignation." He sighed wearily.

"Personally, I think you're making a mistake. Think it over before you decide. You're a good man, and Lord knows the government can use good men. There are far too many fools in politics." He shrugged and stood up. The interview was over.

Matson returned to his offices, filled with cold frustration. Even the President believed he could do nothing, and these shortsighted politicians who could see nothing more than the immediate gains—there was a special hell reserved for them. There were too many fools in politics. However, he would do what he could. His sense of duty was stronger than his resentment. He would stay on and try to cushion some of the damage which the Aztlans would inevitably cause, no matter how innocent their motives. And perhaps the President was right—perhaps the alien science would bring more good than harm.

For the next two years Matson watched the spread of Aztlan ideas throughout the world. He saw Aztlan devices bring health, food and shelter to millions in underprivileged countries, and improve the lot of those in more favored nations. He watched tyrannies and authoritarian governments fall under the passive resistance of their peoples. He saw militarism crumble to impotence as the Aztlan influence spread through every facet of society, first as a trickle, then as a steady stream, and finally as a rushing torrent. He saw Mankind on the brink of a Golden Age—and he was unsatisfied.

Reason said that the star men were exactly what they claimed to be. Their every action proved it. Their consistency was perfect, their motives unimpeachable, and the results of their efforts were astounding. Life on Earth was becoming pleasant for millions who never knew the meaning of the word. Living standards improved, and everywhere men were conscious of a feeling of warmth and brotherhood. There was no question that the aliens were doing exactly what they promised.

But reason also told him that the aliens were subtly and methodically destroying everything that man had created, turning him from an individual into a satisfied puppet operated by Aztlan strings. For man is essentially lazy—always searching for the easier way. Why should he struggle to find an answer when the Aztlans had discovered it millennia ago and were perfectly willing to share their knowledge? Why should he use inept human devices when those of the aliens performed similar operations with infinitely more ease and efficiency? Why should he work when all he had to do was ask? There was plan behind their acts.

But at that point reason dissolved into pure speculation. Why were they doing this? Was it merely mistaken kindness or was there a deeper more subtle motive? Matson didn't know, and in that lack of knowledge lay the hell in which he struggled.

For two years he stayed on with the OSR, watching humanity rush down an unmarked road to an uncertain future. Then he ran away. He could take no more of this blind dependence upon alien wisdom. And with the change in administration that had occurred in the fall elections he no longer had the sense of personal loyalty to the President which had kept him working at a job he despised. He wanted no part of this brave new world the aliens were creating. He wanted to be alone. Like a hermit of ancient times who abandoned society to seek his soul, Matson fled to the desert country of the South-west—as far as possible from the Aztlans and their works.

The grimly beautiful land toughened his muscles, blackened his skin, and brought him a measure of peace. Humanity retreated to remoteness except for Seth Winters, a leathery old-timer he had met on his first trip into the desert. The acquaintance had ripened to friendship. Seth furnished a knowledge of the desert country which Matson lacked, and Matson's money provided the occasional grubstake they needed. For weeks at a time they never saw another human—and Matson was satisfied. The world could go its own way. He would go his.

Running away was the smartest thing he could have done. Others more brave perhaps, or perhaps less rational—had tried to fight, to form an underground movement to oppose these altruists from space; but they were a tiny minority so divided in motives and purpose that they could not act as a unit. They were never more than a nuisance, and without popular support they never had a chance. After the failure of a complicated plot to assassinate the aliens, they were quickly rounded up and confined. And the aliens continued their work.

Matson shrugged. It was funny how little things could mark mileposts in a man's life. If he had known of the underground he probably would have joined it and suffered the same penalty for failure. If he hadn't fled, if he hadn't met Seth Winters, if he hadn't taken that last trip into the desert, if any one of a hundred little things had happened differently he would not be here. That last trip into the desert—he remembered it as though it were yesterday....

The yellow flare of a greasewood fire cast flickering spears of light into the encircling darkness. Above, in the purplish black vault of the moonless sky the stars shone down with icy splendor. The air was quiet, the evening breeze had died, and the stillness of the desert night pressed softly upon the earth. Far away, muted by distance, came the ululating wail of a coyote.

Seth Winters laid another stick of quick-burning greasewood on the fire and squinted across the smoke at Matson who was lying on his back, arms crossed behind his head, eyeing the night sky with the fascination of a dreamer.

"It's certainly peaceful out here," Matson murmured as he rose to his feet, stretched, and sat down again looking into the tiny fire.

"'Tain't nothin' unusual, Dan'l. Not out here it ain't. It's been plumb peaceful on this here desert nigh onto a million years. An' why's it peaceful? Mainly 'cuz there ain't too many humans messin' around in it."

"Possibly you're right, Seth."

"Shore I'm right. It jest ain't nacheral fer a bunch of Homo saps to get together without an argyment startin' somewhere. 'Tain't the nature of the critter to be peaceable. An' y'know, thet's the part of this here sweetness an' light between nations that bothers me. Last time I was in Prescott, I set down an' read six months of newspapers—an' everything's jest too damn good to be true. Seems like everybody's gettin' to love everybody else." He shook his head. "The hull world's as sticky-sweet as molasses candy. It jest ain't nacheral!"

"The star men are keeping their word. They said that they would bring us peace. Isn't that what they're doing?"

"Shucks Dan'l—that don't give 'em no call to make the world a blasted honey-pot with everybody bubblin' over with brotherly love. There ain't no real excitement left. Even the Commies ain't raisin' hell like they useta. People are gettin' more like a bunch of damn woolies every day."

"I'll admit that Mankind had herd instincts," Matson replied lazily, "but I've never thought of them as particularly sheeplike. More like a wolf pack, I'd say."

"Wal, there's nothin' wolflike about 'em right now. Look, Dan'l, yuh know what a wolf pack's like. They're smart, tough, and mean—an' the old boss wolf is the smartest, toughest, and meanest critter in the hull pack. The others respect him 'cuz he's proved his ability to lead. But take a sheep flock now—the bellwether is jest a nice gentle old castrate thet'll do jest whut the shepherd wants. He's got no originality. He's jest a noise thet the rest foller."

"Could be."

"It shore is! Jes f'r instance, an' speakin' of bellwethers, have yuh ever heard of a character called Throckmorton Bixbee?"

"Can't say I have. He sounds like a nance."

"Whutever a nance is—he's it! But yuh're talkin' about our next President, unless all the prophets are wrong. He's jest as bad as his name. Of all the gutless wonders I've ever heard of that pilgrim takes the prize. He even looks like a rabbit!"

"I can see where I had better catch up on some contemporary history," Matson said. "I've been out in the sticks too long."

"If yuh know what's good fer yuh, yuh'll stay here. The rest of the country's goin' t'hell. Brother Bixbee's jest a sample. About the only thing that'd recommend him is that he's hot fer peace—an' he's got those furriners' blessing. Seems like those freaks swing a lotta weight nowadays, an' they ain't shy about tellin' folks who an' what they favor. They've got bold as brass this past year."

Matson nodded idly—then stiffened—turning a wide eyed stare on Seth. A blinding light exploded in his brain as the words sank in. With crystal clarity he knew the answer! He laughed harshly.

Winters stared at him with mild surprise. "What's bit yuh, Dan'l?"

But Matson was completely oblivious, busily buttressing the flash of inspiration. Sure—that was the only thing it could be! Those aliens were working on a program—one that was grimly recognizable once his attention was focussed on it. There must have been considerable pressure to make them move so fast that a short-lived human could see what they were planning—but Matson had a good idea of what was driving them, an atomic war that could decimate the world would be all the spur they'd need!

They weren't playing for penny ante stakes. They didn't want to exploit Mankind. They didn't give a damn about Mankind! To them humanity was merely an unavoidable nuisance—something to be pushed aside, to be made harmless and dependent, and ultimately to be quietly and bloodlessly eliminated. Man's civilization held nothing that the star men wanted, but man's planet—that was a different story! Truly the aliens were right when they considered man a savage. Like the savage, man didn't realize his most valuable possession was his land!

The peaceful penetration was what had fooled him. Mankind, faced with a similar situation, and working from a position of overwhelming strength would have reacted differently. Humanity would have invaded and conquered. But the aliens had not even considered this obvious step.

Why?

The answer was simple and logical. They couldn't! Even though their technology was advanced enough to exterminate man with little or no loss to themselves, combat and slaughter must be repulsive to them. It had to be. With their telepathic minds they would necessarily have a pathologic horror of suffering. They were so highly evolved that they simply couldn't fight—at least not with the weapons of humanity. But they could use the subtler weapon of altruism!

And even more important—uncontrolled emotions were poison to them. In fact Ixtl had admitted it back in Seattle. The primitive psi waves of humanity's hates, lusts, fears, and exultations must be unbearable torture to a race long past such animal outbursts. That was—must be—why they were moving so fast. For their own safety, emotion had to be damped out of the human race.

Matson had a faint conception of what the aliens must have suffered when they first surveyed that crowd at International Airport. No wonder they looked so strangely immobile at that first contact! The raw emotion must have nearly killed them! He felt a reluctant stir of admiration for their courage, for the dedicated bravery needed to face that crowd and establish a beachhead of tranquility. Those first few minutes must have had compressed in them the agonies of a lifetime!

Matson grinned coldly. The aliens were not invulnerable. If Mankind could be taught to fear and hate them, and if that emotion could be focussed, they never again would try to take this world. It would be sheer suicide. As long as Mankind kept its emotions it would be safe from this sort of invasion. But the problem was to teach Mankind to fear and hate. Shock would do it, but how could that shock be applied?

The thought led inevitably to the only possible conclusion. The aliens would have to be killed, and in such a manner as to make humanity fear retaliation from the stars. Fear would unite men against a possible invasion, and fear would force men to reach for the stars to forestall retribution.

Matson grinned thinly. Human nature couldn't have changed much these past years. Even with master psychologists like the Aztlans operating upon it, changes in emotional pattern would require generations. He sighed, looked into the anxious face of Seth Winters, and returned to the reality of the desert night. His course was set. He knew what he had to do.

He laid the rifle across his knees and opened the little leather box sewn to the side of the guncase. With precise, careful movements he removed the silencer and fitted it to the threaded muzzle of the gun. The bulky, blue excrescence changed the rifle from a thing of beauty to one of murder. He looked at it distastefully, then shrugged and stretched out on the mattress, easing the ugly muzzle through the hole in the brickwork. It wouldn't be long now....

He glanced upward through the window above him at the Weather Bureau instruments atop a nearby building. The metal cups of the anemometer hung motionless against the metallic blue of the sky. No wind stirred in the deep canyons of the city streets as the sun climbed in blazing splendor above the towering buildings. He moved a trifle, shifting the muzzle of the gun until it bore upon the sidewalks. The telescopic sight picked out faces from the waiting crowd with a crystal clarity. Everywhere was the same sheeplike placidity. He shuddered, the sights jumping crazily from one face to another,—wondering if he had misjudged his race, if he had really come too late, if he had underestimated the powers of the Aztlans.

Far down the avenue, an excited hum came to his ears, and the watching crowd stirred. Faces lighted and Matson sighed. He was not wrong. Emotion was only suppressed, not vanished. There was still time!

The aliens were coming. Coming to cap the climax of their pioneer work, to drive the first nail in humanity's coffin! For the first time in history man's dream of the brotherhood of man was close to reality.

And he was about to destroy it! The irony bit into Matson's soul, and for a moment he hesitated, feeling the wave of tolerance and good will rising from the street below. Did he have the right to destroy man's dream? Did he dare tamper with the will of the world? Had he the right to play God?

The parade came slowly down the happy street, a kaleidoscope of color and movement that approached and went past in successive waves and masses. This was a gala day, this eve of world union! The insigne of the UN was everywhere. The aliens had used the organization to further

their plans and it was now all-powerful. A solid bank of UN flags led the van of delegates, smiling and swathed in formal dress, sitting erect in their black official cars draped with the flags of native lands that would soon be furled forever if the aliens had their way.

And behind them came the Aztlans!

They rode together, standing on a pure white float, a bar of dazzling white in a sea of color. All equal, their inhumanly beautiful faces calm and remote, the Aztlans rode through the joyful crowd. There was something inspiring about the sight and for a moment, Matson felt a wave of revulsion sweep through him.

He sighed and thumbed the safety to "off", pulled the cocking lever and slid the first cartridge into the breech. He settled himself drawing a breath of air into his lungs, letting a little dribble out through slack lips, catching the remainder of the exhalation with closed glottis. The sights wavered and steadied upon the head of the center alien, framing the pale noble face with its aureole of golden hair. The luminous eyes were dull and introspective as the alien tried to withdraw from the emotions of the crowd. There was no awareness of danger on the alien's face. At 600 yards he was beyond their esper range and he was further covered by the feelings of the crowd. The sights lowered to the broad chest and centered there as Matson's spatulate fingers took up the slack in the trigger and squeezed softly and steadily.

A coruscating glow bathed the bodies of three of the aliens as their tall forms jerked to the smashing impact of the bullets! Their metallic tunics melted and sloughed as inner fires ate away the fragile garments that covered them! Flexible synthetic skin cracked and curled in the infernal heat, revealing padding, wirelike tendons, rope-like cords of flexible tubing and a metallic skeleton that melted and dripped in white hot drops in the heat of atomic flame—

"Robots!" Matson gasped with sudden blinding realization. "I should have known! No wonder they seemed inhuman. Their builders would never dare expose themselves to the furies and conflicts of our emotionally uncontrolled world!"

One of the aliens crouched on the float, his four-fingered hands pressed against a smoking hole in his metal tunic. The smoke thickened and a yellowish ichor poured out bursting into flame on contact with the air. The fifth alien, Ixtl, was untouched, standing with hands widestretched in a gesture that at once held command and appeal.

Matson reloaded quickly, but held his fire. The swarming crowd surrounding the alien was too thick for a clear shot and Matson, with sudden revulsion, was unwilling to risk further murder in a cause already won. The tall, silver figure of the alien winced and shuddered, his huge body shaking like a leaf in a storm! His builders had never designed him to withstand the barrage of focussed emotion that was sweeping from the crowd. Terror, shock, sympathy, hate, loathing, grief, and disillusionment—the incredible gamut of human feelings wrenched and tore at the Aztlan, shorting delicate circuits, ripping the poised balance of his being as the violent discordant blasts lanced through him with destroying energy! Ixtl's classic features twisted in a spasm of inconceivable agony, a thin curl of smoke drifted from his distorted tragic mask of a mouth as he crumpled, a pitiful deflated figure against the whiteness of the float.

The cries of fear and horror changed their note as the aliens' true nature dawned upon the crowd. Pride of flesh recoiled as the swarming humans realized the facts. Revulsion at being led by machines swelled into raw red rage. The mob madness spread as an ominous growl began rising from the streets.

A panicky policeman triggered it, firing his Aztlan-built shock tube into the forefront of the mob. A dozen men fell, to be trampled by their neighbors as a swarm of men and women poured over the struggling officer and buried him from sight. Like wildfire, pent-up emotions blazed out in a flame of fury. The parade vanished, sucked into the maelstrom and torn apart. Fists flew, flesh tore, men and women screamed in high bitter agony as the mob clawed and trampled in a surging press of writhing forms that filled the street from one line of buildings to the other.

Half-mad with triumph, drunk with victory, shocked at the terrible form that death had taken in coming to Ixtl, Matson raised his clenched hands to the sky and screamed in a raw inhuman voice, a cry in which all of man's violence and pride were blended! The spasm passed as quickly as it came, and with its passing came exhaustion. The job was done. The aliens were destroyed. Tomorrow would bring reaction and with it would come fear.

Tomorrow or the next day man would hammer out a true world union, spurred by the thought of a retribution that would never come. Yet all that didn't matter. The important thing—the only important thing—was preserved. Mankind would have to unite for survival—or so men would think—and he would never disillusion them. For this was man's world, and men were again free to work out their own destiny for better or for worse, without interference, and without help. The golden dream was over. Man might fail, but if he did he would fail on his own terms. And if he succeeded—Matson looked up grimly at the shining sky....

Slowly he rose to his feet and descended to the raging street below.

END

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