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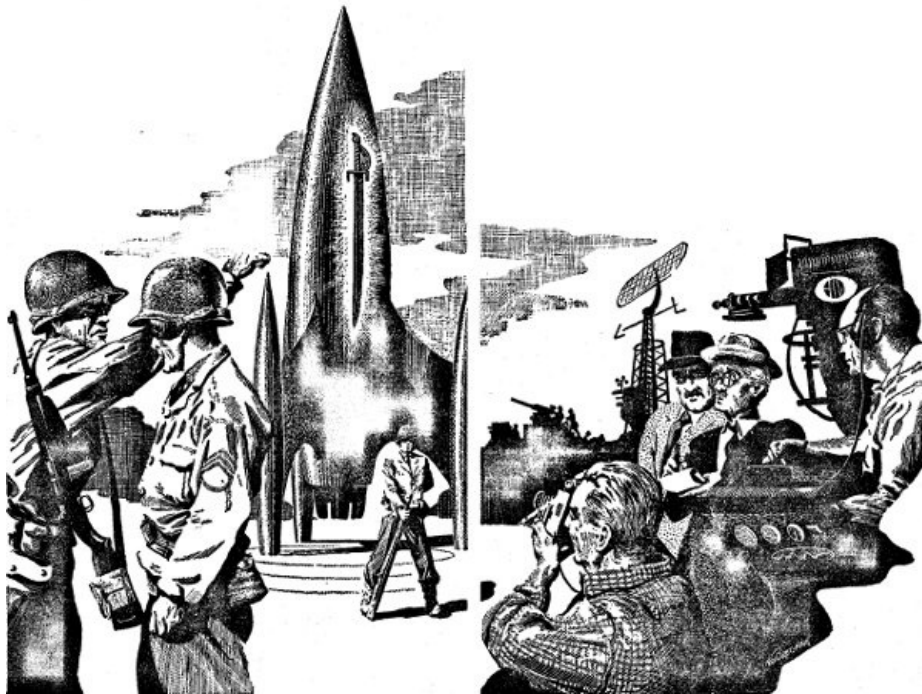


THE SWORD

By Frank Quattrocchi

Illustrated by Tom Beecham

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George Harrison noticed the flashing red light on the instrument panel as he turned onto the bridge to Balboa Island. Just over the bridge, he pulled the car to the curb and flipped the switch with violence. "Harrison," he muttered.

"How's the water, fella?" asked the voice of Bob Mills, his assistant.

There was a beautiful moon over the island. The surf lapped at the tiers of the picturesque bridge. Soft music was playing somewhere. There was a tinkle of young laughter on the light sea breeze.

Harrison was vacationing and he viewed the emergency contact from Intersolar Spaceport with annoyance.

"What do you want, Bob?"

"Sorry, George," Bob Mills said more seriously. "I guess you got to come back."

"Listen—" protested Harrison.

"Orders, George—orders from upstairs."

Harrison took a long look at the pleasant island street stretching out before him. Sea-corroded street lamps lit the short, island thoroughfare. People in light blue jeans, bronzed youths in skipper caps, deep-tanned girls in terry-cloth.

"What the hell is it?"

"Don't know, but it's big. Better hurry." He clicked off.

Harrison skidded the car into a squealing turn. Angrily, he raced over the bridge and onto the roaring highway. Thirty minutes later Intersolar Spaceport, Los Angeles, blazed ahead of him.

The main gate guards waved him in immediately and two cycle guards ran interference for him through the scores of video newsmen who lined the spaceport street.

Bob Mills met him at the entrance to the Administration building.

"Sorry, George, but—"

"Yeah. Oh, sure. Now what the hell is it all about?"

Mills handed him a sheaf of tele-transmittals. They bore heavy secret stamps. Harrison looked up quizzically.

"You saw the video boys," Mills said. "The wheels think there might be some hysteria."

"Any reason for it?"

"Not that we know of—not that *I* know of anyway. The thing is coming in awfully fast—speed of light times a factor of at least two, maybe four."

Harrison whistled softly and scanned the reports frowning.

"They contacted us—"

There were but three days in which to decipher the most cryptic message ever delivered to earth.

"What?"

"—*in perfect Intersolar Convention code*. Said they were coming in. That's all. The port boys have done all they could to find out what to expect and prepare for it. Somebody thought Engineering might be needed—that's why they sent for you."

"Used Intersolar Convention code, eh," mused Harrison.

"Yes," said Mills. "But there's nothing like this thing known in the solar system, nothing even close to this fast. Besides that, there was a sighting several days ago that's being studied."

"One of the radio observatories claims to have received a new signal from one of the star clusters...."

The huge metal vessel settled to a perfect contact with its assigned strip. It hovered over the geometric center of the long runway and touched without raising a speck of dust.

Not a sound, not a puff of smoke issued from any part of it. Immediately it rose a few feet above the concrete and began to move toward the parking strip. It moved with the weightless ease of an ancient dirigible on a still day. It was easily the largest, strangest object ever seen before at the spaceport.

A team of searchlight men swivelled the large spot atop the tower and bathed the ship in orange light.

"What's that mean?" asked Mills paging his way through a book.

"'Halt propulsion equipment,' I think," said Harrison.

"It's a good thing the code makers were vague about that," smiled Mills. "It's a good thing they didn't say jets or rockets—'cause this thing hasn't got any."

"*Attention!*"

That single word suddenly issued from the alien ship.

"*The Races of Wan greet you.*"

It might have been the voice of a frog. It was low, guttural, entirely alien, entirely without either enthusiasm or trace of human emotion.

"Jesus!" muttered Mills.

Scores of video teams focused equipment on the gleaming alien.

"*The Races of Wan desire contact with you.*"

"In English yet!" amazed Mills.

"The basis of this contact together with its nature are dependent upon *you!*"

The voice had become ugly. There was nothing human about it save only the words, which were in flawless English.

"Your system has long been under surveillance by the Races of Wan. Your—progress has been noted."

There was almost a note of contempt, thought Harrison, in the last sentence.

"Your system is about to reach others. It therefore becomes a matter of urgency that the Races of Wan make contact.

"Your cultural grasp is as yet quite small. You reach four of your own system's planets. You have attempted—with little success—colonization. You anticipate further penetrations.

"You master the physical conditions of your system with difficulty. You are a victim of many of the natural laws—natural laws which you dimly perceive.

"But you master yourselves with greatest difficulty, and you are infinitely more a victim of forces within your very nature—*forces which you know almost not at all.*"

"What the hell—" began Mills.

"Because of this disparity your maturity as a race is much in doubt. There are many among the cultures of the stars who would consider your race deviant and deadly. There are a very few who would welcome you to the reaches of space.

"But most desire more information. Thus our visit. We have come to gather data that will determine your—disposition—

"Your race accepts the principle of extermination. You relentlessly seek and kill for commercial or political advantage. You live in mistrust and envy and threat. Yet, as earthlings, you have power. It is not great, but it contains a threat. We wish now to know the extent of that threat.

"Here is the test."

Suddenly an image resolved itself on the gleaming metal of the ship itself.

It was a blueprint.

A hundred cameras focused on it.

"Construct this. It is defective. Correct that which renders it not useful. We shall return in three days for your solution."

"Good God!" exclaimed Harrison. "It's a—*sword!*"

"A what?" asked Mills.

"A sword—people used to chop each other's heads off with them."

Almost at once the metal giant was seen to move. Quickly it retraced its path across the apron, remained poised on the center of the runway, then disappeared almost instantaneously.

The Intersolar Council weathered the storm. The representative of the colony on Venus was recalled, his political life temporarily ended. A vigilante committee did for a time picket the spaceport. But the tremendous emotional outbursts of the first day gradually gave way to a semblance of order.

Video speakers, some of them with huge followings, still denounced the ISC for permitting the alien to land in the first place. Others clamored for a fleet to pursue the arrogant visitor. And there were many fools who chose to ignore the implications of the strange speech and its implied threat. Some even thought it was a gigantic hoax.

But most men soon came to restore their trust in the scientists of the Intersolar Council.

Harrison cast down the long sheet of morning news that had rolled out of the machine.

"The fools! They'll play politics right up to the last, won't they?"

"What else?" asked Mills. "Playing politics is as good a way as any of avoiding what you can't figure out or solve."

"And yet, what the hell are *we* doing here?" Harrison mused. "Listen to this."

He picked up a stapled sheaf of papers from his desk.

"Analysis of word usage indicates a complete knowledge of the English language—that's brilliant, isn't it? 'The ideational content and general semantic tone of the alien speech indicates a relatively high intelligence.

"Usage is current, precise...' Bob, the man who wrote that report is one of the finest semantics experts in the solar system. He's the brain that finally broke that ancient Martian ceremonial language they found on the columns."

"Well, mastermind," said Mills. "What will the *Engineering* report say when you get around to writing it?"

"Engineering report? What are you talking about?"

"You didn't read the memo on your desk then? The one that requested a preliminary report from every department by 2200 today."

"Good God, no," said Harrison snapping up the thin yellow sheet. "What in hell has a sword got to do with Engineering?"

"What's it got to do with Semantics?" mocked Robert Mills.

Construct this. It is defective. Correct that which renders it not useful.

Harrison's eyes burned. He would have to quit pretty soon and dictate the report. There wasn't any use in trying to go beyond a certain point. You got so damned tired you couldn't think straight. You might as well go to bed and rest. Bob Mills had gone long before.

He poured over the blueprint again, striving to concentrate. Why in hell had he not given up altogether? What possible contribution could an engineer make toward the solution of such a problem?

Construct this.

You simply made the thing according to a simple blueprint. You tried out what you got, found out what it was good for, found out then what was keeping it from doing that. You fixed it.

Well, the sword had been constructed. Fantastic effort had been directed into producing a

perfect model of the print. Every minute convolution had been followed to an incredible point of perfection. Harrison was willing to bet there was less than a ten thousandths error—even in the handle, where the curves seemed to be more artistic than mechanical.

It is defective.

What was defective about it? Nobody had actually tried the ancient weapon, it was true. You didn't go around chopping people's heads off. But experts on such things had examined the twelve-pound blade and had pronounced it "well balanced"—whatever that meant. It would crack a skull, sever arteries, kill or maim.

Correct....

What was there to correct? Could you make it maim or kill better? Could you sharpen it so that it would go through thick clothing or fur? Yes. Could you make it a bit heavier so that it might slice a metal shield? Yes, perhaps. All of these things had been half-heartedly suggested. But nobody had yet proposed any kind of qualitative change or been able to suggest any kind of change that would meet the next admonition of the alien:

Correct that which renders it not useful.

What actually could be done to a weapon to make it useful? Matter of fact, what was there about the present weapon that made it *not* useful. Apparently it was useful as hell—useful enough to cut a man's throat, pierce his heart, slice an arm off him....

What were the possible swords; what was the morphology of *concept sword*?

Harrison picked up a dog-eared report.

There was the *rapier*, a thin, light, extremely flexible kind of sword (if you considered the word "sword" generic, as the Semantics expert had pointed out). It was good for duels, man-to-man combat, usually on what the ancients had called the "field of honor."

There were all kinds of short swords, dirks, shivs, stilettos, daggers. They were the weapons of stealth men—and sometimes women—used in the night. The assassin's weapon, the glitter in the darkened alley.

There were the *machetes*. Jungle knives, cane-cutting instruments. The bayonets....

You could go on and on from there, apparently. But what did you get? They were all more or less useful, Harrison supposed. There was nothing more you could do with any kind of sword that was designed for a specific purpose.

Harrison sighed in despair. He had expected vastly more when he had first heard the alien mention "test". He had expected some complex instrument, something new to Terra and her colonies. Something involving complex and perhaps unknown principles of an alien technology. Something appropriate to the strange metal craft that traveled so very fast.

Or perhaps a paradox. A thing that could not be constructed without exploding, like a lattice of U235 of exactly critical size. Or an instrument that must be assembled in an impossible sequence, like a clock with a complete, single-pieced outer shell. Or a part of a thing that could be "corrected" only if the whole thing were visualized, constructed, and tested.

No, the blueprint he held now involved an awareness that must prove beyond mere technology, or at least Terran technology. Maybe it involved an awareness that transcended Terran philosophy as well.

Harrison slapped the pencil down on his desk, rose, put his coat on, and left the office.

"... we are guilty as the angels of the bible were guilty. Pride! That's it, folks, pride. False pride...."

Harrison fringed the intent crowd of people cursing when, frequently, someone carelessly bumped into him in an effort to get nearer the sidewalk preacher.

"We tried to live with the angels above. We wanted to fly like the birds. And then we wanted to fly like the angels...."

Someone near Harrison muttered an "Amen". Harrison wove his way through them wondering where the hundreds of such evangelists had come from so suddenly.

"Ya know, folks, the angels themselves got uppity once. *They* wanted to be like Gawd himself, they did. Now, it's us."

There was a small flutter of laughter among the crowd. It was very quickly suppressed—so quickly that Harrison gained a new appreciation of the tenor of the crowd.

"That's right, laugh! Laugh at our folly!" continued the thin-faced, bright-eyed man. "It was a sword that the angel used to kick Adam and Eve out of the garden. The sword figures all through the bible, folks. You ought to read the bible. You ought to get to know it. It's all there. All there

for you to read...."

By Christ, thought Harrison. Here was an aspect of the concept, sword, he had not considered. Morphological thinking required that *all* aspects of a concept be explored, all plotted against all others for possible correlation....

No. That was silly. The bible was a beautiful piece of literature and some people believed it inspired. But the great good men who wrote the bible had little scientific knowledge of a sword. They would simply describe the weapon as a modern fiction writer would describe a blaster—without knowing any more about one than that it existed and was a weapon.

Surely the ISC's weapons expert could be trusted to know his swords.

"Go on home," Mills pleaded. "You're shot and you know it. You said yourself this isn't our show."

"You go home, Bob. I'm all right."

"George ... you're acting strange. Strange as hell."

"I'm all right. Leave me alone," snapped Harrison becoming irritable.

Mills watched silently as the haggard man slipped a tablet into his mouth.

"It's all right, Bob," smiled Harrison weakly. "I know how to use Benzedrine."

"You damn fool, you'll wreck yourself...."

But the engineer ignored him. He continued paging his way through the book—the bible, no less. George Harrison and the bible!

Mills was awakened by the telephone. Reaching in the dark for it he answered almost without reaching consciousness.

It was Harrison.

"Bob, listen to me. If an angel were to look at us right now, what would he think?"

"For God's sake!" Mills cried into the instrument. "What's up? You still at the office?"

"Yeah, answer the question."

"Hold on, George. I'll be down and get you. What you been drinking?"

"Bob, would he—she—think much of us? Would the angel figure we were...."

"How the hell would *I* know?"

"No, Bob, what you should have asked is 'how the hell would *he* know.'"

In a daze Mills heard the click as the other hung up.

"Mr. Harrison, your assistant is looking for you."

"Yes, I know, Kirk. But will you do it?"

"Mr. Harrison, we only got one of them. If we screw it up it'll take time to make another and today's the day, you know."

"I'll take the blame."

"Mr. Harrison, you look kind of funny. Hadn't I better...."

Harrison was sketching a drawing on a piece of waste paper. He was working in quick rough strokes, copying something from a book.

"They'll blame us both, Mr. Harrison. Anyway, it might hold up somebody who's got a real idea...."

"I have a real idea, Kirk. I'm going to draw it for you."

The metal worker noticed that the book Harrison was copying from was a dictionary, a very old and battered one.

"Here, can you follow what I've drawn?"

The metal worker accepted it reluctantly, giving Harrison an odd, almost patronizing look. "This is crazy."

"Kirk!"

"Look, Mr. Harrison. We worked a long time together. You...."

Harrison suddenly rose from the chair.

"This is our one chance of beating this thing, no matter how crazy it seems. Will you do the job?"

"You believe you got something, eh," the other said. "You think you have?"

"I have to have."

"Gentlemen," said the President of the Intersolar Council. "There is very little to say. There can be no denying the fact that we have exhausted our efforts at finding a satisfactory solution.

"The contents of this book of reports represents the greatest concentration of expert reasoning perhaps ever applied to a single problem.

"But alas, the problem remains—unsolved."

He paused to glance at his wristwatch.

"The aliens return in an hour. As you very well know there is one action that remains for us. It is one we have held to this hour. It is one that has always been present and one that we have been constantly urged to use.

"Force, gentlemen. It is not insignificant. It lies at our command. It represents the technology of the Intersolar alliance. I will entertain a motion to use it."

There were no nay votes.

The alien arrived on schedule. The ship grew from a tiny bright speck in the sky to full size. It settled to a graceful landing as before on the strip and silently moved into the revetment.

Again it spoke in the voice of the frog, but the tone was, if anything, less human this time.

"Earthmen, we have come for your solution."

At that instant a hundred gun crews stiffened and waited for a signal behind their carefully camouflaged blast plates and inside dummy buildings....

Harrison was running. The Administration building was empty. His footsteps echoed through the long, silent halls. He headed for an emergency exit that led directly to the blast tunnel. All doors were locked.

The only way was over the wall. He paused and tossed the awkward, heavy object over the ten-foot wall. Then, backing toward the building, he ran and jumped for a hold onto the wall's edge. He failed by several inches to reach it.

"Earthmen, we have come for your solution."

He ran at the wall once more. This time he caught a fair hold with one hand. Digging at the rough concrete with his feet he was able to secure the hold and begin pulling his body upward.

Quickly he was over the wall and onto the apron, a hundred yards from the shining metal ship.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Wait, for God's sake!"

Picking up the object he had tossed over the wall, he raised it above his head and ran toward the alien ship.

"Wait! Here is the solution," he gasped.

Somehow the command to fire was not given. There was a long moment of complete silence on the field. Nothing moved.

Then the voice of the frog boomed from the alien ship.

"The solution appears to be correct."

The alien left three days later. Regular communications would begin within the week. Future meetings would work out technical difficulties. Preliminary trade agreements, adequately safeguarded, were drafted and transmitted to the ship. The Races of Man and the Races of Wan were in harmony.

"It was simply too obvious for any of us to notice," explained Harrison. "It took that street-corner evangelist to jar something loose—even then it was an accident."

"And the rest of us—" started Mills.

"While *all* of us worked on the assumption that the test involved a showing of strength—a flexing of technological muscle."

"I still don't see—"

"Well, the evangelist put the problem on the right basis. He humbled us, exalted the aliens—that is, he thought the alien was somehow a messenger from God to put us in our places."

"We were pretty humble ourselves, especially the last day," protested Mills.

"But humble about our *technology*," put in Harrison. "The aliens must be plenty far beyond us technologically. But how about their cultural superiority. Ask yourself how a culture that could produce the ship we've just seen could survive without—well destroying itself."

"I still don't understand."

"The aliens developed pretty much equally in *all* directions. They developed force—plenty of it, enough force to kick that big ship through space at the speed of light plus. They must also have learned to control force, to live with it."

"Maybe you better stick to the sword business," said Mills.

"The sword is the crux of the matter. What did the alien say about the sword? 'It is defective.' It *is* defective, Bob. Not as an instrument of death. It will kill a man or injure him well enough.

"But a sword—or any other instrument of force for that matter—is a terribly ineffectual tool. It was originally designed to act as a tool of social control. Did it—or any subsequent weapon of force—do a good job at that?"

"As long as man used swords, or gunpowder, or atom bombs, or hydrogen bombs, he was doomed to a fearful anarchy of unsolved problems and dreadful immaturity.

"No, the sword is not useful. To fix it—to 'correct that which renders it not useful'—meant to make it something else. Now what in the hell did that mean? What can you do with a sword?"

"You mean besides cut a man in two with it," said Mills.

"Yes, what can you do with it besides use it as a weapon? Here our street-corner friend referred me to the right place: The bible!

"They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

"The aliens just wanted to know if we meant what we said."

"Do we?"

"We better. It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a silly ploughshare to convince those babies on that ship. But there's more to it than that. The ability of a culture finally to pound all of its swords—its intellectual ones as well as its steel ones—into ploughshares must be some kind of least common denominator for cultures that are headed for the stars."

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