

# **Peril Of The Starmen**

**By Kris Neville**

## CHAPTER I

"I called you three in," the Oligarch said, "because I have some very important news."

Herb—he would later be assigned that name—was one of the three. He hated the Oligarch, and he had no doubt that the Oligarch knew it.

"There are," the Oligarch said, "people on the planet. Unfortunately."

Dull rage and frustration and despair and helplessness bubbled up in Herb. His face remained calm.

"We'll have to keep them from interfering with us," the Oligarch said.

Herb wanted to cry: Find another! Not this one! Not the only one we've ever found with people on it!

But he said nothing. His anguished thoughts whirled like a dust storm, handling and rejecting ideas like bits of paper. The remote and inaccessible Scientists were beyond accounting. Perhaps only this planet would serve. Perhaps there was insufficient time to locate another of suitable mass. Perhaps.... But one could not know. One could only submit to authority. The storm died away, and Herb acknowledged bitter reality with helplessness. There even seemed a nightmare inevitability about the selection.

"It would be dangerous to try to work secretly," the Oligarch said. "If they were to discover us in the midst of planting the explosive, it would be fatal. We'll go down and ask their permission."

No one protested.

"To that end," the Oligarch said, "I have selected you three competent, trustworthy men. You will learn their language and when we land, lull their natural suspicions. It will be your responsibility to see that we blow up the planet on schedule."

The crush of the responsibility was terrifying. "I don't need to tell you," the Oligarch said, "that you can't fail."

And it was true. Herb *believed*.

Unless the planet Earth were exploded, the ever-unstable Universe, itself, would collapse. Already the binding force was dangerously diminished. If new energy were not released within a month, disintegration would begin. The Universe would alter and flow and contract and after the collapse, slowly build itself into a new form—that form itself containing the inherent stresses of change and mutability. Only the arrival of starmen to space flight at the critical time—only their continued vigilance—prevented disaster beyond accounting for.

*Herb believed.*

## CHAPTER II

Well inside the solar system the huge space ship plunged on, released from the warp drive and slowly braking to establish an orbit around the third planet.

Herb came up from the deep stupor of the drugs. He had been under their influence for the last twenty hours while the sleep tapes hammered information into his unconscious brain.

"All right," said Wezen, their private custodian, "time for exercise. Two hours of work-outs, and then you eat."

Herb sat up and felt his head. It ached dully. "Give me a minute. Time to think, Wezen. I'm—"

The other two starmen were also recovering.

"None of that! No time to think! Get up! Get up!"

Herb got reluctantly to his feet. Cold air washed over his nude body, and he trembled. He wanted to return to sleep, not the drugged sleep of the sleep tapes, but the genuine, untroubled sleep. Something frightening and alien was taking place in his mind.

He looked around for a dream form. It was a subconscious response. He realized with relief that it was not necessary to fill one in. Technically, he had not been asleep.

The Oligarch came to witness the first awakening. "How goes it, Wezen?"

"Fine."

"I don't know," Herb said. "My mind, it's ... I can't think...."

One of the others said, "There's all kinds of information, but I can't get at it. I ... can't ... get ... at ... it." He looked around desperately. "Every time I try, something new comes up. It's like a volcano. I can't control it. I think, the name of a river is Mississi—and then I know that leaves are green, and...."

"The sun is 93 million miles away...."

"The day is divided into twenty-four equal periods of sixty minutes...."

"The largest ocean is the Pacific...."

"The Federal Government of the United States of America is composed of three independent branches...."

They were all talking at once.

"It's awful. Not to be able to control...."

"Good, good," said the Oligarch. He was satisfied with the progress. By the time they landed, they would be little more than mechanisms designed to answer questions; they would not be able to think at all: they would *respond*. Stimuli-response.

"Freedom," said the Oligarch.

"Is," Herb found himself saying, "is the basis of any government that governs justly."

Wezen made a little intake of air that was loud in the shocked silence.

"I said that," Herb said unbelievably.

"Excellent," said the Oligarch. "The proper reaction."

Wezen relaxed, but he was visibly shaken. He had *heard* the heresy. What might happen to him later, when this job was done?

"The indoctrination is beginning nicely." The Oligarch nodded. They would be able to soothe suspicion and dispel fear when they arrived on Earth. They would speak of love and assistance when the time came. "But you still have much to learn."

"You have a lot of information about them," Herb said. "Their history ... their.... You got it just in the last few days from their radio and television shows? I don't see how...."

"We extrapolate; there are machines," the Oligarch said. He regarded Herb narrowly. "I believe we better step up the pace." He was not going to give Herb time to rest, to think, to understand, to correlate the mind staggering mass of information he was receiving. "Let's hurry to the recreation room for calisthenics."

In the corridor, Herb glanced around for microphones and saw he was in an unwired stretch. He turned to the starman beside him. Their eyes met. Identical information had been fed simultaneously to both of them. "You heard what I said?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a place is this, this Earth?"

The other strained to think. "It's.... It's.... I don't believe it."

"All men are created equal," Herb said.

"And they hold these truths to be self evident...."

"Nor make any laws abridging...."

"Shhhhh!" the third starman whispered. "Microphones up here."  
They fell silent.

The Oligarch went to his stateroom and ordered a meal. He had been indoctrinated by the sleep tapes about Earth well over a Brionimanian year previously. The tapes had been brought back by an extensive scouting expedition composed solely of Oligarchs.

He found them a naive race. Weakness, of course, was their short coming. As was often the case. He imagined his hand touching the lever that would trigger the explosive. He saw, in imagination, the planet fly asunder.

He had destroyed before. Five races had died beneath his hands. And now—

Perhaps, he thought, I am growing old. Why is it I do not want to destroy this race myself? Am I becoming weak?

He was angry with himself. Weakness! he thought. I'm acting like a subject, he thought. *I'm an Oligarch.*

Oligarch, he thought.

Five races, and now the sixth....

Where will it end? he thought.

*It will never end.*

Slowly the smile came. We are supreme, he thought, the lords and masters, and it will never end.

His scalp prickled with destiny.

Five races. He saw his hand reach out for the sixth.

He shuddered. Weeks ago he had reached his decision.

Bleakly he thought: I can't do it.

Perspiration crept down his spine. If a planet were not blown up, the whole fabric of his society would collapse. Brionimar must never learn.

But Brionimar *would* learn. Earth was on the verge of space flight. Within a generation they would be listening for radio and television extension-waves in hyperspace that would indicate the existence of another civilization. In two generations they would be in the skies of Brionimar. And then the subjects would see salvation: here (they would reason) is another race capable of preserving the Universe. And there would be no appeasing their blind and mindless wrath until the last Oligarch was dismembered and bloodless.

His hand reached out and curled around an imaginary lever. It must be done, he thought. But not by me. Not by me. Not this hand. He looked down at his hands: white and immaculate and always clean. He washed them frequently.

Someone else must pull the lever.

*I must leave a man behind at the bomb site to do it, he thought.*

Psychology was a science on Brionimar; and he was a scientist. There was only one man he could be sure of out of all the crew. There were several fanatics, but he distrusted them. There was one idealist who would, of a psychological certainty, pull that lever and



blow himself up along with Earth in the belief that his action was necessary to preserve the Universe.

Herb.

## CHAPTER III

When the starmen came, they made headlines in the newspapers all over the world.

They sat down on the east-west runway of the Washington National Airport.

MEN FROM STARS LAND!

And shortly:

FIRST CONTACT REVEALS STARMEN HUMANOID!

GENERAL SAYS ARMY READY IF STARMEN MENACE!

EARTH WARNS VISITORS!

And on the heels of these:

UNEASINESS SPREADS!

STARMEN SAY PEACE THEIR MISSION!

NO INVASION, SAYS WILKERSON!

PEACE, SAY STARMEN!

And a few hours later:

CONGRESS TO MEET!

CONGRESS FORMS COMMITTEE: WILL REPORT  
FINDINGS TO AMERICAN PEOPLE!

STARMEN SAY PEACE BETWEEN WORLDS!

Fear and faith combined; courage and cowardice; hatred and optimism. The great ground swell of popular approval was to come much later. At first there was naked uncertainty. Could the starmen be trusted?

And suppose they could be trusted?

Suppose that.

What then?

What?

Many were afraid.

Bud Council, freshman senator from the state of Missouri, was one of them. In the course of events he was to be assigned to the Committee to investigate the starmen. A weak man, a fearful man, and as such, a dangerous man....

## CHAPTER IV

From his initial statement it was obvious that Bud sided with the group determined to oppose all contact with the starmen. His reaction was more frantic than most. He awoke at night from a soggy dream of terror. *Let us alone*, he sobbed, trembling. *Let us alone*. The future, once so secure, was now a veiled menace. *Go away*, he whispered into the night, *let us alone. We don't want you. Go away*.

He appeared sleepless for the first hearing. The three starmen filed in. He hated them.

They testified.

Herb, in the witness stand, peered out at the swarm of white faces; his head turned automatically from interrogator to interrogator.

"Our government is a modified democracy, much as your own, containing strong safe guards for individual liberty and civil rights," Herb said. One would need to look deeply into his eyes to detect the dullness and the depersonalization that was the true index to the words.

His thoughts were fuzzy, floating upon the periphery of his immediate existence. A detached part of himself seemed to observe and record the proceedings without understanding them; there was a fever of information inside of him.

"We believe in the mutual exchange of knowledge. As proof of our good will, we will be glad to send in a team of scientists...." And later: "Our aim is mutually profitable trade."

He rested. One of the starmen took the stand. The drone and whine of voices lulled Herb. He wanted to relax, to sleep, to recover, to become master of himself once again.

After a recess, he found himself once more on the stand. Senator Rawlins, a thin, nervous mid-Westerner, began a line of inquiry. Herb tested his fingers, feeling the comforting reality of the hard chair arm. He explored the surface with childish wonder while his voice responded and waited and responded. Dimly, persistently, doggedly, stubbornly the ego, the self—that small spark of assertiveness and awareness—struggled to arrange and order, to reason and make sense of—to unify and master—the knowledge it possessed. The consistency with which his spoken lies appealed to human prejudice should have made him realize the extent to which the Oligarchy was experienced in dealing with alien civilizations and the extent to which they had prepared specifically to confront this one. But he was aware only of the sound of his voice. The words fell away into some lost abyss of confusion.

"But the theory behind this, now?" Senator Rawlins said.

"I'm sorry, sir. We are technicians aboard this expedition. We have very little to do with the theoretical aspects. That's up to the Scientists."

"Well, you are, sir, familiar with the idea that—we'll say—that light has limited velocity?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct. It wouldn't make sense for it to have infinite velocity, to be instantaneously everywhere." A tiny sense of urgency formed in his mind.

"Are you familiar with the fact that the speed of light is a limiting factor? Nothing in the natural Universe goes faster than light."

"I couldn't say, sir, I really don't know. At an extremely high speed our space ship makes a, a *transition*, but ... I guess, sir, yes, sir." The answers weren't coming now. The Oligarch had not dared permit him scientific knowledge. There was a little vacuum where there should be information.

"You'll pardon me, but aren't you unusually ignorant, for a technician, about physical theory: about the action of gases that we were talking about a moment ago—in fact, even about astronomy?"

Herb did not say that such pursuits were the exclusive prerogatives of the Oligarchs. He did not say: I am inferior in mental capacity to an Oligarch; I can never become a Scientist. That was not to be mentioned. "I am a technician, sir."

Senator Rawlins shook his head and made a few notes.

There was fear somewhere inside of him. What more could he say? Suppose ... suppose.... Had he answered wrong? It was as if his knowledge were a river rushing his ego toward the great waterfall of defeat, and he was powerless to control anything. He must not fail. Must not, must not, must not fail.

The imminence of collapse made the very sky terrifying, to know that this apparent order could crumble, and planets fly from suns, and suns themselves spin blindly nowhere. Every word before the Committee was vital. The whole wheeling order of existence turned upon it.

He felt the wood beneath his finger tips, smooth and cool and solid.

The second day of the open hearing, Norma flew down from Vermont to reason with Bud.

Bud was gracious. Years in politics had taught him to mask his real feelings; taught him so well that he was no longer at all sure what his real feelings were.

The outbursts of anger and suppressed sadism he unleashed on those closest to him always the morning after confused him and left him feeling that the person of the previous day had been someone distinct and separate from his genuine self.

"It's good to see you," he said. A warm, brotherly and artificial love flattered his sense of rectitude. He considered her the baby of the family. He remembered her as a gawky, frightened girl giving a last long glance at the security of the living room before venturing into the night of her first date. "I've been meaning to get up your way." His hands signaled the extent of his confinement to Washington. "There's so much to do, you can't imagine. I have to take work home with me. I'm sometimes up half the night with it... I've been hearing about you. Very fine, Norma, very fine."

Norma was tense and uncomfortable and, Bud thought, a little over-awed to be sitting across the desk from her own brother in the rebuilt Senate Office Building.

She blinked nervously. "Frank will be in this afternoon."

"Yes. Yes?" A trace of petulance haunted Bud's voice. "Terribly busy just now, but...." Hollow enthusiasm conquered. "That's just fine. I can always find time to see Frank."

"He thinks it's important that he see you," Norma said.

"Has something happened?" Bud always sought ways to escape from the anticipated responsibility of sharing a family crisis.

"We want to talk to you."

"I don't quite understand, Norma. What are you talking about?"

"These hearings, Bud."

Instantly the Senator felt the crush of the whole family arrayed against him, and he wanted to snarl at her in shame and anger and shout, "Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Leave me alone, for Chrissake!"

"They've got space flight. We can't even begin to guess what else they've got. What does Senator Stilson do? And you're there on his side, right with him!"

Bud puffed his cheeks and his skin grew hot and prickly. *It's none of your damned business*, he thought viciously.

"They have space flight," she repeated doggedly. "Think what that would mean to us."

"I haven't time to discuss it right now, Sis. We'll have to talk this out later." He stood up, anger pounding in his temples.

She stood with him. "Tonight. You and I and Frank."

"I don't quite see how...." His voice was weary, and he let the sentence hang short of blunt refusal.

"Tonight, Bud. We've got to see you tonight. He's flying in."

"Well ..." he sighed resignedly. "My place, then. I'll see you at, nine o'clock there."



"That will be fine."

"Nine, then. I've got to rush. My place at nine."

"Goodby, Bud."

Less than an hour later flash bulbs popped from all corners of the room as the starmen entered for their second session of questioning.

Chairman Stilson, in a peevisly thin voice, limited the photographers to ten minutes and ruled against pictures during the questioning. After nearly half an hour, the hearing got under way.

Herb was first on the stand. He continued in the same fashion as yesterday. His answers were polite and informative. Senator Stilson's attempt to get him to contradict himself proved unfruitful. Herb surrendered the chair to one of the others and returned to his seat at the long table reserved for the starmen.

The hearing droned on. He no longer listened. He wanted to sleep.

"Yes," said the starman who was testifying, "that is correct. One of our main reasons for making this expedition is to offer you technological information: space flight, medicine...."

"... eventually trade...."

"Initiate a cultural exchange at the first practical moment...."

Herb heard someone say: "But we have limited facilities on this expedition. A larger one, with your permission, will be dispatched for Earth within a year." He was not even sure whether it was he who was speaking. "In the meantime, we would like permission to conduct certain scientific tests on the surface.... A mineral analysis, sir, primarily. But we are interested in geological evidence...."

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