

Pattern For Conquest

By GEORGE O. SMITH

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I.

The signal officer leaped from his position and made a vicious grab at the thin paper tape that was snaking from his typer to the master transmitter. It tore just at the entrance slot. The tape-end slid in; disappeared.

The master transmitter growled as the tape-end passed the scanner. Meters slapped up against the overload stop and two of the big rectifier tubes flashed over. Circuit breakers came open with a crash down in the power room, and up in the master modulator room the bell alarms rang, telling of the destruction of one of the tuning guides from overload peak.

The signal officer paid no attention to the damage his action had caused. He grabbed for the telephone and dialed a number.

"I want confirmation of messages forty-eight and forty-nine," he snapped. "What fool let 'em get this far?"

"What happened?" asked the superior officer mildly.

"I got forty-eight on the tape before I came to forty-nine," explained the signal officer. "I grabbed the tape just as it was hitting the master transmitter. The tape-end raised hell, I think. Default alarms are ringing all over the building. But who—?"

"It was my fault—I'll confirm in writing—that forty-eight was not preceded by an official sanction. You were quite correct in

stopping them at any cost. As soon as the outfit is on the air again, send 'em both."

"Yeah, but look—"

"Orders, Manley."

"I'll follow 'em," said Signal Officer Manley, "but may I ask why?"

"You may, according to the Book of Regs, but I'm not certain of the reason myself. Frankly, I don't know. I questioned them myself, and got the same blunt answer."

"The whole terran sector has been slaving for years to keep this proposition from happening," grumbled Manley. "For years we have been most careful to stop any possible slipup. Now I find that the first time it ever gets down as far as my position and I leap into the breach like a hero, I'm off the beam and the stuff is on the roger."

"I'll give you a Solar Citation for your efforts," offered the superior ruminatively. "I know what you mean. We've been trying to keep it from happening by mere chance. And all of a sudden comes official orders, not happenstance, but ordering it. Let's both give up."

"The gear is on the air again," said Manley. "I'll carry on, like Pagliacci, roaring madly to our own doom. But first I'm going to have to restrung the master. Shoot me a confirm, will you? I don't expect to use it, but it'll look nice in some time capsule as the forerunner of history."

Within a minute messages forty-eight and forty-nine were through the machine, up through the master modulator room and out in space, on their way to Mars and Venus, respectively.

The Little Man looked up at Co-ordinator Kennebec. The head of the Solar Combine looked down with a worried frown. This had been going on for some time. The Little Man had been, in turn, pleading, elated, demanding, mollified, excited, and unhappy because the ruler of the Solar Combine could not understand him fully. He was also unhappy because he could not understand the head man's meaning, either.

The Little Man had three cards in his hand. He was objecting violently, now. He was not angry, just positive of his desire. He put two of the cards on the desk before Kennebec, and agreed, most thoroughly, that these were what he wanted. The third card he tossed derisively, indicating negation. This one was of no use.

Kennebec shrugged. He picked them up and inserted the unwanted card between the other two. He did it with significance, and indicated that there was a reason.

The Little Man shrugged and with significance to his actions, accepted the three. If he could not have the two without the third, he'd take all three.

He saluted in the manner that Kennebec understood to be a characteristic of the Little People's culture. Then he turned and left the office, taking with him the three cards.

As he opened the door, he was almost trampled by Kennebec's daughter, who was entering on a dead run with a bundle of

transmitter tape trailing from one hand. Patricia looked down, made a motion of apology to the Little Man, whose head came just even with her hip, and then turned to her father as the Little Man left the scene.



"Dad," she said, "here are press flashes from Mars and Venus. Singly, either one of them pleases me greatly. Simultaneously I can't take it."

"Sorry, Pat. But this isn't a personal proposition."

"But it means trouble."

"Perhaps."

Patricia snorted. "It does mean trouble and you know it. How are you going to avoid it?"

"I'm going to assign Flight Commander Thompson to the task of keeping or combing them out of one another's hair."

"And if and when he's successful," smiled Pat derisively. "I assume that Thompson will be awarded the Solar Citation for bravery and accomplishment far above and beyond the call of flesh?"

"He'll have earned it," smiled Kennebec. "Let's see what the sister worlds have to say."

"Not much—yet. Neither one of them seems to be aware of the other's action—yet. I'll bet the Transplanet Press Association wires will be burning when they all find out."

"TPA is going to suppress any word of dissension," said Kennebec.

"Um-m-m—seems that Terra, as usual, has a bear by the tail. Why couldn't he have picked less dangerously?"

"Knowing nothing of the Little People's culture, I can't say. I don't even understand him most of the time excepting that I have attained the idea that something is very important and must be done immediately. What it is I don't really know, but I gather that it concerns the integrity of a number of stellar races including that of the Little People."

"Sounds like corny dialogue from a bum soap opera," said Patricia. "It's a sorry day for civilization when it must depend upon a deal like this."

"I'm certain that they understand. The Little Man reviewed the records. Given the apparent understanding of mere records

that he has—in spite of not being able to understand me or any other Solarian—he must know that we're all playing fireman in a powderhouse. He is going on through with it in spite of what he must certainly know."

"I feel inclined to take a vacation at Lake Stanley or Hawaii until this blows over."

Kennebec laughed. "It won't be that bad, and besides, you're a part of this and no matter where you go, you'll be in it. Might as well give up, Pat. You can't run now."

"I know," answered Patricia wistfully, "but I'd like to keep out of the way of any flying glass."

Stellor Downing was Martian by birth and by six hundred years of Martian-born forebears. His family could trace its line back to the first group of Terran colonists that braved the rigors of Martian life before technology created a Martian world that was reasonably well adapted for human life.

Downing, being of hard nature, cold and calculating, and murderously swift, should probably have been dark and swarthy with beetling brows and a piercing stare.

But Downing lived on Mars, where in spite of the thin atmosphere, Sol's output was low. Downing had light hair, a skin like the baby-soap ads, and pale-blue eyes that looked as innocent.

A lot of people had been fooled—but not Martians.

Stellor Downing's rapid rise up through the ranks of the Solar Guard was legendary on Mars. His swinging gait was more or

less known to all theater-going Martians, and the sound of his voice over the radio was familiar. He wore a double modine belt, with one of the nasty weapons on each hip—where they crossed over his stomach, a dull silver medallion held them together.

The medallion was the sharp-shooter's award.

Stellor Downing came on the spaceport escorted by six or seven officials. He talked with them until it was time for take-off. Then they all became more serious.

"We have no idea what this mission is," said one. "But if you do it honor, you'll get that other star."

"That'll make you a Flight Co-ordinator," added another.

"I can't make any promises," said Downing. "I'll do my best."

"Terra must be really in a hole to call on you," laughed a third. "You're by and far the best flight commander in the Guard."

Downing lifted his eyebrow. "I'll admit that I'm not the worst," he said cheerfully. "I hope you're right about the other." He turned to his orderly and gave a sign. The orderly lifted a whistle and blew a shrill note that cut the thin air of Mars.

Three hundred men entered twenty-five ships, and the spaceport was cleared. Radio messages filled the ether, as the ships were checked before take-off. Then as the clamoring of the radio died, a more powerful transmitter in the flight commander's ship gave the order to lift.

The center ship, bearing the red circle of Mars with the five stars ringing it, lifted first, followed by the next concentric ring of ships.

The third ring followed in close formation and then the last. In a great space cone, the flight closed into tighter formation and streaked straight upward and out of sight.

Stellor Downing was on his way to Terra.

Flight Commander Clifford Lane was driven onto Venusport in a cream-colored roadster that was either spotless enamel or mirror-finish chromium as far as the eye could reach. In the car with Cliff Lane were four women whose glitter was no less flagrant than the car's. The slight olive-tint to their skin made their very white teeth flash in the sunshine as they smiled at their passenger.

This was Venus—living at its highest temperature. The car rolled to a stop beside Cliff Lane's command and they all climbed out. It was with a generous display of well-browned skin.

Lane's costume was no less scanty than the women's. The modine over his right hip was chased with silver and engraved, the holster was hand-tooled and studded with five small emeralds.

"What are you going for?" asked one of the women.

"Don't you know?" teased the one beside her. "Cliff is going to Terra to court Patricia Kennebec."

"I think we should kidnap him."

"You'd be sorry," laughed Cliff, waving the official order in front of her.

"Maybe we can bribe him. Tell you what, Cliff, you get this job done and you'll probably get a promotion. If you do, we'll all chip in and get that insignia on your modine holster changed to six full stars. But to do it you'll have to come back to us—single."

Cliff laughed. "And if it takes me more than six months, you'll all be off elsewhere."

"But what's Patricia got that we haven't?" wailed one.

"Him," grinned another.

"No, we've got him—now."

"Any time someone wants something else, you might as well give it to them, because they'll get it one way or another."

"Look, kids," interrupted Lane, "we've been talking this up and down for three hours. Now it's time to take off. Scram, like good little lovelies."

Cliff bade them a proper good-by and herded them back into the car. It started and rolled slowly away amid feminine calls. Its course was erratic, for the driver was handling the car by instinct; her head being turned back over the front seat to watch Lane, too. Had she been on a road instead of a broad, shining expanse of tarmacadam, trouble would have met her more than half-way.

Cliff waved a last good-bye and turned to face a group of kine-photographers. "Hi, Hal. Hello, fellers."

"Hey, Cliff, will you wipe your puss or don't you care if Venus sees their Favorite Son in lipstick?"

Lane laughed and wiped. "On me it doesn't look good," he agreed. "What'll you have?"

"We'd like shots of you giving the last order, entering the ship, and then wait until we can get set up on the edge of the field. We want a pan shot of the command hitting the ether."

"O.K. That we can do."

He turned to the group of unit commanders and said, "The usual, fellows. Straight up and away. Hey, Hal, pan the gang, will you? As a hotshot I'm slightly cool if they aren't behind me."

"Great stuff," grinned Hal. The kinephotogs spread out, took their shots, and then closed up for the final order. As the space door clanged shut, they raced for the edge of the field and waited.

With an instantaneous rush, the lead ship, bearing the green triangle of Venus surrounded by the five stars of the flight commander, took off in a slight swirl of airswept dust. Then at a separation of exactly three tenths of a second, the other twenty-four ships leaped into the sky and formed a long spiral in space.

The specks that were lost in the sky were Clifford Lane and his command heading for Terra.

II.

The Little Man had a name. Once in his own tiny spacecraft and surrounded by his cohorts, he was addressed in his own semi-speech, semimental means of communications.

"You have succeeded, Toralen Ki?"

"As best I can."

"Not perfect?" asked Hotang Lu.

"As long as the lack of communications exists, there can be no transfer of real detailed intelligence between the two races. They have no mental power of communication at all, of course, and since we use our mental power when we wish to carry over a plan or abstract thought, we fail when we are confronted as we are now. There are no words in our audible tongue that have the proper semantic meaning."

"But you did succeed in part?"

"I have succeeded so far as gaining their co-operation. They will assign to me or to us, rather, the necessary personnel and material to complete the task."

"Then we have succeeded."

"In a sense. To carry this concept over was most difficult. As long as we have their consent, everything will work out in time."

"You have succeeded in convincing them that the Opposites must be used?"

Toralen Ki smiled. "The Opposites we picked are violent enemies."

"Good!"

"It could be better. I'd hoped that they would be mere opposing personalities. It is not necessary that people of opposite personality be bitter rivals for everything."

"But the greater the opposing forces, the greater the strength of the mental field."

"In this case," said Toralen Ki thoughtfully, "they insist upon including a third party, of equal rank, to act as referee, or mediator. It will be his task to keep the Opposites from fighting one another."

"They were quite concerned?"

"Definitely. It was most difficult to convey to them the fact that the future of their—and all, for that matter—race depends upon absolute co-operation between the mental opposites we have picked."

"Once the suppressor is destroyed, communication with this race will be easy. Then they can be told."

Toralen Ki shook his head. "Fate is like that. To carry out the plan properly, they must co-operate. In order to tell them what they must do, the suppressor must first be destroyed. And were it not for the suppressor in the first place, the mental

capability of this race would require no assistance from the like of you and I or any other member of any other race. The Loardvogh were very brilliant, Hotang Lu. To hurl suppressors of mental energy through the Galaxy was a stroke of genius."

Hotang Lu smiled sourly. "I suppose it is a strange trick of fate to have the fate of the entire Galaxy hanging upon an act of cooperation between two bitter rivals. Especially when the means to explain fully also hangs upon the outcome of their cooperation. I am reminded of an incident in my boyhood. I sought work. I had no experience. They wanted men with experience. In order to get the experience I must work—but they wouldn't put me to work without experience. But it will be easier once the initial step is taken," said Hotang Lu.

"I know it will. It will be so much easier once they understand our motives, at least. Had they proved non-co-operative, we would have been completely stopped. As it is now, we can foresee the proper culmination of all of our plans. We will win, yet!"

"To our ultimate victory," said Hotang Lu, taking a sip from the tall tube before him. Toralen Ki followed the other, echoing the words.

"It is fortunate that they have evolved as far as they have," said Toralen Ki, after the toast. "Dealing with a completely ignorant race is more difficult. These people have a proper evaluation of technical ideas. Therefore they will understand the proper course without having it forced down their collective throats."

"With their already available knowledge of the super drive, it indicates their ability. Have they colonized any of the nearer stellar systems yet?"

"Several. But the urge is not quite universal, yet. Only the adventurers and the malcontents seem to go. They will spread though, if they're not stopped within a reasonable time."

"Time.... Time—" muttered Hotang Lu. "Always time. Must we fight time forever?"

"Fighting time is most difficult when you are behind," remarked Toralen Ki. "When you are ahead, it is no longer a fight."

"We must move swiftly and yet we can do nothing to cause haste. Confound it, must a man always be pinched between the urgency and the impossible?"

"Certainly. It makes one feel the ease of life during the times of no-stress."

"Some day I hope to see a period of no-stress that is longer than one tenth the duration of the trouble before and after it."

"You may," smiled Toralen Ki. "But there will be no after."

"Gloomy thought. I'll forget it, thank you. But to change the gloomy subject, I suggest that we contact Tlembo and let our ruler know that we have, in part, been successful."

"Right. I wish we were artists. So much can be conveyed to others by mere pictures."

Hotang Lu shook his head. "How could you possibly sketch the operation of a suppressor? Perhaps *they* could do it, for they seem to have advanced the art of thought-conveyance through pictures to a high degree. But recall that no Tlemban ever considered the art a necessary one and so we lack the technique."

"I know."

"After we contact Tlembo, when can we say we are to start?"

"I think they convey something about two days. We await the arrival of the contingents from the other planets."

"More time wasted."

"Think of the eons before this and the eons that will follow. And then think of how utterly minute your two days are. They will arrive, but quickly enough."

Flight Commander Cliff Lane heard the recognition gear tick off, and he whirled to look at the scanning plate. "The devil," he growled.

"Sir?"

"What is he doing here?"

"I don't understand, sir."

Cliff smiled wryly. "Sorry. I thought this would be more or less pleasant."

"Isn't it?"

"That trace," he said, pointing to the squiggle on the scanning plate, "happens to be the recognition trace of no one other than Steller Downing."

"Oh," said the orderly. "I didn't know."

Lane grinned. "Then you're the only one that doesn't. Any of the rest of this outfit know it on sight. Take a good look at it, Timmy, and the next time you see it, do your best to do whatever that is doing, but do it quicker, neater, and with more flourish. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Lane strode into the operations room, and looked over the plotter's shoulder. "What's he doing, Link?"

Lincoln made some calculations on a paper, plunked the keys on his computer for a moment and then came up with an equation. He showed it to Lane with a grimace.

"Landing," said Lane cryptically.

Lincoln nodded.

"Can we beat him in?"

"I think so—if we get the jump on him."

"There are just two landing circles on Mojave that aren't dusty," said Lane. "One of them is not far from the field office building. The other takes a full hour of travel before you can check in. I don't like to walk."

"Right. I'll see what we can do."

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