

QUEST TO CENTAURUS

By GEORGE O. SMITH

CHAPTER I

Soft Assignment

Captain Alfred Weston entered the room and nodded curtly to the men at the conference table. Doctor Edwards, holding forth at the head of the table, nodded as though he had not seen the over-polite greeting. He waved the newcomer to an empty seat on the opposite side of the table, and Weston went around to sit down.

Edwards had been talking on some other subject, obviously, but now he dropped it. "Captain Weston," he said, "you are still classified as convalescent."

"Rank foolishness," grumbled Weston.

"Unfortunately," smiled Edwards, "it is the Medical Corps that makes the decision. A bit of rest does no man any harm. But, Weston, despite the convalescent classification, we have a job that seems to be right up your alley. Want it?"

"You're asking?" said Weston quizzically. "This is no order?"

"As an official convalescent, we cannot order you to duty."

Weston scowled. "I see no choice," he said. His tone was surly, his whole attitude inimical.

"Nevertheless, the choice is your own," said Edwards. As psychiatrist for the Medical Corps, Edwards was treading on thin ground. But he knew he must force this disagreement into the open and blast it out of Weston's mind.

It was a common enough block, but it needed elimination.

"Certainly the choice is mine," said Weston bitterly. "Hobson's Choice. Either I take the job and do it, or I refuse to take it and gain the disrespect of the entire Corps. I see no choice and therefore I will take your job—sight unseen!"

"We shall offer the job," said Edwards flatly. "After which you will make your decision."

"Very well," answered Weston sullenly.

Edwards ignored the tone of the answer. "Weston, you are a ranking officer. This job requires a ranking officer because it demands someone whose authority to investigate will not be questioned, scoffed at or ignored. You are now a Captain. We intend to raise your rank to Senior Captain—which is due you and has been withheld only until your convalescence is complete.

"We shall offer you a roving order and a four-mark commissioned directive which will give you authority to requisition whatever items you may need to complete your project. Experimental Spacecraft Number XXII will be assigned to you."

"You make it very attractive. Shall I now quote the ancient one about 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts'?"

"There is no need for insolence, Weston. You are in excellent position to do us a service. If you accept it will not be necessary to create a hole in the Corps by removing some other ranking officer from his command. This job will also give you the swing

of space once again. You've been out of space now for about a year—"

"Ever since the First Directive attack," said Weston bitterly.

"Right. But look, Weston. Regardless of what opinion the world may have, we in this room have reason to believe that there is something hidden behind the Jordan Green legend. We want you to get to the bottom of it. Will you do this?"

Weston grunted. He looked across the room to the door beside the blank wall beside the doorframe. On the space above the chair-rail were the scrawled words *Jordan Green was here!*

They were written in space-chart chalk, which Weston understood to be the case with the uncounted thousands of such scrawlings sprinkled all over the Solar System. It looked like a hurried scrawl at first glance, yet it could not have been written by a man in a tearing hurry because it was so very legible.

Weston himself had seen over a thousand of such scrawls in out of the way places and he had joined in the hours of discussion that went on through the Space Corps as to who Jordan Green might be, and if there were really such a character.

Jordan Green, it seemed, was one of those legendary people that are never seen. He had been everywhere and had apparently been there first. It was a common joke that, if the Space Corps started to erect a lonely outpost on some secret asteroid on Monday, Tuesday morning would find Jordan Green's familiar scrawl beside the door on the unfinished wall.

The trouble was that Weston himself had written one or two of these messages. And though he suspected that every officer in the Corps had been guilty of perpetuating the gag at some time or other, not one of them ever admitted it. It was a sort of unmentioned, no-prize contest in the Corps just something to talk about in the long lonely times between missions.

Every officer clamored for missions to the out of the way places because he hoped to have a Jordan Green yarn to spin and the legendary traveller was always reported. Weston smiled at one incident he had heard of.

An officer he knew had found a place where there was no scrawl and had written, *I beat Jordan Green to this spot!* The following day there was written beneath it, *So what? Have you looked under the wallpaper? Jordan Green.* The officer had torn away the wallpaper and, below it on the bare plaster, was the original scrawl.

The officer was still living down the joke.

None the less Weston thought it a waste of time to send a ranking officer on such a wild-goose chase.

He said so. And he went on to recount the facts of the case as he knew them. How, he wanted to know, was he to proceed when he was almost certain that every man in the Space Corps was guilty?

Edwards listened to Weston's objections. He agreed, partially.

"It is admitted that the officers may have amused themselves by writing it themselves. But when you consider the man-

hours and the kilowatts wasted in space-chatter the Martian War could have been finished in three months less time.

"The problem is just this, Weston. Did it start as a joke—perhaps like the boy who carves his initials the highest in the Old Oak Tree—or was some agency hoping to cause enough waste to slow up our prosecution of the late war?"

"I believe that it was started by some courier," said Weston flatly. "Then it caught on and pyramided far beyond Jordan Green's expectations. Have you sought the man himself?"

"We've established that any Jordan Greens in the service were not responsible," said Edwards. "However, this possible courier of yours probably would take a pseudonym lest fooling around with official time and energy get him a reprimand. We want you to track down the origin of Jordan Green! Will you do it?"

Weston shrugged. "I have no choice."

Edwards turned to the man beside him. "Commodore Atkins, will you provide Senior Captain Weston with the necessary credentials, papers, orders and insignia?"

Atkins smiled. "Come to my office, Weston. We'll have you fixed up in a hurry."

Weston rose and followed the commodore out of the room. Then Edwards turned to the other doctor in the conference room and took a deep breath before he said: "Well, that much is accomplished!"

"You're the psychiatrist," said the other. "I'm just a simple surgeon. For the life of me, I can't see it. What happens when Weston discovers that this is just a peg-whittling job handed out to a good man who is going stale for lack of something to do?"

"Reconsider his case from the psychiatric angle," said Edwards. "Weston was an excellent officer. Because of his record he was one of twenty men selected to carry the first projectors of Directive Power against Mars. He was proud of being included in the Directive Power attack.

"His position in the task force was one that gave him the highest statistical chance for success—yet with the usual trick of fate, Weston was the first and only man whose ship was shot to pieces in the counter-measure defense. He never even warmed up the secondary feeds to the Directive Power system before he was hit.

"The rescue squadron picked him up in bad shape. He was maintained in artificial unconsciousness while you put him together again—but by that time the Martians had surrendered and the war was over. Weston feels that he missed his big chance to go down in history. It's a plain case of frustration and self-guilt."

"But how can sending him on this wild-goose chase do any good?"

"The cure for frustration is to let the subject either do that which he has been barred from doing, or to give him something as pleasing to do to divert his attention. The way to cure the

type of self-guilt that Weston has—an inner feeling of failure—is to give him something in which he can succeed."

"But—"

"However, we cannot start another war. Aside from our natural reluctance, we'd have first to develop the application of Directive Power to the space drive, which will give us interstellar flight, and we'd have to go out in the galaxy with a chip on our shoulder to seek such a war.

"Then Weston might be able to obtain release. He is like the chap whose classmate turns up a Space Admiral while he himself is mustered out of service because of Venusite malaria.

"However niggling this job may be, by the time that Weston is cured through the work he'll be doing he will note that all of his former friends are envious of the very lush job he has.

"All space-hopping, no fixed base, a roving commission at four-mark level, an experimental spacecraft and, because he is chasing a will of the wisp that may be either malignant or downright foolish, no one will question his actions, castigate him if he fails or scorn his job.

"Remember this, Tomlinson, any man who goes out to unwind a wildly-tangled legend to its core has a real job on his hands. There must be reams and reams of conflicting evidence that will itself cover up our little work-therapy until he gets interested in some outlandish phase of it and settles down to work. Once he readjusts he won't mind a bit. Right now, however, Weston is mingled anger and gratification."

"Why?"

"He is happy because of the commission and the increase in rank and the freedom of action. He is angry, Tomlinson, because he knows that we have confidence in him. His self-pity is blasted because we still think he is a good bet.

"To continue in his present mental state requires that he continue to believe himself battered by fate. In other words, to enjoy his frustration-complex Weston must continue to be frustrated."

"Golly!" breathed Tomlinson. "Even when a man is slightly nuts he likes himself that way!"

"Correct," laughed Edwards. "That's one of the things that makes psychiatry difficult. It also makes Weston hate any condition which forces him to change. Now, to space with Al Weston. I'm hungry. How about you?"

Tomlinson grinned, nodded and beat Doctor Edwards to the door.

CHAPTER II

No Coddling, Please

Senior Captain Alfred Weston sat in his experimental spacecraft and wondered about it all. He had a swamped, shut-in feeling that was growing worse as the hours went by. He knew that he would never have another chance as good as his first chance with the Directive Power attack. In that he had failed.

This job was a fool project at best. Weston had come down from one of twenty selected men to a high-priced office boy's position. Not that he objected to regaining his position in the eyes of the world via some honest project—but if they persisted in bringing him back along the long hard road, it would be so very long and so very hard.

After all, he was no ensign, to rise through the ranks gaining experience. Yet that is what he was going to do—again. There had to be some project worthy of his ability!

There was conflict in his mind. One very small portion of his brain kept telling him that they did not hand out four-mark commissions, increases in rank and roving orders to ensigns, even ensigns in fact with captain's ratings.

He scoffed at that, but was forced to recognize it anyway. In a fit of sarcasm he went to the wall beside the spacelock, grabbed a piece of space-chart chalk and scrawled, *Jordan Green was here, too!* on the wall.

Then he threw the chalk out the spacelock door in a fit of temper.

The whole assignment was far beneath his dignity. An officer of his rank should have a large command, not a small speedster—even one of the desirable experimental models. He felt like a President of the Interplanetary Communications Network, forced to replace worn patch-cords in a telephone exchange, or a President of Terra, forced to write official letters to a number of third-class civil service employees.

He, Alfred Weston, was being forced to forego his command in order to snoop around trying to locate the originator of one of the craziest space-gags in history.

Well, so it was beneath his notice—he could treat it with proper disdain. No doubt the President of ICN might enjoy replacing worn out patch-cords just to keep his hand in. He could do the same. He could make whatever stupid moves were necessary, make them with an air of superiority that made it obvious he was not extending himself. He might appear to even be doing it for the laughs.

Laughs! he thought. People will think that's all I'm to be trusted with!

He shrugged. He was on a roving commission, and therefore there was no one to watch his progress. He'd put others to work and loaf.

He snapped the communicator, dialed the Department for official orders, gave his rank and commission, issued a blanket order directed at the commanders at all Terran Posts.

"Compile a cross-indexed list of all Jordan Green markings in your command-posts. The listings must be complete on the following factors: text, writing material, handwriting index and approximate location."

This, he knew, would take time. Perhaps he would be forced to follow up the original order with a more firm request. Weston expected no results immediately.

But the mass of data that came pouring in staggered him. It mounted high, it was complex and uncorrelated. Weston's natural dislike of the project made him lax in his work. He went at it in desultory fashion, which resulted in his getting far behind any schedule. The work continued to pile up and ultimately snowed him under.

He began to hate the sight of his desk as the days went by and avoided it diligently. It was groaning under the pile of paperwork. Instead of using his ability and freedom to dig into the job, Weston used his commission and his rank to enter places formerly forbidden to him.

On the pretense of seeking Jordan Green information, he entered the ultra-secret space laboratory on Luna and watched work on highly restricted technical developments. He was especially interested in the work of adapting Directive Power to the space drive and, because they knew him and of him, the scientists were quite free with information that might have been withheld from any visitor of rank lower than Senior Captain.

This he enjoyed. It was a privilege given to all officers of senior rank, a type of compensation, a relaxation. That he accepted the offer without doing his job was unimportant to Weston. He felt that they owed it to him.

By the time he returned from Luna, he had more data that he merely tossed on the pile—and it was immediately covered by another pile of data that had come in during his absence and was awaiting his return. He decided he was too far behind ever to catch up, and so he loafed in the scanning room, looking at the pile of work with a disconnected view as though it were not his.

His loafing was not affected by the streams of favorable publicity he received. His picture was used occasionally; he was mentioned frequently in commendation. It was well-known that the only casualty from the First Directive Attack was working through his convalescence on the very complex job of uncovering the source of the Jordan Green legend.

But Weston knew just how important his job really was, and he ignored both it and the glowing reports of the newspapers.

Eventually friends caught up with him and demanded that he come along on a party. He tried to wriggle out of it, but they insisted. Their intention of making him enjoy himself was obvious. He viewed them with a certain amount of scorn, though he said nothing about it.

If it gave them pleasure to try to lift him out of his slough of despond he'd not stop them, but he could avoid them and their

silly prattlings. They would not be denied, however, so Al Weston went, reluctantly.

Obviously for his benefit, someone had scrawled *Jordan Green was here!* on the side of the wall in Jeanne Tarbell's home, and as he entered the whole gang was discussing it. They turned to him for an official opinion.

"Most of them were made the way this one was," he said scornfully.

Tony Larkin laughed. He turned to Jeanne.

"You see," he said, "a lot of us had much to do with winning the war. I've—found several—myself."

"Scrawled several," corrected Weston sourly.

"Don't be bitter," said Larkin. "Even though you now outrank me, you shouldn't change from boyish prank to official pomp overnight."

"Maybe you'd like to have as silly a job hung on you," snapped Weston.

"If the commish and the roving order and all went with it—I'd take to it like a duck to water."

"Is that all you're good for?" asked Weston scornfully.

"Look, Al, I'm a plain captain in this man's Space Corps," returned Larkin. "Anytime I want to sweep up the floor in my office I'll do it, see? One—no one can do it better, and two—no one can say that sweeping floors is my top position in life.

"It isn't a loss of dignity to exhibit your skill in ditch-digging or muck-raking. It makes you more human when people know that, despite your gold braid, you aren't afraid to get your hands as dirty as theirs. At least they didn't plant you in the front office because you'd make a mess of working in the machine shop."

"You'd not like to be ordered to a dirty job," snapped Weston.

"If it had to be done and I was told to do it, I'd do it and do it quick. You can take a bath afterwards and wash off the dirt—and be the gainer for knowing how the Other Half lives!"

Weston turned and walked out. Larkin frowned sorrowfully and apologized to Jeanne and the rest. Tom Brandt shrugged.

"We all agree, Tony," he said. "But drumming at him will do no good. He'll have to find himself on his own time."

Jeanne nodded and went out after Weston.

"Al," she said, pleading, "come back and be the man we used to know."

"I can't," he said. He was utterly dejected.

"But you can. It's in you. Apply yourself. So this is a poor job in your estimation. If it is beneath your ability you should be able to do it with one hand."

"You too?" he said bitterly. "I thought you'd see things my way."

"I do, honestly. But, Al, I can't turn back the clock. I can't give you another chance at the Directive thing. You did not fail. No

one thinks you did or they'd not trust you with a high rank and a free commission. You were the victim of sheer chance and none of it was your fault."

"But why did it happen to me?" he cried bitterly. "Why couldn't I have been successful?"

"Someone was bound to get it," she said simply. "You prefer your own skin to someone else's?"

"Wouldn't you—if the chips were down?"

She nodded. "Certainly. But I don't think I'd hate everybody that was successful if I were the unlucky one."

"Then they top it off by giving me this stupid job."

"Maybe you think that unraveling a legend is child's play. Well, Alfred Weston, satisfying the demands or the interest of a few billion people as to the truth of Jordan Green is no small item!

"He who satisfies the public interest is far more admired than a captain of industry or a ruler of people. And if this job is a boy's work why did they send a man to do it, complete with increase in rank and a roving commission?"

"Because Jordan Green was of no importance until they needed a simple job to use in coddling a man they consider a simpleton!" growled Weston.

"And you are the man they selected to join with the Directive Power attack," she said, stepping back and inspecting him carefully. "Well, suppose you complete this simple job first.

Then let's see whether you can accomplish something you consider worthy of your stature."

"You're insulting," he said shortly.

"You wouldn't be able to recognize an insult," she said scornfully. She turned and left the place with tears in her eyes. Tony Larkin intercepted her and dried her eyes.

"It's tough," he told her. "But until he shakes the feeling that Fate is against him he'll be poor company. Eventually everybody will dislike him and then he'll have nothing to do but to go ahead and work.

"Whatever initial success comes will break his interest in himself. He'll go at it in desperation, in hatred perhaps, but he'll emerge with a sense of humor again. Until then, Jeanne, you'll have to sit and suffer with the rest of us."

"But was that Jordan Green job wise?"

"I can think of a thousand officers who would tackle it with shouts of glee," he said. "Lady, what a lark! I'd be giving cryptic statements to the press and having a daisy of a time all over the Solar System.

"Weston is one of us. When he regains his perspective he'll view it the same way—as a lark! Right now, though," he said seriously, "it's best that he stay out of the public eye. I'd hate to have the Space Corps judged by his standards."

"I guess we all feel sorry for him," she said.

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