

SPECIAL DELIVERY

By Kris Neville

Parr came to Earth as the advance guard for an invasion. His mission: to see that every person received a package that was being mailed—

CHAPTER I

A cannonade of shell fire met the silver listening post as it zipped across the moonlit desert. It twisted erratically, trying to dodge. Then a radar controlled gun chuckled to itself, and the listening post faltered in flight, slipped air, plunged sandward.

In the Advanceship, far above and to the west, one of the Knougs pressed a button and the listening post exploded in a white flare.

Afterwards, no fragments could be found. The newspapers said the usual thing. The government issued the usual profession of disbelief—and finally even the gunner became convinced of the usual explanation: he had tried to pot Venus.

While on the Advanceship the Knougs continued to prepare for D-Day.

CHAPTER II

Three days later, on D-Day minus thirty, the Advanceship began to move eastward, seeding down advancements toward strategic centers in North America.

Towns with big post offices.

And then on over the Atlantic toward other continents.

Parr was the first advancement to land. The coat tails of his conservative double breasted suit fluttered gently as he fell; air, streaming by, fretted his hair. Except for the anti-grav pack strapped to his back, he could easily have been mistaken in a more probable setting for an Earthman.

Minutes later his feet touched the ground with scarcely a jolt. He peeled out of the anti-grav pack, pushed the button on its disintegrator time fuse and dropped the pack. He lit a cigar and blew smoke toward the cold bright stars.

He walked from the weedy lot to the nearest bus stop. No one else was waiting. Darkness had concealed his descent. He sat down, stared stolidly at the darkened filling station on the opposite corner.

When he was halfway through the cigar the Los Angeles Red Bus came by and he stood up, boarded it, fumbled in his pocket for change.

"Thirty cents, buddy," the driver said.

Still holding the cigar, Parr counted out two dimes and two nickles. He tried to hand the driver the coins, which were excellent

imitations, as was his suit, his cigar, and all the rest of the Earth articles.

"Put it in the box, buddy."

Parr obeyed.

"Hey," the driver said as Parr turned. "Your check." The driver held out a strip of red paper.

Parr took it.

"No smokin' on the bus, buddy."

Parr dropped the cigar and mashed it out. He shuffled down the aisle, sank into a seat and half closed his eyes.

Furtively, then, he began to study the occupants—his first near-at-hand contact with the natives. At the same time he tried to form a mental liaison with some of the other advancements.

For a moment he thought he had one to the east, but there was a hazy swirl of interdiction that erased all contact.

Abandoning further attempts he tried to search out the frequencies of the minds about him. Once he managed to touch a series of thoughts innocently concerned with household details and with an overtone of mild and nameless anxiety. Aside from that he received nothing except the din of electronic impressions at the extreme lower end of his range.

He half-turned to stare out of the window. The passing landscape was peaceful in starshine and the buildings stood proudly defenseless. In imagination he saw the illuminated, "You'll-take-a-

shine-to-this-fine-wine" sign hanging askew over a backdrop of smoking rubble. And it was delicious to know that this would be fit and proper.

Although the preliminary intelligence report (based on nearly four years of preparatory scouting) contained no instance of Oholo activity on the planet, he listened, high up, on their frequencies, (particularly here, vulnerably near their own system it would be no fun fighting them). He let his shoulders slump with relief, let the smile of satisfaction come. As reported, the frequencies were clear: Earth was, indeed, their blind flank.

He closed his eyes, relaxed completely, took quite a joy in the knowledge that shortly Earth would be the lethal dagger pointed at the heart of the Oholo system.

At the Beverly Hills transfer-for-Hollywood-the-film-capital-of-the-world Station, two drunks boarded the bus and settled in the rear, singing mournfully.

Parr grew increasingly irritated by the delay. When the bus finally started, making the sharp turn from the lot and throwing his body to the right against the steel ledge of the window, he cursed under his breath.

The dismal singing went on. It picked up telepathic overtones, and Parr gritted his teeth trying to block out the bubbling confusion that scattered from the drunken brain. He opened and closed his fists. Anger flared at him: the anger of impotence. For a moment, he dared to imagine the planet contaminated, the population quietly dead, the Knougs working from sheath hangers. Only for a second; but the brief thought was satisfying, even as he forced himself to agree with the strategy of the War Committee: which was to leave

the planet as nearly unpoisoned as possible by even a minor land war.

Finally the song bubbled to silence. Half an hour later the bus turned on Olive Street and the gloomy Los Angeles buildings hovered at the sidewalks. It pulled in at the Olive Street entrance of the Hill Street Terminal and Parr got out.

He walked out of the lot and started downhill toward the Biltmore Hotel.

When Parr awoke he knew that something had been added to Los Angeles during the night. He shivered involuntarily and tightened his thoughts down to the place where no fuzzy, side harmonics were possible.

He was afraid—the startled afraidness of finding something deadly underfoot. Gradually he made his body relax; gradually he quieted his twin hearts; gradually he corralled his breathing. Then he let out a wisp of thought as tenuous as mist.

And he sensed the Oholo's mind again. Very near to his own. He closed his mind quickly, waited breathlessly to see if the Oholo had detected him. His ears hummed with danger for he was within mental assault range.

There was no answering probe and after a moment he got up cautiously.

Feeling the rug beneath his bare feet made him wince with a blind associational terror which he could not immediately analyze. Then, looking down, he thought of the tickle of Tarro fur. He half

expected to see the dark stains on the rug too. Always, on Tarro fur—remembering—there were those stains. They had been a difficult people to rule. As *agent provocateur*, (that had been several years ago on Quelta) he had reason to expect blood.

He crossed to the trousers, neatly folded over a chair. In the left front pocket was the comset. He fumbled it out and standing naked in the gloomy dawn, whispered: "Parr. There is an Oholo in my hotel."

After a pause the comset issued the tinny question: "Is he aware of you?" The voice filtering through the small diaphragm was without personality.

"I don't think so."

There was silence. Then: "Is he open?"

"I think ... he is, yes."

"Find out for sure!"

The comset was cold in Parr's hand. He stood shivering. He rubbed his left hand over his naked flank.

He tried to kill his thoughts against the command from the Advancement, tried to let the drilled-in obedience take over. He opened the receptive portion of his mind as far as it would go, knowing that within seconds seepage would be as loud as thunder because he was not adept at double concentration. But even before one second had gone he snapped his mind closed again.

The Oholo was open.

"Parr," he whispered hoarsely into the comset. "He's open."

"... He can't know we're here, then. What did you learn?"

Parr mopped his forehead with the back of his hairy arm. "I just kept receptive a second."

"Keep checking, then."

Parr let the comset fall to the chair. He walked to the window and looked out at the haze-bound city. Early sunlight fought blue smog. Across the street the Pershing Square pigeons waddled self-consciously about on the grass beside the new fountain, picking at invisible tidbits and cooing.

Parr rubbed his throat trying to massage away the inner tenseness. He was alone against the Oholo. An aloneness that he had not been prepared for. And he worried at the fear that was inside him.

He dressed with awkward fingers and left the room, his eyes darting suspiciously along the corridor as he drew the door closed behind him.

He walked quickly down the carpeted stairs and through the front doors of the hotel. Several times he glanced over his shoulder as he hurried toward Sixth Street.

After four blocks he was sure that he had not been followed. He entered a restaurant. He ordered, reading from the menu.

He did not enjoy the meal.

After eating he took a cab to the office of R. O. "Bob" Lucas, Realtor. The Advancement had determined that Lucas was the agent for an empty warehouse on Flower Street.

Parr exposed a bulky wallet for Lucas' benefit and began to rustle bills with blunt, stubby fingers. Within minutes he had signed a six-month lease.

After making an appointment for three o'clock Tuesday at the warehouse, Parr left Lucas' office and caught a cab to a typewriter shop. He purchased a Smith-Corona portable, a ream of corrugated paper, a disk eraser, and five hundred business envelopes. At the bookstore next door, he bought a United States Atlas.

After that he took a cab to the post office, had the driver wait while he rented six postal boxes under the name A. Parr and bought twenty sheets of air mail stamps.

In the cab once more, he concentrated on the city map that had been impressed electronically on his brain. "Drive out Sixth Street," he ordered, being very careful of his enunciation.

A half dozen blocks out Sixth, Parr located a hotel on the right side of the street. It was a reasonably safe distance from the Biltmore. He ordered the driver to stop.

The building sat atop a hill, the street before it twining briskly toward the center of town. Parr studied the building for a moment, memorizing details of architecture for reference.

Then settled with his purchases in a front room on the 3rd floor, Parr opened the Atlas to the Western United States and marked out the territory assigned to him with the heavy ink lines of his pen.

Having done that, he listed all the names of the included towns.

Then he sat down at the portable, inserted a sheet of paper and wrote:

"To the Chamber of Commerce, Azusa, California. Gentlemen: Please send me the current city directory." He looked at the postal numbers. "My mailing address is ..." He typed in the first number on the list. "... Los Angeles, California. Inclosed is five dollars to defray the costs. Thanking you in advance, A. Parr."

He studied the letter. It was a competent job of typing. He flexed his fingers, found them slightly stiff from the unaccustomed work.

He ran his eyes down the list of towns, inserted another sheet of paper.

"To the Chamber of Commerce...."

He stopped typing.

He sat before the typewriter imagining the number of directories, imagining the staggering total of individual names.

He thought of the Advanceship and its baffling array of machines that would automatically scan the directories and print a mailing label for each of the names. He thought of the vast number of parcels waiting to be labeled, as many as fuel requirements permitted the Ship to carry. And of the even vaster number that the synthesizer was adding out of the native resources. The smooth efficiency of the Advanceship, the split second timing of the whole operation.... And all of it auxiliary timing to the main effort. Even with superior weapons, even with complete surprise, the Knougs

were taking no chances. The job of the Advanceship, the job of Parr, was to demoralize the whole planet just before the invasion. To insure an already certain victory.

He turned back to the typewriter, wrote a few more words.

There was still the awareness of the enemy Oholo in the back of his mind.

He split the list of cities into six equal groups for box numbering.

Several hours later another tenant complained about the noise of the typewriter. Parr gave the clerk fifty dollars and continued to type.

CHAPTER III

Parr spent the morning of Tuesday, D-Day minus 28, in his hotel room, reliving what seemed now to be the extremely narrow escape of the previous morning. He imagined what he *might* have done: assaulted the Oholo mentally, or struck him down with the focus pistol when he tried to leave the hotel. And having imagined the situations he proceeded to explain to himself why, instead, he had fled.

At eleven o'clock, by prior arrangement, he reported to the Ship and from it received the reassuring information that the now alerted advancemen had been able to find no other Oholo.

At noon he went out to eat and then for an hour walked the streets, studying the people and their city. Most particularly he listened for accent, intonation. He was afraid to drop his mind shield to try for telepathic contact with them.

A few minutes before three o'clock in the afternoon his cab drew up to the warehouse. The air was hot and sour smelling and Parr was restless. The realtor was waiting for him on the sidewalk. Parr nodded curtly. The man bent clumsily and rattled keys at the lock.

"Here it is," Lucas said.

Parr walked into the warehouse.

It was an old building. Perhaps shabbier, dustier than he had expected. The air was stale and faintly chilly with decay. Remnants of packing crates, wrapping paper, labels and twine had been heaped in a greasy pile in a far corner.

Parr sniffed suspiciously as his eyes darted around the room.

Across from him, above the rubbish, an electric box indicated that the building had at one time been industrialized at least to the extent of a few heavy power tools.

Parr walked to the stairway.

"I'll want someone to clean this mess up," he said curtly.

"Yes, sir," the realtor said.

"Tomorrow," Parr said.

"All right," the realtor said, consciously omitting the "Sir" as if to reassert his own individuality.

Parr glanced at him. "I'll send you sufficient money to cover the fee." Without waiting for an answer, he started up the stairway.

The upper two floors were in much the same condition as the first. From the third there was a narrow flight of steps slanting to the roof. Parr eyed it with disapproval.

"Narrow," he said.

"There's seldom any reason to go up there ... sir."

Parr went up. At the top of the flight, he forced back the door and clambered into the shed which opened onto the roof. Parr dusted his knees. He stepped outside, and the gravelly finish grated under his shoes. The air smelled of warmed-over tar.

He tugged restlessly at his chin. It was a good, substantial roof. As the listening post had reported. Good enough for pick-up and delivery. He permitted himself a glimmer of satisfaction.

He heard movement behind him. Instinctively he whirled around, his hand dipping toward his right coat pocket, the memory of the Oholo—the vision of a composite Oholo face surprisingly like an Earth face—flashed across his mind. The realtor's head bobbed into view, and Parr relaxed his tense muscles.

"How is it up to here?"

Parr rumbled an annoyed and indistinct answer and turned once more to the roof. When the realtor stood at his side, Parr said, "I want that shed thing ripped off and a chute installed, next to the stairs. Have it done tomorrow."

"I'm ..." the realtor began. But he looked at Parr's face and licked his lips nervously. "Yes, sir;" he said after a moment. "Anything I can do. Glad to oblige."

"That's what I thought," Parr said, and Lucas shifted uneasily.

Parr turned to the stairs. Going down he could see dust motes flicker in the fading light at the dirty west windows.

Outside he watched the realtor lock the doors.

"Keep the keys," Parr said. "Send them to me at the Saint Paul Thursday morning. At eight o'clock."

The realtor said, "... Yes, sir."

At six o'clock Parr was in his hotel, undressed, making preliminary arrangements by telephone to hire a fleet of trucks. He had already placed an advertisement for shipping clerks and common laborers in *The Times*: interviews Thursday from ten to four at the Flower Street warehouse.

After finishing with the truckers, he phoned four furniture companies before he found one open. He ordered it to deliver a desk and two dozen folding chairs to the Flower Street warehouse Thursday morning at nine-thirty.

All the while the Oholo was in the back of his mind, now sharp with sudden memory, now dull with continued awareness.

He checked the schedule the Ship had given him.

He took the comset, flicked it on. "Parr. I'm scheduling. I'll need a packet of money along with the dummy bundle. Can you deliver them both to the warehouse tomorrow night?"

"We can."

"Good," Parr said, swallowing, and there was perspiration on his upper lip.

"Have you contacted the Oholo again?"

He felt his blood spurt. "Not yet," he said.

He waited.

Then: "Think you can handle him mentally?"

Parr glanced at the mirror, saw how taut his reflection was.

"I'm not very sure," he said.

"Well, physically, then?"

Parr let out his breath slowly. "I don't know."

"Try. Either way. Get rid of him. An Oholo could cause the invasion trouble."

Parr plucked nervously at his leg. "If I'm not able to?"

The comset was silent for a moment. Then the impersonal voice said, "If you are killed in the attempt, we will replace you." It paused for a reply. Receiving none it continued: "Get what information you can, even at the risk of exposure. It's too late now for them to mount a defense, and they probably have no way to alert the natives. We want to know what he's doing there, and if there are any more on the planet."

"All right," Parr said, and he realized, gratefully, that, to the Ship, his voice would sound emotionless.

He dropped the comset. His hand was shaking.

Not so damned good. How to kill the Oholo?

He tried to steady his nerves by remembering other planets, other times. He had faced danger before, and he was still alive. Except that before the danger had never been an Oholo. He had been Occupation, not Combat. He remembered the few captured Oholos he had seen. They died slowly when they wanted to be stubborn.

Finally he crossed to the bed and stretched out naked, relaxing slowly, knowing that the time had come to get what information he could. Muscle by muscle he began to go limp.

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