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***Beyond
All
Weapons***

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Beyond All Weapons

THE revolt was over and the firing parties had begun. In a single day in Under Washington, three thousand rebels were executed and twelve thousand more condemned to life imprisonment in the camps. And the *Bellerophon* hung fifteen thousand miles out of reach, caught between death by starvation and swifter death by surrender.

She was the last of the rebel ships, the *Bellerophon*. Sent by Admiral Correlli during the last hours of the action to the relief of an isolated community on Mars, she had escaped the debacle which had overtaken all her sister ships in contest with Earth.

The revolt was ill begun and worse ended. But the cause had been bright and the emergency large, and Mars, long-suffering colony of an arbitrary and aged Earth, had at last, as the dying bulldog seeks to take one final grip on the throat of his foe, revolted against Mother Earth.

But there was little sense in recounting those woes now, as Captain Guide well knew. The taxes and embargoes had all but murdered Mars before the revolt had begun. The savage bombardment of the combined navies of Earth had left an expanse of wasted tillage and shattered towns and the colonists had been all but annihilated.

Like her sisters, the *Bellerophon* was a converted

merchantman. Any resemblance she bore to a naval spaceship was resident only in the minds of her officers and crew. Plying her trade from Cap City to Denverchicago, she had suffered much from being colonial-built. The inspectors on Earth had inspected her twice as often as regulations demanded and found ten times as much fault. And because she was colonial, her duties, enforced by irksome searches and even crew seizures for the Earth Navy, had all but bankrupted Smiley Smith and the line's directors—not that that mattered now, for the company and all its people were dead in the wreck which had been the finest city in the colonies.

“I won't surrender!” said Georges Micard, first mate. “Not while I've got a gun to fire! It's their holiday. Let's give them a few blazing cities to celebrate by!”

Guide, cool, austere, had looked at his mate in silence for a while. He said, “Your plan is not without merit, Georges. We have suffered beyond endurance and our comrades have died gallantly. And a few blazing cities would be much in order were it not for one thing: the barrier.”

Georges, optimistic, very young, was apt to forget practical details. The reason Earth had won had been the barrier. So well had the secret been kept that when the colonial fleet had attacked, every missile they had launched at the queen cities of their mother planet had exploded a thousand miles out from target. There was an invisible barrier there, a screen, an electronic ceiling. And Mars, new-formed, braver than she was sensible, had found herself unable to retaliate for the thunder of missiles which had wrenched her cities from their foundations and laid them into dust.

“All right,” said Georges, glancing around the wardroom at the other officers. “We’ll sit up here until the cruisers come get us and then we’ll vanish in a puff of atoms.”

“They won’t come,” said Carteret. “They know we are here, but they’ll wait for us to starve. They have every spaceport on Mars and Venus. We’re done.”

Gloom deepened in the room. Then Albert Firth, their political adviser, an intense-eyed Scot, honed keen in the chill clime of New Iceland, Mars, leaned forward.

“You interested me, Captain, when you spoke today of the drives for which our fleet should have waited. Exactly what were those drives, sir?”

Guide looked at him with understanding. It was time to speak. These people had depleted their own stores of ideas. Hundreds of thousands of colonists were dead, and as fast as the orders for execution could be issued, thousands more were dying. These men would not cavil at thin chances.

“I have had, for some time, a plan,” he said.

Eyes whipped to him. They knew Guide. Bilged out of the Space Academy at fourteen for one too many duels, raised by the lawless camps of the southern cap on Mars, cast off by his family, but infinitely esteemed by his comrades and former employers, Firstin Guide was a man to whom one paid attention.

“I think they ought to be whipped,” he said quietly.

In more optimistic times, that had been a common opinion on Mars. Since the triarchy of the Polar State had destroyed all free government, the thoughts of less disciplined peoples had run in that vein. Martian colonists were, more lately,

refugees from the insensate cruelties and caprices of the Polar regime. And they had all thought that the “snow devils”—that strange race who had managed to adapt their metabolism to the blood-chilling climate of the North Pole, and who in half a century had made their unexploited realm the prime power of Earth—ought to be whipped. But here, in a ship almost out of food, low on ammunition, with half her fuel gone and her cause already lost, those words drew a quick intake of breath from all. But they knew Firstin Guide. He would not speak idly.

“At Spencerport,” he began, “a technician named Jones perfected, about five years ago, an extra-velocity fuel. You all know of that. It burns too fast and has too much thrust for anything but spurt space racing.”

“I know the fuel,” said Albert. “But Spencerport was wiped out.”

“So it was. But it happens that I was loaded with EV fuel for transport to Earth when I was mobilized. I landed that cargo when I landed my merchant crew and took aboard you gentlemen of the Naval Volunteers. That fuel is cached at Rangerhaven. I was not raised to trust the expected to happen, gentlemen. I put it in a vault.”

“But what has this to do with us?” said Georges. “Sure, we can risk a landing at Rangerhaven, that’s ninety leagues south of nowhere, the most godforsaken spot on Mars. But of what value could this fuel be—?”

“Gentlemen, there have been several attempts for the stars.”

They stared at Guide, unwinking, at once stunned and

elated. And then Firth relaxed. “No use, sir. Ships have gone. But ships don’t come back. That’s been a closed book, Captain.”

“If you have closed a book recently, Mr. Firth, you doubtless noticed that it could be opened again.”

They were restless then. They wanted to believe they had a chance. They could imagine they heard the firing parties at Under Washington. And they had been on half rations for a week.

Guide looked coolly at them. He had judged his moment rightly. “I picked up a technician from the prisoners we took at Americaville. A very well-educated young Eskimo.”

They recalled this, and they also recalled Guide’s insistence that they sort out the garrison before they executed the Earth infantry.

“He is down in the brig,” said Guide. And he sat back to give them his final stroke, casually, almost bored. “He knows the formulae of the barricade.”

When he saw how deeply this shaft had sunk, he followed it. “And with those formulae a single vessel could penetrate it and, with her drives alone, lay waste the central Polar cities. That done, the restoration of free government on Earth would be very simple. All that is necessary is that we take all we can in the way of technology and personnel, lay a course for the stars—Alpha Centauri first—and locate a habitable planet. That they exist is unquestionable. There we set up a colony, build our barrier-breaker and return to Earth as a combat ship to ruin Polar domination.”

He lighted a small cigar to make it all seem simple. “I think,” he said, “that they should be whipped.”

His attitude, his casualness, drove away the terrible question marks posed by the plan. Ships had gone, using EV fuel. Ships had not come back. Theoretically it was impossible to travel to the stars, but theory is a cold thing and subject to much reversal. Theoretically a ship blew up when it tried to break the “wall of light.” But there had been many another theory which, in practice, had proven wrong.

They were none of them mathematicians. They were what they called practical men. All but Firth had grown up in space travel around the Sun. The heartbeat of Mars was Earth commerce and it had been to preserve that commerce that they had fought. Therefore a stellar voyage was only an extension of what they already knew.

“I have no instruments for measuring speed nor even for navigation to the stars,” said Guide. “I have no idea whether we can ‘break the wall.’ I know no more than you what lies out there en route to Alpha Centauri. But I know what lies before us here—a firing party for ourselves and the end of freedom in this system forever. I think,” he added, after a slow puff at his cigar, “that an unknown and even dangerous adventure is preferable to a sordid certainty. Your votes?”

There was no standing out against this chance. They gave him their “ayes” right gladly and began to quiver with hope as they stabbed outward for Mars and Rangerhaven.

Going up in a puff of pure energy was better any day than going down before the grinning pleasure of a Polar firing squad.