



Isaac Asimov

Second Foundation

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Asimov I.

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WINNER OF THE HUGO AWARD FOR BEST ALL-TIME SERIESThe Foundation series is Isaac Asimov's iconic masterpiece. Unfolding against the backdrop of a crumbling Galactic Empire, the story of Hari Seldon's two Foundations is a lasting testament to an extraordinary imagination, one whose unprecedented scale shaped science fiction as we know it today. The First Foundation has been defeated, crushed by the formidable mental powers of the Mule. But whispers of the mysterious Second Foundation, the only hope of defeating the Mule, are beginning to spread... Surviving members of the First Foundation also fear the secret powers of the Second Foundation, vowing to find and destroy it. However, the location of the Second Foundation remains shrouded in mystery. Finding it will lead the Foundation to the opposite end of the Galaxy, where the fate of Seldon's two Foundations awaits.

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ISAAC ASIMOV

Second Foundation



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Harper *Voyager*

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Digit (Brown, Watson) 1958

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Source ISBN: 9780008117511

Ebook Edition © March 2018 ISBN: 9780007384853

Version: 2018-09-20

Dedication

to Marcia, John and Stan

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Prologue

The First Galactic Empire had endured for tens of thousands of years. It had included all the planets of the Galaxy in a centralized rule, sometimes tyrannical, sometimes benevolent, always orderly. Human beings had forgotten that any other form of existence could be.

All except Hari Seldon.

Hari Seldon was the last great scientist of the First Empire. It was he who brought the science of psycho-history to its full development. Psycho-history was the quintessence of sociology; it was the science of human behaviour reduced to mathematical equations.

The individual human being is unpredictable, but the reactions of human mobs, Seldon found, could be treated statistically. The larger the mob, the greater the accuracy that could be achieved. And the size of the human masses that Seldon worked with was no less than the population of the Galaxy which in his time was numbered in the quintillions.

It was Seldon, then, who foresaw, against all common sense and popular belief, that the brilliant Empire which seemed so strong was in a state of irremediable decay and decline. He foresaw (or he solved his equations and interpreted its symbols, which amounts to the same thing) that left to itself, the Galaxy would pass through a thirty thousand year period of misery and anarchy before a unified government would rise once more.

He set about to remedy the situation, to bring about a state of affairs that would restore peace and civilization in a single thousand of years. Carefully, he set up two colonies of scientists that he called 'Foundations.' With deliberate intention, he set them up 'at opposite ends of the Galaxy.' One Foundation was set up in the full daylight of publicity. The existence of the other, the Second Foundation, was drowned in silence.

In *Foundation* (Gnome, 1951) and *Foundation and Empire* (Gnome, 1952) are told the first three centuries of the history of the First Foundation. It began as a small community of Encyclopedists lost in the emptiness of the outer periphery of the Galaxy. Periodically, it faced a crisis in which the variables of human intercourse, of the social and economic currents of the time constricted about it. Its freedom to move lay along only one certain line and when it moved in that direction, a new horizon of development opened before it. All had been planned by Hari Seldon, long dead now.

The First Foundation, with its superior science, took over the barbarized planets that surrounded it. It faced the anarchic Warlords that broke away from the dying Empire and beat them. It faced the remnant of the Empire itself under its last strong Emperor and its last strong General and beat it.

Then it faced something which Hari Seldon could not foresee, the overwhelming power of a single human being, a Mutant. The creature known as the Mule was born with the ability to mould men's emotions and to shape their minds. His bitterest opponents were made into his devoted servants. Armies could not, *would* not fight him. Before him, the First Foundation fell and Seldon's schemes lay partly in ruins.

There was left the mysterious Second Foundation, the goal of all searches. The Mule must find it to make his conquest of the Galaxy complete. The faithful of what was left of the First Foundation must find it for quite another reason. But where was it? That no one knew.

This, then, is the story of the search for the Second Foundation!

Part I

1

Two Men And The Mule

THE MULE *It was after the fall of the First Foundation that the constructive aspects of the Mule's regime took shape. After the definite break-up of the first Galactic Empire, it was he who first presented history with a unified volume of space truly imperial in scope. The earlier commercial empire of the fallen Foundation had been diverse and loosely knit, despite the impalpable backing of the predictions of psycho-history. It was not to be compared with the tightly controlled 'Union of Worlds' under the Mule, comprising as it did, one-tenth the volume of the Galaxy and one-fifteenth of its population. Particularly during the era of the so-called Search ...*

ENCYCLOPEDIA GALACTICA ¹

There is much more that the Encyclopedia has to say on the subject of the Mule and his Empire but almost all of it is not germane to the issue at immediate hand, and most of it is considerably too dry for our purposes in any case. Mainly, the article concerns itself at this point with the economic conditions that led to the rise of the 'First Citizen of the Union' – the Mule's official title – and with the economic consequences thereof.

If, at any time, the writer of the article is mildly astonished at the colossal haste with which the Mule rose from nothing to vast dominion in five years, he conceals it. If he is further surprised at the sudden cessation of expansion in favour of a five-year consolidation of territory, he hides the fact.

We therefore abandon the Encyclopedia and continue on our own path for our own purposes and take up the history of the Great Interregnum – between the first and Second Galactic Empires – at the end of that five years of consolidation.

Politically, the Union is quiet. Economically, it is prosperous. Few would care to exchange the peace of the Mule's steady grip for the chaos that had preceded. On the worlds that five years previously had known the Foundation, there might be a nostalgic regret, but no more. The Foundation's leaders were dead, where useless; and Converted, where useful.

And of the Converted, the most useful was Han Pritcher, now lieutenant general.

In the days of the Foundation, Han Pritcher had been a captain and a member of the underground Democratic Opposition. When the Foundation fell to the Mule without a fight, Pritcher fought the Mule. Until, that is, he was Converted.

The Conversion was not the ordinary one brought on by the power of superior reason. Han Pritcher knew that well enough. He had been changed because the Mule was a mutant with mental powers quite capable of adjusting the conditions of ordinary humans to suit himself. But that satisfied him completely. That was as it should be. The very contentment with the Conversion was a prime symptom of it, but Han Pritcher was no longer even curious about the matter.

And now that he was returning from his fifth major expedition into the boundlessness of the Galaxy outside the Union, it was with something approaching artless joy that the veteran spaceman and Intelligence agent considered his approaching audience with the 'First Citizen.' His hard face, gouged out of a dark, grainless wood that did not seem to be capable of smiling without cracking, didn't show it – but the outward indications were unnecessary. The Mule could see the emotions within, down to the smallest, much as an ordinary man could see the twitch of an eyebrow.

Pritcher left his air car at the old vice-regal hangars and entered the palace grounds on foot as was required. He walked one mile along the arrowed highway – which was empty and silent. Pritcher knew that over the square miles of palace grounds, there was not one guard, not one soldier, not one armed man.

The Mule had need of no protection.

The Mule was his own best, all-powerful protector.

Pritcher's footsteps beat softly in his own ears, as the palace reared its gleaming, incredibly light and incredibly strong metallic walls before him in the daring, overblown, near-hectic arches that characterized the architecture of the Late Empire. It brooded strongly over the empty grounds, over the crowded city on the horizon.

Within the palace was that one man – by himself – on whose inhuman mental attributes depended the new aristocracy, and the whole structure of the Union.

The huge, smooth door swung massively open at the general's approach, and he entered. He stepped on to the wide, sweeping ramp that moved upward under him. He rose swiftly in the noiseless elevator. He stood before the small plain door of the Mule's own room in the highest glitter of the palace spires.

It opened—

Bail Channis was young, and Bail Channis was Unconverted. That is, in plainer language, his emotional make-up had been unadjusted by the Mule. It remained exactly as it had been formed by the original shape of its heredity and the subsequent modifications of his environment. And that satisfied him, too.

At not quite thirty, he was in marvellously good odour in the capital. He was handsome and quick-witted – therefore successful in society. He was intelligent and self-possessed – therefore successful with the Mule. And he was thoroughly pleased at both successes.

And now, for the first time, the Mule had summoned him to personal audience.

His legs carried him down the long, glittering highway that led tautly to the sponge-aluminium spires that had been once the residence of the viceroy of Kalgan, who ruled under the old emperors; and that had been later the residence of the independent princes of Kalgan, who ruled in their own name, and that was now the residence of the First Citizen of the Union, who ruled over an empire of his own.

Channis hummed softly to himself. He did not doubt what this was all about. The Second Foundation, naturally! That all-embracing bogey, the mere consideration of which had thrown the Mule back from his policy of limitless expansion into static caution. The official term was 'consolidation.'

Now there were rumours – you couldn't stop rumours. The Mule was to begin the offensive once more. The Mule had discovered the whereabouts of the Second Foundation, and would attack. The Mule had come to an agreement with the Second Foundation and divided the Galaxy. The Mule had decided the Second Foundation did not exist and would take over all the Galaxy.

No use listing all the varieties one heard in the anterooms. It was not even the first time such rumours had circulated. But now they seemed to have more body in them, and all the free, expansive souls who thrived on war, military adventure, and political chaos and withered in times of stability and stagnant peace were joyful.

Bail Channis was one of these. He did not fear the mysterious Second Foundation. For that matter, he did not fear the Mule, and boasted of it. Some, perhaps, who disapproved of one at once so young and so well-off, waited darkly for the reckoning with the gay ladies' man who employed his wit openly at the expense of the Mule's physical appearance and sequestered life. None dared join him and few dared laugh, but when nothing happened to him, his reputation rose accordingly.

Channis was improvising words to the tune he was humming. Nonsense words with the recurrent refrain: 'Second Foundation threatens the Nation and all of Creation.'

He was at the palace.

The huge, smooth door swung massively open at his approach and he entered. He stepped on to the wide, sweeping ramp that moved upward under him. He rose swiftly in the noiseless elevator. He stood before the small plain door of the Mule's own room in the highest glitter of the palace spires.

It opened—

The man who had no name other than the Mule, and no title other than First Citizen looked out through the one-way transparency of the wall to the light and lofty city on the horizon.

In the darkening twilight, the stars were emerging, and not one but owed allegiance to him.

He smiled with fleeting bitterness at the thought. The allegiance they owed was to a personality few had ever seen.

He was not a man to look at, the Mule – not a man to look at without derision. Not more than one hundred and twenty pounds was stretched out into his five-foot-eight length. His limbs were bony stalks that jutted out of his scrawniness in graceless angularity. And his thin face was nearly drowned out in the prominence of a fleshy beak that thrust three inches outward.

Only his eyes played false with the general farce that was the Mule. In their softness – a strange softness for the Galaxy's greatest conqueror – sadness was never entirely subdued.

In the city was to be found all the gaiety of a luxurious capital on a luxurious world. He might have established his capital on the Foundation, the strongest of his now-conquered enemies, but it was far out on the very rim of the Galaxy. Kalgan, more centrally located, with a long tradition as aristocracy's playground, suited him better – strategically.

But in its traditional gaiety, enhanced by unheard-of prosperity, he found no peace.

They feared him and obeyed him and, perhaps, even respected him – from a goodly distance. But who could look at him without contempt? Only those he had Converted. And of what value was their artificial loyalty? It lacked flavour. He might have adopted titles, and enforced ritual and invented elaborations, but even that would have changed nothing. Better – or at least, no worse – to be simply the First Citizen – and to hide himself.

There was a sudden surge of rebellion within him – strong and brutal. Not a portion of the Galaxy must be denied him. For five years he had remained silent and buried here on Kalgan because of the eternal, misty, space-ridden menace of the unseen, unheard, unknown Second Foundation. He was thirty-two. Not old – but he felt old. His body, whatever its mutant mental powers, was physically weak.

Every star! Every star he could see – and every star he couldn't see. It must all be his!

Revenge on all. On a humanity of which he wasn't a part. On a Galaxy in which he didn't fit.

The cool, overhead warning light flickered. He could follow the progress of the man who had entered the palace, and simultaneously, as though his mutant sense had been enhanced and sensitized in the lonely twilight, he felt the wash of emotional content touch the fibres of his brain.

He recognized the identity without an effort. It was Pritcher.

Captain Pritcher of the one-time Foundation. The Captain Pritcher who had been ignored and passed over by the bureaucrats of that decaying government. The Captain Pritcher whose job as petty spy he had wiped out and whom he had lifted from its slime. The Captain Pritcher whom he had made first colonel and then general; whose scope of activity he had made Galaxy-wide.

The now-General Pritcher who was, iron rebel though he began, completely loyal. And yet with all that, not loyal because of benefits gained, not loyal out of gratitude, not loyal as a fair return – but loyal only through the artifice of Conversion.

The Mule was conscious of that strong unalterable surface layer of loyalty and love that coloured every swirl and eddy of the emotionality of Han Pritcher – the layer he had himself implanted five years before. Far underneath there were the original traces of stubborn individuality, impatience of rule, idealism – but even he, himself, could scarcely detect them any longer.

The door behind him opened, and he turned. The transparency of the wall faded to opacity, and the purple evening light gave way to the whitely blazing glow of atomic power.

Han Pritcher took the seat indicated. There was neither bowing, nor kneeling nor the use of honorifics in private audiences with the Mule. The Mule was merely 'First Citizen.' He was addressed as 'sir.' You sat in his presence, and you could turn your back on him if it so happened that you did.

To Han Pritcher this was all evidence of the sure and confident power of the man. He was warmly satisfied with it.

The Mule said: 'Your final report reached me yesterday. I can't deny that I find it somewhat depressing, Pritcher.'

The general's eyebrows closed upon each other: 'Yes, I imagine so – but I don't see to what other conclusions I could have come. There just isn't any Second Foundation, sir.'

And the Mule considered and then slowly shook his head, as he had done many a time before: 'There's the evidence of Ebling Mis. There is always the evidence of Ebling Mis.'

It was not a new story. Pritcher said without qualification: 'Mis may have been the greatest psychologist of the Foundation, but he was a baby compared to Hari Seldon. At the time he was investigating Seldon's works, he was under the artificial stimulation of your own brain control. You may have pushed him too far. He might have been wrong. Sir, he *must* have been wrong.'

The Mule sighed, his lugubrious face thrust forward on its thin stalk of a neck. 'If only he had lived another minute. He was on the point of telling me where the Second Foundation was. He *knew*, I'm telling you. I need not have retreated. I need not have waited and waited. So much time lost. Five years gone for nothing.'

Pritcher could not have been censorious over the weak longing of his ruler; his controlled mental make-up forbade that. He was disturbed instead; vaguely uneasy. He said: 'But what alternative explanation can there possibly be, sir? Five times I've gone out. You yourself have plotted the routes. And I've left no asteroid unturned. It was three hundred years ago – that Hari Seldon of the old Empire supposedly established two Foundations to act as nuclei of a new Empire to replace the dying old one. One hundred years after Seldon, the First Foundation – the one we know so well – was known through all the Periphery. One hundred fifty years after Seldon – at the time of the last battle with the old Empire – it was known throughout the Galaxy. And now it's three hundred years – and where should this mysterious Second be? In no eddy of the Galactic stream has it been heard of.'

'Ebling Mis said it kept itself secret. Only secrecy can turn its weakness to strength.'

'Secrecy as deep as this is past possibility without nonexistence as well.'

The Mule looked up, large eyes sharp and wary. 'No. It *does* exist.' A bony finger pointed sharply. 'There is going to be a slight change in tactics.'

Pritcher frowned. 'You plan to leave yourself? I would scarcely advise it.'

'No, of course not. You will have to go out once again – one last time. But with another in joint command.'

There was a silence, and Pritcher's voice was hard, 'Who, sir?'

'There's a young man here in Kalgan. Bail Channis.'

'I've never heard of him, sir.'

'No, I imagine not. But he's got an agile mind, he's ambitious – and he's *not* Converted.'

Pritcher's long jaw trembled for a bare instant, 'I fail to see the advantage in that.'

'There is one, Pritcher. You're a resourceful and experienced man. You have given me good service. But you are Converted. Your motivation is simply an enforced and helpless loyalty to myself. When you lost your native motivations, you lost something, some subtle drive, that I cannot possibly replace.'

'I don't feel that, sir,' said Pritcher, grimly. 'I recall myself quite well as I was in the days when I was an enemy of yours. I feel none the inferior.'

'Naturally not,' and the Mule's mouth twitched into a smile. 'Your judgement in this matter is scarcely objective. This Channis, now, is ambitious – for himself. He is completely trustworthy – out of no loyalty but to himself. He knows that it is on my coat-tails that he rides and he would do anything to increase my power that the ride might be long and far and that the destination might be glorious. If he goes with you, there is just that added push behind *his* seeking – that push for himself.'

‘Then,’ said Pritcher, still insistent, ‘why not remove my own Conversion, if you think that will improve me. I can scarcely be mistrusted, now.’

‘That never, Pritcher. While you are within arm’s reach, or blaster reach, of myself, you will remain firmly held in Conversion. If I were to release you this minute, I would be dead the next.’

The general’s nostrils flared. ‘I am hurt that you should think so.’

‘I don’t mean to hurt you, but it is impossible for you to realize what your feelings would be if free to form themselves along the lines of your natural motivation. The human mind resents control. The ordinary human hypnotist cannot hypnotize a person against his will for that reason. I can, because I’m not a hypnotist, and, believe me, Pritcher, the resentment that you cannot show and do not even know you possess is something I wouldn’t want to face.’

Pritcher’s head bowed. Futility wrenched him and left him grey and haggard inside. He said with an effort: ‘But how can you trust this man. I mean, completely – as you can trust me in my Conversion.’

‘Well, I suppose I can’t entirely. That is why you must go with him. You see, Pritcher,’ and the Mule buried himself in the large armchair against the soft back of which he looked like an angularly animated toothpick, ‘if he *should* stumble on the Second Foundation – if it *should* occur to him that an arrangement with them might be more profitable than with me – You understand?’

A profoundly satisfied light blazed in Pritcher’s eyes. ‘That is better, sir.’

‘Exactly. But remember, he must have a free rein as far as possible.’

‘Certainly.’

‘And ... uh ... Pritcher. The young man is handsome, pleasant, and extremely charming. Don’t let him fool you. He’s a dangerous and unscrupulous character. Don’t get in his way unless you’re prepared to meet him properly. That’s all.’

The Mule was alone again. He let the lights die and the wall before him kicked to transparency again. The sky was purple now, and the city was a smudge of light on the horizon.

What was it all for? And if he *were* the master of all there was what then? Would it really stop men like Pritcher from being straight and tall, self-confident, strong? Would Bail Channis lose his looks? Would he himself be other than he was?

He cursed his doubts. What was he really after?

The cool, overhead warning light flickered. He could follow the progress of the man who had entered the palace and, almost against his will, he felt the soft wash of emotional content touch the fibres of his brain.

He recognized the identity without an effort. It was Channis. Here the Mule saw no uniformity, but the primitive diversity of a strong mind, untouched and unmoulded except by the manifold disorganizations of the Universe. It writhed in floods and waves. There was caution on the surface, a thin, smoothing effect, but with touches of cynical ribaldry in the hidden eddies of it. And underneath there was the strong flow of self-interest and self-love, with a gush of cruel humour here and there, and a deep, still pool of ambition underlying all.

The Mule felt that he could reach out and dam the current, wrench the pool from its basin and turn it in another course, dry up one flow and begin another. But what of it? If he could bend Channis’ curly head in the profoundest adoration, would that change his own grotesquerie that made him shun the day and love the night, that made him a recluse inside an empire that was unconditionally his?

The door behind him opened, and he turned. The transparency of the wall faded to opacity, and the darkness gave way to the whitely blazing artifice of atomic power.

Bail Channis sat down lightly and said: ‘This is a not-quite-unexpected honour, sir.’

The Mule rubbed his proboscis with all four fingers at once and sounded a bit irritable in his response. ‘Why so, young man?’

‘A hunch, I suppose. Unless I want to admit that I’ve been listening to rumours.’

‘Rumours? Which one of the several dozen varieties are you referring to?’

‘Those that say a renewal of the Galactic Offensive is being planned. It is a hope with me that such is true and that I might play an appropriate part.’

‘Then you think there *is* a Second Foundation?’

‘Why not? It could make things so much more interesting.’

‘And you find interest in it as well?’

‘Certainly. In the very mystery of it! What better subject could you find for conjecture? The newspaper supplements are full of nothing else lately – which is probably significant. The *Cosmos* had one of its feature writers compose a weirdie about a world consisting of beings of pure mind – the Second Foundation, you see – who had developed mental force to energies large enough to compete with any known to physical science. Spaceships could be blasted light-years away, planets could be turned out of their orbits—’

‘Interesting. Yes. But do *you* have any notions on the subject? Do you subscribe to this mind-power notion?’

‘Galaxy, no! Do you think creatures like that would stay on their own planet? No, sir. I think the Second Foundation remains hidden because it is weaker than we think.’

‘In that case, I can explain myself very easily. How would you like to head an expedition to locate the Second Foundation?’

For a moment Channis seemed caught up by the sudden rush of events at just a little greater speed than he was prepared for. His tongue had apparently skidded to a halt in a lengthening silence.

The Mule said dryly: ‘Well?’

Channis corrugated his forehead. ‘Certainly. But where am I to go? Have you any information available?’

‘General Pritcher will be with you—’

‘Then I’m *not* to head it?’

‘Judge for yourself when I’m done. Listen, you’re not of the Foundation. You’re a native of Kalgan, aren’t you? Yes. Well, then, your knowledge of the Seldon plan may be vague. When the first Galactic Empire was falling, Hari Seldon and a group of psychohistorians, analysing the future course of history by mathematical tools no longer available in these degenerate times, set up two Foundations, one at each end of the Galaxy, in such a way that the economic and sociological forces that were slowly evolving, would make them serve as foci for the Second Empire. Hari Seldon planned on a thousand years to accomplish that – and it would have taken thirty thousand without the Foundations. But he couldn’t count on *me*. I am a mutant and I am unpredictable by psychohistory which can only deal with the average reactions of numbers. Do you understand?’

‘Perfectly, sir. But how does that involve me?’

‘You’ll understand shortly. I intend to unite the Galaxy now – and reach Seldon’s thousand-year goal in three hundred. One Foundation – the world of physical scientists – is still flourishing under *me*. Under the prosperity and order of the Union, the atomic weapons they have developed are capable of dealing with anything in the Galaxy – except perhaps the Second Foundation. So I must know more about it. General Pritcher is of the definite opinion that it does not exist at all. I know otherwise.’

Channis said delicately: ‘How do you know, sir?’

And the Mule’s words were suddenly liquid indignation: ‘Because minds under my control have been interfered with. Delicately! Subtly! But not so subtly that I couldn’t notice. And these interferences are increasing, and hitting valuable men at important times. Do you wonder now that a certain discretion has kept me motionless these years?’

‘That is your importance. General Pritcher is the best man left me, so he is no longer safe. Of course, he does not know that. But *you* are Unconverted and therefore not instantly detectable as a Mule’s man. You may fool the Second Foundation longer than one of my own men would – perhaps just sufficiently longer. Do you understand?’

‘Um-m-m. Yes. But pardon me, sir, if I question you. How are these men of yours disturbed, so that I might detect change in General Pritcher, in case any occurs. Are they Unconverted again? Do they become disloyal?’

‘No. I told you it was subtle. It’s more disturbing than that, because it’s harder to detect and sometimes I have to wait before acting, uncertain whether a key man is being normally erratic or has been tampered with. Their loyalty is left intact, but initiative and ingenuity are rubbed out. I’m left with a perfectly normal person, apparently, but one completely useless. In the last year, six have been so treated. Six of my best.’ A corner of his mouth lifted. ‘They’re in charge of training bases now – and my most earnest wishes go with them that no emergencies come up for them to decide upon.’

‘Suppose, sir ... suppose it were not the Second Foundation. What if it were another, such as yourself – another mutant?’

‘The planning is too careful, too long range. A single man would be in a greater hurry. No, it is a world, and you are to be my weapon against it.’

Channis’ eyes shone as he said: ‘I’m delighted at the chance.’

But the Mule caught the sudden emotional upwelling. He said: ‘Yes, apparently it occurs to you, that you will perform a unique service, worthy of a unique reward – perhaps even that of being my successor. Quite so. But there are unique punishments, too, you know. My emotional gymnastics are not confined to the creation of loyalty alone.’

And the little smile on his thin lips was grim, as Channis leaped out of his seat in horror.

For just an instant, just one, flashing instant, Channis had felt the pang of an overwhelming grief close over him. It had slammed down with a physical pain that had blackened his mind unbearably, and then lifted. Now nothing was left but the strong wash of anger.

The Mule said: ‘Anger won’t help ... yes, you’re covering it up now, aren’t you? But I can see it. So just remember – *that* sort of business can be made more intense and kept up. I’ve killed men by emotional control, and there’s no death crueler.’

He paused: ‘That’s all!’

The Mule was alone again. He let the lights die and the wall before him kicked to transparency again. The sky was black, and the rising body of the Galactic lens was spreading its bespanglement across the velvet depths of space.

All that haze of nebula was a mass of stars so numerous that they melted one into the other and left nothing but a cloud of light.

And all to be his—

And now but one last arrangement to make, and he could sleep.

FIRST INTERLUDE

The Executive Council of the Second Foundation was in session. To us they are merely voices. Neither the exact scene of the meeting nor the identity of those present are essential at the point.

Nor, strictly speaking, can we even consider an exact reproduction of any part of the session – unless we wish to sacrifice completely even the minimum comprehensibility we have a right to expect.

We deal here with psychologists – and not merely psychologists. Let us say, rather, scientists with a psychological orientation. That is, men whose fundamental conception of scientific philosophy is pointed in an entirely different direction from all of the orientations we know. The ‘psychology’ of scientists brought up among the axioms deduced from the observational habits of physical science has only the vaguest relationship to PSYCHOLOGY.

Which is about as far as I can go in explaining colour to a blind man – with myself as blind as the audience.

The point being made is that the minds assembled understood thoroughly the workings of each other, not only by general theory but by the specific application over a long period of these theories to particular individuals. Speech as known to us was unnecessary. A fragment of a sentence amounted

almost to long winded redundancy. A gesture, a grunt, the curve of a facial line – even a significantly timed pause yielded informational juice.

The liberty is taken, therefore, of freely translating a small portion of the conference into the extremely specific word-combinations necessary to minds oriented from childhood to a physical science philosophy, even at the risk of losing the more delicate nuances.

There was one ‘voice’ predominant, and that belonged to the individual known simply as the First Speaker.

He said: ‘It is apparently quite definite now as to what stopped the Mule in his first mad rush. I can’t say that the matter reflects credit upon ... well, upon the organization of the situation. Apparently, he almost located us, by means of the artificially heightened brain-energy of what they call a “psychologist” on the First Foundation. This psychologist was killed just before he could communicate his discovery to the Mule. The events leading to that killing were completely fortuitous for all calculations below Phase Three. Suppose you take over.’

It was the Fifth Speaker who was indicated by an inflection of the voice. He said, in grim nuances: ‘It is certain that the situation was mishandled. We are, of course, highly vulnerable under mass attack, particularly an attack led by such a mental phenomenon as the Mule. Shortly after he first achieved Galactic eminence with the conquest of the First Foundation, half a year after to be exact, he was on Trantor. Within another half year he would have been here and the odds would have been stupendously against us – 96.3 plus or minus 0.05% to be exact. We have spent considerable time analysing the forces that stopped him. We know, of course, what was driving him on so in the first place. The internal ramifications of his physical deformity and mental uniqueness are obvious to all of us. However, it was only through penetration to Phase Three that we could determine – *after the fact* – the possibility of his anomalous action in the presence of another human being who had an honest affection for him.

‘And since such an anomalous action would depend upon the presence of such another human being at the appropriate time, to that extent the whole affair was fortuitous. Our agents are certain that it was a girl that killed the Mule’s psychologist – a girl for whom the Mule felt trust out of sentiment, and whom he, therefore, did not control mentally – simply because she liked him.

‘Since that event – and for those who want the details, a mathematical treatment of the subject has been drawn up for the Central Library – which warned us, we have held the Mule off by unorthodox methods with which we daily risk Seldon’s entire scheme of history. That is all.’

The First Speaker paused an instant to allow the individuals assembled to absorb the full implications. He said: ‘The situation is then highly unstable. With Seldon’s original scheme bent to the fracture point – and I must emphasize that we have blundered badly in this whole matter, in our horrible lack of foresight – we are faced with an irreversible breakdown of the Plan. Time is passing us by. I think there is only one solution left us – and even that is risky.

‘We must allow the Mule to find us – in a sense.’

Another pause, in which he gathered the reactions, then: ‘I repeat – in a sense!’

2

Two Men Without The Mule

The ship was in near-readiness. Nothing lacked, but the destination. The Mule had suggested a return to Trantor – the world that was the hulk of an incomparable Galactic metropolis of the hugest Empire mankind had ever known – the dead world that had been capital of all the stars.

Pritcher disapproved. It was an old path – sucked dry.

He found Bail Channis in the ship's navigation room. The young man's curly hair was just sufficiently dishevelled to allow a single curl to droop over the forehead – as if it had been carefully placed there – and even teeth showed in a smile that matched it. Vaguely, the stiff officer felt himself harden against the other.

Channis' excitement was evident, 'Pritcher, it's too far a coincidence.'

The general said coldly: 'I'm not aware of the subject of conversation.'

'Oh— Well, then drag up a chair, old man, and let's get into it. I've been going over your notes. I find them excellent.'

'How ... pleasant that you do.'

'But I'm wondering if you've come to the conclusions I have. Have you ever tried analysing the problem deductively? I mean, it's all very well to comb the stars at random, and to have done all you did in five expeditions is quite a bit of star-hopping. That's obvious. But have you calculated how long it would take to go through every known world at this rate?'

'Yes. Several times.' Pritcher felt no urge to meet the young man halfway, but there was the importance of filching the other's mind – the other's uncontrolled, and hence, unpredictable, mind.

'Well, then, suppose we're analytical about it and try to decide just what we're looking for?'

'The Second Foundation,' said Pritcher, grimly.

'A Foundation of psychologists,' corrected Channis, 'who are as weak in physical science as the First Foundation was weak in psychology. Well, you're from the First Foundation, which I'm not. The implications are probably obvious to you. We must find a world which rules by virtue of mental skills, and yet which is very backwards scientifically.'

'Is that necessarily so?' questioned Pritcher, quietly. 'Our own "Union of Worlds" isn't backwards scientifically, even though our ruler owes his strength to his mental powers.'

'Because he has the skills of the First Foundation to draw upon,' came the slightly impatient answer, 'and that is the only such reservoir of knowledge in the Galaxy. The Second Foundation must live among the dry crumbs of the broken Galactic Empire. There are no pickings there.'

'So then you postulate mental power sufficient to establish their rule over a group of worlds and physical helplessness as well?'

'*Comparative* physical helplessness. Against the decadent neighbouring areas, they are competent to defend themselves. Against the resurgent forces of the Mule, with his background of a mature atomic economy, they cannot stand. Else, why is their location so well-hidden, both at the start by the founder, Hari Seldon, and now by themselves. Your own First Foundation made no secret of its existence and did not have it made for them, when they were an undefended single city on a lonely planet three hundred years ago.'

The smooth lines of Pritcher's dark face twitched sardonically. 'And now that you've finished your deep analysis, would you like a list of all the kingdoms, republics, planet states and dictatorships of one sort or another in that political wilderness out there that correspond to your description and to several factors besides?'

'All this has been considered then?' Channis lost none of his brashness.

‘You won’t find it here, naturally, but we have a completely worked out guide to the political units of the Opposing Periphery. Really, did you suppose the Mule would work entirely hit-and-miss?’

‘Well, then,’ and the young man’s voice rose in a burst of energy, ‘what of the Oligarchy of Tazenda?’

Pritcher touched his ear thoughtfully, ‘Tazenda? Oh, I think I know it. They are not in the Periphery, are they? It seems to me they’re fully a third of the way towards the centre of the Galaxy.’

‘Yes. What of that?’

‘The records we have place the Second Foundation at the other end of the Galaxy. Space knows it’s the only thing we have to go on. Why talk of Tazenda anyway? Its angular deviation from the First Foundation radian is only about one hundred ten to one hundred twenty degrees anyway. Nowhere near one hundred eighty.’

‘There’s another point in the records. The Second Foundation was established at “Star’s End.”’

‘No such region in the Galaxy has ever been located.’

‘Because it was a local name, suppressed later for greater secrecy. Or maybe one invented for the purpose by Seldon and his group. Yet there’s some relationship between “Star’s End” and “Tazenda,” don’t you think?’

‘A vague similarity in sound? Insufficient.’

‘Have you ever been there?’

‘No.’

‘Yet it is mentioned in your records.’

‘Where? Oh, yes, but that was merely to take on food and water. There was certainly nothing remarkable about the world.’

‘Did you land at the ruling planet? The centre of government?’

‘I couldn’t possibly say.’

Channis brooded about it under the other’s cold gaze. Then, ‘Would you look at the Lens with me for a moment?’

‘Certainly.’

The Lens was perhaps the newest feature of the interstellar cruisers of the day. Actually, it was a complicated calculating machine which could throw on a screen a reproduction of the night sky as seen from any given point of the Galaxy.

Channis adjusted the co-ordinate points and the wall lights of the pilot room were extinguished. In the dim red light at the control board of the Lens, Channis’ face glowed ruddily. Pritcher sat in the pilot seat, long legs crossed, face lost in the gloom.

Slowly, as the induction period passed, the points of light brightened on the screen. And then they were thick and bright with the generously populated star-groupings of the Galaxy’s centre.

‘This,’ explained Channis, ‘is the winter night-sky as seen from Trantor. That is the important point that, as far as I know, has been neglected so far in your search. All intelligent orientation must start from Trantor as zero point. Trantor was the capital of the Galactic Empire. Even more so scientifically and culturally, than politically. And therefore, the significance of any descriptive name should stem, nine times out of ten, from a Trantorian orientation. You’ll remember in this connection that, although Seldon was from Helicon, towards the Periphery, his group worked on Trantor itself.’

‘What is it you’re trying to show me?’ Pritcher’s level voice plunged icily into the gathering enthusiasm of the other.

‘The map will explain it. Do you see the dark nebula?’ The shadow of his arm fell upon the screen, which took on the bespanglement of the Galaxy. The pointing finger ended on a tiny patch of black that seemed a hole in the speckled fabric of light. ‘The stellagraphical records call it Pellot’s Nebula. Watch it. I’m going to expand the image.’

Pritcher had watched the phenomenon of Lens Image expansion before but he still caught his breath. It was like being at the visiplat of a spaceship storming through a horribly crowded

Galaxy without entering hyperspace. The stars diverged towards them from a common centre, flared outwards and tumbled off the edge of the screen. Single points became double, then globular. Hazy patches dissolved into myriad points. And always that illusion of motion.

Channis spoke through it all, 'You'll notice that we are moving along the direct line from Trantor to Pellot's Nebula, so that in effect we are still looking at a stellar orientation equivalent to that of Trantor. There is probably a slight error because of the gravitic deviation of light that I haven't the math to calculate for, but I'm sure it can't be significant.'

The darkness was spreading over the screen. As the rate of magnification slowed, the stars slipped off the four ends of the screen in a regretful leave-taking. At the rims of the growing nebula, the brilliant universe of stars shone abruptly in token for that light which was merely hidden behind the swirling unradiating atom fragments of sodium and calcium that filled cubic parsecs of space.

And Channis pointed again, 'This has been called "The Mouth" by the inhabitants of that region of space. And that is significant because it is only from the Trantorian orientation that it looks like a mouth.' What he indicated was a rift in the body of the Nebula, shaped like a ragged, grinning mouth in profile, outlined by the blazing glory of the starlight with which it was filled.

'Follow "The Mouth,"' said Channis, 'Follow "The Mouth" towards the gullet as it narrows down to a thin, splintering line of light.'

Again the screen expanded a trifle, until the Nebula stretched away from 'The Mouth' to block off all the screen but that narrow trickle and Channis' finger silently followed it down, to where it straggled to a halt, and then, as his finger continued moving onward, to a spot where one single star sparked lonesomely, and there his finger halted, for beyond that was blackness, unrelieved.

"Star's End," said the young man, simply. 'The fabric of the Nebula is thin there and the light of that one star finds its way through in just that one direction – to shine on Trantor.'

'You're trying to tell me that—' the voice of the Mule's general died in suspicion.

'I'm not trying. That *is* Tazenda – Star's End.'

The lights went on. The Lens flicked off. Pritcher reached Channis in three long strides, 'What made you think of this?'

And Channis leaned back in his chair with a queerly puzzled expression on his face. 'It was accidental. I'd like to take intellectual credit for this, but it was only accidental. In any case, however it happens, it fits. According to our references, Tazenda is an oligarchy. It rules twenty-seven inhabited planets. It is not advanced scientifically. And most of all, it is an obscure world that has adhered to a strict neutrality in the local politics of that stellar region, and is not expansionist. I think we ought to see it.'

'Have you informed the Mule of this?'

'No. Nor shall we. We're in space now, about to make the first hop.'

Pritcher, in sudden horror, sprang to the visiplat. Cold space met his eyes when he adjusted it. He gazed fixedly at the view, then turned. Automatically, his hand reached for the hard, comfortable curve of the butt of his blaster.

'By whose order?'

'By my order, general' – it was the first time Channis had ever used the other's title – 'while I was engaging you here. You probably felt no acceleration, because it came at the moment I was expanding the field of the Lens and you undoubtedly imagined it to be an illusion of the apparent star motion.'

'Why— Just what are you doing? What was the point of your nonsense about Tazenda, then?'

'That was no nonsense. I was completely serious. We're going there. We left today because we were scheduled to leave three days from now. General, you don't believe there is a Second Foundation, and I do. *You* are merely following the Mule's orders without faith; *I* recognize a serious danger. The Second Foundation has now had five years to prepare. How they've prepared, I don't know, but what if they have agents on Kalgan. If I carry about in my mind the knowledge of the whereabouts of the Second Foundation, they may discover that. My life might be no longer safe, and I have a great

affection for my life. Even on a thin and remote possibility such as that, I would rather play safe. So no one knows of Tazenda but you, and you found out only after we were out in space. And even so, there is the question of the crew.' Channis was smiling again, ironically, in obviously complete control of the situation.

Pritcher's hand fell away from his blaster, and for a moment a vague discomfort pierced him. What kept *him* from action? What deadened *him*? There was a time when he was a rebellious and unpromoted captain of the First Foundation's commercial empire, when it would have been *himself* rather than Channis who would have taken prompt and daring action such as that. Was the Mule right? Was his controlled mind so concerned with obedience as to lose initiative? He felt a thickening despondency drive him down into a strange lassitude.

He said, 'Well done! However, you will consult me in the future before making decisions of this nature.'

The flickering signal caught his attention.

'That's the engine room,' said Channis, casually. 'They warmed up on five minutes' notice and I asked them to let me know if there was any trouble. Want to hold the fort?'

Pritcher nodded mutely, and cogitated in the sudden loneliness on the evils of approaching fifty. The visiplate was sparsely starred. The main body of the Galaxy misted one end. What if he were free of the Mule's influence—

But he recoiled in horror at the thought.

Chief Engineer Huxlani looked sharply at the young, ununiformed man who carried himself with the assurance of a Fleet officer and seemed to be in a position of authority. Huxlani, as a regular Fleet man from the days his chin had dripped milk, generally confused authority with specific insignia.

But the Mule had appointed this man, and the Mule was, of course, the last word. The only word for that matter. Not even sub-consciously did he question that. Emotional control went deep.

He handed Channis the little oval object without a word.

Channis lifted it, and smiled engagingly.

'You're a Foundation man, aren't you, chief?'

'Yes, sir. I served in the Foundation Fleet eighteen years before the First Citizen took over.'

'Foundation training in engineering?'

'Qualified Technician, First Class – Central School on Anacreon.'

'Good enough. And you found this on the communication circuit, where I asked you to look?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Does it belong there?'

'No, sir.'

'Then what is it?'

'A hypertracer, sir.'

'That's not enough. I'm not a Foundation man. What is it?'

'It's a device to allow the ship to be traced through hyperspace.'

'In other words we can be followed anywhere.'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right. It's a recent invention, isn't it? It was developed by one of the Research Institutes set up by the First Citizen, wasn't it?'

'I believe so, sir.'

'And its workings are a government secret. Right?'

'I believe so, sir.'

'Yet here it is. Intriguing.'

Channis tossed the hypertracer methodically from hand to hand for a few seconds. Then, sharply, he held it out, 'Take it, then, and put it back exactly where you found it and exactly how you found it. Understand? And then forget this incident. Entirely!'

The chief choked down his near-automatic salute, turned sharply and left.

The ship bounded through the Galaxy, its path a wide-spaced dotted line through the stars. The dots, referred to, were the scant stretches of ten to sixty light-seconds spent in normal space and between them stretched the hundred-and-up light-year gaps that represented the 'hops' through hyperspace.

Bail Channis sat at the control panel of the Lens and felt again the involuntary surge of near-worship at the contemplation of it. He was not a Foundation man and the interplay of forces at the twist of a knob or the breaking of a contact was not second nature to him.

Not that the Lens ought quite to bore even a Foundation man. Within its unbelievably compact body were enough electronic circuits to pinpoint accurately a hundred million separate stars in exact relationship to each other. And as if that were not a feat in itself, it was further capable of translating any given portion of the Galactic Field along any of the three spatial axes or to rotate any portion of the Field about a centre.

It was because of that, that the Lens had performed a near-revolution in interstellar travel. In the younger days of interstellar travel, the calculation of each 'hop' through hyperspace meant any amount of work from a day to a week – and the larger portion of such work was the more or less precise calculation of 'Ship's Position' on the Galactic scale of reference. Essentially that meant the accurate observation of at least three widely-spaced stars, the position of which, with reference to the arbitrary Galactic triple-zero, were known.

And it is the word 'known,' that is the catch. To any who know the star field well from one certain reference point, stars are as individual as people. Jump ten parsecs, however, and not even your own sun is recognizable. It may not even be visible.

The answer was, of course, spectroscopic analysis. For centuries, the main object of interstellar engineering was the analysis of the 'light signature' of more and more stars in greater and greater detail. With this, and the growing precision of the 'hop,' itself, standard routes of travel through the Galaxy were adopted and interstellar travel became less of an art and more of a science.

And yet, even under the Foundation with improved calculating machines and a new method of mechanically scanning the star field for a known 'light signature,' it sometimes took days to locate three stars and then calculate positions in regions not previously familiar to the pilot.

It was the Lens that changed all that. For one thing it required only a single known star. For another, even a space tyro such as Channis could operate it.

The nearest sizeable star at the moment was Vincetori, according to 'hop' calculations, and on the visiplat now, a bright star was centred. Channis hoped that it was Vincetori.

The field screen of the Lens was thrown directly next that of the visiplat and with careful fingers, Channis punched out the co-ordinates of Vincetori. He closed a relay, and the star field sprang to bright view. In it, too, a bright star was centred, but otherwise there seemed no relationship. He adjusted the Lens along the Z-axis and expanded the Field to where the photometer showed both centred stars to be of equal brightness.

Channis looked for a second star, sizeably bright, on the visiplat and found one on the field screen to correspond. Slowly, he rotated the screen to similar angular deflection. He twisted his mouth and rejected the result with a grimace. Again he rotated and another bright star was brought into position, and a third. And then he grinned. That did it. Perhaps a specialist with trained relationship perception might have clicked first try, but he'd settle for three.

That was the adjustment. In the final step, the two fields overlapped and merged into a sea of not-quite-rightness. Most of the stars were close doubles. But the fine adjustment did not take long. The double stars melted together, one field remained, and the 'Ship's Position' could now be read directly off the dials. The entire procedure had taken less than half an hour.

Channis found Han Pritcher in his private quarters. The general was quite apparently preparing for bed. He looked up.

‘News?’

‘Not particularly. We’ll be at Tazenda in another hop.’

‘I know.’

‘I don’t want to bother you if you’re turning in, but have you looked through the film we picked up in Cil?’

Han Pritcher cast a disparaging look at the article in question, where it lay in its black case upon his low bookshelf, ‘Yes.’

‘And what do you think?’

‘I think that if there was ever any science to History, it has been quite lost in this region of the Galaxy.’

Channis grinned broadly, ‘I know what you mean. Rather barren, isn’t it?’

‘Not if you enjoy personal chronicles of rulers. Probably unreliable, I should say, in both directions. Where history concerns mainly personalities, the drawings become either black or white according to the interests of the writer. I find it all remarkably useless.’

‘But there is talk about Tazenda. That’s the point I tried to make when I gave you the film. It’s the only one I could find that even mentioned them.’

‘All right. They have good rulers and bad. They’ve conquered a few planets, won some battles, lost a few. There is nothing distinctive about them. I don’t think much of your theory, Channis.’

‘But you’ve missed a few points. Didn’t you notice that they never formed coalitions? They always remained completely outside the politics of this corner of the star swarm. As you say, they conquered a few planets, but then they stopped – and that without any startling defeat of consequence. It’s just as if they spread out enough to protect themselves, but not enough to attract attention.’

‘Very well,’ came the unemotional response. ‘I have no objection to landing. At the worst – a little lost time.’

‘Oh, no. At the worst – complete defeat. If it *is* the Second Foundation. Remember it would be a world of space-knows-how-many Mules.’

‘What do you plan to do?’

‘Land on some minor subject planet. Find out as much as we can about Tazenda first, then improvise from that.’

‘All right. No objection. If you don’t mind now, I *would* like the light out.’

Channis left with a wave of his hand.

And in the darkness of a tiny room in an island of driving metal lost in the vastness of space, General Han Pritcher remained awake, following the thoughts that led him through such fantastic reaches.

If everything he had so painfully decided were true – and how all the facts were beginning to fit – then Tazenda *was* the Second Foundation. There was no way out. But how? How?

Could it be Tazenda? An ordinary world? One without distinction? A slum lost amid the wreckage of an Empire? A splinter among the fragments? He remembered, as from a distance, the Mule’s shrivelled face and his thin voice as he used to speak of the old Foundation psychologist, Ebling Mis, the one man who had – maybe – learned the secret of the Second Foundation.

Pritcher recalled the tension of the Mule’s words: ‘It was as if astonishment had overwhelmed Mis. It was as though something about the Second Foundation had surpassed all his expectations, had driven in a direction completely different from what he might have assumed. If I could only have read his thoughts rather than his emotions. Yet the emotions were plain – and above everything else was this vast surprise.’

Surprise was the keynote. Something supremely astonishing! And now came this boy, this grinning youngster, glibly joyful about Tazenda and its undistinguished subnormality. And he had to be right. He *had* to. Otherwise, nothing made sense.

Pritcher's last conscious thought had a touch of grimness. That hypertracer along the Etheric tube was still there. He had checked it one hour back, with Channis well out of the way.

SECOND INTERLUDE

It was a casual meeting in the anteroom of the Council Chamber – just a few moments before passing into the Chamber to take up the business of the day – and the few thoughts flashed back and forth quickly.

‘So the Mule is on his way.’

‘That’s what I hear, too. Risky! Mighty risky!’

‘Not if affairs adhere to the functions set up.’

‘The Mule is not an ordinary man – and it is difficult to manipulate his chosen instruments without detection by him. The controlled minds are difficult to touch. They say he’s caught on to a few cases.’

‘Yes, I don’t see how that can be avoided.’

‘Uncontrolled minds are easier. But so few are in positions of authority under him—’

They entered the Chamber. Others of the Second Foundation followed them.

3

Two Men And A Peasant

Rossem is one of those marginal worlds usually neglected in Galactic history and scarcely ever obtruding itself upon the notice of men of the myriad happier planets.

In the latter days of the Galactic Empire, a few political prisoners had inhabited its wastes, while an observatory and a small Naval garrison served to keep it from complete desertion. Later, in the evil days of strife, even before the time of Hari Seldon, the weaker sort of men, tired of the periodic decades of insecurity and danger; weary of sacked planets and a ghostly succession of ephemeral emperors making their way to the Purple for a few wicked, fruitless years – these men fled the populated centres and sought shelter in the barren nooks of the Galaxy.

Along the chilly wastes of Rossem, villages huddled. Its sun was a small ruddy niggard that clutched its dribble of heat to itself, while snow beat thinly down for nine months of the year. The tough native grain lay dormant in the soil those snow-filled months, then grew and ripened in almost panic speed, when the sun's reluctant radiation brought the temperature to nearly fifty.

Small, goatlike animals cropped the grasslands, kicking the thin snow aside with tiny, tri-hooved feet.

The men of Rossem had, thus, their bread and their milk – and when they could spare an animal – even their meat. The darkly ominous forests that gnarled their way over half of the equatorial region of the planet supplied a tough, fine-grained wood for housing. This wood, together with certain furs and minerals, was even worth exporting, and the ships of the Empire came at times and brought in exchange farm machinery, atomic heaters, even television sets. The last was not really incongruous, for the long winter imposed a lonely hibernation upon the peasant.

Imperial history flowed past the peasants of Rossem. The trading ships might bring news in impatient spurts; occasionally new fugitives would arrive – at one time, a relatively large group arrived in a body and remained – and these usually had news of the Galaxy.

It was then that the Rossemites learned of sweeping battles and decimated populations or of tyrannical emperors and rebellious viceroys. And they would sigh and shake their heads, and draw their fur collars closer about their bearded faces as they sat about the village square in the weak sun and philosophized on the evil of men.

Then after a while, no trading ships arrived at all, and life grew harder. Supplies of foreign, soft food, of tobacco, of machinery stopped. Vague word from scraps gathered on the television brought increasingly disturbing news. And finally it spread that Trantor had been sacked. The great capital world of all the Galaxy, the splendid, storied, unapproachable and incomparable home of the emperors had been despoiled and ruined and brought to utter destruction.

It was something inconceivable, and to many of the peasants of Rossem, scratching away at their fields, it might well seem that the end of the Galaxy was at hand.

And then one day not unlike other days a ship arrived again. The old men of each village nodded wisely and lifted their old eyelids to whisper that thus it had been in their father's time – but it wasn't, quite.

This ship was not an Imperial ship. The glowing Spaceship-and-Sun of the Empire was missing from its prow. It was a stubby affair made of scraps of older ships – and the men within called themselves soldiers of Tazenda.

The peasants were confused. They had not heard of Tazenda, but they greeted the soldiers nevertheless in the traditional fashion of hospitality. The newcomers inquired closely as to the nature of the planet, the number of its inhabitants, the number of its cities – a word mistaken by the peasants to mean 'villages' to the confusion of all concerned – its type of economy and so on.

Other ships came and proclamations were issued all over the world that Tazenda was now the ruling world, that tax-collecting stations would be established girdling the equator – the inhabited region – that percentages of grain and furs according to certain numerical formulae would be collected annually.

The Rossemites had blinked solemnly, uncertain of the word ‘taxes.’ When collection time came, many had paid, or had stood by in confusion while the uniformed, other worldlings loaded the harvested corn and the pelts on to the broad ground-cars.

Here and there indignant peasants banded together and brought out ancient hunting weapons – but of this nothing ever came. Grumblingly they had disbanded when the men of Tazenda came and with dismay watched their hard struggle for existence become harder.

But a new equilibrium was reached. The Tazendian governor lived dourly in the village of Gentri, from which all Rossemites were barred. He and the officials under him were dim otherworld beings that rarely impinged on the Rossemitic ken. The tax farmers, Rossemites in the employ of Tazenda, came periodically, but they were creatures of custom now – and the peasant had learned how to hide his grain and drive his cattle into the forest, and refrain from having his hut appear too ostentatiously prosperous. Then with a dull, uncomprehending expression he would greet all sharp questioning as to his assets by merely pointing at what they could see.

Even that grew less, and taxes decreased, almost as if Tazenda wearied of extorting pennies from such a world.

Trading sprang up and perhaps Tazenda found that more profitable. The men of Rossem no longer received in exchange the polished creations of the Empire, but even Tazendian machines and Tazendian food was better than the native stuff. And there were clothes for the women of other than grey homespun, which was a very important thing.

So once again, Galactic history glided past peacefully enough, and the peasants scrabbled life out of the hard soil.

Narovi blew into his beard as he stepped out of his cottage. The first snows were sifting across the hard ground and the sky was a dull, overcast pink. He squinted carefully upward and decided that no real storm was in sight. He could travel to Gentri without much trouble and get rid of his surplus grain in return for enough canned food to last the winter.

He roared back through the door, which he opened a crack for the purpose: ‘Has the car been fed its fuel, yunker?’

A voice shouted from within, and then Narovi’s oldest son, his short, red beard not yet completely outgrown its boyish sparseness, joined him.

‘The car,’ he said, sullenly, ‘is fuelled and rides well, but for the bad condition of the axles. For that I am of no blame. I have told you it needs expert repairs.’

The old man stepped back and surveyed his son through lowering eyebrows, then thrust his hairy chin outward: ‘And is the fault mine? Where and in what manner may I achieve expert repairs? Has the harvest then been anything but scanty for five years? Have my herds escaped the pest? Have the pelts climbed of themselves—’

‘Narovi!’ The well-known voice from within stopped him in mid-word. He grumbled, ‘Well, well – and now your mother must insert herself into the affairs of a father and his son. Bring out the car, and see to it that the storage trailers are securely attached.’

He pounded his gloved hands together, and looked upward again. The dimly-ruddy clouds were gathering and the grey sky that showed in the rifts bore no warmth. The sun was hidden.

He was at the point of looking away, when his dropping eyes caught and his finger almost automatically rose on high while his mouth fell open in a shout, in complete disregard of the cold air.

‘Wife,’ he called vigorously, ‘Old woman – come here.’

An indignant head appeared at a window. The woman’s eyes followed his finger, gaped. With a cry, she dashed down the wooden stairs, snatching up an old wrap and a square of linen as she

went. She emerged with the linen wrapped insecurely over her head and ears, and the wrap dangling from her shoulders.

She snuffled: 'It is a ship from outer space.'

And Narovi remarked impatiently: 'And what else could it be? We have visitors, old woman, visitors!'

The ship was sinking slowly to a landing on the bare frozen field in the northern portions of Narovi's farm.

'But what shall we do?' gasped the woman. 'Can we offer these people hospitality? Is the dirt floor of our hovel to be theirs and the pickings of last week's hoecake?'

'Shall they then go to our neighbours?' Narovi purpled past the crimson induced by the cold and his arms in their sleek fur covering lunged out and seized the woman's brawny shoulders.

'Wife of my soul,' he purred, 'you will take the two chairs from our room downstairs; you will see that a fat youngling is slaughtered and roasted with tubers; you will bake a fresh hoecake. I go now to greet these men of power from outer space ... and ... and—' He paused, placed his great cap awry, and scratched hesitantly. 'Yes, I shall bring my jug of brewed grain as well. Hearty drink is pleasant.'

The woman's mouth had flapped idly during this speech. Nothing came out. And when that stage passed, it was only a discordant screech that issued.

Narovi lifted a finger, 'Old woman, what was it the village Elders said a se'nnight since? Eh? Stir your memory. The Elders went from farm to farm – themselves! Imagine the importance of it! – to ask us that should any ships from outer space land, they were to be informed immediately *on the orders of the governor*.

'And now shall I not seize the opportunity to win into the good graces of those in power? Regard that ship. Have you ever seen its like? These men from the outer world are rich, great. The governor himself sends such urgent messages concerning them that the Elders walk from farm to farm in the cooling weather. Perhaps the message is sent throughout all Rossem that these men are greatly desired by the Lords of Tazenda – and it is on my farm that they are landing.'

He fairly hopped for anxiety, 'The proper hospitality now – the mention of my name to the governor – and what may not be ours?'

His wife was suddenly aware of the cold biting through her thin house-clothing. She leaped towards the door, shouting over her shoulders, 'Leave then quickly.'

But she was speaking to a man who was even then racing towards the segment of the horizon against which the ship sank.

Neither the cold of the world, nor its bleak, empty spaces worried General Han Pritcher. Nor the poverty of their surroundings, nor the perspiring peasant himself.

What did bother him was the question of the wisdom of their tactics? He and Channis were alone here.

The ship, left in space, could take care of itself in ordinary circumstances, but still, he felt unsafe. It was Channis, of course, who was responsible for this move. He looked across at the young man and caught him winking cheerfully at the gap in the furred partition, in which a woman's peeping eyes and gaping mouth momentarily appeared.

Channis, at least, seemed completely at ease. That fact Pritcher savoured with a vinegary satisfaction. His game had not much longer to proceed exactly as he wished it. Yet, meanwhile their wrist ultrawave sender-receivers were their only connection with the ship.

And then the peasant host smiled enormously and bobbed his head several times and said in a voice oily with respect, 'Noble Lords, I crave leave to tell you that my eldest son – a good, worthy lad whom my poverty prevents from educating as his wisdom deserves – has informed me that the Elders will arrive soon. I trust your stay here has been as pleasant as my humble means – for I am poverty-stricken, though a hard-working, honest, and humble farmer, as anyone here will tell you – could afford.'

‘Elders?’ said Channis, lightly. ‘The chief men of the region here?’

‘So they are, Noble Lords, and honest, worthy men all of them, for our entire village is known throughout Rossem as a just and righteous spot – though living is hard and the returns of the fields and forests meagre. Perhaps you will mention to the Elders, Noble Lords, of my respect and honour for travellers and it may happen that they will request a new motor wagon for our household as the old one can scarcely creep and upon the remnant of it depends our livelihood.’

He looked humbly eager and Han Pritcher nodded with the properly aloof condescension required of the role of ‘Noble Lords’ bestowed upon them.

‘A report of your hospitality shall reach the ears of your Elders.’

Pritcher seized the next moments of isolation to speak to the apparently half-sleeping Channis.

‘I am not particularly fond of this meeting of the Elders,’ he said. ‘Have you any thoughts on the subject?’

Channis seemed surprised. ‘No. What worries you?’

‘It seems we have better things to do than to become conspicuous here.’

Channis spoke hastily, in a low monotoned voice: ‘It may be necessary to risk becoming conspicuous in our next moves. We won’t find the type of men we want, Pritcher, by simply reaching out a hand into a dark bag and groping. Men who rule by tricks of the mind need not necessarily be men in obvious power. In the first place, the psychologists of the Second Foundation are probably a very small minority of the total population, just as on your own First Foundation, the technicians and scientists formed a minority. The ordinary inhabitants are probably just that – very ordinary. The psychologists may even be well hidden, and the men in the apparently ruling position may honestly think they are the true masters. Our solution to that problem may be found here on this frozen lump of a planet.’

‘I don’t follow that at all.’

‘Why, see here, it’s obvious enough. Tazenda is probably a huge world of millions or hundreds of millions. How could we identify the psychologists among them and be able to report truly to the Mule that we have located the Second Foundation? But here, on this tiny peasant world and subject planet, all the Tazendian rulers, our host informs us, are concentrated in their chief village of Gentry. There may be only a few hundred of them there, Pritcher, and among them *must* be one or more of the men of the Second Foundation. We will go there eventually, but let us see the Elders first – it’s a logical step on the way.’

They drew apart easily, as their black-bearded host tumbled into the room again, obviously agitated.

‘Noble Lords, the Elders are arriving. I crave leave to beg you once more to mention a word, perhaps, on my behalf—’ He almost bent double in a paroxysm of fawning.

‘We shall certainly remember you,’ said Channis. ‘Are these your Elders?’

They apparently were. There were three.

One approached. He bowed with a dignified respect and said: ‘We are honoured. Transportation has been provided. Respected sirs, and we hope for the pleasure of your company at our Meeting Hall.’

THIRD INTERLUDE

The First Speaker gazed wistfully at the night sky. Wispy clouds scudded across the faint stargleams. Space looked actively hostile. It was cold and awful at best but now it contained that strange creature, the Mule, and the very content seemed to darken and thicken it into ominous threat.

The meeting was over. It had not been long. There had been the doubts and questionings inspired by the difficult mathematical problem of dealing with a mental mutant of uncertain makeup. All the extreme permutations had had to be considered.

Were they even yet certain? Somewhere in this region of space – within reaching distance as Galactic spaces go – was the Mule. What would he do?

It was easy enough to handle his men. They reacted – and were reacting – according to plan. But what of the Mule himself?

4

Two Men And The Elders

The Elders of this particular region of Rossem were not exactly what one might have expected. They were not a mere extrapolation of the peasantry; older, more authoritative, less friendly.

Not at all.

The dignity that had marked them at first meeting had grown in impression till it had reached the mark of being their predominant characteristic.

They sat about their oval table like so many grave and slow-moving thinkers. Most were a trifle past their physical prime, though the few who possessed beards wore them short and neatly arranged. Still, enough appeared younger than forty to make it quite obvious that 'Elders' was a term of respect rather than entirely a literal description of age.

The two from outer space were at the head of the table and in the solemn silence that accompanied a rather frugal meal that seemed ceremonious rather than nourishing, absorbed the new, contrasting atmosphere.

After the meal and after one or two respectful remarks – too short and simple to be called speeches – had been made by those of the Elders apparently held most in esteem, an informality forced itself upon the assembly.

It was as if the dignity of greeting foreign personages had finally given way to the amiable rustic qualities of curiosity and friendliness.

They crowded around the two strangers and the flood of questions came.

They asked if it were difficult to handle a spaceship, how many men were required for the job, if better motors could be made for their ground-cars, if it was true that it rarely snowed on other worlds as was said to be the case with Tazenda, how many people lived on their world, if it was as large as Tazenda, if it was far away, how their clothes were woven and what gave them the metallic shimmer, why they did not wear furs, if they shaved every day, what sort of stone was that in Pritcher's ring— The list stretched out.

And almost always the questions were addressed to Pritcher as though, as the elder, they automatically invested him with the greater authority. Pritcher found himself forced to answer at greater and greater length. It was like an immersion in a crowd of children. Their questions were those of utter and disarming wonder. Their eagerness to know was completely irresistible and would not be denied.

Pritcher explained that spaceships were not difficult to handle and that crews varied with the size, from one to many, that the motors of their ground-cars were unknown in detail to him but could doubtless be improved, that the climates of worlds varied almost infinitely, that many hundreds of millions lived on his world but that it was far smaller and more insignificant than the great empire of Tazenda, that their clothes were woven of silicone plastics in which metallic luster was artificially produced by proper orientation of the surface molecules, and that they could be artificially heated so that furs were unnecessary, that they shaved every day, that the stone in his ring was an amethyst. The list stretched out. He found himself thawing to these naïve provincials against his will.

And always as he answered there was a rapid chatter among the Elders, as though they debated the information gained. It was difficult to follow these inner discussions of theirs for they lapsed into their own accented version of the universal Galactic language that, through long separation from the currents of living speech, had become archaic.

Almost, one might say, their curt comments among themselves hovered on the edge of understanding, but just managed to elude the clutching tendrils of comprehension.

Until finally Channis interrupted to say, 'Good sirs, you must answer us for a while, for we are strangers and would be very much interested to know all we can of Tazenda.'

And what happened then was that a great silence fell and each of the hitherto voluble Elders grew silent. Their hands, which had been moving in such rapid and delicate accompaniment to their words as though to give them greater scope and varied shades of meaning, fell suddenly limp. They stared furtively at one another, apparently quite willing to let the other have all the floor.

Pritcher interposed quickly, 'My companion asks this in friendliness, for the fame of Tazenda fills the Galaxy and we, of course, shall inform the governor of the loyalty and love of the Elders of Rossem.'

No sigh of relief was heard but faces brightened. An Elder stroked his beard with thumb and forefinger, straightening its slight curl with a gentle pressure, and said: 'We are faithful servants of the Lords of Tazenda.'

Pritcher's annoyance at Channis' bald question subsided. It was apparent, at least, that the age that he had felt creeping over him of late had not yet deprived him of his own capacity for making smooth the blunders of others.

He continued: 'We do not know, in our far part of the universe, much of the past history of the Lords of Tazenda. We presume they have ruled benevolently here for a long time.'

The same Elder who spoke before, answered. In a soft, automatic way he had become spokesman. He said: 'Not the grandfather of the oldest can recall a time in which the Lords were absent.'

'It has been a time of peace?'

'It has been a time of peace!' He hesitated. 'The governor is a strong and powerful Lord who would not hesitate to punish traitors. None of us are traitors, of course.'

'He has punished some in the past, I imagine, as they deserve.'

Again hesitation, 'None here have ever been traitors, or our fathers or our fathers' fathers. But on other worlds, there have been such, and death followed for them quickly. It is not good to think of for we are humble men who are poor farmers and not concerned with matters of politics.'

The anxiety of his voice, the universal concern in the eyes of all of them was obvious.

Pritcher said smoothly: 'Could you inform us as to how we can arrange an audience with your governor.'

And instantly an element of sudden bewilderment entered the situation.

For after a long moment, the elder said: 'Why, did you not know? The governor will be here tomorrow. He has expected you. It has been a great honour for us. We ... we hope earnestly that you will report to him satisfactorily as to our loyalty to him.'

Pritcher's smile scarcely twitched. 'Expected us?'

The Elder looked wonderingly from one to the other. 'Why ... it is now a week since we have been waiting for you.'

Their quarters were undoubtedly luxurious for the world. Pritcher had lived in worse. Channis showed nothing but indifference to externals.

But there was an element of tension between them of a different nature than hitherto. Pritcher felt the time approaching for a definite decision and yet there was still the desirability of additional waiting. To see the governor first would be to increase the gamble to dangerous dimensions and yet to win that gamble might multi-double the winnings. He felt a surge of anger at the slight crease between Channis' eyebrows, the delicate uncertainty with which the young man's lower lip presented itself to an upper tooth. He detested the useless play-acting and yearned for an end to it.

He said: 'We seem to be anticipated.'

'Yes,' said Channis, simply.

‘Just that? You have no contribution of greater pith to make. We come here and find that the governor expects us. Presumably we shall find from the governor that Tazenda itself expects us. Of what value then is our entire mission?’

Channis looked up, without endeavouring to conceal the weary note in his voice: ‘To expect us is one thing; to know who we are and what we came for, is another.’

‘Do you expect to conceal these things from men of the Second Foundation?’

‘Perhaps. Why not? Are you ready to throw your hand in? Suppose our ship was detected in space. Is it unusual for a realm to maintain frontier observation posts? Even if we were ordinary strangers, we would be of interest.’

‘Sufficient interest for a governor to come to us rather than the reverse?’

Channis shrugged: ‘We’ll have to meet that problem later. Let us see what this governor is like.’

Pritcher bared his teeth in a bloodless kind of scowl. The situation was becoming ridiculous.

Channis proceeded with an artificial animation: ‘At least we know one thing. Tazenda is the Second Foundation or a million shreds of evidence are unanimously pointing the wrong way. How do you interpret the obvious terror in which these natives hold Tazenda? I see no signs of political domination. Their groups of Elders apparently meet freely and without interference of any sort. The taxation they speak of doesn’t seem at all extensive to me or efficiently carried through. The natives speak much of poverty but seem sturdy and well-fed. The houses are uncouth and their villages rude, but are obviously adequate for the purpose.’

‘In fact, the world fascinates me. I have never seen a more forbidding one, yet I am convinced there is no suffering among the population and that their uncomplicated lives manage to contain a well-balanced happiness lacking in the sophisticated populations of the advanced centres.’

‘Are you an admirer of peasant virtues, then?’

‘The stars forbid.’ Channis seemed amused at the idea. ‘I merely point out the significance of all this. Apparently, Tazenda is an efficient administrator – efficient in a sense far different from the efficiency of the Old Empire or of the First Foundation, or even of our own Union. All these have brought mechanical efficiency to their subjects at the cost of more intangible values. Tazenda brings happiness and sufficiency. Don’t you see that the whole orientation of their domination is different? It is not physical, but psychological.’

‘Really?’ Pritcher allowed himself irony. ‘And the terror with which the Elders spoke of the punishment of treason by these kind hearted psychologist administrators? How does that suit your thesis?’

‘Were they the objects of the punishment? They speak of punishment only of others. It is as if knowledge of punishment has been so well implanted in them that punishment itself need never be used. The proper mental attitudes are so inserted into their minds that I am certain that not a Tazendian soldier exists on the planet. Don’t you *see* all this?’

‘I’ll see perhaps,’ said Pritcher, coldly, ‘when I see the governor. And what, by the way, if *our* mentalities are handled?’

Channis replied with brutal contempt: ‘*You* should be accustomed to *that*.’

Pritcher whitened perceptibly, and, with an effort, turned away. They spoke to one another no more that day.

It was in the silent windlessness of the frigid night, as he listened to the soft, sleeping motions of the other, that Pritcher silently adjusted his wrist-transmitter to the ultrawave region for which Channis’ was unadjustable and, with noiseless touches of his fingernail, contacted the ship.

The answer came in little periods of noiseless vibration that barely lifted themselves above the sensory threshold.

Twice Pritcher asked: ‘Any communications at all yet?’

Twice the answer came: ‘None. We wait always.’

He got out of bed. It was cold in the room and he pulled the furry blanket around him as he sat in the chair and stared out at the crowding stars so different in the brightness and complexity of their arrangement from the even fog of the Galactic Lens that dominated the night sky of his native Periphery.

Somewhere there between the stars was the answer to the complications that overwhelmed him, and he felt the yearning for that solution to arrive and end things.

For a moment he wondered again if the Mule were right – if Conversion had robbed him of the firm sharp edge of self-reliance. Or was it simply age and the fluctuations of these last years?

He didn't really care.

He was tired.

The governor of Rossem arrived with minor ostentation. His only companion was the uniformed man at the controls of the ground-car.

The ground-car itself was of lush design but to Pritcher it appeared inefficient. It turned clumsily; more than once it apparently balked at what might have been a too-rapid change of gears. It was obvious at once from its design that it ran on chemical, and not on atomic, fuel.

The Tazendian governor stepped softly on to the thin layer of snow and advanced between two lines of respectful Elders. He did not look on them but entered quickly. They followed after him.

From the quarters assigned to them, the two men of the Mule's Union watched. He – the governor – was thickset, rather stocky, short, unimpressive.

But what of that?

Pritcher cursed himself for a failure of nerve. His face, to be sure, remained icily calm. There was no humiliation before Channis – but he knew very well that his blood pressure had heightened and his throat had become dry.

It was not a case of physical fear. He was not one of those dull-witted, unimaginative men of nerveless meat who were too stupid ever to be afraid – but physical fear he could account for and discount.

But this was different. It was the other fear.

He glanced quickly at Channis. The young man glanced idly at the nails of one hand and poked leisurely at some trifling unevenness.

Something inside Pritcher became vastly indignant. What had Channis to fear of mental handling?

Pritcher caught a mental breath and tried to think back. How had he been before the Mule had Converted him from the diehard Democrat that he was. It was hard to remember. He could not place himself mentally. He could not break the clinging wires that bound him emotionally to the Mule. Intellectually, he could remember that he had once tried to assassinate the Mule but not for all the straining he could endure, could he remember his emotions at the time. That might be the self-defence of his own mind, however, for at the intuitive thought of what those emotions might have been – not realizing the details, but merely comprehending the drift of it – his stomach grew queasy.

What if the governor tampered with his mind?

What if the insubstantial mental tendrils of a Second Founder insinuated itself down the emotional crevices of his makeup and pulled them apart and rejoined them—

There had been no sensation the first time. There had been no pain, no mental jar – not even a feeling of discontinuity. He had always loved the Mule. If there had ever been a time long before – as long before as five short years – when he had thought he hadn't loved him, that he had hated him – that was just a horrid illusion. The thought of that illusion embarrassed him.

But there had been no pain.

Would meeting the governor duplicate that? Would all that had gone before – all his service for the Mule – all his life's orientation – join the hazy, other-life dream that held the word, Democracy. The Mule also a dream, and only to Tazenda, his loyalty—

Sharply, he turned away.

There was that strong desire to retch.

And then Channis' voice clashed on his ear, 'I think this is it, general.'

Pritcher turned again. An Elder had opened the door silently and stood with a dignified and calm respect upon the threshold.

He said, 'His Excellency, Governor of Rossem, in the name of the Lords of Tazenda, is pleased to present his permission for an audience and request your appearance before him.'

'Sure thing,' and Channis tightened his belt with a jerk and adjusted a Rossemian hood over his head.

Pritcher's jaw set. *This* was the beginning of the real gamble.

The governor of Rossem was not of formidable appearance. For one thing, he was bareheaded, and his thinning hair, light brown, tending to grey, lent him mildness. His bony eye-ridges lowered at them, and his eyes, set in a fine network of surrounding wrinkles, seemed calculating, but his fresh-cropped chin was soft and small and, by the universal convention of followers of the pseudoscience of reading character by facial bony structure, seemed 'weak.'

Pritcher avoided the eyes and watched the chin. He didn't know whether that would be effective – if anything would be.

The governor's voice was high-pitched, indifferent: 'Welcome to Tazenda. We greet you in peace. You have eaten?'

His hand – long fingers, gnarled veins – waved almost regally at the U-shaped table.

They bowed and sat down. The governor sat at the outer side of the base of the U, they on the inner; along both arms sat the double row of silent Elders.

The governor spoke in short, abrupt sentences – praising the food as Tazendian importations – and it had indeed a quality different if, somehow, not so much better, than the rougher food of the Elders – disparaging Rossemian weather, referring with an attempt at casualness to the intricacies of space travel.

Channis talked little, Pritcher not at all.

Then it was over. The small, stewed fruits were finished; the napkins used and discarded, and the governor leaned back.

His small eyes sparkled.

'I have inquired as to your ship. Naturally, I would like to see that it receives due care and overhaul. I am told its whereabouts are unknown.'

'True,' Channis replied lightly. 'We have left it in space. It is a large ship, suitable for long journeys in sometimes hostile regions, and we felt that landing it here might give rise to doubts as to our peaceful intentions. We preferred to land alone, unarmed.'

'A friendly act,' commented the governor, without conviction. 'A large ship, you say?'

'Not a vessel of war, excellency.'

'Ha, hum. Where is it you come from?'

'A small world of the Santanni sector, your excellency. It may be you are not aware of its existence for it lacks importance. We are interested in establishing trade relationships.'

'Trade, eh? And what have you to sell?'

'Machines of all sorts, excellency. In return, food, wood, ores—'

'Ha, hum.' The governor seemed doubtful. 'I know little of these matters. Perhaps mutual profit may be arranged. Perhaps, after I have examined your credentials at length – for much information will be required by my government before matters may proceed, you understand – and after I have looked over your ship, it would be advisable for you to proceed to Tazenda.'

There was no answer to that, and the governor's attitude iced perceptibly.

'It is necessary that I see your ship, however.'

Channis said distantly: 'The ship, unfortunately, is undergoing repairs at the moment. If your excellency would not object to giving us forty-eight hours, it will be at your service.'

'I am not accustomed to waiting.'

For the first time, Pritcher met the glare of the other, eye to eye, and his breath exploded softly inside him. For a moment, he had the sensation of drowning, but then his eyes tore away.

Channis did not waver. He said: 'The ship cannot be landed for forty-eight hours, excellency. We are here and unarmed. Can you doubt our honest intentions?'

There was a long silence, and then the governor said gruffly: 'Tell me of the world from which you come.'

That was all. It passed with that. There was no more unpleasantness. The governor, having fulfilled his official duty, apparently lost interest and the audience died a full death.

And when it was *all* over, Pritcher found himself back in their quarters and took stock of himself.

Carefully – holding his breath – he 'felt' his emotions. Certainly he seemed no different to himself, but *would* he feel any difference? Had he felt different after the Mule's conversion? Had not everything seemed natural? As it should have been.

He experimented.

With cold purpose, he shouted inside the silent caverns of his mind, and the shout was, 'The Second Foundation must be discovered and destroyed.'

And the emotion that accompanied it was honest hate. There was not as much as a hesitation involved in it.

And then it was in his mind to substitute the word 'Mule' for the phrase 'Second Foundation' and his breath caught at the mere emotion and his tongue clogged.

So far, good.

But had he been handled otherwise – more subtly? Had tiny changes been made? Changes that he couldn't detect because their very existence warped his judgement.

There was no way to tell.

But he still felt absolute loyalty to the Mule! If that were unchanged, nothing else really mattered.

He turned his mind to action again. Channis was busy at his end of the room. Pritcher's thumbnail idled at his wrist communicator.

And then at the response that came he felt a wave of relief surge over him and leave him weak.

The quiet muscles of his face did not betray him, but inside he was shouting with joy – and when Channis turned to face him, he knew that the farce was about over.

FOURTH INTERLUDE

The two Speakers passed each other on the road and one stopped the other.

'I have word from the First Speaker.'

There was a half-apprehensive flicker in the other's eyes. 'Intersection point?'

'Yes! May we live to see the dawn!'

5

One Man And The Mule

There was no sign in any of Channis' actions that he was aware of any subtle change in the attitude of Pritcher and in their relations to each other. He leaned back on the hard wooden bench and spread-eagled his feet out in front of him.

'What did you make of the governor?'

Pritcher shrugged: 'Nothing at all. He certainly seemed no mental genius to me. A very poor specimen of the Second Foundation, if that's what he was supposed to be.'

'I don't think he was, you know. I'm not sure what to make of it. Suppose you were a Second Foundationer,' Channis grew thoughtful, 'what would *you* do? Suppose you had an idea of our purpose here. How would you handle us?'

'Conversion, of course.'

'Like the Mule?' Channis looked up, sharply. 'Would we know if they *had* converted us? I wonder— And what if they were simply psychologists, but very clever ones.'

'In that case, I'd have us killed rather quickly.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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