

Reynolds Mack

# Frigid Fracas



Mack Reynolds

**Frigid Fracas**

«Public Domain»

**Reynolds M.**

Frigid Fracas / M. Reynolds — «Public Domain»,

# Содержание

I	5
II	10
III	14
IV	17
V	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

# Reynolds Mack

## Frigid Fracas

### I

In other eras he might have been described as swacked, stewed, stoned, smashed, crocked, cockeyed, soused, shellacked, polluted, potted, tanked, lit, stinko, pie-eyed, three sheets in the wind, or simply drunk.

In his own time, Major Joseph Mauser, Category Military, Mid-Middle Caste, was drenched. Or at least rapidly getting there.

He wasn't happy about it. It wasn't that kind of a binge.

He lowered one eyelid and concentrated on the list of potables offered by the auto-bar. He'd decided earlier in the game that it would be a physical impossibility to get through the whole list but he was making a strong attempt on a representative of each subdivision. He'd had a cocktail, a highball, a sour, a flip, a punch and a julep. He wagged forth a finger to dial a fizz, a Sloe Gin Fizz.

Joe Mauser occupied a small table in a corner of the Middle Caste Category Military Club in Greater Washington. His current fame, transient though it might be, would have made him welcome as a guest in the Upper Caste Club, located in the swank Baltimore section of town. Old pros in the Category Military had comparatively small sufferance for caste lines among themselves; rarified class distinctions meant little when you were in the dill, and you didn't become an old pro without having been in spots where matters had pickled. Joe would have been welcome on the strength of his performance in the most recent fracas in which he had participated as a mercenary, that between Vacuum Tube Transport and Continental Hovercraft. But he didn't want it that way.

You didn't devote the greater part of your life to pulling your way up, pushing your way up, fighting your way up, the ladder of status to be satisfied to associate with your social superiors on the basis of being a nine-day-wonder, an oddity to be met at cocktail parties and spoken to for a few democratic moments.

No, Joe Mauser would stick to his own position in the scheme of things until through his own efforts he won through to that rarefied altitude in society which his ambition demanded.

A sour voice said, "Celebrating, captain? Oops, major, I mean. So you did get something out of the Catskill Reservation fracas. I'm surprised."

A scowl, Joe decided, would be the best. Various others, in the course of the evening, had attempted to join him. Three or four comrades in arms, one journalist from some fracas buff magazine, some woman he'd never met before, and Zen knew how she'd ever got herself into the club. A snarl had driven some away, or a growl or sneer. This one, he decided, called for an angered scowl, particularly in view of the tone of voice which only brought home doubly how his planning of a full two years had come a cropper.

He looked up, beginning his grimace of discouragement. "Go away," he muttered nastily. The other's identity came through slowly. One of the Telly news reporters who'd covered the fracas; for the moment he couldn't recall the name.

Joe Mauser held the common prejudices of the Category Military for Telly and all its ramifications. Not only for the drooling multitudes who sat before their sets and vicariously participated in the sadism of combat while their trunk bemused brains refused contemplation of the reality of their way of life. But also for Category Communications, and particularly its Sub-division Telly, Branch Fracas News, and all connected with it. His views, perhaps, were akin to those of the matador facing the moment of truth, the crowds screaming in the arena seats for him to go in and

the promoters and managers watching from the *barrera* and possibly wondering if he were gored if next week's gate would improve.

The Telly cameras which watched you as, crouched almost double, you scurried into the fire area of a mitrailleuse or perhaps a Maxim; the Telly cameras which swung in your direction speedily, avidly, when a blast of fire threw you back and to the ground; the Telly cameras with their zoom lenses which focused full into your face as life leaked away. The Spanish aficionados never had it so good. The close-up expression of the dying matador had been denied them.

The other undeterred, sank into the chair opposite, his face twisted cynically. Joe placed him now. Freddy Soligen. Give the man his due, he and his team were right in there when the going got hot. More than once, in the past fifteen years, Joe had seen the little man lugging his cameras into the center of the fracas, taking chances expected only of combatants. Vaguely, he wondered why.

He demanded, "Why?"

"Eh?" Soligen said. "Major, by the looks of you, you're going to have a beaut, comes morning. Why don't you stick to trank?"

"Cause I'm not a slob," Joe sneered. "Why?"

"Why, what? Listen, you want me to help you on home?"

"Got no home. Live in hotels. Military clubs. In barracks. Got nothing but my rank and caste." He sneered again. "Such as they are."

Soligen said, "Mid-Middle, aren't you? And a major. Zen, most would say you haven't much to complain about."

Joe grunted contempt, but dropped that angle of it. However, he could have mentioned that he was well into his thirties, that he had copped many a one in his day and that now time was borrowed. When you had been in the dill as often as had Joe Mauser, the days you lived were borrowed. Borrowed from some lad who hadn't used up all that nature had originally allotted him. He was well into the thirties and his life's goal was still tantalizingly far before him, and he living on borrowed time.

He said, "Why're you ... exception? How come you get right into the middle of it, like that time on the Panhandle Reservation. You coulda copped one there."

Soligen chuckled abruptly, and as though in self-deprecation. "I *did* cop one there. Hospitalized three months. Didn't read any of the publicity I got? No, I guess you didn't, it was mostly in the Category Communications trade press. Anyway, I got bounced not only in rank on the job, but up to Low-Middle in caste." There was the faintest edge of the surly in his voice as he added, "I was born a Lower, major."

Joe snorted. "So was I. You didn't answer my question, Soligen. Why stick your neck out? Most of you Telly reporters, stick it out in some concrete pillbox with lots of telescopic equipment." He added bitterly, "And usually away from what's really going on."

The Telly reporter looked at him oddly. "Stick my neck out?" he said with deliberation. "Possibly for the same reason you do, major. In fact, it's kinda the reason I looked you up. Trouble is, you're probably too drenched, right now, to listen to my fling."

Joe Mauser's voice attempted cold dignity. He said, "In the Category Military, Soligen, you never get so drenched you can't operate."

The other's cynical grunt conveyed nothing, but he reached out and dialed the auto-bar. He growled, "O.K., a Sober-Up for you, an ale for me."

"I don't want to sober up. I'm being bitter and enjoying it."

"Yes, you do," the little man said. "I have the answer to your bitterness." He handed Joe the pill. "You see, what's wrong with you, major, is you've been trying to do it alone. What you need is help."

Joe glowered at him, even as he accepted the medication. "I make my own way, Soligen. I don't even know what you're talking about."

"That's obvious," the other said sourly. He waited, sipping his brew, while the Sober-Up worked its miracle. He was compassionate enough to shudder, having been through, in his time, the speeding

up of a hangover so that full agony was compressed into mere minutes rather than dispensed over a period of hours.

Joe groaned, "It better be good, whatever you want to say."

Freddy Soligen asked, at long last, tilting his head to one side and taking Joe in critically. "You know one of the big reasons you're only a major?"

Joe Mauser looked at him.

The Telly reporter said, "You haven't got any mustache."

Joe Mauser stared at him.

The other laughed cynically. "You think I'm driv-el-happy, eh? Well, maybe a long scar down the cheek would do even better. Or, possibly, you ought to wear a monocle, even in action."

Joe continued to stare, as though the little man had gone completely around the bend.

Freddy Soligen had made his first impression. He finished the ale, put the glass into the chute and turned back to the professional mercenary. His voice was flat now, all expression gone from his face. "All right," he said. "Now listen to my fling. You've got a lot to learn."

Joe held his peace, if only in pure amazement. He ranked the little man opposite him in both caste and in professional attainments. Besides which, he was a combat officer and unused to being addressed with less than full respect, even from superiors. For unlucky Joe Mauser might be in his chosen field, but respected he was.

Freddy Soligen pointed a finger at him, almost mockingly. "You're on the make, Mauser. In a world where few bother, any more, you're on the way up. The trouble is, you took the wrong path many years ago."

Joe snorted his contempt of the other's lack of knowledge. "I was born into the Clothing Category, Sub-division Shoes, Branch Repair. In the old days they called us cobblers. You think you could work your way up from Mid-Lower to Upper caste with that beginning, Soligen? Zen! we don't even have cobblers any more, shoes are thrown away as soon as they show wear. Sure, sure, sure. Theoretically, under People's Capitalism, you can cross categories into any field you want. But have you ever heard of anybody doing any real jumping of caste levels in any category except Military or Religion? I didn't take the wrong path, religion is a little too strong for even my stomach, which left the Category Military the only path available."

Freddy had heard him out, his face twisted sourly. He said now, "You misunderstand. I realize that the military's the only quick way of getting a bounce in caste. I wish I'd figured that out sooner, before I made a trade out of the one I was born into, Communications. It's too late now, I'm into my forties with a busted marriage but the proud papa of a kid." He twisted his face again in another grimace. "By the way, the boy's a novitiate in Category Religion."

Some elements were clearing up in Joe's mind. He said, in comprehension, "So ... we're both ambitious."

"That's right, major. Now, let's get back to fundamentals. Your wrong path is the *manner* in which you're trying to work your way up into the elite. You've got to become a celebrated hero, major. And it's the Telly fan, the fracas-buff, who decides who the Category Military heroes are. Those are the slobs you have to toady to. In the long run, nobody else counts. I know, I know. All the old pros, even big names like Stonewall Cogswell and Jack Alshuler, think you're a top man. Great! But how many buff-clubs you got to your name? How often do the buff magazines run articles about you? How often do you get interviewed on Telly, in between fracasas? Have the movies ever done 'The Joe Mauser Story'?"

Joe twisted uncomfortably. "All that stuff takes a lot of time. I've been keeping myself busy."

"Right. Busy getting shot at."

"I'm a mercenary. That's my trade."

Freddy spread his hands. "O.K. If that's all you're interested in, shooting lads signed up on the other side, or getting shot by them, that's fine. But you know, major" – he cocked his head to one side,

and peered knowingly at Joe – "I've got a sneaking suspicion that you don't particularly like combat. Some do, I know. Some love it. I don't think you do."

Joe looked at him.

Freddy said, "You're in it because of the chance for promotion, nothing else counts."

Joe remained silent.

Freddy pushed him. "Who're the names every fracas buff knows? Jerry Sturgeon, captain at the age of twenty-one, and so damned pretty in those fancy uniforms he wears. How many times have you ever heard of him really being in the dill? He knows better! Captain Sturgeon spends his time prancing around on that famous palomino of his in front of the Telly lenses, not dodging bullets. Or Ted Sohl. Colonel Ted Sohl. The dashing Sohl with his two western style six-shooters, slung low on his hips, and that romantic limp and craggy face. My, do the female buffs go for Colonel Sohl! I wonder how many of them know he wears a special pair of boots to give him that limp. Old Jerry's a long time drinking pal of mine, he's never copped one in his life. What's more, another year or so and he'll be a general and you know what that means. Almost automatic jump to Upper caste."

Joe's face was working. All this was not really news to him. Like his fellow old pros, Joe Mauser was fully aware of the glory grabbers. There had always been the glory grabbers from mythological Achilles, who sulked in his tent while his best friend died before the walls of Troy, to Alexander, who conquered the world with an army conceived and precision trained by another man whose name is all but forgotten, to the swashbuckling Custer who sacrificed self and squadron rather than wait for assistance.

Freddy pushed him. "How come you're never on lens when you're in there going good, major? Ever thought about that? When you're commanding a rear-guard action, maybe, trying to extract your lads when the situation's pickled, who's in the Telly lens where all the stupid buffs can see him? One of the manufactured heroes."

Joe scowled. "The who?"

"Come off it, major. You've been around long enough to know heroes are made, not born. We stopped having much regard for real heroes a long time ago. Lindbergh and Byrd were a couple of the last we turned out. After that, we left it to the Norwegians to do such things as crew the *Kon-Tiki*, or to the English to top Everest – whether or not the Britisher made the last hundred feet slung over the shoulder of a Sherpa. I don't know if it was talking movies, the radio, the coming of Telly, or what. Possibly all three. But we got away from real heroes, they're not exciting enough. Telly actors can do it better. Real heroes are apt to be on the dull side, they're men who do things rather than being showmen. Actually, most adventure can be on the monotonous side, nine-tenths of the time. When a Stanley goes to find a Livingston, he doesn't spend twenty-four hours a day killing rogue elephants or fighting off tribesman; most of the time he's plodding along in the swamps, getting bitten by mosquitoes, or through the bush getting bitten by tsetse flies. So, as a people, we turned it over to the movies, and Telly, where they can do it better."

Joe Mauser's mind was working now, but he held silence.

Freddy Soligen went on, "Your typical fracas buff, glued to his Telly set, wants two things. First, lots of gore, lots of blood, lots of sadistic thrill. And the Lower-Lower lads, who are silly enough to get into the Military Category for the sake of glory or the few shares of common stock they might secure, provide that gore. Second, your Telly fan wants some Good Guys whose first requirement is to be easily recognized. Some heroes, easily identified with. Anybody can tell a Telly hero when he sees one. Handsome, dashing, distinctively uniformed, preferably tall, and preferably blond and blue-eyed, though we'll eliminate those requirements in your case, if you'll grow a mustache." He cocked his head to one side. "Yes, sir. A very dashing mustache."

Joe said sourly, "You think that's all I need to hit the big time. A dashing mustache, eh?"

"No," Freddy Soligen said, very slowly and evenly. "We're also going to need every bit of stock you've accumulated, major. We're going to have to buy your way into the columns of the fracas buff

magazine. We're going to have to bribe my colleagues, the Telly camera crews, to keep you on lens when you're looking good, and, more important still, off it when you're not. We're going to have to spend every credit you've got."

"I see," Joe said. "And when it's all been accomplished, what do you get out of this, Freddy?"

Freddy Soligen laid it on the line. "When it's all been accomplished, you'll be an Upper. I'm ambitious, too, Joe. Just as ambitious as you are. I need an *In*. You'll be it. I'll make you. I have the know-how. I can do it. When you're made, you'll make me."

## II

When Major Mauser, escorting Dr. Nadine Haer, daughter of the late Baron Haer of Vacuum Tube Transport, entered the swank Exclusive Room of the Greater Washington branch of the Ultra Hotels, the orchestra ceased the dreamy dance music it had been playing and struck up the lilting "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

As they followed the maître d'hôtel to their table, Nadine frowned in puzzled memory and after they were seated, she said, "That piece, where have I heard it before?"

Joe cleared his throat uncomfortably. "An old marching song, come down from way back. Popular during the Civil War. The seventh Cavalry rode forth to that tune on the way to their rendezvous with the Sioux at the Little Big Horn."

She frowned at him, puzzled still, "You seem to know an inordinate amount about a simple tune, Joe." Then she said, "Why, now I remember where I've heard it recently. Wednesday, when I was waiting for you at the Agora Bar. The band played it when you entered."

He picked up the menu, hurriedly. The Exclusive Room was ostentatious to the point of menus and waiters. "What'll you have, Nadine?" He still wasn't quite at ease with her first name. Offhand, he could never remember having been on a first name basis with a Mid-Upper, certainly not one of the female gender.

But she was not to be put off. "Why, Joe Mauser, you've acquired a theme song, or whatever you call it. I didn't know you were that well known amount the nit-wits who follow the fracasés. Why next they'll be forming those ridiculous buff-clubs." Her laughter tinkled. "The Major Joe Mauser Club."

Joe flushed. "As a matter of fact, there are three," he said unhappily. "One in Mexico City, one in Bogota and one in Portland. I've forgotten if it's Oregon or Maine."

She was puzzled still, and ignored the waiter who, standing there, made Joe nervous. Establishments which boasted live waiters, were rare enough in Joe Mauser's experience that he could easily remember the number of occasions he'd attended them. Nadine Haer, to the contrary, an hereditary aristocrat born, was totally unaware of the flunky's presence and would remain so until she required him.

She looked at Joe from the side of her eyes, suspiciously. "That new mustache which gives you such a romantic air. Your new uniform, very gallant. You look like one of those Imperial Hussars or something. And your Telly interviews. By a stretch of chance, I saw one of them the other day. That master of ceremonies seemed to think you are the most dashing soldier since Jeb Stuart."

Joe said to the waiter, "Champagne, please."

That worthy said apologetically, "May I see your credit card, major? The Exclusive Room is limited to Upper –"

Nadine said coldly, "The major is my guest. I am Dr. Nadine Haer." Her voice held the patina of those to the manor born, and not to be gainsaid. The other bowed hurriedly, murmured something placatingly, and was gone.

There was a tic at the side of Joe's mouth which usually manifested itself only in combat. He said stiffly, "I am afraid we should have gone to a Middle establishment."

"Nonsense. What difference does it make? Besides, don't change the subject. I am not to be fooled, Joe Mauser. Something is afoot. Now, just what?"

The tic had intensified. Joe Mauser looked at the woman he loved, realizing that it could never occur to her that he, a Mid-Middle, would presume to think in terms of wooing her. That even in her supposed scorn of rank, privilege and status, she was still, subconsciously perhaps, a noble and he a serf. Evolution there was in society, and the terms were different, but it was still a world of class distinction and she was of the ruling class, and he the ruled, she a patrician, he a pleb.

His voice went very even, very flat, almost as though he was speaking to a foe. "When we first met, Nadine, I told you that I had been born a Mid-Lower. Why, I don't know, but from my earliest memories I revolted against the strata in which birth placed me. History – I have had lots of time to read history, in hospital beds – tells me there have been few socio-economic systems under which the strong, intelligent, aggressive, cunning or ruthless couldn't work their way to the top. Very well, I intend to do it under People's Capitalism."

"Industrial Feudalism," she murmured.

"Call it what you will. I won't be happy until I'm a member of that one per cent on top."

She looked into his face. "Are you sure you will be then?"

"I don't know," he said angrily. "But I've heard the argument before. It's been used down through the ages by apologists for the privileged classes. Pity the poor rich man. While the happy slaves are sitting down on the levee, strumming their banjos, the poor plantation owner is up in his mansion drowning his sorrows in mint juleps."

She had an edge of anger, too. "All right," she snapped. "But I'll tell you this, Joe Mauser. The world is out of gear, but the answer isn't for individuals to better their material lot by jumping their caste statuses."

The waiter brought their wine, and, both angry, both held their peace until he had served it and left.

"What *is* the answer?" he said, mock in his voice. "It's easy enough for you, on top, to tell me, below, that the answer isn't in making my way to your level."

She was interrupted in her hot reply by a rolling of the orchestra's drums and the voice of a domineering M.C. who managed effectively to drown all vocal opposition at the tables.

Grinning inanely, holding onto his portable, wireless mike, he babbled along about the wonderful people present tonight and the good time being had by all. The Exclusive Room being founded on pure snobbery, he made great todo about the celebrities present. This politician, that actress, this currently popular songstress, that baron of industry.

Joe and Nadine ignored most of his chatter, still glaring at each other, until he came to...

"And those among us who are fracas buffs, and who isn't a fracas buff these days, given the merest drop of red blood? Fracas buffs will be thrilled to know that they are spending the evening in the company of the intrepid Major Joseph Mauser..."

Behind him, the orchestra broke into the quick strains of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

"... Whose most recent act of sheer military genius and derringdo combined resulted in his all but single-handed winning of the fracas between Continental Hovercraft and Vacuum Tube Transport, and thus inflicting defeat upon none other than Marshal Stonewall Cogswell for the first time in more than a decade."

The M.C. babbled on, now about another present celebrity, a retired pugilist, once a champion.

Nadine looked into his face. "I think I understand now. You mentioned that in any society the ... how did you put it? ... the strong, intelligent, aggressive, cunning or ruthless could work their way to the top. You've tried strength, intelligence, and aggressiveness, haven't you, Joe? They didn't work. At least, not fast enough. So now you're giving cunning a try. Will ruthlessness be next, Joe Mauser?"

He was saved an answer.

A hulking body in evening wear stood next to their table, swaying. Joe looked up into a face glazed by either trunk or alcohol. He didn't know the other man and for a moment failed to realize the other's purpose. The man was mumbling something that didn't come through.

Joe, irritated, said, "What in Zen do you want?"

The stranger shook his head, as though to clear it. He sneered, "The famous Joe Mauser, eh? The brave soldier-boy. Well, lemme tell you something, soldier-boy, you don't look so tough to me with your cute little mustache and your fancy-pants uniform. You look like a molly to me."

"That's too bad," Joe bit out. "And now, if you'll just go away." He turned his face from the other.

"Joe...!" Nadine said in an alarmed warning.

The other's contemptuous cuff, unsuspected, nearly bowled Joe completely from his chair. As it was, he barely caught himself.

His attacker shuffled backward and Joe recognized the trained step of the professional boxer. The other's identity now came to him, although he was no follower of pugilism, a sport largely out of favor since the rapid growth of Telly scanned fracasas. Boxing at its top had never been more than an inadequate replacement of the games once held in the Roman area.

Joe was on his feet, instantly the fighting man under attack. The table that he and Nadine occupied was a ringside one, and in open view of half the room, but that meant nothing. He was under attack and for the nonce surprised, on the defensive.

"How'd you like them apples, soldier-boy?" the professional pugilist chuckled nastily. His left flicked forward and Joe barely avoided its connecting with his face.

He threw aside, for the time, any attempt to explain the other's uncalled for aggression. Unless he did something, and quick, he was going to be a laughing stock, rather than the hero into which Freddy Soligen was trying to build him.

Nadine said, Anxiously, "Joe ... please ... the waiters will deal with –".

He didn't hear her.

Joe Mauser, with all his hospital studies, had never heard of the Marquis of Queensbury. But even if he had, it would never have occurred to him to be bound by that arbiter of fisticuffs. In fact, he had no intention even of being restricted to the use of his hands as fists. The Japanese, long centuries before, had proven the fist less than the most effective manner in which to pursue hand-to-hand combat.

Joe Mauser, working coolly, fast and ruthlessly, now, a trained combat man exercising his profession, moved in for the kill, his shoulders hunched slightly forward, his hands forward and to the sides, choppers rather than sledges.

Joe stepped closer, as quick as a jungle cat. His left hand leapt forward to the other's neck, hacked, came back into another blurring swing, hacked again. His opponent grunted agony.

But a man does not become heavyweight champion without being able to take as well as give punishment. Joe's attacker tucked his chin into his shoulder, fighter style, and moved in throwing off the effects of the karate blows. Somehow, he seemed considerably less drunk or over-trunked than he had short moments before, and there was rage in his face, rather than glaze.

One of the blows caught Joe on a shoulder and sent him reeling back. At the same time, behind the other, Joe could see the maître d'hôtel flanked by three waiters, hurrying up. He was going to have to do something, and do it quickly, or be branded a boorish Middle who had intruded into a domain of the Uppers only to participate in a brawl and have to be expelled by the establishment's servants.

The former champ, his eyes narrowed in confidence of victory, came boring in, on his toes, quick for all of his bulk. Joe turned sideways, his movements lithe. He lashed out with his right foot, at this angle getting double the leverage he would have otherwise, and caught the other on the kneecap. The pugilist bent forward in agony, his mouth opening as though in protest.

Joe stepped forward, quickly, efficiently. His hands were now knitted together in a huge double fist. He brought them upward, crushingly, into his opponent's face, with all the force he could achieve, and felt bone and cartilage crush. Before even waiting for the other to fall, he turned, righted his chair, and resumed his seat facing Nadine, his breath coming only inconsiderably faster than before.

Her eyes were wide, but she hadn't organized herself as yet to the point of either protest or praise.

The maître d' was at their table. "Sir –" he began.

Joe said curtly, "This barroom brawler attacked me. I'm surprised you allow your patrons to get into the shape he is. Please bring our bill."

The head waiter stuttered, his eyes going about in despair, even as his assistants were lifting the fallen champion to his feet and hustling him away.

An occupant of one of the nearby tables spoke up, collaborating Joe's words. The action had been fast, though brief, and had won the fascinated attention of that half of the patrons of the Exclusive Room near enough to see. Somebody else called out, too. And it came to Joe cynically, that a brawl in an establishment exclusive to Uppers, differed little from one of Middle or even Lower caste.

But it was impossible that they remain. He had looked forward to this evening with Nadine Haer, had planned to lay the foundations for a future campaign, when, as a newly created Upper, he would be in the position to mention marriage. He fumed, inwardly, even as he helped her with her wrap, preparatory to leaving.

Nadine, now that she had recovered composure, said coldly, "I suppose you realize you broke that man's nose and injured his eye to an extent I'd have to examine him to evaluate?"

Behind her, he rolled his eyes upward in mute protest. He said, "What was I supposed to do, hand him a rose from our table bouquet?"

"Violence is the resort of the incompetent."

"You must tell that, some time, to a jungle animal being attacked by a lion."

"Oh, you're impossible!"

### III

When Freddy Soligen entered his living room, he automatically switched off the Telly screen which was the entire north wall. The room's lights automatically went brighter.

His perpetual air of sour cynicism was absent as he chuckled to the room's sole inhabitant, "What! A son of mine gawking at Telly? Next I'll be finding trunks by the bowl full, sitting on the tea table."

His son grinned at him. Already, at the age of sixteen, Samuel Soligen was a good three inches taller than his father, at least ten pounds heavier. The boy was bright of eye, toothy of smile, gawky as only a teen-ager can be gawky, and obviously the proverbial apple of his father's eye.

Sam said, the faintest note of apology in his tone, "Just finished my assignments, Papa. Thought I'd see if there was anything worthwhile on the air."

"An incurable optimist," Freddy chuckled. "You take after your mother. Believe me, Sam. There's *never* anything worthwhile on Telly."

"Not even when you're casting?"

"*Especially* when I'm casting, boy. What've you been getting at the Temple school these days? Zen! I've been so busy on a special project I've been working on, I haven't had time to keep check on whether or not you're even still living here."

The boy shrugged, picked up an apple from the sideboard and began to munch. His voice was disinterested. "Aw, Comparative Religion, mostly. We gotta go way back and study about the Greeks and the Triple-Goddess, and then the Olympians, and all that curd."

"Hey, watch your language, Sam. Remember, you're going to wind up a priest."

"Yeah," the boy grumbled, "that'll be the day. You ever heard of a Lower becoming a full priest? I'll be lucky if I ever get to monk."

Freddy Soligen sat down suddenly, across from his son, and his voice lost its edge of good-natured humor and became deadly serious. "Listen, son. You were born a High-Lower, just like your father. Unfortunately, I wasn't jumped to Low-Middle until after your birth. But you're not going to stay a High-Lower, any more than I'm going to stay a Low-Middle."

The boy shrugged, his expression almost surly, now. "Aw, what difference does it make? High-Lower isn't too bad. It's sure better than Low-Lower. I got enough stock issued me for anything I'll ever need. Or, if not, I can work a while, just like you've done, and earn a few more shares."

Freddy Soligen's face worked, in alarm. "Hey, Sam, listen here. We've been over this before, but may be not as thoroughly as we should've. Sure, this is People's Capitalism and on top of that the Welfare State; they got all sorts of fancy names to call it. You've got cradle to the grave security. Instead of waiting for old age, or thirty years of service, or something, to get your pension, it starts at birth. At long last, the jerks have inherited the earth."

The boy said plaintively, as though in objection to his father's sneering words. "You aren't talking against the government, or the old time way of doing things, are you Papa? What's wrong with what we got? Everybody's got it made. Nobody hasta –".

His father was impatiently waving a hand at him in negation. "No, everybody doesn't have it made. Almost everybody's bogged down. That's the trouble Sam. The guts have been taken out of us. And ninety-nine people out of a hundred don't care. They've got bread and butter security. They've got trunk to keep them happy. And they've got the fracasos to watch, the sadistic, gory death of others to keep them amused, and their minds off what's really being done to them. We're not part of that ninety-nine out of a hundred, Sam. We're two of those who aren't jerks. We're on our way up out of the mob, to where life can be full. Got it, son? A full life. Doing things worth doing. Thinking things worth thinking. Associating with people who have it on the ball."

He had come to his feet in his excitement and was pacing before the boy who sat now, mouth slightly agape at his father's emphasis.

"Sam, listen. I'm getting along. Already in my forties, and I never did get much education back when I was your age. Maybe I'll never make it. But you can. That's why I insisted you switch categories. You were born into Communications, like me, but you've switched to Religion. Why'd you think I wanted that?"

"Aw, I don't know, Papa. I thought maybe – "

His father snorted. "Look, son, I haven't spent as much time with you as I should. Especially since your mother left us. She just couldn't stand what she called my being against everything. She was one of the jerks, Sam – "

"You oughtn'ta talk about my mother that way," Sam said sullenly.

"All right, all right. I just meant that she was willing to spend her life sucking on trunk, watching Telly, and living on the pittance income from the unalienable stock shares issued her at birth. But let's get to this religious curd. Son, whatever con man first thought up the idea of gods put practically the whole human race on the sucker list. You say they're giving you comparative religion in your classes at the Temple now, eh? O.K., have you ever heard of a major religion where the priests didn't do just fine for themselves?"

"But Papa... Well, shucks, there's always been – "

"Certainly, certainly, individuals. Crackpots, usually, out of tune with the rest of the priesthood. But the rank and file do pretty well for themselves. Didn't you point out earlier that a Lower, in our society, never makes full priest? Not to speak of bishop, or ultra-bishop. They're Uppers, part of the ruling hierarchy."

"Well, what's all this got to do with me getting into Category Religion? I'd think it'd be more fun in Communications, like you. Gee, Papa, going around meeting all those famous – "

Freddy Soligen's face worked. "Look, son. Sure, I meet lots of people on top. But the thing is, eventually you're going to become one of those people, not just interview them." He began pacing again in nervous irritation.

"Sam, those on top want to stay there. Like always. They freeze things so they, and their kids, will remain on top. In our case, they've made it all but impossible for anybody to progress from the caste they were born in. Not impossible, but almost. They've got to allow for the man with extraordinary ability, like, to bust out to the top, if he's got it on the ball. Otherwise, there'd be an explosion."

"That's not the way they say in school."

"It sure isn't. The story is that anybody can make Upper-Upper if he has the ability. But the thing is, Sam, you can't make a jerk realize he's a jerk. If he sees somebody else rise in caste, he can't see why he shouldn't. That's why real rising has been restricted to Category Military and Category Religion. In the military, a man gives up his security, obviously, and if he's a jerk he dies.

"In Category Religion they've got another way to sort out the jerks and make sure they never get further than monk and beyond the caste of High-Lower. Gods always work in mysterious ways and anybody in Category Religion who doesn't have faith in the wisdom of the God's mysterious choices of who to ordain and who to reject, obviously shows that he's not really got the *true faith* which is, of course, essential to a priest, not to speak of bishop or ultra-bishop. So obviously, the Gods were wise in rejecting him. In simpler words, the would-be priest who simply hasn't got what it takes, can be given the heave-ho without it being necessary for him, or his family or friends, to understand why. It's all very simple; he lacked the humility essential in a priest of the Gods, as proven by his rebellious reaction."

Sam said, unhappily, "I don't get all this."

Freddy Soligen came to a pause before the boy, sat down again abruptly and patted his son's knee. "You're young, Sam. Too young to understand some of it. Trust your father. Stick to your

studies now. You have to get the basic gobbledygook. But you're on your way up the ladder, son. I've got a deal cooking that's going to give us an in. Can't tell you about it now, but it's going to mean an important break for us."

It was then that the door announced, "Major Joseph Mauser, calling on Fredric Soligen."

## IV

Joe Mauser shook hands with the Telly reporter in an abrupt, impatient manner.

Freddy said, "Major, I'd like to introduce my son, Samuel. Sam, this is Major Joe Mauser. You don't follow the fracasas, but the major's one of the best mercenaries in the field."

Sam scrambled to his feet and shook hands. "Gee, Joe Mauser."

Joe looked at him questioningly. "I thought you didn't follow the fracasas."

Sam grinned awkwardly. "Well, gee, you can't miss picking up some stuff about the fighting. All the other guys are buffs."

Joe said to Freddy, "Could I speak to you alone?"

"Certainly, certainly. Sam, run along the major and I have business."

When the boy was gone, Joe sank into a chair and looked up at the Telly reporter accusingly. He said, "This fancy uniform, I stood still for. That idea of picking a song to identify me with and bribing the orchestra leaders to swing into it whenever I enter some restaurant or nightclub, might have its advantages. Getting me all sorts of Telly interviews, between fracasas, and all those write-ups in the fracas buff magazines, I can see the need for, in spite of what it's costing. But what in Zen" – his voice went dangerous – "was the idea of sticking that punch-drunk prizefighter on me in the most respectable nightclub in Greater Washington?"

Freddy grinned ruefully. "Oh, you figured that out, eh?"

"Did you think I was stupid?"

Freddy rubbed his hands together, happily. "He used to be world champion, and you flattened him. It was in every gossip column in the country, every news reporter, played it up. And hell all it cost us was five shares of your Vacuum Tube Transport stock."

"Five shares!"

"Why not? He used to be champ. Now, he's so broke he's got to live on stock he isn't allowed to sell. His basic government issue at birth. He was willing to take a dive cheap, if you ask me."

Joe growled at him unhappily. "I've got news for you, Freddy. Your hired brawler started off as per instructions, evidently, but after a couple of blows had been exchanged his slap-happy brain lost the message and he tried to take me. We're lucky he didn't splatter me all over the dance floor of the Exclusive Club. He didn't take a dive. I had to scuttle him."

Freddy blinked. "Zen!"

"Sure, sure, sure," Joe growled. "Look, next time you decide to spend five shares of my stock on some deal like this, let me know, eh?"

Freddy walked to the sideboard and got glasses. "Whiskey?" he said.

"Tequila, if you've got it," Joe said. "Look, I'm beginning to have second thoughts about this campaign. Where's it got us, so far?"

Freddy brought the fiery Mexican drink and handed it to him, and took a place in the chair opposite. His voice went persuasive. "It's going fine. You're on everybody's lips. First thing you know, some of the armaments firms will be having you indorse their guns, swords, cannon, or whatever."

"Oh, great," Joe growled. "Already my friends are ribbing me about this fancy uniform and all the plugs I've been getting. The glory-grabber isn't any more popular today among real pros than he's ever been."

"Who gives a damn?" Freddy sneered, cynically. "We're not in this to please your lame-brain mercenary pals with their soldier-of-fortune codes of behavior. We're in this for Number One, Joe Mauser, and Number Two, Freddy Soligen."

Joe put away the greater part of his drink. "Sure, sure, sure. But where are we now? Your campaign has been in full swing for months. What's accomplished?"

The small Telly reporter was indignant. "What's accomplished? We've got three Major Joe Mauser buff clubs in full swing and five more starting up. And next month you're going to be on the cover of the *Fracas Times*."

"And I'm still a major and still Mid-Middle caste. And my stock shares available for bribery are running short."

Freddy twisted his mouth and looked worriedly down into his glass. He said unhappily, "We need a gimmick to climax all this. Some kind of gimmick to bring you absolutely to the top."

"A gimmick?" Joe demanded. "What do you mean, a gimmick?"

"You're going to have to do something really spectacular. Make you the biggest Telly hero of them all. We'll have to get you into a real fracas and pull something dramatic. I don't know what, I don't seem to be able to come up with an angle. But when I do, I'll guarantee that every Telly camera covering the fracas will be zeroed in on Joe Mauser."

"Great," Joe growled. "I've got just the gimmick. It'll wow them."

The Telly reporter looked up, hopefully.

"I'll get killed in a burst of glory," Joe said.

## V

A servant took Joe Mauser's cap at the door and requested that Joe follow him. Joe trailed behind on the way to the living room of the mansion, somewhat taken aback by the, to him, ostentation of the display of the luxuries of yesteryear. Among them was to be numbered the butler. Servants, other than military batmen, were simply not in Joe's world. Only the Uppers were in position to utilise the full time of individuals. Long years past, those tasks which once called for servants had been automated, from automated elevators to automated baby-sitters.

The servant announced him and then seemingly disappeared in the brief moment while Joe was bowing formally over Nadine Haer's hand. Even while murmuring the appropriate banalities, Joe wondered how one acquired the ability to seemingly disappear, once one's services were no longer needed. Each man to his own trade, he decided.

He had a date with Nadine, but it turned out that the piquant Upper was not alone. In fact, it was obvious that she had not as yet got around to dressing for her appointment with Joe. He had promised to take her soaring in his sailplane. She was attired, as always, as those dress who have never considered the cost of clothing. And, as ever, when Joe saw her newly, after a period of a day or more away, he was taken with her intensity and her almost brittle beauty. What was it that the aristocrat seemed able to acquire after but a generation or two of what they were pleased to call breeding? That aloof quality, the exquisite gentility.

"Joe," Nadine said, "you'll be pleased to meet Philip Holland, Category Government, Rank Secretary. Phil, Major Joseph Mauser."

The other, possibly forty, shook hands firmly and looked into Joe's face. He had a crisp manner. "Good heavens, yes," he said. "That remarkable innovation of using an engineless aircraft for reconnaissance. My old friend, Marshal Cogswell, was speaking of it the other day. I assume that in advance you purchased stock in the firms which manufacture such craft, major. They must be booming."

Joe grimaced wryly. "No, sir. I wasn't smart enough to think of that. Professional soldiers are traditionally stupid. What was the old expression? They can take their shirts off without unbuttoning their collars."

Philip Holland cocked his head, even as he chuckled. "I detect a note of bitterness, major."

Nadine said airily, "Joe is ambitious, thinking the answer to all his problems lies in jumping his caste to Upper."

Joe looked at her impatiently to where she sat on a Mid-Twentieth Century type sofa.

Philip Holland said, "Possibly he's right, my dear. Each of us have different needs to achieve such happiness as is possible to man."

To Joe, he sounded just vaguely on the stuffy side, even through the crispness. By nature nervous and quick moving, Holland seemed to try and project an air of calm which didn't quite come off. Joe wondered what his relationship to Nadine could be, a twinge of jealousy there. But that was ridiculous. Nadine must be in the vicinity of thirty. Obviously, she knew, and had known, many men as attracted to her as was Joe Mauser – And men in her own caste, at that. Somehow, though, he felt Holland was no Upper. The other simply didn't have the air.

Joe said to him, "Nadine doesn't get my point. I contend that in a strata divided society, it's hard to realize yourself fully until you're a member of the upper caste. Admittedly, perhaps you won't even if you are such a member, but at least you haven't the obstacles with which the lower class or classes are beset."

"Interestingly stated," Holland said briskly. He returned to his chair from which he had arisen to shake hands with Joe, and looked at Nadine. "You said, on introducing us, that Joe would be glad to meet me, my dear. Why, especially?"

Nadine laughed. "Because I have been practicing your arguments upon him."

Both of the men frowned at her.

Nadine looked at Joe. "Phil Holland's the most interesting man I know, I do believe. He's secretary to Marlow Mannerheim, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and simply couldn't be more privy to the inner workings of government. It was Phil who convinced me that something is wrong with our socio-economic system."

"Oh?" Joe said. He wasn't really interested. Let society solve its problems. He had his own. And they were sufficient unto themselves as well as the day thereof. However, conversation was to be kept moving. He needed the other. "I've heard it contended that any type of government is good given capable, intelligent personnel to run it, or bad if not so managed. What was the example I read somewhere? Both heaven and hell are despotisms."

Phil Holland shrugged. "An interesting observation. However, institutions, including socio-political ones, can become outdated. When they do, no matter how intelligent, capable and honest the governmental heads, that socio-political system can be a hell. If, at such time there are capable, intelligent persons available, they will take such measures as are necessary to change the institutions."

Nadine had come to her feet. "The subject is my favorite, but I must change. Joe is taking me a-gliding, and I'm sure this frock isn't *de rigueur*. You gentlemen will excuse me?" She was off before they had time to come to their feet.

Joe Mauser settled himself again, crossing his legs. He said, idly, "And you think our basic institutions have reached the state of needing change?"

"Perhaps, although as a member of the Government Category, it should hardly be my position to advocate such." He seemed to switch subjects. "Have you read much of the Roman *ludi*, the games as we call them?"

"The gladiators and such?" Joe shrugged. "I've read a bit about them. It's been pointed out, in fact by Dr. Haer, among others, that basically our present day fracasas serve the same purposes. That instead of bread and circuses, provided by the Roman patricians to keep the unemployed Roman mob from becoming restive, we give them trunk pills and Telly violence."

"Um-m-m," Holland nodded, "but that isn't the point I was making right now. What I was thinking was that at first the Roman games were athletic affairs without bloodshed. It wasn't until 264 B.C. that three pairs of slaves were sent in to fight with swords. By 183 B.C. the number had gone up to sixty pairs. By 145 B.C. ninety pairs fought for three days. But that was just the beginning. They really got under way with the dictators. Sulla put a hundred lions into the arena, but Julius Caesar topped that with four hundred and Pompey that with six hundred, plus over four hundred leopards and twenty elephants. Augustus beat them all with three thousand five hundred elephants and ten thousand men killed in a series of games. But it was the emperors who really expanded the *ludi*. Trajan had ten thousand animals killed in the arena to celebrate his victory over the Dacians, not to mention eleven thousand people.

"Are you surprised at my memory? The subject has always fascinated me. For one thing, I am a great believer in the theory that history repeats itself. As time went on, arenas were built all over the empire, even small towns boasted their own. In Rome, the number of them grew so that eventually an avid follower could attend every day, the year around. And as they increased in quantity they also had to grow more extreme to hold the fan's attention. The Emperor Philip, in celebrating the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome, had killed a thousand pair of gladiators, a rhinoceros, six hippopotami, ten hyenas, ten giraffes, twenty wild asses, ten tigers, ten zebras, thirty leopards, sixty lions, thirty-two elephants, forty wild horses. I am afraid I forgot the rest."

Joe stirred in his chair. The other's personality grew on him. The crisp voice had a certain magnetic quality that made what he said important, somehow. However, Joe's interest in Roman history wasn't exactly paramount.

Holland said, "You wonder at what I am driving, eh? Do you realize the expense involved in getting a rhinoceros to Rome in those days? Not to speak of hippopotami, tigers, lions and leopards. Few people realize the extent to which the Romans went to acquire exotic animals to be slaughtered for the edification of the mob. They penetrated as far south as Kenya, there are still the ruins of a Roman fort there; as far east as Indonesia; as far north as the Baltic, and there is even evidence that they brought polar bears from Iceland."

Philip Holland snorted, as though in contempt. "But the mob wearied of even such spectacle as giraffes being killed by pigmies from the Iturbi forest. The games had started as fights between skilled swordsmen, being observed by knowledgeable combat soldiers of a warrior people. But as the Romans lost their warlike ardor and became a worthless mob performing no useful act for either themselves or the State, they no longer appreciated a drawn-out duel between equals. They wanted quick blood, and lots of it, and turned to mass slaughter of Christians, runaway slaves, criminals and whoever else they could find to throw to the lions, crocodiles or whatever. Even this became old hat, and they turned increasingly to more extreme sadism. Children were hung up by their heels and animals turned loose to pull them down. Men were tied face to face with rotting corpses and so remained until death. Animals were taught to rape virgins."

Joe Mauser stirred again. What in Zen was this long monologue on the Roman games leading to?

Holland said, "By the way, contrary to some belief, the games didn't end upon Christianity becoming the dominant faith and finally the State religion. Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 A.D. but it wasn't until 365 that Valentinian passed a law against sacrificing humans to animals in the arena and the gladiator schools remained in operation until 399. The arenas were finally closed in 404 A.D. but by that time the Roman Empire was a mockery. In all they last more than half a millennium, but things move faster these days."

The tone of voice changed abruptly and Holland snapped a question at Joe. "By your age, I would imagine you've participated in the present day fracas for some fifteen years. How have they changed in that time?"

Joe was taken aback. "Why ..." he said, hesitated as he got the other's point, then went on, nodding. "Yes. They used to be company size – a few hundred lads involved. After a while, a battalion size fracas became fairly commonplace, then about ten years ago a corporation of any size had to be able to put at least a regiment into the field and the biggies had brigades."

"And now?" Holland urged.

"Now a divisional size fracas is the thing."

"Yes, and if a corporation isn't among the top dozen or so, a single defeat can mean bankruptcy."

Joe nodded. He had known of such cases.

Holland leaned back in his chair, as though all his points had been made. He said, his voice less brisk, "Our People's Capitalism, our Welfare State, took the road of bringing the equivalent of the Roman *ludi* to keep our people in a state of stupefied acceptance of the *status quo*. And as in the case of Rome, the games are bankrupting it. Our present day patrician class, our Uppers, have a tiger by the tail, Joseph Mauser, and can't let go. We need those capable and intelligent people of whom you spoke earlier, to make some basic changes. Where are they? Nadine said that your great driving ambition is to be jumped to Upper in caste. But even though you make it, what will you have on your hands but these problems that the Uppers seem unable to solve?"

Joe said, impatiently, "Possibly you're right. What you say about the fracas becoming bigger and more expensive is true. They're also becoming more bloody. In the old days, a corporation or union going into a fracas was conscious of having a high casualty list among the mercenaries. Highly trained soldiers cost money. Insurance, indemnity, pensions, all the rest of it. Consequently, you'd fight a battle of movement, maneuver, brainwork on the part of the officer commanding, so that practically nobody was hurt on either side. One force or the other would surrender after being caught

in an impossible situation. Not any more. These days, they want blood. Plenty of blood. And they want the Telly cameras to focus right into the middle of it."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.