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# THE REVERSIBLE REVOLUTIONS

By Cyril M. Kornbluth

Albing Publications, 1941

J. C. Battle, late of the Foreign Legion, Red Army, United States Marines, Invincibles De Bolivia and Coldstream Guards, alias Alexandre de Foma, Christopher Jukes, Burton Macaulay and Joseph Hagstrom—né Etzel Bernstein—put up his hands.

"No tricks," warned the feminine voice. The ample muzzle of the gun in his back shifted slightly, seemingly from one hand to another. Battle felt his pockets being gone through. "Look out for the left hip," he volunteered. "That gat's on a hair-trigger."

"Thanks," said the feminine voice. He felt the little pencilgun being gingerly removed. "Two Colts," said the voice admiringly, "a police .38, three Mills grenades, pencilgun, brass knuckles, truncheons of lead, leather and rubber, one stiletto, tear-gas gun, shells for same, prussic-acid hypo kit, thuggee's braided cord, sleeve Derringer and a box of stink bombs. Well, you walking armory! Is that all?"

"Quite," said Battle. "Am I being taken for a ride?" He looked up and down the dark street and saw nothing in the way of accomplices.

"Nope. I may decide to drop you here. But before you find out, suppose you tell me how you got on my trail?" The gun jabbed viciously into his back. "Talk!" urged the feminine voice nastily.

"How *I* got on *your* trail?" exploded Battle. "Dear lady, I can't see your face, but I assure you that I don't recognize your voice, that I'm not on anybody's trail, that I'm just a soldier of fortune resting up during a slack spell in the trade. And anyway, I don't knock off ladies. We—we have a kind of code."

"Yeah?" asked the voice skeptically. "Let's see your left wrist." Mutely Battle twitched up the cuff and displayed it. Aside from a couple of scars it was fairly ordinary. "What now?" he asked.

"I'll let you know," said the voice. Battle's hand was twisted behind his back, and he felt a cold, stinging liquid running over the disputed wrist. "What the—?" he began impatiently.

"Oh!" ejaculated the voice, aghast. "I'm sorry! I thought—" The gun relaxed and Battle turned. He could dimly see the girl in the light of the merc lamp far down the deserted street. She appeared to be blushing. "Here I've gone and taken you apart," she complained, "and you're not even from Breen at all! Let me help you." She began picking up Battle's assorted weapons from the sidewalk where she had deposited them. He stowed them away as she handed them over.

"There," she said. "That must be the last of them."

"The hypo kit," he reminded her. She was holding it, unconsciously, in her left hand. He hefted the shoulder holster under his coat and grunted. "That's better," he said.

"You must think I'm an awful silly," said the girl shyly.

Battle smiled generously as he caught sight of her face. "Not at all," he protested. "I've made the same mistake myself. Only I've not always caught myself in time to realize it." This with a tragic frown and sigh.

"*Really?*" she breathed. "You must be awfully important—all these guns and things."

"Tools of the trade," he said noncommittally. "My card." He handed her a simple pasteboard bearing the crest of the United States Marines and the legend:

LIEUTENANT J. C. BATTLE  
SOLDIER OF FORTUNE  
REVOLUTIONS A SPECIALTY

She stared, almost breathless. "How wonderful!" she said.

"In every major insurrection for the past thirty years," he assured her complacently.

"That must make you—let's see—" she mused.

"Thirty years, did I say?" he quickly interposed. "I meant twenty. In case you were wondering, I'm just thirty-two years old." He tweaked his clipped, military moustache.

"Then you were in your first at—"

"Twelve. Twelve and a half, really. Shall we go somewhere for a cup of coffee, Miss—er—ah—?"

"McSweeney," she said, and added demurely, "but my friends all call me Spike."

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"China? Dear me, yes! I was with the Eighth Route Army during the celebrated long trek from Annam to Szechuan Province. And I shouldn't call it boasting to admit that without me—"

Miss Spike McSweeney appeared to be hanging on his every word. "Have you ever," she asked, "done any technical work?"

"Engineering? Line of communication? Spike, we fighters leave that to the 'greaseballs,' as they are called in most armies. I admit that I fly a combat fighter as well as the next—assuming that he's pretty good—but as far as the engine goes, I let that take care of itself. Why do you ask?"

"Lieutenant," she said earnestly, "I think I ought to tell you what all this mess is about."

"Dear lady," he said gallantly, "the soldier does not question his orders."

"Anyway," said Miss McSweeney, "I need your help. It's a plot—a big one. A kind of revolution. You probably know more about them than I do, but this one seems to be the dirtiest trick that was ever contemplated."

"How big is it?" asked Battle, lighting a cigarette.

"Would you mind not smoking?" asked the girl hastily, shrinking away from the flame. "Thanks. How big is it? World-scale. A world revolution. Not from the Right, not from the Left, but, as near as I can make out, from Above."

"How's that?" asked Battle, startled.

"The leader is what you'd call a scientist-puritan, I guess. His name's Breen—Dr. Malachi Breen, formerly of every important university and lab in the world. And now he's got his own revolution all planned out. It's for a world without smoking, drinking, swearing, arguing, dancing, movies, music, rich foods, steam heat—all those things."

"Crackpot!" commented the lieutenant.

She stared at him grimly. "You wouldn't think so if you knew him," said Spike. "I'll tell you what I know. I went to work for him as a stenographer. He has a dummy concern with offices in Rockefeller Plaza and a factory in New Jersey. He's supposed to be manufacturing Pot-O-Klutch, a device to hold pots on the stove in case of an earthquake. With that as a front, he goes on with his planning. He's building machines of some kind in his plant—and with his science and his ambition, once he springs his plans, the world will be at his feet!"

"The field of action," said Battle thoughtfully, "would be New Jersey principally. Now, you want me to break this insurrection?"

"Of course!" agonized the girl. "As soon as I found out what it really was, I hurried to escape. But I knew I was being followed by *his* creatures!"

"Exactly," said Battle. "Now, what's in this for me?"

"I don't understand. You mean—?"

"Money," said Battle. "The quartermaster's getting short-handed. Say twenty thousand?"

The girl only stared. "I haven't any money," she finally gasped. "I thought—"

"You thought I was a dilettante?" asked Battle. "Dear lady, my terms are fifty percent cash, remainder conditional on the success of the campaign. I'm sorry I can't help you—"

"Look out!" screamed the girl. Battle spun around and ducked under the table as a bomb crashed through the window of the coffee shop and exploded in his face.

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"Open your eyes, damn you!" growled a voice.

"Stephen—the profanity—" objected another voice mildly.

"Sorry, Doc. Wake, friend! The sun is high."

Battle came to with a start and saw a roast-beef face glowering into his. He felt for his weapons. They were all in place. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Ah," said the second voice gently. "Our convert has arisen. On your feet, Michael."

"My name is Battle," said the lieutenant. "J. C. Battle. My card."

"Henceforth you shall be known as Michael, the Destroying Angel," said the second voice. "It's the same name, really."

Battle looked around him. He was in a kind of factory, dim and vacant except for himself and the two who had spoken. They wore pure white military uniforms; one was a tough boy, obviously. It hurt Battle to see how clumsily he carried his guns. The bulges were plainly obvious through his jacket and under his shoulder. The other either wore his more skillfully or wasn't heeled at all. That seemed likely, for his gentle blue eyes carried not a trace of violence, and his rumpled, pure white hair was scholarly and innocent.

"Will you introduce yourselves?" asked the lieutenant calmly.

"Steve Haglund, outta Chi," said the tough.

"Malachi Breen, manufacturer of Pot-O-Klutch and temporal director of Sweetness and Light, the new world revolution," said the old man.

"Ah," said Battle, sizing them up. "What happened to Miss McSweeney?" he asked abruptly, remembering.

"She is in good hands," said Breen. "Rest easy on her account, Michael. You have work to do."

"Like what?" asked the lieutenant.

"Trigger work," said Haglund. "Can you shoot straight?"

In answer there roared out three flat crashes, and Battle stood with his smoking police special in his hand. As he reloaded he said, "Get yourself a new lathe, Dr. Breen. And if you'll look to see how close together the bullets were—"

The old man pattered over to Battle's target. "Extraordinary," he murmured. "A poker chip would cover them." His manner grew relatively brisk and businesslike. "How much do you want for the job?" he asked. "How about a controlling factor in the world of Sweetness and Light?"

Battle smiled slowly. "I *never* accept a proposition like that," he said. "Twenty thousand is my talking point for all services over a six-month period."

"Done," said Breen promptly, counting out twenty bills from an antiquated wallet. Battle pocketed them without batting

an eyelash. "Now," he said, "what's my job?"

"As you may know," said Breen, "Sweetness and Light is intended to bring into being a new world. Everybody will be happy, and absolute freedom will be the rule and not the exception. All carnal vices will be forbidden and peace will reign. Now, there happens to be an enemy of this movement at large. He thinks he has, in fact, a rival movement. It is your job to convince him that there is no way but mine. And you are at absolute liberty to use any argument you wish. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," said Battle. "What's his name?"

"Lenninger Underbottam," said Breen, grinding his teeth. "The most unprincipled faker that ever posed as a scientist and scholar throughout the long history of the world. His allegedly rival movement is called 'Devil Take the Hindmost.' The world he wishes to bring into being would be one of the most revolting excesses—all compulsory, mark you! I consider it my duty to the future to blot him out!"

His rage boiled over into a string of expletives. Then, looking properly ashamed, he apologized. "Underbottam affects me strangely and horribly. I believe that if I were left alone with him I should—I, exponent of Sweetness and Light!—resort to violence. Anyway, Lieutenant, you will find him either at his offices in the Empire State Building where the rotter cowers under the alias of the Double-Action Kettlesnatcher Manufacturing Corporation or in his upstate plant where he is busy turning out not only weapons and defenses but also his ridiculous Kettlesnatcher, a device to remove kettles from the stove in case of hurricane or typhoon."

Battle completed his notes and stowed away his memo book. "Thank you, sir," he said. "Where shall I deliver the body?"

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"Hello!" whispered a voice.

"Spike!" Battle whispered back. "What are you doing here?" He jerked a thumb at the illuminated ground glass of the door and the legend, *Double-Action Kettlesnatcher Manufacturing Corp., Lenninger Underbottam, Pres.*

"They told me where to find you."

"They?"

"Mr. Breen, of course. Who did you think?"

"But," expostulated the lieutenant, "I thought you hated him and his movement."

"Oh, that," said the girl casually. "It was just a whim. Are you going to knock him off?"

"Of course. But how did you get here?"

"Climbed one of the elevator shafts. The night watchman never saw me. How did you make it?"

"I slugged the guard and used a service lift. Let's go."

Battle applied a clamp to the doorknob and wrenched it out like a turnip from muddy ground. The door swung open as his two Colts leaped into his hands. The fat man at the ornate desk rose with a cry of alarm and began to pump blood as Battle drilled him between the eyes.

"Okay. That's enough," said a voice. The lieutenant's guns were snatched from his hands with a jerk that left them stinging, and he gaped in alarm as he saw, standing across the room, an exact duplicate of the bleeding corpse on the floor.

"You Battle?" asked the duplicate, who was holding a big, elaborate sort of radio tube in his hand.

"Yes," said the lieutenant feebly. "My card—"

"Never mind that. Who's the dame?"

"Miss McSweeney. And you, sir, are—?"

"I'm Underbottam, Chief of Devil Take the Hindmost. You from Breen?"

"I was engaged by the doctor for a brief period," admitted Battle. "However, our services were terminated—"

"Liar," snapped Underbottam. "And if they weren't, they will be in a minute or two. Lamp this!" He rattled the radio tube, and from its grid leaped a fiery radiance that impinged momentarily on the still-bleeding thing that Battle had shot down. The thing was consumed in one awful blast of heat. "End of a robot," said Underbottam, shaking the tube again. The flame died down, and there was nothing left of the corpse but a little fused lump of metal.

"Now, you going to work for me, Battle?"

"Why not?" shrugged the lieutenant.

"Okay. Your duties are as follows: Get Breen. I don't care how you get him, but get him soon. He posed for twenty years as a scientist without ever being apprehended. Well, I'm going to do some apprehending that'll make all previous apprehending look like no apprehension at all. You with me?"

"Yes," said Battle, very much confused. "What's that thing you have?"

"Piggy-back heat ray. You transpose the air in its path into an unstable isotope which tends to carry all energy as heat. Then you shoot your juice, light or whatever along the isotopic path and you burn whatever's on the receiving end. You want a few?"

"No," said Battle. "I have my gats. What else have you got for offense and defense?"

Underbottam opened a cabinet and proudly waved an arm. "Everything," he said. "Disintegrators, heat rays, bombs of every type. And impenetrable shields of energy, massive and portable. What more do I need?"

"Just as I thought," mused the lieutenant. "You've solved half the problem. How about tactics? Who's going to use your weapons?"

"Nothing to that," declaimed Underbottam airily. "I just announce that I have the perfect social system. My army will sweep all before it. Consider: Devil Take the Hindmost promises what every persons wants—pleasure, pure and simple. Or vicious and complex, if necessary. Pleasure will be compulsory; people will be so happy that they won't have time to fight or oppress or any of the other things that make the present world a caricature of a madhouse."

"What about hangovers?" unexpectedly asked Spike McSweeney.

Underbottam grunted. "My dear young lady," he said. "If you had a hangover, would you want to do anything except die? It's utterly automatic. Only puritans—damn them!—have time enough on their hands to make war. You see?"

"It sounds reasonable," confessed the girl.

"Now, Battle," said Underbottam. "What are your rates?"

"Twen—" began the lieutenant automatically. Then, remembering the ease with which he had made his last twenty thousand, he paused. "Thir—" he began again. "Forty thousand," he said firmly, holding out his hand.

"Right," said Underbottam, handing him two bills.

Battle scanned them hastily and stowed them away. "Come on," he said to Spike. "We have a job to do."

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The lieutenant courteously showed Spike a chair. "Sit down," he said firmly. "I'm going to unburden myself." Agitatedly Battle paced his room. "I don't know where in hell I'm at!" he yelled frantically. "All my life I've been a soldier. I know military science forward and backward, but I'm damned if I can make head or tail of this bloody mess. Two scientists, each at the other's throat, me hired by both of them to knock off the other—and incidentally, where do you stand?" He

glared at the girl.

"Me?" she asked mildly. "I just got into this by accident. Breen manufactured me originally, but I got out of order and gave you that fantastic story about me being a steno at his office—I can hardly believe it was me!"

"What do you mean, manufactured you?" demanded Battle.

"I'm a robot, Lieutenant. Look." Calmly she took off her left arm and put it on again.

Battle collapsed into a chair. "Why didn't you tell me?" he groaned.

"You didn't ask me," she retorted with spirit. "And what's wrong with robots? I'm a very superior model, by the way—the Seduction Special, designed for diplomats, army officers (that must be why I sought you out), and legislators. Part of Sweetness and Light. Breen put a lot of work into me himself. I'm only good for about three years, but Breen expects the world to be his by then."

Battle sprang from his chair. "Well, this pretty much decides me, Spike. I'm washed up. I'm through with Devil Take the Hindmost and Sweetness and Light both. I'm going back to Tannu-Tuva for the counterrevolution. Damn Breen, Underbottam and the rest of them!"

"That isn't right, Lieutenant," said the robot thoughtfully. "Undeterred, one or the other of them is bound to succeed. And that won't be nice for you. A world without war?"

"Awk!" grunted Battle. "You're right, Spike. Something has to be done. But not by me. That heat ray—ugh!" He shuddered.

"Got any friends?" asked Spike.

"Yes," said Battle, looking at her hard. "How did you know?"

"I just guessed—" began the robot artlessly.

"Oh no you didn't," gritted the lieutenant. "I was just going to mention them. Can you read minds?"

"Yes," said the robot in a small voice. "I was built that way. Governor Burly—faugh! It was a mess."

"And—and you know all about me?" demanded Battle.

"Yes," she said. "I know you're forty-seven and not thirty-two. I know that you were busted from the Marines. And I know that your real name is—"

"That's enough," he said, white-faced.

"But," said the robot softly, "I love you anyway."

"What?" sputtered the lieutenant.

"And I know that you love me, too, even if I am—what I am."

Battle stared at her neat little body and her sweet little face. "Can you be kissed?" he asked at length.

"Of course, Lieutenant," she said. Then, demurely, "I told you I was a very superior model."

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To expect a full meeting of the Saber Club would be to expect too much. In the memory of the oldest living member, Major Breughel, who had been to the Netherlands Empire what Clive and Warren Hastings had been to the British, two thirds—nearly—had gathered from the far corners of the earth to observe the funeral services for a member who had been embroiled in a gang war and shot in the back. The then mayor of New York had been re-elected for that reason.

At the present meeting, called by First Class Member Battle, about a quarter of the membership appeared.

There was Peasely, blooded in Tonkin, 1899. He had lost his left leg to the thigh with Kolchak in Siberia. Peasely was the bombardier of the Saber Club. With his curious half-lob he could place a Mills or potato masher or nitro bottle on a dime.

Vaughn, he of the thick Yorkshire drawl, had the unique honor of hopping on an Axis submarine and cleaning it out with a Lewis gun from stem to stern, then, single-handed, piloting it to Liverpool, torpedoing a German mine layer on the way.

The little Espera had left a trail of bloody revolution through the whole of South America; he had a weakness for lost causes. It was worth his life to cross the Panama Canal; therefore he made it a point to do so punctually, once a year. He never had his bullets removed. By latest tally three of his ninety-seven pounds were lead.

"When," demanded Peasely fretfully, "is that lug going to show up? I had an appointment with a cabinetmaker for a new leg. Had to call it off for Battle's summons. Bloody shame—he doesn't give a hang for my anatomy."

"Ye'll coom when 'e wish, bate's un," drawled Vaughn unintelligibly. Peasely snarled at him.

Espera sprang to his feet. "Miss Millicent," he said effusively.

"Don't bother to rise, gentlemen," announced the tall, crisp woman who had entered. "As if you would anyway. I just collected on that Fiorenza deal, Manuel," she informed Espera. "Three gees. How do you like that?"

"I could have done a cleaner job," said Peasely snappishly. He had cast the only blackball when this first woman to enter the Saber Club had been voted a member. "What did you use?"

"Lyddite," she said, putting on a pale lipstick.

"Thot's pawky explaw-seeve," commented Vaughn. "I'd noat risk such."

She was going to reply tartly when Battle strode in. They greeted him with a muffled chorus of sighs and curses.

"Hi," he said briefly. "I'd like your permission to introduce a person waiting outside. Rules do not apply in her case for—for certain reasons. May I?"

There was a chorus of assent. He summoned Spike, who entered. "Now," said Battle, "I'd like your help in a certain matter of great importance to us all."

"Yon's t' keenin' tool," said the Yorkshireman.

"Okay, then. We have to storm and take a plant in New Jersey. This plant is stocked with new weapons—dangerous weapons—weapons that, worst of all, are intended to effect a world revolution which will bring an absolute and complete peace within a couple of years, thus depriving us of our occupations without compensation. Out of self-defense we must take this measure. Who is with me?"

All hands shot up in approval. "Good. Further complications are as follows: This is only one world revolution; there's another movement which is in rivalry to it, and which will surely dominate if the first does not. So we will have to split our forces—"

"No you won't," said the voice of Underbottam.

"Where are you?" asked Battle, looking around the room.

"In my office, you traitor. I'm using a wire screen in your clubroom for a receiver and loudspeaker in a manner you couldn't possibly understand."

"I don't like that traitor talk," said Battle evenly. "I mailed back your money—and Breen's. Now what was that you said?"

"We'll be waiting for you together in Rockefeller Center. Breen and I have pooled our interests. After we've worked our revolution we're going to flip a coin. That worm doesn't approve of gambling, of course, but he'll make this exception."

"And if I know you, Underbottam," said Battle heavily, "it won't be gambling. What time in Rockefeller Center?"

"Four in the morning. Bring your friends—nothing like a showdown. By heaven, I'm going to save the world whether you like it or not!"

The wire screen from which the voice had been coming suddenly fused in a flare of light and heat.

Miss Millicent broke the silence. "Scientist!" she said in a voice heavy with scorn. Suddenly there was a gun in her palm. "If he's human I can drill him," she declared.

"Yeah," said Battle gloomily. "That was what I thought."

---

The whole length of Sixth Avenue not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse, as the six crept through the early morning darkness under the colossal shadow of the RCA building. The vertical architecture of the Center was lost in the sky as they hugged the wall of the Music Hall.

"When do you suppose they'll finish it?" asked Peasely, jerking a thumb at the boarding over the Sixth Avenue subway under construction.<sup>[1]</sup>

"What do you care?" grunted Battle. "We need a scout to take a look at the plaza. How about you, Manuel? You're small and quick."

"Right," grinned Espera. "I could use a little more weight." He sped across the street on silent soles, no more than a shadow in the dark. But he had been spotted, for a pale beam of light hissed for a moment on the pavement beside him. He flattened and gestured.

"Come on—he says," muttered Miss Millicent. They shot across the street and flattened against the building. "Where are they, Manuel?" demanded Battle.

"Right there in the Plaza beside the fountain. They have a mess of equipment. Tripods and things. A small generator."

"Shall I try a masher?" asked Peasely.

"Do," said Miss Millicent. "Nothing would be neater."

The man with the wooden leg unshipped a bomb from his belt and bit out the pin. He held it to his ear for just a moment to hear it sizzle. "I love the noise," he explained apologetically to Spike. Then he flung it with a curious twist of his arm.

*Crash!*

Battle looked around the corner of the building. "They haven't been touched. And that racket's going to draw the authorities," he said. "They have some kind of screen, I guess."

"Darling," whispered Spike.

"What it is?" asked Battle, sensing something in her tone.

"Nothing," she said, as women will.

"Close in under heavy fire, maybe?" suggested the little Espera.

"Yep," snapped Battle. "Oops! There goes a police whistle."

Pumping lead from both hips, the six of them advanced down the steps to the Plaza, where Breen and Underbottom were waiting behind a kind of shimmering illumination.

The six ducked behind the waist-high stone wall of the Danish restaurant, one of the eateries which rimmed the Plaza. Hastily, as the others kept up their fire, Vaughn set up a machine gun.

"Doon, a' fu' leef!" he ordered. They dropped behind the masking stone. "Cae oot, yon cawbies," yelled Vaughn.

His only answer was a sudden dropping of the green curtain and a thunderbolt or something like it that winged at him and went way over his head, smashing into the RCA building and shattering three stories.

"Haw!" laughed Peasely. "They can't aim! Watch this." He bit another grenade and bowled it underhand against the curtain. The ground heaved and bucked as the crash of the bomb sounded. In rapid succession he rolled over enough to make the once-immaculate Plaza as broken a bit of terrain as was ever seen, bare pipes and wires exposed underneath. Underbottom's face was distorted with rage.

The curtain dropped abruptly and the two embattled scientists and would-be saviors of the world squirted wildly with everything they had—rays in every color of the spectrum, thunderbolts and lightning flashes, some uncomfortably near.

The six couldn't face up to it; what they saw nearly blinded them. They flattened themselves to the ground and prayed mutely in the electric clash and spatter of science unleashed.

"Darling," whispered Spike, her head close to Battle's.

"Yes?"

"Have you got a match?" she asked tremulously. "No—don't say a word." She took the match pack and kissed him awkwardly and abruptly. "Stay under cover," she said. "Don't try to follow. When my fuel tank catches it'll be pretty violent."

Suddenly she was out from behind the shelter and plastered against one of the tumbled rocks, to leeward of the worldsavers' armory. A timid bullet or two was coming from the Danish restaurant.

In one long, staggering run she made nearly seven yards, then dropped, winged by a heat ray that cauterized her arm. Cursing, Spike held the matches in her mouth and tried to strike one with her remaining hand. It lit, and she applied it to the match pack, dropping it to the ground. Removing what remained of her right arm, she lit it at the flaring pack. It blazed like a torch; her cellulose skin was highly inflammable.

She used the arm to ignite her body at strategic points and then, a blazing, vengeful figure of flame, hurled herself on the two scientists in the Plaza.

From the restaurant Battle could see, through tear-wet eyes, the features of the fly-by-night worldsavers. Then Spike's fuel tank exploded and everything blotted out in one vivid sheet of flame.

"Come on! The cops!" hissed Miss Millicent. She dragged him, sobbing as he was, into the Independent subway station that let out into the Center. Aimlessly he let her lead him onto an express, the first of the morning.

"Miss Millicent, I loved her," he complained.

"Why don't you join the Foreign Legion to forget?" she suggested amiably.

"What?" he said, making a wry face. "Again?"

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When last I saw this area, 28 years almost to the day after publication of Cyril's story, the boarding was there still—or again.—  
Ed.

[The end of *The Reversible Revolutions* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]