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# Orders

by

MALCOLM JAMESON

*This is the last Malcolm Jameson story that we can publish, a bit of the Commander Bullard saga found among Jameson's papers after his death.*

Being the world's worst thumb twiddler, Bullard was unhappy. He was restless, disgusted and bored. There was nothing to do. There could be nothing to do. And if there should be, by any chance, there was nothing to do it with. That he temporarily bore the rank of admiral while acting as commandant of the great Lunar Base helped him not at all. He had little taste for brass-hattism and an immense loathing for swivel chairs. He got up from the one he was sitting in and paced the floor of his sumptuous office for awhile. Then he planted himself before its big window and stared gloomily at the dreary scene outside.

The uncanny silence in that former bustling place was depressing. No longer was heard the shrill whistles of traveling

cranes, the whir of fabricating machines, or the *boom-boom* of heavy stamps. The shops were closed; the men laid off; the ships away. Ships! Bullard's mouth tightened. Yes, there were ships present, rows upon rows of them—dead hulls of what had once been proud warships, now rusting away until the wrecking crews should come and go to work on them. What remnants of the Fleet that had escaped the ax wielded by the gang of pacifists now in control were dispersed to the far corners of the System, their crews enjoying themselves on leisurely, junketing "good-will cruises." His own good ship, the *Pollux*, was the sole exception. She lay at the moment over in the remodeling dock in Gobi Crater, her machinery torn out and the bulk of her crew disbanded. The amazing new astral drive units that were meant to go in her still lay unboxed in the storehouse, the nullochrons were not even on order. It might be a year before work was resumed. Bullard sighed. So this was the peace he had fought hard for. Bah!

Peace reigned from the flaming face of Sol to the outermost reaches of the Plutonian orbit. All was serene. Some claimed it would always be serene hereafter; the human race was fed up with war. There was never to be another one. Yes, peace. It was supposed to be wonderful, but Bullard felt otherwise. It was not that he was a war-loving man; far from it. But he knew his Martians, and his Callistans, and his Venusians, and all the rest, not forgetting some scheming Tellurians who dwelt down below on Earth. It was too much to expect that they would stay bound forever by the lofty phrases and noble sentiments expressed in the Treaty of Juno. It is true that they had forsworn the use of force in interplanetary relations, but the paths of history are littered with the torn scraps of similar treaties, though men seemed to have forgotten it. At any rate, the peace had borne

heavily on the armed services. Officers and men were retired in droves, battleships and cruisers were enthusiastically scrapped, new construction came to a dead halt. There was nothing to look forward to but dull routine and inaction. Bullard sighed again, and gnawed his lower lip.

He was about to turn away from the window, weary from the bleak view and his own depressing thoughts, when his eye caught the glint of sunlight on burnished gold. The glitter came from a small sky-cycle that had just entered the dome through the southwest portal and was skimming to a stop in the middle of the parade ground. Bullard knew at once from its dark-green color that it belonged to the State Department, and from the golden insignia it sported that it was the personal car of a very high official. He frowned speculatively at that, for experience had taught him that unscheduled visits from diplomatic bigwigs invariably meant trouble. Their contempt for the Service was notorious—they haughtily ignored the uniformed men until their own muddlings sometimes brought affairs to such a pass that there was nothing left but to call in men of action to strengthen their hand.

"Wonder what this bird wants?" growled Bullard, watching the man alight from the machine. "If it's a snappy warship for a dirty job, he won't get it. There aren't any." Then he put on his best poker face, recrossed the room, and sat down to await his caller.

"I," announced the caller, exuding pomposity and

incompetence from every pore, "am Lionel Wallowby, Undersecretary of State for Asteroidal Affairs. My calling on you, rather than sending for you, though unprecedented—"

"I am honored," said Bullard, bowing stiffly, but without a quiver of expression. Now he knew whom he had to deal with, for Wallowby's name was a byword, and he knew that the interview was not going to be an easy one. Fellow officers who had dealt with the man complained afterward that the strain of holding themselves in was almost intolerable. Not that Wallowby was a villain, or even malicious. He was simply smug, vain, useless—an outstanding example of what nepotism at its worst can foist upon a suffering public.

"I come about a matter of great urgency which will require your immediate intervention."

"How can anything be urgent in these placid times?" asked Bullard bitterly, "and if so what can I do about it? Article VIII of the Treaty of Juno—of which, if my memory is not at fault, you were one of the drafters—forbids forever the use of force or the threat of force in any situation whatever, regardless of provocation. Isn't that correct?"

"Uh, yes," admitted Mr. Wallowby, squirming in his seat, "but there are aspects of the situation in hand that make it exceptional. You see, it is the attitude of the Trojans. It is distressing. Humiliating. They sidestep, fence, and quibble. We have reached an impasse. An exasperating people, really."

"Quite!" said Bullard. He could think of a hundred adjectives applicable to them, all harsher. Exasperating, indeed! On the

gray rocks of those far-off groups of asteroids lived the lowest and meanest dregs of mankind. Their rulers were fugitive shyster lawyers, disbarred from more decent planets. Their "aristocracy" were retired pirates and gamblers, their "working" populace a medley of every type of petty crook from pickpocket to cutthroat. Their very existence as a quasi-independent nation was a reproach to civilization.

"They take every advantage of their privileged international status," complained Mr. Wallowby.

"They would," said Bullard, dryly. "And why not?"

It was a dig at his caller, for it was Undersecretary Wallowby who had held out at the peace conference for the continued autonomy of the Trojans, alleging that to leave them as they were was the simplest evasion of the age-old rivalry between the Martians and the colonists on the Saturnian satellites. And so it might have been had the Trojans been populated by any other kind of people. But as it turned out, "autonomy," as construed by the bosses of the Trojans meant license to thumb their noses at the rest of the civilized world. They owed their immunity to subjugation to their peculiar location in the Solar System. Both groups rode the orbit of Jupiter, one a half billion miles ahead, the other an equal distance behind the master planet. Therefore, the Jovians periodically made claim for jurisdiction. But there are years when Saturn is actually closer to one or the other of them, and often Mars is closer to both. From the earliest asteroid-grabbing days Mars and Saturn had quarreled over which had the primary interest. The nearsighted framers of the Treaty of Juno had ducked the issue by leaving the Trojan groups autonomous, but yet under the joint protection of both

squabbling claimants. Whereupon the Trojans promptly made the most of it.

Bullard knew the rocky planetoids well, for he had visited them often in the days when manhunters were not handicapped by paralyzing rules. He knew the men who ran them, particularly the swashbuckling fourflusher who styled himself the Boss of Nestor. Since he had defied him more than once in cutting out some wanted man. But those good old days were gone. Nowadays the Trojans wrapped themselves in the blessing of the no-violence terms of the fatuous treaty. No one could enter their ports forcibly, or remove any criminal fugitive without their consent—not even one of their own protectors. Should Mars make harsh claims, the Trojans would appeal to the Saturnians, who in turn, could be counted upon to declare the Martians in the wrong. Or they would work it the other way around. On the other hand if the Earth or any other outside planet presented a claim or grievance, both protectors would be called in. The Trojans played both ends against the middle with great skill. Their position resembled that of certain small Balkan countries at an earlier period in history—they were of little intrinsic worth but of high nuisance value. The least upsetting of the status quo could easily initiate another general war. The Trojan situation, in short, was dynamite.

"What is your difficulty with the Trojans?" Bullard asked, seeing that Wallowby seemed at a loss to proceed. "What do you want of me?"

"I ... uh, that is we ... or the Department, I meant to say," stammered Wallowby, "find we are compelled to ask you to extricate ... no, that isn't what I mean ... *execute* a delicate diplomatic mission. It has to do with a notorious criminal known as Groy the Groat. We have extradited him and now want to secure custody."

"I have no ships in commission here," remarked Bullard, "whereas skyliners make the trip every month. Furthermore, you have a large staff of marshals who are maintained for just such missions. The apprehension of a civil prisoner is outside my jurisdiction." He had not missed Wallowby's fumbling of the word "extricate," and already guessed the civil arm had made a try for Groy and messed it up. Wallowby's capacity for bungling was unsurpassed.

"The Trojans do not treat our marshals with respect," whined Wallowby. He was not used to being talked back to, and he did not like to admit what he had to. "We have sent several, but they are always turned back on one legalistic pretext or another. In our first requisition we claimed Groy on charges of treason, sabotage, fomenting rebellion, and gun-running. They accepted it, but when our officer got there they told him that they had reconsidered. It appears that the crimes enumerated were not sufficient in view of the blanket amnesty clause in the Treaty."

"Of course not," said Bullard bluntly. "They have a political tinge. You should have known better. Isn't that general amnesty clause known widely as the Wallowby Provision?"

Wallowby flushed, then turned huffy.

"It was never intended to give immunity to common scoundrels of the Grory stripe," he said stiffly. "Moreover the treaty is not what I came to discuss."

Bullard shrugged. Wallowby went on.

"Since then we have submitted other requests. Five, to be exact. We have presented evidence of piracy, murder and embezzlement. We have demanded him for smuggling drugs and white slaves, for counterfeiting, and a score of other crimes. Each time they say we may have him if we only send. Each time our marshal arrives there they send him back emptyhanded, always with a different excuse. To make the story short, they are evasive and unco-operative. They have persistently refused to arbitrate. They flout us, admiral, they *flout* us!" It was a wail.

"Maybe they don't want to give up Mr. Grory the Groat," said Bullard.

Wallowby looked momentarily startled as if that suggestion was entirely novel to him. Then he rallied himself and completed his oration.

"We have been correct, considerate and courteous throughout. They repay us with legal sophistries. We have dilly-dallied overlong. My patience is at its end. The hour for action has struck. Now the time has come when we must reveal the iron hand that lies beneath the velvet glove—"

"*What* iron hand?" asked Bullard brutally.

Wallowby blinked and swallowed hard.

"Why, uh, the *potential* iron hand, of course. We must be more impressive. We must be more stern. We must cease making request and make *demands*. You will at once send a warship to Nestor and secure the person of this Grory for us."

"That," said Bullard, rising, "is absolutely absurd. The only ships we have that can take the void have been thoroughly demilitarized. Even if they were armed, we are still forbidden by the terms of your ridiculous treaty from using them. What, I ask, can a gunless battleship do that a letter can't do?"

"You are impertinent, *Acting* Admiral Bullard," said Wallowby with what was meant to be cutting sarcasm. He, too, was on his feet, and his face aflame. "I have wasted words enough on you. Here are your orders. Carry them out."

He jerked a long official envelope from an inner pocket and hurled it onto Bullard's desk. Then, after venting one contemptuous sniff, stalked haughtily out.

"Well, I'll be—" whistled Bullard as the door closed on the back of his departing caller.

He sat for long, staring down at those silly orders and marveling at the incredible stupidity of a man such as Wallowby. Yet, he asked himself after a time, was he so stupid after all? However he might bungle jobs, he had cunning enough to find an out. The suspicion was growing in Bullard's mind that this time it was he who had been chosen for the goat. He glanced through the orders again.

They were official enough, having been signed in open council by no lesser personage than the Director himself. And they were simple. They directed that a demilitarized man-of-war be put in commission at once and sent under the command of a competent officer to the port of Nestor in the Anterior Trojans. Upon arrival the ship's captain was to make peremptory demand upon the Boss of Nestor for the person of one Grory the Groat, receive him into custody, and deliver him to the appropriate authorities on Earth. The demand was to be made in the name of interplanetary law only and was not to be accompanied by threatening words or gestures. If refused, no efforts were to be made to apprehend Grory by force. In the latter event, the visiting officer was to politely withdraw and return to Luna.

"Nuts!" snorted Bullard, kicking his swivel chair out from under him and beginning a feverish pacing of the room. For five minutes he angrily strode up and down, cursing Wallowby without cessation. For now his dilemma was crystal clear. Wallowby, the louse, didn't matter any longer. He had adroitly ducked from under. The thing was official now. Whatever the stupidities and ineptness of the Office of Asteroidal Affairs, they had been buried, white-washed, glossed-over, or what have you. The mess had been laid in Bullard's lap. It was his baby now. Worse, it was the Service's baby.

If and when the affair was ever made public, the story would run thus: Justice located their man; State put through the necessary requests and papers; Space Service was assigned to execute the ultimate act of physical possession. Whether or not they got the man would be irrelevant. The two civil departments had done their stuff, if blame was due it was due somewhere

else.

"Heads he wins, tails I lose," growled Bullard, "If we get Grory, it is no more than we are expected to do—a routine matter: if we don't get Grory, we're a pack of bums. There isn't but one answer. No stuffed shirt like Wallowby is going to make this outfit a laughingstock as long as I'm giving the orders. *I'm going to get Grory.*"

He sat down to gather himself together and think of ways and means. The more he contemplated the problem, the thicker it got. Wallowby's legal sharks had done their best—and failed; his diplomats had made representations, argued and pleaded—and had failed; his marshals had been received with ridicule, and sent back defeated. But that, after all, was the Wallowby crowd. Bullard's eyes grew hard. He knew offhand of at least forty officers on the Moon he could send who would bring back Grory dead or alive, and the blustering Boss of Nestor, too, if it came to that, if only told to do so. But Bullard could not order them out. His hands were bound by the let-the-lamb-lie-down-with-the-lion platitudes of the accursed Treaty of Juno. No longer could a Guardsman look a hardboiled criminal in the eye and say, "Put 'em up, or else." Oh, no. You should approach the rogue politely and request he accompany you to the jail. Bah! That time Bullard picked up his chair and hurled it clear across the room. After that he took up his tigerish rug tramping again.

All the answers were negative. If he didn't bring Grory back, he would have furnished Wallowby with the alibi he sought. If he brought him back through the use of, or by the barest hint of force, a delicate interplanetary situation would be provoked. The Martians and Saturnians would be certain to protest it as a

violation of the treaty, and again the blame would fall upon Bullard's man for having been over zealous. It might not result in a resumption of the war, but it was as risky as smoking in a powder magazine.

Spent from his excited pacing, Bullard sat down again. This time he discarded all the usual approaches and went at the problem in his own way. There had been other times in his life that he had received asinine, if not impossible orders, and had managed somehow to carry them into execution, though, it must be admitted in all frankness, not always to the perfect satisfaction of those who had issued them. Now he must wrack his brains again.

He scanned the list of ships present and the roster of personnel. The choice of ships was easy. He selected the ex-cruiser *Llerdyx*, a prize of war, for the vessel. Her guns had been pulled and the ports blanked off, and her torpedo tubes plugged beyond repair, but she was handy and fast and that was all he wanted. Bullard sent orderlies scurrying with word to various departments. The *Llerdyx* was to be renamed the *Texas Ranger*, provisioned and fueled and made ready for departure the following day.

Her crew was to be made up of *Pollux* men then waiting in the lonely barracks by the Gobi dock.

All of Bullard's best officers were away on extended leave, but at length he found a notation on the roster that gave him comfort. Lieutenant Benton, whom he had fleeted up from tubeman, was due back on Luna that very night. Benton then was the man, for Benton could be relied upon. That disposed of the

expedition except provision for what it was to do. That was the hardest task.

He sat down at the ordergraph. His fingers flew as he pecked out part one of the orders. They were largely a paraphrase of the set Wallowby brought. Then the going got hard; Bullard bogged down. He swore softly to himself, scowled, wrote pages and pages of drafts, only to tear them up and feed them into the maw of his wastebasket. He would light one cigarette on the butt of its predecessor, then grind it angrily under his heel. It was one thing to write orders that could be complied with, another to compose a set in the face of almost certain failure. It was like ordering a faithful follower to go up against a ruthless killer with nothing but an empty gun.

Dark was almost at hand when Bullard finally wrote out the words he dreaded to put down. But he did write them out, for his duty was plain. They would be painful for Benton to execute, and disgraceful for Bullard if they were ever made known. But the feelings and reputations of two men did not count in the grander scheme of things. Very reluctantly Bullard inserted the paper in an envelope, sealed it with a sigh, then typed on the cover these words:

To be opened and put into effect only in the event that the Boss of Nestor refuses to hand over the person of Grory the Groat. Otherwise this must be returned to signer intact.

Bullard.

An hour later Benton reported for duty, brisk, cheerful and ruddy after his vacation. But his grin faded when he saw the somber mood of his skipper. Bullard hardly spoke. Instead he handed over part one of the orders.

"Gee!" said Benton, delighted. "I get a command. And do a cruise all on my own. That's great!"

"Evidently you do not understand what you are to do," said Bullard, gravely.

"Sure. It's clear enough. I hop off tomorrow, go out to Nestor, tell 'em I want this bird Grory, slap him in the brig, and then come back. What's the catch?"

"They aren't going to give Grory up."

"Huh?" Benton was astonished. Then his face widened as his old grin came back. Now he knew—Bullard was having a little private fun, he was pulling his leg. "Why that flea-bitten little so-called republic. For two cents I'd blast 'em out of the ether, no matter what they've got."

"That," said Bullard, "is the hard part. You aren't permitted to do any blasting. You haven't any arms but sidearms. And they know it."

"All right. They say no. Then what do I do? Come home like a whipped hound?"

Bullard drew the secret portion of the orders out of his desk drawer and fondled its envelope thoughtfully.

"You will find the answer here," he said. "This will tell you all you need to know."

Bullard got up abruptly and walked to the window, where he stood for a moment looking out into the dim night, his hands clasped behind him. Benton saw that his fingers were twitching nervously, and was surprised, for he had seldom seen the celebrated captain of the *Pollux* display strong emotion. Then Bullard began speaking again, but still facing out the window. His tone was low and his voice solemn.

"Benton, lad, there is something I want you to remember when you get out there on Nestor. That is that I am sending you on this mission only because I am forbidden to take it myself. The darkest hours in any senior's life come when he is compelled to delegate a job so dirty that he would shrink from touching it himself. This job, Benton, is that kind of job. If the worst comes and you *have* to open this envelope, you will have no choice but comply with its harsh instructions. You will want to squirm out from under, you will want to rebel, you will hate me—"

"Oh, no, skipper," exclaimed Benton. "I can carry out orders. You know it!"

"To the letter, whatever the cost, whatever your opinion of the orders themselves or the man who wrote them?"

"Why, yes, sir. What proper officer would not?"

Bullard whirled, and Benton thought he caught a twinkle in his eyes, though the mouth still held its grim set.

"There have been times, Benton," Bullard said softly, with a faint smile, "when officers have not always adhered to the *letter*. In fact, on several such occasions I believe you acted as an accomplice." Then his face grew stern again, and the voice peremptory and commanding. "In this instance you are to attempt nothing of the sort. Orders are orders."

He handed Benton the sealed package. Then he shook him warmly by the hand. Benton looked so crestfallen that Bullard was beginning to wonder if he had not overplayed his hand.

"If you work things right," said Bullard, in a more confident tone, "you will bring this back unopened along with Grory. I cannot tell you in advance what my instructions are, but I assure you that I have prepared for every conceivable contingency. The only hints I can give you are these: be cool and civil; do not bluster or enter into a debate. But be bold, be confident when you make your demand. If it is refused, go back quietly to the ship and wait. If nothing happens by the expiration of four hours, then you will have to do what I have written here. Good luck!"

Many times on the trip out Benton took the mysterious envelope out of the safe and examined it hopefully. There was no clue to what it contained. As often he put it back, more curious than ever. His confidence in Bullard was unbounded; he was sure of one thing, and that was that those hidden orders *did* have the answer to anything that might come up. But what? Bullard had intimated that carrying them out would be distasteful, perhaps hazardous. Oh, well!

Benton went through the ship with a fine-toothed comb, looking for secret gadgets that might have been planted there. He

found nothing. Whatever Bullard expected him to do was probably in the strictly Bullardian manner—a pulling of rabbits out of a hat. He was still puzzling over the teaser when the Trojan group showed up on his screen. A little later he was setting the newly christened *Texas Ranger* down on Nestor.

When he stepped out of the space lock he saw to his surprise that he had company. A Martian gunboat, bristling with long Zordich guns, lay to his left; a Saturnian sloop of war, studded with tube openings, lay to the right. An armed yacht, sporting the triple-cross emblem of the Trojans, was a little way ahead of where he lay. It was apparent that the denizens on the outer planets were not taking disarmament as seriously as the gullible Earth people. It was very disconcerting.

Then Benton thought of his orders inside in the safe. It bucked him up. No doubt the presence of these vessels was one of the contingencies that Bullard had provided for. Bullard was a careful man. Benton walked on toward the port.

His interview with the Boss of Nestor was short and to the point. He stated what he had come for; the answer was a curt no. That was all there was to it.

"Very well," said Benton, calmly. Bullard's words still rang in his ears—"be confident, be cool, be bold."

Someone in the audience chamber snickered, but Benton ignored it. He walked down the aisle and out the door with a firm step but without haste. At the door the Nestorian captain of the port who had escorted him to the palace took him back in tow.

"You take it easier than the marshals did," he said, in an offhand way. "They raved and swore. But it didn't get 'em anywhere. Our Boss is tough."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Are you shoving off now?"

"Oh, no," said Benton, "I haven't finished yet."

They walked along for a hundred yards while the beetle-browed captain mulled that cryptic remark over. At length he asked for enlightenment.

"You came for Grory and the Boss said you couldn't have him? So what? Bluffs don't work on Nestor."

"I wouldn't know."

"Then what? What have you got up your sleeve?"

"You'll find out in just four hours from now—if I don't get Grory."

"Oh, a threat, huh?"

"Nope. A statement."

The port captain left Benton at his ship, then walked across to the Martian vessel and said something to its skipper. Then Benton saw him making his way toward the Saturnian. Benton called for his steward.

"Bring out that fancy deck chair we found in the cabin," he directed.

Ten minutes later Benton was stretched out in a luxurious silken chair over which a striped awning made a canopy against the weak Nestorian sun. By his side stood a taboret and on it a tall, cool drink. Benton relaxed. It was his way of displaying confidence.

Presently the Martian captain came over, read the name of his ship, looked enviously at the fancy chair layout, then opened the conversation.

"Sticking around awhile?"

"Dunno," said Benton. "That's up to the Boss. When I get Grory, I shove off."

The Martian asked several more questions, but the answers were vague and noncommittal. The conversation languished. Benton glanced at his watch. An hour had gone. He took a sip of his drink, closed his eyes and pretended to doze.

The Martian went away. Half an hour later Benton had a new visitor. It was Nestor's deputy Boss, a scarred, one-eyed ex-burglar named Fraggin.

"What's this about an ultimatum?" he demanded roughly. "Captain Zeeter said you said you were going to get Grory inside of four hours or else."

"He quoted me inaccurately, but that was the substance of it."

"Or else what?" Fraggin looked like he was about to swing.

"When the time limit expires I shall carry out the uncompleted portion of my orders. That's all. What's in 'em is my business."

"Who wrote any such orders?" growled Fraggin.

"That's none of your business either, but I don't mind telling you. Bullard did—Admiral Bullard, Commandant of Lunar Base and captain of the *Pollux*. You ought to know him. He pulled the raid on Titania."

"Yeah, yeah, I know him," said Fraggin, rubbing one of his scars thoughtfully. There was not a man in all the Trojans that didn't know him. Most had been arrested by him at one time or another.

"Well," said Fraggin after a long and what must have been for him a painful silence, "I gotta be goin'!"

"O.K.," said Benton, serenely, and reaching for his drink. "I'll be seeing you." Then he settled down to do some concentrated, if well concealed, worrying. At that moment he would gladly have given a pair of fingers for some advanced knowledge of what that sealed envelope held. He felt that he should be making preparations, not dawdling in a silky chair. But he knew he was being watched intently from three ships, and now that he had chosen his role he must stick it out to the bitter end.

It still lacked ten minutes to the deadline when the squad of

soldiers approached. Fraggin led them. Benton glanced up with a pretense of indifference, and then a great weight rolled off his soul. Struggling and cursing in the midst of the squad was the man Grory, handcuffed to the soldiers on either side of him. Benton turned his head and called the steward.

"Ask the master-at-arms to come out," he said. "Here comes our prisoner."

The exchange of formal papers took only a few minutes. Then the *Texas Ranger's* tubes began to glow and a little later she was in the void, headed home. Benton decided to while the time away by refreshing his astragation. Working out the sights made the days of the voyage pass quickly. Almost before he realized it, he was making his landing on Luna.

A prison van from Justice was there to meet him, and Benton took the receipt for Grory from an astonished looking chief marshal. He declined to answer any questions, but the moment he was rid of his prisoner, he hurried over to the Administration Building.

"Well done," said Bullard, meeting him at the door. "I knew you could do it. Any trouble?"

"Not a bit," said Benton, proudly, then to make the most of his brief spot in the limelight, produced the envelope still bearing its seals. "I didn't even have to use this, sir."

"Ah, splendid," said Bullard, taking it and dropping it in the drawer. "You may go back to your regular duties now, Benton, and thank you."

"Yes, sir, of course. But I *am* a little curious. You may not know it, sir, but I was worried. I'm itching to know what those orders were."

Bullard looked at him quizzically. Should he tell him? After all he had been put in an awful hole and had come through with flying colors. Bullard felt he rated something. He would have preferred that Benton never knew, but he had asked, and it was a request that was hard to deny.

"All right, Benton, here you are. Here is the shameful thing you might have had to do."

"Shameful?" said the amazed Benton, taking the envelope and pulling off its seals. Bullard watched him intently as he shook out the contents and fished through them. Benton had expected to find several pages of closely written instructions. Instead he found only sheets of blank paper. Then, in the middle, he found a little slip of paper on which were written three brief words.

"Great God!" he cried, as the enormity of it hit him. He stared at the terse sentence in frank disbelief. Then he laughed. The paper fluttered onto Bullard's desk where the three little words lay until Bullard tore them into fine little bits. The words were:

**RETURN TO BASE.**

THE END.

[The end of *Orders* by Malcolm Jameson]