

Panther Science Fiction

E. E. 'Doc' Smith

With Stephen Goldin

**The classic Family
d'Alembert series**

The Imperial Stars



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THE IMPERIAL STARS

BY E. E. SMITH, PH.D.

**They were the finest interstellar
agents—and greatest circus
stars—the Service of the Empire had!**

I

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Jules and Yvetta

For twenty-eight minutes The Flying d'Alemberts—who throughout two centuries had been the greatest troupe of aerialists of the entire Empire of Earth—had kept the vast audience of the Circus of the Galaxy spellbound: densely silent; almost tranced. For twenty-eight minutes both side rings had been empty and dark. The air over the center ring, from the hard-packed, imitation-sawdust-covered earth floor up to the plastic top one hundred forty-five feet above that floor, had been full of flying white-clad forms—singles and pairs and groups all doing something utterly breath-taking.

Suddenly, in perfect unison, eighteen of the twenty d'Alemberts then performing swung to their perches, secured their apparatus, and stood motionless, each with his or her right arm pointing upward at the highest part of the Big Top.

As all those arms pointed up at her, Yvette d'Alembert moved swiftly, smoothly, out to the middle of her high wire—and that wire was high indeed, being one hundred thirty-two feet above the floor of the ring. She did not carry even a fan for balance. She maintained her equilibrium by almost imperceptible movements of her hands, feet, and body. Reaching the center of the span, she stopped and posed. To the audience she appeared as motionless as a statue.

Like all the other d'Alemberts, she was dressed in silver-spangled tights that clung to every part of her body like a second skin. Thus, while she was too short and too wide and too thick to be acceptable as an Earthly high-fashion model, her flamboyantly female figure made a very striking and very

attractive picture—at a distance. Close up, however, that picture changed.

Her ankles were much larger than any Earthwoman's should have been. Her wrists were those of a six-foot-four, two-hundred-fifty-pound timberman. Her musculature, from toenails to ears to fingertips, would have made all the beach-boys of Southern California turn green with envy.

After a few seconds of posing, she turned her head and looked down at her brother Jules, on a perch sixty-one feet below her and an "impossible" sixty-four feet off to one side. Then, flexing her knees and swinging her horizontally outstretched arms in ever-increasing arcs, she put more and more power into her tightly stretched steel—and Jules, grasping a flying ring in his left hand, began to flex his knees and move his body in precise synchronization with the natural period of the girl-wire system so far above him. Finally, in the last cycle through which she could hold the wire, Yvette squatted and drove both powerful legs downward and to her right—and something snapped, with a harsh, metallic report as loud as a pistol shot.

The wire, all its terrific tension released instantly as one end broke free and dropped, coiled itself up in the air with metallic whinings and slitherings; and Yvette d'Alembert, *premiere aerialiste* of all civilization, sprawling helplessly in mid-air, began her long fall to the floor.

Eighteen d'Alemberts came to life on their perches, seized all the equipment they could reach, and hurled it all at the falling girl. One of her frantically reaching fingertips barely touched the bar of one swinging trapeze; none of the other apparatus came even close.

Jules, in the lowest position, had more time than did any of the others; but he did not have a millisecond to spare. In the instant of the break he went outward and downward along the arc of the ninety-eight-foot radius of his top-hung flying ring. His aim was true and the force of launching had been precisely right.

Yvette was falling face down, flat and horizontal, at a speed of over seventy feet a second as she neared the point of meeting. Jules, rigidly vertical at the bottom of his prodigious swing, was moving almost half that fast. In the instant before a right-angle collision that would have smashed any two ordinary athletes into masses of bloody flesh, two strong right hands smacked together in the practically unbreakable hand-over-wrist grip of the aerialist and Yvette spun and twisted like a cat—except much faster. Both her feet went flat against his hard, flat belly. Her hard-sprung knees and powerful leg muscles absorbed most of the momentum of his mass and speed. Then, at the last possible instant, her legs went around his waist and locked behind his back, and his right hand flashed up to join his left in gripping the ring.

That took care of the horizontal component of energy, but the vertical one was worse—much worse; almost twice as great. Its violence drove their locked bodies downward and

into a small but vicious arc; a savagely wrenching violence that would have broken any ordinary man's back in a fraction of a second. But Jules d'Alembert, although only five feet eight in height, had a mass of two hundred twenty-five pounds, most of which was composed of super-hard, super-reactive muscle; unstretchable, unbreakable gristle; and super-dense, super-strong, horse-sized bone. His arms were as large as, and immensely stronger than, an ordinary Earthman's legs.

The two bodies, unstressed now relative to each other, began to hurtle downward together, at an angle of thirty degrees from the vertical, toward the edge of the ring facing the reserved-seat and box section of the stands.

The weakest point in the whole stressed system was now Jules' grip on that leather-covered steel ring. Could he hold it? Could he *possibly* hold it? Not one person in all that immense audience moved a muscle: not one of them even breathed.

He held his grip for just under half a second, held it while that half-inch nylon cable stretched a good seven feet, held it while the entire supporting framework creaked and groaned. Then the merest moment before that frightful fall would have been arrested and both would have been safe, Jules' hands slipped from the ring and both began to fall the remaining forty feet to the ground.

A high-speed camera, however, would have revealed the fact that they did not fall out of control. Each landed in perfect position. Hard-sprung knees took half of shock of landing; hard-sprung elbows took half of what was left. Heads bent low on chests; powerful leg muscles drove forward; thick, hard shoulders and back muscles struck the floor in perfect rolls; and both brother and sister somersaulted lightly to their feet.

Hand in hand, they posed motionless for a moment; then bowed deeply in unison, turned and ran lightly to an exit—and they covered that one hundred yards of distance in less than five seconds.

And the multitude of spectators went wild.

They had seen a girl falling to certain death. They had felt a momentary flash of relief—or actually of disappointment?—when it seemed as though her life might be saved. Then they had watched two magnificently alive young people fall, if not to certain death, at least to maiming, crippling injury. Then, in the climactic last split second, the whole terrible accident had become the grand finale of the act.

That it was a grand finale—a crashing smash of a finish—there was no possible doubt. The only question was, what emotion predominated in that shrieking, yelling, clapping, jeering, cheering, whistling and catcalling throng of Earthpeople—relief, appreciation or disappointment?

Whatever it was, however, they had all had the thrill of a life-time; and few if any of them could understand how it

could possibly have been done.

For of the teeming billions of people inhabiting the nine hundred forty-two other planets of the Empire of Earth, scarcely one in a million had ever even heard of the planet DesPlaines. Of those who had heard of it, comparatively few knew that its surface gravity was approximately three thousand centimeters per second squared—more than three times that of small, green Earth. And most of those who knew that fact neither knew nor cared that harsh, forbidding, hostile DesPlaines was the home world of the Circus of the Galaxy and of The Family d'Alembert

II

The Service of the Empire (SOTE) was founded in 2239 by Empress Stanley 3, the first of the Great Stanleys, who, during her reign of 37 years (2237-2274) inculcated in it the spirit of loyalty and devotion that has characterized it ever since. Its spirit wavered only once, under weak and vicious Empress Stanley 5, whose reign—fortunately very short (2293-2299)—was calamitous in every respect. SOTE came to full power; however, only under Emperor Stanley 10 (reign 2379- —), the third and greatest of the Great Stanleys, under whom it became the finest organization of its kind ever known. (Baird, A Study of Security, Ed. 2447, p291).

The Brawl in the Dunedin Arms

The city of Tampeta, Florida, had a population of over fifteen million. It included, not only what had once been Tampa, St. Petersburg and Clearwater, but also all the other cities and villages between Sarasota on the south and Port Richey on the north. Just outside Tampeta's city limit, well out toward Lakeland, lay the Pinellas Fair Ground. There the Circus of the Galaxy had been playing to capacity crowds for over a week, with a different show—especially with an entirely different climax—every night.

Jules and Yvette d'Alembert, as top stars of the show, of course had private dressing rooms. They also had private entrances. Thus no one connected with the show saw, and no one else either noticed or cared, that two short, fat Delfians, muffled to the eyes in the shapelessly billowing robes and hoods of their race, joined one of the columns of people moving slowly toward the exits leading to the immense parking lot. It took them half an hour to get to their car, but they were in no hurry.

Out of the traffic jam at last, Jules maneuvered his heavy vehicle up into the second-level, west-bound Interstate Four and sped for the Dunedin district and the Dunedin Arms, one of the plushiest night spots in all North America. At the Arms, he gave a dollar to the parking-lot attendant, another to the resplendently-uniformed doorman and a third to the usher who escorted them ceremoniously into the elevator and up to the fourth floor. At the check-stand the two Delfians refused—as expected—to part with any of their mufflings. Jules did, however—also as expected—give the

provocatively clad hat-check girl a dollar before he handed his reservation slip and a five-dollar bill to the bowing captain.

"Thank you, sir and madam," that worthy said. "We are very glad indeed to have you with us this evening, Mister and Misses Tygven. Will you have your table now, or perhaps a little later?"

"A little later, I think," Jules said, using faultlessly the Russo-English "Empirese" that was the court language of the Empire. He paused then, and gazed about the huge room. At his right, along the full two-hundred-foot length of the room, ran the subduedly ornate, mirror-backed bar. At his left were three tremendous windows overlooking the beach and the open Gulf. Heavy tables of genuine oak, not too closely spaced, filled the place except for a large central dance floor. On a stage at the far end of the room a spot-lighted, red-haired stripper was doing her stuff. Priceless paintings and fabulous tapestries adorned the walls. Suits of armor dating from the ancient days of chivalry stood on pedestals and niches here and there. The place was jammed with a gay, colorful and festive crowd; there were only a few vacant places even at that tremendously long bar.

It was quite evident why the captain had suggested a short delay, so Jules said, "Yes, later, please. We will do a little serious drinking at the bar before we eat."

And at the bar, Jules laid a fifty-dollar bill on the oak and said, "A liter of vodnak, please. Estvan's, if you have it. In the original bottle—sealed."

"We have it, Mister." The bar-tender set out two glasses, a bowl of ice and the heavy, crudely molded, green-glass bottle of the one-hundred-and-twenty-proof beverage that was the favored tippie of the rim-world, Delf. "We've got everything. And don't worry about it not being the clear quill. We don't cheat. With our prices we don't have to"—and he put down on the bar a dollar and fifteen cents in change, which Jules waved away.

Before Jules opened the bottle—he was looking into the mirror, and so was Yvette—the man at Yvette's left finished his drink and moved away, and a tall, slim Earthman came up to take his place. Holding up one finger to the bartender, the newcomer said, "I'll take a jigger of the..."

That was as far as he got. "Rube!" Yvette snapped—throughout the years, half of the old-time circus battle-cry of "Hey Rube!" had survived. She grabbed the heavy bottle by its neck, and hurling it even as she dropped—dropped safely under the vicious blaster-beam that, having incinerated the slender Earthman, swept through the space her chest had occupied an instant before. Still in air, falling almost flat, she braced one foot against the bar, dived headlong under the nearest table, bent her back and heaved.

The blaster-beam, however, had already expired. The heavy bottle, still full and still sealed, hurled with a DesPlainian's strength and with an aerialist's sure control, had struck bottom-on squarely in the middle of the gunner's

face—and that gunner now had no face at all and scarcely enough head to be recognizable as human.

Jules, too, was busy. He too had dropped at his sister's warning word, scanning the room as he fell. He too made a dive; but his was high and far, toward a table for six at which only two couples sat. One of the men at that table, half hidden behind a tall and statuesque blonde, had started to rise to his feet and was reaching for his left armpit.

Jules lit flat on the table and slid angle-wise across its length, in a welter of breaking and flying dishes, glassware, silverware, food and drink, directly at the man trying so frantically to draw his weapon. En route, Jules brushed the blonde aside. He didn't push her hard at all—just a one-handed gentle shove; just enough to get her out of the way. Nevertheless, she went over backward, chair and all, and performed an involuntary back somersault—thus revealing to all interested observers that she wore only a lacy trifle of nylon in the way of underwear.

Continuing his slide, Jules made a point of his left elbow and rammed it into the man's gut. Then, as the man doubled up and "w-h-o-o-s-h-e-d" in agony, Jules whirled to his feet off of the table and chopped the hard edge of his right hand down onto the back of his victim's neck—which broke with a snap audible for dozens of feet above the uproar then going on. Then, seizing the man's half-drawn weapon—it was a stun-gun, not a blaster—he glanced at its dial. Ten. Wide open. Instantly lethal. Clicking it back to three—a half-hour stun—he played its beam briefly over the other man at the table (the guy had been too quiet and too unconcerned by far

during all this action) and whirled around to see how his sister was making out.

Yvette was doing all right. The table under which she had disappeared had leaped into the air, turned over—shedding dishes and so forth far and wide—and crashed down onto the table at which the first blasterman and three other goons had been sitting. She had picked the blaster up and had tried to bend it around the side of Number Two's head; but it broke up almost as thoroughly as the head did. Ducking as only such a performer as she was could duck, she grabbed Number Three by the ankles, up-ended him, kicked the flaming blaster out of his hand before it could kill more than three innocent bystanders and was going to use him as a flail on Number Four when that unlucky (or lucky) wight slumped bonelessly to the floor in the beam of her brother's stunner.

She had the motion all made—why waste it?—So, continuing her swing, she hammer-threw Number Three over a few rows of tables and out into fifty feet of air through the middle of one of the three immense windows already mentioned.

Have you ever heard four hundred and thirty-two square feet of three-eighths-inch-thick plate glass shatter all at once? It makes a noise.

Such a noise that all lesser noises stopped instantly.

And in that strained, tense silence Jules spoke quietly to his sister. Both were apparently perfectly calm. Neither

breathed one count faster than normal. Only their eyes—his a glacially cold gray; hers a furiously hot blue—showed how angry and how disconcerted they both were. "Many more of 'em, you think?" he asked.

"Not to spot." Yvette shook her head. "And we've got no time to check."

"Right. Take that one, I'll bring the other. Flit." Carrying two unconscious men, the two ran lightly, but at terrific speed, down three flights of stairs and out into the parking lot. The attendant, upon seeing what burdens they carried, tried simultaneously to run and to yell, but accomplished neither—a half-hour stun saw to that.

Tortured rubber shrieked and smoked as the heavy car spun out of the lot and into the highway. Fortunately, traffic was so light—it was then half past two in the morning—that Jules did not have to drive far before a moment came when no other car was in sight.

The d'Alembert vehicle, while it looked pretty much like an ordinary groundcar, was a little too long and too wide and too round and much too heavy to be any standard model. Thus, alone in the road for a moment, Jules punched three buttons and three things happened: 1) the car's lights went out; 2) from those too-round sides the two halves of an airtight, bullet-proof, transparent canopy shot up, snapped together, and locked; and 3) the vehicle went straight up, at an acceleration of four Earthly gravities—having two Earthers aboard they couldn't hurry—to an altitude of a hundred and ninety thousand feet before it stopped.

Jules and Yvette removed what was left of their Delfian costumes—which wasn't very much—and stared wordlessly into each other's eyes for a long half minute. Then Yvette spoke:

"That was our contact. Our only contact. And we don't know anybody in SOTE on Earth ... and there was a leak. There *had* to be a leak, Julie."

"That's for sure, and it was no ordinary leak, either. It had to be right in the Head's own office..." Jules voice died away.

Yvette shivered. "I'm afraid so. And we haven't an inkling, except for his retinal pattern, of who the Head is or where he is. He may not be on Earth, even."

"Well, there'll be somebody in the Tampeta office here and they'll be on the alert. That brawl put the stuff into the fan but good. They'll be monitoring the channel every second."

"But our friends' friends down there will be monitoring all channels every second—and they probably have the codes."

He thought for a moment, then grinned. "So I'll go back to one that's so old and so simple that they probably never heard of it ... unless it'd fool our monitor, too ... uh-uh. Whoever they've got on monitor right now is no dumb bunny; so here goes."

He flipped a blue switch and raised his powerful—and not too unmusical—deep bass voice in song: "Sing of the

evening star, Oh Susan; sweetest old tune ever sung. Oh, Susan, sweet one, 'tis..."

"Susan here." A lilting, smooth-as-cream contralto voice came from the speaker. There was a moment of silence, then the voice said "Cut!" and Jules flipped his switch; whereupon the voice concluded, "We'll beep you in. Out."

"I'll say they're alert!" Yvette exclaimed; then went on, half-giggling in relief. "And she's fast on the trigger—'Susan here' my left eyeball. You made that whole thing up, didn't you, on the spur of the moment."

"Uh-huh. If I'd had a little time the verse would have been as good as the music."

Yvette snorted. "Ha! Modesty, thy name is Jules! I expect them to tap you for the Met any minute now. But you were right on one thing—no dumb bunny could make 'S-O-T-E—S-O-S' so fast out of *that* mess of yowling. But it won't really be a beeper, you think?"

"Anything else but. My guess is a laser. They've got us lined up and they'll pour it right into our cup—so I'd better set the cup to spinning."

He did so, and in less than a minute the pencil-thin beam came in, chopped up into evenly-spaced dashes by the rotation of the cup-antenna of the car. There was of course no voice or signal.

While Jules was manipulating his finders to determine the exact line of the beam, he said, "Better unlimber the

launchers, Evie, and break out some bombs. Just in case somebody wants to argue with us on the way. I'll handle the other stuff."

"That's a thought—" She broke off; her tone changed, "But just suppose that's *their* beam?"

"Could be; so we'll have to look a little bit out when we land. But they know that. So if everything's oke they'll engineer a safe approach—we won't have to. They know who we are." Things had gone wrong. They had given the right signal at the rendezvous—but the wrong people had responded. Now they had to find out why!

III

Democracy failed because it could not cope with Communism. This failure, which began early in the twentieth century, became very evident when, in 1922, Canada, the United States of America and Mexico united to form the United States of North America. The Congress of the USNA argued and filibustered, but could not agree upon any effective action against Communism. The Premier of Russia, however, acted. He issued orders; the recipients of which either obeyed them promptly or were promptly shot. (Mees, History of Civilization, Vol. 21, p1077)

The Head

Sliding down the beam, the d'Alembert's vehicle was heading directly toward the roof of a building that towered at least forty stories above any other structure in its neighborhood.

Jules slowed down; approached it gingerly; stopped half a mile away. It was all dark, except, strangely enough, for a small, brightly-lighted spot on the roof of one wing.

"Scan it," Jules said. "Infra first. See what it is."

Yvette put her eye to the scanner. "Hall of State; Sector Four. That makes sense. State would be the best place to hide the Service, wouldn't it?"

"Check. And the spot?"

"Floodlight. One. That's a girl, standing in it. Young. Skinny, but not bad for an Earther. Black hair—throat-mike—sweater—shorts—two Mark Twenty-Nine Service blasters hanging loose—sandals. Sneak up, Julie."

Jules dropped the "car"—which was in fact one of the deadliest fighting machines of its weight ever built by man—down to within a couple of hundred yards of the lighted spot and stopped; and that highly distinctive throaty contralto voice came again from the speaker.

"It's safe to talk now if we don't say too much," the voice said conversationally. "Are you armed?"

"Yes." Jules wasn't saying much, yet.

"Good. You won't need these, then." The girl walked out of the ring of light, put the brutal big hand-weapons down on the roof, and resumed her former place. "You recognize my voice, of course."

"Yes."

"You have a retinascope, I suppose."

"Yes. Hold it a minute."

Jules cut com and turned to his sister. "I don't like this a nickel's worth. What Earther's pattern, except the Head's, would we recognize without a comparison disk? Nobody's. So, if this is on the up and up, we've got to manhandle the Head himself."

Yvette bit her lip. "Well, you said they'd arrange a safe approach, and that certainly would be one. What else can we do?"

"Nothing," and Jules again flipped the blue switch. "Go ahead."

"Land anywhere you please and one person will come aboard. Unarmed."

"Oke." Jules landed the car well away from the ring of light and opened a port.

In the darkness all that could be seen of the man who came up, empty hands outstretched, was that he was of medium height, of medium build and almost completely bald. He put his hands in through the port and Yvette, taking one of his wrists in each hand, helped him through the narrow opening and into the cramped front compartment of the car, where she held him gently but securely while Jules applied the retinoscope to the Earthman's right eye.

"The head himself," Jules said. "I'm sorry, sir..."

"Think nothing of it, Jules." The stranger laughed deeply. "If you had acted differently I would have been amazed, displeased and disappointed. As it is, I am very glad indeed to meet you in the flesh," and he shook hands vigorously. "And you too, Yvette, my dear." Taking her hand, he kissed it in as courtly a fashion as though that tiny, cramped compartment were a ballroom. "And now—purely a formality, of course—the eyes. Yvette first, please," and he handed her the 'scope.

She fitted it to her eye. "But you didn't put any disk in," she said. "Surely, sir, you don't..."

"I surely do." He studied her pattern briefly, then Jules'. "I don't know very many patterns, of course; but Jules and Yvette d'Alembert? You're too modest altogether, my dear." Then, opening the port, he called out, "Still safe, Helena?"

"Still safe, father," the girl called back, and began to walk toward the car. "Nothing suspicious, they say, within three hundred miles of here."

"Fine," Jules said. He opened the car up and all three got out. Jules went on, "I was hoping we were fast enough to get away clean, but I couldn't be sure. Now, sir, about our guests," and he jerked a thumb toward the rear compartment where the prisoners suddenly slept.

"Ah, yes. I've been wondering about them. The reports were confused and contradictory."

"I'm not surprised; it happened fast. That one—" Jules pointed—"is probably just a low-bred gunnie that doesn't know a thing. The other one may not know anything or he may know a lot," and he told, in a very few words, about the too imperturbable observer of the brawl. He finished: "So our secret rendezvous was no secret."

"I see." The Head raised his left wrist to his lips and said, "Colonel Grandon."

"Yes, sir?"

"Be on the roof in exactly two minutes. You'll find two men who got number three stunbeams about twenty minutes ago. They're in a Mark Forty-One Service Special near Space Jay Twelve. Revive them, find what they know and report."

"Very well, sir," and the Head led the way to an elevator.

The elevator took them down to the thirty-first floor, where it stopped of itself and opened its door into what was very evidently the private office of an exceedingly important man.

It was a fairly large room, furnished richly but quietly. The rug, brown in color, was thick and soft. The beamed ceiling was of beautifully grained brown solentawood; the paneled walls were of the same fine, almost metal-hard wood. On the wall behind the big solentawood desk was inlaid the gold-crowned Shield of Empire.

"Now we can talk," the girl said then, holding out her hand to Jules. "I'm Grand Lady ... Oh, excuse that please!" She flushed hotly, whereupon Jules kissed her hand in true Court style; after which she shook hands cordially with both Jules and Yvette.

"She should blush, friends," the Head said, but with no reproof in his voice. "But she hasn't been in the Service very long." Turning to the girl, he went on. "You are the Head's Girl Friday here, my dear. Our guests are of the thinnest upper crust of the entire Service; their worth to the Crown is immeasurable—beyond any number of Grand Ladies. We'll sit down, please, and Helena will pour. A whiskey sour for me, if you please." He cocked an eyebrow at his two agents. "Yours?"

"Orange juice, please," Yvette said, promptly; and Jules said, "Lemonade, please, if you have it handy."

Drinks in hand—Grand Lady Helena was drinking a weird-looking ice-cream concoction—the Head said:

"The attack on you was a complete surprise. No leak, no hanky-panky was even suspected until the man who was to bring you to me here was killed. The connection between this business and the matter that brought you to Earth is clear. In that connection it is a highly pleasing thought that the opposition knows nothing of you or of the Circus. You agree?"

"I agree, sir," Jules said, and Yvette nodded.

But Helena was puzzled. "How can it follow that they don't know, father?"

"The d'Alemberts are new to you because there is no record anywhere of any connection between them and us. Except for this surprise attack you would not be learning of them now. I will go into detail after they leave, but for the present I will simply state as a fact that no one who knows anything about them would send only six men against Jules and Yvette d'Alembert. Or, if only six, all six would have fired simultaneously and on sight at them instead of burning the contact man first. That shows that they were more afraid of the Service here than of the supposed Delfian agents—a fatal error."

"Oh, I see—excuse me, please, for interrupting."

"That's quite all right. It's part of your education, Girl Friday. To proceed: we are investigating. We will find out

where the leak is here and clean up the mess. In the meantime we will go ahead with the business for which we scheduled the Circus of Earth. There's trouble: centering, probably, on Durward. I'll give you all forty-odd reels of the record on it, but there are many things that are not on record and never will be, which is why I had to discuss it with you in person. You'll also have to talk to some outsiders to get the full picture. You may want to conduct preliminary investigation on Earth and/or elsewhere before you go anywhere near Durward."

The Head got up. These were his most valuable agents, and the fact that he had brought them here was a measure of the importance he attached to the situation. He had fully expected that there would be trouble waiting for them between the Circus and his office ... and he had been equally confident that the d'Alemberts would be able to handle it.

What he was less sure of was that they—even they—would be able to handle the trouble that lay ahead.

He said abruptly, "Let's fill in some background. For example, consider the question of loyalty. The Service is loyal to the Crown as the symbol of Empire; to the wearer of the Crown, whoever or whatever he or she may be, as the focal point of the Empire. You agree?"

"Of course, sir," Jules said, and both girls nodded.

"Very well. In early 2378, when Crown Prince Ansel was planning the murder of every other member of the Royal

Family, if we could have caught him at it in time we would have burned him down, Crown Prince though he was."

"Why, I ... suppose that ... yes, sir," Jules said, and Yvette added thoughtfully:

"I never thought of it before in just that way, sir. But that's the way it would have to be."

"Nevertheless, after those eleven murders were accomplished facts Ansel, as the sole surviving member of the House of Stanley, became Emperor Stanley Nine. Was there then any question of gunning him? No. We instantly became as loyal to him as we had been to his father Stanley Eight and now are to his son Stanley Ten."

"Of course, sir. But what..."

"Now comes some off-the-record material. Have you ever heard of Banion the Bastard?"

Jules thought for a moment "I don't think so, sir," he said.

Yvette shook her head, but this time Helena nodded and said, "Oh-oh—a light beginneth to dawn."

"I didn't think you two had," the Head went on. "Not too many people now alive ever have."

IV

Even before Arnold invented the subether drive and made galactic exploration possible, all Earth except the USNA was under Communism and North America was being infiltrated and undermined. The real explosion of mankind into space, however, did not begin until 2013, when Copeland discovered the uranium-rich planet Urania Four; thus assuring all mankind of cheap and virtually unlimited power. In 2016 the American anti-Communists, disgusted and alarmed by the success of the "do-nothings" and "do-gooders" in blocking all effective action, left Earth en masse for Newhope; whereupon Communism took control of all Earth without firing a shot or launching a missile. (Mees, History of Civilization; Vol. 21, p-1281).

Banion the Bastard

Marshalling his thoughts, the Head drank half of his whiskey sour slowly, then went on, "Stanley Nine's weakness was women; particularly young ones. Although he married late in 2378, by the end of that year the Empress was merely a part of the furniture and the then Duke of Durward—one Henry, a bachelor of thirty—saw his big chance. He combed his planet to find one highly special woman. She had to be young, a virgin, spectacularly beautiful, and highly intelligent. Also, as unscrupulous, as vicious, and as hard as he himself was. Also unknown on Earth or at Court. He found her..."

The Head paused to finish his drink and build another one.

"The Beast of Durward," Helena said. "Surely you've heard of *her*."

Neither Jules nor Yvette had, and the Head went on, "A small-time, ruthlessly ambitious actress. The Duke arranged and financed for her a tremendous and tremendously expensive splash at Grand Imperial Court, right here on Earth. Stanley Nine fell hard. He didn't stand a chance—and, with the Duke's full backing, she kept him on the hook much longer than any other woman was ever able to.

"When she was about seven months pregnant the Duke married her; with Nine's full approval. Thus her son Banion was born in wedlock as the first child of and the heir of the Duke and Duchess of Durward. That, however, wasn't enough for the schemers. Stanley Nine, still blindly infatuated with the extremely talented Beast, issued a Patent of Royalty, admitting paternity and bestowing upon the infant the unique title of 'The Prince of Durward'. This patent also authorized a coat of arms as follows:

"Purpure, quarterly three dragons rampant or, in chief sinister a bend sinister or, in dexter..."

"Wait up, father!" Helena broke in. "You're not getting through to me at all, and I don't believe that's our guests' language, either."

The Head laughed. "Gold dragons, rearing on purple enamel. The bar sinister, which may not be a mark of

illegitimacy, in this case definitely was. It goes on that way for a couple of hundred words, only a few of which are pertinent. 'Bordure gules, charged thirteen bezants sable'. Poor heraldry—color on color and an unlucky number of spots on a background of blood—but that and the fact that the Patent was dated Friday the Thirteenth of June, 2380, are perfectly in keeping with the Duke's vicious sense of humor.

"A couple of months later—long overdue—Nine finally got tired of the Beast and came to with a thud. He who had wiped out all the rest of the Royal Family had himself set up a pretender with a completely valid claim. He ordered the Service to kill the Duke and Banion and destroy the Patent; but he was 'way too late. The Beast had seen it coming and they got away clean. *With* the Patent.

"The Patent, of course, was most important. It was handwritten and signed in carbon ink by Emperor Stanley Nine himself, on Imperial parchment, with the signature driven into the parchment by the Great Seal of the Empire of Earth. The Patent was revoked, of course, and erased from all record, and the people were proscribed; but that wasn't enough. That Patent had to be found and destroyed; but it wasn't. Banion the Bastard had to be found and killed; but he wasn't.

"In 2381 there was a fairly serious uprising; which, it was deduced later, was engineered by the Beast on her own. At least, there was clear evidence that she tried to knife the Duke in bed and he cut her throat with her own blade.

"The search for that Patent and the Bastard and his blood has been going on ever since 2380; twenty years before I was born. As I said, the record of it covers more than forty reels. Results were negligible—except for finding, at a cost of eighty-nine lives, three very good forgeries—until two years ago, when several leads pointed back to Durward again. We sent agents, who found nothing. Three months ago all those agents stopped reporting. I sent in four of our best—with orders, of course, to avoid all previous contacts—and have not heard from any of them. Hence the Circus; the heaviest artillery the Service has. The threat to Stanley Ten and The Family is grave indeed. Just how grave I myself did not fully realize until the event of last night.

"Duke Henry was born in 2350, ninety-seven years ago; so he is probably dead. So it may or may not be his children and/or grandchildren who are carrying on. The Bastard, though, at 67, may still be a potent force; and he undoubtedly has children and grandchildren whom we don't know anything about, either.

"Your job is composed of two equally important parts. One, to find the genuine Patent and to bring it in so we can check its authenticity and so Stanley Ten can destroy it with his own hands. Two, to kill Banion the Bastard and all of his blood. Goodbye and good luck."

Back at the Circus, well after daybreak, Jules and Yvette reported to their father, the Managing Director. Then they drove out to the edge of the field, snugged their "oar" down

into its berth in their ultra-fast two-man subspacer, and Jules said:

"I knew the Head would have to be a Big Wheel, but not that big. If his daughter's a Grand Lady he's got to be a Grand Duke, no less. I think maybe I've seen his picture somewhere or seen him in a parade or something on tri-di..."

"Oh, *brother!*" Yvette snorted. "And I use the term advisedly. If you didn't recognize Grand Duke Zander von Wilmenhorst on sight! Oh no, he isn't much of anybody—just one-half Stanley blood and the fifth from the Throne itself, is all. You'd better break out your Peerage and start studying it."

"Uh-huh. *What* a cover for the Head—my God, he owns Sector Four!"

They slept until half past two; then went into the main tent to watch the climax of the matinee. They watched, with trained and minutely observant eyes, Yvette and Jules d'Alembert perform flawlessly a heart-stopping variation of the act they themselves had performed the night before.

Five minutes later, the younger couple still in spangles, the four d'Alemberts sat at a table in the commissary. The two men looked very much alike; so did the two girls—which was not surprising, since the two couples were two pairs of twins born of the same parents three years apart. No one except a DesPlainian could have told the two men or the two girls apart except by direct comparison. To the personnel of the Circus of the Galaxy this succession of top stars was

routine. In the two-hundred-year history of the Circus there had been almost a hundred pairs called "Jules and Yvette d'Alembert"; there would continue to be a succession of them, one new pair every two or three years, as long as the Circus should endure.

"How'd we do, Gran'paw?" the younger brother asked. "It must have been a treat to see a good performance of your act."

"Close the orifice, Jules," the younger girl broke in.

"Oh, you're calling me Jules already?"

"Certainly. You are Jules now. What I started to say was, that's the way people break their arms, patting themselves on the back so much."

"Oke. What I meant was, I'm glad the Head pulled them out of the Circus for special duty. It wouldn't be too long before they'd spatter themselves all over the ring the way their joints are creaking now. How *about* that, Jules?" and Jules grinned at Jules.

"That is very true and very sad, Jules," Jules agreed, as a waitress came up to take their orders. "These ancient and unwieldy bones are just about ready for the fertilizer mill. The old-time pep is all shot..."

"Stop crying, Jules, poor dear," the waitress said. She was, of course, a d'Alembert, too; and she had been a star. "Before I break down and dilute your soup with a flood of tears of my

own. The King and Queen are dead, et cetera. So what? You're just getting started on your real jobs. The usual?"

"Not quite," Yvette said. "You can get fresh orange juice here and I'm drowning myself in it. Squeeze me half a liter, please Felice dear, besides the usual."

"'Drowning yourself' is right," the younger Yvette said, darkly. "I've got to watch my figure; so I'll have one small glass of lemon sour and a lamb chop."

After eating, the older Jules and Yvette left the Circus—without a ripple to show that they had gone.

V

Communism could gain no foothold on the new, raw planets. Communists wanted to agitate, not work; and on the planets a man either worked or died. Confined to Earth and no longer able to keep its masses in line by the imaginary menace of warmongering Capitalism, and facing squarely the fact that men will not produce efficiently under the lash, Communism came to a very low ebb ... until it was saved by Premier Koslov, a strong and able executive, who in 2020 made himself King Boris I of Earth and formed a harsh but just absolute monarchy based upon the profit motive. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire, p76)

Citizens of Earth

Jules and Yvette studied, analyzed and restudied forty-seven spools of top-secret data, then sent them—top-secretly—through channels back to the Head. Then they visited more or less openly almost every district of Earth.

At every point they encountered the same not-right odor. Something was definitely wrong. Security had been breached—within the Service itself!

To Jules and Yvette d'Alembert the situation shrieked for action—instant effective action, at that. If the Service caught a chill, a hundred outlying planets lay under the threat of double pneumonia. For the Service was the ganglionic nerve system of the Stanleys themselves ... and every bright, burning star, every immensely long, black spacelane, every whirling world and pocket of cosmic dust trembled and shook when those nerves tingled.

As the evidence grew it became clear that there were two courses of action. They could patiently, painstakingly search, sift and study ... and hope for a break ... or they could plunge themselves into a trouble spot—offer themselves as bait—risk life and limb on a gamble, and trust to mind and muscle to get them out. These were the choices...

But really, there was no choice—because they were the d'Alemberts.

"Out of everything we've learned I can see only three points of attack outside of Durward itself," Jules said, thoughtfully. "Algonia, Nevander, and Aston. Years apart. Three forged Patents of Royalty. Eighty-nine good agents down the drain ... most of them probably as smart as we are ... in spite of all the help the local SOTE could give them..." He paused.

"Uh-huh. Go on. Or because of it."

"Check. The higher the SOTE the the solider the security. We think. But that thing in the Head's office didn't smell exactly like Coty's L'Arigon."

"I'll say it didn't. Usually they commit suicide or get their throats cut, but he simply disappeared. Absolutely vanished."

"So we'll roll our own, except maybe for tops. So the big question is, what's our best cover?"

"Well, we can't be Earthers, that's for sure." Yvette shrugged her shoulders and indicated his shape and her own. "Nor Delfians, to stand inspection. We're obviously DesPlainians. No other high-gravity planets were ever colonized, were there? Except Purity, of course ... I wonder."

Jules frowned in thought. "That's a thought, sis; that splinter-group of crackpots on Purity. We can be Puritans."

Yvette nibbled her lip. "But would it work? They won't have anything to do with anybody they don't absolutely have to. Everybody's too sinful. They expect all the other planets, especially mother-planet DesPlaines, to be whiffed into

incandescent vapor any minute by the wrath of God. There *are* a lot of renegade Puritans, though. Sinners."

"That's what I meant. We'll play it that they kicked us off because we got to be too sinful. We liked to dance and play cards and drink soda pop—to say nothing of mining gold and platinum and diamonds and emeralds and bootlegging all our stuff to Earth. That's the way we made all our money. Remember?"

Yvette laughed. "Just dimly. I must have been looking the other way at the time, but you can fill me in. They *have* kicked a lot of people off of Purity for doing just that—and for much smaller sins, as well. Go ahead; it listens good."

"Oke, but I don't know exactly what ... get into compound low, brain, and start grinding ... how about this? We'll have the Head make us ex-Puritan Citizens of Earth. You know how toplofty and you-be-damned Earthers are, out on the planets."

"Uh-huh, and we'll be toploftier and you-be-damnedder than anybody. I like."

"Right. Concealment by obviousness. But as you said, not too many people ever even heard of Purity, and with our builds—your build especially—but wait a minute, how about disguising *me*? Hair down to my shoulders; waved and liquid-golded. Eyebrows shaved to a different shape and golded. Handle-bar mustache, waxed to points and golded. A cockeyed hat with gold plumes two feet long. Cloth-of-gold sleeveless jersey and tight purple trunks. Arms and legs bare.

A million dollars worth of jewelry—genuine—and a big, heavy swagger-stick that's really a blaster on one end and a stunner on the other. Think anybody'd recognize me as a DesPlainian in that kind of a fancy rig?"

"I'll say they wouldn't!" Yvette laughed delightedly, "anywhere on DesPlaines they'd shoot you on sight. The idea being that everyone would look at you and not bother to even wonder whether I was a DesPlainian or not."

"Uh-huh. Maybe it's a bit thin, but..."

"I've got news for you, Buster." Yvette laughed again. "Not only it's thin, but also if you think I'm going to play little brown hen to that gorgeous hunk of rooster you're out of your mind. I'll design me a costume that will knock everybody's eyes right out of their sockets—one that no DesPlainian woman would be caught dead in at a cat-fight."

"Now you're chirping, birdie!"

"That'll be fun! But it'll take months to grow your hair ... a wig? Uh-uh."

"Uh-uh is correct. Too chancy. But they've been working on this case for sixty-seven years, so a few extra weeks isn't going to make any important difference. And we'll have plenty to do in the meantime."

"That's true. Oke—let's fly at it."

Thus it came about, some time later, that the Executive Office of the Duke of Algonia was invaded by a couple whose likes had never before been seen on the planet Algonia—or, for that matter, on any other planet. Jules was just as spectacular as his specifications had called for; Yvette was even more so. She, too, wore purple and gold—what little there was of it—with the arrangement of colors the exact reverse of his.

Her shoes—not silly pumps, but half-calf-high sure-grips studded with precious stones—were royal purple. Her tight shorts were of golden jersey; her tight, sleeveless upper garment was of exactly the same shade of purple as her shoes and hair. She wore a wide, heavily-jeweled belt of nylon-backed gold; a jeweled half-veil of fine gold mesh; and, to cap the climax, a towering gold-filigree headdress of diamonds, emeralds and rubies that had been appraised at and insured for one million three hundred ninety thousand dollars.

Paying no attention to the startled stares of the waiting people and office personnel, they walked calmly to the head of the line at the receptionist's desk. "We are citizens of Earth," Jules explained, as he courteously but firmly edged himself into the narrow space between a fat woman and the desk. He leaned over, picked up the amazed receptionist's hand and tucked a hundred-dollar bill into it. "Carlos and Carmen Velasquez, Citizens of Earth," he said gently, and dropped two ID cards onto her desk. "This is where visitors to your fair planet register, is it not?"

"Oh, no, sir—thank you, sir," the flustered girl said, as soon as her eyes got back into place and she could again use her voice. "That's downstairs, sir. The SOTE, sir."

"You will take care of it, my dear," Jules dropped three more notes on the desk. "Bring the cards over to the Hotel Splendide, after you have attended to it. We'll be there for a few days ... or a few weeks, perhaps. Thank you, my girl." And the two walked out of the office as unconcernedly as they had walked in.

At the Splendide, which was the plushiest caravansery the planet boasted, they soon became the favorite guests. Not only because they had the penthouse suite; but also because neither of them knew, apparently, that there was any smaller unit of currency than a five-dollar Earth bill.

Whatever else they did, however, they always walked at a good, stiff hiking gait for at least an hour after supper. For the first few nights they explored; but after that, having found a route they liked, they stuck to it. Every night thereafter they drove out beyond the city limits, parked their car and took a six-mile hike along a fixed succession of narrow, lonely back-country roads and bridle-paths; a route that had five places made to order for ambush—and a route that they had gone to much trouble to publicize.

For six nights they swung along at their five-miles-an-hour hiking gait in complete silence...

Complete silence? Yes. Their sure-grip shoes made not even a whisper of sound against the blacktop: no item of

their apparel or equipment rattled or tinkled or squeaked or even rustled. Everything had been designed that way. They could hear, but they could not be heard. Anyone laying for them would have to see them—and they themselves had very acute hearing and aerialists' eyesight.

Swinging along a clear stretch of road, Yvette asked, "S'pose we goofed, Julie?"

"Uh-uh. Pretty sure not. It's just taking them time to get set. Senor and Senora Velasquez aren't the type to just disappear; it'd raise too much of a stink. Also, besides the king-size fortunes we're wearing, everybody knows that we've got enough money in the safe at the Splendide to start a bank and they'll want that. So the job will take a lot of planning. This three-quarters-naked stunt wasn't designed to make it tough to impersonate us, but how would you go about finding two people to check out of the Splendide—and get that half a megabuck out of their safe—as us?"

"Nice!" Yvette laughed. "I never thought of it cutting both ways. They'll simply *have* to get a Des Plainian gangster and his moll ... but wouldn't they have them ready?"

"I don't think so. You don't find very many DesPlainians on light-grav planets except in grav-controlled buildings. They no like—for which I don't blame them. Another month of this with no work at grav and you and I both will be as flabby as two tubs of boiled noodles."

"So we hope it won't be a month. Oke; well give 'em a few more days."

Five more hikes were eventless.

But on the sixth, at a place where the road would through a coppice of small trees and dense underbrush, their straining ears heard sounds and their keen eyes saw movement

For concealment, the place was perfect, but in order to act the attackers had to move—and low-echelon thugs are not very smart. Also, they had no idea whatever how fast their proposed quarry could move. Jules' hat and swagger stick and Yvette's tiara and handbag hit the blacktop practically at once as the two took off in low, flat dives; he to his side of the road, she to hers.

Diving straight through a bush, Jules slapped the nearest man lightly on the head—gently, so as not to break his neck—picked him up, and hurled him at another man, some twelve feet away, who was just getting to his feet. One jump—he slugged the third in the solar plexus and in the same instant kicked the fourth in the face—not with his toe, but with the whole big flat sole of his shoe. Four down and one to go. But this action had taken almost a second of time—plenty of time for Number Five to get organized. Maybe he was the boss, since he'd been smart enough to station himself well off to one side.

Number Two, who hadn't been hurt much, began to regain consciousness and to thrash around. Jules snaked bellywise over to him, picked his stunner up, and tapped him on the jaw with its butt. Then Jules crawled noiselessly around until

he found a place from which he could get a fairly clear view toward Number Five; who, although he did not seem to realize it, was making a lot of noise. The seeing wasn't good—the moon, while high, was only at quarter—but not much light is necessary to use a stun-gun at close quarters.

"*P-s-s-s-t!*" the hood said, finally. "Ed! Hank! Spike! Did you get 'em. What the *hell* goes on?" He put his head out from behind a tree ... and what went on was a half-hour stun.

"Eve?" Jules asked then, of empty air. "Five here."

"Same here," she replied from across the road. "No sweat. Is there any clear space over there?"

"Yes—we'll lug 'em over here."

Yvette recovered her towering headdress and bag, then came across the road, dragging two limp forms by the collars of their leather jackets. In a few minutes ten unconscious or dead men—Jules was afraid that he had hit Number Three a little too hard—were laid out on their backs in a neat row.

Jules picked up a stunner, then paused. "Uh-uh," he said, "Better give 'em the talk-juice now, so they'll be ready when we get 'em out of the house."

"That'd be better." And Yvette took a hypodermic kit out of her bag and went to work.

VI

In two centuries the colonized planets numbered seven hundred, many of them having large populations. Interstellar commerce increased exponentially. Interstellar crime became rampant. The government of Earth, under a succession of strong and able kings, had been in fact an imperium for many years when, in 2225, King Stanley the Sixth of Earth crowned himself Emperor Stanley One of the Empire of Earth. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire, p539).

Storming the Castle

Jules and Yvette did not drive their car—which was of course the biggest and most expensive one obtainable—back to the hotel. Instead, they loaded their victims into the limousine like cordwood and took them to the "house" they had rented long since—an estate so big and so far away from anywhere that the nearest neighbors could not have heard a forty-millimeter Bofors working at full automatic.

They unloaded their freight, then listened to the nine surviving hoodlums tell, completely unable to lie or withhold knowledge, everything they knew about crime—and especially its biggest chief.

The gamble paid off. "Got it!" exulted Jules when they were done. "I knew our friends—whoever they are—wouldn't stay out of a heist with this kind of money involved.

But who would have thought that it was the Baron of Osberg..."

"You for one, brother dear," supplied Yvette. "And maybe me for another—at least we knew the boss traitor had to be *somebody* big—but tell me, are we going to sit here all night patting you on the back or are we going to *do* something?"

Jules grinned and gave her a mock-salute. Then they gave each of the men a twelve-hour stun and went elsewhere.

The castle of the Baron of Osberg was some seventy miles away. They parked the car a good mile down the road from it and, after selecting certain items of equipment, went the rest of the way on foot, being very careful not to be seen. Then, very cautiously and keeping continuously under cover, they made their way around what was actually a fortress.

The two gates, front and rear, were built of two-inch-square bar steel, topped with charged barbed wire. Neither could be opened except by electronic impulses from inside the castle. The estate was surrounded by a reenforced concrete wall fifteen feet high, surmounted by interlaced strands of charged barbed wire.

The two grinned at each other and separated. Taking advantage of the high, thick hedges bordering the drive, they sneaked up to within six feet of the wall. Both squatted down. Eyes met eyes through the lower, leafless part of the hedges. Muscles tensed and, at Yvette's nod both leaped at full strength upward and inward. Each cleared the topmost wire by a good three feet, stunners drawn, and at the top of

their silent flight they fired rapidly and precisely, stunning every guard they could see. Then, running around the main building, each taking a side, they stunned everything that moved. Yvette ran for the garage; Jules ran to the castle's back door. It was locked, of course! but a Talbot cutter burned the lock away in seconds.

Jules did not know whether that door opened directly into the kitchen or into a hall; but the fact that it did open into the back hall made the job easy and simple. The door to the kitchen was not locked. The dozen or so people in it slumped bonelessly to the floor before any one of them realized that anything unusual was going on. Through the kitchen Jules went, through the butler's pantry and the serving hall, and put an eye to a tiny crack between thick velvet drapes.

The "commons" room was immense. Its beamed ceiling and paneled walls were of waxed yellow-wood. It was furnished lavishly and decorated profusely with ancestral portraits. At the far end there was an antlered fireplace in which a six-foot log smoldered.

Eleven men were in that room; some sitting, some standing; smoking or drinking or both; talking only occasionally and mostly in monosyllables; glancing much too frequently at watches on their wrists. Jules brought his stunner to bear and all eleven collapsed limply into their chairs or onto the floor.

In a couple of minute Yvette came in. "Oke outside," she reported crisply. "Now the big frisk."

"That's right."

They went over the castle from subcellar to garrets, and when they were through they *knew* that everyone else inside the wall was unconscious. Then, and only then, Jules went over to the communicator, cut its video and punched a number.

"This is the Service of the Empire," a perfectly-trained, beautifully-modulated voice came from the speaker. "How may I serve you? If you will turn your vision on, please?"

"Sote six," Jules said. "Affold abacus zymase bezant. The head depends upon the stomach for survival."

"Bub-but-but, sir..." The change in the girl's voice was shocking. She had never heard any two of those four six-letter code words spoken together, and coupled with the words "head" and "survival" they knocked her out of control for a moment; but she rallied quickly. "He's home asleep, sir, but I'll get him right away. One moment, please," and Jules heard the strident clatter of an unusually loud squawk-box.

"Lemme lone," a sleepy voice protested. "G'way. Cut out the damn racket or..."

"Mr. Borton! Wake up!" the girl almost screamed. "*Please* wake up! It's a crash-pri red urgent!"

"Oh." That had done it. "Oke, Hazel; thanks."

"You are connected, sirs, and I'm out. Signal green, please, when you are through." She would much rather take a

beating than listen to any part of the conversation that was to follow, whether she could understand any of it or not.

"Praxis," Borton said. (Request for identification, symbol, or authority).

"Fazzle and Fezzle." (Their own identifying numbers—Agents Eighteen and Nineteen).

"Holy..." Borton began, but shut himself up. The very top skimmings of the very top cream of the entire Service!
"Oke."

"Rafter, angles, angels. Angled. Suffer. Harlot static invert, cosine design. Single-joyful, singer, status, stasis. Over."

"*My—God!* Oke, but you didn't say where you are."

"I don't know your code for local specifics, so ... comprehend Old English ig-pay attin-lay?"

"Ess-yay."

"Tate-ess-ay aron-bay berg-oz-zay."

"Catch."

"Front gate. Douse you glims short-long-short. Over and out if oke."

"Catch. Oke," Borton said. And its *was* oke—perfectly so. If Agents Eighteen and Nineteen told any planetary chief of

SOTE to go jump in the lake he'd do it—and fast. "Here's your green, Hazel. Thanks."

In the time that elapsed before Borton's arrival at the estate of Baron's Osberg, Jules and Yvette questioned the eleven men. They didn't get enough to give them a clear lead to the planet Aston and a general idea of what the mob on Aston would have to be like. Then Borton arrived and they let him in.

"You!" he exclaimed, looking from one spectacular agent to the other and back again. "That's a switch. You came in with bands blaring and pennons waving."

"Check. They would be looking for pussy-footers."

"Could be ... If I may ask, I suppose there's a good reason why I wasn't let in on any of this?"

"Very good. Come in and you'll see what it was." They led him back into the commons room and Jules waved an arm at the stupefied men who, glazed eyes unseeing, lolled slackly in chairs.

"You used Nitrobarb," Borton said. "And on the Baron of Osberg. Half of them will die, I see."

"They'll all die," Jules said grimly. "Especially the Baron. Those who live through this will live a few days longer than the others, is all. But you really don't see, yet. Keep on looking."

Borton's fast-panning gaze came to a burly, crew-cut man of thirty-odd and stopped. His face turned gray; he was too shocked and too surprised even to swear.

"That's Alf Rixton," he managed finally. "My first assistant. He's been with me over ten years! top clearance—lie-detector and hypnosis—every year. He's done splendid work."

"Yeah—for the other side," Jules said coldly. "The only ones he ever gave you were the ones they wanted to get rid of. Take over, Borton, it's all yours. We'll have to stick around for a while—it'd smell cheesy if we'd leave the planet too soon—but we don't want to appear in this. Not a whisper. Nobody around here got a glimpse of us, but there are nine men—" he told him about them—"who shouldn't talk."

"They won't. But listen! This mess here—I couldn't *possibly* have done this alone!"

"Of course not." Jules grinned. "Your assistant there cooked the whole deal up and helped you swing it. He was a tiger on wheels. Too bad the honors are posthumous."

Borton nodded slowly. "Thanks. One of our very best, he died a hero's death, defending gallantly and so forth—sob, sob—the *louse*. But this thing of me taking all the credit for an operation that..." He broke off and grinned wryly. "Oke."

"Uh-huh," Jules agreed. Then he and Yvette said in unison, "Here's to tomorrow, fellow and friend. May we all live to

see it!" And they strode blithely out. One nest had been cleared out—it was time to move on to the next!

Borton, motionless, stared at the closed door. He knew what those two were—Agent Eighteen and Nineteen—but that was all he knew or ever would know about them ... But he had too much to do to waste much time wool-gathering. Shrugging his shoulders, he called his office and issued orders. Then he set up his recorder and began to ask questions of the hoodlums who were still alive.

VII

THE STANLEY DOCTRINE. Empress Stanley 3 also reorganized, simplified and in a sense standardized the theretofore chaotic system of nobility. Her system, which has been changed very little throughout the years, is in essence as follows. Grand Dukes rule sectors of space, each containing many planets. Dukes rule single planets. Marquises rule continents or the equivalents thereof. Earls rule states or small nation. Counts rule counties. Barons rule cities or districts. Primogeniture is strict, with no distinction as to sex. Nobles may marry commoners or higher or lower nobles; the lower-born of each pair being automatically raised to the full rank of the higher-born spouse. (Stanhope, Elements of Empire, p541)

The Switch

The news broke early the following morning. It broke with a crash that was channeled to every planet of civilization.

Carlos and Carmen Velasquez knew nothing of it until half past ten, when the eager waiter hurried in with the breakfast they had ordered a few minutes before. He was accompanied this time by his captain, who carried both morning papers in his hand.

"Good morning, sir and madam," that worthy said. "You have perhaps not heard the extraordinary news on your receiver?"

"Uh-uh." Jules covered a yawn with his hand and shook his head. "We're hardly awake yet." He was wearing only purple-and-gold pajamas; Yvette wore her fabulous headpiece and a purple-and-gold robe that, while opaque in a few places here and there, was practically transparent everywhere else. "Something happen?"

"Most assuredly! The most tremendous, the most sensational of happenings, be assured!" He put the papers down on a side table and helped the waiter arrange the breakfast table most meticulously. "But you will read of it later. You will eat your breakfast now, please, while it is hot." And the two hotel men accepted gratuities and went back downstairs.

After eating, Jules and Yvette went through the story with interest—if with an occasional snort or giggle. The official

version was of course new to them. SOTE, under the masterly direction and leadership of Planetary Chief Borton, had been keeping this band of traitors under close and continuous surveillance for over a year. They had waited until they were sure that they had found every member and connection of the band, then they had struck everywhere at once. They had made a clean sweep.

Faced with absolute proof of guilt, each traitor had confessed and each had been promptly executed, including the Baron of Osberg, who had been the leader. All had been cremated and their ashes had been dumped. The reporter was very glad to say that, since the Baron was the only member of his family involved in the crime, the Barony of Osberg would not revert to the crown. The Baroness Carlotta, who was very well known as a philanthropic clubwoman would succeed—and so on.

Planetary Chief Borton had had no help, not even from Earth. And there was no hint anywhere that nitrobarb—the mere possession of which was by law a capital offense—had been used.

"Nice," Yvette said. "That story is so tight I almost believe it myself. But you said we'd have to stick around. Why? The fact that we were here on the planet—coupled with the fact that those two Delfians had to be DesPlainians—would be plenty for people not half as smart as they are. Whether we stay here a month or leave today makes no difference—except perhaps as an exercise in the old guessing game."

"That's probably right, at that ... Oke, we'll shoot in a call for the ship as soon as we're dressed."

Since the ship had to come from DesPlaines, it was eight days later that Carlos and Carmen Velasquez left the Hotel Splendide for the spaceport, scattering largesse from the penthouse to the limousine as they went.

It was good to feel real gravity again; it was vastly more than good, when, safely inside a private lounge of the big subspacer, they were met by three particular people—two of whom were very special people indeed.

"*Jules!*" a brown-haired girl shrieked, and took off at him in a flying leap from a distance of twelve feet.

"Vonnie! Sweetheart!" He caught her expertly, although her momentum swung him around in a full circle; and for a long, ecstatic minute they stood almost motionless, locked fiercely in each other's arms.

Yvonne pulled back a little, looked at him closely and shook her head. "I've got to have a picture of you. Both of you. They told me, but *this* is a thing that has got to be seen to believed. You always were a handsome dog, Julie, but now you're simply *beautiful!*" She kissed him a few more times. "But I *don't* like that mustache—it tickles! You know something? I asked the Council to let me be Carmen Velasquez—begged them, practically on my knees—but the

old stinkers wouldn't. They made me take the thousand-point test, just like everybody else, and Gabby here beat me out."

Jules grinned. "Did you think they wouldn't?"

"Well, they certainly ought to've given me the job, since I'm engaged to the only thousand-pointer alive. Anyway, I speared second place. I got nine eighty-nine."

"That's mighty good going, sweet." There was a brief interlude, then Jules, with his arm still around his Yvonne's waist, turned to the two others, whom he hadn't even looked at before. The man was of his own age, size and shape, his hair, mustache, and eyebrows matched Jules' exactly. The girl, too, except for costume, was a very reasonable facsimile of Yvette, purple hair and all. The man had been embracing Yvette ardently; the girl, having taken the towering ornament from Yvette's head and put it on her own, was unblushingly admiring herself in a mirror.

"Hi, Gabby; hi, Jacques," Jules said, extending his free hand.

"'Gabby', indeed!" the girl said, tossing her head in fine scorn. "'Grand Lady Gabrielle' to you, lout. I don't think I'll even speak to any of the common herd any more unless they come crawling, bumping their foreheads on the floor."

"Hear, hear!" "That's telling him, Gabby!" Yvette and Jacques said at once, and Yvette added:

"I *liked* wearing these jewels and that crown and stuff, darn it," she mourned. "They *did* something for me," and the

conversation became general.

Jules and Yvette took off their spectacular finery and turned it over to the new Carlos and Carmen. They had their hair un-dyed and rebarbered long and plain; and Jules unwaxed and un-curled his mustache. They donned shapeless brown trousers and jackets of homespun and became in appearance somewhat unorthodox Puritans. The switch completed, at the next transfer-point a new Carlos and Carmen Velasquez, still tossing five-dollar Earth bills around like confetti, boarded the biggest and plushiest liner in port for a planet halfway across all explored space.

There wasn't room enough in Jules' cabin for him to pace the floor, so he stood still, with clenched fists jammed into his pockets. Yvette sat on his narrow bunk, frowning in concentration,

"It's like fighting a fog," Jules said, scowling. "And yet everything we find is just too damned pat."

"You just lost me. Fog, yes. But I haven't noticed any patness."

"Look. In sixty-seven years SOTE hasn't found any evidence that Duke Henry of Durward wasn't I, T, IT."

"Which goes to show that he was."

"Does it? He milked Durward of a staggering fortune, yes. Billions of bucks. But could he possibly have got away with

enough to finance a project that big this long? And the others..."

"I see what you mean. Never mind the others, let's pursue this one. Either he had help from the start or he hooked up with some. He'd have to, to do what he did."

"That's sure. Yet nobody ever got a solid trace, ever. And the leads they did get didn't point to anything solid; just to nit-picking stuff. My thought is that every one of those leads was a trap—a trap that worked."

"And we weren't trapped because we made them come to us."

"I'm not even sure of that."

"My God! Surely you don't think *this* is a trap!"

"Not exactly. I just think it *may* be. We have to follow it, of course, but we'll follow it with our eyes wide open and everything we've got on the trips. And if what we dig up points to Durward—we'll go anywhere else in all space but there."

"So you think everybody's been barking up the wrong trees and all they've got is forty-seven reels of junk and..."

"I said *maybe*," Jules snapped. "I don't know anything!"

"Which puts you one up on SOTE," Yvette said quietly. "That makes the most sense of anything I've heard yet. So we jettison the junk and start from scratch ... the big question

being—how? You're implying a Grand Duke. We *can't* go running around sticking nitrobarb into Grand Dukes at random."

"How true; but you've read about how the old FBI used to catch the top mobsters?"

"Uh-huh. CPA's."

"So look. Durward is in Sector Ten. Algonia is in Three, Aston is in Six, Nevander is in Thirteen and Gastonia is a rim-world clear to hellangone out on the edge of Twenty."

"How did Gastonia sneak into this muddle? It was muddled enough already, without another question mark."

"My own idea. Empress Stanley Five started exiling rebels there way back in the twenty-two hundreds sometime and they've been doing it ever since. What could be nicer for recruiting purposes? But to get back on the beam, the Head thinks this thing is getting ripe. If it is, whoever's doing it has had to do a lot of heavy work and spent an ungodly lot of money. You can hide a lot of building—armaments and such—even without putting it underground. But you can't hide big flows of money from experts who know how to look. So if you don't think I'm nuts, we'll message the Head tonight to check the growth curves of all the planets for the last seventy years and put the best CPA's he's got onto the top five or six."

She looked at him admiringly. "I'm for it; strong. And then we go to Gastonia, or wherever?"

"No. Then we go to Earth."

She looked puzzled for a moment, then her face cleared. "I see. It would have to be a Grand Duke, at that, to get an agent into—and especially out of—the Head's own office ... and the brains would almost have to be on Earth. You *are* smart, Julie; maybe we're getting somewhere, after all."

The ship docked and the two, after killing half an hour—they expected real trouble, and preparations were being made to handle it—made their way to the middle-class dive that was the favorite hangout of the lower officers and the highest crewmen of whatever subspacers happened to be in port. That was all they had—the name of the dive and a cryptic recognition signal bought for them by nitrobarb at the cost of a man's life. But it was enough.

Since the latest ship to come to ground was DesPlainian, the six bouncer-guards of the place—it was a somewhat unusual fact that all six of them were DesPlainians—thought nothing of it when half a dozen leather-clad DesPlainian spacemen came bouncing in, shouting for strong drink and friendly girls.

How could the guards have suspected anything? Or the brains, either, since the d'Alemberts had pitched them such a nice curve? There was no evidence that the Velasquez pair had anything to do with what had happened on Algonia. And if they had had, what were they skys shooting off into the middle of nowhere for?

The renegade Puritans came in—it was quite evident that they were renegades, since no Puritan in good standing would ever enter a bar—and looked unconcernedly around. Since it was early in the afternoon, only one bartender was at work and only a few waitresses and B girls were on hand. The two strolled up to the bar and Jules said, "I was told to ask for the Blinding Flash and say the Deafening Report sent me."

The entire room exploded. The six guards tried, but before any of them could get his blaster half into action he was struck by over an eighth of a ton of the hardest meat he had ever felt. In the same instant Jules put his left arm around the bartender's throat and, with the blaster now in his right hand, drilled a half-inch hole through the PBX operator's head. He then whistled sharply at the terrified girls and waved his weapon at a corner; into which they and the few non-combatant customers were very glad indeed to run.

In the meantime Yvette had dived at the PBX board. She snatched the single earphone off the man's head, put it on her own, let the body fall and sat at the board.

In two minutes the place was a shambles. When a five-hundred-pound pair of DesPlainian free-style brawlers strikes furniture it is the furniture that breaks, not the men. Two tables and half-a-dozen chairs remained intact; one savagely warring pair had gone straight through the heavy yellow-wood bar.

And Jules, standing at ease with his blaster hanging at the loose, studied with keen appreciation the battles going on. He

was not worried about the outcome. Only one result was possible. The guards were good, but they were not d'Alembert—and those six d'Alemberts were the pick of the hardest-trained troupe of no-holds-barred fighting wrestlers known to man.

In three and one-half minutes the place was practically a total loss, but the battle was over. The six survivors sported a few eyes that would soon be black, some contusions and abrasions, and several cuts, tears, scratches, gouges and bites that were bleeding more or less freely, but there had been no real damage at all.

"Nice work, fellows; thanks," Jules said, as the sixth spaceman came to his feet, grinning hugely. "Drink up. There'll be at least some ginger ale left in whole bottles—I think. And break out some champagne for the cuties. I wouldn't know whether they're still in the mood for fun and games or not, but at least we'll do the gentlemanly thing about the drinks. Now, barkeep my friend—" he lifted that wight one-handedly over the bar, set him on his feet and put both big hands uncomfortably tight around his throat—"Do you want to tell me all about all the gizmos between here and the boss upstairs or do I wring your neck exactly like a chicken's?"

"I'll tell, I'll tell!" the man squawked. "Don't wring my neck—please don't! It's all on the board there—really it is—the whole works!"

"He isn't lying, Julie," Yvette said. "There's a whole row of special red indicators that doesn't belong on a standard PBX. It looks like the boss rings down and they set the traps from the board here."

"That's it, that's it!" the man babbled. "There are black-light beams across the halls up there, set to trigger blasters and stunners. The boss calls down and the man on the board sets up whatever he orders."

"Oke. What's his door like—wood or steel? Locked? And how about guards up there?"

"Wood. Not locked. No guards—no trouble ever gets to where he is, sir. He would've set 'em, of course—" nodding his head at the dead man beside the PBX—"but you blasted 'im too quick."

"Oke. Lead the way. That's so in case of trouble you'll get it first—from me, if necessary."

Nothing happened until they reached the Boss's door. The bartender knocked—no code, Jules noticed. A voice from inside the room called "Come in," and the pilot opened the door and led the way into the office. The man behind the desk was alone in the room. He gasped once, turned pale and reached for a row of buttons; but stopped the motion halfway as Jules' blaster came to bear.

"Go ahead, push 'em," Jules said, but the boss, except for twitching muscles, made no move whatever as Jules gave the bartender a tap on the jaw, taking a hypodermic kit out of his

pocket, went up to the desk. The man's eyes widened in panic fear.

"Not that—*please* not nitrobarb!" he pleaded, desperately. "I'm allergic to the stuff—it'll kill me sure, my doctor says."

"What makes you think this is nitrobarb? It could be plain distilled water!"

"Don't mace me, mister! I think I probably know what you want ... and you don't need to give me *anything*! I'll tell you everything I know without it, *honestly* I will!"

And he did, and once again the d'Alemberts listened to the secrets of a traitors' nest. And it was, as Jules had expected it to be, a clear, straight lead to one man in one city of the planet of Durward.

"Oke," Jules said, finally. "I won't kill you—this time. Just tell your boss on Durward I'm coming; loaded to the gills with stuff he never even heard of."

Then the eight d'Alemberts went back to their ship; where Jules and Yvette spent all the rest of the day and almost all of that night in the control room, the most secure spot they could find, composing and encoding a long message to the Head.

When it was done, Jules rose, stretched and walked over to the galactic chart. Her eyes brooding, he set it for maximum span and turned on the activating circuits. As the great wispy star-clouds of the galactic lens took form, each surveyed star positioned with minute accuracy, he keyed the index locators

for Durward, the planet to which all their hard-earned information pointed so surely, and for old Earth. Quickly the taped data spools whined and spun and printed out course and the dizzying distance in parsecs between the two planets. He said slowly, "All the signs say Durward is where the action is..."

"I know, Julie," said his sister, covering a yawn. "So, of course we go to Earth. Well, what are we waiting for?"

VIII

All explored space was divided into 36 wedge-shaped sectors; the line common to all sectors being the line through the center of Sol perpendicular to the plane of the Earth's orbit. Each sector was owned, subject only to the Throne, by a Grand Duke, Earth, by far the most important planet, did not belong to any sector, but was the private property of the Throne. Each Grand Duke had a palace, several residences and a Hall of State on Earth. Because of these facts the nobility of Earth were far more powerful than their titles indicated. The Principal Palace, in which all Grand Imperial Courts were held, was in Chicago; hence the Count of Chicago had more real power than most Earls and Marquises. More, in fact, than many Dukes. (Manley, Feudalism; Reel 1, Intro Sec vii)

The Massagerie

In his private office the Head was talking with a gray-haired man who, while old, was in no sense decrepit. Grand Lady Helena sat, shapely legs crossed, working on a twelve-ounce glass of cherry-ice-cream float.

"But what does it *mean*, Zan?" the older man asked. "Route the Circus to Durward—with instructions not to do anything whatever except circus routine. Carlos and Carmen Velasquez will not report and nothing they do, however wild, will be of any importance. And now this *beauty*-parlor business, right here on Earth! It doesn't make sense."

"Not a beauty parlor, Bill. A massagerie de luxe. Or rather, 'The House of Strength of Body and of Heart'."

"But don't you *know* what they're doing?"

"Very little; and I don't want to know more. I give them a job; they do it their own way. I would hazard a guess that they have some reason to believe that a specific person they are interested in is likely to take an interest in body-building. This, you will note, implies that they have reached the point of being interested in specific persons ... but I don't know who. That is to the good.

"As a recent event proved, the less I know of detail, the better."

"That's true. No trace of your missing person?"

"None. There probably won't be any until the d'Alemberts crack the main case. While they're working on it they get anything they want, with no questions asked."

"As they should, especially since they want so little from us. I know that Circus taxes are rebated, but surely they spend more than that on Empire business?"

"My guess is, they don't. The Circus is so successful that its taxes are very high, but the Duke won't say *how* high. I asked him once if we didn't owe him some money and he told me if I wanted to count pennies I'd better go get myself a job in a dime store."

The old man laughed. "That sounds exactly like him. But DesPlaines is a rich planet, you know, and Etienne d'Alembert is a tremendously able man—as well as being one of my best friends. Well, I'll leave you to your work. I like to talk to you when I'm feeling low, Zan; you give me a lift." He raised his glass. "Tomorrow, fellow and friend. May we all live to see it." They drank the toast and Emperor Stanley Ten, erect and springy, left the room.

Helena grinned up at her father. "You didn't exactly lie, either; but if he knew as much as we do he wouldn't feel so uplifted."

"He has troubles enough of his own without having to carry ours. Besides, we don't know who they're after. It could turn out to be someone outside those six, as well as not."

The girl nodded. "If we had even a good suspicion, he'd get a shot of nitrobarb. All we know is that they haven't got a shred of evidence of anything. But how under the sun and moon and eleven circumpolar stars can this glorified gymnasium help solve anything?"

"I haven't the most tenuous idea, my dear—and just between us two, I'm just as curious as you are."

A ten-story gravity-controlled building in the Evanston district of Chicago had been remodeled from top to bottom. All the work had been done by the high-grav personnel who now occupied the building. Over its splendidly imposing entrance a triple-tube brilliant sign flared red:

DANGER—
THREE GRAVITIES—DANGER

and on each side of the portal, in small, severely plain obsidian letters on a silver background, a plaque read:

duClos

For weeks before the opening it had been noised abroad that this House of Strength would cater only to the topmost flakes of the upper crust; and that was precisely what it did. It turned down applicants, even of the nobility, by the score. Its first clients, and for some time its only clients, were the extremely powerful Count of Chicago, his Countess and their two gangling teen-age daughters. Since this display of ultra-snobbishness appealed very strongly to the ultra-

snobbishness of the high nobility of the Capital of Empire, "duClos" raised snobbery to a height of performance very seldom seen anywhere.

"How're you doing, sis?" Jules asked, one evening. "I'm getting a few bites, but nothing solid. But there's a *feel* about Sector Twenty that I don't like—I'm sure we're on the right track."

"So am I, and I'm getting an idea. I wasn't going to mention it until I could thicken it up a little, but here goes. You know that Duchess of Swingleton? That snooty stinker that's supposed to be the daughter of the Grand Duchess?"

Jules came to attention with a snap. "*Supposed* to be?"

"Well, is then. Maybe I shouldn't have put it quite that way—but you know how I've learned to sneer, in my own inimitable ladylike way?"

"I wouldn't put *that* 'quite that way', either. If it was me on the receiving end I'd sock you right in the middle of your puss."

"She'd really like to. I've been giving her the royal snoot all along and she's burning like a torch. But her mother, Grand Duchess Olga, takes it in stride. So why wouldn't Swingleton ... unless she's bursting at the seams with something she's bottling up?"

"My God, Eve! You think she's the Bastard's daughter?"

"I'm not that far along yet; it's just a possibility. Not daughter; sixty-seven he would be; she's only about twenty. Still in the silly age—which may account for her touchiness and everything. She's beautiful, athletic, rich, talented, noble and spoiled rotten. Her hobby is men. She works hard at it. So my thought is this: if she gets the idea from somewhere that duClos himself is the one and only Mister Big in this business I'm positive that she'll insist on you coaching her yourself—personally. You take her on, but instead of bowing down and worshipping, you act like and say that you wouldn't be caught dead with her at a cat-fight, to say nothing of in bed. If I'm right she'll blow up like a bomb and say something she shouldn't."

Jules whistled piercingly through his teeth. "Wow!" he said.

Three days later, Jules accompanied Yvette into the apartment of the Duchess of Swingleton, who proved to be a tall girl—two inches taller than Jules—beautiful of face and figure, with dark blue eyes and a mass of wheat-straw-colored hair piled high on a proudly-held head. Jules, after being presented, walked slowly around her once, studying her from head to foot from every angle. He scowled and then said, "*Maybe* I can do something with this, but there doesn't seem to be much of anything there to work on. Peel, you, and I'll see."

"Peel?" The girl's head went even higher, her eyes blazed. "Are you talking to *me*?" she flared.

"I'm talking to a mass of fat and a little flabby meat that ought to be muscle but isn't," he replied caustically. "Do you expect a master sculptor to make something of a tub of clay without touching it? Wear a bikini or tights if you like—although how you can imagine that I, duClos, would get the thrills over such a slug's body as yours is completely beyond my comprehension."

"Get out!" Trembling with rage, she pointed at the door. "Leave this castle at once!"

He gave her his choicest top-deck sneer. "Madame, nothing could possibly please me more." He executed a snappy about-face and made for the door.

"Wait, you! Turn around!"

"Yes?" he asked, coldly.

"I am the Duchess of Swingleton!"

"And I, madame, am duClos. There are hundreds and hundreds of duchesses, but there is only one duClos."

She fought her anger down. "I'll put on a swimsuit," she said. "After all, I *do* want to find out whether you're any good or not."

But when she came back, dressed in practically nothing, duClos was even less impressed than before. "Lard," he said, when his talented fingers had reported their preliminary findings to his brain. "Flabby, unrendered lard; but I'll see what I can do with it. We'll go to your gymnasium now."

"Why, aren't you going to take me to your place?"

He looked at her in amused and condescending surprise. "Are you *that* stupid? You'd fall flat and could hardly get up. It'll take a month of work here before you'll be able to work in the House of Strength. To your gymnasium, I say."

In the castle's gymnasium, he said, "First, we'll show you what we, accustomed to three Earth gravities, can do easily here on Earth," and he and Yvette went through a routine of such violence that the apparatus creaked and groaned and the very floor shook.

"Now what a fair Earth gymnast—such as perhaps I'll be able to make out of you—can do," and they showed her that.

"Now I'll find out what you can do—if anything. You can't do even fifty fast push-ups without going flat on your face," and of course she couldn't.

He worked her fairly hard for half an hour, which was about all she could taken, then said, "That's enough for today, poor thing." Then, turning to Yvette, "Give her a massage in steam, and go deep. After that, the usual."

"No, I want you to do it yourself," the girl said. "They say you're tops and I want nothing but the best."

"Oke," Jules said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice, and peeled down to his white nylon shorts. "That'd be better—I'll know more exactly how you come along."

The ladies-in-waiting were shocked—or pretended to be—as the three-quarters-naked man worked on their completely naked mistress; but Jules, alone, of all those present, was—apparently—not affected at all. He was a top-expert masseur working at his profession.

This went on for day after day. Since the Duchess was actually a strong, healthy, athletic girl, splendidly built, and agile both physically and mentally, she learned fast and developed fast. But for the first time in her life she had struck a man and bounced. It was an intolerable situation—a situation that got no better at all as time went on.

He stayed coldly impersonal and more than somewhat contemptuous; he was and he remained a master craftsman wasting his talents on material entirely unworthy of his skill. He paid no attention whatever to any of the little plays she made.

One day, however, when she had become a pretty fair gymnast and was very proud of her accomplishments, all the ladies-in-waiting disappeared before the massage was to begin.

"We don't need them any more, I don't think." She posed, with her skimpy garment half off, and gave him an under-eyebrows look that would have put any other man she knew into a flat spin. "Do we?"

"I don't, that's sure," he said, with the sneer that had become so maddening that she wanted to bash it back into his skull with a sledge-hammer. "And if you're trying to seduce me you're wasting your time. You're a hunk of clay I'm trying to model into something halfway worth while, and nothing else. I'd not rather have you than any other mass of poor-grade clay—or a dime's worth of cat-meat."

That blew it—sky high. "You low-born oaf!" she screamed. "You clod! You base-born peasant, I'll have you flayed alive and staked out on..." She stopped screaming suddenly and her eyes widened the veriest little.

"Stop running off at the mouth!" he rasped, timing it so perfectly that she knew he had interrupted her tirade. "My birth, high or low, has no bearing. I am duClos. I am trying to mold you into what our Creator intended you to be; His instrument to produce *men*, not the milksops and flabs now infesting this sinful planet Earth."

"Oh? Don't tell me you're a *Puritan*!" she exclaimed, very glad indeed to change the subject. "I should have known it, though, by all that hair."

"An ex-Puritan," he corrected her. "I do not believe that everything pleasant is sinful, but neglect of the human body most certainly is. So get in there. And snap it up before you cool off to much."

Work went on, exactly as though nothing had happened. She graduated into the House of Strength and, everything considered, she did very well there.

And she convinced herself quite easily that she had not revealed any tittle of the secret that had been held for sixty-seven years.

IX

As an example of the traditional loyalty of the Navy: When Empress Stanley 5, her husband and four of their five children were assassinated in 2229, their youngest child, Prince Edward, escaped death only because he, then an ensign in the Navy, was being guarded as no other person had ever been guarded before. Fleet Admiral Simms declared martial law and, in the bloodiest purge in all history, executed not only all those found guilty, including Prince Charles and Princess Charlene, but also their entire families. He then made himself regent and ruled with an iron hand for six years. Then, to the vast surprise of all, he relinquished his regency on the day that Prince Edward came of age and he himself crowned Prince Edward Emperor Stanley Six. (Farnham; The Empire, Vol 1, p784)

The Fortress of Englewood

Jules and Yvette deigned to accept six Grand Dukes and their wives as personal clients—among whom were Grand Duke Nicholas and Grand Duchess Olga of Sector Twenty—

but that was all they would take. In that position of intimacy they dug up a few hints, but neither of them could lay hold of anything solid.

At every opportunity they planted Earth operators in the kitchens, in the garages and everywhere else they could. These detectives found bits and pieces of information, but they could not find any leads to Banion or to any of his blood; nor to the all-important Patent of Royalty.

"We've *got* to take this to the Head, Eve," Jules said finally. "I hate to yell for help on our first really big job, but he's just too damned big for us. And it's more than a possibility that it'd be the Head's head that would roll, not Duke Twenty's. We simply *can't* take the chance."

Yvette nodded. "You're right, I'm afraid. He's really big ... but he hasn't got a drop of Stanley blood in him..."

"Which is why he's playing it this way," Jules declared. "The power behind the Throne. I'll set up a meet."

He set it up and they laid the whole ugly mess squarely on the line, and while they talked the Head aged ten years. When they were done he sat silent and motionless, in intense concentration, for a good fifteen minutes. They could almost feel the master strategist's keen brain at work.

Finally he lifted his head sharply and he said:

"I was hoping it would be one of the others, but you're right. We can't move against *him* without the genuine Patent actually in our hands."

Jules scowled. "That's what I was afraid you'd say. And that Patent must be in the solidest safe-deposit vault on Earth."

"It isn't," the Head said, flatly. "The Emperor can open any bank vault he pleases, with no reason at all. So it's in a vault as good as any on Earth, but in the deepest subcellar of Castle Englewood. I'd stake my head on that. Theoretically, the Emperor could open that vault, too, at whim. But trying it would touch everything off and Nicholas might win. So I'm going to stake all our heads. No matter how daintily we try to pussyfoot it, there's always the chance of our touching off the explosion. However, there'd be no point in his killing the Crown Princess as long as the Emperor and the Empress are alive, so what do you think of this?" and they discussed details for two hours.

Three days later, the news media announced that Emperor Stanley Ten had had a heart attack.

It wasn't too serious, as such things go, but a battery of specialists agreed unanimously that he had to have at least two months of carefree rest, preferably at his favorite summer place, Big Piney in the Rockies. Wherefore Crown Princess Edna was given the unusual title of "Empress Pro Tem" and her parents went, with no pomp or circumstance at all—not to Big Piney, but to an island in the Pacific that was guarded by every defensive device known to the military science of the age.

And Empress Pro Tem Edna announced a party—a getting-acquainted party that, beginning with a full Grand Imperial Court, would last for three days—to which all thirty-six Grand Dukes and their entire families were invited. And did any of the invitees even think of declining? Not one.

As that party began, Jules and Yvette and a regiment of experts went as insidiously as possible to work on Castle Englewood. Having free run of the place, as far as anyone now there was concerned, the two went first—with stunners in their hands—to visit the key personnel. They were followed by fifty cat-footed, fully briefed d'Alemberts, who took care of everyone else; particularly of the many-times-too-numerous Castle Guard.

Architects and engineers had detailed plans of the castle, but they were found useless. The actual details had never been registered. So electronic technicians unlimbered their most sensitive detectors and explored walls, floors and ceilings. They traced cable after cable, wire after wire; and section after section of the vast building went dark and powerless.

It had been clear from the start that this was no ordinary residence of any ordinary Grand Duke. It was a fortress; a fortress that, except for the Head's brilliant strategy and the d'Alemberts' ability to carry it out, would have been starkly impregnable. And, even so, the attack almost failed.

"How about this, Major?" Jules asked, as the company, after exploring all the other tunnels and corridors in the sub-basements, returned to a grimly thick steel wall.

"It opens from somewhere, somehow." The officer pointed out an almost invisible crack where steel butted against steel. "It'd probably take a week, though, to find out where or how. I *think* we cut all external leads to here, but they could have independent power in that section."

"We'll assume they have," Jules said. "And automatic blasters—or worse, stunners. Gas, maybe, or triggered bombs. But the Head gambled his life on a lot less than we know now, so bring up your shields and high-powers and burn the damned thing down."

When the eight-inches-thick mass of armor-plate fell inward into the brilliantly lighted room, revealing a squad of tremendously-muscled DesPlainians, it struck a steel floor with a crash that shook the very bed-rock upon which Castle Englewood was built.

One glance, however, was all Jules had; for even before steel struck steel he was smashed down flat by a force of twenty-five gravities; and the fact that the muscle-men inside the room went down too was of little enough comfort. They were weight-lifters. He wasn't.

"Ultra-grav!" Jules gritted, through his clenched teeth. "Can you fellows do anything with it, Rick?" he demanded of the leader of the fighting wrestlers who had done such good work on Aston. "It looks like they've got me just about stuck down."

"We're working on it, Chief," Rick said hoarsely, and they were.

It was fantastic to see two-hundred-fifty-pound brawlers, muscled like Atlases, exerting every iota of their tremendous strength; first to get up onto their knees and then to lift, with the full power of both arms, a five-pound weapon up into some kind of firing position. Unfortunately, one of the guards—a giant even for a DesPlainian weight-lifter—made it first. His first blast went straight through the man in front of Jules; and Jules, who had managed to get almost to his knees, lost a fist-sized chunk of flesh out of his left leg and went back down.

Only the one guard, however, beat the d'Alemberts into action. In the ensuing awkward, slow-motion battle eighteen men died; eight of them being the Grand Duke's guards. Then slowly, ultratoilsomely, the d'Alembert found the gravity controls and restored a heavenly three thousand centimeters per second. And Yvette, who had been pinned down all this time, rushed over and first-aid-bandaged the ghastly wound in her brother's leg.

They did not try to unlock the vault. It was too late now for catfooting. Demolition experts brought up their shields and sandbags and blew the whole face of it to bits. They removed the debris and ransacked the vault—and they found a Patent of Royalty.

Then, hearts in throats and scarcely breathing, they looked on while hand-writing experts and documentary experts gave that parchment the works.

"This is the genuine Patent," the chief examiner said finally; and in the joyously relieved clamor that followed even the dead were for the moment forgotten.

The rest of the project went smoothly enough. The full regiment of Imperial Guards sealed the Principal Palace bottle-tight. The Navy put an impenetrable umbrella over all Chicago. Fleet Admiral Armstrong himself led a company of marines into the Grand Ballroom and broke up the Empress Pro Tem's party by putting Grand Duke Nicholas and his entire retinue under arrest. And immediately, then and there in the Grand Ballroom, the Emperor's personal physician administered nitrobarb and the Court Psychologist asked questions. And Empress Pro Tem Edna, her face too stern and hard by far for any girl of her years, listened; and having listened, issued orders which Fleet Admiral Armstrong carried out.

Since it is much faster to work such an inquiry from the top down than from the bottom up, full information was obtained in less than a week. And thus, while the resultant vacancies in the various services were many and terribly shocking, the menace that had hung over the Empire for sixty-seven years was at long last abated.

And thus—a thing supremely important to Jules and Yvette d'Alembert—the Service of the Empire was at long last clean.

X

Because of their high intelligence, their super-cat agility, their hair-trigger speed of reaction and their enormous physical strength, DesPlainians had been the best secret service agents of, in turn, the Central Intelligence of Earth, the Galactic Intelligence Agency and the Service of the Empire. And of all DesPlainians, throughout the years, the d'Alemberts had been by far the best. The fact that the Circus of the Galaxy was SOTE's right arm did not leak from Earth because only the monarch, the Head and a very few of their most highly trusted intimates ever knew it. Nor did it leak from the Circus. Circus people never have spoken to rubes, and the inflexible Code d'Alembert was that d'Alemberts spoke only to d'Alemberts and to the Head, (unpublished data)

Bill, Irene and Edna

Again it was late at night. Again the d'Alemberts Service Special slanted downward through the air toward the roof of the Hall of State of Sector Four. This time, however, the little speedster was not riding a beam and there was no spot of light upon the building's roof. Except for the light of the almost-full moon, everything was dark and still.

Yvette was the Yvette of old. Jules, again short-haired and smooth-shaved, looked like his usual self; but there was a crutch beside him and his sister was doing the piloting.

She landed the craft near the kiosk of the ultra-private elevator, opened up and leaped lightly out; Jules clambered out, clumsily and stiffly; and Grand Lady Helena came running up in a very ungrand-ladylike fashion.

"Oh, you're wonderful, Yvette—simply *marvelous*!" She put both arms around Yvette's neck and kissed her three times on the lips. "I'm awfully glad father let me be the one to meet you!" She turned and went somewhat carefully into Jules' arms. "And *you*, Jules! Oh, I just can't—but *surely* you can hug a girl tighter than *this*, can't you? Even with a bum leg?"

Jules, returning her kisses enthusiastically, tightened his arms a little, but not much. Then, lifting her by the armpits, he held her feather-lightly out at arms' length, with her toes ten or twelve inches in air. "Sure I can," he said, solemnly but with sparkling eyes, "but the trouble is, I never hugged an Earther before and I'm afraid of breaking you in two. It wouldn't be quite *de rigueur*, would it, to break a Grand Lady's back and half of her ribs?"

"Oh, there's no danger of *that*. I'm ever so much stronger than..." She broke off and her eyes widened in surprise as her hands, already on his arms, tried with all their strength to drive her fingertips into them.

"Oh, I see," she said quietly. "I never quite realized."

Jules lowered her gently to the roof and she led the way into the elevator. She did not tell them what the Head wanted of them and they did not ask. As the elevator started down

she said, "Jules, I'm going to tell you something. I was all set to fall in love with you and make you love me whether you wanted to or not. But when I couldn't make even a dent in those muscles of yours ... arms as big and as hard as those of a heroic-size bronze ... well..." Her voice died away.

"You couldn't, possibly," he replied soberly. "There's too much difference. Three of your gravities is a lot of grav, Helena. But we have your friendship?"

"More than that, both of you. Ever so much more. That, and admiration and esteem and..." She broke off as the elevator door opened.

She stepped aside; motioned for them to precede her. They took one step into the Head's private office and stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes and mouths becoming O's of astonishment. For—

The big but trim old gray-haired man was Emperor Stanley Ten! The statuesque, regal, brown-haired woman was Empress Irene! And the beautifully built, prematurely stern-faced girl mixing drinks at the Head's bar was Crown Princess Edna.

The emperor stood up and raised a hand. "Do not kneel," he said—but of course, with their speed of reaction, Yvette was already on her knees and Jules, gimpy leg and all, was on one.

He raised them to their feet, kissed Yvette's hand and shook Jules' and said, "During this visit and hereafter in

private, my friends, to you two I am Bill."

"Oh, we couldn't, Your ... Sire ... not possibly," Jules said. "But we might call you 'sir', sir?"

Stanley Ten smiled; and in that smiling shed a heavy load. "Oh? I understand. Many of the younger generation are not so well bred. 'Sir' will do very nicely. I take pleasure in presenting you both to Mrs. Stanley ... and to our daughter, Edna."

Introductions made, Edna Stanley went around with her tray, serving Jules last. As she handed him his glass of lemonade her dark, gray eyes, usually distant, were soft and warm. "It's a damned dirty stinking shame," she said, feelingly, "that we can't give you two, the two who saved our lives, at least a Grand Imperial Court channeled to every planet in space. And to cap it off we have to give that stuffed shirt Armsbold all the credit. The fathead! And he'll get another medal, I suppose—and compared to you two he positively could not detect a smell on a skunk!"

"Well—" Jules began, but the princess rushed on.

"Oh, I know that's the way it has to be, Jules, and I know why. And I know exactly how you feel about it. The Service of the Empire. The fine tradition of the finest group of men and women who ever lived. But knowing all that doesn't make it taste any better or go down any easier that all we can do is thank you for saving all three of our lives at such

tremendous risk of your own, and that we have to do even that on the sneak—or cost you yours."

She threw her arms around Jules' neck and kissed him warmly. And, while he could not bring himself to the point of kissing the Crown Princess of the Empire as though she were an ordinary girl, his response was adequate.

Edna Stanley was not the crying type, but her eyes were brimming as she drew her head back, looked straight into Jules' eyes and went on, "But we three will remember it as long as we live; and you two will have a very special place in my heart as long as I live."

Without giving Jules a chance to say anything—which was just as well, since he could not possibly have said a word—she wriggled free and embraced Yvette. "What did *you* expect, Yvette? And call me Edna; we're about the same age."

"I'd love to, Edna, it warms me clear through. What I expected was a pat on the back from the Head there and another tough job."

The Head laughed. "You'll get both, my dear." Then, turning to Stanley, "You see, Bill?"

"I see, Zan. D'Alemberts. Metal of proof. Wrought and tempered." Stanley turned to Jules and Yvette. "You young people don't realize that your lives are more important to the Empire than mine is."

"I not only don't realize it, sir," Jules said, doggedly, "but I don't see how it can possibly be true. You are the third and the greatest of the Great Stanleys. Eve and I are just two d'Alemberts out of over a thousand."

"Correction, please. As of now you are, and probably for the next two or three years will continue to be the two most capable human beings alive." Stanley replenished his drink and brought Yvette a small pitcher of fresh orange juice, while Edna waited on the others. "Let's examine this 'Great Stanley' business a little; it will be a good way to get better acquainted. I've studied the House of Stanley quite thoroughly; enough to have developed what is—to me, at least—a new theory. Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why the three so-called Great Stanleys happened to be the three who reigned longest? Empress Stanley Three, thirty-seven years; Emperor Stanley Six, thirty-six years; and I, who have more than either, and will probably—thanks to you—reign two more before reaching the age of seventy and abdicating in favor of Edna here?"

"N-o-o-o, sir. I can't say that I have."

"It's a highly pertinent fact. You know, I'm sure, that only one Stanley so far has died in bed."

"Yes, sir, but..."

"And one died in a space accident. The other seven were assassinated, usually by their own sons or daughters or brothers or sisters."

"Yes, sir. I know that."

"They had too many children, too young. So Irene and I had only one child, and Edna wasn't born until I was forty-five years old. So as soon as she's able to carry the load we'll hand it to her on a platter and step out."

"Dad!" the Crown Princess exclaimed. "You know very well I'd never even *think* of such a thing!" And:

"William!" the Empress protested. "What a *nasty* thing to say!"

The Emperor grinned. "If you'll analyze what I actually said you'll see that you read that wicked thought of regicide and patricide into it—and you'll know why. Anyway, Irene, you helped plan it. And it's worked out beautifully for all of us. You've all heard the old wheeze that 'Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely'?"

They all had.

"My theory is that only the first part of that old is really true. For, as a matter of fact, no human being ever had absolute power until King Stanley the Sixth crowned himself Emperor Stanley One and took it. He had the whole galaxy. Every other despot in history was always reaching for more; so the truth of that old saying was never tested.

"Indeed, there is much in pre-Stanley history that argues against its truth. The worst gangsters and the most rapacious

capitalists Earth ever knew, when they got old enough and powerful enough and rich enough, turned from crime and rapacity to something that was for the good of all mankind. And the entire history of the House of Stanley bears this out."

There was a short silence, then the Empress said, thoughtfully, "Well, it's something to think about, at least... and it *does* seem to make sense ... but my dear, what has all that to do with the present case?"

"Everything," Stanley said, deadly serious now. "It shows why these two d'Alemberts—highly trained, uniquely gifted, innately and completely loyal to the Empire—are much more important to the Empire than I am. Not that they are indispensable. No one is. But they are at present irreplaceable and I am not. Any Stanley who is able to live long enough becomes a Great Stanley by sheer force of circumstance, and Edna will be one from the day she is crowned."

The Emperor turned to face Jules and Yvette. "Nevertheless, my young friends, my life is extremely important to me. It is also extremely important to Irene and to Edna, as are their lives to me. Our three lives are important to a few real friends, such as Zander there and your father the Duke; but you would be surprised to know just how scarce such real friends are. The life of any individual Emperor or Empress, however, is of very little importance to the Empire itself, of which its rulers are merely the symbols. The Empire endures only because of the loyalty to it of such people as you. Such loyalty can not be

commanded; it must be earned. The Empire will endure as long as, and only as long as, it continues to be worthy of such loyalty. Without that loyalty the Empire would fall. Instead of prosperity and peace there would be wide-spread and terribly destructive wars of planetary conquest. Our present civilization would degenerate into barbarism and savagery.

"We Stanleys do what we can; but in the last analysis the Empire rests squarely upon the arch of its various services, and your Service of the Empire is the very keystone of that arch.

"As Edna said, it is a shame that we three can give you only our thanks. It is not, however the thanks of only three people. I am speaking for the Empire when I say to you and through you to those who work with you..." Emperor Stanley Ten took the d'Alemberts' right hands, one in each of his own:

"Thanks."

END

[End of *The Imperial Stars*, by E. E. Smith]