



The Affair of the Brains

And Other Thought Provoking Tales

by

Hiram Gilmore Bates

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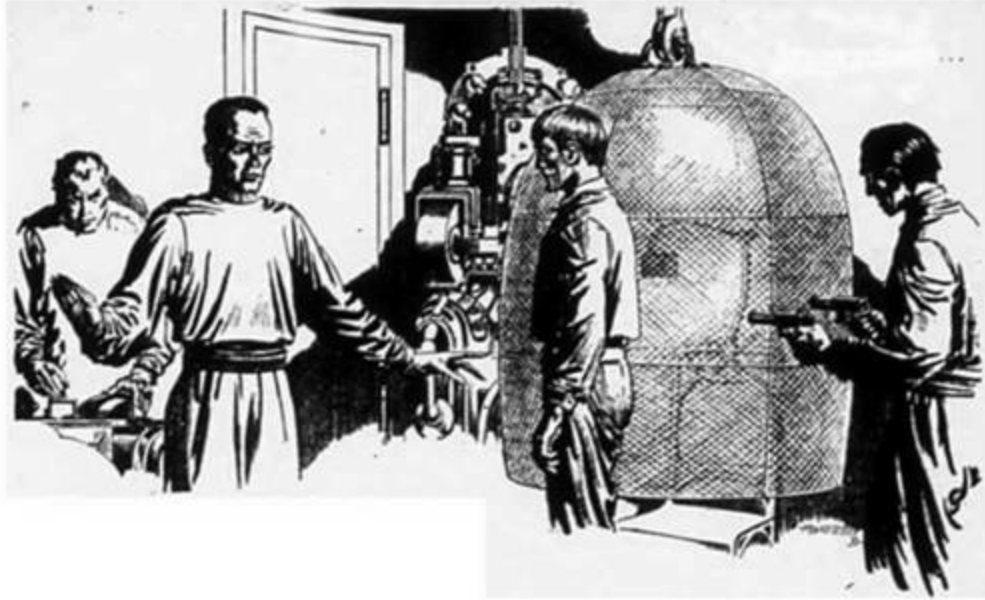
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THE AFFAIR OF THE BRAINS

A Complete Novelette



"I do not know you for a liar.... I will enter."

CHAPTER I

Off to the Rendezvous

Hawk Carse himself goes to keep Judd the Kite's rendezvous with the sinister genius Ku Sui.

Though it is seldom nowadays that Earthmen hear mention of Hawk Carse, there are still places in the universe where his name retains all its old magic. These are the lonely outposts of the farthest planets, and here when the outlanders gather to yarn the idle hours away their tales conjure up from the past that raw, lusty period before the patrol-ships came, and the slender adventurer, gray-eyed and with queer bangs of hair obscuring his forehead, whose steely will, phenomenal ray-gun draw and reckless space-ship maneuverings combined to make him the period's most colorful figure. These qualities of his live again in the outlanders' reminiscences and also of course his score of blood-feuds and the one great feud that shook whole worlds in its final terrible settling—the feud of Hawk Carse and Dr. Ku Sui.

Again and again the paths of the adventurer and the sinister, brilliant Eurasian crossed, and each crossing makes a rich tale. Time after time Ku Sui, through his several bands of space-pirates, his individual agents and his ambitious web of power insidiously weaving over the universe, whipped his tentacles after the Hawk, and always the tentacles coiled back, repulsed and bloody. An almost typical episode is in the affair which followed what has been called the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

It will be remembered—as related in "Hawk Carse"¹—that Dr. Ku laid a most ingenious trap for Carse on the latter's ranch on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn. Judd the Kite, pirate and scavenger, was the Eurasian's tool in this plot, which started with a raid on the ranch. The fracas which followed the Hawk's escape from the trap was bloody and grim enough, and resulted in the erasure of Judd and all his men save one; but the important thing to the following affair was that Judd's ship, the Scorpion, fell into Carse's hands with one prisoner and the ship's log, containing the space coordinates for a prearranged assignation of Judd with Ku Sui.

All other projects were postponed by the Hawk at this opportunity to meet Dr. Ku face to face. The trail of the Eurasian was the guiding trail of his life, and swiftly he moved along it.

There was work to be done before he could set out. Three men had emerged alive from the clash between the Hawk and the Kite: Carse himself, Friday, his gigantic negro companion in adventure, and a bearded half-caste called Sako, sole survivor of Judd's crew. Aided sullenly by this man, they first cleaned up the ravaged ranch, burying the bodies of the dead, repairing fences and generally bringing order out of confusion. Then, under Carse's instructions, Friday and the captive brigand toiled the adventurer's own ship, the *Star Devil*, well into the near-by jungle, while the Hawk returned to the *Scorpion*.

He went into her control cabin, opened her log book and once more scanned what interested him there. The notation ran:

"E.D. (Earth Date) 16 January, E.T. (Earth Time) 2:40 P.M. Meeting ordered by Ku Sui, for purpose of delivering the skeleton and clothing of Carse to him, at N.S. (New System) X-33.7; Y-241.3; Z-92.8 on E.D. 24 January, E.T. 10:20 P.M. Note: the ship is to stand by at complete stop, the radio's receiver open to Ku Sui's private wave (D37, X1293, R3) for further instructions."

He mulled over it, slowly stroking his flaxen bangs. It was a chance, and a good one. Judd's ship would keep that rendezvous, but it would sheathe the talons of the Hawk. This time a trap would be laid for Ku Sui.

The plan was simple enough, on the face of it, but the Eurasian was a master of cunning as well as a master of science, and high peril attended any matching of wits with him. Carse closed the log, his face bleak, his mind made up. A shuffle of feet brought his gaze up to the port-lock entrance.

Friday, stripped to shorts, a sweat-glistening ebony giant, stood there. Shaking the drops of steaming perspiration from his face, he reported:

"All finished, suh—got the *Star Devil* in the jungle where you said to hide her. An' now what? You still figurin' on keepin' that date with Dr. Ku in this ship?"

Carse nodded, absently.

"Then where'll we pick up a crew, suh? Porno? It's the nearest port, I reckon."

"I'm not taking any crew, Eclipse."

Friday gaped in surprise at his master, then found words:

"No crew, suh? Against Ku Sui? We'll be throwin' our lives——"

"I've lost enough men in the last two days," Carse cut in shortly. "And this meeting with Dr. Ku is a highly personal affair. You and I and Sako can run the ship; we've got to." One of the man's rare smiles relaxed his face. "Of course," he murmured, "I'm risking your life, Eclipse. Perhaps I'd better leave you somewhere?"

"Say!" bellowed the negro indignantly.

The Hawk's smile broadened at the spontaneous exclamation of loyalty.

"Very well, then," he said. "Now send Sako to me, and prepare ship for casting off."

But as Friday went aft on a final thorough inspection of all mechanisms, he muttered over and over, "Two of us—against Ku Sui! Two of us!" and he was still very much disturbed when, after Carse had had a few crisp words with the captive Sako, telling him that he would be free but watched and that it would be wise if he confined himself to his duties, the order came through to the engine room:

"Break ground!"

Gently the brigand ship *Scorpion* stirred. Then, in response to the delicate incline of her space-stick, she lifted sweetly from the crust of Iapetus and at ever-increasing speed burned through the satellite's atmosphere toward the limitless dark leagues beyond.

The Hawk was on the trail!

Carse took the first watch himself. Except for occasional glances at the banks of instruments, the screens and celestial charts, he spent his time in deep thought, turning over in his mind the several variations of situation his dangerous rendezvous might take.

First, how would Ku Sui contact the *Scorpion*? Any of three ways, he reasoned: come aboard from his own craft accompanied by some of his men;

stay behind and send some men over to receive the remains of the Hawk—for either of which variations he was prepared; or, a third, and more dangerous, direct that the remains of Carse be brought over to his ship, without showing himself or any of his crew.

Whatever variations their contacting took, there was another consideration, Carse's celestial charts revealed, and that was the proximity of the rendezvous to Jupiter's Satellite III, less than three hundred thousand miles. Satellite III harbored Port o' Porno, main refuge and home of the scavengers, the hijackers, and out-and-out pirates of space, so many of whom were under Ku Sui's thumb. Several brigand ships were sure to be somewhere in the vicinity, and one might easily intrude, destroying the hairbreadth balance in Carse's favor....

There was peril on every side. The Hawk considered that it would be wise to make provision against the odds proving too great. So, his gray eyes reflective, he strode to the *Scorpion's* radio panel and a moment later was saying over and over in a toneless voice:

"XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2...."

After a full two minutes there was still no answer from the loudspeaker. He kept calling: "XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling——"

He broke off as words in English came softly from the loudspeaker:

"XX-2 answering XX-1. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. Give me protected connection. Highly important no outsider overhears."

"All right," the gentle voice answered. "Protected. Go ahead, old man."

The Hawk relaxed and his face softened. "How are you, Eliot?" he asked almost tenderly.

"Just fine, Carse," came in the clear, cultured voice of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, probably the greatest scientific mind in the solar system, Ku Sui being the only possible exception. He spoke now from his secret laboratory on Jupiter's Satellite III, near Porno, this transcendent genius who, with Friday, was one of Carse's two trusted comrades-in-arms. "I've been expecting you," he went on. "Has something happened?"

"I'm concerned with Ku Sui again," the Hawk told him swiftly. "Please excuse me; I have to be brief. I can't take any chances of his hearing any of this." He related the events of the last two days: Judd's attack on the Iapetus ranch, the subsequent fight and outcome, and finally his present position and intention of keeping the rendezvous. "The odds are pretty heavily against me, M. S.," he went on. "It would be stupid not to admit that I may not come out of this affair alive—and that's why I'm calling. My affairs, of course, are in your hands. You know where my storerooms and papers are. Sell my trading posts and ranches; Hartz of Newark-on-Venus is the best man to deal through. But I'd advise you to keep for yourself that information on the Pool of Radium. Look into it sometime. I'm in Judd's ship, the *Scorpion*; our *Star Devil's* on Iapetus, hidden in the jungle near the ranch. That's all, I think."

"Carse, I should be with you!"

"No, M. S.—couldn't risk it. You're too valuable a man. But don't worry, you know my luck. I'll very likely be down to see you after this meeting, and perhaps with a visitor who will enable you once again to return to an honorable position on Earth. Where will you be?"

"In eight Earth days? Let's make it Porno, at the house you know. I'll come in for some supplies and wait for you."

"Good," the Hawk said shortly. "Good-by, M. S."

He paused, his hand on the switch. There came a parting wish:

"Good luck, old fellow. Get him! *Get him!*"

The Master Scientist's voice trembled at the end. Through Ku Sui he had lost honor, position, home—all good things a man on Earth may have; through Ku Sui he, the gentlest of men, was regarded by Earthlings as a black murderer and there was a price on his head. Hawk Carse did not miss the trembling in his voice. As he switched off, the adventurer's eyes went bleak as the loneliest deeps of space....

¹ See the November, 1931, issue of *Astounding Stories*.

CHAPTER II

The Coming of Ku Sui

Straight through the vast cold reaches that stretched between one mighty planet and another the *Scorpion* arrowed, Carse and Friday standing watch and watch, Sako always on duty with the latter. Behind, Saturn's rings melted smaller, and ahead a dusky speck grew against the vault of space until the red belts and one great seething crimson spot that marked it as Jupiter stood out plainly. By degrees, then, the ship's course was altered as Carse checked his calculations and made minor corrections in speed and direction. So they neared the rendezvous. And a puzzled furrow grew on Friday's brow.

What was bothering his master? Instead of becoming more impassive and coldly emotionless as the distance shortened, he showed distinct signs of worry. This might be natural in most men, but it was unusual in the Hawk. Often the negro found him abstractedly smoothing his bangs of hair, pacing the length of the control cabin, glancing, plainly worried, at the visi-screen. What special thing was wrong? Friday wondered again and again—and then, in a flash, he knew.

"Why—how we goin' to *see* Dr. Ku?" he burst out. "Didn't that Judd say somethin'——"

The Hawk nodded. "That's just the problem, Eclipse. For you'll remember Judd said that Ku Sui 'comes out of darkness, out of empty space.' That might mean invisibility or the Fourth Dimension—and God help us if he's solved the problem of dimensional traveling. I don't know—but it's something I can't well prepare against." He fell to musing again, utterly lost in thought.

A day and a half later found Friday genuinely worried—an unusual state for the always cheerful black. The laugh wrinkles of his face were re-twisted into lines of anxiety which gave his face a most solemn and lugubrious expression. From time to time he grasped the butt of his ray-gun with a grip that would have pulped an orange; occasionally his rolling brown eyes sought

the gray ones of the Hawk, only to return as by a magnet to the visi-screen, whose five adjoining squares mirrored the whole sweep of space around them.

Jupiter now filled one side of the forward observation window. It was a vast, red-belted disk, an eye-thrilling spectacle at their distance, roughly a million miles. Against it were poised two small pale globes, the larger of which was Satellite III. Several hours before, when they had been closer to the satellite, Carse had scrutinized it through the electelscope and made out above its surface a silver dot which was a space-ship. It was bound inward toward Port o' Porno, and might well have been one of Ku Sui's. But the *Scorpion*, slowing down for her rendezvous, had attracted no attention and had passed undisturbed.

Now she hung motionless—that is, motionless with respect to the sun. Only the whisper of the air-renewing machinery disturbed the tension in her control cabin where the three men stood waiting, glancing back and forth from the visi-screen to the Earth clock and its calendar attachment. The date the clock showed was 24 January, the time, 10:21 P. M. Dr. Ku Sui was one minute late.

Sako, the captive, was sullen and restless, and made furtive glances at the Hawk, who stood detached, arms hanging carelessly at his sides, gray eyes half closed, giving in his attitude no hint of the strain the others were feeling. But his attitude of being relaxed and off his guard was deceptive—as Sako found out. Suddenly his left hand seemed to disappear; there was a hiss, an arrowing streak of spitting orange light; and Sako was gaping foolishly at the arm he had stealthily raised to one of the radio switches. A smoking sear had appeared as if by magic across it.

Hawk Carse sheathed his gun. "I would advise you to try no more obvious tricks," he said coldly. "Cutting in our microphone is too simple a way to give warning to Dr. Ku Sui. Move away from there. And don't forget your lines when Dr. Ku calls. You will never act a part before a more critical and deadly audience."

Sako mumbled something and rubbed his arm. A pitying smile came to Friday's face as he comprehended what had happened. "You damned fool!" he said.

It was 10:22 P.M. Still, in the visi-screen, no other ship. Nothing but the giant planet, the smaller satellites poised against it, and the deep star-spangled curtain of black space all around.

They had carefully followed the instructions in the log. They were at the exact place noted there: checked and double-checked. The radio receiver was tuned to the wave-length given in the log. But of Ku Sui, nothing.

And yet, in a way, he was with them. His enigmatic personality, his seldom-seen figure was very present in their minds, and with it were overtones of all the diabolic cunning and suave ironic cruelty that men always associated with him. "He comes out of darkness, out of empty space...." Friday licked his lips. He was not built for mental strain: his lips kept drying and his tongue was as leather.

A little sputtering sound tingled the nerves of the three waiting men, and as one their eyes went to the radio loudspeaker. A contact question was being asked in the usual way:

"Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd?"

The voice was not that of Ku Sui. It was a dead voice, toneless, emotionless, mechanical.

"Are you there, Judd?" it went on, over and over.

"The mike switch, Friday," the Hawk said, and then was at Sako's side, his ray-gun transfixing the man with its threatening angle. "Play your part well," was the whisper from his lips.

The switch went over with a click. Trembling, Sako faced the microphone.

"This is Sako," he said.

"Sako?" the dead voice asked. "I want Judd. Where is Judd?"

"Judd is dead. The trap failed, and there was a fight on Iapetus. Judd was killed by Carse, and most of the others. Only two of us are left, but we have Carse and the negro, prisoners, alive. What are your instructions?"

A half minute went by, and the three men hardly breathed.

"How do we know you are Sako?" said the voice at last. "Give the recognition."

"The insignia of Dr. Ku Sui?"

"Yes. It is——"

Carse's ray-gun prodded the stomach of the sweating Sako.

"An asteroid," he said hastily, "in the center of a circle of the ten planets."

The unseen speaker was quiet. Evidently he was conferring with someone else, probably Ku Sui.

"All right," his toneless voice came back at last. "You will remain motionless in your present position, keeping your radio receiver open for further instructions. We are approaching and will be with you in thirty minutes."

Carse motioned to Friday to switch off the mike. Sako sank limply into a chair, soaked with perspiration.

"Now we must wait again," the Hawk murmured, crossing his arms and scanning the visi-screen.

They had heard from Ku Sui, but that had not answered the old tormenting question of how he would come. It was more puzzling than ever. The visi-screen showed nothing, and it should have shown the Eurasian's decelerating ship even at twice thirty minutes' time away. They looked upon the same vista of Jupiter and his satellites, framed in eternal blackness; there was no characteristic steely dot of an approaching ship to give Carse the enemy's position and enable him to shape his plan of reception definitely.

Twenty minutes went by. The strain the Hawk was under showed only in his pulling at the bangs of flaxen hair that covered his forehead as far as the eyebrows. He had, from Judd's words, expected a mystery in Ku Sui's approach. There was nothing to do but wait; he had made what few plans and preparations he could in advance.

Friday broke the tense silence in the control cabin. "He's *got* to be *somewhere!*" he exploded. "It isn't natural for the screen not to show nothin'! Isn't there somethin' we can do?"

The Hawk was surprisingly patient. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It's invisibility he's using, or else the fourth dimension, as Judd said. But we've got one good chance. He'll send more instructions by radio, and surely, after that, his ship

will appear——"

A new voice, bland and unctuous, spoke in the control cabin from behind the three men.

"Not necessarily, my honored friend Carse," it said. *"You will observe there is no need for a ship to appear."*

Ku Sui had come.