

When the interstellar
diplomats and the space
fleets can't handle the job,
it's up to

D-99

a science-fiction novel by
H. B. FYFE



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ROCKETS SLAMMED PAST

—just missing the tall, gaunt man who dodged down the stairs of the Earth Embassy. A figure loomed in a doorway and he snapped off a quick blaster shot at it—missed.

He'd killed one man, wounded others—and was carrying papers stolen from the secret Embassy files. They had to stop him—but they couldn't!

—And, worlds away, the men of Department 99 watched on their galaxy-spanning view-screen ... knowing they were responsible for this disaster—and powerless to do anything about it!

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ONE

At the ninety-fifth floor, Westervelt left the public elevator for a private automatic one which he took four floors further. When he stepped out, the dark, lean youth faced an office entrance whose double, transparent doors bore the discreet legend: "Department 99."

He crossed the hall and entered. Waving at the little blonde in the switchboard cubby to the right of the doorway, he continued a few steps into the office beyond. Two secretaries looked up from the row of desks facing him, a third place being unoccupied. Behind them, long windows filtered the late afternoon light to a mellow tint.

"Did you get it all right, Willie?" asked the dark girl to his left. "Mr. Smith wants you to take it right in. He expected you earlier."

"My flight from London was late; I did the best I could after we landed," said Westervelt. "It took me the whole day to fetch this gadget. At least let me get my coat off!"

He moved to his right, to a modest desk in an alcove formed by the end of the office and the high partition that enclosed the switchboard.

"How do you find yourself inside that?" asked the other secretary, a golden haired girl with a lazy smile. "Talk about women's clothes! The men are wearing topcoats like tents this year."

Westervelt felt himself flushing, to his disgust. He struggled out of the coat, removed an oblong package and a large envelope from inner pockets, and tossed the coat on his desk.

It had hardly settled before the door at the opposite end of the office, beyond the dark girl, was flung open. From the next room lumbered a man who looked even lankier than Westervelt because he was an inch or two over six feet tall. His broad forehead was grooved by a scowl of concentration that

brought heavy eyebrows nearly together over a high-bridged nose. His chin seemed longer for his chewing nervously upon his lower lip. He was in shirtsleeves and badly needed a haircut.

"I'm going down to the com room, Miss Diorio," he told the brunette. "There's another weird report coming in!"

He vanished into the hall with a clatter.

His secretary looked at Westervelt, a smile tugging at the corners of her full lips. She threw up her hands with a little flip.

"I told you to take it right in," she reminded him.

"Aw, come on, Si! What if I'd been in the doorway when he came through?"

"What is it, anyway?" asked the other girl.

Westervelt looked around as she rose. Beryl Austin, he thought, would be a knockout if only there were less of a hint of ice about her. She was, in her high heels, only an inch shorter than he. Her face was round, but with a delicate bone structure that lent it an odd beauty. Westervelt was privately of the opinion that she spoiled the effect by wearing her hair in a style too short and too precisely arranged. *And too bleached*, he told himself.

The talk was that before coming to the Department, she had won two or three minor beauty contests. That might explain the meticulous make-up and the smart blue dress that followed the curves of her figure so flatteringly. Westervelt suspected, from hints dropped by Simonetta Diorio, that this was insufficient qualification for being a secretary, even in such a peculiar institution as Department 99. Of course, maybe Smith had ideas of making her a field agent.

He held out the package in the palm of his hand.

"They said at the London lab that it was a special flashlight that would pass for an ordinary one."

"Oh, the one for that Antares case," exclaimed Beryl. "Si was telling me how they'll send out plans of that. Did they show you how it works?"

"It gives just a dim beam until you press an extra switch," said Westervelt. "Then it puts out a series of dashes bright enough to hurt your eyes."

"What in the world do they want that for?" asked Beryl.

"What in some other world, you mean! On some of these planets, the native life is so used to a dim red sun that a flash like this on their sensitive eyes can knock them unconscious."

"This place is just full of dirty tricks like that," said the blonde. "Why can't they free these people some other way?"

Westervelt and Simonetta looked at each other. Beryl had been in the Department only a few weeks, and did not yet seem to have heard the word.

Or understood it, maybe, thought Westervelt. *She might not look half so intelligent without that nice chest expansion.*

"Some of them just get in trouble," Simonetta was saying. "The laws of alien peoples we've been meeting around the galaxy don't necessarily make sense to Terrans."

"But why can't they stay away from such queer places?"

"What would you do," asked Westervelt, "if you were in a spaceship that blew up near a strange planetary system, and you took an emergency rocket to land on the best looking planet, and the local bems arrested you because they have a law against anyone passing through their system without special permission?"

"But how can they make a law like that?" demanded Beryl.

"Who says they can't? They had a war with beings from the star nearest them; and wound up suspicious of every kind of spaceship. We have a case like that now."

"They've been working on it two months," Simonetta confirmed. "Those poor men were jailed over a month before anybody even heard about them."

Beryl shrugged and turned back to her desk. Westervelt watched her walk, thinking that the rear elevation was good too, until it occurred to him that Simonetta might be taking in his expression. The blonde settled herself and leaned back to stretch. He was willing to bet ten credits that she did it just to get his goat.

"Well, the work is interesting," Beryl admitted, "but I don't see why it can't be done by the Department of Interstellar Relations. The D.I.R. has trained

diplomats and knows all about dealing with aliens."

"Come on, now, dear!" said Simonetta. "Where do you think your paycheck originates? Publicly, the D.I.R. doesn't like to admit that we exist. To hide the connection, they named us after the floor we're on in this building, and hoped that nobody would notice us."

"I knew I was getting into something crooked!" exclaimed Beryl.

"It depends," said Westervelt. "Suppose some Terran spacer is slung into jail out there somewhere, for something that would never be a crime in the Solar System. The D.I.R. protests, and the bems simply deny they have him. How far can diplomacy go? We try getting him out some other way."

He held up the "flashlight."

"Now they'll stellarfax plans of this out to Antares to our field agents. After one is made and smuggled in to our case, all they have to do is run in a fast ship to pick him up when he breaks out."

"Speaking of that gadget," Simonetta suggested, "why don't you take it down to Mr. Smith? He must be waiting out the message in the com room."

Westervelt agreed. He took the package and the envelope of blueprints, and walked into the hall. He turned first to his right, along the base of the U-shaped corridor, then to his left after passing the door to the fire stairs at the inner corner and the private entrance to Smith's office opposite it.

The walls were covered by a gray plastic that was softly monotonous in the light of the luminous ceiling. The floor, nearly black, was of a springy composition that deadened the sound of footfalls.

Along the wing of the "U" into which he turned, Westervelt passed doors to the department's reference library and to a conference room on his right, and portal marked "Shaft" on his left. Beyond the latter was a section of blank wall behind which, he knew, was a special shaft for the power conduits that supplied the department's own communications instruments.

The place was a self-sufficient unit, he reflected. It had its own TV equipment and a sub-space radio for reaching far-out spaceships, although most routine traffic was boosted through relay stations on the outer planets of the Solar System.

Some lines of communication with the field agents were tenuous, but messages usually got through. If the lines broke down, someone would be sent to search the confidential files for a roundabout connection.

I wonder how many of us would wind up in court if those files became public knowledge? thought Westervelt. *I'd like to see them trying to handle Smitty! Nobody here can figure him out all the time, and we're at least half as nutty as he is.*

Down beside the communications room, though normally reached by the other wing of the corridor that enclosed the core of elevators, shafts and rest rooms, the department even had a confidential laboratory. Actually, this was more in the nature of a stock room for peculiar gadgets and implements used for the fell purposes of the organization. Westervelt did not like to wander about in there, for fear of setting something off. It was more or less the domain of the one man in the department whom he knew to have been in an alien prison.

Robert Lydman was an ex-spacer who had joined the group after having been rescued from just such an incarceration as he now specialized in cracking. Westervelt had been told that the sojourn among the stars had left Lydman a trifle strange, which was probably why they no longer used him as a field agent.

He came to the blank end of the corridor, the last door on the right being that of the communications room. He opened it and stuck his head inside.

The room was dimmer than the corridor. The operators, who sometimes had to contend with much-relayed faint images on their screens, liked it that way. They kept the window filters adjusted so that it might as well be night outside. Here and there, small lights glowed at various radio receivers or tape recording instruments, and there was a pervading background rustle of static blended with quiet whistles and mutterings.

At the moment, the operator on duty was Charlie Colborn, a quiet redhead who kept a locker full of electronic gadgets for tinkering during slow periods. Smith sat near him in a straight-backed chair, watching the screen before Colborn.

A message was coming in from the Pluto relay—Westervelt recognized the

distant operator who spoke briefly to Colborn before putting the message through. The next face, blurry from repeated boosting of the image, was that of a stranger.

"This is Johnson, on Trident," the man said. "Capella IV tells me they gave you the facts about Harris. That right?"

Smith hitched himself closer, so the transmitter lens could pick him up. Westervelt tip-toed inside and found himself a stool.

"We just got the outlines," Smith said. "You say this spacer is being held by the natives, and they won't let you communicate with him. Have you reported to the D.I.R.?"

The distance and the relaying caused a few seconds of lag, even with the ultra-modern sub-space equipment.

"I *am* the D.I.R.," said the face on the screen, after a bitter pause. "Along with several other jobs, commercial and official. There are only a few of us Terrans at this post, you know. The natives won't even admit they have him."

"Then how can you be sure they do? And why can't you get to him somehow?"

"We know because he managed to get a message out—we think." Johnson frowned doubtfully. "That is, he did if we can believe the ... ah ... messenger. We made inquiries of the natives, but it is impossible to make much of an investigation because their civilization is an underwater one."

Smith noticed Westervelt.

"Willie," he whispered hastily, "get on the phone and have one of the girls stop in the library and fetch me the volume of the *Galatlas* with Trident in it."

Westervelt dropped his package on a table and punched Beryl's number on the nearest phone. Meanwhile, with its weird pauses, the interstellar talk continued.

The missing Terran, Harris by name, had insisted against all advice at the outpost on one of the watery planet's few islands, upon conducting submarine exploration in a converted space scout. Since ninety-five percent of the surface of Trident was ocean, Johnson had only a vague idea of where Harris had gone. The point was that the explorer had been too long out of touch. The

natives, a sea people of crustacean evolution, who were to be found over most of the ocean bottom, and who had a considerable culture with permanent cities and jet-propelled submarine vehicles, admitted to having heard of Harris but denied knowledge of his whereabouts.

"So we reported to the D.I.R. sector headquarters," Johnson concluded. "They sent an expert to coax the Tridentian officials into visiting the shallows for a conference, but nothing came of it. Then we called in one of your field agents and he referred us to you."

Beryl entered the room quietly, bearing a large book. Westervelt held out his hand for it, but she seemed not to see him until he rose to offer her the stool. When he turned his attention back to the screen, Smith was probing for information which the distant Johnson sounded reluctant to give.

"But if they deny everything, how do you know he's not dead instead of being held in one of their cities? Why do you think he's being made a sort of exhibit?"

Johnson hemmed and hawed, but finally confessed.

Besides the crustaceans, who were about man-sized and "civilized," there was another form of intelligent—or at least semi-intelligent—life on Trident. Certain large, fish-like inhabitants of the planet's seas had been contacted more than once to deliver messages to the exploring members of the outpost. This was always promptly accomplished by having one of the "fish" contact another of the same species who was in the right location.

"*What* did you say?" demanded Smith. "Telepathic? A telepathic *fish*? Oh, no! Don't ask us to—Well, what I mean is ... well, how do you know they're reliable?"

More in the same vein followed. Westervelt stopped listening when he realized that Smith was being convinced, willing or not. Stranger things were on record in the immensity of the known galaxy, but Smith took the attitude that they were all a plot against Department 99. Westervelt pried the book from Beryl's grasp and turned over pages to the article on the planet Trident.

He skimmed the opening, which dealt with galactic co-ordinates and the type of star at the center of the system, and did the same with the general description of the surface and what was known of the life forms there. The

history since discovery was laconically brief.

Here it is, he told himself. A species of life resembling a Terran fish in general configuration, about twenty feet in length and suspected of having some undetermined sense whereby individuals can locate each other at great distances. Well, by the time it's in print, it's outdated.

Someone turned on a brighter light, and he realized the interstellar talk was at an end. Smith looked around. He held out his hand for the book, seeming to take for granted that someone should have found the page.

"I don't see *how* we're going to reach this one," he grunted, plopping the volume down on the table to scan the article.

Colborn snatched at a small piece of apparatus he had evidently been assembling. Only Beryl was impressed; the others knew that Smith said this of every new case.

"Tell Mr. Lydman and Mr. Parrish I want a conference," the department head requested. "We'll use the room next door."

Beryl and Westervelt left Colborn examining his gadget suspiciously and retraced their steps up the corridor. At the door to the main office, the blonde left him, presumably to go through to the corner office occupied by Parrish, whose secretary she was. Westervelt dwelt on the thought of sending her on the way with a small pat, but forced himself to continue up the other wing of the "U."

He passed two doors on his left: another conference room and a spare office used mainly for old files. Doors to his right led to washrooms. This end of the hall was not blank as on the other side; it had a door labeled "Laboratory—No Admittance." The last door to the left, corresponding to the location of the communications room, led to Lydman's office.

Westervelt knocked, waited for the sound of a voice inside, and walked in. For a moment, he saw no one, then pivoted to his right as he remembered that Lydman kept his desk on the inner wall, around the short corner behind the door. Everyone else who had a corner office sat out by the windows.

He found himself facing a heavy man whose bleached crewcut and tanned features bespoke much time spent outdoors. Very beautiful eyes of a dark gray-blue regarded him steadily until Westervelt felt a panicky urge to run.

Instead, he cleared his throat and gave Smith's message. Lydman always had the same effect upon him for the first few minutes, although he seemed to like Westervelt better than anyone else at the office, even to the point of inviting him home for weekends of swimming.

I always get the feeling that he looks right through me and back again, thought Westervelt, but I can't see an inch into him!

TWO

Castor P. Smith sat at the head of a steel and plastic table in the conference room, whistling thoughtfully as he waited for his assistants. Next door in the communications room, the tortured tune his lips emitted would have been treated as deliberate jamming. Simonetta Diorio entered carrying a recorder, and he roused himself for a smile of appreciation.

"You won't forget to turn it on when you start, Mr. Smith?" she pleaded.

"I'll keep my finger on the switch until then," he grinned. "Thanks, Si."

Left alone again, he told himself he would have to do something about the reputation he was acquiring—quite without foundation, he believed—for being absent minded. After all, he was hardly likely to forget to record a conference when it had been his own idea. So many ideas were tossed around on a good day that some were bound to be lost, unless they were down on tape. Even a good steno like Simonetta could not guarantee to keep up with it all when two or three got to talking at once.

Generally, he admitted to himself, he erased the tape without the necessity of filing some brilliant solution. Still, the one in a thousand that did turn up made the precaution worthwhile.

He stared morosely at the volume of the *Galatlas* he had brought from the communications room. Sometimes, in this job, he lost his sense of galactic direction. Calls were likely to come in from stars of which he had never heard.

Wish I could get a little more help from the D.I.R., he thought. It's more than having one secretary on vacation just now; we're always short-handed. They never brought us up to strength since old Murphy blew himself up in the lab with that little redhead. Maybe Willie will grow into something. That will take years, though. We ought to have some kind of training school.

In Smith's opinion, he should have had a larger force of full time agents in the

field, but he recognized the difficulties inherent in the immensity of Terran-influenced space. Even recruiting was a hit-or-miss process. He had made various working arrangements out of chance contacts with independent spacers—he supposed that it was unofficially expected of him—and most had worked out well. About a dozen routine cases were currently being handled out there somewhere by a motley group of his own men and piratical temporary help. In addition, there were three hot cases that had required supervision from headquarters.

I wonder if we should stay a little late tonight? he asked himself. *I hate to ask them again, but who knows what will break with this new skull-cracker?*

He looked up as Pete Parrish entered. His dapper assistant walked around the other end of the table and took a seat on the window side.

"I hear you have another one," he greeted Smith.

Parrish was a trim man of thirty-six or thirty-seven, just about average in height but slim enough to seem taller. Smith was aware that the other took considerable pains to maintain that slimness. By his own account, he rode well and played a fast game of squash.

The wave in his dark hair was somewhat suppressed by careful grooming. He smiled frequently, or at least made a show of gleaming teeth; but at other times his neat, regular features were disciplined into a perfect mask.

Thank God that he doesn't wear a mustache! thought Smith. *That would put him over the brink.*

He was reasonably certain that Parrish had given the idea careful calculation and stopped just short of the brink. That would be typical of the man. He had been at one time a publicist, then a salesman, on Terra and in space. Actually, he should have been a confidence man. It was not until the Department had stumbled across him that he had found opportunity to exercise his real talents. He was expert at estimating alien psychology and constructing rationalizations with which to thwart it.

Smith realized, self-consciously, that he had been staring through Parrish. He passed one hand down the back of his neck, reminding himself that he must get a haircut. He could not imagine why he kept forgetting; it occurred to him every time he faced Parrish. He decided further to wear a freshly pressed suit

the next day.

Lydman padded in, glanced about the room, and sat down as near to the door as he could without leaving an obvious gap between himself and the others. He eyed Parrish briefly, and raised one hand to check the scarf at his throat. Lydman dressed unobtrusively, and probably would have preferred an old-fashioned tie to the bright neck scarves favored by current fashion.

I wonder why I get all the nuts? Smith asked himself, avoiding the beautiful eyes by looking squarely between them. *Even the girls—people with romantic ideas of cloak and dagger work, or the ones that owe us favors, keep sending us peaches. Then they marry off, or go around acting so secretive that they draw attention to us.*

Sometimes, he had to admit, he would have preferred having a babe marry and leave the department. Parrish was often helpful in such situations, which was only fair since he created most of them. Twice divorced, the assistant had lost none of his interest in women. He was as clever at feminine psychology as at alien.

"Well, I suppose you've heard something of the new squawk," Smith said to break the silence. "I just don't see how we're going to reach this one. The damned fool got himself taken on an ocean bottom."

He proceeded to outline the facts so far reported. Parrish received them impassively; Lydman began to scowl. The ex-spacer developed special grudges against aliens who attempted to conceal the detention of Terrans.

"First, let's see where we are before we tackle this," suggested Smith. "I've given you enough on Harris to let it percolate through your minds while we review the other cases. It looks like something we should all be in on."

Sometimes he would put a case in the charge of one of them, but they were accustomed to exchanging information and advice.

"This business of the two spacers who were nailed for unauthorized entry in the Syssokan system seems about ripe," he reminded them. "Taranto and Meyers, you remember."

"Oh, yes," said Lydman in a withdrawn tone. "The dope."

"That's right. There was no trouble getting information about them, just in

comprehending the idiot reasoning that would maintain a law that makes it a crime to crash-land on that planet. Terra, like any other stellar government, is permitted one official resident there. Fortunately, we got the D.I.R. to slip him a little memo about us before he was sent out, and this is the outcome. They may even be on the loose right now."

"Let me see," mused Parrish. "Bob gave you the formula for something that practically suspends animation, didn't he?"

"Yeah," said Lydman. "We figured on the bastards to carry the bodies out and dump them. A bunch of tramp spacers is standing by to pick them up."

"No reason why it shouldn't work," said Smith. "Variations of it have been keeping us in business. Some day we'll slip up just by relying on it too much, but this looks okay. How is your Greenhaven case coming, Pete?"

Parrish hesitated before answering. He stroked the edge of the table with well manicured fingertips as he considered.

"Maria Ringstad," he said thoughtfully. "These reporters should be more careful, should have some knowledge of the cultures they poke into. Greenhaven is hardly a colony to swash a buckle through. I suppose she never thought they would bother a newswoman."

"Did you ever get the answer to what she was after on Greenhaven?"

"Nothing, just passing through!" Parrish snapped his fingers in contempt. "She was on a space liner enroute to Altair VII to gather material for a book. It stopped on Greenhaven to deliver a consignment of laboratory instruments."

"Those Greenies," Lydman put in, "are as crazy as bems. What a way to live!"

"They *have* been described as the bluest colony ever derived from Terra," agreed Smith. "I shudder to think of the life Pete would lead there."

Parrish smiled, but not very deeply.

"Miss Ringstad's mistake was fairly simple-minded," he said. "They had official prices posted in that shop she visited for souvenirs. When they claimed to be out of the article she fancied, she had the bad taste to offer a bonus price. On Greenhaven, this is regarded as bribery, immorality, and

economic subversion, to touch merely upon the highlights."

Smith sighed.

"Why will these young girls run around doing—"

"I don't believe you could call her a girl, exactly," Parrish interrupted.

"Well, this lady, then...."

"I wouldn't guarantee that either."

Smith shrugged and pursed his lips. "You'd be a better judge than I," he admitted innocently. "I yield to superior qualifications."

Lydman grinned. Parrish maintained his mask.

"I suppose that might make it even more dangerous for her," Smith went on. "I forget what you said the sentence was, but suppose she starts to get smart in jail. Would any snappy Terran humor pass there?"

"By no means!" said Parrish emphatically. "I would not expect them to burn her at the stake in this day and age, but they *would* talk about it as being one of the good old ways. Fortunately, their speaking and writing Terran makes this easy. Terrans are all black sinners, but plenty of Terrans are necessary around the spaceports. We keep a few agents among them. One of them is going to pull the paper trick to spring her."

"I'd rather leave them a bomb," said Lydman, almost to himself.

Smith frequently wondered that such a rugged man should speak in so quiet a voice. At times, Lydman used a monotone that was barely audible.

"We hope to destroy all evidence," added Parrish. "Otherwise, it will lead to the usual diplomatic notes, and the D.I.R. will be telling us we never were authorized to do any such thing."

"Yes," said Smith, nodding wearily. "Actually, you couldn't find our specific duties written down anywhere; and there is *nothing* we are forbidden to do either—as long as it succeeds. Well, none of us will see the day when the D.I.R. will publicly recognize us to the extent of chopping our heads into the basket. They *have* been yapping at me, though, for drawing complaints in the Gerson case."

Lydman had been sitting with his gaze narrowed upon a pencil gripped in his

big fists. Now he raised his head, scenting interference in his own project.

"How can the Yoleenites complain? They claim they don't even have Gerson!"

"Easy!" Smith soothed him. "We have an embassy and spaceport there, remember, that you've been relying on. You had them make some inquiries, didn't you?"

"Had to confirm the report somehow. All we had was the story of a kidnapping from the captain of that freighter. It might not have been true."

"I realize that," said Smith.

"It wouldn't have been the first time a spacer got left behind because he didn't make countdown—or because they didn't want him around at payoff."

"Sure," Parrish agreed smoothly. "You could tell us about that."

Lydman turned to look at him, so suddenly that a silence fell among them. Parrish averted his gaze uncomfortably, and reached into the breast pocket of his maroon jacket for a box of cigarettes. He busied himself puffing one alight from the chemical lighter set in the bottom of the box.

One day I'll have to pull them apart, thought Smith, and I'm not big enough. Where does my wife get the nerve to say the neighbors don't know what to make of an average guy like me, just because I can't talk about my work?

"At any rate," he said quietly, "they took the attitude that even to ask them about the incident was insulting. It seemed to rock the top brass."

"What do *they* know about Yoleen?" growled Lydman, giving up his scrutiny of Parrish.

"Not a thing, probably. They make decisions on the basis of how many toes they've stubbed lately. Right now, it sounds like only routine panic. That reminds me—I meant to check with Emil Starke about that."

He shoved back his chair and stepped over to a phone table nearby. Switching on both screen and sound, he waited until the cute little blonde at the board came on.

"Pauline, get me Emil Starke at the D.I.R., please. Extension 1563."

"Yes, Mr. Smith," said Pauline and disappeared from the screen.