



THE PIRATES OF ERSATZ BY MURRAY LEINSTER

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Sometimes it seems nobody loves a benefactor ... particularly nobody on a well-heeled, self-satisfied planet. Grandpa always said Pirates were really benefactors, though....

Illustrated by Freas

I

It was not mere impulsive action when Bron Hoddan started for the planet Walden by stowing away on a ship that had come to his native planet to hang all his relatives. He'd planned it long before. It was a long-cherished and carefully worked out scheme. He didn't expect the hanging of his relatives, of course. He knew that they'd act grieved and innocent, and give proof that they were simple people leading blameless lives. They'd make their would-be executioners feel ashamed and apologetic for having thought evil of them, and as soon as the strangers left they'd return to their normal way of life, which was piracy. But while this was going on, Bron Hoddan stowed away on the menacing vessel. Presently he arrived at its home world. But his ambition was to reach Walden, so he set about getting there. It took a long time because he had to earn ship-passage from one solar system to another, but he held to his idea. Walden was the most civilized planet in that part of the galaxy. On Walden, Hoddan intended, in order (a) to achieve splendid things as an electronic engineer, (b) to grow satisfactorily rich, (c) to marry a delightful girl, and (d) end his life a great man. But he had to spend two years trying to arrange even the first.

On the night before the police broke in the door of his room, though, accomplishment seemed imminent. He went to bed and slept soundly. He was calmly sure that his ambitions were about to be realized. At practically any instant his brilliance would be discovered and he'd be well-to-do, his friend Derec would admire him, and even Nedda would probably decide to marry him right away. She was the delightful girl. Such prospects made for good sleeping.

And Walden was a fine world to be sleeping on. Outside the capital city its spaceport received shipments of luxuries and raw materials from halfway across the galaxy. Its landing grid reared skyward and tapped the planet's ionosphere for power with which to hoist ships to clear space and pluck down others from emptiness. There was commerce and manufacture and wealth and culture, and Walden modestly admitted that its standard of living was the

highest in the Nurmi Cluster. Its citizens had no reason to worry about anything but a supply of tranquilizers to enable them to stand the boredom of their lives.

Even Hoddan was satisfied, as of the moment. On his native planet there wasn't even a landing grid. The few, battered, cobbled ships the inhabitants owned had to take off precariously on rockets. They came back blackened and sometimes more battered still, and sometimes they were accompanied by great hulls whose crews and passengers were mysteriously missing. These extra ships had to be landed on their emergency rockets, and, of course, couldn't take off again, but they always vanished quickly just the same. And the people of Zan, on which Hoddan had been born, always affected innocent indignation when embattled other spacecraft came and furiously demanded that they be produced.

There were some people who said that all the inhabitants of Zan were space pirates and ought to be hung and compared with such a planet, Walden seemed a very fine place indeed. So on a certain night Bron Hoddan went confidently to bed and slept soundly until three hours after sunrise. Then the police broke in his door.

They made a tremendous crash in doing it, but they were in great haste. The noise waked Hoddan, and he blinked his eyes open. Before he could stir, four uniformed men grabbed him and dragged him out of bed. They searched him frantically for anything like a weapon. Then they stood him against a wall with two stun-pistols on him, and the main body of cops began to tear his room apart, looking for something he could not guess. Then his friend Derec came hesitantly in the door and looked at him remorsefully. He wrung his hands.

"I had to do it, Bron," he said agitatedly. "I couldn't help doing it!"

Hoddan blinked at him. He was dazed. Things didn't become clearer when he saw that a cop had slit open his pillow and was sifting its contents through his fingers. Another cop was ripping the seams of his mattress to look inside. Somebody else was going carefully through a little pile of notes that Nedda had written, squinting at them as if he were afraid of seeing something he'd wish he hadn't.

"What's happened?" asked Hoddan blankly. "What's this about?"

Derec said miserably:

"You killed someone, Bron. An innocent man! You didn't mean to, but you did, and ... it's terrible!"

"Me kill somebody? That's ridiculous!" protested Hoddan.

"They found him outside the powerhouse," said Derec bitterly. "Outside the Mid-Continent station that you—"

"Mid-Continent? Oh!" Hoddan was relieved. It was amazing how much he was relieved. He'd had an unbelieving fear for a moment that somebody might have found out he'd been born and raised on Zan—which would have ruined everything. It was almost impossible to imagine, but still it was a great relief to find out he was only suspected of a murder he hadn't committed. And he was only suspected because his first great achievement as an electronic engineer had been discovered. "They found the thing at Mid-Continent, eh? But I didn't kill anybody. And there's no harm done. The thing's been running two weeks, now. I was going to the Power Board in a couple of days." He addressed the police. "I know what's up, now," he said. "Give me some clothes and let's go get this straightened out."

A cop waved a stun-pistol at him.

"One word out of line, and—*pfft!*"

"Don't talk, Bron!" said Derec in panic. "Just keep quiet! It's bad enough! Don't make it worse!"

A cop handed Hoddan a garment. He put it on. He became aware that the cop was scared. So was Derec. Everybody in the room was scared except himself. Hoddan found himself incredulous. People didn't act this way on super-civilized, highest-peak-of-culture Walden.

"Who'd I kill?" he demanded. "And why?"

"You wouldn't know him, Bron," said Derec mournfully. "You didn't mean to do murder. But it's only luck that you killed only him instead of everybody!"

"Everybody—" Hoddan stared.

"No more talk!" snapped the nearest cop. His teeth were chattering. "Keep

quiet or else!"

Hoddan shut up. He watched—dressing the while as his clothing was inspected and then handed to him—while the cops completed the examination of his room. They were insanely thorough, though Hoddan hadn't the least idea what they might be looking for. When they began to rip up the floor and pull down the walls, the other cops led him outside.

There was a fleet of police trucks in the shaded street outdoors. They piled him in one, and four cops climbed after him, keeping stun-pistols trained on him during the maneuver. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Derec climbing into another truck. The entire fleet sped away together. The whole affair had been taken with enormous seriousness by the police. Traffic was detoured from their route. When they swung up on an elevated expressway, with raised-up trees on either side, there was no other vehicle in sight. They raced on downtown.

They rolled off the expressway. They rolled down a cleared avenue. Hoddan recognized the Detention Building. Its gate swung wide. The truck he rode in went inside. The gate closed. The other trucks went away—rapidly. Hoddan alighted and saw that the grim gray wall of the courtyard had a surprising number of guards mustered to sweep the open space with gunfire if anybody made a suspicious movement.

He shook his head. Nobody had mentioned Zan, so this simply didn't make sense. His conscience was wholly clear except about his native planet. This was insanity! He went curiously into the building and into the hearing room. His guards, there, surrendered him to courtroom guards and went away with almost hysterical haste. Nobody wanted to be near him.

Hoddan stared about. The courtroom was highly informal. The justice sat at an ordinary desk. There were comfortable chairs. The air was clean. The atmosphere was that of a conference room in which reasonable men could discuss differences of opinion in calm leisure. Only on a world like Walden would a prisoner brought in by police be dealt with in such surroundings.

Derec came in by another door, with a man Hoddan recognized as the attorney who'd represented Nedda's father in certain past interviews. There'd been no mention of Nedda as toying with the thought of marrying Hoddan

then, of course. It had been strictly business. Nedda's father was Chairman of the Power Board, a director of the Planetary Association of Manufacturers, a committeeman of the Banker's League, and other important things. Hoddan had been thrown out of his offices several times. He now scowled ungraciously at the lawyer who had ordered him thrown out. He saw Derec wringing his hands.

An agitated man in court uniform came to his side.

"I'm the Citizen's Representative," he said uneasily. "I'm to look after your interests. Do you want a personal lawyer?"

"Why?" asked Hoddan. He felt splendidly confident.

"The charges— Do you wish a psychiatric examination—claiming no responsibility?" asked the Representative anxiously. "It might ... it might really be best—"

"I'm not crazy," said Hoddan, "though this looks like it."

The Citizen's Representative spoke to the justice.

"Sir, the accused waives psychiatric examination, without prejudice to a later claim of no responsibility."

Nedda's father's attorney watched with bland eyes. Hoddan said impatiently:

"Let's get started so this will make some sense! I know what I've done. What monstrous crime am I charged with?"

"The charges against you," said the justice politely, "are that on the night of Three Twenty-seven last, you, Bron Hoddan, entered the fenced-in grounds surrounding the Mid-Continent power receptor station. It is charged that you passed two no-admittance signs. You arrived at a door marked 'Authorized Personnel Only.' You broke the lock of that door. Inside, you smashed the power receptor taking broadcast power from the air. This power receptor converts broadcast power for industrial units by which two hundred thousand men are employed. You smashed the receptor, imperiling their employment." The justice paused. "Do you wish to challenge any of these charges as contrary to fact?"

The Citizen's Representative said hurriedly:

"You have the right to deny any of them, of course."

"Why should I?" asked Hoddan. "I did them! But what's this about me killing somebody? Why'd they tear my place apart looking for something? Who'd I kill, anyhow?"

"Don't bring that up!" pleaded the Citizen's Representative. "Please don't bring that up! You will be much, much better off if that is not mentioned!"

"But I didn't kill anybody!" insisted Hoddan.

"Nobody's said a word about it," said the Citizen's Representative, jittering. "Let's not have it in the record! The record has to be published." He turned to the justice. "Sir, the facts are conceded as stated."

"Then," said the justice to Hoddan, "do you choose to answer these charges at this time?"

"Why not?" asked Hoddan. "Of course!"

"Proceed," said the justice.

Hoddan drew a deep breath. He didn't understand why a man's death, charged to him, was not mentioned. He didn't like the scared way everybody looked at him. But—

"About the burglary business," he said confidently. "What did I do in the power station before I smashed the receptor?"

The justice looked at Nedda's father's attorney.

"Why," said that gentleman amiably, "speaking for the Power Board as complainant, before you smashed the standard receptor you connected a device of your own design across the power-leads. It was a receptor unit of an apparently original pattern. It appears to have been a very interesting device."

"I'd offered it to the Power Board," said Hoddan, with satisfaction, "and I was thrown out. You had me thrown out! What did it do?"

"It substituted for the receptor you smashed," said the attorney. "It continued to supply some two hundred million kilowatts for the Mid-Continent industrial area. In fact, your crime was only discovered because the original receptor—naturally—had to be set to draw peak power at all times, with the unused power wasted by burning carbon. Your device adjusted to the load and did not burn carbon. So when the attendants went to replace the

supposedly burned carbon and found it unused, they discovered what you had done."

"It saved carbon, then," said Hoddan triumphantly. "That means it saved money. I saved the Power Board plenty while that was connected. They wouldn't believe I could. Now they know. I did!"

The justice said:

"Irrelevant. You have heard the charges. In legal terms, you are charged with burglary, trespass, breaking and entering, unlawful entry, malicious mischief, breach of the peace, sabotage, and endangering the employment of citizens. Discuss the charges, please!"

"I'm telling you!" protested Hoddan. "I offered the thing to the Power Board. They said they were satisfied with what they had and wouldn't listen. So I proved what they wouldn't listen to! That receptor saved them ten thousand credits worth of carbon a week! It'll save half a million credits a year in every power station that uses it! If I know the Power Board, they're going right on using it while they arrest me for putting it to work!"

The courtroom, in its entirety, visibly shivered.

"Aren't they?" demanded Hoddan belligerently.

"They are not," said the justice, tight-lipped. "It has been smashed in its turn. It has even been melted down."

"Then look at my patents!" insisted Hoddan. "It's stupid—"

"The patent records," said the justice with unnecessary vehemence, "have been destroyed. Your possessions have been searched for copies. Nobody will ever look at your drawings again—not if they are wise!"

"Wha-a-at?" demanded Hoddan incredulously. "Wha-a-at?"

"I will amend the record of this hearing before it is published," said the justice shakily. "I should not have made that comment. I ask permission of the Citizen's Representative to amend."

"Granted," said the Representative before he had finished.

The justice said quickly:

"The-charges-have-been-admitted-by-the-defendant. Since-the-complainant-

does-not-wish-punitive-action-taken-against-him—"

"He'd be silly if he did," grunted Hoddan.

"And-merely-wishes-security-against-repetition-of-the-offense, I-rule-that-the-defendant-may-be-released-upon-posting-suitable-bond-for -good-behavior-in-the-future. That-is, he-will-be-required-to-post-bond -which-will-be-forfeited-if-he-ever-again-enters-a-power-station -enclosure-passes-no-trespassing-signs-ignores-no-admittance-signs -and/or-smashes-apparatus-belonging-to-the-complainant."

"All right," said Hoddan indignantly. "I'll raise it somehow. If they're too stupid to save money— How much bond?"

"The-court-will-take-it-under-advisement-and-will-notify-the-defendant -within-the-customary-two-hours," said the justice at top speed. He swallowed. "The-defendant-will-be-kept-in-close-confinement-until-the -bond-is-posted. The-hearing-is-ended."

He did not look at Hoddan. Courtroom guards put stun-pistols against Hoddan's body and ushered him out.

Presently his friend Derec came to see him in the tool-steel cell in which he had been placed. Derec looked white and stricken.

"I'm in trouble because I'm your friend, Bron," he said miserably, "but I asked permission to explain things to you. After all, I caused your arrest. I urged you not to connect up your receptor without permission!"

"I know," growled Hoddan, "but there are some people so stupid you have to show them everything. I didn't realize that there are people so stupid you can't show them anything."

"You ... showed something you didn't intend," said Derec miserably. "Bron, I ... I have to tell you. When they went to charge the carbon bins at the power station, they ... they found a dead man, Bron!"

Hoddan sat up.

"What's that?"

"Your machine—killed him. He was outside the building at the foot of a tree. Your receptor killed him through a stone wall! It broke his bones and killed

him.... Bron—" Derec wrung his hands. "At some stage of power-drain your receptor makes deathrays!"

Hoddan had had a good many shocks today. When Derec arrived, he'd been incredulously comparing the treatment he'd received and the panic about him, with the charges made against him in court. They didn't add up. This new, previously undisclosed item left him speechless. He goggled at Derec, who fairly wept.

"Don't you see?" asked Derec pleadingly. "That's why I had to tell the police it was you. We can't have deathrays! The police can't let anybody go free who knows how to make them! This is a wonderful world, but there are lots of crackpots. They'll do anything! The police daren't let it even be suspected that deathrays can be made! That's why you weren't charged with murder. People all over the planet would start doing research, hoping to satisfy all their grudges by committing suicide for all their enemies with themselves! For the sake of civilization your secret has to be suppressed—and you with it. It's terrible for you, Bron, but there's nothing else to do!"

Hoddan said dazedly:

"But I only have to put up a bond to be released!"

"The ... the justice," said Derec tearfully, "didn't name it in court, because it would have to be published. But he's set your bond at fifty million credits! Nobody could raise that for you, Bron! And with the reason for it what it is, you'll never be able to get it reduced."

"But anybody who looks at the plans of the receptor will know it can't make deathrays!" protested Hoddan blankly.

"Nobody will look," said Derec tearfully. "Anybody who knows how to make it will have to be locked up. They checked the patent examiners. They've forgotten. Nobody dared examine the device you had working. They'd be jailed if they understood it! Nobody will ever risk learning how to make deathrays—not on a world as civilized as this, with so many people anxious to kill everybody else. You have to be locked up forever, Bron. You have to!"

Hoddan said inadequately:

"Oh."

"I beg your forgiveness for having you arrested," said Derec in abysmal sorrow, "but I couldn't do anything but tell—"

Hoddan stared at his cell wall. Derec went away weeping. He was an admirable, honorable, not-too-bright young man who had been Hoddan's only friend.

Hoddan stared blankly at nothing. As an event, it was preposterous, and yet it was wholly natural. When in the course of human events somebody does something that puts somebody else to the trouble of adjusting the numb routine of his life, the adjustee is resentful. The richer he is and the more satisfactory he considers his life, the more resentful he is at any change, however minute. And of all the changes which offend people, changes which require them to think are most disliked.

The high brass in the Power Board considered that everything was moving smoothly. There was no need to consider new devices. Hoddan's drawings and plans had simply never been bothered with, because there was no recognized need for them. And when he forced acknowledgment that his receptor worked, the unwelcome demonstration was highly offensive in itself. It was natural, it was inevitable, it should have been infallibly certain that any possible excuse for not thinking about the receptor would be seized upon. And a single dead man found near the operating demonstrator.... If one assumed that the demonstrator had killed him,—why one could react emotionally, feel vast indignation, frantically command that the device and its inventor be suppressed together, and go on living happily without doing any thinking or making any other change in anything at all.

Hoddan was appalled. Now that it had happened, he could see that it had to. The world of Walden was at the very peak of human culture. It had arrived at so splendid a plane of civilization that nobody could imagine any improvement—unless a better tranquilizer could be designed to make it more endurable. Nobody ever really wants anything he didn't think of for himself. Nobody can want anything he doesn't know exists—or that he can't imagine to exist. On Walden nobody wanted anything, unless it was relief from the tedium of ultra-civilized life. Hoddan's electronic device did not fill a human need; only a technical one. It had, therefore, no value that would make anybody hospitable to it.

And Hoddan would spend his life in jail for failing to recognize the fact.

He revolted, immediately. *He* wanted something! He wanted out. And because he was that kind of man he put his mind to work devising something he wanted, simply and directly, without trying to get it by furnishing other people with what they turned out not to want. He set about designing his escape. With his enforced change in viewpoint, he took the view that he must seem, at least, to give his captors and jailers and—as he saw it—his persecutors what they wanted.

They would be pleased to have him dead, provided their consciences were clear. He built on that as a foundation.

Very shortly before nightfall he performed certain cryptic actions. He unraveled threads from his shirt and put them aside. There would be a vision-lens in the ceiling of his cell, and somebody would certainly notice what he did. He made a light. He put the threads in his mouth, set fire to his mattress, and laid down calmly upon it. The mattress was of excellent quality. It would smell very badly as it smoldered.

It did. Lying flat, he kicked convulsively for a few seconds. He looked like somebody who had taken poison. Then he waited.

It was a rather long time before his jailer came down the cell corridor, dragging a fire hose. Hoddan had been correct in assuming that he was watched. His actions had been those of a man who'd anticipated a possible need to commit suicide, and who'd had poison in a part of his shirt for convenience. The jailer did not hurry, because if the inventor of a deathray committed suicide, everybody would feel better. Hoddan had been allowed a reasonable time in which to die.

He seemed impressively dead when the jailer opened his cell door, dragged him out, removed the so-far-unscorched other furniture, and set up the fire hose to make an aerosol fog which would put out the fire. He went back to the corridor to wait for the fire to be extinguished.

Hoddan crowned him with a stool, feeling an unexpected satisfaction in the act. The jailer collapsed.

He did not carry keys. The system was for him to be let out of this corridor

by a guard outside. Hoddan growled and took the fire hose. He turned its nozzle back to make a stream instead of a mist. Water came out at four hundred pounds pressure. He smashed open the corridor door with it. He strolled through and bowled over a startled guard with the same stream. He took the guard's stun-pistol. He washed open another door leading to the courtyard. He marched out, washed down two guards who sighted him, and took the trouble to flush them across the pavement until they wedged in a drain opening. Then he thoughtfully reset the hose to fill the courtyard with fog, climbed into the driver's seat of the truck that had brought him here—it was probably the same one—and smashed through the gateway to the street outside. Behind him, the courtyard filled with dense white mist.

He was free, but only temporarily. Around him lay the capital city of Walden—the highest civilization in this part of the galaxy. Trees lined its ways. Towers rose splendidly toward the skies, with thousands of less ambitious structures in between. There were open squares and parkways and malls, and it did not smell like a city at all. But he wasn't loose three minutes before the communicator in the truck squawked the all-police alarm for him.

It was to be expected. All the city would shortly be one enormous man-trap, set to catch Bron Hoddan. There was only one place on the planet, in fact, where he could be safe—and he wouldn't be safe there if he'd been officially charged with murder. But since the police had tactfully failed to mention murder, he could get at least breathing-time by taking refuge in the Interstellar Embassy.

He headed for it, bowling along splendidly. The police truck hummed on its way for half a mile; three-quarters. The great open square before the Embassy became visible. The Embassy was not that of a single planet, of course. By pure necessity every human-inhabited world was independent of all others, but the Interstellar Diplomatic Service represented humanity at large upon each individual globe. Its ambassador was the only person Hoddan could even imagine as listening to him, and that because he came from off-planet, as Hoddan did. But he mainly counted upon a breathing-space in the Embassy, during which to make more plans as yet unformed and unformable. He began, though, to see some virtues in the simple, lawless, piratical world in which he had spent his childhood.

Another police truck rushed frantically toward him down a side street. Stun-pistols made little pinging noises against the body of his vehicle. He put on more speed, but the other truck overtook him. It ranged alongside, its occupants waving stern commands to halt. And then, just before it swerved to force him off the highway, he swung instead and drove it into a tree. It crashed thunderously. One of his own wheels collapsed. He drove on with the crumpled wheel producing an up-and-down motion that threatened to make him seasick. Then he heard yelling behind him. The cops had piled out of the truck and were in pursuit on foot.

The tall, rough-stone wall of the Embassy was visible, now, beyond the monument to the First Settlers of Walden. He leaped to the ground and ran. Stun-pistol bolts, a little beyond their effective range, stung like fire. They spurred him on.

The gate of the Embassy was closed. He bolted around the corner and swarmed up the conveniently rugged stones of the wall. He was well aloft before the cops spotted him. Then they fired at him industriously and the charges crackled all around him.

But he'd reached the top and had both arms over the parapet before a charge hit his legs and stunned them—paralyzed them. He hung fast, swearing at his bad luck.

Then hands grasped his wrists. A white-haired man appeared on the other side of the parapet. He took a good, solid grip, and heaved. He drew Hoddan over the breast-high top of the wall and let him down to the walkway inside it.

"A near thing, that!" said the white-haired man pleasantly. "I was taking a walk in the garden when I heard the excitement. I got to the wall-top just in time." He paused, and added, "I do hope you're not just a common murderer with the police after him! We can't offer asylum to such—only a breathing-space and a chance to start running again. But if you're a political offender—"

Hoddan began to try to rub sensation and usefulness back into his legs. Feeling came back, and was not pleasant.

"I'm the Interstellar Ambassador," said the white-haired man politely.

"My name," said Hoddan bitterly, "is Bron Hoddan and I'm framed for trying

to save the Power Board some millions of credits a year!" Then he said more bitterly: "If you want to know, I ran away from Zan to try to be a civilized man and live a civilized life. It was a mistake! I'm to be permanently jailed for using my brains!"

The ambassador cocked his head thoughtfully to one side.

"Zan?" he said. "The name Hoddan fits to that somehow. Oh, yes! Space-piracy! People say the people of Zan capture and loot a dozen or so ships a year, only there's no way to prove it on them. And there's a man named Hoddan who's supposed to head a particularly ruffianly gang."

"My grandfather," said Hoddan defiantly. "What are you going to do about it? I'm outlawed! I've defied the planetary government! I'm disreputable by descent, and worst of all I've tried to use my brains!"

"Deplorable!" said the ambassador mildly. "I don't mean outlawry is deplorable, you understand, or defiance of the government, or being disreputable. But trying to use one's brains is bad business! A serious offense! Are your legs all right now? Then come on down with me and I'll have you given some dinner and some fresh clothing and so on. Offhand," he added amiably, "it would seem that using one's brains would be classed as a political offense rather than a criminal one on Walden. We'll see."

Hoddan gaped up at him.

"You mean there's a possibility that—"

"Of course!" said the ambassador in surprise. "You haven't phrased it that way, but you're actually a rebel. A revolutionist. You defy authority and tradition and governments and such things. Naturally the Interstellar Diplomatic Service is inclined to be on your side. What do you think it's for?"

II

In something under two hours Hoddan was ushered into the ambassador's office. He'd been refreshed, his torn clothing replaced by more respectable garments, and the places where stun-pistols had stung him soothed by ointments. But, more important, he'd worked out and firmly adopted a new point of view.

He'd been a misfit at home on Zan because he was not contented with the humdrum and monotonous life of a member of a space-pirate community. Piracy was a matter of dangerous take-offs in cranky rocket-ships, to be followed by weeks or months of tedious and uncomfortable boredom in highly unhealthy re-breathed air. No voyage ever contained more than ten seconds of satisfactory action—and all space-fighting took place just out of the atmosphere of a possibly embattled planet, because you couldn't intercept a ship at cruising speed between the stars. Regardless of the result of the fighting, one had to get away fast when it was over, lest overwhelming force swarm up from the nearby world. It was intolerably devoid of anything an ambitious young man would want.

Even when one had made a good prize—with the lifeboats darting frantically for ground—and after one got back to Zan with a captured ship, even then there was little satisfaction in a piratical career. Zan had not a large population. Piracy couldn't support a large number of people. Zan couldn't attempt to defend itself against even single heavily-armed ships that sometimes came in passionate resolve to avenge the disappearance of a rich freighter or a fast new liner. So the people of Zan, to avoid hanging, had to play innocent. They had to be convincingly simple, harmless folk who cultivated their fields and led quiet, blameless lives. They might loot, but they had to hide their booty where investigators would not find it. They couldn't really benefit by it. They had to build their own houses and make their own garments and grow their own food. So life on Zan was dull. Piracy was not profitable in the sense that one could live well by it. It simply wasn't a trade

for a man like Hoddan.

So he'd abandoned it. He'd studied electronics in books from looted passenger-ship libraries. Within months after arrival on a law-abiding planet, he was able to earn a living in electronics as an honest trade.

And that was unsatisfactory. Law-abiding communities were no more thrilling or rewarding than piratical ones. A payday now and then didn't make up for the tedium of labor. Even when one had money there wasn't much to do with it. On Walden, to be sure, the level of civilization was so high that many people needed psychiatric treatment to stand it, and neurotics vastly outnumbered more normal folk. And on Walden electronics was only a trade like piracy, and no more fun.

He should have known it would be this way. His grandfather had often discussed this frustration in human life.

"Us humans," it was his grandfather's habit to say, "don't make sense! There's some of us that work so hard they're too tired to enjoy life. There's some that work so hard at enjoying it that they don't get no fun out of it. And the rest of us spend our lives complainin' that there ain't any fun in it anyhow. The man that over all has the best time of any is one that picks out something he hasn't got a chance to do, and spends his life raisin' hell because he's stopped from doing it. When"—and here Hoddan's grandfather tended to be emphatic—"he wouldn't think much of it if he could!"

What Hoddan craved, of course, was a sense of achievement, of doing things worth doing, and doing them well. Technically there were opportunities all around him. He'd developed one, and it would save millions of credits a year if it were adopted. But nobody wanted it. He'd tried to force its use, he was in trouble, and now he could complain justly enough, but despite his grandfather he was not the happiest man he knew.

The ambassador received him with a cordial wave of the hand.

"Things move fast," he said cheerfully. "You weren't here half an hour before there was a police captain at the gate. He explained that an excessively dangerous criminal had escaped jail and been seen to climb the Embassy wall. He offered very generously to bring some men in and capture you and take you away—with my permission, of course. He was shocked when I

declined."

"I can understand that," said Hoddan.

"By the way," said the ambassador. "Young men like yourself— Is there a girl involved in this?"

Hoddan considered.

"A girl's father," he acknowledged, "is the real complainant against me."

"Does he complain," asked the ambassador, "because you want to marry her, or because you don't?"

"Neither," Hoddan told him. "She hasn't quite decided that I'm worth defying her rich father for."

"Good!" said the ambassador. "It can't be too bad a mess while a woman is being really practical. I've checked your story. Allowing for differences of viewpoint, it agrees with the official version. I've ruled that you are a political refugee, and so entitled to sanctuary in the Embassy. And that's that."

"Thank you, sir," said Hoddan.

"There's no question about the crime," observed the ambassador, "or that it is primarily political. You proposed to improve a technical process in a society which considers itself beyond improvement. If you'd succeeded, the idea of change would have spread, people now poor would have gotten rich, people now rich would have gotten poor, and you'd have done what all governments are established to prevent. So you'll never be able to walk the streets of this planet again in safety. You've scared people."

"Yes, sir," said Hoddan. "It's been an unpleasant surprise to them, to be scared."

The ambassador put the tips of his fingers together.

"Do you realize," he asked, "that the whole purpose of civilization is to take the surprises out of life, so one can be bored to death? That a culture in which nothing unexpected ever happens is in what is called its Golden Age? That when nobody can even imagine anything happening unexpectedly, that they later fondly refer to that period as the Good Old Days?"

"I hadn't thought of it in just those words, sir—"

"It is one of the most-avoided facts of life," said the ambassador. "Government, in the local or planetary sense of the word, is an organization for the suppression of adventure. Taxes are, in part, the insurance premiums one pays for protection against the unpredictable. And you have offended against everything that is the foundation of a stable and orderly and damnably tedious way of life—against civilization, in fact."

Hoddan frowned.

"Yet you've granted me asylum—"

"Naturally!" said the ambassador. "The Diplomatic Service works for the welfare of humanity. That doesn't mean stuffiness. A Golden Age in any civilization is always followed by collapse. In ancient days savages came and camped outside the walls of super-civilized towns. They were unwashed, unmannerly, and unsanitary. Super-civilized people refused even to think about them! So presently the savages stormed the city walls and another civilization went up in flames."

"But now," objected Hoddan, "there are no savages."

"They invent themselves," the ambassador told him. "My point is that the Diplomatic Service cherishes individuals and causes which battle stuffiness and complacency and Golden Ages and monstrous things like that. Not thieves, of course. They're degradation, like body lice. But rebels and crackpots and revolutionaries who prevent hardening of the arteries of commerce and furnish wholesome exercise to the body politic—they're worth cherishing!"

"I ... think I see, sir," said Hoddan.

"I hope you do," said the ambassador. "My action on your behalf is pure diplomatic policy. To encourage the dissatisfied is to insure against universal satisfaction—which is lethal. Walden is in a bad way. You are the most encouraging thing that has happened here in a long time. And you're not a native."

"No-o-o," agreed Hoddan. "I come from Zan."

"Never mind." The ambassador turned to a stellar atlas. "Consider yourself a good symptom, and valued as such. If you could start a contagion, you'd

deserve well of your fellow citizens. Savages can always invent themselves. But enough of apology from me. Let us set about your affairs." He consulted the atlas. "Where would you like to go, since you must leave Walden?"

"Not too far, sir—"

"The girl, eh?" The ambassador did not smile. He ran his finger down a page. "The nearest inhabited worlds, of course, are Krim and Darth. Krim is a place of lively commercial activity, where an electronics engineer should easily find employment. It is said to be progressive and there is much organized research—"

"I wouldn't want to be a kept engineer, sir," said Hoddan apologetically. "I'd rather ... well ... putter on my own."

"Impractical, but sensible," commented the ambassador. He turned a page. "There's Darth. Its social system is practically feudal. It's technically backward. There's a landing grid, but space exports are skins and metal ingots and practically nothing else. There is no broadcast power. Strangers find the local customs difficult. There is no town larger than twenty thousand people, and few approach that size. Most settled places are mere villages near some feudal castle, and roads are so few and bad that wheeled transport is rare."

He leaned back and said in a detached voice:

"I had a letter from there a couple of months ago. It was rather arrogant. The writer was one Don Loris, and he explained that his dignity would not let him make a commercial offer, but an electronic engineer who put himself under his protection would not be the loser. He signed himself prince of this, lord of that, baron of the other thing and claimant to the dukedom of something else. Are you interested? No kings on Darth, just feudal chiefs."

Hoddan thought it over.

"I'll go to Darth," he decided. "It's bound to be better than Zan, and it can't be worse than Walden."

The ambassador looked impassive. An Embassy servant came in and offered an indoor communicator. The ambassador put it to his ear. After a moment he said:

"Show him in." He turned to Hoddan. "You did kick up a storm! The

Minister of State, no less, is here to demand your surrender. I'll counter with a formal request for an exit-permit. I'll talk to you again when he leaves."

Hoddan went out. He paced up and down the other room into which he was shown. DARTH wouldn't be in a Golden Age! He was wiser now than he'd been this same morning. He recognized that he'd made mistakes. Now he could see rather ruefully how completely improbable it was that anybody could put across a technical device merely by proving its value, without making anybody want it. He shook his head regretfully at the blunder.

The ambassador sent for him.

"I've had a pleasant time," he told Hoddan genially. "There was a beautiful row. You've really scared people, Hoddan! You deserve well of the republic! Every government and every person needs to be thoroughly terrified occasionally. It limbers up the brain."

"Yes, sir," said Hoddan. "I've—"

"The planetary government," said the ambassador with relish, "insists that you have to be locked up with the key thrown away. Because you know how to make deathrays. I said it was nonsense, and you were a political refugee in sanctuary. The Minister of State said the Cabinet would consider removing you forcibly from the Embassy if you weren't surrendered. I said that if the Embassy was violated no ship would clear for Walden from any other civilized planet. They wouldn't like losing their off-planet trade! Then he said that the government would not give you an exit-permit, and that he would hold me personally responsible if you killed everybody on Walden, including himself and me. I said he insulted me by suggesting that I'd permit such shenanigans. He said the government would take an extremely grave view of my attitude, and I said they would be silly if they did. Then he went off with great dignity—but shaking with panic—to think up more nonsense."