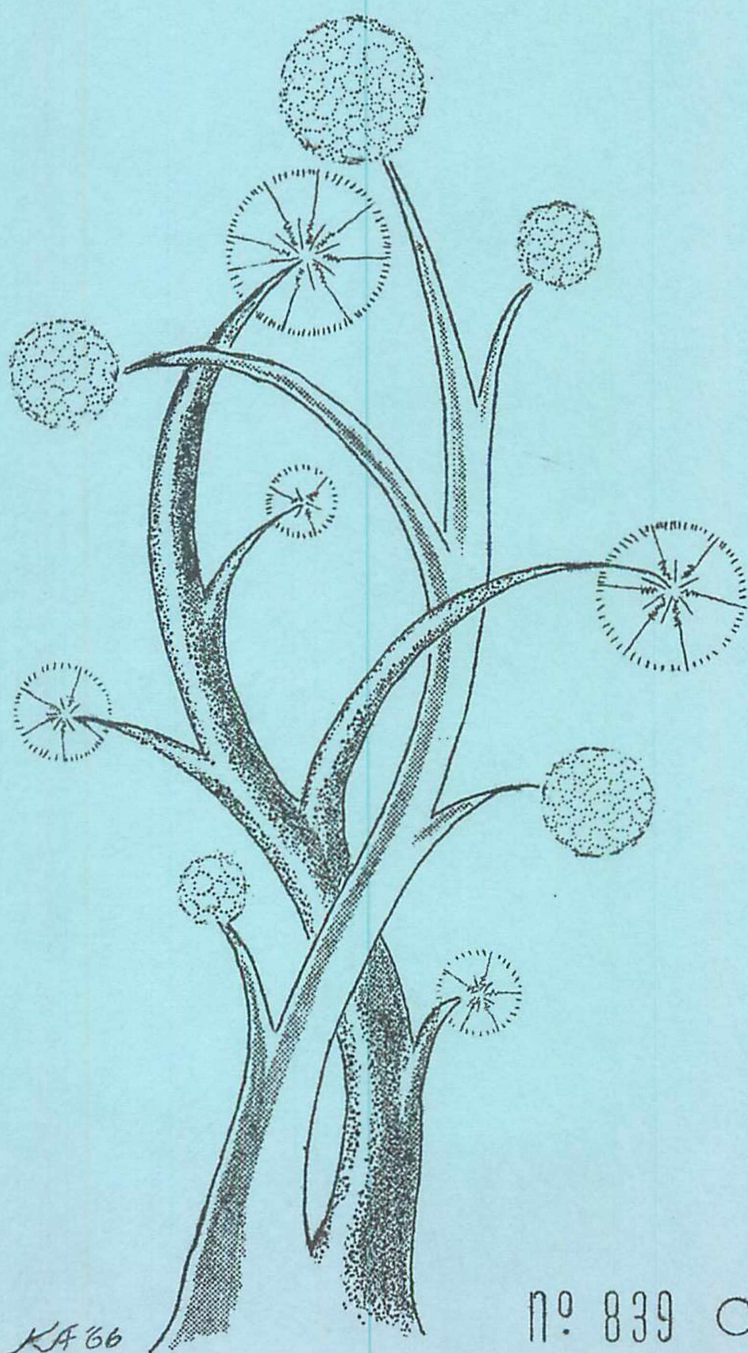


Goliard



KA 66

Nº 839 ○ SAPS 75

Goliard 839

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is published for the Spring 1966 mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society and a few surviving

Those of you who didn't see the issue in the last FAP mailing last heard from me when I was still in England. Scotland, actually, now that I check back. Just to bring you up to date: we went from Edinburgh back to London, where we looked at the British Museum some more, then to Paris. The bad weather let up for us in Paris and we had a lovely time, seeing the Egyptian and Mesopotamian antiquities in the basement of the Louvre and drinking Pernod in sidewalk cafes. (Oh yes, we did go upstairs to see the Nike of Samothrace and the Venus de Milo, but we didn't bother about hunting for the Mona Lisa. Have you any idea how big that place is?) And then we came home. It was the middle of October and I'd lived out of one single suitcase for nearly four months and I hated every single garment I had.

Boy, it felt good to put on a pair of slacks.

o o o o o o o o

I'm speaking on Poul's typewriter now. I stopped above to stencil "Kolgay Incident" and wanted this space to add any explanations that became necessary. My electric got impossible halfway through, which spares you having to read that much more of its previously not-quite-illegible output.

The story is one that I wrote last spring, hoping it would be saleable. It just wasn't. It was worth doing, though, because I did the original 30-page draft in two days. That's very bracing to the ego.

Nine-thousand-word stories are too furshlugginer long to stencil and run off for a six-page activity requirement, though. So I ruthlessly split off the whole first half, in which Rhayader is innocently on his way to see a friend and gets mixed up in a struggle whose participants never once tell him the truth about their purposes.

I rearranged the ending some, but didn't cut it. That original long draft had left all kinds of loose ends, such as how any of the bad guys knew the memory-matrix existed in the first place and how they got hold of it at all and why its owner let it out of his hands in the first place. If I'd tried to make the story saleable I'd have figured that all out and had a final explanatory scene. But that would take a couple of evenings to rationalize, and I'm in my usual hurry to beat the deadline.

I used the name "Palæ Guard" solely because Poul's typer has the æ key. Palæ is the Danish spelling of palais; they use it as commonly as we use "palace."

And now I'd better think of something to put on the cover.

KOLGAY INCIDENT

(This is the second half of a story I wrote last year. It isn't good enough to try to sell, but it's too long to put in a fanzine in one lump, and I don't want to serialize it. I think the second half can stand by itself. --KA)

It was an hour after breakfast by ship's time, but late afternoon by local time, when they made planetfall at the passenger spaceport serving Outer Kolgay. Rhayader was taken by the dry National Security man and two husky crew members to a waiting police flitter. He had to carry his own baggage. It amused him to wonder what would have happened if he'd refused to, but he did not feel inclined to find out.

The crewman saw him into the restraint section of the police flitter, nodded to the NS man Croyson, and left. He nodded back, a slight quick jerk of the head, and got in front with the police driver. As they started off at ground level, a black flitter with official markings swooped down almost on top of them and raced for the gate they'd come out. Rhayader wondered if somebody else wanted his hide.

But if his estimation of the situation was correct, he'd get out of this mess without too much trouble. They were arriving at an ordinary police station. Once he invoked the strength of the Triadic embassy -- Of course there was the matter of the confiscated flask. If poison had been planted in it, he'd have to undergo verisynthesis. Then the facts concerning the matrix would come out. A distaste was growing in him for turning over that memory matrix to anybody, even to the Great Triad.

In the police station, a bored officer inventoried Rhayader's possessions: one overnight bag, containing two candy bars, one textbook, one pair pajamas . . . He came to the gadget case. "Open it."

Rhayader had maintained an attitude of mildly curious boredom up to this point. At the mention of opening the case, he said "No. Leave it locked."

"Mister, it's regulations," said the officer. "We have to take a full inventory so's you get everything back if you leave."

Mirko Rhayader winced internally at the "if." He said, "Just inventory it as a locked case. It has a special lock. Nobody can open it but me, and I don't want it opened. It's full of engineering tools and I don't want them pawed over and messed around

with. Leave it."

"We can have it opened by force if necessary," protested the officer. "All we need is a prefect's ~~order~~. You don't want a good case like that ripped up."

"Get a prefect's order, then, and I'll open it when I see one," blustered Rhayader. "Let me get in touch with my embassy first and we'll see whether a prefect's dirty little order can touch a citizen of the Great Triad."

The officer looked dubious. "May I see your civic book, sir?" he asked with something approaching politeness. Rhayader handed it over.

"A murderer of such resource could easily obtain a false civic book," pointed out the National Security man.

"We'll have to check with the embassy to make sure, Mr. Croyson," said the officer.

Croyson took the officer into a corner of the room and began arguing. The security man seemed to be winning. He'd be in a bad spot if he couldn't get in touch with the Embassy. And once they found he had the equipment to read a memory matrix, they'd stop pretending they only wanted him for murder and start taking him apart. Everything he owned would be examined within an angstrom of its life to find the matrix. The improvised bookmark wasn't at all safe as a hiding place.

The door thudded open and a square, fast-moving man in uniform bore down on the two arguing in the corner. They hushed and the policeman moved forward: "Yes, General Juan?"

"What kind of grunt-brained nonsense is going on with you civilians? Arresting a Triadic citizen -- without a warrant, as far as anyone knows -- on the thinnest sort of suspicion of murder, and removing him from the Port District and from my jurisdiction! Until you secure a proper indictment, you have no right to imprison him. The utmost that's permissible at this stage is to have him held in quarantine."

"Excuse me, General," interjected Croyson. "I am a National Security agent. This case has aspects --"

"Blow it out your ears, you grubby clerk. I'm qualified to handle security matters for the Port District, not you. Your prisoner belongs in my custody. Cough him up."

"Very well, sir. I shall report this to my superiors," the security man answered coldly.

"Where is he?"

"Right here, sir," said Rhayader. "And that pawn-shop display is my luggage, which I'd be glad to have back, as well as my flask which they've confiscated."

"That's evidence!" snapped Croyson. "The contents will have to be analyzed for poison."

"That's what he's supposed to have used, is it?" said General Juan. "Seal it up in an envelope and I'll have it sent to the Central Bureau myself. I don't want to have anything happen to it. And return Mr. Rhayader's property to him."

"Yes, sir," the agent and the policeman muttered in ragged unison. The policeman found a large green plastic envelope and handed

it over, then pushed Rhayader's things into the overnight bag and tore up the inventory. Croyson sealed the flask into the envelope and turned it over to General Juan.

"I will be in touch with the Central Bureau," the agent said, "and if they find poison in the flask, I will obtain a prefect's warrant to search the suspect's effects." He left.

"I'll see that when it happens," grunted the general. "Do you have everything, Rhayader?"

"Just about, sir." He tucked his things a little more carefully into the overnight case, snapped it shut and slung the gadget case over his shoulder. They went out.

The general's flitter was sleek and new. The general got into the driver's seat and motioned Rhayader to sit beside him. They zoomed up at what felt like three G's. In moments the autopilot was fitting them into a medium-altitude traffic pattern.

The general swung around in his seat to face Rhayader. "You're damn lucky, you know."

"No, I don't know," he answered truthfully. He'd have sworn that same fast black flitter with official markings he'd seen at port had also arrived at the police station just as they were leaving. Someone else was after him. Who? And for that matter, what was General Juan's game?

"How much do you know about the situation you're in, Rhayader?"

He answered slowly, making his account as neutral as possible. "A stewardess asked me to deliver a message for her. She said she belonged to a group that was afraid of a coup of some kind by a group of officers, and was trying to prevent it. She claimed that the message was the location of a ship that could be salvaged profitably. I know that the ship she named has already been salvaged. I refused to deliver the message. This morning she was found dead. I was then accused of her murder."

The general laughed. "That's not all by a bucketful. You're cautious. That's good, I like to see it. But you're safe now. I belong to the Populist League, and the memory matrix is for me."

"Then you're not really the Port Commander?"

"I am indeed. And a member of the Cabal as well -- or so they think. I'm a sleeper, my boy, and when they stage their coup the Cabal is going to be very surprised when they find out how many of us there are."

"What about the security man, Croyson? I thought he was part of the Cabal. He kept demanding the matrix from me."

"There are three or four factions inside the Cabal; when I took you away from him he must have put it down to factional rivalry. He won't suspect. What did he tell you the matrix was?"

"A list of the co-ordinates of secret bases. He said the stewardess was a member of a spy ring."

"So she was, though not the kind he meant you to think. She was working for me and the Populist League against the Cabal. The actual contents of the matrix is a list of officers in the other two systems -- Kolgadan and Kolgavon -- who can be counted on to side against the Cabal when they start their coup. I had to re-

cover that before a genuine Cabal member got hold of it. I took you along with it to be sure of getting it. You must still have it, or they wouldn't have been trying to keep you away from me."

"But I don't!" protested Rhayader. "I told you, I refused to take it from the stewardess."

The general had taken over from the autopilot and was landing on an apron by a rambling blue-tiled house. The eaves of other houses were visible here and there between tall bushes. The flitter stopped and General Juan turned to face Rhayader again. "Then why did she tell me she'd given it to you instead of to Pon Gillock?"

"She told you --"

"Not in so many words. But the meaning was clear."

"She must have misunderstood me and sent the message prematurely. I told her I'd think about it and tell her at breakfast. I intended to refuse definitely then. But I never saw her again."

"Umh!" grunted the general. "Well, you're here. Come on in while I decide what's to be done."

The big door swung open ahead of them and the general led Rhayader through a bare entrance hall. There were two menservants, chauffeur and butler perhaps, who broke off a conversation when the general entered.

"Mr. Rhayader will be staying here for a short while."

"Yes, sir."

"Put him next to our other guest."

Mirko Rhayader was turning toward the general to ask if he could get in touch with the Triadic Embassy when a blow on the back of his neck overbalanced him into darkness.

He consisted of a throb of pain in the midst of darkness. Awareness came back in quick little rushes. He had a body whose neck had been hurt. He was Mirko Rhayader, and someone had hit him. Perhaps it was dark because his eyes were closed. He opened them.

He was lying on a bed in a room with light yellow walls and ceiling. There was a light on in one corner. He looked toward the light, and winced at the spurt of pain.

"Awake already? But then, they don't waste effort hitting harder than they have to." The speaker was still a blur; Rhayader blinked and looked again.

This time he saw a young man not much older than himself, round-shouldered, stringy looking. His face was bruised and there was what looked like a gravel burn on his forehead.

"Pon Gillock, I presume."

The man frowned and gestured elaborately at the ceiling.

"The place is bugged? I never doubted it. I wondered if you were Gillock because Juan mentioned the name."

"Oh. I'd hoped he hadn't got that far. What's been happening outside?"

"And who am I, and what am I doing in this. Your courier tried to get me to substitute for you, and everybody so far has assumed I agreed. She was killed before I got around to telling her that I was staying out of things. Result, I'm in the middle after all."

"Then what did become of the -- the message?"

"Nobody seems to know," Rhayader said.

"Oh. Who are you? And why did she pick you?"

"Name's Minnie Rhayader. I'm a Triadic, and was on my way home to the family manufacturing business when this happened. I wouldn't even have been on that ship if I hadn't had a notion to call on a former classmate who lives here. Next time I take a vacation I'll stay in the Great Triad! As to why she picked me -- somehow she got the impression that I was you, and had said too much when she found out I wasn't. And so she expected me to be gallant and take your place."

"My message was delayed, then," said Gillock. "I'd warned her to stash it in one of our drops before the ship took off. Thinking, of course, that I could get there and pick it up on another flight -- but the next thing I knew, I'd walked into Quan's hands."

"And what is this message that's so important to your group and the general's?"

"Don't ask," said Gillock. "If you ever find out, you're a dead man."

"That's about what I thought. The trouble is, I'm probably a dead man already. Aside from that, is there such a thing as a drink of water in here?" Rhayader tried sitting up, found it wasn't as bad as he'd feared. He rubbed the back of his neck very gently. The muscles would probably be sore for several days.

"I'll get you a glass," Gillock said. He went through a door. There was a sound of running water and he came back with a glassful. "That's the bathroom; the other door is a closet. You'll probably get your clothes back after they've been taken apart and been put back together."

"What little I have. Almost everything went on ahead to Capella; I only meant to spend a day or so here, seeing my friend. I was going straight home then. Thanks." He drank the water and stood up.

The plan of the room suggested various possibilities to him. He assumed there was no point in trying to get out by the door, and a look into the bathroom confirmed the complete absence of windows. He tapped the glass on the shelf as if he had put it down and went back to the other room with it in his hand. Gillock looked surprised but said nothing.

Rhayader moved silently into the closet. On one side was the bathroom. The other side was two meters short of the corner of the room, and there was probably another closet there. But the back must share its wall with some other room of the

house. Probably empty . . . but that was to be found out. He put the mouth of the glass to the wall and his ear to the bottom of the glass.

His improvised amplifier brought him, at first, only a few scraps of voice. He waited. Another voice spoke, closer and clearer: "You bungled, I bungled, maybe we both did. I'm still not sure he ever had it, Croyson."

"I had searched the cabin of the stewardess quite thoroughly before she returned from her meeting with Rhayader. Immediately on leaving him she gave the signal officer the message you intercepted, and went directly to her own cabin. I searched her person with equal thoroughness."

The dry, clerkish voice of Croyson, the National Security agent, reporting to Quan did not really surprise Rhayader. The system is old. First the bully, then the friendly treatment -- and he'd almost believed in Quan himself. Except that a sleeper doesn't tell a chance acquaintance that he is one.

"Never mind all that." It was General Quan's voice again. "Get on with opening his precious case. Even if he's swallowed the keys, or whatever it takes, you ought to be able to crack it."

Croyson's voice died away to a mutter.

"Take it along, then," the general said. "I'll go upstairs and see if anything's showing up in the transcriber."

There was no more. Rhayader returned the glass silently to its shelf and sat down on a straight chair to think.

Sooner or later they'd get into his gadget bag and find the memory matrix wasn't there after all. They would give his other belongings a really thorough examination then, eventually finding it. But by that time they would know if they had any sense -- and he didn't doubt for a minute that they had plenty -- that he had held onto it while denying so stubbornly that he had it because he had used his very professional-looking gadgets to read and identify the contents.

He wished he hadn't read it. Because once he'd done so, he couldn't pass it on to anyone but its rightful owner. Even at the Academy of War, psychometric profiles were made by machine, by the subject himself, and only the subject had a copy. The information in such a profile gave too much power over a man to be handed over to anyone else; it must be reserved for self-analysis. Rhayader had worked enough with his own profile before he'd been dropped from the Academy to know that.

And since this profile was the object of so much assorted skulduggery, it could only be that of one person: the Grand Duke of Kolgay himself. Whoever owned this profile would be master of Kolgay; the Grand Duke would be his puppet.

Rhayader didn't want to stand by and let any man be made a puppet.

But, right now, how was he going to prevent it -- and incidentally, but more important to him, get out of this alive?

But he needed more information. He hoped he could get it by indirection.

"I suppose we get fed sometimes? What's the routine?" he asked.

"Not much chance there, if that's what you mean. One man brings in the tray. The other stands outside with a blazer."

"Doesn't sound helpful," Rhayader agreed, but he nodded to himself. Only two men.

He went to the bathroom door and set it half-open, then stood by the outer door and noted just how much of the bathroom could be seen. Then he went into the bathroom and looked it over carefully. When he was satisfied he took off his shoes, culottes, and stockings, and stuffed them carefully with towels. There were plenty of towels. When this was arranged to suit him on the floor, he went through a pantomime to explain to Gillock what he wanted done. After the second repetition, Gillock understood.

Rhayader stood in his shirt and undershorts half a pace along the wall from the hinge-side of the outer door. He gave Gillock the signal.

Gillock walked firmly to the bathroom, as Rhayader said clearly, "There's one sure way out of this mess, and I'm going to take it. So long, Gillock."

Running water into a glass, Gillock answered "Wait! No, don't do that!" Then he took a noisy gulp and threw the glass down on the floor, whirled, and ran to the outer door.

"Help! Get a doctor! He's dying! Help!" Gillock shouted as he ran, and pounded on the door.

There were sounds of running in the hall and the door was kicked open in Gillock's face. "Back away from the door! Where is he?"

Gillock retreated, pointing. "Over there. He took something."

The first man ran over to the "body." Behind the door, Rhayader waited till the man with the blazer had come far enough into the room. Then he leaped forward, started the door swinging shut as he passed, and with the same economical neck chop he'd so recently received himself he dropped the gunman. Even as he delivered the chop with his right hand, he was catching the slumping body with his left, and he picked the falling blazer out of mid-air. After all, he hadn't been expelled from the Academy for underachievement.

Easing his man to the floor, he looked to see what the other was doing. That one had realized that it was only a dummy in the bathroom and was turning toward him now. Rhayader snapped two quick bursts at him with the blazer and he toppled.

They left at a run. Rhayader didn't even stop to recover his clothes, but followed Gillock down halls and around corners to the entryway. There was his overnight case, lying where he he must have dropped it when he was slugged. He grabbed it and kept moving.

Gillock flung open the door to the apron and was several running steps out when he saw in the fan of light two flitters with official markings.

"It's the Palæ Guard!" he shouted, trying to halt, to turn. A searchbeam from one flitter blazed on him.

Rhayader, just coming out the door, skittered sideways and into a bush. He saw Gillock fall with a patch of fire on his shoulder.

The flitters had been in the apron long enough for a score or more of armed men to have hidden themselves. Now, when blazers began to crackle brittly from the upper windows of the general's house, they returned the fire from all sides.

Rhayader crouched very still. It wasn't as dark as he had supposed; though it was well past sunset, clear blue light lay everywhere. Already he began to see dark silhouettes that slipped from tree to bush, converging on the door. In a moment they would see him.

He tried desperately to fit the Palæ Guard into this wild game of coup and counter coup. He'd never had a chance to get word to the Triadic Embassy; there wasn't any hope that they had come to rescue him. Unless -- the wild idea spurted a moment's hope in him -- old Dess was something big in the Palæ Guard? Dess had known he was coming on the Kolgay Lady. The flitters here had the same markings as the one at the spaceport and at the police station. Had Dess been trying to get him out of the plotters' hands all along?

But that was impossible, of course. When Dess resigned from the Academy he'd said his father had just died and he had to run the family business. Rhayader had the impression it was some kind of estate management. That wouldn't describe even an inherited Guard commission.

No, this was just what it looked like: one military faction against another, battling for the means of controlling the Grand Duke. No safety here for Mirko Rhayader.

The men were massing close to the open door. How soon would they see him?

Suddenly over the crackling crossfire of blazers came a clear, commanding voice.

"Forward! Fidelis, fidelis!"

"Fidelis!" Rhayader heard himself answer his former classmate's watchword. "Fidelis!" But had that commanding voice been Dess?

The Guardsmen streamed past him and into the house, blazers at the ready. Rhayader, struggling upright behind the bush, instinctively turned to follow them, but a hand on his arm spun him around.

"This way, quick! Behind the flitter -- get under cover!"

They flung themselves across the open space and sprawled in the shelter of the flitter. Rhayader gasped, "Dess -- it's really you?"

"None other, bunkie. You've led me hell's own chase."

"So it was you? I noticed a couple of near-encounters while I was being dragged around quaint, exotic Kolgay. What do you want?"

"It's been bad, huh? Look, I don't know and don't care what you have that these nuts have been after. I've just been trying to get you out of whatever this hooah is they've tangled you up in."

"And you aren't playing a hand in this game of who's-got-the-coup?" prodded Rhayader.

"Coup? Coup d'état?" Shock was unmistakable in Dess' voice. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be. And I'm in a very bad spot yet. Dess -- was it to go into the Palæ Guard that you dropped out of the Academy?"

"Not exactly."

"I'd thought you were going into a family business, you see, and then -- here you are."

"That wasn't exactly it either."

"The thing is, I have to know where you stand; I can't figure this business out."

"On my honor, Mirko, I swear you can trust me."

"All right." Rhayader took a deep breath. "I've accidentally gotten hold of something that's of the utmost importance to the safety of the Grand Duke. I won't turn it over to anyone else. Can you wangle me a chance to see him?"

"Can I!" Dess chuckled. "Nothing easier. By the way, I think this operation is about wrapped up: shooting's over, so I'll just leave the boys to play with the loose ends." He stood up and shouted a few terse orders.

"Yes," he went on, "I knew old Quan was up to something, but I thought it was the usual sort of spy business and I could take my time about getting his whole organization. Then I learned he was about to grab you off your ship -- well, we won't stand here talking; do you have this thing in your bag there? -- good, we'll go right over to the palace."

When Dess turned on the overhead light in the flitter, Rhayader got his first sight of him: He stared, utterly dumbfounded. The total absence of rank-insignia on the Guard's uniform was not too surprising; but the face of the man who wore the uniform, though familiar, was not that of his old friend.

"I'm afraid I was using a temporary face at the Academy," he said apologetically. "You'll understand that I had to be incognito."

"Grand Duke Rodesso -- you, Dess!"

"It's the family business, unfortunately. Now what's this mysterious whatsit that all the fuss was about?"

Rhayader reached into his overnight bag for the book, shook out the folded candy-wrapper, and began to work loose the chip of stress-coded plastic from the candy smears that secured it.

"Here's what they all wanted so badly," he said as he handed it over. "Your soul."

THE END