In a Good Cause—

Isaac Asimov

In the

Great Court, which stands as a patch of untouched peace

among the fifty busy square miles devoted to the towering buildings that are the pulse beat of the United Worlds of the Galaxy, stands a statue.

It stands where it can look at the stars at night. There are other statues ringing the court, but this one stands in the center and alone.

It is not a very good statue. The face is too noble and lacks the lines of living. The brow is a shade too high, the nose a shade too symmetrical, the clothing a shade too carefully disposed. The whole bearing is by far too saintly to be true. One can suppose that the man in real life might have frowned at times, or hiccuped, but the statue seemed to insist that such imperfections were impossible.

All this, of course, is understandable overcompensation. The man had no statues raised to him while alive, and succeeding generations, with the advantage of hindsight, felt guilty.

The name on the pedestal reads ’Richard Sayama Altmayer’. Underneath it is a short phrase and, vertically arranged, three dates. The phrase is: “In a good cause, there are no failures.” The three dates are June 17, 2755; September 5, 2788; December 21, 2800;—the years being counted in the usual manner of the period, that is, from the date of the first atomic explosion in 1945 of the ancient era.

None of those dates represents either his birth or death. They mark neither a date of marriage or of the accomplishment of some great deed or, indeed, of anything that the inhabitants of the United Worlds can remember with pleasure and pride. Rather, they are the final expression of the feeling of guilt.

Quite simply and plainly, they are the three dates upon which Richard Sayama Altmayer was sent to prison for his opinions.

1—June 17,2755

At the age of twenty-two, certainly, Dick Altmayer was fully capable of feeling fury. His hair was as yet dark brown and he had not grown the mustache which, in later years, would be so characteristic of him. His nose was, of course, thin and high-bridged, but the contours of his face were youthful. It would be only later that the growing gauntness of his cheeks would convert that nose into the prominent landmark that it now is in the minds of trillions of school children.

Geoffrey Stock was standing in the doorway, viewing the results of his friend’s fury. His round face and cold, steady eyes were there, but he had yet to put on the first of the military uniforms in which he was to spend the rest of his life.

He said, “Great Galaxy!”

Altmayer looked up. “Hello, Jeff.”

“What’s been happening, Dick? I thought your principles, pal, forbid destruction of any kind. Here’s a book-viewer that looks somewhat destroyed.” He picked up the pieces.

Altmayer said, “I was holding the viewer when my wave-receiver came through with an official message. You know which one, too.”

“I know. It happened to me, too. Where is it?”

“On the floor. I tore it off the spool as soon as it belched out at me. Wait, let’s dump it down the atom chute.”

“Hey, hold on. You can’t—”

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t accomplish anything. You’ll have to report.”

“And just why?”

“Don’t be an ass, Dick.”

“This is a matter of principle, by Space.”

“Oh, nuts! You can’t fight the whole planet.”

“I don’t intend to fight the whole planet; just the few who get us into wars.”

Stock shrugged. “That means the whole planet. That guff of yours of leaders tricking poor innocent people into fighting is just so much space-dust. Do you think that if a vote were taken the people wouldn’t be overwhelmingly in favor of fighting this fight?”

“That means nothing, Jeff. The government has control of—”

“The organs of propaganda. Yes, I know. I’ve listened to you often enough. But why not report, anyway?”

Altmayer turned away.

Stock said, “In the first place, you might not pass the physical examination.”

“I’d pass. I’ve been in Space.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. If the doctors let you hop a liner, that only means you don’t have a heart murmur or an aneurysm. For military duty aboard ship in Space you need much more than just that. How do you know you qualify?”

“That’s a side issue, Jeff, and an insulting one. It’s not that I’m afraid to fight.”

“Do you think you can stop the war this way?”

“I wish I could,” Altmayer’s voice almost shook as he spoke. “It’s this idea I have that all mankind should be a single unit. There shouldn’t be wars or space-fleets armed only for destruction. The Galaxy stands ready to be opened to the united efforts of the human race. Instead, we have been factioned for nearly two thousand years, and we throw away all the Galaxy.”

Stock laughed, “We’re doing all right. There are more than eighty independent planetary systems.”

“And are we the only intelligences in the Galaxy?”

“Oh, the Diaboli, your particular devils,” and Stock put his fists to his temples and extended the two forefingers, waggling them.

“And yours, too, and everybody’s. They have a single government extending over more planets than all those occupied by our precious eighty independents.”

“Sure, and their nearest planet is only fifteen hundred light years away from Earth and they can’t live on oxygen planets anyway.”

Stock got out of his friendly mood. He said, curtly, “Look, I dropped by here to say that I was reporting for examination next week. Are you coming with me?”

“No.”

“You’re really determined.”

“I’m really determined.”

“You know you’ll accomplish nothing. There’ll be no great flame ignited on Earth. It will be no case of millions of young men being excited by your example into a no-war strike. You will simply be put in jail.”

“Well, then, jail it is.”

And jail it was. On June 17, 2755, of the atomic era, after a short trial in which Richard Sayama Altmayer refused to present any defense, he was sentenced to jail for the term of three years or for the duration of the war, whichever should be longer. He served a little over four years and two months, at which time the war ended in a definite though not shattering Santan-nian defeat. Earth gained complete control of certain disputed asteroids, various commercial advantages, and a limitation of the Santannian navy.

The combined human losses of the war were something over two thousand ships with, of course, most of their crews, and in addition, several millions of lives due to the bombardment of planetary surfaces from space. The fleets of the two contending powers had been sufficiently strong to restrict this bombardment to the outposts of their respective systems, so that the planets of Earth and Santanni, themselves, were little affected.

The war conclusively established Earth as the strongest single human military power.

Geoffrey Stock fought throughout the war, seeing action more than once and remaining whole in life and limb despite that. At the end of the war he had the rank of major. He took part in the first diplomatic mission sent out by Earth to the world of the Diaboli, and that was the first step in his expanding role in Earth’s military and political life.

2—September S, 2788

They were the first Diaboli ever to have appeared on the surface of Earth itself. The. projection posters and the newscasts of the Federalist party made that abundantly clear to any who were unaware of that. Over and over, they repeated the chronology of events.

It was toward the beginning of the century that human explorers first came across the Diaboli. They were intelligent and had discovered interstellar travel independently somewhat earlier than had the humans. Already the galactic volume of their dominions was greater than that which was human-occupied.

Regular diplomatic relationships between the Diaboli and the major human powers had begun twenty years earlier, immediately after the war between Santanni and Earth. At that time, outposts of Diaboli power were already within twenty light years of the outermost human centers. Their missions went everywhere, drawing trade treaties, obtaining concessions on unoccupied asteroids.

And now they were on Earth itself. They were treated as equals and perhaps as more than equals by the rulers of the greatest center of human population in the Galaxy. The most damning statistic of all was the most loudly proclaimed by the Federalists. It was this: Although the number of living Diaboli was somewhat less than the total number of living humans, humanity had opened up not more than five new worlds to colonization in fifty years, while the Diaboli had begun the occupation of nearly five hundred.

“A hundred to one against us,” cried the Federalists, “because they are one political organization and we are a hundred.” But relatively few on Earth, and fewer in the Galaxy as a whole, paid attention to the Federalists and their demands for Galactic Union.

The crowds that lined the streets along which nearly daily the five Diaboli of the mission traveled from their specially conditioned suite in the best hotel of the city to the Secretariat of Defense were, by and large, not hostile. Most were merely curious, and more than a little revolted.

The Diaboli were not pleasant creatures to look at. They were larger and considerably more massive than Earthmen. They had four stubby legs set close together below and two flexibly-fingered arms above. Their skin was wrinkled and naked and they wore no clothing. Their broad, scaly faces wore no expressions capable of being read by Earthmen, and from flattened regions just above each large-pupilled eye there sprang short horns. It was these last that gave the creatures their names. At first they had been called devils, and later the politer Latin equivalent.

Each wore a pair of cylinders on its back from which flexible tubes extended to the nostrils; there they clamped on tightly. These were packed with soda-lime which absorbed the, to them, poisonous carbon dioxide from the air they breathed. Their own metabolism revolved about the reduction of sulfur and sometime those foremost among the humans in the crowd caught a foul whiff of the hydrogen sulfide exhaled by the Diaboli.

The leader of the Federalists was in the crowd. He stood far back where he attracted no attention from the police who had roped off the avenues and who now maintained a watchful order on the little hoppers that could be maneuvered quickly through the thickest crowd. The Federalist leader was gaunt-faced, with a thin and prominently bridged nose and straight, graying hair.

He turned away, “I cannot bear to look at them.”

His companion was more philosophic. He said, “No uglier in spirit, at least, than some of our handsome officials. These creatures are at least true to their own."

“You are sadly right. Are we entirely ready?”

“Entirely. There won’t be one of them alive to return to his world.”

“Good! I will remain here to give the signal.”

The Diaboli were talking as well. This fact could not be evident to any human, no matter how close. To be sure, they could communicate by making ordinary sounds to one another but that was not their method of choice. The skin between their horns could, by the actions of muscles which differed in their construction from any known to humans, vibrate rapidly. The tiny waves which were transmitted in this manner to the air were too rapid to be heard by the human ear and too delicate to be detected by any but the most sensitive of human instrumentation. At that time, in fact, humans remained unaware of this form of communication.

A vibration said, “Did you know that this is the planet of origin of the Two-legs?”

“No.” There was a chorus of such nos, and then one particular vibration said, “Do you get that from the Two-leg communications you have been studying, queer one?”

“Because I study the communications? More of our people should do so instead of insisting so firmly on the complete worthlessness of Two-leg culture. For one thing, we are in a much better position to deal with the Two-legs if we know something about them. Their history is interesting in a horrible way. I am glad I brought myself to view their spools.”

“And yet,” came another vibration, “from our previous contacts with Two-legs, one would be certain that they did not know their planet of origin. Certainly there is no veneration of this planet, Earth, or any memorial rites connected with it. Are you sure the information is correct?”

“Entirely so. The lack of ritual, and the fact that this planet is by no means a shrine, is perfectly understandable in the light of Two-leg history. The Two-legs on the other worlds would scarcely concede the honor. It would somehow lower the independent dignity of their own worlds.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“Neither do I, exactly, but after several days of reading I think I catch a glimmer. It would seem that, originally, when interstellar travel was first discovered by the Two-legs, they lived under a single political unit.”

“Naturally.”

“Not for these Two-legs. This was an unusual stage in their history and did not last. After the colonies on the various worlds grew and came to reasonable maturity, their first interest was to break away from the mother world. The first in the series of interstellar wars among these Two-legs began then.”

“Horrible. Like cannibals.”

“Yes, isn’t it? My digestion has been upset for days. My cud is sour. In any case, the various colonies gained independence, so that now we have the situation of which we are well aware. All of the Two-leg kingdoms, republics, aristocracies, etc., are simply tiny clots of worlds, each consisting of a dominant world and a few subsidiaries which, in turn, are forever seeking their independence or being shifted from one dominant to another. This Earth is the strongest among them and yet less than a dozen worlds owe it allegiance.”

“Incredible that these creatures should be so blind to their own interests. Do they not have a tradition of the single government that existed when they consisted of but one world?”

“As I said that was unusual for them. The single government had existed only a few decades. Prior to that, this very planet itself was split into a number of subplanetary political units."

“Never heard anything like it.” For a while, the supersonics of the various creatures interfered with one another.

“It’s a fact. It is simply the nature of the beast.”

And with that, they were at the Secretariat of Defense.

The five Diaboli stood side by side along the table. They stood because their anatomy did not admit of anything that could correspond to ’sitting’. On the other side of the table, five Earthmen stood as well. It would have been more convenient for the humans to sit but, understandably, there was no desire to make the handicap of smaller size any more pronounced than it already was. The table was a rather wide one; the widest, in fact, that could be conveniently obtained. This was out of respect for the human nose, for from the Diaboli, slightly so as they breathed, much more so when they spoke, there came the gentle and continuous drift of hydrogen sulfide. This was a difficulty rather unprecedented in diplomatic negotiations.

Ordinarily the meetings did not last for more than half an hour, and at the end of this interval the Diaboli ended their conversations without ceremony and turned to leave. This time, however, the leave-taking was interrupted. A man entered, and the five human negotiators made way for him. He was tall, taller than any of the other Earthmen, and he wore a uniform with the ease of long usage. His face was round and his eyes cold and steady. His black hair was rather thin but as yet untouched by gray. There was an irregular blotch of scar tissue running from the point of his jaw downward past the line of his high, leather-brown collar. It might have been the result of a hand energy-ray, wielded by some forgotten human enemy in one of the five wars in which the man had been an active participant.

“Sirs,” said the Earthman who had been chief negotiator hitherto, “may I introduce the Secretary of Defense?”

The Diaboli were somewhat shocked and, although their expressions were in response and inscrutable, the sound plates on their foreheads vibrated actively. Their strict sense of hierarchy was disturbed. The Secretary was only a Two-leg, but by Two-leg standards, he outranked them. They could not properly conduct official business with him.

The Secretary was aware of their feelings but had no choice in the matter. For at least ten minutes, their leaving must be delayed and no ordinary interruption could serve to hold back the Diaboli.

“Sirs,” he said, “I must ask your indulgence to remain longer this time.”

The central Diabolus replied in the nearest approach to English any Diabolus could manage. Actually, a Diabolus might be said to have two mouths. One was hinged at the outermost extremity of the jawbone and was used in eating. In this capacity, the motion of the mouth was rarely seen by human beings, since the Diaboli much preferred to eat in the company of their own kind exclusively. A narrower mouth opening, however, perhaps two inches in width, could be used in speaking. It pursed itself open, revealing the gummy gap where a Diabolus’ missing incisors ought to have been. It remained open during speech, the necessary consonantal blockings being performed by the palate and back of the tongue. The result was hoarse and fuzzy, but understandable.

The Diabolus said, “You will pardon us, already we suffer.” And by his forehead, he twittered unheard, “They mean to suffocate us in their vile atmosphere. We must ask for larger poison-absorbing cylinders.”

The Secretary of Defense said, “I am in sympathy with your feelings, and yet this may be my only opportunity to speak with you. Perhaps you would do us the honor to eat with us.”

The Earthmen next the Secretary could not forbear a quick and passing frown. He scribbled rapidly on a piece of paper and passed it to the Secretary, who glanced momentarily at it.

It read, “No. They eat sulfuretted hay. Stinks unbearably.” The Secretary crumpled the note and let it drop.

The Diabolus said, “The honor is ours. Were we physically able to endure your strange atmosphere for so long a time, we would accept most gratefully.”

And via forehead, he said with agitation, “They cannot expect us to eat with them and watch them consume the corpses of dead animals. My cud would never be sweet again.”

“We respect your reasons,” said the Secretary. “Let us then transact our business now. In the negotiations that have so far proceeded, we have been unable to obtain from your government, in the persons of you, their representatives, any clear indication as to what the boundaries of your sphere of influence are in your own minds. We have presented several proposals in this matter.”

“As far as the territories of Earth are concerned, Mr. Secretary, a definition has been given.”

“But surely you must see that this is unsatisfactory. The boundaries of Earth and your lands are nowhere in contact. So far, you have done nothing but state this fact. While true, the mere statement is not satisfying.”

“We do not completely understand. Would you have us discuss the boundaries between ourselves and such independent human kingdoms as that of Vega?”

“Why, yes.”

“That cannot be done, sir. Surely, you realize that any relations between ourselves and the sovereign realm of Vega cannot possibly be any concern of Earth. They can be discussed only with Vega.”

“Then you will negotiate a hundred times with the hundred human world systems?”

“It is necessary. I would point out, however, that the necessity is imposed not by us but by the nature of your human organization.”

“Then that limits our field of discussion drastically.” The Secretary seemed abstracted. He was listening, not exactly to the Diaboli opposite, but, rather, it would seem, to something at a distance.

And now there was a faint commotion, barely heard from outside the Secretariat. The babble of distant voices, the brisk crackle of energy-guns muted by distance to nearly nothingness, and the hurried click-clacking of police hoppers.

The Diaboli showed no indication of hearing, nor was this simply another affectation of politeness. If their capacity for receiving supersonic sound waves was far more delicate and acute than almost anything human ingenuity had ever invented, their reception for ordinary sound waves was rather dull.

The Diabolus was saying, “We beg leave to state our surprise. We were of the opinion that all this was known to you.”

A man in police uniform appeared in the doorway. The Secretary turned to him and, with the briefest of nods, the policeman departed.

The Secretary said suddenly and briskly, “Quite. I merely wished to ascertain once again that this was the case. I trust you will be ready to resume negotiations tomorrow?”

“Certainly, sir.”

One by one, slowly, with a dignity befitting the heirs of the universe, the Diaboli left.

An Earthman said, “I’m glad they refused to eat with us.”

“I knew they couldn’t accept,” said the Secretary, thoughtfully. “They’re vegetarian. They sicken thoroughly at the very thought of eating meat. I’ve seen them eat, you know. Not many humans have. They resemble our cattle in the business of eating. They bolt their food and then stand solemnly about in circles, chewing their cuds in a great community of thought. Perhaps they intercommunicate by a method we are unaware of. The huge lower jaw rotates horizontally in a slow, grinding process—”

The policeman had once more appeared in the doorway.

The Secretary broke off, and called, “You have them all?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have Altmayer?”

"Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

The crowd had gathered again when the five Diaboli emerged from the Secretariat. The schedule was strict. At 3:00 p.m. each day they left their suite and spent five minutes walking to the Secretariat. At 3 :35, they emerged therefrom once again and returned to their suite, the way being kept clear by the police. They marched stolidly, almost mechanically, along the broad avenue.

Halfway in their trek there came the sounds of shouting men. To most of the crowd, the words were not clear but there was the crackle of an energy-gun and the pale blue fluorescence split the air overhead. Police wheeled, their own energy-guns drawn, hoppers springing seven feet into the air, landing delicately in the midst of groups of people, touching none of them, jumping again almost instantly. People scattered and their voices were joined to the general uproar.

Through it all, the Diaboli, either through defective hearing or excessive dignity, continued marching as mechanically as ever.

At the other end of the gathering, almost diametrically opposing the region of excitement, Richard Sayana Altmayer stroked his nose in a moment of satisfaction. The strict chronology of the Diaboli had made a split-second plan possible. The first diversionary disturbance was only to attract the attention of the police. It was now -

And he fired a harmless sound pellet into the air.

Instantly, from four directions, concussion pellets split the air. From the roofs of buildings lining the way, snipers fired. Each of the Diaboli, torn by the shells, shuddered and exploded as the pellets detonated within them. One by one, they toppled.

And from nowhere, the police were at Altmayer’s side. He stared at them with some surprise.

Gently, for in twenty years he had lost his fury and learned to be gentle, he said, “You come quickly, but even so you come too Iate.” He gestured in the direction of the shattered Diaboli.

The crowd was in simple panic now. Additional squadrons of police, arriving in record time, could do nothing more than herd them off into harmless directions.

. The policeman, who now held Altmayer in a firm grip, taking the sound gun from him and inspecting him quickly for further weapons, was a captain by rank. He said, stiffly, “I think you’ve made a mistake, Mr. Altmayer. You’ll notice you’ve drawn no blood.” And he, too, waved toward where the Diaboli lay motionless.

Altmayer turned, startled. The creatures lay there on their sides, some in pieces, tattered skin shredding away, frames distorted and bent, but the police captain was correct. There was no blood, no flesh. Altmayer’s lips, pale and stiff, moved soundlessly.

The police captain interpreted the motion accurately enough. He said, “You are correct, sir, they are robots.”

And from the great doors of the Secretariat of Defense, the true Diaboli emerged. Clubbing policemen cleared the way, but another way, so that they need not pass the sprawled travesties of plastic and aluminium which for three minutes had played the role of living creatures.

The police captain said, “I’ll ask you to come without trouble, Mr. Altmayer. The Secretary of Defense would like to see you.”

“I am coming, sir.” A stunned frustration was only now beginning to overwhelm him.

Geoffrey Stock and Richard Altmayer faced one another for the first time in almost a quarter of a century, there in the Defense Secretary’s private office. It was a rather strait-laced office: a desk, an armchair, and two additional chairs. All were a dull brown in color, the chairs being topped by brown foamite which yielded to the body enough for comfort, not enough for luxury. There was a micro-viewer on the desk and a little cabinet big enough to hold several dozen opto-spools. On the wall opposite the desk was a trimensional view of the old Dauntless, the Secretary’s first command.

Stock said, “It is a little ridiculous meeting like this after so many years. I find I am sorry.”

“Sorry about what, Jeff?” Altmayer tried to force a smile, “I am sorry about nothing but that you tricked me with those robots.”

“You were not difficult to trick,” said Stock, “and it was an excellent opportunity to break your party. I’m sure it will be quite discredited after this. The pacifist tries to force war; the apostle of gentleness tries assassination.”

War against the true enemy,” said Altmayer sadly. “But you are right. It is a sign of desperation that this was forced on me.’—Then, “How did you know my plans?”

“You still overestimate humanity, Dick. In any conspiracy the weakest points are the people that compose it. You had twenty-five co-conspirators. Didn’t it occur to you that at least one of them might be an informer, or even an employee of mine?”

A dull red burned slowly on Altmayer’s high cheekbones. “Which one?” he said.

“Sorry. We may have to use him again.”

Altmayer sat back in his chair wearily. “What have you gained?”

"What have you gained? You are as impractical now as on that last day I saw you; the day you decided to go to jail rather than report for induction. You haven’t changed.”

Altmayer shook his head, “The truth doesn’t change.”

Stock said impatiently, “If it is truth, why does it always fail? Your stay in jail accomplished nothing. The war went on. Not one life was saved. Since then, you’ve started a political party; and every cause it has backed has failed. Your conspiracy has failed. You’re nearly fifty, Dick, and what have you accomplished? Nothing.”

Altmayer said, “And you went to war, rose to command a ship, then to a place in the Cabinet. They say you will be the next Coordinator. You’ve accomplished a great deal. Yet success and failure do not exist in themselves. Success in what? Success in working the ruin of humanity. Failure in what? In a good cause, there are no failures; there are only delayed successes.”

“Even if you are executed for this day’s work?”

“Even if I am executed. There will be someone else to carry on, and his success will be my success.”

“How do you envisage this success? Can you really see a union of worlds, a Galactic Federation? Do you want Santanni running our affairs? Do you want a Vegan telling you what to do? Do you want Earth to decide its own destiny or to be at the mercy of any random combination of powers?”

“We would be at their mercy no more than they would be at ours.”

“Except that we are the richest. We would be plundered for the sake of the depressed worlds of the! Sirius Sector.”

“And pay the plunder out of what we would save in the wars that would no longer occur.”

“Do you have answers for all questions, Dick?”

“In twenty years we have been asked all questions, Jeff.”

“Then answer this one. How would you force this union of yours on unwilling humanity?”

“That is why I wanted to kill the Diaboli.” For the first time, Altmayer showed agitation. “It would mean war with them, but all humanity would unite against the common enemy. Our own political and ideological differences would fade in the face of that.”

“You really believe that? Even when the Diaboli have never harmed us? They cannot live on our worlds. They must remain on their own worlds of sulfide atmosphere and oceans which are sodium sulfate solutions.”

“Humanity knows better, Jeff. They are spreading from world to world like an atomic explosion. They block space-travel into regions where there are unoccupied oxygen worlds, the kind we could use. They are planning for the future: making room for uncounted future generations of Diaboli, while we are being restricted to one corner of the Galaxy, and fighting ourselves to death. In a thousand years we will be their slaves; in ten thousand we will be extinct. Oh, yes, they are the common enemy. Mankind knows that. You will find that out sooner than you think, perhaps.”

The Secretary said, “Your party members speak a great deal of ancient Greece of the preatomic age. They tell us that the Greeks were a marvelous people, the most culturally advanced of their time, perhaps of all times. They set mankind on the road it has never left entirely. They had only one flaw. They could not unite. They were conquered and eventually died out. And we follow in their footsteps now, eh?”

“You have learned your lesson well, Jeff.”

“But have you, Dick?”

What do you mean?”

“Did the Greeks have no common enemy against whom they could unite?”

Altmayer was silent.

Stock said, “The Greeks fought Persia, their great common enemy. Was it not a fact that a good proportion of the Greek states fought on the Persian side?”

Altmayer said finally, "Yes. Because they thought Persian victory was inevitable and they wanted to be on the winning side.”

“Human beings haven’t changed, Dick. Why do you suppose the Diaboli are here? What is it we are discussing?”

“I am not a member of the government.”

“No,” said Stock, savagely, “but I am. The Vegan League has allied itself with the Diaboli.”

“I don’t believe you. It can’t be.”

“It can be and is. The Diaboli have agreed to supply them with five hundred ships at any time they happen to be at war with Earth. In return, Vega abandons all claims to the Nigellian star cluster. So if you had really assassinated the Diaboh’, it would have been war, but with half of humanity probably fighting on the side of your so-called common enemy. We are trying to prevent that.”

Altmayer said slowly, “I am ready for trial. Or am I to be executed without one?”

Stock said, “You are still foolish. If we shoot you, Dick, we make a martyr. If we keep you alive and shoot only your subordinates, you will be suspected of having turned state’s evidence. As a presumed traitor, you will be quite harmless in the future.”

And so, on September 5th, 2788, Richard Sayama Altmayer, after the briefest of secret trials, was sentenced to five years in prison. He served his full term. The year he emerged from prison, Geoffrey Stock was elected Coordinator of Earth.

3—December 21, 2800

Simon Devoire was not at ease. He was a little man, with sandy hair and a freckled, ruddy face. He said, “I’m sorry I agreed to see you, Altmayer. It won’t do you any good. It might do me harm.”

Altmayer said, “I am an old man. I won’t hurt you.” And he was indeed a very old man somehow. The turn of the century found his years at two thirds of a century, but he was older than that, older inside and older outside. His clothes were too big for him, as if he were shrinking away inside them. Only his nose had not aged; it was still the thin, aristocratic, high-beaked Altmayer nose.

Devoire said, “It’s not you I’m afraid of.”

“Why not? Perhaps you think I betrayed the men of ’88.”

“No, of course not. No man of sense believes that you did. But the days of the Federalists are over, Altmayer.”

Altmayer tried to smile. He felt a little hungry; he hadn’t eaten that day—no time for food. Was the day of the Federalists over? It might seem so to others. The movement had died on a wave of ridicule. A conspiracy that fails, a ’lost cause’, is often romantic. It is remembered and draws adherents for generations, if the loss is at least a dignified one. But to shoot at living creatures and find the mark to be robots; to be outmaneuvered and outfoxed; to be made ridiculous—that is deadly. It is deadlier than treason, wrong, and sin. Not many had believed, Altmayer had bargained for his life by betraying his associates, but the universal laughter killed Federalism as effectively as though they had.

But Altmayer had remained stolidly stubborn under it all. He said, “The day of the Federalists will never be over, while the human race lives.”

“Words,” said Devoire impatiently. “They meant more to me when I was younger. I am a little tired now.”

“Simon, I need access to the subetheric system.”

Devoire’s face hardened. He said, “And you thought of me. I’m sorry, Altmayer, but I can’t let you use my broadcasts-for your own purposes.”

“You were a Federalist once.”

“Don’t rely on that,” said Devoire. “That’s in the past. Now I am—nothing. I am a Devoirist, I suppose. I want to live.”

“Even if it is under the feet of the Diaboli? Do you want to live when they are willing; die when they are ready?”

“Words!”

“Do you approve of the all-Galactic conference?”

Devoire reddened past his usual pink level. He gave the sudden impression of a man with too much blood for his body. He said smolderingly, “Well, why not? What does it matter how we go about establishing the Federation of Man? If you’re still a Federalist, what have you to object to in a united humanity?”

“United under the Diaboli?”

“What’s the difference? Humanity can’t unite by itself. Let us be driven to it, as long as the fact is accomplished. I am sick of it all, Altmayer, sick of all our stupid history. I’m tired of trying to be an idealist with nothing to be idealistic over. Human beings are human beings and that’s the nasty part of it. Maybe we’ve got to be whipped into line. If so, I’m perfectly willing to let the Diaboli do the whipping.”

Altmayer said gently, “You’re very folish, Devoire. It won’t be a real union, you know that. The Diaboli called this conference so that they might act as umpires on all current interhuman disputes to their own advantage, and remain the supreme court of judgment over us hereafter. You know they have no intention of establishing a real central human government. It will only be a sort of inter-locking directorate; each human government will conduct its own affairs as before and pull in various directions as before. It is simply that we will grow accustomed to running to the Diaboli with our little problems.”

“How do you know that will be the result?”

“Do you seriously think any other result is possible?”

Devoire chewed at his lower lip, “Maybe not!”

“Then see through a pane of glass, Simon. Any true independence we now have will be lost.”

“A lot of good this independence has ever done us.—Besides, what’s the use? We can’t stop this thing. Coordinator Stock is probably no keener on the conference than you are, but that doesn’t help him. If Earth doesn’t attend, the union will be formed without us, and then we will face war with the rest of humanity and the Diaboli. And that goes for any other government that wants to back out.”

“What if all the governments back out? Wouldn’t the conference break up completely?”

“Have you ever known all the human governments to do anything together? You never learn, Altmayer.”

“There are new facts involved.”

“Such as? I know I am foolish for asking, but go ahead.”

Altmayer said, “For twenty years most of the Galaxy has been shut to human ships. You know that. None of us has the slightest notion of what goes on within the Diaboli sphere of influence. And yet some human colonies exist within that sphere.”

“So?”

“So occasionally, human beings escape into the small portion of the Galaxy that remains human and free. The government of Earth receives reports; reports which they don’t dare make public. But not all officials of the government can stand the cowardice involved in such actions forever. One of them has been to see me. I can’t tell you which one, of course—So I have documents, Devoire, official, reliable, and true.”

Devoire shrugged, “About what?” He turned the desk chronometer rather ostentatiously so that Altmayer could see its gleaming metal face on which the red, glowing figures stood out sharply. They read 22:31, and even as it was turned, the 1 faded and the new glow of a 2 appeared.

Altmayer said, “There is a planet called by its colonists Chu Hsi. It did not have a large population; two million, perhaps. Fifteen years ago the Diaboli occupied worlds on various sides of it; and in all those fifteen years, no human ship ever landed on the planet. Last year the Diaboli themselves landed. They brought with them huge freight ships filled with sodium sulfate and bacterial cultures that are native to their own worlds.”

“What?—You can’t make me believe it.”

“Try,” said Altmayer, ironically. “It is not difficult. Sodium sulfate will dissolve in the oceans of any world. In a sulfate ocean, their bacteria will grow, multiply, and produce hydrogen sulfide in tremendous quantities which will fill the oceans and the atmosphere. They can then introduce their plants and animals and eventually themselves. Another planet will be suitable for Diaboli life—and unsuitable for any human. It would take time, surely, but the Diaboli have time. They are a united people and ...”

“Now, look,” Devoire waved his hand in disgust, “that just doesn’t hold water. The Diaboli have more worlds than they know what to do with.”

“For their present purposes, yes, but the Diaboli are creatures that look toward the future. Their birth rate is high and eventually they will fill the Galaxy. And how much better off they would be if they were the only intelligence in the universe.”

“But it’s impossible on purely physical grounds. Do you know how many millions of tons of sodium it would take to fill up the oceans to their requirements?”

“Obviously a planetary supply.”

“Well, then, do you suppose they would strip one of their own worlds to create a new one? Where is the gain?”

“Simon, Simon, there are millions of planets in the Galaxy which through atmospheric conditions, temperature, or gravity are forever uninhabitable either to humans or to Diaboli. Many of these are quite adequately rich in sulfur.”

Devoire considered, “What about the human beings on the planet?”

“On Chu Hsi? Euthanasia—except for the few who escaped in time. Painless I suppose. The Diaboli are not needlessly cruel, merely efficient.”

Altmayer waited. Devoire’s fist clenched and unclenched.

Altmayer said, “Publish this news. Spread it out on the interstellar subetheric web. Broadcast the documents to the reception centers on the various worlds. You can do it, and when you do, the all-Galactic conference will fall apart.”

Devoire’s chair tilted forward. He stood up. “Where’s your proof?”

“Will you do it?”

“I want to see your proof.”

Altmayer smiled, “Come with me.”

They were waiting for him when he came back to the furnished room he was living in. He didn’t notice them at first. He was completely unaware of the small vehicle that followed him at a slow pace and a prudent distance. He walked with his head bent, calculating the length of time it would take for Devoire to put the information through the reaches of Space; how long it would take for the receiving stations on Vega and Santanni and Centaurus to blast out the news; how long it would take to spread it over the entire Galaxy. And in this way he passed, unheeding, between the two plain-clothes men who flanked the entrance of the rooming house,

It was only when he opened the door to his own room that he stopped and turned to leave but the plain-clothes men were behind him now. He made no attempt at violent escape. He entered the room instead and sat down, feeling so old. He thought ’ feverishly, I need only hold them off for an hour and ten minutes.

The man who occupied the darkness reached up and flicked the switch that allowed the wall lights to operate. In the soft wall glow, the man’s round face and balding gray-fringed head were startlingly clear.

Altmayer said gently, “I am honored with a visit by the Coordinator himself.”

And Stock said, “We are old friends, you and I, Dick. We meet every once in a while.”

Altmayer did not answer.

Stock said, “You have certain government papers in your possession, Dick.”

Altmayer said, “If you think so, Jeff, you’ll have to find them.”

Stock rose wearily to his feet. “No heroics, Dick. Let me tell you what those papers contained. They were circumstantial reports of the sulfation of the planet, Chu Hsi. Isn’t that true?”

Altmayer looked at the clock.

Stock said. “If you are planning to delay us, to angle us as though we were fish, you will be disappointed. We know where you’ve been, we know Devoire has the papers, we know exactly what’s he planning to do with them.”

Altmayer stiffened. The thin parchment of his cheeks trembled. He said, “How long have you known?”

“As long as’you have, Dick. You are a very predictable man. It is the very reason we decided to use you. Do you suppose the Recorder would really come to see you as he did, without our knowledge?”

“I don’t understand.”

Stock said, “The Government of Earth, Dick, is not anxious that the all-Galactic conference be continued. However, we are not Federalists; we know humanity for what it is. What do you suppose would happen if the rest of the Galaxy discovered that the Diaboli were in the process of changing a salt-oxygen world into a sulfate-sulfide one?

“No, don’t answer. You are Dick Altmayer and I’m sure you’d tell me that with one fiery burst of indignation, they’d abandon the conference, join together in a loving and brotherly union, throw themselves at the Diaboli, and overwhelm them.”

Stock paused such a long time that for a moment it might have seemed he would say no more. Then he continued in half a whisper, “Nonsense. The other worlds would say that the Government of Earth for purposes of its own had initiated a fraud, had forged documents in a deliberate attempt to disrupt the conference. The Diaboli would deny everything, and most of the human worlds would find it to their interests to believe the denial. They would concentrate on the iniquities of Earth and forget about the iniquities of, the Diaboli. So you see, we could sponsor no such expose.”

Altmayer felt drained, futile. “Then you will stop Devoire. It is always that you are so sure of failure beforehand; that you believe the worst of your fellow man—”

"Wait! I said nothing of stopping Devoire. I said only that the government could not sponsor such an expose and we will not. But the expose will take place just the same, except that afterward we will arrest Devoire and yourself and denounce the whole thing as vehemently as will the Diaboli. The whole affair would then be changed. The Government of Earth will have dissociated itself from the claims. It will then seem to the rest of the human government that for our own selfish purposes we are trying to hide the actions of the Diaboli, that we have, perhaps, a special understanding with them. They will fear that special understanding and unite against us. But then to be against us will mean that they are also against the Diaboli. They will insist on believing the expose to be the truth, the documents to be real—and the conference will break up.”

“It will mean war again,” said Altmayer hopelessly, “and not against the real enemy. It will mean fighting among the humans and a victory all the greater for the Diaboli when it is all over.”

“No war,” said Stock. “No government will attack Earth with the Diaboli on our side. The other governments will merely draw away from us and grind a permanent anti-Diaboli bias into their propaganda. Later, if there should be war between ourselves and the Diaboli, the other governments will at least remain neutral.”

He looks very old, thought Altmayer. We are all old, dying men. Aloud, he said, “Why would you expect the Diaboli to back Earth? You may fool the rest of mankind by pretending to attempt suppression of the facts concerning the planet Chu Hsi, but you won’t fool the Diaboli. They won’t for a moment believe Earth to be sincere in its claim that it believes the documents to be forgeries.”

“Ah, but they will.” Geoffrey Stock stood up, “You see, the documents are forgeries. The Diaboli may be planning sulfation of planets in the future, but to our knowledge, they have not tried it yet.”

On December 21, 2800, Richard Sayama Altmayer entered prison for the third and last time. There was no trial, no definite sentence, and scarcely a real imprisonment in the literal sense of the word. His movements were confined and only a few officials were allowed to communicate with him, but otherwise his comforts were looked to assiduously. He had no access to news, of course, so that he was not aware that in the second year of this third imprisonment of his, the war between Earth and the Diaboli opened with the surprise attack near Sirius by an Earth squadron upon certain ships of the Diaboli navy.

In 2802, Geoffrey Stock came to visit Altmayer in his confinement. Altmayer rose in surprise to greet him.

“You’re looking well, Dick,” Stock said.

He himself was not. His complexion had grayed. He still wore his naval captain’s uniform, but his body stooped slightly within it. He was to die within the year, a fact of which he was not completely unaware. It did not bother him much. He thought repeatedly, I have lived the years I’ve had to live.

Altmayer, who looked the older of the two, had yet more than nine years to live. He said, “An unexpected pleasure, Jeff, but this time you can’t have come to imprison me. I’m in prison already."

“I’ve come to set you free, if you would like.”

“For what purpose, Jeff? Surely you have a purpose? A clever way of using me?”

Stock’s smile was merely a momentary twitch. He said, “A way of using you, truly, but this time you will approve. We are at war.”

With whom?” Altmayer was startled.

"With the Diaboli. We have been at war for six months.”

Altmayer brought his hands together, thin fingers interlacing nervously, “I’ve heard nothing of this.”

“I know.” The Coordinator clasped his hands behind his back and was distantly surprised to find that they were trembling. He said, “It’s been a long journey for the two of us, Dick. We’ve had the same goal, you and I—No, let me speak. I’ve often wanted to explain my point of view to you, but you would never have understood. You weren’t the kind of man to understand, until I had the results for you.—I was twenty-five when I first visited a Diaboli world, Dick. I knew then it was either they or we.”

“I said so,” whispered Altmayer, “from the first.”

“Merely saying so was not enough. You wanted to force the human governments to unite against them and that notion was politically unrealistic and completely impossible. It wasn’t even desirable. Humans are not Diaboli. Among the Diaboli, individual consciousness is low, almost nonexistent. Ours is almost overpowering. They have no such thing as politics; we have nothing else. They can never disagree, can have nothing ,but a single government. We can never agree; if we had a single island to live on, we would split it in three.

“But our very disagreements are our strength! Your Federalist party used to speak of ancient Greece a great deal once. Do you remember? But your people always missed the point. To be sure, Greece could never unite and was therefore ultimately conquered. But even in her state of disunion, she defeated the gigantic Persian Empire. Why?

“I would like to point out that the Greek city-states over centuries had fought with one another. They were forced to specialize in things military to an extent far beyond the Persians. Even the Persians themselves realized that, and in the last century of their imperial existence, Greek mercenaries formed the most valued parts of their armies.

“The same might be said of the small nation-states of pre-atornic Europe, which in centuries of fighting had advanced their military arts to the point where they could overcome and hold for two hundred years the comparatively gigantic empires of Asia.

“So it is with us. The Diaboli, with vast extents of galactic space, have never fought a war. Their military machine is massive, but untried. In fifty years, only such advances have been made by them as they have been able to copy from the various human navies. Humanity, on the other hand, has competed ferociously in warfare. Each government has raced to keep ahead of its neighbors in military science. They’ve had to! It was our own disunion that made the terrible race for survival necessary, so that in the end almost any one of us was a match for all the Diaboli, provided only that none of us would fight on their side in a general war.

“It was toward the prevention of such a development that all of Earth’s diplomacy had been aimed. Until it was certain that in a war between Earth and the Diaboli, the rest of humanity would be at least neutral, there could be no war, and no union of human governments could be allowed, since the race for military perfection must continue. Once we were sure of neutrality, through the hoax that broke up the conference two years ago, we sought the war, and now we have it.”

Altmayer, through all this, might have been frozen. It was a long time before he could say anything.

Finally, “What if the Diaboli are victorious after all?”

Stock said, “They aren’t. Two weeks ago, the main fleets joined action and theirs was annihilated with practically no loss to ourselves, although we were greatly outnumbered. We might have been fighting unarmed ships. We had stronger weapons of greater range and more accurate sighting. We had three times their effective speed since we had antiacceleration devices which they lacked. Since the battle a dozen of the other human governments have decided to join the winning side and have declared war on the Diaboli. Yesterday the Diaboli requested that negotiations for an armistice be opened. The war is practically over; and henceforward the Diaboli will be confined to their original planets with only such future expansions as we permit.”

Altmayer murmured incoherently.

Stock said, “And now union becomes necessary. After the defeat of Persia by the Greek city-states, they were ruined because of their continued wars among themselves, so that first Macedon and then Rome conquered them. After Europe colonized the Americas, cut up Africa, and conquered Asia, a series of continued European wars led to European ruin.

“Disunion until conquest; union thereafter! But now union is easy. Let one subdivision succeed by itself and the rest will clamor to become part of that success. The ancient writer, Toynbee, first pointed out this difference between what he called a "dominant minority" and a "creative minority".

“We are a creative minority now. In an almost spontaneous gesture, various human governments have suggested the formation of a United Worlds organization. Over seventy governments are willing to attend the first sessions in order to draw up a Charter of Federation. The others will join later, I am sure. We would like you to be one of the delegates from Earth, Dick.”

Altmayer found his eyes flooding, “I—I don’t understand your purpose. Is this all true?”

“It is all exactly as I say. You were a voice in the wilderness, Dick, crying for union. Your words will carry much weight. What did you once say: "In a good cause, there are no failures".”

“No!” said Altmayer, with sudden energy. “It seems your cause was the good one.”

Stock’s face was hard and devoid of emotion, "You were always a misunderstander of human nature, Dick. When the United Worlds is a reality and when generations of men and women look back to these days of war through their centuries of unbroken peace, they will have forgotten the purpose of my methods. To them they will represent war and death. Your calls for union, your idealism, will be remembered forever.”

He turned away and Altmayer barely caught his last words: ’And when they build their statues, they will build none for me.”