



CLASSICS TO GO

**SALINE
SOLUTION**
AND TWO MORE STORIES
KEITH LAUMER

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Saline Solution

**Blast you, Retief! Your violent ways
are the disgrace of Earth's diplomatic
corps—but your salty jokes are worse!**

I

Consul-General Magnan gingerly fingered the heavily rubber-banded sheaf of dog-eared documents. "I haven't rushed into precipitate action on this claim, Retief," he said. "The Consulate has grave responsibilities here in the Belt. One must weigh all aspects of the situation, consider the ramifications. What consequences would arise from a grant of minerals rights on the planetoid to this claimant?"

"The claim looked all right to me," Retief said. "Seventeen copies with attachments. Why not process it? You've had it on your desk for a week."

Magnan's eyebrows went up. "You've a personal interest in this claim, Retief?"

"Every day you wait is costing them money. That hulk they use for an ore-carrier is in a parking orbit piling up demurrage."

"I see you've become emotionally involved in the affairs of a group of obscure miners. You haven't yet learned the true diplomat's happy faculty of non-identification with specifics—or should I say identification with non-specifics?"

"They're not a wealthy outfit, you know. In fact, I understand this claim is their sole asset—unless you want to count the ore-carrier."

"The Consulate is not concerned with the internal financial problems of the Sam's Last Chance Number Nine Mining Company."

"Careful," Retief said. "You almost identified yourself with a specific that time."

"Hardly, my dear Retief," Magnan said blandly. "The implication is mightier than the affidavit. You should study the records of the giants of galactic diplomacy: Crodfoller, Passwyn, Spradley, Nitworth, Sternwheeler, Rumpwhistle. The roll-call of those names rings like the majestic tread of ... of...."

"Dinosaurs?" Retief suggested.

"An apt simile," Magnan nodded. "Those mighty figures, those armored hides—"

"Those tiny brains—"

Magnan smiled sadly. "I see you're indulging your penchant for distorted facetiae. Perhaps one day you'll learn their true worth."

"I already have my suspicions."

The intercom chimed. Miss Gumble's features appeared on the desk screen.

"Mr. Leatherwell to see you, Mr. Magnan. He has no appointment—"

Magnan's eyebrows went up. "Send Mr. Leatherwell right in." He looked at Retief. "I had no idea Leatherwell was planning a call. I wonder what he's after?" Magnan looked anxious. "He's an important figure in Belt minerals circles. It's important to avoid arousing antagonism, while maintaining non-commitment. You may as well stay. You might pick up some valuable pointers technique-wise."

The door swung wide. Leatherwell strode into the room, his massive paunch buckled into fashionable vests of turquoise velvet and hung with the latest in fluorescent watch charms. He extended a large palm and pumped Magnan's flaccid arm vigorously.

"Ah, there, Mr. Consul-General. Good of you to receive me." He wiped his hand absently on his thigh, eyeing Retief questioningly.

"Mr. Retief, my Vice-Consul and Minerals Officer," Magnan said. "Do take a chair, Mr. Leatherwell. In what capacity can I serve today?"

"I am here, gentlemen," Leatherwell said, putting an immense yellow briefcase on Magnan's desk and settling himself in a power rocker, "on behalf of my company, General Minerals. General Minerals has long been aware, gentlemen, of the austere conditions obtaining here in the Belt, to which public servants like yourselves are subjected." Leatherwell bobbed with the pitch of the rocker, smiling complacently at Magnan. "General Minerals is more than a great industrial combine. It is an organization with a heart." Leatherwell reached for his breast pocket, missed, tried again. "How do you turn this damned thing off?" he growled.

Magnan half-rose, peering over Leatherwell's briefcase. "The switch just there—on the arm."

The executive fumbled. There was a *click*, and the chair subsided with a sigh of compressed air.

"That's better." Leatherwell drew out a long slip of blue paper.

"To alleviate the boredom and brighten the lives of that hardy group of Terrestrials laboring here on Ceres to bring free enterprise to the Belt, General Minerals is presenting to the Consulate—on their behalf—one hundred thousand credits for the construction of a Joy Center, to be equipped

with the latest and finest in recreational equipment, including a Gourmet Model C banquet synthesizer, a forty-foot sublimation chamber, a five thousand tape library—with a number of choice items unobtainable in Boston—a twenty-foot Tri-D tank and other amenities too numerous to mention." Leatherwell leaned back, beaming expectantly.

"Why, Mr. Leatherwell. We're overwhelmed, of course." Magnan smiled dazedly past the briefcase. "But I wonder if it's quite proper...."

"The gift is to the people, Mr. Consul. You merely accept on their behalf."

"I wonder if General Minerals realizes that the hardy Terrestrials laboring on Ceres are limited to the Consular staff?" Retief said. "And the staff consists of Mr. Magnan, Miss Gumble and myself."

"Mr. Leatherwell is hardly interested in these details, Retief," Magnan cut in. "A public-spirited offer indeed, sir. As Terrestrial Consul—and on behalf of all Terrestrials here in the Belt—I accept with a humble awareness of—"

"Now, there was one other little matter." Leatherwell leaned forward to open the briefcase, glancing over Magnan's littered desktop. He extracted a bundle of papers, dropped them on the desk, then drew out a heavy document and passed it across to Magnan.

"Just a routine claim. I'd like to see it rushed through, as we have in mind some loading operations in the vicinity next week."

"Certainly Mr. Leatherwell."

Magnan glanced at the papers, paused to read. He looked up. "Ah—"

"Something the matter, Mr. Consul?" Leatherwell demanded.

"It's just that—ah—I seem to recall—as a matter of fact...." Magnan looked at Retief. Retief took the papers, looked over the top sheet.

"95739-A. Sorry, Mr. Leatherwell. General Minerals has been anticipated. We're processing a prior claim."

"Prior claim?" Leatherwell barked. "You've issued the grant?"

"Oh, no indeed, Mr. Leatherwell," Magnan replied quickly. "The claim hasn't yet been processed."

"Then there's no difficulty," Leatherwell boomed. He glanced at his finger watch. "If you don't mind, I'll wait and take the grant along with me. I assume it will only take a minute or two to sign it and affix seals and so on?"

"The other claim was filed a full week ago—" Retief started.

"Bah!" Leatherwell waved a hand impatiently. "These details can be arranged." He fixed an eye on Magnan. "I'm sure all of us here understand that it's in the public interest that minerals properties go to responsible firms, with adequate capital for proper development."

"Why, ah," Magnan said.

"The Sam's Last Chance Number Nine Mining Company is a duly chartered firm. Their claim is valid."

"I know that hole-in-corner concern," Leatherwell snapped. "Mere irresponsible opportunists. General Minerals has spent millions—millions, I say—of the stockholders' funds in minerals explorations. Are they to be balked in realizing a fair return on their investment because these ... these ... adventures have stumbled on a deposit? Not that the property is of any real value, of course," he added. "Quite an ordinary bit of rock. But General Minerals would find it convenient to consolidate its holdings."

"There are plenty of other rocks floating around in the Belt. Why not—"

"One moment, Retief," Magnan cut in. He looked across the desk at his junior with a severe expression. "As Consul-General, I'm quite capable of determining the relative merits of claims. As Mr. Leatherwell has pointed out, it's in the public interest to consider the question in depth."

Leatherwell cleared his throat. "I might state at this time that General Minerals is prepared to be generous in dealing with these interlopers. I believe we would be prepared to go so far as to offer them free title to certain GM holdings in exchange for their release of any alleged rights to the property in question—merely to simplify matters, of course."

"That seems more than fair to me," Magnan glowed.

"The Sam's people have a clear priority," Retief said. "I logged the claim in last Friday."

"They have far from a clear title." Leatherwell snapped. "And I can assure you GM will contest their claim, if need be, to the Supreme Court!"

"Just what holdings did you have in mind offering them, Mr. Leatherwell?" Magnan asked nervously.

Leatherwell reached into his briefcase and drew out a paper.

"2645-P," he read. "A quite massive body. Crustal material, I imagine. It should satisfy these squatters' desire to own real estate in the Belt."

"I'll make a note of that," Magnan said, reaching for a pad.

"That's a Bona Fide offer, Mr. Leatherwell?" Retief asked.

"Certainly!"

"I'll record it as such," Magnan said, scribbling.

"And who knows?" Leatherwell said. "It may turn out to contain some surprisingly rich finds."

"And if they won't accept it?" Retief asked.

"Then I daresay General Minerals will find a remedy in the courts, sir!"

"Oh, I hardly think that will be necessary," Magnan said.

"Then there's another routine matter," Leatherwell said. He passed a second document across to Magnan. "GM is requesting an injunction to restrain these same parties from aggravated trespass. I'd appreciate it if you'd push it through at once. There's a matter of a load of illegally obtained ore involved, as well."

"Certainly Mr. Leatherwell. I'll see to it myself."

"No need for that. The papers are all drawn up. Our legal department will vouch for their correctness. Just sign here." Leatherwell spread out the paper and handed Magnan a pen.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to read that over first?" Retief said.

Leatherwell frowned impatiently. "You'll have adequate time to familiarize yourself with the details later, Retief," Magnan snapped, taking the pen. "No need to waste Mr. Leatherwell's valuable time." He scratched a signature on the paper.

Leatherwell rose, gathered up his papers from Magnan's desk, dumped them into the briefcase. "Riff-raff, of course. Their kind has no business in the Belt."

Retief rose, crossed to the desk, and held out a hand. "I believe you gathered in an official document along with your own, Mr. Leatherwell. By error, of course."