CLASSICS TO GO CULTURAL EXCHANCE AND TWO HORE STORIES

KEITH LAUMER

Cultural Exchange

And two more stories

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Cultural Exchange

It was a simple student exchange—but Retief gave them more of an education than they expected!

I

Second Secretary Magnan took his green-lined cape and orange-feathered beret from the clothes tree. "I'm off now, Retief," he said. "I hope you'll manage the administrative routine during my absence without any unfortunate incidents."

"That seems a modest enough hope," Retief said. "I'll try to live up to it."

"I don't appreciate frivolity with reference to this Division," Magnan said testily. "When I first came here, the Manpower Utilization Directorate, Division of Libraries and Education was a shambles. I fancy I've made MUDDLE what it is today. Frankly, I question the wisdom of placing you in charge of such a sensitive desk, even for two weeks. But remember. Yours is purely a rubber-stamp function."

"In that case, let's leave it to Miss Furkle. I'll take a couple of weeks off myself. With her poundage, she could bring plenty of pressure to bear."

"I assume you jest, Retief," Magnan said sadly. "I should expect even you to appreciate that Bogan participation in the Exchange Program may be the first step toward sublimation of their aggressions into more cultivated channels."

"I see they're sending two thousand students to d'Land," Retief said, glancing at the Memo for Record. "That's a sizable sublimation."

Magnan nodded. "The Bogans have launched no less than four military campaigns in the last two decades. They're known as the Hoodlums of the Nicodemean Cluster. Now, perhaps, we shall see them breaking that precedent and entering into the cultural life of the Galaxy."

"Breaking and entering," Retief said. "You may have something there. But I'm wondering what they'll study on d'Land. That's an industrial world of the poor but honest variety."

"Academic details are the affair of the students and their professors," Magnan said. "Our function is merely to bring them together. See that you don't antagonize the Bogan representative. This will be an excellent opportunity for you to practice your diplomatic restraint—not your strong point, I'm sure you'll agree."

A buzzer sounded. Retief punched a button. "What is it, Miss Furkle?"

"That—bucolic person from Lovenbroy is here again." On the small desk screen, Miss Furkle's meaty features were compressed in disapproval.

"This fellow's a confounded pest. I'll leave him to you, Retief," Magnan said. "Tell him something. Get rid of him. And remember: here at Corps HQ, all eyes are upon you."

"If I'd thought of that, I'd have worn my other suit," Retief said.

Magnan snorted and passed from view. Retief punched Miss Furkle's button. "Send the bucolic person in."

A tall broad man with bronze skin and gray hair, wearing tight trousers of heavy cloth, a loose shirt open at the neck and a short jacket, stepped into the room. He had a bundle under his arm. He paused at sight of Retief, looked him over momentarily, then advanced and held out his hand. Retief took it. For a moment the two big men stood, face to face. The newcomer's jaw muscles knotted. Then he winced.

Retief dropped his hand and motioned to a chair.

"That's nice knuckle work, mister," the stranger said, massaging his hand. "First time anybody ever did that to me. My fault though. I started it, I guess." He grinned and sat down.

"What can I do for you?" Retief said.

"You work for this Culture bunch, do you? Funny. I thought they were all ribbon-counter boys. Never mind. I'm Hank Arapoulous. I'm a farmer. What I wanted to see you about was—" He shifted in his chair. "Well, out on Lovenbroy we've got a serious problem. The wine crop is just about ready. We start picking in another two, three months. Now I don't know if you're familiar with the Bacchus vines we grow...?"

"No," Retief said. "Have a cigar?" He pushed a box across the desk. Arapoulous took one. "Bacchus vines are an unusual crop," he said, puffing the cigar alight. "Only mature every twelve years. In between, the vines don't need a lot of attention, so our time's mostly our own. We like to farm, though. Spend a lot of time developing new forms. Apples the size of a melon—and sweet—"

"Sounds very pleasant," Retief said. "Where does the Libraries and Education Division come in?"

Arapoulous leaned forward. "We go in pretty heavy for the arts. Folks can't spend all their time hybridizing plants.

We've turned all the land area we've got into parks and farms. Course, we left some sizable forest areas for hunting and such. Lovenbroy's a nice place, Mr. Retief."

"It sounds like it, Mr. Arapoulous. Just what—"

"Call me Hank. We've got long seasons back home. Five of 'em. Our year's about eighteen Terry months. Cold as hell in winter; eccentric orbit, you know. Blue-black sky, stars visible all day. We do mostly painting and sculpture in the winter. Then Spring; still plenty cold. Lots of skiing, bobsledding, ice skating; and it's the season for woodworkers. Our furniture—"

"I've seen some of your furniture," Retief said. "Beautiful work."

Arapoulous nodded. "All local timbers too. Lots of metals in our soil and those sulphates give the woods some color, I'll tell you. Then comes the Monsoon. Rain—it comes down in sheets. But the sun's getting closer. Shines all the time. Ever seen it pouring rain in the sunshine? That's the musicwriting season. Then summer. Summer's hot. We stay inside in the daytime and have beach parties all night. Lots of beach on Lovenbroy; we're mostly islands. That's the drama and symphony time. The theatres are set up on the sand, or anchored off-shore. You have the music and the surf and the bonfires and stars—we're close to the center of a globular cluster, you know...."

"You say it's time now for the wine crop?"

"That's right. Autumn's our harvest season. Most years we have just the ordinary crops. Fruit, grain, that kind of thing; getting it in doesn't take long. We spend most of the time on architecture, getting new places ready for the winter or remodeling the older ones. We spend a lot of time in our houses. We like to have them comfortable. But this year's different. This is Wine Year." Arapoulous puffed on his cigar, looked worriedly at Retief. "Our wine crop is our big money crop," he said. "We make enough to keep us going. But this year...."

"The crop isn't panning out?"

"Oh, the crop's fine. One of the best I can remember. Course, I'm only twenty-eight; I can't remember but two other harvests. The problem's not the crop."

"Have you lost your markets? That sounds like a matter for the Commercial—"

"Lost our markets? Mister, nobody that ever tasted our wines ever settled for anything else!"

"It sounds like I've been missing something," said Retief. "I'll have to try them some time."

Arapoulous put his bundle on the desk, pulled off the wrappings. "No time like the present," he said.

Retief looked at the two squat bottles, one green, one amber, both dusty, with faded labels, and blackened corks secured by wire.

"Drinking on duty is frowned on in the Corps, Mr. Arapoulous," he said.

"This isn't *drinking*. It's just wine." Arapoulous pulled the wire retainer loose, thumbed the cork. It rose slowly, then popped in the air. Arapoulous caught it. Aromatic fumes wafted from the bottle. "Besides, my feelings would be hurt if you didn't join me." He winked.

Retief took two thin-walled glasses from a table beside the desk. "Come to think of it, we also have to be careful about violating quaint native customs."

Arapoulous filled the glasses. Retief picked one up, sniffed the deep rust-colored fluid, tasted it, then took a healthy swallow. He looked at Arapoulous thoughtfully. "Hmmm. It tastes like salted pecans, with an undercurrent of crusted port."

"Don't try to describe it, Mr. Retief," Arapoulous said. He took a mouthful of wine, swished it around his teeth, swallowed. "It's Bacchus wine, that's all. Nothing like it in the Galaxy." He pushed the second bottle toward Retief. "The custom back home is to alternate red wine and black."

Retief put aside his cigar, pulled the wires loose, nudged the cork, caught it as it popped up.

"Bad luck if you miss the cork," Arapoulous said, nodding. "You probably never heard about the trouble we had on Lovenbroy a few years back?"

"Can't say that I did, Hank." Retief poured the black wine into two fresh glasses. "Here's to the harvest."

"We've got plenty of minerals on Lovenbroy," Arapoulous said, swallowing wine. "But we don't plan to wreck the landscape mining 'em. We like to farm. About ten years back some neighbors of ours landed a force. They figured they knew better what to do with our minerals than we did. Wanted to strip-mine, smelt ore. We convinced 'em otherwise. But it took a year, and we lost a lot of men."

"That's too bad," Retief said. "I'd say this one tastes more like roast beef and popcorn over a Riesling base."

"It put us in a bad spot," Arapoulous went on. "We had to borrow money from a world called Croanie. Mortgaged our crops. Had to start exporting art work too. Plenty of buyers, but it's not the same when you're doing it for strangers."

"Say, this business of alternating drinks is the real McCoy," Retief said. "What's the problem? Croanie about to foreclose?"

"Well, the loan's due. The wine crop would put us in the clear. But we need harvest hands. Picking Bacchus grapes

isn't a job you can turn over to machinery—and anyway we wouldn't if we could. Vintage season is the high point of living on Lovenbroy. Everybody joins in. First, there's the picking in the fields. Miles and miles of vineyards covering the mountain sides, and crowding the river banks, with gardens here and there. Big vines, eight feet high, loaded with fruit, and deep grass growing between. The winecarriers keep on the run, bringing wine to the pickers. There's prizes for the biggest day's output, bets on who can fill the most baskets in an hour.... The sun's high and bright, and it's just cool enough to give you plenty of energy. Come nightfall, the tables are set up in the garden plots, and the feast is laid on: roast turkeys, beef, hams, all kinds of fowl. Big salads. Plenty of fruit. Fresh-baked bread ... and wine, plenty of wine. The cooking's done by a different crew each night in each garden, and there's prizes for the best crews.

"Then the wine-making. We still tramp out the vintage. That's mostly for the young folks but anybody's welcome. That's when things start to get loosened up. Matter of fact, pretty near half our young-uns are born after a vintage. All bets are off then. It keeps a fellow on his toes though. Ever tried to hold onto a gal wearing nothing but a layer of grape juice?"

"Never did," Retief said. "You say most of the children are born after a vintage. That would make them only twelve years old by the time—"

"Oh, that's Lovenbroy years; they'd be eighteen, Terry reckoning."

"I was thinking you looked a little mature for twenty-eight," Retief said.

"Forty-two, Terry years," Arapoulous said. "But this year it looks bad. We've got a bumper crop—and we're shorthanded. If we don't get a big vintage, Croanie steps in. Lord knows what they'll do to the land. Then next vintage time, with them holding half our grape acreage—"

"You hocked the vineyards?"

"Yep. Pretty dumb, huh? But we figured twelve years was a long time."

"On the whole," Retief said, "I think I prefer the black. But the red is hard to beat...."

"What we figured was, maybe you Culture boys could help us out. A loan to see us through the vintage, enough to hire extra hands. Then we'd repay it in sculpture, painting, furniture—"

"Sorry, Hank. All we do here is work out itineraries for traveling side-shows, that kind of thing. Now, if you needed a troop of Groaci nose-flute players—"

"Can they pick grapes?"

"Nope. Anyway, they can't stand the daylight. Have you talked this over with the Labor Office?"

"Sure did. They said they'd fix us up with all the electronics specialists and computer programmers we wanted—but no field hands. Said it was what they classified as menial drudgery; you'd have thought I was trying to buy slaves."

The buzzer sounded. Miss Furkle's features appeared on the desk screen.

"You're due at the Intergroup Council in five minutes," she said. "Then afterwards, there are the Bogan students to meet."

"Thanks." Retief finished his glass, stood. "I have to run, Hank," he said. "Let me think this over. Maybe I can come up with something. Check with me day after tomorrow. And you'd better leave the bottles here. Cultural exhibits, you know." As the council meeting broke up, Retief caught the eye of a colleague across the table.

"Mr. Whaffle, you mentioned a shipment going to a place called Croanie. What are they getting?"

Whaffle blinked. "You're the fellow who's filling in for Magnan, over at MUDDLE," he said. "Properly speaking, equipment grants are the sole concern of the Motorized Equipment Depot, Division of Loans and Exchanges." He pursed his lips. "However, I suppose there's no harm in telling you. They'll be receiving heavy mining equipment."

"Drill rigs, that sort of thing?"

"Strip mining gear." Whaffle took a slip of paper from a breast pocket, blinked at it. "Bolo Model WV/1 tractors, to be specific. Why is MUDDLE interested in MEDDLE's activities?"

"Forgive my curiosity, Mr. Whaffle. It's just that Croanie cropped up earlier today. It seems she holds a mortgage on some vineyards over on—"

"That's not MEDDLE's affair, sir," Whaffle cut in. "I have sufficient problems as Chief of MEDDLE without probing into MUDDLE'S business."

"Speaking of tractors," another man put in, "we over at the Special Committee for Rehabilitation and Overhaul of Underdeveloped Nations' General Economies have been trying for months to get a request for mining equipment for d'Land through MEDDLE—"

"SCROUNGE was late on the scene," Whaffle said. "First come, first served. That's our policy at MEDDLE. Good day, gentlemen." He strode off, briefcase under his arm.

"That's the trouble with peaceful worlds," the SCROUNGE committeeman said. "Boge is a troublemaker, so every

agency in the Corps is out to pacify her. While my chance to make a record—that is, assist peace-loving d'Land—comes to naught." He shook his head.

"What kind of university do they have on d'Land?" asked Retief. "We're sending them two thousand exchange students. It must be quite an institution."

"University? D'Land has one under-endowed technical college."

"Will all the exchange students be studying at the Technical College?"

"Two thousand students? Hah! Two *hundred* students would overtax the facilities of the college."

"I wonder if the Bogans know that?"

"The Bogans? Why, most of d'Land's difficulties are due to the unwise trade agreement she entered into with Boge. Two thousand students indeed!" He snorted and walked away.

Retief stopped by the office to pick up a short cape, then rode the elevator to the roof of the 230-story Corps HQ building and hailed a cab to the port. The Bogan students had arrived early. Retief saw them lined up on the ramp waiting to go through customs. It would be half an hour before they were cleared through. He turned into the bar and ordered a beer.

A tall young fellow on the next stool raised his glass.

"Happy days," he said.

"And nights to match."

"You said it." He gulped half his beer. "My name's Karsh. Mr. Karsh. Yep, Mr. Karsh. Boy, this is a drag, sitting around this place waiting...."