

Off Course

Mack Reynolds

A decorative graphic consisting of several thick blue lines of varying lengths and orientations, set against a solid green background. The lines form a complex, abstract shape that resembles a stylized letter 'E' or a series of horizontal bars with irregular ends. One line on the left is curved, while others are straight and horizontal or vertical.

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Project Gutenberg's Off Course, by Mack Reynolds (AKA Dallas McCord Reynolds)

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Shure and begorra, it was a great day for the Earth! The first envoy from another world was about to speak—that is, if he could forget that he had for a minute....

off course

By Mack Reynolds

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

FIRST ON the scene were Larry Dermott and Tim Casey of the State Highway Patrol. They assumed they were witnessing the crash of a new type of Air Force plane and slipped and skidded desperately across the field to within thirty feet of the strange craft, only to discover that the landing had been made without accident.

Patrolman Dermott shook his head. "They're gettin' queerer looking every year. Get a load of it—no wheels, no propeller, no cockpit."

They left the car and made their way toward the strange egg-shaped vessel.

Tim Casey loosened his .38 in its holster and said, "Sure, and I'm beginning to wonder if it's one of ours. No insignia and—"

A circular door slid open at that point and Dameri Tass stepped out, yawning. He spotted them, smiled and said, "Glork."

They gaped at him.

"Glork is right," Dermott swallowed.

Tim Casey closed his mouth with an effort. "Do you mind the color of his face?" he blurted.

"How could I help it?"

Dameri Tass rubbed a blue-nailed pink hand down his purplish countenance and yawned again. "Gorra manigan horp soratium," he said.

Patrolman Dermott and Patrolman Casey shot stares at each other. "'Tis double talk he's after givin' us," Casey said.

Dameri Tass frowned. "Harama?" he asked.

Larry Dermott pushed his cap to the back of his head. "That doesn't sound like any language I've even *heard* about."

Dameri Tass grimaced, turned and reentered his spacecraft to emerge in half a minute with his hands full of contraption. He held a box-like arrangement under his left arm; in his right hand were two metal caps connected to the box by wires.

While the patrolmen watched him, he set the box on the ground, twirled two dials and put one of the caps on his head. He offered the other to Larry Dermott; his desire was obvious.

Trained to grasp a situation and immediately respond in manner best suited to protect the welfare of the people of New York State, Dermott cleared his throat and said, "Tim, take over while I report."

"Hey!" Casey protested, but his fellow minion had left.

"Mandaia," Dameri Tass told Casey, holding out the metal cap.

"Faith, an' do I look balmy?" Casey told him. "I wouldn't be puttin' that dingus on my head for all the colleens in Ireland."

"Mandaia," the stranger said impatiently.

"Bejasus," Casey snorted, "ye can't—"

Dermott called from the car, "Tim, the captain says to humor this guy.

We're to keep him here until the officials arrive."

Tim Casey closed his eyes and groaned. "Humor him, he's after sayin'. Orders it is." He shouted back, "Sure, an' did ye tell 'em he's in technicolor? Begorra, he looks like a man from Mars."

"That's what they think," Larry yelled, "and the governor is on his way. We're to do everything possible short of violence to keep this character here. Humor him, Tim!"

"Mandaia," Dameri Tass snapped, pushing the cap into Casey's reluctant hands.

Muttering his protests, Casey lifted it gingerly and placed it on his head. Not feeling any immediate effect, he said, "There, 'tis satisfied ye are now, I'm supposin'."

The alien stooped down and flicked a switch on the little box. It hummed gently. Tim Casey suddenly shrieked and sat down on the stubble and grass of the field. "Begorra," he yelped, "I've been murdered!" He tore the cap from his head.

His companion came running, "What's the matter, Tim?" he shouted.

Dameri Tass removed the metal cap from his own head. "Sure, an' nothin' is after bein' the matter with him," he said. "Evidently the bhoy has niver been a-wearin' of a kerit helmet afore. 'Twill hurt him not at all."

"YOU CAN talk!" Dermott blurted, skidding to a stop.

Dameri Tass shrugged. "Faith, an' why not? As I was after sayin', I

shared the kerit helmet with Tim Casey."

Patrolman Dermott glared at him unbelievably. "You learned the language just by sticking that Rube Goldberg deal on Tim's head?"

"Sure, an' why not?"

Dermott muttered, "And with it he has to pick up the corniest brogue west of Dublin."

Tim Casey got to his feet indignantly. "I'm after resentin' that, Larry Dermott. Sure, an' the way we talk in Ireland is—"

Dameri Tass interrupted, pointing to a bedraggled horse that had made its way to within fifty feet of the vessel. "Now what could that be after bein'?"

The patrolmen followed his stare. "It's a horse. What else?"

"A horse?"

Larry Dermott looked again, just to make sure. "Yeah—not much of a horse, but a horse."

Dameri Tass sighed ecstatically. "And jist what is a horse, if I may be so bold as to be askin'?"

"It's an animal you ride on."

The alien tore his gaze from the animal to look his disbelief at the other. "Are you after meanin' that you climb upon the crature's back and ride him? Faith now, quit your blarney."

He looked at the horse again, then down at his equipment. "Begorra," he muttered, "I'll share the kerit helmet with the crature."

"Hey, hold it," Dermott said anxiously. He was beginning to feel like a character in a shaggy dog story.

Interest in the horse was ended with the sudden arrival of a helicopter. It swooped down on the field and settled within twenty feet of the alien craft. Almost before it had touched, the door was flung open and the flying windmill disgorged two bestarred and efficient-looking Army officers.

Casey and Dermott snapped them a salute.

The senior general didn't take his eyes from the alien and the spacecraft as he spoke, and they bugged quite as effectively as had those of the patrolmen when they'd first arrived on the scene.

"I'm Major General Browning," he rapped. "I want a police cordon thrown up around this, er, vessel. No newsmen, no sightseers, nobody without my permission. As soon as Army personnel arrives, we'll take over completely."

"Yes, sir," Larry Dermott said. "I just got a report on the radio that the governor is on his way, sir. How about him?"

The general muttered something under his breath. Then, "When the governor arrives, let me know; otherwise, nobody gets through!"

Dameri Tass said, "Faith, and what goes on?"

The general's eyes bugged still further. "*He talks!*" he accused.

"Yes, sir," Dermott said. "He had some kind of a machine. He put it over Tim's head and seconds later he could talk."

"Nonsense!" the general snapped.

Further discussion was interrupted by the screaming arrival of several motorcycle patrolmen followed by three heavily laden patrol cars. Overhead, pursuit planes zoomed in and began darting about nervously above the field.

"Sure, and it's quite a reception I'm after gettin'," Dameri Tass said. He yawned. "But what I'm wantin' is a chance to get some sleep. Faith, an' I've been awake for almost a *decal*."

DAMERI TASS was hurried, via helicopter, to Washington. There he disappeared for several days, being held incommunicado while White House, Pentagon, State Department and Congress tried to figure out just what to do with him.

Never in the history of the planet had such a furor arisen. Thus far, no newspapermen had been allowed within speaking distance. Administration higher-ups were being subjected to a volcano of editorial heat but the longer the space alien was discussed the more they viewed with alarm the situation his arrival had precipitated. There were angles that hadn't at first been evident.

Obviously he was from some civilization far beyond that of Earth's. That was the rub. No matter what he said, it would shake governments, possibly overthrow social systems, perhaps even destroy established religious concepts.

But they couldn't keep him under wraps indefinitely.

It was the United Nations that cracked the iron curtain. Their demands that the alien be heard before their body were too strong and had too much public opinion behind them to be ignored. The White House yielded and the date was set for the visitor to speak before the Assembly.

Excitement, anticipation, blanketed the world. Shepherds in Sinkiang, multi-millionaires in Switzerland, fakirs in Pakistan, gauchos in the

Argentine were raised to a zenith of expectation. Panhandlers debated the message to come with pedestrians; jinrikisha men argued it with their passengers; miners discussed it deep beneath the surface; pilots argued with their co-pilots thousands of feet above.

It was the most universally awaited event of the ages.

By the time the delegates from every nation, tribe, religion, class, color, and race had gathered in New York to receive the message from the stars, the majority of Earth had decided that Dameri Tass was the plenipotentiary of a super-civilization which had been viewing developments on this planet with misgivings. It was thought this other civilization had advanced greatly beyond Earth's and that the problems besetting us—social, economic, scientific—had been solved by the super-civilization. Obviously, then, Dameri Tass had come, an advisor from a benevolent and friendly people, to guide the world aright.

And nine-tenths of the population of Earth stood ready and willing to be guided. The other tenth liked things as they were and were quite convinced that the space envoy would upset their applecarts.

VILJALMAR ANDERSEN, Secretary-General of the U.N., was to introduce the space emissary. "Can you give me an idea at all of what he is like?" he asked nervously.

President McCord was as upset as the Dane. He shrugged in agitation. "I know almost as little as you do."

Sir Alfred Oxford protested, "But my dear chap, you've had him for almost two weeks. Certainly in that time—"

The President snapped back, "You probably won't believe this, but he's been asleep until yesterday. When he first arrived he told us he hadn't slept for a *decal*, whatever that is; so we held off our discussion with him until morning. Well—he didn't awaken in the morning, nor the next. Six days later, fearing something was wrong we woke him."

"What happened?" Sir Alfred asked.

The President showed embarrassment. "He used some rather ripe Irish profanity on us, rolled over, and went back to sleep."

Viljalmar Andersen asked, "Well, what happened yesterday?"

"We actually haven't had time to question him. Among other things, there's been some controversy about whose jurisdiction he comes under. The State Department claims the Army shouldn't—"

The Secretary General sighed deeply. "Just what *did* he do?"

"The Secret Service reports he spent the day whistling Mother Machree and playing with his dog, cat and mouse."

"Dog, cat and mouse? I say!" blurted Sir Alfred.

The President was defensive. "He had to have some occupation, and he seems to be particularly interested in our animal life. He wanted a horse but compromised for the others. I understand he insists all three of them come with him wherever he goes."

"I wish we knew what he was going to say," Andersen worried.

"Here he comes," said Sir Alfred.

Surrounded by F.B.I. men, Dameri Tass was ushered to the speaker's stand. He had a kitten in his arms; a Scotty followed him.

The alien frowned worriedly. "Sure," he said, "and what kin all this

be? Is it some ordinance I've been after breakin'?"

McCord, Sir Alfred and Andersen hastened to reassure him and made him comfortable in a chair.

Viljalmar Andersen faced the thousands in the audience and held up his hands, but it was ten minutes before he was able to quiet the cheering, stamping delegates from all Earth.

Finally: "Fellow Terrans, I shall not take your time for a lengthy introduction of the envoy from the stars. I will only say that, without doubt, this is the most important moment in the history of the human race. We will now hear from the first being to come to Earth from another world."

He turned and gestured to Dameri Tass who hadn't been paying overmuch attention to the chairman in view of some dog and cat hostilities that had been developing about his feet.

But now the alien's purplish face faded to a light blue. He stood and said hoarsely. "Faith, an' what was that last you said?"

Viljalmar Andersen repeated, "We will now hear from the first being ever to come to Earth from another world."

The face of the alien went a lighter blue. "Sure, an' ye wouldn't jist be frightenin' a body, would ye? You don't mean to tell me this planet isn't after bein' a member of the Galactic League?"

Andersen's face was blank. "Galactic League?"

"Cushlamachree," Dameri Tass moaned. "I've gone and put me foot in it again. I'll be after getting *kert* for this."

Sir Alfred was on his feet. "I don't understand! Do you mean you aren't an envoy from another planet?"

Dameri Tass held his head in his hands and groaned. "An envoy, he's sayin', and meself only a second-rate collector of specimens for the Carthis zoo."

He straightened and started off the speaker's stand. "Sure, an' I must blast off immediately."

Things were moving fast for President McCord but already an edge of relief was manifesting itself. Taking the initiative, he said, "Of course, of course, if that is your desire." He signaled to the bodyguard who had accompanied the alien to the assemblage.

A dull roar was beginning to emanate from the thousands gathered in the tremendous hall, murmuring, questioning, disbelieving.

VILJALMAR ANDERSEN felt that he must say something. He extended a detaining hand. "Now you are here," he said urgently, "even though by mistake, before you go can't you give us some brief word? Our world is in chaos. Many of us have lost faith. Perhaps ..."

Dameri Tass shook off the restraining hand. "Do I look daft? Begorry, I should have been a-knowin' something was queer. All your weapons and your strange ideas. Faith, I wouldn't be surprised if ye hadn't yet established a planet-wide government. Sure, an' I'll go still further. Ye probably still have wars on this benighted world. No wonder it is ye haven't been invited to join the Galactic League an' take your place among the civilized planets."

He hustled from the rostrum and made his way, still surrounded by guards, to the door by which he had entered. The dog and the cat trotted after, undismayed by the furor about them.

They arrived about four hours later at the field on which he'd landed, and the alien from space hurried toward his craft, still muttering. He'd been accompanied by a general and by the President, but all the way he had refrained from speaking.

He scurried from the car and toward the spacecraft.

President McCord said, "You've forgotten your pets. We would be glad if you would accept them as—"

The alien's face faded a light blue again. "Faith, an' I'd almost forgotten," he said. "If I'd taken a crature from this quarantined planet, my name'd be *nork*. Keep your dog and your kitty." He shook his head sadly and extracted a mouse from a pocket. "An' this amazin' little crature as well."

They followed him to the spacecraft. Just before entering, he spotted the bedraggled horse that had been present on his landing.

A longing expression came over his highly colored face. "Jist one thing," he said. "Faith now, were they pullin' my leg when they said you were after ridin' on the back of those things?"

The President looked at the woebegone nag. "It's a horse," he said, surprised. "Man has been riding them for centuries."

Dameri Tass shook his head. "Sure, an' 'twould've been my makin' if I could've taken one back to Carthis." He entered his vessel.

The others drew back, out of range of the expected blast, and watched, each with his own thoughts, as the first visitor from space hurriedly left Earth.

... THE END

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Mack Reynolds (AKA Dallas McCord Reynolds)

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