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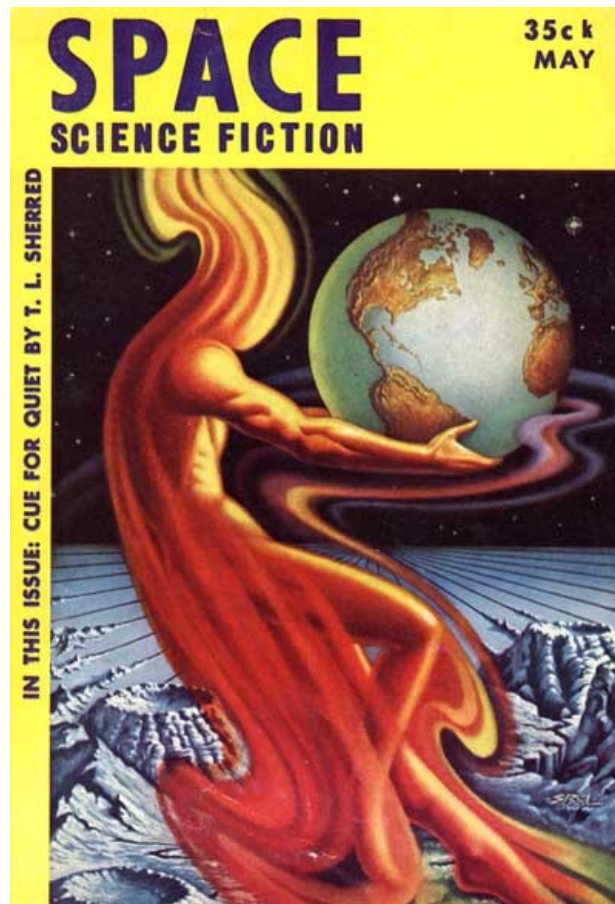
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CUE FOR QUIET

BY T. L. SHERRED

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

After too many years, T. L. Sherred returns with a story that gets our SPACE SPECIAL rating. It's the story of a man with a headache—who found a cure for it! And the cure gave him more power than any man could dream of.



So I had a headache. The grandfather of all headaches. You try working on the roof line sometime, with the presses grinding and the overhead cranes wailing and the mechanical arms clacking and grabbing at your inner skull while you snap a shiny sheet of steel like an armored pillowcase and shove it into the maw of a hungry greasy ogre. Noise. Hammering, pounding, shrieking, gobbling, yammering, incessant noise. And I had a headache.

This headache had all the signs of permanency. It stayed with me when I slid my timecard into an empty slot that clanged back at me, when I skittered across a jammed street of blowing horns and impatient buses with brakedrums worn to the rivets, when I got off at my corner and stood in the precarious safety of a painted island in a whirring storm of hurtling hornets. It got even worse when I ate dinner and tried to read my paper through the shrill juvenile squeals of the housing project where I live surrounded by muddy moppets and, apparently, faithless wives and quarrelsome spouses. The walls of my Quonset are no thicker than usual.

When Helen—that's my wife—dropped the casserole we got for a wedding present from her aunt and just stood there by the kitchen sink crying her eyes out in frustration I knew she finally had more of a mess to clean up than just the shattered remains of a brittle bowl. I didn't say a word. I couldn't. I shoved the chair across the room and watched it tilt the lamp her mother bought us. Before the lamp hit the floor my hat was on my head and I was out the door. Behind me I heard at least one pane of the storm door die in a fatal crash. I didn't look around to see if it were the one I'd put in last Sunday.

Art was glad to see me. He had the beer drawn and was evening the foam before the heavy front door had shut us off from the street. "Been a while, Pete. What's new?"

I was glad to see him, too. It was quiet in there. That's why I go eight blocks out of my way for my beer. No noise, no loud talking or you end up on the curb; quiet. Quiet and dark and comfortable and you mind your own business, usually. "Got any more of those little boxes of aspirin?"

He had some aspirin and was sympathetic. "Headache again? Maybe you need a new pair of glasses."

I washed down the pills and asked for a refill on the beer. "Maybe, Art. What do you know that's new?"

Nothing. We both knew that. We talked for a while; nothing important, nothing more than the half-spoken, half-grunted short disjointed phrases we always repeated. Art would drift away and lean on the other end of the bar and then drift back to me and at the end of each trip there would be clean ashtrays and the dark plastic along the bar would gleam and there would be no dregs of dead drinks and the rows of fresh glasses would align themselves in empty rows on the stainless steel of the lower counter. Art's a good bartender when he wants to be. I held up my empty glass.

"One more, Art. Got the radio section of the paper?"

He handed it to me. "Might be something on the television."

We both laughed. We both feel the same way about television, but he has to have a set in his business for week-end football or baseball games. A big set he has, too, with an extra speaker for the far end of the bar for the short beer trade. I found the program I wanted and showed Art the listing.

He looked at it. "Strauss ... that's that waltz music," and I nodded and he went over to the radio and found the station. These small stations can't sell every minute of their time for commercials, although they try, and every once in a while they run through a solid hour of Strauss or Bing Crosby or Benny Goodman. I like Strauss.

And there I sat drinking beer and eating stale popcorn when I should have been home with Helen, listening to quiet violins and muted brasses when I should have been doing something noisy and instructive. In my glass I could see whatever I wanted, wherever I would. I made circular patterns on the bar and drew them into a grotesque mass with fingers wet with the silver condensation of bubbles drawn magically through impervious crystal. Then Art turned off the radio.

He was apologetic, but he still turned off the radio. In answer to my unspoken question he shrugged and indicated Freddie. Freddie likes television. He likes dog acts and circus bands and bouncing clowns. He watches the commercials with an innocent unjaundiced eye. Sometimes he sings along with the animated bakers and cooks and gas stations at the top of his boyish beery baritone. He sings loud, and he likes his television the same way.

Art flipped up the lid of the television and stood there long enough to make sure the picture, whatever it was, would be in focus. Then he came back to me and poured another. Hesitating, he added another smaller glass. I can't afford that stuff on what I make. Where I made my mistake was taking it. We each had another. And another. The headache got worse.

Ivan and Jack came in, and, when they heard the blast of sound, came down to my end of the bar where, although the extra speaker is overhead, you don't have to look at the source of the noise. Art handed us a deck of cards and a piece of chalk to keep score and we started to play euchre. You don't have to think to play euchre, which is good. It's about the only game you can play with sign language, the only game for a noisy bar. So we played euchre, and at ten-thirty Ivan and Jack left me alone to face the music. The little cords at the nape of my neck were tight as wires, the temple areas near my eyes were soft and tender and sore to the touch, and my head was one big snare drum.

That was when Freddie half-shouted to Art to get the Roller Derby on Channel Seven and—so help me!—to turn it up a little louder. The cards fell out of my hand and onto the table. I took out a cigarette and my lighter slipped out of my tight fingers and fell on the floor and I bent over to pick it up. My head swelled to twice its size, my glasses slid down a little on my sweaty nose, and the tiny red veins in my eyes grew from a thread to a rope to a flag to a tapestry of crimson rage and the noise abruptly stopped. And Art began to bellow. I stood up. The television set was smoking.

Well, it was fast while it lasted. Art didn't really need the fire department. There wasn't any flame to speak of. Someone pulled the plug from the wall and rolled the set out and used the hand extinguisher on the burnt innards of the set and with the rear exhaust fan going the last of the bitter smoke was drifting out before the sirens pulled up in front. The firemen were relieved, not angry, as they always are, and Art in his misery was thoughtful enough to slip a square bottle in the pocket of the lieutenant in charge. It was cold outside, at that. Freddie said so, when he left; there was no reason to stay at Art's any more when most other bars would have the Roller Derby. I watched him go, and mentally cursed the bearings in his new car. Well, fairly new. I went home. Helen was in bed when I got there, probably asleep. She was still probably asleep when I left for work in the morning. She gets like that.

The next day at Art's there was a big space lighter in color than the surrounding wall where the television set had stood. I asked Art about it.

He didn't know. The serviceman had come out and collected it, clucking in dismay at the mess the extinguisher had left. No, no idea what caused it. Short circuit wouldn't make it that bad; fuses should have blown first. They'd find it, though. Art hoped it wouldn't be the picture tube; that wasn't covered in his service policy, and those tubes in that size cost money. Anything else was covered. At that, he was better off than Freddie.

I looked up. "What's the matter with Freddie?"

He told me. Freddie had ruined his motor on the way home last night. What hadn't blown out the exhaust pipe had gone out the hood, and right after his ninety-day guarantee had expired.

I remembered what I had thought of last night. "How did he do that?"

Art didn't know. He had been driving along and—that was it. The car was in the garage with nothing left between the radiator and the firewall and Freddie was trying to get something out of the insurance company. Fat chance, too, with that bunch of pirates. We'd all had experience with that sort of thing, hadn't we? Why—someone at the other end of the bar wanted some service and Art left. I sat back and began to add two and two. I got five.

Art came back and grinned at me. "You're not going to like this, Pete."

"What won't I like?"

"This," and a man in coveralls shouldered me aside and set a cobra on the bar in front of me, a snake with a twelve inch tube. Art went on to explain: "They're giving me a loaner until my own set gets back and they don't want to plug it in the usual place until they get a chance to completely check the wiring. Okay?"

It had to be okay. It wasn't my place of business. I moved down a bit and watched the serviceman plug it in. He tried the channels for clarity and without warning flipped the volume control all the way over and the whole building shook. I shook, too, like a bewildered Labrador throwing off an unwanted splash of icy water. The top of my head lifted from its moorings and shifted just enough for me to name that infernal serviceman and all his issue. He just sat there and grinned, making no attempt to tone down the set. Then I said what I thought about his television, and the set went quiet. Like that.

It began to smoke and the serviceman began to shuck tools from his box. Art opened his mouth to yell and I walked out the front door. The High Hat, right across the street, would serve to keep me warm until the smoke and profanity was cleared and Art had the repairman under control.

I knew it! They had a jukebox inside the door with the same twenty top tunes of the week, the same gaudy front with the same swirling lights and the same tonsillectomied tenors. I shuddered as I eased by, and I murmured a heartfelt wish over my shoulder, something about the best place for that machine. I ordered a beer, a short one. The barkeep, a pleasant enough fellow, but with none of Art's innate joviality, rang up the dime.

"You didn't happen to pull the cord out when you walked by, did you?"

"Pull the cord out of what?"

He didn't bother to answer, and went over to the machine. That was the first I realized the music had stilled. He clicked the switch on and off a few times with no result, and went to the telephone, detouring by way of the cash register to pick up a coin. Thoughtfully sipping my beer I heard him dial and report a jukebox out of order. Then a relay clicked in the back of my head.

Could all this be a coincidence? Could be.... Couldn't be! The beer grew warm in my hand as I remembered. Every time I'd wished, really really wished, something had happened. Now that I had time to think it over I remembered that red rotor spinning madly past my eyes, that horrible hatred and afterward, that sated sense of fulfillment.... Better have another beer and forget it, Pete. Better make it two beers. Maybe three.

The High Hat sold me a lot more than two beers, or three. When I left there, although I was walking a mental chalkline I had a little trouble lighting a cigarette in the chill breeze. I didn't bother going back to Art's. Art was all right, and there was no sense in making trouble for a pal. Harry, now. He was a stinker. Go put the needle in Harry, two blocks away.

While Harry was drawing the beer I walked string straight to the jukebox, clicked in a quarter, and stalked back to the barstool. Turn your back, Pete, just as though you didn't know perfectly well what was going to happen. Now take a tasty sip of your beer, wait for the noise to start.... Take a deep breath, now; Pete Miller, saviour of man's sanity. I closed my eyes and pretended to be covering a yawn.

"Tubes," I whispered, "do your stuff. Blow that horn, Gabriel—go ahead and—blow!"

The jukebox moaned as far as the first eight bars; I got my quarter back from a puzzled Harry; I listened to Harry call his repairman; I finished my beer; I got outside and almost around the corner before I began laughing like a hyena; I got to bed snickering and went to sleep the same way; and I woke up with a headache.

Hammering presses the next day I treated with the contempt of long practice. One single theme kept rolling around like a pea in a washtub; just what had happened to that television set and those jukeboxes? And what had made a fairly new eight-cylinder almost disintegrate, apparently on command? Agreed, that coincidence has a mighty long arm, but hardly long enough to scratch its own elbow. Forty years old and a superman? One way to find out. Let's go at this cold sober. Let's scratch this shiny new rubber band until it snaps.

At three-thirty I was first in line at the timeclock, second out the gate, and fourth or fifth to line up at the National Bar. "Aspirin and ginger ale," I ordered, and got a knowing grin from the barkeep. Laugh, buddy. You may think I feel bad now, but wait and see what happens to your bangbox. I dare someone to put in a nickel; I double-dare you. That's it—pick a good number from one to twenty and go back to your stool and sit down. Take it easy, now, Pete. Don't strain, don't

press, no slugging in the clinches, and break clean. The place needs a good airing, anyway, and the floor could use a new broom, too. Bubble, bubble, go for double ... no more music. No more noise. Smoke, you boiler factory, smoke! Hey, somebody, pull that plug. Not that one, *that* one. Pull it out. Pull it out! *Pull it out!*

Finally someone did pull it out, someone chattered excitedly into the telephone, and I slid out the front door when the fire engines were wailing blocks away. Coincidence, hey. And cold sober, too. I stood on the curb and watched the firemen dash in and straggle out. Dirty trick to break up a pinochle game in weather like this. Four red-eyed crimson giants snorted and whined their blunt noses back into the clogged traffic, back to wait another call. Three buses were sentinels at the safety zone, and one of them took me home to dinner. This was on a Friday, the night for the Olsens, next door, to have their weekly sangerbund. When Helen shook me into wakefulness the party was going strong.

"Pete, will you wake up? You know perfectly well when you hear me!"

Yes, I heard her. "What time is it?"

"Never mind what time it is. You go over there and tell them you're going to call the police if they don't turn off that radio—"

I yawned. "After two o'clock."

"Almost two-thirty. You just get up and—"

I laughed out loud, as loud as you can laugh at that time of the morning. "Roll over and go back to sleep," I told her. "They'll shut it off in a minute."

I shut my sleepy lids and went through the deep breath routine. The radio stopped. Then an afterthought; this was Friday, and I wanted to sleep late on a Saturday unsullied and unwelcomed by soap operas. Another deep breath, complicated by a yawn, and I went back to sleep.

Over our coffee Helen pulled aside the kitchen curtain.

"I thought there was some reason I didn't wake up until ten. Look across the street," and she pointed.

In front of the Olsen's, a red panel truck, Chuck's Radio Service. Next door, in front of the Werner's, Harper Radio Parts. In the Smith's driveway, Rapid Radio Repair.

"What are you grinning at?"

"Me? I'm not grinning. Not at this time of the morning."

"Pete Miller, you were, too. Just like the cat that ate the fish."

"Canary, you mean."

"That's what I said. What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I said. "We just got a good night's sleep for a change. I like my sleep."

She harrumphed a bit, as suspicious as she usually is, and I went to the stove for more coffee. Over my shoulder I said, "Want to play a little cards tonight?"

She was skeptical about that. "At Art's, I suppose."

"Sure. Saturday night euchre tournaments."

"That noisy place? Nothing doing."

I told her the jukebox and the television set were out of commission and there'd be no noise she didn't make herself. She loved to play cards, I knew, and she liked Art. It was just the incessant roar that wore her down. I managed to talk her into it.

At Art's that night I listened with envy to the words that were used over the telephone when the jukebox gave up its ghost. I heard only Art's end of the conversation, of course, but I gathered that Art was being accused at the very least of sabotage. I changed the subject quick when I caught Helen trying to figure out the look I must have been wearing. Women get so they're pretty good at that after they've been married awhile. Art himself drove us home at closing time. Helen and Art's wife did all the talking, and I'm sure no one noticed I held my breath before every bar or house and Helen commented, as I fit the key into the front door, on the fact that the Olsens and the Werners and the Smiths all picked the same time to turn off their radios. "Very nice of them," she said, "considering it's Saturday night."

Now, I use two buses to get to work, transferring from the Harper bus to the Clairmount line, and it's a forty minute ride. For two days I fed my ego by holding my breath. I likely looked queer with a bursting red face, but no one said anything, at least directly to me. I wouldn't have cared much, anyway, because I didn't care much what happened; after all, wasn't I a benefactor to practically all the human race, the thinking part, that is? Wasn't it going to be nice to live in a world without punctured eardrums and hamstrung nerves? Wasn't it going to be good to be able to eat a meal in peace, to sip your ten or sixty-cent drink without having some moron with a nickel prodding your ulcer? I thought so.

Thursday, or maybe Friday, my careful searching of the daily papers found my tiny item buried back of the stock reports, with the labor news. I read it three times.

JUKEBOX WAR SUSPECTED.

An anonymous tip today told our labor reporter that serious trouble looms in the canned music industry. R. C. Jones, czar of Local 77, AFL, has issued orders to individually guard each machine serviced by his union. Jones had the classic "no comment" for publication, but it is an open secret that intra-union friction is high in the Harper-Gratiot area. Jones inferred that deliberate sabotage is responsible for the wholesale short-circuiting of jukeboxes and television sets. He named no names, but in an off-the-record statement threatened to fight fire with fire. "We're not," he snapped, "going to stand by and watch while goons ruin our livelihood. We will...."

Now I was in a fix. They had to make a living. I'd forgotten that. A union man myself, who was I to break another's rice bowl? I could see no point in writing to this R. C. Jones. He'd think I was as crazy as they come. And the newspapers—I could imagine the reactions of a tough city editor. So, wrapped up in my own thoughts, I stepped off the curb a little ahead of the green, and I jumped just in time. I swore at the truck that almost got me, and it happened so quickly I wasn't prepared to hear or to see the motor of the truck throw a piston right through the rusted hood. White as a sheet the driver got out of his cab, and I crossed the street against the red light and lost myself in the crowd. This curve I was putting on the ball, it came to me then, wasn't limited to jukeboxes and noisy radios and burnt-out bearings. I had to watch my temper, or I was going to get someone in trouble. I was in trouble myself, and I had to get out of it.

By the time I got home I'd thought it over quite well. This—this power whatever it might be, was the McCoy. Why should I waste it when an honest dollar might be turned? A factory job in Detroit is just a factory job, and I might keep mine for the next forty years if I lived long enough through the noise and the dirt and the uncertainty and the model changeover layoffs every Christmas. The Olsens' radio disturbed my thinking and it took only a second. Either they were going to get tired of putting new tubes into that gadget, or play it softer, or move. I didn't care which.

So I used my wife's portable to type out a letter to Naval Ordnance in Aberdeen where my brother-in-law used to be stationed, telling them what I'd done, what I thought I might be able to do, and asking them for an opportunity to give them a demonstration. In return, I asked for a steady government job in a warm climate. Until I could arrange a certain demonstration, I went on, I could understand they might think me a crank, so I wouldn't at present sign my name. I suggested they pay close attention through the week of the fifth through the twelfth to the various press association dispatches, and I would arrange later, in my next letter, for a more personal show if they wanted to take it any further.

The fifth fell on a Saturday. Bright and early I was up to ride the bus downtown, changing to the Woodward line, ending up at Ferndale, all the time concentrating furiously and holding my breath as much as I dared. On the way back home I tried to work it a little differently. Probably no one else on the streetcar beside myself noticed there wasn't a single passenger car, truck or bus that passed us. Every car, as we sailed by, stalled and every traffic light we passed either turned three colors or blinked out completely. Most of the moving cars made it to the curb on their momentum. The others stayed where they were. When I got off in front of the City Hall, filthy old hulk that it is, the streetcar stayed immobile at the safety zone, it was a new PCC car, and the insulation poured smoke from under the wheels. Naturally there wasn't any moving traffic in back of it, or in front. I saw to that. Then I just strolled around Cadillac Square, bollixing up everything that occurred to me, from trucks to busses to traffic lights. You never saw such a verminous tangled mess in all your life. When the patrol wagons began to scream into the Square loaded with reinforcements for the helpless purple single cop at the Michigan intersection I let them get as far as the center of the street before I pinned them down. Even when I saw it later in the newsreels I couldn't believe it. Even Mack Sennett could have done no better.

I had to walk all the way out Gratiot to St. Antoine before I could find transportation home that wasn't walled off by screaming horns and haggard foot-patrolmen, and when I got off at my corner all Gratiot and Harper behind me was as clogged as Woodward. I even knocked out every red neon sign within two blocks of a traffic light. That one might keep a few pedestrians alive a little longer.

Helen was over at her mother's helping her hang drapes when I got home. The icebox gave me a cold Jumbo bottle and I turned on our little portable set. On every station the spot broadcast crews were hoarse. I spun the dials and finally concentrated on one announcer—you know who I mean—with the raspiest, most grating voice this side of a vixen file. Unfortunately, the housewives seem to like him, including Helen, and it's the housewives who have the radio on all day. I knew he was broadcasting from the roof studios of one of our highest buildings, and I took an enormous and perverted pleasure in holding my breath and thinking about the elevator system there. On second thought, I held my breath again and the station left the air in the middle of a word. I hope he liked the walk downstairs.

The newspapers next day couldn't make things add, as was natural. They published silly interviews with all the top engineers in the city and a good many all over the world, including the Chairman of the Board of the company where I worked, and his answer was just as asinine as the rest. All in all, it had been a good show, and I put in another letter to Naval Ordnance. I knew I had gone much further than I had intended, and I suggested they get in touch with me, if they wanted, through the personal columns of one of the Detroit newspapers. I didn't want to get into trouble with the city police. I didn't sign my name to the second letter either. And that was a mistake.

Early in the morning of the tenth I felt good. I'd been sleeping well lately, now that I was rid of the Olsens' radio, not to mention the Werners', and the Smiths'. I rolled over and squinted at the luminous hands of the clock. Beer cheese in the icebox. Half a Dutch apple pie left over from dinner. Milk. Helen didn't wake as I eased out of bed and groped for my slippers, and the rustling and shuffling I heard as I tiptoed down the back stairs I attributed to an overbrave mouse. One of these days, I thought, I was going to have to get some traps and catch me a mouse. When I turned on the kitchen light the mouse was holding a howitzer nine inches away from my head.

"All right, you," the mouse snarled. "Reach!"

I reached. Quick.

The gunman backed to the outside door and flicked it open with one hand, never taking his eyes from me. Footsteps pounded on the back porch and hard faces filled the kitchen. One even had one of these gaspipe Sten guns, and I liked that even less than the howitzer. My pajama tops might have concealed an arsenal from the care I got when I was searched. No one said a word, and I didn't dare. Just about that time Helen got the sandman out of her eyes. Likely the noise had awakened her appetite, and she had come down to help me eat a snack. One of the gunmen heard her slippers clattering down the stairs, and a hard hand slapped over my mouth and a gun rammed viciously against my spine. Spun around and held as a human shield I had to helplessly watch her come yawning in the kitchen door. One look she got in at me, and the drawn guns, and her mouth opened for a scream that got no further than a muffled yip and a dead faint. They let her fall. The gunman took his hand from my mouth and swung me around.

"Shut up!" he snapped, although I hadn't tried to say anything.



At the point of his gun he held me there while the rest of the hard faced crew roamed the house, upstairs and down. None of the faces did I know, and I began to wonder if behind one of those granite masks was the revengeful personality of R. C. Jones, President of Local 77, AFL. I heard footsteps pad on the back porch, and my head tried to turn in spite of myself. The gun in my back gouged a little harder. Out of the corner of my eye I could see who pushed open the screen door I hadn't got around to taking down yet. The gun in my back helped me stand up.

J. Edgar Hoover motioned to the gun and the pressure eased a trifle. His voice was reasonably unexcited, but to my present taste, ominous.

"All right. Someone go get him some pants." To me, "Your name Miller? Peter Ambrose Miller? Get that woman off the floor."

Yes, I was Peter Ambrose Miller. I agreed to that. My mouth was dry as popcorn, but I managed to ask him what this was all about.

Hoover looked at me and scratched his nose. "This is about your fingerprints being all over an anonymous letter received in Aberdeen, Maryland."

I gulped. "Oh, that. Why, I can explain—"

Hoover looked at me with the fond expression of a man who has cracked open a bad egg. "That," he said, "I doubt," and he turned on his military heel and walked out the back door. When they got me my pants I followed him. I had to.

I ended up at the Federal Building, which is a cavernous morgue, even during business hours. They gave me what might have been a comfortable chair if I hadn't had to sit in it. A young fellow was sitting opposite me with a stenographer's notebook, and I knew that any story of mine had better not be repeated two different ways. Hoover came in with a nondescript man with a hat pulled down over his eyes, who inspected me from all angles and then shook his head, a little resentfully, I thought. The hat-over-the-eyes left and I shifted nervously under those grim eyes staring at me.

"All right," said Hoover; "now we'll hear that explanation. Talk!"

So I talked.

When I finished my throat was dry and he was nodding as though he believed every word. He didn't. I asked for a cigarette and for news of my wife, and they gave me a cigarette. They told me my wife was all right, or would be, if I behaved.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll behave." They just laughed when I said that.

"Quite likely," said Hoover. "Now, let's hear that once more. Begin at the beginning."

They gave me a room all to myself, finally. For three days, maybe more, I had that room all for myself and the various people that walked in at all hours of the day and night to ask me some of the silliest questions you ever heard just as though they expected sensible answers. After that first night I didn't see J. Edgar Hoover at all, which is just as well, because I don't think he liked me one little bit. They brought me a suit with the lining in the sleeve ripped and a shirt with the cuffs turned. When I got those I began to worry all over again about Helen, because I knew she had no part in picking out the clothes they brought me. I didn't feel too chipper when they came after me in force again.

The same room, this time more crowded. Older men this time, and a few of the usual high school boys. Again we went through the same routine, and once again my voice cracked dusty dry. They were all desperately sorry for such an incurable psychopathic liar. I hadn't felt so helpless, so caught-in-a-quicksand since my days in the army.

"I'm telling you the truth, the truth. Don't you see that I've got to tell you the truth to get out of here? Don't you believe me?"

Never such disbelief outside of a courtmartial. In desperation my eyes jerked around looking for escape. They slid over, and back to, the ventilation fan purring on the wall. I sucked in a loud gasp. The blades of the fan slowed to where you could see them as individuals, and the motor housing began to smoke.

"See?" I yelled at them. "Believe me now?"

The blades came to a standstill and the black smoke oozed toward the ceiling.

"See?" I yelled again. "Look at that fan!"

Their eyes showed their astonishment. The smoke began to disappear in the stillness. "What about that? Now do you believe me?"

Maybe they did. No one said anything. They took me back to my room. About an hour or so later they came after me again. The chair felt no more comfortable than it ever had, though it was beginning to shape itself to my seat. The same faces were there, but the air was a little different this time. On the desk, where I had seen sit no one but J. Edgar Hoover were a half dozen fans, plugged to an extension cord that snaked away and lost itself in a dark corner. My ears twitched hopefully. Maybe this was going to get me out of here. One of the younger men spoke up.

"Mr. Miller," he said briskly, "can you stop these fans as you did, apparently, the other?"

I started to tell him that "apparently" wasn't the right word. One of the older men broke in.

"One moment," he said. "Can you stop any one of these fans, or all of them? Any particular one, and leave the rest alone?"

I thought I could. "Which one?" There were five fans whirring silently away.

"Well ... the one in the center."

The one in the center. One out of five. Hold your breath, Peter Ambrose, hold it now or you can hold your breath the rest of your natural life and no one will ever know, nor ever care. The fan in the center began to smoke and the blades choked off abruptly.

I said, "The one on the far left ... the one next to it ... the far right ... and four makes five." I watched the last blade make its last swing. "Has anybody got a cigarette?"

I got a full package. While I tore off the cellophane someone held a light. I filled my lungs so full they creaked and sat back defiantly.

"So now what?"

No one knew just what. Two men slipped out and the others drew together their chairs for a whispered conference full of dark looks in my direction. I sat quietly and smoked until even that got on my nerves. Finally I broke it up with a yell.

"Can't you fatheads make up your minds? Don't you know what you want? Do you think I'm going to sit here all night?"

That was a stupid question; I knew I was going to sit there until they told me to get up. But at the time I wanted to say it, and I did, and I said a few other things that were neither polite nor sensible. I was a little upset, I think. It didn't matter. They paid no attention to me, so I lit another cigarette and waited. The outer door opened and one of the two that had left came back in. He came directly to me, waving the others out as he came. They filed out and he stood in front of me.

"Mr. Miller. This is rather an awkward situation for all of us, particularly for you, obviously. I want to say this, Mr. Miller; I—that is, we here in the Bureau are extremely sorry for the turn of events that brought both of us here. We—"

At the first decent word I'd heard in days I blew up. "Sorry? What's being sorry going to do for me? What's being sorry going to do for my wife? Where is she? What's happened to her? Where is she, and what are you doing to her? And when am I going to get out of here?"

He was a polite old man, come to think about it. He let me blow off all the steam I'd been saving, let me rant and rage, and clucked and nodded in just the right places. At last I ran down, and he moved a chair to where he could be confidential. He started like this:

"Mr. Miller, I, speaking personally, know exactly how you must feel. Close custody is as unpleasant for the jailor as it is for the jailee, if there is such a word, sir."

I snorted at that one. A jail is a jail, and the turnkey can walk out if he chooses.

"You must remember that you are and have been dealing with an official agency of the Government of the United States of America, of which you are a citizen; an agency that, officially or otherwise, can never be too careful of any factor that affects, however remotely, the security or safety of that Government. You understand that quite well, don't you, Mr. Miller?" He didn't wait to find out if I did. "For that reason, and for no other, you were brought here with the utmost speed and secrecy, and kept here."

"Oh, sure," I said. "I'm going to blow up a tax collector, or something like that."

He nodded. "You might."

"Blah. So you made a mistake. So you're sorry, so my wife is probably completely out of her head by now, I'm crazy myself, and you want to talk politics. All I want to know is this—when do I get out of here?"

He looked at me with an odd, queer smile. "This, Mr. Miller, is where the shock lies. I think, diametrically opposite to the opinions and, I might add, to the direct pleadings of some of my colleagues involved in this rather inexplicable affair, that you are the adaptable Teutonic type that likes to know exactly the odds against him, the type of man who likes to know where and when he stands."

"I know exactly where I stand," I told him. "I want to know just one thing; when do I get out of this rat trap?"

He mulled that over, his forehead wrinkled as he searched for the right words. "I'm afraid, Mr. Miller, very much afraid that you're going to get out of here very soon. But never out of any place else." And with that he walked out the door before I could lift a finger to stop him.

But when they came after me to put me away I wasn't stunned. It took four of them, and one more that came in as reinforcement. They weren't rough deliberately, but they weren't easy. They had a time, too. I think I've been around long enough to know a few dirty tricks. I used them all, but I still went back to my room, or cell. I got no sleep at all for the rest of the night, nor most of the next night. I wondered if I could ever sleep again. If someone had mentioned "Helen" to me I likely would cry like a baby. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

When they came after me again they were all prepared for another argument. I didn't care, this time. Meekly I went along, back to that same conference room. Four men; the old man who had given me the spurs before, one of the high school boys, and a couple of uniforms. The old man stood up very formally to greet me.

"Good morning, Mr. Miller."

I snarled at him. "Good for what?"

One of the uniforms was indignant. "Here, here, my man!"

I let him have it, too. "In your hat, fatty. My discharge went on the books in forty-five!" He was shocked stiff, but he shut up.

The old man kept his face straight. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Miller?" I sat. I still didn't like the chair. "This is General Hayes, and this is General Van Dorf." They nodded stiffly, and I ignored them. He didn't introduce the young man, not that I cared.

"Mr. Miller, we'd like to talk to you. Talk seriously."

"Afraid that I'll get mad and fly out the window?"

"I said seriously. It won't take long. Let's compress it into one short sentence without the preliminaries: give these gentlemen a demonstration like the last one."

I told him what he could do with his demonstration, and I told him what he could do with his

generals. The high school boy grinned when I said that. He must have been old enough to have served in the army.

The generals were crimson. You don't get that kind of talk where they worked. But the old man was unperturbed. "Let's make that one sentence a paragraph. Give these gentlemen a demonstration as effective as the last—and ten minutes after, if you like, you can walk out of here free as the air."

I jumped at that. "Is that straight? If I do it again you'll let me loose?"

He nodded. "If you really want to."

I persisted. "Straight, now? On your word of honor?"

He wasn't lying. "If you want my word you have it."

I grinned all over like a dog. "Bring on your fans, or whatever you have cooked up."

The young man went out and came right back in with a little cartload of electric fans. Either they had too many for general use, or someone had very little imagination. Come summer, with Detroit ninety in the shade, they were going to miss their ventilation. Me, I was going to be a long way from the Federal Building. He set the fans on the desk, and the generals craned stork-like to see what was going on. The old man bowed to them.

"Name one, gentlemen. Any one you like." They named the middle one again.

I called my shots again, as free and easy as though I'd been doing it for years. "The middle one first, you say? No sooner said than done, gentlemen. Right? Right! Now the far left, and right down the line. Eeney, meeny, and out goes me." They were all dead, and I stood up and asked the room, "Which is the express elevator to the main floor?"

The old man held up his hand. "One moment, Mr. Miller." He read my mind, which, at that second, wasn't hard to do. "Oh, no. You're free to go any time you so desire. But I would like to make this demonstration a little more convincing."

He meant it. I could go if I liked.

"You also, Mr. Miller, as I understand it, exhibit somewhat the same degree of control over internal combustion engines." And well he knew I did. That traffic tieup I'd engineered had traveled via newsreels all over the world. "Will you gentlemen step over to the window?" This was to me and the generals.

We all crowded over. I looked down and saw we were on the ninth floor, maybe the eighth or tenth. It's hard to judge distance when you're looking straight down.

"Mr. Miller—"

"Yeh?"

"If one of these officers will pick out a car or a truck down on the street below can you stop it? Stop it dead in its tracks?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"All right, then. General Hayes, we'll let you do the honors. Will you select from all those cars down there any particular item?"

I broke in. "Or any streetcar." I was feeling cocky.

"Or any streetcar. I would suggest, General, that you choose a target for its visibility. One that you cannot mistake."

The uniforms were suspicious, as they conferred with their noses flat against the glass. They beckoned to me and pointed.

"That one there."

"Which one where?" They had to be more explicit than that.

"The big truck. The one with the green top and the pipe sticking out."

I spotted it. It slowed for a red light, and came to a complete stop. I concentrated. Blow, Gabriel.

The crosstraffic halted, and the truck again got under way. Then suddenly, as it must have been, although from where we were it seemed like a leisurely stroll, it veered through the other traffic lane and smoke burst from its hood. We could see the driver pop from his seat and race to the corner fire alarm box. Almost instantly traffic both ways was four deep. I turned away from the window. I don't like heights, anyway.

"Now can I go?" Walk, not run to the nearest exit.

The old man spoke directly to the uniforms, "Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied?"

They were satisfied, all right. They were stunned. They were probably visualizing a stalled tank retriever, a stalled 6x6.

"Thank you, Mr. Miller. Thank you very much." My grin was wide, as I started for the door.

"But I think that it is only fair, before you go, for me to tell you one thing."

With my hand on the knob, I laughed at him. "You mean that there isn't any Santa Claus?"

The corners of his mouth went up. "Not for you, I'm afraid. Are you insured?"

"Me? Insured? You mean the extra thirty cents I give the newsboy every week?"

"That's it. Insured. Life insurance."

I shrugged. "Sure. A couple of thousand as long as I take the papers."

"Suppose your subscription expires, or is cancelled, for certain reasons that should be obvious?" The generals stopped fidgeting and looked curiously at the old man.

I couldn't figure out what he meant, and said so.

"You can—well, let's say that you can 'interfere' with electrical or mechanical devices, can't you?"

Sure I could. At least, all the ones I'd ever tried.

"So, with that established, you would be in a military sense the theoretically perfect defense."

I hadn't thought about it that way. But if it ever came down to it I should be able to knock down an airplane, gum up the works on a fusing detonator, maybe even—. No, I didn't like that idea. Not me. Not at all.

The old man's voice was hard and soft at the same time. "So you're the irresistible force, or maybe the immovable object. And if you walk out of this office right now—and you can, Mr. Miller, that was our agreement—knowing what you know and being able to do what you have been doing.... Now, just how long do you think it would take the intelligence of a dozen different nations to catch up with you? And how long after that would you stay 'free,' as you put it? Or how long would you stay alive? There are all types of ways and means, you know." You bet I knew that.

My hair tried to stand on end. "Why, you'd be just cutting your own throat! You'd have to keep an eye on me. You can't back out on me now!"

He was sympathetic. "That's just what we're trying to do. We're trying to protect you and all you want to do is go home."

I sat down in the old chair. "So that's why you said I could go any time I wanted to." The old man said nothing. I ran my hands through my hair and tried to find the right words. "Now what?"

One of the generals started a preparatory cough, but the old man beat him to it. "I have a suggestion, Mr. Miller. You likely will not approve. Or, then again, you might."

"Yeah?"

"You know by now that this room, or its rough equivalent, is where you can be safe. This place, or one as well guarded."

"Yeah. And then what?"

He tried to make it as easy as he could. "Voluntarily—remember that word, and what it means—voluntarily put yourself in our charge. Put yourself under our care and our protection—"

"And your orders!"

General Van Dorf couldn't hold in his snort. "Good Heavens, man, where's your patriotism? Where's your—"

He got the worst of that exchange, and he didn't like it. "Where's your brains, man? Whatever patriotism I have left is pretty well worn after thirty-two months overseas. I'm sick of the Army and Navy; I'm sick of hurrying up to stand in line; I'm sick of being told what to do, and being told how and where to do it; I'm sick of being bossed. As far as I'm concerned there's only one person in this world who can tell me to do anything—and what's happened to my wife, anyway? Where is she? And where does she think I am right now?" The old man hesitated. "She doesn't know where you are. She's in the woman's division, downstairs. She's been well-treated, of course—"

"Sure. Well-treated." That was when I got really mad. "Sure. Jerk her out of bed in the middle of the night and throw her in jail and give her enough to eat and a place to sleep and that's supposed to be good treatment!"

The generals left without excusing themselves. Evidently they knew what was coming and wanted no part of it. The old Army game of signing your name and letting the sergeant hear the howls. I think that was the only thing that kept me there, as furious as I was, to hear what the old man had to say. He had been handed the dirty end of the stick, and he had to get rid of it the best way he could. When they were gone he circled a bit and then got the range.

Boiled down, it was like this. "As of right now, you no longer exist. There is no more Peter Ambrose Miller, and maybe there never was. This I would suggest; your wife, being human, could keep quiet no longer than any other woman—or man. As far as she is concerned you're no longer alive. You were killed while escaping arrest."

The sheer brutality, the plain cruelty of that, almost drove me insane right there on the spot. I don't know what kept my hands off him. Now, of course, I realize that he was doing that deliberately to focus my hate on him, to present the bad side of it, to show me what could be done if I didn't cooperate. But I didn't know that then.

"So if I've got the name I'll have the game! Does it make any difference if I get shot in report or in fact? How would *your* wife like to know that you'd been shot down like a criminal? What would Helen say to her friends and my friends and her relatives and all the people we know?"

That was just the reaction he'd been waiting for. "I mentioned that only as a suggestion. That could be easily arranged another way. Let's say, for example, that you've been working for the Government ever since your legal discharge, in an undercover assignment, and you died in line of duty. It should be quite easy to see that your widow was awarded some sort of posthumous decoration. Would that help?"

I never thought that I would ever sit quietly and listen to someone calmly plot the complete obliteration of my whole life, my whole being. It was like one of these European novels when one sane man tries to live and find another sane person in a world of madness. A posthumous decoration. A medal for one that is dead and rotting. A nightmare with no waking up.

"And perhaps—oh, certainly!—a pension. You can rest assured your wife will never want. You see, Mr. Miller, we want to test you, and your ... ability. Perhaps this unbelievable control you have can be duplicated, or understood. That we want to find out. We want to turn inside out all the enormous potential you have. In short we want—we must—have you in strictest custody and under rigid observation. If you like, I can see that you have a military or naval commission of rank commensurate with your importance. And don't think, Mr. Miller, that you're any less important than I've stated. Right now, from this side of the fence, it looks to me that you're the most important thing this side of the invention of the wheel."

I didn't want a commission. I wanted to lead a normal life, and I wanted my wife.

"The Marines, perhaps? Or the Air Corps?"

It wasn't just the Army, or the Navy; it was the system. If I had to be a Sad Sack I'd be a civilian.

"As you like. Agreed?"

I looked at him. "Agreed? What do you want me to say? Agreed. That's a good word for you to use to me."

"You can rest assured—" He saw what must have been on my face, and stopped short. For a long minute we sat there, he thinking his thoughts, and me thinking mine. Mine weren't pleasant. Then he got up and came over to me. "Sorry. This is a pretty big meal to digest all at once. I know how you must feel."

I stared up at him. "Do you?"

Then he turned and left. Later, I don't know when, the young fellow came back alone and took me to my cell. I must have finally gotten to sleep.

The young fellow, who turned out to be a fairly good citizen named Stein, came after me the next day. He wanted me to pack. Pack? All the clothes I had were on my back.

"Toothbrush, things like that. Tell me what you want in the line of clothes and you'll get them. Or anything else, within reason."

"Anything? Anything at all?"

"Well, I said anything reasonable." We didn't have to go any further into that. He knew what I meant.

When it was dark they took us away, Stein and myself. In the back of a mail truck, cramped and silent we rode for what seemed hours. Long before we rattled to a halt I could hear the familiar roars of motors being warmed. The tailgates swung open and a twenty-foot walk put us into a military ship. That meant Selfridge Field. Stein and I sat in the old painful bucket seats, the twin

motors blasted and we trundled down the paved strip, a takeoff to nowhere. So long, Miller; so long to your wife and your home and your life. So long, Miller; you're dead and you're gone, and your wife will get a medal.

When I awoke, the cabin was stuffy, and the sun was brassy and hot and high. Stein, already awake, came up with a thermos of coffee and a snack. A peep from the ports didn't tell me where I was, not that it mattered. Somewhere in the west or southwest, on a sandy waste on the far end of a landing strip away from a cluttered group of shacks, we walked long enough to get out the kinks. Then a hurried sandwich from a picnic basket left in the cabin by an invisible steward, and we transferred to a gray amphibian. The next time I had interest enough to look out and down we were over water, and toward the rim of the world we floated for hours. I dozed off again.

Stein woke me up. Wordlessly he passed me a heavy helmet, and the kind of goggles that present a mirrored blankness to the outside world. All this time I had seen none of the crews, even when we had landed. The two of us had strolled alone in a tiny world of our own. When the pilot cut his engines for the landing I had the old style helmet on my head. It was far too big, and hurt my ears. The galloping splash we made puddled the ports high, and we bobbed awkwardly until Stein got his signal from the pilot, who popped out an impersonal arm. From the wing-struts we transferred to a Navy dory, manned by enlisted men commanded by a blank-faced ensign in dungarees. We were both wearing the concealing helmets in the stifling heat, and the ensign's "Eyes Front," did no more than keep the sailors from sneaking curious looks from the corners of their eyes.

The small boat put us alongside what looked like more of a workshop than a fighter. It might have been an oiler or a repair-ship, or it might not have even been Navy. But it was Navy clean, and the crew was Navy. Some gold braid, way out of proportion to the size of the ship, met us at the top of the ladder, saluted, God knows why, and led Stein and I to a cabin. Not too big, not too small. I heard the amphibian rev up and take off again, and the deck tilted a trifle beneath us as we gathered way. A yank, and the suffocating helmet was off and I turned to Stein.

"Navy ship?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Navy ship."

"No beer, then."

I drew a big grin this time. He was human, all right. "No beer."

Like an oven it was in that cabin. In a shower stall big enough for a midget I splashed away until I got a mouthful of water. Salt. I paddled out of there in a hurry and spent the next two hours trying to get interested in a year-old House and Home. Hours? I spent three solid days looking at that same issue, and others like it. All the sailors on the ship must have had hydroponics or its equivalent on the brain. In between times it cost me thirteen dollars I didn't have to play gin with Stein. Then—

I never did find out his real name. Neither his name, nor his job, nor what his job had to do with me, but he must have been important, from the salutes and attention he got. Maybe he'd just gotten there, maybe he'd been there all the time. He told me, when I bluntly asked him his name and what he did, that his name was Smith, and I still think of him as Smith. When he tapped on the door and stepped into that airless cabin I could smell the fans and the generals and the Federal Building all over again.

"Hello, Mr. Miller," he smiled. "Nice trip?"

"Swell trip," I told him. "Join the Navy and see the world through a piece of plywood nailed over a porthole."

When he sat down on the edge of the chair he was fussy about the crease in his pants. "Mr. Miller, whenever you are above decks, day or night, you will please keep your face concealed with that helmet, or its equivalent, no matter how uncomfortable the weather. Please."

"Since when have I been above decks? Since when have I been out of this two-by-four shack?"

"The shack," he said, "could be smaller, and the weather could be hotter. We'll see that while you're aboard you'll have the freedom of the deck after sunset. And you won't if things go right, be aboard much longer."

My ears went up at that. "No?"

"On the deck, upstairs"—he Was no Navy man, or maybe that was the impression he wanted to

give—"are racks of rockets of various sizes. You might have noticed them when you came aboard. No? Well, they have been armed; some with electrical proximity fuses, some with mechanical timing devices, and some have both. They will be sent singly, or in pairs, or in salvos, at a target some little distance away. Your job will be the obvious one. Do you think you can do it?"

"Suppose I don't?"

He stood up. "Then that's what we want to know. Ready?"

I stretched. "As ready as I'll ever be. Let's go and take the air."

"Forget something?" He pointed at the helmet, hanging back of the door.

I didn't like it, but I put it on, and he took me up, up to the rocket racks on the prow. Even through the dark lenses the sun was oddly bright. Smith pointed off to port, where a battered old hull without even a deckhouse or a mast hobbled painfully in the trough of the sea.

"Target."

He jerked a thumb at the racks.

"Rockets."

I knew what they were. I'd seen enough of them sail over my head.

"Ready?"

Yes, I was ready. He made a careless flick of his hand and an order was barked behind me. A clatter and a swoosh, and a cylinder arced gracefully, catching me almost by surprise. I felt that familiar tightening behind my eyes, that familiar tensing and hunching of my shoulders. The propellant was taking the rocket almost out of sight when the fuse fired it. "Wham!"

Caught that one in midair. Try another. Another "whoosh," and another "wham."

Then they tried it in pairs. Both of the flying darning-needles blew together, in an eccentric sweep of flame. Four, maybe five or six pairs I knocked down short of the target, some so close to us that I imagined I could feel the concussion. They switched to salvos of a dozen at a time and they blew almost in unison. They emptied the racks that way, and I was grimly amused at the queer expression of the officer in charge as the enlisted men refilled the maws of the gaping racks. Smith, the old man, nudged me a little harder than necessary.

"All racks, salvo."

All at once. I tried for a cool breath in that sweaty helmet. "Ready!"

I couldn't pick out any individual sounds. The racks vomited lightning and thunder far too fast for that. The rumble and roar bored itself into a remote corner of my brain while I watched that barnacled hulk and concentrated. I couldn't attempt to think of each rocket, or each shot, individually, so I was forced to try to erect a mental wall and say to myself, "Nothing gets past that line *there*."

watched that barnacled hulk and concentrated. I couldn't attempt to think of each rocket, or each shot, individually, so I was forced to try to erect a mental wall and say to myself, "Nothing gets past that line *there*."

And nothing did. Just like slamming into a stone wall, every rocket blew up its thrumming roar far short of the target. The racks finally pumped themselves dry, and through the smoke Smith grasped my arm tighter than I liked. I couldn't hear what he was saying, deafened as we all were by the blasts.



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"Now what's the matter with you?"

He shook his head and sat down heavily. "You know, Miller, or Pete, if you don't mind, I still don't actually believe what I've just seen."

I borrowed a light from the ubiquitous Stein. His expression told me he'd seen the matinee.

"I don't believe it either, and I'm the one that put on the show." I blew smoke in the air and gave back the lighter. "But that's neither here nor there. When do I get out of this Black Hole of Calcutta?"

"Well..." Smith was undecided. "Where would you like to spend some time when we're through with all this?"

That I hadn't expected. "You mean I have a choice?"

Noncommittally, "Up to a point. How about some island somewhere? Or in the States? Cold or warm? How, for instance, would you feel about Guam or—"

"Watched by the whole Mounted Police?" He nodded.

I didn't care. "Just someplace where no one will bother me; some place where I can play some records of the Boston Pops or Victor Herbert;" (and I guess the nervous strain of all that mental effort in all the noise and smoke was fighting a delaying action) "someplace where I can get all the beer I want, because it looks like I'm going to need plenty. Someplace where I can sit around and take things easy and have someone to—" I cut it short.

He was one of the understanding Smiths, at that. "Yes," he nodded, "we can probably arrange that, too. It may not be..." What else could he say, or what other way was there to say it?

"One more thing," he went on; "one more ... demonstration. This will take some little time to prepare." That, to me, meant one thing, and I liked it not at all. He beat me to the punch.

"This should be what is called the pay-off, the final edition. Come through on this one, and you'll be better off than the gold in Fort Knox. Anything you want, anything that money or goodwill can buy, anything within the resources of a great—and, I assure you, a grateful—nation. Everything

—"

"—everything," I finished for him, "except the right to go down to the corner store for a magazine. Everything except what better than me have called the pursuit of happiness."

He knew that was true. "But which is more important; your happiness, or the freedom and happiness of a hundred and seventy millions? Peter, if things political don't change, perhaps the freedom and happiness of over two billion, which, I believe, is the population of this backward planet."

"Yeah." The cigarette was dry, and I stubbed it in an ashtray. "And all this hangs on one person—me. That's your story." My mouth was dry, too.

His smile, I'm afraid, was more than just a little forced. "That's my story, and we're all stuck with it; you, me, all of us. No, you stay here, Stein. Let's see if we can get this over once and for all." Lines came and went on his forehead, as he felt for words.

"Let's try it this way: for the first time in written history as we know it one single deadly new weapon can change the course of the world, perhaps even change the physical course of that world, and the people who in the future will live in it. Speaking personally, as a man and as a reasonable facsimile of a technician, I find it extremely hard, almost impossible, to believe that at the exact psychic moment an apparent complete nullification of that weapon has appeared."

I grunted. "Maybe."

"Maybe. That's what we want to find out. Could you, Peter, if you were in my place, or you in your own place, get a good night's sleep tonight or any other night knowing that problem might have an answer without doing anything about it? Or are you one of these people who believe that there is no problem, that all things will solve themselves? Do you believe that, Stein? Do you think that Peter Ambrose Miller thinks that way?"

No, Stein didn't think that way, and Miller didn't think that way. We all knew that.

"All right," and he rubbed the back of his neck with a tired hand. "We have that weapon now. We, meaning the United States, and the whole wide world, from Andorra to Zanzibar. Now means today, in my lexicon. Tomorrow, and I mean tomorrow, or tomorrow of next year or the year after that, who will be the one to use that weapon? Do you know, Peter? Do you know?"

There was no need for an answer to that.

"And neither does anyone else. Peter, you're insurance. You're the cheapest and best insurance I know of. If! There's that big if. I hate that word. I always have, and I'm going to eliminate 'if,' as far as Peter Ambrose Miller is concerned. Right?"

Of course he was right. Hiroshima could just as well have been Memphis or Moscow or Middletown. And I always had wanted to be rich enough to carry my own insurance....

Before Smith left he told me it might be a month or two before he would see me again.

"These things aren't arranged overnight, you know."

I knew that.

I would be landed, he said, somewhere, someplace, and I'd be my own boss, up to a point. Stein would be with me, and the secrecy routine would still be in effect.... His voice trailed off, and I neither saw nor heard him leave.

Three miserable weeks I spent somewhere in some stinking Southern Pacific mudhole. Cocker spaniel Stein was never out of reach, or sight, and gave me the little attention I wanted. From a distance I occasionally saw Army and Navy. The enlisted men were the ones who brought me not everything I asked for, but enough to get along. Later on, I knew, I'd get the moon on ice if I were actually as valuable as appeared. At that time no one was sure, including some brass who came poking around when they thought I might be asleep. They stayed far away from me, evidently under strict orders to do just that, although they took Stein aside several times and barked importantly at him. I don't think they made much impression on Stein. I was aching for an argument at that stage, and it's just as well they dodged contact. When Smith showed up, with the usual officious body-guard, I was itching to go.

Bikini I'd seen in the newsreels, and this wasn't it. The back forty would have dwarfed it. Just a limp palm or two and an occasional skinny lump of herbiage. Ships of all naval types and a civilian freighter or so spotted themselves at anchor like jagged rocks around the compass. The gray cruiser we were on never once dropped its hook; it paced nervously back and forth, up and down, and I followed, pacing the deck. With Stein at my heels, I saw daylight only through the ports. Only at night did I get to where I could smell the salt breeze free of the stink of paint and Diesel oil. From what I know about ships and their complements we must have had at least the captain's cabin, or pretty close to its mate. We never saw the captain, or at least he was never

around when I was. The buzzing mass of brass and high civilians I knew were there, the old man told me, were and berthed on the big flattop carrier that idled off to port. Only Smith dropped in occasionally to rasp my frayed nerves deeper. With all the activity seething around us, and with only Stein and myself to keep each other company, we were getting cabin fever. I told that to Smith, who soothed me with promises.

"Tomorrow's the day."

"It better be. How are we going to work this, anyway?" I was curious, and I thought I had a right to be. "From what I hear, you better have your holes already dug."

"Too true," he agreed. "The bomb itself will be released from a drone plane, radio-controlled. We will, of course, be far enough from this island and the target installations you might have noticed going up to be out of range of radiations—"

"You hope!"

"—we hope. Your job will be to keep the bomb from detonating, or if that cannot be done, to fire it harmlessly, or as much so as possible. *That's* what we want to know. Clear?" Of course it was clear. That's what I wanted to know, too.

The sun came up out of the sea as quickly as it always does, and although the cruiser deck was almost bare far off we could see the carrier deck swarming with tiny ants. The odd-angled posts and gadgets we could see sticking up must have belonged to the technical boys, and they must have had plenty of it, if we could see it at that distance. Overhead they must have had at least eight planes of all types, from B-36's to helicopters to Piper Cubs, all dipping and floating and racing madly from one air bubble to another. Smith took time to tell me that, regardless whether the Bomb was fired by Miller or Iron Mike the explosion data would be immensely valuable.

"These things cost money," he said, "and this is killing two birds with one stone." I didn't want to be a bird, and my smile was sickly strained. Smith went off with a wry grin.

The helmet itched the back of my neck and the glasses dug into the bridge of my nose. From the open space I had to work in they must have thought I was a ferry-boat, until it dawned on me that all those armed Marines with their backs turned weren't there just for ornament. Peter Valuable Miller. Very, very, queer, I thought, that all those technicians swarming on the carrier deck could be trusted enough to build and fire a Bomb and yet couldn't be allowed to know that there might be a possible defense to that Bomb. I watched Stein scratch his back against a projecting steel rib as the Smith strolled absently out of nowhere. Stein straightened sheepishly, and the old man smiled.

"Ready?"

Why not? I gave him the same answer as before. "Ready as I ever will be."

He handed me a pair of glasses, 7 x 50. "The drone ship took off ten minutes ago. Look due north—no, north is that way—and whenever it comes into whatever you consider your range—"

"Bingo!"

"Bingo!" He liked that. "When you fire it—"

"You mean, *if* I fire it."

"If you fire it, just before, you slide the filters over the ends of your binoculars like so. Or better still, turn your back."

Turn my back? I wanted to see what was going to happen.

"All right, but make sure you get those filters down in time." He cocked an ear as someone shouted something that was carried away in the freshening breeze. "Must have picked it up with radar. Let's see if we can find it," and together we set to sweeping the northern horizon.

Radar must have been sharp that day, because the drone, a battered B-24, was right on top of us before we picked it up, a mote in the sun's brazen eye. A flurry of orders relayed to the control ship sent it soaring back into the distance, a mile or so high. Just at the limit of visibility I used the corner of my mouth to Smith.

"Hold your breath and help me out." Maybe he did, at that. "Motors. I'll try to get the motors first."

The slapping of the salty waves against the cruiser's armored hull seemed to pause in midstride. Nothing happened—nothing, until the waves, with a frustrated sigh, gave in and began again their toppling roll and hiss. Then slowly, ever so slowly, so faintly that it was only a speck in the sky, the distant dot tilted and hung suspended on a wingtip, hung, hung, hung.... A jerk, and a warped spiral. My ears rang, and the falling leaf, now swooping and sailing in agonized

humpbacked scallops, seemed to double and triple in my tear-swimming eyes. Then I tried—

There was no sound. There was no booming roar, no thunder. But I forgot to yank down those dark filters over the ends of the Zeiss. They had told me that it would be like looking at the sun. Well, the sun won't throw you flat on your back, or maybe I fell. Not quite flat; Smith threw a block as I reeled, and held me upright. I tried to tell him that I was all right, that it was just the sudden glare that paralyzed me, and to get his arms off my neck before I strangled. No attention did I get from him at all in that respect, but plenty of other unneeded help. Wriggle and swear as I might, with that helmet scoring a raw groove in my neck, I was toted below and dropped on my bunk with, I suppose, what whoever carried me would call gentleness.

The anxious officer in front of me, when the action was over, had the physician's harried look. He liked my language not one little bit, and only Smith's authority kept him from calling corpsmen to muzzle me while he examined my eyes. When my sore eyes had accustomed themselves to the dim light in the cabin, Smith led the officer to the door of the hatch or whatever they call it, explaining that the recalcitrant patient would doubtless be later in a more receptive mood.

"If you think so," I yelled at his indignant ramrod back, "you must try sticking in your head and see what happens." I don't like anyone to poke anything in my eyes anytime.

Smith shut the door quickly. "Must you bellow like that? He was trying to help you."

I knew that, but I was mad. "I don't want any help. I could have made it down here under my own power, and you know it."

Smith sat down. "These your cigarettes? Thanks." He lit his own and puffed furiously. "I don't think you can reasonably expect to be let alone, Peter. After all, you're a very valuable—"

"—piece of property. Sure. In the meantime I don't want anyone fooling around me."

He smoked in silence, thinking. That meant trouble.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

He reached for the ashtray. "Ready to talk now?"

"Sure," I said. "Talk or listen?"

"A little of both."

I talk too much. It would do me no harm to listen. "Shoot."

"This, then, Peter, is the situation; you, without a doubt, are the most remarkable person in the whole wide world. Almost an institution in yourself."

I grinned. "Like the Maine farmer; a character."

"Right. As far as I, and anyone else that has had any contact with you at all, can tell or even guess, you are absolutely and perfectly unique."

"You said that before."

"So I did. You know—" and he held my eye steadily—"you're so completely unique, and so—dangerous, that more than once I have been personally tempted to arrange your—elimination. From behind."

I couldn't put up more than a weak grin for that. I had wondered about that, myself. A variation, a deadly one, of the old "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em" theme. And I hadn't been too cooperative.

He went on, slowly. "My personal reactions, for obvious reasons, do not enter into this. But I think, Peter, that you should consider those words very seriously before you are tempted to do or say anything rash."

I agreed that he was probably right, and that it might be better if I piped a quiet tune. "But that's not the way I operate. As far as I'm concerned, I'm responsible to myself, and myself alone. If I wanted to be told what to say and what to think, and when to say it, I would have stayed in when I got my discharge."

He shrugged. "It might be better for all concerned if you were under military discipline, although it might not suit your ego. Take, for example, the two generals you met in Detroit; Generals Hayes and Van Dorf. They both are regarded as brilliant; they are both regarded as too mentally precocious to be risked in physical action. They are two of the most agile minds on the staff."

I took his word for it. "They are still generals to me. And I don't have to stand at attention, and I don't have to take their orders."

"Exactly," and he reached for the cigarettes again. "It is not going to do any good by adding more fuel to your mental furnace, but it is only fair to tell you that the ... elimination thing was more or less seriously discussed before you left Detroit."

He didn't give me a chance to blow up, but raced on. "General Hayes and General Van Dorf are sensible men, dealing in material and sensible things. You are neither practical or sensible, in many ways, this being one. They, as well equipped as they are, are not prepared to cope with such a problem presented with such as you. I might add here, that neither is anyone else. What are you laughing at?"

I couldn't help it. "The military mind at its best. First cross up the world by getting a weapon with no defense. Then when someone comes up with a defense for any weapon, including the weapon with no defense, they start turning back flips."

"Take that idiotic grin off your face." Just the same, he thought it was rather comic, himself. "Neither of us are in the Armed Forces, so for the present we can talk and plan freely. If you think, Peter, that all this can be solved with prejudice and a smart remark, you're very, very wrong. The worst is yet to come."

I asked him if I'd had a bed of roses, so far. "I don't think I could be much worse off than I've been so far. How would you like to be penned up—"

"Penned up?" He snorted disgustedly. "You've had yourself a holiday, and you can't see it. Try to see the military, the legal point of view. Here is one person, Peter Ambrose Miller, one man and only one man, with the ability, the power, to cancel at one stroke every scientific advancement that armament has made in the past three thousand years."

"And the big boys don't like it," I mused.

"The little boys, as you use the word, won't like it, either," he said. "But, that's not the point. Not the point at all. The stem of the apple is this—what are we going to do with you?"

"We?" I asked him.

"We," he explained carefully, as to a baby, "is a generic term for the army, the navy, the government, the world in general. As long as you live, as long as you continue to be able to do the things you can do now, a gun or an airplane is so much scrap metal. But—only as long as you live!"

That I didn't like. "You mean that—"

"Exactly what I said. As long as you're alive a soldier or a sailor might as well be a Zulu; useful for the length he can throw a spear or shoot an arrow, but useless as he now stands. There is no army, apparently, right now that is worth more than its body weight—again, as long as you live."

"Do you have to harp on that?"

"Why not? Do you want to live forever, or do you expect to?"

He had me there. You bet I wanted to live forever. "Well?"

He yanked pensively at his upper lip. "Two solutions; one, announce you to the world with a clang of cymbals and a roll of drums. Two, bury you someplace. Oh, figuratively speaking," he added hastily as he saw my face.

"Solution one sounds good to me," I told him. "I could go home then."

He made it quite clear that Solution One was only theoretical; he was firm about that. "Outside of rewriting all the peace treaties in existence, do you remember how our Congress huddled over the Bomb? Can you see Congress allowing you, can you see the General Staff agreeing to share you with, for example, a United Nations Commission? Can you?"

No, I couldn't.

"So," with a regretful sigh, "Solution One leaves only Solution Two. We'll grant that you must be kept under cover."

I wondered if Stein was somewhere at the earphones of a tape recorder. For someone with as big a job as the old man likely had, it seemed that we were talking fairly freely. He went on.

"And that Solution Two has within itself another unsolved problem; who watches you, and who watches the watchers?"

That didn't matter to me, and I said so.

"I suppose not to you, but it would matter to the army, and it would matter to the navy, and when J. Edgar Hoover gets around to thinking about it, it will matter to the FBI."

"So what? Would I get a choice?"

He was curious for a moment. "Would you want one?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I had a uniform once. The FBI go to college and take off their hats in the house, but they're still cops, and I don't like cops. Don't look at me like that; you wouldn't like cops either, if you made less than a couple of hundred a week. Nobody does. So I'm prejudiced against everybody, and just what difference does it make?"

"Not a great deal. I was just curious." He was honest, anyway. "But you can see the possibilities, or the lack of them."

"Look," and I got up to take as many steps as the cabin would allow. "This is where we came in. We could talk all day and get no further. All I want to know is this—what's going to happen to me, and when, and where?"

He followed me with his steady eyes. "Well, at the immediate moment, I'm afraid that—" He hesitated.

"I'm afraid that, quick like a bunny, you're going to have one solid headache if we don't quit using the same words over and over again. Here I am stuck in the middle of all the water in the world, and I'm tired, and I'm disgusted, and I'm starting to get mad. You're trying to smother my head in a pillow, I've got nothing but a first-class run-around from you and everyone I've seen, who has been one man named Bob Stein. I see nothing, I know less, I get cold shoulders and hot promises."

I sailed right on, not giving him a chance to slide in one word. "Why, there must be ten thousand men and maybe some women right upstairs, and who knows how many within a few miles from here, and do I get to even pass the time of day with any of them? Do I? You bet your sweet life I don't!"

"There aren't any women within miles of here, except nurses, and maybe a reporter, and I'm not sure about that."

"Nurses and reporters are human, aren't they?"

Had he found a chink in the armor? He frowned. "Is it women you want?"

"Sure, I want women!" I flared at him. "I want a million of them! I want Esther Williams and Minnie Mouse and anyone else that looks good to me. But I don't want them on a silver platter with a gilt chain. I want them when I want them—my wife and the waitress at Art's, and the beer I used to drink would taste a lot better than the beer you said I'd get and never seen!"

The Smith stood up and I sat down. "Women and beer. Anything else?"

"Sure," I snapped at him. "Women and beer and traffic piled up on Gratiot and the same double feature at all the movies in town—" I got a look at him. I felt silly. "All right, take out the needle. You win."

He was a gentleman. He didn't laugh. "Win? Yes, I suppose I win." Before I could think of anything else to say, he was gone.



PART II



Smith knocked early the next morning when Stein was still clearing the breakfast coffee. For that time of day he was disgustingly happy.

"The customary greeting, I believe, is good morning, is it not?"

I gulped the rest of my cup. "Yeah. What's on your mind?"

He sat down and waved away Stein's wordless offer of a cup. "How would we like to take a little trip?"

We. The editorial we. "Why not?"

"This little trip—how would you like to go back home for awhile?"

"Home?" I couldn't believe my ears, and I stared at him.

He'd made a slip, and he was sorry. "I meant, back Stateside."

I slumped back in my chair. "Then you heard me the first time. What's the difference?"

"Quite a bit of difference. No, Stein, you stay here. We're all in this together."

"Sure," I said. "Stick around. I'm the last one to find out what's going on around here."

He didn't appreciate my sarcasm. "I wouldn't say that, Peter."

"Forget it. What's the story?"

"We want you to go back where we can run some tests, this time as comprehensive as we can arrange."

I couldn't see why what we'd done wouldn't be enough. "Don't tell me you have more than the Bomb up your sleeve."

No, it wasn't like that. "There aren't more than four or six that know anything but that the Bomb was set off prematurely because of motor failure on the drone. The general knowledge is that it was just another test in routine fashion. But, as I said, there are a few that know the truth. They think it desirable that you be examined scientifically, and completely."

"Why?" I felt ornery.

He knew it, and showed a little impatience. "Use your head, Peter. You know better than that. We know you're unique. We want to know why, and perhaps how, perhaps, your ability can be duplicated."

That appealed to me. "And if you can find out what makes me tick I can go back to living like myself again?" I took his silence for assent. I had to. "Good. What do I do, and when?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, yet. You'll go to ... well, let's call it college. It shouldn't take too long. A week, maybe, maybe two, or four, at the most."

"Then what?"

He didn't know. We'd talk about that later. Okay with me. If a doctor could find out how I was whistling chords, all well and good. If not—could I be any worse off?

"Then it's settled. We'll leave today, if it can be arranged, and I feel sure it can. Robert—" to Stein—"if you'll come with me we'll try to make the necessary arrangements." Stein left, and Smith left, and I got up and looked into the mirror. I needed a shave again.

My college didn't have a laboratory worth counting when I went to school. We'd had a stadium, and a losing football team instead. Now the balding, bearded physicists sat in the front row when the appropriations were spooned out. I suppose that's all for the better. I really wouldn't know. The old fellow that met us at the front door looked like an airedale, and like an airedale he sniffed all around me before getting into combat range.

"So you're Peter Miller!"

"That's my name," I admitted. I wondered what all the dials and the gadgets were for. It looked to me like the front end of one of these computers I used to see in the magazines.

"I'm Kellner. You must be Stein, right? Never mind your coats. Just follow me," and off he trotted, and we trailed him into a bare office with what looked like the equipment of a spendthrift dentist.

"You sit here," and he waved at a straightbacked chair. I sat down, Stein shifted nervously from one foot to the other, and in a moment Kellner came back with a dozen others. He didn't bother to introduce any of them. They all stood off and gaped at who'd killed Cock Robin.

Kellner broke the silence. "Physical first?" There was a general nod. "Physical, psychological, then—we'll come to that later." To Stein: "Want to come along? Rather wait here? This is going to take some time, you know."

Stein knew that. He also wanted to come along. Those were his orders.

I felt self-conscious taking off my clothes in front of that ghoulish crew. The sheet they left me kept off no drafts, and I felt like a corpse ready for the embalmer, and likely appeared one. Stethoscope, a scale for my weight, a tape for my arm and the blood pressure, lights that blinked in my eyes and bells that rang in my ear ... when they were finished with me I felt like a used Tinker-Toy.

"Do I pass? Will I live?"

Kellner didn't like juvenile humor. He turned me over to another group who, so help me, brought out a box of children's blocks to put together, timing me with a stopwatch. They used the same stopwatch to time how long it took me to come up with answers to some of the silliest questions I ever heard outside of a nursery. Now I know why they label well the patients in an insane asylum. The man with the watch galloped off and came back with Kellner and they all stood around muttering. The sheet and I were sticking to the chair.

"Kellner. Doctor Kellner!" They didn't like me to break up the kaffeeklatch. "Can I go now? Are you all through?"

"All through?" The airedale changed to a cackling Rhode Island Red. "Joseph, you are just beginning."

"My name isn't Joseph, Dr. Kellner. It's Miller. Peter Ambrose Miller."

"Excuse me, Peter," and he cackled again. "Nevertheless, you're going to be here quite awhile."

Peter, hey? No more, Mr. Miller. Pete to my wife, Peter to my mother, and Peter to every school teacher I ever had.

They conferred awhile longer and the party broke up. Kellner and a gawkish Great Dane led me sheet and all to what I thought would be the operating room. It looked like one. I found a chair all by myself this time, and watched them hook up an electric fan. They were hipped on fans, I thought.

Kellner trotted over. "Stop that fan." Not, please stop that fan. Just, stop that fan.

I shivered ostentatiously. "I'm cold."

Kellner was annoyed. "Perfectly comfortable in here." Sure, you old goat, you got your pants on. "Come, let's not delay. Stop the fan."

I told him I was still cold, and I looked at the fan. It threw sparks, and the long cord smoked. I was going to fix those boys.

The other man yanked the cord from the wall, and from the way he sucked his fingers, it must have been hot. Kellner was pleased at that. He ignored the man's sore fingers and snarled at him until he brought out some dry cells and hooked them in series to a large bell, almost a gong. He pressed the button and it clanged.

"All right," and Kellner motioned imperiously to me. "No point in fooling. We know you can make it stop ringing. Now, go ahead and ring the bell."

I looked at him. "Make the bell ring what?"

"What?" He was genuinely puzzled. "What's this?"

"I said make the bell ring what?" He stared blankly at me. "And you heard me the first time!" He shot an astonished glance at Stein. "Oh, hell!" I got up and started out, trailing my sheet. I almost stumbled over Stein, who was right at my shoulder.

"Here, what's this?" Kellner was bouncing with excitement.

I turned on him. "Listen you; I said I was cold. Not once, but twice I said I was cold. Now, blast it, I want my clothes, and I want them now. Right now!" The airedale became a fish out of water. "Do I look like a ten-year-old in to get his tonsils out? I ask you a civil question and you smirk at me, you tell me to do this and you tell me to do that and never a please or a thank you or a kiss my foot. Don't pull that Doctor write the prescription in Latin on me, because I don't like it! Catch?" Stein was right on my heel when I headed for the door.

Poor Stein was wailing aloud. "Pete, you can't do this! Don't you know who Doctor Kellner is?"

"One big healthy pain!" I snapped at him. "Does he know who I am? I'm Pete Miller, Mister Miller to him or to anyone but my friends. I want my pants!"

Stein wrung his hands and slowed me down as much as I would let him. "You just can't get up and walk out like that!"

"Oh, no?" I came to a full stop and leered at him. "Who's going to stop me?"

That's the trouble with the doctors and lawyers and technical boys; they're so used to talking over people's heads they can't answer a civil question in less than forty syllables. Keep all the secrets in the trade. Write it in Latin, keep the patient in the dark, pat his head and tell him papa knows best.

When Kellner caught up with us he had help. "Here, here, my man. Where do you think you are going?"

I wished he was my age and forty pounds heavier. "Me? I'm getting out of here. And I'm not your

man and I never will be. When you can admit that, and not act like I'm a set of chalkmarks on a blackboard, send me a letter and tell me about it. One side, dogface!"

One big fellow, just the right size, puffed out his cheeks. "Just whom do you think you are addressing?"

Whom. I looked him over. I never did like people who wore van Dyke goatees. I put whom and van Dyke on the floor. It was a good Donnybrook while it lasted. The last thing I remember was the gong in the next room clanging steadily while Stein, good old Stein, right in there beside me was swinging and yelling, "Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him!"

I woke up with another headache. When I sat up with a grunt and looked around I saw Stein and his nose four inches from a mirror, gingerly trying his tongue against his front teeth. I snickered. He didn't like that, and turned around.

"You don't look so hot yourself."

He was right. I couldn't see much out of my left eye. We grinned at each other. "Right in there pitching, weren't you?"

He shrugged. "What did you expect me to do?"

"Run for help," I told him. "Or stand there and watch me get a going over."

"Sure." He looked uncomfortable. "I'm supposed to keep an eye on you."

"So you did." I thought back. "What happened to Whom when I addressed him properly?"

It must have hurt his cheek when he tried to smile. "Still out, at last report. You know, Pete, you have a fairly good left—and a lousy temper."

I knew that. "I just got tired of getting pushed around. Besides, with no pants I was stuck to that chair."

"Probably." His tongue pushed gently against his sore lip. "You think that was the right way to go about making things better?"

Maybe not. But did he have any better ideas?

He wasn't sure, but he didn't think a laboratory was just the right place for a brawl.

"Just why I started it. Now what?"

He didn't know that either. "Kellner is having hysterics, and I just made some phone calls."

If the Old Man showed up I had some nice words ready to use. "Now we might get some action."

Stein gave me a sour look. "Not necessarily the kind you'll like. I'll be back after I try to talk some sense into Kellner."

"Hey!" I yelled after him. "Where's my pants?"

"Back in a few minutes," he tossed over his shoulder; "make yourself comfortable," and he left.

Comfortable with a cot and a mirror and a washbowl. I washed my face and lay on the cot with a washrag soaked in cold water on my throbbing eye. I must have dozed off. When I woke the Old Man was standing over me. I sat up and the rag fell off my eye.

"What's cooking, Bossman?"

I don't think his frown was completely genuine. "You, apparently."

I swung my legs over the edge of the cot and stretched. "Have a seat and a cigarette."

He sat down beside me and reached for his lighter. "Peter, I wish—"

I cut in on him. "Item one, I want my pants."

He gestured impatiently. "You'll get them. Now—"

"I said, I want my pants."

He began to get annoyed. "I told you—"

"And I told you I want my pants. I don't want them later or in a while; I want my pants and I want them now."

He sat back and looked at me. "What's all this?"

I let fly. "For the record, I want my pants. I'm certainly no patient in this morgue, and I'm not going to be treated like one, so whatever you or anyone else has got to say to me is not going to be while I'm as bare as a baby. My mind's made up," and I scrunched together ungracefully on the little space that remained on my end of the cot and pulled the sheet over my head. Kid stuff, and we both knew it.

He didn't say anything, although I could feel his eyes boring through the flimsy sheet, and I lay there until I felt the springs creak as he got up and I could hear his footsteps retreating. When he came back with my clothes over his arm I was sitting up. While I was dressing he tried to talk to me, but I would have none of it.

When I was dressed I said, "Now, you were saying—?"

I drew a long speculative stare. "Peter, what's eating you?"

I told him. "I just got tired of being shoved around. With the physical exam over with you give me one reason why I should sit around in my bare hide. Am I a machine? My name's Miller, not the Patient in Cell Two."

He thought he was being reasonable. "And you think you get results by knocking around people that are trying to help you?"

"With some people, you do. I tried talking, and that didn't work. I got action my way, didn't I?"

He sighed. "Action, yes. Do you know what Kellner said?"

"Not interested. Whatever he's got to say to me is going to have a please in front and a thank you after."

Wearily, "Peter, must you always act like a child?"

"No, I don't," I blazed at him. "But I'm damn well going to. I'm free, white and a citizen, and I'm going to be treated like one, and not a side-show freak!"

"Now, now," he soothed. "Doctor Kellner is a very famous and a very busy man. He might not have realized—"

"Realize your hat! He's so used to living in the clouds he thinks the world is one big moron. Well, I may be one, but no one is going to tell me I am!"

"I see your point," and he stood up. "But you try to be a little more cooperative. I'll see Kellner now," and he started out.

"Cooperative?" I bellowed at his back. "What do you think I've been doing? What do you—"

He must have read the riot act. When they took me in to Kellner and his crew it was "please, Mr. Miller" and "thank you, Mr. Miller." The place didn't seem so cold and bare so long as I had my pants. I didn't see Whom and his van Dyke, but I hoped it was the tile floor and not me that gave him the concussion.

The rest of the tests, you can imagine, were almost anticlimactic. I stopped motors, blew tubes, turned lights off and on, rang bells and cooked the insulation on yards and yards of wire. My head they kept connected with taped terminals and every time I blew a fuse or a motor they would see the dials spin crazily. Then they would stand around clucking and chattering desperately. They took X-rays by the score, hoping to find something wrong with the shape of my head, and for all the results they got, might have been using a Brownie on a cue ball. Then they'd back off to the corner and sulk. One little bearded rascal, in particular, to this day is certain that Kellner was risking his life in getting within ten feet. He never turned his back on me that I recall; he sidled around, afraid I would set his watch to running backwards. You know, one of the funniest and yet one of the most pathetic things in the world is the spectacle of someone who has spent his life in mastering a subject, only to find that he has built a sled without runners. Long before we were finished I thought Kellner, for one, was going to eat his tie, stripes and all. Running around in ever-widening circles they were, like coon dogs after a scent. They didn't get a smell. The medico who ran the electro-cardiograph refused to make sense, after the fifth trials, out of the wiggly marks on his graphs.

"Kellner," he stated flatly, "I don't know just what your game is, but these readings are not true."

Kellner didn't like that. Nor did he like the man who wanted to shave my head. I wouldn't let them do that. I look bad enough now. I compromised by letting them soak my head in what smelled like water, and then tying or pasting strands of tape all over my scalp. A pretty mess I was, as bad as a woman getting a permanent wave. Worse. One whole day I stood for that. This specialist, whatever he did, had Kellner get me to run through my repertoire of bells and fans and buzzers while he peered nearsightedly at his elaborate tool shop. When the fuse would blow or the bell would ring, the specialist would wince as though he were pinched. Kellner stood over his shoulder saying at intervals, "What do you get? What do you get?" Kellner finally got it. The specialist stood up, swore in Platt-deutsch, some at Kellner and some at me and some at his machine, and left in all directions. The gist of it was that he was too important and too busy to have jokes played on him. Kellner just wagged his head and walked out.

The Old Man said, "You're not one bit different from anyone else."

"Sure," I said. "I could have told you that long ago. It shouldn't take a doctor."

"Miller, what in blazes are we going to do with you?"

I didn't know. I'd done my share. "Where do we go from here?"

The Old Man looked out the window. The sun was going down. "Someone wants to see you. He's been waiting for Kellner to finish with you. We leave tonight."

"For where?" I didn't like this running around. "Who's 'he'?"

"For Washington. You'll see who it is."

Washington, more than just a sleeper jump away. Washington? Oh, oh.... Well, let's get it over with. We did. We left for the capital that night.

We slipped in the back door, or what passed for the back door. Pretty elaborate layout, the White House. Our footsteps rang as hollow as my heart on the shiny waxed floors.

The Old Man did the honors. "Mr. President, this is Mr. Miller."

He shook hands. He had a good grip.

"General Hayes, you know. Admiral Lacey, Admiral Jessop, Mr. Hoover you know, General Buckley. Gentlemen. Mr. Miller."

We shook hands all around. "Glad to know you." My palms were slippery.

The President sat, and we followed suit. The guest of honor, I felt like my head was shaved, and I had a slit pants leg. You don't meet the President every day.

The President broke the ice. It was thin to begin with. "You have within yourself the ability, the power, to do a great deal for your country, Mr. Miller, or would you prefer to be called Pete?"

Pete was all right. He was older, and bigger. Bigger all around.

"A great deal of good, or a great deal of harm."

No harm. I'm a good citizen.

"I'm sure of that. But you can understand what I mean, by harm."

Likely I could, if I really wanted to. But I didn't. Not the place where you were born.

"Naturally, Pete, it makes me feel a great deal better, however, to hear you say and phrase it just like that." The light of the lamp glittered on his glasses. "Very, very much better, Pete."

I was glad it was dark beyond the range of the lamp. My face was red. "Thank you, Mr. President."

"I like it better, Pete, because from this day on, Pete, you and I and all of us know that you, and you alone, are going to have a mighty hard row to hoe." That's right; he was a farmer once. "Hard in this respect—you understand, I know, that for the rest of your natural life you must and shall be guarded with all the alert fervor that national security demands. Does that sound too much like a jail sentence?"

It did, but I lied. I said, "Not exactly, Mr. President. Whatever you say is all right with me."

He smiled. "Thank you, Pete.... Guarded as well and as closely as—the question is, where?"

I didn't know I'd had a choice. The Old Man had talked to me before on that.

"Not exactly, Pete. This is what I mean: General Buckley and General Hayes feel that you will be safest on the mainland somewhere in the Continental United States. Admirals Lacey and Jessop, on the other hand, feel that the everpresent risk of espionage can be controlled only by isolation, perhaps on some island where the personnel can be exclusively either military or naval."

I grinned inwardly. I knew this was going to happen.

"Mr. Hoover concedes that both possible places have inherent advantages and disadvantages," the President went on. "He feels, however, that protection should be provided by a staff specially trained in law-enforcement and counter-espionage."

So where did that leave me? I didn't say it quite that way, but I put across the idea.

The President frowned a bit at nothing. "I'm informed you haven't been too ... comfortable."

I gulped. Might as well be hung for a sheep. If the Boss likes you, the Help must. "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but it isn't much fun being shifted around pillar and post."

He nodded slowly. "Quite understandable, under the circumstances. That, we'll try to eliminate as much as we can. You can see, Pete," and he flashed that famous wide grin, "it will be in the national interest to see that you are always in the finest physical and mental condition. Crudely expressed, perhaps, but the truth, nevertheless."

I like people to tell me the truth. He could see that. He's like that, himself. On his job, you have to be like that.

"Now, Pete; let's get down to cases. Have you any ideas, any preferences, any suggestions?" He took a gold pencil out of his breast pocket and it began to twirl.

I had an idea, all right. "Why not just let me go back home? I'll keep my mouth shut, I won't blow any fuses or raise any hell, if you'll excuse the expression."

Someone coughed. The President turned his head out of the circle of light. "Yes, Mr. Hoover?"

J. Edgar Hoover was diffident. "Er ... Mrs. Miller has been informed of her husband's ... demise. An honorable one," he hastened to add, "and is receiving a comfortable pension, paid from the Bureau's special funds."

"How much?" I wanted to know.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well ... a hundred a month."

I looked at the President. "Bought any butter lately?"

The President strangled a cough. "Have you, Mr. Hoover, bought any butter lately?"

J. Edgar Hoover couldn't say anything. It wasn't his fault.

I flicked a glance at General Hayes. "How much does it cost the Army for an anti-aircraft gun?" I looked at one of the admirals. "And how much goes down the drain when you launch a battleship? Or even a PT boat?"

The President took over. "Rest assured, Mr. Miller. Your wife's pension is quadrupled, effective immediately." He swung his chair to face Hoover; "Cash will be transferred tomorrow to the Bureau from the State Department's special fund. You'll see to that?" to the Old Man. So that was what he did for a living. That State Department is a good lifetime job, I understand.

That took a load from my mind, but not all. I spoke to Hoover directly.

"How is my ... widow?"

As tense and as bad as I felt just then, I was sorry for him.

"Quite well, Mr. Miller. Quite well, considering. It came as a blow to her, naturally—"

"What about the house?" I asked him. "Is she keeping up the payments?"

He had to admit that he didn't know. The President told him to finish the payments, pay for the house. Over and above the pension? Over and above the pension. And I was to get a regular monthly report on how she was getting along.

"Excuse me, Mr. President. I'd rather not get a regular monthly report, or any word at all, unless she—unless anything happens to her."

"No report at all, Pete?" That surprised him, and he eyed me over the top of his bifocals.

"She's still young, Mr. President," I said, "and she's just as pretty as the day we got married. I don't think I'd want to know if ... she got married again."

The quiet was thick enough to slice. If they talked about Helen any more I was going to throw something. The President saw how I felt.

"Now, Mr. Miller—Pete. Let's get back to business. You were saying—?"

Yes, I had an idea. "Put me on an island somewhere, the further away the better. I wouldn't like being around things without being able to be in the middle. Better put me where I can't weaken, where I can't sneak out a window or swim back." Everyone was listening. "Keep the uniforms away from me, out of sight." The Brass didn't like that, but they heard me out. "Feed me a case of beer once in a while and a few magazines and some books and right boys to play euchre. I guess that's all I want."

The gold pencil turned over and over. "That isn't very much, Pete."

"That's all. If I'm going to do the Army's and the Navy's work they can leave me alone till they need me. If I can't live my life the way I want, it makes no difference what I do. My own fault is that all my family lived to be eighty, and so will I. Is that what you wanted to know?"

The gold pencil rolled off the table. "Yes, yes, Pete. That's what I wanted to know."

I tried once more. "There isn't any way I can just go home?"

A slow shake of his head, and finality was in his voice. "I'm afraid there isn't any way." And that was that.

The President stood up in dismissal, and we all rose nervously. He held out his hand. "Sorry,

Pete. Perhaps some day...."

I shook his hand limply and the Old Man was at my elbow to steer me out. Together we paced back through the dark hall, together we stepped quietly out into the black Washington night. Our footsteps echoed softly past the buildings of the past and the future. The car was waiting; Stein, the driver. The heavy door slammed, and the tires hissed me from the pavement.

The Old Man's voice was gentle. "You behaved well, Peter."

"Yeh."

"I was afraid, for a moment, that you were going to kick over the traces. The President is a very important man."

"Yeh."

"You are, too. Right now, probably the most important man in the world. You took it very well."

"Yeh."

"Is that all you have to say?"

I looked out the window. "Yeh," and he fell quiet.

Stein got us to the airport, and there was waiting an Army ship for the three of us. I might have been able to see the Monument or the Capitol when we were airborne. I don't know. I didn't look.

Later I asked Stein where we were going. He didn't know. I prodded the Old Man out of a doze. I wished I could sleep.

He hesitated. Then, "West. Far west."

"West." I thought that over. "How much out of your way would it be to fly over Detroit?"

"You couldn't see much."

I knew that. "How much out of your way?"

Not too much. He nodded to Stein, who got up and went forward. After he came back and sat down the plane slipped on one wing and straightened on its new course. No one said anything more after that.

We hit Detroit about five thousand feet, the sun just coming up from Lake Ste. Clair. Smith was right. Although I craned my neck I couldn't see much. I picked up Gratiot, using the Penobscot Tower for a landmark, and followed it to Mack, and out Mack. I could just pick out the dogleg at Connors, and imagined I could see the traffic light at Chalmers. I had to imagine hard. The way we were flying, the body and the wing hid where I'd lived, where—the cigarette I had in my fist tasted dry, and so did my mouth, so I threw it down and closed my eyes and tried to sleep. Somewhere around Nebraska we landed for fuel.

Maybe it was Kansas. It was flat, and hot, and dry. The Old Man and Stein and I got out to stretch. There was no shade, no trees, no green oasis for the traveler. The olive drab tanker that pulled up to pump gas into our wing tanks was plastered with "No Smoking" tabs, and we walked away before the hose was fully unreeled. Off to our right was the only shade, back of the landing strip, a great gray hangar glutted with shiny-nosed, finny monsters. Out of the acrid half-pleasant reek of high-octane, we stood smoking idly, watching the denimed air-crews clamber flylike over the jutting wings. From the post buildings off to the right jounced a dusty motorcycle. We watched it twist to a jerking stop at our refueling ship, and the soldier that dismounted bobbed in salute to the two pilots watching the gassing operation. Two motions only they used; one to return the salute and another to point us out in the shadow of the hangar. The soldier shaded his eyes from the sun to peer in our direction, calculated the distance with his eye, and then roared his motorcycle almost to our feet.

"Post Commander's compliments," he barked. "And will the gentlemen please report at once to the Colonel's office?"

The Old Man eyed the motorcycle and the empty sidecar. He looked at Stein.

"Better stay here," he said thoughtfully. "If I need you, I'll come back." He climbed awkwardly into the sidecar, and the soldier, after a hesitant acceptance, kicked the starter. The Old Man gripped the sides firmly as they bounced away in the baking breeze, and Stein looked absently at his watch. It was close to noon.

At twelve-thirty the gas truck rolled ponderously back to its den. At one, our two pilots struck out across the strip for the post buildings, shimmering in the heat. At one-thirty, I turned to Stein, who had been biting his nails for an hour.

"Enough is enough," I said. "Who finds out what—you or I?"

He hesitated, and strained his eyes. The Old Man, nor anyone, was not in sight. The post might have been alone in the Sahara. He chewed his lip.

"Me, I guess." He knew better than to argue with me, in my mood. "I'll be back. Ten minutes," and he started for the post. He got no further than half the distance when an olive sedan, a big one, raced toward us. It stopped for Stein, sucked him into the front seat, whirled back past me to our plane standing patiently, and dumped out our two pilots. A final abrupt bounding spin brought it to the hangar. The Old Man leaned out of the back door.

"In, quick," he snapped.

I got in, and the soldier driver still had the sedan in second gear when we got to our ship. One motor was already coughing, and as we clambered into the cabin the starter caught the second. Both propellers vanished into a silvered arc, and without a preparatory warmup we slewed around and slammed back in the bucket seats in a pounding takeoff. Stein went forward to the pilot's cabin, and I turned, half-angrily, to the Smith. His face was etched with bitterness. Something was wrong, something seriously wrong.

"What's up?" I asked. "What's the big hurry?"

He flicked a sidelong glance at me, and his brows almost met. He looked mad, raving mad.

"Well?" I said. "Cat got your tongue?" I noticed then that he was fraying and twisting a newspaper. I hadn't seen a newspaper for what seemed years. Stein came back and sat on the edge of the seat. What in blazes was the matter?

Smith said something unprintable. That didn't sound right, coming from that refined face. I raised my eyebrows.

"Leak," he ended succinctly. "There's been a leak. The word's out!"

That was a surprise. A big one.

"And it's thanks to you!"

"Me?"

He flipped the newspaper at me. I caught it in midair, and there it was, smeared all over the face of the Kansas City *Sentinel*. Great, black, tall shrieking streamer heads:

AMERICA HAS ATOMIC DEFENSE!

I scanned the two columns of stumbling enthusiastic prose that trailed over on to Page Two. Stein came over and leaned over my shoulder and breathed on my ear as we read. He hadn't seen the sheet, either. It ran something like this:

America, it was learned today, has at last an absolute defense, not only to the atomic bomb, but to every gun, every airplane, every engine, every weapon capable of being used by man. Neither admitted nor denied at this early date by even the highest government officials, it was learned by our staff late last night that America's latest step forward....

Column after column of stuff like that. When the reporter got through burbling, he did have a few facts that were accurate. He did say it was my doing that set off the last atomic bomb test; he did say that I was apparently invulnerable to violence powered by electrical or internal combustion engines; he did say what I could do, and what I had done, and how often. He didn't say who I was, or what I looked like, or where I'd come from, or what I did or didn't know.

Sprinkled through the story—and I followed it back to Page 32 and the pictures rehashed of the traffic jam in Detroit—were references to T. Sylvester Colquhoun, the boy who dumped the original plate of beans. He attested this and swore to that. Whoever he was, wherever he got his information, he—there was his picture on Page 32, big as life and twice as obnoxious; Mr. Whom and the van Dyke.

Guiltily I handed the paper over to Stein, who turned back to the front page and started again from the beginning. I tried to carry things off in the nonchalant manner, but I couldn't. I had to watch the Old Man light a cigarette with fumbling fingers, take a few snorting puffs, and crush it viciously under his heel. Miller and his temper.

Whom—or T. Sylvester Colquhoun—had, quite obviously, a grudge against the short left that had given him his concussion. According to the *Sentinel*, he had babbled a bit when he was released from the hospital, and an alert newshawk had trailed him to his home and bluffed him into spilling the whole story. He had sense enough, at that late stage of the game, to keep my name out of it, if he ever knew it. The reporter had gone to his editor with the story, who had laughed incredulously at first, and then checked Kellner at the laboratory. Kellner had clammed up, and when the now suspicious editor had tried to check Colquhoun's tale personally, Colquhoun had vanished. A snooping neighbor had noted the license of the car that had taken him away. The Highway Department—the editor must have moved fast and decisively—showed the license plate as issued to a man the editor knew personally as a special agent of the Kansas City Branch of the FBI.

Then hell began to pop. Repeated long-distance calls to Washington ran him up against a stone wall. The answers he got convinced him that there was something to Colquhoun's wild tale, something weird and yet something that had a germ of truth. (Half of this, understand, was in the

Sentinel. The other half I picked up later on, adding two and two.) As he was sitting mulling things over it was his turn to get a call from Washington. The State Department was on the line; Morgan, the Under Secretary.

Morgan fairly yelled at him. "Where did you get that information? What's the idea?" and so on. That clinched it for the editor. Then it was he knew.

Morgan made his mistake there. He began to threaten, and the editor hit the ceiling. Hit it hard, because he stretched things a little. He stretched it more than just a little.

He said, "Furthermore, that's on the street right now—this is a newspaper, not a morgue!"

It wasn't on the street, the editor knew. Perhaps he wanted to throw a scare into Morgan, perhaps—But Morgan!

Morgan gasped, "Oh, my God!" and hung up with a bang.

The editor flipped a mental coin. His circulation was not what it should be, the boss had been riding him lately, his job might be where a beat would tilt the balance up or down. The national safety that Morgan had shouted about—well, if we had the perfect weapon and the perfect defense, what was there to fear? And this *was* a newspaper, not a morgue! They replated, and the first extras hit the street to wake up half the city. The wire services had the story and extras were rolling throughout the country, or the world, about the time I was watching the sun over Lake Ste. Clair.

Neither the State Department nor the FBI were on their toes that day. Instead of denying everything, or instead of laughing heartily at the pipedream of an editor trying to sell an extra edition or two, whoever was pulling the strings behind the scenes demanded flatly that all wire services kill and disregard all references to Colquhoun. No one ever made a newspaperman do what he really didn't want to do. The very fact that the government was so eager to kill the story made every newsman worthy of his salt all the more eager to break the paper-thin shell around the meaty yolk. By noon, the time we landed for fuel, every Washington correspondent for every news service had a little different story for his boss, the White House was practically besieged at the mere rumor that the President was to issue a statement, and the State Department was going quietly mad.

"Not so quietly, at that," the Old Man said sourly. "One hour straight I stayed on that telephone. One hour straight I talked to one bunch of raving maniacs, and all the common sense I heard would go into your left eye."

By that time his temper had cooled below melting, and we were again on reasonably good terms. I was curious to know just who the Old Man had talked to.

He grunted. "Just about everyone in Washington with any authority at all. No one with any intelligence."

I could appreciate that. I have a very low opinion of anyone who stays in Washington any longer than necessary.

I asked him, "We're apparently heading back there. Why? Where were we going when they stopped us?"

He wasn't sure. "I wanted to keep on going," he said, "and get you out of the country. I still think that would have been best. There was to be a cruiser waiting at Bremerton for a shakedown cruise. But whoever is running all this—and I don't think that the President has thought too much about it—wants us to get back to Washington for another conference."

"Another meeting?" I was disgusted. Washington political rashes manifest themselves most often by the consistent eruption of conferences in which nothing is said, nothing decided, nothing done. "What does who think what?"

He blinked, and then smiled. "I couldn't say. I've been in this game only twenty years. At any rate, you can see who's worried."

I didn't see, exactly.

"No?" He was amused. "Don't you remember the discussion we had about who was going to watch the watchers? Now that there's been a leak, the Army is going to blame the Navy, the Navy is going to blame the FBI, and I take punishment from all three." He sighed. "My department seems, invariably, to be in the middle."

I let it go at that. I didn't have the heart to remind him that a good portion of the trouble and friction this country has had in its history has been because the State Department has been sitting on the water bucket when it should have been playing deep centerfield. No use worrying about things until the fuse is burnt half its length, I thought. That might be, for me and all of us, a good policy to adopt, for the time being. Let the boys at the top fret and worry; let them wrack their brains and beat their heads against the wall. I'd do what they told me, if I could. The man that pays the salary worries about the unemployment tax.

"Stein," I said, "are there any more of those sandwiches?"

The Old Man settled back in his seat and began to read the Kansas City *Sentinel* all over again. He was still worried when we landed in Washington.

He left in a waiting black sedan, and Stein and I stayed in the ship until it was yanked into a dark hangar by a tiny tractor with great rubber tires. We slid out the back of the hangar when the wary Stein thought it was safe, and a taxi rolled us to the Mayflower. There we registered, I was told, as James Robertson and William Wakefield, Wisconsin Dells.

"Milwaukee," I suggested, "has better beer."

He took the hint, and when the waiter brought our late dinner, the ice bucket had eight frosty bottles. They practically sizzled when they went down. Bob Stein, at times, had some earmarks of genius, even if you had to lay them bare with an axe.

The first day wasn't bad; we sat around, drank beer and ate huge thick sirloins on the swindle sheet, and told all the stories we knew. The radio was blurting either soap operas, hill-billy music, or lentil-mouthed commentators. The story broken in the *Sentinel* was gathering momentum, by what we read and heard, and that was too close to home. So we made a pact to turn off the radio and keep it that way. We never missed it.

The second day the beer tasted as good as ever. The steaks were just as thick and just as tender, the hotel service just as unobtrusive. Stein was just as cheerful and as pleasant company. But I spent a lot of time looking out the window.

"You know, Bob," I said thoughtfully, "how would you like a big plate of spaghetti? Or ravioli? Maybe some pizza?"

He came out of the bathroom wiping his face with a towel, his hair wet and frizzled.



"Am I going to have trouble with you?" He was pessimistic. "Aren't you ever satisfied?"

I turned away from the window and let the curtain flap in the breeze. "Who wants to be satisfied? How about some sub-gum war mein, or chicken cacciatora?"

He tossed the towel back through the open door. "Now, look here," he protested.

I laughed at him. "Okay, but you get the point."

He did, but he didn't know what he could do about it. "We were supposed to wait here until—"

That one I'd heard before. "Until the hotel freezes over, sure. But I don't want to freeze. Do you?"

No, nor to rust. You could see that he liked his job of body-guard and factotum, and yet....

I pushed him over the edge. "Tell you what to do," I said. "You call up and say that I'm getting restless. Say that you're afraid I'll ease out of here when your back is turned. Say anything you

like, as long as you lay it on thick, and I'll back you up. Okay?"

He weighed it awhile. He liked inaction, no matter how sybaritic as much as I. Then, "Okay," and he reached for the telephone.

The number he gave answered the first ring.

"I'm calling for Mr. Robertson," he said. "This is Mr. William Wakefield. W. W. Wakefield." He paused. Then, "Ordinarily, I wouldn't, but Mr. Robertson felt that I should get in touch with you at once."

The other end squawked, nervously, I thought.

Stein thought so, too. "That's quite possible. However, Mr. Robertson feels that his time here in Washington is valuable. So valuable that he thinks that his business is soon going to call him back to Wisconsin Dells, if the merger referred to is delayed any longer. I beg your pardon?"

He twisted to throw me a wink over his shoulder as the telephone chattered frantically.

"That's exactly what I told Mr. Robertson.... Yes, he knows of that.... Yes, I have assured him that, in these days of business uncertainty and production difficulties, mergers are not as easily arranged as—" That Stein had a sense of humor when he wanted to use it.

"Is that right? I'm glad to hear it. One moment, while I check with Mr. Robertson." He held his hand over the mouthpiece and grinned at me. "They are ready to have a stroke. This man I'm talking to has no more authority than a jackrabbit, and he knows it. He wants to check with his boss, and call us back later. All right with you, Mr. Robertson?"

I laughed out loud, and he clamped the mouthpiece tighter. "I think so, Mr. W. W. Wakefield. As long as he puts the heat on that merger."

He went back on the telephone. "Mr. Robertson thinks he might be able to wait a trifle longer. He asked me to warn you, that as he is a very busy man, every minute of his time can cost a considerable amount of money and goods.... Yes, I'll tell him that.... I'll be waiting for your call.... Yes, I will. Thank you, and good-bye." He hung up the telephone with a flourish.

"Satisfied, Mr. Robertson?"

I was satisfied. "Quite, Mr. W. W. Wakefield. Wouldst care for ein bier?"

Ein bier haben. He would.

The telephone rang about an hour later, and I answered it. It was the Old Man's voice.

"Mr. Robertson?" he said cautiously.

"Mr. Robertson speaking," I said. "Yes?"

"I'm calling," he told me in a voice that said he was annoyed, but didn't want to show it, "in reference to the Wisconsin Dells merger."

"Yes?" I gave him no help.

"You understand, Mr. Robertson, that such an important merger can hardly be arranged at a moment's notice."

Yes, I understood that. "But two days notice is more than sufficient, even allowing for an enormous amount of red tape." I put real regret into my voice. "It is not that I wouldn't like to let nature take its course, but other things must be taken into consideration." I hoped I sounded like the busy executive. "I believe that Mr. Wakefield, Mr. W. W. Wakefield, has explained that I am a very busy man, and that I can hardly be expected to wait indefinitely in even such a pleasant atmosphere."

The Old Man forced a cheery—and false—heartiness. "There are, or there might be, Mr. Robertson, other things that might induce you to stay. Many other things."

Threaten me, would he? "That, I doubt very much. I'm afraid I must insist—it's now two-twenty. If a merger, or at least a meeting cannot be arranged by tomorrow at the very latest, the reason for having a meeting will, for all practical purposes, have ceased to exist. Do I make myself clear?"

I certainly did. With a short-tempered bang, Smith hung up, after saying that he would call back later. I relayed the conversation to Bob Stein, and we sent down for lunch.

The Old Man called back about seven, when I was washing up, and Bob answered the telephone. By the time I came out he had all the information we needed, and was calling room service to clear the dishes.

"Meeting tonight," he said when he was finished. He was pleased with himself.

"Good." It was getting a little tiresome being cramped up. "When? Where?"

He shrugged. "Where? I couldn't say. Someone will call for us, somewhere between nine and ten."

And," he added slowly, "it might be a good idea to wear the best bib and tucker, with Sunday School manners."

"Oh?" I said, "that kind of a party? Fine. I'm all ready now. Better get your hat."

At ten-thirty, the telephone rang. I answered it.

"This is the desk," it said. "Mr. Wakefield?"

"He's here," I said. "Wait a minute," and I passed the phone to Stein.

"Wakefield," he said. "Yes?"

The receiver chattered briefly.

"All right," and he waved at me. "Be right down." He turned. "Car waiting." It didn't take us long to get downstairs.

It was a sedan with a neat little drive-yourself tab on the right-hand door. Before we got near the car, Stein was careful to see who was the driver. He evidently was someone he knew, so Bob nodded curtly, and we got in and pulled away from the curb.

I don't know Washington at all, so I can't say where we made port. Not too far a drive, I imagine, if we had gone there directly. It was a good forty-five minutes before we ended our erratic turning of corners and sped up a long tree-bordered driveway.

"Nice place," I said to Stein as we braked to a stop in front of a long white-columned Southern portico. "Who lives here?"

He smiled and shook his head. "That's something I don't know. Does it matter?"

It didn't.

As we strode up the steps the Drive-Yourself pulled away, tires crackling on the white gravel. We both reached for the knocker at the same time, but before we had it, the door swung open. Stein recognized the young fellow who opened it and took our hats. A message passed between their eyes, and the young man almost imperceptibly shook his head in negation.

"Will you come this way, please?" and he led us down the hall.

The house was smaller than the outside had led me to expect. The builder had gone whole hog on the giant Greek columns and the wide sweep of the porch, and the inside of the house showed the results of the skimping. Not that it wasn't a far bigger and a far more expensive house than any average man would hope to have, but the limited space inside didn't go with those sweeping curves of the drive. I wondered who lived there.

The room where the doorman left us went with the inside of the house. So small it reminded me of the times when I tried to sell brushes during the depression, in Grosse Pointe, I expected every moment to have an underpaid maid, laundress, and butler come in to tell me that the lady of the house was out. In keeping with the faded appointments of the tiny room, a Chinese table held, for those who wait and read, an ancient collection of "Spur" and "Town and Country." As we sat and smoked, far off through the thin walls we could hear the soft rumble of voices. Occasionally a bass would rise above the sound, and a baritone would slide softly and soothingly across the pained roar. The front door opened and closed twice during the fifteen minutes or so we waited, and the footsteps that came in went past our room and pattered further down the hall. Each time, when the steps were out of reach of hearing, another door would open, and the distant voices would become almost distinguishable until the door again was shut. I looked curiously around the walls. Decorated with prints and pictures they were, yes, but with that faded permanency that to me spells the furnished house. The rugs were worn, worn to the shredding point, worn until the spurious Oriental design seemed an eerie Dali drawing. All it needed was the faroff smell of secondhand ham and cabbage.

The doorman slipped in and beckoned to us, a grim conspirator if ever I saw one. We followed him back to the entrance hall, back, back, to where the voices grew louder at every step. A double door—golden oak, or I don't know wood—barred the end of the hall, and the young fellow preceded us to throw it open with a semi-flourish. We walked in.

The place was blue with smoke. That was the first thing we saw. Lights there were in plenty, hanging around, hanging over the great oval table in the center of the room in a fiery glitter of glassy brilliants. The room was enormous, and I began to realize why this house was still in existence. Who cares about rugs if there is just one single room in the house where a ball or a party could be comfortably accommodated. Or a conference. I didn't know whose name appeared on the tax bills, but I would bet that it would be any other name besides the United States Government.

No group of men or women could produce that much smoke in a short time. That meeting had been going on for hours. As we stepped in through the double doors I tried to pick out anyone I knew, but the glare flickered in my eyes and I saw no face as more than just a pale blur against a background of tenuous blue. Tentatively I got inside the doors and they shut behind me with an

abrupt finality. Two steps forward, three, four, five, and Stein drifted away from my side, away from the eyes that grew in size as I got closer to the table rim, toward the vacant chairs I saw slightly pulled away and ready for occupants. I stumbled over nothing and a reassuring hand touched mine. I felt callow, self-conscious, awkward. I never thought I'd be so glad to see Old Man Smith.

He stood alongside me as I sank gratefully into my ready chair. "Gentlemen," he announced quietly, "Mr. Peter A. Miller."

I half-bowed automatically, the proper thing to do, and the Old Man gave me his moral support by sitting next to me. He leaned over to say, "I won't introduce you formally. Point out who you want to know and I'll tell you who he is."

"Okay," I muttered, and felt in my pockets for cigarettes. I had to do something with my hands. I blew a cloud into the air and felt better. Settled back into the chair, I sent my glance around the table. Did I know anyone there?

At my right, the Old Man. His suit was wrinkled and his eyes were red-rimmed and tired. The large paper pad in front of him was covered with crisscross lines. On his right, a quite old man, bald and beetle-browed. His collar was open and wrinkled, his vest twisted under the lapel of his coat. I leaned toward Smith, and indicated his companion with my eyes.

"Morgan, Undersecretary of State," he said softly.

Morgan heard his name spoken, and shot a questioning glance my way. He realized what had been said and the beetlebrows slid upwards in a movement meant to be conciliatory. He bobbed his head with a cursory jerk and went back to staring across the table. I followed his glance.

The object of his affections seemed to be—yes, it was. Five-Star General Oliver P. Legree, not so affectionately called Simon by the men who served under him. I had been one of them. Trim and rigid and oh, so military he was, the very figure of a modern five-star general. His poker-stiff back thrust the tiers of ribbons to a sparkling glitter under the tinkling glare of the massive chandelier overhead. His face—well, it's been in enough rotogravures worldwide. The cigar was there, the big black cigar he never lit and never lost. His trademark was that cigar; his trademark was that and his jutting jaw that to everyone but his compatriots spelled determination and grit. To his staff and his men—me—it meant an ill-fitting lower plate.

That prognathous jaw was tilted, aimed at Morgan, and Morgan knew it. What had gone on just before I had come in? Just as I started to turn my glance away, the General threw his famous scowl directly at me. For one long second our eyes clung, almost glared. Then, without a sign of emotion or recognition he went back to staring at the Undersecretary with an intensity almost violent. Shaken back into self-consciousness by that grim stare I tried to fit together some of the other faces about the table.

Admiral Mason-Nason-Lacey—Admiral Lacey. I'd met him just a few days before, in that ill-fated conference in the White House. What was the other name? Jessop. He was there, too, alongside Lacey. But where was the Army, outside of Simon Legree? That was like Simon, at that. Let the Navy stick together; Legree was the *General*, and as such was himself the Army.

Who were the others? I knew none of them, certainly, although some trick of memory made me sure that I had seen or heard of them before. Like faces in an old school album they presented themselves to me, and for a long fraction of a minute I delved deep, trying to recall. A voice, that deep barking bass I had heard while waiting, boomed across the table.

"Mr. Morgan!" and the table seemed to quiver. "Mr. Morgan!" and the tenseness seemed to flow back into that huge room like a warm current. The Old Man leaned over and answered my unspoken question.

"Senator Suggs, Foreign Affairs Chairman."

I eyed the redoubtable senator. Short, swarthy skin that belied all his ranted racial theories, hair that straggled by intent over his weak green eyes, and a chin that retreated and quivered and joggled in time with his twitching adolescent eyebrows. Six solid terms in the Senate; six solid terms of appealing to the highest in theory and the lowest in fact; six terms of seniority for the chairmanship of committees far too important for a bigot; six terms of Suggs, Suggs, Suggs. The bass rumbled on.

"We're no further ahead, Morgan, than we were two hours ago. This, definitely cannot go on, if it has to be taken to the people themselves."

Morgan pondered well before he answered, and the room stilled.

"Senator," he said at last; "this is right now in the hands of the people, if you consider that you are one of the elected representatives, and the rest of us are chosen, with one exception, by those same elected representatives. The exception, naturally, is Mr. Miller."

Five Star Simon snorted. His nasal voice carried well. "People?" and that brittle snap was only too familiar to me. "What have the people to do with it? This is no time for anything but a

decision, and a quick one!"

Morgan agreed with that. "Correct, General. The question, I believe, is not that a decision be made, but the wording and definition of that decision."

"Bah!" and the cigar jumped to the other side. "Words! Definitions! Decisions! Words, words, words! Let's decide what's to be done and do it!"

The Undersecretary coughed gently behind his palm. "Unfortunately, General Legree, for the sake of speedy action, and as unfortunately for the sake of all concerned, words mean one thing to one man, and another thing to a second."

A fine party this turned out to be. In the dark as to what happened before I came in, and equally at sea as to what was going on, I leaned toward the Old Man.

"What's this?" I whispered.

He shot a quick retort. "Keep your mouth shut for the time being." He paused, and then bent in my direction. "You'll get your chance to talk." He grasped my extended arm tightly. "I'll nudge you when the time comes. Then talk, and *talk!* You know what I mean?"

Did I? I didn't know. He saw my indecision and motioned for quiet. Evidently he was expecting me to catch the trend if I waited long enough. I waited, and I watched, and I listened.

Simon had been right about one thing. Words, words, words. But I began to get some of the drift. They'd already settled the part of the problem I thought was supposed to be bothering them. They'd decided that since the news on me was out, the facts had to be faced—the way they understand facing them.

I should have been reading the papers or listening to the radio. It must have been something to hear when the news that I was a new secret weapon to end them all was confirmed; but they'd confused the issue by indicating that I was just one of the men with the new power, and that the country was now practically blanketed with it.

It was fine for them. It meant that the people were happy, and that Army, Navy and all the other departments were being openly and publicly adulated for the fine thing they had done for everyone.

The Undersecretary made an answer to one of Simon's remarks. I hadn't been listening for a few seconds while the scheme sank in, but this registered.

"You're right, of course, General. Certain foreign information bureaus won't be deceived by the confusion we've created. And that still leaves us with the unfortunate need for speedy action on the case of Mr. Miller."

Suggs rolled his bass across the room. It was the only characteristic he had favorable to eye or ear.

"Unfortunate, Mr. Undersecretary? Unfortunate is hardly the word to describe an event so favorable for the fortunes for all."

Favorable. Me? Was I good or bad? I came in just in the middle of the picture. Keep your ears and your eyes and your ears open, Miller, and catch up on the feature attraction.

Suggs licked his razor-sharp lips and hooked his fingers in his stained vest.

"'Unfortunate,' Mr. Undersecretary? Hardly!" He loved to hear his own voice. "This country, these great United States, these states have never in their existence been in such a favorable position as today...."

I would rather have read the Congressional Record. That, at least, I could have discarded when I became bored.

"No, never in such a favorable position; diplomatically, economically...."

The Undersecretary coughed politely. It's nice to be tactful and know how to break in.

"To use your own words, Senator. 'Hardly!' Diplomatically we are at the brink of one of the worst imaginable pitfalls."

The medals on Five Star clinked. "Bosh!"

Morgan went on. "Where would you like to live, gentlemen?" and his glance flicked around the table; "in the best liked or most hated country in the world?"

It mattered not to Five Star, nor to Suggs.

"What difference does it make, Mr. Undersecretary? Speaking for myself and my constituents, I

can truthfully say that the opinion of the world matters not one good solitary damn. Who cares what some other country has got to say, if words can't be backed up with action? Right now, and you know it as well as you're sitting there, Mr. Undersecretary, right now Uncle Sam is known all over the world as Uncle Sucker, and Uncle Shylock. Europe and Asia have had what they wanted over my protests and those of my constituents, and now Europe and Asia can go hang, for all I care. That's What they want us to do!"

He gave Morgan no chance to break in. That rolling bass rattled off the walls and crinkled my ears.

"Europe and Asia and the rest of the world could never affect us one way or another, favorable or otherwise, if it weren't for the ninny-headed mouthings of a few influential morons. Fight, Mr. Undersecretary, fight and murder and declare war and blow up millions of people and then run to Uncle Sam to pay the bills. I say, Mr. Undersecretary, I say what I've said before and what I'll say again; if Europe and Asia and the rest of the world don't like what we do here in these United States, let Europe and Asia and the rest of the world go to hell!"

Suggs wasn't a bit excited. Those grand, those mellifluous and rotund phrases rolled out of those skinny lips at a mile-a-minute pace with never a flicker of emotion but a nervous twitching of the drooping eyelids. If that was the way he talked when calm, I could see why he had been sent back and back to the Senate time after time.

The General deliberately tossed his cigar on the floor and pounded his fist on the table.

"Well said, Senator! My sentiments exactly. If Europe and Asia and the rest of the world don't like what we do here, let 'em all go to hell, or better yet, let's send them there in a hand-basket."

Bloodthirsty old bat. I never remembered seeing him any too close to the jumping-off point. That's what generals are for, they tell me.

"I say to hell with them all, and the sooner they know about it, the better for all concerned." His gaudy gold case, the gift of a grateful staff, was on the table in front of him, and he jerked out a cigar with a flourish. A light with a gold lighter, and he puffed thick clouds.

Morgan coughed politely. "Regardless, Senator, of what has or what is happening, we're concerned at present with what might happen."

Suggs opened his mouth like a thirsty carp and closed it again as Morgan went on.

"Call it what you like, Senator; General Legree will agree with me that this perfect defense—if defense is the word—is equally well the perfect weapon. Right, General?"

Legree pursed pontifical lips for a reply and was annoyed when Morgan paused only momentarily.

"Perfect defense means the nullification of an opposing weapon. Obviously, a weaponless army is no longer anything but a disciplined mob. In correlation, Senator, *our* arms and weapons are still effective, and—you mentioned the distrust (or dislike, or hatred, or whatever you will) held for us by Europe and Asia. Now, Senator, think of yourself and your constituents: is it not far better that Europe and Asia and the world be solaced and comforted by the announcement that we would use our ... Iron Curtain only in our own defense? Would it not be better—how many years, Senator, have there been recorded of universal peace? How many years?"

Some men can sit poker-stiff, yet give the impression of teetering slowly on their heels, slowly counting the horses' teeth. Suggs was a horse trader from away back.

He said, "Mr. Morgan, I say I can appreciate your viewpoint. I can even appreciate the fact that you mean exactly what you say. But—!"

Sharks must have teeth like that; broken and yellow, and razor-keen. The smile of the Senator fascinated me.

"But—! Mr. Undersecretary, who's been doing all the fighting, and who's been starting all these wars? The United States? No, sir! We just get in them too late to do anything but pay all the bills!" He leaned forward and fixed the tabletop with a piscine stare.

"Look at it this way, the only way. When this whatshisname dies, all these countries look at the map and start mobilizing the Guards. How do we know how long he's going to live, or how long he's going to keep this magic head of his?"

My magic head itched, and I rubbed it.

"Now, here's what I've said before, and here's what I say now—we can't let the world get away with murder—'murder' is what I said, Mr. Undersecretary, and 'murder' is what I mean. Didn't you say—now, tell us the truth, now—haven't you always said that it would be just a question of time until just about anyone has the secret of the atomic bomb? Didn't you say that?"

Morgan nodded. "Quite often I've said that, Senator. Too often for some."

Suggs was triumphant. "All right, now. You've hung yourself on your own rope and you don't know it. Answer me this; now, what's to prevent anyone who has the bomb from coming over here and using it on us? What's to prevent them?"

They had been all through that before, and Morgan knew it was no use to answer.

Suggs was his own echo. "Nothing's to prevent them, not a thing in the world. How many times have I come right out and said in public that the only way to keep the world where we want it is to just make sure that no one else is going to get it? How many times?"

Morgan rubbed his cigarette in the ashtray and spoke to the table. "You've said that many times, Senator. That's true, too true. I, on the other hand, have asked you many times if you've thought that the only way to make sure no other nation gets the bomb would be to go right in and make *sure*. You agreed with me that *that* would mean force. Force, meaning war. Right, Senator?"

And the Senator, champion of Man and Humanity and Right said, "Right, Mr. Undersecretary. Right. We have the bomb, haven't we?"

Morgan didn't say much in answer to that. I don't think there was much he could find to say. Psychologists claim there is hardly anyone, anyone with a modicum of logic in a brain-pan, who cannot eventually see the light of reason. Maybe. Maybe calm logic could force Senator Suggs and his brain-pan off his muddy detour. Maybe humanity and decency and all the other things that complement the civilized man to this day lie submerged in that pithecanthropic skull. Maybe, but I hated his guts then, and I do now.

I cleared my throat, and it must have been louder than I thought, because all the eyes swung my way. Well, so what? If I had anything at all to say about what was going to happen, or if I was ever going to be more than just a rubber stamp, now was the time to find out. After all, I'd been asked to bring my harp to the party, and I was going to play.

So I said, "Senator. Senator Suggs!"

He was a little taken aback. Like having the sweeper talk back.

"Senator," I said, "you talk big. Let's get right down to rock-bottom, and let's stay there until we're finished. Okay?... All right; in words of one syllable, you want us to do what amounts to declaring war on the rest of the world, winning the war and then running things our way. Right?"

The Senator teetered on those mental heels again. His lips sucked in and sharp hollows formed in his cheeks. I could see his mind reach all the way across the table and throw face-up the cards, one by one.

"You're Mr. Miller, I presume, although we haven't been formally introduced." His eager eyes flickered over me. "You haven't said much so far, and it's just as well that you spoke when you did."

Legree groped for his cigar case, and Suggs rumbled on.

"You said I talk big, Mr. Miller, and I'm going to take that as a compliment. Yes, I do talk big. And you talk plain. I like men who talk plain. We're going to get along well together." And he paused to let his thoughts catch up.

I gave my needle a little push. "You're still talking big, Senator," I reminded him.

He resented that, and tried to hide it. "Hardly, Mr. Miller. Hardly. But you asked a question, and I'll try to talk plain, like you do. If we have to fight the rest of the world to do things our way, the American way, then my answer is yes. Yes!"

Legree grinned his saturnine smile through a blue wreath of smoke and Morgan sat back in his chair with an almost silent exhalation. The rest of the group seated around that great table affected me hardly at all one way or another. Suggs was the spokesman for one faction and I—well, Morgan was willing to let me talk; the Old Man was sunk in the dumb obscurity of his chair, and who else was there to speak for me? Who else?

All right, Miller. Take it slow and easy. Watch your temper. Say what you have that's important, and let it go at that. But—say it!

Now, there's one thing I learned long ago; you get a lot further if the other loses his temper first, and the best way to pry the lid of a temper is the use of the unexpected. The man who is handy with his hands will crack wide open with ridicule, with words used as the lever. The man who is handy with words is a different nut to crack; slap him down with insults while his verbal guard is down. If his temper doesn't snap in the first two minutes, it never will.

So, because I thought it was the right thing to say, and because I didn't like the Senator anyway, I said, "Senator Suggs, you talked plain. That's good. I like men who talk plain. Let's have some more of that talk. Let's get this right on the record for everyone here to see and hear.

"I don't like you, Senator. I like neither you nor your ideas, nor anything about you or your thoughts. How long has it been, Senator, since anyone has told you right to your face—not in a newspaper—that you're a self-convinced liar and a hypocrite, and that you and your ideas and everything about you stink to high heaven?"

"Stink" was the word that got him. He'd expected a nice gentlemanly quarrel with gentlemanly words above the table and rapiers below, and instead had walked around the corner and taken a barrel-stave across the mouth. His face flushed in an instant to a livid unhealthy red, his lips pulled away from his yellow teeth, his eyes seemed to protrude visibly. A beautiful sight.

It took him long seconds to throttle his gasping shock. I gave him just enough time to inhale for a long tirade, just long enough to open that fish-like mouth for words that might have been anything, then I let him have it again. And I don't know whether or not I told you, I was a sergeant before I got busted back to private, first class.

"Shut up!" I bellowed, and my roar boomed back at me from all those startled, those stunned faces. Shut up shut up shut up shut up....

I'm certain that those walls had never heard anything above a quiet murmur before that night. I just shocked Suggs and the rest into a panicky silence while I ranted. I had to talk fast, because while volume and violence are a good temporary substitute for brilliance, I knew I wasn't going to have the floor forever.

"Let's talk straight, Suggs. Get this once, because I'm not repeating it, and get that silly look off your face—" I'd heard he was vain—"you and your constituents and your Army and your Navy can go to hell, as far as I care for any of them. I'm the man you want to keep your shirt clean while the rest of the world wallows in filth; I'm the man that's supposed to let you and your type, God forbid, rule the world; I'm the man—" I leaned over the table as far as I could, as far as I dared.

"Suggs," and I poured venom down his shirtfront, "the only thing that keeps me from despising the Government of the United States and the people in it is the fact that I know you're not typical. You're a freak, a monster!" And I threw in another to keep him off balance. "You even *look* like a fish!

"Remember this, Senator. Remember this one thing; if I ever see, if I ever hear as much as one word from you about war or bombs, in private or public, you'll live just long enough for me to hear about it!"

I threw a disgusted glance at the rest of the table. "One thing you don't know, Senator, is that I can kill you where you sit. Smith!"

The Old Man was astonished as the Senator, who sat with gaping piscine mouth and pop eyes. "Yes, Peter?"

"Tell him," I snapped. "Tell him how Kellner found out that I can stop a heart just as fast as I can a truck. And you'd better tell him while you're at it that Kellner thinks I'm emotionally unstable, subject to fits of temper. Tell that to the Senator. Tell him what Kellner said about me."

Smith coughed. "I think you all agree that Mr. Miller is a trifle upset. You can form your own opinion as to his temper. As to the other ... well, Dr. Kellner is the top man in his field. He tested Peter—Mr. Miller—very thoroughly. I would give very careful consideration to whatever he says about Peter's capabilities."

Now you can see what makes a diplomat. When Smith was finished talking it sounded as though Kellner had actually said that I could murder someone. And yet Smith hadn't told even a tiny bit of a lie. Lying, as any married man knows, is knowing what to say and what not to say at the right time. But to get back to the rest. I dismissed Suggs. I ignored him for all the rest of the time he was there. Even when I looked directly at him, and that hurt him. I have hopes, high hopes, that might have brought on the real heart attack he had the next day.

"So," I said generally to the rest of the table, "let's just assume from now on that you're dealing with a homicidal maniac with unlimited power. Is that the phrase you were thinking of, General?"

General Legree jumped as though he had seen me pull the pin on a live grenade.

"Forget it, General," I told him kindly. "I just read a lot of your speeches. Now you, Mr. Morgan, you're apparently having a meeting. I got here a little late. How about telling me the score?"

The tension seemed to seep out of the room as tangible as a stream of water. Suggs shrank up in his chair like a little old kobold, the Generals shifted into easier positions with the old familiar creak of expensive leather, and the man Smith looked right at me with his right eye closed. I'd said what he wanted me to say, but now what? Where did we go from here?

Undersecretary of State Theodore Morgan was one of the career men to be found in State Departments throughout the world, if by that you mean someone who has had the same job for years. The newspapers liked to tee off on him occasionally, using his pseudo-British mannerisms and habits for caricature. And the great American public, I suppose, considered him pretty much as a jerk, as the public is most apt to do when regarding a man who wore striped pants and a top hat in public and apparently liked it. But the Old Man, Smith—and I never did find out if Morgan was Smith's boss or vice versa—set me straight on a lot of things about Morgan. He had a fairly rough job, as jobs are when you do something you dislike merely because policy has been set by higherups. Let's just say he did the best he could, and let it go at that.

He was in charge of the meeting, all right. He knew just how to handle Simon Legree, and without Suggs things went fairly smooth—on the surface.

"Mr. Miller," he said, "you made a rather abrupt entrance into the conversation. I think it better if we have it understood right now that we prefer to use reason instead of volume."

"Call me Pete," I said. I knew, somehow that he hadn't disapproved too much of what I'd said, and he was cracking down at the outset just to show the rest that *he* wasn't intimidated. "Pete is all right with me, since I'm sure that this is all among friends." I looked around, and they were all friends. Especially the two generals that had seen me stop the trucks from the Federal Building window. I don't say they were actually afraid; just cautious. Just friends.

I went on. "Maybe I can help break the ice. I suppose you were talking about what you were going to do about things in general, and in particular, me. Well, go ahead."

So they did.

I won't bother with the details of the rest of the meeting or conference, or whatever you want to call it, because I don't think the details are too important. For one thing, when the first flush wore off, and I began to realize the colossal bluff I'd gotten away with, I got a little weak in the knees. For another, Morgan and Smith did all the talking to amount to anything. Legree, who seemed to be the self-appointed spokesman for the Army, really didn't have much to say when he knew that the State Department had all the cards, with me the joker. The Navy played right along when it was tentatively agreed that it was to be an island where I would be "stationed," as they euphemistically called it; they knew that islands are surrounded by water, and who sails on the water? The FBI got in their little piece when they were made responsible for general security. My contribution was that I was to be responsible to State, in the person of Smith, and Smith was to be the boss as far as conditions were concerned. When I brought that up I knew the Old Man was thinking of all the times I'd complained about his guardianship, and wrote him a tiny note so he wouldn't get too pleased with himself.

"The lesser—or the least—of many evils. Don't get swell-headed." He just grinned when he read it, and stuck it in his pocket to save for Morgan, I feel sure.

Smith and Bob Stein and I were the last to leave, and Morgan's grip for an old man was firm as we shook hands. "You did an excellent demolition job on the Senator," he said. "You know, Pete, there is one of the few people that have made me regret the job I have."

"Forget it," I told him. "You can get fired. Me, I got seniority in a lifetime job. As far as that carp is concerned, you can consider me your chief steward. I'll run ten miles to take up your grievance with Suggs."

Morgan smiled politely as he ushered us to the door, but I don't think he knew what I meant. They don't have unions in State.

The island isn't too bad. I swore, years ago, with the first cold I ever remember having, that I would never care if I ever saw snow again. And where I am, there isn't any snow. The beach is yellow as gold, the sun comes up every day in the east and sets in the west, and I've got for my personal use the biggest, shiniest bar you ever saw in all your life. They ship in draft beer for me all the way from La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Munich, Germany. Every month I get a four-quart keg from Belfast in Ireland, and I've got all the gadgets I need to mix anything a barkeep could dream up. The ice I get from what probably is a six-hundred dollar refrigerator that makes nothing but ice cubes. I have a subscription to practically every magazine I ever heard of, and I get daily aerial delivery—that's right. A little Piper Cub with floats drops the *New York Times*, the *Monitor*, and a couple of others every morning—of the newspapers with the least amount of junk. I used to get the Detroit papers, but I found out it took too much mental effort to avoid looking at the Vital Statistics, where they record the marriages and deaths.

I finally learned to play bridge. Euchre doesn't seem the same without a barful of people, and pinochle is not the game that Stein is good at. Bob Stein, the poor guy—although he never says one word about it—takes everything in his stride. He spends six weeks out of every eight here with me and the others that form the crew of this little island afloat in the Southern Sea. The food is good, and with no limit to variety and type. We can't be too far from somewhere, because every once in a while we hear a rattle and banging somewhere out to sea. Once we heard what sounded like a full scale battle. I pried it out of Bob Stein that it was just maneuvers, as he called it. I know better. I see nothing but naval craft, and I suspect that they're not always just at the horizon for practice.

National affairs? Well, they're not too bad. The big noise came when the UN wanted my custody and didn't get it. The Old Man once asked me why I wasn't in favor of it, and I told him. In theory, yes; in practice, the UN was too dangerous. Personally, I felt that I could trust very few, and none that I hadn't known before all this happened. UN supervision meant that I would serve too many masters, and that I didn't like. And too, there are too many people in the United States that don't believe in the UN, and might be tempted to do something about it if they thought I owed allegiance to someone else besides the United States. I couldn't stir up anything like that, I told him. Deep down in my heart, I wanted people to like me, to admire me, to think that I was their

hero, and no other country's. I think I can see admiration and affection in the eyes of the civilians and sailors that supply me the food and the other things I ask for. They ask me every once in a while if I'm all right, if I need women. I tell them I don't, that I'm reconciled with living like I am. And that's true; I want no other woman except Helen, and her I can't have, for devious reasons; my name is just anonymous to the world. Smith talked me into that—his idea was that if no one knew who I was, I'd be just that much harder to find. He explained that there are several other islands set up the same as mine, with almost the same conditions and the same surroundings. He calls it camouflage on a grand scale, and he's the boss. I know I'm not very smart; just smart enough to know that the reports in the *Times* about other people in other parts of the world with my capabilities are some of the grand-scale camouflage started by Smith's agents. I'm all alone, and I know it. But sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and go for a walk along the beach and kick up a little sand with my bare feet like Helen and I did on our honeymoon. They asked me once if I really had to do that. I told them I felt like it, and they asked me why. I didn't tell them I was just lonesome.

CONFIDENTIAL MEMO

FROM: Morgan

TO: Smith

MESSAGE: *I don't care how many plants got hit. Draft another plant. Draft the Times itself. But get those special editions to Miller and get them there today. Repeat, today! You're already one day late in getting started on those hints of probable attack. Better rush the softening up. The way things are going, all plans are off, and we may need him in a hurry. And that means we'll need cooperation. You know Miller. You saw those reports on the Suggs post-mortem. Do I have to draw diagrams for you? You've got unlimited authority. Use it. I'm serious about drafting the Times if you have to. **But GET THOSE PAPERS PRINTED AND GET THEM TO HIM TODAY....***

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