
THE CHOSEN ONE by Eric Thomson

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Chapter 1 **BUENA VISTA.**

The breeze brought a welcome breath of cool air into the Cantina Perez. It played with the mildewed shreds of wallpaper and set them waving apologetically, underscoring the futility of the slowly-turning fan that moaned above our wobbly table. Under the swinging doors I saw discarded papers blowing over the abandoned streetcar tracks and cobblestones of the Avenida. It was going to rain.

The young American looked thoughtful as he watched the flies gathering, attracted by the little oases of spilled beer on the grime-encrusted tabletop.

"So you left the States to find a man's work," I said, waving the flies away from my beer.

"That sums it up." He smiled grimly, swirling the dregs in his glass.

"Well, I've spent a lifetime looking for a man's work and never got more than a partial education. You'll find lots of education here in Buena Vista, but I don't know if you'll find the work you're looking for."

"At least it's better than the States. That place is cracking up." He shook his head in disgust.

"Yes, it's too bad," I said. "It had potential."

"You seem to take it pretty calmly, for an American." He regarded me with a quizzical expression.

"Oh, I've seen a few empires come and go in my time. So will you, if you stick around as long." I drained my glass.

"Maybe. Like another?" He got up and swore, seeing that the chair had torn a hole in his trousers.

"Sure, but this round's on me." I handed him a filthy banknote. "No, don't bother reading the denomination. Just see if Don José will give you any change for it."

He came back to the table with two bottles of warm Pacifico and sat down on the rickety chair, which was waiting to bite another hole in his faded blue jeans.

"Well?" I poured my beer, which began to foam over even though I had tilted the glass.

"No change. Don José says it may be a foreign note, but he's willing to give you credit for the two beers until he washes it."

"Hmm, you'd think he'd trust an old customer."

He looked at me over the edge of his glass. "So how long have you been down here?"

"Oh, not so long. I was here back in 'twenty-seven, when I was almost your age."

"I'm twenty-three," he volunteered.

"I was seventeen."

"Nineteen twenty-seven! Hell, that's a long time ago. What was it like here, then?"

I did my best to remember, trying to recall my first day in Buena Vista. Suddenly the cobwebs were blown away by a loud clap of thunder, and I saw myself, seventeen years old, stepping off the mail boat that had tied up at the Embarcadero.

I'd come down with what money I'd saved from two mind-rotting years in the insurance racket in Frisco. What a dismal life that had been! But now, in the wisdom of my mature years, I was going to change all that. I'd set out to make a career in journalism.

Unfortunately, the newspapers had other ideas, so I figured I'd look for trouble, which was always newsworthy, and become a free-lance correspondent. The nearest trouble which was to be had within the range of my limited funds was here in Buena Vista.

The rich tropical air was intoxicating. That's the first thing I noticed after the wood smoke of the steamer. It made me feel ready for great adventure and confident that I would find it. Approaching the prostrate forms of soldiers on the Embarcadero, I thought I'd encountered the first casualties of the civil war.

My journalistic imagination was black with headlines: 'CAPITAL BESIEGED!' 'TROOPS MASSACRED BY INSURRECTOS!' But on closer examination, I was

disappointed to discover that some of the 'corpses' were snoring. They had a funny way of guarding the government's major source of income, the customs house.

I went inside, full of goodwill and charity, that is, until I was confronted by one of those pot-bellied officials with a permanent colic from over-eating. He looked at my passport (an obvious forgery); my suitcase (a trove of contraband); my blank notebooks (secret messages); and became more ill-tempered at discovering nothing incriminating.

"You aren't a missionary, are you?" he scowled, knitting his formidable black eyebrows.

I was tongue-tied. There I was, The Compleat Correspondent, worldly, cynical, jaded, debauched - I'd had a touch of dysentery down river and was still a little queasy. Having practiced my knowing sneer so often that I suspected my face had gone out of joint, I was horrified. A missionary!

"No," I replied, in perfect Spanish.

"Put that down, officious troglodyte!"

I wish I'd said that. I saw my fellow-victim at the other end of the counter, a well-padded woman in fashionable overdress. How she survived the humid heat with that feather boa, I didn't know.

She was engaged in a tug-o-war with another official over a brand new Victrola. The official must have thought it was some new-fangled type of Gatling gun. Seeing that he was attracting adverse attention, he released the instrument, but insisted that the device be demonstrated, taking care to aim its muzzle out the door.

The lady cranked up the machine and vindicated herself by treating us to an aria by Caruso, who was becoming very popular down here, though he'd died some years earlier.

The officials and soldiers, the ones who had awakened, were most reluctant to let her leave. They insisted she play her complete selection of records.

"May I repack my suitcase now?" I asked.

"Yes," said the official, "and be quick about it. I'm a very busy man."

I hurried away from the customs house, considering that I'd got off lightly, thanks to The Great Caruso. A few blocks away from the Embarcadero, I discovered myself in the heart of the capital. Walking through the deserted streets, I was unable to believe that it really was a capital city in the true sense, nor that there was a civil war in full swing. It was midday, and nothing was happening. Nothing. This was my first experience of siesta time.

I stopped in the Cantina Perez for a few beers, and killed time for a couple of hours. The beers were cold because they had ice in those days. Around three o'clock I had a look out the door and saw a few bodies moving about on the Avenida. It was time to seek a Person of Authority, I thought, putting on my expensive Panama and setting it at a jaunty, journalistic angle which guaranteed that it would blow off at the slightest breeze.

As I stepped out of the cantina, I heard bugles. People were gathering on the sidewalks, and faces appeared in windows and doorways. Soon there was no point in trying to negotiate a way through the crowd. There was barely standing room, and so many were dissatisfied with their places in the crowd that there was a lot of pushing and shoving. I was fortunate to gain a vantage point at the edge of the sidewalk where I could hang on to a lamp post to avoid being pushed into the street.

A clatter of hooves, and a squadron of French *cuirassiers* led by an arrogant-looking Prussian captain came into view, trotting smartly in front of a long column of goose-stepping German infantry whose hobnail boots made a terrible racket on the cobbles. A military band blared an awkward hispanic version of some German march, which was applauded with great enthusiasm by the crowd. The soldiers made no attempt to keep in step, neither with the music nor with each other, and their heads kept bobbing up and down like waves on a choppy sea. They looked quite young and rather wilted under the heavy uniforms and equipment, but the smiles from the 'ladies' on the balconies of the Hotel Internacional made them straighten up and take on expressions of sternness and grave determination.

A battery of horse-drawn artillery brought up the rear, led by a French lieutenant, but this amazing collaboration of the French and German armies proved illusory. Excepting the Prussian and the Frenchman, all the troops were natives.

As the last gun carriage rumbled by, the jubilant crowd poured in behind, followed closely by the city's red and yellow streetcars which had been held up by the parade. I waited, grimly clutching my suitcase and the lamp post, until the crowd began to thin out, then fought my way toward an imposing building at the end of the street opposite the Hotel Internacional.

The Presidential Palace was well-guarded, but no one was at home, so I walked through a serpentine maze of side streets, asking directions from every shoe-shine boy and hot-sauce vendor, until I found myself on the steps of the Ministry of War, trying to explain to a dubious sentry that I wanted to see the District Commander. My atrocious Spanish was more impressive than my logic, but I wore him down, and he led me into a small office where a major was in charge.

"Good afternoon. Be kind enough to state your business, Señor." He looked at me as if I'd been a stray dog.

"I wish to see the District Commander," I said, trying to act all of my seventeen years and then some.

The major's face was shadowed by a lowering cloud of perplexity. "And why do you wish to see the District Commander?"

"I require a permit to travel into the war zone."

"Incredible! On what business?" He reached into a box of lethal-looking cigars.

"I'm a correspondent, a journalist."

He narrowed his eyes and gave forth an evil-smelling puff of smoke which billowed around us. Between fits of coughing, I managed to draw a sheaf of papers from my coat pocket.

"Here are my credentials." I handed them to him with a flourish, as if from long practice.

These were, in fact, a motley collection of personal letters, bills, cancelled steamship tickets and other items having nothing at all to do with journalism. Indeed, the only letter which I had that pertained to my job as news correspondent was one from a San Francisco paper which said that my services were most definitely not required, but this I preferred not to show, just in case someone read English.

The major pretended to read through this mass of rubbish. "Ah, yes. In that case, please come with me."

We went up a flight of stairs and through some heavy wooden doors which opened into a guard-room, passed among some soldiers who were cleaning their equipment, and arrived at another large door which was hurled open by a big man in a bowler hat who nearly trampled us in his hurry to leave. We entered a great, high-ceilinged room and crossed over a wilderness of parquet flooring littered with the busts of national heroes and model cannon. I thought the room was empty until I noticed the general sitting at an ornate desk in one of the corners.

"Yes, who is it?" he said, not taking his eyes from a paper on the desk.

"It is a foreigner, General, who says he is a journalist." The major gave me a dubious glance.

"You are rather young-looking to be a journalist," said the general. "Please sit down."

"What is it you wish? Cigarette?" He offered me a 'Formidable' wrapped in brown paper.

"No thank you. Well, Sir, I need a permit to travel into the war zone."

"Is that all?" He took a cigarette for himself as the major departed.

I saw my first chance for an interview.

"Well, if it wouldn't be too much bother, General, I'd appreciate any information you'd care to give me on the latest developments."

"Certainly."

He rose abruptly from his chair. Indicating the map on the wall, he began to pace up and down.

"I am at liberty to tell you only what you probably know already. Officially, there is no civil war, just banditry which government forces have successfully confined to the eastern plains districts. With the recent acquisition of modern arms and foreign advisors, it is a mere matter of time until the bandits are brought to justice."

"What do you estimate as being the strength of these, uh, bandits, General?"

"That is for me to know and for you to find out, if you are a good journalist, that is."

He sat back in his chair and blew a smoke ring up toward the plaster angels on the rococo ceiling. "There is one thing that most strongly advise you not to do, young man."

"Yes?"

"I advise you most strongly not to go into the war zone."

"Then it is possible to go there?" I leaned forward in my chair with eagerness.

He shrugged. "Of course. Just as you wish."

The general took a piece of note paper from the blotter and wrote a few rapid lines, finishing the work with his flamboyant signature. A roll of thunder signalled the afternoon downpour.

"You will get wet," he said, handing me the paper, "but you must hurry if you are to catch the evening train. Good luck."

We shook hands and I was out the door like a shot. The soldiers in the guard-room looked up at me in surprise as I brushed past them, and I was in such a hurry that I nearly forgot my suitcase which I had left in the major's office.

Outside, the rain and hail seemed to come down with a special vindictiveness. The streets were several feet deep in water, and my linen suit was soaked in no time. It was quite warm, though, and I managed to navigate to the railroad station without feeling too uncomfortable.

By that time it was dusk, and the rain storm had become a drizzle that gleamed upon the flanks of the steaming locomotives which stood panting in long lines, their headlamps casting a yellow glare over the switch yard. Here and there, the beams caught the shining bayonets of sentries who tramped around the yard in rain-sodden uniforms.

I strode past large crates and boxes which cluttered the loading platform, stepping over rain puddles in a vain attempt to dry my shoes out.

The presence of so many 'no smoking' signs drew my attention to the contents of some of the crates: '30 cm. Granaten, Minenwerfer, 1916, Krupp'; '75 mm., 1917, Hotchkiss'; '5 Gewehr, 1898, Mauser.' All very interesting.

"All very interesting, I'm sure!"

I turned and saw the tall Prussian captain whose lean face bore the scars of saber duels.

"Who are you, and what is your business here?" he demanded, prodding me on the chest with his riding crop which he wielded like a foil.

"I'm a journalist."

"Your papers!"

I reached into the sodden pocket of my coat, and discovered that my papers had congealed into a mass of inky pulp.

"Uh, I'm sorry, but I got caught in the rain and my papers are as you see them."

The Prussian shook his head and glared at me for a moment, then he began to laugh.

"We have rain, and the tracks are washed out. We have mosquitoes, and we all get malaria. We have delays which may cost us this campaign, and now we have a journalist who can't even keep his papers dry! This is ..."

He paused to clean his monocle, using a handkerchief which he kept in the cuff of his left coat sleeve.

"... a tragedy?" I ventured.

"No. The tragedy has been repeated too many times. We have all become buffoons in a comedy. Of course, I am obliged to shoot any unauthorized person found in the station area."

I stepped back in surprise, squarely into the two sentries who had approached us during our peculiar conversation. They encouraged me to go forward, using their rifle butts in the small of my back.

The Prussian stood for a moment, slowly tapping the top of his riding boot with the crop while he measured me up.

He was about to say something when a balding man in shirt- sleeves rushed up to him.

"Capítan, you are wanted in the telegraph office."

The Prussian motioned with his riding crop that we were to stay where we were, and he hurried off with the balding man.

"May I sit down?" I asked.

My two guards made no reply. They only looked at me as if I were the chief of the insurgents, and continued to stand rigidly to attention, side by side, with me sandwiched in between. A water flask was gouging my thigh and two cartridge pouches sought a meeting somewhere near my backbone.

"May I sit down?" This time I said it as clearly as possible.

Again, no reply. Then I realized that these sentries could have been Indians who spoke no Spanish. In any case, they would not speak to me, so I passed the time listening to the faint clicking of the telegraph key in the office and the soporific croaking of the vultures sheltered under the water tower. Rain still dripped from the station roof, and I began to feel sleepy despite my uneasy situation.

The Prussian reappeared, looking very agitated. For awhile he paced up and down on the platform, stopping now and then to look at his watch. I had begun to think he had forgotten me when he suddenly turned in my direction and asked my age.

"Seventeen," I said, too surprised to lie.

"Ach so. Too young for a spy, I should think, not to mention that a good spy would have his papers in order. Perhaps you are merely a bad spy. What is your business here?"

"I'm a journalist."

He brought his riding crop down upon a case of rifles with a resounding whack. "I know that!"

"Oh, I wish to entrain for the war zone."

"And so do I. There have been too many delays already."

A whistle sounded at the far end of the switch yard and a train chugged slowly into view, the yellow light from its headlamp making the wet rails gleam. Two locomotives, their boilers protected by thick steel plates and sandbags, were preceded by a flatcar loaded with rails and a second on which rode a Maxim gun and its crew. The locomotives hissed past us, pulling another flatcar with two French seventy-five millimeter field guns and their limbers. The remainder of the train carried troops, horses, supplies and munitions. It was aswarm with riflemen and observers. Rifle muzzles pointed out the coach windows, and the platforms were packed with so many well-armed troops that the train bristled like a hedgehog.

The French lieutenant who had been with the artillery in the parade stepped onto the station platform from the train as it rumbled to a halt, and saluted the Prussian who returned the greeting with his riding crop.

"Bad news," growled the Prussian. "The telegraph line has gone out between Las Aguas Station and Rio Negro. It may mean that the enemy has encircled General Miranda."

"Or it could mean that the telegraph has simply taken a siesta at our expense," joked the Frenchman, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The Prussian nodded, ignoring the intended humor.

"Yes, if only we knew . . . But we have delayed our reinforcements long enough. This train must get through this week or not at all. We leave as soon as the tenders are filled."

A safety-valve opened and the blast of escaping steam drowned out further conversation. The Prussian took the Frenchman by the arm, and they both disappeared into the telegraph office, returning to the platform once the noise had stopped.

The water spouts rose and tender hatches clanged shut just as the train whistled to get underway. Clouds of steam hissed from the cylinder cocks as the wheels began to turn, slipping at first on the wet rails, then biting in as the train gained momentum.

The Prussian leaped onto the second flatcar that carried the machine gun, and snatched a pair of binoculars from an observer who rode with the gun crew. The Frenchman stepped onto the flatcar with the seventy-fives, and shouted to me as the train passed.

"You're coming with us, aren't you? Well, get on!"

My unwelcome escort stood aside so suddenly that I nearly fell over. I grabbed my suitcase and ran to catch up with the Frenchman. The train was gaining speed, and I barely managed to jump on in time to avoid running off the end of the station platform.

I was received by the guncrews with friendly amusement and no little curiosity. They made a place for me and returned to their game of vingt-et-un which they dealt out

laboriously from a deck of sticky cards whose numbers were legible only to those with good imaginations. Steadying myself against one of the limbers, I opened my suitcase, expecting to find all my belongings ruined by the storm. Fortunately, all seemed pretty dry, especially my blank notebooks which would soon be filled with the makings of my journalistic career. I shut the case and turned it to good use by sitting on it.

The flanges sang against the curves as we threaded our way out of the switch yard and found a straight single track which took us through the suburbs and shanty-towns on the outskirts of the city. Hordes of children gaped at us with vacant eyes and chewed on pieces of sugarcane with the absent-mindedness of cattle chewing their cud.

From the air, the city must have looked a paradise with white-walled houses and red-tiled roofs, palm trees caressing all with their shade, but down below the *bougainvillia* on the balconies, one could see the muddy streets that reeked of garbage and offal, made all the riper with the rain. Stray dogs of the mangiest variety roamed the town, alternately showing their teeth or putting their tails between their legs to suit the occasion. Drunks tottered out of dreary cantinas, trying to focus on us with bleary eyes, and flocks of vultures rose into the air, disturbed by our passage. A crowd of men paid no attention to the train, so intent were they on the result of a cockfight, even though we came near to hitting a few on the fringes of the mob as we swept past.

The stench of the city was soon gone, and the freshness of the rain in the country air was very good. The rain had let up, save for a few occasional drops, but the clouds promised more, and lightning flickered on the horizon. Frogs in the ditches were making a cheerful racket, and bats or nightbirds flitted on important errands. Ahead thundered the two locomotives, smokestacks shooting glowing cinders like twin volcanoes.

I was exhausted, and found a place under one of the tarpaulins which I shared with the guncrew. As I went to sleep, I heard the creaking and straining of the gun against its chain moorings and dimly realized that my head would be crushed if one of those wheels moved even a few inches. I woke up for a short time that night, partly because my feet were cold and wet, and partly because one of my fellows was a virtuoso snorer. I drew my legs under the tarp as well as I could and made the best of things until morning.

That morning we drank hot coffee made by the engine crew, some of whom laced theirs with *aguardiente*. We took on water at a place called La Cienaga, and sped on at full throttle. I had the enjoyable illusion that I was floating over the green country-side, with only the hard planks of the flatcar to jar me into reality.

We dashed through a jungle which made a green tunnel over the track, and startled brightly-colored macaws and other birds of every color of the rainbow. There were orchids growing on the sides of the railway cuts and hanging from the trees. The jungle smelled strangely of coffee. Soon we came out of the jungle and onto a savanna. The warm sun and lack of food made me drowsy, and I dozed off on top of a limber.

The next thing I knew, I was struggling for breath, trying to fight my way out of warm, slimy water. As I came to my senses I vaguely remembered flying through the air, and when I had finally got my eyes unstuck, I saw that I was standing knee-deep in an algae-covered pool beside the train.

Both locomotives had been derailed and were blowing off steam, their crews nowhere around. A soldier was lying face down in the water, a red stain spreading upon the green surface beside him. It was so dream-like that I shook my head and discovered that my ears were full of water. Once I had cleared them, I became aware of a rapid popping and cracking all around me, interspersed with the buzzing of angry bees.

The Prussian struggled past me in the mud, followed by some bleeding and dishevelled soldiers whose uniforms were caked with mud.

"Follow me, journalist, and you will become a man!" he bellowed.

"But, I'm a correspondent, a non-combatant," I said.

"Do you think the enemy knows or cares? You are with us, and you must fight. If we die, you die."

I struggled to keep up with him, almost losing my shoes in the clinging mud of the ditch. "But we could become prisoners."

"There are no prisoners in this campaign." He pulled me with him.

I stumbled along, passing the Frenchman and some of his crew who were attempting to right one of the seventy-fives which had tumbled into the mud. In the after sections of the train there was terrible confusion. Soldiers were jumping out of coach windows into the ditch, many without rifles or ammunition. Terrified horses were trying to kick their way out of splintered cattle cars. Men would crumple to the ground and not get up. There was a great deal of shouting and loud reports from guns fired by soldiers in the coaches.

We hurried past this pandemonium and came to a boxcar where several soldiers were working frantically to pry open the door. They had already bent several rifle barrels and broken the butts in their attempts when some thoughtful person arrived with a sledgehammer from one of the tenders. Soon we had the door open, and out came two machine-guns and belts of ammunition.

"Quickly!" shouted the Prussian. "Sergeant, take the first Maxim to the head of the train. I shall take the second to the rear, and we will set up a cross-fire. Lieutenant, have your men ready to light the fuses if we are overrun. On no account must this cargo be captured!"

With great effort we pushed, dragged and carried the heavy Maxim along the slippery embankment to the end of the train.

"Can you work this?" asked the Prussian.

"I think so." I said it with more confidence than I felt.

"Good. Remember to press the safety button forward. That's it, the one marked 'Sicher.' Yes, that's right. Now I must see to the troops. Do not bring the gun from behind the carriage until you see the enemy." He strode away, back into the confused and disordered soldiery.

I was left trying to load the Maxim. After the first few attempts I was pretty sure I had it right but I didn't try to fire for fear of giving away our little surprise. A lull in the firing encouraged me to look at the battlefield.

The train had been derailed and had lost any chance of escape from the enemy. Owing to the flatness of the terrain, the enemy had chosen to entrench himself on a low ridge which ran parallel with the rail line, and so was attacking the train from one side only. There was a large expanse of grassy field between the train and the enemy positions, making any attack over such open ground a suicidal proposition. Thus the soldiers were confined to the train not only to protect its valuable cargo of supplies and munitions, but to take advantage of the only defensive position available. Fortunately, the enemy seemed to have no artillery, but even so he was causing havoc among the soldiers with his machine-gun and rifle fire. It looked as if the enemy could trade shots with us as long as he liked, knowing that every man and hour lost would mean fewer reinforcements at the front. At the same time, the lay of the land made him almost invisible to us, so we could not be sure of exacting any casualties from him. In fact, we were virtually ignorant of the enemy's numbers and dispositions.

A ricochet off the coupling above my head turned my mind from fantasied military tactics to the unpleasant situation I was in. There was a good chance of my being wounded or killed, something I had forgotten in the excitement. Another possibility loomed into view in the person of a horseman who galloped unsteadily toward us from the enemy lines.

Some shots were fired by the soldiers until they recognized the rider's uniform as their own. The rider seemed unsure of his direction, and slowed somewhat as he approached the train. Two soldiers leaned out from under one of the coaches and grabbed the reins, leading the horse around my end of the train. As they passed, I noticed blood running down the frightened animal withers. Then I looked at the rider. His eyes had been gouged out and his throat cut, the tongue protruding through the slit as a necktie. I shuddered, seeing that he was still alive.

The cavalryman was freed from the ropes which bound him in the saddle and laid upon the ground by a group of soldiers who crowded around the dying man. Soon there was the muffled sound of a rifle shot, and the soldiers went back to their positions. The rider lay at rest on the trampled ground.

The enemy observed the effect of his message and resumed his hail of fire which was answered by one of the seventy-fives. A geyser of brick-red earth rose beyond the ridge, and a dull explosion boomed. Another shell exploded directly on top of the ridgeline, and another on the military crest. Small figures in straw hats could be seen scurrying back over the top of the ridge, accompanied by the cheers of the soldiers. Another shell burst beyond the ridge, raising a column of red dust and black smoke which drifted lazily in the rising wind of afternoon. Save for the squawking of vultures and the cries of the wounded, all was silent. I could even hear the grass rustling in the breeze.

Suddenly, there were hundreds of horsemen swarming over the ridge. They came directly toward us for a moment, then changed directions, splitting into two groups which made for each end of the train.

The Maxim was so heavy that it took me some time to maneuver it around the coach. At last I had it on the track and feverishly set about cocking and aiming it,

Rifle fire from the train brought down scores of horsemen, but was failing to prevent them from achieving their objective. I slammed in the first round and pressed the 'Sicher' button. The gun spat out three rounds and jammed. Traversing had twisted the ammunition belt.

"Venga!" I shouted to a young soldier who had just run out of rifle ammunition.

I showed him how to guide the belt so it would not jam the gun. At first I fired low, merely kicking up lots of dirt, until I found the range of the first group of horsemen. They seemed to melt into the ground, horses and men disappearing into the grass. The groups spread out, making more difficult targets. I managed to fire in bursts to conserve ammunition, and was able to thin out those groups of horsemen considerably, but they kept coming.

I was deafened by the noise of the Maxim, my nose filled with guncotton fumes, my nerves numbed by the recoil. I cursed my helper for letting the gun jam, until I realized the belt was used up. The first horsemen were barely fifty yards away as I tried to reload. My hands were unsteady and my fingers so numb that I knew I would not be in time. I felt a slap on my back. It was the Prussian.

"You are loading incorrectly. Don't be in such a hurry."

I looked around and saw some twenty or so of the soldiers standing as if for inspection.

"Fuego!" commanded the Prussian, but these men had no rifles. Instead, they hurled stick grenades in unison. The ground erupted in front of the horsemen, but even as they wheeled their mounts, the second barrage landed among them. By the time I was ready to fire at the nearest group, there were only a few pitiful horses hobbling around, but another wave was swooping in to engulf us.

I opened fire and time seemed to stand still. Horses rearing, riders sprawling, groups of lancers disappearing in shell bursts, never to reappear, grenades crashing; I was as abstracted from the battle as I would have been seeing a painting of it in a museum. The gun was no longer a weapon which I used. It was a machine, and I was an integral part of its mechanism. I was not angry at the charging horsemen, nor was I afraid. I simply made sure they went down.

Suddenly, there were no more horsemen. I stopped firing and stood up, weakly clutching the side of the coach for support, my ears ringing, throat dry. I looked over the field and saw that the horsemen had become rag dolls. They carpeted the meadow in grotesque poses. Only the horses looked natural, as if they had fallen asleep. Here and there, someone or something moved, but that was an exception. I noticed blood on my coatsleeve and discovered a gash on my arm. I hadn't felt a thing.

There was a commotion behind me, and I looked in the direction in which a soldier was pointing. A dozen horsemen were galloping hard at us from the rear. The soldiers were amazed, to be attacked by a dozen horsemen. Clearly, the enemy had gone mad.

The Prussian drew his pistol and took steady aim, emptying a saddle with every shot, until his magazine was used up, but still they came, the last two. He picked up a rifle and killed the first, but when he drew back the bolt for the second shot, he found the magazine empty. At such close range, there was no way to save him from the lance of the second horseman.

There was no need to save the Prussian, anyway. He stepped aside, parried the lance with the rifle barrel, and in a graceful but deadly pirouette, dashed out the horseman's brains. The blow from the rifle butt raised the lancer out of his saddle and cart-wheeled him into the mud, leaving the riderless horse to gallop away toward the gathering rain clouds on the horizon. The lance had torn the Prussian's coatsleeve, but that was all. Some of the soldiers cheered.

They had little affection for him, but a lot of respect. To the soldiers, the Prussian captain was a kind of war god, a hard task-master who spared neither the men nor himself. In fact, he spared the men much more than himself, but he was raised in a harder school than they. The soldiers had never seen this combination of cool, directed ferocity and apparent disdain for danger. Some said that he was really the angel of death disguised in a blue uniform, and not human at all. He only ate and slept, they said, to keep up appearances. But human or not, they reasoned that it was best to stay on his good side.

I had my own ideas about the captain. I had never before seen the leadership principle demonstrated in such a forceful manner. Here was a man who ruled himself, and quite naturally ruled other, less willful men. It was his driving power, his will, that drove each man to do his best. Without him, this unit would have fallen apart, and every man and boy, including myself, would now be lying in the grass or the mud of the ditch. By driving us ruthlessly, he had saved us. Maybe the enemy's lancers understood and decided that this man must be killed at any cost. Otherwise why the last, determined

effort by twelve men against overwhelming numbers? I considered this as I walked back toward the locomotives in search of my suitcase.

The train was a scene of hurried activity. Dead horses were butchered for rations and cooking fires lit in advance of the rain which was soon to come. I passed a group of soldiers who were kindling their fire with dynamite shavings. The smell of coffee made me realize that I was very hungry.

There was plenty of fresh horse meat to go around, and I accepted a well-done chunk which was skewered on a rifle cleaning rod. I was ravenous, and nearly broke a tooth on a piece of shrapnel embedded in the meat. A dead soldier's canteen yielded some aguardiente which took the powder taste out of my mouth. I resumed my stroll, chewing cautiously, and discovered my suitcase beside a pile of artillery shells. Aside from some scratches, it was intact and perfectly dry.

Hearing lewd shouts and catcalls, I looked up to see the Frenchman, assisted by some of the soldiers, achieve a precarious perch upon one of the telegraph poles. The soldiers thought this was very funny, though I could not appreciate the finer points of their rabelaisian humor. I watched the lieutenant as he spliced a telegraph key into the line. The capital was about to receive some news.

A young soldier came running up to us. "Señor, the captain invites you to accompany him!" He motioned that I was to follow, and in a great hurry, led me up the embankment.

We clambered over the derailed artillery flatcar. One of the guns, the one which remained on the car, was still aimed out over the charnel field, the barrel at maximum deflection. The gunners had fired over open sights during the last desperate rush, and now the gun pointed, like the finger of death, to heaps of broken bodies which fanned out as if they had been spewed from the muzzle of the gun itself. A plainsman's lance was firmly imbedded in the wooden flooring of the flatcar. That was how near they had come. On the other side of the embankment the Prussian and a native lieutenant were waiting with horses. Accompanied by a few of the cavalymen, we mounted up and went off to do a quick reconnaissance of the battlefield. Soon we gained the top of the ridge and looked out over the vast expanse of the Llanos Orientales, the breeding ground of the enemy.

"Plainsmen," said the Prussian, indicating the sandals and peculiar palm leaf hats of some corpses in a trench. "All of the insurgents are from the Llanos. They breed like mosquitoes and fly in to pester the towns. Sometimes they are too much for the townsmen. Then they conquer them and become townsmen themselves. There is no end to it. In all of this struggle they are merely impoverishing the country and providing a market for arms and exercise for foreigners like ourselves. I don't complain. I'm a soldier, and this is my life, but it is obvious these people do not know how to run a country."

"They seem patriotic enough," I said, watching my horse prick its ears at the sound of distant thunder.

"Oh, yes, they love the flags and the parades, and woe to you if you criticize their country, but they cannot make the daily sacrifices nor suffer the constant discipline required to make a country. They are irresponsible, from top to bottom."

"Then they will probably be ruled by others."

"They already are, but they will not know this as long as they can fly their flags and sing their national anthems." Turning in his saddle, he shouted, "Teniente! Detail men to collect all weapons and ammunition. Tell them they can have any valuables on the bodies, but they must bring me the weapons. And Lieutenant, listen carefully: I shall give a gold piece to any man who brings me papers or maps."

The lieutenant saluted, made a smart about turn by rearing his horse, and went back to the train at a gallop.

"Incentive," said the Prussian, wiping his monocle with a clean handkerchief.

We rode back to the train and watched preparations for continuing the journey. The leading flatcar had jumped the track, but had not gone into the ditch as had the second. The rails were unloaded and the wheels put back on the track. Using levers, improvised ramps, blocks and tackle, horses and lots of cursing the two seventy-fives and their limbers were hoisted upon the flatcar, along with all the ammunition that could be placed aboard. Those in charge of the flatcar were taught the use of the handbrake, and hardwood chockblocks were placed fore and aft to insure against a runaway. A team of horses was chosen to pull this rolling munitions exhibit, using a special harness concocted from the combined harness of the limbers. With the loss of our steam power, we were back among the ancients as far as transport was concerned, and no match for them when it came to walking.

"General Miranda must have those guns," said the Prussian. "The real problem is getting them over the bad trails once they leave the railway."

He selected a group of cavalry to screen the line of march. Owing to the casualties among the mounts, there were many cavalymen without horses. The number of mounted cavalry had to be pared down even more, as every horse was needed to carry supplies and munitions.

There was a lot of grumbling among the cavalymen, the dandies of the army. Each man felt that the captain was grossly unfair to use his mount as a pack animal. Using any other man's horse was perfectly all right. Thus, I discovered that Latins have no objection to rules so long as exceptions are made for every individual. The Prussian was not amused. He expected his orders to be obeyed without question, whether his subordinates were cavalry darlings or infantry peons.

The festering resentment among the cavalry came to a head when one of the horses balked at carrying two cases of rifle ammunition. A young private who had been helping

with the loading had been struck in the face with a cavalryman's riding crop. The indignant *cuirassier* accused the boy of hurting his animal. A crowd of loafers gathered, eager to fan the flames of rancor.

I saw the young soldier's face was bleeding. He was kneeling, quivering with pain from the blow, the blood oozing through his fingers where he held his cheek.

"Dog of a soldier," spat the cavalryman. "I'll teach you to mistreat my horse." He was playing to the audience.

I noticed how much importance these people vested in their concept of 'dignity,' but I suspected that the cavalry were really upset over the prospect of a tiring walk which would reveal them as pampered weaklings before the lowly infantrymen. The intricacies of Latin machismo were part of a new world for me.

"What is going on here?" bellowed the Prussian. "These pack animals must be loaded immediately. Private, why have you not loaded this horse?"

The boy soldier stood up, trying to control his sobbing. I recognized him as the one who had helped me with the machine-gun. "The gentleman will not permit it, Sir." His effort at military protocol was very touching.

"You have no right to use my horse in this fashion," said the cavalryman, striking a melodramatic pose to reclaim the center of the stage.

"Ach so," said the Prussian. "Would you rather carry these boxes yourself?"

The cavalryman drew his saber, only to find himself staring into the muzzle of the Prussian's Mauser pistol. The shot was no surprise, but it seemed to have that effect upon the cavalryman. His mouth gaped, and his eyes rolled upwards, as if to examine the place where his forehead had been. Overbalanced by his heavy breastplate, he toppled backwards and slid head-first down the trampled grass of the embankment, sinking into the stagnant pool of water in the ditch until only his expensive riding boots showed.

"Finish the loading, Private," said the Prussian. "General Miranda needs your ammunition. The rest of you have work to do as well. Go now, or I'll have you flogged." He cast a steely eye in their direction and assisted the slowest gawkers with the toe of his boot. The taste of his riding crop was not to their liking, either, and they scattered. He had no time for play-acting.

I accompanied him to see how the wounded were being looked after. They were only our wounded, of course. The enemy were left to die on the field where they had fallen. Flies buzzed in swarms, and the smell of blood pervaded the air.

The seriously wounded were made as comfortable as possible and left with a guard of walking wounded who could tend them. They were told that a train would arrive that

evening or early next morning to take them back to the capital. For many, it was their last night.

We stopped beside a soldier with a stomach wound. He was moaning for water. The Prussian leaned over to examine the wound and frowned. "There is nothing to be done for this one. It is already turning septic. Take his boots. They are your size."

"But ..."

"Your shoes are ruined. Soon your feet will be sore. Then you will stop, but the column will not stop. The enemy will find you and you will die, just like any straggler in this campaign. You have already seen what happens to stragglers."

I remembered the pitiful remains of the tortured cavalryman and began to remove the dying soldier's boots as gently as possible. When I pulled at the first boot, he seemed to snap out of his delirium. He could have been my age, though the pain of his wound made him appear much older to me as I looked into his drawn face. His fevered eyes looked into mine with stark terror. Now he realized he would die. "No!" he screamed, struggling with me to keep his boots on.

He exhausted his last reserves of strength and lapsed into unconsciousness. As I pulled off the second boot, my hands were clammy with cold sweat and tears were streaming down my face. I said nothing as I changed out of my shoes.

The Prussian rested his hand on my shoulder. "You are very young," he said softly. "Life is hard. If it were not, it would not go on. At least he feels no pain now. Do not concern yourself about him. Dying is quite natural and unavoidable. You saw how he received the knowledge. Just think how you will receive it. Come, you have entered the world of men. There is no turning back."

I nodded, still unable to appreciate the cold comfort of the Prussian's words. I saw the face of the dying youth many nights thereafter.

It came to me that life was so abundant in this tropical zone that all things which were not vigorously alive soon fell prey to other forms of life and perished. A fantastic rate of reproduction insured that what could not endure could be replaced. Like nature, my fellows were indifferent to the creation and destruction of life, and I was already becoming one of them, but I was too tired to care.

With my new boots, I made hurried preparations for the march. I found a haversack, abandoned my suitcase, and wrapped my precious notebooks in oiled cloth to keep out the impending rain. I was issued with a Mauser rifle, leather pouches of ammunition and a greatcoat which could double as a blanket. My rations consisted of chunks of thoroughly-roasted horsemeat.

I gathered four canteens, as there was much equipment to choose from, and filled them with hot water from the boiler of one of the locomotives. I saw others filling theirs from the tenders, but had no wish to contract another case of dysentery. One performance was sufficient to make me cautious about what I ate and drank. Knowing thirst would be a problem, I drank as much water as I could hold.

As I passed the wrecked locomotive which had gone nose first into a mined culvert, I reflected that it would take days for another train to pass beyond this point. I saw the Prussian looking over the mess and shaking his head. It must have been as bad as I thought, or even worse.

He motioned for me to join him. "A single track line in marshy country. No way to go around. The train must be rerailed, car by car and towed back to the nearest siding, then the locomotives. Ach, I'm afraid this one is unsalvageable. See, its frame is twisted. Then the culvert must be repaired. New pilings must be driven."

"It almost sounds worse than it looks," I said, leaning against the brakewheel of the overturned flatcar. It seemed quite comfortable, standing ankle-deep in the stinking mud, using the wrecked flatcar as a backrest. I wondered if I were ever going to be my old self again. As it happened, I never had time to find out.

The Prussian appeared satisfied with the progress of the loading, and stooped to pick up a lump of coal which had spilled from the tender of the wrecked locomotive. He examined the dark, bituminous facets as a seer might examine a crystal ball.

I broke in upon his thoughts. "This flatcar was the one you were on, wasn't it?"

He said nothing at first, his mind far away. "Yes ... All of us managed to jump, but the machine-gun was put out of action."

"What happened to the engine crew?"

"They jumped too, but they chose the wrong side. You will find them lying in the field." He threw the lump of coal, scattering some vultures that were quarrelling over a heap of entrails.

I winced. "No thank you. I've seen enough corpses for one day."

"That is only one aspect of war. In fact, it is probably the least important aspect. Good military strategists can attain their ends without producing mountains of corpses."

"You sound like a humanitarian, Captain, if you'll pardon my presumption."

"Not at all. Modern warfare is very expensive. The cost of producing one corpse in battle is astronomically higher than in ancient times, but this is to overlook the major problems of war."

"What are those?"

"War is most complex in its economic aspects. Time, distance, supplies present problems alongside of which the problems of strategy and maneuver become insignificant. Today's contretemps remind me of the Turkish campaign in the Hejaz." He scanned the darkening horizon with his binoculars.

"How is that?" I shifted my feet in the mud.

"An army dangling on the end of a railway is never in a comfortable position, as my colleagues of the Turkish-Fourth in Medina soon discovered."

"What did they do about it?"

"Nothing. Medina is a holy city, and was of great political importance to the Turkish Empire, though I maintained that it was of even greater advantage, both militarily and politically, were it abandoned to the infidel British."

"How would that have been an advantage?"

"The Turkish Army could have shortened its supply lines and remained a viable force. A holy war could have been proclaimed to drive out the infidel, in due time, of course."

"Did you mention this idea to anyone?"

"Certainly. General von Sanders, the chief of our military mission, was convinced. He had seen the danger at the outset."

"Why wasn't anything done, then?"

"Ach, the Turks! There was no reasoning with them."

"So what finally happened?"

"The railway was cut so often that no attack could be mounted against the British from Medina. The original spearhead, the Fourth Army, became a mere garrison whose very numbers sapped its efficiency, even in a defensive role. Starvation reduced the army to virtual prisoners in the city. They finished the rats and were eating the palm trees when the British attacked and put an end to their misery. Only a handful returned to our lines. A whole army lost without a fight, and they dearly wanted to fight, believe me."

"Aren't we in much the same predicament?"

"By no means. The enemy is not using guerrilla tactics, as you have just had the opportunity to see. He is determined to take and hold territory. Thus we can close with him before our supplies are exhausted and defeat him decisively."

"And what if he uses guerrilla tactics?"

"As long as his guerrilla activities are not supported by a foreign power, he will get nowhere. He only becomes a nuisance in such a context as this."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Let us say that you wished to take over this country. Recruits, weapons, munitions, supplies and transport are not to be found on trees, you know, and without them, the 'gentlemen' in the capital will see no good reason why they should simply hand over to you, whatever your shining ideals may be."

"No, I guess not."

"Suppose that you have managed to acquire a certain amount of the requisite items which could be used to induce the 'gentlemen' of the government to retire. You've never enough, of course. Would you use them? If so, how would you use them?"

"I might wait until I had enough."

"And in the meantime you might be betrayed by informers."

"Well, I might use what I had in limited engagements, sniping here, blowing up things there, always hit and run."

"And run you would, because you would be well-chased, usually by men better fed, equipped and mounted than you. Assuming you did not receive outside assistance, do you see anything but attrition in this process? If you survived indefinitely, you would only succeed in impoverishing the country."

"I could gain popular support."

"Only if you could convince people that the government was more rapacious, corrupt and incompetent than you."

"It could go on for years."

"Generations, provided that in your running around you did not become so isolated from the populace as to cut off your source of recruits. There would be every chance that, in your desperate attempts to survive, your means of living would gradually eclipse your original objectives and you would become just one more bandit tribe living in the backlands."

"In that case, there would be no use in carrying on the struggle."

"Or, you might try to concentrate your forces and mount one all-out attack on the government forces, relying on the element of surprise."

"But isn't that what the enemy has tried to do?"

"Yes, but there is never any guarantee of success, no matter what prescription is used for wresting power away from those who wish to retain it. The enemy has tried one recipe, and as a consequence, I believe we have hurt him badly today."

"And what about ourselves?" I looked over at the bedraggled assemblage of men and animals.

"Look around you. Do you see any of the enemy forces standing, ready to fight?"

"No."

"Look again at our soldiers. They are tired, but they are on their feet, and they are going to fight."

We formed up in a long, thin line upon the railroad track which provided the only firm footing for miles in the marshy pastureland of the area. Our few mounted cavalry formed a screen to the front and on either flank. To make up for the disadvantage of our disposition, the two Maxims were posted at the front and rear of the column, and packed upon the horses in such a way that they could be put into action at the first sign of trouble.

I looked up and saw a bird of prey hanging motionless in the last blaze of sunset. The shadows lengthened on the llanos and the horizon spawned dark thunderclouds which were sweeping our way.

The Prussian, mounted upon a fine-looking roan, raised his hand, and the bugler sounded 'forward march.' The rain began as we went up the line, leaving the vultures in command of the battlefield. My long march had begun.

I was very proud that the Prussian had left me in charge of the rear Maxim gun, although he probably wouldn't have if there had been anyone else left with the ability to use it. His relief column had been pieced together so hurriedly that I wondered how many of the soldiers knew which end of a rifle was which.

The rain was cool and refreshing and dripped off the brass cooling jacket of the Maxim, wetting the harness straps that held it in place. Soon the leather began to stretch.

"We must stop for a moment, Señor. The straps will soon give way," said my assistant, the young soldier who had been slashed by the cavalryman's whip. The blood on his cheek had stopped flowing, and he seemed to have forgotten about it. Perhaps he was used to such treatment.

I drew on the reins and stopped the pack horse, holding her steady while the boy tightened the straps.

"Please help me," he said.

Still holding the reins, I put my shoulder under the gun and raised it so the slack could be taken out of the harness. The weight was appalling. I wondered how I had managed to drag the gun and its mount onto the railroad line that day. The boy worked rapidly, his lips pursed in concentration as he made sure the knots were tight and would not slip.

"Not too tight," I said. "We may need this in a hurry, you know."

"Oh, yes." He smiled. With his dark eyes, smooth face and long lashes, he reminded me of a girl.

I gave the mare a flick of the reins, and we resumed our walk through the steady drizzle.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Juan, Señor."

"Mine's Fred."

"How is that?"

"Federico. How old are you, Juan?"

"Fifteen, Señor."

He could have been younger, but it was nice having someone nearly my age calling me 'sir.'

"How long have you been in the army?"

"Since last month."

"Do you like it?"

"Sometimes, but I am beginning to miss my mother."

"Do you live in the capital?"

"Yes, in Barrio Plamenco."

I had heard that was one of the poorer quarters of the city.

"How many in your family?"

"Fifteen, perhaps."

"You're not sure?"

"Only that there is always another. That is why I have joined the army. With my pay I can help my mother and my brothers and sisters. Is that why you joined the army?"

"No. I'm not a soldier. I'm a journalist."

His eyes widened in appreciation. "Oh, that means you can read and write. But how is it that you know how to use this?" He pointed to the Maxim.

"My father taught me. He was an officer in the California State Militia."

"He was a general?"

"No, a dentist." I tried to explain that duty in the militia was only part time, but I only succeeded in confusing him.

"What does your father do?" I asked, to change the subject.

"I don't know. He went away a long time ago. I hate him."

"What?"

"I hate him for what he did to my mother. He made her very unhappy. Fortunately, I have many uncles who come to visit, and they help to take care of her."

"Oh." I gave him a dubious glance.

"Still, it must be nice to have a father. You are very lucky."

"I was, but my father died a year ago."

"No! How did that happen?"

"He caught pneumonia."

"What's that?"

"A very bad sickness." I licked my lips and tasted the raindrops, salty with my own perspiration. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Juan shiver. "Do you feel cold?"

"A little."

I put the back of my hand on his forehead. He was feverish. "You must take my coat. This rain is very bad for you."

"No, Señor."

"Federico."

"No, Federico. You will need it yourself."

"No, I won't. You need it now. I don't want you to catch pneumonia. It is very easy to catch, you know."

He made no further protest as I unrolled my greatcoat, put it over his shoulders and buttoned it for him. With his equipment and cartridge pouches bulging underneath, he looked like a walking circus tent, or like someone who was sneaking a few friends into the circus without paying.

Except for the incessant lightning, the rainswept night was pitch black. The wind blew the torrent almost horizontally, the cold drops drenching us thoroughly. Sleep was worth more to us now than gold, but the only way we could withstand the chill was to keep moving. There was no sleep for anyone that night. I plodded on, the patient horse beside me providing an illusion of warmth, even though I could not get very close because of my equipment. As I led the animal, I chewed some of my ration meat. No one felt like speaking, and if one had, his words would have been swept away in the wind-driven rain.

I felt Juan's forehead again and was glad to see that his fever had gone. Maybe it was caused by the cut on his cheek. He smiled impishly and placed an icy hand on the back of my neck. I gave a start and began to laugh. Somehow, the night had become more bearable.

We welcomed the sunrise. For hours I smelled the damp horses and wet uniforms ahead, but soon we were all dry. It was now the turn of the blazing sun to put us to the test. By eleven o'clock we were sweltering. Some of us began to long for the afternoon rainstorm. Soon we would be grateful for the chill of the night, forgetting our tooth-chattering discomfort. We were such a forgetful species, I thought, but without this amazing ability to forget, we probably wouldn't carry on.

Suddenly, we were all down upon the steaming railroad ties. A rifle had cracked in the distance. We strained our eyes for signs of the sniper, but all we saw were the grass and scrub trees of the savanna. Cautiously, I got up and began undoing the straps which held the machine-gun mount. Juan had already unloaded a box of belted ammunition by the time we heard the order to move out. We loaded up and plodded onward, at first throwing fearful glances to the flanks and rear, but later, with the heat and exhaustion, we lost our vigilance and with heads bowed, saw only the rough-hewed ties passing slowly beneath our halting feet.

Several hours had passed when we heard the invisible rifleman again. One of our men was killed. We stopped, gazed at the monotonous savanna and went on. By this time we were so tired we would have been utterly indifferent to a hail of bullets.

That afternoon we made a halt, ate more horsemeat, and rested for an hour. There was no time to kindle fires for coffee and little dry wood to be found in any case, since this was the rainy season. Reluctantly we got up and resumed the march.

Sweating so much, we soon began to suffer the keen thirst and exhaustion which come from loss of salt. The Prussian, seeing numbers of the men collapse or near collapse, ordered a halt by late afternoon, and we made camp for the night.

We had fires going before the rain started, were issued rations of salt, and drank great quantities of coffee made with water drawn from pools beside the railroad embankment. Strict orders were given that the troops were to answer the calls of nature on one side of the line and draw water from the other. The soldiers did not know why they were to do this, but the Prussian gave them his usual encouragement to do so.

The boiling of the water and the flavor of coffee disguised the taste of the algae, though it didn't remove all of the scum. I had drained my canteens during the day, and now refilled them with this coffee-flavored soup. Several times I had seen soldiers drink the water beside the embankment, and I was sorely tempted to do the same, mosquito larvae and all, but held back, knowing the soldiers were immune to most of the waterborne infections and that I was not. It was an exercise of willpower that I never regretted.

Mercifully the rain stopped, and raised our hopes for a dry night. It was not as cold as the previous night, so sleeping on the damp ground was not so bad, even though the occasional frog might jump on one's face.

In addition to the usual sentries, teams of men were posted with the horses to protect the precious animals from vampire bats which had decimated the cattle in the area. We were fortunate in one way, there were so many men and so few animals that Juan and I weren't called for sentry duty.

We shared my greatcoat which was not much good as a blanket, but helped to retain some of the warmth of our huddled bodies. In a few minutes I was sound asleep, just as if I had been in the softest bed of the Hotel Internacional. No thoughts of vampires or even the occasional shots of the sniper could keep me awake that night. For all I cared, they could have been on the moon.

Toward morning I had a nightmare about the dying soldier. Somehow I felt responsible for his death. I saw his eyes, full of pain, fear and pleading. We were struggling and I was saying over and over that I didn't mean to do it, but he didn't understand. I reached out to touch his face and woke up.

"Federico, Federico! Everything is all right. You were dreaming."

"Juan," I said, or rather, sobbed.

"You are crying."

"Yes."

"Sometimes I cry at night, too," he said, wiping my tears away.

I drew him close and we fell asleep with our arms around one another.

We broke camp at dawn and resumed the trek, feeling rested and even cheerful. Youth has such advantages.

Four days later we left the railroad at the smoldering ruins of Las Aguas Station and entered the stands of trees and rolling country of the sierra foothills. Now the real work began, that of widening and levelling the trail for the passage of the limbers and guns. The toil of manhandling them over the streams and through the narrow canyons was shared by everyone. Ropes were attached to the gun carriages so that teams of soldiers could help the horses drag them over the many obstacles. The Frenchman called the ropes 'prolonges,' a fancy name, but they raised blisters on one's hands all the same.

Trees were felled with axes and machetes and used as bridging material for crossing the many streams that had appeared in the area since the rains. It was no wonder that the last railroad station was called 'Las Aguas,' or 'The Waters,' although most of the freshets would dry up after the rainy season.

I winced, seeing one of the guns slip sideways, nearly toppling into a ravine. The soil was red laterite which baked hard in the dry season and turned to slippery mud in the rain. A few inches below the surface it was brick-hard, and the covering of gruel-like mud made going very treacherous on the slopes where there was no vegetation. Men and horses frequently lost their footing.

A load of shells dropped into a water-filled arroyo along with the unfortunate animal that bore it. The soldiers dragged the struggling horse out of the ravine and laid the exhausted animal upon the muddy bank, while others waded into the water and passed up the spilled shells.

"Its leg is broken," pronounced a corporal, after feeling the horse for signs of injury.

A private responded by smashing the animal in the head with his ride butt. After stunning, he rammed his bayonet between the horse's eyes. The dying horse was set upon by the ravenous soldiers, hungry as pirañas. It was still twitching feebly as they skinned it and hacked off pieces of warm flesh. A soldier sank his face into the blood and noisily sucked it up. I had concluded some time ago that the horses were far more civilized than

we were, and was momentarily ashamed at the discovery that my mouth was watering. Maybe our ideas of civilization were more suited to grazing animals than to omnivores.

As I stood watching this gory business, I felt a warm pressure on my foot. It was my own pack horse, placidly licking the encrusted salt off my boot. Even the animals were becoming accustomed to slaughter.

Suddenly a bullet whined, ricocheting off the machine-gun mount strapped to the horse's side. As I hit the ground I thought I had seen the flash of something metallic in a clump of bamboo off to my right. Someone in the column let off a shot in surprise or panic, with no visible effect. I peered at the bamboo, straining to glimpse the metallic flash. It could have been my imagination, maybe a sunbeam glancing off a wet leaf. Horses' hooves clumped and slithered on the adobe mud. I turned to see a native lieutenant with a few cavalry.

"Hola, Teniente!" I called.

He rode toward me. "What is it?"

"I saw something in that stand of bamboo."

"I'll call the captain." He spurred his horse.

The Prussian came in a few moments, accompanied by a flying squad of sharpshooters and regular infantry with light equipment. The skirmishers went out in a pincer movement as the Prussian observed the bamboo through his binoculars.

"Do you wish to see?" He offered me the field-glasses.

"Thank you." I made a minor adjustment and focussed on the bamboo. A tattered man came running out, running toward us, soldiers at his heels. He faltered and collapsed behind a bush. The soldiers raised their bayonets and thrust downward. Soon they were with us, displaying a pair of human ears and an extra rifle.

"He was impatient," said the Prussian. "The trees made him come too close."

"Federico!" It was Juan. He was pale, and weakly supported himself by clutching the harness straps of our pack horse. I caught him just as he began to slump to the ground. There was a large bloodstain spreading over his shirtfront and trousers. I laid him down and opened his shirt. From what I could see, with all the blood flowing, there was a jagged wound in his side. The ricochet had done it.

"We cannot save him," said the Prussian.

I shook my head in disbelief.

"You must leave him now. The column is moving on. There may be more enemy forces in this area, and we must not straggle. Do you hear me?"

I nodded and looked down at Juan.

"Federico." He reached out to me.

"I shall carry him," I said.

"You love him, don't you?" said the Prussian.

I looked into the captain's expressionless blue eyes. "Yes!" I shouted.

I removed Juan's equipment and lifted him in my arms. Without a word the Prussian took the reins of the pack horse and walked ahead of us.

"You will not leave me, Federico," Juan murmured.

"No." I pressed my cheek to his.

"I am cold." His voice grew fainter.

"Juan."

He couldn't hear me. Gently I laid him on the damp ground beside a thorn bush. His eyes were closed and he had the faintest trace of a smile on his smudged face. A lock of black hair fell down over his forehead.

"You see, Juan, I haven't deserted you."

The Prussian thrust his pistol into my hand, "Here, if you want to join your friend, use it."

I stared at the Mauser, then turned the muzzle toward me and looked into the inscrutable blackness of the barrel.

"No," I said, returning the pistol.

"All right." He thumped me on the back. "Let's go!"

He gave me the reins and walked beside me until we reached the rear of the column, both of us singing some German song about a hunter in a beautiful green forest. The soldiers thought we had gone mad with the heat. The next few days, I threw myself into the work, seeking the solace of exhaustion.

As it grew dark on the ninth day, I heard or imagined I heard gunfire booming sporadically in the distance, and as we continued our advance, the sounds became unmistakable. A battle was taking place somewhere ahead of us. The column quickened its pace.

General Miranda's headquarters was being attacked, but we had no idea of the distance we had to go. The foothills echoed the gunfire and soon it seemed to come from every direction.

Around midnight, we found ourselves on a road of sorts. True enough, it was more like a streambed, but compared to the way we had come, it was like a royal highway. Cavalry scouts rode ahead, straining to see something in the cloudy night.

Suddenly, I heard the crash of a ragged volley. A bugle blared off-key, and there was cheering. A rifle shot flashed in the trees and the column returned the fire, but ceased on orders of the officers. There was no more firing from the woods. The cheering grew louder as we advanced. Soon the column was surrounded by a jubilant mass of soldiers. We had broken the siege of Las Aguas. Coming to a halt, most of us collapsed beside the road and slept where we fell.

I woke up sooner than I had intended when a horse began licking the perspiration from my face. It must have been the middle of the day. The sun was blazing down. For a moment I lay still, listening to the ring of machetes chopping firewood, the bray of mules, the jingle of harness and equipment and the desultory conversations of nearby soldiers. The aroma of coffee dispelled further thoughts of sleep, and I found a stream where I washed and put on a clean shirt. Looking in my pocket mirror, I was disappointed to see that I still didn't need a shave.

After a cup of delicious coffee, brewed in a German gasmask tin, and a chunk of roasted horsemeat which I warmed over a fire, I gathered my notebooks and walked up the path to the hacienda where General Miranda had his headquarters. It looked very much like a castle from the foot of the hill, complete with a white tower which rose out of the central patio. Haciendas in the backlands were like sugar cubes to the swarms of bandit flies, so they were fortified out of necessity rather than romantic taste.

I was startled by the roar of an internal combustion engine. Looking around, I saw a yellow biplane soar over the palmettos on a nearby ridge. Soldiers cheered and waved their caps as the plane swooped down over the tents and earthworks, and I could see the pilot was smiling, though his features were otherwise masked by his goggles and aviator's helmet. If he hadn't looked so friendly, the twin machine-guns at his front cockpit would have given me a scare. I waved my battered Panama hat.

He dipped his wings to salute us and rose almost vertically into the air, stalled, and dove straight down, coming out in a tight loop. Making no attempt to right his plane, he flew off over the horizon, upsidedown. I stared after him in amazement.

The frantic yells of a dispatch rider caused me to tear my eyes from the horizon, and I jumped off the narrow path, just avoiding being trampled as the rider swept by.

In a slightly shaken state I arrived at the main gate of the hacienda and was admitted by two sentries. Passing a machine-gun emplacement and some lounging soldiers, I entered the patio. A fountain splashed exuberantly, refreshing the horses and men who drank from its green waters. Sentries paced along the walls and women chattered as they prepared the afternoon meal. My hobnails rang upon ancient tiles which had been plundered from some Moorish palace in Spain. Crossing the patio, I came to the tower entrance which was guarded by two more sentries. They allowed me in with no questions. I followed the many telephone lines which led through a maze of crowded rooms and corridors until I found General Miranda.

He was in a vortex of confusion, but seemed to maintain a regal calm, standing imperturbably at a large map table, flanked by staff officers who apparently held contradictory points of view. They stabbed their fingers at the man and vied for his attention, all speaking at once. Added to their babble was the frantic ringing of telephones in the next room, combined with the rapid clicking of a telegraph instrument. Messengers came and left so frequently that I began to believe there was some kind of competition going on, the rules of which I could not understand.

On the outskirts of this confusion stood two soldiers in charge of a machine-gun which was aimed out one of the tower loopholes. Casually, they smoked their cigarettes and looked quite unconcerned. I imagined they felt superior to the staff officers who rushed about like insects trapped in a burning box.

Gradually the room became quieter and I found a chair. Most of the staff officers had received their orders and had left on various missions. The messengers seemed sated with outgoing dispatches and the telephones calmed down. Only the telegraph key clicked on persistently. It was so quiet I could hear the rumble of artillery or thunder in the distance. Ignoring me, the general lit a cigarette and studied the map.

Then the door burst open, and in came the big man in the bowler hat. I remembered him from the District Commander's office in the capital. He looked like a person who was always in a hurry, in whose path conspirators placed doors and other obstacles with the sole purpose of wasting his valuable time. He removed a paper from his briefcase as he strode over to the map table and handed it to the general with no introductions. The general read the paper and appended it with a long statement which he signed and returned to the man with the bowler who left as suddenly as he had come. Except for the two soldiers, General Miranda and I were alone.

"It may interest you to know," he said in English, "that I suspect that man of being a spy. It appears that he may have an unfortunate accident very soon, but I really know nothing about this matter, you understand."

The general dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it out with the heel of his riding boot. He drew a fine gold pocket watch from his tunic and looked at the time with studied nonchalance. From the patio came the crack of a rifle which made lonely echoes among the walls of the hacienda and was soon joined by the rumble of thunder or artillery in the distance. The general looked satisfied and returned the watch to his pocket.

I returned to my blank notebook and my bitten pencil, the sum total of my journalistic efforts. Here I was, in the brain center of the campaign, but I was helpless. The general and his staff refused point blank to make any comments about the military situation. I was mystified by the few sentences I could make out on the telegraph. The map before me had no place names, only numerical and alphabetical designations. My experience of the war so far had not provided the stuff with which to make a newspaper article, as my jaded editors would likely reject a battle story which had simply popped out of context. I relapsed into chewing my pencil.

The soldier had already said something before I realized he was speaking to me.

"Yes, what is it?" I looked up from my doodles.

"Captain von Mannerheim's compliments, Señor. He has sent me to tell you that your horse is waiting outside."

I rose from my feeble efforts at composition and followed him, leaving my pencil and notebooks forgotten on the chair.

Thunder rolled off somewhere in the distance, and the rain splattered with less vehemence upon the shining cobbles outside the cantina. Don José lit the hurricane lanterns, the electric lights having failed in the storm. The smell of kerosene complemented the cantina's musty aroma of stale beer and mildewed wallpaper,

"So you forgot your notebooks," said the young American. "Did you go back for them?"

"No," I said. "I would have made a lousy journalist anyway. For example, I don't even know your name, and we've been sharing our life stories most of the afternoon."

"Charles," he said, shaking my hand.

"Fred. You intend to be here long?"

"Don't know."

"If you don't find work here, are you going back to the States?"

He gave me a bleak look. "Go back? To what, a ruined career? A job with the C.I.A.? I'd do nearly anything not to go back."

"Sounds as if you've had some differences of opinion with the backroom boys who run the U.S. Well, to up-date Mr. Fields, I'd say that any man accused of treason by those crooks can't be all bad."

He smiled. "So what do you do for a living?"

"As little as possible. I'm a tropical tramp."

"A what?"

"A tropical tramp. You see, first you've got to become proper tramp."

"That's easy."

"No, it isn't. You think I mean a bum or down-and-outer. Those aren't tramps."

"Okay, so you qualify as a tramp and then you hit the tropics."

"Ah, but that doesn't make you a tropical tramp."

"No?"

"No. You need more qualifications."

"Like what?"

"Like you've got to learn the lingo they speak here, and you have to travel around these parts for a couple of years."

"So then I become a tropical tramp. Then what?"

"Then you start working to qualify for the next grade."

"The next grade?"

"Right. If you show diligence and pass all the exams, you may qualify as a Typical Tropical Tramp."

It did me good to see him laugh.

A whistle sounded moist and clear in the evening air.

"Well, that's my boat. I'm off." I finished my beer.

"You going up or down river?" asked Charles, handing me my old suitcase.

"Down, then back to the States for a visit. I've got some business to wind up."

"I'll carry your suitcase and see you off, then, if you don't mind."

"Thanks, much obliged." I gave it back to him.

The rain was gentle, but soaking, so I hailed a victoria which had just let off a passenger at the door of the cantina. "Al embarcadero, Señor, y rápido, por favor," I said, prodding the driver with a handful of coins.

We got in. The driver gave the two nags a flick of his coach-whip and we proceeded smartly through the gleaming cobbled streets, the rain pelting pleasantly upon the cloth top of the carriage.

"This is travelling in style," said Charles.

"And it's quiet, smokeless, and saves foreign exchange."

"If I could live at my own pace, this would be my speed."

"Same here. Most things people do don't really justify so much hurry, anyway." I slouched comfortably in the seat.

"You know, I've got a strange feeling I've seen you someplace before."

"Me? I doubt it. You know the old Chinese saying, 'all Caucasian look alike.'"

"I'm pretty sure I have, all the same."

"Stop here, Driver! Charles, this is where you get out." The driver pulled on the reins and brought the carriage to a halt.

"I don't understand." Charles' eyes widened.

"You want a job, don't you?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, just step right out and knock on number thirty-eight over there, and if you are what you say you are, you'll be gainfully employed.

"Well, I ..."

"If you're trying to thank me, don't. You may be getting a lot more than you bargained for. All right, the steamer is waiting. Out you go. Déle, hombre!"

The driver whipped up the horses and we lurched away. From the rear window I watched him as we drove down the narrow street. He stood in the rain, looking bewildered at first and undecided. Then he seemed to make his mind up. I saw him turn and stride toward the black door numbered thirty-eight.

"Arrives at quick decisions and follows them through with determination." That was Charles, all right. I had read his dossier.

Chapter 2 **THE SAILING OF THE SANDSHARK.**

As the train slowed to a stop at Chihuahua Station it was besieged by hordes of food and soft drink vendors. The din of hawking and haggling and the jostling as passengers crowded to the train windows had wakened Charles, but he made a pretense of sleeping, slumped in the seat with his straw sombrero over his eyes. The wooden slats of the seat gouged into his back, as they had the whole trip from Topolobampo. He watched the sunbeams peeping through his sombrero and concentrated on slowing his breathing as the Mexican customs and immigration officials approached.

"Señor." A hand tapped his arm. He straightened up and slowly raised the brim of his grimy hat, yawned, and rubbed his eyes which were ringed by layers of desert dust that had blown in through the open train windows.

"Documentos, por favor," said the official.

"Sí, Señor." Sleepily, Charles rummaged through the pockets of his soiled shirt, discovering as if by chance his forged tourist card. "Is this what you want, Señor?" He laid on a thick American accent.

The official took the document without replying and his nose twitched with disgust as he scrutinized the issue date and the personal identification features. Charles had 'aged' the forgery by putting it inside his boot and later, adding a dash of cheap mescal to enhance the aroma. The official surveyed him with a glare of disapproval and looked as if he were going to vomit.

Charles looked back at him and yawned. "Excuse me."

"Are you returning to the United States?"

"Yes."

"Then I must take your tourist card."

"I have enjoyed my stay in Mexico, Señor."

Yes, I'm sure you have." The official shook his head and moved down the aisle of the third class coach.

Charles turned his sigh of relief into a profound yawn and stretched to satisfaction.

"Señor, do you want tamales, enchiladas, tortillas, something to drink?"

He saw a little Indian girl on the platform, looking up at him with expectant brown eyes. She struggled with the weight of two great baskets, one loaded with food under a once white cloth and the other clinking with soft drink bottles.

"Yes, I'm pretty hungry. Let's see what you've got."

She raised the cloth as if unveiling a sculpture.

"Hmm, I like the looks of the enchiladas. What's in them?"

"Onions, chiles and chicken, Señor."

"How much?"

She gave him an appraising look. All blue-eyed people had lots of money. That's what her mother always told her. "Two pesos each, Señor." She shuffled her bare feet among the banana peels and corn husks that littered the station platform.

He laughed. "What do you take me for, chica, a crazy gringo tourist?"

"Oh no, Señor, but these are very good enchiladas."

"Maybe, but they are very small. I'll give you fifty centavos each."

"One peso, Señor."

"Not interested."

"Okay, fifty centavos."

"You speak English very well." She giggled and looked coy.

"Give me ten enchiladas and two bottles of orange soda." He gave her the money through the train window and received his purchase wrapped in coarse brown paper. Since he had no table, he spread the paper out upon the train seat and devoured the enchiladas picnic fashion. They were very hot.

The air horn of the diesel locomotive excreted its unmelodious blat just as he finished the last bottle of soda. He handed the bottles down to the little girl as the train began to pull out of the station and waved goodbye to her. "Tell your mother I couldn't find any chicken in her chicken enchiladas. It must have run away."

The little girl waved back, hiding a broad smile with her other hand.

The train growled across the shimmering desert and arrived in Juárez late in the afternoon. After a good meal of steak, beans and cold Carta Blanca, Charles found a taxi to take him to the outskirts of the city.

"Do you know how to get to Juanita's whorehouse, Señor?"

The driver nodded enthusiastically. "Sí, Señor!"

"Okay, if you can get me there in less than half an hour I'll give you fifty pesos."

The driver opened the door. "Get in."

They sped away from the cab stand, narrowly avoiding collision with a Pemex truck, screeched around corners, paying no attention to traffic lights or policemen, skidded over streetcar tracks and leap-frogged over the spiderweb network of dirt roads which went off in every direction from the city. On these roads one found the thieves' market, the bordellos, the rendezvous of smugglers, the sites where illicit transactions of every kind imaginable and unimaginable, occurred.

"Juanita's is just ahead, Señor." The driver pointed with one hand and guided the lurching Chevy with the other. How he saw anything through the dusty windshield was a mystery.

"Perfect. You've made it with time to spare. I hope you have retro-rockets on this thing." Charles held on the door-frame to keep his head from being driven through the roof as the car bounced over the rough road.

The driver laughed and slammed on the brakes. They skidded up to the entrance of a nondescript adobe house in a choking dust cloud.

"When you want to come back, just tell Juanita." The driver opened the door for him and accepted the extra fifty pesos with his regular fare.

Charles waited until he had driven away, making a show of arranging his rucksack and tying his bootlaces. Hearing the bolt being drawn back on the door, he ran around the corner of the house, out of sight from the entrance, and headed off into the sagebrush.

"Nobody out here," said a woman with a piercing voice.

Charles heard the door slam as he walked back to the road. Removing the map from his rolled-up raincoat, he took his bearing. There was nothing special about Juanita's, except that it was close to the border. He went back into the brush and followed the road until he came to the international boundary fence, taking care that no one saw him.

The sun had begun to set, but there was ample light for him to observe the U.S. side with his binoculars for any signs of activity. He was at a point just over twenty miles out of Juárez. It was desert, with nothing but the smoke of El Paso's smelters to indicate the existence of a large city. He took a compass reading to make sure it was smoke from the smelters and not a brushfire, then arranged his pack for the hike.

When it was dark, he left his hiding place in the brush and advanced upon the fence, making a neat hole in the wire links with his cutters. Having enlarged it sufficiently, he put his pack through and followed it, squeezing through the gap which the wire grudgingly yielded. He pulled the gap closed and repaired it with a length of baling wire from his kit.

A startled bird flew overhead. He stopped working and listened, slowly scanning the darkened brush and cactus for the cause of the disturbance, but he saw only the full moon and heard only the gurgle of the shallow Rio Grande behind him.

There was quicksand in the Rio Grande. That's what everyone said. He waded into the muddy water, his belongings on his head, and tried to avoid splashing so as to evade the ears of any border patrolmen in the area. Reaching the other side, he walked in the coolness of the beautiful desert night, trailing a piece of sagebrush behind him to cover his tracks in the sand. The owls, coyotes and crickets gave him musical accompaniment, and the sage and yucca perfumed the air. He felt like whistling, but decided against it. Following a dry stream-bed, he reached a culvert and crossed under a highway, then made his way into the desert, away from signs of habitation.

At daybreak he was well across the border, but it was still unwise to travel by day, so he found cover beneath a rock out-crop. He ate some of the tortillas he had saved from his meal in Juárez and took a few sips of water from his canteen. Then he stretched out upon the cool stone slab and slept.

Around noon he woke up, ravenously hungry. He ate a few more tortillas, but he craved meat. Shrewdly he surveyed the rocky area where he had taken refuge. He cut a stout pole of brushwood and looped some baling wire at one end of it, arranging the loop so that it could be tightened by pulling on the free end of the wire.

In a shady crevice near his hiding place he found what he wanted, a big diamond back. He pried the angrily buzzing rattlesnake out of its den and placed the loop around it. After severing its head with his hunting knife, removing the entrails and skinning it, he built a small fire of dry sticks and roasted the clean white meat on a wooden skewer. With salt, the rattlesnake was delicious, roast chicken tasting no better. He ate his fill, leaving the remainder of the snake to dry in the blistering sun. Hearing the sound of a

spotter plane, he crawled into his cool recess in the rocks. The fire was out and there had been little smoke. He listened to the crows calling from their perches on the saguaros and fell asleep.

That evening he heard voices. They were discussing him, or rather what to do with him before they stripped him of his valuables. "The gringo is asleep," whispered one called Juan.

"Then we must make sure he does not wake up," said Domingo.

The rock declivity acted like an ear trumpet, and Charles heard everything. He began to snore and rolled over so that his hand now rested upon his snub-nosed Colt. His assailants were just below him, on the point of ascending the gradual incline of the rock stratum. He heard their sandals as they dislodged the screes at the base of the outcrop. They were coming up. He was about to sit up and start shooting when he heard a weird groan from one of the men. It hardly sounded human.

"Cristo y los cantos!" exclaimed one.

"Diablos!" added the other.

In the bright moonlight they had happened upon the remains of the rattlesnake Charles had nearly finished. There was no doubt that the snake had been cooked and eaten.

"A warlock!" shouted Juan as he made his getaway.

"Saints preserve me from specters!" screamed Domingo, running after him.

Charles laughed long and loudly. After gathering his kit together, he began the night trek toward the lights of El Paso.

He trudged through the dilapidated entrance of the Hotel Fisher in the old part of town, his heavy boots clumping on the rickety wooden floor. The hotel was a relic of the cowboy era, boasting high ceilings covered with embossed sheet iron, all the rage in the eighteen-seventies, he thought, dropping his pack on the dusty floor.

He caught the eye of the desk clerk. "Evening. Nice place you've got here - electric lights, wall-to-wall floors. Any vacancies?"

"Gawd, another hippy!" exclaimed the desk clerk, who had been giving him a hard look from the time he came in the door. The wizened little man's beady eyes glared at him from beneath his green eyeshade.

"Hippy?" Charles looked around. "No, not me. I've just been out doing some prospecting."

"Sorry about that, I really am." But the clerk continued to survey him with suspicion. Prospectors had equally bad reputations.

"Got a room?"

"Oh, sure. Here you are. Just sign the register." He shoved a yellowed sheet of paper across the warped planks of the counter. Charles signed it 'W. Irving,' and gave his address as the Great Northern Hotel, Bodie, California. Bodie was a ghost town, which made things even more interesting for the clerk as he studied the information.

"Ah, do you have some identification, Mr. Irving? Police requirement, you know." He snapped his metal sleeve garters off officiously.

"Sure." Charles took out his forged California driver's license and showed it to the clerk.

"Sorry, but things are getting tight these days. Used to have lots of the locals, businessmen mostly, comin' in with floozies. Now that they have to give their real names, they take all their business to Juárez. It's a cryin' shame. That's why we got rooms vacant. Take your pick."

"Where can I get a bath?"

"End of the hall. You'll find soap and towels in your room. Payment in advance." The clerk held out his hand.

"Right." Charles counted out the money carefully to make sure he didn't encumber the hotelier with an over-payment.

The bathtub had long since lost its enamel and needed cleaning. He found some laundry soap and filled the tub, which he cleaned as he washed his socks, shirt and underwear. After thoroughly rinsing and wringing out his clothes, he filled the tub and got in, luxuriating in the hot water. The towel was slightly shredded, but served to dry off with. Clad in his trousers and boots, he went back to his room and hung out his laundry on the cold steam radiator under the open window.

He looked out at the bustling street below, thronging with sellers and purchasers of contraband, arms and gold, and listened to the noises of the traffic and the pigeons cooing on the ledge below the window. Before he went to bed, he cleaned his revolver and laid it on the nightstand beside him. He lay in bed for some time with the light off, watching the threadbare curtains billowing in the desert breeze, the neon lights in the street turning them into gossamers of brilliant pastel.

He got up late the next morning, shaved and went across the street to the Chinese restaurant where he had breakfast. The egg foo yong and beer were just right, and he felt

completely restored. Leaving the restaurant, he went down the street to look for a suit, something more conservative than the Italian pimp outfits then in fashion.

He came out of the shop wearing a charcoal grey, single-breasted suit, a new pair of shoes, new shirt and tie, the complete ensemble making him look like a young banker who might have owned the bank. It was certain he would not be mistaken for a seller of used cars or insurance. This was soon to be to his advantage. Outside the clothing shop he found himself in a large crowd. Both sides of the street were lined with people.

"What's up?" he asked a man who looked like a rancher.

The man looked at him, shifted his chewing tobacco to one side of his mouth, and spat. "Merican Legion parade today."

He heard a blare of trumpets, and saw a local high school band come up the street, led by shapely drum majorettes. The girls were all blondes and drew whistles and obscene comments from the largely Mexican crowd. Following the band came the walking wounded of the American Legion, paunches, gray-heads and double-chins at the ready. The crowd grew hostile, and Charles made out what they had begun to chant: "Muerte a los gringos y la tierra para nosotros."

"So that's how it is." he thought. "Death to the gringos and land for us."

The hatred of the crowd was palpable. He could feel it radiating in all directions. Carefully, he began to edge toward the wall of the building.

A homemade bomb went off, making a loud bang and raising a cloud of white smoke in the street. A policeman blew his whistle and sirens screamed. In no time the milling crowd was confined within the length of the block by an array of police cars and motorcycles. Charles cursed under his breath. He wasn't worried about bombs.

The police lines were too close. If he ran into a shop he would be seen and pursued. He picked the whitest policeman he could find.

"Excuse me, Officer, may I get through?"

The policeman looked him over. "Well, Sir, I'll have to check your package."

Charles undid the string and removed the cover of the box. "Just some old clothes I was taking to the Salvation Army."

"Sorry, Sir. Orders are to search everybody."

"What's going on, anyway? As you can see, I'm new in town."

"Tijerina's gang, the Brown Berets, up to their usual tricks. Okay, boys, let him through." The policeman waved him on.

On the way back to the hotel he bought a cheap suitcase to carry his kit in. He checked out of the Fisher and walked to the bus station.

"Oakland, California," he told the ticket clerk.

"There's one leaving right now. You can make it if you hurry. Door number eight."

"Thanks." He pushed his way through the crowd and found a queue that was disappearing through the doorway. After seeing 'Oakland' among the names over the lintel, he gave his ticket to the driver.

"Bus eleven oh four, right over there." The driver pointed to one of the blue-and-white monsters which growled in the smoke-filled den.

He entered the bus and wrinkled his nose at the familiar aroma of recirculated flatus which was chilled by the air conditioner to the temperature desired by the thermostat. He preferred the heat and dust of the open train windows to this, but now he was in the United States and consumption was mandatory in this consumers' paradise. The windows could not be opened in any case, other than dire emergency.

The bus was nearly filled, but there was a vacant seat at the front, next to a middle-aged man, wearing a tweedy-looking business suit.

Charles nodded to him. "This seat taken?"

"Nope, it's all yours." The man's friendly smile was somehow reassuring, and Charles felt more at ease. He was tired of being a target for special observation and ready antagonism. Now, perhaps, he was blending into his background. He placed his suitcase in the overhead baggage rack and sat down.

"Going a long way?"

"Oakland," said Charles, adjusting his backrest, "and you?"

"Bakersfield."

"Well, looks like we'll be seeing a good deal of each other. My name's Irving, Bill Irving," said Charles, shaking hands.

"Dave Tucker. Glad to meet you."

The door closed, air brakes hissed, and the bus roared out of the station, leaving El Paso's skid row behind.

"You do much travelling by bus, Bill?"

"Not if I can help it."

"No, you don't look the type."

"Oh?" Charles felt the hair begin to rise on the back of his neck.

Tucker smiled. "I play a little detective game with myself, try to size people up, Let's see, I'd take you for a banker, young vice-president type. Am I right?"

"Sorry, you missed, but you're right on one count. My car broke down and I'm short of cash, so I'm going on by fartmobile."

"No credit cards?"

"Don't believe in 'em."

"Cash on the barrelhead, eh?"

"Usually. What line are you in?"

"Novelties. Got my own company." Tucker took a business card out of his breast pocket and handed it to him.

Charles studied the card. "Do you get around much on buses?"

"No, I'm like you. I try to avoid 'em, but my wife and I planned one of those 'see America' tours, and I couldn't go, so I'm using my ticket to do some business trips on. Never again, I can tell you!"

"Do you see much of your family?"

"No, but I got the greatest little wife and couple of kids you'd ever want to meet." He showed Charles some pictures.

"Umm, nice house."

"And it'll be all mine when it's paid for."

"When will that be?"

"Let's see ... Another fifteen years, I guess. You married, Bill?"

"No, can't afford it just now."

"It's the greatest thing going, marriage. You really should, you know."

"Why? So I can go into debt, wind up as a divorce statistic and raise a couple of strangers for a decadent society? You must be joking."

"Jesus, you're not a commie, are you?"

"No, just real conservative."

"What sort of work ya do, Bill?"

"I'm retired."

"No!"

"'Fraid so."

"I think you're pulling my leg." Tucker shook his head and looked out the tinted window, watching the desert flash by.

Suddenly, there was a muffled pop outside and the bus began to swerve from side to side, crossing the white lines. The driver was fighting the wheel, his teeth gritted with the effort of holding the huge vehicle on the road and avoiding collision with other traffic. "Blowout!" exclaimed Tucker.

Expertly, the driver regained control of the bus and slowed down, stopping on the shoulder of the highway.

"Sorry, folks," he said through the intercom, "we've just had some tire trouble. I'm afraid we'll be delayed for awhile until a relief bus comes along."

The passengers groaned, not realizing how lucky they were to be alive and uninjured.

"Good work," said Charles to the driver. "That was real Grand Prix stuff."

The driver leaned back in his seat and rubbed his shoulder. "Thanks. I don't mind telling you it had me worried for a moment."

"You get many blowouts?"

"Some. We shouldn't get any, but the company likes to retread 'em a few times too often, That's between you and me, you understand."

"The dirty crooks."

"It's all right for you to say that, but I've got a wife and kids to support. If I didn't, I could write a book ... Oh no!"

"What's wrong?"

"There goes the air conditioner."

"That's all we need."

The driver opened the door and stepped out into the furnace heat of the desert. "I'll flag somebody down and get word to the next station. Enjoy the cool air while it lasts." He pushed the door shut behind him.

"Well, I'm for a walk around," said Charles.

Tucker looked glum. "Not me. Careful you don't fry yourself out there."

It was quite a while before the driver got someone to stop and take word to the next town. Charles hoped the financial reward promised was sufficient to insure co-operation. By this time the interior of the bus had become like a bake oven and the passengers began to file out to stand beside the road. Charles noticed a pretty young brunette who seemed extremely fatigued. She walked slowly off into the bush, her head nodding.

"Probably doesn't like the stink of that toilet on the bus," he thought.

For some reason, six strapping negroes, with stylish Afro hairdos, got the same urge for desert exploration and followed her. Ten minutes later he heard faint screams among the cactus.

"They're raping her!" screeched an elderly woman, who would have traded places with the girl if she had been able.

The passengers rushed off in the direction of the screams, led by the driver. They reached the girl and found one of the Afros on top of her, very much as they had imagined.

"Now, why don't you folks jest turn around and go back to the bus. Don't you know you is where you ain't wanted?" The black waved a forty-five caliber pistol at them in a good-natured manner, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that he viewed the situation as quite unimportant, but would just as casually kill someone if pressed.

The passengers looked at the driver. "Look," he stammered, "I've got a wife and kids. You don't expect me to ..." Whatever they expected, it was not the driver's affair.

"Come on," said Charles. "You heard the man. Let's go back."

"That's what I call a real smart boy. Go on, you folks do like he say." The other negroes laughed.

"Well, I never ... !" exclaimed the elderly woman. "And you call yourselves men."

"Listen lady, there's no contest. Let's go." Charles took her arm, but she shrugged him away. He grabbed her and forced her to come with him. "I don't know what your problem is, Ma'am, but you're only going to get someone killed, and I really don't fancy that."

"Yeah," said Tucker, "you don't see any James Bonds on this bus, do ya'?"

The girl moaned.

"And what if she were your daughter, or your wife?"

"I'd hope she was on the pill," said Charles, as he led her away, accompanied by the other passengers.

Back at the bus, the passengers spoke in low tones. Few of the men could look one another in the eye. The old woman was busy haranguing all who would listen and the bus driver was on the verge of tears.

Charles went over to him. "Listen, I know you can't do anything about it. Don't take it so hard. You did right,"

The driver was trembling. "It's a hell of a business, and on my bus, my bus!"

"They do seem to be taking their time. Look, you don't know anything, understand?" Charles gripped his arm and whispered into the driver's ear.

"How do you mean?"

"Just keep the passengers here 'til I come back."

The driver swallowed and nodded that he would, and Charles strode off into the desert.

"What's up?" asked Tucker, who had watched Charles leave.

"Don't know, exactly," said the driver. "You know that fellow?"

"No, not really, but I'd say he could be poison if he took a dislike to you."

"What's his line?"

"Says he's retired, but he packs a gun."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I just know, that's all." Tucker had no wish to elaborate. "Probably one of those gangsters."

"Him? A clean-cut kid like that?"

"Things are different these days. Got a light?" He offered the driver a cigarette and took one for himself.

Charles circled the spot where the girl was, listening to the hoots and catcalls of the blacks. He took off his shoes and moved quietly through the sand, dropping on all fours as the voices grew louder. He saw them beyond the clump of cactus. They had their backs toward him, cheering on the one who was now raping the girl. "An arrogant bunch," he thought, as he took aim at the one holding the gun, and he was glad that he had cut x's into the soft lead noses of his .38 cartridges.

He fired, traversing the revolver like an automatic weapon. Four of them went down before the other two even discovered the source of the gunshots. The fifth ran off, but didn't get far. He fell and impaled himself on the bayonets of a yucca. The one on top of the girl was not very agile. Unfortunately for him, the forty-five was too far away to be of any use. He crawled off as fast as his lowered trousers permitted, but Charles easily overtook him and fired the last bullet into the negro's head at close range. He was a big fellow, and his body slumped upon the sand like a wounded rhino. "Wouldn't like to tangle with him," thought Charles.

He went back to the girl. She seemed exhausted and gasped for breath between sobs.

"Come on, pull your panties up and let's go." He didn't understand all there was to the 'permissive society,' but he felt that she had received what she had asked for. He wiped the sand off the forty-five and checked the magazine to see if it were loaded. After slipping his shoes on, he searched the bodies for additional weapons, but only discovered a few switchblade knives. He found a substantial sum of money in one of the negro's socks and put that into his pocket. One of the bodies groaned. A hard kick to the temple stopped that.

"Well?" he said, sticking the pistol into his belt. He looked at the girl and saw that she had gone to sleep. "Of all the lazy ..." He reached over to pull her skirt down and glanced at her bare thighs, a strange place to have so many mosquito bites, he thought. But they weren't mosquito bites. As he raised her up, he saw more needle marks under her arms. Cursing, he threw the girl over his shoulder and struggled back to the bus.

"We heard shooting," said the driver."

"Yeah, that was me. I got the jump on the one with the gun, twisted it out of his hand, and cut loose. I don't think I hit any of 'em, but I sure scared 'em. At the rate they were going, I'd say they should touch down at Cape Canaveral sometime this evening."

Most of the passengers laughed, relieved of the uncomfortable burden of responsibility. They made way for Charles as he carried the sleeping girl into the shade of the bus and laid her on the oil-soaked gravel.

"What's wrong with her?" squawked the old woman.

"Well, Ma'am, aside from being kicked, raped and man-handled, I'd say she was loaded with heroin."

"No! A nice-looking girl like that."

"Young people, today!" exclaimed another passenger, just as the relief bus pulled up.

Charles took the first driver aside. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't make a big thing about this."

"But I've got to make a report."

"Look, do me a favor. Have you considered what those guys would have done if they had come back?"

"No."

"Well, at the very least they would have held everybody up and stolen the relief bus."

"Yeah, I guess so."

He passed the driver a hundred dollars. "Go on, buy the kids a present."

"Hey, thanks a lot. I sure can use it."

"It won't hurt that bunch to get a little thirsty, now, will it?"

"No, serves 'em right." The driver chuckled as he deftly folded the sweaty notes and put them into his shirt pocket.

Everyone who was able slaved to transfer all the baggage and cargo on to the second bus. By the time they had finished, they were soaked with perspiration and ready to drop from heat exhaustion. The temperature had reached its zenith, and all the desert creatures had long since left the hot sand for the comfort of their burrows. Stepping into the air-conditioned bus was like going into an arctic gale. As the last of the passengers got on, the old woman turned to the first driver.

"Aren't you going to call the police? I think it's just awful, having those criminals running around out there."

The driver wiped his streaming forehead with a sodden handkerchief. "Ma'am," he said wearily, "where have you been the last decade, or so? 'Call the police,' you say. Do you think they grow on trees? The other driver says there's trouble in Las Cruces. Do you think the police have got nothing else to do but run around in the desert at this hour, chasing rowdy passengers?"

"Rowdy passengers! Well, I never ..."

"Until that girl wakes up and lays a charge of rape, you won't even get them for disturbing the peace."

"But they threatened us with a gun!"

"Can you prove that?"

"We all saw it, didn't we?"

"Yes, but we're white and they're black. No judge or jury would think of prosecuting."

"But ..."

"Please get on the bus, Lady, we're holding up the other folks."

The girl was dead when they arrived in Las Cruces, a sweltering town full of riot police and drab National Guard vehicles.

"Passengers will please remain on the bus. We are leaving immediately." The driver looked nervous.

"What's up?" asked Tucker.

"Don't know, exactly," said the driver, "but I hear somebody's taken over some ranches or farms hereabouts, and they've got artillery, or something. That's why all the soldiers have been called in. We'll be in military convoy as far as Albuquerque."

Tucker's jaw dropped in amazement. "Hell! What do you make of that?"

Charles shook his head and said nothing. He could have told him what the latest reports said about the El Paso area. That was why the area had been chosen for infiltration. The reports were accurate, and not to be found in any newspaper. He looked out the window and watched the ambulance drive away with the body of the girl. "Well, there she goes."

Tucker craned his neck to look out. "That really was a shame. Poor kid. Those coons sure had it comin'."

"You mean, their little run in the sun?"

"I'm sure you didn't leave 'em in any condition for running." Tucker winked.

"My dear Sir, whatever do you mean?"

"Okay, I won't be pushy. I'm just proud to meet up with a real man, for a change.

"Don't mention it, please."

"The girl, what do you suppose ..."

"Umm, I'd say it was heroin."

"An overdose?"

"Probably."

"It's poison. Don't the kids know that? Just like taking poison."

"Yeah, but that's what they heard in high school about tobacco, alcohol and marijuana. When it comes to heroin, the kids figure it's just another cry of 'wolf.' Besides, heroin's a pleasant way to die. You're so high you don't even care about it."

They left Las Cruces in convoy with three other buses, escorted by jeeps mounting machine-guns. Soon they were growling down the four-lane highway, spewing rank exhaust fumes over the desert.

"But seriously, there must be a way of stopping this heroin epidemic," said Tucker.

"You can't stop it. You can control it, but no one will make any money out of that. You come up against the churches and the gangsters, just like Prohibition. Bad laws make big money, you know."

"And how would you control it more effectively than it's being controlled?"

"Legalize death."

"I don't get you."

"It's very simple. Let people know that taking heroin is just like taking death on the instalment plan, then let them do it. I understand that an addict has about two years to live if he can get all the heroin he wants. If not, that could be arranged."

"You mean, make sure the addict dies?"

"Yes."

"But that's murder!"

"Depending on your definition of the term. I only suggest this scheme so that normal, non-gangster society can be allowed to function. Naturally, the addict population would be segregated from the non-addict. Slum areas could be reserved for them. The present shooting galleries would continue to operate, but they would be free."

"I don't see how you can use free heroin to stop heroin addiction, and murder ... !"

"But you want to stop the spread of heroin addiction among productive members of society and take power from the gangsters who are spreading corruption."

"Yes."

"Well, then you must identify the sources of heroin addiction and eradicate them."

"Sure, that's logical, but what are they?"

"Despair and the profit motive."

"What you advocate is that all persons who are fed up with life should be given a pleasant way out."

"Why not? What have you got against people that you should force them to live?"

"But what if someone, an addict, changes his mind and wants to rejoin society?"

"He could be given a chance to return, cured somehow, if that's really so important to you."

"There's something monstrous in the idea. I don't quite know what it is, but ..."

"You don't think a man has the right to take his own life?"

"No, that isn't what I disagree with. It's just that you're advocating wholesale suicide."

"Why not? Do you think that the world is any better for being crowded with unhappy people, people who can't cope with life, old people who only have the pain of arthritis to remind them that they are still alive?"

"There's a flaw in your argument, but I can't quite get at it."

"The reason you can't find the flaw, but are still not satisfied with my proposal is that you are only midway to accepting its major premise, and I think that events will draw you all the way over so that you will accept not only this idea, but others which will seem even more extreme."

"You sound like a college professor. Just what do you do for a living?"

"I told you. I'm retired."

"Okay, okay. Hey, would you look at that!"

They drove onto an overpass, part of a massive cloverleaf complex. Nestled in one of the great loops were the smoldering ruins of a modern service station and restaurant. Military ambulances and cratered asphalt indicated that the damage was other than an ordinary insurance conflagration.

"Looks like mortar work," said Tucker.

"Yes, the place has been under bombardment. Incidentally, have you ever seen the Pont du Gard?"

"No, what's that?"

"A tremendous Roman bridge-aqueduct in France. These big freeway bridges remind me of it."

"Do they look the same?"

"No. The Pont du Gard is beautiful. It's a reminder of Rome. One day those bridges will be reminders of the United States."

"You mean of the U.S. as a great country?"

"No, like decadent Rome, a country of great buildings and little men."

Charles had dozed off, despite the spine-curving uncomfortableness of the seat, and woke up as the bus bounced over the concrete apron of the station. It was dark outside.

"Folks, this is Albuquerque. I've got some good news and some bad news. Might as well let you know the bad news first. We can't leave Albuquerque until daylight. Army says the road's too dangerous."

"Aw, shit!" lamented one of the passengers. The others just groaned or mumbled to themselves.

"But here's the good news. The company'll pay for your overnight accommodation. Food's not included, though."

Sleepily, they stepped down from the bus and were herded into an establishment that made the Fisher look luxurious. They soon discovered the bedbugs had hearty appetites.

Next morning, after a greasy, over-priced breakfast, they escaped from the hotel and returned to the bus, to be greeted by the radiant company smile of a new driver.

"Morning, folks! Good to see yuh lookin' so fresh and cheerful. Army says we're cleared through to Gallup without escort, so we'll try to make up for some lost time. Hope y'all enjoy the ride." Without bothering to mesh the gears properly, he cannoned the bus out of the station and roared down the main street out of town.

"Fresh and cheerful!" grumbled Tucker. "He must have rose-colored glasses on."

"They look green to me," said Charles. "At least, that's how I feel." He scratched a bug bite.

"They got you, too, the little bastards." Tucker rubbed his ears and scratched the side of his neck.

"Yeah, we need de-lousing powder. Bet the driver didn't stay in the hotel."

"Just as well. You wouldn't want him driving the bus in our condition, would you?"

They arrived in Gallup that morning.

"Hope we won't be here too long," said Tucker. "Nothing to do in this dumpy town but watch drunken Indians in cowboy suits."

"Maybe they'd go for some of your novelties," said Charles, scratching his shoulder.

"New, they don't look like rubber tomahawk types to me." Tucker scratched the bites on his stomach. "Damn bugs!"

Their stop in Gallup was mercifully short, and soon they were speeding down the highway. Charles felt the bus swerve and looked out at the road ahead.

"Now what does that fool think he's up to?" exclaimed the driver.

A station wagon with its doors open was parked diagonally in the middle of the two lanes. The driver braked suddenly and took the bus around the obstacle by going onto the shoulder of the highway.

"There's nobody inside," said Charles.

"Oh, you'll probably find the Indian asleep in the brush," said the driver. That's what they do when they've had a few too many, just park on the highway."

"It seems pretty dangerous."

"Sure, mainly for people new to the state who don't expect it. It's a lot worse at night, though. You're right on top of 'em before you know it. No lights."

"Why all the drunk drivers?"

"They don't allow liquor to be sold on the reservation. If it weren't for selling liquor to the Indians, a two-bit town like Gallup would dry up and blow away."

"Wouldn't it make sense to sell booze on the reservation so the Indians wouldn't have to drive so far?"

"Not only would you have the saloon keepers on your neck, but you'd have the car dealers screaming for your scalp as well."

"I guess the car dealers and saloon keepers never drive on these dangerous roads."

"It only happens to the other guy, right?" The driver down-shifted and tapped the brakes.

"Hey, what did we get into, a funeral procession?" Tucker looked at the line of cars ahead.

"Looks like there's been a train wreck over there. People are helping themselves to anything they can grab." The driver pointed beyond the roadside.

Charles saw a cluster of automobiles, like dung beetles, parked around a smashed refrigerator car.

"Umm, grapes," said Tucker. "I could do with a box of those."

"So could I," said the driver, "but the police wouldn't like it. Those grapes gotta be left in the ditch to rot."

"Here they come," said Charles, seeing a pair of police cars, their red lights flashing. All along the wrecked train, people were running to their cars and driving off in every direction.

"Look at 'em scatter!" exclaimed Tucker. "Hell, I wish I had a bunch of those grapes right now."

It was hot the following day when they pulled into the Indio bus station.

"All right, folks, this is Indio. You'll have a forty-minute lunch stop here. Remember your bus number, thirty-one twenty- three." The intercom made the driver sound as if he had a bad cold.

"Good. I could do with a stretch. Don't think I'll have any- thing to eat, though." Tucker stifled a belch. "Breakfast nearly did me in."

They had just left the bus when swarms of little Mexican children besieged them, handing out leaflets concerning an agricultural workers' strike. A picket line of adults, overseen by a priest, barred the way to the bus station restaurant. The pickets waved placards in English and Spanish and chanted, "Viva la huelga!"

"What are they yammering?" asked Tucker.

"Long live the strike," said Charles.

"I hope not. Maybe some of us would like to eat."

"Señores said a mustachioed Mexican picketer, "you don't intend to eat in the restaurant.":

"I don't," said Tucker.

"But I do," said Charles.

"You should not do it," recited the Mexican. "The owners have bought food harvested by Mexican bracero labor, imported scab labor whom they pay slave wages."

"I'm sorry," said Charles, "but aren't you a Mexican?"

"Me, Señor? Oh no. I am a U.S. citizen."

"So you don't want the farm owners labor any more?"

"That is right, Señor. All foreigners must be kept out. It is unfair competition."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Charles, "but my stomach is complaining and I don't think it will be satisfied with a strike leaflet."

"Please do not break the picket line, Señor. I have nine children to feed."

"You look as if you can barely feed yourself. Why did you have so many?"

"Señor," he said, fingering a heavy gold crucifix, "because I am a man and a good Catholic."

"We all have our crosses to bear, amigo," said Charles, breaking a path through the picket line.

They entered the bus station restaurant, its familiar reek of diesel fumes, old cigarette butts and disinfectant assaulting their nostrils, smells which added flavor to the otherwise insipid food substitutes on display. The tawdry rock-and-roll that blared and crackled from the inescapable loudspeakers lent a broken-down carny atmosphere. Seeing the glum, seedy-looking patrons and attendants, Charles thought that there was nothing wrong with the place a good hydrogen bomb couldn't cure.

"Think I'll have a toasted cheese and coffee," he said.

"Nothing for me," said Tucker. "You can have one of my stomach mints afterward. I think I'll sneak a look at those girly magazines."

"Don't ruin your mind."

Charles took a seat at the counter. Because the place was crowded, he sat next to a border patrol officer, a big man wearing a revolver, Sam Browne belt and campaign hat.

"Scuse me, Officer," he said, "but aren't you working a little bit north of the border?"

"Got to," said the patrolman. "We're trying to catch the ones already in."

Charles succeeded in attracting the waitress' attention and got his coffee, if that was the word for it, half a cupful of brown liquid, most of which had been slopped into the chipped saucer.

"Wetbacks?" he said, pouring the spillage into his cup.

"Yeah, and then some. Not just Mexicans, though, Asiatics."

"Bad? Hell, it's a flood."

"Well, I'll be damned. Never heard anything about it." Charles decided whatever the brown liquid was, he didn't like it.

"Read the papers lately?" The patrolman wasn't drinking his 'coffee' with much enthusiasm, either.

"No."

"Haven't you heard anything about the new tong wars in Frisco?"

"No," he lied, "haven't heard a thing."

"Well, they're keeping it hushed up. Don't want to scare people, but even so, something has to get out now and then."

"Guess it does." Charles sniffed his toasted cheese sandwich. It smelled of hot plastic.

The patrolman finished his coffee with grim determination, since he'd paid for it. "Well, gotta check the next bus."

"Have fun."

"Sure try to."

"Think I will have something after all." Tucker took the patrolman's seat. "Don't know what, though. It's almost time to leave."

"Try a date milkshake."

"How come?"

"You know, Indio, 'The Date Capital of California.'"

"Good idea."

The waitress made him a date milkshake, using highly chlorinated water, soya bean 'ice cream' and genuine imitation essence of date extract. Tucker offered debased currency in payment for the debased milkshake, but the waitress told him to pay at the postcard counter instead. Charles wondered if the postcards tasted any better than the 'food' served in the place.

"What's that?" asked Tucker, interrupting his guzzling to look around.

Charles wiped his chin with a paper napkin. "The Mexican kids are throwing rocks at the windows."

As they approached the cash register, trying to stay away from the plate glass, Tucker reached into his pocket.

"No, it's my treat," said Charles. "Just watch your head. That window may go any time."

Tucker ducked and moved behind a revolving book stand. "Well, thanks for the milkshake, Bill. I keep forgetting that you're a rich, retired so-and-so."

"That's right." Charles peeled a twenty-dollar bill from the dead negro's bankroll.

They sprinted out a side door, and followed the other passengers, keeping their heads low to avoid flying rocks. Charles was nearly run into by a policeman in riot gear who puffed after a Mexican boy. Some of the pickets were using their staves against the policemen's batons.

When everyone had boarded the bus, the driver slammed the door and hastily backed out of the terminal parking area, narrowly missing collision with an incoming bus. Sirens shrieked from every direction.

"Did you enjoy your 'milkshake'?" Charles gave Tucker a wry smile.

"Still waiting for my stomach to deliver the verdict," said Tucker, scratching a bug bite on his arm.

"Sometimes I wonder what ever happened to real food."

"Don't know. You think they export it?"

"Could be. Maybe the Russians are eating it. They pay in real money, gold, you know."

"Maybe so. Gee, I can remember when I was a boy in Iowa. There was a bakery down the street from us. They made the best bread and pastries. Even made their own candy." Tucker looked wistful as he remembered.

"You mean you could actually taste something when you bit into a chocolate éclair?" Charles was eager for reassurance.

"Oh boy, could you! The pastry shells were delicious and buttery by themselves, and when they put in the thick, fresh cream and poured on the real chocolate that would melt when you looked at it, it didn't matter if you were king of Big Rock Candy Mountain. You just couldn't get anything better than that. Hey, you like chocolate eclairs?"

Charles nodded. "I seem to remember eating some that were very good, but I was just a little kid, then. They don't have any flavor to speak of, these days, so I don't buy 'em. I was beginning to think my tastebuds had got disconnected, or something."

"There's nothing wrong with you. No, the flavor just isn't there anymore. I don't get it. We pay taxes to support the price of cream and butter, flour, and all the rest 'cause there's a surplus, and all you can find in the stores are things made with chemical substitutes. I just don't get it."

"Oh, it's easy to figure out what's going on. The farm racketeers twist the government's arm to buy the real stuff, and the chemical food crooks twist the other arm so the government will hang onto the surplus until it spoils or can be dumped secretly in the ocean. I remember the poisoned potatoes outside my town. The government took my

parents' tax money to buy the potatoes and poison them to keep them off the market. Meanwhile, my parents were paying outrageous prices to buy worse quality potatoes than the ones being poisoned."

"It's a racket, all right. Look at that smoke. We must be coming to Los Angeles."

"Not for awhile," said Charles. "Almost a hundred miles to go. That's L.A. smog, all right. Hope you enjoy it."

Los Angeles was having a normal day of smog. It hit them as they got off the bus. Soon they were wheezing, coughing and wiping tears from their eyes. Tucker and Charles got back on the bus and closed the door, hoping to keep out the smog as much as possible when they left.

Charles gazed out the tinted window, idly watching a couple of maimed youths scavenging from garbage cans which stood outside the bus station restaurant. Evidently they were poaching on the preserve of some elderly winos who appeared and protested the youths' presence. One of the young men found half a loaf of stale bread in one of the cans, and the battle was on.

The winos were old, but they had their limbs, while both the younger men were on crutches, and one was missing an arm. The youths wielded their crutches skillfully, but they were no match for their street-wise elders, and were soon writhing on the filthy pavement after receiving vicious kicks to the groin.

Inside the closed bus, it was like watching an old silent movie. The old men ran off with the loaf of bread, and laughing negro children ran off with the amputees' crutches. The passengers boarding the bus grimaced, and drew away from the two suffering youths, fearing to catch some contagion from the gaunt figures.

"Probably Vietnam veterans," said Charles.

"I'm Korean War, myself," said Tucker. "Feel sorry for those kids. They're having a rough time."

"Guess you could call it that. I'm glad we're on our way."

They left the grimy station and turned onto the usual skid row side street where bus stations are unfailingly located. Suddenly the bus came to a halt. A policeman waved them over to the center of the street and they drove along slowly. On either side of them were police cars, vans, armored vehicles and policemen armed with rifles and shotguns. Against the walls, their backs to the street, stood Negroes being searched by policemen with drawn pistols and snarling Alsatians. More blacks were being herded out of the buildings and made to stand, feet spread apart, arms extended against the sooty walls of the tenements.

"Looks like a dope raid," said Tucker.

"Could be," said Charles. "Hope we get out of here. We're a sitting duck for a molotov cocktail."

"Well, I sure hope they find the stuff, whatever they're looking for."

"If it's heroin, the cops are only helping the Mafia keep the prices up. They get a percentage, of course."

"The C.I.A.? But that's a government outfit."

"Sure, but they control the major source of heroin in Southeast Asia, the Golden Triangle of Laos, and besides, they need the money."

"Bullshit! "

"It's all documented, if you care to check me out."

Tucker shook his head. "But why, man? A U.S. government agency selling heroin. It doesn't make sense."

"All the sense in the world. You'd admit that the U.S. has a tremendous problem with surplus population, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yes."

"You also know that the gangsters have a lot of influence in all levels of government."

"Yes, after Old Tricky's shenanigans ..."

"You're also aware that there's been a certain amount of limousine liberalism among the middle class over the years, a la J.F.K."

"Sure, but what ... ?"

"Well, say you were a really big gangster, one who wanted to make a lot of money and run the country as well."

"You mean, impose a dictatorship."

"You said it, not I."

"Okay, but I still don't see ... "

"Don't you see how vital heroin is to the set up?"

"No. You've lost me."

"Well, look at the surplus population angle. Heroin depoliticizes a person. Muggers and purse-snatchers aren't collecting for a revolution, just the next fix."

"Yeah, that's right."

"And as muggers and purse-snatchers, the superfluous people make themselves visible, hated and feared by people who might otherwise sympathize with them."

"I see that, all right. A lump on the head doesn't bring out any milk of human kindness, especially at election time."

"Right. Instead of backing limousine liberal candidates, the voters want 'law and order,' even if it means tossing the Bill of Rights into the trash can, and this is just the way the big crooks can increase their power. Most people prefer order to chaos, even if it takes a dictatorship to maintain order. This is exactly what certain interests are up to, creating chaos in order to grab power as the order-restoring dictators. Heroin addiction is a vital part of this very necessary chaos."

Tucker slumped in his seat and shook his head wearily. "I don't know any more. I thought I did, a long time ago. Things are changing too fast ... "

Charles felt sorry for him. Tucker reminded him of his own father who had disappeared years ago in the Rub' al Khali Empty Quarter. At the same time he realized that the incomprehension of Tucker and others like him, whether willing or not, was a major factor in the present unhappy situation. He wanted to grab all the Tuckers by the collar and shake them. "Why didn't you know?" he thought. "It was your duty to find out what was going on, damn it!"

He looked at Tucker and sighed with resignation. There was no altering the past, nor was there time for pity. He had returned to do what was required of him, without reservation.

The bus crept along with the traffic jam on the Golden State Freeway, and Charles looked out the window, remembering his first trip to Los Angeles as a child. The Pacific Electric Railway had taken him over the same distance in twenty minutes. Looking at his watch, he discovered that they had been able to go half as far in half an hour by 'freeway.'

"At this rate, we'll be celebrating Christmas in Bakersfield."

"Wish there was a better way of going overland," said Tucker.

"There was, back in 1910. The old Pacific Electric, the 'big red cars' as we called them, could average seventy-five miles per hour. That's better than we're doing now."

"You weren't around in 1910, so how do you know?"

"Well, my senior friend, if you'd pull your eyes away from the boob tube, you'd discover there are things called books."

"Yeah, well, you can't believe much you read in them."

"Are you a Christian?"

"Sure."

"I suppose you've seen Jesus, then."

"Well, no."

Charles smiled. "So in many ways, Mr. Tucker, you're much more 'with it' than I am. You're a member of the 'now' generation. The only distinction is that you can remember more than the median hippy, because you've lived longer."

"Well, I didn't go to college, if that's what you mean. I don't see that it would help much in my line of work."

"Maybe not, but I think Santayanna was right when he said that 'those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it.'"

"You're sure a gloomy Gus. All right, so why aren't we doing seventy-five miles per hour right now, in a big red car?"

"Because the automobiles got in their way and reduced the speed they were allowed to travel. In 1920 the speed began to drop, until 1950, when the interurbans could only average twenty miles per hour. At that point, they ripped up most of the lines and stopped carrying passengers. Now they want to rebuild some of the system. The money the taxpayer has spent on 'studies' for the reconstruction have already cost more than the original construction costs for the entire system. It might jolt you to know that this freeway and most of the others follows the old interurban right-of-way."

"Well, why did the idiots take up the system in the first place if they're just going to build it again?"

"'Idiot' is a very strong word. Let's say everyone was just being human, that is myopic. Some wanted to sell cars and others wanted to buy them. Nobody thought of the consequences, and if they did, they didn't care. It only happens to the other guy, right?"

"Yeah, but now look at it. We're stuck. Haven't moved an inch the last ten minutes."

Well, it's all got to do with 'freedom.'

How's that?"

"Freedom disappears when it is available to everyone. The automobile, as we are now discovering, was meant for the enjoyment of the few. When it is enjoyed by everyone, it's no longer enjoyment. In fact, it's not even a way of getting from one place to another, as you can see."

"Do you think we should ban the automobile?"

"No, not at all. All problems are self-correcting. More roads will be needed to accommodate more cars, and soon, most of the places people used to go will be covered with pavement, so there'll be no reason to go there anymore. Then they'll stay at home and the traffic problem will disappear, except for adolescent joy-riders. The pollution is already killing off motorists, so that's another plus factor."

"Yeah, but by that time, the United States will look like a concrete jungle under a smoke cloud."

"Well, at least you'll be able to drive your car as fast as you like."

"Then there'd be no point to it."

"No, but any other solution to the automobile problem would mean a general exercise of thoughtfulness, honesty and restraint. Are you some sort of Utopian radical?"

"Hell, no, but I ... "

"Are you in the habit of assuming that people usually exercise thoughtfulness, honesty and restraint?"

"Well, no."

"Under what sort of conditions would you expect this miraculous change to come about, other than in some radical Utopia?"

"Well, I see what you mean, but I'm no radical."

"Good. You were making me nervous there, for a moment."

Now that you know that I'm not a communist and I know you're not a radical, we should be able to relax the rest of the trip."

Tucker laughed. "I take it you grew up here, unless you have some sort of far-out interest in this smog-hole."

"Yeah. See those slum houses over there?"

"Yeah, there ought to be a law against building crap like that."

"Well, you probably won't believe it, but all that land used to be orange groves. The air was perfumed, like something out of Arabian Nights."

"No kidding?"

The bus pulled into the San Fernando station.

"Folks," said the driver, "we'll have a fifteen minute rest stop here. Don't go too far."

"I wouldn't worry about strays," said Tucker. "Nobody in his right mind would want to tour this dump."

They got out and strolled around the bus, coughing and sniffing from the smog.

"It's a dump, all right," said Charles. "I remember when the pepper trees made arches over the streets and you could walk for miles in the shade."

"You must be imagining things. Pepper trees in this asphalt desert?"

"It wasn't a desert, then. The trees made it look like an enchanted garden."

"What happened?" Tucker lit a cigarette and threw the paper match upon the littered pavement.

"Car owners didn't like the leaves. They stuck to the cars and were hard to clean up, so they had the city rip out the pepper trees."

"'Arabian Nights,' 'enchanted garden,' huh? It's hard to imagine this dusty dump ever fitting your description. Come on, admit it. You're gilding your childhood a little bit, aren't you?"

"No. I've seen other places a lot prettier, but it's sad to see this place get so ugly. It took so little to keep it looking good."

They boarded the bus and once again, Charles looked out the window at the ruined town, a clear case of morbid fascination, he thought. The once-thriving business district had become a row of run-down buildings decorated with old election posters and signs which read 'bargain sale' and 'for rent' in Spanish. The human derelicts staggering along on the sidewalks took no interest in the boarded-up shop windows, nor in the interminable line of traffic that crawled through the town.

They drove past his high school where he saw sullen young hoodlums lounging on either side of the chain-link fence with its topping of barbed wire. Junked cars, some of

them burned-out, lay abandoned along the roadside, and the bus bounced in and out of the potholes in the paving. They passed the old mission and the abandoned orange-sorting shed, its walls red with the slogans of Mexican nationalism. He was relieved when the bus turned onto the freeway and gathered speed. The thrice-daily traffic jam was breaking up.

It was long after sunset when they stopped in Bakersfield, a town which had lost any claim to individuality in the 1952 earthquake.

"I can't believe it," said Tucker. "Never thought I was going to make it. How about a drink to celebrate a safe arrival?"

"No thanks," said Charles. "Must pay my respects to the shrine."

"Well, I sure can use one after this trip. Last time I ever go by bus."

"Decided to stick to air travel, huh?"

"Yeah. At least I won't get into the mess. I can fly over it and pretend it isn't there."

"Good idea."

"Well, goodbye, young fellow." Tucker waved.

"Take it easy." Charles watched him disappear into the murk of the bus station cocktail lounge and made for the sign at the top of the stairs which read 'gentlemen,' 'hombres.' The reek of disinfectant and stale cigarette smoke was very strong in the men's room, making him cough. He washed his hands and face and shaved with a rental electric razor. In lieu of a shower, he dashed some pungent shaving lotion under his arms. "Whew!" he thought. "Just like the proverbial French whore."

He went over to the battery of urinals which stood in a great open area under the glare of bright fluorescent lights. It was like being on stage. He found himself under the scrutiny of a negro. "If he doesn't stop watching what I'm doing and attend to his business," he thought, "he'll piss on his shoes." Charles zipped up and strode out, welcoming the diesel fumes of the waiting room.

"Passengers bound for Fresno, Oakland ..." said the saccharine voice over the public address system.

Charles found his seat on the bus and idly studied the faces of the passengers getting on. He recognized the negro from the men's room.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" he asked.

"No," said Charles. "It's all yours."

"A little chilly this evening." The negro spoke with an eastern accent and was tastefully dressed in a business suit. A cravat provided a touch of comfortable elegance. Charles looked down at his own graying shirt and rumpled suit, feeling thoroughly unkempt by comparison.

"Yes, it is chilly, but Bakersfield's a funny place," said Charles, "it can blaze and freeze in the same day."

"Is that right?" The negro stared at him. "Do you mind my asking you something?"

"No, not at all."

The bus rocked from side to side as it came off the driveway apron and turned into the nearest traffic jam.

"You're a foreigner, aren't you?" said the negro.

"What makes you say that?" Charles gave him a quizzical look.

"Well, your diction and accent, they're so precise and so modulated ..."

"Thanks, but what if I told you I was from California?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"You're having me on."

"No. Oh no. Now I've caught you. You said, 'having me on' instead of 'putting me on!'"

"Oh, my gosh!" Charles shook his head. "Well, where do you think I'm from?"

"Europe. One of the Nordic countries."

"I deny it. What's more, I'll take the Fifth Amendment."

"All right, if you want people to think you're an American that's your business, but I'd brush up on my accent and vocabulary if I were you."

"Are you a linguist, by any chance?"

"No, but I always play a little detective game with myself when I get on a bus, and try to guess where people are from and what business they're in. The cut of your suit was one indication, definitely European style. I might even say Eastern European, if that's no offense to you. Your accent was the clincher." It was evident that he had made up his mind about Charles.

"Sherlock Holmes seems to be very popular these days."

"Ah yes," said the negro, brightening. "Are you a fan of his?"

"I certainly was. Holmes was one of my childhood heroes. I tried to read all of his adventures."

"Quick, Watson, the game's afoot!"

"... The swirling fog, a Hansom cab; footsteps on the stair. 'Ah, yes, a young man of high station, a foreign prince of Bohemian ancestry ...' 'Preposterous, Holmes!' 'Elementary my dear ...'"

They laughed.

"You like music, I'll bet," said the negro.

"Mostly classical."

"My favorite classical composer is Bach, but I also like modern jazz. I find certain similarities. Cigarette?"

"No thanks."

"Mind if I smoke?"

"No, go right ahead."

The negro lit a cigarette of an expensive brand, using a gold butane lighter. "I'm quite a record collector," he said, exhaling the smoke with calm assurance. "My apartment is simply bulging with them. I also have a good stereo-tape collection."

"That makes you quite a patron of music."

"I do painting as well."

"Abstract?"

"Yes! How did you guess?"

"Well, I play this little detective game with myself and ..."

"Not you, too!"

"It must be catching."

"Well, I'd surmise that Beethoven is one of your favorites, or Mahler. Am I right?"

"Sorry, I prefer the modern Russians," said Charles.

"Barbaric, man, simply barbaric!"

"Yes, I enjoy their expressions of power and sensuality."

"You do?"

"I must admit to certain barbaric tendencies," Charles smiled.

"I'd have taken you for a Brubeck man, even, but Russians!"

"Doesn't the image of Tartar cavalry sweeping across the steppes do something for you?"

"No, man," the negro suppressed a shudder. "It really turns me off."

Charles enjoyed the conversation and hardly noticed the passage of time. It was late in the morning when the bus crawled into the outskirts of Oakland. He noticed that the smoke pall was unusually heavy over the city and was confused by the unfamiliar route they were forced to take, as most of the streets were blocked by police barricades and motorcycle patrolmen. Fire engines came down the street, and the bus pulled toward the curb and stopped.

"Just look at that!" The negro pointed to a great column of smoke.

"There seem to be fires all around. Has there been an air raid, or something?" Charles pretended ignorance.

"You must be a foreigner. Man, those are riots. Got to have 'em whenever it's warm enough."

"Well, I've got to see my customers here. I hope some of them are still in business."

"What sort of business are you in?" "Ladies' lingerie."

"No!"

"Yes. I've got a new line from Paris. I think it'll sell."

"New, you don't want to go around this place just now. Come over to my apartment. We can listen to records and ..." He put his hand on Charles' knee.

"No, you've got me all wrong, man." Charles laughed.

"Oh, sorry." The negro took his hand away.

The bus arrived at the terminal and hissed to a stop in the loading bay. Charles made his way across the crowded waiting room, hoping that he passed inspection from the closed-circuit television cameras that scrutinized all arriving passengers.

He entered a coin-operated photo booth, where he unpacked his suitcase. Quickly removing his tie and coat, he changed into his drab nylon jacket and battered straw hat. After studying himself in the mirror, he took off the hat and placed it under his coat, along with the knapsack. By slinging one pack strap over his shoulder and holding the hat and coat in place with one hand, he availed himself of a choice of disguises. The hat and knapsack meant 'hippy' to the police, and the nylon jacket and slacks meant 'worker' to the hippies and radicals. He saluted himself in the mirror, thinking that his was the strangest invasion in U.S. history.

Leaving his empty suitcase in the booth, he hurried around the queues at the ticket windows and found the street exit. Outside the bus station, he followed the discarded newspapers blowing down the boulevard and turned onto Telegraph Avenue, dodging the police cars and ambulances coming into Oakland.

The sidewalks teemed with forlorn remnants of a crumbling empire, young war veterans minus limbs from a war no one wanted to know about. They lay in the alleys in stupors from drugs, wine or starvation. Some rummaged in garbage cans for food. Charles frowned as he walked around a cadaverous young man who had collapsed into a pool of his own excrement. Swarms of old looking youngsters besieged him for handouts, filthy, claw-like fingers protruding from the sleeves of ragged field jackets.

Seeing his jacket and slacks, a white girl in the company of a bearded negro fixed him with a glare of pure hatred. "Go to hell you devil!" she shouted as he passed.

A police patrol van cruised slowly along the curb, its occupants displaying grim looks behind their protruding shotgun barrels. He felt trapped in between, a target of hatred for the police and the rabble. Hostile gazes followed him down the street, and he forced himself not to break into a run.

Approaching the university, he began to recognize some of the landmarks, or what remained of them, of the Berkeley he had known as a student. All the store fronts were boarded with plywood, most showing signs of recent fire damage. Water still trickled out of the entrances, and the sidewalks were littered with rocks, bricks and broken glass. He kicked an empty tear gas canister out of his way, and it clinked into the rubble-clogged gutter.

Firebombs had burned out the coffee house where he had celebrated logical positivism, and made often frustrated attempts to entice some of the marriage-hungry coeds into bed, a major operation in pre-pill America. A musty smell of burned wood and damp cloth pervaded the street, deserted except for the occasional police car or National

Guard vehicle that passed, crunching over the broken glass with apparent impunity. The authorities hardly glanced his way. What could be looted from the shops had already gone and what was left had been burned.

At first he thought the smoke was getting thicker, but realized the sun was beginning to set. Through the haze he could make out a glowing orb beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. The city was dying, and it looked as if the sun were dying, too. He quickened his pace, knowing there would be a curfew.

The winding roads of the Berkeley hills took him above the squalor of the city and into stands of pines that whispered soothingly in the moist sea wind. The rustic houses of the privileged flanked him on either side of the road, and he wondered what the occupants were thinking as they looked out over the ruins.

Soon he came to a split level house, just off the ridge road. His feet crunched on the gravel path which led up to the solid looking front door with its massive brass knocker. From the living room came the sound of a hi-fi playing classical music. He raised the heavy knocker and let it resound upon its polished metal plate. The door sprang open instantly, and he recognized the swarthy features of his colleague, Jesus.

"Hijo de puta! How happy I am to see you, Carlitos. Come in, come in. You are early." Jesus pulled him in and took his knapsack which he put beside the umbrella stand. "I trust you had an uneventful trip."

"Fortunately." Charles smiled weakly.

"You look exhausted. Coffee?"

"Yes, thanks."

Shutting the door, Jesus followed him into the living room redolent with oil paints from an unfinished seascape that stood on its easel in a corner by the fireplace.

"Hell, this is a fancy layout!" Charles marvelled at his feet sinking into the carpet.

"You like it, huh? With the rent I pay, it should look good."

"I see you've broken away from abstract expressionism. I like it."

"I'm not quite satisfied. I fail to capture the full effect of sunlight upon the waves."

"Ah, but that breaker captures the full effect of the light shining through the wave. I can almost feel the spray."

"Such flattery!" Jesus looked pleased, nevertheless.

Heavy footsteps came up the stairs from the basement, and Charles turned to see the stocky, perspiring form of a balding man whose face bore smudges of dirt. The man stood for a moment, looking at him, his gaze that of a bird of prey. Then he strode forward and grabbed Charles by the arm.

"Charles!" The man's grimy hand felt like a vise.

"Hans, old man! Good to see you. Glad to see you're keeping fit as ever." Charles winced from the pressure.

"You are early. We were expecting you next week," said Hans, brushing at the dirt smudge he'd left on Charles' sleeve.

"All the better to be ahead of schedule. You need some help, I understand." Charles slumped gratefully upon the couch.

"We certainly do. You are a welcome addition to our little coffee club. Well, how does it feel to be back among your fellow Americans, Charles?" Hans chuckled.

"Nervous. You two seem to be thriving, though."

"I think we are all a little nervous, with anticipation," said Jesus. "Come along. We'll have some sandwiches and coffee on the roof."

They relaxed on lawn chairs and sipped Jesus' excellent coffee, while looking down upon the profusion of bright pearls that were the lights of the city. Grieg's Piano Concerto in A Minor accompanied their unspoken thoughts, and Charles felt a twinge of sadness, drawn out by the music and the panorama of the city that was going through its last agonies, a city he had known, grown fond of, and now must turn away from, not wishing to see its squalid death. From their hillside vantage-point they could see the fires glowing in the distance and hear the incessant wailing of sirens.

"So it's come to this," said Charles. "Never in my communist youth could I have imagined such a situation, here in my own country."

"Yes, it does seem incredible," said Hans, "even to me, to see Hitler's prophecy fulfilled - the inevitable collapse of a mongrelized culture." He poured himself a sherry from the bottle on the trolley. "Now, only dictatorship can save what is left of this country, but I fear that it will be a mean little dictatorship; no ideals or grandeur at all, just a petit bourgeois effort to keep the masses at each other's throats and off the backs of the rich gangsters. It is the Götterdämmerung, the death of the gods the Americans worshiped. The United States will be dangerous for many years, but its time of greatness has passed. Sherry, everyone?"

"Finish it up, muchachos. It will only go to waste, otherwise." Jesus held out his glass so Hans could fill it.

"Jerez.' From Spain, isn't it?" asked Charles.

"Yes, the best."

Charles looked at the ruby liquid in his glass and held it up so that it glowed with the light from the street lamps and conflagrations in the city below.

"We'd better move fast," said Jesus. "My contacts at the university have informed me something very big is brewing."

"You mean more bombing and disorders sponsored by the government?" Charles raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, and then some." Jesus took a sip of sherry and rolled it over his tongue. "But the bombings of the government have been purposely amateurish and not aimed at valuable property or the means of production. The intention is merely to spread the fear of terrorism of the left."

"And the bombings of the left?"

"More enterprising, but sporadic and equally amateurish. They still think the workers are on their side, whether the workers know it or not, so they only bomb 'symbolic targets,' nothing that would bring the economy to a halt."

"Ah, yes," said Hans, rubbing his calloused hands together, "but there is another variable which makes haste imperative."

"And that is?" said Charles.

"The sheer volume of it. Everyone is joining in. Hired provocateurs, romantics, dissident groups, foreign agents are hurling bombs like confetti. Over four thousand bombings have been reported this year, some of which did lots of damage. It is becoming the new national sport. If we don't act quickly, we may be lost in the shuffle."

"Well, here's to the bombing of the middle, then. May it be more profitable." Charles raised his glass and drained the last of the sherry.

"And to an early night's sleep, courtesy of the National Guard's curfew," said Hans, rising from his chair.

"A warm welcome to your old country, Carlitos."

"Not too warm, I hope."

Morning came with the chirping of sparrows and the pungency of the smog which was already rising to the foothills. Charles and Hans followed Jesus down the spiral stairway which led to the basement.

"As you see, it is not a real basement, since it is carved into the hillside and gives a perfect view of the slope." Jesus pointed to a loophole in the basement wall overlooking the bay.

"We have already begun the tunnel," said Hans, directing his flashlight beam into a horizontal cavity in the hillside. "By our calculations we should be running into the drainage tunnel in a week or so, maybe less, since you are with us and we have Jesus' cafe con leche to fortify us."

"You flatter my poor efforts. Observe between the two trees."

Charles peered through the loophole. "Yes, I see it."

"There is only one other outlet for that drainage tunnel, as we have determined, and that empties down the opposite slope. They are to place the boxes just inside the entrance, which you can see is only a short distance below the roadway, so they are likely to think the pickup will be made from a car, however, we will be entirely underground during that part of the operation. The other outlet will serve as our exit. It drains into a pretty little canyon, with a well-shaded dirt road."

"Sounds like a vacationer's paradise. You ought to go into the tourist business, Jesus." Charles scanned the slope. "This house has the only view of the tunnel entrance. You realize ..."

"Of course. We've prepared a warm welcome for them." Jesus smiled.

"Good. Very good." Charles nodded appreciatively.

"But you have not seen everything." Hans led them back upstairs.

Outside the house they slipped and scrambled up a talus slope, clinging to clumps of sagebrush to steady themselves. At last they came upon a rock-strewn section of abandoned road.

Jesus kept lookout while Hans moved a piece of sagebrush, uncovering a rusty manhole cover. Taking a socket wrench from his coat pocket, he unbolted the cover and lifted it so that Charles could look in. The morning sun illuminated everything in the little room below. He saw tools, bombs, submachine guns, rocket launchers, and in the center of the display, a large steel tube that yawned up at them.

"What's that?"

"Kleine Bertha," said Hans, "a 120 millimeter mortar."

"Compliments of the Minutemen?"

"Yes, and not the only bon voyage present they so kindly gave us, as you shall see."

"Hurry up, you two," said Jesus. "It is past our breakfast time."

Charles discovered breakfast at Jesus' was a round-the-clock affair, the only stopping point in a brisk schedule of digging, shoring, dirt-hauling and brief catnaps. It was an active week.

"Breakfast time," said Hans. "You go up and get started. I want to check the shoring at the end of the tunnel."

"Don't be too long, or I'll have everything eaten." Charles kicked off his boots at the foot of the stairs, hung his miner's hardhat on a peg, stripped off his overalls and tucked his T-shirt into his bluejeans. Jesus was a stickler for formality.

"You load sixteen tons ..." he hummed as he padded up the steps in his socks. The smell of bacon gave him a jolt of energy which propelled him up the last steps and into the kitchen. He swooped down upon the heaping plate of bacon, eggs and pancakes, devouring them with only slight pauses for breaths of air and gulps of coffee.

"... The rioters have begun to move into the suburbs of Boston. State police report incidents of sniping on principal freeways. The Governor of Massachusetts has declared a state of emergency.

And now for the latest sports summary ..."

"Flush that shithead and pass me some more scrambled eggs."

Jesus switched off the radio and returned from the stove with another frying pan of bacon and eggs. Seeing Charles stoking up with food, he smiled. "Now you know how we have developed such hearty appetites, Carlitos. Where is Hans? His fuel bunkers must be very low."

Hans burst into the kitchen, wringing wet with perspiration and covered with dirt. "We have broken through. Give me coffee and lots of sugar."

"Congratulations!" Jesus handed him a cup of coffee and a broom. "You can celebrate by sweeping up the dirt you've tracked into the kitchen and by vacuuming the living room rug."

Hans looked down at his feet in embarrassment, and they began to laugh. Jesus took the broom away and motioned him to sit down.

"Does our letter to the Governor meet with your approval?" asked Jesus, setting a platter of food before the grimy Hans.

Charles paused with his fork in mid-air and swallowed. "Yes but I would have preferred that it were signed 'Francis Drake' instead of 'Internal Revenue Association.' We are holding the state for ransom after all."

"I sympathize, but the initials were too good to pass up. We'll have the F.B.I. chasing Irish-Americans, while the C.I.A. scratch their heads wondering if some of their pendejos haven't got out of hand."

"To the jolly roger!" Hans raised his cup.

The sun would soon be up, thought Jesus, as he sniffed the morning air which carried a mixed aroma of sea, sage and crude oil from the refinery. He fingered the safety catch of the Sterling while squinting into the rolling mist which obscured the dirt road and blanketed the hills with a damp silence. Somewhere, he heard the occasional clink of tools, and knew that Charles and Hans were busy.

"I've never seen any like these," said Charles, as he lowered the nose of the rocket upon its simple launching trough.

"Homemade," grunted Hans, screwing in the detonator. "I thought we might use them up, as they may not be reliable. The principle is quite simple, you see: Black powder propellant, impact detonator, shaped plastique bursting charge. The 'guidance system' is not overly accurate at long range. A child's toy, really."

"Yes, buy a set now, and be the first child on your block to rule the world."

"And you would probably deserve it, too."

"The last one. You can cut the fuse short."

"I won't cut it too short, though. We need fifteen minutes."

"How did the truck carry all this?" Charles wiped the perspiration off his forehead with a sleeve of his coveralls.

"I made a few modifications."

"Oh?"

"Heavy-duty shock absorbers, overload springs, special axles, extra-strong tires and rims." Hans lit the last fuse.

"In other words, you manufactured your own truck."

"I have discovered that people who buy pickup trucks really believe they can carry things in them. Ha, ha! Little do they know."

"Jesus must be freezing."

"He's not the only one. Coffee is in the truck. Let's go."

They made their way down through the damp sagebrush and onto the road, where they found Jesus with the truck.

"What took you so long? I've been standing here freezing, trying to see through this damned mist so long I'm beginning to see things that aren't there."

"See, Hans. What did I tell you?"

"I apologize for the fact that some of the detonator threads were rusty and delayed us, but the waiting is over. Get in. Did you leave the I.R.A. leaflets?"

"All along the road."

Hans let off the brake and they began to coast down the road which skirted the refinery.

"It's a city, not a refinery, and not a worker in sight." Jesus looked out over the well-lit panorama below them.

Charles surveyed the metropolis of boilers, separators, cracking towers and cooling columns as he wiped his greasy hands on his overalls. "What you see there produces nearly fifty per cent of the refined petroleum on the west coast. I should say, produced nearly fifty per cent after this morning's work."

"The Governor is not going to like it. He will have much explaining to do, and the oil companies will be very angry with him." Jesus smiled.

"Just his fault for being a skeptic and a verdammt tightwad," said Hans.

"Poor Governor." Jesus assumed an expression worthy of a hired mourner.

"Yes, poor Governor. How about some more coffee?" Charles passed him the steaming thermos flask.

"Might as well drive with lights, otherwise we'll never see our way through this mist." Hans shifted into second gear and engaged the clutch. As the engine roared into life he switched on the lights and clicked the dimmer switch to low beam.

Charles glanced behind them. "How long before ..."

"We have seven minutes." Hans looked at the racing second hand of his watch. "Six and one half. No one can interfere with the process now, not even if he knew exactly what was about to happen."

They were nearing the road which led to the freeway, when Jesus hit Charles on the arm. "Look, lights on the ridge!"

"There they go! Perfect timing, Hans."

"Ach, I didn't think ..."

"Look at that!"

"Hijole!"

Hans stopped the truck and they looked back in fascination as a catalytic cracking tower received a direct hit and burst into a gigantic pillar of flame. A huge tank of gasoline opened like the petals of an infernal blossom and hurled forth a demonic ball of fire. The tank farm floated and danced in a lake of fire, the air shuddering with the reverberation of explosions. The waning night became day as the refinery became a sea of flame, and the waxing day became night as dense black smoke poured up from the inferno in stygian clouds, blotting out the sunrise. Streams of burning petroleum were lapping over the retaining walls and pouring through breaches made by the rocket barrage.

"Scheisse! This place will be cordoned off in no time." Hans trod upon the accelerator and raced over the last quarter mile to the freeway.

Charles pointed. "Look, it's crossing the freeway."

The gasoline and fuel oil had rushed down the slope and on to the roadway, and cars in the constant stream of traffic were catching fire. Their fuel tanks exploded, adding to the inferno. Frenzied drivers accelerated, only to crash into others who had not seen the need for hurry. On the other side of the river of fire, more collisions occurred as impatient commuters crashed into their panic-stricken fellows who had braked to avoid the fire storm ahead.

One driver left the road and drove madly along the shoulder, but the flames had already reached his car, which soon lurched to a halt, enveloped in burning gasoline from

its exploded fuel tank. A flaming figure ran from the car, waving its arms about until it was overcome. It sprawled, still burning, upon the pavement.

Hundreds of figures were propelled from their cars by the intense heat. They too were aflame, and they leaped and pirouetted in a fiery ballet until they were engulfed by the flood of burning oil that spread over the freeway.

Hans stamped on the brake peddle. "We must go north, but how are we to cross the freeway? The southbound lanes are already blocked."

Cars choked the three lanes they had to cross. In the northbound lanes there was not a car to be seen.

Hans rolled down the window. "Emergency crew, please give way!"

Several drivers complied. Now they were one lane away from their objective. One car stood between them and escape. White teeth gleamed in its driver's baboon-like countenance. "Go to hell, you muthas! White devils suck!"

"Jesus, the Sterlings. Hans, crash the fence when we get the car out of the way."

"Jawohl!"

Charles and Jesus jumped out onto the pavement, firing bursts which shattered the windows of the car. Jesus covered while Charles opened the door. Out sprawled the blood-spattered body of a Black Panther, his pistol clattering on the asphalt. Charles pulled the driver's body out of the car and swung into the gory seat. He had no trouble starting the engine which was still warm. Engaging the clutch, he rammed the car in front, reversed and rammed the car behind, making enough space to maneuver. The stunned occupants of the cars looked at him, mouths agape. He revved the motor and crashed through the divider fence, bending the frail steel posts like spaghetti. Then he parked the car out of the way, wondering how the owner would claim on his insurance, and signaled Jesus to jump into the truck. As Hans drove by, Charles leaped into the rear. He looked back as the refinery rocked with more explosions and slipped a fresh magazine into his Sterling, reflecting that Black Panthers were exempt from taking out insurance.

They left the truck in its hiding place and returned to the house in Jesus' Volkswagen camper. It was noon when they turned into the driveway and backed into the vine-covered carport.

Jesus shook his head, seeing the two inert forms in the back of the camper. "Hey, you two, we're home!"

"Go to hell." Charles spoke in his sleep.

"Well, it's okay by me if you want to sleep in the car. It's just that there's cold beer on the roof."

Hans stirred and rubbed his eyes. "Beer, did someone say beer?"

"That's what I said."

"Donnerwetter! Now that's what I call a dilemma. Ach, the beer wins. But then I sleep all day. No interruptions."

Charles groaned. "That means I have to get out so you can get out. Never trust Hans when there's beer around. Hmm, it does sound good, though."

Laughing, Jesus pulled open the double doors of the camper. The two tumbled out and staggered bleary-eyed into the kitchen.

"I told you that you shouldn't sleep during the day. It puts you out of sorts."

"Listen to our Spanish professor. Now he wants to abolish the siesta!"

"A crypto-calvinist," said Charles, splashing water on his face from the kitchen tap. As he dried himself on the dish towel, he happened to glance out the window. "What time is it?"

Jesus looked at his watch. "Just after twelve."

"Would you look at that!"

"Yes, I saw it as I drove from the place where we left the truck. It is an early dusk."

"That sets the smog program back ten years, I'd say. Look over there. It looks like India ink pouring into the sky."

"It reminds me of Ploesti, after the Allies paid their visit. I tell you we shot down hundreds of the bastards, but, as you say, 'India ink in the sky.' Such a beautiful refinery. I think it will burn for days." Hans nodded in confirmation.

"What about the beer, Jesus? I thought you said on the roof."

"It will be if you bring it up with you."

"Very funny."

"Well, how do you expect me to carry the beer and the lobster mayonnaise?"

"The what?" Charles opened the refrigerator. "Hans, look at this."

"A verdammtes feast!"

"I apologize, Jesus. If you'd like us to carry the beer, the lobster and yourself up to the roof, just say so."

"No, just bring the radio."

"... The toll of deaths has still to be concluded following the refinery holocaust which blocked the coast highway for five hours this morning. Fire department officials are still uncertain as to the cause of this disaster. At this moment, firemen are battling the flames raging through tinder-dry brush toward luxurious canyon residential areas. Traffic has been slowed in the Bay Area due to the smoky pall, and driving with headlights is requested.

Earlier today, three Black Panthers were killed and one seriously injured when two unidentified caucasians shot them in a gun battle which flared about five miles from the scene of today's refinery disaster. The two men ran amok with others when the refinery exploded. There was no apparent motive for the killings as police have yet determined. The search for these men is being continued.

National Guard units have isolated southwestern sections of Oakland after an outbreak of arson and looting last night which burned down most of the businesses in that area. Negro leaders are calling for black youths to obey the Governor's curfew order. Sniper fire has been reported, however, and persons are advised to remain clear of these areas until order has been restored.

Snipers today halted noon rush-hour traffic on the Nimitz Freeway. No fatalities were reported, but traffic is snarled and motorists are requested to use alternate routes.

And now, a word from our sponsor ..."

Jesus leaned forward and switched off the radio. "Nothing at all. Maybe the Governor thinks the refinery was some kind of prank, or a coincidence."

"You left the leaflets," said Charles, "so he should have enough to go on, and when the wreckage cools off, they'll be able to find the rocket fragments and deduce that the I.R.A. isn't just a one-shot outfit."

"You think they are already working on it?"

"You can bet your life they are. They've already sifted through their government provocateur organizations, like the Black Panthers, checked out the dossiers on the others, made discreet enquiries about foreign agencies, and now they're probably filtering questions up through the C.I.A. echelons to find out if those boys are working a caper. Then, of course, there are the D.I.A., the N.S.A., the F.B.I. and who knows what else."

"Diablos!"

"You shouldn't smoke so much," Charles admonished.

"One of the few vices permitted a priest."

"Yes, but now that you're not a priest, I suggest a few other vices may be in order so you can keep your health. Moderation in all things."

"Ach, what time is it?" Hans sat up in his chair and stretched.

"Nearly three o'clock," said Charles.

"But it's almost dark."

"Thanks to us."

"Did the Governor say anything on the radio?" "For a politician, he's been very quiet."

"He has ignored our request, then."

"That's what it looks like."

"So, we must continue with our bill of entertainment."

"Right." Charles finished his beer and stood up. "Well, I'm off to Los Angeles."

"See you tomorrow, Carlitos. Don't forget the keys to the Volkswagen."

Charles parked the camper on a side street near the International Airport, and quickly got out to strip the masking tape off the door panels. The name concealed by the tape was the same as the one on his white overalls, that of the airport's sanitary firm.

He drove into the immense parking lot, skirting the mass of cars simmering in the heat of a smoggy afternoon, bypassing the fantastic array of airlines, each competing, each losing money, each subsidized heavily by the taxpayer, each pumping tons of pollution into the atmosphere. In the center of this gigantic con game he saw the airport restaurant, a phoney space age artifact which could only have been stolen from an early Flash Gordon production, a glaring tribute to fashion rather than function. Still, he thought, it was fitting. The food they served was also fake.

The guard waved him through the gate and he drove in, backed up to the control tower building's service entrance and began to unload the shiny new waste receptacles, just like

the ones in all the air terminal buildings. The guard, a negro, seemed to have time on his hands. He sauntered over to Charles who was busy setting the time fuses.

"Hi ya." He chewed his gum noisily.

"Hi. Pretty warm, huh?" Charles pushed the swinging cover, arming the last charge.

"Sure is. You new on the job, ain't cha?"

"Yeah. I'm really not supposed to be out here. Union rules ya know, but somebody's got to deliver these or the night crew'll blow their stacks."

"More trash cans, huh?"

A jet roared overhead, drowning out any conversation. Charles had the six trash receptacles lined up in a neat row, like soldiers ready for inspection. He hoped they were going to pass inspection, for at least two hours. He tilted one and rolled his warehouse man's dolly under it, trying not to show how heavy it was.

"Yeah, night shift say they have to sweep up. Papers on the floor, you know. They say the other ones are getting filled up too fast. Need some more. Would you mind holding the door?"

"New, come right ahead." Good naturedly, the guard opened the double doors and put down the stops.

A horn sounded at the gate.

"Jest shut 'em when you leave," said the guard, going back to his post.

"Thanks."

Working rapidly, he deployed the trash cans into their designated positions, checked them against the diagram which Hans had given him, and looked at his watch. He had twenty minutes to catch his plane.

He dashed out of the building, kicked up the door stops at the entrance, slammed the doors on the camper and started the engine. "Take it easy, man." He waved to the guard at the gate.

"Yeah, take care. Like don't drink the water and don't breathe the air." The guard waved back at him.

Charles laughed, wondering where the guard had heard that. He parked the Volkswagen in a loading zone, peeled off the coveralls, shook the wrinkles out of his suit, and grabbed his empty briefcase off the seat. After making a final check that there was

nothing left behind to indicate the course of the next few hours, he sprinted off to the air terminal, a businessman in a hurry.

He confirmed his reservation for Oakland and submitted to the scrutiny of a metal detector before boarding the plane. In case of capture, his only friend was a cyanide capsule.

The 'fasten seat belt - no smoking' sign lit up and he relaxed.

The Volkswagen was a masterpiece, he thought; fake license plates, parts scavenged from wrecking yards. Hans did good work, all right. An hour to go.

"Like a sweet, Sir?" The stewardess smiled, offering him a tray of cellophane-wrapped hard candies.

"Yes, thanks. What flavor do you recommend?"

Hans parked the pickup truck in the vast parking lot, just in sight of the control tower. He looked at his watch and was satisfied. A car drove up beside him, Jesus in his old Ford. He double-parked, leaving his engine running, got out and came over to Hans.

"No sign of Charles?" Jesus' eyes were watering from the smog. "I hope he has not had any difficulties."

"Nor do I. He is essential. We have over half an hour. Cigarette?" Hans shook two from his pack.

"Thanks."

A big jet broke the sound barrier above them.

Hans lit Jesus' cigarette. "The bastards are guarding the planes, but they forgot about the airports."

"I hope we used enough explosive."

"All we had, but it should be enough to knock out the control towers in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Too bad we didn't have more."

"But shouldn't two towers be enough?"

"No. I have calculated that we must knock out at least three to make sure the system breaks down. You see, each airport has a 'stack' of planes circling overhead, sometimes more than twenty at once."

"Like vultures circling over a dying animal." Jesus chuckled.

"Very poetic, but listen, when the tower goes, the planes will not be able to land, especially at this time of year, when there is ground fog. In another hour it will be dark. With luck, the mist should thicken."

Jesus surveyed the sea of cars in the parking lot. "I hope I don't forget how to get out of here."

"You won't. Besides, you don't have Kleine Bertha in your car."

"Someone is coming."

"It's Charles. Perfect timing!"

He came running up to them, the very picture of the harried young executive. "Sorry I took so long."

"Not at all. You are just in time for the party." Hans started the truck, set the hand brake and left the engine idling.

Jesus kept watch while they pulled back a tarpaulin covering what looked like a section of gas main.

"No, move the baseplate a little more. So, ganz gut."

"A beautiful sunset," said Charles. "Mine should have gone off by now."

"Then we can begin as soon as we have set up."

They raised the heavy tube into place and locked it into the swivel on the baseplate. Charles watched the tube move slightly as Hans turned the traversing screw.

"That should be on target."

"If you say so."

"Well, a little more deflection, then. Those parking area lights and the mist are not ideal for range-finding."

Charles cradled a round for firing.

"Observer!" shouted Hans, as he sighted across the muzzle.

"Sí Señor. I am observing."

"Tell me where it goes. Charles, are the bombs ready?"

"Fuses all set. Ready whenever you say."

"Fire!"

The tube belched yellow flame and there was a tearing sound in the air. Charles and Hans peered in the direction of the control tower. Suddenly there was a great flash and a puff of smoke. The explosion resounded in the blowing mist.

Jesus came running from his observation post atop a nearby car. "Short! One mil depression." He ran back to the car.

Hans turned the elevation screw. "One mil depression. Fire!"

The tower was burning. Large chunks of material fell from the structure. The second shell caused the great radar mast to lean over and the third caused it to topple. High voltage electrical apparatus exploded with blue and green flashes and showers of yellow sparks, turning the misty evening into a weird technicolor day. The air smelled of cordite and hot oil from the mortar.

Quickly, Charles and Hans lowered the tube onto the truck bed, jumped out and assisted Jesus in tying down the tarp.

"Let Hans lead the way, Jesus. I'll go in your car."

Slowly, with lights on low beam, they drove out of the parking lot, the air shrill with sirens. When they had gained the freeway, they came abreast and held a steady speed so that they occupied two of the four northbound lanes.

"Ouch! These tetrahedrons are sharp." Charles sucked his bleeding finger.

"I'm glad you have made sure," said Jesus, his eyes on the road ahead.

"These are vicious. No matter how they land, there's one hollow spike standing up. Okay, let Hans know we're ready."

As soon as there was a clear space in front of them, Jesus waved to Hans who sped on ahead. "I'm ready to begin the run."

"Okay, now!"

Jesus turned diagonally, crossing all four lanes while Charles scattered the tetrahedrons from the window, taking care that they fell clear of the car. They returned to the first lane and made the run again.

"That's it. All gone. Don't look, but a semi-trailer rig has just hit one. Oh, oh. There he goes. He's turned over."

Jesus glanced in the rear view mirror. "Yes, a big one. Nothing behind us now. Just a lot of headlights taking off in all directions. I don't think anyone will be following us, but I'll take the usual evasive action."

Charles stuck his head out the window and looked for signs of traffic control aircraft. "Nothing." He checked the magazine of his Sterling.

After many twists and turns, they came to a hitchhiker beside the road, and stopped.

"We're not allowed to take riders. This is a company car," said Jesus.

"Good evening, Hans. Shall we park here?"

"Yes, quickly. Both of you into the truck. We are late."

Hans wasted no time in rounding the curves of the narrow, winding road, turning off at the preselected site and stopping abruptly. "I don't think the truck will be seen from the road."

Charles looked out at the darkened shrubbery, listening to the crickets. "I hope the local teenagers don't decide to have their evening orgy down here."

"They shouldn't. It's a week night," said Jesus.

"You learn American customs very quickly."

"Jesus, help me with the tools. Charles, bring the frog. Orgies must wait."

"On my honor, I've never tried it in a car."

"Amazing! You must be the most unusual American in the country."

"Why do you think campers have become so popular? Oops!" Charles lost his footing, grabbed for a nearby eucalyptus branch, missed, and slid down the dusty incline in a seated position, holding the cast steel frog in his lap. He came to rest on the sandy bottom of the arroyo.

"You okay?" asked Jesus.

"Yes, damn it! There goes another expensive suit. Ouch!"

"What's the matter?"

"Rocks in my shoes." Charles dusted himself off.

"Why didn't you drop the frog? Did you think it would break?"

"I didn't want it to get dirty."

"Shut up, you two."

Over the crickets in the brush they heard the klaxon of a diesel locomotive, followed by the growl of the engines. A few minutes more, and the growl became a whine as the traction motors began to brake.

"He's over the hump and starting the downgrade." Charles checked to see that his Sterling was in working order. "That should be the first one. They've taken to sending a short train of empties ahead of the big ones because of all the rail defects and sabotage."

Hans looked up at the track. "We're fortunate there is a new moon tonight. As it is, we will be in full view from the road. We must work quickly."

"We'll have to work quickly if we're going to catch the big one." Charles kicked the frog. "It sure weighs enough."

Jesus looked at his watch and yawned. "Sangre de Cristo. Look at the time! If we were paid up members of the Terrorists' Union we wouldn't have to put in such long hours."

Charles laughed. "It has been a busy week, all right. After tonight, the Governor will be yelling for the Marines."

"Why do that, when all he has to do is pay us? Is he such a fathead?"

"It looks like it, along with the small group of crooks who put him in office."

Above them, on the other side of the arroyo, the rail joints popped and the ties began to creak. The rumble of the wheels grew louder, and suddenly the locomotive rounded the curve, its cyclopean headlight sweeping the track and verges of the right-of-way. The pilot train sped around the curve, lunged across the trestle over the dry canyon and was quickly lost to view.

Hans slapped Charles on the back. "Let's go!"

Panting and stumbling, they scrambled up the embankment, the smell of fuel oil and creosote strong as they knelt upon the line. Working quickly, they placed the frog on the outside rail of the curve and firmly bolted the clamps.

Jesus tapped the frog with his wrench. "I thought it was a piece of modern sculpture when I first saw it. What does it do, exactly, aside from derailing the train?"

Charles smiled. "Well, it serves as an art object and a conversation piece, but when it's used like this, it deftly raises the flange of the leading wheel, pulling it and the one opposite off the rails and onto the ties."

"And if the train is going fast?"

"That's when the railroad goes into competition with the airlines."

Hans rejoined them. "I've thrown the leaflets into the sagebrush above the line." He laid his hand on the rail which was still warm from the passage of the locomotive and its string of empties. A klaxon sounded. "The fast freight. Back to the truck! We'll see the show from the road."

They had just reached the truck when the sweeping headlamp of the train came into view.

Hans started the truck. "The time, please."

"Nine twenty-five," said Charles. "It must be the fast freight. Over a mile long."

"What?"

"I said, it could be over a mile long."

"And going eighty miles an hour? This will be spectacular." Hans backed the truck onto the road.

"It isn't very economic, really, but it saves paying so much bribe money to the unions, and it's just right for our purposes."

The shining rails flashed in the beam of the headlight, and the train on the other side of the arroyo seemed much too close.

"Hans, you'd better get started."

The train rushed by in the opposite direction. Its locomotive comprised of eight diesel units, rounded the curve approaching the trestle and soared into thin air. For a moment, the train appeared to be flying, but illusion suddenly gave way to gravity as it plunged into the canyon. Tortured metal screeched as car after car followed the locomotive, wheels masses of sparks from the brake shoes. The ground shook and thunder rolled up from the canyon. Then the night vanished, dispelled by the garish names of burning gasoline from ruptured tank cars. Surrounding the yellow glare was a creeping green haze which curled up toward them, lifted by the air rising from the inferno.

The smell of bleach entered the cab of the truck as Hans accelerated. "Chlorine gas, my friends. It is time we left."

"... Making a total of fifty-one planes whose passengers and crew members have been rescued by the over-worked air-sea rescue teams.

And now, a special message to the people of the state: Ladies and gentlemen, the Governor of California.

'I ... I wish to extend my thanks to the citizens who have done so much to support the forces of law and order in these trying days.'

Thank you Governor. The weather report follows this important message from our sponsor ..."

"Hans, Jesus, wake up! The message!" Charles shook them from their slumbers beside the television set.

"Ja? The message, you say. Ach, I'd looked forward to wrecking the power station and those pipelines, not to mention the aluminum foundry."

"Easy, tiger. Now all we have to do is send the Governor our final instructions."

Alone in the house, Jesus watched the drainage tunnel outlet from the kitchen window. He could also see plumes of smoke rising from riot-stricken quarters of the city. Then he saw the delivery van.

It stopped over the culvert. Six men got out and looked down at the tunnel entrance. Apparently satisfied, they opened the back of the van and carefully removed some small but heavy-looking boxes. These they moved with great effort down the slope, placing them just inside the tunnel. When they had finished, they looked around in bewilderment, as if expecting to see the collector of the ransom nearby, pen poised to sign a receipt. They were obviously government employees. One of them looked up at the house, but did not see Jesus who observed them through a hole in the curtain. Having had a good look at nothing in particular, they got into the van and drove away.

Jesus reached beneath the sinkboard and pressed a doorbell button twice to begin the pick up. He raised his head, startled by a helicopter that swooped low over the house. "The damned fool will take the roof off," he thought.

The helicopter circled like a great dragonfly, apparently attracted by something in the area.

"Ah, so that's it. Now it begins." He turned on the television and adjusted the vertical hold knob at the back so that the picture jumped.

"... The chlorine gas remains in pockets and continues to hamper emergency crews in their task of clearing the wreckage. As you see in these films taken at the scene, wrecking crews must wear gas masks at all times. Here, they are removing portions of the trestle which was demolished when the train, acting like a huge battering ram, smashed into the supporting girders. Spokesmen for the railroad say the main line will be reopened to traffic in five days, at the earliest.

The toll of deaths from gas poisoning in the adjacent housing tract could now be well over two hundred. Hospitals are still unable to give conclusive figures on ..."

He heard the door knocker bang.

As usual, there were two of them. They looked so unstylishly clean-cut that they were impossible not to recognize.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Rios. We're Agents Morneau and Hayden of the F.B.I." They showed him their badges and paused to let their announcement sink in.

Jesus managed to look surprised. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I wonder if we might step inside," said Morneau, the senior of the two.

"Oh, yes. Please come in. Pardon me, but I must be forgetting my Latin hospitality." He showed them into the living room.

Morneau nodded to Hayden, reminding him of a duty he had to perform.

"May I have a look around the house, Mr. Rios?" asked Hayden.

"Certainly, but please let me know what I can do in the way of assistance."

"Now, Mr. Rios," said Morneau, "we don't want to trouble you, but unfortunately, we can't discuss our business just yet. I'd like to ask your co-operation in confirming a few details we've gathered."

"Of course. Please sit down."

Morneau settled comfortably on the couch and Jesus sat upon his artist's stool, facing him.

"First of all, you're an instructor at the university."

"Yes, I'm a part-time Spanish instructor, but I'm on vacation just now."

"Yes, that's right." Morneau thumbed through a notebook. "Do you own this house, Mr. Rios?"

"Well, I'm considering that. Right now I just rent it, but if there's an opening as a permanent faculty member, I'll certainly buy it."

Their conversation was interrupted by the helicopter swooping over the house.

"Excuse, me, Mr. Rios," said Hayden, returning from the upstairs bedrooms, "where does that stairway go?"

"Down to the laundry room. I'm afraid the light doesn't work. Would you like a flashlight?"

"Yes, I'd appreciate it."

"There's one in the kitchen. I'll show you where it is."

They went into the kitchen where the television was still on.

"... National Guard units have cordoned off the university campus after today's disturbances led by students in sympathy with ghetto revolutionaries. The Chancellor says little damage was done and that normal classes would resume tomorrow. The campus situation, he says ..."

"Caramba, that picture is lousy!"

"It keeps jumping," said Hayden, "so it's probably your vertical hold."

"Or possibly outside interference," said Morneau, "maybe an airplane."

"Gentlemen, you'll find the flashlight in that drawer. Would one of you be so kind as to tell me when the picture stops moving?" Jesus went behind the television set. "There, is that better?"

"No, it's not any different." said Morneau as Hayden rummaged through the contents of the drawer, looking in vain for a flashlight.

"Must be interference," said Jesus, who was not even attempting to correct the distortion.

The helicopter drowned out their conversation. It was so loud that Jesus hardly heard the two bursts he fired from his Sterling which had been resting behind the television stand.

Both F.B.I. men were thrown back against the sink, then toppled forward and crumpled into heaps on the kitchen floor. Behind them, the white cupboard doors were spattered with red polka-dots which started to run down in streaks like peppermint candy. Water sprayed up to the ceiling from a cracked faucet, and the tiles above the sink had

been smashed by stray rounds. Empty cartridges rolled off the kitchen table, still smoking as they clinked upon the floor. One of the agents had caught his hand on the drying rack, bringing down a deluge of plastic dishes. With all the dishes, cups and saucers scattered about, they looked like two mental defectives who had quarrelled violently while playing house.

Jesus switched off the television. "Yes, Mr. Hayden, it was the vertical hold." He lit a cigarette and savored the tobacco smoke, noticing in his eagerness that his hands were trembling slightly. It had been as easy as fool's mate, he thought.

Skirting the blood spreading over the linoleum, he pressed the doorbell button to signal Charles and Hans in the tunnel that visitors had arrived and had been properly welcomed. Then he looked at his watch. His one-man rear guard action would have to last almost an hour, long enough for Charles and Hans to remove the gold.

After slinging his Sterling so that it hung behind his back, he went down to the basement to fetch his hunting rifle. The light on the stairway was in working order if one thought to screw in the bulb a bit more. Returning to the living room, he found the telephone ringing.

"Hello?"

"Agent Rossi speaking. May I speak to Agent Morneau?"

"He's just gone down to the basement. Shall I have him come up?"

"Yes, right away. Are you Hayden?"

"Yes, anything I can do for you?"

"Listen, this is urgent. Rios, or whoever he is, may be one of the men we're looking for. Immigration has no record of anyone of his description. The Chilean Consul denies ever having issued a passport to him. Don't let him out of your sight, and get Morneau on the phone right away."

"Will do." Jesus smiled.

Instead of going in search of Agent Morneau, he ran upstairs and onto the roof, crouching under an awning lashed to the side of the chimney. The helicopter was an easy target, but the tail rotor presented difficulties. At last he had the drive shaft lined up in his telescopic sight and slowly squeezed the trigger. The rifle recoiled with a vicious crack as the powerful Magnum sought its target. No effect. The men in the helicopter seemed concerned about something, but were not deviating from their circular course over the tunnel area.

Jesus slammed the bolt home and took aim at the drive shaft once more. "Perhaps I must hit a universal joint," he thought. Steadying his aim by propping the rifle on the refreshment trolley, he was just squeezing the trigger when the shaft parted and the tail rotor stopped. Instead of firing, he ejected the cartridge and stood up for a better look. "Why waste a bullet on two dead men?"

He stooped, retrieved the gleaming cartridge, and strolled over to the balustrade, watching as the two men strove frantically to work the controls, but the aircraft did not respond. It began to corkscrew violently, then plummeted to earth, raising a geyser of smoke and dust on the hillside below. Soon it burst into flame setting a stand of firs alight.

Jesus ran down to the telephone. The line was disconnected and the dial-tone was buzzing. He replaced the receiver, looked at his watch, and raced across the room to the front door where he closed a simple knife switch, then carefully picked his way over the carnage in the kitchen and closed the switch beside the kitchen door. He slipped in some blood, caught himself on the table and escaped to the living room, pausing to wipe his shoes on the thick carpet.

Bringing his Sterling and hunting rifle with him, he hurried down the spiral stairway and reached the basement, stopping at the foot of the stairs. After taking five deep breaths, he felt calmer and was able to concentrate on his final task, the closing of the last switch. He forced himself not to think of the racing second hand as he coolly took all the extra ammunition from the gun cabinet and made a final check that everything was in order. Then he entered the dimly-lit tunnel which smelled fragrantly of fresh earth and newly-sawn timbers. Coming to the intersection with the drainage tunnel, he found Hans wearing his miner's helmet and lamp.

"How is everything down here, Hans?"

"Very good. Fortunately, we took the precaution of providing our own boxes. We discovered a few radio direction transmitters and a listening device built into their boxes, not the sort of 'extras' we require."

"No, it's not nice to be greedy. What about the gold?"

"I weighed the coins as I put them into our boxes. They come out just right. Here you are. You can help me carry the last box to the truck. My back has had enough."

Charles ran up to them, gasping for breath. "Booby trap is set in the tunnel."

"They've been on the phone. They know something funny is going on here. No time to lose." Jesus looked back the way he had come.

"Did you set the farewell salutes?" asked Hans.

"Yes. Mine will go off in about four hours." Charles checked his watch.

"And mine will go as soon as they arrive, which may be any minute," said Jesus anxiously.

"Good men," said Hans. "Now we get the hell out of here!"

They hurried down a sloping passage and came out into the shady canyon where an army weapons carrier stood. After loading on the last box, they hastily donned U.S. Army fatigues with National Guard insignia. Charles and Jesus jumped into the back and Hans jammed the truck into gear. Armed conspicuously with M-1 rifles, the two 'National Guardsmen' slouched against the wooden stake sides of the careening truck, their feet resting on ammunition boxes filled with gold eagles. The sunlight shining through the branches made leafy patterns of light and shade upon the green boxes as they raced down the canyon. Soon, Hans slowed down and turned into the paved road which ran through Tilden Park.

Charles heard another helicopter approaching and he looked up at the clouds. "Beautiful day, if you don't mind the smog."

"It's not the smog I'm worried about." Jesus looked back toward the house on the hillside where the helicopter was circling.

District Agent Rossi was beside himself. "Goddammit! Move those hoses." He beat the steering wheel of his car in frustration as a few firemen complied. There weren't many firemen available as it was, and most of them were exhausted from days of thankless battle in the ghettos where conflagrations, crumbling masonry and sniper bullets had become a daily routine.

Rossi's junior, Fitzgerald, had never heard him use profanity before, and he was shocked. Fortunately, there were no members of the public around to hear, unless the three carloads of Treasury agents behind them could be classed as public.

There were groans and screams from the crowd which had gathered near the fire as the timber props gave way from beneath a modernistic bungalow. Majestically, it toppled into the furiously burning woods with a shuddering crash, accompanied by a cacophony of breaking glass. The flames leaped higher as they fed on this additional morsel.

"The only f---ing road in the area, and it has to be blocked by a goddamn fire!"

"Well, Sir, it was one of our helicopters that did it." Fitzgerald had a genius for saying the wrong thing at precisely the right time. The other agents in the car sucked in their breaths. But Fitzgerald was saved by the timely arrival of the Fire Chief, who poked his besooted head into the car.

"What the hell do you think this is, a pleasure drive? Can't you see there s a fire?" He was a desperate-looking creature, eyes ringed with fatigue, nearly mad from exhaustion and smoke inhalation.

"Federal agents," shouted Rossi. "Move your damn toys out our way, and be quick about it!"

"Toys! Listen, you meat head, this is a fire, and I'm in charge. We're moving no equipment until the area is secure. Can't you see the whole ridge is about to go up?"

"Let it go up! I'm the representative of the Federal Government in this area, and I can guarantee reimbursement for any losses incurred." Rossi's face was red, and the throbbing vein on his temple looked as if it were going to burst at any moment.

"And I'm King Kong. Why don't you f--- off!"

Rossi gave a shrill growl, like that of a puma ready to spring, and drew his service revolver. There was nothing anyone could do. The Fire Chief was a huge man, but the Magnums somersaulted him halfway across the road as they smashed into his body.

"Now, move those trucks!" Rossi waved the smoking weapon about, leaving no doubt of the fate in store for back-talkers.

"Yes, Sir, where can we park them, Sir?" asked the intrepid Fitzgerald.

"Drive them over the cliff, but off the road, immediately!"

The crowd grew ugly when they saw the first fire engine roll over into the flames, and other agents had to draw their weapons to allow the convoy to pass through. It was all a matter of priorities.

At last, they drew up in front of the house on the hillside. Agent Rossi led a group to the front door while others took up positions on both sides. Additional agents were working their way up the hillside in order to take the house from all directions. Rossi approached the door with drawn gun and kicked it open.

Agents Reilly and Funguido approached the tunnel swiftly but cautiously, the one covering the other as each made his dash up the brushy slope. Guns drawn, they rushed into the tunnel to find what they expected: Nothing.

Wordlessly, Funguido motioned Reilly to take cover against the opposite wall. They stood for a moment, listening to the trickle of water and the muted engine of the helicopter as it passed overhead. When their eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, they began to pick their way quietly over the rocks and broken glass littering the sides of

the tunnel floor. They noticed the center of the floor had been swept clear of stones and other obstacles, and they could make out the tracks of a boy's wagon in the sandy spots.

Suddenly, the tunnel seemed to leap into the air. Both men were thrown down and stunned by the shock of an explosion. Regaining their senses, they looked around. The tunnel appeared intact. Nothing had collapsed. The water still splattered and trickled from above and the warm air still came in from the entrance below.

They resumed their careful tread along the sides of the tunnel until they found their way blocked by the rusted remains of a bicycle which leaned against some ruined lawn chairs, their canvas hanging tattered and mildewed.

Noiselessly, they put the bicycle out of the way, not noticing that it was bound to a piece of fine piano wire which ran back toward the tunnel entrance. As the wire went taut, some pellets dropped into a tray of acid concealed beneath a pile of rubble. They hadn't gone much further when Agent Funguido barked his shins on a boy's wagon directly in their path.

"Damn it! What is this, a kid's toy dump?"

Reilly was about to warn his partner to be silent, but his inhaled breath caused him to choke instead. Both men were dead by the time they slumped to the floor. When they were discovered a few days later, they had begun to mildew.

Hans drove exceptionally well. They sped around the tree-lined curves of the park road and came to the first intersection at the base of the foothills, stopping for a red light.

Jesus was about to say something when his breath was nearly taken away by the shock wave of the explosion. A great pillar of dirt and smoke rose from the hillside behind them.

Charles smiled. "That's one way to avoid paying the rent."

"Let them dig for evidence in that!" Hans laughed and put the truck into gear, driving across the intersection toward the campus.

Jesus beat his hands on the canvas top of the cab. "Hans, don't go near the University!"

Hans stopped. "Which way should I go, then?" He pointed to the columns of smoke rising to the north and south of them.

"Mierda! More riots. But there will be trouble at the University."

"It's the only way we can go, so we must take the risk. Charles, get into the cab with me in case I am wounded." Hans laughed as they drove on.

"What is it?" asked Charles.

"This reminds me of another trip I made, years ago, when you were only a child."

"During the war?"

"Yes. The roads were muddy. The mud nearly finished us. And then there was the silence."

"In wartime?"

"Yes, that is what made it so frightening. It was suffocating. The park forest reminded me of it."

"Where were you at the time?"

"Traveling west with the eastern front."

"You seem to be well-practiced at making getaways."

"Let us hope practice makes perfect." Hans mused grimly over the steering wheel. "It comes to the same thing if we are captured now, as it did then. 'Vitamin C' tablets." He chuckled.

"Let's hope we won't need them."

"No, my young friend, especially in your case. I have had some twenty good years after my last escape. I can only wish you the same after this one." He turned onto the tree-lined road marked 'University Drive.'

"No one around. That's ominous." Charles arranged the grenades and extra magazines for his Sterling so they would be in easy reach. He looked out the rear opening in the canvas. "How are you for ammunition, Jesus?"

"Five extra Sterling magazines, two full clips of M-1 and a box and a half of Magnums."

"Well, don't feel left out." He passed him six high-explosive assault grenades.

"Gee, thanks."

"Just to keep you from getting bored back there. And keep the Sterling out of sight. It's not G.I. You want us to look like urban guerrillas or something?"

Jesus laughed and laid the Sterling on the floor of the truck beside the ammunition boxes.

Charles tapped Hans on the shoulder. "Stop here."

"What the hell for?"

"We need those trash cans."

"I have no objection to looting whatever we can take with us, but this is ridiculous!"

Hans put on the brakes, and Charles leaped out. He came back with two large trash cans after he had emptied them by the roadside.

"That's right, Jesus, stand them up in the back."

"Charles, you are mad," said Hans.

"Not at all. Who's going to pick a fight with a garbage detail? Besides, the National Guard won't enlist us in any action if we keep the guns out of sight."

"Good thinking, Herr Oberst. It might even work."

"Jesus, give me your M-1. Hans, get out for a moment."

Charles waited until Hans was clear, then fired carefully aimed shots at the truck. Holes appeared in the door panels, the hood, and the windshield on the passenger's side. He stepped back to survey his work while Hans and Jesus stood by in consternation.

"Mad, Jesus. He's utterly mad."

"Do you suppose it was the late nights, or the lobster mayonnaise? I thought the lobster was fresh." Jesus shrugged.

"No, not the lobster mayonnaise. Such vandalism. Ach, my beautiful weapons carrier!"

Charles stood for a moment, debating whether another bullet hole would get any raves from the critics, then decided against it. "I like it the way it is. Let's get out of here."

"He seems to be regaining his senses," said Hans.

"Great art is always ahead of its time, but you'll both see very soon that I've made us an alibi." Charles returned the M-1 to Jesus.

"Or a conversation piece." Jesus swung into the back of the truck, and studied the road behind for signs of pursuit.

"Just humor me, okay?" Charles slammed the perforated door.

Hans drove carefully, but the sharp bend in the narrow drive obscured the armored personnel carrier until they were almost upon it. He hit the brakes hard, and the weapons carrier spun about, nearly hitting the a.p.c. broadside. The engine stalled, and the soldier manning the fifty caliber machine gun atop the a.p.c. looked over at them.

Charles gave him a cheerful wave. "Hi! What's cookin'?"

The machine gunner said nothing, returning his gaze to the large wooden house which he was covering with his weapon. Some troops were approaching the structure cautiously, in a classical enveloping maneuver, moving from cover to cover in short rushes.

A rifle muzzle poked from one of the boarded up windows of the house.

"Out!" Hans gave Charles a shove and threw his door open.

They jumped out of the truck as the machine gun began to fire, spraying the front of the house in a long burst. There was silence for a moment and Charles peered around the side of the a.p.c. where they had taken refuge. Looking up, he saw a tremendous gush of smoke from the chimney. Simultaneously, there boiled out of the house a great number of blacks, some leaping from windows others from fire escapes, all screaming and cursing at the top of their lungs.

"Down!" Charles pulled Hans with him as he hit the pavement.

The house swelled up, sprang into the air, and burst into a vicious cloud of flying splinters, glass and brick. The ground heaved, and a great, hot fist drove them hard against the pavement, leaving them stunned and breathless. When they looked up, the house was gone and so were the blacks and the soldiers. The machine gunner's arm dangled from the top of the a.p.c. for a moment before it plopped into the street beside them.

"Himmel! Was passiert mit ... What was that?"

Jesus wiped blood from a cut on his forehead. "A bomb factory. I warned you ..."

They sprawled on the pavement again as another explosion shook the area. Where the house had been, there was now a crater, belching flame and brightly-colored smoke as mysterious objects exploded with great whooshes.

In the background they heard the rattle of small arms fire and the squeak of tank treads. A broken power line flashed, writhing and cracking on a rubble-strewn lawn. Here and there, cars burned, filling the air with the stench of plastic and rubber. A pall of smoke rose from burning buildings.

Numbly, they got into the truck and drove on slowly, skirting the fallen electric poles and other debris that threatened to block the street. Somehow, Hans found a path through the chaos, while Charles and Jesus scanned the damaged houses for snipers. To avoid the litter in the streets, they drove over lawns and sidewalks, incidentally ruining the back fence and garden of the university's president who cowered somewhere in the recesses of his palatial house. There was no bravery among the corrupt.

Charles looked up as a searing roar split the sky above them. "Fighter bomber!"

The sunlight glinted on its fuselage as it streaked over the university library, which erupted in a black cloud of flaming napalm.

Jesus put his head through the rear window. "My students. They invited me to come with them, as if they were going on a picnic. The books were all right against bullets and bomb fragments, but ..."

Charles watched the column of smoke rise from the library. "I was a student here, myself."

"No, Carlitos! In this university?"

"Yes, but it was a little different, then."

They laughed.

Hans stopped. "Up ahead. What is that?"

Charles peered through the drifting smoke. "It could be smoke, but then ..."

"It must be gas."

"Oh, hell!"

"What kind do the Americans use?"

"At this stage, anything, but we'll have to take a chance that it's just C.S. gas. Jesus!"

"Yes?"

"Now, listen. You've never been through gas before, but there's nothing to worry about. Your face and hands will sting like hell, but whatever you do, keep your mask on.

Roll down your sleeves and button your collar. That will help some. I think it's concentrated in that pocket up ahead."

"You mean we must go into that?"

"I'm afraid so, but Hans won't take too long to get through it. Just sit tight and hold on."

"Caramba!" Jesus put on his mask and Charles tested the straps to make sure they were taut.

Charles adjusted his own mask as Hans put on his.

"Now, get ready for a special treat." Charles' voice was muffled even as he shouted. "Let's go!"

They drove into the sinister cloud that billowed and eddied around them. The area was saturated with gas. No shots came from the houses which were just visible in the haze, but a man staggered toward them, vomited, and blindly reeled down the street until he doubled up again to retch. This time he collapsed, adding his to the growing number of bodies that littered the streets and lawns of the suburb, sprawled in grotesque postures that reflected their agonized deaths. The truck lurched and bumped over the corpses, which provided the smoothest roadway amid the rubble of street-fighting.

As the gas thinned out, sniper bullets began to whistle around them. They were bypassing a lawn strewn with the mutilated remains of policemen when a molotov cocktail sailed into their path and burst, the sudden inferno blocking the street. Hans reversed the truck and backed away from the flames.

"Watch out!" yelled Charles, as a swarm of youths appeared from a side street, wearing gas masks and brandishing firebombs.

Jesus fired a burst which cut down the first group and whirled around to machine-gun another group coming at them from the other side. The youths fell, and some of the firebombs burst among the would-be throwers who vanished as suddenly as they had appeared, in pools of flame.

Skillfully, Hans took them away from the fires and into an area which had seen heavy fighting between National Guard units and well-armed rioters. They passed a line of a.p.c.'s which had taken direct hits from anti-tank rockets and were blazing furiously, their ammunition still exploding like fireworks on the Fourth of July, in sharp accompaniment to the crump of bombs in the distance. Charles was glad that his mask prevented him from smelling the roasted flesh as they drove over the charred bodies of the ambushed troops.

They detoured around an overturned school bus and found themselves confronted by a heavily-manned roadblock whose machine guns were all aimed at them.

Seeing that none of the soldiers wore masks, they removed theirs, grateful for the coolness of the smoke-laden air.

"Smile," said Charles. "This is it."

Hans managed a toothy grin and waved at the grim-faced National Guardsmen ahead. "You've got your Sterling out of sight?"

"Yes, but I'm pulling the pin on this grenade."

"Don't drop it in here."

"I'll try not to."

A dishevelled-looking lieutenant signaled them to halt, and they stopped at the barricade. "Now, what the hell do you guys think you're doin'?"

"Jeez, Lootenant," moaned Charles, "Ah think we got lost." He laid on a thick hill-billy accent.

"That ain't all," said Jesus. "You gotta do somethin' 'bout them snipers or you gonna be minus one mess detail."

"You guys just gotta be kidding!" The lieutenant looked at them and saw that they were not kidding. "Well, I'll be damned. We lost a tank column in there an hour ago, and you clowns gripe over a few snipers. What you don't have for brains, you sure as hell make up for in luck."

"Wal, now, what'd Ah tell yew?" Charles nudged Hans. "Ah thought that theah neighbahood was a maht unfriendly."

"Unfriendly?" Hans muttered. "Donnerwetter!"

"Okay, you guys, let 'em through." The lieutenant signaled for the troops to move the barricade, a county road department contraption militarized by the addition of strands of barbed wire. He waved them to come on. "Hey, let's speed it up now, or your cook is gonna serve late dinner, and I'm so hungry I could eat a nigger fried, roasted or on the half-shell."

They laughed appropriately.

Hans revved the engine and proceeded past the barricade, Charles with a silly grin, holding the grenade on the seat beside him. He saw the barricade close behind them. Now

they were boxed in between two barricades. "I don't like this," he thought, and he felt his hand grow moist upon the casing of the grenade.

The lieutenant motioned them to halt. "Okay, just step out for a second. Orders are to search every vehicle leaving this area."

"Sure," said Charles, smiling at him and giving Hans a punch on the shoulder. "Go!"

Hans stamped on the accelerator. The weapons carrier leaped forward and crashed through the second barricade, scattering the soldiers who quickly knelt beside the road and aimed their weapons. Jesus shot the trooper who had swung one of the machine guns around, and Charles hurled the grenade at a group of soldiers who sprawled flat, just as they were about to fire a deadly volley. Hans accelerated, trailing some of the barbed wire and broken palings from the shattered barricade. Bullets flew in every direction as exploding grenades and bursts from the Sterlings spoiled the aim of the soldiers behind them. Ahead lay the open highway, not a car or truck in front of them.

"They're after us!" shouted Jesus.

Two jeeps mounting fifty-caliber machine-guns raced in pursuit, gunners firing bursts from their swaying platforms.

Hans put the accelerator peddle on the floor. "I don't think we can out-distance them. Keep your head down."

Jesus, lying on top of the gold boxes, fired both M-1's until the clips were expended. His rapid fire made the jeeps weave from side to side as the drivers swerved to avoid the bullets that ricocheted off the pavement in front of them. The distance was still too great for him to use the Sterling, so he took up his hunting rifle and began to fire slowly and deliberately, trying to hit someone or something vital on the jeeps. Accurate aim from the careening truck was almost impossible, just as it seemed to be from the bouncing jeeps whose bullets bit large chunks from the pavement or screamed overhead. No damage was done, despite all the shooting, but the jeeps were gaining on them.

Charles dropped a grenade which exploded only after the jeeps had sped past. Jesus rolled both trash cans over the tailgate, like depth charges. At that speed, they seemed to turn to rubber, bouncing up in the air and performing wondrous gyrations before they fell to the ground and rolled erratically across the pavement.

The driver of the nearest jeep zigged when he should have zagged, and was forced to turn violently to avoid collision with one of the trash cans. His jeep went into a spin, smashed into a concrete bridge abutment and burst into flames.

Bullets tore holes in the pavement around them as the gunner of the remaining jeep found the range. Hans swerved from side to side, throwing his aim off, but losing speed. Suddenly the windshield exploded, showering their lowered heads with shards of glass

and angry splinters from the wooden stake sides. Charles saw blood on Hans' cheek and neck and was about to grab the wheel, but Hans pushed his arm away.

"I'm all right," he grunted, his eyes fixed eagerly on the road ahead.

Charles turned to look out the back window, hearing Jesus give a Latin version of a rebel yell. He saw the pursuing jeep go off the road and climb an embankment. It stalled for a moment, then rolled over and over and crashed back onto the roadway upside down.

"Snipers!" exulted Jesus. "Bless their dirty little hearts!"

Charles grinned. "I could hang a medal on every one of the bastards!"

"And I shall never complain about hard luck, my friends, not after today." Hans brushed some pieces of glass off the back of his neck.

It was nearly dusk when they pulled into the driveway of a suburban house not far from the burned-out refinery.

Hans knocked on the door. "Come on, Captain Barman, open up!"

The door opened as much as the security chain would allow, and out poked a double-barrelled shotgun.

"Who are you?" asked a woman with a frightened voice.

"Mrs. Barman," said Hans cordially, "it's Harry Holbrook remember? I chartered the Sandshark. Is the captain in?"

The woman peered out at them and sighed with relief at the sight of their uniforms. "Oh, Mr. Holbrook, please come in."

They entered a dimly-lit hallway and came into the living room where they found the captain and his two children watching television.

"Dear, Mr. Holbrook is here. I'm sorry, I don't know your friend's names. So you've all been called up." She said it as if they had been chosen to wash dishes after a church social.

"It's our duty, Ma'am," said Charles, modestly.

"What brings you out here?" asked the captain, not looking away from the riot scenes on television.

"... And the President has declared the State of California a disaster area. National Guard units are to be federalized and reinforced by regular army units due to the present state of emergency.

Here is a special bulletin ..."

"We wish to sail the Sandshark this evening as agreed," said Hans.

"Out of the question." The captain left his easy chair to turn up the volume, resuming his seat with a hiss of plastic cushions

"... Earlier today, three men made their getaway from F.B.I. and National Guard authorities with over a million dollars in gold coins stolen from the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. They are believed to be wearing National Guard uniforms and are using a military vehicle. A reward is offered for information leading to their capture. Federal authorities have mounted an all-out effort to apprehend these men, who are armed and dangerous. They were last seen ..."

"Allow me," purred Jesus as he took the shotgun from Mrs. Barman.

"Nobody move!" Hans covered the captain with his Sterling. "Now listen, and listen well, because I am only going to make this offer once: Come with us, Captain, you and your family. We have arms, money. There is a country in Latin America ..."

"Yes, I know what you've loaded on my ship. I opened one of the cases this afternoon. You don't use machine-guns for oceanography. You're crazy, all of you, and I won't have any part of this business. You can't use my ship for gun-running and God knows what else. I won't sail 'er out of berth for a bunch of cut-throat renegades."

"Captain, you don't understand. I offer you a good life, a place to see your children grow to become men and women. True, you will have to fight there as you will here, but there, the rewards are great, and here will be only dismal survival."

"Now I recognize that accent, Holbrook, or whoever you are. You're a Kraut, a dirty Nazi!"

"Look, Captain," said Charles, "I speak as an American. This country's finished. Can't you see what's happening?"

"... And the news has been brought to you by the makers of ..."

They saw a negro plunge a knife into the announcer's back. The television camera swung wildly, showing scenes of desperate struggle in the studio.

"Now listen here, all you soul brothers and muthas! This here's the Black Liberation Front, and we jest now got a piece of our rightful turf from these white devils."

The camera was brought to bear on the slightly out-of-focus face of a bearded negro who began reading from a prepared speech. "Fust of all, I say, power to the people!" He raised a clenched fist. Then his voice was drowned out by shouting and gunshots in the studio. The screen went blank, and there was no sound except for the hum of the transmitter.

"You are the one who is mad, Captain, if you choose to stay here."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"As you wish." Hans pulled the trigger.

The captain was thrown back in his easy chair, twitched, then lay still, his blood flowing down the sides of the chair to drip upon the carpet. The wife's screams were silenced by the shotgun blast which tore her in half.

"The children," said Jesus. "It's no good leaving orphans with unhappy memories."

Charles drew his pistol. "Easy kids, there's nothing to be afraid of." He knelt beside the whimpering children and shot each of them through the head, sending them sprawling across the living room floor. They lay peacefully, as if asleep.

"Too bad," said Hans. "The captain had a motorboat in his garage. There must be gasoline."

They found a large drum of it in the carport, just beside the garage. Jesus took two jerry cans into the house and splashed gasoline over the bodies and around the living room, pouring the remainder down the basement stairs, while Charles made molotov cocktails, using empty bottles and old rags from the trash bin. Hans was keeping lookout beside the truck when he saw Jesus come running from the house, just as flames gushed from the open windows on the ground floor.

He started the weapons carrier, waited for Charles and Jesus to climb into the back, then released the brakes, allowing them to coast down the driveway. The fire had reached the basement of the house and cans of paint and cleaning solvents began to explode, spouting vari-colored flames from the cellar windows. It was a warm evening, and the crickets were harmonizing pleasantly, lending an air of unreality to the burning house.

Charles and Jesus steadied themselves as Hans stopped abruptly in front of the next house on the street.

"I'll try for the picture window," said Charles, calling his throw.

After Jesus lit the rag for him, he gauged the distance with a practiced eye and hurled the bottle. It sailed off, trailed by the flaming rag tied to its neck, and crashed through the window, filling the darkened room with flame.

"Very good!" exclaimed Jesus. "Let me try the next one."

"Be my guest." Charles took Jesus' cigarette lighter.

"Do you suppose we are disturbing the next door neighbors with all this noise?"

"I don't think so. These houses are pretty far apart from each other. That's one of the advantages of living in an exclusive neighborhood, Jesus. You're never disturbed by your neighbors milk deliveries. Here you are, try that one on the other side of the street while I get this one."

When they had driven further, they looked back and saw the many fires twinkling like stars in the distance.

Charles sniffed the gasoline on his hands. "That'll throw them off the trail for awhile. We'll need all the time we can get to make some distance between us and this madhouse."

"Good idea, Carlitos, to burn the whole neighborhood, otherwise some bright one could have made a quick connection between the death of Captain Barman and the disappearance of the Sandshark."

"Barman was a fool." Charles spat over the side of the truck, trying to rid himself of the taste of gasoline.

"Hans was right. He should have come with us. The captain did not strike me as a stupid man, though he certainly behaved like one."

"System rejection," said Charles.

"What?"

"Oh, it's just some political science jargon. It means that a system, in this case, a human brain, rejects facts and concepts which threaten it. Barman wasn't stupid, he was merely a fool who refused to see what was right in front of him."

They drove onto the deserted wharf. Beside them, the black hull rocked gently, lapped by the outgoing tide. White letters streaked with rust from the anchor read 'Sandshark' in matter-of-fact script. The ship was old fashion-looking, with a rakish funnel and clipper bow. Only the harpoon gun on the fo'c'sle indicated her speed and purpose, that of a whaling killer ship.

"He may have told the police about the guns." Jesus scanned the decks of the darkened ship for signs of life, his Sterling muzzle following his gaze.

Charles looked around the wharf. "Not likely. We got here pretty quickly. What's more, the police have their hands full."

"You're probably right. The authorities have enough to do coping with guns already out of boxes. They can't really concern themselves with ones lying quietly in their crates."

"How long to raise steam, Hans?"

"One, maybe two hours. I first must raise steam in the auxiliary boiler to heat the bunker oil."

"Good. Better see to that right away. Jesus and I will load the gold and see to things topside."

"Jawohl, Herr Kapitän." Hans saluted. "You are now in charge."

They watched Hans mount the gangplank and waited for him to signal 'o.k.' before taking the gold off the truck. Working quickly, they took the boxes on board, leaving them on the gangway beside the door to the cargo hold.

Charles opened the door before switching on his flashlight. They entered and drew the door closed. When he switched on the light, they saw that they were standing at the top of a steel landing, looking down at an array of neatly-stacked boxes and crates. The hold was pervaded by a clean smell of fresh grease and light oil which rose above the pine scent of the crates and pallets.

"Oceanographic equipment." Charles chuckled. "It looks securely stowed. I'd hate to have this load of hardware shifting around."

"Hans supervised the loading. It was all he could do to keep the thieving longshoremen from smashing the boxes in order to pilfer the contents, even after bribing them not to. Bastards!"

Charles shined his light on an open box, the nails gleaming from its wooden lid. A crowbar lay beside it. "That must have been the one that got Barman into trouble."

"Just what I was looking for, a machine-gun. May I borrow your flashlight to find some ammunition for it?"

"Sure."

Charles walked down the gangplank and onto the wharf, listening to the clang of a harbor buoy and the slap of the waves. Pigeons cooed under the eaves of the warehouse. He looked up and saw clouds slowly moving across the face of the moon. It was so peaceful here, he thought. It was like finding a spring of clear water in the desert, and he drank in the atmosphere while he could. The oases of peace were fast drying up.

He started the weapons carrier and drove toward the end of the wharf, jumping out when the truck's course was no longer in doubt. It bumped over the timber curbing and splashed into the murky water, throwing a deluge of stinking harbor slime onto the dock. A look over the edge satisfied him that the vehicle was sunk sufficiently to be out of sight, and he returned to help Jesus stow the gold with the rest of the cargo. A few lusty heaves at the blocks, and the gangplank slid back upon the wharf. One by one, Charles thought, the ties were being severed. Now only the mooring lines remained.

A seagull flew down and perched upon the railing. It too, seemed anxious to be away.

Black smoke poured from the Sandshark's funnel, and the whine of the blowers announced that the ship was coming to life. Jesus kept watch on deck while Charles studied the charts and navigation instruments. From the dimly-lit wheelhouse he could see the glow of large fires in the riot areas, casting fitful light on the oily ripples of the harbor. Sirens wailed and small arms popped like strings of firecrackers.

Charles blew into the engine room speaking tube.

"Ja?"

"How is everything down there?"

"Wunderbar! Plenty of bunker oil, steam-pressure rising, good condenser vacuum, injector pumps working fine. Both boilers will be up to working pressure in a few more minutes. Shall I run the main dynamo?"

"Go ahead, but don't show any lights."

"When does your farewell diversion take place?"

"Any time, now. Can we get underway?"

"Moment mal ... Yes! We have full pressure."

"Incidentally, which way does the propeller turn?"

"Clockwise ahead."

"Thanks." Charles replaced the plug and stepped out onto the bridge. "Hola, Jesus!" he shouted.

"Sí, mi Capitán!"

"Cast off the stern moorings!"

"La puta madre! You mean we are leaving?"

"That's right."

"You better get us out of this parking place pretty damn quick. I see headlights coming this way."

"Will do. Just hop to it!"

Charles waited until Jesus signaled that the stern lines were cast off, then rang 'slow astern' on the telegraph. The engine room indicator answered, and the engine began its unhurried panting, pulling the stern away from the dock and out into the channel. There were cars approaching the wharf, fast.

Charles shouted from the wheelhouse door. "Cast off the bow lines! Get the machine gun ready. It looks like a send off party."

Jesus threw the bowlines into the water before they went taut, and Charles rang 'full ahead.' The water boiled around them. The ship quickly lost its backward momentum and began to move forward, the pilings of the wharf looming rapidly. It was a near miss, and Charles sighed with relief as the bow turned away from the wharf and pointed into the channel. The ship was gaining speed, and he brought the wheel around just in time to keep them from running onto the mud flats exposed by the lowering tide. His full concentration was devoted to steering, so he could only guess the meaning of the gunshots on the dock. When they were well away from the trouble, he rang down to quarter speed and kept to mid-channel. The bow wave diminished and the ship rolled gracefully in the harbor swells.

Jesus entered the wheelhouse, his face damp with perspiration. "That was some fine hotrodding, Carlitos."

"Thanks. I hope I never have to do that again."

"Why not?"

"Well, we almost rammed the pier, sank a small boat, and ran aground on the mud. Other than that, we did okay."

"You mean that is not the proper way to leave berth?"

"No. It breaks the rules of seamanship, and when you break those rules, you run into danger."

"Not like the laws on land. You must break them in order to survive."

"Yes, but the laws of the sea are different. You can't bribe Neptune."

"Well, how are things, otherwise?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Who were those characters on the wharf?"

"Rioters, I think. They took a few shots at us, but they seemed more interested in breaking into the warehouse."

"Good. I was afraid they were police. We need at least two hours to get clear of this place, and if the tide turns, we'll need closer to five."

"They might try to stop us at the Golden Gate."

"If the word is out, they'll try to stop us a lot sooner. How are we fixed for anti-aircraft weapons?"

"I've got the machine-gun set up and some small heat-seeking rockets. Not much good against jets, I don't think."

"They'll have to do. Oh well, we'd look pretty conspicuous in a battleship, anyway, so it looks as if the old Sandshark is our best bet."

"Isn't that the gasworks over there?"

"That's it, all right."

Suddenly, the ship was caught in the glare of a searchlight. "Ahoy, there, Sandshark!" crackled a voice from a loudhailer. "U.S. Coast Guard. Stop your engines and prepare to be boarded."

"Jesus, get to the machine-gun and open fire as soon as you can make out the target. Try to keep out of sight!"

"Sí, Señor!" He ran out of the wheelhouse, crouching low, and shielding his eyes from the brilliant light.

Charles rang 'stop engines' and blew into the speaking tube "Hans, raise as much steam as you can and stand by!"

"Wird gemacht, Herr Kapitän!"

They would have made a hell of a U-boat crew, thought Charles.

On a brush-covered hill overlooking the harbor was a disused manhole from which protruded a large tube. A projectile was poised, ready to plummet down the mouth of the tube, but was prevented from doing so by a piece of heavy twine across which burned a length of fuse. The fuse had nearly burned through, when the twine snapped and the projectile dropped. The tube coughed bright flame and there was a tearing sound in the air. Heavily armed F.B.I. agents sprinted toward the concealed position, confident that

they would receive the credit for capturing the elusive band of urban guerrillas which had inflicted such severe losses on them that day.

Jesus heard the tearing sound as it came nearer, and shut his eyes at the sudden radiance as the gas works exploded, illuminating the harbor and the Coast Guard cutter in a flare of brilliant yellow. He felt the blast of heat from the burning storage tanks and the breeze changing as the fire drew in the air.

By reflex he jammed the stock of the MG-42 hard into his shoulder and held it down with his left hand. He saw the splashes in the water near the cutter and felt the gun leaping against him. Hot cartridges glanced off the mooring cleat beside him, and he was vaguely aware that they burned his cheek.

He fired a burst at the gun crew who were trying to bring their Oerlikon to bear, scattering them over the deck. The red tracers pointed to the radio mast which wilted onto the roof of the wheelhouse, then walked over to the searchlight whose beam went from white to yellow to darkness. As he fed in a new belt of ammunition he heard the clang of the engine telegraph and felt the Sandshark surge forward, her bow rising in eagerness as it bore down upon the cutter. He saw men leaping into the icy, polluted water of the bay, frantically trying to swim away from the remorseless black hull and the voracious propeller.

Jesus clung to the gun and the mooring cleat with all his strength, but even so, the collision nearly made him lose his grip. The Sandshark bucked and rolled, leaving the Coast Guard cutter sinking in its wake, a few heads bobbing in the water nearby. He leaped up and threw some grenades into the water. If there were any survivors, he thought, it would not be his fault. Once again the harbor was in darkness, save for the fires which threw a greenish-glow over the bay cities.

Charles saw Alcatraz Island ahead, now used as a temporary detention center for rioters. A volley of shots echoed across the water, a pause, then another volley.

"Bodies floating in the water! Sharks are going for them." Jesus entered the wheelhouse with his thermos jug.

"To port or starboard?"

"Well, off to the right. The sharks are heading toward that island, where the shots are coming from."

"Alcatraz. They're shooting the prisoners."

"Coffee?" Jesus poured a cupful.

"Thanks. How'd you know I like milk and sugar?"

"You're just lucky. I made the whole batch with milk and sugar. That reminds me, I wonder if we went away and left the stove on."

They laughed.

"What's that beeping noise, Carlitos?"

"The echo-sounder. It tells you if you're running out of channel. You see the buoys over there, on the right?"

"I thought they were oil drums."

"They're a lot bigger than that. Those tell us we're in the channel. If they were on our left, you might hear this little box get real nervous, and it wouldn't be playing a bossa nova."

"If you know we're in the channel, why use it?"

"Just testing, besides, we've got company." Charles pointed to a huge dark shape ahead.

"Diablos! What's that?"

"At first, I thought it was part of San Francisco gone adrift, but it's an aircraft carrier. That's why I'm giving him most of the channel, but even so, it looks like a tight squeeze." Charles sounded the whistle.

"They may not know we're here."

"Isn't it better if they don't?"

"I don't know. Ever tried sharing a telephone booth with an elephant?"

The carrier's siren boomed out across the water.

"Well, that's what I call a friendly greeting. Hey, they're signaling ... 'Where-are-you-going?' Take the Morse lamp, Jesus. Tell 'em we're going fishing."

"Sí, Señor." Jesus flashed the word, 'fishing,' and received a reply.

"Caramba, those are wordy bastards! They say, 'we-have-become-fishers-of-men.' Now, what the hell do they mean by that? Carlitos, look!"

The carrier blazed with light, and over the water, from its shipboard address system came the sound of a hymn. They saw the gray hull decorated with the slogans, 'peace,' 'one way,' and 'Jesus saves,' surrounded by flower motifs in luminous paint.

"What's going on, Carlitos?"

"You missed the fall of the Roman Empire, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, take another look. We're getting a slightly modernized rerun. They've mutinied. The Jesus-freaks have taken over the ship."

"Amazing! The United States is really finished, then."

"Nearer collapse than I thought. Well, the seeds of destruction were there all along. A powerful combination, a slave religion and blind greed. All that was needed was the final working out of the process."

"It must be the end of an era." Jesus shook his head.

"I prefer to see it as a continuum, one in which we have an important part."

"Yes, but you can't divide continuums into college courses."

"So much the worse for college courses." Charles laughed.

The carrier sailed past them and Jesus breathed a sigh of relief. "For a moment, I thought they would try to stop us and use their guns to convert us, in the true Christian tradition. We priests have always relied on brutality to mold others into the faith, especially the children. Nothing like the cat-of-nine to instill the seven deadly sins."

"They're only beginners. What can you expect?"

They steamed back into mid-channel and ran with the tide which took them through the Golden Gate at great speed. Jesus looked up and saw the tall bridge fly over them. Soon, the lights and conflagrations of San Francisco Bay were only flickers in the distance. They followed the scudding clouds into the open sea, covered by the protective cloak of a gathering storm.

Charles rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. "Take over, Jesus. I'm beat, but tonight I feel very happy. We've come a long way."

"I've always wanted to steer a ship."

"Hope you like it. You'll get lots of practice on this trip. Just keep us on this heading and watch out for other ships." Charles blew into the speaking tube.

"Ja?"

"Good work, Hans. I'm off for my four hours' sleep."

"Sleep well, Herr Kapitän, and congratulations!"

Charles stood on the fo'c'sle, filling his lungs with delicious sea air in order to wake up. It was nearly time to go on watch. The first days had been ones of unmitigated fatigue, but now they were becoming accustomed to four hours of sleep every eight hours, day or night. He marveled that he had not grown tired of the sea, their constant companion these days. Maybe he should have been a sailor, he thought, looking at the watery horizon.

The sea was choppy, but free of swells, and a steady wind whistled in the rigging. They were well away from land, and the seagulls no longer cried in their wake. The sky was almost cloudless, but the barometer showed rough weather to be imminent. The weather was the least of Charles' worries at the moment, and he anxiously surveyed the pale blueness above the green horizon, but the sky was undisturbed either by sight or sound of aircraft. Reassured, he smiled in appreciation as a school of flying fish spattered against a wave. Dolphins were following off the starboard bow, adding their lusty splashes to the scudding whitecaps.

He watched the wind whip the smoke away from the funnel and saw the black bow knife steadily through the white-flecked sea, the foaming curl of the bow wave hissing past them as it fled the turbulent wake of the propeller. He strolled aft to the open door of the stokehold and felt the air rushing down to the furnaces below. It was time to go on watch.

He sped down the gleaming ladders to find Hans tending the engine with a cloth and oil can. Hans believed that machinery knew when it was loved, and responded accordingly. A strange belief, thought Charles, but why did otherwise good mechanics get into so much difficulty? There seemed to be something in it.

"Wie geht es, Dir, mein Liebling?" Hans gave one of the great piston rods a caress with his oily rag. He always addressed engines in the familiar.

Charles tapped him on the shoulder. "Everything okay?"

Hans leaned closer to speak into his ear. "Excellent. The engine daybook shows a very thorough and recent servicing. I insisted upon it, and after much bribery and cajoling, succeeded in having the work done. The workers grumbled, even so, because the ship would otherwise have been laid up at the end of whaling season, and they could have taken early vacation."

"Men who hate their jobs are never to be trusted. Any bearing trouble?"

"None. Bearing temperatures normal. Follow me."

Hans led him down through the intricate labyrinth of ladders and catwalks, guiding him through the pulsing jungle of steel and brass that took shape in the yellow glare of the lamps. The hissing roar of furiously burning oil, the keening of the dynamo, the click of the injector pumps were mere counterpoint to the all-pervading rhythm of the main engine whose steady metallic breathing was slight indication of the tremendous power needed to turn the huge crankshaft.

Charles looked up, feeling a blast of cool air from an open skylight that seemed far above them. He remembered his childish impression of his first visit to an engine room: He stood in the den of a huge animal whose hot, oily breath shook the world.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" said Hans, catching his look of admiration. "You see the size of the drive shaft?"

Charles nodded, looking at the spinning pillar of steel.

"This beauty could twist that in two, like saltwater taffy. Amazing what a little boiling water can do." Hans pointed to the tachometer. "We're keeping a steady 360 R.P.M."

"What's the maximum?"

"Just over four hundred, but I wouldn't risk that for long."

"We're holding a speed of twenty knots. I calculate that we should rendezvous at Rio Sucio on the twelfth, as planned, but we're in for some stormy weather."

"That shouldn't slow us too much. I shall simply burn more oil."

They entered the tunnel where the great propeller shaft rumbled over the oily bilges, and Hans laid his hand on each of the huge bearings as a doctor would when examining a patient.

"Okay?" Charles steadied himself against the tunnel bulkhead.

"Perfect, but at this speed, we must check them every quarter hour, at least." He turned a valve to allow more oil on number three bearing.

"We mustn't have a bearing failure, you know."

"I know."

"We may be able to reduce speed. My plot shows us off the coast of Chile. We've made a good deal of time, so that will give us three or four days' leeway on our schedule."

"Of course, and if we go down to twelve or fifteen knots, we will have fuel to spare."

"Depending on the weather."

"Yes, always the weather ..."

"How are the bilge readings?"

"Normal."

"Even after ramming the Coast Guard cutter?"

"Naturally. The bow is reinforced against ice floes. The bilges are virtually dry."

"How's the feed water?"

"My last check showed that the evaporator is doing its job. No precipitate."

"Congratulations on your choice of transport, Hans."

"No need to. You remember my father was from Hamburg and he taught me about ships. I used to sail with him."

"Why didn't you become a sailor?"

"Too ambitious, I guess. I saw opportunity for more advancement in the S.S."

"It looks as if you're a sailor, anyway. Have a sandwich." Charles drew a waxed paper packet from his dirty field jacket.

"Thank you." Hans unwrapped the sandwiches, crumpled the waxed paper with his greasy hand, and thrust the refuse into his pocket. He didn't mind grease on his food, but there would be no litter in his engine room. He devoured the sandwiches. "Umm, cheese and tomato."

"Sorry the tomatoes were a little green."

"No matter. It just reminds me ..."

"Reminds you of what?"

"Oh, of strolling through a tomato garden with an old friend." -----

"So, you have found me out." Hoess knelt down and fondled tomato which was beginning to ripen in the summer sun.

Hans looked down at him, his boots planted between the rows "Yes, I have eliminated all other suspects. No one can be stealing the gold but you.

"You know, my friend, I used to bring my girlfriend out when the tomatoes began to ripen ... The summer nights were warm."

"I imagine they still are."

"So you will arrest me, or shoot me, here in front of these Jews."

"You surprise me, Hoess. Such melodrama!" Hans raised the visor of his cap with his swagger stick.

It was hot in the sun. A prisoner had crept close to them pretending to weed the plot with his hoe. He was listening.

"Get away, stinking Jew!" Hans gave him a cut across the back with his stick. The little man's threadbare jacket was no protection from the blow and he made off, yelping apologies.

Hoess motioned Hans to have a closer look at his prize tomatoes. The two S.S. officers sat on their haunches, apparently discussing the merits of a scrawny plant. "Well?" Hoess looked expectant. His shrewd face showed he knew something was up.

"You misunderstand me, my friend. I only want you to know our situation ..." Hans drew meaningless hieroglyphics in the sand with his stick. The war is going badly."

"Finish the preamble and tell me what's on your mind."

"The V-weapons will come too late to save the Reich. We have lost."

"Ha! Even you, a loyal, incorruptible member of The Party have read the writing on the wall. Now I am beginning to understand/"

"Yes, you can help me. I am willing to help you, as you have seen."

"Quickly! The Hauptscharführer is coming."

"I must escape from here and you can help me."

"You have heard the guns, too."

"Of course. Even the prisoners are talking about them."

"They are getting louder."

"I know you have a plan." Hans drew closer.

"What? A prison officer planning to escape?" Hoess smiled.

"We will live to see stranger things if you help me."

"All right. You're included. On a certain day you will receive a suitcase. Guard it with your life. If you are discovered with it now, you are lost, and if you are discovered without it when the time comes, you are also lost. The guns will tell us when we must leave. I suggest you show some enthusiasm at the progress of my little plantation, Herr Hauptsturmführer."

"Heil Hitler, Herr Hauptsturmführer." The Hauptscharführer came to attention and saluted smartly.

"Heil Hitler." Hans returned the salute.

"I have to report, Sir, that the Herr Doktor requires you in the reception area."

A locomotive whistled as it shunted a long string of cattle cars onto the camp siding.

Hans straightened his cap. "I must go. There is never a let up."

"At least the breeze is blowing the smoke away." Hoess waved his riding crop toward the great crematorium chimneys. "I am thoroughly put off by burning bacon, these days."

"Pity," said Hans. "I don't think your tomatoes will ripen before the frost."

He didn't see Hoess again for several weeks. One day he discovered a mysterious suitcase in his room, a cheap wartime thing made of ersatz leather. It was fairly heavy, but he wasn't so curious as to force the catches and see what was inside. He hid it away in his locker, under an old overcoat. The camp was so busy he forgot about it.

Hans slept badly. The fever he'd contracted in North Africa had recurred. He lay in his bunk, sweating and shivering, listening to the rain beating on the window and to the incessant rumble of the guns. The lights went out and the air raid siren began to wail. Outside he heard the bark of a watchdog and the squelch of booted feet in the mud.

With trembling fingers he lit a cigarette and took a deep puff. He was thankful there was still real tobacco to smoke. No one on the camp staff was denied any luxury, not even the Jews of the Sonderkommando who ran the gas chambers and the crematoria. As for the inmates, well, the living-dead were beyond the need for luxuries. For them the gas chambers were the only appropriate relief from their condition. He had watched them on their last journey and saw that many understood and were even grateful. He fell asleep and dreamed of North Africa.

The heat was blistering. He didn't know where to turn his gaze. In every direction it was like looking into the heart of a blast furnace. The white sand threw the white hot glare of the sun into his eyes, even though he wore the darkest goggles available in the Waffen S.S. stores.

He was alone after a night of hard fighting. His tank had run over a mine and blown up, but he'd been thrown clear. While he was unconscious the battle had ebbed and flowed. It was daylight by the time he'd recovered his senses, and all was quiet, save for a rumble of guns, or was it surf? in the distance. He set out to rejoin his unit, but the criss-crossed pattern of tank tracks led him nowhere in particular. The merciless sun drove away all thoughts of duty and forced him to look for shade.

He quickened his pace at the sight of an overturned halfback. Beside it he found relief from the glare, but not from the furnace heat. He tried to sleep, but the heat and flies were stifling, so he covered his head and huddled miserably in the small patch of shade until sunset. Resuming his trek, he found a wrecked vehicle with radiator intact. He opened the drain cock and drank most of the brackish water, letting the remainder trickle into his canteen. An hour later, he was violently ill. Waves of nausea washed over him. Exhausted, he fell beside an oil drum and slept. The night was cold and he was forced to dig himself into the still warm sand.

Hans awoke to the all-clear siren and the lights came on again. He knew he'd been asleep because his dream was fresh in his mind. He'd almost expected to find sand and not blankets over his feet. Someone had covered him as he slept, tossing with fever. He smiled, feeling a strong affection for his unknown comrade. His fever was gone and he fell into a delicious sleep as soon as he'd switched off the light. In his exhaustion he was unaware that the guns had fallen silent.

"Hans! Hans!" A voice called to him. Of course he was dreaming again. He made no attempt to answer. Suddenly, he was being rudely shaken and slapped across the face. It was no dream.

"Hans, wake up! Do you want to die?" Hoess stood over him, a Schmeisser machine-pistol slung from his shoulder. It had been fired recently. "I have been looking for you everywhere. The others have gone. Get dressed, immediately!"

He understood the last words. Certainly he could get dressed. Automatically he pulled on his trousers, boots, blouse, tunic and pistol belt.

"Hurry! Do you want the Russians to catch us?"

The Russians. He shook his head. Now he was beginning to wake up.

"Idiot! Where have you left the suitcase?"

He pointed to his locker while he pulled on his greatcoat. Hoess ransacked the locker and threw the suitcase on the floor.

"Carry that, and come' with me. Quickly, quickly!"

He stumbled after Hoess. The S.S. barracks were brightly lit but deserted. Outside he found the bodies of four prisoners, sprawled next to two stout wooden boxes which were beginning to sink into the softening earth. A steady drizzle diluted the spreading bloodstains from the corpses.

Hoess lifted an end of one of the boxes. "Take the other end! Help me. No, no! Put the suitcase into the car. That is more important."

With some difficulty they placed the two boxes into the waiting Volkswagen scout car.

Hoess drove like a fiend. They sped out of the camp, through the great gate with its inspirational slogan and past the empty rows of cattle cars which stood on the railway siding. The prisoners had begun to wander about, and Hoess bore down on the horn. Zombie-like, they would half turn and dazedly stumble out of the way, standing to gaze emptily as the car rushed by. Soon they found themselves caught up in the westward flow of the retreating army.

The silence made the whole scene seem unreal, ghostly. The treads of tracked vehicles rolled silently through the deepening mud, the snarl of engines muffled by the rain. Exhausted men slogged onward without a word, like phantoms. The trees on either side of the road were spattered with mud thrown up by the frenzied passing of motorized columns. Slower horse-drawn transport plodded on either side of them, men assisting the horses in pulling the wagons, many of which were loaded with wounded.

"These are dead men," said Hoess. "The Russians will get them."

"And what about us?" asked Hans.

"We will die, too, if the mud stops us."

"It is getting deeper."

"Yes. We can hope the rain lets up for a moment."

They drove around a tank which had run out of fuel. The Volkswagen's wheels spun. They lost their headway and became stuck.

"Soldiers! Come over here, quickly," shouted Hoess.

He drove onto a firmer portion of road, assisted by the soldiers who forgot their exhaustion at the sight of the death's heads and lightning bolt insignia of the two officers.

It was lack of sleep that Hans remembered most. He vaguely recalled diving out of the car when an enemy fighter plane came down the road, machine-gunning the snarled transport column. Somehow, Hoess found his way around the burning vehicles and continued the endless journey.

They stopped in a forest, the boom of guns announcing that the American lines were not far off. Hoess careened off the road and into a clearing. They dug feverishly and covered the two boxes, taking care to pack the earth and recover the spot with alien fir needles. Then they opened the mysterious suitcase.

Inside were the boots, trousers and tunics of two Wehrmacht sergeants, in suitable disrepair. They changed out of their S.S. uniforms and buried them, along with the ashes of their identity papers.

Hoess drove the scout car up to a fresh bomb crater on the main road. They pushed the vehicle into the crater and staggered on a short distance, exhausted.

"... Kilometer fifty," muttered Hoess, barely audible.

"I said, the boxes are fifty paces due west of the kilometer fifty post."

Hans' mind reeled. "Must try to remember."

They dropped into a ditch beside the road and slept like corpses.

Hans awoke, feeling stiff and damp from the mist which filled the forest and dripped off the fir branches above them. It seemed very quiet. Even the birds were still. He wondered what had wakened him. Idly, he looked around, glancing at the pair of boots beside his head. With a start, he realized that neither he nor Hoess had removed their boots. He looked up into the muzzle of a Luger pistol, held by a very young Wehrmacht officer.

"Deserters. I shall shoot you on the spot. Wake up your friend and stand over there."

Hans nudged Hoess who was feigning sleep and they both stood up, blinking their eyes. The mist was beginning to thin out and a bird was chirping on a nearby branch. Warplanes droned overhead, the crump of bombs mingling with the shudder of distant artillery fire. Otherwise, the sector was quiet.

They saw themselves surrounded by a squad of child-soldiers who were dwarfed by the clumsy helmets and weapons which they wore, weapons now aimed at them.

The boy officer stood back. "Do you have anything to say before I carry out the sentence?"

"Are you crazy?" asked Hoess. "Why do you say we are deserters?"

"Because you are separated from your unit. The orders are clear."

"Yes, I know all about the orders. We are from a field communications unit. The two of us had to abandon our lorry to the Americans and carry on on foot. We were trying to rejoin the main body, until we found our way blocked by the Americans."

"I can assure you we had no intention of deserting," said Hans, pointing to the ditch. "Do deserters carry weapons?"

"Weapons are easily discarded," said the officer. "I know nothing about an American advance. In any case, we are ordered to 'defend every inch of the Fatherland,' even though we die."

"Ach, mein Liebling, do you have a radio?"

Some of the boys giggled at Hoess' term of endearment. To them, the sixteen-year-old officer looked so old that they could not even conceive of his being spoken to as a sweet child. The officer frowned at them and they wiped off their smirks.

"We have no radio." The officer regained his composure.

"There is a scout car only a short distance up the road." Hoess pointed. "It has a radio. Try all channels. It sounds like American Broadcasting Corporation. You have been overrun, outflanked, surrounded."

"But we must fight on as our Führer has said."

"Suicidal nonsense! The Führer never intended that you should throw your lives away. Would you commit suicide in an American prison camp?"

"Of course not."

"Well, you are in one right now. The Americans are aware of your presence, but such an insignificant band of schoolboys is not even interesting to them. Face it: We are nicely in the bag, and the drawstring has been pulled tight. We are prisoners of war right now, and the enemy needn't bother feeding us."

Hans saw the pistol waver. The thought of food was potent.

"Perhaps ... Perhaps you are right."

"Well, I have nothing more to say." Hoess shrugged. "If you must shoot someone, you may as well shoot two tired-out German sergeants who are beyond caring, anyway. Then when the Americans swoop down upon you, you will discover that we were right, and you will carry the guilt with you the rest of your lives."

"Before you shoot us," said Hans, "consider your duty as an officer. An officer must always consider the welfare of his men."

He saw several of the younger boys brighten. So now they were men. He continued, seeking to wear them down, if not convince them. "No doubt you have fought well, and bravely. You are prepared to make the final sacrifice, but as soldiers you know that such a sacrifice is useless. The Fatherland expects you to survive, to carry on the race. That is your first duty. Now throw down those guns and come with us. The Americans will shoot us all if we wait until dark. If we surrender now, we will be in time for dinner!"

The pistol was still leveled at them, but at last it was lowered and thrown upon the damp fir needles of the forest, followed by the weapons of the child recruits. Hoess lifted the smallest on his shoulders and they all marched toward the American lines, hands raised, singing merrily.

Hans finished the last sandwich and looked at his watch. "Now for my four hours' sleep." He steadied himself against the catwalk railing. "The sea is rising, Charles."

"Yes, it could be a rough one." Charles blew into the speaking tube. "How is it, Jesus?"

"Lots of whitecaps and lightning on the horizon. The raindrops sound like bullets when they hit the wheelhouse."

"Okay, coming right up." Charles took a glass phial from his pocket and shook out some yellow tablets. "Sorry, Hans, no sleep for us if it's as bad as I think it is up there."

Charles checked the cargo hold, seeing that everything was still secured, and made an inspection tour of the ship, grabbing at railings and bulkheads for support. He was soaked in no time by icy raindrops, driven so fast by the howling gale that they stung his face. Waves broke over the bow and washed down the gangways, nearly bowling him over. He checked that the lifeboats and rafts were still intact, though he doubted they would be of any use if they had to abandon ship in such a sea. Like a deep sea diver, he struggled to the bridge with leaden steps, fighting the wind, and the violent tossing of the ship.

Inside the wheelhouse, it was a different world. He stripped off his sodden clothing and dropped it on the deck. His worst suspicions were confirmed by the anemometer and barometer readings.

"Damn it! Just what we need on this trip." He noticed Jesus looked a little green. "Seasick?"

"A little," Jesus swallowed, trying to stem his rising gorge.

"I'll take the wheel. Put on that raincoat and go out on the bridge. Take deep breaths and look at the horizon. You'll get over it."

"Thank you, Doctor." He managed to grin, despite his misery.

"And hang on, or you'll blow away!"

Jesus was gone for sometime, but suddenly blew back in with the gale, looking better.

"I'm all right now. I made a check of the hatch covers and ventilators. Everything seems to be tied down and buttoned up."

"Good man! Well, as the old saying goes, 'we've done what we can and will suffer what we must.'"

The wheelhouse was illuminated by constant flashes of lightning, but they could see nothing beyond the curtain of green water which deluged the thick glass of the portholes. The swells threatened to smash down upon the Sandshark, but the ship always rose in time, taking the lessened force of the breakers on her fo'c'sle.

"Hans, give us maximum revs. We're taking too much water on the bow."

"Ja wohl, Herr Kapitän. You now have the maximum."

The ship shuddered and the engine raced madly.

"What was that, Hans?"

"Propeller out of the water. Please steer into the wet parts, if you don't mind, or have you decided on flying?"

"Sorry, most of the water is no longer under us, it's coming down on top of us. You should see it."

"No thank you, Charles. I prefer being warm and dry."

The rain lifted, but the wind intensified. The Sandshark plunged into the troughs like a crash-diving submarine. Each plunge seemed like the last to Jesus who imagined the waves closing over them like the jaws of a monstrous boa constrictor. But each time the Sandshark would shake herself and bound up to meet the crest of the next wave.

"Don't look so sour, Jesus. The sea's playing with us."

"You talk as if the sea were a person."

"She is, don't you think'?"

"A very dangerous and unpleasant female, then."

"Well, she didn't ask us to ride on her back, so we have to take our chances."

"I'm not so keen on taking such chances as you and Hans seem to be."

"You're a paragon of caution." Charles laughed.

"Do you think I'll get any pension benefits from the University?"

The money won't be worth the paper it's printed on."

"Terrible, and there I was saving for my old age."

They both laughed. The idea of Jesus scrounging for a pedagogue's pittance was hilarious. They braced themselves as the ship rolled into another swell.

Charles looked out at the bounding sea. "Our storm is nature. That's where our strength and inspiration come from Don't you feel it, Jesus, a surge of power moving through you, quickening your pulse?"

"I'm more scared than thrilled. Still, the sea does have a sort of beauty, even as it tries to hurl us to the bottom. That's why man has invented religions, to insulate him from the beauty and terror of nature."

"You're on to it, there. Religion is for the weak and the lazy, a shelter from reality and a patent-medicine recipe for meaning. To live, a man has to face reality and find his own meaning. It's no good looking through the old glasses. The vision has changed and a new prescription is appropriate."

"In theology, you could be accused of being a personalist. That is the most complimentary of all the uncomplimentary labels I can think of."

"Well, until I tune in on a collective consciousness, I'm stuck with living as an individual. But that's the trouble with theology, isn't it? It always assumes that man should be angelic or have a different set of wave lengths, just like the Marxist theologians of politics."

"You mean that man should not try to improve?"

"Yes, but as man and not as an angel." Charles fought to bring the wheel over so the bow faced directly into the waves next onslaught.

"Doesn't drowning worry you, Carlitos?"

"I'd find it quite acceptable. I'd drown, knowing that I had nothing better to do."

"A strange thing for a young man to say."

"Not when you know at last that you're on the right track that you've found your real work. The satisfaction you get from that is a reward even dying can't spoil."

"But wouldn't you be disappointed if ..."

The ship plunged down, only to meet an uprushing swell and shuddered from keel to crow's nest.

"We won't have any rivets left if this keeps up. You were saying?"

"Wouldn't you be disappointed if you drowned now, denied a feeling of completion?"

"Drowning would be completion enough for anyone, I'd think."

"No, I mean, if you were denied the experience of doing what we hope to do when we arrive."

"There'd always be some experience to miss out on. Sure, I'd be disappointed, but look at it this way: If the risk of drowning is part of the price one pays for worthwhile experience, then it's a bargain. Would you trade places with anyone right now, if you could?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

The storm lasted two more days.

Charles stood on the bridge watching the dolphins at play. The wind was down and both sea and sky had resumed their usual places, basking innocently in the warm sun. He raised the sextant to his eye and took a reading, then entered the wheelhouse and marked their position on the chart.

"That's it." He laid the pencil on the table. "Now to set the gyro-compass for automatic steering."

"Wonderful." Jesus was using the wheel as much to hold himself up as to steer the ship.

"We're almost asleep on our feet." Charles blew into the speaking tube. It was some time before Hans answered. "Ja?"

"Engage the steering engine."

"Okay to shut down number two boiler? Quarter speed doesn't require both."

"Yes. It's time we all shut down for a day or two."

"Wake me up when we hit the Cape of Good Hope." Jesus sat upon the deck of the wheelhouse, stretched out and went to sleep.

They had made excellent time, despite the storm, and were nearing their destination on the tenth, two days ahead of the deadline. With engine slowed the Sandshark passed up the river, threading its way among the paddle wheelers, ocean steamers, canoes and flotsam that made up the bulk of the traffic. Hordes of starveling river people gazed at them impassively from their stilted huts of palm thatch.

Jesus watched the verdant riverbanks, his Sterling slung from his shoulder. "Would you believe there were fewer than ten huts along this part of the river twenty years ago? Now there must be hundreds."

Charles looked at the huts briefly before returning his concentration to the river ahead. "Amazing, all right. What do those people live on?"

"They live off the river, mainly from what they steal from ships passing at night. The rest of their time they spend breeding."

"They look like a real scurvy bunch of cutthroats, hollow-cheeked dark circles under the eyes, unshaven, very much like us."

Jesus laughed. "Yes, and their looks aren't misleading. Years ago some gringo company thought of shipping bananas by barge. The tug with its string of barges was found grounded on a mud bank, the crew murdered. Not a banana was to be found. Two months later, people were falling into the river and drowning, drunk on banana beer. The pirañas grew quite fat."

Charles blew the whistle to warn off a motor launch which was moving erratically, the sound startling a flock of hiss birds which glided from their treetops, expressing their usual ill-temper.

"It's beautiful, Jesus."

"What is?"

"All of it: the dirty green river, those pestilent shacks, the jungle, the birds, the blue sky, that dead tapir floating over there."

"Of course, from a safe distance and with a poet's eye, even squalor becomes romantic. You will find the inhabitants who are trapped here quite unreceptive to your romantic view. For them, a crowded subway or a freeway traffic jam in a smoke-filled city would hold a thousand delights. Very few are poets, as you have probably learned. The very things which wrack a poet's spirit are sheer ambrosia to the masses. It amazes me, really, how a poetic sort like yourself could ever have been a communist."

Charles gazed into the distance. He steered the ship competently, but his thoughts were thousands of miles and many years away. "Well, I see the contradiction very clearly from your viewpoint. The political poet who becomes a communist believes naively that the injustice and squalor, the suffering, are all borne by people like himself, people with his own sensitivities, abilities and objectives. This is a very naive belief, much like believing children to be miniature adults. If the poet pursues his study beyond this first stage of naivete, he arrives at a more subtle stage in which he believes man may be changed, so that every man will become a poet in the poet's image. In these two stages, then, he passes from loving the masses as he thinks they are to loving them for what he thinks they will become, with his help, of course."

"He never doubts that man can be fundamentally changed?"

"Not when he has the communist mythology to fall back on." Charles laughed. "As I remember from my school reading, Wells and Conrad were having an argument. Conrad summed it up by saying, 'The trouble with you, Wells, is that you dislike mankind but believe it can be changed. I like mankind and know that it can't be.'"

"That sounds pretty cynical, to me."

"Call it what you like. I still prefer Conrad's side of the issue." Charles looked at his watch. "Oh, oh. You'd better catch up on your four hours' sleep. We'll need sharp eyes tonight."

It was black outside. Navigation was only possible with the ship's searchlight which revealed the riverbanks and turned the eyes of the crocodiles into glowing rubies. In the darkened wheelhouse, Charles listened to the ping of the echo-sounder and the steady panting of the engine. A large fish leaped out of the water and the splash made a cluster of pearls in the glare of the light. Bats, giant moths and myriads of other night creatures swarmed in and out of the beam.

Jesus came into the wheelhouse from the bridge, trying to fend off a cloud of mosquitoes with one hand while he gestured with the other. "Stop the engine. Switch off the light. I think I've seen it."

The clang of the engine telegraph completed the stillness of the tropical night and extinguishing the searchlight made its blackness total.

"Where did you see it, Jesus?"

"Out to the left. Look!"

A green light flashed the Morse letter 'V.'

"That's it, all right. Give the recognition signal."

The engine room speaking tube whistled and Charles removed the plug. "That's right, Hans, we're home! Looks like we'll sleep tonight."

"Wunderbar! I hope I haven't forgotten how."

Chapter 3 **THE LLANOS.**

It was around noon, though of which day they could not be sure. The three of them sat on ammunition boxes amid swarms of great dragonflies, shaded by the tall trees of the rain forest, telling the story of the voyage to incredulous men in gray-green uniforms.

"No!" Hoess, commander of the column, shook his head in disbelief. "Three men on the whole ship! How did you do it?"

"Oh, with a good manning table, lots of luck and a judicious use of amphetamine tablets." Hans stifled a yawn.

Hoess wiped perspiration off his grinning face. "Just like our last motoring 'holiday' in Germany, eh Hans'?" "Yes, without the mud." Jesus rubbed his eyes. "What day is it?"

"Thursday. You've slept for two days, and it looked as if you all needed it." Hoess crushed a scorpion with the toe of his riding boot.

They watched a man wearing white overalls signal the winch operator. A warning whistle blew and a heavily-laden cargo net rose out of the Sandshark's forward hold, ropes creaking with strain. Other men, their uniforms dark with sweat, streamed up and down the gangplanks like carpenter ants, carrying small cases which they stacked carefully on the sandbar.

Charles pointed to the activity. "Are you nearly finished, Commander?"

"We'll be finished by this evening, and tomorrow we will uncrate everything for loading onto the pack animals. You brought us a lot of 'merchandise,' you know. It's really staggering." "Thank Hans for that."

"Ach, the quantity was no problem." Hans smoothed the thinning hair back on his forehead with dirty fingers. "There are enough arms and munitions in the hands of private armies in the United States to wage one or two major wars. This shipment was nothing, really."

"In any case, it's more than sufficient. I've issued each man with a rifle and submachine-gun as well as plenty of ammunition. Grenades will be distributed as soon as we open the boxes." Hoess nodded to a soldier who placed three bundles on the sand before them, saluted casually, and walked away. "Ah yes, your uniforms. Now you can change out of those stinking rags."

"First, a bath!" said Charles.

"There you are." Hoess pointed to the river. "Your tub has been filled already."

"But won't the crocs and pirañas object?"

"Not at all. They will enjoy your company."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

They stripped off what remained of their National Guard uniforms and plunged into the clear green water, eyeing the basking crocodiles with a certain amount of suspicion at first, but soon they discovered the grinning reptiles were only interested in soaking up the hot sun on the riverbank. They splashed one another with the warm water and cavorted like otters.

Charles pointed to some minnows. "How do you know if those little fish are pirañas, Jesus?"

"When your voice goes up several octaves."

"Ho, ho, funny man!"

"Race you to the opposite bank!" shouted Hans, taking a head start.

"You're on!"

They swam madly out into the slowly-moving tributary, Charles beginning to overtake Hans, but stopping suddenly in midstream and treading water.

Hans looked back. "What, the younger generation has chosen early retirement?"

Charles pointed to something in the water. "Look, there, in that shady spot!"

Jesus swam over to him. "What is it?"

"It's a submarine!"

"Oh," said Hans, "so you have seen her."

The shadows and shimmering green of the water almost obscured the stark outlines of the U-boat resting on the river bottom near the Sandshark's mooring.

Hans joined them. "Yes, an interesting story. Remind me to tell you about it sometime."

Charles looked at him eagerly. "Why not now?"

"Because it's rather sad, and I don't wish to be sad right now."

A soldier waved to them and shouted from the fantail of the Sandshark. "Hey, loafing plutocrats, it's lunchtime!"

They swam back to the sandbar and put on their new uniforms, tall boots for riding or walking, baggy cotton trousers and tunics of gray-green, and distinctive but functional Afrika Korps caps. Now they were indistinguishable from their fellows, except for their rank and sidearms.

They joined the company who had stopped working and were now lying or sitting on the sand, chatting in small groups before the meal was ready. Those not off duty were the sentries who paced the bridge of the Sandshark or stood in the shade of the foliage at the edge of the jungle. Their ready weapons were the only sign that this was not some kind of club outing and picnic.

From the Sandshark's galley came cauldrons of savory stew. From the late Captain Barman's refrigeration locker came beer and ice cream which vanished instantly down parched throats. On the sandbar, well away from the stocks of ammunition, monkey meat was roasting over pits of charcoal, along with fresh fish from the bountiful river.

"Nobody should complain about not getting enough to eat," Charles raised a dumpling on his fork, "but this flour has a peculiar flavor."

Hoess looked up from his mess tin. "Manioc, ground cassava roots. Deadly poisonous."

Charles looked mystified. "But ... "

"Oh, it's been suitably prepared."

"Hmm, I see. At least, I think I see."

"You will soon discover that our men are adept at living off the land."

"They seem to know what they're doing, all right." Charles drank the remainder of the stew from his mess tin, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"These are elite troops, like the Waffen S.S." Hoess nodded in Hans' direction. "They are not required to salute. Officers and men share the same rations and the same work. You will find a good deal of joking and comradeship in this group, but you will also see excellent discipline and teamwork."

Hoess looked at his watch. "Now for an hour's siesta. Find some shade and snooze. The off-loading resumes at fourteen hundred hours. Schlafen Sie gut!"

Charles sprawled under an awning of jungle creepers which camouflaged a stack of boxes containing mortar shells. Through the vines he could see the contrails of a jet, crawling across the sky, far above the hot jungle and the concealed anchorage.

"They couldn't see us, even if they tried," he thought. "By nightfall, our fires will be out. They can use their infrared cameras all they like."

It seemed no time at all before he was being shaken by a sadistically-smiling sergeant who invited him to join the 'fun' of piling ammunition on the sandbar. Off-loading proceeded briskly, as if the men had just wakened from a full night's rest.

Charles flopped beside Jesus during a break. "Hell, they're fit!" He wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his sleeve.

Hoess passed out salt tablets. "Take three of these, both of you. Without salt, you'll drop if you keep on working in this heat."

Charles downed the tablets with water from his canteen. "Incidentally, I see you've left the, uh ..."

"Don't worry, my friend." Hoess smiled. "I have experience in such matters. The gold will be left on board, under a suitable guard who will steam up to the capital once it has been secured."

Charles looked dubious.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking ... All right, then, where would you take the gold, once you'd stolen it?"

"Well, I ..."

"Switzerland is out. The Swiss would hand it and you back to the U.S., once they'd determined its origin. Other European countries? We'd get you, then. Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East? All too rapacious. They'd see you parted company with it right away. Back to the U.S.? As an American, you know that possession and dealing in gold is illegal, even if it's not stolen from the Federal Reserve. And what about your pursuers? Who would protect you from them? No, you may set your mind at rest. Our little treasure will be quite safe."

Charles smiled. "Good. I see you've figured all the angles. As you say, you have experience in these matters."

Hoess, his vulpine features set in a quizzical expression, eyed Charles for a moment, perceiving the meaning in Charles' air of studied innocence.

Hoess laughed. "You are devilishly tactful, my young Captain Hendricks, but your brawn is required right now, more than your brain. Back to work. Remember, 'Arbeit macht frei.'"

"Und Kraft durch Freude, Commander." Charles winked at him and rejoined the work detail.

He managed to set down the box of detonators without jarring them, despite his fatigue. A hand fell upon his shoulder. It was the sergeant who had wakened him from his siesta.

"Come with me, Captain Hendricks. Now we must water the animals."

"But what about the off-loading?" Charles looked back at the ship.

"It is finished. Follow me."

He stumbled after the sergeant, his heavy boots sinking into the loose sand which bore the imprint of hundreds of feet, human and animal. He saw the sergeant disappear into a seemingly impenetrable thicket on the border of the sandbar and found himself on a path which had been hacked through the undergrowth. Soon, he entered the immense cathedral of the rain forest. Here, walking was much easier, since few bushes and creepers could survive the lack of light. As he became accustomed to the perpetual twilight, he saw hundreds of horses and mules tethered to picket lines strung between the trees. Guards were already loosing their halters and leading them off to the river. Charles soon discovered he was leading a handsome chestnut stallion.

The sergeant led a mule up to him. "Take good care of them, Sir. They're both yours."

He took the rope halter from the sergeant and examined the mule. It was a fine-looking animal, young, strong and healthy, with a gleam of mischief in its eyes. Charles drew upon the halter. The rope went taut, but the mule refused to budge, even when Charles tugged with all his strength.

"The water's this way, idiot. Come on, don't be mule-headed."

Some soldiers were laughing. The mule had a reputation.

Charles was not amused. "Sergeant, give me that length of rope."

"Here you are, Captain." The sergeant passed him a lariat and stood by, a broad smile on his stubbled face.

"Thank you, Sergeant. You can go on about your business and let me get on with mine." Charles cinched the stout rope around the mule's fetlocks, tying all four of its legs together.

"If it's all the same to you, Sir, I'd like to lend a hand. That one's got no culture. He kicks, bites and goes on strike if you give him any chance at all." He drew back from the mule's teeth. It appeared that the mule was beginning to resent his immobilized state.

"No culture, eh ? Well, I'll give him a real lesson in etiquette." Charles removed his pistol belt.

The sergeant offered him a cutting from a vine. "Care to use this switch, Sir?"

"No, thanks. I don't want to cut him, just warm his rump a bit. Besides, this belt will make a louder noise."

Holding the wide leather belt by its buckle, Charles laid on a lusty whack, one after another, with suitable pauses for effect. The mule snorted, humped his back and strained at the hobbles, to no effect. His efforts were rewarded by more well-aimed blows on the behind.

"Play bastardo with me, eh? I'll tan your stubborn hide." Charles warmed to his work, stopping only after reaching the point of exhaustion. He stood perspiring and panting in the still, warm air of the jungle, the pistol belt gleaming with the mule's sweat.

The mule had long since forgotten his rage and was now quivering in expectation of the next stinging blow. When the blow failed to come, he craned his neck around to see what had become of his two-legged tormentor.

"You have him worried, Sir," said the sergeant, calming the nervous stallion.

"With good reason. His lesson isn't over." Charles buckled on his pistol belt and stood before the mule. "Go on, take a good look. I don't want you to forget me."

He took one stride forward, locked the mule's head in his arms and sank his teeth into its ear. The mule, braying more from fright than pain, struggled, then was still. Charles released him, stepped back, and spat blood upon the ground. He unhobbled the mule and led him toward the river. This time there was no balking.

The sergeant handed him the stallion's halter. "Bravo. You should have no more trouble with that one."

"We've reached an understanding." Charles smiled, giving the mule a slap on his streaming withers.

The sandbar was the scene of spirited frolic, men and animals splashing into the water, horses and mules guzzling, men shouting encouragement, everyone thoroughly soaked in the humid hour of the last light. The rain forest resounded to the whinnies of excited horses and the bray of pack mules, chorused by the whoops and screeches of jungle creatures. Clouds of parakeets took to the air and the setting sun turned the men and beasts into fiery demons locked in the weird permutations of a bacchanalian revel. Charles caressed the stallion as it drank from the foaming river, and watched the great lily pads as they undulated gracefully upon the turbulent water.

He saw the members of the column arrayed before him, and was thrilled. It was a privilege to be among such men, he thought. They were going to fight somewhere on the llanos. Maybe they would be defeated, perhaps killed. No matter. He would rather die with this column than live under any other circumstances. If they were defeated and lived, there would be no place left on earth for them. They would be disowned by the power that sent them and shown no mercy by those they came to oppose. He thought of this as he led the animals back to the jungle.

Returning to the sandbar where most of the soldiers were bedding down, he unrolled his mosquito net and crawled into the lee of some ammunition boxes. He squirmed his way into the warm sand, making a contoured mattress for himself, and lay still, looking up at the incredible display of stars in the clear jungle night. A pack mule hee-hawed amid the singing of the insects and the green water slapped against the black hull of the Sandshark. On the far side, a crocodile splashed into the river. A faint breeze wafted the scent of wild vanilla over him.

It was still dark when Charles felt himself being shaken by the sergeant who had imposed a respectful tyranny over him.

"Your turn to watch the animals, Captain."

The word 'captain' woke him up. Suddenly, he remembered where he was. "What time is it, Sergeant?"

"Oh four hundred hours, Sir."

He took the lamp from the sergeant, slung on his rifle and picked his way among the dark forms of men and equipment that were strewn upon the sand like a depiction of the aftermath of Waterloo. Coming to the path through the thicket, he switched on the lamp. As he entered the jungle he cast its beam upon the rows of horses and mules, looking for any signs of mischief. He continued his surveillance around the remuda's perimeter, followed by other beams of light, other eyes scanning the sleeping rows for the small, dark forms of blood-lapping vampires and sucking leeches.

He stopped and unslung his rifle, hearing the whistle of a jaguar. A horse whinnied and stamped, frightened by the smell of the cat. He turned the lamp into the jungle, following the beam with his rifle. The eyes of a tapir caught the glare for a moment, then its rump as it scuttled off among the trees. A small jungle cat bounded away from the light, not the sort he was worried about. He saw a furry tarantula the size of a puppy scurrying up one of the thick vines, probably on the hunt for young birds. A giant moth brushed his cheek and fluttered about the light, displaying its beautiful patterns. So lavish was nature that she provided rainbow colors and intricate designs for these insects that lived in darkness.

The beam caught the dark stream of blood coursing down a horse's leg. On the ground, crouching beside the small pool that had formed, was the offending bat. Charles raised the lamp so the vampire would not be distracted and bounded to the side of the bleeding animal. Shining the light on the ground, he located the bat and raised his boot over it. There was a faint squeak, then the snap of tiny bones as he crushed the life out of the creature.

He saw to the horse's wound, a neat incision into a vein. As he worked to staunch the flow with pitch, the horse woke up and stirred, startled by the smell of its own blood.

Charles stroked the animal's neck. "Easy, boy."

The horse calmed down and let him finish the job as if it understood that Charles was there to help.

He'd not even made a complete circuit of the remuda by the time his relief arrived. Returning to the sandbar, he saw the sun beginning to appear, tingeing the wispy clouds with coral. Someone blew a whistle and the beach came to life, men rising, standing stretching, yawning, rubbing eyes caked with sleep. Nails screeched in protest as crates were ripped apart for firewood and cooking fires.

Charles drew a tin of bully beef from the food line and contemplated it without enthusiasm.

Hans slapped him on the back, full of glee. "Better enjoy it! We have a thousand cases, and it's all we have, except for this." He handed Charles a brown tin.

Charles looked horrified. "C-ration biscuits! You're a fiend, a raving sadist!"

"At least they will encourage us to wage a short campaign."

Charles gritted his teeth. "You know how we can make the enemy surrender, immediately?"

"How?"

"Just say we'll feed him this stuff if he dares to put up a fight"

Jesus joined them by the fire. "It isn't lobster mayonnaise."

"Don't look so glum." Hans grinned. "Whoever heard of Boy Scouts eating lobster mayonnaise?"

Charles speared a tin with his bayonet. "I'm sorry I heard that."

The horses and mules were watered and given their rations of salt and maize while the crates were unpacked and the contents divided into heaps which would make up the load for each animal. Hoess supervised, walking up and down among the piles of supplies and weaponry, slapping the top of his boot with his riding crop.

Charles approached him. "You don't seem too pleased about something, Commander. May I share some of your burdensome thoughts?"

"Oh, good morning, Captain." Hoess shook his head. "In the whole of my military experience, I have never been confronted by an oversupply of anything. So this is how the Americans wage war!"

"Not enough transport?"

"I don't think so. There is so much to carry. Fortunately, we put caches of food and water for the animals along the route we are to follow, but even so, many will not be able to ride until we reach the escarpment. Perhaps we should leave some of this behind."

"You mean we can take it all with us?"

"Yes, but most of us must go dismounted if we do."

"We'll have to go on foot through the jungle, won't we?"

"Yes, that's so, at least most of the way."

"Well, I advise you to take everything, even if you double the men's rations. When you need supplies, you need them very badly. They won't do us any good here. Besides,

we can't move fast until we leave the jungle, and by that time, we'll have consumed a lot of the rations. If we're still too heavy, we can dump things then."

"True. All right, we load the whole lot, and you, my friend, can join the infantry. I shall ride whenever the opportunity presents itself." Hoess saluted with his riding crop.

"Your prerogative, Commander." Charles returned the salute smartly.

The animals were loaded quickly but systematically, the items to be used first being packed last, the pack ropes arranged meticulously to secure the loads and to distribute their weight evenly and comfortably upon the animals. Every trick in the mule-skinner's handbook would be needed for the hard going ahead, thought Charles, watching two of the packers check the diamond hitch on his mule. They nodded their approval and he led his animals into position in the column.

Hoess blew three sharp blasts on his whistle, answered by the croaks and cackles of toucans which festooned the camouflage netting on the Sandshark. The column wheeled into line and entered the shallows so that the animals could have a last drink from the river. Their morning salt had made them thirsty.

Hoess, among the few riders, raised his hand. The column reformed and slowly moved out over the sandbar, entering the thicket where it was swallowed up by the shadow of the rain forest. Charles looked back at the Sandshark which had now become part of the jungle itself.

It seemed to him that the jungle alone was real, the Sandshark, the burning cities of San Francisco Bay, the hatred, futility, choking smog, only figments of his fevered imagination. The jungle, with its soothing yet vibrant emanations, had driven the fever from his head, along with the mad visions of his last days in California. The rain forest was all.

Somewhere in the green vastness he heard the rending crash of a giant tree falling upon the teeming humus, its clinging network of vines unable to sustain it. At once it would be set upon by the agents of decay and would soon feed other giants. The jungle smelled of this process, the unending cycle of blossoming and decay, and Charles, having experienced it, hoped it would go on forever, changing yet unchanging.

The drowsy hum of the insects and the peaceful shade imposed a hush over the horses and men working their way among the vine-clad pillars of the green canopy. The cackle of hornbills and squawking of parrots seemed out of place.

Groups of Indians appeared along the line of march, their short, well-muscled bodies decorated with brilliant feathers and hideous tribal scars. Some of the soldiers gave them trinkets, nails salvaged from broken crates. The Indians waved and acted friendly, understanding that it would do them no good to behave otherwise.

A troop of monkeys made strong objection to the column's trespass into their neighborhood. From their vantage points in the branches above, they emptied their bladders and threw fruit and seed pods upon the men and animals of the column, shrieking and chattering simian invective. There was much cursing or laughing among the soldiers, depending on who was sprinkled or pelted.

Leading his animals, Charles observed the things of beauty and fascination which the jungle displayed. One day, when this business was over, he wanted to return and give these creatures of the jungle the attention they deserved. But he had a strong feeling that such a day would never come, so he tried to capture all that he saw in his memory. His eyes could not take in enough of it, the profusion of orchids, the intricate pattern of vines and branches revealed by vagrant rays of sunlight. He saw nests of giant wasps and hoped their occupants were not disturbed by the column's passage. Not once did he see a snake, however hard he looked. The jungle was not all delight, despite its beauties. There was the heat, the ticks, and leeches and occasional swarms of plum flies to detract from his enjoyment.

Days and nights passed in timeless succession. Charles felt suspended in a green universe. The only way he knew how many days he had spent in the jungle was by counting his diminishing stock of ration tins. A few more days, he calculated, and he would be able to ride.

They had begun to climb. A few tins of bully beef later, the air grew cooler. Gradually, the foliage was changing. He saw wild coffee trees beside the trail. The trail got steeper and switchbacks more frequent. One day he saw outcrops of naked rock, not covered with the usual cloak of moss. Springs of clear water gushed from some of these, and the men filled their canteens and water casks. Charles had never tasted anything so delicious as the water of the escarpment.

As they went on, he noticed that he and the animals were breathing more heavily. One night, he had to unpack a blanket, and the next day he saw the sun rise over the Llanos Orientales.

He and Hoess stood upon a lava rise on the edge of the escarpment overlooking the llanos. Charles, scanning the horizon through his binoculars, saw some shapes darting hither and thither over the dry grass. He pointed them out to Hoess, who raised his binoculars for a moment and had a look.

"Reas." Hoess took a deep breath of the wind from the llanos. Standing arms akimbo, chin held high, his cap at a jaunty angle, he looked every inch an S.S. officer. "The dry season is nearly over. You can smell rain on the wind."

Charles sniffed the air. "Your nose is much better than mine, Commander. I'm afraid I only smell thorn trees and grass."

"There's a subtle change, but you can smell it. Wait until you've been out here for a few more years." Hoess slapped him on the shoulder. "Horseman's country, my friend. That's what you see. Wild horses, wild cattle, wild people. Plenty of grass, water in the rivers, a clear sky and open land as far as you can see, indeed, farther. On the llanos a man can stand as tall as he wishes without bumping his head on any ceilings. Here you are your own boss. You know what the llaneros say?"

"No, aside from a few swearwords." Charles cased his binoculars.

"They say, 'Over the earth, my horse, over my horse, me; and over me ...'" Hoess laughed.

"Yes?"

"... Over me - my hat!' Pride and self-sufficiency go together. In the llaneros you will find both, as well as ignorance, superstition, brutality, selfishness, disease, and so on, but their first two qualities make them stand out from other louts, so I have a certain liking for them." He tried to scratch his back. "Ach, I can't reach it. Captain, please do me the favor."

"Certainly." Charles dug his fingernails into the commander's back.

"No, higher. There! Ah, that's heavenly." He shrugged his shoulders, like a bird ruffling its feathers while enjoying a bath. "Thank you. Your services are most satisfactory. I shall note that in my report, 'Captain Hendricks is recommended for the Order of the Back-Scratcher in bronze with five claws.'"

"All in the line of duty, Commander."

"Hmm, I see Hans waving to us. Better go back to the men."

Charles stood for a moment, feeling the contrast between the thrilling sweep of the llanos and the subduing mantle of the jungle. Hoess was right. The llanos gave him a feeling of boundless opportunity, limitless possibilities. Clambering down the lava slope, he imagined he could smell the first rain on the wind, and down among the men and horses, he could see the same exhilaration taking hold.

Hoess stood upon a water cask and addressed the members of the column. "We conceal ourselves and move only at night. You may expect contact with the enemy at any time, so keep your weapons ready and stay alert, especially for aircraft. The men of the anti-aircraft section will have their chance to show us what they can do. Now, I suggest you make yourselves comfortable and sleep. We move at dusk."

The moon and stars turned the llanos to silver, the column winding among the thorn bushes and clumps of pampas grass like pale ghosts, no sound coming from the horses' hooves now wrapped in tent cloth and burlap. Charles heard the cry of a coyote or wild

dog and saw the dark shape of an owl as it soared and pounced upon some creature in the grass.

Splashes ahead told him they were fording a stream. Their crossing was on a gradual incline which had been worn by the passage of animals over many years. At first, Charles thought such a stream could have posed them only a small obstacle. Then he changed his mind, seeing the steepness of the banks and the water-swept wrack clinging to projecting roots at the arroyo's edges, well above his head. From these flood signs, he judged that the water would normally flow deeper and swifter than a horse and rider could negotiate by wading without some kind of assistance. Hours, even days, could be lost getting the column across such a stream once the rains began. Now he realized why there had been such insistence on the Sandshark's reaching the column at Rio Sucio before the end of the month.

The stallion snorted and blew, having inhaled some mosquitoes. They were a minor annoyance during the dry season. After the rains, there would be clouds of them sufficient to clog the horses' nostrils and drive the animals mad.

The night went quickly for Charles, and he was surprised when the first sunrays appeared on the horizon. Like the other night creatures, the column dispersed, sheltering under the scattered thorn trees. The cool morning air would soon yield to the dust devils and shimmering heat of midday.

After seeing his animals provisioned and secured with others under the leafy umbrella of a large thorn tree, Charles joined Hans, Jesus and the sergeant under a bush. They wolfed down their breakfast of bully beef and biscuits. Using his haversack as a pillow, Charles lay down and looked up at the clear sky through the screen of thorny branches overhead.

"I can see you, but you can't see me," he thought, hoping it were true, because the sound of an aircraft was now unmistakable.

"It sounds like a single piston engine to me." Hans assembled his rocket launcher. "Probably an observation plane."

They rushed out into the clearing, carrying rockets and two of the launchers. Jesus loaded them and Hans and the sergeant sighted in the plane's direction.

Charles raised his binoculars. "That's what it is all right, a light observation plane with army insignia, rockets under the wings.

Hans followed the plane with the barrel of his launcher. "Probably looking for bandits."

"Or us." Charles focussed on the cockpit, trying to discern the pilot or any passengers.

"Not so soon, I hope. Damn, he's turning away!"

Hoess joined them. "I want him brought down. Do the best you can."

Charles drew out his compass. "Then I have your permission to signal him."

"Yes. Excellent!"

He caught the sun with his compass mirror and flashed a beam at the plane's cockpit.

Hoess slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. "I think he's seen it. Yes, he's circling back!"

Jesus tapped him on the arm. "You'd better stand clear of the launchers. They can be very hot."

Charles showed Hoess to a safe distance. "Infra red-seeking missiles, Commander. They're beauties!"

"If I like them, I'll buy them, as you Americans say."

They turned around, hearing a muffled whoosh behind them. Charles could see nothing in the sky but the plane, its rockets and even more lethal radio antenna. Then the plane's engine vanished in a bright flash and a puff of black smoke. The aircraft hesitated pausing for a moment as if suspended by wires, then rolled over leaving a twisted ribbon of smoke, obscene in the clear sky. The plane disintegrated, burning pieces of wing and fuselage scattering and spinning to the dry grass below. Charles thought he saw the body of the pilot plummeting to earth, still strapped in his seat.

Hoess gripped his arm. "Very good, I do like them!"

Charles laughed. "They're yours. Your children will love playing with them."

"My grandchildren perhaps. I think my own sons have outgrown rocketry. Maybe you have a chemistry set or some model trains in your interesting collection."

"Ask Hans. Any moment I expect to see him bring out a kitchen sink."

"Ah, my wife would like one of those."

There was the dull boom of an explosion and Jesus came running. "The plane's gasoline tank has exploded! The grass is burning and the wind is driving the flames this way."

"Drei Teufels Namen!" Hoess looked anxious. "The grass is like tinder. Get out the spades, entrenching tools. I want every man ... Towards us, you say?"

"Yes, Sir. The ammunition ..."

"Good! Excellent! Yes, the smoke comes this way. The smoke!" Hoess blew his whistle. "Load up! Move out! We ride with the smoke!"

Charles ran after him. "Won't the fire draw suspicion?"

"Always fires, this time of year. Get your horse!"

They rode with the smoke, a line of flames leaping at the rear of the column, swarms of hot cinders, like wasps, stinging men and beasts. Acrid smoke swirled and billowed around them choking, blinding. Charles guided the stallion, at times barely able to see the horse in front. He splashed water from his canteen on the handkerchief he wore over his nose and mouth, and turned to see a clump of pampas grass blaze up against the smoky background. The fire was gaining on them. The mule seemed to know this, and kept trying to come abreast, needing no coaxing to hurry. The problem was to keep the animals from stampeding and losing their way in the smoke. A line of thorn trees roared into flame not far behind them and the stallion quickened his pace. Charles hoped the horse wouldn't stumble and thought of the trouble they would have with the animals should they be overtaken by the fire and be forced to turn back into the burned area. Once they had done that, the flames would no longer threaten them, but they would be seen from the air.

The wind was changing. He felt a cool breath on his face. It must be afternoon, he thought. There was an explosion - had the fire reached some of the ammunition? He squinted, trying to pierce the clouds of smoke, and felt a drop of cold water on his cheek. A large drop spattered upon the horse's neck, just as a sharp crack of thunder resounded overhead. The wind was rising, blowing the smoke back toward the fire, bringing with it the sweet smell of the first rain.

The column halted, dispersed under the thorn trees and watched the rain, a hesitant sprinkle at first, become a monsoon, sheets of icy water accompanied by violent gusts of wind and searing bayonets of lightning that stabbed much too close for Charles' liking. After one drenching, thundering hour, the clouds moved on, leaving ashy rivulets of water coursing among the scorched thorn bushes and indestructible quebracho trees of the blackened area.

The men of the column ate their rations as much to rid their mouths of the smoke as to satisfy their hunger. At nightfall they moved on, stopping to feed and water the horses at the first stream they encountered. The rain made the night air cool, even chilly, to the sodden members of the column. Charles shivered as he rode and longed for a dry, uninterrupted day's sleep. He wondered if he had caught malaria.

In his stupor, he thought he heard someone calling to him. He tried to remember bedding down the animals, but all he could recall was how good it had been to fall upon the dry space he'd cleared beneath the thorn tree. Forcing his eyes open, he looked up at the parakeets chattering overhead. It was still daylight. Maybe he'd imagined a voice.

He looked around to see if he were alone, then groaned. "Oh no, not you again, Sergeant!"

"Sorry, Sir, but the scouts report firing ahead. The commander says mount up."

"Shooting at this hour? It's uncivilized." Charles drew on his haversack and crawled from his bed under the tree.

He joined the small group sent out to reconnoiter, leaving the rest of the column concealed, but ready to advance. They were trotting up a grassy slope, nearing the sound of the shooting, when one of the scouts signaled them to dismount. Approaching the top of the slope, they dropped on all fours. Charles grinned at Hoess crawling along beside him. A snake rustled in the grass as it slithered away from them. Reaching the top, they parted the blades of grass and peered out over the rolling countryside. On the reverse slope were some army vehicles, two trucks and an armored scoutcar which sheltered some government soldiers from gunfire that came from a rocky knoll beyond. Dead horses lay at the base of the knoll.

"Bandits, most probably," whispered Hoess.

Charles nodded in agreement. "Look, that blond-haired fellow by the scoutcar, he's using the radio."

"Probably calling for an air strike."

Charles fingered the safety catch on his rifle. "Shall I shoot him?"

"No. It's too late. Let them come."

Hoess whispered to the soldier beside him. The soldier, crouching as he ran, rejoined the group attending the horses below.

Charles heard the heavy breathing of horses and the creak of leather harness as more of the party joined them. Well-practiced hands soon had a small mortar and shells unloaded, ready for firing

"Feed the belt." Jesus snuggled beside him with the machine-gun.

The horses were taken away and tethered beneath the thorn trees, while the men on the slope camouflaged one another with stalks of grass. They waited. Charles watched a tiny spider lower itself on a web from a grass stem. A line of busy leaf-cutter ants passed a

few inches under his nose. The machine-gun smelled of fresh oil, its ugly perforated cooling jacket and conical flash-hider clashing with the graceful lines of nature.

Charles took out his binoculars and gazed at the knoll. He glimpsed a straw hat for an instant. One of the soldiers behind the trucks had seen it, too, and let off a shot. Someone replied from the knoll, and a bullet came whistling overhead.

An aircraft droned, coming closer. It was an old Corsair, just right for the job. Napalm canisters glittered beneath the wings.

Hoess raised his arm. "Ready!"

Jesus jammed the stock into his shoulder, feeling the cool, polished wood against his cheek.

Charles returned his binoculars to their case and picked up the belt of gleaming cartridges, his hands damp with perspiration.

Hoess studied the enemy through his binoculars. "Not the blond one. He must be captured, alive."

The Corsair's pilot made a perfect dive-bombing run, directly over the knoll, its engine screaming.

"Poor devils," thought Charles. "Nothing for them to do."

A silver glint in the air announced the dropping of the napalm. Hoess dropped his arm, and the world seemed to explode, the plane, the knoll, the armored car, but the only sound Charles could hear was the deafening staccato of the machine-gun as the belt jumped through his hands. Smelling the hot oil and burned cordite of the gun, he looked up and saw the soldiers sprawling, flung about, geysers of blood spouting from their bodies. Hoess waved his hand and the firing stopped, leaving silence, save for the crackle of flames and indignant outcries of startled birds.

He stood up, cupped his hands around his mouth, and bellowed in Spanish, "You, there! American! Come out from under that truck. Come out, Kowalski, it's too hot to play games."

The blond-headed man peered out from between the tires of the truck he was hiding under, saw Hoess looking imperiously down upon him, and shook his head in disbelief. He crawled out from under and brushed himself off.

"Well, don't be shy. Come up here!"

Exploding ammunition from the burning scoutcar hastened the American's limping steps.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Hoess.

"I hurt my knee when my car blew up. Jesus, who are you guys?" He raised his arms as they searched him for weapons.

"We are here to see you safely on your way home, Sergeant Kowalski."

"Hey, how do you know my name, anyway?"

"It's written above your pocket, Dummkopf!"

"Oh, yeah."

A scout came forward. "No one escaped, Herr Kommandant."

"Good. Bring up the rest of the column. We have just acquired two trucks. Load on the extra ammunition. Hans and Charles can drive."

"Uh, Commander ..."

"Shut up, Prisoner Kowalski. Behave yourself and you will survive this little episode."

A smoke cloud erupted on the site of the plane crash and the explosion echoed among the low hills.

Hoess shook his head. "A pity, wasting all these aircraft. If only the fools would stop sending them over us!"

The column moved out, trotting on either side of the two trucks, leaving the blackened knoll and burning scoutcar far behind. Carrion crows and toucans, driven away by the skirmish, returned to their perches in the neighboring thorn trees. Vultures would join them shortly.

Soon after dark they saw a campfire. Scouts rode off to investigate and returned. They reported that the fire was burning in front of a llanero's hut. The hut was deserted, and food scattered around the fire indicated that the inhabitants had fled in great haste. No one could be found.

A few hours later, they arrived at another hut, abandoned like the first. Some of the men helped themselves to beans which had been left stewing in an iron pot hanging over the fire.

With the look of a connoisseur, Jesus chewed some of the beans. "They could do with a little more cooking."

Hoess blew on a spoonful until it was cooled. "Um, yes, but they are not bad. Strange, running off and leaving food."

"Maybe they think we're bandits." Charles checked his submachine-gun.

Hoess smacked his lips and drew another spoonful of beans. "Unlikely. These llaneros are all bandits, at least when there are strangers to rob. You see, they are all related by marriage and godfatherhood."

A scout saluted, offering Hoess a broken catapult. "Sorry, Commander, we made a thorough search and found no other weapons. We found these, however." He showed them a gold crucifix and an expensive-looking watch.

Hoess threw the catapult into the fire and examined the valuables with an appraising eye. He gave them back to the scout. "Keep them, Corporal, in payment for your trouble."

Jesus looked into the hut's interior where a kerosene lantern burned, and perceived all the signs of recent occupation. He came back to the fire. "Well, they sure cleared out in a hurry, bandits or not."

They rode on for some way and came to a dirt track which led through a citrus grove. The column stopped and the men dismounted. The animals were watered from the irrigation stand pipes then unloaded and bedded down for the night. Having left a suitable guard, the men formed up along the dirt track, weapons ready.

"Move over!" Hoess got into the cab of Charles' truck. "We are going to a party."

Kowalski looked dubious. "Am I invited, too?"

"Of course."

Charles drove slowly up the track, followed by Hans' truck and the silently marching infantry. The road took them up a hill, and turned so sharply that they nearly collided with the dark shapes of buildings which loomed out of the night. Charles saw that they had entered a large courtyard, or a small village square.

"Stop!" said Hoess. "Sound the horn."

Charles pressed the horn button and blinked his eyes as the square was illuminated by powerful spot lights. Iron doors and shutters clanged open, showing the well-lit interiors crowded with friendly-looking people, most of them women and children, who ran out to greet the soldiers. Ardent hugs and kisses revealed more than casual relationships.

As he got out of the truck, Hoess was besieged by a little boy and girl who threw their arms around him, their grasp not much higher than his boot tops.

"Grandpa, we've caught you!"

"It looks that way, doesn't it?" Hoess knelt and hugged the children.

"Ooh, you smell like a horse," they giggled.

"You say such nice things, but tell me, where is Grandmother?"

"We'll take you to her!"

Clinging to his trousers, they led him over to a tall, white haired woman whose weathered features radiated that Nordic serenity born of intelligence. A life well-examined, thought Charles. She said nothing, but reached out and took Hoess by the hand reading all he had to say in his tired face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Kowalski.

Hans nudged him in the ribs. "Let's eat."

On one side of the square they discovered four large oxen roasting over pits of brightly-glowing coals. Fragrant pots of beans and strong black coffee hung from iron stanchions over the fire pits. On tables they found fresh black bread and a variety of fruit to accompany the meal. Nearby bubbled a fountain of the clearest water flowing from a windmill pump in the square.

Hoess came up to them brandishing a hero sandwich he had assembled. "Are you gentlemen all right?"

"I've died and gone to heaven," said Jesus.

The others' mouths were too full for speaking. Sated, they lay upon the grass or flagstones and slept beside their weapons. The prisoner, Kowalski, was secured in a private room and placed under guard.

A warm breeze turned the windmill in the now darkened square, and the footsteps of sentries joined the steady beat of the pump. An owl hooted in a stand of trees and a dog barked as a squad of soldiers tramped off to relieve the men guarding the horses. They took hot food for them from the banquet.

When Charles woke up, it was mid-morning. He looked around for the sergeant, his unwelcome alarm clock, got up stretched, decided he'd had enough sleep and walked over to the watering trough at the base of the windmill tower, picking his way carefully among the gray-green forms scattered over the square. As he splashed cold water on his face, he heard a voice calling him.

"Captain Hendricks!"

He looked around the square, scanning the doorways of the silent, whitewashed buildings. The only others awake were two old men playing draughts under a tree.

"Good morning!"

He looked up. On the topmost platform of the windmill tower stood the sergeant, smiling down at him.

"Don't you ever sleep, Sergeant?" Charles felt the water running down his neck as he looked up.

Hoess came out of one of the buildings, looked at the sun, then at his watch. He had bathed and put on a clean uniform.

"Nothing yet?" he shouted to the sergeant.

"No, Sir!"

Hoess looked immaculate. He looked at Charles, who felt like a little boy caught making mud pies in his best suit. "The water running down my neck must be causing soil erosion," thought Charles. "I'll be growing potatoes in no time, if we get some rain."

"Would you care for some breakfast, Captain?" Hoess gestured to a table on the veranda.

"Well, Sir, I certainly would, but I'm in pretty foul condition just now. It might spoil your appetite."

"Not at all. My wife and I are old soldiers. Nothing spoils our appetite. You'll have plenty of time for a shower and change."

They went up the stone steps, and Charles joined Hoess and his wife at breakfast. As the coffee, orange juice, bread, jam, eggs and homemade sausages made a rapid disappearance, Charles broke the silence, asking about the two old men playing checkers. Hoess' wife looked surprised.

Hoess finished sipping his coffee. "One, the oldest, the one with the stoop, is a retired officer of the French artillery."

"The other has a crippled hand."

"You are observant, Captain. Such a trait is essential in a good officer. I know you are discreet, as well." Hoess gave an assuring nod to his wife.

"It doesn't matter, now," said Charles.

"No, I suppose it doesn't, really."

"Kommandant!" The sergeant waved from the tower.

"Yes! "

"I hear it."

"We must be off, Captain. Please excuse us, my dear." Hoess rose from the table and kissed his wife on the cheek.

As they went down the steps of the vine-draped veranda, Charles noticed a large golden spider sunning itself in the middle of a perfect orb web.

"Die Spinne." Hoess chuckled.

Charles watched the two old men get up from their game, the younger helping the older.

"Ach, he is finished."

"How's that?"

"The Frenchman has become senile. He only experiences clarity in the mornings, and his time span is rapidly diminishing. When he is not sleeping, he just stares into space and drools. He can't feed or dress himself, but the other looks after him."

"Sad." Charles' boots crunched over gravel on the flagstones.

"Yes. To die head first is to be avoided at all costs."

"But isn't it unavoidable?"

"I don't think so, not if one determines to stay active. To allow the death of the mind is a willful act done by those lacking the courage for suicide." Hoess waved good morning to the soldiers who were rising from the square and arranging their equipment.

Charles heard an approaching plane. "Oh, oh!"

"Relax, it's ours."

Even so, he could not avoid ducking his head as the little Fiesler Storch flew low over the square. Some of the soldiers waved at the plane.

"Shower time." Hoess pointed to a queue of soldiers in one corner of the square.

"Something I need very badly." Charles remembered his last bar of soap with nostalgia.

"Yes, today everyone can clean up and have a change of uniform. To say we smell like horses is something of a compliment."

They passed some soldiers having a spirited archery contest in a corner of the square. One of the men had just scored a bull's eye, almost dead center, displacing his opponent's arrow.

"Good shooting, Schneider!" exclaimed Hoess.

"Thank you, Commander. I hope we do as well tomorrow.

"You will, don't worry. Another good meal and some rest will steady you considerably."

Charles heard the plane land. Its engine grew louder as it taxied toward the hacienda. Rounding a corner, he saw the plane parked on the edge of the nearby pasture. Its propeller stopped turning and the field was peaceful once more except for the cawing of crows. The pilot, a fair youth clad in a black leather flying suit, carrying an attache case, alighted from the plane and strode toward them. Not until the aviator helmet came off did Charles see that the pilot was an attractive young woman.

Hoess saluted her. "Marlene von Mannerheim, I wish you to meet our Captain Hendricks."

"Ah, Captain Hendricks, what good things I have heard about you." She removed her glove and extended her hand.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance." Charles took her hand. "I hope you'll pardon my disreputable appearance and stay upwind from the aroma."

"Oh, I have nothing against horses. I enjoy riding as well."

"I see you have a considerable number of talents."

"She is also an excellent aerial photographer and photo interpreter." It seemed Hoess was anxious to get down to business.

Marlene removed two large black and white prints from her briefcase. "This, I took yesterday. This one, two days ago."

Hoess passed him the most recent picture. "What do you make of it, Captain?"

"Well, it's obviously a military installation of some kind. It looks like a fort. That's an airstrip running outside the enclosure, and that large building is a hangar."

"All correct, so far. If you were planning to capture this fort with a force such as ours, what would you look for?"

"The best avenue of approach."

"Yes?"

"Well, you see, as something of an amateur in military tactics, my scheme would involve quick penetration of the fort itself, rather than encirclement. The builders of the fort have already done that for us, encircling themselves with these high walls."

Hoess looked interested. "Please continue."

"This cleared strip, running around the entire position, how wide is it?"

"Ten meters."

"Fifteen," said Marlene.

"Excuse me." Hoess touched the side of his cap with his riding crop.

"Is this strip mined?" Charles held the picture so they could all see. He could smell Marlene's perfume and see the fine blond hair on the nape of her neck.

"Yes," said Hoess.

"And this?"

Concertina wire, booby-trapped."

"What's on the outside of the wire?"

"Maize, nearly one and a half meters high. The watch towers command an excellent view of the surrounding countryside and of the only access roads. These cross the mined strip like causeways, and are in full view of the towers for at least five hundred meters. At night the strip is illuminated by searchlights."

"These pits just inside the strip?"

"Bunkers, machine-gun nests."

"What about coming from behind and hitting the rear gate?"

"And cross an airfield as well as a mined area?"

"Just a thought. Not such a good one, I guess." He saw Marlene smile. "What about driving some livestock through the mine-field here, followed by an infantry assault?"

"Good idea, but very noisy," said Hoess.

"Livestock would be conspicuous," said Marlene, in her low, well-modulated voice. "There are none in the area."

"Show him the earlier picture, Marlene."

She gave Charles the other print, the same except for some minor details.

Charles pointed to the runway. "Two planes instead of one. And ... Yes!" He compared the two pictures. "Three vehicles are missing from the motor pool."

"Exactly!" Hoess flexed the riding crop in his hands, his eyes betraying eagerness. "What can you tell us, Marlene?"

"General Toral and his Americans from the Military Assistance Advisory Group do not believe the peasants' talk of the ghost army."

"Ghost army?" said Charles.

"Yes, they say the ghost army of General Miranda is sweeping silently over the plains, chasing the damned souls of the llaneros and that anyone who looks upon them will be taken to hell or will go mad. It is a curse which will not be lifted until the rains set in."

Charles shook his head in amazement. "I've never heard so much nonsense since I stopped reading American news magazines."

"That would account for the abandoned huts we encountered." Hoess chuckled. "I wonder what sort of ghosts eat a llanero's beans?"

"Our radio monitor reports an observation plane missing. A day later, a motor convoy was sent out toward the area in which radio contact with the plane was broken. Another aircraft would have gone out instead, but flying weather was bad. Yesterday, the convoy reported an action with bandits. A call was made for air support and a plane dispatched. After that, no further transmissions were received, despite efforts to contact the missing units by radio. Can you account for this, Commander?"

"Yes. We are the culprits."

"Did you see the fort today?" asked Charles.

"Yes, and I saw no unusual movement. They are planning a massive search for the missing units in the next few days, however. The capital has told them to wait for the return of the motor convoy but General Toral is impatient and sounds anxious over the radio. He wants more planes, but the capital asks what he is doing with the ones they've sent him."

"Things are tough all over."

Hoess snapped his fingers. "Not so, my dear Captain! We may not even have to blast down the gates. I think they will open them for us."

"Gentlemen, I must go back." Marlene closed her briefcase. "Well, Captain, I hope to see you again, soon."

Charles took her hand and saw the trace of a smile in her pale blue eyes.

"Here, Schützen, come help with this plane!" Hoess waved some soldiers over from cleaning their weapons.

Charles and the soldiers lifted the tail section and turned the plane into the wind. Marlene climbed into the cockpit. The engine was still warm and started with the first spin of the propeller. They dug their heels into the stubble of the pasture and held the rear stabilizer while Marlene revved the engine, blowing dust and stinging pieces of straw into their faces. When they let go, the plane seemed to leap into the air. Soon Marlene was circling above them, dipping her wings in leave-taking.

Hoess nudged Charles in the ribs. "An intelligent girl, Captain, single only because she is headstrong and difficult to please."

"The 'Ice Princess.' That's what old Fred calls her." There was a note of admiration in Charles' voice.

"That kind of ice can burn, my friend."

"Then I hope to go down in flames. Well, if you don't have any more entertainment, I'm off for a shower." Charles saluted and strode back in the direction of the windmill.

He spent the remainder of the afternoon with Hans, making sure the two captured trucks were roadworthy. The forty soldiers in their complement practiced quick exits from the trucks in-full kit. They were becoming adept at leaping from the backs of the trucks, landing silently and swiftly employing weapons at the ready.

"Just like peas flying out of a pod." Hans wiped his grease smudged face with his sleeve.

The sergeant came over to them. "Captain, the men say it's much easier with the tailgates down, otherwise they get tangled up with the benches."

"Good, we'll drop them before we get to the fort." Charles looked pleased. "No need to tell them every second counts."

"How do we look?" Jesus presented Kowalski and himself for inspection.

"Ghastly!" Charles grinned. "You look as if you've been trampled by a herd of horses."

"We look like real emergency cases, then."

"Yes, maybe even too far gone for treatment."

Jesus laughed. "Well, those bandits ambushed us, you know, and we barely got out alive."

"It sure looks that way."

"What about Hans' disguise?"

"Just smear a little more grease over his face until you're satisfied and give him a khaki shirt. He'll be driving the second truck, anyway. It's you two who have to make the right impression. You know what you're supposed to do, Kowalski. Think you can handle it?"

"Bastards!" Kowalski spat the words out bitterly.

"He means 'yes.'" Jesus smiled, his Sterling muzzle jabbing Kowalski in the back. "My, this ox blood does draw flies."

"That's what I like to see, Kowalski, co-operation, teamwork, the things that made America great!" Charles felt exuberant and slightly mischievous after his wash.

"Even in Spanish, I can tell you're a dirty Kraut, Capítan." Kowalski laid heavy, sarcastic emphasis on his rank.

Charles smiled and arranged the blood-soaked sling on the American's shoulder. "Shut up! You're not essential to this exercise. For two centavos I'd see you lying in the dust, and you wouldn't be covered in ox blood." He felt the man shiver beneath the gory bandages.

"There." Charles stood back, satisfied with his adjustment of the sling. "As far as you're concerned, you died on the trail, back there with your men and the scoutcar. If any of us live through this bit, we can consider ourselves damned lucky."

"You could be driving into a trap, Captain." This time there was no sarcasm in Kowalski's voice.

"Maybe. All we want is to get that gate open. Trap or not, we'll succeed in that."

"Well, gentlemen, it's nearly dusk." Hoess came over to take his leave. "We should be off if we are to arrive before daybreak. Good luck."

Charles brought his heels together and saluted. "Gute Reise Herr Kommandant. See you tomorrow, at siesta time."

They watched him mount his horse, now curried and brimming with energy, and gallop across the square to join the column in the orange grove.

Charles blew his whistle, and activity ceased. "Attention! We leave at dawn. The men who are not guarding the prisoner are free to visit their families. Any questions? If not, I'll see you all out here at oh-four-thirty hours. Dismissed!"

The air of the llanos brought some of its night-time dampness to them as the sun rose. Charles let in the clutch and drove off slowly, followed by Hans and the sergeant in the second truck. They returned the waves of some women and children standing in the square and passed an open doorway which framed the two old men in a brightly-lit room, the younger feeding the other maize porridge with a large spoon, overseen by a young woman who stood shaking her head. The smell of coffee made it all seem very homelike to Charles as they left the square and turned onto the bumpy dirt track.

Kowalski dozed in the front seat beside him, while Jesus, Sterling at the ready, sniffed the morning air. The ox blood had dried and the unconcern with which the two 'injured' men bore their apparently serious wounds made them seem more like refugees from a ketchup factory.

They drove at a businesslike pace, stopping once to allow the men to relieve themselves. It was late that morning when they left the barely-visible trail and turned onto a smoother, dustier road. Now they drove faster, leaving clouds of reddish dust hanging in the hot, still air.

Charles was down-shifting to take a steep length of road when he saw a soldier from the column waving them to halt. He drew up in front of the soldier and stopped, the truck engine idling.

"Good morning, Private." Charles leaned out the window.

"Good morning, Sir. Welcome to the rear of the staging area. We heard you coming when you were some distance away, and the commander sent me to stop you. The fort is only a few kilometers ahead, so you are to wait here."

They drove the trucks off the road and had no sooner finished camouflaging them than it was time to go.

Charles got down from the cab of the truck and held the door open. "Okay, Jesus, the driving's all yours. Don't get any funny ideas Kowalski. I'll be right behind you."

Charles put his submachine-gun on 'safety' and climbed into the rear of the truck with the men. He sat on the knees of one of the soldiers, while clinging to the framework of the truck with his left hand and aiming his Sterling at the back of Kowalski's head with his right. As the truck lurched out from under the trees, he saw rays of sunlight coming through the bullet holes in the dusty canvas top and smelled the gun oil, leather and perspiration of the twenty soldiers who sat on the low benches running the length of the truck's cargo section. They looked alert, but rode relaxed, swaying as the truck jolted over rough parts of the road. He wondered how many times they'd done this kind of operation, and where: Africa, most likely. Some of the men spoke Spanish with French accents.

Charles looked back at the second truck and saw Hans and the sergeant smiling grimly through the dust that rose from their passage. The sun blazed down, making the covered vehicles as hot as ovens. There was no breeze at all. A perfect time of day for a siesta in some cool, high-ceilinged barracks, he thought.

He looked at the road beyond Kowalski's head. They were approaching a sentry post on the outer edge of the cornfield. Two khaki-clad soldiers waved them on. The uniforms were in a bad state, but their previous occupants had probably fared worse. Sooner than he'd expected, they passed through the cornfield, crossed the mined strip and drew up to the gate. Just like that, thought Charles. It was so easy to get into the thick of things.

He motioned for the men to duck their heads and drew back to avoid being seen from the gateway. The soldiers bent over, their heads nearly touching in the confines of the truck. The two at the tailgate made ready with their bayonets. He heard exclamations of surprise and horror from the sentries.

"Quick, let us in!" shouted Kowalski, in a hoarse voice. "We have wounded."

"Very good," thought Charles. "I'll recommend him for an Oscar."

"Open!" cried one of the sentries.

Charles heard bolts drawn back and the squeak of hinges. He saw the gate begin to open and heard a sentry's rifle clatter on the pavement. The archers in the cornfield were doing their work. As they drove into the compound, he caught sight of black arrow shafts protruding from khaki shirts.

Jesus accelerated, leaving Hans' group to deal with the gatekeepers. Charles saw lines of parked vehicles, tanks and field pieces sweep by as they sped to the second gate. The truck had barely stopped when the troops spewed out upon the pavement and rushed the guards, one of whom was able to fire a shot before he was overwhelmed. Most of the men sprinted off to the barracks, leaving the remainder to open the gate.

Charles saw Hans' truck speeding up to them. Behind came the men of the column, charging through the open entrance of the fort. As the rear gate opened, he heard the engine of a plane revving for take off. Bursts of machine-gun fire and grenade explosions came from the barracks as they drove out and stopped upon the runway.

Charles leaped out of the truck and sprawled onto the runway asphalt as the plane's machine-guns opened fire. He realized the bullets were passing overhead and ran, crouching low, to the ditch beside the runway where Jesus and Kowalski had taken cover. Hans leaped in with them, quite out of breath.

"Sergeant, come here!" Charles tried to shout over the crash of grenades and the angry drone of the aircraft engine. "What's he trying to do?"

"He wants to hit the plane with the bazooka," gasped Hans.

Rockets whooshed from the plane, one making a direct hit on Hans' truck. Charles saw the sergeant drop the bazooka and fall, just as the truck burst into flame.

"No!" cried Hans, but Charles had already sprung from the ditch and onto the runway.

Hans and Jesus emptied their Sterlings at the plane, trying to distract the pilot, as Charles dashed to rescue the fallen sergeant. He reached him before the gasoline tank of the burning truck exploded, and dragged him away. The plane seemed to be coming closer as Charles worked his way across the runway, dragging the unconscious sergeant in a slow-motion nightmare. He could see the pilot's face by the time he reached the ditch.

"Kowalski, take his legs! Easy, now." Charles darted a glance at the plane. "What's that idiot up to?"

"He's taxiing toward the trucks." Hans slipped another magazine into his Sterling.

The pilot accelerated, set the brakes and jettisoned his napalm canisters which skittered down the runway.

"Quick, out of the ditch!" The rest of Charles' words were drowned by the detonations as the canisters reached the trucks and covered the center of the runway with liquid fire. Frantically, they carried the wounded man, cursing and stumbling over the recently plowed furrows that skirted the mined strip. Exhausted, they laid the sergeant down and collapsed upon the soft earth.

"He's made a perfect ground loop," said Hans. "Look, he's going in the opposite direction."

"Is he going to take off?" asked Jesus.

"With the wind and on half a runway? He's a fool!" Hans shook his head.

The pilot revved the engine to maximum, released the brakes and accelerated. His wheels lifted off the ground, but not enough to miss the concertina wire at the end of the runway. The plane nosed over, crashed into the minefield and exploded, raising a great plume of smoke and dust.

"How is he?" Jesus watched Charles loosen the sergeant's tunic.

"He's breathing all right. There's a bad-looking gash on his shoulder and a hell of a lump starting up on his head, but he doesn't seem to be losing much blood." Charles tore open a sterile bandage packet from his first aid kit. "Give me some more sulfa powder. Good. Kowalski, raise his feet a little higher."

Hans looked up. "Here comes a jeep. It's Hoess!"

Charles saw the sergeant's eyelids move. "Wake up, there, Sergeant! Can't have you sleeping all day."

The sergeant tried to sit up, but Charles made him lie quietly.

"Sorry, Sir. Must have dozed off... Wait a minute, how did I get here?"

The jeep halted beside them.

"I'll tell you later," said Charles. "You missed out on some real fancy flying."

A trooper on horseback galloped up to the jeep and saluted. "Most of the sentries have been rounded up, Commander. They fled into the bush when they heard the firing. Not a single bunker was defended."

"Very good, Corporal. See that they are brought into the compound for processing." Hoess returned the salute and the soldier galloped away.

A breeze was starting up, idly stirring the flag which hung dispiritedly from the staff of the fort's headquarters. The prisoners assembled in the barracks compound looked equally listless and dejected as they faced the machine-guns of the column. Smoke from grenades tainted the shimmering air with the reek of explosive.

General Toral stood beside Commander Hoess. It looked as if the garrison were on review, except for the fact that General Toral was in his dressing gown.

"You are not lying to me, General." Hoess slapped his boot top impatiently with the riding crop.

"It would not enter my mind, Señor Commandante. As I told you, there were only two American advisors. One, you have captured. The other was in the plane which crashed on take-off."

"All right, I believe you."

"Now that we have settled the question of the missing American, please tell me what you intend doing with my men? It is very hot out here and many have been wounded." The General shifted his bare feet uncomfortably upon the rough stones of the compound.

"Why, General, it must be obvious to you that we are too few to take this number of prisoners." Hoess waved his riding crop with casual indifference. "Open fire!"

Charles felt the second belt of ammunition go still in his hands. Jesus had stopped firing and looked over the smoking barrel of the machine-gun for any stirring among the wind rows of khaki. A flock of vultures circled overhead, squawking at the disturbance. One by one they settled on their customary perches atop the barracks roof and beheld the feast in store for them.

General Toral gaped in disbelief. His face was ashen. "But you let them surrender, Commandante. You asked them ..."

"You are mistaken, General. I merely allowed them to exercise their wishful thinking." Hoess calmly straightened his gloves.

The general strode over to the outstretched bodies and turned around, facing Hoess. "You are the Devil himself. Go on, damn it! Shoot me! I shall die with my men."

Hoess walked up to him and took his arm. "Come now, you are much too grown up for these histrionics."

"I don't understand." The general was completely flustered, denied his supreme moment.

"You forget the service you have to perform for your country. There are certain numbered bank accounts, some safety deposit boxes which you alone can provide. The return of stolen property is not only heroic, but good for your Catholic soul."

Toral's voice had become a croak. "You do me no favors."

"On the contrary, General. On the contrary." Hoess smiled.

"Kommandant! The message has been transmitted. Control acknowledges. The capital expresses puzzlement that we should report difficulties with our transmitter." The radio operator waited expectantly.

"Thank you, that is all. We move into the capital as soon as the men have had something to eat. Come along, General. Some coffee will improve your disposition."

Thunder clouds loomed on the horizon at dusk, bringing the smell of distant rain and a cool breeze. Engines roared in the darkened compound. Men ran purposefully among the vehicles. Orders were shouted and doors slammed. The column got underway.

"Just like the old days in North Africa." Hans threw the truck into gear and took up his position in the convoy.

"I could do with a bath," said Charles.

"That's right, just like North Africa!"

Chapter 4 **THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES.**

The bald American in the next seat began to wake up as our plane circled over the Buena Vista airport.

"What time ya got?" he asked, yawning like a hippo.

"Morning. Don't know what a.m., though. We've crossed some time zones," I said, looking down on the jungle as the airliner dipped its wing. I always like a window seat, myself.

"Hmm, looks like a lotta salad down there." The American leaned his gleaming bald head in front of me and partially blocked my view. The magnificent jungle below was not of interest to him, fortunately, so he sat back and got his head out of my way. For a moment I saw the great river, winding down below like a huge anaconda.

"When we get in?" He belched and pummelled his solar plexus with a pudgy fist.

"Pretty soon."

I saw the white buildings of the capital and tried to distinguish the Presidential Palace through the gaps in the luxuriant cloud formations. It was the kind of view I imagined the Greek gods enjoying from their Olympian heights.

"Gum?" He thrust a cellophane packet in my face.

"No, thanks."

Magical moments are spoiled by clods like these, I thought, sitting back in my seat as we began the approach to the runway. The perspective was gone in any case.

"You on vacation?" He snapped his gum in a way I've never been able to imitate.

"Yeah, a rest tour."

"Looks like you need it."

"Thanks. I always enjoy a compliment so early in the morning."

"What sort of work ya do?"

"Retired."

"Lucky so-and-so. I gotta work for my living." He chewed noisily, without closing his lips.

"No kidding." I feigned an interest in the airline's travel brochure, but to no avail.

"I'm a visiting lecturer."

"Oh."

"Bet you can't guess my field."

"Nuclear physics."

"Naw, you're way off. I give lectures on Ulysses."

"... S. Grant?"

"No, Ulysses, by James Joyce." He looked annoyed.

"Haven't read it."

"You should. There's everything you need to know about life in there."

"No wonder I'm so ignorant." I wiped his saliva from my stubbled cheek.

The 'fasten seat belt' sign came up, and soon we were down among the palms. A runway appeared beneath us. There was the familiar bump and screech of tires, and we were in. The plane shuddered as the jets thrust in reverse. Slowly, we taxied toward the control tower and the waiting customs officials.

"You seen the papers?" He popped in another stick of gum as he spoke.

"Try not to." I leaned away from the mint-flavored spray that accompanied his words.

"Awful, just awful. They're still lookin' for those three guys."

"What three guys?"

"The three who swiped the million dollars in Frisco. They say the coins were in mint condition, real collectors' items, so the haul could come to another ten million on top of the face value."

"You sound like a coin collector, yourself."

"I'd sure like to be. But those guys, wow! They got the collector bug in a big way."

"They haven't caught 'em yet?"

"New, think they skipped the country."

"Smart move." I nodded appreciatively.

"Aw, it won't do 'em any good. They'll catch 'em."

"I wouldn't be too sure, not these days."

"Yeah, I know, but three guys, not a chance."

"You think there were only three?"

"Oh, maybe a few more, but three was all it took to do the job. They sure blew hell out of California. Lucky there weren't four of 'em."

"You mean, like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?"

"Those guys were amateurs compared to these three."

"But they always slip up in the end, don't they?"

"Yeah, like in the movies."

The stewardess I'd been eyeing most of the flight looked even more attractive when she showed her nervousness at the microphone.

"Señoras y señores favor de ..." Then she shifted into pleasantly-accented English, repeating our landing instructions.

I'd remember her pretty face as I always did. Over the years I'd stored a good many pretty faces in my head, each one as clear and striking as on first sight. Sometimes I leafed through my mental album, looking at them and remembering the time and place in which I saw them. Not bad for an old man, I guess. Those faces would lead me back through the maze of years, and I would remember how I felt at the time, as a younger man. The human mind is like a time machine. It just takes practice.

"Daniels." The bald American wanted to shake hands.

"Sorry, guess I was dozing. Fred's the name." I shook hands with him, noticing that his palm was sweaty.

The other passengers were standing up and stiffly moving toward the exits, reminding me of invalids who were trying out their artificial legs. We were midway between the fore and aft exits, so we sat smiling inanely at one another until I pretended to take an interest in the tedious customs formalities just visible from my window.

As the last of the passengers seeped past us, I took my valise from under the seat and got my raincoat down from the rack. Meanwhile, Daniels was festooning himself with cameras and all sorts of little leather cases which dangled from a network of straps, adding another foot or so to his girth.

The stewardess offered us sweets on a tray as we left the plane, but I declined, telling her in Spanish that her sweet smile was enough for me. I hand out flattery shamelessly in Spanish, but I'd feel a perfect dolt even approaching such floridness in English or German. I left the American at customs, trying to convince certain officials that he wasn't an illegal importer of camera equipment.

"Taxi, Señor?" The driver looked more like a locomotive fireman who'd survived a train wreck, but I allowed him to take my valise.

"Al Hotel Internacional, por favor." I got into the decrepit old car and slammed the door. Looking back, I saw the American hurrying toward me, laden with his horrendous amount of gear. He waved to attract my attention, but I pretended myopia. As we drove off, I saw him hailing another cab, looking a little frantic about it.

Daniels was a real character. There hadn't been any write-ups about the gold robbery in any of the papers. I'd read them all. There was only one brief announcement on television, and after that, silence. I didn't like the way he played the game. He was too erratic. I've always preferred a certain consistency ...

The taxi ceased its bone-jarring progress over the streetcar tracks and uneven cobbles of the Avenida, and drew up to the crumbling façade of the Hotel Internacional. I got out, paid the driver, and rubbed my back to make sure my spine was still in place. Looking up at the rusted iron balconies and sagging shutters I tried to visualize the hotel in its days of grandeur.

The Hotel Internacional had done great business before the advent of the airplane, since it was equidistant from the railroad station and the steamer landing, but now it was wholly dependent on the overflow of guests from its more fashionable successors. The only clue to its past reputation could be gleaned by standing in one of the massive porticoes and looking down the broad, palm lined Avenida which ended at the gates of the Presidential Palace. The original intention was that the Ministry of War would face the palace at the opposite end of the Avenida, but there were rumors of certain sums of money being received by the incumbent president in exchange for giving the hotel such a prestigious location. Some said that the wife of the hotel's owner had been the president's mistress, while others maintained that the president had no wish to face the cannons which adorned the entrance to the War Ministry. At any rate, the Ministry came to occupy a ramshackle building on a nondescript sidestreet and the hotel became a place where coups were planned, rather than executed.

The hotel achieved the height of its glamorous reputation in the days of the rubber boom. Army officers and politicians left off intriguing in order to sample the most fashionable ladies of the evening who came to grace the capital and incidentally to earn fortunes for their services. Famous opera stars and entertainers of every description came up the river to stay at the hotel which was conveniently located near the lavishly constructed Opera House. A newly-installed streetcar system was a source of pride in the capital and also, furnished the hotel with electric illumination for late-night festivities.

It was said that La Belle Otero had bathed in champagne in the hotel's fountain, and there would be no point in denying such a story, because it would have shrunk to insignificance beside the many extravaganzas witnessed in the lofty foyers. There was the time, for instance, when Don Alfredo Perez, one of the rubber barons, brought in five richly-caparisoned Indian elephants to complement a daughter's wedding reception.

Orchestras came from the concert halls of Europe to play in the ballroom, and great chefs favored the establishment with excellent cuisine. The dining room, a vast expanse of arches, potted palms and electric fans, was presided over by the best waiters in three continents. Gypsy violinists strolled among the tables while the diners enjoyed the choicest lobster and wines to be found on the planet. It was even said that red caviar, reserved for the Shah of Persia alone, had found its way to the hotel's tables, but this was the Hotel Internacional and anything could be believed, no matter how amazing or scandalous.

An old man favors the familiar over the fashionable, so I returned to the place, even though I'd come by plane. As I strode through the great arcade I remembered other days in the hotel, days when my pace had been quicker and my hopes incredibly high. That for me was youth, living in constant expectation of what might happen. Age was simply having lived to see what, out of all the possibilities, had actually happened. On the balance I lost those optimistic expectations, but I also lost the terrible anxieties of Youth: Would I fail? Would I marry the right girl? Would I catch some disease or be crippled so that I would live in misery? Would I make enough money to retire on? Would I find the

right job? Would I find comradeship and recognition? On the whole, I was glad those trying days were over.

I entered the decaying lobby. Seeing no one at the desk, I banged on the elaborately-decorated, but rusty call bell, raising echoes among the shadowy arches and corridors. When no one appeared I put down my suitcase and strolled over to a dust-covered music box.

It had a little orchestra of toy musicians who played for a group of toy couples on a miniature ballroom floor. Everywhere the little scene showed the pitiless work of time. The musicians' painted features were scarred or obliterated, their instruments damaged or missing. The little conductor had lost an arm, and the dancers looked a tattered bunch, indeed. The dance floor was covered with dust and strewn with dead flies and cockroaches.

Idly, I dropped the required coin in the slot and turned the hand crank to wind up the mechanism. The music box came to life grudgingly, with much whirring and clicking of cogwheels and escapements. The dancers began to twirl and the orchestra went into spasmodic motion. Above the noise of the weary mechanism I heard the first notes of a charming little tune.

"Señor, do you wish a room? Ah, welcome, Don Federico!"

I turned around to see the desk clerk, manager, bellboy, head porter and doorman standing behind me. His moustache was going a little gray. "Good morning, Armando. Yes, the usual room thirteen next to the boiler."

"Don Federico always wants hot water."

"You know me. I can do without a roof over my head if I can just start the day with a hot bath."

We turned toward the music box, startled by a loud crack from the mechanism. The lively, yet plaintive tune which I had been trying to follow became a jumble of discordant notes interspersed by loud whirrings and clashings of cogwheels.

"I think the governor has failed. Can't we switch it off, Armando?"

"No, Señor. It must run down of its own accord. I think the machine is destroying itself. See, it bleeds."

Cogwheels were falling upon the tiles of the lobby where they bounced and spun like dervishes. A cloud of dust arose, obscuring the frenzied motions of the dancers and orchestra. A final crack and the whole works came to a stop. The devastation was complete.

"What was that tune, Armando?"

"I do not know, Señor. I don't believe the machine has been played since the good times."

"What a shame. Do you mind if I take a small souvenir?"

"Of course not. We will give the debris away as trinkets for the begging urchins."

I reached through the broken glass cover and retrieved the remaining arm of the little conductor. I felt a strange affection for him having seen that he carried out his duty to the last.

"About my room ..." I put the arm in my coat pocket.

"Unfortunately, Señor, it is already occupied by a foreign gentleman, like yourself, who has this exotic craving for hot water."

"And room eleven?"

"The same. Our only vacant rooms are on the top floor."

"Amazing. You mean the place is nearly booked up?"

"Sí, Señor. It is like the good times, but the elevator was working then."

"Mostly foreigners, you say."

"Yes, and they keep to themselves, too. No banquets, no girls. Maybe they are all queer."

"An unlikely coincidence, I should think, an army of homosexual tightwads descending on Buena Vista. Well, if my room's on the top floor, we'd better get going. I want my bath before nightfall."

A buxom but very homely chambermaid came toward us, her sandals slapping on the tiles.

"Maria! Tell Diego to get the boiler steaming. This gentleman must be boiled before evening."

Maria nodded, crossed herself and went off muttering about evil vapors.

We arrived, somewhat out of breath, at my room. Armando threw open the door with as much ceremony as possible, allowing for the rusted hinges which protested like a pig being slaughtered. I wrinkled my nose at the musty air of the room.

"Maria will dust the room and bring bedding. Do you wish it fumigated?"

"No, I'll see to that."

Armando opened the warped shutters with my help and the darkened room suddenly became cheerful in the bright noon sun. I stood on the balcony and looked down the Avenida to the sentries lounging at the gates of the Presidential Palace. Twin streaks of rust and sagging wires marked the abandoned streetcar line. There was no sign of life on the Avenida and no shade either, at this hour. A knife-sharpener's pan pipes called in the distance.

Armando indicated the room telephone, saying it had not been working since the 'good times,' but that I could order anything I wanted by shouting down the stairwell. The raucous shouting of the chambermaid showed the system to be effective.

"Diablos, another guest! What is going on today?" Armando vanished into the darkened corridor.

Soon, Maria appeared with bedding and a dustmop. She was well-practiced. In no time she had the dust off the floor and into the air, where it circulated freely, lending a subtle grayness to my white linen suit. Coughing, I retreated to the dining room for an early lunch.

The stucco was coming off the arches in large chunks, the paint having been the first to go. That was not to say that certain additions had not been made to the dining room decor. Splotches of mildew were spreading around the bases of the pillars. Eventually there would be moss, then frogs would come to chase the cockroaches. The jungle was reasserting itself. I imagined Armando serving lunch in a vine-draped clearing on the ballroom floor. Gazing up past the blades of the electric fans which had stopped turning long ago, beyond the recollection of the hotel's present occupants, I thought I saw small, dark shapes clinging from the vaulted ceiling, but the sunlight never penetrated into those recesses. The room was so dimly-lit that I barely recognized Daniels, let alone the species of bat sharing our quarters.

"Dr. Daniels, I presume?" I managed a grim smile.

"Hey! Pull up a chair and sit down, man. What are you doin' in this dump?"

"I could ask the same of you."

"Well, you know ... These fellowship grants aren't what they used to be."

"Neither is this place." I was growing accustomed to the darkness, and saw that most of the dining room was being used as some sort of warehouse.

"Every hotel is packed, even this Dracula dormitory."

"Yes, I imagine the place has hot and cold running bats."

Bats are warm-blooded, aren't they?"

"Not dead ones." I kicked one across the floor. The dead bat came to rest beside a pair of human legs protruding from under a shroud like tablecloth.

"Who's under the table over there?" I asked.

"One of Armando's cousins. Armando says he works nights." He looked at the dead bat lying on the dusty tiles. "Hell, that was a bat! Jesus, I hate those muthas, can't stand 'em."

"Better get used to them. They won't go away. Besides, they don't eat much." I could see that Daniels was not cheered by this information.

The figure under the table began to snore, just as slippers footsteps padded toward us. Into the circle of kerosene light stepped Armando.

"Have the señores decided what they will have to eat?"

"Yeah, I'll take whatever you've got as long as it's an inch-thick, rare T-bone," said Daniels.

"The señor is surely joking." Armando looked at me for an explanation.

"Like hell, I'm joking!" Daniels bleated.

I intervened, taking a fatherly tone. "Daniels, if you'll simmer down, I can explain the problem."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. There isn't a T-bone steak in the whole country. They don't make 'em."

"Well, give me something like it, and make it thick and rare."

"I wouldn't advise that, either. There's no refrigeration to speak of."

"So?"

"So the meat you get has to be slaughtered the same day it's eaten."

"Gamey, huh?"

"And tough. Also, they have lots of tapeworm and beef trichinosis out here."

"Well, what am I supposed to do, go on a meatless diet?"

"No. Just have what I'm ordering. Armando, two of your Creole Beefsteaks, please, very well-done, and four Pacificos."

"Sí, Señor, as always, I have already begun the preparation." He turned toward the kitchen.

"Hey, Armando, before you disappear, you can switch on the lights?"

"The lights, Señor Daniels?" He was perplexed all over again. "How can one foreigner, sitting at a table, cause so much trouble?"

"Yeah, dum-dum, the electric lights. This kerosene stinks. Besides, I like to see what I'm eating."

"But, Señor, there is no electricity."

"When did the power go off?"

"Oh, I think when my grandfather ran the hotel."

"He means, around the nineteen-twenties," I said, blandly.

"Jeezus Christ!" Daniels looked as if we were playing a joke on him.

Armando padded off to the kitchen, leaving Daniels staring out into murky space, shaking his head in utter disbelief.

"Don't feel so bad." I tried to cheer him up. "After all, we put a rocket on the moon, didn't we?"

"Yeah, and left the rest of the world a thousand years behind. Hey, where is everybody, all the other clowns who'er usin' up the hot water?"

"Maybe they're eating out, or maybe they're crash-dieting."

"Smells fishy to me."

"I hope not. It's supposed to be beefsteak, you know."

"No, I mean ..."

"I know what you meant, but here comes Armando."

He set two steaming plates before us, deploying the bottles of beer like sentries alongside.

"Don't stand on ceremony," I said. "Dig in."

"What is it?" Daniels prodded his steak gingerly, as if it might leap up and wrest his fork away at any moment.

"Bistec criollo, Creole Beefsteak. It's just fresh, lean, thinly-sliced steak, well-grilled and fried with lots of chopped tomatoes and onions. Oh yes, a little chili pepper for flavor."

"Looks like a dog's breakfast."

"You're supposed to eat it, not look at it. Well, how is it?"

"Um, not bad. Just tough."

"That's par for the course."

"What's the idea of all the tomatoes and onions?"

"It's all very scientific." I paused to swallow a chunk which had so far resisted the most determined chewing, and would probably endure its immersion in stomach acid. "The cooking kills the bugs in the beef and the bugs on the tomatoes and onions. The chili pepper kills the taste of the bugs and the beef, and the onions and tomatoes kill the taste of the chili peppers. Theoretically, the whole mess should go prompt critical and vaporize the kitchen, but all the ingredients just neutralize one another."

Daniels began to choke on a mouthful, and I thumped him on the back.

"It's not so bad," he said, tears in his eyes.

"Shut up and drink your beer."

Daniels insisted on accompanying me for an afternoon stroll around town. He was sticking to me like a limpet, so I made the best of things. As it was, I thought I could do my business effectively, even with his prying into it. We stepped out into the blazing sun, blinking at the drastic change from the cavern-like dining room.

"Don't think it'll rain before evening." I looked at the clouds.

"Where are we going?"

"Let's see where those streetcar tracks go."

"Do we have to?"

"If you're coming on Fred's Guided Tour, you do."

"Hell, it's hot." Daniels mopped his brow with a dirty handkerchief.

"Yeah." I shooed off a swarm of beggars, and we began to walk over the uneven pavement that bordered the Paseo de las Victorias, or Victory Promenade, as the narrow, dusty street was called. I wore a disreputable-looking Panama hat with a wide, battered brim, and Daniels courted heatstroke in one of those absurd New York efforts which looked like a damaged fez to which a tiny snap-brim had been added. I marveled at the fashion designer who was able to get away with it, getting people to pay money to be uncomfortable and at the same time look ridiculous. The perspiration was running down Daniels' face as we crossed over to the shady side of the street.

The rusty tracks led us past the National University, a dilapidated structure that served as an ornate perch for vultures which croaked and flapped their wings as they watched us from above. Weathered planks over doors and windows showed streaks of rust from the spikes which held them in place, driven carelessly into the fluted stone pilasters.

I pointed to the crumbling, pock-marked façade where the name 'Universidad Nacional' was barely visible. "I don't think you'll be lecturing in there. The place was closed during the student riots a few years ago, and nobody's in any hurry to reopen it."

Daniels gave a worried chuckle. "Oh, yeah I knew about that. Actually, I'm giving my lectures at the Faculty of Medicine, in case you'd like to come."

"Thanks for the invitation. I'll make a point of it. It's never too late to learn something, you know."

The way Daniels bit his lip, I knew he'd have to make a few hasty arrangements. His cover was getting so thin it was becoming transparent. It was obvious that he'd been sent down to keep tabs on me, but his unsatisfactory preparation indicated a certain desperation or befuddlement on the part of his employers. I wondered why he'd been sent on such short notice.

We came to the abandoned streetcar terminal which teemed with wretched families who had come away from the boredom of country life to breed in the pestilence of the city. They crowded the disused streetcars which they shared with the rats that flourished on their filth. The only sound one could hear above the squawking of vultures and carrion crows was the constant screaming of babies.

Bypassing this infernal place, we turned a corner and arrived at the high iron fence surrounding the Botanical Garden. After paying the guard a nominal fee, we entered a different world. Here was peace, fragrance, beauty, and the tranquility of water dripping from the leaves of giant ferns, each drop catching the sun with dazzling brilliance.

Parakeets darted overhead, protected in this verdant sanctuary from the hordes of street urchins and their catapults.

Daniels wished that he were someplace else. He wrinkled his nose. "You really are a swinger. Is this what you do for kicks?"

I paid no attention, savoring the clean-smelling air of the garden. From the angle of the sun I guessed that it was nearly four o'clock. We had come in plenty of time.

Then I saw her standing between two royal palms that flanked the path ahead of us. She was more grown up now, her honey-colored hair no longer in pigtails, but drawn back into a bun of pure gold. Her skin was almost as white as the blouse she wore, in contrast to the black riding boots and breeches which revealed her lithe figure. She took a step toward me, about to say something, the innocent smile of recent childhood lighting her face. Seeing Daniels, she tossed her head back and surveyed him with a glare of pure ice that accentuated her fine profile. The ice thawed as her blue eyes met mine, and I saw the sparkle of mischief in them before she turned and vanished into a thicket of rhododendrons which encroached upon the path.

Daniels was rooted to the spot, oblivious that he was standing in a mud puddle. "Wow! Now there's a piece of stuff I'd like to get into. You know her, Pop?"

"Von Mannerheim's granddaughter," I thought. "What did she want to tell me? Damn this leering goon!"

"No, never saw her before," I said. "She was nice, wasn't she?"

I half expected him to drop down on all fours and sniff the bushes where she'd been, yelping and whining appropriately. Marlene had gone, and that was that. Then I realized what she wanted to tell me, thanks to Daniels.

I tapped him on the arm. "Let's get back to the hotel. I just remembered something."

"Hell, just when things were getting interesting." He nodded his head uneasily. "Okay, I know, 'Fred's Guided Tour.'"

We left the garden and turned down the street

Daniels took my arm and stopped. "Hey, the hotel's back that way!"

"I thought we might make a circle. Besides, the way we came was dangerous."

"Look, Pop, I'm beat. You trying to scare me, or are you getting paranoid?"

"Okay, we'll go back the way we came, just to show you I'm neither a sadist nor a psycho."

The sun was low in the sky as we passed the streetcar terminal. Two of them were waiting in the shadows, and jumped us as we walked by. The first thing I knew was that two hands tried to thrust their way into my front trouser pockets, then withdrew. Daniels yelled, and I spun around to see our assailants as they stepped back for room to draw their switchblades. Like a dancer in a budget production of Billy the Kid's Ballet. I stepped back, regained my balance, and drew the .38 Colt I had stuck in my trouser belt at the small of my back. Taking dead aim at the nearest, I told them to be off. They stood for a moment, gripped by fear and surprise, but turned in time to save themselves, and sprinted down the squalid Paseo.

"Did they get anything off you?" asked Daniels, breathlessly.

"No. Let's get out of here, fast." I began to run.

The puffing Daniels was so near collapse after two blocks that we had to stop. We strolled, that is, he staggered and I strolled another two blocks before he recovered his breath.

"What, he panted, "was that all about?"

"Amateurs, but they'll know better next time. Then they'll cut our throats first, and go through our pockets later."

"But, you pointed a gun at 'em. You gotta expect hostility if you carry guns around."

"You mean, they wouldn't have pulled those knives if I'd been unarmed? LSD and lollipops! I'd hate to have you as witness on my behalf."

"You wouldn't have shot 'em, would you?"

"Look, I don't pull guns on people unless I intend to shoot 'em, and then I may give 'em two seconds to give me one good reason why they shouldn't stop one. That's what they had, two seconds, and they took advantage of it."

"Don't you have any feeling for human life?"

"In quality, not quantity."

"You're a savage!"

"And that's why we're both alive to argue about it. You're a regular bleeding heart this evening, Daniels. Coming down with dysentery, or something?"

"Aw, lay off!"

That was better. I much preferred Daniels the slob to Daniels the humanitarian.

As we entered the deserted and dimly-lit lobby of the hotel, I heard boisterous singing coming from the dining room, of all places. Since it was almost dinnertime, I decided to see what was going on, followed closely by a very disconcerted Daniels. We went in, to find the immense room in brilliant transformation. Dozens of kerosene lamps bathed the scene in a warm, yellow glow, revealing two hundred men, all about the same age, dressed in short-sleeved shirts and denim trousers. They sat at two long trestle tables in a room now bare of the mysterious crates and boxes I'd seen that afternoon.

The men were being served by Maria and Diego, their numerous children, Armando, and a fellow I imagined was Armando's cousin, the one who worked nights. They rushed back and forth from table to kitchen, eyes rolling with desperation, as they carried large loaves of bread and steaming plates of very enticing stew. The hotel staff were so busy that they didn't know we'd come in.

Now and then, some of the men would leave off their animated conversations and sing, joined by others. They made periodic journeys to a row of large tubs of ice from which protruded the necks of many bottles of beer, and made other journeys out into the patio where the once-dry fountain served as a pissoir.

It wasn't long before we were noticed. A hard-looking man older than the others, rose from the head of the nearest table and raised his hand for silence.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he said, with a strong German accent. "Your places have been reserved. Please join us."

Sure enough, there were two empty chairs at his end of the table. All eyes were turned toward us, and the whole group waited expectantly.

"Jeez!" Daniels looked worried.

I pulled him along with me. "Come on, we mustn't miss a free meal. It looks good, too."

Before we sat down, our host introduced himself.

"I am a director of the Vienna Men's Choir. We have come to sing at the Opera House."

"We'll enjoy hearing your performance." I managed to stifle a burst of laughter. This fellow was worse than Daniels. The Opera House roof had collapsed years ago.

"Uh, I've gotta go," said Daniels, half getting up from his chair. "A date with a señorita, you know."

The 'choir director' placed a heavy hand on his arm, drawing him back into his chair. "No, please, not until you've had your dinner and some beer. I must insist."

Seeing that the others were watching him, Daniels reluctantly agreed. Plates of stew appeared, and one of our table mates was kind enough to bring us beer. The conversations resumed, interrupted by outbursts of singing, and we were made to feel like part of the group, although Daniels seemed dubious about something as he picked at his stew. I found it excellent. Amazing what could be done with the local beef if you cooked it long enough. The cold Pacifico was delicious.

I soon finished my beer, and the director told a fellow named Horst to get me another. I noticed Daniels hadn't touched his, which was unusual, as he enjoyed beer, especially cold beer, and this was chilled to perfection. Seeing that I was on my second beer, and nearly finished with my first helping of stew, he sipped his beer tentatively, and made a more determined effort on his stew. Finding that everything tasted all right, he soon had it put away and received his second helping.

The director was in a jovial mood. "As our honored guests this evening, you have only to tell us what you want. We shall do the rest to the best of our ability."

I recognized the music of a song, but couldn't make out the words. Then it came to me, 'Zwölfland, Zwölfland über Alles ...'

"Oh, no," I thought, "does Daniels ...?"

But Daniels' head had found a mushy landing in his stew, and he was fast asleep.

"He won't like that," I thought. "Stew stains all over his Mandarin Orange van Heusen shirt and purple, hand-painted tie, not to mention the damage done to his Nieman Marcus clover-green slacks."

The director stood up, and the room was hushed. "Gentlemen," he said in German, "we finish this last beer of the evening as a toast: Tomorrow's success. Prosit!"

"Prosit!" thundered the group, and we drained our glasses.

The director gave me a pat on the back. "Now we must go, my friend, but you and your companion are welcome to stay and finish the beer. There are probably another hundred bottles in the tubs."

"Thank you, but I may not finish all hundred tonight."

"Possibly not, but your friend can help you when he wakes up."

"With a friend like that, I don't need any enemies."

"He will sleep quite well, but he will have a bad headache in the morning."

"Yes, I gathered that."

"Also, 'wiederssehen.'"

"Gute Nacht, Herr Dirigent, und viel Glück. I shook his hand.

The men filed out swiftly. One by one, the lamps were extinguished, and Armando and I were left in the vast, darkened room, sipping our beers in thoughtful silence.

"Armando, what about my bath?"

"I am very sorry, Señor. The others used up all the hot water, and the boiler is shut down.

"Tomorrow, then, but no more funny business. You've just run out of excuses."

"Oh sí, Señor. Tomorrow there will be hot water, without fail."

I left the dregs of beer in my glass. "Well, I've had my quota. Let's clear up this mess."

"But, Señor Federico, you are a guest."

"This mess, I mean." I pointed to Daniels. "Help me get him up to his room and bring him lots of beer in the morning. Best thing for a headache."

I woke up late the next morning and saw the sun peeping through the louvered shutters, making zebra patterns in the spacious bedroom. My mouth was dry, and I was glad I'd thought to bring up a beer from the dining room the night before. I took the bottle from the nightstand, uncapped it with the opener on my pocketknife and drank the beer before it foamed over. It was cool and very pleasant.

I slipped on my trousers and boots and opened the shutters, letting in the warm sunlight. "Surely, that water must be hot by now, I thought, and went into taps. They were well-rusted. I got one open by kicking it with the heel of my boot. The other one proved equally co-operative under repeated blows, but no water came. I bent down and listened, hearing a faint gurgle, then a feeble hiss of air. After kicking the taps once more to make sure they were wide open, I was almost inundated by twin gushes of filthy black liquid that smelled of the River Styx. Time passed, and I observed that the liquid was beginning to lighten to a coffee brown. It was then that I noticed I was standing in several inches of this foul substance. The bathtub spewed its contents directly onto the floor, the black deluge crossing the tiles to gurgle away into some corner drain or rathole. If it were the latter, I would have no trouble making the acquaintance of anyone quartered below me.

Someone knocked on the door and I opened it, expecting to see the sodden form of an irate gringo, but it was Maria with a towel. She laid her burden on one of the dusty chairs and viewed me with suspicion.

"Why don't you take your boots off?" Maria looked as if I were up to no good.

"I always wear them when I take a bath." I could see that sarcasm was utterly wasted. "You must be very busy."

"Yes, so many gringos. They do not tip Maria, despite all the work I do for them."

I took the hint, giving her a peso which she accepted as her due.

"The water has been heating all morning, Señor. Surely, you have had enough." She had a horror of people who bathed in hot water, thinking it unbalanced the humors of the body, and filled the world with contagion. Not only were there numerous physical dangers involved in contact with hot water, but Maria's religious background depicted moral dangers as well. Knowing what she was thinking, I showed her to the door.

"But none of your hot water has come up here, so I am still quite innocent of a bath. Tell Diego to keep stoking, or I'll go down there and make things very warm for him."

Maria departed, shaking her head and crossing herself compulsively, as she always did when she felt the influence of Satan, and I rummaged through my suitcase for something to use as a stopper for the bathtub, finding that the lid of a large tin of Tiger Balm would serve the purpose.

The water which the taps spat out was an acceptable weak coffee color. I discovered the hot water tap by its tepid feel, since both of the taps were marked 'hot,' and let the tub fill. Soon I felt like a Roman senator.

Outside, in the heat waves of afternoon, I heard the crackle of squibs accompanying some Christo-pagan fiesta and the rumble of an approaching thunderstorm. Traffic had increased on the Avenida, and people shouted in the street below. "It's a good day for celebrating," I thought, making a small tidal wave and letting the soapy water break over my shoulders, splashing some on the floor. "This is the life!"

There was a loud knock on the door of my room.

"Nobody home!" I shouted. "Don't want any, whatever it is."

The knocking grew louder and more insistent.

I got out of the tub, grabbed the threadbare towel, and stood in front of the door. "Now listen, I am getting angry! You are interrupting my bath. If the hotel is on fire, I don't want to know. I'll read about it in next week's newspaper. Now, get the hell away and leave me alone!"

The heavy door burst off its hinges, nearly falling on top of me. I jumped back, dropping my towel, as two dishevelled soldiers sprawled into the room. I advanced and retrieved the miserable towel, accompanied by the lewd chuckles of the soldiers.

"What a thing?" commented one. "The old gringo has a nice present for the señoritas."

"Yes, and it's sired gentlemen, not cojonudos like you. I wrapped the towel around myself.

"Silence, fools!" yelled an officer. "What are you doing, taking a siesta? Get up, and bring in the machine-gun, this instant!"

The soldiers picked themselves up off the floor and trundled in a heavy, water-cooled Browning which they set up on my balcony.

The officer saluted me. "I regret the inconvenience, Señor but there is a slight disturbance."

"If you gentlemen will pardon me, I shall return to my bath."

"By all means, Señor. Just behave as if we were not here."

The officer was encouraging and the bath was tempting, but I lingered in fascination, watching groups of people swarm across the Avenida, shouting and waving their arms. Small knots of cavalry darted along the pavement. I could not tell whether they were pursued or in pursuit. All sorts of thunder was booming, but there were few clouds in the sky. Suddenly, artillery shells began to whistle overhead. Several burst upon the Avenida, toppling palm trees and raising dust. Then the barrage shifted to another sector of the city, and just as suddenly, the Avenida was still, except for some fruit rolling into the gutter from an overturned cart near the Cantina Perez. A few bodies lay sprawled upon the pavement.

Again, the street came to life, this time peopled by skirmishers in light khaki. Grudgingly, they backed across the Avenida, firing slowly and steadily at unseen targets. A machine-gun opened up pocking the façade of the Cantina Perez and filling the air with screaming ricochets. About a dozen of the skirmishers fell, spun around by the force of the bullets, and the remainder ran off.

For a time the Avenida was deserted, the only signs of activity being splashes of dust as bullets glanced off the cobblestones and stuccoed walls. A stray cannon shell shook the building as it exploded nearby, followed by human outcries and the crunch of falling masonry. I began to hope that some nitwit of an artillery spotter had not mistaken the hotel for the president's palace. Clutching my towel with ludicrous determination, I listened as hand grenades crashed among the side streets. There was nothing else to do.

Then I saw them. They wore gray-green uniforms and moved like wisps of wind-driven fog as they rushed from cover to cover in extended formation.

The officer gnashed his teeth in frustration. "Caramba! At least fifty have already crossed the Avenida."

"But, Señor Teniente, they do not provide us with a worthwhile target."

"Open fire!"

The Browning was deafening in the room, but otherwise, not very effective. I could have told the lieutenant that a good observation point was not necessarily a good firing point, but these oafs were going to learn the hard way.

The officer saw part of the error. "Move the gun forward, fools! You are firing over their heads."

I moved forward for a better view, then decided to step back smartly and take refuge in the bathroom. The machine-gun resumed firing until one wall of the room caved in. The shell-burst was stunning. I thought the ceiling was coming down, but it was just myself, rising to meet it. Regaining my feet, I was grateful for the thick walls of the hotel. At least it was built to take punishment. I had lost my hearing, but I could see a figure moving erratically in the dust and smoke. It was one of the soldiers.

"The bastards have tanks, our tanks." He staggered out of the room and tottered down the stairs, leaving smears of blood on the tiles.

I tried to think of something to do: Run out into the street? Too many bullets flying around. Take refuge in the cellar? Troops on mop-up toss in grenades before asking questions. I got back into the tub, coughing from the dust and wishing that I had another cold beer.

At the sound of small arms fire on the lower floor, I broke into loud and boisterous song. Heavy boots paused at the doorway and entered the room with a rush.

"Down by the old mill stream ...!"

"Two dead ones over there, Sergeant."

"Very good."

A finger tapped me on the head. I turned and looked into the face of a European clad in gray green, the cut of his uniform fresh out of the Third Reich.

"Do you understand me, old man?" The sergeant spoke in heavily-accented Spanish.

"Yes, but I've become a little hard of hearing, so you'll have to shout."

He obliged me by yelling in my ear. "You are to remain in the hotel until further notice."

"Very good, but what if someone tries to leave?"

"He will be shot. That would be unfortunate."

"Yes, it would be."

"Good day. Sorry to have disturbed you." He saluted and turned on his heel.

"Good day." I dabbled my toes in the dust-covered water.

My ears were still ringing as I dressed, after shaking the plaster off my clothes. I was afraid I'd gone permanently deaf from the shell-burst, but was happy to discover that I could hear the thunder which accompanied the afternoon downpour.

The storm howled and buffeted the hotel with lusty vengeance, threatening to flood my room in short order. As there was no way of stopping the gap left by the shell, I broke camp and moved into the next room, which I helped Maria clean up, insisting that she use a wet mop on the dust.

When she had finished, I unpacked my belongings and sprawled on the freshly-made bed, thinking that a little nap would be just right before dinner. Even the roar and clatter of passing armored vehicles could not keep me from dozing off, and it was early the next morning when I finally woke up. The fatigue of the plane trip had caught up with me.

Rising with the sun, I threw open the shutters and stepped onto the balcony for a look at the Avenida. There were no bodies in sight, and gangs of normally unemployed were busy tidying up the damage, overseen by soldiers in gray-green. Shell holes were filled, fallen palms cut up and hauled away, and the Avenida brought back to its day-before-yesterday appearance, but it looked as if the khaki era had come to an end.

I had a shave and went down for breakfast, meeting Armando in the dining room.

"Good morning, Don Federico, I trust you slept well."

"Thank you, I certainly did. What do you recommend for breakfast, Armando?"

"The huevos rancheros are good this morning, as you like chili peppers, and anyway, that is the only thing Maria has on the stove."

"I'll take them, with black coffee and a big glass of orange juice." I sat down at one of the cleaner tables.

"As always, Señor." Armando smiled.

"Armando, how many coups have you seen while you've been here?"

He pursed his lips in thought for a moment. "Oh, seven, maybe eight in thirty years."

"Hmm, not bad. I've managed to avoid seeing most of them."

"They are very boring, Señor. You always see the same faces but in a different order. The football matches are more interesting."

"Yes, but more dangerous to watch, I think."

"Ah, I do not worry. If it is your time to die, there is nothing you can do about it."

"You may be right. I've deserved it on many occasions. Perhaps Death does not like me." I flicked a large cockroach off the table.

"As they say in the magazines, you are probably using the wrong toothpaste." He grinned mischievously.

"Very good. I like that," I chuckled.

"Oh, before I forget. The soldiers say the guests may watch the victory parade, but they are still confined to the hotel."

"Guests"? You mean, Daniels, and I."

"And one other."

"That's interesting. Who is he?"

"A foreigner."

"Doesn't he eat?"

"He takes meals in his room, and listens to classical music on his tape recorder. He hasn't gone out since he arrived."

"A very sociable fellow. You know, Armando, I'm beginning to suspect that you engineered this coup so you could hang on to the few customers you have left."

"Oh, not me, Señor but I am fortunate to have guests who pay in foreign currency."

"Stop grinning like that. You'll injure your face. By the way, have you seen Daniels?"

"Yes, he came down for supper last night."

"How did he look?"

"Terrible. He was white and trembled all over, like this." Armando gave me his impression of a spastic with a fit of epilepsy.

"Very expressive, but you're exaggerating, surely."

"Oh, no, Don Federico. He spilled his soup into his lap as soon as I served it, and went back to his room, steadying himself by holding onto the bannister."

"Where is he now?"

"In his room."

After breakfast, I paid my respects. The sound of the typewriter ceased as I knocked on Daniels' door.

"Yeah, who is it?"

"It's Fred. Are you busy?"

"Uh, no. Just a minute."

I heard papers being shuffled and objects being put away. A heavy piece of furniture scraped upon the tiles. A few moments later, the door opened and I saw the perspiring face of the bald American.

"Yeah, what can I do for you?" Daniels looked as if he'd been washed in a strong bleach and put through a wringer.

"I hate to bother you, but I was wondering if I could see the parade from your balcony. The second floor is always good for these things."

"Uh, the parade?" He stood back from the door and motioned for me to come in. The room smelled of someone being sick.

"Yeah, Armando tells me we can see the victory parade when it comes up the Avenida. You sure you're all right, Daniels?"

"Me? Sure, I'm all right."

"Sometimes the beer goes off in this hot climate. You'll get used to it."

"Not if I can help it."

"You know what you need?"

"No."

"A hair of the dog. I'll order up some cold beers and you can drink your medicine while we watch the parade."

"Well ..." He looked dubious. "I'll think about it, but first I'll just load my little old Nikon, here, and catch some color photos ..."

"I wouldn't do that, but I would advise the beer. Be back in a second." I went over to the stairwell and shouted to Armando.

It was a perfect morning for a parade. I've always liked them. I saw Barnum and Bailey come into town when I was a kid, and watched Hitler come into Austria in '38. Some parades were exceptional, others just so-so, but they always make me feel a lot younger. I saw the Japs march into Singapore, and the French march out of Indochina, but I guess I'm giving away my age.

This was the damndest parade I've ever seen, I must admit. The crowds had already assembled along the Avenida and they had been waiting over three hours in the hot sun. I was beginning to think that the show was off, when a bugle sounded and a small group of cavalry came around the corner by the Presidential Palace, and started up the Avenida. Baldy lent me his binoculars, and I looked over the horsemen. They were a grubby bunch, but their weapons gleamed with fresh oil. The horses seemed fit and rested, though they had obviously been ridden for quite some time and needed curry-combing. I heard music and raised the binoculars to see three trucks following the beleaguered-looking cavalry. In the trucks rode all the members of the capital's municipal orchestra, who applied themselves vigorously, if not successfully, to some tango version of Mozart, or a Mozart version of a tango. I still haven't decided which.

After gaping at this musical menagerie, I raised the binoculars and looked past the trucks, seeing nothing but bare cobblestones. Either part of the parade had got lost, or that was all of it. I began to gather that there wasn't anything more, and looked down upon the crowd.

At first, the rabble were incredulous. They thought there was more to come. So had I. Then they began to laugh. Laughter turned to derision. The mob began to whistle and shout insults. Suddenly, the leader of the cavalry signaled a halt. The orchestra stopped playing. The officer blew his whistle, and the roof tops along the Avenida came to life. There was gray-green everywhere and not a red tile in sight. Rifles gleamed in the sun.

There were murmurs of fear from the crowd. Some thought of running, but decided against it. For a moment there was an oppressive silence. I could even hear the clip-crop of a restless cavalry horse's hooves. It was a tableau. Then someone began to cheer. This

was picked up by the rest. Now all was enthusiasm. The orchestra struck up a national tune, and the cavalry took up the trot.

I handed the binoculars back to Daniels at his insistence and he stayed glued to them until the head of the column turned to pass in front of us.

"Hey, Charles!" I shouted.

Charles raised his arm and the parade stopped beneath our balcony. "Fred, old man, I'll see you later!"

I waved. "Okay, hope you've been having a good time!"

Charles laughed as he waved back and caused his stallion to turn about on its hind legs.

"You know that guy?" Daniels crouched like a pointer, beside me.

"He's an acquaintance, you might say."

"Yeah? Well, he's the guy we want."

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to meet him."

We'd finished the beer and ordered another round by shouting down the stairwell. Soon there was a knock on the door.

"Come in, Maria." I watched the door handle turn.

In came Charles with three bottles of beer on a tray. His uniform was caked with salt from perspiration and looked as if he had slept in it. I'd no doubt that he had.

"Compliments of the management," he said, placing the tray on the coffee table. He took a copy of La Gazeta from the tray and handed it to me. "Next week's newspaper."

"You're Charlie, ain't cha?" Daniels stood up.

"Yes, but my friends call me 'Captain Hendricks.'"

I'd forgotten that he was so tall, but when he stood up from the coffee table, I saw that he was an imposing officer. He patted the holster from which protruded the butt of an automatic pistol and the bald American stammered an apology.

"Ain't you an American?"

"Drop the hick talk, Daniels, and get dressed. We're keeping the transport waiting."

Daniels looked at me, then at Charles, and made a quick inventory of his luggage.

"Oh, your belongings will be safe," said Charles. "They're coming with us. Would you mind bringing the beer, Fred?"

"Not at all. It's going to be a long trip."

We got ourselves and our luggage into the jeep which awaited us, and drove through the deserted streets, skirting shell craters and occasional falls of rubble. Fortunately, we were between showers and so avoided a thorough soaking, arriving at Buena Vista Station in good time.

How many times I'd been at that station, and put through some sort of Byzantine formality. This occasion stood out in my mind as the great exception, which almost made up for all the other difficult arrivals and departures I'd experienced. Soldiers carried our luggage to a special train which consisted of a sleek passenger locomotive and one first class coach.

The officer in charge of the train showed us into a plush compartment that would have accommodated six of us quite comfortably. As we were only three, it was even better. The officer wasn't interested in tickets, but insisted that we keep the shades drawn until we reached the outskirts of the city. Charles, Daniels and I made ourselves comfortable, sipping our beer and listening to the panting of the engine.

"What are we waiting for?" Daniels looked as if he felt trapped. He was.

"Clearance for takeoff," said Charles.

I heard a jeep pull up with a screech of brakes, and then heard heavy footsteps in the corridor. More luggage, probably. The footsteps entered the adjoining compartment. I recognized the officer's voice and made out the words 'Hotel Internacional' and 'Devil's Island' in another voice that seemed to have a Slavic accent. Both voices laughed, and the compartment door clicked shut. I heard the folding table being put down and something laid upon it, possibly an overnight case. It turned out to be a tape recorder. Soon we were treated to a muffled version of a violin concerto. I sat back in my seat, and began to put a few things together.

"Gawd!" moaned Daniels. "Am I gonna hear that junk the whole trip?"

"Shut up, Daniels. That's Bela Bartok." Charles leaned forward and cupped both hands behind his ears. If a wheeltapper had been able to look into our compartment, he would have thought we were playing some sort of charade.

Thunder boomed outside, and the locomotive whistled. The train started with a jerk, and soon we were speeding off into a rainy afternoon. A short time later, the officer came in to inform us that we could now raise the shades and open the windows. We did so

immediately, eager to have some fresh air. Outside, the frogs chirped, and the glistening foliage swept by at tremendous speed. Inside, we felt the coolness and smelled the verdant freshness of the rain.

We hurtled on through the night, our coach rocking like a wave-tossed dinghy. None of us said much, though Daniels seemed in need of conversation. Realizing that Charles was in no mood for prattle and that I was either unwilling or unable to satisfy his curiosity, he sank into a morose silence. I stretched out and fell asleep, listening to Mozart.

We were having breakfast in our compartment next morning when I heard the engine beginning to labor. Looking out the window, I saw that we had begun to climb above the savanna and were on the first leg of a switchback. It was almost lunchtime when I heard the whistle for a station, and felt the train slow down as it switched onto a siding. The place was familiar. First came the palm trees and the water tank, then the red tile roof of Las Aguas Station.

The place was surrounded by soldiers of the new regime, smart-looking in their Afrika Korps caps. They were standing in that casual but alert manner of troops who have been told to hurry up and wait. They were waiting for us.

We were hustled aboard a jeep and barely had time to sort ourselves out before an officer blew his whistle. Motorcycles revved and took up positions ahead of us, and our jeep lurched into gear, followed by a second jeep in which rode the civilian who had accompanied us on the train. I saw that he held a tape recorder in his lap.

Hours passed as we bounced over the rough dirt road which was seamed by the running waters of the many springs in the area. It was virtually the same road we had cleared for the Frenchman's artillery, but someone had run a bulldozer over it, so there was less danger of our slipping into the arroyos.

I saw a clump of bamboo near the spot where Juan and the sniper had been killed, and supposed that I would have found their bones nearby. Again, I saw the dying Juan reaching out to me, not wishing to be left behind, but I took a deep breath and forced my attention to other things.

The sunset was magnificent, as always in this part of the world, the last defiant burst of radiance that turns the clouds to flame, followed by the apologetic leave-taking in cool pink.

Just after dark, we entered a citrus grove whose blossoms perfumed the air. Our headlights disclosed the flittings and scurryings of the many night creatures, whose eyes gleamed back at us in the sudden glare. A startled owl gave a powerful shriek, and I felt Daniels shiver in the seat next to me.

"Vampires, Daniels. That's why you haven't seen any livestock in the area. Don't worry, they only attack humans when they're rabid."

"Look, old man, just don't bug me."

Charles leaned forward. "Save your breath, Daniels, you'll need it."

The dirt road wound up a hill and brought us to the white walls of a fortified hacienda. We were waved in by sentries at the main gate and parked in the spacious patio. The white tower loomed before us, its loopholes brightly lit, like the eyes of a jack-o-lantern. The crickets and the splash of the fountain were just discernible amid the throbbing whine of a diesel generator and the strident tones of Morse transmissions which echoed among the arcades. Clerical types in uniform strode purposefully over the Moorish tiles of the courtyard, going back and forth between the great rooms which now served as offices.

"You will please accompany me to the general," said a slightly built man who wore thick glasses and carried a sheaf of papers.

Leaving our armed escort in the patio, Charles, Daniels and I followed him into the tower and through the maze of passageways leading into the chartroom. Seated at the table was a very old gentleman, flanked by two sentries with submachine-guns. He was poring over an old map whose place names were designated only by cryptic number and letter combinations.

Seeing me, he rose and took my hand in his still-firm grip. The saber scars were livid on his pale face and reminded me of our first meeting at the Buena Vista Station. He still wore a monocle which he polished from time to time with a handkerchief that he kept inside the left sleeve of his tunic.

"You have worked quickly, Frederick." He cast a critical glance at Daniels.

"I always deliver the goods, as you know, General." I noticed that Daniels was perspiring, even though the chart room was cool.

"Captain Hendricks, is this the prisoner called Daniels?"

"Yes, Sir." Charles came to attention.

General von Mannerheim let his monocle drop, to hang suspended by the black cord that was tied to a button of his tunic. The eyeglass seemed to fascinate Daniels.

He tore his eyes away from it. "Now, let's just cut this 'prisoner' jazz. I'm a representative of the U.S. Government."

"Yes, we are aware of that." The general regarded him with an expression of pity and disgust.

Daniels looked surprised. "Listen, the Central Intelligence Agency takes grave exception to this business. We're willing to drop the whole matter if you return the gold and back out of this comic opera scheme. We'll even let off Charles, here, although the F.B.I. would like to get hold of him, and that goes for you too, Frederick, or whatever your name is." He pointed a trembling finger in my direction. For a plump person, he had a very nervous disposition. "And you can stop looking so innocent, you son-of-a-bitch! You worked for the Nazis in the Second World War, and you're still working for them."

"A man stands by his friends and his principles." I looked him in the eye. "That's more than you can say for yourself."

"Enough!" said the general. "I find such emotional outbursts most unbecoming, Mr. Daniels. A man in your profession should exercise some restraint."

Anger brought color to the general's cheeks, but he maintained his outward composure. "Pay attention, Mr. Daniels, and take a seat. I fear I must give you a lecture."

"Sit down, you bastard!" Charles kicked a chair in his direction.

"Mr. Daniels, you are in no position to bargain. You are bluffing. Your organization and the government it pretends to represent are now powerless, precisely because you have sacrificed everything in pursuit of power. You replaced loyalty with professionalism, as you were unworthy of loyalty, and now your organization is strictly professional. It has no people to whom it owes loyalty, no country, no set of principles, and no longer any objective. Your pursuit of power has been so unprincipled, so diffuse, that you have destroyed the very basis of the power you sought. Now what remains? The squalid ruins of the country which raised you, a far-flung network of mercenary agents and a group of Jewish Mandarins in your Langley headquarters who think their computers can reverse this disaster.

Your 'tough-minded' liberals have programmed death and destruction from their air-conditioned offices, yet none of them have the courage to soil their hands with the blood of another human being. You eat steak and condemn butchers. I find you utterly despicable. And now, I think it would be well for you to resign before you are checkmated." The general turned his head. "Colonel Petrov!"

In came our civilian fellow-traveller from the adjoining room. "Yes, General von Mannerheim. Good evening to you. I am happy to see you looking so well. Campaigning makes you look much younger."

"You flatter an old man, Colonel. Please take a seat. You already know Mr. Daniels, I believe."

"Yes, we have his dossier." Petrov smiled.

"Well, here is Captain Hendricks and an old comrade of mine, Frederick."

"How do you do," I said.

Alongside the miserable Daniels the Colonel looked dapper and fresh, even though his suit was slightly wrinkled from the long trip. He sat down heavily in a creaking wooden chair, offered us some of his top-grade Cuban cigars, and lit one for himself.

The cigar's rich aroma combined with the scent of the orange blossoms on the night air, and I inhaled deeply, enjoying every breath. The rain clouds had lifted, and the air was cool. Peacocks called in the garden below, and drowsy vultures croaked upon the tile roof of the arcade. Through the loophole I saw a full moon and the headlights of another motor column coming up the road. The Night of the Long Knives had begun with disarming pleasantness.

Colonel Petrov leaned forward in his chair. "So, your coup has been successful. My congratulations. Now I believe we can do business."

"For your information, Mr. Daniels, I shall elaborate. The general indicated a map of the world in the corner. "Until now the world has been divided among four great powers. The surprising collapse of the United States has put the world situation into a state of flux. The other three powers, China, Japan and the Soviet Union are vying with one another to fill the power vacuum, that is, to set up their own spheres of influence in what was once the American Empire."

"But we have nuclear capabilities." Daniels mopped his brow with a soiled handkerchief.

"And you dare not use them. The United States is now a hollow shell, a nest of anarchists surrounded by a palisade of missiles. There is nothing to be gained by using your nuclear capabilities, as you describe them. Will a missile on Moscow stop the riots in New York City? I fear not, nor will it stop the mutinies in your armed forces.

To continue: We Europeans have contrived to pick up some of the pieces in order to build our own empire. We shall become the fourth world power, with certain assistance from the Soviets, who fear Chinese penetration of this hemisphere. Is this not so, Colonel?"

"I think your assessment is basically correct, Herr General. The Vanguard of the Working Class has always sought to free oppressed peoples of the world from the yoke of yellow imperialism." Colonel Petrov's smile broadened, and he began to laugh.

We all laughed heartily, amused at this monstrous contortion of communist casuistry, except for Daniels, whose eyes were riveted on the colonel in horror, like a man caught in a nightmare from which there was no waking.

The general observed his reaction and smiled, shaking his head incredulously. "I believe you have led a very sheltered life, Mr. Daniels. Come now, the weight of the world is no longer on your shoulders. Colonel, please accompany him into the garden. The fresh air will do him good, and I imagine you will find much to discuss with one another."

The telephone on the map table began to jangle insistently. The scene was suddenly familiar. All I lacked were my pencil and notebooks.

The general picked up the receiver. "Yes? Very well, send him in."

A few moments later, in came the President of the Republic.

"What is the meaning of ...?"

"Shut up and sit down, Your Excellency." Charles escorted President Miranda as a bouncer would a drunk in a bar.

The general remained seated, his forehead cradled in the palm of his hand. It was obvious that he was controlling himself with great effort. "You wretch!" he exploded.

I could see that tears were gleaming in his eyes.

"You, the son of the great General Miranda! How dare you defile his memory! He fought for this country. It took him decades to undo the damage done by his predecessors, and you betrayed him in your first year of office."

The president, a man in his late forties, gazed at the general in terror. His lower lip began to tremble, and his hands were frozen to the arms of the chair.

The general rose from his chair and turned his back to us. It was as if he could no longer stand so distasteful a sight as the craven figure before him.

"But General," stammered Miranda "I have tried to serve ..."

"... The predatory interests of outsiders," concluded the general. "You are shameless. Even now you are not without your self-serving guile."

The president choked off something he was going to say and silence enveloped the room. I could hear a telegraph key clicking in the corridor outside, so faintly that it seemed to be at the other end of the world. From the patio came sounds of motorcycles

revving and trucks being started. A police dog barked and harsh voices shouted commands.

The general turned to face us. His cold blue eyes fixed President Miranda like twin skewers.

"You will serve." His voice was husky with phlegm. "You shall remain president of the republic, at your own expense, once you have divulged the numbers of your Swiss bank accounts and liquidated your family's foreign holdings. Until then, you and your family will be held prisoners in the most uncomfortable quarters of this fortress. If you value your possessions more than your life and the lives of your family, including your mistresses and their families, so be it, but I can guarantee that you will beg for death unless you return what you have stolen.

If you are co-operative, you will be allowed to continue your presidency, a prisoner for life in your palace. You will make speeches, which will be prepared for you, and in all of your public appearances you will be accompanied by an honor guard of your own executioners, should you show reluctance at performing your duties. Do you understand me?"

The president had slumped in his chair and just managed to nod in assent.

"Captain, take the prisoner away. I've nothing more to say to him, except that he was like a son to me."

Charles led the president out of the room, their footsteps echoing down the corridor.

"Are you all right, General?" I saw him prop his head upon his arm.

"Yes, thank you. It has been a trying day, and it is not yet over."

"You should rest."

"I shall. Have no fear." He brightened. "That young man, Charles. What a remarkable discovery, Frederick, almost as remarkable as you."

"He has the necessary qualifications: determination, a taste for action and mastery of political theory. Hard combination to find. I believe your successor was well-chosen."

"Yes, and not too soon. Our time is running out, my friend. Our knowledge has served us well and will serve others, but we are almost used up. If only my son had not been killed in the war. Ach, a waste of time to think about such things."

"Sadness is a luxury these days. I'm afraid we're running gravely short of able men like Charles."

The general fingered his monocle. "Surely, more can be taken from the breeding rabble."

"I doubt it. The rabble is breeding, but its level of intelligence is declining. In another century, people will need to go to university just to learn how to tie their shoes properly."

"Not if we are successful in our eugenics program."

"That will leave most of the world tripping over their shoelaces."

"Exactly, and when they have strangled themselves with them, we shall be prepared to rule. This planet is too beautiful to leave in the hands of shopkeepers and savages."

"I think we can take it, this time. The opposition is giving it to us on a platter."

"The best minds are coming to our way of thinking. Amazing, to think that it has taken so much hammering on history's anvil for this to come about. Like our young colleague, Charles, they are beginning to realize that there isn't room for everyone on this planet."

"Yes, if you want children today, you must be prepared to kill so they may live. The human race has not covered the earth, but it sure has crowded it." I heard footsteps coming this way.

Jesus entered the room, gave me a curt nod, and saluted. "May I bring them in, General?"

"By all means, Major. I am rather tired, so I trust you will be able to address the gentlemen in my stead."

"With great pleasure, General." He ushered in two clergymen, replete with the finery of their office. "By way of introduction, I shall simply recite the reasons for which my section has detained these gentlemen, as you call them. They are the scum of the country, vampires who batten on human failings, and even encourage them for their own selfish aggrandizement. They think that they may profit from chaos and disaster, so they encourage the poor to have large families. By preaching that man is weak, they encourage him to cultivate his weaknesses. By telling man to store up goodness in the life to