

# WHO STEAL MY PURSE

by John Brunner

## MINUS EIGHT AND COUNTING

*Hamlet Siao Kat*

Cham Loc plodded up the winding narrow path that led from the paddies to the hillside village he called home. He had done so daily, except during the worst of the monsoon rains, since he was nine—the age of the son who now followed him. There had been two sons, but one was gone.

Today the path seemed steeper than it used to be, the rocks sharper to his bare feet, the drifting smoke of the cook-fires at its end further away.

And the day's labor had been infinitely long, with the promise of little to show for it. Sometimes he thought he could sense the sheer weariness of the land, farmed for a thousand years.

Overhead sounded the drone of a plane, and the boy excitedly called his attention to it. But Cham Loc could not summon the energy to glance up. He too was infected with the land's fatigue. He was not alone, moreover. The entire local population moved slowly, bruised easily and often, found customary weights like a pailful of water more tiring than formerly, requiring to be set down at ever shorter intervals between the river and the village.

He was thirty years old, sallow-skinned, black-haired, and thin to the point of being, scrawny. He wore a loose off-white shirt and breeches belted with a bit of rope. That was twice as much as his son, who had only breeches. Cloth was expensive.

The upward trudge eventually over, he reached his house. It was, or had been, a very good, very large one, inside which a man could take seven long steps each way, built of poles lashed together and walled and thatched with many layers of braided leaves. As great an area again was sheltered by an extension of the roof to make a sort of veranda at the front. But the last rains had washed away much earth, and the poles were tilted now and there was a hole in the thatch. He kept meaning to fix it, only somehow...

His wife was boiling the evening rice. They had a fine big pot, as wide as his forearm was long. But today there were only about three handfuls of rice in it. A year ago they had been able to spare as much as five.

Moreover, there would have been chicken or fish to garnish it. Stale vegetables were their diet now.

With barely a word, because he was so exhausted, he propped his hoe against the nearest roof-pole and sat down and closed his eyes, ignoring even the greeting his daughter gave him when she came outside. She was seven. She had been one of twins, but her sister had died.

After Cham Loc received the gift of his one luxury, the transistor radio she was carrying. It was not a satisfactory trade he had made, he'd now decided. The radio did talk a great deal, and brought them news and music, but another son would have helped him in the fields.

Too late, though, to change his mind.

As usual when he returned from work, the little girl proudly switched on, and caught in mid-sentence an address by a man with a familiar voice, the premier who lived in the distant capital city and always spoke about the greater world Cham Loc had never seen.

“—typical of their arrogant, insensitive behavior. After all, who pays for the affluence they wallow in? Why, we do, and poor people like us! What they regard as problems, we can scarcely imagine. What color should they choose for the second car? Which out of twenty or thirty television programs should they watch tonight? Which shirt goes best with the new suit—the red, the green, the blue, the yellow, the brown, the white, the striped, the spotted? While we have sickness to worry about, hunger, crop-blight, a buffalo with a broken leg! When they come to our country, they boast about how easily they've bought the honor of a girl from a good family, seducing her with a cheap watch or a pretty dress. Then back they go to their life of endless extravagance, while she—*she* has to sleep in any bed she can find, or lie out in the street, and when her child is born it must face the miserable existence of an outcast.”

The words blurred into a drone, not unlike the noise of the aircraft which had lately passed by, and Cham Loc dozed. He had heard such statements over and over, particularly from the man the government had sent to Siao Kat as resident political educator. But he himself had no special desire to watch twenty TV shows a night, or even to own a car. Everybody he knew lived within walking distance, and if you wasted your time watching television, when would you have the chance to take your proper part in village affairs? You'd be failing in your clear public duty!

On the other hand, it would be nice to possess a hammer... maybe an ax... a whole bolt of cloth twenty paces long...

Dreaming of such unreachable goals, he missed the final rousing peroration.

“This inequality, this injustice, must cease! That is why I have given them seven days to quit our country. We are sick and tired of their greed, their disrespect for our traditions, their lack of morals! We too have our pride, and no matter how rich and powerful they may be, we must stand up to them and take the consequences. Long live our nation and its noble heritage!”

By the time his wife shook him awake and invited him to dip in the rice-pot, there was music instead, which was far more pleasant. Cham Loc knew little of affairs of state, but he was aware that whenever politicians talked about matters of inflexible principle, life was scheduled to become even more difficult than usual.

Waiting until he finished eating, as was the custom, his wife anxiously inquired whether he thought the premier's decision was wise. He could only answer that the people must put their trust in their leaders,

and all would come out for the best in the end.

In his heart of hearts he was less confident than he sounded. To say anything else with the children listening, though, would have been most unfair to them. They had a hard enough time anyway: short of food, short of clothes, forever exposed to their parents' quarreling... Cham Loc hated rows, but the future was so dreadfully uncertain.

Could the premier—could anybody—free the people, from famine, epidemics, crop-failure, the most ancient and deadly enemies of all?

The problem was too deep for him. He dozed again.

## MINUS SEVEN AND COUNTING

*2131 West Poplar Avenue*

The President's face was calm in the window of the TV set. He wore the expression of a man who had had a rough passage across a sea of personal uncertainty and was now committed, for better or worse, to a haven of decision around which the storm of controversy would continue to rage for a very long time.

Barney Ratchett hung on his every word. Not only was this crisis the first world-scale problem the new Chief Executive had had to deal with since his election—which implied that it was a test of his declared policies, and the rest of his four-year term would depend on his judgment—but it was also the first in the nation's third century of existence, and hence it had, far greater symbolic significance than its actual content might suggest. The setbacks, great and small, of the past decade had made people hungry for the taste of achievement. This was the man who had promised it to them, and they were ready to sit in judgment on him.

Reportedly, he wrote his own speeches, or at any rate rewrote them. If that was true—and having covered the last election campaign Barney was inclined to believe it might be—then at the very least he must accord the President the respect due to a fellow craftsman in communications. His style was plain and direct, and his whole address lasted no more than eight minutes, marshaling the arguments *pro* and *con* with admirable detachment. Now at the end he was summing up the reason for his choice of action into an elegant, pithy climax.

"What it comes down to is this," he said, blinking a little too often as Barney had seen him blink when confronting a hostile election meeting. "We cannot allow accusations of this kind against our nation to go unanswered. To say what has been said is insulting, not simply to the government—your government—but to you. Words are not enough. There must be deeds."

"Hypocrite!" Barney's wife Donna muttered, shaking back her dark hair and taking another sip of hot buttered rum. It was a cold day with snow thick on the ground and the sky masked by dense cloud, a somber day when the mind was more inclined to visions of disaster than of hope.

"Damn right," said their son Hal, who was seventeen and lay sprawled on the rug turning the pages of a paperback thriller as though what it said were more important than anything the President could talk about. "I bet Dad would sing a different tune if he were my age, what's more!"

Barney's heart sank. How to avoid another shouting match? It was inevitable that in the home of a political reporter there would be rows about politics. But the split here in the family seemed to be as deep as the split in the nation.

"For immediate reactions to the President's announcement," the TV, said, "we're going over to our on-the-spot reporters in Washington. First of all..."

"Look," Barney said in what he intended to be a placatory tone, "even if you don't feel happy about the guy being elected, now he's up there we ought to give him a fair chance to show that his policies—"

Donna interrupted. "You know as well as I do how he got to the White House. He was sold to the public by a clever PR team, playing on the bicentenary mood. Back in '72 he wouldn't have stood a prayer. No more will he in 1980. That's assuming the country is still in one piece."

"If it hadn't been for our sense of desperation all the PR work in the world couldn't have won him the votes," Barney snapped. "He wasn't elected on his record so much as on his predecessors' records. What they did landed us in one mess after another. It was time somebody made a fresh start, so—"

"Oh, save the lecture!" Hal said, slapping his book shut and eeling around to face his father. "What we're talking about is something that could destroy the whole way of life of those poor peasants over there. What right do we have to do that? Quite apart from the consequences to ourselves!" And he added, pointing to the TV: "Now there's a man who does know what he's talking about. Think we could hear him instead of you?"

The screen showed the familiar features of the defeated candidate... defeated to everybody's surprise including Barney's. One would have thought the country was ripe for a President of this stamp: forthright, downright and *right*, as his campaign slogan had expressed it.

He was saying to a crowd of eager reporters, among whom Barney recognized several of his colleagues: "Not only is it highly questionable whether he possesses the authority to commit our forces to this irresponsible undertaking—a matter which no doubt Congress will decide—but there is also the question of the cost, which will be incalculable. Taking the most charitable view, one can only assume that we the people suffered a momentary, and hopefully a brief lapse of good sense when we gave this man a majority of our votes. Here now he plans to squander our precious national resources on a pointless and ill-conceived adventure. And for what good reason? None! Even he himself offers no better justification than the claim that we've been insulted. Insulted!" Throwing up his hands in disbelief. "Are we being attacked? Is our territorial integrity at stake? Are we being menaced by a nuclear power that could lay our cities waste and murder our people by the millions? On the contrary! This ridiculous, this incredible response has been provoked by a handful of dissidents armed with rocks and bottles in a run-down, backwater country an ocean's breadth away from us, of no importance to our security and virtually no commercial interest. We shall live to regret this foolishness, you mark my words."

Barney's canny professional judgment informed him that the senator must have had advance news on the grapevine. This was not so much an impromptu comeback as a polished speech which heaven had sent him the opportunity to deliver to the TV audience instead of at a private meeting.

"Talking of PR jobs," he murmured, "you do know this guy had special training from a top Hollywood drama coach—and doesn't it show?"

"It's not the same thing," Donna said obstinately.

Barney rounded on her. "I see! It's a case of 'O.K. when I do it but not when you do it!'"

The phone rang in the adjacent room. After the second ring it was answered by their daughter Lissa. It was probably for her anyway.

“Garbage!” Hal said. “What counts is not what you do but why you do it. Someone who kills a thousand people is a great guy provided he’s fighting on your side, right? But if he did it because he was ordered to by someone like—well, like Hitler, say—that makes him a criminal! Ah, the whole scene makes me want to puke!”

“Dad!” Lissa put her pretty head around the door. “The boss for you... oh, no!” She set one hand on her hip and glowered at them, giving a very fair imitation of her grandmother in a bad temper, considering she was only fourteen. “You’re having another row about politics, aren’t you? I can smell it in the air!”

“One of these days,” Barney said, rising with a sigh, “you’ll realize that everything is politics down to the food you eat and the air you breathe. Sometimes I wish I’d decided to be a sports reporter, though. All this is playing hell with my digestion.”

The caller was Andy Scharf, chief news editor of the TV chain he worked for, and his voice was full of excitement Barney could not share.

“Barney, I guess you were watching?” And without waiting for a reply he plunged on: “It’s stirred up a hornets’ nest, believe me. The phones here are already ringing non-stop—protest groups saying they’re going to mobilize the people against the President, veterans saying they’re damned if they’ll cooperate in this crazy waste of money and manpower, black militants saying it’s bound to be the blacks as usual who have to pay in the end... it’s the biggest, and I mean the *biggest!*”

“May you live in interesting times,” Barney muttered.

“What? I didn’t catch that.”

“Nothing. Just an old Chinese curse.” Barney ran his fingers wearily through his crisp brown hair. “Well, I guess you want me at the office, huh?”

“A story like this blows up and you expect to enjoy a quiet weekend? You pack a bag with enough gear to see you through a full week! They’ve given us this seven-day ultimatum to pull everyone out of the country, so I’ve had a terrific idea. I’m creating a slot called ‘Counting Down’, numbering the days to the deadline, and I’m relying on you to supply hard-hitting interviews of the kind you’re so good at, one or two per day until the crunch comes.”

“Thanks for the few kind words,” Barney grunted. “Much good may they do me in the long run.”

“Don’t pretend to be bitter. It doesn’t suit you. Just grab a pen and note down your first date. Ginger and Lucy are on the way and they’ll meet you in an hour.”

## **MINUS SIX AND COUNTING**

*Fielding Electronics Inc.*

“All set, Barney,” said Ginger Hummel, the cameraman, who was called Ginger because he was a bricktop black, one of those rare people whose heredity produces dull red hair and a skin splotched with tawny patches on a tan ground. On the way here he and Barney had been snapping at each other because of the tension in the air, and taking opposite sides. That had come as something of a surprise to Barney.

“Fine here too,” Lucy Cash the sound-girl said, tucking a stray wisp of her fair hair behind the side-piece of her glasses and poising her hand over the switch on her recorder.

Barney gave them the go signal and addressed Jason Fielding, the good-looking, well-dressed man in his late forties who sat with elbows aggressively planted on the big desk between them. This smart modern office was excellent for recording in; first-class soundproofing shut away the noise of the trucks that were coming and going literally the other side of the wall.

“Mr. Fielding,” Barney said, “your company may not exactly be a household name, but I’m sure a lot of our audience would be as impressed as I was to learn just how many patents you control which are licensed to nationally-advertised manufacturers of TV sets and radios and other electronic equipment. What impact is the President’s decision going to have, from your standpoint as an independent industrialist?”

“Immense. No doubt about it. And I welcome that. I myself voted for the President—don’t make any secret of it—precisely because I hoped this kind of thing was likely to happen. You know we’ve done a great deal of work in the past for the Department of Defense. Well, now we hope to do a lot more.”

“Are there new contracts for your company in the pipeline?”

“I sincerely hope so. We’ve been carrying on research for years in areas which are precisely what the present situation calls for. And I want to say this to the people who are objecting to the President’s plan.” Jutting his jaw bulldog-fashion. “I’ve been running my own firm since I was thirty. I’m a self-made man. I got my chance to accomplish what I’ve done because of what this country is and what it stands for. After two hundred years it seems the rest of the world has started to think we’re in danger of forgetting the ideals we began with. It isn’t true, of course. I hope to do much more than simply make my personal contribution to proving that it isn’t true. I hope I’m going to create jobs and the chance to earn a decent living for a lot of people who have been less fortunate than I have. What’s more, in the process I can help to restore our country’s image overseas. This time the world is going to see that we mean what we say. I don’t have the slightest doubt or reservation about the course we’re committed to.”

Half relaxed because Fielding was such a fluent talker, half tense because he didn’t want his own total agreement to color what was supposed to be an objective interview, Barney countered, “Some people claim not only that the President is not entitled to exert his authority in this manner, but also that the cost will be excessive—that we’re going to squander money and manpower just to prove a trivial point.”

“It’s not in the least trivial! What better use is there for our tax-money than to help safeguard the trust we invite our allies to repose in us? I could go further and ask what nobler cause a man could choose than preserving the good name of his native land. Sure, some people do think insults are negligible. I don’t. Our honor and goodwill have been called in question. The President would be failing in his duty if he’d acted otherwise than as he’s doing.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fielding,” Barney said and nodded to Ginger and Lucy to switch off.

“Oh, it’s a pleasure,” Fielding said, rising. “I only wish I could invite you to shoot some film around the

plant—sorry, I mean tape. But of course we are working at high pressure right now, and quite apart from the fact that we have some tricks up our sleeves we'd prefer not to put on TV yet, my staff might resent having to take time out to pose for you. I always walk around the factory at least once a day though, and if you'd care to join me on my morning tour you'd be welcome."

"I'd enjoy that," Barney said with a nod.

"So would I," agreed Ginger. "I use a lot of your gear, you know, and so does Lucy. But the chief wants this tape as soon as possible. Some other time, maybe."

"See you back at base, then," Barney said, and they went out.

"We'll have to dress up, I'm afraid," Fielding said as he led Barney in their wake. "We work dust-free, and that means gowns, masks and boots."

Garbed like surgeons in an operating theater, they explored the plant. To Barney it was a strange place: stark, chill, yet somehow not forbidding, because the workers were as sober as priests dedicated to the service of their machines. Keeping up a running commentary, Fielding quietly explained the purpose behind what they were seeing.

"We have three really basic problems," he expounded. "There's lightness above all, of course. The lighter and smaller you can make equipment like this, the more you can pack into a plane. What you or I would normally think of as small—pocket-sized, for instance—just is not good enough to meet our standards. When someone brings me the breadboard mockup of a promising new gadget, my first reaction is automatic. I say go back and shrink it. If it still works when you've halved the weight, I'll take a closer look."

"And the second problem?" Barney said.

"Oh, robustness. If you drop your personal radio on the sidewalk, you don't complain if you have to take it in for repair before it works again. But this stuff we're building may have to be parachuted from fifty thousand feet. Even with a chute the impact is about equivalent to hitting the ground from—oh—twenty-five or thirty feet up. And it has to start working right away, no faults, no circuit-breaks, nothing. Matter of fact, we have an ex-Cardinals pitcher who spends his time literally throwing random samples at various targets: a brick wall, a hay-bale, a puddle of water... It's a publicity gimmick one of my people dreamed up, but there's a solid purpose behind it."

Long ago Barney Ratchett had decided he was a cynic. It was a novel and in some ways a reassuring experience to discover that the description of such technical expertise could make a shiver run down his spine.

In the most literal sense, it was awe-inspiring.

"And the third problem," Fielding pursued, "concerns idiot-proofing. Ever see this cartoon where there's this woman hung around with kids at a domestic-appliance exhibition? She's saying to this slick salesman type on the washing-machine stand, 'But what I want is a washing machine a child *can't* work!'"

"And there are more idiots than suckers in the world," Barney said with a rueful chuckle. "One every second, not one a minute, right?"

“Right. When you consider that, the stuff we’re building has to be handled by people who probably know no more about electronics than... well, I was going to say savages out of the jungle, but don’t let me exaggerate. The fact stands, though. Our gear doesn’t only have to work every time from the moment it’s first switched on, but it has to be proof against ignorance, meddling, childish curiosity...”

“Makes me think of the Little Jiffy Fuseblower,” Barney said.

“What? Oh, I know what you mean. A box with a button on top, and a pilot light, and a label that says what it does?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yes, we had a guy here who tried one out on my staff. It worked O.K., have to admit that. Leave it on someone’s desk in the morning, next thing you knew, *pow*, all the lights out! I had to put my foot down, hard! But you’re quite right. If a trained engineer can’t resist doing exactly what he knows he shouldn’t, how can you expect an untrained person to behave any better?”

By now they had almost completed their circuit of the plant. Ahead lay one more door which they had not yet been through. Barney was heading toward it automatically when Fielding checked him with a touch on his arm.

“Not that way,” he murmured.

Barney glanced at him. At the very edge of hearing he could discern a series of regular thuds, as though something heavy and solid were being thrown and picked up and thrown again.

“Is that where you keep your tame pitcher?”

“Nope.” Fielding urged him toward an exit, and as he swung it open peeled off his mask. “We’re out of the dust-free zone here, by the way. No, I’m afraid you have to skip that department. As a matter of fact, so do I.”

Barney stared at him.

“Don’t worry,” Fielding said “If the crunch comes, you and everybody else will find out what’s being hatched in there. Like I said on camera, we’ve been working on various items against just such a crisis as the present one.”

“I see,” Barney said slowly.

“Do you? I wonder!” Fielding was undoing his gown and boots; a hopper stood ready to accept them for ultrasonic cleansing. “Tell me something, Mr. Ratchett. What do you think about the President’s decision? Or are you not allowed to have opinions?”

Barney hesitated. He said at length, “It’s obviously a hell of a gamble. But I hope very much it will pay off.”

“So do I. Which is why I’m involved. We’re doing our damndest here to make sure that this time we don’t screw everything up.”



## MINUS FIVE AND COUNTING

*Box Eastern Reserve University*

The obvious background against which to pose an academic who was also held in some regard as a poet and novelist would be a book-lined wall. It took Barney approximately three minutes, from the time of their first introduction, to realize that would be entirely wrong for Melvin X. Child.

The guy simply was not what one—or anybody else not personally acquainted with him—would have predicted.

To start with, he was half-cut, and his hair was all over the place, like his beard, and in the middle of winter his shirt was open to display a vast wedge of his massive paunch, while he salted his speech with elaborately contrived objurgations. It wasn't often that an interview subject made Barney feel ill at ease. Melvin Child managed it in next to no time.

When it was suggested to him that in view of the circumstances he might doctor the image a bit (visions of maiden ladies, if any were left nowadays, fainting before the TV screen), he snapped back, "Just what you'd expect from someone feeding predigested pabulum to the puling public! You're here because when you asked if you could come I said yes, like an idiot. The minute I put the phone down I realized I must have been out of my skull. Still, I don't mind making a few compromises where something this important is concerned. I'll go through with it, provided you don't rile me too much."

Defiant, he threw another handful of ice-cubes into the tall glass he clung to as though to a security blanket, and covered the three-inch pile of them with straight whiskey.

Barney sighed. Well, he had to put up with it. During what Andy had succeeded in having termed "Countdown Week" his assignment was to interview people who were making news in the crisis context, and this ill-mannered foul-mouthed man had done just that when he announced yesterday that he was quitting the university and putting himself at the disposal of the government "for the duration."

He glanced around the room, reviewing the décor. What would make a suitable backdrop? Those Mexican bullfight posters were very striking, but that hideous glaring-Japanese mask holding a foot-long knife between its teeth might be more appropriate—

From outside there came a screech of brakes, and someone shouted at the top of his voice, and a hammer-blow on the wall followed, a flung rock that narrowly missed shattering a window. Gasping, Lucy—who was nearest—twisted around to look out at the mall before the building, and her urgent gesture summoned Barney.

A station-wagon full of students had arrived, and they were producing from the back of the vehicle placards and banners denouncing Child. Another bunch joined them on foot, panting. Suddenly an instant demonstration was in progress, complete with leafleters who offered literature to passersby. There were few of those. The weather was dry, but it was terribly cold and the forecast said there would be more snow before nightfall.

Regardless of the icy wind, the students chanted and clapped and stamped and sounded the horn of the station-wagon and one way and another contrived to create a considerable disturbance.

“Hey, Lucy,” Ginger said doubtfully. “Think you can shoot tape against that racket?”

Before she could reply, Child snapped, “Racket? What racket? You mean those wet-behind-the-ears kids? Forget ‘em—like I’ve done. They’ve been turning up every hour on the hour since yesterday breakfast-time, but I swear I didn’t lose any sleep over them last night! Besides, I can shout into the mike loud enough to drown them out.”

“O.K.,” Barney said in a tone of resignation, and kicked a chair into position to start the interview.

“Professor, your interest in Asiatic art, language and literature dates back, I understand, to the time the Army first sent you to Saigon.”

“That’s right,” Child replied.

“And you voluntarily undertook a second tour there as a result of your response to the richness of the area’s culture?”

Mockingly: “If you mean I didn’t *have* to go back the second time, yup!” With a slurping gulp at his drink.

“Since then you’ve become recognized as one of our most outstanding authorities on the languages of Southeast Asia. You’ve published translations of plays, poetry and novels, and you’ve written a highly-esteemed novel of your own set in that part of the world.”

“Sure. My publishers are proud of me. Cavour and Pilley, by the way. Never miss the chance to slip in a plug! And don’t forget that cock-fighting manual with all the traditional ritual in it, because it outsold all the others put together.”

“Ah... yes!” Barney blinked several times in quick succession. It crossed his mind, though he did not have the chance right now to reflect on the point, that he had seen someone else do that recently. “But your chief fame has been confined to the academic world, where your linguist studies are extremely highly thought of, so it came as a surprise to many people when you announced—”

“That I think I can do a better job by working for the Army again than sitting in my ivory tower,” Child cut in, and sauced the words with the rest of his whiskey. “Of course! Just because I’m a poet, among other things, doesn’t mean I’m a guy who skulks in corners and watches the world go by hoping *he* won’t get singed in the next conflagration! Me, I believe in involvement. When a cause appears that’s worth committing yourself to, you have to stand up and be counted. That’s the long and short of it, and the middle-sized as well. If you’ve finished I want another drink.”

“Flag that for deletion,” Barney snapped at Lucy. “In fact, professor, I *haven’t* finished.” He waited a beat to allow editing-space on the tape. “Professor, one gets the impression that the stand you’ve taken is none too popular. Right now a bunch of students outside can be heard chanting slogans against you—”

“Think I’m worried? ‘Sticks and stones’, damn it!”

“Well, it’s no secret that some of your colleagues on the faculty—”

“It’s no secret that some of my colleagues are bloodless time-servers with hardly enough red corpuscles between them to satisfy a crab-louse!”

Another rock, and this time a pane of glass shattered, letting a wave of freezing air into the room. But Child's only reaction was to thumb his nose and stick out his tongue.

"More they do of that, more it makes me want to go on saying what I think," he grunted. "Don't let 'em interrupt. They'd call it a great victory if you did!"

What was this supposed to be—bravado on the firing line? But he had a point, Barney privately conceded. Ginger and Lucy both looked as though they wished today's stint could end right here; he himself, though, had a point in mind which Hal had raised, and he was determined to get it on tape because, like so many kids of his generation, Hal was only impressed by what he saw and heard on TV... if at all. In this case he ought to be; he was a sort of sub-fan of Melvin Child and owned three or four of his books.

"Some people have pointed out that if we follow the course the President has committed us to we risk destroying a whole precious traditional culture, indeed a way of life. It's been said that we have no right to—"

"Destruction be damned," Child broke in. "Culture has to evolve under pressure, same as everything else. What's good lasts; what isn't goes under. Do we feel any the less able to appreciate Shakespeare because we go to see his plays in an air-conditioned theater instead of a modified bear-baiting pit? As a matter of fact it's smart of you to remind me of Shakespeare, because he said everything that needs to be said about this situation in *Othello*."

An almost magical change overcame him. Setting aside his glass, he leaned back in his chair and declaimed with such relish one would have said he could taste the words as he uttered them.

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls! Who steals my purse, steals trash. 'Tis something, nothing! 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands. But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him, and makes me poor indeed!"

Equally swiftly he reverted to his normal manner, and jabbed a finger through the air toward Barney.

"These cost-efficiency creeps drive me out of my skull! 'Is it worth it, is it going to pay a dividend?'" He hoisted his voice toward a febrile falsetto to provide the quotation marks, then let it drop back to its regular booming baritone. "What's at stake is our country's reputation—our honor, to use a word those castrated wonders wouldn't know the meaning of without a dictionary! If we're ever going to stand up like men again, we have to do this. And the hell with what it costs. If it pans out the way we hope, it'll be cheap at any price."

"Which is why you—"

"Which is why I, tomorrow morning, propose to bid farewell to the groves of Academe and put my uniform back on, of my own free will, and sit in a horrible little government office doing elementary translations when I would far rather be working on my new novel. I have half of it written, by the way, and I wish I could advertise the title, but so far I haven't made up my mind!"

## MINUS FOUR AND COUNTING

*Perdido Petrochemicals*

The sidewalks were lined with protesting demonstrators, despite the continuing bitter weather. Like oversized flowerbeds they bloomed with colorful placards, banners and flags, and every fifty yards another speaker with a bullhorn was addressing the crowd: here a young black, there a shrill-voiced girl, yonder a middle-aged factory worker in a tartan mackinaw. Barney caught snatches of what was being said as their car, an obvious target with the TV chain's company insignia on its doors, crept the final mile toward their destination. Luckily no worse weapons than words had been aimed at them as yet. Elsewhere in the country, though, there had been shooting and bombing...

"—doesn't matter to them how much it costs, oh no! It's underwritten by your tax-dollar and mine! Aren't there better ways to spend the money? You might as well pile it on a bonfire!"

"I hope we make it," Lucy said with forced cheerfulness from her seat beside Barney. Up front next to the driver, Ginger scowled.

"Me, I wish it was worth going through with!"

"It is!" Barney snapped.

Something clanged on the car's roof: a rock; an empty bottle... something loud, anyway. Ginger ducked and grimaced.

"Ginger, what's eating on you?" Lucy demanded. "Would you rather be out there with the demonstrators?" She attempted a chuckle. It was unconvincing. And Ginger took her seriously regardless.

"In some ways I would. I think we're all set to make fools of ourselves on the grand scale. I think we're going to be laughed at for suckers."

"For rising to the bait?"

"Sure, for rising to the bait and getting well and truly hooked. They breed a keen style of hooker over there. You never met them. I did." Ginger rubbed his chin, brooding morosely. "Honor! Good name! The hell with *that*!" he added after a pause.

Another speaker by the roadside raised another bullhorn and bellowed, "Look, look! They're from TV news! Show 'em what we think of the lies they're spewing out, the bill of goods they're trying to sell the people!"

A cry of execration followed, and a shower of dirt, garbage and snowballs with rocks inside that almost made their driver swerve into oncoming traffic. But they were close to the factory entrance now and eager company guards were rushing to admit them.

"All the time and everywhere, these demonstrations against the President," Ginger said with gloomy relish. "What about the demonstrations in favor, hm-m-m? What happened to all the people who voted for him? I don't see them out here freezing their asses off!"

Which gave Barney his lead when he sat facing Peter Perdido, chairman of this nationally-famous corporation: almost a caricature of a tycoon with his huge cigar and his ultrastylish suit and his incredibly

lavish office. In addition he was very fat.

Making his voice harsh by pure reflex—the mood of the country was such that he knew the viewers would expect a hostile tone whether or not he personally had contrary opinions—Barney said, “Mr. Perdido, seldom in the history of our nation, certainly not in our own time since the so-called Tonkin Gulf episode, has a President taken a foreign-policy decision which has created such a deep division in the mind of the public. Your company has just secured a contract to supply vast quantities of chemicals, from gasoline to glycerine as one of your own spokesmen has put it, to the Department of Defense. It’s being said loudly and openly that you should have refused to cooperate.”

“Who says so?” Perdido snapped. “Them lamebrains out on the street?” Jerking his cigar toward the office window. “They can drop dead for all I care. I’m in business. My company makes chemicals. You name it, we make it: fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, preservatives, not to mention explosives and rocket-fuel. And gas! Sure we make gas. Been making it since 1917.”

“It’s been argued,” Barney said doggedly, “that you’d be performing a greater service for the nation by refusing this contract. A number of your competitors have publicized the fact that they declined to tender—”

“That’s their privilege.” Perdido folded his arms on his chest. “Equally, it’s my privilege to say they’re being holier-than-thou! I could name a good few corporations that... but I won’t. I’ll just remind you that they’re around. Dig into the records, you’ll find some of the firms concerned made fortunes out of Vietnam, Korea, even World War II. So they don’t have any right to tell me what I can and can’t do. It’s a question of the national interest, and looking back at what they did I feel I’m better justified.”

He was breathing heavily, almost snorting.

“If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be doing what I’ve agreed to do. If my competitors don’t like it—well, this is a democracy, and they could make a better impression by bowing to the will of the majority, the majority that elected the President than by hiring gangs of loudmouths to picket our plant!”

“It’s been rumored,” Barney said delicately, “that you’ll be facing trouble with the unions, too. There’s been wild talk not simply of strike action but even of sabotage.”

“Let someone try it—let just one guy try it—and he’ll be out on his ear and very probably in jail.” Perdido leaned back, firming his lips into a thin line, and Barney took his cue to wind up.

## **MINUS THREE AND COUNTING**

### *Route 5, Pegasus, Wisconsin*

One could sense the sinews of the nation growing taut as the seven-day deadline drew to its close and the moment of inevitable action neared. Fierce argument had swept around the world like a tsunami. The rights and wrongs of the course the President had committed them to were the sole topic of conversation from Hawaii to New England, from Alaska to Puerto Rico. Keen eyes belonging to calculating statesmen watched from Moscow, Paris, Peking, Canberra...

It was known that behind the scenes there was frantic diplomatic activity. Even someone in Barney’s

position, though, could learn little of what was actually being said and done at the “quasi-official” level, that strange half-world where the most alarming threats and lunatic promises were tossed around like images in a dream, not meant to be taken literally.

The ordinary public had to be content with what actually appeared in the daily news, and that amounted to a fuzz of predictable generalities. From the President’s supporters, defiant and perhaps not altogether convincing patriotic assertions that this was the only recourse the country could adopt and preserve its self-respect. From his opponents, shouts of “Blackmail!” and “Crazy waste!” and “Unconstitutional!”

Overseas comment was more restrained. The major European powers had decided to maintain their detachment for the time being, this not involving the various alliances, so their spokesmen confined themselves to expressions of keen interest, sympathy and good will, tinged with cynical doubt. The further eastward one looked around the globe, the more that doubt grew dominant. In the Socialist countries, climaxing with Russia, the uniform standard comment was, “Hah! What a lot of hot air! We’ll believe it when we see it!”

As for the Chinese, they had temporarily reverted to their traditional inscrutability. But it was known that they regarded the whole of Southeast Asia as lying within their sphere of influence, so doubtless they would speak up in opposition out of sheer principle, even if they did not directly intervene. It was authoritatively asserted that they would not; however, one could never be certain where the Chinese were concerned.

Barney, who had mirrored so much small detail of the frenzied debate for the enlightenment of the TV audience, was glad he did not have to endure the load the President now bore, the knowledge that he had embarked the world’s richest nation on a venture which had alienated at least half its population from him and which even his own supporters were half-inclined to regard as an idiotic gamble.

Here in Wisconsin, though, all that seemed to be a long way off, not just in space but in time too. In winter one could never have guessed that under the blanket of snow lay some of the most fertile land on the continent. Apart from a few modern structures—tall silos, a globular water-tank on a high pylon—the landscape looked much as it must have done before the advent of cars and electricity. The farmhouse where the Swen family lived was timber-built, and its interior, though disorderly, was snug and breathed a feeling of welcome. There was a huge warm stove. There was a piano draped with a lace-trimmed cloth. The walls bore a display of family portraits. Immediately on their arrival their hostess had insisted on serving the visitors hot soup and home-baked rolls. Waiting for Ginger and Lucy to set up their equipment, Barney found himself overcome by a powerful nostalgia. The surroundings belonged to an age when life was simpler, when morality could safely be discussed in terms of sharp blacks and whites. Now the world seemed to have shaded into a depressing series of lighter and darker grays.

Mr. Swen, whom he had come here to talk to, was elderly, slow-moving and slow-spoken. In youth he must have been tremendously muscular, and despite an increasing tendency to stoop he still overtopped Barney by a head and a half. But the years had wasted him. His work-clothes of drab dark blue, doubtless identical to what he had worn all his life, hung loose around his gaunt frame, and the huge boots whose thick soles clumped as he crossed the wooden floor seemed an over-heavy burden for his legs.

It would be great, Barney thought, to catch some of the atmosphere of this house on their tapes. But over the past few days Ginger had been growing more and more hostile, and had declared his disapproval of the way these interviews were being handled, so Barney dared not put a straight request to him. He would just have to rely on the man’s sense of craftsmanship to make the most of the material offered to

them.

Eventually everything was ready, and—talking from a rocking-chair which Mrs. Swen normally used, twin to the one in which the old farmer sat—he cleared his throat and began.

“Mr. Swen, the whole country has heard by now of your magnificent gesture in donating your farm to the national effort: everything from corn to cattle and from beets to barley. What decided you to do this?”

Mr. Swen shrugged his thin shoulders. “We-ell... well, it’s this way, y’see. Me and m’wife, we don’t have any kinfolk to leave it all to, and we’re gettin’ on, so the work here is more’n we can handle now. So we talked it over and made up our minds.”

“You”—this had to be handled very tactfully—“you say you have nobody to leave it to.”

“We did have two sons. One got killed in Korea.” He said “keeled,” more or less. “Then the other got killed in Vietnam. Got pictures of ‘em both on the wall yonder.” He jerked a calloused and bony thumb. Prompt, Ginger swung his camera. He was adept at that; he could stop the tape, zoom in, restart a heartbeat later so that one barely needed to edit. It was a minor relief to Barney to see his professional reflexes overcoming his personal opinions.

“Me, I came here when I was a kid,” Mr. Swen said “Along with my folks. I was born in Dalarna, Sweden. Right here is where I met my wife, and we’ve been together more’n forty years. All I got, I owe to this here country where I’ve spent my life. I guess the way I feel is this. If a country gives you as much as I been given, you don’t stop giving back what you can to it just ‘cause some things didn’t work out like you hoped.”

He spread his hands, and just in time Ginger focused on him again.

Barney hesitated. He had come here expecting to collect no more than a curio, maybe even the senile ramblings of a complete crank. He’d been pleasantly surprised. It seemed like a shame to spoil such a perfect capsule declaration of faith, but... well, the tape could always be edited if he did overdo it. He said, “And how do your neighbors feel about what you’ve done, Mr. Swen? I mean the other farmers in this area.”

The lined old face turned sour, mouth twisting down at corners.

“They been calling up on the phone, sayin’ all kinds of things I guess I better didn’t repeat. But the hell with ‘em. I stand by what I’ve done, and so does m’wife.”

“Thank you, Mr. Swen. On behalf of us all.”

## **MINUS TWO AND COUNTING**

### *Rosebush Air Force Base*

The wind blew from the direction of the Pacific, but it brought no scent of the sea. Instead, it carried the stink of jet-exhausts, the sound of engines, voices raised to make orders heard above the continuous roar of trucks, cranes, now and then aircraft taking off at the further end of the long spiral runway traversing

the field.

Barney's guide here was an affable young black officer, Captain Monk according to the name-badge pinned to his overalls. He himself, Lucy and Ginger had also been issued with protective garb; owing to the haste with which the operation had to proceed, there was a risk that drums of chemicals might be dropped and burst open, or a crate of powder dangerous if inhaled.

"But there hasn't been an accident so far this week," Captain Monk was at pains to emphasize.

His explanations of what was going on were clear and simple, and Lucy recorded them and Ginger taped pictures to correspond, and one way and another today's stint was going very smoothly indeed.

"As you know we don't have any land facilities to speak of in the area any more," Monk expounded. "So this is going to have to be almost exclusively a carrier-borne operation. This field is essentially a staging-post right now. Over there"—pointing at the full stretch of his arm—"we're bringing in bulk cargo. You can see one of our transports lining up for its approach at this very minute."

Shrunkened by the effect of distance, a dot appeared on the skyline. It grew—and grew—and grew, a vast four-engined freighter approaching at about a hundred and fifty miles per hour. Pure reflex made Barney clench his fists as he remembered that even with its tanks light its cargo must make it weigh around two hundred tons.

One expected to feel the ground shudder as it touched down. But there was only the abrupt roar of its engines being switched to full reverse thrust.

"Any idea what it's carrying?" he asked Monk.

The officer shook his lean dark head. "Could be one of any number of things. Very likely pharmaceuticals—we're due for a thousand tons of them today and tomorrow."

As the plane taxied toward a man waving bright luminous bats, a score of powered trolleys and fork-lift tracks converged on it. Monk continued his explanation.

"What they'll do now is break down the consignment into smaller units and repack it. Most of it will have to be air-dropped into the target zone, of course. Within a matter of hours at most it'll be in the air again, this time aboard one of the planes which will carry out the actual strike missions."

He swung around and pointed to another corner of the field. "Over there, the 657th is already on the move. Since early today they've been flying out about four or five planes an hour to join the naval task-force that's been re-assigned to this project from regular patrols in the China Sea. There are three carriers in the group, but they've had to fly off their own planes—not suitable for this kind of work—and they're taking on the planes you can see over there."

Compared to the massive freighter, the aircraft he was indicating were little more than toys. But deadly-looking toys, painted matt-black, purposive, efficient.

"Naturally they've retained their 'copters," Monk added. "We'll be flying a hell of a lot of 'copter missions."

"What's the weather like where they're going?" Barney inquired.

"Windy," Monk answered with a thin smile. "It won't be the easiest job in the world to set down on



those carriers with a heavy load on board. Matter of fact, it's pretty windy out here, isn't it? Let's go in one of these packing-sheds and see what's being readied for shipment."

For the next half-hour they toured the huge converted hangars where men and women quietly and rapidly broke down the bulk deliveries for onward transmission: pharmaceuticals as Monk had said, but also electronic equipment, food, clothing, tools... no munitions. Of course.

"What kind of a reception do you think our boys are likely to get?" Barney asked.

"Oh, that's anybody's guess. How, do you predict the success or failure of an operation like this one? Speaking personally, I'm confident, it will be a huge success, in fact. There's a great spirit among our boys, you know."

"Any hint of Soviet intervention for example?" Barney persisted. "Or Chinese?"

"I'm not sure I'm the right guy to ask about that," Monk parried. "Of course it's an open secret that our task force is under constant surveillance, but beyond that... Well, to be candid, I don't believe they'd dare to meddle."

Barney hesitated. He said eventually, "Captain, it's been rumored that some of our men are reluctant to participate in this operation."

Monk halted and turned to face him squarely, and the camera. He said, "Yes, sir. That is so."

Such an immediate and positive answer was not what Barney had been expecting. He was caught momentarily off balance. The best he could come up with was, "And what do you think of their reaction?"

"All I can say is I don't understand it. Of course, it's their right to request alternative duty, and I'm advised that in all such cases so far the request has been granted. It's a matter of policy. To offset that, though, you might take my own case. I did two tours in 'Nam, and my term of service was due to expire at the beginning of this week. In view of the circumstances I requested an indefinite extension of my engagement. I'm very happy to be involved in this operation. If I'm reassigned to active duty I'll accept with enthusiasm."

Before Barney could put another question, the air was battered by the screech of a jet taking off, and then another, and another, *en route* to their rendezvous across the ocean.

## **MINUS ONE AND COUNTING**

### ***Point Benefit Missile Station***

Now the tension was so terrific, it was as though one of those ancient siege-engines—a ballista, would it be?—had been wound up to the point where its bunched ropes threatened to snap. The image came readily to mind. They had baptized the payload of the giant rocket that stood on its launch-pad three miles from here, "The Dead Horse," after the kind of impromptu missile such siege-engines had sometimes been called on to deliver. Barney couldn't help shuddering when he imagined a half-rotted horse's corpse splashing after being thrown over a castle wall.

Some very, very high-speed alterations had had to be carried out on that rocket. It had never been intended for such a precise—surgically precise—operation. But the job had been accomplished, and its countdown was proceeding smoothly, and an hour and a half still remained before the midnight expiry of the seven-day ultimatum.

For good and logical reasons maximum publicity had been given to every stage of the preparations. Tonight, as though this were nothing more than a grandiose firework show, people were milling around in hordes, chatting, sometimes uttering loud laughter that betrayed a hint of nervousness... and small wonder. Air Force and Army personnel, of course, were everywhere; additionally, though, there were scores of civilians, wearing thick coats and hats with fur-lined ear-flaps, hands plunged deep in their pockets for protection against the sub-zero wind.

Around and among them Barney led his camera team, Ginger looking more despondent by the minute—as though only tonight had he realized that this scheme he regarded as crazy would actually be carried through—and Lucy looking by contrast more and more cheerful, Barney himself was poised on a knife-edge between the two moods. While he still supported the idea, now that its execution was upon them he found doubt preying on his mind. Suppose there were an unforeseen snag? Suppose the response were not as had been calculated? After all, nothing like this had been attempted ever before. Nothing *quite* like this, anyhow.

Someone walking past was carrying a transistor radio. The instantly-recognizable voice of the President's defeated rival issued from it, hammering away at his constant theme.

“—apart from the patent idiocy of the idea, what about the *cost*? It's frightening to see money thrown away like this! You might as well take a pile of bills up the Empire State Building and consign them to the mercy of the wind!”

Ginger gave a vigorous nod of agreement, but at the same moment Barney caught sight of one of the people he had been hunting for among the crowd and rushed toward him.

“Mr. Fielding! I've been looking for you all over, ever since they told me you'd arrived. Would I be right in guessing that behind the door you said even you were not allowed through—?”

“Something to do with this?” Fielding cut in with a grin, waving toward the immense silhouette of the flood-lighted rocket. “Oh, sure! We designed and built special electronics for that bird. I'm told there's never before been a rocket or missile, bar the Mars and Venus probes, that called for such needle-point accuracy. So we supplied gear for it that will function under five or six times the maximum expected g-load.”

“Hm-m-m. That certainly is impressive!”

“Even more impressive than you probably imagine,” Fielding said. “And, by the way! I've been watching out for your interviews since you called on me—not that I've had much time for TV, of course—and I remember you also talked to Peter Perdido, didn't you? He's around somewhere, too. It was his company that supplied fuel for the rocket.”

“Mr. Perdido!”

“What? Oh, hello, Mr. Ratchett. Might have expected to find you here, I guess.”

“Look, I’m told your firm provided the fuel for this bird. Could you—?”

“No. Definitely no. Not until she’s been safely fired. But if you want someone who’ll talk to you; there’s someone around here who notoriously never stops talking—someone I believe you know, what’s more.”

“Who?”

“I think you said that the day before you called on me you’d been to interview Professor Melvin Child—”

Blaring from wall- and pole-mounted PA speakers, a voice cut in. “One hour and counting at the mark... Mark! Repeat, one hour and counting. All personnel to sixty-minute stations!”

“Professor! Professor Child!”

“Who the hell... ? Oh, it’s the master of instant news.” Child looked very strange in his Army uniform, with major’s rank-badges, particularly since he had retained his beard—though at least it was more neatly brushed than before. Several times while in his company Barney saw other officers catch sight of him and have to do a double-take.

“What in the world brings you here, Professor—or I guess I should say Major?”

“Me? Oh, they sent me an invitation to join the gang. Think I don’t deserve it? Hell, I’ve had almost no sleep since I last saw you. You’d think the Army would keep a full-time staff of competent linguists, wouldn’t you? But you should have seen some of the stuff their so-called propaganda experts had in draft. Full of elementary errors of grammar, vocabulary, phrasing—and as for style...! I can just picture one of those blockheads in a peasant village over there, trying to make friends with the people. Everybody would be laughing at him, even the kids!”

He bundled his greatcoat closer around himself.

“So since they said I could come along and see the shot... crazy, you know. Bad as England, this. They have their firework shows on Guy Fawkes’ Day, November Fifth, and of course the weather is filthy nine years out of ten. At least we had the good sense to pick the Fourth of July.” He hesitated, then added in a lower tone, “Say, do you know anywhere around here I could get a drink? I’m frozen to the marrow!”

Hiding a smile, Barney said, “We’re operating out of that big trailer over there. It’s our mobile HQ. And I know my chief Andy Scharf keeps a stock of Jim Beam for—ah—VIP’s.”

With alacrity Child said, “I’m one!”

“Thirty minutes from the mark... Mark!”

Child was a fascinating talker. He held forth with such verve that even those members of the news-team who had privately declared he most have made his recent notorious gesture purely for publicity were won

over in a matter of minutes, and more than once Andy Scharf—who himself gave the impression he'd have enjoyed listening—had to recall them sternly to neglected duties.

“Hard to get accustomed to, isn't it?” Child said after that had happened a couple of times. “I mean the fact that an operation like this is taking place in the full glare of the media. That's a breakthrough, if you like!”

“Operation,” Barney echoed, thoughtfully.

“A good term. The only possible term. Because of its medical overtones.”

“That's the point which had just struck me,” Barney agreed.

Child was nodding fervently. “You know the old French proverb, *il faut souffrir pour être belle*? You must suffer to be beautiful! We want this planet of ours to be beautiful for mankind to live on, but there's no doubt that here and there it's riddled with the counterpart of cancer. So now and then it's essential to undertake the equivalent of a surgical operation, because otherwise the disease will spread and the result will be disaster for us all. All this talk about our ‘right’ to destroy the way of life of those people yonder”—a vague easterly gesture,—“I've been there, and I've seen. For most of them it's not a way of life. It's a way of death—at an early age!”

“Fifteen minutes, counting... Fourteen... Thirteen...”

The talk began to die away until at last there was no sound in the big trailer except Andy Scharf's commentary for the viewers and occasional whispered instructions. Everybody was under cover now; only the remote cameras gave a view of the looming bulk of the rocket, tipped with its ridiculously small payload. The service gantry was withdrawn, the count reached thirty seconds, twenty, ten...

“—five, four, three, two, one, fire.”

And after that it was impossible to hear anything for a long while except the incredible thunder of the engines, until at last a calm official voice said. “On course, on course. We have a bird.”

“The die is cast,” said Melvin Child, and somehow, coming from him, the phrase did not ring at all false.

After all, when in history had a nation taken a greater gamble?

## ZERO

### *Hamlet Siao Kat*

During the past week they had been warned, over and over, by the premier, by official spokesmen, by generals, by a panicky visitor from the capital, and on the day it happened exactly as they had been told

to expect. Very faint, very high, there were aircraft; one caught a glimpse of them now and then between the drifting clouds.

Today Cham Loc had not gone to work in the paddies. Instead he had remained at his house with his wife and children, anxiously scanning the sky. Everyone in the village was equally on edge, and the transistor radio—which at the risk of running down its battery he had kept switched on since dawn—mingled its declarations of defiance with still more warnings.

“Stay under cover as much as you can. Beware of anything that falls from the sky. No matter how innocent it looks, treat it as dangerous. Keep a careful eye on your children. It’s been known for antipersonnel bombs to be disguised as toys and dolls!”

Cham Loc shuddered. He rarely had the chance to see a newspaper, but recently some had been brought to the village, and he had been appalled by photographs showing scarred and maimed children, many of them no older than his own two. How could anybody be so cruel? Yet there the evidence was, plain in the pictures!

The day wore on. By late afternoon he was half-convinced that nothing was going to happen in this area after all, that the planes were all bound for the capital city, the ports, or the country’s few industrial centers, and this poor agricultural region was going to be ignored.

Neither he nor his wife had had much sleep last night. He dozed, and so did she, when the waiting grew unbearable. Both of them were lost in dreams before the white of parachutes bloomed in the rays of the declining sun.

Overhead quiet voices spoke from plane to plane: “Electronics One through Three, commence your delivery run now... Chemical One through Chemical Five, stand by to follow them...”

It was planned as a saturation mission. From now on it would continue every day from dawn to dusk until the government admitted the people had had enough. Aboard the carriers at sea, men stripped to the waist in subtropical heat sweated and cursed as they struggled to turn the planes around within the permitted half-hour deadline. Refuel, reload, and off again...

And down they came like the seeds of some inconceivably huge thistle, sifting through the clear air, and thumped or banged or skidded or tangled or splashed according to the direction of the breeze and the nature of the terrain. It was a cry from his son which awoke Cham Loc in horror—a cry of pain? And, less loud, a voice that spoke in the sole language he understood, saying something about... but never mind! What was important was that his son was holding up his hand, bright red with smears of blood!

Shouting for his wife to wake up too, he ran toward the bulky container which, by the look of things, the boy had foolishly dared to open, and stopped dead as he realized that was where the strange voice was issuing from, uttering strange but perfectly plain words.

It was roughly cubical. It had a large square lid. The lid was upright. On its interior face, there were moving pictures.

“This container is blue,” the voice was saying. “That means it holds tools. There are also yellow containers. They hold medicines for common diseases. There are also green containers. They hold good

seed. There are also brown containers...”

The boy’s injury, on inspection, was no more than a scratch. Puzzled, but with growing courage, Cham Loc ventured to take a look inside the open box...

And gave his son a thorough dressing-down. At his age he should have known better than to snatch at the gleaming steel of a saw-blade.

On the upright lid, a picture of just such a saw: a smiling man using it to cut a log. After that, a picture of the same man using an ax; that too was in the box. And a hammer, and an assortment of nails, and a mallet and a chisel and a pair of pincers and a folding carpenter’s rule and half a dozen pencils and... It was too much for Cham Loc. Faced with such unimaginable wealth, he could only gape as the picture-show in the box’s lid demonstrated the proper use of each of these items, and then began the explanation all over again.

“This container is blue. That means it holds tools...”

Clothes, shoes, buckets, cook-pots, scissors, needles, knives, pans, soap, looms, thread and yarn, buttons, plastic pipe, map-books, pen-pencil-and-compass sets, writing-paper, rope, disinfectant, fishing-line, wire, water-purifying tablets, lens-grinding kits with instructions on how to make simple spectacles, microfilm libraries, one per village, complete with magnifier, containing data on agriculture, medicine, hygiene, weaving, building, pottery...

The list was two thousand items long. Later, there would be instructions on how to detach the lids from the containers so that they could be set up permanently to receive the signals which were now emanating from the broadcasting satellite put tidily into stationary orbit by the converted ICBM code-named “The Dead Horse.”

## **PLUS 8 AND HOPING**

### *Planet Earth*

“I’m pleased to report to the nation,” the President said from the screen of the TV set, “that at nine o’clock this morning I was able to give orders to discontinue all Navy and Air Force missions except those currently in progress. An hour earlier, I had received a full, frank, and I may say handsome apology from—”

“Smug bastard!” Hal Ratchett muttered resentfully.

“In his position,” Barney countered, “wouldn’t you be?”

“—spoken personally by phone to the premier, and he assured me that diplomatic relations will be resumed tomorrow. Moreover the first of our aid-and-counsel teams are presently on their way by scheduled, or maybe I ought to say rescheduled, commercial flights. They include doctors, nurses, agronomists, engineers, civil engineers and teachers. It goes without saying that all of these people are volunteers.”

The President leaned back in his chair, beaming.

“As you know, my authority to commit our forces to a venture of this kind has been called in question, and I am required by Congress to present a detailed accounting of its cost—as is just and proper, of course. But I can give you the public a preliminary report here and now.”

He lifted a single sheet of paper from a table at his side with conscious theatricality.

“I see we have flown nine hundred and fifty missions. I see we suffered nine casualties, none fatal, due to such accidents as badly-secured crates falling from a crane, while nineteen have been reported from the target areas—including, I regret to say, one fatality when an elderly man was pinned down by one of our air-drop packages and seemingly died from shock. I have authorized compensation for his widow, naturally.”

Laying the paper aside, he concluded. “All in all, it appears that the total cost amounts to one billion dollars.”

“A billion bucks!” Donna burst out. “He didn’t have any right to—!”

Almost as though he had heard her, the President gazed straight into camera and concluded, “I should like to remind those who feel that a billion dollars is excessive that at the height of our commitment in Vietnam we were spending a billion dollars, on average, *every five days*. I leave you and the world to judge which investment has secured the better return. Good-bye.”

There was dead silence for a long moment in the Ratchetts’ living-room. At last Barney rose, yawned, and stretched on tiptoe, before turning down the TV sound.

“I think it’s cheap at the price,” he said. “Does anybody care to argue?”

At which moment Lissa—who had as usual declined to stay and listen to the President when he came on—opened the door just in time to catch the last word. Her face fell.

“Oh, no! You’re not arguing about politics *again*?”

“The argument,” Barney said contentedly, “is over.”