

*The martyr (as distinguished from the person who is surprised to find himself giving his life for a cause) is very nearly the only person who is thoroughly convinced of death, both before and after dying.*

—The Public Notes of Isidor Norm

The Secretary of Defense said, because he was essentially a simple man, just three simple words: "You are insane."

The President of the United States, on the other hand, was an elected official and therefore accustomed to tempering his words to the shorn. He used a good many more words. "You have gone entirely out of your mind," he said, "and you belong in the bughouse with all the other bugs, and nuts, and kooks."

Everett Carson, who had gone to the Secretary of Defense directly from a reasonably lengthy time of contemplation in a quiet pew of his parish church, and who planned to return there, for a few minutes at least, after leaving the President, said just the same thing to each man: "Well, sir, we live in strange times."

"Damned strange," the President said, looking around the Oval Office with the opaque resignation which seems to descend on all Presidents in that room, after a year or so. "I mean—well, I mean *very* strange times," he said.

But, damn it, the President thought behind his mask, it wasn't easy to think of Carson as an Associate Secretary and a responsible career officer over at State. It wasn't that he acted like some sort of preacher, not exactly—and if he looked like one (the long lean sort), a good many State Department men seemed to run to that type. But . . . well, the President, and most of official Washington, had always had the uncomfortable feeling (which was perfectly correct) that this man Carson wasn't satisfied with trundling off to church on Sunday morning and taking care of the matter of religion as normally as that. There had always been the suspicion that Carson might be found in a church at any time at all: Wednesday afternoon, for instance, or some perfectly ordinary Friday.

"Don't moderate your language in deference to me, sir," Carson was saying. "I've heard worse, you know. At the Crystal Palace, for one thing—the limited-level space-armaments conference. And—"

"Nevertheless," the President said irritably, "this proposition of yours is idiotic. Insane." He made a sweeping gesture with one hand. "Ridiculous."

"If I may, sir," Carson began, and, when the President nodded, went on: "What have we got to lose?"

"Five kids," the President said, in a voice his TV audience would not have recognized. "Five young, suburban, well-brought-up children, average age sixteen, are in possession of an armed atomic bomb. That silly magazine—the one that published the mechanics of a Molotov cocktail a few years back, during the riots!—ran a technical breakdown on the things a few issues back. 'America's Shame: Death at a Fingertip.' Something like that." Carson made a sympathetic noise. "And now these—*kids*," the President went on, "are established in a cabin outside the Denver suburbs, and, thanks to the miracle of live-remote TV spy-eyes, have told the world that they are going to set the thing off—it's quite powerful enough to wipe half of Colorado off the map, you know—unless we agree to their terms."

"Yes, sir," Carson said, evenly, but still sympathetically. "And their terms would mean anarchy: the destruction of the rule of law—"

"Which is the only alternative to cutting your neighbor's throat when you happen to disagree with him," the President put in.

"Quite," Carson said. "The destruction of the rule of law, the destruction of this country and this society . . . as we both clearly see. And, since we cannot agree to any such terms, and cannot allow them to kill four to seven million people—or even take the chance of their doing so—we must come up with something else."

"Brilliant," the President said hopelessly. "A brilliant analysis. The dissection of the obvious ... oh,

damn it, Carson—"

"And we have come up with nothing else to do," Carson said, in the same even voice. "Sending a plane up and destroying the cabin and our—blackmailers—is impossible: the TV coverage there would call us murderers, at the least; and, at worst, we might just set the bomb off as well. Dropping a gas grenade, knocking them out and recovering the bomb is open to the same objections . . . the TV coverage would be merciless, sir. Unwilling even to discuss national goals with these brave youths . . . You know the sort of thing."

"I'm afraid I do," the President said. "And the freedom of the press . . ."

"Yes, sir," Carson said. "There just isn't any way to shut off the spy-eyes—not without a nationwide uprising. And the uprising could as well be touched off by coverage calling us murderers, or secretive, warlike men who cruelly brush aside the earnest voice of youth in order to continue our stockpiling of . . ."

"Stop that," the President said. "It sounds too familiar. Good Lord, Carson: do they really think we *like* killing people?"

"I wouldn't know, sir," Carson said. "I have never been able fully to understand such minds. But they exist—and in sufficient numbers so that one such act, carried by TV, would set off an uprising . . ."

The President nodded. "I know," he said. "And if we agree to negotiate, and *then* go in—barring TV for the actual negotiations, which they'll stand for—and gas the kids, get the bomb . . . why, the kids will speak up later. And if they're not around to speak up . . . Carson, every alternative is horrible. Everything we have to do is horrible—and none of it will even work."

"Exactly, sir," Carson said. "Therefore, since we must do something, and can't think of anything effective to do, I repeat: what have we got to lose?"

"Send you to negotiate with them? Actually *negotiate*? With five children? Now, Carson—"

Carson shrugged. The Oval Office had always had a strange feeling of closeness for him, as if he and its other occupant were locked in together, permanently. He dismissed the feeling, as irrelevant to the business at hand. "First, we must recover the bomb with the full agreement of the children," he said. "After recovery, TV will interview them: that much is plain." The President nodded. "And, too . . . there are very few adults in this world," Carson said. "I think that I have met four in my lifetime; and I do not count myself, not in modesty but on rather a long acquaintance. My wife might qualify . . . In any case," he said a bit more sharply, "age is certainly not a controlling factor. I have spent a good many negotiating sessions with children, Mr. President."

"Wordplay—"

"With respect: no, sir," Carson said. "Fact."

"And you think these negotiations of yours might—might—"

"Might remove at least this threat to the Republic and the world," Carson said. "And remove it entirely. Yes, sir, I do. Leaving us, of course, to deal with all the others."

"But the others—China, Czechoslovakia, the United Nations, Taiwan, pollution, the balance of payments—the others are *normal*, Carson. This—"

"I agree, sir," Carson said. "This is a trifle odd. Which is why I broke channels to present my idea. Unless there is a better operation now about to mount—"

"Nothing," the President said. "Nothing. You'd think the CIA, or Defense, or *somebody*—maybe HEW, for all I know—would have come up with a plan. But—"

"I'm afraid," Carson said, very gently, "that they tend to have the wrong approach to this sort of thing."

The President stared. "The—" he began, and stopped, and tried again. "To this sort of—"

"Exactly," Carson said. "A pattern does exist. And I suggest, as gently as I may, that we hurry this a bit. They've given us, you know, a deadline."

"I know," the President said. "It's down to forty-two hours now, from sixty. Forty-two hours . . . Carson, there isn't *anything* that can be done in forty-two hours!"

"I should rather like to try," Carson said gently. "Mountainview, their nearest suburb, not yet having a full heliport of its own—if I might emplane to Denver at once, with Mr. Suesman, and proceed from

there with two cars and chauffeurs—"

"And that's another thing," the President said. "There are hundreds of experienced men, Carson. You've seen them come and go for—what is it, thirty years?" He waved a hand, forbidding reply. "But this Suessman . . . well, I ran a check. Had Combined Records do it, rush-star-rush. He came into State three years ago. Wanting, the form says, 'to serve his country'; not many of those left, or at any rate not many who'll admit it. But before that he spent four years with Actors' Studio. A few off-off-Broadway parts, nothing special . . . a drama student, Carson. A *drama* student! No negotiating experience—basically a clerk . . ." The President shut his eyes. "Carson," he said softly, "will you tell me one thing?"

"If I can," Carson said, "certainly, sir."

"Why this one?" the President said. "Why Suessman?"

Carson took a breath. "Well," he said, "for one thing, he was never much of a success as an actor, sir. Never even appeared on television; he won't be recognized."

"I suppose that makes sense. But—"

"And for the other," Carson said, as the President opened his eyes, hoping, apparently, that all was now to be made clear, "he's never seen Denver, sir. Or any of the country out there. I think he'll rather like it; I know that I do."

Long training among hecklers prevented a Presidential explosion. After a time he said: "Now, really—" and felt proud of his moderation.

"We're running short of time," Carson said. "If your security precautions have been tightened, and the technical matters—"

"Damn right," the President said. "I mean: certainly. Certainly. No drone flying to Colorado Springs is going to get off the ground again without six checkovers. Or sixteen. If there'd been a pilot . . . well, we might have had a dead pilot as well, I suppose. But the idiotic luck of the thing . . . the crash, these kids finding the cushioned bomb in the wreckage . . . for God's sake . . . I mean: for Heaven's sake—"

"God," Carson said with a perfectly straight face, "is quite acceptable."

"Idiotic . . . I thought the coast of Spain, years ago, had been the last of it. But it is not going to happen again. Believe you me," the President said, in a voice that sounded, briefly, very much like that of his native Ohio.

"Good. I'm glad of that," Carson said, meaning it, of course, quite sincerely. "Then all that remains—"

"Is your trip," the President said. "I suppose so. I suppose so . . . I don't know what else can be done, I don't know . . . Carson, there's nothing else left. You understand that, don't you?" He looked into the spare, pale face always diplomatically bland but never less than competent in appearance. "Of course you do," he said. "Certainly. Anyhow . . . well, Carson, I hope you do. I have to: it's the only hope we have, any of us."

The five (three male, two female, though the point of sex was quite irrelevant) were waiting in what they called their "conference room," after having tried "clubhouse" with a less dramatic effect. It had been their choice for a meeting, an abandoned shack in rocky country some five miles beyond the posh-suburban outskirts of Mountainview. Carson had taken some care to reassure his associate on one point, at least. "They won't shoot. Not at once, at any rate. They're negotiating with the entire U.S. Government, as equals. They should rather like the feeling of power that provides; our hope is that they continue to like it for just long enough." Suessman showed no signs of nervousness as he came to the opened door, and Carson hoped that he had done, outwardly, at least as well.

The tallest of the men, who seemed to be the spokesman and who had been the most heavily featured on spy-eye TV coverage, stood in the open doorway and looked the two men up and down. Carson: long, lean, fifty-odd. Suess-man: middle-sized, middle-thirtied, middling-bald. Behind them two automobiles waited, and the chauffeurs stood, as Carson had insisted, at an easy attention in the broiling afternoon sun. The area had the temperature and the general feeling of a large oven.

The leader of the group of rebels spoke first, without moving. "We got the bomb inside here," he said

flatly. His Western accent, not quite a twang, was, Carson thought, rather attractive. "No false moves, now, because we know how to set it off—and *we will!* One touch, and we all go up—and a fair piece of Colorado with us."

"Which would hardly do you a great deal of good," Carson said mildly. The leader (twenty-two, local-college graduate, no military history, no police history, no declared formal religion) gave him a flat-eyed stare.

"You're scared," he said. "Look: the people know what we've got here. Thanks to the TV. And if this bomb goes off, the people will *rise*. You know that, mister. A real rising, too—more than your shaky establishment can stand. Which you also know."

"I see," Carson said. The cars and chauffeurs waited, baking, as everyone else did except the four children inside the cabin. "Martyrs, then. Martyrs for your cause."

"Right on," the leader said. "Martyrs. Because we are not afraid to go. You have to understand that, mister: *we are not afraid to go*. Not if the people rise behind us. We'll be remembered, mister; we'll go down in the books, and in the stories. Later. When the establishment is gone at last—"

"I'm sure," Carson murmured politely. "May we come inside? I'll permit our drivers inside their cars, then, quite out of anyone's way, I assure you. They would appreciate the air-conditioning, and I'm sure that your conference room is cooler inside than out."

"Comfort," the leader said, and grinned, with the enormously attractive force of a very few of the insane. "Big comfort. That's what you all live for, isn't it—you big people?"

Carson knew that each of the five had come from a home in the twenty-to-thirty-thousand-dollar income bracket, and consequently from a life-style more opulent than either chauffeur's, or Suessman's. Carson himself drew a somewhat higher salary, but tithing with his church, and a few other such matters, brought him nearer Suessman's level than that of the rebels. He said, of course, nothing whatever; and after ten seconds had passed, the leader said: "All right, sure. Go ahead. What do we care?"

Carson nodded to the chauffeurs. He and Suessman stepped past the leader and into the cabin. Already in the dimly-lit cabin were three chairs, two candles, four human beings, and a heavy-looking sphere which shone rather dully in the light. A good many gadgets seemed to be growing out of the thing, and Carson found himself wondering idly just how a thing like that worked. Terribly complex, of course. . . probably beyond anything he could understand ...

The door shut, neither quietly nor with a slam. The musty, cool air inside seemed to thicken. The leader, standing against the door, said: "All right. Now you're here. Now we negotiate—in private for now. You asked for that, and it's all right with us: if we don't show up again, or if this little baby goes off—why, then, everybody will know what it means. Isn't that right, mister?"

"Exactly," Carson said.

"Now," the leader said comfortably, "here we all are. Let it out. What is it you think you have?"

Twenty minutes later, Carson said: "I take it, then, that you are determined to be martyrs, if that will best aid your cause?"

"Take it," one of the girls said abruptly, "and you know what you can do with it. Sure: we're set for that. Nobody searched you coming in here, did they? What harm can you do? Either the bomb goes, or we do—or we get what we want. This talk isn't worth spit. You just remember there isn't much time left."

"Not much," one of the others said. "Better get out of ground zero, big people."

"Because—"

"When she blows—"

"It'll be too late, mister, too late, too late—"

"Too late," the leader said. "We told you what we want. Now: do we get it?"

*Spoiled children*, Carson thought (not for the first time during a negotiation): *spoiled brats*. Aloud, he said: "Nothing I say can change your minds about this?"

"Nothing," the girl said. The others murmured what seemed to be agreement. The leader said: "Nothing at all. Talk is "cheap, mister—too cheap."

"I agree," Carson said. Before anyone could move, he had drawn his revolver and shot Suessman cleanly through the junction of neck and shoulder—one of the faster and bloodier of the absolute-fatal targets.

"And that, of course, ended it," he said ten hours later.

"Insane," the President said. "Entirely insane. We'll do what we can for them—"

Carson shook his head. "I shouldn't call them insane, sir," he said. "Just—unprepared. When they saw Suessman fall, quite bloodily, twitching his life away—"

"He will be all right, won't he?" the President said.

"Of course," Carson said. "Acting and makeup, mostly; though I understand he will need attention for shock, and for burns from the wadding of the blank with which I shot him. I'm afraid my aim is a bit rusty, sir—not enough practice time these days, really—and I came uncomfortably close. For which I am—truly—extremely sorry."

The President snorted. "Don't be silly," he said. "Good as new in a week . . . but . . . Carson, I don't understand. You shot your assistant. You pointed the gun—one gun—at the others. And they let you walk over to the bomb and pick it up?"

"Not exactly, sir," Carson said. "They let me walk over to it and guard it until the chauffeurs could come in—signaled by intercom in my jacket, of course—and pick it up. It was much heavier than anything I ought to lift, sir: my doctor has been quite emphatic on the subject in recent years. Prudence therefore dictated—"

"Yes, yes," the President said impatiently. "But, damn it, Carson: *why?* There they were, five of them. Willing to be killed. Willing to set that thing off. They said so; they went on saying so."

"Quite," Carson said. "That was what I had counted on; that, and the fact that none of the five practiced any formal religion."

"That none of the—*what?*"

Carson sighed. "Religion, sir," he said, "perhaps especially Christianity, though it would be difficult to justify such a claim—religion teaches us to contemplate death. It does other things, too. But it does that, sir: it teaches us to become familiar with death, to accept it; to know it, sir, in short, in every detail."

The President shut his eyes, waited, opened them. "Well," he said. "Perhaps . . . perhaps it does. But I don't see—"

"Most people under, perhaps, twenty-two," Carson said, "have never seen truly violent death. I except some members of the military—perhaps the one in ninety who has any actual experience of front-line warfare, and also the medical corps, and so forth—and of course I except, as well, residents of those poor and hopeless neighborhoods we might as well call ghettos until some other word is available. And I except a few others. But the average suburban person of sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, even twenty simply has never seen violent death. He has seen carefully expurgated TV versions, perhaps, on news broadcasts or some especially enthusiastic shows; he has seen a Hollywood version in the movies. But the *fact* . . . no."

The President nodded. "Agreed. Well?"

"They cannot conceive of death," Carson said, "or at least of such an unpleasant, violent and painful death as a revolver provides. Or a plane crash . . . sir, if the plane carrying the bomb had killed a man in its crash, the situation would not have arisen; violent and distasteful death would have been seen and recognized by these children. But it was not; a life was saved therefore."

"At the cost of your ingenuity," the President said.

Carson shrugged. "At the cost of asking me to—or, rather, forcing me to request permission to—do my job," he said. "Nothing more. Certainly a lesser cost. But to continue . . . these children are encouraged by the society we live in to ignore death and to think of a sort of eternal life—even an eternal youth. The advertisements, for instance; even more, such catchwords as 'never trust anyone over thirty' . . . well, all this is obvious." He paused and went on in the same calm voice he had begun with, many hours before. "They were faced with the actuality of that death. With no experience and no familiarity to draw on, they—froze, perhaps. Retreated. It was not something with which they were prepared to deal.

Words—*martyr, execution, death*—come easily to the mind, sir. The facts for which they stand come to the mind with difficulty, if at all. The loose, the constant talk of martyrdom told me that these children had no faintest conception of the fact; the fact is not spoken of so carelessly, sir."

The President nodded again. "So you faced them with the fact," he said.

"Exactly," Carson said. "I had no wish to injure anyone, and with current techniques an actor could be used. But, if necessary, sir, I should have been quite willing to act as their—ah—example. Without makeup, or blank wadding."

"I believe you would," the President said. "I believe you would—be a martyr, in fact."

"Perhaps," Carson said. "At any rate, I keep in practice with my revolver when I can: riots occur, and if threatened I intend to protect my wife and my children, whether my own death is involved or not. At least, sir, I hope that would be my attitude."

"A rare one," the President said, and Carson shook his head.

"Not at all, sir," he said. "Suessman, for instance: he faced identical risks. All that is required is—not Christianity—but the ability to accept and to realize not only the concept but the fact of violent death. It is helpful, sir, to have that ability provided and confirmed by a formal religious structure. If, for instance, one of those five had been a formally—a truly—religious person, for instance . . ." His voice trailed away.

"Yes?" the President said.

"It occurs to me, sir," Carson said, "that a truly religious person might have done what I did not . . . and what I begin, sir, to regret having left undone."

"Regret?" the President said. "Come now, man: you've disarmed that pack of idiotic rebels, you've saved your country—possibly the world—"

"Yes, sir," Carson said. "All of that, sir, and all of it quite necessary." He paused for a long minute. "But . . . a truly religious person, sir," he went on, "might not have returned the bomb to Colorado Springs after all."

"But—"

Carson went on as if he had heard nothing—nothing except the voice he had always tried to hear, and thought he heard at that second, the voice that spoke, quite silently, within.

"A truly religious person," he said, "might, very simply, have destroyed the damned thing."