



I Was a Teen-Age Secret Weapon

Sabia, Richard

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"Get away from me!" screamed Dr. Berry at the approaching figure.

"But Ah got to feed an' water the animals an' clean out the cages," drawled the lanky, eighteen-year-old boy amiably.

"Get out of this laboratory, you hoodoo," shrilled Berry, "or I swear I'll kill you! I'll not give you the chance to do me in!"

Tow-headed Dolliver Wims regarded chubby Dr. Berry with his innocent green eyes. "Ah don't know why y'all fuss at me like you do," he complained in aggrieved tones.

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHY!" shrieked two hundred and eighteen pounds of outraged Dr. Berry. "How dare you stand there and say you don't know why?" Berry flung a pudgy hand within an inch of Wims' nose. Slashed across the back of it, like frozen lightning, was a new, jagged scar. "That's why!" he shouted. Berry twisted his head into profile, thrust it at Wims and pointed to a slightly truncated ear lobe. "And that's why!" he roared. He yanked up a trouser leg, revealing a finely pitted patch of skin. "And also why!" he yelled. He paused to snatch a breath and glared at the boy. "And if I weren't so modest I'd show you another why!"

"Kin Ah help it if you're always havin' accidents?" Wims replied with a shrug.

Berry turned a deeper red and a dangerous rumble issued from his throat, as if he were a volcano threatening to erupt. Then quite suddenly, with an obvious effort, he capped his seething anger and subsided somewhat. Through taut lips he said, "I'm not going to stand here and argue with you, Wims; just get out."

"But the animals—"

"You can come back in an hour when I've finished running these rats through the maze."

"But—"

"I SAID OUT!" Berry leaped at Wims with arms outthrust, intending to push him toward the door, but Wims had stepped aside in slight alarm and the avalanche of meat plunged past and into a bench on which rested a huge, multilevel glass maze which was a shopping-center model being tested to determine a design that would subliminally compel shoppers into bankruptcy. There was a sustained and magnificent tinkling crash as if a Chinese wind-chime factory was entertaining a typhoon. Berry skidded on the shards into a bank of wooden cages and went

down in a splintering welter of escaping chimpanzees, Wistar albino rats, ocelots and other assorted fauna.

Wims moved forward to help extricate the stunned Dr. Berry from the Everest of debris in which he sat immersed.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Berry screeched.

"O.K.," Wims said, retreating, "but Ah guess y'all gonna blame me fer this, too."

Berry's mouth worked convulsively in sheer rage but he had no words left to contain it. He put his head on his knees and sobbed.

The other psychologists of the research division came crowding into the laboratory to seek the cause of all the tumult.

"What happened?" Dr. Wilholm inquired.

"Well, Doc Berry has gone an' riled hisself into 'nuther accident," Wims informed him.

"I suppose you had nothing to do with it," Wilholm snapped.

"Cain't rightly say Ah had. He worked it out all by hisself."

"Just like the rest of us, I suppose," Wilholm said with unconcealed hostility.

"Well now y'all mention it, Doc, Ah ain't nevah seen sich a collection o' slip-fingered folk. Always bustin' either their gear or theirselves."

"Listen, you—"

"Now lookit Doc Castle up on top o' that lockah. He's gonna bust a leg if he don't quit foolin' with that critter."

Wilholm turned to see Dr. Castle up near the ceiling trying to get at a chimpanzee perched just out of reach on a steam pipe. "Castle, are you crazy?" he cried. "Get down from there before you hurt yourself."

"But I've got to get Zsa Zsa into a cage before one of the cats gets her," Castle protested. Just then an ocelot leaped for Zsa Zsa and she leaped for Dr. Castle who promptly lost his balance and plummeted toward Dr. Wilholm who foolishly tried to catch him. They all crashed to the floor and lay stunned for some moments. Castle attempted to rise but he sank back almost immediately with a grimace of pain. "I think my leg is broken," he announced.

"Well Ah tole you," Wims said. "Ain't that so, Dr. Wilholm?"

Wilholm attempted to hurl Zsa Zsa at Wims but found to his surprise he could only wriggle his fingers. The effort sent little slivers of pain slicing through his back.

By this time the laboratory was resounding with the fury of a riot sale in a bargain basement. Sounds of destruction, counterpointed with cries of pain and imprecations increased as the staff pursued maddeningly elusive animals through a growing jungle of toppled and overturning equipment. At the far end there was a shower of sparks and a flash of flame as something furry plunged into a network of wires and vacuum tubes.

Two hours later, Dr. Titus, the division chief, strolled in just as the firemen quenched the last stubborn flames. He surveyed the nearly total ruin of the laboratory. "Really!" he said to a thickly bandaged Dr. Berry who was attempting to rescue an undamaged electroencephalograph from a gleeful fireman's ax, "can't you test your hypothesis without being so untidy?"

Dr. Berry whirled and struck Dr. Titus.

"Of course you know what this means," Titus said calmly, rubbing his jaw. "I'll just have to have a closer look at your Rorschach."

"You can just go take a closer look," Berry snarled.

"Now, now," Titus said soothingly, "why don't we just go to my office and find out what is disturbing us? Hm-m-m?"

The ax came down on the encephalograph and Berry burst into tears and allowed Titus to lead him away.

Titus seated himself at his desk and waited for the sobbing Berry to subside. "That's it," he said unctuously, "let's just get it right out of our systems, shall we? Hm-m-m?"

Berry stopped in mid-sob and became all tiger again. "Stop talking to me as if I were a schizo!" he roared.

"Now, now, we are not going to become hostile all over again are we? Hm-m-m?"

"Hm-m-m all you want to, Titus, but you'll change your tune soon enough when you hear what happened. It was no band-aid brouhaha this time. I've warned you time and again about Wims and you've chosen to treat the matter as airily as possible—almost to the point of being elfin. However, the casualty list ought to bring you back down to

earth." Berry ticked off the names on his fingers: "Dr. Wilholm hospitalized with a broken back; Dr. Castle, a broken leg; Dr. Angelillo, Dr. Bernstein, Dr. Maranos and four lab technicians severely burned; Dr. Grossblatt and two assistants, badly clawed; Dr. Cahill, clawed and burned; and no one knows what's wrong with Dr. Zimmerman. He's locked himself in the broom closet and refuses to come out. Twelve other people will be out a day or two with minor injuries, including your secretary who was pursued by Elvira, the orangutan, and is now being treated for shock."

Titus protested, "Why Elvira wouldn't harm—"

"Elvira has been misnamed. Elvis might be more appropriate."

"Why I had no idea," Titus mused. "Now I'll have to rerun those tests with the new bias."

Berry flared up again. "You don't even have a lab left to run a test in. You can't keep Wims after this!"

"Are you blaming poor Wims for what happened?"

"How can you sit there and ask that question without choking? Ever since that two-legged disaster was hired to sweep up, everybody in the psycho-research division has suffered from one accident after another; even you haven't remained unscathed. Why within the month he arrived we lost the plaque we had won two years running for our unmarred safety record. In fact, the poor fellow who came to remove it from its place of honor in the staff dining room fell from the ladder and broke his neck. Guess who was holding the ladder?"

"I was there at the time," Titus said, "and I saw the entire performance. Wims did nothing but hold the ladder as he had been instructed to do. Old John, instead of confining his attention to what he was doing, kept worrying about whether or not the ladder was being held firmly enough and, as could be expected, he dropped the plaque, made a grab for it and down he went."

"Don't you think it significant, Titus, that Old John had been the university handyman for eighteen years, had climbed up and down ladders, over roofs, and had never fallen or had a serious accident until Wims came upon the scene? And this is just about the case with everyone here?"

"Yes, I think it is very significant."

"Then how can anyone but Wims be blamed?"

"But Wims never has the accidents. He never gets hurt; not so much as a scratch!"

"The devil never gets burned."

"My dear Berry, let the scientist in you consider the fact that never yet has Wims so much as laid a finger on any of our people. And Wims never knocks over equipment, or lets things explode, or sets fire to anything. I find it very odd that it is only my staff that does these things and yet to a man they invariably fix the blame on an eighteen-year-old lad who seems to want nothing more out of life than to be liked. Don't you find it odd?"

"The only thing I find odd is your keeping him in the face of the unanimous staff request to get rid of him."

"And have you ever thought of what my reason might be?"

Dr. Berry looked hard at Dr. Titus and said with unmistakable emphasis, "Some of your people think they know."

It took Titus a moment to fully understand, then he said severely: "Let's discuss this sensibly."

"There's no point in further discussion. There's only one thing more I have to say. I'm not going to endanger my life any longer. Either Wims goes or you can have my resignation."

"Are you serious?"

"Certainly."

"Well then, it was pleasant having a good friend as an associate. I'm certain you will easily find something more satisfactory. Of course you can depend on me for a glowing letter of reference."

Berry sat openmouthed. "You mean to say you'd keep a mere porter in preference to me?"

Titus regarded his steepled fingers. "In this case I'm afraid so."

The telephone in the outer office rang several times before Titus remembered he was without his secretary. He pressed a stud and took the call on his line. He identified himself and after listening a long while without comment, he spoke. "That's very good, general, two weeks will be fine. You understand he must be commissioned as soon as possible, perhaps at the end of basic training... . Of course I know it's unheard of but it's got to be done. I realize you are not too happy about being brought into this but someone on the General Staff is needed to pull the

necessary strings and the President assured me that we could depend on your complete co-operation." Titus listened and when he spoke again a trace of anger edged his voice. "I don't know why you are so hostile to this project, general. If it succeeds, the benefit to the free world will be immense. If not, all we stand to lose is one man, no equipment to speak of; not even 'face' since it need not ever be made known. A far cry, I must say, from the military, whose expensive Roman candles, when they do manage to get off the ground, keep falling out of the sky and denting Florida and New Mexico with depressing regularity. Good-by!"

Titus hung up and turned to Berry. "Now, my dear Berry, if you'll withdraw your resignation we can go and have dinner and plot how we can milk more funds from the university to refurbish the lab and keep ourselves from getting fired in the process."

"My mind is made up, Titus, and all your cajoling will not get me to change it."

"But Wims is going," Titus said, nodding toward the phone. "In two weeks he will be in the Army."

Berry's face went white. "Heaven preserve us," he gasped.

"Really, my dear Berry, for a jolly, fat man you can be positively bleak at times."

"Let's get the finest dinner we can buy," Berry said. "It may be one of our last."

Private Dolliver Wims liked the Army but was unhappy because the Army did not like him. After only two weeks of basic training his company shunned him, his noncoms hated him and his officers, in order to reduce the wear and tear on their sanity often pretended he did not exist. From time to time they faced reality long enough to attempt to have him transferred but regimental headquarters, suspicious of anything that emanated from the "Jonah" company, ignored their pleas. Now in his third week of basic, Wims sat on the front bench in the barrack classroom, an island unto himself. His company, now twenty-two per cent below strength, and the survivors of his platoon, some newly returned from the hospital, were seating themselves so distant from him that the sergeants were threatening to report the company AWOL if they didn't move closer to the lieutenant-instructor.

The lieutenant watched the sullen company reluctantly coagulating before him and inquired facetiously of the platoon sergeant, "Prisoners of war?"

"No such luck," the sergeant replied grimly.

"Be seated, men," the lieutenant addressed the company. Misinterpreting the resentment of the recruits, he decided a bit of a pep talk was in order. "I know a lot of you are wondering why you're in the Army in the first place, and secondly, why you should be afflicted with the infantry. As civilians you've probably heard so much about the modern pentomic army with its electronic and atomic weapons and all the yak about push-button warfare, you figure the infantry is something that should be in the history books with the cavalry. O.K., so let's look at the facts. In the forty-five years since World War II, there've been almost as many localized, 'brush fire' wars as the one now going on in Burma. Sure, there's still a limited use of tactical atomic weapons, but it's still the infantry that has to go in and do the winning. So far nobody wants to try for a knock-out and go whoosh with the ICBM. So no matter how many wheels or rotors they hang on it, it is still the infantry, still the Queen of Battles and you should be proud to be a part of it."

With the exception of one recruit sitting alone on the front bench and leaning forward with eager interest, the lieutenant observed that his captive audience was utterly unimpressed with his stirring little "thought for today." He knew he could find more esprit de corps in a chain gang. He shrugged and launched his scheduled lecture.

"Because of the pentomic army's small, mobile and self-sufficient battle groups and the very fluid nature of modern warfare the frequency of units being surrounded, cut off and subsequently captured is very high. As early as thirty years ago, in the Laotian War, the number of prisoners taken by all sides was becoming increasingly unmanageable and so the present system of prisoner exchange was evolved. At the end of every month an exchange is made; enlisted men, man for man; officers, rank for rank. This is an advantage for our side since, generally, except for the topmost ranks, no man is in enemy hands over thirty days. This makes any attempts to brainwash the enlisted men impracticable and a great deal of pressure is thereby removed.

"So, if you're taken prisoner, you have really nothing to worry about. Just keep your mouth shut and sit it out till the end of the month. The only information you're required to give is your name, rank and serial number. There are no exceptions. Don't try to outsmart your interrogator

by giving false information. They'll peg you right away and easily trick you into saying more than you intend. Now you'll see a film which will show you the right and wrong way to handle yourself during an interrogation and a lot of the gimmicks they're liable to throw at you in order to trick you into shooting off your mouth." The isolated and unnaturally attentive Wims again caught the lieutenant's eye. "You there!" he said, pointing to Wims, "come help me set up this screen."

Wims rose to his feet and one of the platoon sergeants leaped forward. "I'll help you, sir. Wims, sit down."

"I asked this man to help me, sergeant."

"But sir—"

Another platoon sergeant and a corporal were already on the platform. They had seized the stand and were unfolding it. The lieutenant spun around. "What are you doing?"

"We're helping, sir," the sergeant said.

"Well, cut it out. You noncoms are too officious and it's unnatural. It makes me nervous."

Wims was now on the platform and had taken hold of the screen cylinder. One of the corporals was tugging at the other end, trying to get it away from him.

"Let go of that screen," the lieutenant roared at the corporal. Wims, misunderstanding, released the cylinder a fraction of a second before the corporal did and the corporal went tumbling backwards, knocking the lieutenant off the platform and demolishing the loud-speaker.

The top sergeant raced outside and found one of the company lieutenants. "Sir, you'd better move the company out of the building right away!"

"Why?"

"It's Wims. He's being helpful again."

The lieutenant paled and dashed inside. He took no time to determine the specific nature of the commotion which was shaking the building. He managed to evacuate the company in time to prevent serious casualties when the structure collapsed.

Captain Aronsen, the company commander, faced two of his lieutenants. "You're not telling me anything new," he said wearily. "I know all about Wims. I've tried everything to get him discharged, honorably and

otherwise. I've spent a lot of time setting things up so he could hardly help but foul up and we could bounce him, but what happens? Everybody else fouls up and he stays clean. And as if that isn't enough to worry about, headquarters has notified me that General Harmon B. Fyfe of the General Staff will come down from Washington tomorrow for a tour of this post. He'll visit the bivouac area and observe the tactical exercises. As you know, gentlemen, tomorrow is the final day of the two-week bivouac for this company which completes their sixteen-week basic training program. We'll have the usual company combat exercise which will involve the attack, capture and defense against counterattack of Hill Ninety-three."

"The same as always," said one of the lieutenants.

"It won't be the same as always!" the captain said, banging his fist on his desk. "The area of action, the battle plan may be the same but this time we've got General Fyfe as an observer and Dolliver Wims as a participant and, if I can manage to squeeze the day successfully past that Scylla and Charybdis, I'll promise not to devour any more second lieutenants between meals."

"Sir," offered one of the lieutenants, "why don't we put Wims in the hospital just for tomorrow. It would be simple to arrange—say, an upset stomach."

The captain looked sadly at his junior officer. "It's the only hospital we have," he said. "Besides, I have a better idea. I'm detaching Wims from his platoon and will keep him with me at the company command post as a messenger and I'll shoot the first man who attempts to use him as a messenger or anything else."

"Hah! No need to worry about that, sir. Wims may have us a little shook up but he hasn't flipped us yet."

"I hope we can all say that when tomorrow ends," the captain said fervently.

The company command post had been set up under a cluster of dispirited pines obviously suffering from tired sap but in spite of the ragged shade they provided against the mild, mid-morning sun, Captain Aronsen was perspiring excessively and becoming increasingly unsettled. He glanced uneasily over at the somewhat planetary bulk of General Fyfe surrounded by his satellite colonels and other aides, and muttered to his lieutenant, "If Old Brassbottom came down here to observe the exercise,

then why the devil doesn't he go over to the hill and observe instead of hanging around here like a sword of Demosthenes?"

"I think you mean Damocles, captain," the lieutenant corrected. "Demosthenes was the orator."

Aronsen looked sourly at the lieutenant. "I know what I'm talking about. Fyfe has only to say the word and off come our heads."

The lieutenant lowered his voice. "I don't like the way he keeps looking at Wims. Do you think he's heard about him?"

"In Washington?"

"You know how rumors travel in the Army."

"Rumors, yes," the captain said, "but the truth can't even limp out of the orderly room." He wiped his brow and shot a venomous glance at Wims. He said to the lieutenant, "I don't like Wims sitting there in full view of the general. Go tell him to take his comic book and sit on the other side of the tree."

At that moment one of the young trainees stumbled into the headquarters area bleeding profusely from a deep gash on his cheek. Between lung-tearing gasps he told how the machine gun, intended to serve as the base of fire for the attacking platoons, had been captured by a Red patrol before it could be set up. They were being led off under the supervision of a referee when he tumbled into a ravine and in the confusion made good his escape.

"Get the jeep and rush this man to the hospital," the captain instructed the lieutenant.

"What about the attack?" the lieutenant inquired. "Someone will have to get word to the forward platoons to hold up until we can move up a new gun."

"I'll send a messenger."

"But they're all out."

"One of them is bound to return soon. If not, I'll—"

"What is the matter with that man sulking behind that tree?" boomed General Fyfe who had been listening since the trainee had blurted his story.

The lieutenant snatched the bleeding recruit's arm and bolted for the jeep.

"Hey, lieutenant, take it easy," the trainee complained, "you're pulling my arm off!"

Ignoring him, the lieutenant was absorbed in desperate calculation. "The base hospital is about twelve miles from here," he muttered as they ran. "We should be safe enough there."

"But, general," the captain was protesting, "that man is the company snafu. He means well but he was designed by nature to foul things up."

"I won't buy that, captain," the general said forcefully. "If a man has the right attitude and still doesn't measure up then it's the fault of the people who are training him." There was a mark of menace in the general's voice as he said, "Do you read me?"

"Like the handwriting on the wall," the captain said resignedly. He glanced at the tree behind which, he knew, doom sat reading a comic book.

"Give the man a chance to redeem himself and I'm certain he'll come through with flying colors. I'll give you the opportunity to prove it to yourself." The general turned and bellowed at the tree, "Soldier! You! Private Wims! Come over here!"

Wims scurried over to the general and snapped a salute. The general flicked his hand in return. "Wims, your commanding officer has an important mission for you."

Wims turned to his captain, his face alight. He braced and saluted smartly.

"Wims," the captain said, "I want you to take a message to the lieutenant in command of the first, third and fourth platoons now in the jump-off area. Do you understand so far?" Wims nodded. "Tell the lieutenant there's been a delay in the attack plan. He's not to move out until he sees a white signal flare fired from the spur of woods on his left. Have you got that?"

Wims nodded emphatically, "Yes, suh!"

"Repeat the message."

"Ah'm to tell the lieutenant there's been a change in plans an' he's not supposed to move until a white flare is shot outta the woods on his left flank."

The captain exploded. "Delay, not change! And I didn't say anything about a left flank! The woods on his left flank and the spur of woods on his left that stick out a hundred yards beyond his present position are

two different things! So help me, Wims, if you get this message fouled up, I'll use you as a dummy for bayonet practice."

Wims squirmed unhappily. "Couldn't you write it down, suh?"

"Why? So you can get captured and—"

The general interposed. "Even if the message is a bit garbled the intent should be obvious to the lieutenant if he has any intelligence."

The captain regarded the general balefully and then snapped at Wims, "What are you waiting for? Move out! ON THE DOUBLE!"

Wims trotted away and as soon as he was out of sight the general said abruptly to Aronsen, "I'm going over to the Red lines and watch your Blue attack from there."

Sure, the captain snarled inwardly, now that he's set the fuse he's running for the hills.

The general climbed into his command car and waited while one of his majors dashed into the woods along the path that led to the attack group's staging area. Less than a minute later he returned, followed by a colonel. They jumped into the command car which roared off immediately. As the captain was trying to puzzle out the incident's meaning, three of his runners came out of the woods along the same path.

"Where have you goldbricks been? You should've been back long ago!"

"Sir," one of them spoke up, "there was a colonel a little way back there wouldn't let us pass. Said the gen'ral was havin' a secret conf'rence and for us to wait."

The captain tucked away the strange information for later consideration. Right now there was no time to be lost. "You! Get over to the attack group and tell the lieutenant in command to hold up until a white flare is fired from the spur of woods on his left. All other orders remain the same. If Wims has already been there, the lieutenant is to disregard any message Wims might have given him. If you see Wims, tell him to get back here. All right, move out!

"You! Get over to the second platoon in the reserve area and tell them to rush a replacement machine gun with support riflemen to the tip of the spur; base of fire to be maintained twenty minutes. Signal end of firing with white flare."

The captain dispatched his last runner with additional tactical revisions and then took time to consider the odd fact that the general had one of his colonels delay his messengers. Was he only testing his ability

to improvise? Yet he seemed unduly anxious to have him use Wims. Why? Suddenly, into his mind flashed the scene of the general calling Wims from behind the tree and he knew what it was that had been screaming for attention at the back of his mind these last hectic minutes. No one had mentioned Wims' name within earshot of the general and yet Fyfe had called Wims by name!

Wims had not been included in the company briefing and he wished he had had the courage to ask the captain where the jump-off area was, but the captain had been so angry with him he had not wanted to provoke him further. After a while of wandering he came upon two of his own company's flank pickets nested in a deadfall a short distance beyond the edge of the woods. They greeted him with hearty hostility. "Git outta here, Wims. You ain't got no business here."

"But Ah'm lookin' fer the lieutenant. Ah got a message fer 'im from the captain."

"He's over there on that hill," one of them replied, spitefully indicating the hill occupied by the Red force.

"Thanks," Wims said gratefully and in all innocence headed for the enemy hill. He lost his bearings in the woods and when he finally came upon the hill he had made a wide swing around the left flank and was approaching its rear slope. Immediately he was spotted by several trainees of the defending force foxholed on the lower slope. Since he came so openly from their rear area and alone, they assumed he was one of their own men.

As they let him come within challenging distance, they saw, pinned to his tunic, the green cardboard bar that identified him as a messenger. The bars were worn so that noncoms wouldn't be snatching for other duties, messengers idling between missions. As had always been done, both sides in this exercise were using the same device to identify their messengers, never expecting them to be delivering messages behind enemy lines.

The challenged Wims explained his mission and he was passed through with the information that most of the junior officers were on the forward slope. Wims climbed up the hill, inconspicuous among others scurrying about on various missions, many of whom did not wear the identifying red armband of the defenders.

He reached the crown of the wooded hill without finding a second lieutenant who was not a referee. He had almost reached the bottom of the forward slope when a small bush jumped up and yelled, "Hey, jerk! Why'n't ya watch where ya goin'?"

Wims pulled back just in time to avoid falling into a well camouflaged machine-gun nest. One of the foliage-covered gunners, thinking Wims was about to topple on him, jumped aside. His ankle twisted under him and he fell, catching the barrel of the machine gun just under the edge of his helmet and sagging into unconsciousness.

A platoon sergeant heard the steely clatter and rushed over. "That's funny," he growled ominously, "I coulda sworn I set up a machine-gun emplacement here but it's makin' noises like a boiler factory."

The assistant gunner pointed to the unconscious gunner. "He fell an' hit his head. He's breathin' but he ain't movin'."

The chattering of a machine gun from the woods opposite the hill was noted by the sergeant and he knew the Blues would be coming soon. He turned to the gunner. "Get up the hill an' snag one of our loeys or a referee. Tell 'im we got a man hurt here, needs lookin' at."

The gunner dashed off and the sergeant jerked his thumb at Wims. "You! Get on that gun!"

"But Ah got an important message fer the lieutenant," Wims protested.

The sergeant, annoyed, glanced at the green bar. "What lieutenant?"

"The captain said the lieutenant in charge."

"Gimme the message. I'll tell 'im."

Wims started to protest but the sergeant's eyes crackled. "Well, the captain said fer the lieutenant not to move out 'til he saw the white flare fired outta the woods on his left."

"Not to move out?" the sergeant echoed doubtfully. "That don't sound right. Are ya sure he didn't say not ta fire until we saw the white flare?"

"Maybe that's it," Wims said agreeably.

"Maybe!" the sergeant roared, "whaddaya mean, maybe?" He grabbed Wims by the collar and pushed his face against the boy's as if he were about to devour him. "Is it YES or NO?"

"Y-yes," Wims agreed nervously.

"What's your name, soldier?" the sergeant asked.

"Dolliver Wims."

"You don't happen to be a gen'ral do ya?"

Wims looked confused. "No," he ventured.

"Well then say so!" the sergeant screamed.

"Ah'm not a gen'ral," Wims said, desperately trying to please.

"Are ya tryin' ta get wise with me? WHAT IS YOUR RANK?"

"Private."

"Now, what's your name, soldier."

Wims finally understood. "Private Wims, Dolliver."

"That's better." The sergeant's eyes narrowed as he searched his memory. "I don't r'member seein' ya 'round this company before."

"Ah don't recall seein' you 'roun' here either," Wims said in suicidal innocence.

"Y'ARE GETTIN' WISE WITH ME!" the sergeant roared. "I'll take care of ya later." He thrust Wims into the pit with the machine gun. "Now stay there on that gun 'til I get back. I'm goin' ta find the lieutenant."

Wims squatted behind the gun, squinting experimentally through the sights and swinging the barrel to and fro.

The sergeant returned shortly with the lieutenant. "That's him," he said, pointing to Wims.

The lieutenant glanced at the green bar. "Are you sure you got that message straight?"

Wims looked at the menacing sergeant. "Yes, suh," he said, swallowing.

"Somebody is crazy," the lieutenant muttered. "Sergeant, tell Lieutenant Haas to cover my platoon. I'm going back to the CP to see Captain Blair about this message. I'll try to be back before the attack starts to either confirm or cancel the order, but, if not, Haas is to hold his fire until he spots the white flare, or the Blues are right on top of us; whichever happens first."

The lieutenant hustled up the hill and the sergeant went off to find Lieutenant Haas, leaving Wims alone with the machine gun and the still unconscious gunner. The distant machine-gun firing had stopped and the white smoke of a screen laid down by the Blue attackers started scudding thickly across the face of the hill, hiding them as they charged.

"Pickets are back," the sergeant yelled at Lieutenant Haas. "The Blues've crossed the road an' are in the gully at the bottom of the hill."

"How the devil can I possibly see a signal flare through these trees and all this smoke?" Haas muttered to the sergeant. "I think we've got a first-class snafu. Let's go check the machine-gun position; if it's still there."

A whistle sounded and the Blue company surged up out of the ditch and swarmed up the hill. As had been ordered, not a defending shot had yet been fired. Wims opened the breech of the machine gun to see if the ammunition belt was properly engaged. He had a difficult time forcing it open and when he succeeded he found the webbing twisted and a couple of cartridges jammed in at impossible angles. As he was trying to clear it, the unconscious gunner revived, glanced at the advancing Blues and made for the gun which Wims had already commenced to take apart.

"Whaddaya doin'?" the gunner yelled. He pushed Wims aside, causing him to release his hold on the powerful spring. The bolt shot out of the back of the gun and struck the approaching Lieutenant Haas above the left ear just as he was opening his mouth to give the order to return fire. He fell to the ground with the command unspoken and the sergeant knelt to his aid. At the same moment Wims recognized some members of his platoon charging up the hill and realized for the first time he was behind enemy lines. In sheer embarrassment he slunk away, hoping none of his comrades would notice.

The lieutenant who had gone to confirm Wims' message now came running down the hill shouting at his men to return fire. He had his captain with a lieutenant aide in tow and when they reached the machine-gun nest and the fallen Haas the lieutenant looked for Wims.

"I tell you he was here," the lieutenant said. "The gunner and the sergeant can bear me out."

"And I tell you," the captain said excitedly, "I did not issue any such bird-brained order."

A lieutenant referee tapped the captain on the shoulder. "Sir, would you gentlemen please leave the field," he said, indicating the lieutenant, the captain and his aide, the sergeant, the gunner and the unconscious Haas. "You are all dead."

The captain looked around to discover that their little group was the target of the blank fire of several advancing Blue infantrymen. "But we're trying to straighten out a mix-up here," the captain protested.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you're all standing here gossiping in the middle of a battle. Theoretically you are all Swiss cheese. Please leave the area."

"We WON'T leave the area!" the captain shouted. "I'm trying to tell you we wouldn't be dead if some idiot hadn't gotten in here and bollixed up this training exercise and—"

"... It was a brilliant demonstration of infiltration and diversionary tactics by Dolliver Wims," said General Fyfe, striding forward.

The captain rolled his eyes heavenward in supplication before turning to face the general. "Sir," he inquired acidly, "What are dolliver wims?"

"Private Wims is the embodiment of the initiative and resourcefulness we are trying to inculcate in all our soldiers. I observed the entire operation and he has demonstrated a great potential for leadership." Fyfe hesitated and for a moment a shadow of repugnance darkened his features as if, for purposes of camouflage, he were about to perform the necessary but distasteful task of smearing mud over his crisp, shining uniform. "I am recommending Private Wims for a battlefield commission."

"A battlefield commission during a training exercise?" the captain screeched incredulously.

Fyfe looked at him severely. "Captain, if you are unable to communicate except in those high tones, I would suggest a visit to the base hospital for some hormones." The general paused and looked around. "It seems, captain, you've lost the hill." He glanced at his watch. "And in record time, too."

"Sir," the captain said, "I won't accept that. This is a limited training exercise conducted without benefit of full communications, weapons or elaborate tactics. Blue company had no right to send a man behind our lines to—"

"Captain," Fyfe said with annoyance, "you are the most argumentative corpse I have ever encountered. I'm leaving now to get that recommendation off to Washington. In the meantime, have someone tell Captain Aronsen to see that Wims is not assassinated before we get him his lieutenantcy."

Lieutenant Wims unfolded out of the jeep into the jungle mud. The driver pointed to a cluster of tents sagging under the weight of the streaming rain. "You'll find Major Hecker in there."

"Thanks fer the ride," Wims said as he wrestled his gear out of the jeep. He located the headquarters tent and an orderly brought him in to the major. "Lieutenant Dolliver Wims reportin' fer dooty, suh," the saluting Wims said crisply.

Major Hecker's hand slid wearily to the vicinity of his fatigued and unshaven face in return salute. "Welcome, lieutenant, to Hlangtan, Burma's foremost nothing." Wims handed his orders to the major who said as he accepted them, "You'll be taking the third platoon of A company. They lost their lieutenant two days ago." The major glanced at the orders and exploded. "What do they mean, 'attached to your command as an observer'? I need a platoon leader! What are you supposed to observe?"

Wims shifted uneasily. "Ah cain't rightly say, suh." The truth of the matter was that Wims didn't really know. His commission had been virtually thrown at him. In Washington he had been vaguely briefed that he was to be sent to the front in Burma on a mission of the utmost importance and not to breathe a word to anyone. It was only when he alighted from the plane in Rangoon that he fully realized that actually no one had breathed a word to him about what exactly he was to do. His orders merely stated that he was to get as close to the enemy as possible and observe.

The major regarded him nastily. "What's that insignia you're wearing? They look like question marks."

"Ah guess they do," Wims replied unhappily.

"Well are they?" the major inquired with a soft shout.

"Ah guess they are, suh."

"You guess!" The major now regarded him with open animosity. "And I suppose you don't know what they stand for."

"Well, suh, Ah tried to find out but somehow Ah couldn't get a straight ansuh."

"O.K., O.K., Lieutenant Cloak and Dagger, but if you don't want questions why wear the things? If the Commies know you're a special and catch you—"

"But Ah'm not no special nuthin'. Ah'm jus'—"

"Yeah, sure." The major poked a grimy finger at the paper before him and grinned almost savagely. "It says here you're to operate with our most forward units. That's just fine. I've got a patrol going out tonight. They will take you close enough to sit in their ever-lovin' yellow laps."

As Wims was leaving the major suddenly called after him. "Say, lieutenant, since you're some kind of special agent you probably have an 'in' at the Pentagon. Will you pass the word that I need a looey replacement? One that doesn't wear punctuation marks."

The patrol had not been out twenty minutes before it fearfully decided it had better ditch this boy lieutenant who, with each step, sounded as if he were setting off a room full of mousetraps. At a whispered signal from the sergeant in command, the patrol slid noiselessly off the trail and dropped to the ground as the groping Wims went clattering by in the darkness. Within the hour Wims tripped over a Chinese patrol that lay cowering in the ferns as it listened apprehensively to what it thought was an approaching enemy battalion.

The next several days were confusing ones for Wims. With little food or sleep he was hustled from place to place and endlessly questioned by officers of increasing rank. He was passed up to the divisional level where he was briefly interrogated by a Russian officer-advisor to the Chinese headquarters. There seemed to be some disagreement between the Russian and Chinese officers concerning Wims and they were almost shouting when he was pulled from the room and thrown back into his cell.

In the chill, early hours of the following morning he was yanked out of an embarrassing nightmare where he dreamed he went to a hoedown in his briefs. He was squeezed between two furtive men into a shade-drawn limousine with unilluminated headlamps and after a frenzied ride the vehicle screeched to a halt. He heard a roaring and in the darkness he was dimly aware that he was being shoved into an airplane. After that he was certain of nothing as he plunged gratefully back into sleep.

Wims was back at the hoedown only this time without even his briefs. And all the interrogators had stopped dancing and were circled around him, glaring and demanding to know what he was hiding. As they closed in upon him he was snatched from the dream by two guards who prodded him out of his cell, down a bleak corridor and into a large room. The windows were hidden by drawn, dark-green shades and two low-hanging, unshaded electric-light bulbs provided a harsh illumination.

The chamber was sparsely furnished with a splintered desk, several battered chairs and half a dozen Russian MVD officers.

A man, so thick and heavy in appearance and movement that he was obviously a concrete abutment come to life, stepped up to Wims. The man's stony visage cracked in a slow, cold smile as he rumbled in English, "Welcome to Moscow, Lieutenant Dolliver Wims. I am Colonel Sergei Bushmilov. I am your friend." The word "friend" sounded rather squeaky as if it had not been used in years and needed oiling.

Wims glanced around the room. These people were like unshielded reactors throwing off hard radiations of hostility. "Ah sure could use a friend," he said with utmost fervency.

"Good!" said Bushmilov. "There are some things I wish to know and you are going to tell to me because we are friends."

"Ah kin only give you mah name, rank an' serial number, suh." Wims saw the colonel's face harden and his fist clench. Just then a burst of angry shouting and scuffling erupted in the corridor. Suddenly the door was flung open and half a dozen Chinese stormed into the room trailing a couple of protesting Russian guards. Two of the Chinese were civilian attachés from the embassy and the remainder were uniformed, military intelligence officers.

Bushmilov whirled and immediately recognized the foremost man. "Colonel Peng! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed in startled surprise.

Colonel Peng replied in an askew English, the only language he had in common with Bushmilov. "Our American lieutenant, you kid-stolen." He pointed at Wims.

Bushmilov unconsciously shifted his bulk to blot Wims from Peng's view. "You are wrong Colonel Peng. Your intelligence was not getting nowhere with him and we are having more experience in these matters. We think you approve to take him to Moscow."

"Ah. Yes? Then why you sneak away like folding Arabian tent? Ah!"

Although Bushmilov did not comprehend what Arabian tents had to do with this business he did understand the accusation. Before he could reply, Peng continued. "Us Chinese not fool, Comrade Colonel. You Russian think us not good like you, like smart. O.K. Us not b'long Russia like sat'lite. Us b'long us. Us not let you take what you want and no asking. You will give it back, the American officer. Us can make him say secret."

Bushmilov stiffened and dropped all pretense at cordiality. "Us will—" He shook his head in annoyance. "I will not do that without order from my superior, Minister Modrilensky. Now you will be kind to leave. There is business to finish."

"No go unless us take officer."

An angry Bushmilov strode to the door and snarled at the two guards in Russian. One of them dashed away down the corridor. "We shall see," Bushmilov sneered at Peng.

"Yes us shall, ah!" said Peng, withdrawing his automatic pistol from its holster. The other Chinese did the same and their movement was duplicated immediately by the Russians.

No one moved or spoke further until five Russian security guards burst into the room with submachine guns at the ready. The corporal in charge looked to Bushmilov for instructions. The Russian colonel looked long and thoughtfully at the primed Chinese. He had not expected them to go to this extreme. Perhaps they were only bluffing but one sudden misinterpreted movement or the wrong word and another ugly incident in an already dangerously long chain might be created to accelerate the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations. Without specific instructions he dared not take the responsibility for any untoward action. Bushmilov ordered the guards to stand at ease and dispatched one of his henchmen to notify his superior of the crisis.

"You being very wise, Comrade Colonel," Peng said.

"You are being very annoying," Bushmilov snapped.

"O.K., yes," Peng replied. "Chinese People's Republic ambassador now at Kremlin demand give back American officer. Come soon now, us go. Take lieutenant. You annoying finish. Ah!"

Bushmilov spoke sharply to his junior officers who still stood with drawn pistols. One of them came over and stationed himself alongside Bushmilov. He explained to Peng, "I go on with questioning. My men will shoot anyone who interfere."

Colonel Peng knew his bounds. "O.K., yes. Us wait when order come you give us lieutenant. Us stay. Listen."

Bushmilov turned to Wims. "You are captured six days before. Two weeks from now at this month end you suppose to be exchange by Geneva Concordat number seventeen. Now you tell to me why your government in such a hurry they can not wait and why they make special request to government of Chinese People's Republic for immediate

return of you. And why is it offered, twelve Chinese officers, all ranks, to get back only you?"

"Ah don't know, suh," Wims said in honest surprise.

"I warn you. If you not co-operating, you not go home at month end. You cannot pretend with us. We check and know much about you. You go in army three month before now. No university education, no military experience and now you are second lieutenant so quick. How so?"

"Oh, Ah kin tell y'all that," Wims said with relief. "That ain't no mil't'ry secret. When we was havin' basic trainin' this here gen'ral allowed as to how Ah did some right smart soldierin' durin' maneuvers an' he up an' give me a battlefield commission."

Bushmilov's eyes were slits. "Ha. Ha. Ha," Bushmilov said without a smile. "You Americans, always making joke. I enjoy that good laugh. Now we are serious. It is true, yes, that you are intelligence officer sent to Burma with special mission? We know everything," Bushmilov lied, "but we want you say it with your words the few details."

"Cain't tell you nuthin' cause they ain't nuthin' to tell, Ah mean!"

Bushmilov swung up his arm to strike Wims across the face. His hand smacked against the pistol held by the Russian officer standing next to him. The gun went off. The bullet zipped through the window, across the courtyard, into another office and past the nose of Minister of Internal Security, Modrilensky.

Modrilensky shouted for his guards while his aide pointed out the window and yelled, "The shot came from Bushmilov's office. See! The glass is broken in his window!"

Modrilensky paled. "Bushmilov? My truest comrade? Who is there to trust? This I expect from that filthy plotter, Berjanian! Or that sneak, Lemchovsky, or Kamashev. And Gorshkinets and that babyface, Konevets; they do not fool me, I assure you! They would all like to denounce me and steal my job! And the others! I know them all, every last one of them and I'll deal with them, they'll see! But Bushmilov!"

Several guards with submachine guns burst into the room. "Those windows!" Modrilensky screamed. "Shoot them! Kill the deviationist plotters!"

The guards were uncertain which windows Modrilensky was indicating with his wildly waving arms but they had no intention of risking the displeasure of the top man of the MVD. They tentatively sprayed all the

windows around the courtyard with bullets and when they received no censure from their chief they went at it with gusto. Modrilensky was too busy shouting orders to other guards to give them any further attention. The sound of the firing was assurance enough that his orders were being obeyed. By the time he had dispatched men to get Bushmilov and neutralize other potential plotters the occupants of most of the offices overlooking the courtyard were crouched at the windows, shooting indiscriminately at each other.

"I can't believe it about Bushmilov," Modrilensky shouted to his aide over the din.

"You know he was at the Kremlin yesterday with Shaposnik," the aide shouted back. "And you know how close Shaposnik is to the Premier. Maybe they have discovered our plan and Bushmilov, as your successor, was ordered to liquidate you!"

Modrilensky slapped his forehead. "Of course! We must act at once! Send our man to Marshal Mazianko and tell him it is time. He must get his trusted troops into the city before the others suspect what is happening, especially that Kamashev."

Major Kamashev of the MVD put in a hasty call to the Minister of Transport. "I am forced to phone because of a sudden emergency. Modrilensky must have gotten wind of our plans. His men are besieging my office. You must get General Kodorovich to move his men into the city at once! And watch out for the Foreign Minister. I think he and Lemachovsky are up to something."

Major Lemachovsky of the MVD was listening to the Foreign Minister. "The Premier has ordered the arrest of the Minister of Heavy Industry for plotting with General Plekoskaya to bring in troops to seize the government. As soon as General Zenovlov arrives with his troops and we are in control, I will teach these vile counterrevolutionaries that they cannot plot against the party and the people with impunity! And be careful! I think the Minister of Hydroelectric Power is involved with your Colonel Berjanian."

Colonel Berjanian of the MVD was shouting into the phone. "Why can't I get the Minister of Hydroelectric Power? If you don't want a vacation in Siberia, you had better get my call through!"

"I'm sorry, Comrade Colonel," the harried operator whined, "but it isn't my fault. Can I help it if all of Moscow decides to use the telephones all at once? The lines are still tied up. I will keep trying, Com—"

Berjanian slammed down the phone just as an aide rushed in. "Colonel, I have good news! Our men have gained control of most of the immediate hallway and we have captured the lavatory from Captain Konevets!"

"Wonderful!" Berjanian beamed as he hastily left the room.

General Kodorovich's command car rattled and bounced along the rough shoulder of the highway past his stalled 71st Motorized Infantry Division. He found the van of his column tangled with the rear of the 124th Armored Division under General Plekoskaya. Kodorovich sought out Plekoskaya and found him at table under some trees having a fine lunch.

"Would you mind getting your army out of the way," General Kodorovich said to General Plekoskaya. "I have emergency orders to proceed immediately to Moscow."

"So have I," Plekoskaya replied, wiping his lips. "Won't you join me for lunch?"

"I haven't time!" Kodorovich snapped, glaring accusingly at the roast fowl and wine on the white linen.

"Oh but you have, my dear Kodorovich," Plekoskaya said pleasantly. "You see, neither of us is going anywhere for the moment. There's a brigade of the 48th blocking the road ahead."

"The 48th from Kiev?" Kodorovich exclaimed. "What is a brigade of the 48th doing up here?"

"Looking for its sister brigades from which it was separated when the 116th Mechanized, in its hurry to reach Moscow, cut through their column."

"The 116th Mechanized?" Kodorovich exclaimed again. He wanted to stop talking in questions but all this was coming so fast and unexpectedly.

"Don't even inquire of me about them," Plekoskaya said, shuddering. "They are so disorganized and tangled with two other armored divisions whose designations I don't even know. It all happened because they were trying to outrace each other to the trunk highway and they arrived at the intersection almost simultaneously. You can't possibly imagine the hideous clatter when you have two stubborn armored divisions and an obstinate mechanized one all trying to occupy the same road at once. I

could hear it all the way back here." Plekoskaya belched delicately. "General, do wash off the dust of the road and join me at table."

"No thank you. If that's all the delay is, it should be cleared soon and we'll be moving again. I'll want to be with my division."

"General Kodorovich, you evidently don't understand what has happened. The word that has been passed from the most forward units, which are in the city itself, to the rear ones, indicates that Moscow is the hub of one vast military traffic jam thirty to perhaps fifty miles deep and growing worse all the time as new groups are moving in."

"But I must get to the city," Kodorovich insisted. "I have orders to surround the Kremlin, seal off MVD headquarters and—"

"Ease your mind," Plekoskaya interrupted. "The Kremlin is well surrounded. General Smolledin is deployed around the walls; General Alexeiev is deployed around General Smolledin; General Paretsev is deployed around Alexeiev and so on to the outskirts of the city. Those of us out here, of course, cannot deploy off the roads, for, who knows, tomorrow the Minister of Agriculture may be Premier and he may not take it kindly if we trample the collectives."

"How can you just sit there and do nothing when the people's government is in some kind of danger?" Kodorovich said with some heat.

"It is very simple," Plekoskaya said with mild irritation and sarcasm. "I merely bend at the knees and hips and have a lunch of a weight adequate enough to keep me from floating off my chair and rushing about seeking trouble. Of course it takes years of experience to learn how to do this and most important, when." In kindlier tones Plekoskaya continued. "Whatever it is that is happening in the Kremlin and the other hotbeds of intrigue will have to happen without us. There is no telling who, if anyone, is in control. Conflicting orders have been coming over the military radio depending upon which clique controls which headquarters. Why do you know, my dear Kodorovich, already this morning the 124th has alternately been ordered to march to Moscow and a dozen other places including downtown Siberia."

Kodorovich did not smile at Plekoskaya's slight humor. He was squinting anxiously through the bright sunlight at the immobile column of men and vehicles jammed along the road into the far, blue distance.

Plekoskaya took a sip of wine. "There is obviously some kind of political readjustment going on within the government and the unpleasant

thing about these little disturbances is that one can never be certain who will emerge to inform the people that he is their unanimous choice for leader. So don't be in so much of a hurry to rush off to Moscow to commit yourself. You might pick the wrong one."

Kodorovich shrugged and sat down at the table. "Perhaps you are right. Do you have any idea who is involved this time?"

"Who isn't involved?" Plekoskaya snorted. "You and I know, as sensible men must, that in our milieu there are at any given moment thousands of intrigues and plots and counterplots simmering away in the Party halls, the ministries, the barracks and anywhere else you care to look. Of course it is treason, don't misunderstand, general, but most of it is really quite harmless. It is the national pastime of the power elite; a sort of political mah-jongg and most of these little bubbling kettles cool and sour from inaction. However, this time, it is evident that some drastic catalyst has caused a most violent reaction of these subversive ingredients and the incredible, one in a million possibility has occurred. All the pots are suddenly, all at once, boiling over ... erupting into action!

"By the way," Plekoskaya continued with a smile, "you might be interested to know that when I reach Moscow I am supposed to relieve you of command of the 71st and place you under arrest for unsocialistic activities."

Kodorovich, looking dazed, took a glass of wine. "Who signed your orders?"

"Major Lemchovsky of the MVD."

Kodorovich smiled for the first time since they had met under the trees. "I have orders for your arrest also, to take effect when we reach Moscow; signed by Major Kamashev, MVD."

"I'm sorry," Plekoskaya said, "but you will have to wait your turn. The commanders of the 116th and the 48th are both ahead of you."

Kodorovich suddenly stood up frowning and stared around at the fields where the peasants were working. "I don't like the way those people keep glancing at the troops and snickering. I can hear some of their remarks."

"Don't trouble yourself about it. They've been doing it all morning. It's only good-natured jesting."

"It breeds disrespect of the Army. And disrespect of authority is the first step on the road to anarchy," Kodorovich said severely.

"Well at least that's a movement to somewhere," Plekoskaya said. "Can you blame them for smiling? That's the 124th, the famous 'lightning' division, that's been glued to the road in front of them for the past six hours. In that time it has moved perhaps a hundred or so feet and I suspect it is only because your 71st is very ill-manneredly pushing from behind."

"I still don't like their smirking."

Plekoscaya became suddenly solemn. "It is when they begin to laugh openly that we should become concerned."

"How did you get the American lieutenant out of Moscow?" Colonel Peng's superior was asking him.

"Bushmilov was conducting the interrogation," Colonel Peng replied, "when suddenly somebody started shooting through the window from another office across the way. I heard Bushmilov yell something about plotters and counterrevolutionaries and he and his men started shooting back. Within minutes the entire building was like a battlefield. In the confusion we snatched the American and hustled him away. The corridors were full of groups of MVD men running and shooting and I have no idea what it was all about but whatever it was it didn't affect us for we were allowed to pass unmolested. We managed to escape stray bullets and get out of the building with whole skins to our embassy.

"Getting out of Moscow was the real problem. Within hours the city was clogged with troops. Slowly, as supplies were choked off by the congestion, offices and factories and shops closed down and the people were on the streets strolling about as if on holiday, laughing and joking about the tangle of tanks and vehicles and military equipment that was effectively strangling the city.

"It appears that not even the highest officers and officials were making any effort to clear up the mess. Each one seemed to be afraid to take any responsibility beyond the last coherent orders that had brought practically the entire army converging on Moscow.

"We tried to get out by air but that proved impossible. All civil flights were canceled so that the fields could accommodate the armadas of military aircraft that swarmed into the area. We couldn't even get a wireless message out because of the spreading chaos. We had to proceed out of the city on foot and by then affairs were beginning to take an ugly turn. Food supplies were becoming exhausted and as long as the military

refused to budge nothing could be brought in, even their own supplies. Once out of the city we took to the river. No one attempted to stop us but neither did any official attempt to help their Chinese comrades. The curious paralysis had spread. It was as if the entire countryside was holding its breath, waiting for some positive sign of authority. In Gorki, where there was less air-congestion, we managed to steal a plane and flew it to Finland. The rest you know."

Peng's superior nodded. "Our Russian friends are losing their grip. That is because they do not practice pure Communism. Upon China now falls the mantle of leadership of the people's republics as we knew, long before, it was destined to be." He rose from behind his desk. "Come, let us now turn our attention to this strange American lieutenant and see how the interrogation is proceeding."

As Peng and his chief stepped into the hallway, they heard a shattering of glass and a cry of pain from a room at the far end of the hallway.

"It sounds like someone falling through a window!" Peng exclaimed.

His chief's face was shadowed with a momentary irritation. "If that is another one of my men having a foolish accident—"

"What do you mean?" Peng inquired.

"Mean?" his chief repeated in exasperation. "I'll tell you what I mean. Since this interrogation started four of my men have injured themselves in silly, stupid accidents; like the captain who fell off his chair and broke his leg. If I didn't know my men, I would swear that they had all been drinking!"

There was a sudden, single shot. They hurried along the hall but before they could reach the room at the end they had to drop to the floor to escape the fusillade of bullets that whined down the corridor.

In the great Operations Room of the Pentagon, the uppermost echelons of the American General Staff glared at Dr. Titus whose civilian presence was defiling this military "holy of holies."

An admiral, sitting next to General Fyfe, banged his fist on the table and almost shouted at Titus. "So you're one of the idiots who's been advising the President not to let us commit our forces in Afghanistan. Do you realize the Russians will—"

Titus appealed to the Chairman of the General Staff. "Do I or do I not have the floor? Hm-m-m?" Reluctantly, the chairman restored order and motioned Titus to continue. "It is true that the President has been

persuaded to not commit the United States to any further military adventures until we have given a plan of mine some little time to take effect. Gentlemen, we have in operation a secret weapon that, if all goes well, will make any future military undertakings unnecessary and bring about the destruction of our enemies." At the mention of "secret weapon," the entire General Staff, excepting Fyfe, creaked forward in their seats with eager interest. "The secret weapon is an eighteen-year-old boy named Dolliver Wims, recently commissioned a lieutenant in the Army and now in Russian hands."

An avalanche of derisive remarks concerning his sanity roared down on Titus but he ignored them and continued. "Wims came to work for us last spring and nothing in his manner or appearance indicated that he was in any way unusual. However, he had hardly been with us a month before complaints from my staff started flooding my office. Our accident rate soared skyward and all staff fingers pointed at Wims. I investigated and discovered that in spite of the accusations Wims was never directly involved in these mishaps. He was present when they occurred, yes, but he never pushed or bumped anyone or dropped anything or even fingered anything he wasn't supposed to and yet in the face of this fact, almost everyone, including my most dispassionate researchers, invariably blamed Wims. Finding this extremely odd, I kept the boy on and under various subterfuges I probed, tested and observed him without his knowledge.

"Then one day I became annoyed with him; without just cause I must admit, merely because I was not getting any positive results; and I handled him rather roughly. Within seconds I sliced open a finger. My irritation mounted and later I went to shove him rudely aside and down I went, giving my head a nasty crack on the edge of a lab bench. I felt wonderful as I sat in pain on the floor, sopping the blood out of my eyes. With the blow an idea had come to me and I felt I at last knew what Wims was and the factor that triggered his dangerous potential. For weeks afterward, under carefully controlled conditions, I was as nasty to him as I dared be. It took my most delicate judgment to avoid fatal injury but I managed to document the world's first known accident prone inducer. I call him Homo Causacadere, the fall causer, whose activator is hostility.

"We have always had the accident prone, the person who has a psychological proclivity for having more than his share of mishaps. Wims is an individual who can make an accident prone of anyone who threatens his well being and survival. This boy, who, as indicated by the tests,

hasn't an unkind thought for any creature on this planet, has an unconscious, reactive, invulnerable defense against persons who exhibit even the slightest hostility toward him. The energies of their own hostility are turned against them. The greater the hostility, the more accidents they have and the more serious they become. And the increase in accidents gives rise to an increase in hostility and so it goes in an ever widening circle of dislocation and destruction.

"As a scientist I would have preferred to take the many months, perhaps years, necessary to investigate this phenomenon thoroughly, however these are critical times and I was possessed with an inspired idea on how we might utilize this phenomenon against the enemies of the free world. Through a colleague on the Scientific Advisory Council I got the President's ear and he decided to let us try, on the basis, I'm certain, that the best way to handle screwball scientists is to allow them one or two harmless, inexpensive insanities in the hope that they will make an error and discover something useful.

"Through the good offices of General Fyfe, who was apprised of our plan, Wims was snatched into the Army, commissioned and sent to Burma to be captured. Intelligence advises that he has been taken to Moscow which is for him, an American officer ostensibly on a secret mission, the most hostile environment extant." Titus shook his head. "I suppose I should feel sorry for those poor Russians. They don't have a chance."

"Sorry for them!" Fyfe blustered. "Think what I've had to go through. Those ridiculous orders; couldn't explain to anyone. All my people think that I've lost my mind. Felt like a fool giving that idiot a battlefield commission during a training exercise."

"It was necessary to give him some rank," Titus explained. "The Communists wouldn't expect a private to be sent on a secret mission; they just wouldn't bother to interrogate him. Now an officer, whose return was specially requested the day following his capture would seize their attention and surely they would apply their nasty pressures to find out why. He hasn't been returned through the regular monthly exchange and they even deny having captured him which seems to indicate that the plan is working."

An admiral stirred and shifted under his crust of gold. "How long have they had him?"

"Six weeks."

"And nothing's happened yet," the admiral commented. "My guess is that we could sit here for six years and nothing would come of such a barnacle-brained scheme."

An Air Force general spoke up in the breezy jargon of the youngest service. "I'm with the old man from the sea on this one," he said as the admiral winced. "I just don't see spending billions for alphabet bombs and then warming our tails on them while these psycho-noseys move in and try to fight these sand-lot wars with voodoo and all that jazz."

An aide hurried in from the adjoining message center and handed the chairman a paper. Everybody waited in silence while the chairman seemed to take an unusually long time to read it. Finally he looked up and said. "This is a special relay from the President's office and since it concerns us all I'll read it aloud." He held the paper up and read, "Apropos of your present conference with Dr. Titus, it may please the General Staff to learn that the Russian Communist Party newspaper, Pravda, has just denounced the newspaper of the Red Army, Izvestia, as a tool of the decadent, warmongering, capitalist ruling circles of the imperialist Western bloc. Other evidence of severe internal upheaval of a nature favorable to the West is pouring in through news channels and being confirmed by State and CIA sources. Congratulations, Dr. Titus."

Dr. Titus arose with unconcealed triumph. "Gentlemen, apparently my hypothesis is correct. The disintegration that will crumble our enemies has already begun. Our secret weapon is a stunning success!"

The crusted admiral looked sourly at Titus. "Of course you're only assuming that this Wims person is responsible. We'll never really know."

"Why won't we?" Titus demanded. "You speak of him as if he were dead or doomed and I tell you he is no such thing. Don't you understand? He cannot be harmed! And when he gets back here, as he will, he'll tell us himself exactly what and how it happened."

The aide rushed in with another message. "Again from the President," he announced. "It has been confirmed by CIA," he began reading aloud, "that two weeks ago a group of Chinese officials in a Russian aircraft landed at a Finnish airfield. It is now known definitely that an ostensibly ill member of their group who was put aboard their plane in a stretcher was in reality a young American officer. Among other things, this explains the eighteen contradictory Five Year Plans announced by Peiping this week. CIA says they are going the way of the Russians. Again congratulations, Dr. Titus."

"Well, General Fyfe," Titus said, smiling at him, "perhaps you now feel somewhat differently about this Wims business, hm-m-m?"

Fyfe roared, unable to contain himself any longer: "Do you really believe that rot you've been feeding us? You have the audacity to credit yourself with the downfall of two powerful nations, even if it does happen? You think your insane ditherings about an incompetent halfwit has anything to do with anything? You may have bamboozled the President, after all he's only a civilian, but you're not about to fool me! These are perilous times and I have no use for you professors and your crazy, useless theories. Now why don't you get out of here and let us do our job, trying to keep this planet from blowing up in our faces!"

For the first time in his life Dr. Titus flew into an unreasoning fury. How could this fat, uniformed mountain of stupidity still contrive to deny the facts and dare speak to him the way he did? And after what he had just accomplished! His rage boiled over and Titus rushed at Fyfe, his fist already striking ahead. He never touched the general. Unaccountably he got tangled in his own legs and fell heavily to the floor. When he tried to rise hot pain burned in his ankle. He sat there staring up in astonishment at Fyfe, hulking over him.

It had happened so swiftly no one had yet spoken or moved.

"YOU!" Titus screeched incredulously, pointing directly at Fyfe. "You of all people!" And Titus sat there on the floor rubbing his injured ankle and he laughed and laughed till the tears came.

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