

It Becomes Necessary

by Ward Moore

She sat there thinking. These chairs were never designed for living women, only mannikins. You had to be wax or plastic or whatever they made them out of, with Brancusi heads for pillared hats (the cult of Nefertiti, like that of the Druids, domesticated for Macy's and Gimbels) and lower extremities in the best tradition of Albert the Good. Ten years younger, and she could do a nice paper for Sociology 2—or would it be European History 4?—on the Victorianism of the French, or, Why Was Louis Napoleon Little? Whatever happened to feminism? Her feet ached.

Hot water. Surely there was nothing unreasonable about hot water. Fifty thousand bathtubs in lower Manhattan, five million in New York (Oh God, why did I ever start on this, with my head for statistics?) ... Even in England, with the stoic revulsion against comfort, it wasn't too hard to get. Only here in France, in mobilized, dedicated, redeemed, righteous France, with everyone sacrificing to the point of ecstasy, was there suspicion attached to such use of patriotic resources.

She sipped the beer which she found completely revolting. I have no business here, she told herself for the fiftieth time, no business whatever. I could be asleep in that kennel they call a hotel, or could have gotten decently drunk, or thrown myself in the Seine (Paris is worth a Mass—but not to me) instead of torturing myself with this filthy chair and this filthy drink in this filthy café in this filthy city. Oh heavens ...

He slid into the seat opposite so quickly that he was there, established, before she was aware of him. He was big, with a crooked nose and light eyes and freckled, hairy hands which he placed on the table like an offering. "Mrs. Fieldman?"

I don't have to answer, she assured herself, I really don't have to answer. I didn't agree to any meeting. I've promised nothing; I'm not committed even to acknowledge my name. I can jump up and say, Sir! or just look haughty, or walk away. But of course I've been so conditioned against making a scene (Concord and Lexington were in bad taste, the fall of the Bastille would have shocked Emily Post and we don't even *think* of the storming of the Winter Palace), I'm not going to do anything except sit here and listen to this fat man—he isn't really fat; I've just been out of the country so long that anyone who eats steak regularly looks fat—and hear him patiently through. Hate him? Naturally I hate him. He's one of them, isn't he?

"Mrs. Fieldman—Do you want to see my credentials, by the way?"

"No."

"That's good. Because I could hardly carry them in enemy territory, could I?"

"France isn't enemy territory," she said more pedantically than she meant because she hadn't intended to talk to him in anything but monosyllables. "It's only one of the policing nations which—"

"Policing nations." He didn't raise his voice; he expressed his disgust softly, with a soft sneer, a soft contempt. "The U.S. isn't a two-bit country to be policed. If there's policing to be done, we do it. Policing nations, Third Force! Who do they think they are?"

She shrugged her shoulders. Answering rhetorical questions only got you started on a treadmill.

He made an observable effort to be soothing, earnest, confident, winning. "Mrs. Fieldman, you have an opportunity—"

"Oh God," she said, "the opportunities I've had. When I consider my moderation, I'm amazed at my opportunities. This time no doubt it's to serve my country."

She thought his pale eyes wavered just a little. "Well, it is your country."

"Is it? I understood, or read in the paper, or something, that my citizenship was voided."

He regarded her through partly closed lids. How silly, she thought; like a parlor hypnotist or something: the hard look. Really, they picked the stupidest men for agents. It's a pattern, I guess. William S. Hart, the frontier marshal, steel-eyed character. "That disability can be removed."

"What's done can be undone?"

"Sure. Sometimes. Especially in the case of native-born."

"The March on Washington can be reversed, the Defenders of the Constitution can bow out, Regulations can be replaced by laws again, the disfranchised minorities can be reinfranchised, the dead restored to life?"

He leaned back in the chair, obviously never meant to accommodate a man of his weight. "Little lady," he said easily, "why do you bother your pretty head about crap like that? Sure, they lynched a few coloreds and booted out a few Jews, but what's that between you and me?"

You just can't ever tell, she thought; I'd have sworn (an archaic expression) he was the type to say between you and I. You never know, do you? "This": she began, hoping she was speaking judicially, implacably, with a haughty calm which should make him quail, yet feeling pretty sure she was only sounding feminine and hysterical, "is the destruction of a democratic system which may not have worked too well but which was infinitely better (in kind, not just in degree) than the totalitarianism you replaced it with. Monstrousness, brutality, beastliness, the killing or exiling of those who couldn't be numbed or corrupted, moral and political bankruptcy—Oh, hell, I can't talk about it without bleating like an orator ..."

"We all make mistakes," he said soothingly. "You have to admit the Defenders have done a lot of good."

"Do I? The compulsion doesn't seem inescapable. Or have you a car around the corner that will draw up in a minute to convince me?"

"Now, we don't do things like that. You've been reading those sensational limey papers."

"They are annoying, aren't they?" she taunted him, suddenly unafraid. "Too bad you can't suppress them or take them over the way you did the *Times* and the *Post-Dispatch* and all the rest."

"If you love the English so much, why did you leave London? What are you doing in France?"

She had an impulse to stick out her tongue and say, Yah, don't you wish you knew? Try and find out. Or to speak of the conflict inside her and the depression of spirit which had sent her across the Channel. Instead she murmured, "England and France are allies. Along with the rest of the world, except the United States and the Soviet Union."

"Yeh, sure." For the first time he showed impatience. "The Third Force and all the rest of it."

"*Garçon,*" she called, "*une boc encore, s'il vous plait.*"

"How can you drink that swill?" he asked, not scornfully but curiously. "Why don't you let me buy you an honest drink?"

"Pepsicola?"

"If you like. Or a real martini or some of this Norman applejack."

"Shall we consider the amenities taken care of? And come down to business?"

"Sure, sure. Here it is, right on the line: restoration of citizenship (after all, it isn't as though you were a Jew yourself), full compensation for any property confiscated or bought at less than market value, guaranteed protection, freedom to travel in or out of the country and fifty thousand bucks in cash."

"And my ... my husband?"

The prescriptive sympathy on his face made him resemble a beagle who has lost the scent. "Look, I can't do miracles; nobody can bring back the dead. Like I said, we all make mistakes, don't we? But hell—excuse me—a good looking girl like you can get all the husbands she wants. Genuine American ones. Especially with fifty grand, along with the body. And, oh yes, we'll throw in a good job too—maybe nine, ten thousand a year."

"What am I supposed to do for all this? Shoot a few well-chosen statesmen?"

He leaned back again, making the chair creak. "Kid, you've got nothing but blood on your mind. I've told you we're not doing things that way. We don't want violence. No violence at all. We just want to be left alone. Peaceful coexistence. If the Third Force wants to police the Russians, let them go ahead. We don't mind. But just leave us alone, see?"

"And if they won't leave you alone?"

"We'll fight." The face which had been uncommitted, fixed in an expression of reasoning and persuasion, became truculent, potentially menacing. Like a policeman or Defender who wears a mask of good nature. He was undoubtedly both.

"What would you fight with?"

"Oh, we've got a couple of shots in our locker yet. Maybe the war did hit us pretty hard, but even after you write off Pittsburgh and Gary and Birmingham—"

"And New York, San Francisco, Chicago."

"Sure, sure. But we won, didn't we? We can still get a lot of planes in the air and mobilize an army—which is more than the Russkis can. And we hardly lost a sub. And we know your Third Force is too chicken to drop C-bombs on us—"

"Not *my* Third Force."

"See?" All menace had been tucked back behind the folds and lines of his face. "I knew you were a good American deep down. Just a little misunderstanding."

"That's right," she replied, thinking of Sol and refusing to think of Sol.

"Pardon, m'sieu, 'dame."

Two men had paused by their table in a delicate balance between part of the sidewalk used

exclusively by pedestrians and that occupied by the café. The older, paunched, wattled, bald, with a William Howard Taft mustache, was trying to pull the younger away. Except for heavy, decayed teeth, the young man had the face of one of Pope Gregory's angels: blond, blue-eyed, straight-nosed, pink-cheeked. His lips were red and full, but firm.

The man opposite Maggie set the front legs of his chair soundlessly on the pavement again and put his hands on the table edge, ready for action.

"Yes?" she inquired.

"American, no?" The red lips retained the perfect circle for a perceptible instant after the question was finished.

"No," said the big man. "*Non. Pas du tout. Kenya. Dominion britannique. Aiméée de France—cawmprah?*" His accent was as pure Cedar Rapids as she had ever heard. He pulled out a booklet and flipped the pages in front of their eyes.

"Oh yays. Africain. Vairy nice for England, too bad for France. Ah, ah. A joke, is it not? And madame?"

"Are you a cop?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"*Un flic?*"

He breathed nastily into her face, his chiseled features subordinate to his bad teeth. They can laugh all they want about American toothpaste, she thought, but I'd rather smell peppermint any time than yesterday's pot-au-feu. "You insult!"

"Beat it, Chester. I have no passport to show you and I wouldn't if I had. Call a gendarme if you want action; meanwhile leave us alone. See?" She drank some of her beer—Pepsicola might have been an improvement after all—ignoring them until the older man finally succeeded in coaxing the younger to leave.

"That wasn't bright," remarked the agent, tilting his chair again.

"Wasn't it?" she asked indifferently. "I just happen to be fresh out of phony documents."

"The bottom dropped out of the hero market during the war," he said. "Glory was running in the streets. If you'd been home you'd have died with the rest of the eagle scouts. We're in business to survive now, not to sing 'God Bless America' and run up the flag on the Eiffel Tower. But I can see you're our girl. How about it?"

"How about what? What do you want?"

"Hardly anything at all. Nothing dangerous. You still in that long hair committee?"

It would be so easy to upstage him; all the formulas walked through her mind: What committee? Oh, you mean Americans Exiled for Freedom—the AEF? Well, naturally ... Of course a man like you ... I suppose you've run out of local victims; now you've gone into the overseas trade ... let's end this little chat right here, shall we? ... Any one of these gambits would lead to the same end game. Was it conceivable she could be betrayed by simple biological weakness? Could she find herself in bed with a Defender? (Will Rock Hudson get girl?) Why, he was not even faintly physically attractive. When you

had been living alone for a long time—for such an interminably long time—you began thinking like a man, feeling as a man does. Disgusting. "Yes. I suppose you want their names, addresses, letter-drops?"

(What an absurdity; it only went to show how far nature imitated pulp fiction. As though the AEF were a cohesive, dedicated body instead of a number of wrangling, petulant groups, forming and reforming, changing factions, dissatisfied and impotent. The Defenders, having conspired melodramatically and achieved power through their ludicrous conspiracy, believed their opponents must have remodeled themselves in their image. A government which could imagine the dilettantes of the AEF a threat wasn't competent to run Outer Baldonia or one of the smaller Micronesian atolls.)

"Not to harm them. Believe me, kid, they're worth their weight in isotopes to us. We want to work with them, convince them they're making a mistake to criticize their country. Look, I'm not going to hand you a line, I'm not going to tell you the Defenders have thrown their whole program out of the window and the good guys have become bad guys and vice versa. I'm only saying you people never understood politics; now we want to get you back in on the ground floor."

"A bribe like my fifty thousand dollars and a good job?"

"Bribe? It's how you look at it. We're all Americans—exiles, committee, Defenders—and we're on the spot. No matter what, you wouldn't want to see a bunch of limeys or frogs telling us how to run our country, would you?"

"They aren't telling us how to run our country. Just not to fight any more wars or put people in concentration camps."

"Education Centers. Nobody's business but our own. Anyway, I see you wouldn't work with the English."

"That isn't exactly true. Let's say I couldn't go all the way with them. But don't fool yourself: as between the Third Force and the Defenders, I pray the Third Force beats you."

"But you don't pray hard enough to do something?"

"Treason is an ugly word, even when you can argue that it isn't treason."

"Look, Mrs. F, you lose me with fancy talk. Let me lay it on the line. All we want you to do is your duty to your country: give us the names; nobody's going to get mussed up, I swear, and anyway, what could we do to them? We need them because the war hurt us, even if it hurt the Russians worse, and they need us because a refugee is only half a man. Go back to London and say you've changed your mind and you'll work with them. Just tip us off to what they're doing. That's all; no fireworks, no rough stuff, nobody hurt on either side, everything settled nice and smoothly."

"And the Defenders will continue to run the United States as a dictatorship?"

"There's still a vote, isn't there? And Congress can yak."

"And pass laws which the Defender-in-Chief supersedes with new Regulations."

"The Defender-in-Chief isn't going to resign and turn the job over to you, if that's what you want, but there's bound to be some easing up."

"All through now?"

"Let's say I've reached a comma."

"All right. No."

"Now, let's not paint ourselves into corners—"

"Good-by. I can't say it's been nice knowing you, because it hasn't. Or that you've clarified my thinking, because I'm afraid it's as soupy as ever. But good-by, anyway."

The greedy fingers closed over hers. "You're hysterical, kid. You're making a mistake and you—somehow, somewhere, in your subconscious—"

Maggie winced. She didn't mean to, but she couldn't help it. "Unconscious," she corrected, hearing in the primness of her voice an echo of exactly what made the opponents of the Defenders ineffective.

"Okay, okay. In your unconscious, you know it. What you need is to simmer down and look at things coolly. Let's go somewhere quiet—I hate these frog sidewalk joints—and talk everything over. Have a real get-together. I've got a room ..."

She could visualize the whole scene. If he tried—If he raped her, she would lie still and docile. Maybe afterward she would kill him (how?), Judith—or was it Jael?—and Holofernes. But during the act she would be complacent.

His hand jerked away. "The damn frogs are coming back and they have the makings of an army with them."

She looked over her shoulder. A crowd, a mob, not led—no, certainly not led, but he was there, near the front, thrown up and forward—by the beautiful young man. His older, calmer friend wasn't in evidence. Clearly they had been assembled, drilled, directed, outfitted, rehearsed by some demented escapee from the lushest days of Hollywood; some man with a limp and a milky eye, gray stubble and beret, who in a Montmartre garret made nightly obeisance with a lipped cigarette to Griffith and Von Stroheim. There was a United Nations flag—a faded one whose tatters had been mended with coarse thread—tied to a bamboo stick (now I know what happens to the poles those old men fishing along the Seine use; they become implements of riot) and a large placard, *VIVE LA FORCE TROISIÈME*.

They didn't seem in a particularly ugly or vicious mood. Rather they were like adolescents escaping boredom for some pointless horseplay. The bearer of the UN flag had a broken front tooth against which he kept thrusting his tongue; he looked bewildered and innocent. The man beside him was wall-eyed; Maggie wished profoundly he could take some position where both eyes looked at her simultaneously.

The angelic leader stepped forward, epauletted with importance. "You 'ave not finish your beer, Madame?"

Now what happens? Does my compatriot with the Kenya passport produce a paper signed by the president of the republic attesting him a double-agent of long standing, who is loyal not only to *la patrie* but to *la reine britannique* and the whole droning list of *allies glorieux*? Or does he whip out two Smith and Wessons from shoulder holsters and cow the whole mob until the US cavalry (read: paratroopers) comes to the rescue? She shifted her gaze slightly; the agent had vanished.

The leader took her glass and brought it to his carven, pouted mouth. She saw she had left a lipstick smear on the rim and that he had carefully turned the glass so he would be drinking from the same spot. The ruling spirit, she thought, but not in death; this is farce, not drama. "What is it this time, Chester?"

He took a full breath. "*À bas les États Unis*," he shouted, and then translating for her benefit in a more confidential tone, "To 'ell weeth Americans." He swallowed what was left of the beer in a gulp.

She pushed her chair back. "Excuse me."

"A minute, Madame."

Ceremony, ceremony, thought Maggie; it'll be the death of me. The Queen opens Parliament, the President reviews the Republican Guard on the Champs de Mars, the ruler of Holland sticks her finger in the dike. You can't even blame it on foreigners: the bailiff knocks subserviently on the jury room door to ask, What is your pleasure? The chairman inquires, For what purpose does the delegate from the Canal Zone arise? The Flag comes tenderly down as the bugle sounds Retreat and the Nation's might yields to the inexorable processes of Nature.

He caught her wrist. "Raymond! *Ici!*"

Raymond was lantern-jawed, self-conscious, in constant danger of stumbling over his own feet as he advanced holding in his hands an American flag as aged as the UN banner. Though it was folded, she could see from the alignment of the stars that it dated before 1959. Raymond smiled at her deprecatingly. The leader took it and thrust it at her. "Speet, Madame," he invited.

She almost smiled at the theatricalism of it. Presumably if she made the gesture she would convince them of her political purity. Demonstrating indifference or contempt for the rectangle of red, white and blue material would establish her position in their eyes more firmly than the most fervent protestations or solemn oaths. The agent shouldn't have run off; he would certainly have spat with zeal. And why not?

"Thanks. You just drank my beer and my mouth is dry." She tried to slide her wrist out of his grasp, but it was too tight.

"You loaf these Defenders? These fascists?"

"They killed my husband."

"Alors!" He turned, speaking so rapidly she couldn't follow him, hearing only the words, "*mari ... assassiné.*" The crowd applauded rather listlessly.

He shook out the ensign with elaborate deliberation. She saw again the posters in the history museum, Remember December 7, with the colors coming down in unmistakable, unbelievable surrender. This is utterly ridiculous, she thought, ridiculous, pointless, futile. Such an allegedly logical people confusing cause and effect. Indulging in sympathetic magic, making the tableau to induce the events leading up to what it represented.

The man threw the flag on the pavement and smeared his foot over the field of stars. "Oh, you mustn't do that," she cried, in a high, little girl's voice of shock at impropriety. "You mustn't!"

She hurried forward and snatched up the bunting, clutching it to her. The kicking did not really hurt intolerably. Sol had been hurt much, much worse than this. Only her jaw, and her eye, and now her stomach ...

The End

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