

TOMORROW'S WAR...

...the war that could not be. The army of the United States was stationed along the length of the Mississippi River, guns pointed east...with orders to shoot anyone attempting to cross.

For the Final War was not a war of the ultimate bomb, of atomic hell. It was a war of the tiny germ, the filterable virus, the disease that came to conquer a nation...and stayed to damn a world...

WILSON TUCKER is author of many famous science fiction novels, including *THE LINCOLN HUNTERS*, *THE TIME MASTERS* and *TIME BOMB*. Lancer Books, in response to the requests of thousands of readers, is pleased to again make available his most famous novel of all, in a new edition especially revised and updated by the author.

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

A LANCER BOOK—COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED • Cover price \$1.95 in the U.S.A.

LANCER 74-600
0
THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

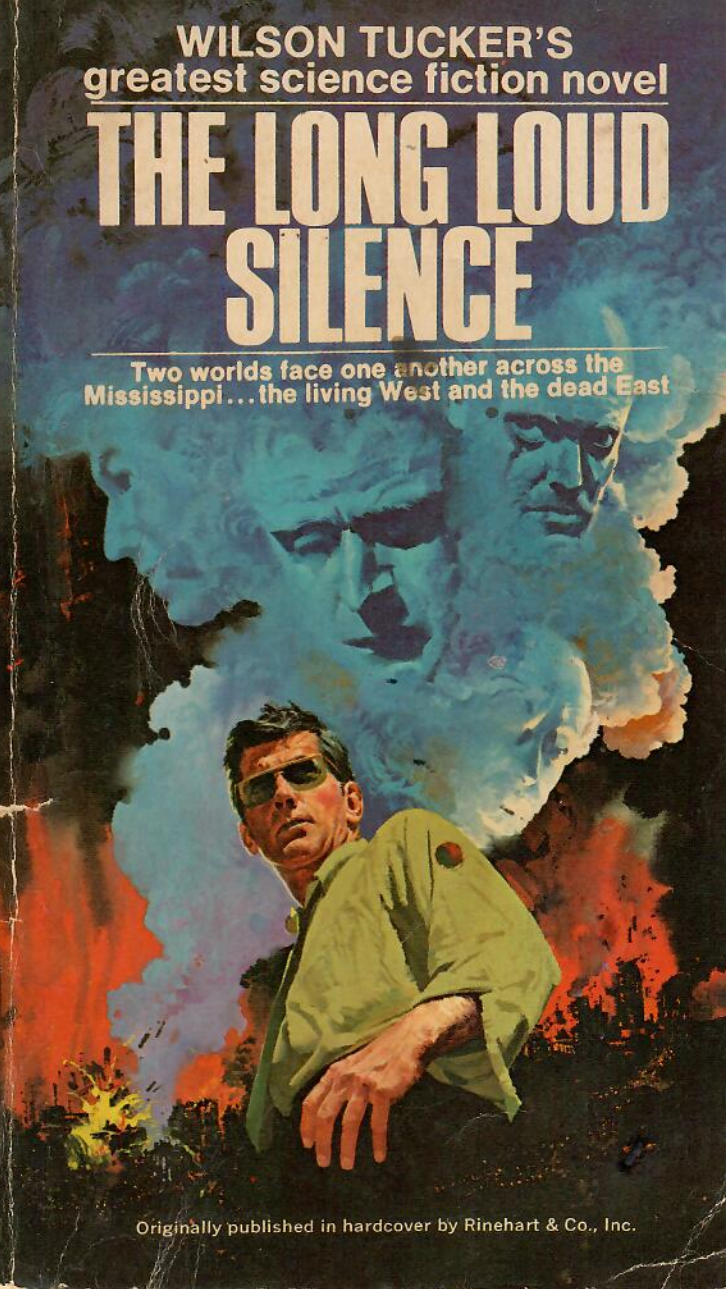
WILSON TUCKER



WILSON TUCKER'S
greatest science fiction novel

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

Two worlds face one another across the Mississippi...the living West and the dead East



Originally published in hardcover by Rinehart & Co., Inc.

THE DAY AFTER DOOMSDAY

The day the world ended, Corporal Russell Gary was sleeping off a three-day celebration, in honor of his thirtieth birthday and his ten years in the army. He missed the excitement . . . but he didn't miss the devastation that followed.

Caught on the wrong side of the world by the happenstance of a day, Corporal Gary resented the bad trick fate had chosen to play. And when he resented something, he did something about it. The trouble was, the still-living world—the world on the other side of the Mississippi River—didn't want to listen to his complaints. They wanted nothing to do with Corporal Gary, or the few thousand other unfortunates trapped in the east. Gary, by the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the right time, had become a carrier of death. It wasn't fair. . . .

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

WILSON TUCKER

To TED, for a title
To ERLE, for a long ago promise
and to the
CHICAGO SCIENCE FICTION SOCIETY
just for the hell of it

LANCER BOOKS  NEW YORK



A LANCER BOOK

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

Copyright © 1952 by Wilson Tucker
This edition specially revised and updated, published 1969
by Lancer Books, Inc.
All rights reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036

Chapter One

GARY hugged the shadows along the shore and waited for the sound of the shot, for the sharp crack of a carbine. The old woman had been a fool to think she could sneak across the bridge, either starved to the point of desperation or a fool. The darkness of the night couldn't hide her, not any more, not with the troops guarding the other end of the bridge with infra-red lamps and sniper scopes on their rifles.

This was the only bridge left intact along a six or seven hundred mile stretch of the Mississippi, and American troops would be concentrated in strength on the other end. The old woman had no more chance of slipping across to the Iowa shore than a snowball in a cyclotron.

Gary crawled around a concrete abutment and waited. He was careful not to show his body on the roadway, not to cross to the other side of the two-lane bridge. He was too far away from the troops to be in real danger, but some gun-happy soldier just might catch him in his 'scope and fire.

The old woman didn't know the army, didn't know their equipment as he did. In her foolish, hungry mind she must have thought she could cross over under cover of darkness. She should have known better; she should have known what to expect after a year of it. Or perhaps she no longer cared. The old woman surely knew she couldn't live to reach the other side. No one from the contaminated area crossed the Mis-

Mississippi and lived more than a few seconds, a few minutes. If you were among the lucky millions living in the western two-thirds of the nation, you gave thanks to your god. But if you were among the unlucky thousands still struggling for an existence east of the river, you remained there until you died. There was no other choice, no other future.

Stay where you were and die slowly. Make an attempt to reach the clean, unbombed country west of the Mississippi and die quickly under the sights of a carbine. The trooper's heart might not be in it—he might hesitate the fraction of a second, but you'd die. No contamination cases wanted.

The rifle cracked in the blackness.

Gary lay still, waiting. There was no other sound for long minutes. He knew the routine, had watched it often in the daylight. Some soldier garbed in a white radiation suit would walk out on to the bridge, move the body with a toe of his boot, searching for a spark of life. If there was still movement he would put a pistol shot through her head. Finally he would pick up the body and hurl it over the guardrail.

He seemed to hear a faint splash. The wind was in the wrong direction and he couldn't be sure, but the hungry old woman was undoubtedly floating downstream by now.

He crawled off the bridge approach and sought the sanctuary of a near-by field, seeking out the hollow depression where he had been lying when the woman passed him half an hour before. Curiosity had made him follow her, the morbid curiosity of an onlooker who knows the game will end in disaster. She had been carrying no food, he saw that in his first swift scrutiny; had she been carrying anything to eat he would have forcibly taken it from her. But her arms had been bare and there were no bulges to her pock-

ets. So he had let her go to the bridge, silently following for no real reason.

He had known what would happen to her, and surely she did. In all likelihood she no longer cared. You get so old, you grow so hungry—and finally you seek a way out. The bridge was always a way out. Or downstream where the bridges had been dynamited, a rowboat. The troops were continuously on the prowl and the river watch never ended.

Gary knew there were many thousands of them, a large portion of what remained of the United States Army, stationed all along the western bank of the Mississippi, all the way from the delta northward to Lake Winnibigoshish in Minnesota, and from that point still northward overland to Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba. Still north of that body of water, the Mounted Patrol or terrain stopped you.

He could have been among those lucky troops on the other side of the river, the safe side. If he hadn't got blind drunk a year ago. Hadn't wakened up in that hotel.

Corporal Russell Gary, with a Fifth Army patch on his shoulder and nothing more strenuous than recruiting duty in downstate Illinois. Veteran of the Hue campaign—he lasted five days on the River of Perfumes before shrapnel pushed him off; veteran of the Tuy Duc thrust—he was promoted to a tech-sergeantcy in the early days on the Mnong Plateau and busted again before his outfit fell back on Saigon. Experienced and unscrupulous black-marketeer, junior grade; turned a tidy sum dealing in military gasoline, rations, soap, foodstuffs—those small luxuries valued by the Viet Nameese. He had joined the army in peace time after listening to many gaudy stories told by his father about France and Germany in World War Two, and had been shocked senseless

when he was sent to Viet Nam as an "adviser" to native troops. Then—on his thirtieth birthday—he was celebrating ten years of khaki with a monumental binge.

A year's pay.

He figured the army owed him a year's pay.

When he woke up he was on the wrong side of the river, the bombed and contaminated side. . . .

Chapter Two

CORPORAL GARY sneezed and opened his eyes.

The dirty wallpaper only half-clinging to the ceiling seemed ready to come loose and drop on him at any moment. He sneezed again and rolled his eyes to see the equally sad paper peeling from the side walls. The layer peeling off wore faded pink roses and below that was another of dirty blue feathers. A battered old telephone hung on the wall near the door, screwed to the cracking plaster. His rumpled trousers were on the floor beside the bed.

"Mother of Moses!" the corporal complained, "another stinking firetrap."

He fought away a nagging ache in his back and a dull pain in his head to sit up. The movement sent a fine cloud of dust flying, and he sneezed again. Instinctively he reached under the pillow for his wallet and dislodged a whisky bottle. Savagely throwing the pillow and the bottle across the room, he snatched up his trousers from the floor and searched the pockets. His wallet was tucked in one of them, empty.

The corporal shouted one word and hurled the wallet after the pillow and the bottle.

Swinging his legs to the floor, he swore loudly when his naked toes made contact rather violently with another bottle. Gary peered down at it, was vaguely disappointed to find it empty, and saw still another one lying part way under the bed.

"That," he said to the dirty carpet, "must have been one hell of a toot!"

The room contained a toilet and a wash basin in one corner, half concealed behind a wooden screen. Another empty floated in the stool. A thin layer of dust and powdered plaster lay over every surface. Gary twisted the single tap jutting out over the basin but no water came out. He repeated the single, shouted word with added emphasis and stalked across the room to the ancient wall telephone.

"Hey, down there! What the hell goes on here? I want some water."

The instrument did not answer him.

"Hell of a note," he complained, and let the ear-piece bang against the wall. Behind the wallpaper some loose plaster dribbled down. "Hell of a note."

He stopped to survey the room. Except for the dust, it was no different from a dozen other cheap hotels he had previously frequented for one purpose or another. The room hadn't been cleaned for a week—and hell, he hadn't been sleeping that long. One or two days was the limit on this sort of thing. Say two days—and that was stretching it. He shoved a bottle with his toe and tried to recall events. Quite plainly he hadn't been miserly with the liquor—he must have pitched a king-sized bitch. Ten years in the damned army, thirty years old and still reasonably healthy, and if that didn't call for a birthday celebration, nothing did. So all right, he had shot the works. But he couldn't have been out for more than two days.

Somebody would have missed him by now, and he'd be on the carpet for sure.

"Hell of a note," he said again and reached for his trousers.

They were the only article of clothing in the room. Gary searched carefully, quickly, his anger growing,

but there were no shoes or socks, no underwear, shirt or cap. He pulled on the wrinkled trousers and kicked at the wallet, cursing the unknown thief who had robbed him and then stolen his clothing while he slept. In nothing but the trousers he yanked open the bedroom door and strode into the narrow hall. His room number told him he was on the third floor.

Without hesitation he walked to the stairway, dust flying from the worn carpet with each angry foot-fall. Approaching the dimly lighted stairs, he passed a room whose door hung open and absently looked in.

Shocked, he stopped, took a step backward, and stared again. She lay naked on the bed.

Gary turned quickly, searched the hall behind him and the stairway beneath, to find he was still alone. Silently then he moved just inside the room.

The room was dusty and unclean like his own, but it also held an offensive odour that stung his nostrils, an odour he had known and lived with long ago. The woman's clothing was scattered about the floor; her open and ransacked purse had been tossed under the bed. A cheap suitcase had been split open and thrown aside. Gary stared at her body.

She was a nondescript woman, thirty or forty years of age—it was difficult to tell now. Not pretty, not ugly, but obviously a tramp. She fitted into the cheap and smelly room, into the run-down hotel. There were old and new scars on her thin body, and a dried trickle of blood on one ear where an earring had been torn away.

Gary moved nearer the bed, ignoring the odour, to confirm his first startled suspicion. A G.I. bayonet protruded from between her bony ribs.

He hesitated only a second longer and ran from the room. The hallway remained empty. He sped for the stairs, half-jumping them in his eagerness to descend,

to get away from the third floor. The second floor landing and corridor were equally bare of sound or movement and he continued down without pause, seeking the lobby.

It was a small lobby, dirty, dusty, empty.

"Hey," he shouted nervously, "wake up!" He ran to the desk. "It's me, Corporal Gary!"

There was no answer, no appearance.

He hit the old desk with his fist, pounding on its scarred surface. Dust flew upward and he sneezed. The lobby remained empty of life. A calendar pad caught his eye and he snatched it up, blowing a fine film of dust from its surface. Wednesday, June 20th. The day after his birthday, the day after the evening on which he had begun the celebrated binge. But the calendar couldn't be right because he knew damned well he had not got drunk only the night before. That had been two or three days ago, maybe more, and he had slept it off upstairs. It *was* two or three days ago. The calendar had dust on it. To hell with the calendar!

He hurled the metal base and its papers through a lobby window, hearing the shards of glass sprinkle the pavement outside.

"I'm in here!" he shouted after the calendar.

Silence.

In sudden anger he picked up a heavy inkwell from the desk and tossed it through a second window, with the same negative result. No one came to investigate. Gary waited until he had counted fifty, aloud, and turned away from the desk. Sunlight shining through the unwashed glass of a street door caught his eye. He crossed the lobby, pushed through the door and stood on the pavement outside. The hot sun felt good on his half naked body but the pavement was uncomfortable to his feet.

He saw only a mongrel dog trotting along the gutter. The dog and a car.

Gary ignored the dog and concentrated on the car. The nose and radiator of the car were rammed through a plate glass window of a clothing store, the front tires flat and shredded where they had exploded upon violent contact with first the curb and then the building. Both bumpers were crumpled and the windscreen cracked and shattered to the limit of its resistance. A window dummy had toppled forward across the hood, while within the car another lifeless body hung across the wheel, impaled. The odour he had found in the room upstairs was multiplied here on the street.

Gary walked slowly from the hotel, fighting to read some kind of sense into what he had found. The bomb crater stopped him, shocked him. And then he knew.

The round, uneven crater occupied the whole width of the street and a truck had tumbled into it, unable to stop. The driver of the truck was still in the cab, dead. Beyond that was another crater, and he quickly saw the signs of an air strike—that had been so familiar eight to ten years before. Show windows shattered, buildings chipped and battered, the street a crazy tangle of cars and debris. The city had been bombed. Bombed while he slept like a drunken fool.

But bombs—here, in Illinois! Towns and cities like this were common in the northern provinces of Viet Nam. He had been through hundreds of them, fought through and helped raze scores of them—in Viet Nam. But not here in Illinois! Who would bomb Illinois? Who would make war on the United States?

This was why the hotel was empty of life, this was why the murdered woman lay up there on the third

floor bed. The city had been bombed, the survivors evacuated.

The survivors?

Gary ran along the street, searching for a living man. Some cars stood at the curb, unoccupied, while others were smashed in their flight. None contained anything living. Debris littered the street and only an occasional breeze moved a bit of trash, a discarded newspaper. Eagerly he snatched up the newspaper, scanned the headlines. Nothing. The paper held no mention of war, no hint of war, no threat of a bombing, no clue or forewarning to any sort of catastrophe—to America. The front page and the others inside mirrored only the day-to-day violence of usual nature at home and abroad. The date?

Like the dusty calendar. Wednesday, June 20th. The day after his birthday.

He dropped the paper and ran to the nearest car, reached inside and snapped on the radio. The battery was dead. Running along the street, Gary paused at another car parked alongside the curb, tried the radio. It hummed into life. The airwaves were dead—either dead or deliberately silent. He slowly worked the dial from one end to the other, hoping to catch even the faintest whisper of sound, a spoken word or a bit of music, but there was nothing.

He decided they were maintaining radio silence. The absence of living people around him was proof they had been evacuated, that authority still existed somewhere. But that authority was keeping a rigid silence on the air, still fearing attack. He turned off the radio and slumped in the seat, wondering what he should do.

He supposed he was technically classed as a deserter by this time—that or listed as missing in action. The absence of a comparatively unimportant recruiting

corporal would be noticed after two or three days. But for the moment it didn't make much difference; sooner or later he would find a military post and report in. Where? Might as well go back to Chicago—he was known there. How? He'd have to help himself to a car and drive—he rather doubted that trains would still be running. The enemy always goes for the rail lines first.

His feet burned. So first he'd have to find some shoes. And after that, something to eat. . . .

Corporal Gary sat on the deserted curb before a grocery store, watching the tired sun go down and eating his supper from an assortment of pilfered cans and jars. He had helped himself to the food, there being no one in the store to either help or hinder him. The absence of assistants led him to suspect the bombing had happened at night; the display windows were smashed and the door hung askew but there were no bodies within the store itself. The grocery offered itself to him.

The bread he passed by because it was beginning to glaze over with a green mould, the fruit and vegetables were inedible. The big refrigerators had been neutralised with the failure of electricity, and the meats, milk, and cheeses within them made unsafe. Angrily he had slammed the doors on the odour. He had discovered and pulled from a slowly thawing freezer a whole chicken, which now lay wrapped in a bag on the pavement beside him. There had been other food in the freezing unit but they were much too hard to eat now, and did not represent the value of the chicken to his mind. They could wait. Cans, jars, and a wax-sealed box of crackers made up his meal. Unable to locate running water, he drank canned juices and bottled soda water.

And then he threw an empty can across the wide street, listening to its clatter in the stillness. When the noise had died away he ripped open a carton of cigarettes and lit one.

"A hell of a note!" he said to the oncoming evening.

A borrowed car stood at the curb a few feet away, its radio humming. He had set the dial at what he thought to be one of the most popular Chicago wavebands, and let it run. As yet there had been no rewarding voice.

During the remainder of the afternoon he had driven around the town, ranging it from one end to the other in search of any living thing. He had found no one, the city was dead or deserted. It did occur to him belatedly that there might be someone there, someone who would hide at the sound of the approaching car. Looters, the thieves and murderers who had stolen his money and killed the woman, lost survivors like himself. But no living person had made himself seen. The dead were everywhere, lying in the street, slumped on the porches of homes, folded up in smashed cars. Nothing alive moved, other than himself. And that straggling dog he had first seen when he emerged from the hotel.

And during the afternoon another strange thing had occurred to him, a thought that quietly took shape and grew in his mind as he drove along the rubble streets. The bombing hadn't been heavy. The few bomb craters that pockmarked the city hadn't been nearly enough to wipe out the population, hardly enough to account for the dead he found everywhere. The city may have panicked and fled, yes. Any American city, never before subjected to enemy fire, would quickly panic and run at the first few bombs. The city may have been hurriedly evacuated by the military,

yes. But how to account for the large number of dead? There were bodies lying in streets that contained no craters, no evidence of war at all.

"Holy Mother of Moses! Gas!" And then he paused. No, not gas. Gas would have found him in his third floor room unless it were some strange new kind that clung to the surface, did not rise. He stooped and sniffed the street, the grass growing on the lawns. There was no odour of gas. And that dog was still alive. Not gas then. What?

Atomic radiation? Bacterial bombs? Germ warfare—*that* germ warfare? He didn't know; he knew nothing about them. He knew as much about them as any other G.I. did, which was next to nothing. But those craters could have been made by special, hellish bombs that killed without steel splinters, without shrapnel. It could account for those lifeless bodies lying far from the craters, could account for the dead and deserted city. How did you go about looking for radiation? Oh yes—Geiger counters.

Gary didn't have a counter, wouldn't know where they could be found, wouldn't know how to use one if he had it. Bacteria? Germs of some kind. You can't fight germs. If his induction shots didn't protect him, to hell with it.

He was still alive. So he was immune to whatever hit the city, or the stuff didn't reach to the third floor. He was still alive in a city of the dead.

The jarring crash of a plate glass window brought him to his feet. Someone *else* was alive.

The sound had come from somewhere off to his left, surprisingly near, and after a moment of frozen surprise and indecision, he leaped for the car. A following thought stopped him. The sound of the motor might scare them away, might scare them—whoever they were—into hiding. He turned from the car and

ran lightly up the street, swinging his eyes from side to side. Broken glass lay everywhere and it was impossible to determine which window had been breached. He slowed, trotted cautiously, eyes and ears alert.

He came to a cross street, peered up and down its length without seeing anything, and crossed over to continue his route. The darkness of evening was closing in. Slowly now he paced along the street, avoiding the glass that might crunch underfoot and betray him, side-stepping the rubble that barred his way. He hurried along to the next cross street, and the next after that, until he felt that he had come too far. It was like the house-to-house searches in those bombed-out Viet Nameese towns—you sometimes sensed the presence of humans and again you knew beforehand that a house was empty. He realised now, with a surprising return of that old sense, that he had passed the person who smashed the window.

Gary turned and retraced his route, cautiously.

He spotted the brief flicker of a flashlight ahead of him and dropped to the street, studying the building as he approached it. Quite apparently a jewellery shop. Looters then—but the whole city lay open for the taking. What was the especial crime of this one act? In a sense he had looted a grocery and a clothing store himself. Somebody wanted the valuable stuff.

The light flicked on again, scanning a row of display cases along one wall. He caught a faint silhouette created by the small light. He crept nearer, was rising to his feet when he heard the joyous exclamation.

The looter was a woman.

Gary sank back to the pavement, thinking better of rushing her. The woman on the hotel's third floor had been murdered by a thief; this feminine looter could be well armed. She might misinterpret his approach and shoot him. He had no desire to stop her, to pre-

vent her from taking what she wanted. He was interested only in her, not in what she was doing. She was the only living thing he had found in the town except for the dog, and the dog wouldn't make good company. He stayed in the street, waiting.

The woman in the shop took her time, picking over the stock, obviously enjoying herself. Once or twice she flicked off the light and stepped to the broken window, searching the street for people. Gary was only another shapeless bundle of nothing on the black street. She did not see him. He heard the tinkle of gems and rings as she gathered them up in a bundle.

When she had satisfied herself and at last came out of the shop she was carrying a brown paper sack stuffed with loot. She briefly switched on the light to find her footing and left the store as she had entered, through the gaping hole knocked in the heavy window. Gary tensed his muscles and waited. She turned toward him. Holding the sack clutched tightly in one hand and the flash in the other, she made her way along the street as he had done, avoiding the rubble. Accepting his flattened body as just another obstacle, she was steering a course around him when he leaped.

The woman screamed in terror and struck out with the flashlight. He knocked it from her hand and shoved her backward, crooking one foot behind her legs as she stumbled. She fell back, sprawling and screaming, the paper sack bursting as it hit the pavement.

He was on her in an instant, pinning her down, trying vainly to clamp a hand over her mouth to throttle the screams.

"Shut up!" he shouted. He got a palm over her mouth and she bit it. "Shut up—I won't hurt you!"

"You're a cop . . ." Her voice was girlish and shrill with terror. "You're a cop!"

When she had recovered all that could be found in the light's dim beam, she brought the double handful of gems over to dump them in his trouser pockets.

"We'll have to come back here tomorrow. I know I've missed some."

"To hell with that," he told her. "There's other stores around here."

"Yes!" She paused in pleased surprise. "That's right. There are many of them; I know where they all are. We'll find them tomorrow, you and I."

He contradicted her. "We'll get the devil out of here tomorrow, and fast. Don't you know what this city will be like this time tomorrow night?"

"But Russell, my jewellery—What will it be like?"

"What do you think, with those bodies under two or three days of baking sun?"

"Oh . . ." She was silent, and took the flashlight from his hand to direct the beam up into his face. He squinted against the sudden light and heard her in-drawn breath.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Russell. But you need a shave."

He took the light from her hand and shut it off.

"Let's get away from here."

"Where are we going?"

He hesitated. Where were they going?

They stood like silent sentinels in the middle of a dead, deserted city, an odorous city lying lifeless under a black night sky—the victim of some enemy's bombs. They alone, for all he knew, among uncounted dead. They and a stray dog. Where to go? Certainly not back to that place where he had spent the previous nights. Were it not for the girl he knew what he would have preferred, what he would have done. A pair of blankets from the first shop offering

such merchandise, and a bunk in the fields outside of town, out of reach of the smell and reminder of death. Or a vacant farmhouse whose occupants had left before disaster struck.

She put a small hand in his, anxiously waiting.

"Do you live here?" he asked. "Do you know the town?"

"I've lived here all my life. I know it all."

"Find us a hotel," he directed then, "a big one."

She hesitated only a moment and he could guess what she might be thinking. "Where are we now?" she asked him.

They picked their way to the nearest intersection and he turned the light on the street sign.

"Oh, yes," she said then. "This way."

The lobby seemed empty. He searched it carefully in the beam of the flashlight before advancing across it. The desk clerk was slumped on the floor behind his desk.

"This bombing," Gary said, "did it come at night?"

"The bom—oh, yes. In the early evening. The radio said some planes had been shot down, and something about long-range rockets. It wasn't very clear."

He went behind the clerk's desk and scanned the key rack, finally taking several of them from their slots. "How did you escape? Where were you?"

"Oh, I wasn't here. I was with my class in Havana. Do you know where that is?"

"No."

"A small town south of here; my class was on an archaeological field trip. There are Indian mounds at Havana."

"Still sticking to your story?"

"I *am* nineteen!" she declared with anger.

"I won't argue about it; I don't give a damn how

old you are. Come on." He walked to the stairs. "What happened to the rest of the class?"

"I don't know. When we heard the news on the radio, I came home. Home was . . . home was . . ."

"Bombed out?" He led her up the stairway.

"No. It hadn't been touched. But inside, Mother was . . . dead. Her body had turned colour, sort of purple."

"Purple?"

"Bluish-purple. I can't describe it. It was ugly."

"I can't figure that one out. Some disease? It worked fast, damned fast. Say—when did this happen, this bombing? Wednesday night?"

"I think so. Yes, Wednesday evening."

"And this is Friday." He shook his head.

They continued to climb the carpeted stairs. At the second floor landing he paused only long enough to send the light flashing down the corridor, to assure himself that it was empty, and started upward again, pulling the girl along. He believed the third or the fourth floor would be the safest, away from the street. The silent city might contain other prowlers besides themselves.

"What have you been doing since Wednesday night?"

"I don't know. Honestly I don't." She shuddered. "I came home and found— It was unpleasant. I cried a lot, and I was sick. Every time I attempted to eat I was sick. I guess I've lived on canned juices, and soup. There was no electricity, no running water."

"Power station must be out," he explained. "Either a bomb struck it or something went wrong and the machinery shut itself off. Automatic cutouts, things like that. Nobody was around to start it again. That explains the water, too. The pumping stations are run by electricity. I'm surprised the whole damned town

isn't burning down." He thought about her remarks on food. "Soup?" he asked.

"The gas stove worked, after a fashion. The flame was very low."

"Pressure giving out. It'll be gone in a day or so."

"What will we do then?"

"We won't be here," he assured her. "We're getting out of this town tomorrow."

"There's no place to go."

When they reached the fourth floor he paused to examine the keys he carried in his hand, and then flicked the light along the door numbers. The keys directed them away from the stairway toward the rear of the building. The first room he unlocked and kicked open proved to be a narrow one, holding but a single bed; the following two were replicas of the first. On the next try a large room having a double bed stood revealed in the gleam, and adjoining that a similarly large room with twin beds. He pulled her inside, locked the hall door, unlocked the connecting door between the rooms and locked the remaining outside doorway of the other bedroom.

"This is where we bunk," he told her.

She watched him, saying nothing.

He wagged his thumb at the connecting door. "Which room do you want?"

Irma shook her head, not answering.

"Come on, kid, pick your room. I'm not robbing the cradle!" He put the flash down on the bureau top, still lit, and emptied his pockets of the stolen jewels. They made dim fires in the weak light. Belatedly he remembered to pull down the shades to prevent the light from betraying them. When he turned away from the windows she was still standing in the centre of the room, watching him. "Which room?" he asked sharply.

"I'm frightened."

"Not that frightened."

"I'm afraid to sleep in another room."

"To hell with that. I locked the doors."

"I will not sleep in a separate room," Irma declared. Her voice climbed with an hysterical note. "This place is . . . is . . . *dead!*"

Russell Gary studied her youthful face briefly in the light of the torch, wondering what he was to do with her. He'd like to leave her, walk off and pretend he'd never found her, be rid of her . . . but he couldn't just abandon a child. In sudden decision he snapped off the light. "Suit yourself. I'm taking the bed by the window." And he sat down on it.

He undressed, taking off everything but the twin dog tags hanging round his neck. It was the way he usually slept; he hadn't even considered adding pyjamas to his wardrobe when he had helped himself in that clothing store during the afternoon. After long minutes spent in relaxing on the hotel sheets, he reached out to raise the shade and pry open the window a few inches.

There was the quiet sound of the girl moving on the opposite bed.

His mouth was dry with a consuming thirst and he got up in the darkness for water, only to remember there was none. Swearing, he climbed back into bed.

Irma laughed at him with unconcealed satisfaction.

"Now," she said boastfully, "am I nineteen?"

Chapter Three

HE awoke with the sun shining on his face, spilling through the open window he had raised the night before. The room was quiet and unmoving, a large and clean room in sharp contrast to that other squalid cell in which he had awakened the previous day. After a few moments the quiet and unmoving street below the window came to his attention, and he remembered where he was and what had happened to him. Nothing had happened to him—that was the surprising thing. He lived. He didn't move, didn't get up and rush to the window to see if the city had changed itself overnight, to see if the dead had returned to life and were moving about the streets in normal fashion. There would be no magical change, no overnight erasing of the nightmare that had killed a city. Yesterday and last night were too real, too much like those towns in the northern provinces. This city was gone. His immediate concern was to find out how many others had died with it, how many others had fallen under enemy bombs.

That, and get back to the army.

Meanwhile, what would he do with the girl? Take her along and turn her over to the Red Cross—or walk out on her, leave her here in the city where she lived? He turned his inquiring eyes toward the other bed and found it empty.

Gary sat up, startled. Had she left him?

He stepped out of bed and padded across the rug in

his bare feet, to pause before the bureau. The flashlight was still there but the stolen jewellery was gone. Turning, he quickly crossed the room to the outer door, tugged at the knob and found it locked. The key was not there. The girl had left him and locked the door from the outside, taking her loot with her. He stood at the door, thinking of her.

Nineteen . . . and she could prove it. Had proved it. He looked back at her rumpled bed and said aloud, "Hell of a note!" And then he went into the bathroom.

The mirrored cabinet set in the wall was empty but for a few tiny bars of hotel soap and he slammed the lid shut in disgust. A dirty, bearded face stared back at him. The water taps above the sink still refused to run and he was on the point of turning to leave the room when his eyes found the water closet. Lifting off the porcelain lid and twisting the floating ball back out of the way, he scooped his hands into the box and washed his face. The water felt good on his skin and he poured handfuls over his head, letting it run down his body. A half dozen untouched towels hung nearby. As he was drying himself he caught sight of his beard in the mirror again, and stopped.

Gary quit the bathroom and walked to the door, forgetting it was locked until the knob resisted his hand. He muttered an impatient threat to the absent girl under his breath and crossed through the connecting doorway to the adjoining room, to let himself out into the hotel corridor. Going downstairs, he noted the room numbers nearest the lobby and on reaching the ground floor, scooped from the clerk's rack several keys to those rooms. Searching about the lobby he found a drugstore opening off it, and picked up a heavy chair to hurl through its locked door. The drugstore shelves offered him his choice of shaving

equipment and he picked up a handful, taking the things up to the second floor and the nearer rooms.

The first room he unlocked was a sample room and he backed out of it, impatient at the minor delay. The next two rooms he opened contained bodies in the beds and he vacated them just as quickly. Finally locating an empty one, he closed the door and locked it with the bolt, to dump his supplies in the bathroom. Lifting off the lid of the water box, he used his hands to scoop out water and fill the sink. Then he shaved.

Afterward he lay down on the bed and ripped open a packet of cigarettes taken from the drugstore, smoking two in succession before the taste in his mouth satisfied him. It was then that he discovered he had forgotten to dress. Cursing his own forgetfulness, Gary swung off the bed and unlocked the door, to climb two flights of stairs to the fourth floor and his own room.

Both doors hung open—the one he had left open and the other the girl had locked. He checked his stride and listened. Irma Sloane was inside, crying hysterically.

Gary paused in the doorway, saw her lying across his bed.

"Stop that bawling, dammit!" he said with a sharp and husky voice.

She swung around quickly, raised her head to stare at him, and then with a happy cry sped across the floor to throw herself at his chest. He caught her in self-defence, braced himself to prevent her lunge from pushing him backward. Irma clung to him fiercely, still crying.

"Stop it, I said! *Stop it.*" He shook her.

"I thought you'd gone." Her words were muffled, her mouth pressed against his chest. "I thought you'd left me!" Her arms encircled his waist possessively.

"That's what I thought about you."

She raised her face to his. "What?"

"Where did you go?"

"Oh, Russell . . . you've shaved."

"Where did you go? When I woke up you were gone."

She smiled at him and turned her head to the bed, pointing. "Look what I have. Oh, I have lots of pretty things."

He saw the sack, an extra large grocery sack, its brown seams bulging with whatever was packed and crammed inside it. "What is it?"

She released him then, straightened up from him and ran over to the bed, to dump the contents of the sack across the rumpled sheet. He stared half-believing at her loot.

"Mother of Moses! Why do you keep picking up that junk? You can't eat it."

"They're mine! I'm going to keep them, keep them all!" She dipped her fingers into the pile of jewellery, letting the pieces trickle sensuously through her fingers. "Aren't they pretty, Russell?"

"You can't eat them," he repeated, "and if you want to stay alive you had damned well better begin collecting food. Why didn't you bring something to eat?"

"I've never had so many nice things before . . . they are so pretty." She looked up at him, and then at his body, to laugh gaily. "Hadn't you better put some clothes on, Russell?"

He picked up his clothing from the floor and stalked into the adjoining room, slamming the door behind him.

They ate breakfast in the same manner in which he had eaten the night before: from cans, sitting on the

curb before a grocery store. It was less than satisfying. Afterwards he asked about cars. He wanted a new car from some dealer's showroom or garage, and he wanted a light one that did not consume too much fuel. She led him on a tour of car agencies and he picked a compact wagon, a demonstrator with slightly under a thousand miles on its meter.

"Why are you so fussy?" she asked impatiently. "Why not take one of those cars out in the street? There's no one here to stop us. Where are we going?"

"God only knows! We're getting out of this town fast but I don't know where we're going. Chicago? What if it has been bombed out? Supposing we have to go all the way to New York, or out to California? How much of the country has been bombed, do you know? Where will we find living people?"

"I don't know." She was frightened now.

"I don't either, but we've got to look somewhere. The army or the Red Cross is somewhere and we want to find them. The whole damned country can't be dead!" He climbed in the car and started the motor, listening to it. "I want a car that will give me mileage, I want provisions for a long haul, and then we're moving. Get in. Find a gun shop."

"A gun shop?"

"Guns—rifles. Find me a store that sells them."

"I don't know of any," she told him helplessly.

"Sporting goods," he snapped at her, "a big hardware store or a——"

"Oh, yes," she interrupted. "I know of a place where you can buy fishing equipment, boats, things like that."

"That's what I want." He drove the compact out of the garage, listening to the performance of the motor.

While she stood absently watching him, Gary chose from the store's wall rack a heavy .30-30 and a Marlin

.22. He loaded the girl down with ammunition for the two rifles, had her pack it on the rear floor of the car. Afterwards they drove by the grocery where they had taken two meals, and loaded in food. He stumbled over debris on the floor that hadn't been there when they visited the place for breakfast, and searched the store carefully before allowing the girl to enter. She would have chosen light, fancy and almost useless goods had not he vetoed the choices, instead filling her arms with canned soups and meats, a variety of vegetables, fruits and juices. On a second thought he picked up a case of canned milk.

She was quick to complain. "Oh—Russell! Do we have to take all this now? Why can't we simply stop somewhere when we want to eat?"

"Lift your nose," he said sharply. "Smell the air. Do you want to come back into this stink every day to eat? And it'll get worse."

Casting another look at the litter left on the floor by some other prowler, Gary drove back to the gun shop once more and picked up a .38 revolver.

"Now what's that for? You going to fight someone?"

He poked a finger at the bulging sack she held tightly in her lap. "What if somebody takes a notion to loot *us*?"

"Oh."

He left town quickly, picking up and following a marked route that he knew led to Chicago. Occasionally he was forced to detour around a blocked street where a falling bomb had gouged out a great crater, or a tangle of wrecked cars made passage difficult. The suburbs were less badly hit, with only an occasional crater revealing where some stray bomb had come down. But the suburbs were as lifeless. And still he didn't understand why, didn't comprehend

why a few scattered bombs should so completely wipe out a population. Momentarily he switched on the car's radio, but the band was silent.

Either the army was continuing radio silence—or the entire nation was off the air permanently. Optimistically he told himself it was not the latter. Sudden and unexpected bombs had fallen a few days ago: more might come, or an enemy force might follow them to establish a bridgehead and dig in for counter-attack. In either event radio stations would remain off the air to prevent information from leaking to the enemy, to deny him radio beams on which to track more bombs, or his planes. The lack of information was harmful to the country, to what remained of it, but radio silence was of paramount importance. When the radios again came back on the air, the danger would be over. He looked at his watch, mentally laying out an hourly schedule for listening.

"Look—look, there's a man!"

He slowed the car. "Where?"

"There—that farmhouse ahead."

Gary put his foot on the brake and one hand on the horn, pulling up sharp at the mouth of a lane leading up to a cluster of farm buildings.

"Hey there!" He leaned out of the window.

To his astonishment the farmer whirled and ran into the nearer barn, to emerge a moment later brandishing a double-barrelled shotgun. Immediately behind him the barn door ejected two boys, the taller of the two carrying another gun and wearing on his frightened face a stamp of determination.

The red-faced farmer waved his weapon. "Git out of here!"

"Hey—now wait!" Gary shouted at him. "All I want is information."

"You ain't getting nothing here but buckshot. Now

git!" He hoisted the shotgun into firing position, and beside him the older boy did likewise. "I've had enough of you double-damned thieves!"

Gary slipped the idling motor into gear and poised for a quick getaway. "Information," he shouted once more. "Where is the army?"

"Ain't seen no army!" And the shotgun blasted the air.

The car's rear tires spun madly, throwing a shower of dirt and gravel into the air. Gary piloted it a fast mile down the highway before taking his foot from the gas, and then he slowed to a stop, to climb out and circle the car looking for damage. The buckshot had missed them. He settled behind the wheel to light a cigarette.

"Sort of mad, wasn't he?" he asked mildly.

"What in heaven's name was the matter with him?" She reached over and helped herself to a cigarette.

His answering laugh was bitter. "You looters are giving us decent people a bad name."

"Well, we certainly didn't get any information from him."

"On the contrary," Gary corrected her, "we did. We learned that the countryside is already overrun with looters. That means people from the cities, the survivors running into the open country to get away from . . . well, from the city. That farmer has had so much food stolen from him he won't talk to anybody. Shoot first and answer questions afterward." He reached into the back seat for the revolver.

She watched him. "You aren't going to——"

"I'm not going to what? Go back and fight it out with him? Don't be silly." Methodically he opened a box of cartridges and loaded the revolver, to lay it on the floor between his feet. "We also learned that people in the open country have survived; that was his

family behind him. The bombs—and whatever death they carried—didn't fall here, didn't spread their gas or radiation or germs out here. Only the cities. Maybe only the big cities. We'll find out soon, when we come to some whistle stop."

"What are we going to do? I mean—about this?"

He studied her childish face, dwelling on the almost mature mind that existed behind it, the almost mature body that existed below it. She had dumbfounded him last night.

"I'm going back to the army," he told her, "as soon as I can find it. I'm supposed to be there right now. I'm going to locate a command post somewhere and report in. And when that happens, they'll outfit me with clothing and equipment and ship me off to some place. That's the end of it."

"But it isn't the end of it! What about me?"

"You? I can't take you along, Irma."

She laughed at him again, an echo of last night's wild laughter which had burned his ears, made him ashamed of himself. "I'm nineteen . . . and I could be a nice mascot."

"Hell's fire, you'd have the army on its ear and I'd be in the guardhouse for life. If you want to do something, the Red Cross people could put you to work."

"I don't want the Red Cross people," she snapped at him peevishly, "I want you."

He flicked away his half-smoked cigarette. "Tough sister. The army saw me first."

"Russell . . ." She turned to him, easily forcing the tears into her eyes. "Russell, supposing I'm in trouble?"

He eyed her silently, contemptuously.

"Well," she wavered, "I was only supposing . . ."

"You can get out and walk any time you want to, Irma."

"I won't talk about it any more, Russell. I promise. Russell . . . will you really leave me?"

"I haven't any choice. When I meet up with the army, we say good-bye."

She settled back in the seat as he started the car. "All right, Russell."

"We'll try Chicago first."

They did not drive into Chicago. Gary drove near the metropolis, moving slowly and incredulously through the small fringe-area towns which infest every major highway leading into the city. He was turned back by the fire and the smell of death borne on the night wind. The wind whipped the odour south, to where he finally stopped the car on the highway and got out to stare at the flames in the night sky. The fire had evidently been burning for days and now it was eating rapidly toward them, pushed on by the torrid winds. The unholy red glow of it stretched from one horizon to the other, indicative of methodical and widespread bombardment, making the city a vast crematorium. Chicago: bottleneck and major target, terminus of every railroad north of Saint Louis, possessor of the only waterway connecting the Great Lakes with the Mississippi and the Gulf, headquarters of a vast defensive ring designed to protect the nation from invasion from the north. Chicago: obsolete now in the strictest sense.

Gary clung to the car door and stared at the fiery spectacle in the sky, unable even to utter the curse on his tongue. It shocked him as that first city never had.

"Russell . . ." the girl inched toward him on the seat, staring forward through the windscreen. "Russell, isn't it dangerous? If atom bombs did that, isn't it dangerous for us to be here?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. The radiation is supposed to disappear after a few days . . . but I

don't know. Mother of Moses! What they must have poured on that place!" He had read descriptions, had seen the army films of the destruction caused in Hiroshima and Nagasaki . . . and as he remembered it, something like sixty per cent of the cities were obliterated and over a hundred thousand had died in those two places. One bomb on each city. And Chicago with a population of almost four million had quite apparently received many direct hits.

"Let's leave, Russell. I'm afraid."

He slowly turned the car around, staring first through the open window and then in the rear-vision mirror at the towering flames. Driving south again, away from the vanishing city, he couldn't help turning his head to look behind. The glow persisted, hung in the sky after they had travelled many miles. It left him with a deep sense of despair that he could not shake off, plunged him into a mood and a silence so deep that the girl was forced to speak twice to make herself heard.

"Russell! I said, where shall we sleep?"

"I don't know. Anywhere."

"We passed some motor courts."

"I'm not turning around. Find another one."

Sunrise the following morning was no better than the two previous dawns, no different from those other two unpleasant awakenings to a changed world. He rolled his head on the twisted pillow, trying to clear away the ghastly memory of the burning city. The image of the flames persisted and he found himself wondering if anything alive still moved in Chicago's streets, wondering what it would be like to be in their shoes. The picture would not erase itself. He had gone to sleep with the fire burning fitfully behind his eyelids, had dreamed of it, talked

aloud of it in the night, and awakened in the morning with the red sky still fresh in his mind. It shouldn't be! Chicago was different from those cities in Europe, in the two Viet Nams, big and little cities that had undergone brutal destruction from the skies. Chicago was *ours* . . . and *our* cities were not meant to be touched. Chicago was not at all like those foreign towns that belonged to strangers.

Chicago hurt him.

He arose and dressed, ignoring the sleeping girl, to walk outside and scan the sky.

Gary turned the car west toward the Mississippi.

His reasoning was that the east was dead or deserted like the towns they had driven through, that the large cities crowding the eastern sections of the country must by now be only counterparts of the death and silence they found everywhere. Or else they were like Chicago. Deeper in the west there was more room, more space, and cities were greater distances apart. The place to find sane, living people, to find the army was somewhere in the west. He filled the petrol tank from an abandoned station and started.

The countryside they traversed was the same as the day before, the road and the few people unchanged from the previous unfriendly attitudes. Disaster had overtaken the nation and strangers were regarded with open suspicion. Occasionally Gary discovered an isolated farmer still working his fields, and more often a few men and boys hovering close to their farm buildings with shotguns very much in evidence. Some few farmhouses were silent with an air of desertion, while one had burned to the ground, smoking embers the only remaining trace of it. The small towns and villages along the highway were fast becoming islands of feudalism.

Some, like the farms, were empty, the population having gone elsewhere. Others only appeared to be empty as the automobile passed the length of the one, long main street. Gary saw signs of unfriendly people behind the curtained windows, the closed doors. Storekeepers were armed. And in one a heavily armed delegation met him at the village limits, stopped him. He explained his mission, his desired destination, and showed them the army identification tags hanging about his neck. After a while they allowed him to proceed through the village, one of the armed townsmen riding in the back seat to make certain they did not stop. The man had no news to offer, apparently knew no more of the general situation that Gary had already discovered for himself.

The airwaves remained dead.

In a town near the river he had his first piece of luck. Some country printer had issued a newspaper, a small and hastily assembled two-page journal turned out on a flat-bed press. The newspaper had cost him a half-dollar and an unending series of questions shot at him by the printer—questions which revealed the sources of the news stories in the sheet. With the radio silent, the mails unmoving and the wire services long dead, the printer had obtained his news from travelers such as they.

It wasn't much, and much of it wasn't news.

Chicago was treated in some detail because its nearness made it important and because a local family had attempted to reach it, seeking relatives. Every city of respectable size in that area had been bombed, bombed by some mysterious enemy—speculations all pointed at *one* enemy but no one knew for a certainty. The survivors of those cities were pillaging farms and towns and many of them had been shot. There were not many survivors—Chicago and Peoria

had died under atomic bombs, but the other cities had been hit by something else, something unknown, like a gas that killed as it spread. Sometimes the survivors of *those* cities had wandered into the country to die later; they apparently carried the death with them, living a few days longer only because they were physically able to withstand the original treatment.

When he could, Gary put a question to the printer.

The old man stared at him. "The army? Yeah, the army's out there." He pointed westward. "My son saw 'em."

"Where?"

"T'other side of the river."

"Thanks—I've got to get going."

The old fellow shook his head. "Can't get across."

"No? Why not?"

"Blowed up the bridge." He related the cold facts.

"I'll get across!"

He put the car in gear.

The bridge was a high steel structure arcing across the sky above Savannah, stretching from sheer rock cliffs on the Illinois side over to the Iowa shore. Its middle gaped and dangled openly above the river waters where an explosion had torn it apart. Gary stopped the car a quarter of a mile away because he could not force a path through the knot of cars clogging the highway, cars belonging to the group of seventy-five or a hundred people clustered at the nearer end, looking out across the river. He got out of the car and squinted his eyes against the sun, peering as they were, presently to discern a small group of soldiers milling around the Iowa terminal of the bridge.

Irma moved across the seat, slid out and stood be-

side him, clinging to his arm. She stared at the Iowa shore.

"Russell . . . ?"

"Yes." It was an answer but she didn't recognise it as such. She moved to where she could watch his face.

"Russell . . . are you leaving me? Now?"

"Yes." He pointed at the far soldiers. "I belong over there."

"Russell, you can't leave me."

"Watch me," he stated flatly.

"But Russell, what will I do?" She was frightened.

Gary brought his eyes away from the opposite shore. "Irma, I don't care what you do. There's the car, take it. Can you shoot a gun? There's ammunition and food to last you awhile, there's that damned bag of glass you stole. Take it and go somewhere, anywhere, I don't care." He raised his glance once more to the Iowa shore, squinting. "I'm going over to the other side and get back in the army. I've been out of it four or five days too long."

"I don't know what to do!" she wailed.

"Find yourself another man to sleep with," he told her then, and shook off her restraining hand. "You'll get along." Deliberately he walked away from her, walked toward the knot of people standing at the bridge.

She let him go for about fifty feet. "Russell."

He turned his head toward her. "Yes?"

"Good-bye, darling."

"So long, nineteen. Take care of yourself."

He approached the crowd at the bridge, worked his way through it to advance part way up the structure and stand with his hand shading his eyes, peering at Iowa land. The exploded hole in the centre was too wide to cross and he realised he would have to locate

a boat of some kind. In the distance he saw someone observing him through field glasses, and waved at him. The wave was not returned. Gary shrugged, turned his back on Iowa to retreat to the highway.

He approached a browned, unshaven character who looked as if he might be a riverman, a man who leaned indolently on a car buffer and chewed tobacco.

"Any boats around here?" Gary asked him.

"Not now," the man answered him.

"I've got to get across and get back to the army."

"You a soldier?" the riverman shot at him.

"Yes."

The oldster spat. "Not a chance."

"Not a chance of what? Where can I find a boat?"

The other raised a lean finger to point downstream. "There goes the last one." Gary's squinting eyes followed the finger but could see nothing on the river. The man spat again, raked him with an amused yet bitter glance. "You can't get across. That feller didn't."

"I don't see anyone. What fellow?"

"He's in that boat driftin' downstream. Tried to get across."

"What happened to him? Mother of Moses, make sense, will you?"

"They shot him," the riverman said.

Gary whirled to scan the river again but could not see any vessel on its surface. "Who shot him? What for?"

"The soldiers over there shot him. He tried to get across, I told you."

Gary stepped backward a pace. "Are you crazy?"

"I reckon somebody is." The man straightened up and slowly reached through his pockets, to bring out a folded and creased sheet of pink paper. He handed it

to Gary. "Nobody gets across, mister. We're contaminated."

The leaflet contained about two hundred words, a terse notice written in army doubletalk with some attempt to water it down for public consumption. It stated briefly that that part of the United States lying east of the Mississippi River was under strict quarantine, due to atomic and bacteriological bombing by the enemy, and therefore all traffic across the river was forbidden. It was hoped the quarantine could be lifted in a short while. The leaflet was signed by a Sixth Army commander; Gary knew the Sixth was headquartered on the west coast.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded.

The other pointed a thumb across the river. "Those fellers flew over in a plane and dropped them yesterday." He turned bitter eyes at Iowa. "Blowed up the bridge, too."

"The plane?"

"Nope—them soldiers over there. They ain't letting nothing cross over—that feller that took my boat, he was a soldier too. Shot him."

Gary read the leaflet again and stood there for long minutes watching the other end of the bridge, watching the soldiers clustered there. Presently his eyes picked out others patrolling the shore to the north and south of the bridge.

"Are they watching the whole damned river?"

The riverman nodded. "Seems so. We're contaminated, mister." He reached for the leaflet, folded it and returned it to his pocket, patted the pocket for security. Again his eyes sought the river, his lost boat floating away.

Gary turned his back on the bridge to face the crowd, to thread a path through their silent ranks. He

found their faces dull, mirroring nothing but helplessness and unviolent anger at what the anonymous men across the river had done to them. The people gathered there waited, simply waited, hoping the army would do something about them. Their attitudes suggested they would wait until the bridge and the highway crumbled and fell away from beneath them, waiting for someone to help them. Gary cast one sullen glance backward at a lone sentry prowling the opposite shore, and picked his way through parked cars to where he had left the new car.

Irma and the car were gone.

He swore at her briefly, angry because she had waited so short a time, because she had taken with her the arms and ammunition he now needed. Picking his way through the cars he had felt a momentary foolishness at coming back to her again, a slight embarrassment as he pictured the sudden reunion, but these easily turned to anger when he discovered her absence. His first thought was to walk into town and hunt about for her or to find another car, but an idea stopped him. Glancing briefly at the people clustered on the bridge, he slid behind the wheel of the first car having a key in the ignition lock, turned it about and followed the road paralleling the river. There was no outcry behind him.

Chapter Four

Contamination and Quarantine

At the end of a week the phrase sounded like a curse, a vile term hurled at an enemy in the heat of anger. Pink leaflets were scattered by the tens of thousands in every town lying within a certain radius of the Mississippi, were thick like discoloured snow along the river highways and the blocked bridges.

Rock Island, Illinois, untouched by a single bomb and suffering from nothing more than fright, was sealed off from its sister city of Davenport across the river by army order. Contamination and quarantine. Rock Island looked across the one whole bridge spanning the river and stared into the loaded muzzle of an armed tank squatting in the roadway. Rock Island's fifty-five thousand population was fast becoming a special police problem because transportation had stopped and food was no longer moving in. Davenport, under martial law and supplied and controlled by the army, was almost its normal self. A tank waited on the bridge, facing east. Rock Island and the eastern third of the nation must wait out the quarantine.

At the end of a week some few radio stations were straggling back on to the air on both sides of the river, the surest sign that the military considered the danger of invasion to be over, to be averted or perhaps never attempted by the enemy. The types of bombing had made the possibility of an invasion a remote one for the contamination could strike friend and foe alike. In

an isolated instance or two, in widely scattered interior towns, a voice on the air revealed that some life still existed there, some sort of electrical power had been harnessed despite the bombing. The lone voices haltingly took the air in search of news, aid, encouragement. Gary listened stonily to their broadcast appeals for help, their frantic quest for information about the rest of the country. He turned his eyes across the river and wondered if *they* were listening to the voices.

At the end of a week he had grown weary of listening to impassioned pleas and desperate arguments, to proposals and rejections between two cities facing each other across the dividing river.

And by the end of a week he had explored the state from the Wisconsin border south to the Kentucky fields across another river, to find the quarantine prevailed everywhere. He was trapped in Illinois unless he got away from the river, unless he drove eastward along the muddy Ohio searching for an undamaged bridge. The army engineers had methodically blown up all those structures which had escaped enemy destruction, all except a single span every few hundred miles along the river of demarcation; these remained intact but heavily guarded, intact for some purpose of their own. And everywhere they sowed pink leaflets, coldly explaining the necessity as they saw it, faintly hoping the quarantine might be lifted . . . some day.

Every day for a week Gary stopped someone, anyone, who might have a grain of information, who might know or guess at the nature of the catastrophe, without success. The guesses were wild and unreasonable and he rejected them, knowing from experience the cities had not undergone the fantastic poison gases said to be released by the falling bombs; realising by the application of common sense that the places he

had lived in and passed through had not been doused by atomic radiation, mists, dusts. People and dogs still lived there, some people and dogs were still slowly dying there and his observations of the near-dead did not fit into any lesson he had learned. There had never been a mention of bodies turning purple, or purple as death came. Not from atomic radiation.

Finally he had caught a snatch of conversation on the air that led him to the answer. Rock Island was pleading for an open bridge, pleading its mounting distress, pointing out that pestilence and death have been spared the city. A brusque voice of authority in Davenport maintained a steadfast *no*, bluntly told the sealed city its fate was still to come. Travellers from the bombed cities were undoubtedly moving through Rock Island and those travellers were spreading the plague, sowing the deadly contamination as they moved.

"What plague?" Gary shouted aloud at the radio, and heard Rock Island echo his question with a dull passivity which belied knowledge.

The authoritative voice in Davenport answered in a tone of painful repetition, spoke of two distinct types which had been identified, added that only God knew how many others had been thrown at them. The voice repeated the names of the two, pneumonic plague and botulism, and passed on to the unswerving *no*. Gary listened for many minutes longer but there was no more mention of the diseases, no explanation of them. He switched off the radio and drove in a frenzy along the highway seeking someone who might have knowledge of the terms, stopping strangers at gun point if they would not stop otherwise, stopping armed men who patrolled their towns or farms, demanding answers of them.

They had no answer. And at the end of a week he found out another way.

He picked his way into Bloomington, avoiding the debris and wrecked cars filling the streets, detouring where the sight and smell of a body ahead threatened to turn his stomach, and cruised around and around the business district until he had located the public library. The heavy glass door had to be smashed in. He searched the long high rows of books with a growing impatience, finding nothing that might help him, and after an hour he climbed the stairs to the second floor to see what was stored there. The stairway opened on to an immense reading room heavy with a silence it had never known before, occupied now only by tables, rack of magazines and out-of-date newspapers. At his immediate right was an attendant's dusty desk and just behind the desk were the volumes he sought, an encyclopedia set. He shoved the desk aside and reached for them.

Botulism at first had no meaning as applied to the dead world outside the library door. Botulism was poisoning caused by eating food in which a bacterium had developed. Pneumonic plague was *see plague, pestilence, etc.* He threw down the heavy volume and reached for another only to find he had misjudged the alphabetical spacing, plague was in the discarded book. Plague was slowly giving him an answer when his impatient eyes skipped over the paragraphs of history and dropped to the bottom of the column. The reference there was *see also biological warfare.*

Gary abandoned the page he was reading and searched for another volume. That one, with occasional references to the first, provided the startling answer. He carried the tomes to a near-by table and spread them open.

Biological warfare began in a limited way during

the war of 1914 when enemy agents were believed to have injected disease-producing germs into American cattle being shipped abroad. Biological warfare mushroomed into an expensive and heavily classified entity of its own in the war which began for America in December, 1941. During that war the United States poured more than fifty million dollars into new experiments for biological destruction, recruited some three thousand scientists to devise new ways to die. Both offensive and defensive weapons were produced, most important among the former being a poison, the toxin of botulism.

The toxin was successfully isolated in a pure crystalline form and methods were developed for producing it on a large scale. A really large scale wasn't necessary inasmuch as the poison was so deadly one-seventh of a microgram was a fatal dose when taken internally; one ounce was capable of slaughtering a hundred and eighty million people. The military machine thought to introduce this toxin into an enemy's food or water supply by agents, or by spraying from the sky. Unstated, but implied, was the definite possibility of its being introduced by long-range missiles, whether guided or in free flight.

Gary stopped reading, looked up to see sunlight through the windows. He reached for a cigarette, paused to inspect it critically and then put it in his mouth. The following sentence caught his eye: "Among diseases suitable for biological warfare are pneumonic plague . . ." He paused again, to reach for the other volume.

Pneumonic plague was a different kind of a killer. The plague was a dark left-over from the Middle Ages when Bubonic swept a countryside and completely decimated a town. Pneumonic plague was so named because the lungs were the organs infected; the

disease was freely transmitted by the spray from the mouths and lungs of other infected persons. The infection may spread—he turned the page—to other parts of the body, resulting in septicæmic plague. There followed a graphic description of the symptoms of the two, and the statement that one is about ninety-five per cent fatal whereas the other is almost invariably so. Time: death as early as the same day on which the symptoms first develop, or as late as two or three days afterward. The final paragraph pulled his attention. The victims assume a deep blue or purple colour, typical of the last hours of all forms of plague, due to respiratory failure. The so-called “black death.”

Gary puffed slowly on the cigarette, disliking the taste of it. His gaze wandered back to the brutal line of the other article.

Among diseases suitable for biological warfare are penumonic plague, influenza, yellow fever, dengue, glanders. . . . The United States, because of its particular geographic isolation, would be highly vulnerable to biological attack. Infectious diseases would be spread by air or other means and then freely allowed to propagate themselves; for instance, pneumonic plague, one of the most contagious and highly dangerous diseases known, could readily be spread in this manner.

Biological warfare can be a weapon as deadly and as devastating as an atomic bomb, in addition to having the advantage of being an inexpensive and efficient method of waging an undeclared war. A nation could be quickly and seriously disabled by subjecting its population to . . .

He flipped shut the volume and let the cigarette drop to the floor. Absently stepping on it, he slumped down in the chair and stared moodily through the window, unmoving and unconscious of the passage of

time until the sun covered his face and struck his eyes.

So *that* was what was thrown at them.

The black plague. After all the years of crying and worrying about atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, cobalt bombs, they were finally hit by a manufactured plague.

Who threw it?

Someone to the east of them, the north and east; at least the bombardment appeared to have come from that direction. The north-eastern third of the nation was wrecked, pulverised and depopulated by bombs and flying missiles dropping out of the sky. Atomic bombs for the larger cities, pneumonic plague for the smaller, the toxin of botulism spread everywhere. Water supplies, the grain fields, wherever people gathered, ate and drank in sufficient number, someone to the north-east had knocked out the industrial potential and the greatest mass of the population. Quite apparently the bombing had not been carried into the West or even far into the Middle West for the Mississippi River marked the dividing line between the contaminated and the clean. The government had explained its present position coldly and clearly in the pink leaflets: the eastern third would be sealed off to protect the remainder. How much was left of the government, he wondered?

First Army, at Fort Meade, Maryland, was charged with the over-all defence of the country. The fact that a western headquarters was now defending it bespoke the fate of Fort Meade. Even Washington admitted what might befall it when it built secret bomb shelters under the Pentagon building, super-secret military and government chambers beneath the green rolling hills of Maryland and Virginia. Those chambers still might contain living people, but they too were quarantined on the wrong side of the river. He

recalled that in an earlier war, Hitler's underground retreat had not proved successful in the end.

Who threw it?

Someone to the north-east, someone whose missiles and bombs were concentrated on the eastern third of the nation for tactical and economic reasons. They could have easily originated in some spot as near as Greenland, an island almost as large as a continent and nine-tenths uninhabited. A source such as Greenland would not find it too difficult to shower death on those portions of Canada and the United States nearest it, with the West and the South escaping immediate devastation only to fall victim to pestilence shortly thereafter. The plague would spread as fast as frightened people ran. By now, he realised, it must have reached the southernmost tip of Florida and would quickly have gone to the Rockies if it were not for the river and the pink leaflets.

The sun reached his eyes and he left the chair.

He was immune. The past week had proved that. Therefore he could see no reason why he shouldn't cross the river and get back into uniform. If nothing else, the army offered him security, a precious security now that death in many forms stalked the countryside and food was becoming scarce. *This* food was contaminated and . . .

But he had already eaten it, and drunk the water.

Gary sat down again to puzzle it out, to think back to that morning when he woke up in the run-down hotel. What he had eaten had come from cans, liquids from sealed bottles. He had passed by the meats and vegetables, the bread in the stores because of mould and the decaying odours; he had not been able to brew coffee because water was not running from the taps. So he had opened cans and drunk from bottles.

But what about shaving? *That* water was stale, clean but stale. It had lain untouched in the flush boxes since at least the day before the bombardment. And since then he had drunk only from bottles or fresh water country wells, forced to by the dry taps or the nearness of a well. The narrow margin between life and death, *his* life and death staggered him. Had water still been flowing from taps . . .

The only food that could still be regarded as safe, then, was stored on grocery shelves. And despite the immense loss of life, there still remained some thousands of people roaming the countryside between the river and the Atlantic. The grocery shelves would not supply them for ever and in the very near future an acute situation would arise. When the food began to disappear, a different kind of plague would grip the survivors.

A man would either be quick, or dead.

Gary intended to be quick even before the necessity of making such a choice confronted him. He quite the library abruptly, conscious of the several days he had wasted, and descended the stairway at a fast trot with the two volumes under his arm. Absently closing the smashed door behind him, he dumped the books on to the car seat and started the motor, straining to recall the location of the street which carried the highway through town. He stopped only once more in the silent city to pick up tobacco from the shelves of an outlying store, and then nosed the car south along the highway which would eventually lead him to the Kentucky border.

Briefly as he drove he thought about the girl, the nineteen-year-old Irma something . . . what did she say her name was? He wondered what had become of her in the week since he had last seen her, won-

dered what she had done since deserting him at the bombed bridge. Or since he had deserted her. Where was she now?

Night found him still rolling southward.

He cautiously refrained from using the road lights for fear their brilliant beams might attract shooting. The white concrete strip was not hard to see as it unrolled before him; he drove with only the dim parking lights aglow, to give warning to anyone who might be in his path. Far over on the horizon an unseen structure illuminated the night with its fiery, burning glow. Another farmhouse, he supposed.

Some time during the early morning hours he stopped for a few minutes to get out of the car, to stretch his legs and stand stiffly on the pavement examining the dawn stars. Waiting there, standing only half-awake in the very dead stillness of the waning night, he picked up the sound of another car coming toward him, heard the fast approaching whine of a motor in labour and the peculiar sound of hot tires taking punishment on the cement roadway. Turning quickly, he discovered distant headlights probing the earth and sky.

Gary hesitated but a few indecisive seconds, and then leaped behind the wheel of his car to roll it forward across the road. He cut diagonally across the pavement to let the front wheels come to rest in a shallow ditch paralleling the highway, snapped off the motor and the lights and leaped out again, leaving one door hanging open as though the car had been abandoned. Recrossing the road, he sped back a hundred feet along the highway and dropped into the opposite ditch, to watch the approach of the strange car with his eyes barely above the rim of the depression.

It roared toward him through the night, making no attempt at caution or secrecy, the noise and the head-

lights magnified many times in the vacant stillness. When it was but half a mile distant he dropped forward into the bottom of the ditch, hiding his face to prevent its contrasting whiteness from betraying him. He followed the rapid progress of the car with his ears, judging its nearness by the overtaxed revolutions of the engine. It must be doing eighty or ninety miles an hour. He thought he could hear someone shouting or screaming above the noise of it.

It came rushing on, the reflected fan-glare of the headlights briefly illuminating the bottom of the ditch so that he saw his own outstretched hands before him. It was abreast of him, above him for a fraction of a second, and then it was gone, passing him and his ditched car as though both objects were non-existent. Carefully he raised his eyes to the rim of the shoulder, staring after the receding red splotches as they dwindled with distance. He stayed where he was, watching them until they were gone from sight, until the faraway beams of the headlamps had been lost in the night, until even the sounds of the motor and the tires had dwindled into nothing. And then he climbed back on to the road.

Now why, he asked himself, had he done that? Was it caution born of long-ago battle training, or was it nothing more than fear of another moving car in the darkness? They had not been interested in his car, hadn't so much as slackened speed to look at it. Why, then, had he acted as he did?

He crossed over to his car and stood staring at it, still thinking of that other one. He could find no ready answer—but he realised he wanted to play the cautious rôle. Staring down at the rear of his car, he remembered the bright red tail-lights of that other, and without stopping to analyse the reasons for doing so, raised his foot to smash both red glasses and the

small bulbs beneath them. Stepping forward to the dash, he pulled on the parking lights and again returned to the back bumper. There was no revealing gleam.

Gary jockeyed the car on to the pavement and once again drove south, toward Kentucky. He moved along slowly with the windows open so that he might hear the coming of another motor, drove with constant attention to the far road ahead and the rear-vision mirror, that he might see approaching lights while still some distance away. Only after sunrise did he leave the highway and pull up a dusty country road to catch a brief sleep.

The bridge spanning the Mississippi was intact, one of the very few the army had left that way. Two other bridges had been found and passed by as useless before he arrived at this whole one. And the opposite end of the intact structure was heavily guarded as always; this one was blocked by a big troop carrier parked sideways just beyond the middle, two soldiers manning a heavy machine-gun in the rear of the truck. Behind them, Gary saw an armed patrol waiting for something to happen. He intended to be the something.

He stopped his car near the bridge, got out of it and walked on to the span, warily watching the two men behind the machine-gun. When one of them moved, he came to a sudden halt. Unbuttoning his shirt, he lifted out the chain hanging around his neck and held the dogtags high in the air, knowing that he was making his point when the morning sun glistened on their metallic surfaces. One of the machine-gunners called to someone else behind him and presently a third soldier joined the pair stationed on the truck. The new-

comer studied Gary briefly with field glasses and then climbed down again after a word to the gunner. Gary waited, knowing army procedure, knowing what that word was. After long minutes the third man reappeared, this time accompanied by an officer who wore a small white stripe painted on the fore of his helmet. Both men stood in the truck and put glasses to their eyes to observe him.

Gary righted one of his tags so that it might be read and held it between thumb and forefinger, hopefully watching the patrol. It was very doubtful that the field glasses were sufficiently powerful to pick out the small lettering at that distance, but still it was worth trying. Holding the tag aloft, he began a slow walk toward the centre of the span. Very quickly he saw the gesture was in vain and the movement an error. The officer half-turned to one of the watching riflemen, and Gary slammed his body to the bridge as that soldier lifted his carbine. Even as he fell he saw that it was no more than a warning—the carbine pointed at the sky and the single slug screamed through the summer air overhead. Gary scrambled backwards five yards before regaining his feet. When he stood up, he clenched his fist around the dogtags and shook that fist at the watching officer.

The officer made no reply.

Gary retreated to the automobile and sat down facing the bridge. Shortly thereafter the officer and the other man left the truck and the two machine-gunners returned to their perpetual watch of the bridge. Gary looked at them, felt a sudden resentment rising within him and cupped his hands to shout a single, descriptive word. The word had its beginning root in *mutton-head*.

"That goes for me too," a quiet voice cut in.

Gary whirled, startled and alert. A tousled, unshaven soldier leaned against a bridge girder not far away. The man's uniform was in rags.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Gary demanded.

"The field over yonder"—he pointed with a lazy thumb. "Was sleeping—until that shot woke me. Warm welcome, huh?"

"I'm going to get across this damned bridge if I have to break every one of their damned heads!"

"Sure. I said that, two-three days ago."

Gary stared at him. "Yeah?" He came to a decision. "Sit down and take a load off your feet."

"Was waiting for the invitation," the soldier grinned. "Some folks are touchy about company any more." He crossed the roadway and sat down beside Gary. "Anything to smoke?"

Gary passed him a package of cigarettes. "Won't they let us come over?"

"Nope, not us, not even a general if he's on this side of the creek. Afraid we're carrying the plague. The lieutenant said as how he was sorry, but there it was."

"The lieutenant said. . . . He talked to you?"

"By flag. I'm in Signals—tore up some cloth and made myself some flags the other day. Had quite a conversation. The lieutenant's name is MacSneary, unless I missed a letter. Decent sort but inclined to be stuffy about orders. Mine is Jay Oliver."

"I'm Gary," Gary told him moodily, watching the two machine-gunners. "I was a corporal until a week ago. No way of getting over to the other side?"

"Not alive. MacSneary was quite positive about that. Pointed out to him that I was still alive and healthy—as well as hungry—but he answered that I could be carrying the plague even though I hadn't contracted it. Yet. Good sense, of course. Said that all

of us still alive on this side of the creek were common carriers. He read that last in some army explanation and doesn't fully understand the implications, but it sounded weighty and he used it on me."

Gary contemplated the machine-gun. "There's some books in the car that explain it."

"Am familiar with it," Oliver told him. "Was a science teacher until I was drafted." He smiled at Gary. "And that label is a catchall if there ever was one. Taught science in a small township high school in Indiana; biology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, was supposed to be familiar with them all. How to construct a wet cell battery, where Orion is located, on Tuesday dissect a frog, show the girls how to make their own cold creams on Wednesday, and since 1945 every succeeding class tinkered around with the theory of nuclear fission." He smiled at some memory. "Never did produce a bomb."

"Ah, this is a hell of a note! Here we are supposed to be defending the country and they won't let us. What if we're invaded?"

"That, friend, is one worry we on this side of the creek will never have to face." Oliver took another cigarette from the package. "Our friends across the bridge may have a fight on their hands in the near future, but we're out of it. The enemy has made this section of the country so thoroughly untenable that even he can't land here, all of which leads me to believe no invasion was intended." He paused to light the cigarette. "Our lieutenant yonder is rather vague as to what happened—communications must be in a sad state when the army doesn't fully know what is going on. But the gist of it is that you-know-who unloaded on us. Long-range bombers, flying missiles, and apparently some infiltrators who polluted the water supplies. They ran in a flock of robot bombers—the

lieutenant doesn't know how many; but between the bombers and the rockets they pretty well blanketed every major city east of the creek here: atomic bombs and at least two types of disease. There may be more that haven't come to light yet—I should think they'd use anthrax on the cattle." He waved his hand toward the land behind them. "Shrewd tactical move—half the country done for and they lost only their infiltrators and the flying hardware."

"I'd rather be on the other side," Gary declared.

Oliver nodded. "Likewise. Prefer to fight the enemy to fighting what's behind us—and will be behind us, shortly."

"I had a supply," Gary told him, following the thought. "Guns, food, a good car. A kid ran away with it all."

"Little buggers learn fast."

"This one was a girl."

"Oh."

"She claimed she was nineteen," Gary continued. "Looked about sixteen, acted about sixteen the way she ran around picking up stuff. She acted nineteen. . . . once."

Oliver pulled slowly on the cigarette, watching the smoke. "Would suggest we team up—if you don't mind company. Find us a truck and put away all we can. Stores'll be empty in another week, the idea of this is catching on fast."

Gary stared at the patrol across the bridge. "You don't think . . . ?"

Oliver shook his head. "No. Been here three days. NacSneary said 'no' three days ago and he told you 'no' to-day. I've resigned myself to the idea of waiting out the quarantine—might be several weeks and then again it could be months. Would suggest you do the same."

"A hell of a note!"

"Food is of the utmost importance. And guns. When these people begin' starving they'll begin shooting."

"Yeah." Gary stood up and stretched, rubbed a hand across the rubble on his cheeks. "Well, let's get moving. I'm hungry now." He cast a look at the men behind the machine-guns, and again shook his fist at them, repeating the single descriptive word he had used earlier.

Oliver said, "Likewise."

They climbed into the nearby car and Gary turned it around, heading back along the blacktopped highway that slowly pulled away from the river and wound through flat, sticky bottomland on its route to the nearer hills. The heat was intense and the air not moving. His eyes kept returning to the rear-vision mirror, watching the bridge fading behind.

"The muttonheads!"

The machine-gunners blankly watched the car out of sight. A rifleman thought to replace the round he had fired. Silence settled over the bridge.

Chapter Five

EX-CORPORAL Gary carefully stamped out the remains of the small cooking fire and with his shoe scraped a bit of loose dirt over the embers. The skillet he cleaned by scrubbing it with a handful of grass, and then turned it upside down to thump it on the ground. Finally he ran his tongue over teeth and gums to lick away any remaining taste of egg.

"That was the last one," he announced.

"Pity," Oliver said. Oliver was seated on a hillock twenty-five or thirty feet from the fire, a rifle lying in the crook of an arm. "Maybe we shouldn't have killed the hen."

"You wanted fried chicken, remember?"

Oliver closed his eyes, dreaming. "I remember! She was a tough old bird but she was fine eating. So we were tired of eggs anyway."

"Mention that to me this time next week."

"Will do. Pity these farmers are so narrow-minded."

Gary glanced down at his arm, ran his fingers along the frayed sleeve of his jacket where hastily fired buckshot had grazed him. "Yeah. No respect for the United States Army." He hugged his arms tightly about his chest as though to ward off the creeping chill, and turned his attention to the overcast skies. Behind the thick cloud blanket the sun had not yet surmounted the low range of mountains to the east. Around them the skimpy grove of trees was silent but

for their few noises. "This weather is ready to turn. We'd better be moving south."

"These hills always snappy in the morning."

"Snappy, he says."

"How's the ammo?" Oliver wiped his mouth on his sleeve after emptying the contents of the tin cup down his throat. He shifted the rifle to the other arm and ran his eyes along the nearer range of hills. "Enough?"

"Plenty. The damned mountains stay cold all day long." He stacked his utensils in the skillet and pushed them aside. "I say we get out of them and head south."

"Willing. But we'd be safer staying around here. There were—and still may be—moonshiners in these hills the government agents never found. Did you know Daniel Boone opened up this country? Came through the Cumberland Gap and down into Kentucky; settlers followed him so fast Kentucky couldn't hold them all and they spilled over into Tennessee here."

"Daniel Boone should see it now."

Oliver shook his head. "He wouldn't approve."

"Look here," Gary persisted, "we can go down through Knoxville or Chattanooga—might be something there worth picking up. Everybody can't be bright like us and maybe they haven't thought about the warehouses, like that one in . . . Where was it?"

"Covington."

"Yeah—Covington. That watchman was a crazy little dope; who the hell needs night watchmen these days with everything shot to hell anyway? Well—we should have thought of the warehouses before, and let the stores go hang. Small stuff. If they haven't found out about 'em in Knoxville or Chattanooga we can stock up where we're short." He jerked around in

pleased surprise. "Say—Fort Oglethorpe is just outside of Chattanooga! I'd sure like to get my hands on an automatic rifle."

Oliver ducked his head to peer intently through the trees. After a long moment he relaxed and swung around to grin down at Gary. "What do you think the troops in Oglethorpe have been doing all this time?"

"Drinking Chattanooga dry for all I care. I'd like to make a stab at it. It's getting cold here."

Oliver nodded and swung back to watch. "Can take a look if you like. No risks, though."

"I like my hide," Gary retorted. "I've hung on to it this far—most of it." He gathered up his eating utensils and climbed the hill to retrieve Oliver's. Stacking them all together in a slipshod pile he walked over to where the mail truck was parked, half-hidden and neatly blending with the turning foliage. He tossed the gear into the back and closed the doors.

The mail truck had been an inspiration, now sporting a new olive green paint job that did not blatantly advertise its presence when parked off the road, and having the added advantage of heavy steel construction, construction which fitted the government's specification to the manufacturer of "armoured truck." Gary stepped-up the armoured truck's mileage by adding a water-spray injector to the carburetor and pumping the tires hard beyond their rated capacity. They transferred their stock of staples and ammunition from the farm truck they had been using, and took leave of the remnants of civilisation which clung to the river. The truck was not comfortable and rode hard, crawling through the hills at a snail's pace, but it offered a safety to themselves and their provisions otherwise lacking.

They had journeyed back to the river and that particular bridge twice, just twice. One visit each month.

Lieutenant MacSneary had not changed his mind during those eight weeks and on both trips the answer had been the same, with a pair of machine-gunners beside him to enforce the refusal. On that first trip back, Gary and Oliver had found a dozen or so people camped around this end of the structure, patiently prepared to wait out the quarantine. There had been a brief conversation across the length of the bridge with Oliver's ragged flags, and that was the end of it. Oliver ended it by flagging out a single word addressed to the officer, a word much loved and used by the army's rank and file. The officer stiffly turned his back.

The second final trip to that bridge had been far different. While still some distance away they saw that the refugee camp had been abandoned; closer inspection showed the abandonment had been in haste. Three bodies sprawled out on the steep span, bodies that while still alive had foolishly attempted a dash for the barricade. The machine-gunners had been faster. Oliver stepped out of the newly acquired mail truck and signalled his question, carefully avoiding the bodies with his eyes but unable to escape the stench of them. The answer was a curt *no*, and thereafter they refused to answer at all. Gary turned the truck around and started back.

"You should have asked them about our pay," he said.

"Have a good idea what that answer would be."

"Those boys ain't slow on the trigger."

"No. I wonder what I'd do, in their place?"

When another four or five weeks had rolled by and the time arrived for the usual monthly trip, neither of

them suggested the journey. With unspoken accord they thought it best to avoid the bridge. And so they remained in the hills, meeting no one, watching the woods slowly turn colour with the approach of autumn and the coming of cool nights, chilly dawns. When they could, they raided an occasional isolated farm or cultivated hillside patch, taking what could be stolen on the run. The hen and her few eggs had come from one of these.

More than three months had passed since the bombing.

Gary kicked each of the truck tires with his foot, testing them, and carried a bottle of dirty water from a nearby pond to pour in the radiator. He didn't bother to check the gas, knowing it was low.

Flat on the side of the hillock, Oliver hissed against his teeth.

Gary snatched his rifle from the cab of the truck and hit the ground, rolling sideways to get away from the vehicle. He came to rest behind the trunk of a tree and looked up at Oliver. Oliver raised one finger and pointed to the west. Gary commenced a slow crawl over the ground, putting distance between himself and the ashes of the fire, circling around to the west to move completely away from camp. He waited to see who was coming.

A woman.

She walked toward them with no attempt at concealment, a very tall girl whose bare feet moved noiselessly and without effort over the ground, carrying her body with a peculiar grace. A thin girl with tanned face and blue eyes, who wore a faded cotton dress and uncombed hair. The dress had once been a shade of red or brown. Her legs and toughened feet were nearly a matching shade of brown, and sturdy

for their few noises. "This weather is ready to turn. We'd better be moving south."

"These hills always snappy in the morning."

"Snappy, he says."

"How's the ammo?" Oliver wiped his mouth on his sleeve after emptying the contents of the tin cup down his throat. He shifted the rifle to the other arm and ran his eyes along the nearer range of hills. "Enough?"

"Plenty. The damned mountains stay cold all day long." He stacked his utensils in the skillet and pushed them aside. "I say we get out of them and head south."

"Willing. But we'd be safer staying around here. There were—and still may be—moonshiners in these hills the government agents never found. Did you know Daniel Boone opened up this country? Came through the Cumberland Gap and down into Kentucky; settlers followed him so fast Kentucky couldn't hold them all and they spilled over into Tennessee here."

"Daniel Boone should see it now."

Oliver shook his head. "He wouldn't approve."

"Look here," Gary persisted, "we can go down through Knoxville or Chattanooga—might be something there worth picking up. Everybody can't be bright like us and maybe they haven't thought about the warehouses, like that one in . . . Where was it?"

"Covington."

"Yeah—Covington. That watchman was a crazy little dope; who the hell needs night watchmen these days with everything shot to hell anyway? Well—we should have thought of the warehouses before, and let the stores go hang. Small stuff. If they haven't found out about 'em in Knoxville or Chattanooga we can stock up where we're short." He jerked around in

despite her thinness. The girl paused a dozen yards from Oliver and stared at his rifle.

"Hello."

Oliver nodded to her, searching behind her. "Hello. Where did you come from?"

"Yonder." The blue hills somewhere behind. "Seen your smoke this morning."

He twisted his head to survey the ashes.

"Did you, now?"

"Did. You hiding out?"

"Yes." He glanced up into her face.

"Seen your smoke. You ought to use good wood."

"I'm afraid I don't know very much about wood."

"Guess not. I could show you."

"You could? Now why would you do that? Why would you help me if I'm hiding out?"

The girl gravely stared at him. "I'm hungry."

Oliver nodded slowly, still watching the way she had come. "Swap?"

"Sure, swap. I'm alone."

With caution he raised up on his knees and peered over the hillock, searching the area behind her. "How do I know I can trust you? How do I know you're alone?"

"I *said* I was alone." She came a few steps nearer and stared down at his upturned face. "I'm awful hungry. The other man can watch."

"What other man?" he shot back.

She gestured off among the trees to her left. "Him. I seen him first. I seen him when he jumped out of the truck."

Oliver laughed loudly, sat back on the ground. "Come on out, corporal, the girl scout spotted you." He turned his head to watch Gary as he emerged from cover. "The army could have used her."

"Maybe we can," Gary suggested. He stopped at a

distance and spoke to the girl. "All alone—where's your folks?"

"They died, long time back. Most everybody's dead. Folks, they went into town to see what was happening, and when they come back, they died. It's like the end of the world, ain't it?"

"For us," Oliver said, "for you and us it is the end of the world. The world is still turning across the creek, but the end has come on this side. Have you got a name?"

"Sally."

"Welcome home, Sally." He stood up and rubbed the stiffness from his knees, all the while looking at her legs. "Take over, corporal. I'll fix her something to eat."

She joined them as quietly as that.

That she intended to remain with them became evident after Jay Oliver had prepared her breakfast and then cleaned and stowed away the gear for a second time that morning. She ate everything he cooked, not speaking to either of them, but watching Oliver's movements with a curious intent interest. She had pointed out what to use for the fire that would not give off a betraying smoke, and then sat down cross-legged, feet tucked up beneath her, to let him feed her. Sally had not understated her hunger.

Gary was on the hill position as lookout.

In less than an hour they broke camp and once again locked the rear doors of the mail truck. Oliver climbed into the cab and took his place behind the wheel, resting the rifle on the edge of the seat near his left leg. He started the motor. Sally followed him into the truck then, leaping in with a quick movement to sit next to him, still without a word. Oliver turned to look at her, studied her face for an instant and then beat a short, sharp note on the horn.

Gary left his position and came running down the incline to the truck. He stopped, staring at Sally, one foot lifted to climb in.

"Company," he said, looking at her thin body. His voice did not give evidence of being surprised.

"Seems that way." Oliver was grinning in satisfaction.

"Your company," Gary persisted.

"Been on a fifty-fifty basis so far," Oliver answered. "We get along better as a team."

Gary hesitated but a second longer and then climbed into the cab and slammed the door. "Suits me." He shifted the weight of the rifle from his shoulder, resting the butt on the floorboards. "Suits me."

Oliver put the truck into motion and rolled it forward across the slope of the grassy hill, seeking the lonely dirt road which would lead them back to the highway. The seat was crowded with the three of them, their bodies tightly wedged together. Silence held the cab until the truck had found and followed the twisty little road to the pavement, until they had turned south and were moving out of the hills for the flatter land of Georgia and Alabama. The sky remained cloudy and bleak.

After a while Oliver broke the silence. "Me and the corporal are partners."

The girl seemed puzzled.

Oliver correctly interpreted the expression. "Gary—he's a corporal."

"Army soldier?" Sally wanted to know curiously.

"That's our hero, complete with Purple Heart." He broke off when he saw that he was adding to her confusion. "Both soldiers," he told her then, feeling her eyes on his face. "Partners—we share everything."

She didn't answer him immediately but concentrated on his face, studying his eyes and lips. The truck rumbled along the highway.

Sally said to Oliver, "I like you."

"Thank you—appreciate the compliment no end." He briefly took his eyes from the road and flashed her a warm grin. "I like you too—but that doesn't alter the terms of our partnership. The corporal and me: fifty-fifty."

Sally thought about it. "You want me to be nice to both of you?"

"That's right." Oliver nodded. "Or not at all."

The long silence descended on the crowded cab once more. She turned her head sharply to study Gary, to examine his eyes and lips as though they were most important to her, as though they were the keys she sought to determine character. Their glances met and locked, each glance a neutral one that had not yet found time to form a bias. When the girl turned away to again concentrate on the driver's profile, Gary went back to his continual chore of watching the countryside for movement.

The mail truck rolled rapidly through some small, anonymous Tennessee town which appeared completely deserted. Each one of the few stores in the village had been looted and wrecked, the windows smashed and splintered doors left hanging on hinges. The body of a dog gathered flies on the porch. And then they were out of the place, the last houses vanishing behind.

The sight and soundlessness of the town had reacted on the girl. "All right," she said suddenly. "I can like both of you. Fifty-fifty."

"Pleased to hear it," Oliver commented. "Partners."

"But I like you best," she added quickly.

It required several days to work their way south to the Gulf of Mexico, avoiding the larger cities and using only the less-travelled highways and sometimes a dusty country road. Occasionally they met, or even overtook and passed another automobile, but the occupants of both vehicles regarded each other with a maximum of suspicion and with weapons in readiness. There was no stopping, no seeking or exchanging of information. That stage of human curiosity seemed to have passed.

Sally was beside herself with surprise and delight when they came in sight of the sea, revealing without words that she had never seen an ocean before. The highway turned and ran parallel to the water.

The trio spent the mild winter months on a long, sparse sliver of land jutting out into the sometimes blue, sometimes green waters of the Gulf; it was a sandy island lying like an outstretched finger offshore from the mainland of western Florida and reached only by a wooden causeway. There were no signs of recent habitation. After Gary had trucked in supplies calculated to last through the winter, he and Oliver set about ripping up the planking of the causeway to prevent any other vehicle from following them. They hid the lumber in a ramshackle boathouse and lived in an adjoining fisherman's cabin.

The truck was parked to the seaward side of the cabin to conceal it from eyes on the mainland, and a part of the winter provisions taken inside. Not until several weeks of complete isolation had passed did Gary and Oliver abandon the habit of standing guard each night; occasionally the fast-moving roar of a speeding automobile could be heard along the highway paralleling the coast, but none ever stopped, none ever investigated their island. Vigilance slowly relaxed and a sense of half-security overcame them.

The cabin contained in addition to a small stove, one narrow bed which had been awarded to Sally without discussion, while they bunked on the ground beside it or sometimes out on the sandy beach. Sally, in complete if silent submission to the partnership agreement, was compliant with the wishes of both but as time went on she found herself favouring Oliver rather violently, and had some difficulty in concealing it.

Sally was lost in the enchantment of the sea, and enjoyed wading barelegged into the rolling surf with them while they fished. Fishing was a daily occurrence.

"That lieutenant . . ." Oliver remarked once to the far horizon. He baited his hook and cast the line into deep water.

"What about him?"

"Keep thinking of his precious bridge."

"He can have it," Gary retorted, wading in deeper. The white sandy slope of the beach continued underwater, forcing them to wade out fifty or seventy-five feet to reach a depth fit for fishing. The sea was clear and unruffled and so transparent Gary could see his feet dug in on the bottom. "He's welcome to it. This is for me."

"Unhappy position, though," Oliver insisted. "Wouldn't want to be in his shoes—suppose he had a family on the wrong side of the creek? What would you do in his place?"

"I'm damned if I know. Join 'em, I guess." He tugged on his line thoughtfully. "I don't like the idea of shooting up our side."

Sally waded over to stand behind him, watching.

"Other hand," Oliver argued, "you wouldn't want to spread the plague to the western states either. Now

would you? Unholy predicament the man finds himself in—feel for him, sort of. If you and I had started across that bridge he wouldn't have hesitated to shoot because his orders said to shoot. But lacking orders what would he have done? If his wife started across, what would he do? Or his kids? Can a man obey orders and shoot his wife and children? Matter would be squarely up to his conscience. Most difficult to answer."

"Nuts, officers don't have them."

"Officers do, but you can't see it. I don't think I'd like to watch the lieutenant make a decision like that."

"I'll stick with this, thanks." He turned and put his arm about Sally's waist. "Just like a six-month leave."

"Likewise." Oliver stared absently at his sagging line and then again at the distant horizon, his thoughts presently returning to the bedevilled officer. "I consider his present position untenable; couldn't hold it myself but have to admire his guts for staying. Wonder if he can hold out as long as a year?"

Gary was startled. "You think this might last a whole year?"

"Not surprising." Oliver tightened his line quickly, watching it intently for a moment before relaxing. "Quite possible as a matter of fact. Keep us quarantined as long as there remains a shred of doubt—and that can be a long time." He shifted his feet on the sandy bottom and turned to allow the sun to warm his chest and stomach. "I'm not too impatient. Now if I were in their place—headquarters that is—I'd send patrols across all the bridges periodically to take samples and make tests. Send them far inland."

"What for?" Gary asked. "What tests?"

"Water, soil, grain, cattle if any are still to be found. Sample the swamps and the mountain ridges.

Take specimens of paint peeling from buildings, almost any substance capable of concealing a foreign body."

"Sometimes you sound like a schoolteacher."

"Sometimes I do, yes. The patrols would gather up residue and test it for contamination; when the tested matter no longer revealed a danger, the crisis would be over except for mopping up the stragglers."

"Except for——" Gary jerked away from the girl. "Like us?" he asked flatly.

"Like us," Oliver nodded. "Latent carriers, Typhoid Marys, apparently immune but spreading the death by merely breathing."

"That's a hell of a note! Either they shoot us for crossing the bridge, or they shoot us for staying alive over here. What's the damned country coming to?" He jerked his line savagely through the water.

Sally left him to wade nearer the other man.

"May not be that bad at all," Oliver pointed out mildly, apparently unworried about his future. "Not by the time they get around to us. All depends on the prevailing mood of high brass and the state of medicine on the day the bridges are reopened. If the stragglers can be cleansed and cured by some revolutionary medical means—welcome back to the United States. If not—why then, we're blocking reconstruction."

"Yeah, fine! I can see me blocking reconstruction. Haven't they got anything to cure us?"

"Who can say? Science makes wonderful strides in some respects and yet stands still in others. We thought the atomic bomb would make the land uninhabitable for thousands of years, yet you can move right back in a short while after an airburst. When I was teaching school there were no known cleansing agents for the likes of you and me—and Sally."

"What about that stuff I read in the library?"

"Oh, vaccines exist, yes, but they are intended as a preventive measure, not an antidote to be administered a year or more after the poison takes effect." He was gazing at the point where the sea met the horizon. "Seem to recall there were vaccines for one or two types of toxin of botulism, but antitoxins are useless at this late date. And as for the pneumonic plague! Perhaps, just perhaps, sulfadiazine and streptomycin could help if you were treated immediately."

Sally spoke up. "Is it bad, Jay?"

"About as bad as it can get, Sally. *Our* only hope is that medicine will find something new in the next year, something based perhaps on the existing vaccines."

"But what about those tests?" Gary demanded.

"How can the patrols come over on our side and then get back without catching hell?" He had forgotten his line and was watching Oliver.

"Would use airtight suits. Something like those atomic radiation suits the bomb clean-up squads are supposed to wear. Set up a decontamination chamber on one end of the bridge and work from there; send out the patrols dressed in the suits to gather samples for laboratory tests, bring them back through the chamber and burn the suits if necessary. Easily done—standard laboratory measures. A series of such patrols would definitely establish when the danger was ended. If it ended."

They returned to their fishing. Sally moved up close to Oliver and held on to his arm, watching the beginning of a small swell roll in and splash against her legs.

Neither of the fishermen had luck. After awhile Gary worked away from the two and moved down the beach, slowly trolling and recasting his line but without success. Standing almost hip-deep in water he

heard a car careering along the highway and was instantly alert, straining his ears to follow its passage. It was the first passing car they had noticed in almost a month. The car did not slow and presently the sound of it was lost to him as it sped rapidly westward. He turned and walked back to the couple, dragging the line carelessly behind.

"You know," he suggested as he approached, "there might be a way to get across the Mississippi."

"Think so?"

"Sure. I saw something when we were hanging around those bridges—some of them at least. Did you notice the little signs down near the waterline? They were put there for the boats to read. The signs said not to drop anchor there, it was a cable crossing. Those cables follow along the bottom of the river and come up somewhere on the other side. I could get me a breathing mask and crawl along a cable."

Oliver didn't answer, still watching the sea."

"I could get across that way," Gary insisted.

"Assuming that you evaded the sentries waiting on the other side, how long would you stay live over there? How long could you remain free and undetected?"

"I can get lost damned quick!"

"You *couldn't* get lost—no matter how hard you tried. Dammit, corporal, didn't you listen to what I said? You'd leave a trail a blind man could follow."

"Nuts. I'm immune."

"Immunity isn't what you seem to think it is. And the people across the creek aren't immune. Your immunity wouldn't protect them, wouldn't save them from dying just because you walked by. Your immunity means that you and you alone are not subject to the diseases—at the present time. Just as Sally and I are temporarily protected. That's why the three

of us are still alive. But Gary—your immunity may last you a lifetime, it usually does in common cases, and then again it may not. I hope to God you don't go across the creek, or under it. You'd only start *this* all over again."

"All right . . . forget it." He knew the wisest thing to do would be to turn the subject. "Forget that I ever mentioned it. Let's knock off, they're not biting."

"Wait a second," Oliver said, and raised a hand to shade his eyes against the sun.

"What is it?" Gary followed his glance to see.

"Thought it was a sail. Couldn't be sure but for the last couple of hours I thought I could see a sail out there."

Sally looked at him in surprise. "There is."

"Where? I wish I had a moonshiner's sharp eyes."

"Over there." She pointed to the southeast. "It was there"—she indicated the west—"and it went all the way across."

"From New Orleans or Mobile, most likely," Oliver guessed. "Steering for some point down the peninsula."

Gary couldn't see it and said nothing, dropping his eyes instead to watch the sea swirling about Sally's legs. The water rushed in with little waves to dash against her skin and form eddies about the parted legs, kicking up foam. He continued to watch with a quiet contemplation, letting the motion of the water and foam stir dream images in his mind.

"Oh, well," Oliver said after a while, "let's eat."

Gary glanced up, startled from his reverie, to find Sally watching him with a patient knowledge.

They observed what they believed to be Christmas Day by going swimming in moderately cold water,

and then spending the remainder of the afternoon on the warm beach sand. Sally lay between them, entranced as usual by the sound of the sea and the fantasy cloud-castles floating overhead. The routine was nothing out of the ordinary but there was no new thing to do, no new way to celebrate a holiday. Gary gave the girl a wooden link chain he had carved and saved for weeks, saved for the day, while Oliver contented himself by stretching out on the sands and resting his eyes on her body. He suspected Sally was gaining weight.

And at what they believed to be midnight of New Year's Eve, Gary pushed open the cabin door and stepped into the darkness inside, to raise a pointed finger and shout, "Bang!"

"Get the hell out of here!" Oliver cried from the blackness.

Gary laughed at him and backed out.

They made no real effort to tell time, to calculate the passing days or weeks, but waited with unspoken consent for the coming of a warmer season.

It may have been late January, or perhaps early February when the remainder of the provisions stacked in the mail truck were transferred to the cabin. The transfer represented the half-way point in their remaining supplies but the season was far advanced and they had no fear of the storehouse's being exhausted before spring. After the truck was emptied, Oliver tugged at Gary's sleeve and motioned him away from the cabin. They strode down the beach in silence.

"Spill it," Gary suggested after a time. "You've had something on your mind for days."

"Bit difficult," Oliver answered. He walked along with his eyes on the water, kicking up loose sand.

"First time I've ever seen you fumble with words. Come on, spill it. We're fifty-fifty, remember?"

"That's just it," Oliver hesitated. "About our partnership. . . ."

Gary stopped walking. "You want to break it up?"

"You guessed?"

"I guessed now, by the way you're acting. Why?"

Oliver turned to face him. "Corporal, something's come up. I think it best that we break up." He frowned and kicked sand again. "Sally thinks so, too."

"Spill it," Gary ordered once more.

"Well . . . one of us is going to be a father."

Gary held his silence, considering the news. It did not particularly surprise him, although he had not suspected it. He had formed the habit months earlier of taking Sally for granted, accepting her casually as no more than another woman, a convenient cook, a pleasant interlude. Now this new element had been added.

"One of us, huh?" he answered at last. "How do you act when this happens? Are we supposed to congratulate each other, or what?"

"I don't know," Oliver said desperately. "It never happened to me before! And I don't know which of us is the father—that upsets me. Sally doesn't know, either."

The beginning of a grin appeared on Gary's lips.

Oliver was quick to stop it. "I refuse to think of it in a humorous vein and I don't want any wisecracks! That's why I want to dissolve our partnership, corporal; right now, *to-day*. I want you to stop—"

"Oh the hell you do?"

"Corporal . . ." He hesitated and then plunged forward into the most difficult part of it. "I want to be the father. Sally wants me . . . too."

"You *want* to be? But I thought you said—"

"Don't play a dumb bastard! I *did* say it, and Sally is. You know what I mean. But both of us can't be the father, realise that—what'll the kid think? I want to be the father, corporal—the only one."

Gary regarded his partner with a momentary silence. So this was the end of the line. "All right," he said. "I can take a hint."

Almost bashfully, Oliver put out his hand. "Thanks, corporal." He made no attempt to hide his relief or that he was pleased with the outcome. "Damned white of you! Sally and I talked this thing over; we didn't know what to do. The kid scares her a little bit but the thought of you and me fighting scared her more. I'll tell her everything is fixed up." He turned and started back toward the cabin, a wise grin pasted foolishly across his face. "And corporal—if you're down this way next winter, drop in and see us, will you? Stop in and see my kid?"

"Now don't rush me," Gary objected. "I'll be around for a while yet."

It had been a hollow, thoughtless promise. He left in less than a week, too aware of the sudden tension that sprang up between the girl and himself, and vaguely uncomfortable because of it. Both Sally and Oliver tried to pretend that nothing had changed, nothing was different and the old fifty-fifty partnership remained the bond between the trio. The pretending was false and the tension grew. Gary stayed away from the cabin as much as possible and seldom spoke to the girl.

"We've had some good times," Oliver said reminiscently.

"Sure as hell have! I nearly froze in those damned mountains, talking you into coming south."

"Pretty good place to hide out."

Gary loaded his pockets with ammunition and packed food in a shoulder bag, choosing a revolver and a heavy rifle for protection. At the final parting, he shook hands with a grinning Oliver and blew an empty kiss to the girl standing in the cabin door. She half-lifted her hand to return it, and then stopped herself.

"Where do you think you'll go?" Oliver asked.

"Dunno. Work my way over to the river," Gary guessed with an indifferent shrug. "Upstream, maybe."

"No cable-crawling!"

"No cable-crawling," Gary returned. "Keep your eyes open."

"Will do." He nodded sombrely. "You do the same."

Turning his back on them, Gary left the island and made his way by hand across the partially dismantled causeway. Once past the opening where the timbers had been torn up, he shifted the bag of food to a more comfortable position and strode off toward the distant, empty highway. There entered his mind a brief memory of the girl—a pleasant memory. He didn't look back to fit the memory to the person.

The partnership was dissolved.

Chapter Six

GARY hugged the blacker shadows along the shore and waited without emotion for the sound of the shot, for the sharp crack of a carbine. The doddering old woman had been a fool to believe she could sneak across the bridge, either she was starved to the point of sheer desperation or she was a fool. The darkness of the night couldn't hide her, not any more, not when the troops guarding the other end of the bridge were equipped with infra-red lamps and sniperscopes on their rifles.

This was the only bridge left intact along a six or seven hundred mile stretch of the Mississippi; he'd discovered that as he slowly worked his way north from New Orleans. Many of the spans that had been left open a year ago were now blown up, one more indication of the government's determination to maintain the barrier, to keep the quarantine. The troops now concentrated in strength at the western ends of the remaining bridges were hardened to their duty, almost calloused after a year of stopping the sneakers.

The old woman had no more chance of slipping across to the Iowa shore than a snowball in a cyclotron, not as much chance as ridding her body of the seeds of plague.

Gary crawled behind a concrete abutment and waited. He was careful not to expose his body on the roadway, not to cross over to the opposite side of the two-lane bridge. While he was too distant from the

troops to be in any real danger, still some gun-happy soldier just might catch him in his 'scope and open fire. The old woman didn't know the army, didn't know their equipment as he did. In her foolish, hungry mind she might have thought she could cross over under the mantle of darkness. She *should* have known better, she should have known what quick death to expect after a year of it.

Or perhaps she no longer cared.

The old woman surely knew she couldn't live to reach the Iowa side—no one from the contaminated area crossed the river and lived for more than a few seconds, a few minutes. She must have known it and counted on it. She was one of the unlucky thousands still struggling for an existence east of the river, and she would remain there until she died. There was no other real choice, no other future. But sometimes the death on the bridge was much preferred to the death in what remained of a home.

The rifle cracked in the blackness. Good night, old woman.

Gary lay still, waiting. There was no other sound for long minutes. He knew the routine now, had watched it many times during the daylight hours on his slow, plodding trip upstream from the Gulf. Some soldier garbed in a white radiation suit would walk out on to the bridge while his mates covered him, move the old body with a toe of his boot, searching for a spark of life. If there was still movement he would put a pistol shot through her head. Finally he would pick up the body and hurl it over the guardrail. And then the man in the white suit would retire to a small brick building at the opposite foot of the bridge.

He seemed to hear a faint splash. The wind was in the wrong direction and he couldn't be sure, but the hungry old woman was undoubtedly floating down-

stream by now. She had reached out and secured what she must have wanted.

He crawled backward off the bridge approach and sought the sanctuary of a near-by field, cautiously seeking out the hollow depression where he had been lying when the old woman passed a half-hour before. Nearing the spot, he stopped to listen and sniff the air, to satisfy himself no intruder had hidden there while he was away. Curiosity had made him follow the woman, the morbid curiosity of an onlooker who knows the game will end in disaster. She had been carrying no food, he saw that in his first swift scrutiny and again realised it when he became aware of her intentions. Had she been carrying anything to eat she wouldn't have attempted to cross the bridge, and he would have forcibly taken it from her. The old and the lame lose their meagre rations to the quick and the young.

But her arms had been bare and there were no bulges to her pockets. So he had indifferently let her go on to the bridge, silently following for no real reason. Now he lay on his back in the unkempt field, studying the clouded, moonless sky. The night was hot and sticky with a high temperature, a typical midsummer night along a riverbank in Illinois. There would be rain eventually, if not tonight or tomorrow, then the following night. It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except the real problems of living, the day-to-day existence. Where tomorrow's meals were to be found, the careful avoidance of armed men, how to live until the following day and the day after that. How to stay alive and reasonably healthy until the quarantine was lifted.

The army owed him a year's pay—maybe more. And sometime during the summer he had passed his thirty-first birthday; there was no knowing what par-

ticular day. But he remembered vividly the day of his thirtieth birthday, the day he had got blind drunk celebrating his ten years of service. He could have been among those lucky troops on the other side of the river, the safe side. *If* he hadn't tossed that big one. He could have been over there with them, continuously on the prowl, taking part in the river watch that never ended. And shooting at old women who tried to sneak across under cover of darkness, or who were damned sick and tired of quarantined starvation and *wanted* to commit suicide. He could have been dumping their bodies in the river, and waiting for the next ones. How long could he have kept at that?

His tenure on the River of Perfumes was five brief days but he hadn't wanted to stay there. The swing across the plateau, sometimes at a run and sometimes at a crawl, was much better than Hue but he hadn't wanted that either. No more than he had wanted the past year or thirteen months on the wrong side of the river. But—here he was and here he'd have to stay until the powers beyond saw fit to remove him, the same as at Hue, the same on the plateau. The one small difference to the predicament was that he had drunk himself into this one.

The awakening from that was vivid, too.

He remembered the dusty, lonely awakening; the firetrap of a hotel, the stabbed woman lying on the bed, the loss of his money and clothes. The bombed and deserted streets of cities had become a common sight but he still remembered that first one, the morning he awoke from the celebration. He had taken his meals on the sidewalk, eating from cans picked up in the grocery store. There had been the crash of a window—and that girl. The one who looted shops; now what in the hell *was* her name? Not Sally. Sally had been the winter in Florida and the dissolved part-

nership. Not Bea. Bea was the tiger-tempered three weeks in New Orleans before he struck out for the north. The name of the looter, then? The kid who laughed at him and proved herself nineteen? She——

A sound alerted him.

Gary rolled over on his stomach to bury his beard in the dirt. Slowly and with much care he brought up his rifle, muffling with his clothing the slipping of the safety so that it would make no answering sound in the night.

He peered into the night around him, straining to pick out a blacker shape moving against the darkness, listening for an incautious footfall or perhaps the odour of stale tobacco. A few nearby crickets continued to chirp, moderate assurance that he was still alone. The sound came again, between him and the river, and he aimed the rifle that way.

Presently he made out a moving mass not too far away, a mass that divided itself into three shapes as it approached. Three men, prowling the field. He followed them with the gun, drawing a bead on the nearest. They moved along in the night with a stealth born of practice but betraying themselves nonetheless because of their number. He waited. They did not stop, did not make the slightest attempt to inspect the field in which he lay hidden.

Gary relaxed slightly.

The three shadows moved closer to the bridge, slowing their steps too late to muffle the noise of movement, and as they reached the concrete abutment where he had lain earlier, they dropped to their hands and knees to become lost to his sight.

Gary lowered the rifle and began to breathe again. With that last movement he knew their purpose. The trio were scavengers, attracted by the sound of the

shot from across the river; they came to the bridge in hopes the body had fallen on this side, or failing that, had left something behind worth salvaging or eating. After their short, fruitless search they would continue on their way.

He remained watchfully alert until they had gone.

A man, or a woman or a child for that matter, lived by his wits and his nature. The reversion had come fast in the year following the calamity. Whether that nature lay shallow or deeply buried, it had quickly come to the surface of every man who stayed alive. Wits were of the utmost importance, often marking the dividing line between those who lived and those who did not. On his journey up from the South during the spring and early summer months, Gary had noticed solitary plunderers raiding farmhouses, quietly and at great peril to themselves; and again he had watched a noisy, armed band burn another house to the ground and take what they wanted—at a cost of four or five lives in the mob.

Somewhere in Alabama a hulking, amiable Negro had shared a poor supper with him and warned him of some of the more dangerous black men to the immediate north. The Negro then tried to stab him while he slept. And also in Alabama he had stopped to watch a dozen women and children scouring the fields for grasshoppers, sweeping them into gunnysacks they carried for the purpose. Those who couldn't obtain food by force or wile obtained it in another way.

In the hills along the Kentucky-Tennessee line he had discovered a squad of armed soldiers like himself, a half-dozen men who shared the common disaster of awakening on the wrong side of the river. Their leader, a private who possessed in brawn what he lacked in rank, had invited Gary to join them.

Gary refused. "You're too much of a target—I heard you coming a mile away. And it's tougher to feed seven than six. Thanks, anyway."

"Suit yourself, Jack," the private told him. He stared at the tanned, well-fed body Gary had acquired on the beach. "Where'd you winter?"

"Texas," Gary answered promptly. "Lots of cattle."

"I'll keep it in mind. Hey—wait a minute, you can't get across to Texas!"

"No? Well maybe it was Arkansas—I'm not much good on geography."

"Wise guy! Just don't ever cross us again, Jack, if you're packing grub. You don't get a second chance."

"That goes double," Gary replied. "But I'll see you long before you spot me. If you've never been up in the line, soldier, put somebody in charge who has. You won't last long without scouts."

He watched them out of sight, working their slow way over the hills to the east. The last man in the troop turned round to wave briefly at him before vanishing over a ridge. Later, Gary wondered if they complained to the private about their back pay.

Little good it would do any of them to complain, himself included—they'd probably never see it. The high brass would trot out some fancy excuse for not paying up—like A.W.O.L. And there would be a full year shot to hell. Thirteen or even fourteen months perhaps—it had been at least that long since the unforgettable day he had celebrated his thirtieth birthday. More than a full year for certain, for he had already spent most of *this* summer working his way northward.

He had no particular destination, nothing but a vague desire to see how far up the Mississippi he could

go and still encounter troops. Some one he had met, some one coming downstream from the north had told him the river watch extended all the way to the Canadian border, and that after the river ended—or began rather, in a Minnesota lake—the troops patrolled overland to the border. The Canadian Mounties took over at that point but the risks and chances of slipping between *their* patrols were useless, for the United States had armed the border and the friendly nationals to the north were no longer permitted entry.

Gary squirmed on the hard ground and rested the rifle in the crook of his arm. The long, scraggly beard on his face was dirty and itched continually. He wondered again when the quarantine would be lifted. He had seen no exploratory patrols coming across the bridges as yet, testing and sampling as the schoolteacher had said they would. As far as he knew there had been nothing done to reunite the two halves of the country. The river spans remained closed and no one crossed to either side. There had been an occasional plane overhead but it did not attempt contact with anyone on the ground—reconnaissance, he guessed, photographing the towns and perhaps the people who stood in the open to watch it.

A full year now had passed, and perhaps even more.

A year. And in the dim beginning he and a thousand like him had supposed it might last a couple of days, perhaps a week or so. What blind and stupid fools they had been. The schoolteacher had been more of a pessimist in his opinions—his early thoughts were that the quarantine would last a month, even two. And now the first full year had passed and he was in the beginning months of another. How much longer would the cursed thing continue? Wasn't a year long

enough to wear away the dangers? Wasn't a year much, much too long to be cut off from your own kind?

The damned brass was responsible.

The first few drops of rain fell on his upturned face and he waited to see if it were a false alarm, or the beginning of a shower. The rifle was snuggled under his coat to keep it dry. After a few hesitant minutes the rain began in earnest and Gary struggled up out of his earthy bed. Down near the river there were ragged trees and a hedge that would offer brief shelter from the sky.

He trudged across the field, soggy and dispirited.

Chapter Seven

GARY waited with beads of sweat standing out on his neck, knowing how near they were and not liking it. They were behind him and creeping in, moving slowly and without real nerve or daring because of what they were, but coming in nevertheless for he was alone and they were three. He hugged the bulky object between his knees and waited, tense.

"Don't move!"

Gary jerked himself up in simulated surprise and then held deathly still, waiting for the man behind the voice to reveal himself. The voice was not too unexpected—shrill, nervous, but still carrying a note of bravado because its owner held a gun at the seated man's back. The man would have two companions. There had to be three of them, although he hadn't been able to distinguish their number by the muted sounds of their slow approach. It had been a clumsy approach and he had followed it with ease, his back turned, his nerves tingling.

"Throw out that gun!"

Very carefully he tossed the rifle away from him. There must be three of them. He had spotted the three scavengers moving along the river during the day, parallel to his route, and he knew that with the coming of darkness they would remain in the vicinity of the bridge. He and they must have unknowingly followed or leap-frogged each other all the way

upriver, from where he had first sighted them a month ago.

The nervous voice spoke again. "Now stand up—easy."

He did as he was ordered, climbing slowly to his feet and putting his hands in the air without being told. Instantly a pair of quick, fluttery hands was on his body searching for concealed weapons, for tobacco or food hidden in his pockets. This would be the second of the trio.

"I haven't got anything," he said quietly.

"Shut up!" The bravado was stronger now that Gary was disarmed and at a physical disadvantage.

The hands went away from his body and the second voice became known. "He's clean, Harry."

There were shuffling footsteps to one side and a man slid into view carrying a shotgun. Gary looked at him briefly and recognised the scavenger, Harry. His glance dropped to the shotgun and he stiffened with interest.

"Now don't get no funny notions," Harry warned him.

"That gun," Gary said, "I never saw one like that before. What is it?"

"None of your damned businsss." The owner of the weapon motioned with its muzzle to the object on the ground. "What's that?"

"None of your da—" He cut it short as the gun came up on a line with his stomach. "Diving gear," he explained sulkily.

"What'cha got it for, anyhow?"

Gary hesitated long enough to sow the suspicion. "I found it."

"You're a liar!"

"Well—I picked it up back there a piece. In a store."

"Step away from it—over there."

Gary took a dozen careful steps to one side and turned to face the three of them. The other two stood there uselessly, equally nervous and apprehensive, watching him and their leader. All of them were in ragged clothing and all smelled offensive from long weeks or months without a bath. They appeared unarmed. The leader held the shotgun on Gary and made a motion with his thumb.

"Take a look at it, Sully."

Sully trotted over to the gear and pawed it, not knowing what it was and therefore not knowing how to examine it with intelligence.

"It's clean, Harry," was all that he could think to say.

"Spread it out!" Harry barked. "Let's have a look."

The scavenger spread it out, eagerly and clumsily, displaying the few pieces on the ground. Harry advanced and stood over it, looking down.

"Looks like a gas mask to me."

"It's diving gear," Gary said again.

"What'cha going to use it for?"

"I dunno—I just found it." They did not believe him.

"Where?" Harry demanded. He kicked at it viciously with a ragged shoe. "What kind of a store would have things like this? And stop lying!"

"I'm *not* lying. And don't kick it—you'll break the glass in the eyes."

"I'll do any damn' thing I want with it, see kid?" He flourished the shotgun and delivered another kick.

"I'm boss around here. What kind of a store?"

"A place back there in town," Gary said with ill-humour and jerked a vague thumb across his shoulder. "A riverman's store—they sell boat supplies and things. They had that in the window and I took it."

"Oh, you did? You was expecting poison gas, I suppose? If it's diving gear, what's it for?"

"I don't know," Gary explained cautiously. "They use it to go down to boats that are sunk, I guess."

"It still looks like a gas mask to me." Harry peered at him, bristling with suspicion and disbelief. "Was you gonna investigate some sunken boats?"

"Of course not. I just brought it along."

"You're a liar," Harry repeated.

Gary didn't answer and the man with the gun lapsed into a disgruntled silence, unable to offer anything further. He kept the weapon trained in the general direction of the soldier's stomach and dropped to one knee, to examine the equipment. Harry tapped the glass eyepieces with a dirty finger and turned the gear over to finger the straps. Finally he picked up the heavy metal box fastened by a hose to the mouthpiece and shook it. It seemed solid.

One of the others crept nearer. "Harry . . ."

"What?"

"I know, Harry, I know what he was gonna do."

"Well, what?"

"He was gonna put it on and swim across!"

The leader shot a startled glance at Gary and then at his companion. He hefted the metal box in his hand. "Not a chance," he declared after a moment. "They'd see him."

"Underwater, Harry, underwater!" Sully danced around in his eagerness to please and tapped the box quickly. "That's air in the box—you know, that condensed air stuff, what do they call it? The kid was gonna swim underwater, Harry."

Harry lost his balance and sat down on the ground. The corporal stood quietly, watching him, seeing the idea take hold in the man's dulled imagination. Sur-

prise mixed with a growing greed appeared on his face as he realised what the mask could mean.

"I'll be damned," he said slowly. "Now why didn't I think of that!"

"That's mine," Gary spoke up quickly to drive the point home. "You can't take—"

"I'll take any damn' thing I want, see kid? Ask these guys who's boss around here." He got to his feet and advanced on Gary to ram the shotgun in his middle. "Lied to me, didn't you? Figured on swimming across and didn't want me to know it, didn't you? I gotta notion to pull the trigger."

Gary said hastily, "I'll swap you for it, Harry. That's a good shotgun you've got there. We can make a deal."

"We ain't making no deal, kid. I keep the gun *and* the mask." He stepped back a pace. "Sully, come here."

The little man was at his side. "Yeah, Harry?"

"Put that thing on."

"Me?" Sully was aghast. "Harry, I can't swim!"

"Who said you was gonna swim?" Harry shouted at him. "Put it on—we gotta test it, don't we?"

Sully fumbled unhappily with the gear. "I don't know how, Harry, I don't know how. I don't like this thing."

"The kid'll show you." He moved the shotgun. "Go on, put it on him. And you'd better make it right."

With open reluctance, Gary took the mask from the skinny man's fingers and slipped it over his head, adjusting the straps on his back and fastening the metal box at his waist. He pulled the fittings tight until the gear was snugly in place. Sully stood there, arms akimbo, looking goggle-eyed through the eyepieces.

"Make him breathe."

"I fixed it. He is breathing."

Harry watched for a moment. "All right—now down to the river."

The four of them moved across the field and approached the river, Gary and Sully in the lead with the shotgun held to their backs. The third member of the trio trailed along without a word. The ground became soft and soggy near the stream and they floundered through it, Gary holding on to the skinny one's arm to keep him from falling. He hoped there were no prowlers about to overhear the noise they were making, for his weapons were hidden in the field behind him and the present safety of the four of them depended on the marksmanship of the man with the shotgun. He wanted to get back and get his own weapons before danger could find them. At the water's edge the party halted.

The river wasn't so wide at this point. Gary flung a glance toward the Minnesota shore but saw no patrolling sentries. They could hide themselves easily in the near-darkness.

"Lay down in the water," Harry ordered.

Sully stared at him through the round glass eyes.

"Lay down!" He thumped the man's back and Sully fell on his stomach in the water, the muddy surface almost covering him. Harry planted a heavy boot in the middle of his back and pushed him under, holding him there for long minutes.

Gary waited impatiently to one side, alternately watching the man struggling in the water and the riverbank behind them. They were in an exposed and precarious position, easy prey to anyone who might sneak up on them, and the leader lacked the wits to post a guard. The third and remaining member of the

gang stood uselessly a few yards away, watching Sully flailing his arms and legs in the stream.

Harry reached down and took hold of one of Sully's arms, yanking him up. Quickly he pulled the mask aside and examined the interior, as well as the man's red face.

"Are you all right?" he inquired of Sully.

Sully cringed, thoroughly wet and thoroughly miserable. "I can't swim, I tell you, I can't swim. You was trying to drown me!"

Harry balled a fist on his face. "Shut your damned mouth! I wasn't trying to drown you, you dumb-bell—you didn't get your face wet, did you?"

Sully put dripping hands to his face in surprise. "I . . . no."

"All right. And you was breathing all the time, wasn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Harry."

"All right then, this thing works. You can swim underwater with it."

"Not *me*, Harry, I can't swim. You ain't gonna make me swim under the river, Harry, you ain't!" He jumped away.

"Shut up—nobody said you was." Harry turned to peer at the corporal with shrewd speculation.

"Thought you was pretty foxy, didn't you? Thought you was better'n the rest of us. Thought you'd sneak across underwater and leave the rest of us over here holding the bag. Well kid, you ain't as smart as old Harry is, 'cause *you're* the guy left behind. I'm just gonna take your fancy mask and you can go and find another'n."

"But Harry—you ain't going to *leave* us here?"

The leader stared at Sully contemptuously. "You expect me to play nursemaid all your life?"

"But Harry—what'll we *do*?" he asked imploringly.

"Rot for all I care." He reached for the man. "Take off that stuff." He yanked the straps over Sully's head with a rough eagerness and unhooked the belt holding the breathing apparatus. Sully did his best to help, glad to skin out of the gear. It was then that Harry collided head-on with his first problem. He stood there with one foot in the water, swinging the mask in one hand and clutching the shotgun in the other. Yet he needed both hands to don the gear.

Gary grinned at his predicament.

Harry hesitated for long seconds puzzling over the situation and finally made up his mind who to trust. He crooked a finger at the silent partner standing on the bank.

"C'mere."

The other came down to him.

"Take the gun"—Harry handed it over—"and keep it on that smart-aleck kid. If he makes one move, plug him."

The partner nervously pointed the barrel at Gary.

Both hands free, Harry quickly pulled the mask over his face and wriggled into the short and tightened shoulder straps. He buckled the belt about his waist and held himself still a moment to check his breathing and make certain the thing was working. Then, regaining his earlier air of bravado, he stoutly clapped the shoulder of the man holding the shotgun and turned to plunge into the water.

Sully took a few steps after him. "Harry . . ."

Harry met his second problem squarely and lost.

He swam for a few yards beneath the water and paused for breath, unused to the exertion. Harry promptly bobbed to the surface and discovered himself slowly floating downstream. He faced himself up-

stream, unconsciously took a deep breath and went down again. This time he gained a few more yards before coming up, but this time he came up voluntarily because he couldn't see where he was going while underwater. As his head broke the surface he found himself staring at the three waiting on the bank. Burning with an impotent rage, he ceased swimming and promptly sank.

Gary laughed aloud. "Hell of a poor swimmer, that Harry!"

Sully glanced at him in nervous fear while the other toyed uncertainly with the gun.

Harry finally bobbed up once more, downstream. He thrashed his way back to the bank and climbed out, shaking mud and water off the shoes he had neglected to take off. With savage force he ripped off the mask and let it dangle about his neck, to discover Gary laughing at him.

"What's so damned funny, wise guy?"

"You are," Gary said. "Might as well give it back to me—you'll never get across."

"I'll be damned if I will! Maybe you think you could get across that damned river."

"Yes—I could; I can swim it easy enough."

"Well, you're not going to get a chance, not with *this* outfit, you ain't." He walked closer and seized the shotgun again. "Come on, let's move away from here. Somebody's apt to find us."

Gary turned about with relief and headed for the comparative security of the field; he had been afraid the old fool would never realise the danger they were in. They had been exposed on the river far too long for comfort, a tempting target to a curious sentry across the stream or a predatory prowler on this side. He knew the raging Harry could not be relied upon to think fast enough or shoot straight enough in the

event they were surprised; if the man were startled by something or someone in the night he was likely to blast away in any direction, heedless of the safety of his companions. The four men moved back through the soggy ground.

That shotgun was a powerful and deadly weapon, whatever make it was. He wanted it. Stripped of his own arms, Gary felt a deep sense of unease and emptiness based on the sure knowledge that the three scavengers would not protect him in case of trouble. He had to get that shotgun.

Upon reaching the field again he sank quickly to the ground and burrowed in, making his body as small a silhouette as possible. Harry followed clumsily and flopped down near him, muttering. Gary knew without looking that the man was fussing over the gear, forgetting to keep him covered with the gun. He clasped his hands behind his head and regarded the darkened sky overhead with a bland smile.

If Harry didn't discover the proper way to cross the river soon, he'd have to do a little prodding.

Twice more that September night Harry attempted to reach the Minnesota shore. On the second try he was spectacularly successful.

The first renewed attempt was a similar failure to that earlier fiasco and the man only floundered wildly in the water, unable to remain beneath the surface and never sure of his bearings. Too, he was making a racket that was undoubtedly heard across the river, as well as along the banks of the contaminated side. Gary remained alert for any other movement in the night, wanting no unexpected interruption to his plans. The always-silent third member of the band was holding the gun again but Gary was sure he could reach it in time if a prowler should discover their hiding-place in the field. Both scavengers were staring

anxiously into the night after their would-be-escaping leader.

After the better part of an hour Harry came stumbling back, searching for them in the darkness. Wet, shaking with exertion and angry frustration, he fell to the ground and cursed the swimming gear, cursed his own physical shortcomings and the vagaries of the current which defeated him. Remembering Gary, he turned on him a florid flow of profanity, blaming him for first dangling a paradise before his eyes and then denying him the ability to reach it. Ignoring the manner in which he had come by the gear, he blamed Gary for deliberately setting a trap, and then taunting him with the unreachable bait. It was all his fault, everything was his fault.

Gary waited until the man had exhausted his foul vocabulary and his breath.

"Still want to make a swap?" he asked quietly.

"Shut your damned mouth."

"Harry—listen to me. You've been running around like a fool all day; you've made enough noise to arouse every soldier on the other side and attract the attention of every thief on this side. If you weren't such a stupid jerk you'd have realised hours ago that I can't swim that current underwater any more than you can. Now think about that for a minute."

Harry was incapable of that much thought. "So what?" he asked instantly, weakly defiant.

"So I *know* how to get across without bucking the river and without making noise. If you had waited and watched me this afternoon, instead of jumping me, you'd have seen how I was going to do it. Now—do you want to swap?"

"Swap for what?" Harry muttered, half convinced.

"I want that shotgun. I'll tell you how to cross over."

There was no immediate answer. Gary lay back and waited, counting on the greedy desire in the man. The silence of the night had fallen over the river and the surrounding fields, while somewhere far off a nightbird was crying. Gary absently wondered if it were a bird, or a prowler's signal. The two scavengers had crowded in close, listening to their heated conversation.

"How?" Harry said grudgingly.

"The shotgun," the corporal calmly reminded him.

"Now wouldn't I be a blamed fool to give it to you now? You'd grab the mask and beat it."

"I want the gun—it's a good one. I can go back to that store and get me another mask tomorrow."

Harry shook his head, not realising the gesture was lost in the darkness. "Nothing doing, I don't trust you that much." He clutched the weapon tightly. "And I don't give it up until you show me."

"Then let your partner hold it," Gary said savagely. "Dammit, Harry, we can't sit here and argue all night. Let him hold it until you come back, if what I say is wrong. But if you *do* get across—if you're not back here by daylight, the gun is mine. That's my deal, take it or leave it."

Harry accepted it after the proper examination for trickery and loopholes. There was little else he could do for reaching the other side of the river was the one and only ambition left in his life, his constant and only goal other than food to stay alive each day. What happened to his partners and the gun once he reached the other side was of no concern to him—so to hell with them.

"Okay," he growled, "spit it out."

"The gun," Gary reminded him again.

Harry passed it over to his voiceless partner. "Give

it to him in the morning, Jonesy, if I ain't back. Now come on, come on, I can't wait all night."

Gary explained about the underwater cables, running from one shore to the other.

"How do you know them cables are there?" Harry demanded excitedly.

"I helped put 'em in," Gary lied. "I was working with the Western Union construction gang. The cables are there, all right. We put 'em in eight or ten years ago. Just look for the signboard——"

Harry was off like a flushed deer.

Sully quickly climbed to his feet and made as if to follow, only to totter a few steps and sink down again. The skinny old man sounded as though he were crying. The silent Jonesy fondled the shotgun and sighed. Harry's passage through the field was an incautiously noisy one; so eager was he to reach the bridge and the cables that he made no attempt to conceal himself or mask the sound of his movements.

Gary waited until the last hasty footfall had faded into distant silence. He turned. "All right, Jonesy, I'll take that shotgun now."

The scavenger handed it over without a word.

More than an hour had passed since the over-eager Harry had shot out of sight, when the silent Jonesy spoke for the first time. "Eh . . . kid?"

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you, if I may."

"You're doing it."

"You didn't fool me, young man. Poor Harry—yes, but not me."

"Poor Harry is a damned fool," Gary retorted. He lay outstretched on his belly, chin buried in the dirt and the treasured shotgun cradled in his arms. Gary's

senses were alert, his eyes and ears directed towards the distant river. "So?"

"I have watched you, of course, since we came upon you. Army, weren't you—or perhaps the Marines? You could have jumped Harry a dozen times today—there were plenty of opportunities. And you could have taken the gun away from me any time you wished. But you didn't, you deliberately held off. Why?"

"I wanted Harry—or somebody—to tackle the river," the corporal answered.

"I realise that. I realised what you were trying to do when you introduced the marine gear and yet passed up an opportunity to seize the gun. But why? Why didn't you swim across and let us go hang?"

Gary grinned and the macabre humour of it was reflected in his voice. "I'm no test pilot, Jonesy. I think up the ideas and let somebody else try them out. If Harry makes it, I can—later on and at another bridge."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll know the soldier boys over there are wise to *that* angle, too. And I'll have to figure out another way."

"I see," Jonesy said and lapsed into silence.

"This gun," Gary said after a while, "where did he get it?"

"From my store."

"Your store?"

"A sporting goods store where I worked before the . . . the disaster. Near here, so to speak. Harry wanted a good shotgun and I selected that one for him."

"Where's yours?"

"I don't have one—Harry wouldn't permit it. And I've never fired a shot in my life."

A short distance away the thin old man lay on the ground, openly weeping and oblivious to those around him.

Gary asked in annoyance. "What's the mater with him?"

"Scared, lonely, lost. He is Harry's father." The former merchant paused in speculation. "I suppose I'll have to look after him if Harry doesn't come back."

Gary fingered the stock of the shotgun, tracing it with his fingertips. "This is a new one on me. What is it?"

"The gun? A Browning Automatic, one of the best of my stock. You'll find it an excellent weapon: full choke and the very best steel, the magazine holds five shells in addition to a sixth in the chamber. The retail price is a hundred and twelve dollars."

"Knock it off, I'm not going to buy it. Got shells?"

"Yes, quite a few. In Harry's bag, there. . . ."

"Thanks," Gary said dryly.

"I'd like to ask one more question if I may?"

"What?"

"This afternoon when we came upon you sitting there in the field, fussing with the underwater apparatus . . . eh, you *knew* we were behind you, didn't you?"

"Heard you coming a mile away."

"I rather thought so," Jonesy commented. "While you acted as though you had been taken by surprise, still—" He broke off, startled out of his wits as the night sky lit up with a burning incandescence. The night was bright and white around them, reflecting the varied emotions on their faces. "Good God! What's that?" Jonesy sat up.

Gary froze to the ground, unmoving, searching the field with narrowed eyes. Both Jonesy and the old

man were stiffly upright, staring at the brilliant light in the sky.

"Hit the dirt, you damned fool!" Gary snapped.

The darkness was split with light and sound.

A rifle cracked suddenly on the other side of the river, half a mile to the south of the field where they lay hidden. A heartbeat later the first machine-gun cut loose to shatter the night with its rapid song, followed instantly by another. Gary listened to the guns, recognizing their make and calibre by memory. There came a flurry of whistles and the guns stopped firing. In the new silence a belated rifle spoke once and was still. Very slowly the hanging light faded from the sky and night took over its rightful domain.

"What was that?" Jonesy demanded again in a shaking, frightened voice. The older man had sidled near him.

"That was your friend Harry," the corporal answered. "He made it all right."

"They . . . they killed him?"

"Those guys weren't shooting fish, mister."

"But what was that big light?" He was trembling.

"Magnesium flare—Harry fell over a trip wire and set it off, I guess. It means they got the shore wired. I'll have to remember that." He burrowed deeper into the soil and moved the shotgun to a more comfortable position, preparatory to dozing off. "Yessir, poor old Harry actually made it. I didn't think he had it in him."

So they had the shore wired—at that point. They surely didn't have it wired the entire length of the river—counting all the crooks and turns the damned thing must be two thousand miles long or more. The army didn't have *that* much wire. No—only the weak points were booby-trapped. They had wired the immediate area about the bridge either because the struc-

ture itself offered concealment to anyone attempting to sneak across *beneath* it, or because they were aware of the underwater cables and knew someone would eventually discover them. Such as poor old Harry—short of wind and not too sound of limb, but he had made it after a long time. *And* a baited trap plus patient prodding.

Why hadn't the army simply cut the cables?

He could think of only one sensible answer to that: they were still being used. Used, say, by those government people still alive and operating the underground fortresses beneath the Pentagon, beneath the rolling Virginia hills. And used perhaps by the survivors still clinging to Fort Meade, the remnants of the First Army. The eastern and western halves of the nation evidently remained in communication. A point to remember.

The night's events somewhat narrowed his future plans. He knew now that all the cables still intact would be heavily guarded, wired and trapped. They would be waiting for him and any other like him at every cable snaking across the river, while Harry's spectacular ending had neither helped nor hindered his own future chances. Harry had been a competent test pilot, not only showing the stream could be crossed, but also that such crossings were expected. As yet, then, he had not broken his promise to the schoolteacher in Florida: *he* had not done any cable-crawling. A sucker had taken care of it for him. Whether or not the promise would be kept in the future remained to be seen. It all depended on whether or not he could find still another way to cross over.

The September night carried a chill. He pulled his coat tighter, turning away from the old man's sobs.

Gary was awake and moving before dawn, not wanting to be caught asleep in an open field when daylight came. He rifled the scavenger's bag for shotgun shells and a box of matches he found there. His two companions still slept, huddled together for warmth. Gary looked down at them for a moment and then swiftly stooped to place his revolver near the old man's hand. In the cold, still darkness he quit the field and left the sleeping men behind.

The air was frosty.