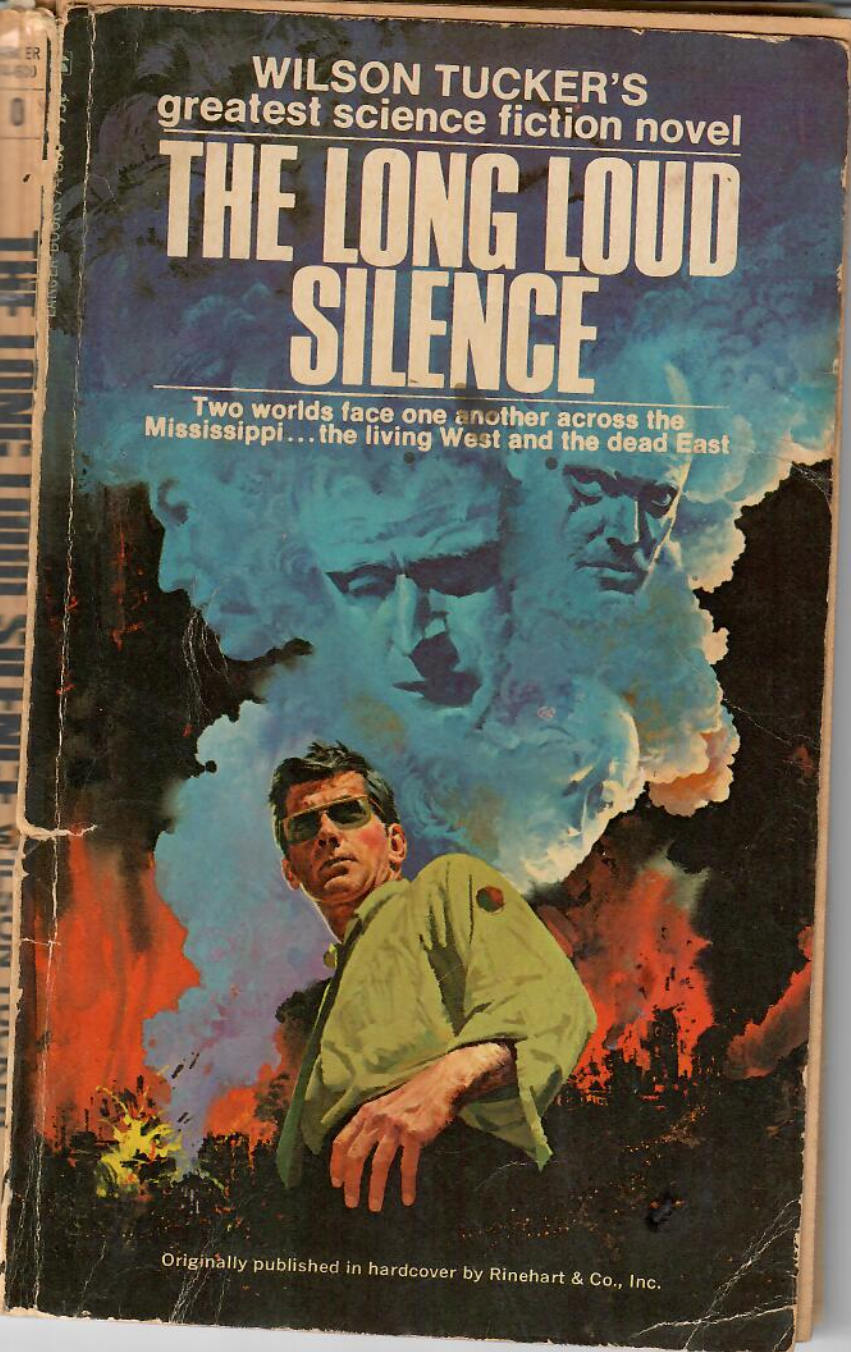


WILSON TUCKER'S
greatest science fiction novel

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE

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

THE LONG LOUD SILENCE WILSON TUCKER



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Chapter Eight

WINTER came early, harshly and entirely unexpectedly overnight less than a week afterwards. It came with a bitterly cold wind that swept down from the Canadian plains to engulf the central and northeastern states, to tumble the mercury by thirty degrees in one night, to lay a thin coating of ice on the quiet lakes and stagnant ponds. Snow began to fall before dawn and continued throughout the day, whipped by swirling gusts of wind, making a farce of the yellow autumn leaves still on the trees. Under the bumpy white blanket the world seemed to grow quiet and still. Nothing seemed to move in the early biting daylight, no man or animal stirring from whatever warmth it possessed. Countless pairs of eyes peered out at the wintry scene in dismayed speculation. The shock of its sudden coming was slow to wear away, and for some sleeping in the open fields it never wore off. They could not move.

Gary slumped in the rear seat of an abandoned car and cursed himself for staying in the North. He should have used his head, should have begun moving south when the first chill hung in the air. He was a fool for staying here.

He could have gone back to the fisherman's cabin in Florida—just to visit, of course. He wouldn't have wintered there. But he could have gone back in response to a sincere invitation: come back and see the kid. Whose kid, he wondered briefly? Or he could

have pushed deeper into the South, there were plenty of beaches in Florida; he could have holed up in one of those tourist cabins on the St. Petersburg beach, or gone down to the Keys below Miami. Anywhere to avoid *this*. New Orleans was all right—he could have gone back there. For some reason or other that city wasn't accepting its fate as tragically as the northern river towns. New Orleans attempted to continue as before, its population thinned down, the ferries no longer operating and the Huey Long bridge blocked by a pair of squat tanks. But it went on living after a fashion.

Gary shifted his cramped position on the car seat and told himself again he was a damned fool.

The blast of a shotgun brought him to his knees, his eyes peering through a dirty rear window.

He saw a figure running toward him, toward the old car, a small person who laboured and stumbled as he ran. The figure flung a hasty glance over his shoulder and tried to increase his speed. Gary peered beyond him and discovered the two stalking men. They both carried guns and one of them was reloading as he ran, intent on capturing or killing the fleeing quarry.

Gary snatched up his newly acquired shotgun and flung open the car door, taking care to keep himself out of sight on the rear seat. The little runner continued blindly on toward the car, unaware of his presence or the movement of the door. Gary readied the shotgun. There was a second burst of fire from the pursuers and the youngster screamed, either in pain or terror.

He batted his eyes and waited, trigger finger tensed. It had been a child's scream, a young girl's.

With hoarse, rasping sounds in her dry throat, the girl reached the car and flung herself through the open door to collapse on the floor. Gary reached over

and pulled shut the door behind her. The girl whirled and saw him, screamed again and sobbed with a tortured breath. Her eyes were dilated with fright. She looked to be ten or twelve, maybe.

"Cut it out," he said roughly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She didn't answer him, didn't stop crying and rolling her eyes. With his left hand he reached over and cranked down the rear window, then turned to open the other at his feet. The noise of the two running men came plainly to his ears, their feet making slapping noises in the snow. As best as he could judge, both were following the same path the girl had made, both were running together or nearly so. They should arrive at the car within seconds, approaching on the same side to use the door the child had used.

Gary glanced down. "Now keep your head down, kid, and I'll get rid of these guys. You won't get hurt."

The rear door was yanked open and the girl screamed once more, frantically pushing herself into the far corner.

"I got her! I got the little——"

Gary quietly raised the shotgun to the man's face and fired at his open mouth. The blast cut the head from the shoulders like a hot, ragged knife. Without pause or lost motion, Gary rose swiftly to his knees and poked the smoking barrel through the open door to fire again. It caught the running man in mid-stride, bending him double. As he tumbled to the snow, Gary pumped a second shot into the body. Calmly then, he scanned the horizon for further movement, saw none, and sank back on the seat. With his foot he kicked the severed head outside and shut the door, finally running up the windows.

The child was still in the corner, her face covered

by her hands. He wondered how much she had seen. Her crying was hysterical, uncontrolled, and he didn't know how to stop it. She was too little to slap, to gag.

It was more than an hour before he could calm her, could persuade her that he intended no harm, to stop her crying and listen to him, to talk to him. Her story was disconnected and not always intelligent, continually punctuated by fits of dry sobbing. He watched the road and nearby fields, listening to her.

Her name was Sandy, she said. Sandra Hoffman. She was twelve years old and she lived with her two brothers and her parents on the farm "over there." Gary could not recall any farmhouse nearby and guessed that she had wandered for several miles. Shortly after daylight this morning, she and her older brother Lee—"he's fifteen, almost"—had gone out rabbit hunting. The early morning hours of the first snowfall is always good rabbit weather, she assured him. Her father had warned them to stay close to the farm but no one suspected any real danger—there had been many "stealers" about the place, trying to get away with food and clothing, but none offered bodily harm unless caught in the act. She and Lee must have walked further from home than they realised. They hadn't found any rabbits.

Lee had been ahead of her, concentrating on a thicket likely to be concealing rabbits when the two men jumped him. The men had been hiding in the thicket and as they approached, leaped out at them with guns. Lee was carrying his .22 rifle. He fired at them without hesitation, probably in fright rather than fight, and missed. One of the men fired back at him, and Lee fell.

She turned and ran, hiding among the trees for a long time—"hours and hours"—before she heard them hunting her again. She kept moving around,

trying to be quiet, but they finally flushed her. She took to her heels, finding the snow-covered road and running along it until she saw the automobile. They kept shooting at her, too, but they didn't hit her. And now what were they going to do?

Going to do? "I don't know," Gary replied absently. "Let me think about it."

With her question, a vague idea was born in his mind that he might be able to turn the incident to his advantage. Abandoning the child, simply walking away on her was out of the question; he might have done it if she were older and a boy—if she were her brother Lee, for instance. But he couldn't leave her there in the deserted car. He realised that it could be many tedious weeks, perhaps even bitter months before he could work his way back to the Gulf coast—and there always remained the danger of starving or freezing before reaching it. On the other hand if he stayed in the North, stayed *here*, there was the very real possibility that he could talk his way into a warm and comfortable house for the winter—with food on the table three times a day. He just might be able to use Sandy, *and* the body of her brother, as his entrance into that farmhouse.

It was well worth trying. He sat up.

"The first thing to do," he said to the girl, "is to go back and get Lee. Then we'll find your house."

"But I don't know where he is!" she wailed.

He put out a hand to ruffle the stockingcap pulled down over her hair. "Aw, that'll be easy for me. All we have to do is follow your backtrail. Say—I'll bet you didn't know I was a scout in the army!"

She gazed at him, round-eyed. "Was you really?"

"Yep. Used to track Charlies all over the place."

"Enemies too?"

He smiled at her and nodded. "Everybody. I

tracked them all. Let's be moving along now—your dad will be worrying about you." He opened the door on the opposite side of the car away from the two bodies and helped her out, to lead the way along the erratic, running trail she had left.

The small patch of woods in which she had hidden was not too far distant nor difficult to find. He didn't waste time in trying to follow her wandering footsteps through the woods, but instead began an encircling motion designed to carry him in a complete arc around the trees. A quarter of a mile from where he began, he located the trampled snow where the girl and her two pursuers had entered the woods. Standing there, sighting across the snow, he saw the body as a patch of dark clothing against the white.

"You wait right here," he told Sandy. "I'll get Lee."

She leaned against a cold tree and watched him go.

A part of Lee Hoffman's body had been stripped bare and the flesh cut away. Gary paused for long minutes, staring down at it, gripping his lower lips between his teeth. In an absent sort of way he had speculated on this, had foreseen it if the quarantine lasted long enough and the contaminated survivors grew hungry enough. There had been authenticated reports of it happening among marooned Japanese soldiers during World War II—when the food gave out, the prisoners suffered if there were any, and if not, then one of the soldiers became the unwilling victim. The strongest and the most unprincipled will stay alive in some way, even when that way is winnowed down to cannibalism.

Sooner or later, Gary reflected bitterly, it had to happen east of the Mississippi. Thanks to the damned army and their quarantine, their river patrols. And now here it was.

He stooped low over the body of the boy and wrapped it in clothing, covering it completely so that the girl would see nothing amiss. Hoisting the body over one shoulder and swinging the shotgun in his free hand, he turned and called to Sandy. She came running.

"Is he . . . is he dead?"

"Yes. Let's take him back home now."

Her lips quivered and he saw that she had been crying while she waited for him. "I'm lost . . . I don't know where it is."

"Now stop that stuff! Didn't I tell you I was a scout? A first-class scout?"

"Yes . . ."

"All right then, Sandy, just trust me. Does your farm have any big barns? A tall silo, maybe? Something we could recognize from a distance?"

"Sure, we got them." She tried to keep her eyes from the burden on his shoulder.

"Then here's what we'll do: see that hill over there, the high one with the two pine trees? Let's climb up there and look for your place—you can shinny up the tree to see better. Okay?"

"Okay." She fell in behind him, eyes downcast.

Gary completed his plan of action as he walked. When they neared her home, he would send the girl in ahead of him with the news. She was better than a white flag, she and the body across his shoulder, and he would not be shot before he had the opportunity to speak his piece. The farmer, no matter how hostile, would hold off for a few minutes on the strength of the girl and the body of his son. After all—what could be more disarming, more sincere than an utter stranger bringing the two children home? Gary smiled to himself.

"Just stop right there," Hoffman ordered coldly.

Gary waited without answering. The man stood at the gate to his yard, an old shotgun in his hands. Behind him in the open doorway of the farmhouse Gary glimpsed the farmer's wife, Sandy, and a smaller boy. Fright coupled with alarm was on the woman's face; she didn't look at the newcomer but at the boy's body across his shoulder.

"Put the boy down," Hoffman said. "And your gun."

Gary did as he was told, and backed away a few paces.

Hoffman was a middle-aged man, red of face and weather-beaten from his profession. His eyes were clear and sharp, cautious and distrustful. He approached the body and sank to his knees, keeping the gun on Gary.

"Be careful," Gary said then. "Something happened to the boy."

Hoffman shot him an angry glance. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't find the boy until it was too late—until the little girl led me back to him. You'll see what I mean when you unwrap him—but be careful! Don't let your wife see it."

Puzzled but still brimming with anger, the farmer shifted his position to block the view from the doorway and reached out a quivering hand to pull away the coat from the body. He stared at his son's lifeless face and then slowly let his eyes drift along the body.

"God Almighty!" His head jerked up to ask a question but when his lips formed the words no sound came. He knew the answer. Finally—"Who *did* this?"

"A couple of no-good bastards," Gary told him

without emotion. "They were after the girl when I caught them."

Tears had formed in the man's eyes. "So help me God, when I get my hands on them . . . !"

"There's nothing you can do to them now, except spit. I said I caught them."

"You . . . ?"

Gary pointed to his automatic. "That."

The farmer stared at him without really seeing him, and then carefully wrapped the clothing about the body and picked it up. "Bring the guns," he said to Gary and turned his back. "Come on up to the house."

Gary followed him in.

Hoffman carried the body into an inner bedroom, the entire family trailing after. Left alone, Gary looked about the room in which he found himself and sat down, remembering to take off his ragged cap. It seemed to be a combination living room and dining room, opening directly off the kitchen. Something was cooking on the kitchen stove, something that bubbled and hissed, carrying to him a taunting odour that excited his hunger and caused the saliva to flow in his mouth. He held himself in the chair with difficulty, his eyes attempting to see the stove and the kettle around a corner. The room was comfortable and warm and he thought it had been years since he had known anything like it; there was a rocking chair and a long leather couch at the far end, three or four other chairs scattered about and some ancient magazines piled on the floor. From behind a closed door came the sounds of grief.

He pulled his eyes away from the kitchen doorway and tried to shut off the smell of cooking. The wallpaper around him was old and creased with yellow lines,

yet it did not detract from the comfort and ease the room suggested. In the centre of the floor stood a heavy oaken table from which the family took their meals, and the faded oilcloth covering it contained hardened, dried spots of spilled food. The little girl's doll lay on the table. Gary looked across the doll and discovered the radio.

He half-rose from his chair, fingers already reaching out to snap the switch, and abruptly sat down again.

Hoffman walked into the room, hand outstretched. Gary stood up, took it.

"I ain't quite got the words to thank you."

"Not necessary," Gary told him. "Any decent man would have done the same."

"Any man didn't do it," Hoffman insisted. "You did."

"I just happened to be there," Gary said slowly, almost awkwardly. "The little girl came running to me . . ." He released the farmer's hand, sat down when the other did. There was a moment of strained silence. "If it's all the same to you, I'll move along. There's nothing more I can do to help you, I guess."

"Leave?" Hoffman eyed him with astonishment. "By God, you'll not leave! I can't let you up and walk out of here after what you've done for me, man. I owe you a debt I can't ever repay!"

"You don't owe me anything," Gary contradicted him. His eyes drifted toward the kitchen. "I wouldn't take pay."

The farmer was staring at him. "You're hungry!" he said with sudden surprise. "The devil, I should have thought of that." He jumped out of his chair and took Gary's arm, pulling him toward the kitchen. "Come on out here—you can eat until it runs out of your ears!" He snatched the lid from the hot kettle and

burned his fingers, swearing absently. "The Lord knows we ain't got much left in this crazy world, but we *have* got food. You can have all you want of it."

Gary accompanied Hoffman late that afternoon when the farmer took his son's body to a snow-covered hill for burial. He offered to help but was politely turned down, and told the farmer he would go along anyway to keep watch—one of them should keep their eyes open that far from the house.

He said nothing more while the silent man dug the grave, knowing that his remark would take root. When the grave was completed and the body ready for burial, the remainder of the family joined the two of them on the hillside, and Hoffman opened an old family Bible. Gary stood a short distance away, his cap off, listening to the halting words and the weeping of the bereaved mother. He slowly and silently paced the hill, continually watching the fields around them and seeing to it that his watch crossed and recrossed the vision of the farmer. That too would take root.

He felt no remorse over the boy's death for the boy had meant nothing to him; his stomach was full—overly full—for the first time since he had left the fisherman's cabin on the Florida beach; and he knew a vast satisfaction and a return of his old cockiness. Completely without cynicism or qualms of conscience he was putting on an act, an act designed to win him a warm winter home. He counted on the farmer's noticing it and bringing up the matter first.

The brief service over, they returned to the house.

By the next morning he had it.

Hoffman brought it up over the breakfast table. "Sandy tells me you're a soldier? In the army?"

"I was—yes. I was attached to the Fifth Army in

Chicago, before the bombing. But they wouldn't let me come across the river to rejoin them." He reached for another helping.

"Them devils don't let nobody across. I know a couple of fellas who tried it." He paused. "You a good shot?"

"Yes," Gary answered frankly. "Sharpshooter. Why?"

"I want to offer you a job—I ain't forgetting what we owe you."

Gary grinned across the table at him. "Mr. Hoffman, I told you, you don't owe me a thing. And as for the job—I've never worked on a farm in my life. I can't milk a cow."

"Wouldn't expect you to—we can take care of that. It'll be hard doing without Lee next summer, but we can take care of that. You would take care of the soldiering."

"What?" He stopped eating.

"Be our lookout, our guard. What do they call them in the army? Sentry. We've had one blamed thief after another around here, day in and day out. They've been robbing us blind, and I can't run the place and keep chasing them too. That would be your job—keeping thieves off the place."

"Well . . . I don't know what to say. I sort of figured on going down south for the winter. . . ."

"I can't pay you nothing," Hoffman continued. "Not in money. We ain't got none left and you couldn't spend it anyway. But we can offer you a good home and the best eating in this part of the country; my wife's a fine cook!"

Gary glanced at the woman and then the two children. "I'd certainly like to, Mr. Hoffman, but—"

"Please?" Sandy broke in.

He glanced down the table to find the girl shyly smiling at him, a pleading invitation in her eyes.

"Do you really want me to stay, Sandy?"

She nodded eagerly. "Pretty please?"

"Well . . ." He scratched his ragged beard, pretending to consider it. Finally his gaze swung back to Hoffman. "Oh well, all right." And then he added quickly, "Until spring, anyway."

"Fine! Believe me, we're glad to hear of it—all of us. Now eat up. You've got to put on some weight."

"Can I borrow a razor?" Gary asked. "And if you have a pair of scissors handy I'd like to trim off this hair. I haven't been to a barbershop in a long time."

Staring at his newly-pale image in the yellowed mirror later that morning, he winked at the lathered man in the glass. "Very neat, Corporal Gary." The image agreed.

Gary studied the terrain about the farm buildings, conscious of the one blind approach to their defences. Beyond the barn the ground fell away sharply, a rough pasture land that dipped down to a frozen creek nearly three-quarters of a mile away. Anyone approaching from that direction need only keep the barn between himself and the house, to be able to come very near without detection. Gary found baling wire in a machine shed and strung trippers across the slope beyond the barn, fastening a rusty cowbell to the outermost wire. The next snow would hide everything from sight.

He set up a pattern of watching at night and sleeping during the day, knowing from experience that the most dangerous marauders would approach only under cover of darkness. In his nightly prowling he looked for and expected every trick of the trade that

he himself had practised, knowing there were men out there as smart as he, and as hungry as he had been. Awake at night and sleeping during the day, but still unwilling to miss the day's hot meals, he had himself awakened for each of them. And after dusk he stalked about the deserted land, prying around the buildings, alert for sight or sound of any moving thing. The farmer's family slept soundly, trusting him.

Gary came in to the house one evening just at bedtime, just as Sandy was snapping off the radio. The illumination was slowly dying behind the transparent dial and he watched it fade with startled eyes.

"That thing *works!*"

"What?" Hoffman turned around. "Oh—sure it does. Didn't you know it?" The farmer shrugged. "Ain't worth a dang, though. All the time when silly comics is blabbering, and it's always selling something we can't buy."

"But how?" Gary demanded impatiently, indicating the single, flickering kerosene lamp the farmer held in his hand. "Where do you get the electricity for a radio over here?"

"The windmill—Lee fixed it up for us last winter."

"What about the windmill?"

"The boy fixed it, he was a mighty smart kid—knew his way around with electricity and machinery. He hooked a generator up to the windmill somehow. I don't know how he did it—if it ever goes out of whack, that'll be the end of it. Lee was a good kid. It plays all right as long as the wind holds out. Kinda fades away, sometimes."

"A radio!" Gary was fascinated with it. "Well I'll be damned—a radio right here in the house with me and I never knew it worked." He went over to it, caressed the cabinet with his fingers and let his nails flick the glass of the dial. "I want to play it."

"Help yourself," Hoffman returned. "Kinda keep it down though, will you? The wife's a light sleeper."

"What? Oh, sure, sure." The cabinet felt hot under his hand. "Sure."

Hoffman turned away. "Good night."

Gary was too entranced with the set to answer. The farmer left, carrying with him the only kerosene lamp and the room was plunged into darkness. Sandy's voice was audible for a few seconds and then the bedroom door slammed, cutting off her words and the last stray gleam of the light.

Impatiently, Gary flung back the blackout curtains at the windows, letting in the faint light of the clouded moon and reflected snow. He never used a light. The night outside was cold and quiet. He ran back to the radio, sank to his knees before it and excitedly twisted the knob which furnished electric current. The small dial gained life, bringing the imprinted numbers into sharp relief and bringing a hum to the speaker. His burning eagerness to *hear* stopped his fingers, made him aware of the peculiar thrill the glow and sound had given him. A year, a year and a half ago, this was nothing, but now it was everything. This was next to life itself. This was people somewhere on the other side of the river, healthy people, safe people, talking to each other and continuing their lives. This was civilization, and sanity, and warmth, and food, this was one man on friendly terms with the next. This was what he had lost a long time ago and despaired of ever having again.

Quickly he snapped the radio off and counted the long seconds, then eagerly turned it on again only to see the light come up, to listen to the growing power of the set. There was a strange tightness in his stomach as he touched a second control knob and moved it a fraction of an inch.

A girl was singing.

He found her in the middle of a word, on a syllable that at once brought the entire word into his mind as though he had heard it from the beginning, and that word and the next few cast the image of the entire sentence on his consciousness so that he could not remember where he had come in, could readily imagine that he had heard it all. She was singing a slow song, a sweet and sad song about leaves of brown that tumbled down and somewhere behind her where it shouldn't have been interfering a bell tinkled faintly.

He frowned at that, annoyed with the bell and knowing it shouldn't be there.

A bell. He leaped to his feet and dashed for the door, snatching up the automatic shotgun as he sped through it.

In his haste he forgot the radio, forgot to shut the door after him as he ran across the yard and slammed through the wire gate of the old fence. Running silently, lightly, he was careful to keep the hulking barn between him and the sloping pasture land beyond it. Once in the moon-shadow of the structure he slowed, trotted cautiously alongside the building and came to a full stop just short of the corner. He listened. There was no sound.

Gary flattened himself against the wall and inched his head past the corner. Down the slope a dark bundle of nothing lay on the ground. As he watched, a slow movement of an arm and hand seemed to detach itself from the shapeless mass, seemed to reach out probing fingers for the wires he had strung there. The dark figure was well past the outer wire which had held the bell.

And behind him, although he could not hear it, he knew the radio was playing softly and a girl was singing to him. All for him. The sound of his shooting

would stop her, would end the quiet contentment of the voice and the moment, as the family roused from their beds and rushed into the room. He didn't want the family there, didn't want the interference, didn't want to answer their foolish questions and waste time getting them back into bed again. The girl would be gone.

There was no sound but the windmill pumping in the clouded night. Below him, the figure had passed another wire.

Gary backed away from the corner, retreated alongside the barn until he came to a small door. Unlatching it, he went inside and made his way through the gloom to a corner where cast-off machinery was kept. Feeling around on the floor, his fingers touched an iron rod and he picked it up, hefted it, judging its weight and striking power. It would serve. He let himself out and quietly latched the door behind him, careful to avoid a betraying noise. Once more he took up his post at the corner of the barn, concealed in the shadows and impatient with the stranger for taking so much time to climb the slope.

Damn him, damn him, why didn't he hurry?

Immediately afterward, Gary thought to dispose of the body. To leave the man here for discovery on the morrow would only raise a furor, cause questions, perhaps more of that confounded weeping. The corpse had nothing in his pockets.

He circled the barn very slowly, peering with feverish eyes across the fields and pasturage, but if the fellow had a companion there was no sight of him. Nothing else moved under the clouded moon. Finally satisfied, he at last returned to where the body lay and stooped to hoist it across his shoulders. Swinging the shotgun in his free hand, he set off in a fast walk down

the slope toward the distant creek. The man was heavy and his shoulder tired; twice he had to dump the body into the snow and stop for a short rest. It seemed to Gary that an hour had passed before he reached the frozen creek and threw the body down on to the ice.

The woman and the two kids would not come this far from the house, not any more, and it would be spring before Hoffman had occasion to come this way.

Gary turned and ran for the farmhouse.

Just inside the yard gate he hurled himself to the frozen ground and aimed at the yawning door, seeking movement within. The man's voice was low, soothing. It went on and on without variation. Gary frowned, jumped forward and halted again, listening to the voice. The voice stopped and some instrument struck three tiny notes.

The notes stirred his memory and he climbed to his feet, swearing softly at himself. The radio was still on. Gary let himself through the door and closed it behind him, eyes darting about the room. There was nothing, no one other than himself. A second male voice came from the speaker.

The girl was gone.

Chapter Nine

GARY ran to the radio and crouched down before it.

“. . . while in the west the icy grip of winter caused another tragic accident, this one near Laramie, Wyoming. A heavily loaded troop train running behind schedule was struck from the rear by a speeding freight, and the last four cars demolished. The engineer of the freight, himself hurt, blamed lack of visibility; it was snowing heavily, he said, and he had extreme difficulty seeing the track signals, much less the lights on the rear of the troop train. Police on the scene have not released the casualty figures, and military authorities said the train was en route to the Mississippi frontier, carrying replacements.

“And that brings us to the next piece of news, happy news for some men in the line and their women waiting at home. Rotation goes on, winter or not, and many weary soldiers can look forward to Christmas at home. An army spokesman said fresh troops are arriving weekly at the Mississippi and Canadian frontiers, releasing those with the longest months of service. Authorities have consistently refused to divulge the number of troops now guarding those frontiers—but, the spokesman reminded me again to-day, there are more than enough to protect the nation from the few enemy agents known to be roaming around that desolate land. Those agents are welcome to the contaminated states, the hard-eyed soldiers tell me, welcome to the dead and vacant nothing that is east of the

river. And when we get ready to take it again, what few remain will run like frightened rabbits."

Gary sat down hard, staring at the lighted dial.

"Only a few months ago, you will remember, the army security office released the details of one such agent who attempted to cross the river *under* it, at an undisclosed point along the Minnesota shore. He was cut down amid a hail of bullets before he could climb from the water, and the river swallowed his body. A pity, I think, for once we capture one of these fellows we can definitely prove his origin and his nationality to the world.

"Meanwhile, weak signals continue to trickle in from the Pentagon, proving that some brave Americans are still alive in that underground fortress—quite possibly the only Americans still living east of the Mississippi. A few days ago I was privileged to see some rare photographs obtained by reconnaissance planes flying over parts of Illinois and Kentucky—photographs which showed no living thing in those unfortunate states. No smoke curled upward from chimneys, no children or adults moved about the houses and yards, there was not even a dog to track the smooth expanse of snow. Without a doubt, the only American survivors are those who have secreted themselves in an underground bastion, while the despicable enemy agents patrol the rest."

"You're a lying sonofabitch and you know it!" Gary hurled back at the smooth voice.

"And now, closer to home Right here in federal court to-day a former Missouri farmer named Edward Evans won his long-contested case against the government. Evans, who with thousands of others was hastily evacuated from the frontier when the bombs fell, protested that the government did not

allow him anything near a fair price for his land. The Evans farm lay entirely within the ten mile strip now called 'No Man's Land,' and of course he lost it all, not even being allowed to harvest his crops. A federal jury agreed with the distressed farmer, awarding him twenty dollars an acre more than the government offered. Other such suits are expected to follow.

"Street cars are running again, after a long absence from our streets, and I must say they make a strange, if welcome, sight. Following the ban on pleasure travel due to the critical shortage of oil and gasoline, public buses were next to feel the pinch and their schedules were drastically curtailed. This in turn played havoc with the habits of bus riders and local defence plants reported a serious increase in absenteeism and tardiness. Street cars were the answer, and happily the rails had never been ripped up. Let's welcome back the noisy old trolley and save gasoline.

"And as for rubber tires! Mister, mention that word around town and you are knee-deep in argument. Akron, Ohio—if that unfortunate city still stands—will have number one priority when we march across the river once more.

"An optimistic note in today's news comes from the postal department. By next summer, declares the postmaster general, the cost of mailing a first class letter should be down to about ten cents—perhaps even less if other ways can be found to bolster post-office revenues. There is also reason to believe that smaller cities and towns—as well as rural routes—may again be receiving mail every day instead of every second or third day as they do now. You may expect this before next summer. The loss of books, magazines, advertising and other types of third and fourth class mail plunged the department into the red, of course, and it

had been a slow uphill fight coming back. I'm sure that my listeners will be pleased with the prospect of loosening that wartime belt by at least one notch."

"Oh, go to hell!" Gary reached out angrily and shut off the radio.

The suave voice was lying with every other sweet sentence it uttered, lying or spreading propaganda of the most transparent sort. He had seen the army working *that* line of endeavour too well in Southeast Asia to be taken in by it, had seen the effects of smooth talk on newly conquered, vastly bewildered natives. It seemed all right at the time, seemed the thing to do to a defeated enemy. They had to be re-educated, given refresher courses in democracy, and what better way to do it than feed them propaganda pills sugar-coated with news? And now the United States was receiving the same treatment from the same hands—the twenty-four United States west of the all-important river. Those twenty-four states were under martial law, no question of it. The radio announcer had unconsciously confirmed it by his honed words, his phrasing of the news; in a situation such as the present one the army passed on what was broadcast, what was printed.

He was still alive, still walking around in the contaminated zone, therefore declared the army he was an enemy agent. What could be the reason for spreading that? To cover up their inability to accept him back, to hide their fear of him and others like him? Or was it the foundation for something else to come, the preparatory steps of reconstruction such as the schoolteacher had hinted? Was he branded an enemy agent for the sake of convenience—when the mopping-up process came?

In the year and a half since awakening in that dirty hotel room he had not met one person who might be

such an agent, who might actually have entered the country for war-making purposes. He had seen only countless hundreds of ordinary people fighting to stay alive—to prolong their lives until the day the government came to their rescue. Of course the chimneys didn't smoke, not any more, not during the daylight hours unless you wanted strangers. He had cautioned Hoffman's wife of that folly and she now did her cooking under cover of darkness. And of course there were no more dog tracks on the snow—dogs had vanished long before cannibalism came into the picture. But there *were* people in and about many of the houses; it might be that they no longer rushed out to stare at an airplane overhead, but they were there even though the photographer chose to ignore them. There were thousands of them still alive in the contaminated zone—waiting for what? Waiting to be "reconstructed"? Was that the real reason in telling the western states they no longer existed.

Rotation of troops—that was a sweet one! Troops were rotated by the trainload only when several thousand of them were in the line, and why should several thousand be needed when only a handful of "enemy agents" ran free across the river? Did good tax-paying citizens with tight belts swallow that? Had they all lost the ability to think for themselves?

That dumb lout Harry had been an enemy agent, so they quickly knocked him off. Harry would have lacked the humour to appreciate the joke. Harry would have demanded a better reward for the effort of crawling the cable. But crawl it he did, neglecting to give the password, and they cut him down before he could leave the water. Then maybe a high-flying fish fell over that trip wire and set off the flare, while afterwards someone in a radiation suit came down to the shore and kicked the fish back into the water. But

of course the army could get away with that sort of thing—the ten-mile strip of No Man's Land took care of leaks. There were no civilians anywhere within ten miles of the river line.

There had been but one thing in the news broadcast that caught his imagination and held it—those brave, unknown warriors who still held the Pentagon cellars.

That was worth looking into—next spring when he could travel again.

He had guessed that the intact cables under the bridge meant that east-west communications remained open, and this was proof of it. The incoming signals may or may not be weak—you couldn't take that lying announcer's word for it—but signals were received. In view of the implied declaration of war on survivors such as himself, there would be little point in mentioning still other survivors in Washington—eventually they would have to be accounted for as other than "enemy agents." Top brass, therefore, had some reason for their still being "alive," some reason for talking about them. Gary decided that the cellar holdouts definitely needed investigation. Next spring.

He reached up listlessly and turned the radio on again. There was no mounting thrill this time as the dial glowed, nothing but an undefined dullness within him, no impatience in waiting for the instrument to speak.

It spoke with a slick new voice.

"Yes, I said Mother Mahaffey's Candies are back! Good news indeed for lovers of sweet things—government restrictions on sugar have been lifted and once more you may help yourself to the delicious candies from Mother Mahaffey's kitchens! Just listen to the goodies she has for you: crisp and crunchy pecan twists . . . creamy caramels . . . toothsome bitter-sweet creams . . . the utter goodness of home-made

chocolates! Don't delay, get some to-day, treat that best girl to a treasure she'll long remember! Mother Mahaffey's Candies, the best in the West. There is a Mother Mahaffey Candy Kitchen near you.

"You have been listening to the late news round-up by Judson May, your Mother Mahaffey Candy Man. The following is transcribed—"

Gary savagely twisted away the transcription, telling the announcer in short, angry words his opinion of him, Judson May and Mother Mahaffey. Mother Mahaffey at least would experience difficulty in following his advice, were she a mind to try. The dial pointer came to rest on still another unctuous male voice and he twisted it again, to discover the sound of music beneath his fingers. He didn't recognize the song, had not the slightest idea what it was all about, but the music pleased him. He stretched out full length on the floor and listened to it.

It hurt him.

For hours the music had caused him pain, bringing out his abject loneliness and underscoring the world he had lost. He stood at a window watching the empty fields. A heavily clouded sky had long since obscured the moon, bringing the threat of a new snow. Periodically during the night he had torn himself away from the radio to swing hastily about the farm buildings, scanning the vast reaches for visitors.

And as the hour grew late, one by one the stations left the air, the announcer invariably bidding him a pleasant good-night. One by one he chased the departing stations over the dial, avidly seeking a new one to replace the old. Each time he felt the brief fear that there would be no more stations waiting for him, and each time he tuned in another. The number of them steadily narrowed until finally there was but one and

he clung to it possessively, hoping against hope it would stay with him all night. During the long hours he had even come to accept the intervening announcements and advertisements, to wait out nervously the long-winded appeals for the purchase of lotions and medicines and shrubs, of war bond drives and pleas for scrap iron, of short and worthless news bulletins and idle horseplay on the part of the speaker. Eventually the music came back.

Some of the numbers he knew and remembered of years before, some he had sung or tried to sing in saloons and Red Cross loafing rooms, a very few went all the way back to his father's days in Italy and France. Others were undoubtedly as old but he hadn't heard them before—that, or had not paid enough attention to recognize them now. And once in a while there was something he was positive was new, brand-new. The recordings having men singers annoyed him but still he listened, for a year and a half is too long a time. Those sung by women hurt the most—the women and their words reminded him how desperately lonely he was.

He talked aloud to himself, and didn't care. He had done that in Viet Nam a few years before and the mark of loneliness clung to him ever afterward. Not that he cared. He had not bothered to break the habit when he moved into the farmhouse, although he often found the children staring at him. They'd learn when they grew up—if they grew up. So he talked back to some of the women who sang to him—it depended on what they sang, how they said it; and sometimes he threw a bitter word at the announcer, disgusted with his assininity.

The world was gone. He knew it now with finality. He was alone in it, just himself, and those other

minor figures who moved about did so only as foils, as shadows from which he must protect himself or die, or other shadows on whom he must prey or die. There was no one else alive with a life he could feel, no living thing he could trust, eat with, sleep with. She was back there. . . .

He snapped his finger, starting at the sound.

Irma. That had been her name—Irma something. The nineteen-year-old kid who had been with her college class on an exploration trip when the bombs fell. Irma who had come back home to loot jewellery shops when he found her, found her by the shattering noise of a plate glass window. It was difficult now to recall what she was like—young yes, but not little or undeveloped. She had looked like a sixteen-year-old but still there had been something of a woman about her. He could remember the brilliant blue of her eyes the first time he saw them—that night when he pinned her to the street, holding the light on her face. Her hair? He had the vague impression it had been brown. She had thrown herself at him the next morning in the hotel, the morning she had thought him gone, and her tears had wet his naked chest. That was Irma.

They had eaten together while sitting on the curbing before some abandoned grocery store, or sitting on a hotel bed, or behind the wheel of a car. Eaten and lived together for many days back before he realised the world was lost. She had gone with him while he collected his weapons, his first car, his initial stock of supplies for the hungry days he supposed were ahead until he could get back to the army. Days! Irma had kept him close company, only to part at the bridge.

That had been a damned fool thing to do. They should have stayed together. Irma had been a pretty

girl, would be pretty still—if she were living. She'd be twenty-one now, according to her figures. Attractive figures.

And after Irma?

The string bean who had walked up to them in the Tennessee hills. Sally. No other name, just Sally, who could be nice to them both but preferred Oliver, the schoolteacher. He wondered briefly if *he* had a son, or had Oliver? Sally was pretty much of a nonentity in his memory, just a woman who had been there at the time and left no indelible mark on him. Somewhat similar to the woman in New Orleans for a couple of weeks after leaving Sally. *Her* name was already lost, and the memory of her nearly so until he concentrated on it.

Three. In a year and a half. And *that* for a man who liked to boast around the barracks of his numberless conquests.

The world was gone. He stared through the window at the vast emptiness of it, wondering if it would ever again come alive. Just behind him an unseen woman sang softly. She sang from another world across the void because this one was gone, populated only by the quick and the dead; she sang from a world which used to exist for everybody but was now permanently restricted. She mouthed the words and carried the melody as though nothing untoward had happened, as though *her* singing—and the commercial appeal to follow—were all that mattered.

That hurt, too.

The casual acceptance of the propaganda and the news reports that they alone still lived, while all else was death. The willingness to believe that only they were safe and healthy while east of the river nothing but sure death and enemy agents stalked the land. How much will people believe without questioning?

Did none of them stop to consider that *some one* might still be alive over here . . . that *some one* was listening to their broadcasts and knowing how false they were? Hadn't it ever occurred to any of them that their programmes were being picked up by people who used to be in their world, people who could be hurt as they listened?

What if he had a telephone? Supposing that by some strange means he had a 'phone and he could casually pick up the receiver and put through a call to the radio station. To ask for a song, say. People did that all the time.

"What?" the surprised announcer would ask.

"I said," Gary would have to repeat, "that I'm calling from something-or-other Wisconsin, and I want you to play a number."

"But you can't be!" that disbelieving man would answer him. "There's no life in Wisconsin."

"There is, and don't believe everything you hear. How about playing *Clementine* for me? Or maybe, *Cruising Down the River*? That's a good one these days."

"I can't, do you hear? I refuse. You're dead, Judson May said you were dead."

"Upstick Judson May! You going to play me a song or not?"

"This is a trick! There's no one alive on the other side of the river. You're attempting to hoax me!" And he would hang up in anger. Or sudden fear.

And when the security office heard *that* they would immediately get the station on the line, or perhaps send around an officious major. It had been a despicable occurrence and they would caution the announcer to say no more about it. Might upset the citizens. There are some things they could not be trusted to know. Under cover of darkness a wily enemy agent

had surreptitiously crossed the river and made his way to a telephone. It was to be regretted of course and it would not happen again. Alert sentries had cut the man down before he could climb out of the water. All quiet. All safe and snug west of the line of quarantine.

He stood with his chilled back against the barn, looking down across the sloping pasture toward the distant creek. The ancient pipe given him by the farmer was unlit but he continued to hold it in his mouth, savouring the stale taste of it.

The approaching dawn was bitterly cold and sulking behind the heavy cloud blanket, revealing itself only as a faint brightening close to the eastern horizon, a gradual increase in the visibility over the frozen fields. He saw the telltale marks of the night just past, the slow and crawling path the stranger had made coming up the slope, the infinite twists and turns to avoid the trip wire. The trail led up to the side of the barn, up to the corner where he had waited for the man. Before he had covered it with a shuffling foot there had been a frozen splotch of blood, black in the faint light of the new day. He saw his deeply indented footsteps where he had carried the heavy body back down the slope to the frozen creek, and returning, the light and wide-spaced marks he had left on the run.

But the first girl had been gone, the girl he wanted.

A short while ago that last station had left the air, left him scrabbling frantically over an empty dial searching for another voice, another bar of music. There were no more. The loneliness descended two-fold then, and the hurt deepened. The airwaves were as empty as the land around him. He shut off the radio and was depressed by the silence of the room, by the emptiness of it after his new-found companions had

left. Pulling on the borrowed overcoat he wore and taking up his gun, he had quit the house to make another patrol of the buildings, striding in a great circle through the nearer fields alert for fresh footprints leading toward the house. Eventually he had come upon the slurred trail made by last night's visitor, and followed it up to the barn.

He stood there, cold and forlorn.

Some day—out there, across those snowy wastes—would come the conquering army from across the Mississippi, mopping up the stragglers and paving the way for the reconstruction of a half-wrecked nation. Hoffman and his wife, the younger boy and Sandy—all stragglers, blocking their path. The four of them, four "enemy agents" rushing out to greet returning troops with heartfelt cries of welcome. What a shock they would receive.

Oliver's speculative medical aid was pretty much of a lost dream . . . what was it he had said? "It all depends on the prevailing mood of high brass and the state of medicine on the day bridges are reopened. If the stragglers can be cleansed and cured by some revolutionary medical means—well then, welcome back to the United States!" And "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."

A lost dream with a brutal awakening for many people; people like the Hoffmans who clung to their farm and what few possessions that remained to them, awaiting the day of deliverance. He didn't want to be here when that day came. He didn't want to see the terrified expression on Sandy's face again. And now he was convinced that day was coming, that *kind* of day . . . Judson May glibly spouting his lines had all but said it. Judson May was parroting the words and

schemes placed in his mouth by high brass. High brass and the lamentable state of medicine had left no room in their blueprints of reconstruction for surviving stragglers, and a good many "enemy agents" would be eliminated before Akron, Ohio, could be rebuilt again.

He wanted to be a thousand miles from Sandy when that day arrived. Sandy wouldn't be nineteen for seven more years.

With a start he came to, saw that snow was falling. The eastern glow was gone, diffused by the clouds, but day had arrived over the fields. He stepped to the corner of the barn and looked back toward the house, looked up at the patched chimney where a thin curl of smoke drifted upward. Hoffman's wife was cooking breakfast before damping the fires for the day. She needn't worry now, not with the snow. A fairly heavy snow would conceal the smoke a reasonable distance away.

He was hungry and turned his steps toward the house, casting one last glance behind him to see if the marauder's trail was disappearing. Sandy poked about the barn occasionally and he didn't want her to see that.

Come spring, he promised himself aloud, the *first* sign of spring, and he was going to have a look at the heroes hiding in the Washington cellar. To hell with this weather.

Chapter Ten

BLUE-SKY summer. Warm, mellow, peaceful and relaxing, summer in Ohio. He supposed he was in Ohio—someone had chopped down the highway markers and probably used them for firewood the previous winter. He made it a habit to avoid the cities. It didn't matter; if he wanted to think he was in Ohio, then he was there. He lay flat on his back in the tall, uncut grass watching the shapeless clouds drift along. A wandering ant explored the skin of his hand but he was too content to brush it away. The sky, the rolling clouds and the smell of the grass.

He had really intended to be here sooner, had wanted to be nearer Washington by this time. Taking leave of Sandy and her parents had been a difficult thing; they had kept him long past his decided departure date, long past the day his eyes began searching the far horizon in eager yearning. He had finally got away from them only by promising that he would return in the early autumn.

Gary watched the slothful clouds in the blue and doubted very much that he would keep that promise.

He *would* like to go back in perhaps eight or ten years—if he were able—to see Sandy. That would be worth going back to; but to return sooner than that, as early as next winter, no. Next winter he intended to exercise common sense and head back to the Gulf coast, perhaps back to that fisherman's shack on the water where an invitation awaited him. And after

that, as deep into Florida as he could go. There he would not freeze unless the weather tricked him, would not starve as long as fish swam in the sea.

Ohio was fine in the warm, lazy summer . . . so fine and comfortable that he felt no alarm when the distant sound of shooting broke out. He lay still, listening to it, knowing that a sizable party was involved by the number of guns and knowing too that it was too far away to involve him.

An answering machine-gun brought him to his feet.

Machine-guns! Machine-guns meant soldiers, unless somewhere a band of marauders had come into possession of such a weapon. Barring that, soldiers meant . . .

He was running lightly and swiftly toward the firing. Soldiers this far from the Mississippi could mean the mopping-up process had begun, that the river had been crossed and high brass was clearing the land of enemy agents and contaminated survivors. Gary leaped a sagging barbed wire fence and sped across the field. As he ran he found himself praying—praying not to any Creator he may have believed in but praying in his own expressive, violent tongue that it was not so, that the western states had not come to reclaim the bombed land. The land was harsh, hungry and terrible but he suddenly didn't want to lose it, to give it up in exchange for what *they* offered. He had hated it but now he didn't want to lose it; had often cursed it and the obscene fate which had placed him there but now it was preferable. The remainder of his lean, starved life there was better than the firing squads. Hell, he was only thirty . . . Thirty-something. He didn't want to die now!

Gary flung himself down behind a knoll and inched his way toward the grassy top. The firing was loud in his ears. He paused just short of the crest, ready to

leap and run in retreat, and then hitched his shotgun forward to part the grasses shutting off the view. He stiffened.

A battered, paved highway wound along the valley floor less than half a mile distant and nothing but two small trucks occupied that highway. Two trucks! With mounting excitement he wriggled forward to gain a better view. Two green-panelled army trucks somewhat resembling that armoured mail truck he had used years before; two trucks, halted and under seige in the lonely road. He looked to see why they had stopped. One truck was partially nosed over into the roadside ditch, and from this distance it looked as if a tyre had been shot away, leaving it helpless. The second had stopped a few yards ahead. Gary studied the tableau. Rifle fire was pouring from the cabs of both vehicles, snapping the tall grass along the nearer ditch and searching out the terrain behind it.

After a moment he located the machine-gun. It was barking from a small broken window in the rear of the disabled truck. He saw a body lying on the road.

Army trucks, their blunt noses pointed westward toward the distant Mississippi.

Instantly he concocted a plan of action. Half rising, he sped several yards downhill toward the raging battle and dropped again into the concealing grass—waited long seconds before rising and running again, following a zigzag path down the slope. As he worked his way in hasty, cautious spurts toward the stalled trucks he knew he was visible from the road, knew they couldn't help but see him, yet no bullet spat his way. As he drew nearer he ran shorter distances before dropping to earth again, putting up his head for quick reconnaissance before making another dash. His method of approach should be obvious to the men in the trucks, should be familiar to them.

Finally he located five men on the ground before him, fairly well hidden from the roadway but in positions that were open to his view. Four of the five were firing at the road; the fifth lay still.

When he was within easy range he fell flat on the ground and opened on them a murderous fire.

Startled, they turned to stare at him, half-rising in their sudden fear. He fired again and one man fell. Rifle fire from their now unprotected rear increased sharply and the surviving three jerked around, aware of the trap. Abruptly the three broke cover and ran, attempting to flee along the ditch. Gary rose to his knees and loosed a final blast before sinking to the ground. The machine-gun opened up once more as the three ran into its range, and then it was quiet.

Gary could almost feel the solid silence.

Without moving, he shouted, "Hold your fire!"

Some one in the truck answered him. "Come out with your hands up."

Very slowly he rose to his feet, his hands high, still clutching the shotgun in a doubled fist. He cautiously made his way across the ditch to stand at the edge of the roadway, peering at the two men in the nearer cab.

"Put down the gun."

Gary hesitated. "Not until you cover me—I don't want to get shot in the back."

"You're covered. Put it down fast!"

He stooped to lay it on the cement.

"All right now, who are you?"

"Corporal Russell Gary . . . used to be with the Fifth in Chicago."

A helmeted head appeared in the window of the cab. The helmet bore a stripe of white paint. Gary absently added, "Sir."

"Do you carry identification, Corporal?" the officer asked suspiciously.

"Yes, sir." He dug down under his clothing to bring up the two dog-tags hanging on a chain.

The lieutenant peered at them and then up at the man. "Well, I don't mind saying thanks! You certainly helped us out of a hole." He paused. "Are you alone?"

"Yes, sir." Gary looked down the road at the sprawled bodies. "Except for the casualties, sir."

There was a moment of silence as the officer sought for words. Gary stared at him, at the second face looking over his shoulder.

The second face suggested, "Ask him about Chicago, Lieutenant."

"A-bombed," Gary said without waiting for the other to repeat the question. "Hundreds of A-bombs. The place is just a pile of ashes now."

"How did you escape?" was the quick retort.

"I wasn't there, sir. I was on recruiting duty downstate." He thought to volunteer more. "The whole damned country is washed out, sir. A-bombs and disease everywhere. There can't be more than a couple of thousand people left."

"That many? Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir. I've covered all the ground between Chicago and Florida in the last couple of years, sir. There was a lot more that first year, but I'd say there's only a few thousand this summer, Lieutenant."

"Well, I'll be damned. They said——"

"Yes, sir?"

"Good work, Corporal, good work. We can't thank you enough. Now we'll have to repair that tire and move on."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I was sort of hoping you could take me with you."

"Out of the question," the lieutenant snapped. "You are contaminated. Was that why you opened fire on the enemy? I commend you, Corporal, but I can do no more."

Gary stared at him, his bearded face a carefully framed picture of disappointment. "I can't . . . ? But sir, I . . ."

"No!"

Gary shuffled his feet, made as if to leave and then turned back once more. "Say, Lieutenant, got anything to eat?"

"None to spare, Corporal; I'm sorry. Our supplies must last out the trip. And now move down the road, please. We have to replace that tire."

Eagerly he said, "I'll fix it for you, sir. If you can let me have something to eat." He waited for a moment and then added, "Please, Lieutenant—food is damned scarce."

The officer examined him, his thin body and ragged clothing. He turned once to exchange glances with the other men in the car and then faced Gary again. He struggled to keep his face emotionless.

"All right, Corporal. We haven't too much ourselves but I dare say you need it worse than we do. Now—the tire."

"Yes, sir," he started forward. "Give me the jack."

"Stop right there! Don't approach the truck, man, you're contaminated. We haven't our suits on. We'll throw the jack out to you."

"Suits?" Gary repeated stupidly.

"Radiation suits—have to wear them in this damned place. Now about that tire. . . ."

"Yes, sir!" Gary walked around to the front of the truck and squinted at the wrecked rubber. That tire would never roll again. "Keep a sharp look-out, Lieu-

tenant. Don't want somebody to take a shot at me." He slid the jack under the front axle and began pumping. The wheel slowly rose in the air.

Gary was in high humour but he was careful not to let it show in his face. *These*, he told himself with bitter amusement, these were some of the surviving heroes from the eastern cellars. The very adroit way he had taken them in revealed their ignorance of the harsh world they were passing through, revealed how little they knew of the dangerous men who now inhabited that world. They still trusted another man. These, then, were from some sheltered place in the East, journeying westward to some point on the Mississippi. Or *across* the Mississippi. That sudden thought shocked him, stilled his fingers.

Their destination was on the other side of the river! Two trucks, each containing three men if he had judged correctly; two trucks and six men driving for the quarantine line, carrying with them their supplies and radiation suits to protect them while passing through contaminated territory. With smouldering excitement he slid the wheel off the hub and replaced it with the spare. Unscrewing the valve cap, he reversed it and jammed it down inside the valve as he let the jack drop the car. There was a faint whisper of escaping air.

He stood up. "You want the jack back, Lieutenant?"

The man hesitated, struck by a new worry. He hadn't considered that complication before allowing Gary to work on the tire and now he was unsure whether allowing him to handle it had somehow contaminated the tool. His face mirrored his uncertainty and he cursed himself for his shortsightedness. Finally he ordered, "Put it in the back . . . easy now."

"Yes, sir." Gary went around to the rear and found

the door opened for him. He peered into the darkened interior, found himself staring into the bore of the machine-gun. The gunner was seated on a packing case watching him, a cigarette hanging from his lips. The truck was loaded with similar wooden cases. Gary sniffed at the cigarette smoke.

"Toss it in," the gunner said sharply.

"Okay, bud." Gary dropped the jack on the nearest box and backed away, his eyes on the cigarette. The gunner reached out and closed the door.

"Well done, Corporal," the lieutenant called. "I shall mention this in my reports. You have been of valuable assistance to your government today."

"Thank you, sir." Gary's face was expressionless.

"The grub, Lieutenant?"

"Oh, yes." He tossed out two boxes of C-rations. "I'm sorry I can't give you more, but we are short. Just where are we, do you know?" He looked around as if expecting guideposts.

"Thank you, sir. This is Ohio—pretty close to the Indiana line. And Lieutenant, I wouldn't stay in any of the towns overnight—they'd probably gang up on you. Keep to the open country."

"Thank you, Corporal. We've already found that sound advice. And now, don't recover your weapon until we are out of range." He gunned the motor and put the truck into reverse gear, pulling it back on to the road. An impatient beat on the horn urged the other truck forward. "Good-bye and good luck."

The two vehicles rolled away.

Gary watched them go. "So long, you scurvy, son-of-a-bitch." The machine-gunner in the rear truck tossed a package of cigarettes through the broken window. Gary bent over to pick up the rations and turned to get the gun. When he straightened again the swiftly moving trucks were some distance away. He

walked along the pavement, retrieved the cigarettes and stuffed them in an inner pocket. When the vehicles vanished from sight he quickly abandoned the road and took to the field, to follow. If he had guessed right on that leaking tire, he should overtake the convoy when they stopped for the night.

The trucks were parked back-to-back in a small grove of trees. That would mean a machine-gunner sat in each cab, covering three avenues of approach. Gary studied the scene. They had stopped for the night in a small roadside park built and maintained by the state highway department, a stopping place originally installed for tourists. A gravel road curved off the highway and through the clump of green trees; there were two or three picnic tables that somehow had been overlooked in the search for firewood, a drinking fountain probably fed by a fresh-water spring, and a pair of rusty cans for trash. The gravelled path made room for a half dozen cars beneath the shading branches before completing the arc back to the highway. The trucks were but shapeless masses in the night; he might have missed them altogether had he been travelling along the paved road.

Gary waited in the underbrush on the far edge of the grove, wondering how to take the convoy.

They were green troops—they had allowed him to come this close undetected, but he knew they weren't so green as to permit him to simply walk up to the trucks. He had been lying at the edge of the grove for two hours, watching and waiting, and still he lacked a plan of action. Each cab held a man—they had betrayed themselves earlier and many times as they held matches to cigarettes. The flare of the matches revealed no other faces beside them, and although he could not be certain, he thought he could distinguish

the shapes of men lying on the ground beneath the trucks. There may be one man in the rear of each vehicle, stretched out on the boxes. Maybe. If so, that left two on the ground.

He was still there, patiently waiting an unknown time later, when a noise from one of the trucks alerted him.

The sentry of one truck put his head out of the window and called back to the other cab. Although he kept his voice low, the words carried quite clearly.

"Hey—Jackson!"

"Yeah?" The second head appeared in the opposite cab.

"What time is it? My damned watch stopped."

"Almost midnight."

"That's close enough—let's wake these guys up and turn in."

"I'm ready—damn' near asleep now."

There was a scuffling noise from the interior of the nearer truck, and hushed voices in the other. Gary crept closer. The sentries changed places in the seats of the cab with noisy movement, awakening one of the figures on the ground. The man put his head out from under the truck and spoke sharply.

"What's going on up there?"

"Midnight, Lieutenant. Changing watch."

"Well, be more quiet about it."

"Yes, sir."

The officer lay back on the ground, moved about as though he were hunting the spot where he had been sleeping, and abruptly rolled from beneath the truck. He stood up.

"I'm going to take five. Keep your eyes open."

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant walked toward the spot where Gary lay, fumbling with his clothes. Gary hugged the

ground and let him approach, waited until the man paused beside a tree. He rose up silently and smoothly when the officer's hands were occupied, and reached for him.

After an interval Gary tautly stalked into the clearing and slid under the truck, ready to open fire if he were challenged. He rooted about on the grass, sighed, and lay still. Above him the newly awakened sentry scratched a match on the dashboard to light a cigarette. Gary hugged the lieutenant's automatic under his shirt and waited for time to pass. His first act was to eliminate the other sleeping man beside him, and two were out of the way.

It required another half-hour to reach the sentry sitting behind the wheel, a tedious half-hour of creeping along the rocky ground without noise, of hugging the side of the truck and raising his body toward the window sill. He held a pebble in his hand. When he was standing upright slightly to the rear of the open window, he tossed the pebble over the truck and heard it strike the ground beyond. Clutching the barrel of the automatic, he curled his left arm around and through the window to catch the sentry on the back of the head. He caught the man before he could slump forward into the horn, and lowered his body to the seat. There was no other sound, no movement from within or from the second vehicle.

Slowly and carefully he opened the door to let himself inside. The sentry of a short while before was sleeping soundly, and then he wasn't sleeping at all. There remained only the two in the other truck.

He needed information, needed it badly if he hoped to cross the river alive. After turning over the problem in his mind, he suddenly opened the door of the truck with no attempt at concealment, and climbed out to walk back to the other cab.

A head appeared before him. "Keep quiet, dammit! You want the lieutenant on your tail?"

Gary rammed the automatic into his face. "Come out of there, slow and clean."

The face stared at him in the night, moved back to look down at the gun. "For Ch——"

"Shut up and come out—now!"

The sentry scrambled out. "Don't shoot!"

"Get your buddy out here. Make it fast."

The sentry beat on the panel of the truck and after a moment a second face appeared in the open door. "What the hell is——" He stopped, staring.

"This is going on," Gary retorted. "Come on, outside." He stood the two of them against the side of the truck, facing away from him, their hands atop their heads with fingers locked together. "Now you're going to give information or you're going to be dead ducks. Which is it going to be?"

"I don't know nothing."

"You know where you're going," Gary contradicted.

There was a moment of silent hesitation. The two exchanged glances.

Gary prodded one with the automatic. "Where?"

"There's a bridge at a place called Fort Madison, Iowa," the soldier told him sullenly. "We——"

Gary chopped him short by reversing the gun and bringing the butt down on his head. The man crumpled to the ground. His companion stared down at the unconscious form.

"The bridge at Fort Madison," Gary said smoothly, "has a hole in it a mile wide. Now I'll ask you." He stepped close to ram the barrel in the man's spine. "Where are you going?"

"It ain't Fort Madison," the other answered shakily. "It's a bridge called the Chain of Rocks, or some name

like that. It's around St. Louis someplace. They're waiting for us there."

"Who is?"

"I don't know—honest I don't. The whole damned army, I guess. We're just supposed to deliver these trucks."

"Why? What's in them?"

"Some gold. Gold bricks."

"You're lying!"

"Hold it—I'm not! Go look for yourself if you don't believe me. We had three loads of that damned gold. We lost a truck back there in the mountains somewhere."

"Lost it?"

"They jumped us—like those guys did today. The captain was in that one."

"What in the hell does the army want that gold for?"

"I don't know. We just had orders to deliver it."

Gary considered the matter, intently watching the man. "The government must be getting hard up; three trucks started out, eh? You guys are pretty green—I'm surprised you got this far. How's everybody in Washington?"

The soldier half-turned to look at him. "We ain't from Washington—we're outta Fort Knox."

"For . . ." Gary was instantly suspicious. "Then what the hell you doing this far north?"

"I don't know, fella, I didn't write the orders. The lieutenant said we come this way and follow route 50. And we was doing just that." He added bleakly, "Until you enemy agents showed up."

Gary let it pass. "What happens next—when you deliver the trucks to the bridge?"

"Well, we just drive across and join 'em, I guess."

"Did they say you could?" Gary held his breath.

"If we don't catch the plague. We was supposed to wear the monkey suits all the time, but the lieutenant said we didn't have to unless some of you ene . . . unless you guys bothered around. They're supposed to test us at the bridge and if we're clean, we can cross over." He cast another backward glance at Gary. "Me, I'm damned glad you're healthy. I don't want no plague. Have you really been around since the bombing?"

Gary nodded. "Couple of hundred miles south of Chicago when it happened." He thought of another question. "What happens now—with the lieutenant dead, I mean? Yeah—he's dead all right." The soldier had twisted around to study the other truck, seeking his companions. "All of them, except you and your buddy here—and he's in no condition to drive. What are you going to do now? *You*, I mean; what do the orders read?"

The soldier didn't answer at once. He stared at the side of the truck some inches before his face and then looked down at the man lying at his feet. He seemed to take faint hope from the question.

"Damned if I know for sure," he answered presently. "The lieutenant was shooting off his mouth all the time—I got a hazy idea what to do. And he's carrying papers; he's got the captain's stuff, too. I guess the only thing to do is beat it for the bridge and tell them you—tell them what happened."

"Can you make it by yourself?" Gary insisted. "Can you get across without the officers? Know the password or the signal?"

"There ain't none that I heard of; we just stop in the middle of the bridge and wait for them to come out to us. I told you they've been waiting for us."

Gary pursed his lips, relishing the simplicity of it.

"Are there any more coming? More trucks behind you?"

The soldier shook his head. "Not yet, not until we get there okay. If we . . . I mean, if I make it, there'll be more on the way."

"Is that a fact? This road will be crawling with them in no time at all." He thoughtfully rubbed the stubble on his face, realizing he had better shave again. "Why the devil didn't they send a column to protect you? They should have known what to expect on this side of the river."

He was answered by a bitter laugh. "Corporal, there *ain't* no column to send. Most of our men got caught above ground and died in the plague—or deserted. *We've* been living down in the hole ever since . . . and I'll bet there ain't a hundred left. Hell, mister, we've got more trucks than we got men to drive them." He lapsed into silence.

Gary backed away to glance about the grove, alert for sound or movement. Two trucks, loaded with gold ingots for a pinched government west of the Mississippi—and if these arrived safely, more to come. But two in the grove were worth a hundred others still at Knox, especially if this man should reach the river with his story. He came to a quick decision.

"I think," he said slowly, "that the lieutenant should go along; it might look better to show up with his body, just in case we are questioned. You'll find him over there in the trees."

The soldier peered around at him warily.

Gary jerked the automatic. "Go get him!" He stepped clear of the vehicle to cover the man. The trooper crossed the clearing to thrash among the underbrush and presently located the officer's body. Grunting, he carried it back to dump it in the rear of the truck, across the wooden boxes.

"Ready to roll? How about gas?"

The other nodded. "Gassed up when we stopped. We carry our own." And then he added, "Pretty slick trick with that tyre."

Gary's dry grin was lost in the darkness. "You haven't seen anything yet. What about grub and ammo? Got plenty in both trucks?"

"Yeah. In case we got separated."

"If I helped myself to one of the trucks, could you get along all right in the other one?"

"Sure. Say, are you thinking of . . . ?"

"Never mind what I'm thinking. And you'd better be telling the truth because your life may depend on it. I'm pulling out of here with this one. How's that for slickness?"

"You'll never get across . . ." He stopped, and then began again. "What for? The lieutenant's in there."

"The lieutenant will take me across. And listen to some good advice, bud—the old voice of experience himself. I've lived two hears in this damned country, and if you hope to live that long you'll have to keep your eyes and ears open, and shoot first. Don't pull any more damned fool tricks like you did tonight—and if I was you, I'd head south this fall. Got all that?"

"You can't get away with it! I'll follow you to the river and tell them—"

Gary rammed his face close and laughed. "You can follow me all you please, but you won't tell them nothing! You don't seem to get the idea, bud. You're an enemy agent, *now*." And he clipped him with a short, hard right.

Gary rolled his body aside, and then strode back to the second truck. Lifting the hood, he ripped out the distributor cap and pocketed it and then to satisfy his

mounting excitement he tore loose the wiring to the plugs and smashed the glass gasoline cup. He tried to take off the fan belt but it resisted his fingers. Dropping the hood, he reached under the truck and hauled out the dead man lying there. This one, of the party of six, was nearest his height and build. He stripped the body of its uniform and as an afterthought, removed the chain and dog tags from the man's neck.

Gary shoved aside the body of the lieutenant to examine the contents of the truck he had chosen. There were three radiation suits, the machine-gun, several dozen boxes of C-rations, red gasoline cans and the personal effects of the troopers. Satisfied, he seated himself behind the wheel.

Without lights, the truck left the roadside park and rolled on to the highway, nose to the west.

Somewhere in Illinois, Gary stopped the vehicle on a deserted highway and climbed out, cradling the machine-gun. Walking a distance from the truck, he turned and spewed it with slugs, leaving it nicked and scarred as though it had undergone a running battle. Taking off his clothes, he threw away his own identification tags and slipped the stolen chain over his head. His new name, he learned, was Forrest Moskowitz. He read the serial number over several times, striving to memorise the initial four or five digits. Satisfied, he put on the uniform. The papers carried by the late captain and lieutenant were already familiar to him—as the sole survivor, he would be expected to have read them from curiosity if nothing else. Gary was confident he could carry his new identity smoothly. There remained only the odd chance that someone at or near the bridge was familiar with Fort Knox.

He clothed the lieutenant's body in a radiation suit, donned another himself, and drove on.

The truck neared the Chain of Rocks bridge.

Two years—nearly two years since the day of his thirtieth birthday, the day of a glorious drunk and personal disaster. Two years since awakening in that broken-down hotel to find dust on the bed and death everywhere in the city. Two years since he had moved among living people with no great fear of the present or the future. Two years of dodging, hiding, stealing, killing to eat and stay alive, two years of hunting or be hunted. How many dead men lay behind him, he wondered then? How many lives had he taken to protect his own, or to gain what he wanted?

He couldn't remember their number.

But to hell with all that, to hell with the memories and the hunger and the freezing cold. Ahead lay the bridge.

He approached it slowly and cautiously, turned on to the span and comenced the long climb to the middle of the river, the truck creeping along at less than twenty miles per hour. A knot of excited panic gripped his stomach and for a brief moment he debated turning back, abandoning the truck and the sighted goal to turn and flee for the comparative safety of a known ground. Gary fought it away and drove on. Just over the arbitrary dividing line, just past that invisible point where the Illinois boundary touched Missouri, two tanks waited for him in the roadway, blocking passage with their bulk.

He pulled up short, staring into their gun muzzles. They excited him, frightened him not a little and at the same time they appealed to an almost forgotten emotion within him. *Now* he was standing under their snouts with impunity, in safety, and they again imparted the peculiar sense of friendly guns facing a common enemy. *His* guns now—almost. He climbed from the truck to lift an arm in greeting but they did

not reply. Gary leaned against the vehicle to await their next move. He wanted desperately to smoke but the suit prevented it.

After a while he heard a car come racing up the other side of the bridge. It came to a skidding halt just beyond the tanks and several clothed figures emerged, clumsily grasping hand weapons. They moved around the tanks and advanced upon him. Gary held his position, nervously alert but striving to hide any fear of them. When they were but ten feet distant the group stopped and a leader motioned with his arm. Gary obeyed by moving away from the truck, to lean on the bridge railing and watch.

The suited troopers closed in on the truck, yanking open the rear door to examine the interior and kneeling to peer underneath. They found the body of the lieutenant—with obvious surprise, the precious cargo, Gary's hijacked supplies and nothing more. Again the anonymous leader motioned and two of the troopers climbed into the truck to roll it forward across the state line. Heavy motors broke into sudden, noisy life as one of the tanks moved sluggishly aside. The truck shot past it, and the tank resumed its former position.

The remaining troops herded Gary forward.

They marched around the tanks and at an unspoken command, Gary climbed into the waiting automobile with the others pushing in behind him. The car turned about, jockeying back and forth on the bridge to return to the Missouri shore. The nearer faces in the seat peered at him curiously. The car shot forward. Gary slumped against the back of the seat, exhausted with tension. He was in! After two years of bitter struggle and constant dreaming, he had realised his ambition and crossed the river.

Chapter Eleven

AN ornate brick building flashed past his window, a building which had housed the toll-collector's offices back before a part of the world had ended; now it contained a command post with a pair of sentries before the door. They stared at the passing car, watched after it when it pulled up before a smaller and newer building a short distance down the road.

At a pressure on his arm, Gary left the car and followed the troopers toward the small building. Some one opened the steel door, pushed him in and then crowded in after him. The door was slammed and bolted from the inside. The leader made some sort of a signal and an instant later the whole ceiling seemed to open, showering down on them a thick grey fog. Gary jerked back nervously, fighting the swirling mist with ineffective fists. The man nearest him seized his arms, held him still, and then thumped his back encouragingly. At that moment he realised what it was, where he was—this was the decontamination chamber, erected to cleanse the troops returning from patrols. Or returning from the task of throwing bodies over the bridge rails.

The fog closed around him, hiding the others.

After an interval he detected a new note in the chamber and the mist began to dissipate as blowers sucked the gas away. The other men began peeling off their suits. He lifted a slow hand to open his, and was stopped.

"Hold it, buddy. Not yet. You've gotta be processed so keep it on until we get out of here."

Now what the devil did he mean by that? Gary watched them, the nervous knot again forming in his stomach. They slid out of their suits and left the building, slamming the door behind them to leave him standing there alone. Again he raised a hand and commenced undressing, noticing for the first time that his uniform didn't quite fit him, that he had a stubble of beard. Abruptly the steel door opened and a medical corpsman appeared there.

He stared at Gary professionally. "I oughtta get a medal for this," the man announced briskly. "Maybe you got the plague."

"And maybe I haven't!" Gary retorted. "Come on, get it over with. I want to get outside—this place gives me the willies."

"You don't go outside, brother—not until your tests come out. Gimme your arm."

"The hell I don't! What for?"

"The hell you don't." The soldier reached for his arm. "Blood tests, see? You might be carrying something. We gotta be damned careful." He plunged the needle into Gary's arm and drew forth a sample.

"What type blood?"

"How do I know?" Gary said with angry impatience.

"By looking at your tag, stupid." He reached out a swift hand to lift the chain hanging from Gary's neck, to read the inscription on the metal tag. "AB. Kinda rare, ain't you?"

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"AB ain't common around here chum, like in the Egyptians or the Chinese maybe." He glanced at the tag again. "You're Moskowitz, huh? Well, I've seen funnier—maybe you're an Egyptian Moskowitz."

"Get the hell out of here!" Gary was fast losing his temper, aided by a growing fear. "And bring me something to eat—I'm damned tired of C-rations."

"Okay, okay." The corpsman completed his work and left.

Gary sat down on the floor to wait and to brood. He waited a full hour, worrying about the dog tag on his neck. The stolen Moskowitz tag—and the Moskowitz blood type. He hadn't thought about that. It occurred to him suddenly that he hadn't thought about many things, little things really that seemed unimportant until they reached out to push him before a firing squad. What were they doing with the lieutenant's body? He had strangled the man and later encased the body in a radiation suit, but there were no bullet holes in the suit. What did *that* do to his carefully prepared story of ambush, with himself the only survivor?

The personnel from Knox were not supposed to remove their suits on the journey, but they had done so, believing themselves safe from contamination so long as they did not fraternise with "enemy agents." If then he admitted that the lieutenant had removed his suit en route and had been strangled by an enemy, it followed that Gary must have replaced the suit after the officer was dead. It also followed that both the officer and Gary had exposed themselves to the plague. That would be the certain end of *him*. On the other hand it was difficult to believe that the lieutenant could be strangled while wearing his suit—and there was the manufactured evidence of a bullet-scarred truck to show that the ambushers had used guns, not fingers to kill.

Bitterly, he realised he should have left the rotting officer behind. Rotting . . . the thought took form,

shaped itself into a faint hope. It might be that they would not remove the suit from the lieutenant's body.

There were other things—he didn't know the names of the people of Knox, he didn't know the history or background of Moskowitz . . . didn't so much as know the man's enlistment date. The serial numbers on the dog tag would give some clue to that, but he couldn't guess the accurate answer from the numbers. His only chance of escaping detection there lay in the fact that serial records may have been destroyed in a ravaged Washington.

The door opened and the corpsmen entered, carrying a tray.

"Another medal—you phony Egyptian!"

"I ain't no Egyptian," Gary flared, half frightened.

"I'll say you ain't. *AB* hell! You ain't no more *AB* than I am. In case anybody asks, you're a big fat round *O*. Better remember that—you might need it sometime."

"But the tag says—"

"The tag lies like a rug, chum,—but don't let it throw you. You're an early bird, ain't you?" He put down the tray. "It happened all the time, back at the beginning; they rushed them through fast and made some mistakes. I'll bet one guy out of every twenty is walking around with the wrong type on his tag—or pushing up flowers. Sloppy work, but you can't help it. Only trouble is, if you ever need a transfusion in a hurry and they pump the wrong kind into you—bingo."

"Maybe it changed," Gary suggested. "It was a long time ago."

"Nope." The soldier shook his head and grinned at Gary's ignorance. "It never changes, no more than fingerprints. You was born with *O* and you'll die with

O. Now eat up. I'll bring in water and a can pretty soon; you're stuck here until the tests prove out. Two or three days maybe."

"What for?" he asked again. "Why the tests?"

"To see if you picked up anything, stupid. If you're carrying any plague germs around, we'll soon know it." He backed away. "And I'll earn that damned medal."

"That's a hell of a note. Listen—do me a favour. Put in for a pass for me. I've been out of circulation too long."

"A pass he wants yet!"

Gary didn't get the pass—he never waited for it, never waited out the three days. He knew with certainty what those tests would reveal, knew beyond doubt that the test tubes or whatever things they used would point to his two years of wandering around the quarantined land, would shout what must be in his blood. Freedom was too near to wait three days.

He did nothing the first night, other than lie in the decontamination chamber and wait quietly. He called for and received repeated trays of food, a great quantity of water, the needed things a half-starved man would demand. And he noted with each opening and closing of the door that it was not locked from without. A single sentry stood outside, seldom at attention. They did not consider him a dangerous risk. Twice during the first night he sent out for water and once asked for more cigarettes. The sentry brought them, laid them in the doorway and retreated a few paces. Gary opened the door and hauled the things inside.

On the second day the medical corpsman brought paper and pencil and commenced questioning; he began in the routine way with Gary—or Moskowitz's

immediate and current history, but quickly moved on to the journey made by the three truckloads of gold, and what happened to them. Gary hid his relief and spun an acceptable story. He included a vivid description of the country through which he had supposedly passed, and for spite threw in mention of the thousands of people they had seen, people hospitable and otherwise.

The questioner's head jerked up in disbelief. "Huh?"

"Huh, what?" It seemed that Gary had him hooked.

"Thousands of enemy agents?"

"I don't know if they were enemy agents or not," Gary said casually, "but there were thousands of them all right. I don't mean in the cities—all the cities are dead and bombed out, we avoided those, but the little towns are full of people. Every time we passed through a whistle stop the whole damned population rushed out to greet us—just like those towns in Viet Nam I went through."

"But there *can't* be people over there, our people. They're all dead."

Gary stared at him. "Why should I lie about it?"

"Well—I dunno."

"All right. The burgs are full, believe me. Farmers in the field—a lot of the horses are dead, I guess, because I saw men pulling ploughs." He hid a grin, watching the corpsman write down what he had said. The corpsman would do more than that—he would spread it around the camp. He went on with his story, bringing it up to the point where the ambush had wiped out everyone but him and the lieutenant—and the lieutenant had died a few hours later. And say—did the lieutenant get a military funeral?

"Hell, no," the corpsman answered. "They weighted his body and dumped it in the river—ain't taking no chances."

That night, the second in the chamber, Gary escaped.

He first considered asking the sentry for milk, knowing that milk would take longer to procure, but then quickly abandoned the idea with the knowledge that the sentry might well refuse—also being aware of the difficulty. Or if he did consent to go after it he might lock the door before leaving, or he might not be gone more than five minutes at the most. Five minutes were not enough. He needed hours to be free of the area.

Instead, Gary made the usual request for water and held the door opened the slightest crack, peering into the night. He could hear no one else nearby, could smell no tobacco smoke in the air. The sentry returned with the water and stooped to place it on the doorsill—stiffening with surprise when his eyes noticed the tiny crack in the opening. Gary caught him on the back of the neck, cracking the side of his hand on the man's spinal cord. The sentry slumped. Gary thrust his head outside warily but there was no outcry. Quickly then he dragged the inert body into the chamber and stretched it out along the far wall where he had slept the night before. Within seconds he had slipped outside and locked the door behind him, to vanish instantly into the surrounding darkness, away from the river.

He counted on three to four hours. At least three hours before the guard was scheduled to be relieved.

He was wearing civilian clothes, a pair of dirty overalls and a nondescript sweater he had taken from a farmer. A couple of dollars in change, also belong-

ing to the throttled farmer, rattled around in his pocket. The farmer's unconscious body lay many miles behind in a ditch but his ancient Ford truck sped along a highway to the south. Sunrise found Gary and the stolen truck nearly fifty miles south of St. Louis and well away from the river, well outside the ten-mile military zone.

This was freedom, this was what he had waited two years to see again.

He bowled along the highway at top speed, watching the unhurried activity about the farms, the sleepy beginnings of a new day in each small town he passed. There were no suspicious faces turned his way, no armed men to greet him at the village limits, no skulking figure to waylay the noisy truck as it sped along the road. This was free country, living country. Far behind him, unknown to him, not everything was so alive. A sentry lay dead in a decontamination chamber and a medical corpsman lay dying on a hospital bed, his body turning blue. Early alarm had turned to furor when the corpsman was discovered, and a hasty quarantine had been thrown around the camp guarding the bridge. Of a sudden two paramount problems had arisen for the responsible brass: finding the escaped carrier, and disposing of a few hundred men suddenly turned "enemy agents."

Finding Gary would be the easier of the two: he would mark his own trail.

Early that afternoon he entered a theatre and sat through a double feature, suddenly discovering as he passed the theatre that capering images had been one of the things he hungered for. The double feature consisted first of a very sexy woman flinging her body around in a bathing suit, to the dismay . . . and delight . . . of every other male and female in the picture; and next of the true-blue western hero throwing

the deep-dyed villain for a loss to save the ranch. Each held him enthralled and he stayed for a second showing of the bathing suit, to emerge finally with another thought in mind. The idea wasn't so readily fulfilled, but he managed it by nightfall. His money was short, not nearly enough to eat and drink with, much less satisfy his desires. The first robbery netted him only pocket change, the second brought him a wallet. He left the town behind him and sought another.

He bought other clothes, not new ones for fear they would mark him, but second-hand garments in a shop. The farm truck was abandoned on a side street and he caught a bus, to find himself in Little Rock late that night. Little Rock held much of what he sought. Little Rock also held radios and television sets that blared forth the news, or part of the news of what had happened. An enemy agent was loose west of the river. He sat in a bar and listened to the bulletins repeated every fifteen minutes.

There was an interest in the bulletins, faces turned and ears listened, but after each one the faces went back to their preoccupations. There was talk, speculation, idle threats as to what *they* would do to the son-of-a-bitch if he came *here*, but their most immediate interest lay in the liquor at hand and the companion at the table.

"Hell," Gary told the bartender, "he'll never get this far. The soldiers will catch him."

The bartender agreed. "They always do. Them soldiers are all right joes—I'm for 'em. They certainly changed things around here. You know what *this state* was before the change."

Gary didn't, but nodded as if he did. He guessed that the bartender might be referring to the subject nearest his heart—the liquor trade—but he didn't dare reveal his ignorance by asking. He couldn't recall hav-

ing been in Arkansas before, nor did he remember anything said about the place. Furthermore he didn't give a damn.

He left the establishment and wandered along the street, watching the neon lights and the blinking electric signs. Those too he had missed, longed for without stopping to think about it, and their brilliant flickerings fell across his eyes like memories. There weren't many cars, due to the petrol rationing, but the sounds of those passing was sweet on his ears, and even though the odour of burnt petrol stung his nostrils as he stepped from behind a bus, he liked it. This was living in the way he wanted to live. This was living again.

It wasn't hard to find a girl willing to share the contents of the wallet with him. She cooked breakfast for him the following morning and he was so delighted with the process and the deep sense of contentment, with the feeling of being at home with her—despite the shabby apartment and her lack of taste in dress and speech—that he asked to stay a few days. She was more than willing. She made a transparent kind of love to him that satisfied his long starvation diet—love that did not wait on an hour or a place; he tried to read her newspapers but she would interrupt, he fingered a few of her worn books but she plucked them from his hands and threw them across the room. She did not fool him—he knew it would stop when the wallet was empty, but meanwhile the wallet was not empty and she was a pleasing torrent after a two-year drought. He rumbled the false blonde hair and let her have her way.

He did not think to switch on the radio because now that he was *here*, what people said on the air *here* did not arouse curiosity or desire within him; and because her continual chatter was all that he desired in

human speech at the moment. Hers was a friendly voice and a loving one; it satisfied him. So he did not hear the later bulletins and did not know the new tone the broadcasts had taken.

Gary spent a lazy, spendthrift afternoon walking about the city and buying things he both did and didn't need. For once the advertisements didn't annoy him and he purchased a new razor because a colourful sign told him he could be a smoother rooster; he found no Mother Mahaffey Candy Kitchen, but bought a box of chocolates for the girl waiting at the apartment. Stopping at half a dozen stores, loading his arms with groceries only for the pleasure of buying things, Gary wandered back to the apartment just before sunset. He twisted the knob with his fingers and shoved open the door with one knee, his voice raised to shout for the woman. Gary stopped short in the doorway to stare at the twisted, writhing body on the floor. She was clad only in a slip, her reddish-purple body ugly with approaching asphyxiation. She raised an accusing finger at him, trying to gasp out a few words. Behind her the radio was talking. He dropped the bundles from his arms and turned to run, forgetting even to close the door in his hasty flight.

Another bus, still southward because it was the first one out of the city.

He thought he had been in Shreveport before but he couldn't be sure—that other life had been so long ago that the memories of it sometimes played tricks on him. He might have been there some years ago, or it may have been only a troop train passing through. But the memory of that tortured girl on the floor was no vague trick. It would not leave him, despite his efforts to wipe it away. It remained with him during the tedious bus ride south, haunted him as he stalked the brilliantly lit streets of Shreveport, a memory which

burned bright and bitter. She lay on the floor, twisted, struggling for breath, accusing him with a barbed finger.

He couldn't stay anywhere now, couldn't stay longer than a day. Just one day! Wherever he paused, small town or bustling city, overnight at some farmhouse, he could stay but one day or his past would overtake him. That farm family—the Hoffmans—had not been affected by his presence for the same reasons they had lived through the initial exposure. They were immune, he was immune. These people living west of the river were not, and he was killing them. Carrying death to the people in the bus, the stores, those he jostled on the streets, the bartender, the girl in her shabby apartment.

Shreveport had lost the magic it once had known.

He drank by himself, off in a corner as though a few empty tables would erect a wall between him and the others, ate at a small and nearly deserted restaurant that served him cheap unsatisfactory food. At the opposite end of the counter a taxi driver nursed a cup of coffee, dawdling over a newspaper. Gary turned his eyes away from the paper—there was no picture of him, they didn't have that, but he knew after one glance the headlines concerned him. With that paper, there were many more men than soldiers after him now. Everyone was watching for him. Some of them would see him, but not know him until it was too late. Damn that schoolteacher! He had called the turn with an accurate deadliness.

This then was the brightly glowing life he had wanted west of the river, life filled with women, food and drink that could not be had in the contaminated area. This was what he had risked his life to gain—and he could stay here one day.

"They'll get the bastard all right!"

Gary jerked around, brought his attention on the cabby. "Yeah," he said. "Sure." He put down money on the counter and walked out.

So he was a bastard to be hunted and shot, simply because he wanted to live with them instead of in that empty wasteland to the east. They wanted to kill him because he should have died long ago and didn't—wanted to kill him if they could find him. The laugh was on them. He actually held them in the hollow of his hand; he had only to cough in the cab driver's face, to touch or kiss the waitress, to throw his arm about the shoulders of a drunken barfly and he could slay them while they were hunting him. But he could stay only one day. Tomorrow they would discover he had been there.

Had been there. The taxi stood at the kerb, motor running.

Gary turned his head to look back through the restaurant window, to see the cabby still buried in his paper. The girl was bringing him a second coffee. Gary stepped off the kerb and walked around the vehicle to slide under the wheel. He released the brake and put the car into low gear, moving off slowly and quietly to avoid attention of the driver. When he was a block away he changed gears and pushed the throttle to the floor, scooting along the nearly deserted street. A cross-town thoroughfare claimed his attention and he turned west, thinking to flee still further from the river. By this time those trailing him would believe him going steadily south.

He found the western route closed. A roadblock had been thrown across the highway and two or three cars were lined up there, undergoing an inspection by uniformed police. Without changing speed he turned off on a side road and drove north, striving to give the impression such had been his route.

He continued north until he came to an intersecting road, and pivoted toward the city once more. Back in Shreveport he directed the cab south, having described a complete circle from his earlier start, only to find a similar roadblock on the highway to Alexandria and Baton Rouge. He stopped well back from the barrier where police were inspecting the passengers of a cross-country bus, and turned around.

The routes to the west and south were closed to him—the plague scare had snowballed that quickly to those dimensions. Escape to the north might be open, on the theory that he would not return that way, but again he would find barriers thrown up on the southern outskirts of Little Rock. The girl lay on the apartment floor in Little Rock—the last apparent clue to him. There would be more in Shreveport tomorrow or the next day. A waitress, another bartender, more . . .

Escape only to the east?

Driving cautiously, Gary sent the cab across the Red River into Bossier City. No one stopped him. He continued on, seeking out and finding the federal route to Monroe and the Mississippi. There were no roadblocks that way. Not yet.

Not yet . . . but there would be soon. As soon as that cabdriver reported his stolen vehicle, as soon as the police manning the roadblocks reported the cab had not gone west or south. Suddenly the cab stuck out like a yellow thumb on a bare highway. He had to get rid of it.

The opportunity came shortly after dawn next morning.

She was a middle-aged woman driving an old Ford, driving it slowly and carefully along her lane. Gary slowed the stolen cab and fell in behind her, watching the manner of her driving, noting that her speed never

exceeded a steady, careful thirty miles an hour. A cautious, lonely woman driving in a lonely dawn, intent on some distant destination. She had pulled over on the far right side of the road to permit him to pass, and was taking quick peeks at the cab in her mirror.

Gary shoved down on the accelerator and shot around her, to swing directly in front of the Ford and apply the brakes. She obediently slowed, nervously gauging her distance by watching his bumper and tail-lights. He slackened speed again, dropping well below her accustomed thirty and was satisfied to see the uncertainty on her face. She tried to fall well behind him but he kept his foot on the brake and stayed just ahead of her. Finally, when the two vehicles were doing less than ten miles an hour, he jerked to a complete stop. Her reflexes were not quick enough and the Ford piled into the rear of the cab.

Gary slid out from under the wheel, leaving the motor running and the door open, to walk back and inspect the damage. She was beside him in an instant, berating him for his poor driving and decrying the damage to her own car. Without a word he seized her arm and pulled her forward, to place her on the front seat of the cab. She stared at him, speechless then with surprise and growing anger. He left her there, ran back to the Ford and jumped in. Before she could recover her wits and step down to the pavement he had backed the Ford away from the tangle of bumpers and shot forward, curving out and around the stalled cab with a rich burst of speed. The woman screamed at him as he sped by. The old car would do no more than fifty, wide open, but he slammed his foot to the boards and held it there until the yellow taxi and wildly gesticulating woman had fallen from sight.

Gary slowed to a leisurely thirty, secure in the belief that the cautious woman would not attempt to

close the gap between them. Plus the necessary amount of time she would need before continuing in the cab—she would undoubtedly waste many minutes, debating the honesty of driving off in the strange vehicle.

The high-pitched sound of a diving plane caught his ear: Gary twisted the wheel and savagely nosed the car over into the nearer ditch, to leap clear and run for the fields as soon as the Ford had come to rest. At the fence he stopped. The plane was several miles behind him, back along the highway he had just traversed and it was not coming his way. He wandered back to the road, staring into the distance.

The aircraft's motors were screaming again and he found it just as it was pulling out of a dive. As he watched, the plane climbed into the sky, snapped around in another circling approach, and dived at the highway once more. Quite clearly he could hear the rattle of machine-guns. The ship plummeted below the horizon and was hidden for only a moment, before tilting its nose for the climb. It made one last pass at the target while Gary stood there, watching, and then stayed in the sky to aimlessly circle the object, waiting.

The cabdriver would be annoyed at the loss of his vehicle.

Gary backed the Ford on to the road and hurried eastward toward the river, toward the only place of safety that he knew. He hoped the occupants of the plane would not notice his car. There was no shred of doubt *now* that his presence had been detected in Shreveport.

The river lay wide and dark ahead of him, moving along listlessly with a whispering nothing that wasn't

quite sound and yet was not silence. The real silence lay on the other side, a silence so complete it was a tangible thing that could be held in the hand. A loud, hurtful silence. Gary lay motionless, frozen in the marshy grasses, his eyes searching for the black silhouette of a sentry against the night sky. They knew he was here somewhere now, knew that he had entered the forbidden ten-mile zone, knew with certainty that he was hiding in some secret place between the wrecked taxi and the river. They even knew where he was going, and would have denied him the right to go back to the silence.

Gary lay still, hating the silence and the river.

There was no other choice for him if he wanted to go on living beyond this moment and this hour, and that knowledge angered him. He felt a burning hatred of the choice, of the narrowness of it and of the hard necessity for making it. He could spring to his feet now and shout his defiance of the west—to die in the next second, or he could go back across the line of quarantine—and what? The river was a tormenting barrier that divided the nation in halves, unequal halves in which unequal lives were played out on a stage of poverty or plenty. For many—food, drink, chocolates, radio, sensation, gasoline, money, neon, flesh, sleep, peace. For some—be quick or be dead, starve slowly or die quickly by violence. And so common a thing as a river was the line of bitter division.

The black and almost shapeless mass of a prowling sentry moved against the stars.

Gary stopped breathing, watching the dim figure stalk past him, watching him out of sight. He counted a hundred while waiting for any others that might be following the sentry and then rose up on hands and knees to edge toward the water. A rock turned under his knee and he froze to the sand, watching and listen-

ing. Slowly then, feeling his way with his senses as much as his fingers, he wormed toward the river's edge, on the alert for trip wires. One outstretched hand came down in water, causing a minute splash. After a taut, silent moment of listening he lowered his naked body into the river and moved sluggishly away from the Louisiana shore.

He swam for one of the tiny spits of land he had seen in midstream while reconnoitring in the early evening, swam and floated for any of the islands that would give him a brief rest before pushing on to the silence beyond. The hatred still churned within him, hatred now for his own bitter futility and silly hopes that he could live like a man again. Hatred for the injustice that had been done him after two years of watchful waiting and crafty planning; he had succeeded in crossing the forbidden river only to have his triumph hurled in his face, and now he was literally crawling back again with nothing left to him but his life, a naked and defenceless body returning to the dead silence.

He pushed on, increasing the bite of his strokes.

For a flashing instant he wished he could have spread the disease beyond stopping, could have run free through hundreds of towns and villages spewing a choking death as he ran. He wished he could have pulled the smug and stupid western states down to his own level by carrying the plague to the mountains, could have shown them what really lay on the eastern side of the river.

Gary paddled on in the darkness until he felt a mixture of mud and sand beneath his feet. Pulling himself out of the water, he got to his feet and turned to shake an angry fist at the Louisiana shore.

"You sonsabitches!"

The farm woman in the riddled taxi would have ap-

preciated that; the anonymous man whose body had been hurled into the frozen creek might even have grinned with the humour of it. Clumsy Harry, in his ignorant haste to crawl the cable, would have laughed out loud.

Chapter Twelve

THE long sparse sliver of land jutted out into the blue-green waters of the Gulf, tiny swells running up to foam on the baking sandy beach. That alone had not changed. The Florida sun was hot and uncomfortable in midsummer.

Gary pawed through the charred remains of the old fisherman's cabin, seeking some slight clue to the fate of its occupants, something to indicate how long ago they had departed—and in what manner. He wanted desperately to know how long ago the familiar shack had burned to the ground.

He walked along the glaring white shore-line and stared out to sea, remembering how he and Oliver had fished there, how Sally had watched a sail which was quite invisible to them beating across the Gulf. Their old mail truck was gone, vanished completely with no remaining sign of how it had left. The ruins of the cabin still held the cooking stove, a mass of wrecked and useless metal now that was rapidly rusting away; that and some miscellaneous scrap which had not survived the fire in any recognisable form. A part of the wooden causeway to the mainland had been broken up and carried away, or burned on the spot. Other parts of it sagged with rotten, collapsing timbers. The wind, the rain and the water had destroyed all traces of human passage other than his own fresh footprints.

Oliver was gone, Sally gone—the baby gone. Where?

He kicked angrily at the charred wood and realised that the initial advantage of wintering here was no longer an advantage—it had now become a definite, deadly liability. Too many of the survivors were moving down from the North to escape the punishing winters, too many of them had discovered the warm sands and the seas filled with food. He knew that those who still survived *this* year were the deadliest, the hard core of a savage, steadily dwindling life east of the Mississippi. He stopped his pacing to count and frown. *This* year was . . . what?

The fifth year? Five years since the bombs fell? In which of those years, then, had strangers found the tiny cabin, sacked it, burned it?

His bare foot came down on an artificial something which dug into his skin and he bent over to examine it, pry it from the sands which half buried it. The wooden link chain he had carved and given to Sally . . . for Christmas, one of those years ago.

Abruptly, Gary quit the island, conscious of his exposed position.

Chapter Thirteen

He had to find something to eat.

Three days without food were racking his stomach with pain, causing his guts to rumble and ache. The air of the cave was foul and dead from his refuse, blurring his wits and creating a dangerous drowsiness. A bucket for drinking water in the rear of the cave contained a scant half-inch of liquid—he could make that stretch another day if need be, but he had to have something to eat soon. The last of the few edible roots he had ripped from the frozen ground were gone and if he delayed longer, he would be too weak and dulled to fight.

Gary picked up his .22 rifle and crawled to the mouth of the cave to search the snow-covered plain.

In earlier years he had favoured the shotgun or the heavier rifle, along with many men who wanted or needed the greater distance and more powerful shell. But other men who clung stubbornly to those heavier rifles were no longer alive. The crack of a heavy rifle carries a long distance—too long a distance across the silent, watchful land. The crack of a gun meant *man*, and a man fired only to bring down food. He had quickly discovered what a smaller gun could do, discovered that it carried a far less betraying noise but, if he were near enough, could bring down a man just as easily. Gary let the other hunters with heavy rifles stalk the game and reveal their presence—and then eliminated them with the .22. There was so little food

to be had that no one hesitated to close another mouth.

The plain before him was clear, white and bright with fresh-fallen snow. Nothing moved across his vision.

He carefully parted the brush and wriggled through the mouth of the cave, pausing every few inches to look and listen and sniff the air. The hillside was barren of life or movement as he emerged into the open, and he rose to his knees the better to search the field below and the rising slope of the hill behind him. A man had very nearly killed him there, three or four years before. The man had lain for days above the cave mouth waiting for him to emerge, slashing down with a rusted bayonet as his head and neck protruded through the opening. His only mistake was that he was too slow, his long hunger robbing his mind and muscles of concerted action. Gary caught the hand that held the bayonet and yanked him down. Afterwards he strung the hill with concealed wires.

Moving guardedly down the hill, he paused to look back at his revealing tracks in the snow. They disclosed his hiding-place, advertised his presence, but there was nothing he could do about it now. It would mean the use of extra caution when returning to the cave, but meanwhile the snow would also reveal any other living thing that moved, would reveal an intruder. Snow usually brought into the open what few rabbits that remained, snow betrayed the tracks and trails of chipmunk, grey squirrel, field mice—anything edible. He set traps when he could; ammunition was scarce, valuable. He had managed to loot and steal barely enough to last him through the winter.

At the base of the hill Gary settled down against the white frozen ground, unmoving, listening, his taut

nostrils held to the wintry air. There was nothing, no one beside himself. A part of him hungered for the past when there had been others, other men and women moving around without danger to themselves so long as they took reasonable precautions. He liked to remember a winter and a farmhouse in Wisconsin, a family who lived in the old familiar way, a radio, a little girl. And three meals a day. That had been a long time ago, many years ago when he was younger and ate more regularly than he did now. *Now* he counted himself fortunate when he had something to eat two or three times in the same week and *now* that enforced hunger was leaving its marks on his body. *Now* he bitterly resented a competing mouth, and that other mouth resented his.

The snowy plain remained empty and silent, dead. An old concrete highway crossed the middle of it, crumbling away.

There had been but one car on that highway in the past . . . how many years? Perhaps ten? How long had it been since he had awakened in that dimly remembered hotel to find the world poisoned around him? How long since the winter on the Florida beach, that other winter in the Wisconsin farmhouse, the brief, unhappy excursion across the Mississippi into the land of the living? All of ten years, surely. But there had been a car creeping along that vacant highway since then, since he had taken to living in the cave. A heavily armoured truck that reminded him of the mail truck, that rumbled through the valley searching for someone, anyone. The noise of the approaching motor had excited him, made him want to rush down to it, but common sense forced him to hide in the brush and watch it pass. It finally vanished into the distant afternoon sunlight and had not come back.

There was nothing on the plain. He stood up from his cramped position and slowly moved around the base of the hill, rifle at the ready.

A brook, doubtless frozen now, wound among the rocks on the far side of the hill and that was his immediate goal, for animals—and sometimes men—stopped there to drink. A few scattered trees gave scant cover as he neared it and he dropped to his belly, searching the area for tracks. There would be no man-tracks here, only those of animals. A man would have smelled the promised snow the night before, would have lain up on the hillside to observe the water hole or would have hidden himself in the trees overhead.

Gary could see nothing among the trees and directed his eyes toward the hill, raising his nostrils to the air. There were no tell-tale odours; ground and wind alike were bare. Approaching the frozen stream, he studied the snow but it was smooth and without marks. There was no game there.

In the far distance a gun boomed, vibrating the air.

Startled, surprised and yet pleased, he dropped quickly to the ground and searched the horizon.

It had been a medium rifle of some kind—the sound was too far off for easy identification. They had not been aware of him, else they wouldn't have fired at that distance. The thought of someone else nearby, of possible food there for the taking, quickened the pangs of hunger in his stomach. He waited only long enough to scan the fields around and behind him, to see if another man had heard the shot and was moving to investigate, before leaping to his feet. Gary set off at a fast trot for the white horizon, the world empty about him.

The sound of the gun had seemed to come from somewhere near the town—always a deadly trap.

Men still loved towns, were still fascinated by them,

still dreamed of them. Uncautious men sometimes visited the towns and died in them—the prey of others who waited there and waylaid them. A few who were wiser, more experienced like Gary, often waited outside the towns for the unwary visitor and stopped them in their tracks before they could enter. Once they entered they fared no better. But sometimes a town was actually empty and remained that way because men in the vicinity only thought there were others within.

Two hours of moving swiftly across the snow brought Gary near the town. Suddenly there, he found the new trail.

He crouched down again, making himself a small and almost unnoticeable hump in the snow as he studied the prints of the man who had passed that way. It had been a small person, light of weight and light of step—short and measured paces. Surprisingly, the shoes were in fair repair. He was evidently well-fed and clear of mind because his steps marched the ground without faltering. The right foot was sunk a trifle deeper than the left, indicating perhaps that the traveller was carrying something on that side. He had made no effort to cover his tracks.

Gary pursed his lips. Another trap.

Only the dumb, the unskilled or the over-eager would follow the inviting footprints of the well-fed traveler. Only a desperately starving man would rush headling after the steps, seeking their wealthy owner. He would never live to find him of course. The trail would lead into a town, or the tracker would circle around and double back on his own tracks to wait for the unlucky man following them. Well-fed men stayed that way by living on the hopes of those whose misfortune it was to have trailed them.

These footprints led into the town.

Gary crept nearer and stretched out flat on his belly to study the place. Nothing moved along its streets and there was no betraying curl of smoke from any chimney. An hour went by, and then another. He heard no sound of moving doors, no scraping of shoes on wood, no noise whatever. Toward noon the wind shifted, bringing the smell of the town to him and also bringing the promise of more snow. Carefully he raised his head to sniff the wind. There was no odour of fresh blood, of newly killed game. The firing of the rifle had been but a part of the trap.

The well-fed traveller, new to this region, had journeyed across the plain and left his visible marks behind him. He had fired the rifle to attract attention of any who might be in the vicinity and was now lying in ambush for anyone who stupidly followed. Gary searched the area around him but there was no one other than himself reaching for the bait.

He waited without movement for the snow that was coming.

In mid-afternoon it began to fall, lightly at first and then the flakes grew heavier and larger, falling with a steadiness that indicated it would continue for some time. It was not too cold. The clouded sky darkened and shortly before the unseen sunset a heavy fall began in earnest. The lump he made on the ground was soon blanketed over, merging into the white surrounding night. From a distance—the distance to the nearest building—his body was no more than a shapeless bulge in the snow.

Patiently, Gary waited for sight or sound or smell of the bait.

The scent brought him fully awake.

The snow had long since stopped and the utter darkness of late night engulfed the world, leaving

only that faint illumination close to the ground. Gary had been dozing, almost sleeping with his eyes warily open and his face twisted to catch the vagrant drift of wind, when the scent came. It floated to him downwind from the town and he shut his eyes in an effort to force identification. There was no surface memory to name it, no quick cataloguing to identify the scent displayed by the bait. It remained elusive, tantalizing.

He recognised it as none of the variety of clothes or skins man now wore to cover his body, none of the combustibles used for fire, no possible kind of food he had ever smelled or sampled. It was not the peculiar odorous fumes given off by that lone truck traversing the highway, nor was it of any animal across the face of the silent land. The scent had come suddenly, as if emerging from a doorway, and after a few brief moments it had gone away again, as if behind a closed door. Oddly, there had been no mingling scents, no accompanying smell of leather or wool clothing, no smoke of tobacco, nothing but *it* alone.

Then, in the next half hour, came wood smoke.

Gary continued to watch and wait but the smoke was invisible in the night air. The peculiar scent did not come again.

He realised it would be foolish to wait until dawn for then he would only retreat from the town; if anything was to be gained, if he was to go in after the bait at all, he would have to do it now under cover of darkness. And if the bait *knew* he was waiting, the queer scent and the wood smoke were designed to draw him in quickly. If it did not know, it was sheer carelessness. Gary listened only a moment longer to his demanding stomach, and moved forward.

Rising up from the ground he crept nearer the town, taking care not to dislodge the snow clinging to his back. The smell of smoke grew stronger as he ap-

proached the buildings and presently he located the source, the tumbling chimney of an old brick house situated on the very edge of the field he was crossing. Briefly thankful that he did not have to enter the town proper, he came up close to the house, circled it, watched it, listened to it.

At the door he found prints in the snow, prints placed there since the fall had ceased. They were small, narrow prints of bare feet—much smaller than the shoes which had left the trail the day before. Gary backed away from them, crept around to the far side of the house again and paused at the chimney. The bricks were warm, absorbing the heat of the crackling fire within. Presently he detected another sound, a fainter one that after long minutes of study revealed itself as boiling water. A fire in the fireplace and a pot of boiling water—and who would prepare a meal in the dead of night? Who would betray themselves with wood smoke, who would stand barefoot in the snow and let that strange scent mingle with the wind?

Moving cautiously along to a boarded-up window, Gary put his nostrils to the cracks.

Fire, warmth, excretion, no discernible odour from the bubbling pot—and very strongly, that puzzling scent.

A woman wearing perfume.

Abruptly there was a movement within the room and he fell to the ground, poorly covered because the snow no longer clung to him. He readied the rifle and waited.

Very slowly, very cautiously the door opened again and he knew those naked feet were standing in the doorway once more, perhaps stepping out into the snow itself so that she might better search the field where he had lain—and so that he might gain a better

view and scent of her. The bait was quite aware that he had followed, and had prepared herself accordingly.

He inched along silently toward the corner of the house, working a heavy-handle knife out of his belt and stopping just out of sight at the corner until she should close the door again, until those naked feet should return to the fireplace for warmth. Until her back was turned and she was off guard. Gary flung a swift glance around to search for possible movement—he was convinced the town was empty, else something would have happened when she first exposed herself. He and a strange woman, alone in the town, alone in the loud silence—how long had it been since that last occurred?

He snapped to attention. There was a soft whisper of sound as the door closed, the faint slap of her bare feet moving across the floor.

He jumped from his crouch at the corner of the house and sped for the door, holding the knife by its long wicked blade. He knew where she would be, knew she would be coming to a stop just before the fireplace, her back to him. With a leap and a swing of his foot he kicked the door open, threw the reversed knife at the same instant and dropped prone across the sill, to prevent the door from closing on the rebound. The hilt thudded against the back of her skull.

The woman fell without sound escaping her lips, her rifle clattering to the floor beside the limp body.

Again Gary swung around to search the street and the town behind him, but nothing stirred. He scrambled inside, shut and barred the door. Crossing over to the woman, he seized the rifle and emptied it of its ammunition, tossing the now useless weapon at her feet. Finally, stepping over her prone body, he spilled

the kettle of boiling water on to the fire, dousing the tell-tale heat and smoke.

Only then did he step back to look at her.

Her clothing had been neatly piled beside the fireplace, her shoes and a heavy black bag rested on the floor beside them. Gary moved swiftly over to the bag, seized his knife from the floor and slit a long gash in its side. The raw, partly frozen remains of a rabbit tumbled through the slit and he promptly scooped it up, to sink his teeth into the cold flesh. Following the exit of the rabbit, a thin trickle of sparkling glass beads dribbled out of the bag. Astonished, Gary dug his fingers into the interior and pulled out a fistful of the things, shiny pebbles that gleamed dully in the darkened room.

He moved across to the woman's body, turned her over on her back to stare down into her quiet face.

She was *much* older than nineteen now.

After a while he went to the door and got snow to rub in her face, to bring her back to consciousness. While he waited for her to revive, gently massaging her head and the back of her neck, he speculated on their future together. She could be of high value in the struggle to stay alive, could be the most tempting bait possible to trap men—as she had only recently demonstrated. She could be of very great use to him. And if she did her job well, perhaps he would forgive her the kettle of boiling water she had prepared. And there was *that* angle—it wouldn't be safe for him to let her grow hungry again.

He glanced down into her face, seeing her lids flutter with the slow return of consciousness. Gary reflected that he'd have to find a new place to live—she'd certainly object to the cave. He grinned at the girl but it was lost in his heavy beard.

Her eyes were the same wide, brilliant blue they

had been the first time he'd seen them, her face the same frightened image he had first known. Only her body had changed in the ten years.

"Hello, nineteen . . . remember me?"

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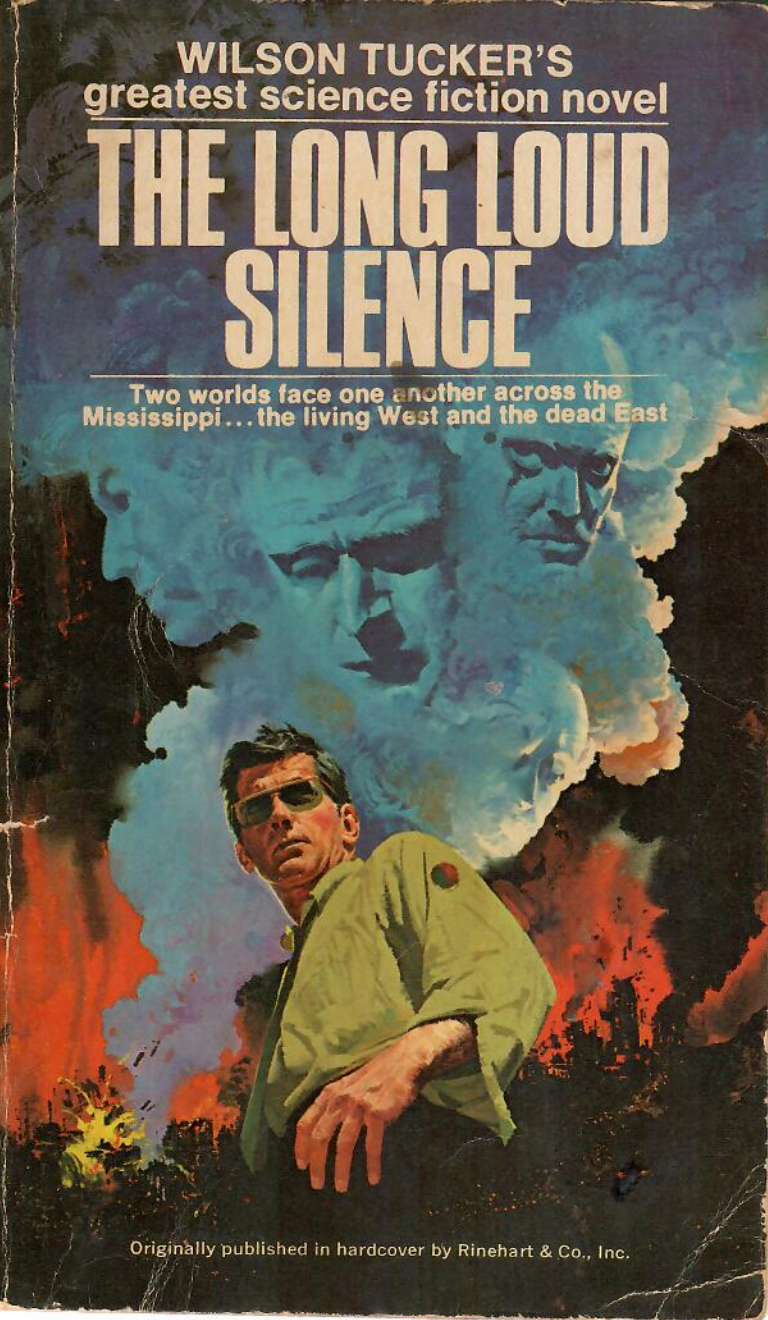
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