

Night Before Battle

At this time we were working in a shell smashed house that overlooked the Casa del Campo in Madrid. Below us a battle was being fought. You could see it spread out below you and over the hills, could smell it, could taste the dust of it, and the noise of it was one great slithering sheet of rifle and automatic rifle fire rising and dropping, and in it came the crack of the guns and the bubbly rumbling of the outgoing shells fired from the batteries behind us, the thud of their bursts, and then the rolling yellow clouds of dust. But it was just too far to film well. We had tried working closer but they kept sniping at the camera and you could not work.

The big camera was the most expensive thing we had and if it was smashed we were through. We were making the film on almost nothing and all the money was in the cans of film and the cameras. We could not afford to waste film and you had to be awfully careful of the cameras.

The day before we had been sniped out of a good place to film from and I had to crawl back holding the small camera to my belly, trying to keep my head lower than my shoulders, hitching along on my elbows, the bullets whocking into the brick wall over my back and twice spurting dirt over me.

Our heaviest attacks were made in the afternoon, God knows why, as the fascists then had the sun at their backs, and it shone on the camera lenses and made them blink like a helio and the Moors would open up on the flash. They knew all about helios and officers' glasses, from the Riff and if you wanted to be properly sniped, all you had to do was use a pair of glasses without shading them adequately. They could shoot too, and they had kept my mouth dry all day.

In the afternoon we moved up into the house. It was a fine place to work and we made a sort of a blind for the camera on a balcony with the broken latticed curtains; but, as I said, it was too far.

It was not too far to get the pine studded hillside, the lake and the outline of the stone farm buildings that disappeared in the sudden smashes of stone dust from the hits by high explosive shells, nor was it too far to get the clouds of smoke and dirt that thundered up on the hill crest as the bombers droned over. But at eight hundred to a thousand yards the tanks looked like small mud-colored beetles bustling in the trees and spitting tiny flashes and the men behind them were toy men who lay flat, then crouched and ran, and then dropped to run again, or to stay where they lay, spotting the hillside as the tanks moved on. Still we hoped to get the shape of the battle. We had many close shots and would get others with luck and if we could get the sudden fountainings of earth, the puffs of shrapnel, the rolling clouds of smoke and dust lit by the yellow flash and white blossoming of grenades that is the very shape of battle we would have something that we needed.

So when the light failed we carried the big camera down the stairs, took off the tripod, made three loads, and then one at a time, sprinted across the fire-swept corner of the Paseo Rosales into the lee of the stone wall of the stables of the old Montana Barracks. We knew we had a good place to work and we felt cheerful. But we were kidding ourselves plenty that it was not too far.

"Come on let's go to Chicote's," I said when we had come up the hill to the Hotel Florida.

But they had to repair a camera, to change film and seal up what we had made so I went alone. You were never alone in Spain and it felt good for a change.

As I started to walk down the Gran Via to Chicote's in the April twilight I felt happy, cheerful and excited. We had worked hard, and I thought well. But walking down the street alone, all my elation died. Now that I was alone and there was no excitement, I knew we had been too far away and any fool could see the offensive was a failure. I had known it all day but you are often deceived by hope and optimism. But remembering how it

looked now, I knew this was just another blood bath like the Somme. The people's army was on the offensive finally. But it was attacking in a way that could do only one thing: destroy itself. And as I put together now what I had seen all day and what I had heard, I felt plenty bad.

I knew in the smoke and din of Chicote's that the offensive was a failure and I knew it even stronger when I took my first drink at the crowded bar. When things are all right and it is you that is feeling low a drink can make you feel better. But when things are really bad and you are all right, a drink just makes it clearer. Now, in Chicote's it was so crowded that you had to make room with your elbows to get your drink to your mouth. I had one good long swallow and then someone jostled me so that I spilled part of the glass of whisky and soda. I looked around angrily and the man who had jostled me laughed.

"Hello fish face," he said.

"Hello you goat."

"Let's get a table," he said. "You certainly looked sore when I bumped you."

"Where did you come from?" I asked. His leather coat was dirty and greasy, his eyes were hollow and he needed a shave. He had the big Colt automatic that had belonged to three other men that I had known of, and that we were always trying to get shells for, strapped to his leg. He was very tall and his face was smoke darkened and grease smudged. He had a leather helmet with a heavy leather padded ridge longitudinally over the top and a heavily padded leather rim.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Casa del Campo," he said, pronouncing it in a sing-song mocking way we had heard a page boy use in calling in the lobby of a hotel in New Orleans one time and still kept as a private joke.

"There's a table," I said as two soldiers and two girls got up to go. "Let's get it."

We sat at this table in the middle of the room and I watched him raise his glass. His hands were greasy and the forks of both thumbs black as graphite from the back spit of the machine gun. The hand holding the drink was shaking.

"Look at them," he put out the other hand. It was shaking too. "Both the same," he said in that same comic lilt. Then, seriously, "You been down there?"

"We're making a picture of it."

"Photograph well?"

"Not too."

"See us?"

"Where?"

"Attack on the farm. Three twenty-five this afternoon."

"Oh, yes."

"Like it?"

"Nope."

"Me either," he said. "Listen the whole thing is just as crazy as a bedbug. Why do they want to make a frontal attack against positions like those? Who in hell thought it up?"

"An S. O. B. named Largo Caballero," said a short man with thick glasses who was sitting at the table when we came over to it. "The first time they let him look through a pair of field glasses he became a general. This is his masterpiece."

We both looked at the man who spoke. Al Wagner, the tank man, looked at me and raised what had been his eyebrows before they were burnt off. The little man smiled at us.

"If anyone around here speaks English you're liable to get shot Comrade," Al said to him.

"No," said the little short man. "Largo Caballero is liable to be shot. He ought to be shot."

"Listen Comrade," said Al. "Just speak a little quieter will you? Somebody might overhear you and think we were with you."

"I know what I'm talking about," said the short man with the very thick glasses. I looked at him carefully. He gave you a certain feeling that he did.

"Just the same it isn't always a good thing to say what you know," I said. "Have a drink?"

"Certainly," he said. "It's all right to talk to you. I know you. You're all right."

"I'm not *that* all right," I said. "And this is a public bar."

"A public bar is the only private place there is. Nobody can hear what we say here. What is your unit, Comrade?"

"I've got some tanks about eight minutes from here on foot," Al told him. "We are through for the day and I have the early part of this evening off."

"Why don't you ever get washed?" I said.

"I plan to," said Al. "In your room. When we leave here. Have you got any mechanic's soap?"

"No."

"That's all right," he said. "I've got a little here with me in my pocket that I've been saving."

The little man with the thick lensed glasses was looking at Al intently.

"Are you a party member, Comrade?" he asked.

"Sure," said Al.

"I know Comrade Henry here is not," the little man said.

"I wouldn't trust him then," Al said. "I never do."

"You bastid," I said. "Want to go?"

"No," Al said. "I need another drink very badly."

"I know all about Comrade Henry," the little man said. "Now let me tell you something more about Largo Caballero."

"Do we have to hear it?" Al asked. "Remember I'm in the people's army. You don't think it will discourage me do you?"

"You know his head is swelled so badly now he's getting sort of mad. He is Prime Minister and War Minister and nobody can even talk to him anymore. You know he's just a good honest trade union leader somewhere between the late Sam Gompers and John L. Lewis but this man Araquistain who invented him?"

"Take it easy," said Al. "I don't follow."

"Oh Araquistain invented him. Araquistain who is Ambassador in Paris now. He made him up you know. He called him the Spanish Lenin and then the poor man tried to live up to it and somebody let him look through a pair of field glasses and he thought he was Clausewitz."

"You said that before," Al told him coldly. "What do you base it on?"

"Why three days ago in the Cabinet meeting he was talking military affairs. They were talking about this business we've got now and Jesus Hernandez, just ribbing him you know, asked him what was the difference between tactics and strategy. Do you know what the old boy said?"

"No," Al said. I could see this new Comrade was getting a little on his nerves.

"He said, 'In tactics you attack the enemy from in front. In strategy you take him from the sides.' Now isn't that something?"

"You better run along, Comrade," Al said. "You're getting so awfully discouraged."

"But we'll get rid of Largo Caballero," the short Comrade said. "We'll get rid of him right after his offensive. This last piece of stupidity will be the end of him."

"O.K. Comrade," Al told him. "But I've got to attack in the morning."

"Oh you are going to attack again?"

"Listen Comrade. You can tell me any sort of crap you want because it's interesting and I'm grown up enough to sort things out. But don't ask me any questions, see? Because you'll be in trouble."

"I just meant it personally. Not as information."

"We don't know each other well enough to ask personal questions, Comrade," Al said. "Why don't you just go to another table and let Comrade Henry and me talk. I want to ask him some things."

"Salud Comrade," the little man said, standing up. "We'll meet another time."

"Good," said Al. "Another time."

We watched him go over to another table. He excused himself, some soldiers made room for him, and as we watched we could see him starting to talk. They all looked interested.

"What do you make of that little guy?" Al asked.

"I don't know."

"Me either," Al said. "He certainly had this offensive sized up." He took a drink and showed his hand. "See? It's all right now. I'm not any rummy either. I never take a drink before an attack."

"How was it today?"

"You saw it. How did it look?"

"Terrible."

"That's it. That's the word for it all right. It was terrible. I guess he's using strategy and tactics both now because we are

attacking from straight in front and from both sides. How's the rest of it going?"

"Duran took the new race track. The *hipódromo*. We've narrowed down on the corridor that runs up into University City. Up above we crossed the Coruña road. And we're stopped at the Cerro de Aguilar since yesterday morning. We were up that way this morning. Duran lost over half his brigade, I heard. How is it with you?"

"Tomorrow we're going to try those farm houses and the church again. The church on the hill, the one they call the hermit, is the objective. The whole hillside is cut by those gullies and it's all enfiladed at least three ways by machine gun posts. They're dug deep all through there and it's well done. We haven't got enough artillery to give any kind of real covering fire to keep them down and we haven't heavy artillery to blow them out. They've got anti-tanks in those three houses and an anti-tank battery by the church. It's going to be murder."

"When's it for?"

"Don't ask me. I've got no right to tell you that."

"If we have to film it, I meant," I said. "The money from the film all goes for ambulances. We've got the Twelfth Brigade in the counter-attack at the Arganda Bridge. And we've got the Twelfth again in that attack last week by Pingarrón. We got some good tank shots there."

"The tanks were no good there," Al said.

"I know," I said, "but they photographed very well. What about tomorrow?"

"Just get out early and wait," he said. "Not too early."

"How you feel now?"

"I'm awfully tired," he said. "And I've got a bad headache. But I feel a lot better. Let's have another one and then go up to your place and get a bath."

"Maybe we ought to eat first."

"I'm too dirty to eat. You can hold a place and I'll go get a bath and join you at the Gran Via."

"I'll go up with you."

"No. It's better to hold a place and I'll join you." He leaned his head forward on the table. "Boy I got a headache. It's the noise

in those buckets. I never hear it any more but it does something to your ears just the same."

"Why don't you go to bed?"

"No. I'd rather stay up with you for a while and then sleep when I get back down there. I don't want to wake up twice."

"You haven't got the horrors, have you?"

"No," he said. "I'm fine. Listen, Hank. I don't want to talk a lot of crap but I think I'm going to get killed tomorrow."

I touched the table three times with my finger tips.

"Everybody feels like that. I've felt like that plenty of times."

"No," he said. "It's not natural with me. But where we've got to go tomorrow doesn't make sense. I don't even know that I can get them up there. You can't make them move if they won't go. You can shoot them afterwards. But at the time if they won't go they won't go. If you shoot them they still won't go."

"Maybe it will be all right."

"No. We've got good infantry tomorrow. They'll go anyway. Not like those yellow bastards we had the first day."

"Maybe it will be all right."

"No," he said. "It won't be all right. But it will be just exactly as good as I can make it. I can make them start all right and I can take them up to where they will have to quit one at a time. Maybe they can make it. I've got three I can rely on. If only one of the good ones doesn't get knocked out at the start."

"Who are your good ones?"

"I've got a big Greek from Chicago that will go anywhere. He's just as good as they come. I've got a Frenchman from Marseille that's got his left shoulder in a cast with two wounds still draining that asked to come out of the hospital in the Palace Hotel for this show and has to be strapped in and I don't know how he can do it. Just technically I mean. He'd break your bloody heart. He used to be a taxi driver." He stopped. "I'm talking too much. Stop me if I talk too much."

"Who's the third one?" I asked.

"The third one? Did I say I had a third one?"

"Sure."

"Oh yes," he said. "That's me."

"What about the others?"

"They're mechanics, but they couldn't learn to soldier. They can't size up what's happening. And they're all afraid to die. I tried to get them over it," he said. "But it comes back on them every attack. They look like tank men when you see them by the tanks with the helmets on. They look like tank men when they get in. But when they shut the traps down there's really nothing inside. They aren't tank men. And so far we haven't had time to make new ones."

"Do you want to take the bath?"

"Let's sit here a little while longer," he said. "It's nice here."

"It's funny all right, with a war right down the end of the street so you can walk to it, and then leave it and come here."

"And then walk back to it," Al said.

"What about a girl? There's two American girls at the Florida Newspaper correspondents. Maybe you could make one."

"I don't want to have to talk to them. I'm too tired."

"There's the two Moor girls from Ceuta at that corner table."

He looked over at them. They were both dark and bushy headed. One was large and one was small and they certainly both looked strong and active.

"No," said Al. "I'm going to see plenty Moors tomorrow without having to fool with them tonight."

"There's plenty of girls," I said. "Manolita's at the Florida. That Seguridad bird she lives with has gone to Valencia and she's being true to him with everybody."

"Listen, Hank, what are you trying to promote me?"

"I just wanted to cheer you up."

"Grow up," he said. "What's one more?"

"One more."

"I don't mind dying a bit," he said. "Dying is just a lot of crap. Only it's wasteful. The attack is wrong and it's wasteful. I can handle tanks good now. If I had time I could make good tankists too. And if we had tanks that were a little bit faster the anti-tanks wouldn't bother them the way it does when you haven't got the mobility. Listen, Hank, they aren't what we thought they were though: Do you remember when everybody thought if we only had tanks?"

"They were good at Guadalajara."

"Sure. But those were the old boys. They were soldiers. And it was against Italians."

"But what's happened?"

"A lot of things. The mercenaries signed up for six months. Most of them were Frenchmen. They soldiered good for five but now all they want to do is live through the last month and go home. They aren't worth a damn now. The Russians that came out as demonstrators when the government bought the tanks were perfect. But they're pulling them back now for China they say. The new Spaniards are some of them good and some not. It takes six months to make a good tank man, I mean to know anything. And be able to size up and work intelligently you have to have a talent. We've been having to make them in six weeks and there aren't so many with a talent."

"They make fine flyers."

"They'll make fine tank guys too. But you have to get the ones with a vocation for it. It's sort of like being a priest. You have to be cut out for it. Especially now they've got so much anti-tank."

They had pulled down the shutters in Chicote's and now they were locking the door. No one would be allowed in now. But you had a half an hour more before they closed.

"I like it here," said Al. "It isn't so noisy now. Remember that time I met you in New Orleans when I was on a ship and we went in to have a drink in the Monteleone bar and that kid that looked just like Saint Sebastian was paging people with that funny voice like he was singing and I gave him a quarter to page Mr. B. F. Slob?"

"That's the same way you said 'Casa del Campo.'"

"Yeah," he said. "I laugh every time I think of that." Then he went on, "You see, now, they're not frightened of tanks anymore. Nobody is. We aren't either. But they're still useful. Really useful. Only with the anti-tank now they're so damn vulnerable. Maybe I ought to be in something else. *Not really*. Because they're still useful. But the way they are now you've got to have a vocation for them. You got to have a lot of political development to be a good tank man now."

"You're a good tank man."

"I'd like to be something else tomorrow," he said. "I'm talking

awfully wet but you have a right to talk wet if it isn't going to hurt anybody else. You know I like tanks too, only we don't use them right because the infantry don't know enough yet. They just want the old tank ahead to give them some cover while they go. That's no good. Then they get to depending on the tanks and they won't move without them. Sometimes they won't even deploy."

"I know."

"But you see if you had tankists that knew their stuff they'd go out ahead and develop the machine gun fire and then drop back behind the infantry and fire on the gun and knock it out and give the infantry covering fire when they attacked. And other tanks could rush the machine gun posts as though they were cavalry. And they could straddle a trench and enfilade and put flanking fire down it. And they could bring up infantry when it was right to or cover their advance when that was best."

"But instead?"

"Instead it's like it will be tomorrow. We have so damned few guns that we're just used as slightly mobile armored artillery units. And as soon as you are standing still and being light artillery, you've lost your mobility and that's your safety and they start sniping at you with the anti-tanks. And if we're not that we're just sort of iron perambulators to push ahead of the infantry. And lately you don't know whether the perambulator will push or whether the guys inside will push them. And you never know if there's going to be anybody behind you when you get there."

"How many are you now to a brigade?"

"Six to a battalion. Thirty to a brigade. That's in principle."

"Why don't you come along now and get the bath and we'll go and eat?"

"All right. But don't you start taking care of me or thinking I'm worried or anything because I'm not. I'm just tired and I wanted to talk. And don't give me any pep talk either because we've got a political commissar and I know what I'm fighting for and I'm not worried. But I'd like things to be efficient and used as intelligently as possible."

"What made you think I was going to give you any pep talk?"

"You started to look like it."

"All I tried to do was see if you wanted a girl and not to talk too wet about getting killed."

"Well I don't want any girl tonight and I'll talk just as wet as I please unless it does damage to others. Does it damage you?"

"Come on and get the bath," I said. "You can talk just as bloody wet as you want."

"Who do you suppose that little guy was that talked as though he knew so much?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I'm going to find out."

"He made me gloomy," said Al. "Come on. Let's go."

The old waiter with the bald head unlocked the outside door of Chicote's and let us out into the street.

"How is the offensive, Comrades?" he said at the door.

"It's O. K., Comrade," said Al. "It's all right."

"I am happy," said the waiter. "My boy is in the One Hundred and Forty-fifth Brigade. Have you seen them?"

"I am of the tanks," said Al. "This Comrade makes a cinema. Have you seen the hundred and forty-fifth?"

"No," I said.

"They are up the Extremadura road," the old waiter said. "My boy is political commissar of the machine gun company of his battalion. He is my youngest boy. He is twenty."

"What party are you Comrade?" Al asked him.

"I am of no party," the waiter said. "But my boy is a Communist."

"So am I," said Al. "The offensive, Comrade, has not yet reached a decision. It is very difficult. The fascists hold very strong positions. You, in the rear-guard, must be as firm as we will be at the front. We may not take these positions now but we have proved we now have an army capable of going on the offensive and you will see what it will do."

"And the Extremadura road?" asked the old waiter, still holding to the door. "Is it very dangerous there?"

"No," said Al. "It's fine up there. You don't need to worry about him up there."

"God bless you," said the waiter. "God guard you and keep you."

Outside in the dark street, Al said, "Jees he's kind of confused politically, isn't he?"

"He is a good guy," I said. "I've known him for a long time."

"He seems like a good guy," Al said. "But he ought to get wise to himself politically."

The room at the Florida was crowded. They were playing the gramophone and it was full of smoke and there was a crap game going on the floor. Comrades kept coming in to use the bathtub and the room smelt of smoke, soap, dirty uniforms, and steam from the bathroom.

The Spanish girl called Manolita, very neat, demurely dressed, with a sort of false French chic, with much joviality, much dignity and closely set cold eyes, was sitting on the bed talking with an English newspaper man. Except for the gramophone it wasn't very noisy.

"It is your room isn't it?" the English newspaper man said.

"It's in my name at the desk," I said. "I sleep in it sometimes."

"But whose is the whisky?" he asked.

"Mine," said Manolita. "They drank that bottle so I got another."

"You're a good girl, daughter," I said. "That's three I owe you."

"Two," she said. "The other was a present."

There was a huge cooked ham, rosy and white edged in a half opened tin on the table beside my typewriter and a comrade would reach up, cut himself a slice of ham with his pocket knife, and go back to the crap game. I cut myself a slice of ham.

"You're next on the tub," I said to Al. He had been looking around the room.

"It's nice here," he said. "Where did the ham come from?"

"We bought it from the *Intendencia* of one of the brigades," she said. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Who's we?"

"He and I," she said, turning her head toward the English correspondent. "Don't you think he's cute?"

"Manolita has been most kind," said the Englishman. "I hope we're not disturbing you."

"Not at all," I said. "Later on I might want to use the bed but that won't be until much later."

"We can have a party in my room," Manolita said. "You aren't cross are you, Henry?"

"Never," I said. "Who are the Comrades shooting craps?"

"I don't know," said Manolita. "They came in for baths and then they stayed to shoot craps. Everyone has been very nice. You know my bad news?"

"No."

"It's very bad. You knew my fiancé who was in the police and went to Barcelona?"

"Yes. Sure."

Al went into the bathroom.

"Well he was shot in an accident and I haven't any one I can depend on in police circles and he never got me the papers he had promised me and today I heard I was going to be arrested."

"Why?"

"Because I have no papers and they say I hang around with you people and with people from the Brigades all the time so I am probably a spy. If my fiancé had not gotten himself shot it would have been all right. Will you help me?"

"Sure," I said. "Nothing will happen to you if you're all right."

"I think I'd better stay with you to be sure."

"And if you're not all right that would be fine for me wouldn't it?"

"Can't I stay with you?"

"No. If you get in trouble call me up. I never heard you ask anybody any military questions. I think you're all right."

"I'm *really* all right," she said then, leaning over, away from the Englishman. "You think it's all right to stay with him? Is *he* all right?"

"How do I know?" I said. "I never saw him before."

"You're being cross," she said. "Let's not think about it now but everyone be happy and go out to dinner."

I went over to the crap game.

"You want to go out to dinner?"

"No, Comrade," said the man handling the dice without looking up. "You want to get in the game?"

"I want to eat."

"We'll be here when you get back," said another crap shooter. "Come on, roll, I've got you covered."

"If you run into any money bring it up here to the game."

There was one in the room I knew beside Manolita. He was from the Twelfth Brigade and he was playing the gramophone.

He was a Hungarian, a sad Hungarian, not one of the cheerful kind.

"Sulud Camarade," he said. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Don't you shoot craps?" I asked him.

"I haven't that sort of money," he said. "They are aviators with contracts. Mercenaries . . . They make a thousand dollars a month. They were on the Teruel front and now they have come here."

"How did they come up here?"

"One of them knows you. But he had to go out to his field. They came for him in a car and the game had already started."

"I'm glad you came up," I said. "Come up any time and make yourself at home."

"I came to play the new discs," he said. "It does not disturb you?"

"No. It's fine. Have a drink."

"A little ham," he said.

One of the crap shooters reached up and cut a slice of ham.

"You haven't seen this guy Henry around that owns the place, have you?" he asked me.

"That's me."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry. Want to get in the game?"

"Later on," I said.

"O.K.," he said. Then his mouth full of ham, "Listen you tar heel bastid. Make your dice hit the wall and bounce."

"Won't make no difference to you, Comrade," said the man handling the dice.

Al came out of the bathroom. He looked all clean except for some smudges around his eyes.

"You can take those off with a towel," I said.

"What?"

"Look at yourself once more in the mirror."

"It's too steamy," he said. "To hell with it, I feel clean."

"Let's eat," I said. "Come on Manolita. You know each other?"

I watched her eyes run over Al.

"How are you?" Manolita said.

"I say that is a sound idea," the Englishman said. "Do let's eat. But where?"

"Is that a crap game?" Al said.

"Didn't you see it when you came in?"

"No," he said. "All I saw was the ham."

"It's a crap game."

"You go and eat," Al said. "I'm staying here."

As we went out there were six of them on the floor and Al Wagner was reaching up to cut a slice of ham.

"What do you do, Comrade?" I heard one of the flyers say to Al.

"Tanks."

"Tell me they aren't any good any more," said the flyer.

"Tell you a lot of things," Al said. "What you got there? Some dice?"

"Want to look at them?"

"No," said Al. "I want to handle them."

We went down the hall, Manolita, me and the tall Englishman, and found the boys had left already for the Gran Via restaurant. The Hungarian had stayed behind to replay the new discs. I was very hungry and the food at the Gran Via was lousy. The two who were making the film had already eaten and gone back to work on the bad camera.

This restaurant was in the basement and you had to pass a guard and go through the kitchen and down a stairs to get to it. It was a racket.

They had a millet and water soup, yellow rice with horse meat in it, and oranges for desert. There had been another dish of chickpeas with sausage in it that everybody said was terrible but it had run out. The newspaper men all sat at one table and the other tables were filled with officers and girls from Chicote's, people from the censorship, which was then in the telephone building across the street, and various unknown citizens.

The restaurant was run by an anarchist syndicate and they sold you wine that was all stamped with the label of the royal cellars and the date it had been put in the bins. Most of it was so old that it was either corked or just plain faded out and gone to pieces. You can't drink labels and I sent three bottles back as bad before we got a drinkable one. There was a row about this.

The waiters didn't know the different wines. They just brought

you a bottle of wine and you took your chances. They were as different from the Chicote's waiters as black from white. These waiters were all snotty, all over-tipped and they regularly had special dishes such as lobster or chicken that they sold extra for gigantic prices. But these had all been bought up before we got there so we just drew the soup, the rice and the oranges. The place always made me angry because the waiters were a crooked lot of profiteers and it was about as expensive to eat in, if you had one of the special dishes, as Twenty-One or the Colony in New York.

We were sitting at the table with a bottle of wine that just wasn't bad, you know you could taste it starting to go, but it wouldn't justify making a row about, when Al Wagner came in. He looked around the room, saw us and came over.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"They broke me," he said.

"It didn't take very long."

"Not with those guys," he said. "That's a big game. What have they got to eat?"

I called a waiter over.

"It's too late," he said. "We can't serve anything now."

"This Comrade is in the tanks," I said. "He has fought all day and he will fight tomorrow and he hasn't eaten."

"That's not my fault," the waiter said. "It's too late. There isn't anything more. Why doesn't the Comrade eat with his unit? The army has plenty of food."

"I asked him to eat with me."

"You should have said something about it. It's too late now. We are not serving anything any more."

"Get the headwaiter."

The headwaiter said the cook had gone home and there was no fire in the kitchen. He went away. They were angry because we had sent the bad wine back.

"The hell with it," said Al. "Let's go somewhere else."

"There's no place you can eat at this hour. They've got food. I'll just have to go over and suck up to the headwaiter and give him some more money."

I went over and did just that and the sullen waiter brought a

plate of cold sliced meats, then half a spiny lobster with mayonnaise, and a salad of lettuce and lentils. The headwaiter sold this out of his private stock which he was holding out either to take home, or sell to late comers.

"Cost you much?" Al asked.

"No," I lied.

"I'll bet it did," he said. "I'll fix up with you when I get paid."

"What do you get now?"

"I don't know yet. It was ten pesetas a day but they've raised it now I'm an officer. But we haven't got it yet and I haven't asked."

"Comrade," I called the waiter. He came over, still angry that the headwaiter had gone over his head and served Al. "Bring another bottle of wine please."

"What kind?"

"Any that is not too old so that the red is faded."

"It's all the same."

I said the equivalent of like hell it is in Spanish, and the waiter brought over a bottle of Château Mouton Rothschild 1906 that was just as good as the last claret we had was rotten.

"Boy that's wine," Al said. "What did you tell him to get that?"

"Nothing. He just made a lucky draw out of the bin."

"Most of that stuff from the palace stinks."

"It's too old. This is a hell of a climate on wine."

"There's that Wise Comrade," Al nodded across at another table.

The little man with the thick glasses that had talked to us about Largo Caballero was talking with some people I knew were very big shots indeed.

"I guess he's a big shot," I said.

"When they're high enough up they don't give a damn what they say. But I wish he would have waited until after tomorrow. It's kind of spoiled tomorrow for me."

I filled his glass.

"What he said sounded pretty sensible," Al went on. "I've been thinking it over. But my duty is to do what I'm ordered to do."

"Don't worry about it and get some sleep."

"I'm going to get in that game again if you'll let me take a thou-

sand pesetas," Al said. "I've got a lot more than that coming to me and I'll give you an order on my pay."

"I don't want any order. You can pay me when you get it."

"I don't think I'm going to draw it," Al said. "I certainly sound wet, don't I? And I know gambling's bohemianism too. But in a game like that is the only time I don't think about tomorrow."

"Did you like that Manolita girl? She liked you."

"She's got eyes like a snake."

"She's not a bad girl. She's friendly and she's all right."

"I don't want any girl. I want to get back in that crap game."

Down the table Manolita was laughing at something the new Englishman had said in Spanish. Most of the people had left the table.

"Let's finish the wine and go," Al said. "Don't you want to get in that game?"

"I'll watch you for a while," I said and called the waiter over to bring us the bill.

"Where you go?" Manolita called down the table.

"To the room."

"We come by later on," she said. "This man is very funny."

"She is making most awful sport of me," the Englishman said. "She picks up my errors in Spanish. I say, doesn't *leche* mean milk?"

"That's one interpretation of it."

"Does it mean something beastly too?"

"I'm afraid so," I said.

"You know it *is* a beastly language," he said. "Now Manolita stop pulling my leg. I say stop it."

"I'm not pulling your leg," Manolita laughed. "I never touched your leg. I am just laughing about the *leche*."

"But it *does* mean milk. Didn't you just hear Edwin Henry say so?"

Manolita started to laugh again and we got up to go.

"He's a silly piece of work," Al said. "I'd almost like to take her away because he's so silly."

"You can never tell about an Englishman," I said. It was such a profound remark that I knew we had ordered too many bottles. Outside, in the street, it was turning cold and in the moonlight the clouds were passing very big and white across the wide, building-

sided canyon of the Gran Via and we walked up the sidewalk with the day's fresh shell holes neatly cut in the cement, their rubble still not swept away, on up the rise of the hill toward the Plaza Callao where the Florida Hotel faced down the other little hill where the wide street ran that ended at the front.

We went past the two guards in the dark outside the door of the hotel and listened a minute in the doorway as the shooting down the street strengthened into a roll of firing then dropped off.

"If it keeps up I guess I ought to go down," Al said listening.

"That wasn't anything," I said. "Anyway that was off to the left by Carabanchel."

"It sounded straight down in the Campo."

"That's the way the sound throws here at night. It always fools you."

"They aren't going to counterattack us tonight," Al said. "When they've got those positions and we are up that creek they aren't going to leave their positions to try to kick us out of that creek."

"What creek?"

"You know the name of that creek."

"Oh. *That* creek."

"Yeah. Up that creek without a paddle."

"Come on inside. You didn't have to listen to that firing. That's the way it is every night."

We went inside, crossed the lobby, passing the night watchman at the concierge's desk and the night watchman got up and went with us to the elevator. He pushed a button and the elevator came down. In it was a man with a white curly sheep's wool jacket, the wool worn outside, a pink bald head, and a pink, angry face. He had six bottles of champagne under his arms and in his hands and he said, "What the hell's the idea of bringing the elevator down?"

"You've been riding in the elevator for an hour," the night watchman said.

"I can't help it," said the wooly jacket man. Then to me, "Where's Frank?"

"Frank who?"

"You know Frank," he said. "Come on help me with this elevator."

"You're drunk," I said to him. "Come on skip it and let us get upstairs."

"So would you be drunk," said the white woolly jacket man. "So would you be drunk Comrade old Comrade. Listen, where's Frank?"

"Where do you think he is?"

"In this fellow Henry's room where the crap game is."

"Come on with us," I said. "Don't fool with those buttons. That's why you stop it all the time."

"I can fly anything," said the woolly jacket man. "And I can fly this old elevator. Want me to stunt it?"

"Skip it," Al said to him. "You're drunk. We want to get to the crap game."

"Who are you? I'll hit you with a bottle full of champagne wine."

"Try it," said Al. "I'd like to cool you, you rummy fake Santa Claus."

"A rummy fake Santa Claus," said the bald man. "A rummy fake Santa Claus. And that's the thanks of the Republic."

We had gotten the elevator stopped at my floor and were walking down the hall. "Take some bottles," said the bald man. Then, "Do you know why I'm drunk?"

"No."

"Well I won't tell you. But you'd be surprised. A rummy fake Santa Claus. Well well well. What are you in Comrade?"

"Tanks."

"And you Comrade?"

"Making a picture."

"And I'm a rummy fake Santa Claus. Well. Well. Well. I repeat. Well. Well. Well."

"Go and drown in it," said Al. "You rummy fake Santa Claus."

We were outside the room now. The man in the white woolly coat took hold of Al's arm with his thumb and forefinger.

"You amuse me, Comrade," he said. "You truly amuse me."

I opened the door. The room was full of smoke and the game looked just as when we had left it except the ham was all gone off the table and the whisky all gone out of the bottle.

"It's Baldy," said one of the crap shooters.

"How do you do, Comrades," said Baldy bowing. "How do you do? How do you do? How do you do?"

The game broke up and they all started to shoot questions at him.

"I have made my report, Comrades," Baldy said. "And here is a little champagne wine. I am no longer interested in any but the picturesque aspects of the whole affair."

"Where did your wing men muck off to?"

"It wasn't their fault," said Baldy. "I was engaged in contemplating a terrific spectacle and I was ob-livious of the fact that I had any wing men until all of those Fiats started coming down over, past and under me and I realized that my trusty little air-o-plane no longer had any tail."

"Jees I wish you weren't drunk," said one of the flyers.

"But I *am* drunk," said Baldy. "And I hope all you gentlemen and Comrades will join me because I am very happy tonight even though I have been insulted by an ignorant tank man who has called me a rummy fake Santa Claus."

"I wish you were sober," the other flyer said. "How'd you get back to the field?"

"Don't ask me any questions," Baldy said with great dignity. "I returned in a staff car of the Twelfth Brigade. When I alighted with my trusty par-a-chute there was a tendency to regard me as a criminal fascist due to my inability to master the Lanish Spanguage. But all difficulties were smoothed away when I convinced them of my identity and I was treated with rare consideration. Oh boy you ought to have seen that Junker when she started to burn. That's what I was watching when the Fiats dove on me. Oh boy I wish I could tell you."

"He shot a tri-motor Junker down today over the Jarama and his wingmen mucked off on him and he got shot down and bailed out," one of the flyers said. "You know him. Baldy Jackson."

"How far did you drop before you pulled your rip cord Baldy?" asked another flyer.

"All of six thousand feet and I think my diaphragm is busted loose in front from when she came taut. I thought it would cut me in two. There must have been fifteen Fiats and I wanted to get completely clear. I had to fool with the chute plenty to get

down on the right side of the river. I had to slip her plenty and I hit pretty hard. The wind was good."

"Frank had to go back to Alcalá," another flyer said. "We started a crap game. We got to get back there before daylight."

"I am in no mood to toy with the dice," said Baldy. "I am in a mood to drink champagne wine out of glasses with cigarette butts in them."

"I'll wash them," said Al.

"For Comrade Fake Santa Claus," said Baldy. "For old Comrade Claus."

"Skip it," said Al. He picked up the glasses and took them to the bathroom.

"Is he in the tanks?" asked one of the flyers.

"Yes. He's been there since the start."

"They tell me the tanks aren't any good anymore," a flyer said.

"You told him that once," I said. "Why don't you lay off? He's been working all day."

"So have we. But I mean really they aren't any good, are they?"

"Not so good. But he's good."

"I guess he's all right. He looks like a nice fellow. What kind of money do they make?"

"They got ten pesetas a day," I said. "Now he gets a lieutenant's pay."

"Spanish lieutenant?"

"Yes."

"I guess he's nuts all right. Or has he got politics?"

"He's got politics."

"Oh well," he said. "That explains it. Say Baldy you must have had a hell of a time bailing out with that wind pressure with the tail gone."

"Yes Comrade," said Baldy.

"How did you feel?"

"I was thinking all the time, Comrade."

"Baldy, how many bailed out of the Junker?"

"Four," said Baldy, "out of a crew of six. I was sure I'd killed the pilot. I noticed when he quit firing. There's a co-pilot that's a gunner too and I'm pretty sure I got him too. I must have because he quit firing too. But maybe it was the heat. Anyhow

four came out. Would you like me to describe the scene? I can describe the scene very well."

He was sitting on the bed now with a large water glass of champagne in his hand and his pink head and pink face were moist with sweat.

"Why doesn't anyone drink to me?" asked Baldy. "I would like all comrades to drink to me and then, I will describe the scene in all its horror and its beauty."

We all drank.

"Where was I?" asked Baldy.

"Just coming out of the McAlester Hotel," a flyer said. "In all your horror and your beauty—don't clown, Baldy. Oddly enough we're interested."

"I will describe it," said Baldy. "But first I must have more champagne wine." He had drained the glass when we drank to him.

"If he drinks like that he'll go to sleep," another flyer said. "Only give him half a glass."

Baldy drank it off.

"I will describe it," he said. "After another little drink."

"Listen Baldy take it easy will you? This is something we want to get straight. You got no ship now for a few days but we're flying tomorrow and this is important as well as interesting."

"I made my report," said Baldy. "You can read it out at the field. They'll have a copy."

"Come on Baldy, snap out of it."

"I will describe it eventually," said Baldy. He shut and opened his eyes several times then said "Hello Comrade Santa Claus," to Al. "I will describe it eventually. All you Comrades have to do is listen."

And he described it.

"It was very strange and very beautiful," Baldy said and drank off the glass of champagne.

"Cut it out, Baldy," a flyer said.

"I have experienced profound emotions," Baldy said. "Highly profound emotions. Emotions of the deepest dye."

"Let's get back out to Alcalá," one flyer said. "That pink head isn't going to make sense. What about the game?"

"He's going to make sense," another flyer said. "He's just winding up."

"Are you criticizing me?" asked Baldy. "Is *that* the thanks of the Republic?"

"Listen Santa Claus," Al said. "What was it like?"

"Are you asking me?" Baldy stared at him. "Are *you* putting questions to me? Have you ever been in action, Comrade?"

"No," said Al. "I got these eyebrows burnt off when I was shaving."

"Keep your drawers on, Comrade," said Baldy. "I will describe the strange and beautiful scene. I'm a writer you know as well as a flyer."

He nodded his head in confirmation of his own statement.

"He writes for the *Meridian*, *Mississippi Argus*," said a flyer. "All the time. They can't stop him."

"I have talent as a writer," said Baldy. "I have a fresh and original talent for description. I have a newspaper clipping which I have lost which says so. Now I will launch myself on the description."

"O.K. What did it look like?"

"Comrades," said Baldy. "You can't describe it." He held out his glass.

"What did I tell you?" said a flyer. "He couldn't make sense in a month. He never could make sense."

"You," said Baldy, "you unfortunate little fellow. All right. When I banked out of it I looked down and of course she had been pouring back smoke but she was holding right on her course to get over the mountains. She was losing altitude fast and I came up and over and dove on her again. There were still wingmen then and she'd lurched and started to smoke twice as much and then the door of the cockpit came open and it was just like looking into a blast furnace, and then they started to come out. I'd half rolled, dove, and then pulled up out of it and I was looking back and down and they were coming out of her, out through the blast furnace door, dropping out trying to get clear, and the chutes opened up and they looked like great big beautiful morning glories opening up and she was just one big thing of flame now like you never saw and going round and round and there were four chutes just as beautiful as anything

you could see just pulling slow against the sky and then one started to burn at the edge and as it burned the man started to drop fast and I was watching him when the bullets started to come by and the Fiats right behind them and the bullets and the Fiats."

"You're a writer all right," said one flyer. "You ought to write for *War Aces*. Do you mind telling me in plain language what happened?"

"No," said Baldy. "I'll tell you. But you know, no kidding, it was something to see. And I never shot down any big tri-motor Junkers before and I'm happy."

"Everybody's happy, Baldy. Tell us what happened, really."

"O.K.," said Baldy. "I'll just drink a little wine and then I'll tell you."

"How were you when you sighted them?"

"We were in a left echelon of V's. Then we went into a left echelon of echelons and dove onto them with all four guns until you could have touched them before we rolled out of it. We crippled three others. The Fiats were hanging up in the sun. They didn't come down until I was sightseeing all by myself."

"Did your wing men muck off?"

"No. It was my fault I started watching the spectacle and they were gone. There isn't any formation for watching spectacles. I guess they went on and picked up the echelon. I don't know. Don't ask me. And I'm tired. I was elated. But now I'm tired."

"You're sleepy you mean. You're rum-dumb and sleepy."

"I am simply tired," said Baldy. "A man in my position has the right to be tired. And if I become sleepy I have the right to be sleepy. Don't I Santa Claus?" he said to Al.

"Yeah," said Al. "I guess you have the right to be sleepy. I'm even sleepy myself. Isn't there going to be any crap game?"

"We got to get him out to Alcalá and we've got to get out there too," a flyer said. "Why? You lost money in the game?"

"A little," said Al.

"You want to try to pass for it once?" the flyer asked him.

"I'll shoot a thousand," Al said.

"I'll fade you," the flyer said. "You guys don't make much do you?"

"No," said Al. "We don't make much."

He laid the thousand peseta note down on the floor, rolled the dice between his palms so they clicked over and over, and shot them out on the floor with a snap. Two ones showed.

"They're still your dice," the flyer said picking up the bill and looking at Al.

"I don't need them," said Al. He stood up.

"Need any dough?" the flyer asked him. Looking at him curiously.

"Got no use for it," Al said.

"We've got to get the hell out to Alcalá," the flyer said. "We'll have a game some night soon. We'll get hold of Frank and the rest of them. We could get up a pretty good game. Can we give you a lift?"

"Yes. Want a ride?"

"No," Al said. "I'm walking. It's just down the street."

"Well we're going out to Alcalá. Does anybody know the password for tonight?"

"Oh the chauffeur will have it. He'll have gone by and picked it up before dark."

"Come on Baldy. You drunken sleepy bum."

"Not me," said Baldy. "I am a potential ace of the people's army."

"Takes ten to be an ace. Even if you count Italians. You've only got one, Baldy."

"It wasn't Italians," said Baldy. "It was Germans. And you didn't see her when she was all hot like that inside. She was a raging inferno."

"Carry him out," said a flyer. "He's writing for that Meridian, Mississippi paper again. Well so long. Thanks for having us up in the room."

They all shook hands and they were gone. I went to the head of the stairs with them. The elevator was no longer running and I watched them go down the stairs. One was on each side of Baldy and he was nodding his head slowly. He was really sleepy now.

In their room the two I was working on the picture with were still working over the bad camera. It was delicate, eye-straining work and when I asked, "Do you think you'll get her?" the tall one said, "Yes. Sure. We have to. I make a piece now which was broken."

"What was the party?" asked the other. "We work always on this damn camera."

"American flyers," I said. "And a fellow I used to know who's in tanks."

"Goot fun? I am sorry not to be there."

"All right," I said. "Kind of funny."

"You must get sleep. We must all be up early. We must be fresh for tomorrow."

"How much more have you got on that camera?"

"There it goes again. Damn such shape springs."

"Leave him alone. We finish it then we all sleep. What time you call us?"

"Five?"

"All right. As soon as is light."

"Good night."

"Salud. Get some sleep."

"Salud," I said. "We've got to be closer tomorrow."

"Yes," he said. "I have thought so too. Much closer. I am glad you know."

Al was asleep in the big chair in the room with the light on his face. I put a blanket over him but he woke.

"I'm going down."

"Sleep here. I'll set the alarm and call you."

"Something might happen with the alarm," he said. "I better go down. I don't want to get there late."

"I'm sorry about the game."

"They'd have broke me anyway," he said. "Those guys are poisonous with dice."

"You had the dice there on that last play."

"They're poisonous fading you too. They're strange guys too. I guess they don't get overpaid. I guess if you are doing it for dough there isn't enough dough to pay for doing it."

"Want me to walk down with you?"

"No," he said, standing up, and buckling on the big web-belted Colt he had taken off when he came back after dinner to the game. "No, I feel fine now. I've got my perspective back again. All you need is a perspective."

"I'd like to walk down."

"No. Get some sleep. I'll go down and I'll get a good five hours sleep before it starts."

"That early?"

"Yeah. You won't have any light to film by. You might as well stay in bed." He took an envelope out of his leather coat and laid it on the table. "Take this stuff will you and send it to my brother in N.Y. His address is on the back of the envelope."

"Sure. But I won't have to send it."

"No," he said. "I don't think you will now. But there's some pictures and stuff they'll like to have. He's got a nice wife. Want to see her picture?"

He took it out of his pocket. It was inside his identity book.

It showed a pretty, dark girl standing by a rowboat on the shore of a lake.

"Up in the Catskills," said Al. "Yeah. He's got a nice wife. She's a Jewish girl. Yes," he said. "Don't let me get wet again. So long, kid. Take it easy. I tell you truly I feel O.K. now. And I didn't feel good when I came out this afternoon."

"Let me walk down."

"No. You might have trouble coming back through the Plaza de España. Some of those guys are nervous at night. Good night. See you tomorrow night."

"That's the way to talk."

Upstairs in the room above mine, Manolita and the Englishman were making quite a lot of noise. So she evidently hadn't been arrested.

"That's right. That's the way to talk," Al said. "Takes you sometimes three or four hours to get so you can do it though."

He'd put the leather helmet on now with the raised padded ridge and his face looked dark and I noticed the dark hollows under his eyes.

"See you tomorrow night at Chicote's," I said.

"That's right," he said, and wouldn't look me in the eye. "See you tomorrow night at Chicote's."

"What time?"

"Listen, that's enough," he said. "Tomorrow night at Chicote's. We don't have to go into the time." And he went out.

If you hadn't known him pretty well and if you hadn't seen the terrain where he was going to attack tomorrow, you would

have thought he was very angry about something. I guess somewhere inside of himself he was angry, very angry. You get angry about a lot of things and you, yourself, dying uselessly is one of them. But then I guess angry is about the best way that you can be when you attack.

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