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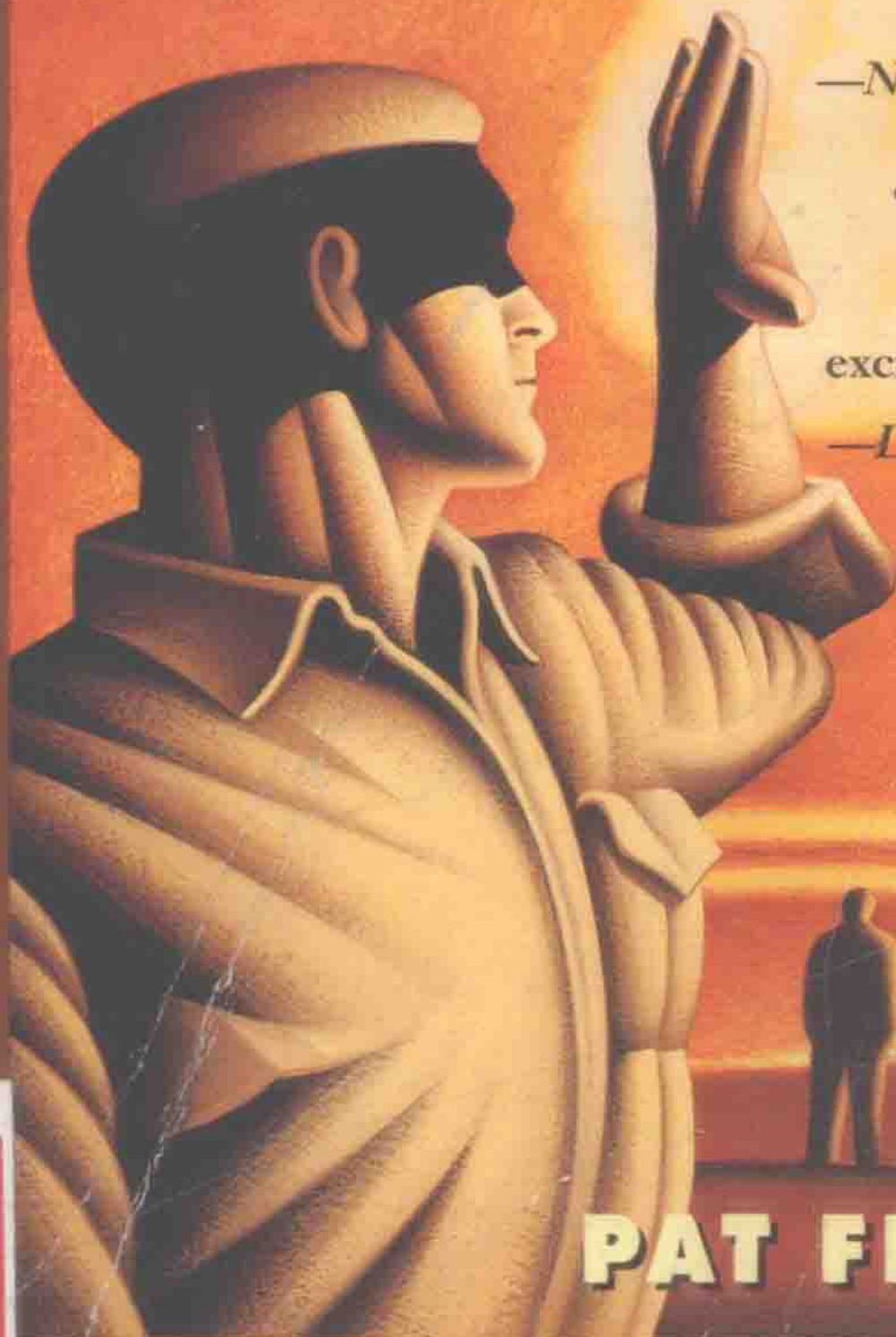
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PAT FRANK

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**ALAS,
BABYLON**

Pat Frank

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FOREWORD

I have an acquaintance, a retired manufacturer, a practical man, who has recently become worried about international tensions, intercontinental missiles, H-bombs, and such.

One day, knowing that I had done some writing on military subjects, he asked: "What do you think would happen if the Russkies hit us when we weren't looking—you know, like Pearl Harbor?"

The subject was on my mind. I had recently returned from a magazine assignment at Offutt Field, Headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, several SAC operational bases, and the Missile Test Center on Cape Canaveral. More to the point, I had been discussing just such a possibility with several astute British staff officers. The British have lived under the shadow of nuclear-armed rockets longer than we. Also, they have a vivid memory of cities devastated from the skies, as have the Germans and Japanese.

A man who has been shaken by a two-ton blockbuster has a frame of reference. He can equate the impact of an H-bomb with his own experience, even though the H-bomb blast is a million times more powerful than the shock he endured. To someone who has never felt a bomb, bomb is only a word. An H-bomb's fireball is something you see on television. It is not something that incinerates you to a cinder in the thousandth part of a second. So the H-bomb is beyond the imagination of all but a few Americans, while the British, Germans, and Japanese can comprehend it, if vaguely. And only the Japanese have personal understanding of atomic heat and radiation.

It was a big question. I gave him a horseback opinion, which proved conservative compared with some of the official forecasts published later. I said, "Oh, I think they'd kill fifty or sixty million Americans—but I think we'd win the war."

He thought this over and said, "Wow! Fifty or sixty million dead! What a depression that would make!"

I doubt if he realized the exact nature and extent of the depression—which is why I am writing this book.

PAT FRANK

[1]

In Fort Repose, a river town in Central Florida, it was said that sending a message by Western Union was the same as broadcasting it over the combined networks. This was not entirely true. It was true that Florence Wechek, the manager, gossiped. Yet she judiciously classified the personal intelligence that flowed under her plump fingers, and maintained a prudent censorship over her tongue. The scandalous and the embarrassing she excised from her conversation. Sprightly, trivial, and harmless items she passed on to friends, thus enhancing her status and relieving the tedium of spinsterhood. If your sister was in trouble, and wired for money, the secret was safe with Florence Wechek. But if your sister bore a legitimate baby, its sex and weight would soon be known all over town.

Florence awoke at six-thirty, as always, on a Friday in early December. Heavy, stiff and graceless, she pushed herself out of bed and padded through the living room into the kitchen. She stumbled onto the back porch, opened the screen door a crack, and fumbled for the milk carton on the stoop. Not until she straightened did her china-blue eyes begin to discern movement in the hushed gray world around her. A jerky-tailed squirrel darted out on the longest limb of her grapefruit tree. Sir Percy, her enormous yellow cat, rose from his burlap couch behind the hot water heater, arched his back, stretched, and rubbed his shoulders on her flannel robe. The African lovebirds rhythmically swayed, heads pressed together, on the swing in their cage. She addressed the lovebirds: "Good morning, Anthony. Good morning, Cleo."

Their eyes, spectacularly ringed in white, as if

embedded in mint Life Savers, blinked at her. Anthony shook his green and yellow plumage and rasped a greeting. Cleo said nothing. Anthony was adventurous, Cleo timid. On occasion Anthony grew raucous and irascible and Florence released him into limitless freedom outside. But always, at dusk, Anthony waited in the Turk's-cap, or atop the frangipani, eager to fly home. So long as Cleo preferred comfortable and sheltered imprisonment, Anthony would remain a domesticated parrot. That's what they'd told her when she bought the birds in Miami a month before, and apparently it was true.

Florence carried their cage into the kitchen and shook fresh sunflower seed into their feeder. She filled Sir Percy's bowl with milk, and crumpled a bit of wafer for the goldfish in the bowl on the counter. She returned to the living room and fed the angelfish, mollies, guppies, and vivid neons in the aquarium. She noted that the two miniature catfish, useful scavengers, were active. She was checking the tank's temperature, and its electric filter and heater, when the percolator chuckled its call to breakfast. At seven, exactly, Florence switched on the television, turned the knob to Channel 8, Tampa, and sat down to her orange juice and eggs. Her morning routine was unvaried and efficient. The only bad parts of it were cooking for one and eating alone. Yet breakfast was not her loneliest meal, not with Anthony ogling and gabbling, the six fat goldfish dancing a dreamy oriental ballet on diaphanous fins, Sir Percy rubbing against her legs under the table, and her cheery friends on the morning show, hired, at great expense, to inform and entertain her.

As soon as she saw Dave's face, Florence could sense whether the news was going to be good or bad. On this morning Dave looked troubled, and sure enough, when he began to give the news, it was bad. The Russians had sent up another Sputnik, No. 23, and something sinister was going on in the Middle East. Sputnik No. 23 was the largest yet, according to the Smithsonian Institution, and was radioing continuous and elaborate coded signals. "There is reason to believe," Frank said, "that

Sputniks of this size are equipped to observe the terrain of the earth below."

Florence gathered her pink flannel robe closer to her neck. She glanced up, apprehensively, through the kitchen window. All she saw were hibiscus leaves dripping in the pre-dawn ground fog, and blank gray sky beyond. They had no right to put those Sputniks up there to spy on people. As if it were on his mind also, Frank continued:

"Senator Holler, of the Armed Services Committee, yesterday joined others of a Midwest bloc in demanding that the Air Force shoot down Sputniks capable of military espionage if they violate U.S. air space. The Kremlin has already had something to say about this. Any such action, the Kremlin says, will be regarded the same as an attack on a Soviet vessel or aircraft. The Kremlin pointed out that the United States has traditionally championed the doctrine of Freedom of the Seas. The same freedom, says the Soviet statement, applies to outer space."

The newsman paused, looked up, and half-smiled in wry amusement at this complexity. He turned a page on his clipboard.

"There is a new crisis in the Middle East. A report from Beirut, via Cairo, says that Syrian tanks of the most modern Russian design have crossed the Jordanian frontier. This is undoubtedly a threat to Israel. At the same time Damascus charges that Turkish troops are mobilizing. . . ."

Florence flipped to Channel 6, Orlando, and country music. She did not understand, and could not become interested in, the politics of the Middle East. Sputniks seemed a closer and more personal menace. Her best friend Alice Cooksey, the librarian, claimed to have seen a Sputnik one evening at twilight. If you could see it, then it could see you. She stared up through the window again. No Sputnik. She rinsed the dishes and returned to her bedroom.

As she wrestled with her girdle, Florence's thought gravitated to the equally prying behavior of Randy

Bragg. She adjusted the venetian blinds until she could peer out. He was at it again. There he was, brazenly immodest in checked red and black pajamas, sitting on his front steps, knees akimbo and binoculars pressed to his eyes. Although he was perhaps seventy-five yards distant, she was certain he stared directly at her, and could see through the tilted louvers. She ducked back against the bedroom wall, hands protecting her breasts.

Almost every evening for the past three weeks, and on a number of mornings, she had caught him at it. Sometimes he was on the piazza, as now, sometimes at a second-floor window, and sometimes high up on the captain's walk. Sometimes he swept the whole of River Road with his glasses, pretending an interest elsewhere, but more often he focused on her bungalow. Randolph Rowzee Bragg a Peeping Tom! It was shocking!

Long before Florence's mother moved south and built the brown-shingle bungalow, the Braggs had lived in the big house, ungainly and monolithic, with tall Victorian windows and bellying bays and broad brick chimneys. Once it had been the show place of River Road. Now, it appeared shabby and outmoded compared with the long, low, antiseptic citadels of glass, metal, and tinted block constructed by rich Northerners who for the past fifteen years had been "discovering" the Timucuan River. Still, the Bragg house was planked and paneled with native cypress, and encased in pine clapboard, hard as iron, that might last another hundred years. Its grove, at this season like a full green cloak flecked with gold, trailed all the way from back yard to river bank, a quarter mile. And she would say this for Randy, his grounds were well kept, bright with poinsettias and bougainvillea, hibiscus, camellias, gardenias, and flame vine. Florence had known Randolph's mother, Gertrude Bragg, well, and old Judge Bragg to speak to. She had watched Randolph graduate from bicycle to jalopy, vanish for a number of years in college and law school, reappear in a convertible, vanish again during the Korean War, and finally come home for good when Judge Bragg and Mrs. Bragg were taken in the same year. Now here was Randy, one of the best

known and most eligible young men in Tumucuan County, even if he did run around with Pistolville girls and drink too much, a—what was it the French called it?—a *voyeur*. It was disgusting. The things that went on in small towns, people wouldn't believe. Florence faced the bureau mirror, wondering how much he had seen.

Many years ago a man had told her she looked something like Clara Bow. Thereafter, Florence wore her hair in bangs, and didn't worry too much about her chubby figure. The man, an imaginative idealist, had gone to England in 1940, joined the Commandos, and got himself killed. She retained only a vague and inexact memory of his caresses, but she could never forget how he had compared her to Clara Bow, a movie star. She could still see a resemblance, provided she sucked in her stomach and lifted her chin high to erase the fleshy creases in her neck—except her hair was no longer like Clara's. Her hair had thinned, and faded to mottled pink. She hurriedly sketched a Clara Bow pout on her lips, and finished dressing.

When she stepped out of the front door, Florence didn't know whether she should cut Randy dead or give him a piece of her mind. He was still there on the steps, the binoculars in his lap. He waved, grinned, and called across lawn and road, "Morning, Miss Florence." His black hair was tousled, his teeth white, and he looked boyish, handsome, and inoffensive.

"Good morning, Randy," Florence said. Because of the distance, she had to shout, so her voice was not formal and frigid, as she had intended.

"You look real pretty and chipper today," he yelled.

She walked to the carport, head averted as if avoiding a bad odor, her stiff carriage a reprimand, and did not answer. He really was nervy, sitting there in those vile pajamas, trying to sweet-talk her. All the way to town, she kept thinking of Randy. Who would ever guess that he was a deviate with a compulsion to watch women dress and undress? He ought to be arrested. But if she told the sheriff, or anybody, they would only laugh at her. Everybody knew that Randy dated lots of

girls, and not all of them virgins. She herself had seen him take Rita Hernandez, that little Minorcan tart from Pistolville, into his house and, no doubt, up to his bedroom since the lights had gone on upstairs and off downstairs. And there had been others, recently a tall blonde who drove her own car, a new Imperial with Ohio plates, into the circular driveway and right up to the front steps as if she owned the place, and Randy. Nobody would believe that he found it necessary to absorb his sex at long range through optic nerves and binoculars. Yet it was strange that he had not married. It was strange that he lived alone in that wooden mausoleum. He even had his office in there, instead of in the Professional Building like the other lawyers. He was a hermit, and a snob, and a nigger-lover, and no better than a pervert. God knows what he did with those girls upstairs. Maybe all he did was make them take off their clothes and put them on again while he watched. She had heard of such things. And yet—

She couldn't make herself believe there was anything basically wrong with Randy. She had voted for him in the primaries and stood up for him at the meetings of the Frangipani Circle when those garden club biddies were pecking him to bits. After all, he was a Bragg, and a neighbor, and besides—

He obviously needed help and guidance. Randy's age, she knew, was thirty-two. Florence was forty-seven. Between people in their thirties and forties there wasn't too wide a gap. Perhaps all he needed, she decided, was a little understanding and tenderness from a mature woman.

Randy watched Florence's ten-year-old Chevy diminish and disappear down the tunnel of live oaks that arched River Road. He liked Florence. She might be a gossip old maid but she was probably one of the few people on River Road who had voted for him. Now she was acting as if he were a stranger trying to cash a money order without credentials. He wondered why. Maybe she disapproved of Lib McGovern, who had been in and out of the house a good deal in the last few weeks.

What Florence needed, he guessed, was the one thing she was unlikely to get, a man. He rose, stretched, and glanced up at the bronze weathercock on the garage steeple. Its beak pointed resolutely northeast. He checked the large, reliable marine barometer and its twin thermometer alongside the front door. Pressure 30.17, up twenty points in twelve hours. Temperature sixty-two. It would be clear and warm and the bass might start hitting off the end of the dock. He whistled, and shouted, "Graf! Hey, Graf!" Leaves rustled under the azalea bed and a long nose came out, followed by an interminable length of dachshund. Graf, his red coat glistening and tail whipping, bounded up the steps, supple as a seal. "Come on, my short-legged friend," Randy said, and went inside, binoculars swinging from his neck, for his second cup of coffee, the cup with the bourbon in it.

Except for the library, lined with his father's law books, and the gameroom, Randy rarely used the first floor. He had converted one wing of the second floor into an apartment suitable in size to a bachelor, and to his own taste. His taste meant living with as little exertion and strain as possible. His wing contained an office, a living room, a combination bar and kitchen alcove, and bedroom and bath. The décor was haphazard, designed for his ease, not a guest's eye. Thus he slept in an outsize mahogany sleigh bed imported from New England by some remote ancestor, but it was equipped with foam rubber mattress and contour nylon sheets. When, in boredom, he wasted an evening preparing a full meal for himself, he ate from Staffordshire bearing the Bragg crest, and with silver from Paul Storr, and by candlelight; but he laid his place on the formica bar separating living room from efficient kitchen. Now he sat on a stool at this bar, half-filled a fat mug with steaming coffee, dropped two lumps of sugar into it, and laced it with an inch of bourbon. He sipped his mixture greedily. It warmed him, all the way down.

Randy didn't remember, exactly, when he had started taking a drink or two before breakfast. Dan Gunn, his

best friend and probably the best medic north of Miami, said it was an unhealthy practice and the hallmark of an alcoholic. Not that Dan had reprimanded him. Dan had just advised him to be careful, and not let it become a habit. Randy knew he wasn't an alcoholic because an alcoholic craved liquor. He never craved it. He just drank for pleasure and the most pleasurable of all drinks was the first one on a crisp winter morning. Besides, when you took it with coffee that made it part of breakfast, and therefore not so depraved. He guessed he had started it during the campaign, when he had been forced to load his stomach with fried mullet, hush puppies, barbecued ribs dripping fat, chitlins, roasted oysters gritty with sand, and to wash all down with warm beer and raw rotgut. After such nights, only mellow bourbon could clear his head and launch him on another day. Bourbon had buoyed him during the campaign, and now bourbon mercifully clouded its memory. He could have beaten Porky Logan, certainly, except for one small tactical error. Randy had been making his first speech, at Pasco Creek, a cow town in the north end of the county, when somebody shouted, "Hey, Randy, where do y' stand on the Supreme Court?"

He had known this question must come, but he had not framed the right kind of answer: the moderate Southern quasi-liberal, semi-segregationist double-talk that would have satisfied everybody except the palmetto scrub woolhats, the loud-mouthed Kluxers and courthouse whittlers who would vote for Porky anyway, and the Georgia and Alabama riffraff crowding the Minorcans for living space in the shanties and three-room bungalows of Pistolville. The truth was that Randolph Bragg himself was torn by the problem, recognizing its dangers and complexities. He had certain convictions. He had served in Korea and Japan and he knew that the battle for Asia was being lost in counties like Timucuan. He also knew that Pasco Creek had no interest in Asia. He believed integration should start in Florida, but it must begin in the nursery schools and kindergartens and would take a generation. This was all difficult to explain, but he did voice his final conviction, ines-

capable because of his legal heritage and training, and the oaths he had taken as voter and soldier. He said: "I believe in the Constitution of the United States—all of it."

There had been snickers and snorts from the rim of the crowd, and his listeners, except for the reporters from Tampa, Orlando, and the county weekly, had drifted away. In later speeches, elsewhere, he attempted to explain his position, but it was hopeless. Behind his back he was called a fool and a traitor to his state and his race. Randolph Rowzee Bragg, whose great-grandfather had been a United States Senator, whose grandfather had been chosen by President Wilson to represent his country as Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary in time of war, whose father had been elected, without opposition, to half a dozen offices, Randolph was beaten five-to-one in the Democratic primaries for nomination to the state legislature. It was worse than defeat. It was humiliation, and Randy knew he could never run for public office again. He refilled his mug, this time with more bourbon than coffee, and Missouri, his maid, shuffled in the hallway and knocked. He called, "Come in, Mizzoo."

Missouri opened the door, pushing a vacuum cleaner and carrying a pail filled with cans, bottles and rags. Missouri was the wife of Two-Tone Henry, neighbor as well as maid. She was six inches shorter than Two-Tone, who was just Randy's height, five-eleven, but Two-Tone claimed she outweighed him by a hundred pounds. If this was true, Missouri weighed around two-forty. But on this morning, it seemed to Randy that she had dwindled a bit. "You dieting, Mizzoo?" he said.

"No, sir, I'm not dietin'. I got nerves."

"Nerves!" Missouri had always seemed nerveless, solid, and placid as a broad, deeply rooted tree. "Two-Tone been giving you a bad time again?"

"No. Two-Tone been behavin'. He down on the dock fishin' right now. To tell you the truth, Mister Randy, it's Mrs. McGovern. She follow me around with white gloves."

Missouri worked two hours each morning for Randy,

and the rest of the day for the McGoverns, who lived half a mile closer to town. The McGoverns were the W. Foxworth McGoverns, the Central Tool and Plate McGoverns, formerly of Cleveland, and the parents of Lib McGovern, whose proper name was Elizabeth. "What do you mean, Mizzoo?" Randy asked, fascinated.

"After I dust, she follow me around with white gloves to see has I dusted. I know I cleans clean, Mister Randy."

"You sure do, Mizzoo."

Missouri plugged in the vacuum cleaner, started it, and then shut it off. She had more on her mind. "That ain't all. You been in that house, Mister Randy. You ever seen so many ashtrays?"

"What's wrong with ashtrays?"

"She don't allow no ashes in 'em. That poor Mister McGovern, he has to smoke his cigars outside. Then there was that roach. Big roach in the silver drawer. Mrs. McGovern opened that drawer yesterday and saw that roach and screeched like she'd been hit by a scorpion. She made me go through every drawer in the kitchen and dining room and put down fresh paper. Was that roach sent me to Doctor Gunn yesterday. Mrs. McGovern she can't 'bide bugs or little green lizards and she won't go out of the house after dark for fear of snakes. I don't think the McGoverns going to be with us long, Mister Randy, because what's Florida except bugs and lizards and snakes? I think they leave around May, when bug season starts good. But Miss McGovern, she won't want to leave. She stuck on you."

"What makes you think so?"

Missouri smiled. "Questions she asks. Like what you eats for breakfast." Missouri glanced at the decanter on the bar. "And who cooks for you. And does you have other girls."

Randy changed the subject. "You say you went to see Doctor Gunn. What'd he say?"

"Doctor says I'm a complicated case. He says I got high blood, on account of I'm heavy. He says it's good I'm losin' weight, because that lowers the high blood,

but frettin' about Mrs. McGovern white-glovin' me is the wrong way to do it. He says quit eatin' grits, eat greens. Quit pork, eat fish. And he gives me tranquil pills to take, one each day before I go to work for Mrs. McGovern."

"You do that, Mizzoo," Randy said, and, carrying his mug, walked out on to the screen upstairs porch overlooking grove and river. He then climbed the narrow ship's ladder that led to the captain's walk, a rectangle sixteen by eight feet, stoutly planked and railed, on the slate roof. Reputedly, this was the highest spot in Timucuan County. From it he could see all the river-front estates, docks, and boats, and all of the town of Fort Repose, three miles downstream, held in a crook of sun-flecked silver where the Timucuan joined the broader St. Johns.

This was his town, or had been. In 1838, during the Seminole Wars, a Lieutenant Randolph Rowzee Peyton, USN, a Virginian, had been dispatched to this river junction with a force of eighteen Marines and two small brass cannon. Lieutenant Peyton journeyed south from Cow's Ford, its name patriotically changed to Jacksonville, by longboat. His orders from General Clinch were to throttle Indian communications on the rivers, thus protecting the flank of the troops moving down the east coast from St. Augustine. Lieutenant Peyton built a blockhouse of palm logs on the point, his guns covering the channel. In two years, except during one relief expedition overland to New Smyrna, he fought no battles or skirmishes. But he shot game and caught fish for the garrison pot, and studied botany and the culture of citrus. The balmy weather and idyllic life, described in a log now in a teak chest in Randy Bragg's office, inspired the Lieutenant to name his outpost Fort Repose.

When the wars subsided, the fort was decommissioned and Lieutenant Peyton was assigned to sea duty. Four years later he returned to Fort Repose with a wife, a daughter, and a grant from the government for one hundred acres. He had picked this precise spot for his homestead because it was the highest ground in the area, with a steep gradient to the river, ideal for plant-

ing the oranges just imported from Spain and the Far East. Peyton's original house had burned. The present house had been built by his son-in-law, the first Marcus Bragg, a native of Philadelphia and a lawyer eventually sent to the Senate. The captain's walk had been added for the aging Lieutenant Peyton, so that with his brass spyglass he could observe what happened at the junction of rivers.

Now the Bragg holdings had dwindled to thirty-six acres, but thirty were planted in prime citrus—navels, mandarins, Valencias, and Temples—all tended and sold in season by the county co-operative. Each year Randy received checks totaling eight to ten thousand dollars from the co-operative. Half went to his older brother, Mark, an Air Force colonel stationed at Offutt Field, Headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, near Omaha. With his share, plus dividends from a trust established by his father, and his occasional fees as an attorney, Randy lived comfortably. Since he drove a new car and paid his bills promptly, the tradespeople of Fort Repose thought him well-to-do. The rich newcomers classed him with the genteel poor.

Randy heard music below, and knew that Missouri had started his record player and therefore was waxing the floor. Missouri's method was to spread the wax, kick off her shoes, wrap her feet in rags, and then polish by dancing. This was probably as efficient, and certainly more fun, than using the electric waxer.

He dropped into a deck chair and focused his binoculars on Preacher Henry's place, looking for that damn bird in the hammock of pines, palmettos, and scrub oak. The Henrys had lived here as long as the Braggs, for the original Henry had come as slave and manservant to Lieutenant Peyton. Now the Henrys owned a four-acre enclave at the east boundary of the Bragg groves. Preacher Henry's father had bought it from Randolph's grandfather for fifty dollars an acre long before the first boom, when land was valued only for what it grew. Preacher was hitching his mule, Balaam—the last mule in Timucuan County so far as anyone knew—to the disk. In this month Preacher harrowed for his