

CUE FOR
QUIET

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[ILLUSTRATED]

By

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ILLUSTRATED &
PUBLISHED BY
E-KİTAP PROJESİ & CHEAPEST BOOKS



www.cheapestbooks.com

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Istanbul

ISBN:

978-625-6004-14-6

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After too many years, T. L. Sherred returns with a story that gets our SPACE SPECIAL rating. It's the story of a man with a headache—who found a cure for it! And the cure gave him more power than any man could dream of. First of Two Parts.

So I had a headache. The grandfather of all headaches. You try working on the roof line sometime, with the presses grinding and the overhead cranes

So I had a headache. The grandfather of all headaches. You try working on the roof line sometime, with the presses grinding and the

overhead cranes wailing and the mechanical arms clacking and grabbing at your inner skull while you snap a shiny sheet of steel like an armored pillowcase and shove it into the maw of a hungry greasy ogre. Noise. Hammering, pounding, shrieking, gobbling, yammering, incessant noise. And I had a headache.

PART I

This headache had all the signs of permanency. It stayed with me when I slid my timecard into an empty slot that clanged back at me, when I skittered across a jammed street of blowing horns and impatient buses with brakedrums worn to the rivets, when I got off at my corner and stood in the precarious safety of a painted island in a whirring storm of hurtling hornets. It got even worse when I ate dinner and tried to read my paper through the shrill juvenile squeals of the housing project where I live surrounded by muddy moppets and, apparently, faithless wives and quarrelsome spouses. The walls of my Quonset are no thicker than usual.



When Helen—that's my wife—dropped the casserole we got for a wedding present from her aunt and just stood there by the kitchen sink crying her eyes out in frustration I knew she finally had more of a mess to clean up than just the shattered remains of a brittle bowl. I didn't say a word. I couldn't. I shoved the chair across the room and watched it tilt the lamp

her mother bought us. Before the lamp hit the floor my hat was on my head and I was out the door. Behind me I heard at least one pane of the storm door die in a fatal crash. I didn't look around to see if it were the one I'd put in last Sunday.

Art was glad to see me. He had the beer drawn and was evening the foam before the heavy front door had shut us off from the street. "Been a while, Pete. What's new?"

I was glad to see him, too. It was quiet in there. That's why I go eight blocks out of my way for my beer. No noise, no loud talking or you end up on the curb; quiet. Quiet and dark and comfortable and you mind your own business, usually. "Got any more of those little boxes of aspirin?"

He had some aspirin and was sympathetic. "Headache again? Maybe you need a new pair of glasses."

I washed down the pills and asked for a refill on the beer. "Maybe, Art. What do you know that's new?"

Nothing. We both knew that. We talked for a while; nothing important, nothing more than the half-spoken, half-grunted short disjointed phrases we

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always repeated. Art would drift away and lean on the other end of the bar and then drift back to me and at the end of each trip there would be clean ashtrays and the dark plastic along the bar would gleam and there would be no dregs of dead drinks and the rows of fresh glasses would align themselves in empty rows on the stainless steel of the lower counter. Art's a good bartender when he wants to be. I held up my empty glass.

"One more, Art. Got the radio section of the paper?"

He handed it to me. "Might be something on the television."

We both laughed. We both feel the same way about television, but he has to have a set in his business for week-end football or baseball games. A big set he has, too, with an extra speaker for the far end of the bar for the short beer trade. I found the program I wanted and showed Art the listing.

He looked at it. "Strauss ... that's that waltz music," and I nodded and he went over to the radio and found the station. These small stations can't sell every minute of their time for commercials, although they try, and every once in a while they run through a solid

hour of Strauss or Bing Crosby or Benny Goodman. I like Strauss.

And there I sat drinking beer and eating stale popcorn when I should have been home with Helen, listening to quiet violins and muted brasses when I should have been doing something noisy and instructive. In my glass I could see whatever I wanted, wherever I would. I made circular patterns on the bar and drew them into a grotesque mass with fingers wet with the silver condensation of bubbles drawn magically through impervious crystal. Then Art turned off the radio.

He was apologetic, but he still turned off the radio. In answer to my unspoken question he shrugged and indicated Freddie. Freddie likes television. He likes dog acts and circus bands and bouncing clowns. He watches the commercials with an innocent unjaundiced eye. Sometimes he sings along with the animated bakers and cooks and gas stations at the top of his boyish beery baritone. He sings loud, and he likes his television the same way.

Art flipped up the lid of the television and stood there long enough to make sure the picture, whatever it was, would be in focus. Then he came back to me and poured another. Hesitating, he added another smaller glass. I can't afford that stuff on what I make.

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Where I made my mistake was taking it. We each had another. And another. The headache got worse.

Ivan and Jack came in, and, when they heard the blast of sound, came down to my end of the bar where, although the extra speaker is overhead, you don't have to look at the source of the noise. Art handed us a deck of cards and a piece of chalk to keep score and we started to play euchre. You don't have to think to play euchre, which is good. It's about the only game you can play with sign language, the only game for a noisy bar. So we played euchre, and at ten-thirty Ivan and Jack left me alone to face the music. The little cords at the nape of my neck were tight as wires, the temple areas near my eyes were soft and tender and sore to the touch, and my head was one big snare drum.

That was when Freddie half-shouted to Art to get the Roller Derby on Channel Seven and—so help me!—to turn it up a little louder. The cards fell out of my hand and onto the table. I took out a cigarette and my lighter slipped out of my tight fingers and fell on the floor and I bent over to pick it up. My head swelled to twice its size, my glasses slid down a little on my sweaty nose, and the tiny red veins in my eyes grew from a thread to a rope to a flag to a tapestry of crimson rage and the noise abruptly stopped. And Art

began to bellow. I stood up. The television set was smoking.



Well, it was fast while it lasted. Art didn't really need the fire department. There wasn't any flame to speak of. Someone pulled the plug from the wall and

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rolled the set out and used the hand extinguisher on the burnt innards of the set and with the rear exhaust fan going the last of the bitter smoke was drifting out before the sirens pulled up in front. The firemen were relieved, not angry, as they always are, and Art in his misery was thoughtful enough to slip a square bottle in the pocket of the lieutenant in charge. It was cold outside, at that. Freddie said so, when he left; there was no reason to stay at Art's any more when most other bars would have the Roller Derby. I watched him go, and mentally cursed the bearings in his new car. Well, fairly new. I went home. Helen was in bed when I got there, probably asleep. She was still probably asleep when I left for work in the morning. She gets like that.

The next day at Art's there was a big space lighter in color than the surrounding wall where the television set had stood. I asked Art about it.

He didn't know. The serviceman had come out and collected it, clucking in dismay at the mess the extinguisher had left. No, no idea what caused it. Short circuit wouldn't make it that bad; fuses should have blown first. They'd find it, though. Art hoped it wouldn't be the picture tube; that wasn't covered in his service policy, and those tubes in that size cost

money. Anything else was covered. At that, he was better off than Freddie.

I looked up. "What's the matter with Freddie?"

He told me. Freddie had ruined his motor on the way home last night. What hadn't blown out the exhaust pipe had gone out the hood, and right after his ninety-day guarantee had expired.

I remembered what I had thought of last night. "How did he do that?"

Art didn't know. He had been driving along and—that was it. The car was in the garage with nothing left between the radiator and the firewall and Freddie was trying to get something out of the insurance company. Fat chance, too, with that bunch of pirates. We'd all had experience with that sort of thing, hadn't we? Why—someone at the other end of the bar wanted some service and Art left. I sat back and began to add two and two. I got five.

Art came back and grinned at me. "You're not going to like this, Pete."

"What won't I like?"

"This," and a man in coveralls shouldered me aside and set a cobra on the bar in front of me, a snake with a twelve inch tube. Art went on to explain: "They're

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giving me a loaner until my own set gets back and they don't want to plug it in the usual place until they get a chance to completely check the wiring. Okay?"

It had to be okay. It wasn't my place of business. I moved down a bit and watched the serviceman plug it in. He tried the channels for clarity and without warning flipped the volume control all the way over and the whole building shook. I shook, too, like a bewildered Labrador throwing off an unwanted splash of icy water. The top of my head lifted from its moorings and shifted just enough for me to name that infernal serviceman and all his issue. He just sat there and grinned, making no attempt to tone down the set. Then I said what I thought about his television, and the set went quiet. Like that.

It began to smoke and the serviceman began to shuck tools from his box. Art opened his mouth to yell and I walked out the front door. The High Hat, right across the street, would serve to keep me warm until the smoke and profanity was cleared and Art had the repairman under control.

I knew it! They had a jukebox inside the door with the same twenty top tunes of the week, the same gaudy front with the same swirling lights and the same tonsillectomied tenors. I shuddered as I eased by, and I murmured a heartfelt wish over my

shoulder, something about the best place for that machine. I ordered a beer, a short one. The barkeep, a pleasant enough fellow, but with none of Art's innate joviality, rang up the dime.

"You didn't happen to pull the cord out when you walked by, did you?"

"Pull the cord out of what?"

He didn't bother to answer, and went over to the machine. That was the first I realized the music had stilled. He clicked the switch on and off a few times with no result, and went to the telephone, detouring by way of the cash register to pick up a coin. Thoughtfully sipping my beer I heard him dial and report a jukebox out of order. Then a relay clicked in the back of my head.

Could all this be a coincidence? Could be.... Couldn't be! The beer grew warm in my hand as I remembered. Every time I'd wished, really really wished, something had happened. Now that I had time to think it over I remembered that red rotor spinning madly past my eyes, that horrible hatred and afterward, that sated sense of fulfillment.... Better have another beer and forget it, Pete. Better make it two beers. Maybe three.