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Day of Truce

Clifford D. Simak

1

THE evening was quiet. There was no sign of the Punks. Silence lay heavily across the barren and eroded acres of the subdivision and there was nothing moving - not even one of the roving and always troublesome dog packs.

It was too quiet, Max Hale decided.

There should have been some motion and some noise. It was as if everyone had taken cover against some known and coming violence - another raid, perhaps. Although there was only one place against which a raid could possibly be aimed. Why should others care, Max wondered; why should they cower indoors, when they had long since surrendered?

Max stood upon the flat lookout-rooftop of the Crawford stronghold and watched the streets to north and west. It was by one of these that Mr. Crawford would be coming home. No one could guess which one, for he seldom used the same road. It was the only way one could cut down the likelihood of ambush or of barricade. Although ambush was less frequent now. There were fewer fences, fewer trees and shrubs; there was almost nothing behind which one could hide. In this barren area it called for real ingenuity to effect an ambuscade. But, Max reminded himself, no one had ever charged the Punks with lack of ingenuity.

Mr. Crawford had phoned that he would be late and Max was getting nervous. In another quarter hour, darkness would be closing in. It was bad business to be abroad in Oak Manor after dark had fallen. Or, for that matter, in any of the subdivisions. For while Oak Manor might be a bit more vicious than some of the others of them, it still was typical.

He lifted his glasses again and swept the terrain slowly. There was no sign of patrols or hidden skulkers. There must be watchers somewhere, he knew. There were always watchers, alert to the slightest relaxation of the vigilance maintained at Crawford stronghold.

Street by street he studied the sorry houses, with their broken window panes and their peeling paint, still marked by the soap streaks and the gouges and the red-paint splashes inflicted years before. Here and there dead trees stood stark, denuded of their branches. Browned evergreens, long dead, stood rooted in the dusty yards - yards long since robbed of the grass that once had made them lawns.

And on the hilltop, up on Circle Drive, stood the ruins of Thompson stronghold, which had fallen almost five years before. There was no structure standing. It had been leveled stone by stone and board by board. Only the smashed and dying trees, only the twisted steel fence posts marked where it had been.

Now Crawford stronghold stood alone in Oak Manor. Max thought of it with a glow of pride and a surge of painful memory. It stood because of him, he thought, and he would keep it standing.

In this desert it was the last oasis, with its trees and grass, with its summer houses and trellises, with the massive shrubbery and the wondrous sun dial beside the patio, with its goldfish-and-lily pond and the splashing fountain.

'Max,' said the walkie-talkie strapped across his chest.

'Yes, Mr. Crawford.'

'Where are you located, Max?'

'Up on the lookout, sir.'

'I'll come in on Seymour Drive,' said Mr. Crawford's voice. 'I'm about a mile beyond the hilltop. I'll be coming fast.'

'The coast seems to be quite clear, sir.'

'Good. But take no chances with the gates.'

'I have the control box with me, sir. I can operate from here. I will keep a sharp lookout.'

'Be seeing you,' said Crawford.

Max picked up the remote control box and waited for his returning master.

The car came over the hill and streaked down Seymour Drive, made its right-hand turn on Dawn, roared toward the gates.

When it was no more than a dozen feet away. Max pushed the button that unlocked the gates. The heavy bumper slammed into them and pushed them open. The buffers that ran along each side of the car held them aside as the machine rushed through. When the car had cleared them, heavy springs snapped them shut and they were locked again.

Max slung the control-box strap over his shoulder and went along the rooftop catwalk to the ladder leading to the ground.

Mr. Crawford had put away the car and was closing the garage door as Max came around the corner of the house.

'It does seem quiet.' said Mr. Crawford. 'Much quieter, it would seem to me, than usual.'

'I don't like it. sir. There is something brewing.'

'Not very likely,' said Mr. Crawford. 'Not on the eve of Truce Day.'

'I wouldn't put nothing past them dirty Punks,' said Max. 'I quite agree,' said Mr. Crawford, 'but they'll be coming here tomorrow for their day of fun. We must treat them well for, after all, they're neighbors and it is a custom. I would hate to have you carried beyond the bounds of propriety by overzealousness.'

'You know well and good,' protested Max, 'I would never do a thing. I am a fighter, sir, but I fight fair and honorable.'

Mr. Crawford said, 'I was thinking of the little gambit you had cooked up last year.'

'It would not have hurt them, sir. Leastwise, not permanently. They might never have suspected. Just a drop or two of it in the fruit punch was all we

would have needed. It wouldn't have taken effect until hours after they had left. Slow-acting stuff it was.'

'Even so,' said Mr. Crawford sternly, 'I am glad I found out in time. And I don't want a repeat performance, possibly more subtle, to be tried this year. I hope you understand me.'

'Oh, certainly, sir,' said Max. 'You can rely upon it, sir.'

'Well, good night, then. I'll see you in the morning.'

It was all damn foolishness, thought Max - this business of a Day of Truce. It was an old holdover from the early days when some do-gooder had figured maybe there would be some benefit if the stronghold people and the Punks could meet under happy circumstance and spend a holiday together.

It worked, of course, but only for the day. For twenty-four hours there were no raids, no flaming arrows, no bombs across the fence. But at one second after midnight, the feud took up again, as bitter and relentless as it had ever been.

It had been going on for years. Max had no illusions about how it all would end. Some day Crawford stronghold would fall, as had all the others in Oak Manor. But until that day, he pledged himself to do everything he could. He would never lower his guard nor relax his vigilance. Up to the very end he would make them smart for every move they made.

He watched as Mr. Crawford opened the front door and went across the splash of light that flowed out from the hall. Then the door shut and the house stood there, big and bleak and black, without a sliver of light showing anywhere. No light ever showed from the Crawford house. Well before the fall of night he always threw the lever on the big control board to slam steel shutters closed against all the windows in the place. Lighted windows made too good a night-time target.

Now the raids always came at night. There had been a time when some had been made in daylight, but that was too chancy now. Year by year, the defenses had been built up to a point where an attack in daylight was plain foolhardiness.

Max turned and went down the driveway to the gates. He drew on rubber gloves and with a small flashlight examined the locking mechanism, it was locked. It had never failed, but there might come a time it would. He never failed to check it once the gates had closed.

He stood beside the gates and listened. Everything was quiet, although he imagined he could hear the faint singing of the electric current running through the fence. But that, he knew, was impossible, for the current was silent.

He reached out with a gloved hand and stroked the fence. Eight feet high, he told himself, with a foot of barbed wire along the top of it, and every inch of it alive with the surging current.

And inside of it a standby, auxiliary fence into which current could be introduced if the forward fence should fail.

A clicking sound came padding down the driveway and Max turned from the gate.

'How you, boy,' he said.

It was too dark for him to see the dog, but he could hear it snuffling and snorting with pleasure at his recognition.

It came bumbling out of the darkness and pushed against his legs. He squatted down and put his arms about it. It kissed him sloppily.

'Where are the others, boy?' he asked, and it wriggled m its pleasure.

Great dogs, he thought. They loved the people in the stronghold almost to adoration, but had an utter hatred for every other person. They had been trained to have.

The rest of the pack, he knew, was aprowl about the yard, alert to every sound, keyed to every presence. No one could approach the fence without their knowing it. Any stranger who got across the fence they would rip to bits.

He stripped off the rubber gloves and put them in his pocket.

'Come on, boy,' he said.

He turned off the driveway and proceeded across the yard - cautiously, for it was uneven footing. There was no inch of it that lay upon the level. It was cleverly designed so that any thrown grenade or Molotov cocktail would roll into a deep and narrow bomb trap.

There had been a time, he recalled, when there had been a lot of these things coming over the fence. There were fewer now, for it was a waste of effort. There had been a time, as well, when there had been flaming arrows, but these had tapered off since the house had been fireproofed.

He reached the side yard and stopped for a moment, listening, with the dog standing quietly at his side. A slight wind had come up and the trees were rustling. He lifted his head and stared at the delicate darkness of them, outlined against the lighter sky.

Beautiful things, he thought. It was a pity there were not more of them. Once this area had been named Oak Manor for the stately trees that grew here. There, just ahead of him, was the last of them - a rugged old patriarch with its massive crown blotting out the early stars.

He looked at it with awe and appreciation - and with apprehension, too. It was a menace. It was old and brittle and it should be taken down, for it leaned toward the fence and some day a windstorm might topple it across the wire. He should have mentioned it long ago to Mr. Crawford, but he knew the owner held this tree in a sentimental regard that matched his own. Perhaps it could be made safe by guywires to hold it against the wind, or at least to turn its fall away from the fence should it be broken or uprooted. Although it seemed a sacrilege to anchor it with guywires, an insult to an ancient monarch.

He moved on slowly, threading through the bomb traps, with the dog close at his heels, until he reached the patio and here he stopped beside the sun dial. He ran his hand across its rough stone surface and wondered why Mr. Crawford should set such a store by it. Perhaps because it was a link to the olden days before the Punks and raids. It was an old piece that had been brought from a monastery garden somewhere in France. That in itself, of course, would make it valuable. But perhaps Mr. Crawford saw in it another value, far beyond the fact that it was hundreds of years old and had come across the water.

Perhaps it had grown to symbolize for him the day now past when any man might have a sun dial in his garden, when he might have trees and grass without fighting for them, when he might take conscious pride in the unfenced and unmolested land that lay about his house.

Bit by bit, through the running years, those rights had been eroded.

2

First it had been the little things - the casual, thoughtless trampling of the shrubbery by the playing small fry, the killing of the evergreens by the

rampaging packs of happy dogs that ran with the playing small fry. For each boy, the parents said, must have himself a dog.

The people in the first place had moved from the jampacked cities to live in what they fondly called the country, so that they could keep a dog or two and where their children would have fresh air and sunlight and room in which to run.

But too often this country was, in reality, no more than another city, with its houses cheek by jowl - each set on acre or half-acre lots, but still existing cheek by jowl.

Of course, a place to run the children had. But no more than a place to run. There was nothing more to do. Run was all they could do - up and down the streets, back and forth across the lawns, up and down the driveways, leaving havoc in their trail. And in time the toddlers grew up and in their teen-age years they still could only run. There was no place for them to go, nothing they might do. Their mothers fore-gathered every morning at the coffee klatches and their fathers sat each evening in the backyards drinking beer. The family car could not be used because gasoline cost money and the mortgages were heavy and the taxes terrible and the other costs were high.

So to find an outlet for their energies, to work off their unrealized resentments against having nothing they could do, these older fry started out, for pure excitement only, on adventures in vandalism. There was a cutting of the backyard clotheslines, a chopping into bits of watering hoses left out overnight, a breaking and ripping up of the patios, ringing of the doorbells, smashing of the windows, streaking of the siding with a cake of soap, splashing with red paint.

Resentments had been manufactured to justify this vandalism and now the resentments were given food to grow upon. Irate owners erected fences to keep out the children and the dogs, and this at once became an insult and a challenge.

And that first simple fence. Max told himself, had been the forerunner of the eight-foot barrier of electricity which formed the first line of defense in the Crawford stronghold. Likewise, those small-time soap-cake vandals, shrieking their delight at messing up a neighbor's house, had been the ancestors of the Punks.

He left the Patio and went down the stretch of backyard, past the goldfish-and-lily pond and the tinkling of the fountain, past the clump of weeping willows, and so out to the fence.

'Psst!' said a voice just across the fence. 'That you, Billy?'

'It's me,' said Billy Warner.

'All right. Tell me what you have.'

'Tomorrow is Truce Day and we'll be visiting...'

'I know all that,' said Max.

'They're bringing in a time bomb.'

'They can't do that,' said Max, disgusted. 'The cops will frisk them at the gates. They would spot it on them.'

'It'll be all broken down. Each one will have a piece. Stony Stafford hands out the parts tonight. He has a crew that has been practising for weeks to put a bomb together fast - even in the dark, if need be.'

'Yeah,' said Max, 'I guess they could do it that way. And once they get it put together?'

'The sun dial,' Billy said. 'Underneath the sun dial.'

'Well, thanks,' said Max. 'I am glad to know. It would break the boss' heart should something happen to the sun dial.'

'I figure,' Billy said, 'this might be worth a twenty.'

'Yes,' Max agreed. 'Yes, I guess it would.'

'If they ever knew I told, they'd take me out and kill me.'

'They won't ever know,' said Max. 'I won't ever tell them.'

He pulled his wallet from his pocket, turned on the flash and found a pair of tens.

He folded the bills together, lengthwise, twice. Then he shoved them through an opening in the fence.

'Careful, there,' he cautioned. 'Do not touch the wire.' Beyond the fence he could see the faintly white outline of the other's face. And a moment later, the hand that reached out carefully and grabbed the corner of the folded bills.

Max did not let loose of the money immediately. They stood, each of them, with their grip upon the bills.

'Billy,' said Max, solemnly, 'you would never kid me, would you? You would never sell me out. You would never feed me erroneous information.'

'You know me, Max,' said Billy. 'I've played square with you. I'd never do a thing like that.'

Max let go of the money and let the other have it.

'I am glad to hear you say that, Billy. Keep on playing square. For the day you don't, I'll come out of here and hunt you down and cut your throat myself.'

But the informer did not answer. He was already moving off, out into the deeper darkness.

Max stood quietly, listening. The wind still blew in the leaves and the fountain kept on splashing, like gladsome silver bells.

'Hi, boy,' Max said softly, but there was no snuffling answer. The dog had left him, was prowling with the others up and down the yard.

Max turned about and went up the yard toward the front again, completing his circuit of the house. As he rounded the corner of the garage, a police car was slowing to a halt before the gates.

He started down the drive, moving ponderously and deliberately.

'That you, Charley?' he called softly.

'Yes, Max,' said Charley Pollard. 'Is everything all right?'

'Right as rain,' said Max.

He approached the gates and saw the bulky loom of the officer on the other side.

'Just dropping by,' said Pollard. 'The area is quiet tonight. We'll be coming by one of these days to inspect the place. It looks to me you're loaded.'

'Not a thing illegal,' Max declared. 'All of it's defensive. That is still the rule.'

'Yes, that is the rule,' said Pollard, 'but it seems to me that there are times you become a mite too enthusiastic. A full load in the fence, no doubt.'

'Why, certainly,' said Max, 'Would you have it otherwise?'

'A kid grabs hold of it and he could be electrocuted, at full strength.'

'Would you rather I had it set just to tickle them?'

'You're playing too rough. Max.'

'I doubt it rather much,' said Max. 'I watched from here, five years ago, when they stormed Thompson stronghold. Did you happen to see that?'

'I wasn't here five years ago. My beat was Farview Acres.'

'They took it apart,' Max told him. 'Stone by stone, brick by brick, timber by timber. They left nothing standing. They left nothing whole. They cut down all the trees and chopped them up. They uprooted all the shrubs. They hoed out all the flower beds. They made a desert of it. They reduced it to their level. And I'm not about to let it happen here, not if I can help it. A man has got the right to grow a tree and a patch of grass. If he wants a flower bed, he has a right to have a flower bed. You may not think so, but he's even got the right to keep other people out.'

'Yes,' said the officer, 'all you say is true. But these are kids you are dealing with. There must be allowances. And this is a neighborhood. You folks and the others like you wouldn't have this trouble if you only tried to be a little neighborly.'

'We don't dare be neighborly,' said Max. 'Not in a place like this. In Oak Manor, and in all the other manors and all the other acres and the other whatever-you-may-call-thems, neighborliness means that you let people overrun you. Neighborliness means you give up your right to live your life the way you want to live it. This kind of neighborliness is rooted way back in those days when the kids made a path across your lawn as a shortcut to the school bus and you couldn't say a thing for fear that they would sass you back and so create a scene. It started when your neighbor borrowed your lawn mower and forgot to bring it back and when you went to get it you found that he had broken it. But he pretended that he hadn't and, for the sake of neighborliness, you didn't have the guts to tell him that he had and to demand that he pay the bill for the repairing of it.'

'Well, maybe so,' said Pollard, 'but it's gotten out of hand. It has been carried too far. You folks have got too high and mighty.'

'There's a simple answer to everything,' Max told him stoutly. 'Get the Punks to lay off us and we'll take down the fence and all the other stuff.'

Pollard shook his head. 'It has gone too far,' he said. 'There is nothing anyone can do.'

He started to go back to the car, then turned back.

'I forgot,' he said. 'Tomorrow is your Truce Day. Myself and a couple of the other men will be here early in the morning.'

Max didn't answer. He stood in the driveway and watched the car pull off down the street. Then he went up the driveway and around the house to the back door.

Nora had a place laid at the table for him and he sat down heavily, glad to be off his feet. By this time of the evening he was always tired. Not as young, he thought, as he once had been.

'You're late tonight,' said the cook, bringing him the food. 'Is everything all right?'

'I guess so. Everything is quiet. But we may have trouble tomorrow. They're bringing in a bomb.'

'A bomb!' cried Nora. 'What will you do about it? Call in the police, perhaps.'

Max shook his head. 'No, I can't do that. The police aren't on our side. They'd take the attitude we'd egged on the Punks until they had no choice but to bring in the bomb. We are on our own. And besides, I must protect the lad who told me. If I didn't, the Punks would know and he'd be worthless to me then. He'd never get to know another thing. But knowing they are bringing something in, I can watch for it.'

He still felt uneasy about it all, he realized. Not about the bomb itself, perhaps, but something else, something that was connected with it. He wondered why he had this feeling. Knowing about the bomb, he all but had it made. All he'd have to do would be to locate it and dig it out from beneath the sun dial. He would have the time to do it. The day-long celebration would end at six in the evening and the Punks could not set the bomb to explode earlier than midnight. Any blast before midnight would be a violation of the truce.

He scooped fried potatoes from the dish onto his plate and speared a piece of meat. Nora poured his coffee and, puffing out a chair, sat down opposite him.

'You aren't eating?' he asked.

'I ate early, Max.'

He ate hungrily and hurriedly, for there still were things to do. She sat and watched him eat. The clock on the kitchen wall ticked loudly in the silence.

Finally she said: 'It is getting somewhat grim, Max.'

He nodded, his mouth full of food and unable to speak.

'I don't see,' said the cook, 'why the Crawfords want to stay here. There can't be much pleasure in it for them. They could move into the city and it would be safer there. There are the juvenile gangs, of course, but they mostly fight among themselves. They don't make life unbearable for all the other people.'

'It's pride,' said Max. 'They won't give up. They won't let Oak Manor beat them. Mr. and Mrs. Crawford are quality. They have some steel in them.'

'They couldn't sell the place, of course,' said Nora. 'There would be no one to buy it. But they don't need the money. They could just walk away from it.'

'You misjudge them, Nora. The Crawfords in all their lives have never walked away from anything. They went through a lot to live here. Sending Johnny off to boarding school when he was a lad, since it wouldn't have been safe for him to go to school with the Punks out there. I don't suppose they like it. I don't see how they could. But they won't be driven out. They realize someone must stand up to all that trash out there, or else there's no hope.'

Nora sighed. 'I suppose you're right. But it is a shame. They could live so safe and comfortable and normal if they just moved to the city.'

He finished eating and got up.

'It was a good meal, Nora,' he said. 'But then you always fix good meals.'

'Ah, go on with you.' said Nora.

He went into the basement and sat down before the shortwave set. Systematically, he started putting in his calls to the other strongholds. Wilson stronghold, over in Fair Hills, had had a little trouble early in the evening - a few stink bombs heaved across the fence - but it had quieted down. Jackson stronghold did not answer. While he was trying to get through to Smith stronghold in Harmony Settlement, Curtis stronghold in Lakeside Heights began calling him. Everything was quiet, John Hennessey, the Curtis custodian told him. It had been quiet for several days.

He stayed at the radio for an hour and by that time had talked with all the nearby strongholds. There had been scattered trouble here and there, but nothing of any consequence. Generally it was peaceful.

He sat and thought about the time bomb and there was still that nagging worry. There was something wrong, he knew, but he could not put his finger on it.

Getting up, he prowled the cavernous basement, checking the defense material - extra sections of fencing, piles of posts, pointed stakes, rolls of barb wire, heavy flexible wire mesh and all the other items for which some day there might be a need. Tucked into one corner, hidden, he found the stacked carboys of acid he had secretly cached away. Mr. Crawford would not approve, he knew, but if the chips ever should be down, and there was need to use those carboys, he might be glad to have them.

He climbed the stairs and went outside to prowl restlessly about the yard, still upset by that nagging something about the bomb he could not yet pin down.

The moon had risen. The yard was a place of interlaced light and shadow, but beyond the fence the desert acres that held the other houses lay flat and bare and plain, without a shadow of them except the shadows of the houses.

Two of the dogs came up and passed the time of night with him and then went off into the shrubbery.

He moved into the backyard and stood beside the sun dial.

The wrongness still was there. Something about the sun dial and the bomb - some piece of thinking that didn't run quite true.

He wondered how they knew that the destruction of the sun dial would be a heavy blow to the owner of the stronghold. How could they possibly have known?

The answer seemed to be that they couldn't. They didn't. There was no way for them to know. And even if, in some manner, they had learned, a sun dial most certainly would be a piddling thing to blow up when that single bomb could be used so much better somewhere else.

Stony Stafford, the leader of the Punks, was nobody's fool. He was a weasel - full of cunning, full of savvy. He'd not mess with any sun dial when there was so much else that a bomb could do so much more effectively.

And as he stood there beside the sun dial, Max knew where that bomb would go - knew where he would plant it were he in Stafford's place.

At the roots of that ancient oak which leaned toward the fence.

He stood and thought about it and knew that he was right.

Billy Warner, he wondered. Had Billy double-crossed him?

Very possibly he hadn't. Perhaps Stony Stafford might have suspected long ago that his gang harbored an informer and, for that reason, had given out the story of the sun dial rather than the oak tree. And that, of course, only to a select inner circle which would be personally involved with the placing of the bomb.

In such a case, he thought, Billy Warner had not done too badly.

Max turned around and went back to the house, walking heavily. He climbed the stairs to his attic room and went to bed. It had been, he thought just before he went to sleep, a fairly decent day.

3

The police showed up at eight o'clock. The carpenters came and put up the dance platform. The musicians appeared and began their tuning up. The caterers arrived and set up the tables, loading them with food and two huge punch bowls standing by to serve.

Shortly after nine o'clock the Punks and their girls began to straggle in. The police frisked them at the gates and found no blackjacks, no brass knuckles, no bicycle chains on any one of them.

The band struck up. The Punks and their girls began to dance. They strolled through the yard and admired the flowers, without picking any of them. They sat on the grass and talked and laughed among themselves. They gathered at the overflowing boards and ate. They laughed and whooped and frolicked and everything was fine.

'You see?' Pollard said to Max. 'There ain't nothing wrong with them. Give them a decent break and they're just a bunch of ordinary kids. A little hell in them, of course, but nothing really bad. It's your flaunting of this place in their very faces that makes them the way they are.'

'Yeah,' said Max.

He left Pollard and drifted down the yard, keeping as inconspicuous as he could. He wanted to watch the oak, but he knew he didn't dare to. He knew he had to keep away from it, should not even glance toward it. If he should scare them off, then God only knew where they would plant the bomb. He thought of being forced to hunt wildly for it after they were gone and shuddered at the thought.

There was no one near the bench at the back of the yard, near the flowering almond tree, and he stretched out on it. It wasn't particularly comfortable, but the day was warm and the air was drowsy. He dropped off to sleep.

When he woke he saw that a man was standing on the gravel path just beyond the bench.

He blinked hard and rubbed his eyes.

'Hello, Max,' said Stony Stafford.

'You should be up there dancing. Stony.'

'I was waiting for you to wake up,' said Stony. 'You are a heavy sleeper. I could of broke your neck.'

Max sat up. He rubbed a hand across his face.

'Not on Truce Day, Stony. We all are friends on Truce Day.'

Stony spat upon the gravel path.

'Some other day,' he said.

'Look,' said Max, 'why don't you just run off and forget about it? You'll break your back if you try to crack this place. Pick up your marbles, Stony, and go find someone else who's not so rough to play with.'

'Some day we'll make it,' Stony said. 'This place can't stand forever.'

'You haven't got a chance,' said Max.

'Maybe so,' said Stony. 'But I think we will. And before we do, there is just one thing I want you to know. You think nothing will happen to you even if we do. You think that all we'll do is just rip up the place, not harming anyone. But you're wrong, Max. We'll do it the way it is supposed to be with the Crawfords and with Nora. We won't hurt them none. But we'll get you, Max. Just because we can't carry knives or guns doesn't mean there aren't any other ways. There'll be a stone fall on you or a timber hit you. Or maybe you'll stumble and fall into the fire. There are a lot of ways to do it and we plan to get you plenty.'

'So,' said Max, 'you hate me. It makes me feel real bad.'

'Two of my boys are dead,' said Stony. 'There are others who are crippled pretty bad.'

'There wouldn't nothing happen to them, Stony, if you didn't send them up against the fence.'

He looked up and saw the hatred that lay in Stony Stafford's eyes, but washing across the hatred was a gleam of triumph.

'Good-by, dead man,' said Stony.

He turned and stalked away.

Max sat quietly on the bench, remembering that gleam of triumph in Stony Stafford's eyes. And that meant he had been right. Stony had something up his sleeve and it could be nothing else but the bomb beneath the oak.

The day wore on. In the afternoon, Max went up to the house and into the kitchen. Nora fixed him a sandwich, grumbling.

'Why don't you go out and eat off the tables?' she demanded. 'There is plenty there.'

'Just as soon keep out of their way,' said Max. 'I have to fight them all the rest of the year. I don't see why I should pal up with them today.'

'What about the bomb?'

'Shhh,' said Max. 'I know where it is.'

Nora stood looking out the window. 'They don't look like bad kids,' she said. 'Why can't we make a peace of some sort with them?'

Max grunted. 'It's gone too far,' he said.

Pollard had been right, he thought. It was out of hand. Neither side could back down now.

The police could have put a stop to it to start with, many years ago, if they had cracked down on the vandals instead of adopting a kids-will-be-kids attitude and shrugging it all off as just an aggravated case of quarreling in the neighborhood. The parents could have stopped it by paying some attention to the kids, by giving them something that would have stopped their running wild. The community could have put a stop to it by providing some sort of recreational facilities.

But no one had put a stop to it. No one had even tried.

And now it had grown to be a way of life and it must be fought out to the

bitter end.

Max had no illusions as to who would be the winner.

Six o'clock came and the Punks started drifting off. By six thirty the last of them had gone. The musicians packed up their instruments and left. The caterers put away their dishes and scooped up the leftovers and the garbage and drove away. The carpenters came and got their lumber. Max went down to the gates and checked to see that they were locked.

'Not a bad day,' said Pollard, speaking through the gates to Max. 'They really aren't bad kids, if you'd just get to know them.'

'I know them plenty now,' said Max.

He watched the police car drive off, then turned back up the driveway.

He'd have to wait for a while, he knew, until the dusk could grow a little deeper, before he started looking for the bomb. There would be watchers outside the fence. It would be just as well if they didn't know that he had found it. It might serve a better purpose if they could be left to wonder if it might have been a dud. For one thing, it would shake their confidence. For another, it would protect young Billy Warner. And while Max could feel no admiration for the kid, Billy had been useful in the past and still might be useful in the future.

He went down to the patio and crawled through the masking shrubbery until he was only a short distance from the oak.

He waited there, watching the area out beyond the fence. There was as yet no sign of life out there. But they would be out there watching. He was sure of that.

The dusk grew deeper and he knew he could wait no longer. Creeping cautiously, he made his way to the oak. Carefully, he brushed away the grass and leaves, face held close above the ground.

Halfway around the tree, he found it - the newly upturned earth, covered by a sprinkling of grass and leaves, and positioned neatly between two heavy roots.

He thrust his hand against the coolness of the dirt and his fingers touched the metal. Feeling it, he froze, then very slowly, very gently, pulled his hand away.

He sat back on his heels and drew in a measured breath. The bomb was there, all right, just as he had suspected. But set above it, protecting it, was a contact bomb. Try to get the time bomb out and the contact bomb would be triggered off.

He brushed his hands together, wiping off the dirt.

There was, he knew, no way to get out the bombs. He had to let them stay. There was nothing he could do about it.

No wonder Stony's eyes had shown a gleam of triumph. For there was more involved than just a simple time bomb. This was a foolproof setup. There was nothing that could be done about it. If it had not been for the roots, Max thought, he might have taken a chance on working from one side and digging it all out. But with the heavy roots protecting it, that was impossible.

Stony might have known that he knew about it and then had gone ahead, working out a bomb set that no one would dare to mess around with.

It was exactly the sort of thing that would be up Stony's alley. More than likely, he was setting out there now, chuckling to himself.

Max stayed squatted, thinking.

He could string a line of mesh a few feet inside the tree, curving out to meet the auxiliary fence on either side. Juice could be fed into it and it might serve as a secondary defense. But it was not good insurance. A determined rush would carry it, for at best it would be flimsy. He'd not be able to install it as he should, working in the dark.

Or he could rig the tree with guywires to hold it off the fence when it came crashing down. And that, he told himself, might be the thing to do.

He got up and went around the house, heading for the basement to look up some wire that might serve to hold the tree.

He remembered, as he walked past the short wave set, that he should be sitting in on the regular evening check among the nearby strongholds. But it would have to wait tonight.

He walked on and then stopped suddenly as the thought came to him. He stood for a moment, undecided, then swung around and went back to the set.

He snapped on the power and turned it up.

He'd have to be careful what he said, he thought, for there was the chance the Punks might be monitoring the channels.

John Hennessey, custodian of the Curtis stronghold, came in a few seconds after Max had started calling.

'Something wrong, Max?'

'Nothing wrong, John. I was just wondering - do you remember telling me about those toys that you have?'

'Toys?'

'Yeah. The rattles.'

He could hear the sound of Hennessey sucking in his breath.

Finally he said: 'Oh, those. Yes, I still have them.'

'How many would you say?'

'A hundred, probably. Maybe more than that.'

'Could I borrow them?'

'Sure,' said Hennessey. 'Would you want them right away?'

'If you could,' said Max.

'Okay. You'll pick them up?'

'I'm a little busy.'

'Watch for me,' said Hennessey. 'I'll box them up and be there in an hour.'

'Thanks, John,' said Max.

Was it wrong? He wondered. Was it too much of a chance?

Perhaps he didn't have the right to take any chance at all. But you couldn't sit forever, simply fending off the Punks. For if that was all you did, they'd keep on coming back. But hit back hard at them and they might get a belly full. You might end it once for all. The trouble was, he thought, you could strike back so seldom. You could never act except defensively, for if you took any other kind of action, the police were down on you like a ton of bricks.

He licked his lips.

It was seldom one had a chance like this - a chance to strike back lustily and still be legally defensive.

4

He got up quickly and walked to the rear of the basement, where he found the heavy flexible mesh. He carried out three rolls of it and a loop of heavy wire to hang it on. He'd have to use some trees to stretch out the wire. He really should use some padding to protect the trees against abrasion by the wire, but he didn't have the time.

Working swiftly, he strung the wire, hung the mesh upon it, pegged the bottom of the mesh tight against the ground, tied the ends of it with the auxiliary fence.

He was waiting at the gates when the truck pulled up. He used the control box to open the gates and the truck came through. Hennessey got out.

'Outside is swarming with Punks,' he told Max. 'What is going on?'

'I got troubles,' said Max.

Hennessey went around to the back of the truck and lowered the tail gate. Three large boxes, with mesh insets, rested in the truck bed.

'They're in there?' asked Max.

Hennessey nodded. 'I'll give you a hand with them.' Between them they lugged the boxes to the mesh curtain, rigged behind the oak.

'I left one place unpegged,' said Max. 'We can push the boxes under.'

'I'll unlock the lids first,' said Hennessey. 'We can reach through with the pole and lift the lids if they are unlocked. Then use the pole again to tip the boxes over.'

They slid the boxes underneath the curtain, one by one. Hennessey went back to the truck to get the pole. Max pegged down the gap.

'Can you give me a bit of light?' asked Hennessey. 'I know the Punks are waiting out there. But probably they'd not notice just a squirt of it. They might think you were making just a regular inspection of the grounds.'

Max flashed the light and Hennessey, working with the pole thrust through the mesh, flipped back the lids. Carefully, he tipped the boxes over. A dry slithering and frantic threshing sounds came out of the dark.

'They'll be nasty customers,' said Hennessey. 'They'll be stirred up and angry. They'll do a lot of circulating, trying to get settled for the night and that way, they'll get spread out. Most of them are big ones. Not many of the small kinds.'

He put the pole over his shoulder and the two walked back to the truck.

Max put out his hand and the two men shook.

'Thanks a lot, John.'

'Glad to do it. Max. Common cause, you know. Wish I could stay around...'

'You have a place of your own to watch.'

They shook hands once again and Hennessey climbed into the cab.

'You better make it fast the first mile or so,' said Max. 'Our Punks may be laying for you. They might have recognized you.'

'With the bumpers and the power I have,' said Hennessey, 'I can get through anything.'

'And watch out for the cops. They'd raise hell if they knew we were helping back and forth.'

'I'll keep an eye for them.'

Max opened the gates and the truck backed out, straightened in the road and swiftly shot ahead.

Max listened until it was out of hearing, then checked to see that the gates were locked.

Back in the basement he threw the switch that fed current into the auxiliary fence - and now into the mesh as well.

He sighed with some contentment and climbed the stairs out to the yard.

A sudden flash of light lit up the grounds. He spun swiftly around, then cursed softly at himself. It was only a bird hitting the fence in flight. It happened all the time. He was getting jittery and there was no need of it. Everything was under control - reasonably so.

He climbed a piece of sloping ground and stood behind the oak. Staring into the darkness, it seemed to him that he could see shadowy forms out beyond the fence.

They were gathering out there and they would come swarming in as soon as the tree went down, smashing the fences. Undoubtedly they planned to use the tree as a bridge over the surging current that still would flow in the smashed-down fence.

Maybe it was taking too much of a chance, he thought. Maybe he should have used the guywires on the tree. That way there would have been no chance at all. But, likewise, there would have been no opportunity.

They might get through, he thought, but he'd almost bet against it.

He stood there, listening to the angry rustling of a hundred rattlesnakes, touchy and confused, in the area beyond the mesh.

The sound was a most satisfying thing.

He moved away, to be out of the line of blast when the bomb exploded, and waited for the day of truce to end.