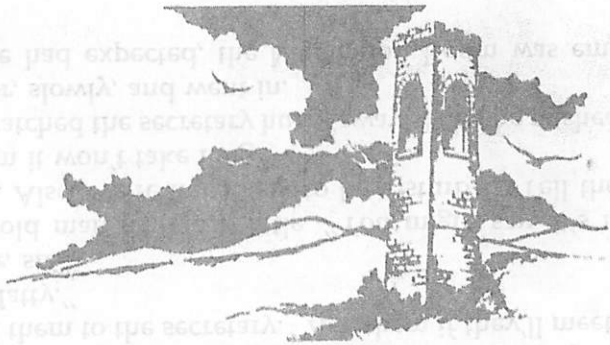

XIII

The headquarters of the United Nations in New York City is an impressive place. The flags of more than a hundred nations snapping in the wind that blows off the East River. The handsome gardens with statuary from all over the world. The great gold pendulum just inside the main entrance that swings majestically to and fro, its motion caused—they say—by the rotation of the earth itself.

And then there's a small room called the Meditation Room, where very few people go. I suppose it's the closest the UN, with its multiplicity of religions, could come to a chapel. It's very quiet in there. Once or twice I've sat on one of the backless benches and listened to the silence and wondered how much influence the room might have—if any—on the thoughts or actions of the diplomats who come and go in the busy corridors.

The world never seems to be able to draw back from the brink of self-annihilation. It never quite seems to go over the

edge, either. The story that follows, now, was written some time ago and it may be a little dated now.

But not much.

That's the pity of it.

Not much.

One Hour to War

On the third day of the crisis, the old man came to New York. Unannounced, uninvited, he flew in with Mathieson, his quiet selfless secretary. The old man's face was seamed with age and wisdom; he moved stiffly as he descended from the plane. But there was great dignity and purpose in him still.

Waiting for his car, hat pulled down over his eyes, he watched the long lines at the ticket counters. So far there had been no mass exodus, no panic. But already some people were moving out. And it was not surprising, the old man thought. Not when you considered the black headlines, the grim bulletins on radio and television, the conviction growing, hour by hour, that this time the fuse was really lit and hissing, this time the explosion was inevitable. And when it came, New York . . .

He felt a touch on his arm, heard Mathieson's anxious voice. "Car was held up by the traffic, sir. But it's here now." Poor Matty—so devoted, so efficient and such a worrier. With the world about to collapse, he could still be upset because a car was five minutes late.

In the limousine, the old man leaned back wearily. He touched a button at his elbow, and at once the doomlike voice of some newscaster filled the car: ". . . spokesman held out no hope that an open clash could be averted. In this morning's meeting of the Security Council the Soviet delegate made it crystal clear that Russia would consider any military move by

Britain or France an act of war against itself. The British and French made equally clear their determination to support at all costs. . . ."

The old story. Threat and counterthreat. Then the ultimatum, carefully calculated to call a bluff—if it was a bluff. And then, swift and deadly, the chain reaction leading to . . . The old man felt his mind shy away from the thought. Twice he had seen the process lead to global war. This time it would be—annihilation.

The radio voice droned inexorably on: ". . . announced that the armed forces were in a state of complete combat readiness. In New York, a formal announcement of the decision to resort to force is expected within the hour. It will be contained in an address scheduled to be delivered before the General Assembly by the foreign minister of. . . ."

The old man snapped the radio off. It could tell him nothing that he did not already know. Outside, the gray twilight fled past. They crossed the soaring bridge that led to Manhattan, and Mathieson said, worriedly, "Wouldn't you rather go to the hotel first, sir? Rest up a bit before . . ."

The old man shook his head. "There isn't time, Matty."

When they reached the UN buildings, a fine, chill rain had begun to fall. The crowd outside the visitors' entrance was smaller than the old man had anticipated.

He moved, unrecognized, through the heavy glass-and-nickel doors, across the lobby, past the great golden pendulum that marked with its majestic rhythm the slow rotation of the earth. In front of a closed door on the western side of the building he stopped. From his pocket he drew the five identical notes he had written with his own hand on the plane. He handed them to the secretary. "Ask them if they'll meet me in here, Matty."

"*Here,* sir?"

The old man smiled a little. "You might say, it's neutral ground. Also, we're not likely to be disturbed. Tell them . . . tell them it won't take long."

He watched the secretary hurry away. Then he pushed open the door, slowly, and went in.

As he had expected, the Meditation Room was empty. It

was not large: twelve paces long, perhaps, one end narrower than the other so that the blank walls seemed to converge. The indirect lighting was very dim; the silence was profound. Directly ahead of the old man were two backless benches. Beyond them, centered in the thick carpeting, was a block of stone, narrowly rectangular, perhaps four feet high. It was without ornament or inscription of any kind, but from a concealed spotlight overhead a shaft of light fell like a sword blade and glittered on the particles of mica in the polished surface.

He moved forward and sat down stiffly on one of the benches. They would come; he was fairly sure of that. But when they did come . . . he felt the sudden doubt bite into him. What he planned to do seemed so weak, suddenly, so inadequate in the face of the avalanche poised above them all.

He waited and they came. Out of curiosity, perhaps. Certainly out of self-interest. But also out of respect for the old man and the greatness that had filled his life.

One by one they came, alone as requested, and the old man greeted each one quietly. When all were assembled, he moved around the block of stone so that he stood at the far end, facing them."Gentlemen," he said, "thank you for coming."

He could only see their faces dimly. They had divided themselves so that the Briton, the Frenchman, and the American were on one side of him. The Russian and his satellite were on the other. The stone was a granite barrier between them.

"Gentlemen," the old man said, "we all know, the whole world knows, that time is running out. It is no longer a question of which of you is right. There is right on both sides; that is why it is so hard to reach a solution, or to compromise. But—"

"We have!" The shadowy figure on the old man's left interrupted him furiously. "We have compromised! We have made concessions! The conscience of the free world—"

From the other side of the stone came a fierce whisper: "My country will not submit to threats! We will not yield to force! Never!"

The tall Briton said, in his weary, cultured voice, "I assure you, sir, we have tried everything. Everything . . ."

The old man said slowly, "Have you tried loving one another?"

The question hung in the quiet air. Simple. Enormous.

"It is hard, I know," the old man went on. "And realization comes late, for governments as well as individuals. But this is the true purpose of the United Nations: to turn this ideal into a reality." He moved slightly so that he was facing the Russian. "Even you, sir, have for your objective the betterment of people, is it not so? And not just your people, but all people. If, then, our aims are so similar, how can we take or permit any action that will destroy them?"

Silence sang in the room. There was no answer.

"I wish," said the old man, "that each of you would do me the courtesy of resting his hand for a moment on this stone." He stretched out his own hand, and slowly the others did likewise.

"Originally," the old voice went on, "an altar was a place of sacrifice. Is there any reason why it should not serve today for the sacrifice of self-justification, of arrogance, of pride? We are all guilty of these things, and in our hearts we know it. Perhaps that is why we set this symbol here, although we have never truly consecrated it. This is more than just a stone, gentlemen. It is the future of mankind. Which of you, then, will be the first to draw your hand away?"

Silence again. No one moved. Under the steady shaft of light the Frenchman's thin fingers trembled slightly. The Russian's big fist moved back half an inch, then grew still. The seconds ticked away.

Finally the old man lifted his hand. "I know you have much to do, gentlemen. Thank you, again, for coming here."

When they were gone, he stood motionless for a time. Then he moved over to the bench and sat down. Time passed, but he did not move. An hour went by, and part of another. Once he thought he heard a muffled sound that might have been cheering. But he could not be sure.

He wasn't sure of anything until the door opened and

Mathieson came in. The secretary was breathing hard, almost as if he had been running. He leaned back against the wall, and when he spoke, his voice shook a little. "The speech is over, sir. The foreign minister didn't even—even mention the crisis. He talked about—about the future of his country, and of the world . . ."

The old man nodded without speaking. At last he said, "How's the weather outside, Matty? Is it still raining?"

The secretary shook his head. "It's stopped, now, sir. The stars are out . . ."

The old man stood up slowly. "That's good." He bent down, picked up his hat. He looked once around the quiet room. Sighing, he turned to the door. "I think I am a little tired, Matty. Maybe we ought to be getting along."