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The Golden Gate



Alistair MacLean

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A tense and nerve-shattering classic from the highly acclaimed master of action and suspense. A ROLLING FOR KNOX is how the journalists describe the Presidential motorcade as it enters San Francisco across the Golden Gate. Even the ever-watchful FBI believe it is impregnable – as it has to be with the President and two Arab potentates aboard. But halfway across the bridge the unthinkable happens. Before the eyes of the world a master criminal pulls off the most spectacular kidnapping in modern times...

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ALISTAIR MACLEAN
The Golden Gate



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Dedication

To Mary Marcelle

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ONE

The operation had to be executed with a surgically military precision marked with a meticulousness that matched, in degree if not in scope, the Allied landings in wartime Europe. It was. The preparations had to be made in total stealth and secrecy. They were. A split-second co-ordination had to be achieved. It was. All the men had to be rehearsed and trained, over and over again until they played their parts perfectly and automatically. They were so trained. Every eventuality, every possible departure from the planned campaign had to be catered for. It was. And their confidence in their ability to carry out their plan, irrespective of reversals and departures from the norm, had to be total. It was.

Confidence was a quality exuded by their leader, Peter Branson. Branson was thirty-eight years old, just under six feet tall, strongly built, with black hair, pleasant features, lips that were curved in an almost perpetual smile and light blue eyes that had forgotten how to smile many years ago. He was dressed in a policeman's uniform but he was not a policeman. Neither was any of the eleven men with them in that disused trucker's garage not far from the banks of Lake Merced, halfway between Daly City to the south and San Francisco to the north, although three were attired in the same uniform as Branson.

The single vehicle there looked sadly out of place in what was, in effect, nothing more than an open-ended shed. It was a bus, but barely, by normal standards, qualified for the term. It was an opulently gleaming monster which above shoulder level was composed, except for the stainless-steel crossover struts, entirely of slightly tinted glass. There was no regular seating as such. There were about thirty swivel chairs, anchored to the floor but scattered seemingly at random, with deep armrests and aircraft-type swing-out dining-tables housed in each armrest. Towards the rear there was a cloakroom and a remarkably well-stocked bar. Beyond that there was a rear observation deck, the floor of which had for the moment been removed to reveal the cavernous baggage department. This was filled to near capacity but not with baggage. This enormous storage space, seven and a half feet wide by the same in length, held, among other things, two petrol-driven electric generators, two twenty-inch searchlights, a variety of smaller ones, two very peculiar-looking missile-like weapons with mounting tripods, machine-pistols, a large crated unmarked wooden box, four smaller wooden boxes, and a variety of other items of material, conspicuous among which were large coils of rope. Branson's men were still loading.

The coach, one of only six ever made, had cost Branson ninety thousand dollars: for the purposes for which he intended to use it, he considered this figure a trifling investment. He was buying the coach, he had told the Detroit firm, as an agent for a publicity-shy millionaire, who was also an eccentric who wanted it painted yellow. And yellow it had been when it was delivered: it was now a gleaming, translucent white.

Two of the remaining five coaches had been bought by genuine and extrovert millionaires, both of whom intended them for luxurious, personal vacation travel. Both buses had rear ramps to accommodate their mini-cars. Both, presumably, would rest for about fifty weeks a year in their specially built garages.

The other three buses had been bought by the Government.

The dawn was not yet in the sky.

The other three white buses were in a garage in downtown San Francisco. The big sliding doors were closed and bolted. In a canvas chair in a corner a man in plain clothes, a sawn-off riot gun held on his lap by flaccid hands, slept peacefully. He had been dozing when the two intruders arrived and was now blissfully unaware that he had sunk into an even deeper sleep because he'd inhaled the single-second squirt from the gas gun without being aware of the fact. He would wake up within the

hour almost equally unaware of what had happened and would be extremely unlikely to admit to his superiors that his vigilance had been a degree less than eternal.

The three buses looked indistinguishable from Branson's, at least externally, although the centre one was markedly different in two respects, one visible, the other not. It weighed two tons more than its companions, for bullet-proof glass is a great deal heavier than ordinary plate glass, and those panoramic buses had an enormous glass area. And the interior of the coach was nothing less than a sybarite's dream, which was no less than what one would expect for the private transportation of the country's Chief Executive.

The Presidential coach had two huge facing sofas, so deep, so soft and so comfortable that the overweight man possessed of prudent foresight would have thought twice about ensconcing himself in either of them for regaining the vertical would have called for an apoplectic amount of will power or the use of a crane. There were four armchairs constructed along the same treacherously voluptuous lines. And that, in the way of seating accommodation, was that. There were cunningly concealed spigots for ice-water, scattered copper coffee tables and gleaming goldplated vases awaiting their daily consignment of fresh flowers. Behind this section were the washroom and the bar, a bar whose capacious refrigerators, in this particular and unusual instance, were stocked largely with fruit juices and soft drinks in deference to the customs of the President's guests of honour, who were Arabs and Muslims.

Beyond this again, in a glassed-in compartment that extended the full width of the bus, was the communications centre, a maze of miniaturized electronic systems which was constantly manned whenever the President was aboard. It was said that this installation had cost considerably more than the coach itself. Besides incorporating a radio telephone system that could reach any place in the world, it had a small row of differently coloured buttons in a glass case which could be removed only with the aid of a special key. There were five such buttons. To press the first brought instant contact with the White House in Washington: the second was for the Pentagon: the third was for the airborne Strategic Air Command: the fourth was for Moscow and the fifth for London. Apart from the necessity of being in touch with his armed forces all the time, the President was an acute sufferer from telephonitis, even to the extent of an internal phone connecting him with his habitual seat on the bus and the communications compartment at the rear.

But it was not in this coach that the intruders were interested but in the one standing to its left. They entered by the front door and immediately removed a metal plate by the driver's seat. One of the men shone a torch downwards, appeared to locate what he wanted almost immediately, reached up and took from his companion something that looked like a polythene bag of putty to which there was attached a metal cylinder not more than three inches long and one in diameter. This he securely bound to a metal strut with adhesive tape. He seemed to know what he was doing – which he did, for the lean and cadaverous Reston was an explosives expert of some note.

They moved to the rear and went behind the bar. Reston climbed on to a stool, slid back an overhead cupboard door and looked at the liquor contents. Whatever the camp-followers in the Presidential motorcade were going to suffer from, it clearly wasn't going to be thirst. There were two rows of vertically stacked bottles, the first ten to the left, five in each row, being bourbon and scotch. Reston stooped and examined the upside-down optics beneath the cupboard and saw that the bottles that interested him in the cupboard were duplicated in the ones below and that those were all full. It seemed unlikely that anyone was going to be interested in the contents of the cupboard for some little time to come.

Reston removed the ten bottles from their circular retaining holes in the cupboard and handed them down to his companion who stacked five of them on the counter and placed the other five in a canvas bag which had evidently been brought along for this purpose, then handed Reston a rather awkward piece of equipment which consisted of three parts: a small cylinder similar to the one that had been fitted forwards, a beehive-shaped device, no more than two inches high and the same in

diameter, and a device which looked very like a car fire extinguisher, with the notable exception that it had a plastic head. Both this and the beehive were attached to the cylinder by wires.

The beehive had a rubber sucker at its base but Reston did not seem to have any great faith in suckers for he produced a tube of quick-acting glue with which he liberally besmeared the base of the beehive. This done he pressed it firmly against the forward-facing side of the cupboard, taped it securely to the large and small cylinders and then taped the three to the inner row of circular holes which retained the bottles. He replaced the five bottles in front. The device was completely hidden. He slid shut the door, replaced the stool and left the bus with his companion. The guard still slept peacefully. The two men left by the side door by which they had entered and locked it behind them. Reston produced a walkie-talkie. He said: 'PI?'

The amplified voice came through clearly on the fascia-mounted speaker in the bus in the garage north of Daly City. Branson made a switch.

'Yes?'

'Okay'

'Good.' There was no elation in Branson's voice and no reason why there should have been: with six weeks of solid preparation behind him he would have been astonished if anything should have gone wrong. 'You and Mack get back to the apartment. Wait.'

Johnson and Bradley were curiously alike, good-looking, in their early thirties, almost identical in build and both with blond hair. They also bore a striking resemblance, both in build and coloration, to the two men, newly awakened from sleep, who were propped up in the two beds in the hotel room, gazing at them with an understandable mixture of astonishment and outrage. One of them said: 'Who the hell are you and what the hell do you think you're doing here?'

'Kindly modulate your voice and mind your language,' Johnson said. 'It ill becomes a naval air officer. Who we are doesn't matter. We're here because we require a change of clothes.' He looked at the Beretta he was holding and touched the silencer with his left forefinger. 'I don't have to tell you what those things are.'

He didn't have to tell them what those things were. There was a cold calm professionalism, a chilling surety about Johnson and Bradley that discouraged freedom of speech and inhibited even the very thought of action. While Johnson stood there, gun dangling in apparent negligence by his side, Bradley opened the valise they had brought with them, produced a length of thin rope and trussed up the two men with a speed and efficiency that indicated a long or intensive experience of such matters. When he had finished Johnson opened a cupboard, produced two suits, handed one to Bradley and said: 'Try them for size.'

Not only were the suits an almost perfect fit but so also were the hats. Johnson would have been surprised if they had been otherwise: Branson, that most meticulous of planners, almost never missed a trick.

Bradley surveyed himself in a full-length mirror. He said sadly: 'I should have stayed on the other side of the law. The uniform of a Lieutenant in the US Naval Air Arm suits me very well indeed. Not that you look too bad yourself.'

One of the bound men said: 'Why do you want those uniforms?'

'I thought naval helicopter pilots were intelligent.'

The man stared at him. 'Jesus! You don't mean to stand there and tell us -'

'Yes. And we've both probably flown Sikorskys a damned sight more than either of you.'

'But uniforms? Why steal our uniforms? There's no trick in getting those made. Why do you -'

'We're parsimonious. Sure, we could get them made. But what we can't get made are the documentation you carry about with you – identifications, licences, the lot.' He patted the pockets of his uniform. 'They're not here. Where?'

The other bound man said: 'Go to hell.' He looked as if he meant it, too.

Johnson was mild. 'This is off-season for heroes. Where?'

The other man said: 'Not here. The Navy regard those as classified documents. They have to be deposited in the manager's safe.'

Johnson sighed. Oh, dear. Why make it difficult? We had a young lady stake-out in an armchair by the receptionist's last evening. Redhead. Beautiful. You may recall.' The two bound men exchanged the briefest of glances: it was quite clear that they did recall. 'She'd go on oath in a witness stand that neither of you deposited anything.' He smiled in a wintry fashion. 'A witness stand in court may be the last place on earth she'd want to go near, but if she says it's no deposit, it's no deposit. Let's not be silly. Three things you can do. Tell us. Have your mouths taped and after a little persuasion tell us. Or, if those don't work, we just search. You watch. If you're conscious, that is.'

'You going to kill us?'

'What on earth for?' Bradley's surprise was genuine.

'We can identify you.'

'You'll never see us again.'

'We can identify the girl.'

'Not when she removes her red wig, you can't.' He dug into the valise and came up with a pair of pliers. He had about him an air of gentle resignation. 'Time's a-wasting. Tape them up.'

Both bound men looked at each other. One shook his head, the other sighed. One smiled, almost ruefully: 'It does seem a gesture of useless defiance – *and* I don't want my good looks spoilt. Under the mattresses. At the foot.'

Under the mattresses they were. Johnson and Bradley flicked over the leaves of the two wallets, looked at each other, nodded, extracted the not inconsiderable dollar billfolds in each wallet and placed those by the bedside tables. One man said: 'Couple of crazy crooks you are.'

Johnson said: 'Maybe you'll be needing that more than us pretty soon.' He extracted money from his newly discarded suit and placed it in his uniform while Bradley did the same. Our suits you can have. Unthinkable for US officers to be running around the city in their striped underpants. And now, I'm afraid, we have to tape you.' He reached into the valise.

One man, a quick mixture of suspicion and apprehension in his eyes, tried, vainly, to sit up in bed. 'I thought you said -'

'Look, if we wanted to kill you, the noise from those silenced guns wouldn't even be heard in the corridor outside. Think we want you to start hollering the place down the moment we step outside that door? Besides, it would upset the neighbours.'

After they were taped Johnson said: 'And, of course, we don't want to have you jumping and wriggling around and making banging noises on the floor or walls. I'm afraid we can't have any bangs in the next couple of hours or so. Sorry.' He stooped, retrieved what looked like an aerosol can from the valise, and squirted it briefly in the faces of both bound men. They left, hanging up the no disturb notice outside. Johnson double-locked the door, produced his pliers, leaned on the key and snapped it leaving the head jammed in the lock.

Downstairs, they approached the clerk at reception, a cheerful youngster who gave a cheerful good morning.

Johnson said: 'You weren't on last night?'

'No, sir. The management wouldn't believe it but even a desk clerk requires a little sleep now and again.' He looked at them with interest. 'No offence, but aren't you the two gentlemen who're going to ride herd on the President this morning?'

Johnson smiled. 'I'm not sure if the President would care to have you put it quite that way, but yes. It's no secret. We phoned for an alarm call last night. Ashbridge and Martinez. Was it recorded?'

'Yes, sir.' The clerk put his pen through the names.

'Now, we've left one or two – ah – naval things in our room that we really shouldn't have done. Will you make certain that no one goes near our room until we return? Three hours, about.'

'You can depend on me, sir.' The clerk made a note. 'The no disturb sign -'

‘We’ve already done that.’

They left and stopped at the first pay telephone on the street. Johnson went inside with the valise, fished inside and brought out a walkie-talkie. He was immediately through to Branson, waiting patiently in the dilapidated garage north of Daly City. He said: ‘PI?’

‘Yes?’

‘Okay’

‘Good. Get down there.’

The sun was coming up as the six men filed out of their cabin in the hills above Sausalito in Marin County, north across the bay from San Francisco. They made up a nondescript and not particularly attractive group, four of them in overalls and two in faded raincoats that might have been lifted from some unsuspecting scarecrow. They all piled into a rather battered Chevrolet station-wagon and headed down to the town. Before them stretched a stunning vista. To the south the Golden Gate and the staggering – if rather Manhattanized – skyline of San Francisco. To the south-east, lent a slightly spurious glamour by the early rays of the sun, Alcatraz Island, of unhappy history, lay to the north of the Fisherman’s Wharf, in line of sight of Treasure Island, the Bay Bridge and Oakland on the far side of the bay. To the east lay Angel Island, the largest in the bay, while to the north-east lay Belvedere Island, Tiburon and, beyond that again, the wide reaches of San Pablo Bay vanishing into nothingness. There can be few more beautiful and spectacular vistas in the world – if such there so be – than that from Sausalito. On the basis that not to be moved by it would require a heart of stone, the six men in the station-wagon had between them, it was clear, the makings of a fair-sized quarry.

They reached the main street, travelled along past the immaculate rows of sailing craft and the far from immaculate hodge-podge of boathouses, until eventually the driver pulled off into a side-street, parked and stopped the engine. He and the man beside him got out and divested themselves of their coats, revealing themselves as clad in the uniforms of California State Patrolmen. The driver, a sergeant by the name of Giscard, was at least six feet three in height, burly, red-faced, tight-mouthed and, even to the cold, insolent eyes, was the conceptualized epitome of the dyed-in-the-wool tough cop. Policemen, admittedly, were part and parcel of Giscard’s life but his frequent acquaintanceships with them he had kept to as limited a nature as possible on the numerous occasions when, hitherto without success, they had attempted to put him behind bars. The other, Parker, was tall, lean and of a nasty appearance and the best that could be said for him was that he might have passed for a cop if one were myopic or he were viewed at a considerable distance: his habitually wary bitter expression was probably attributable to the fact that he had experienced considerably less success than the sergeant in evading the long arm of the law.

They turned a corner and entered a local police precinct station. Two policemen were behind the counter, one very young, the other old enough to be his father. They looked rather tired and unenthusiastic as was natural for two men who were looking forward to some sleep, but they were polite, courteous.

‘Good morning, good morning.’ Giscard could be very brisk indeed as only befitted a man who had shown a clean pair of heels to half the police forces on the Coast. ‘Sergeant Giscard. Patrolman Parker.’ He pulled from his pocket a paper with a long list of names. ‘You must be Mahoney and Nimitz?’

‘Indeed we are.’ Mahoney, a guileless youth, would have found some difficulty in concealing his Hibernian ancestry. ‘And how do you know?’

‘Because I can read.’ The niceties of salon conversation were not for Giscard. ‘From this I take it that your station boss didn’t advise you we were coming. Well, it’s this damned motorcade this morning – and from what I’ve found out this morning maybe I’m not wasting all that much of my time in making this final check-up. You’d be surprised at the number of policemen in this state who are either illiterate or stone deaf.’

Nimitz was polite. ‘If we were to know what we have done wrong, Sergeant -’

'You haven't done anything wrong.' He consulted his sheet. 'Just four things. When do the day shift come on? How many? Where are the patrol cars? And the cells.'

'That's all?'

'All. Two minutes. And hurry. I've got to check every place from here across the bridge to Richmond.'

'Eight o'clock. Eight men – twice the usual. The cars -'

'Let me see them.'

Nimitz lifted a key from a board and led the two men round the corner of the block. He opened double doors. The two police cars, as was only proper on this auspicious occasion when a President, a King and a Prince were travelling through their precinct, had the impossible glitter of showroom models.

'Ignition keys?'

'In the ignition.'

Back in the station, Giscard nodded to the entrance door. 'Keys?' 'I beg your pardon.'

Giscard was heavily patient. 'I know it's normally never locked. But you might *all* have to leave in a tearing hurry this morning. You want to leave the shop unattended?'

'I see.' Nimitz indicated the keys on the board.

'The cells.'

Nimitz led the way, taking keys with him. They were only a few feet away but round a corner out of sight of the more sensitive citizens who had reluctant occasion to enter the front office. Nimitz entered and Giscard unholstered his pistol and stuck it against his back. 'A dead policeman,' Giscard observed, 'is no good to anyone.' Parker joined them in ten seconds pushing a furious and flabbergasted Mahoney in front of him.

Both captives were gagged and left sitting on the floor, backs to the bars, arms thrust uncomfortably through them and wrists handcuffed. From the baleful expressions on their faces it was as well that they were so securely gagged. Giscard put the keys in his pocket, picked up two other sets from the board, ushered Parker out before him, locked the entrance door, pocketed that key too then went round and opened up the garage. He and Parker backed the cars out and while Giscard locked the doors – and, inevitably, pocketed the keys – Parker went to fetch the other four men from the station-wagon. When they appeared they were not, surprisingly, any longer overalled working men but gleaming advertisements for the California State Patrol.

They drove north on the US 101, took the cutoff west to State I, passed by Muir Woods and its pre-Christian stands of two-hundred-and-fifty-feet-high redwoods and finally stopped in the Mount Tamalpais State Park. Giscard brought out the walkie-talkie that went so well with his uniform and said: 'PI?'

Branson was still patiently waiting in the bus in the abandoned garage. 'Yes?' 'Okay.' 'Good. Stay.'

The forecourt and street outside the luxurious caravanserai atop Nob Hill were, understandably at that hour of the morning, practically deserted. There were, in fact, only seven people in sight. Six of those stood on the steps of the hotel which was that night housing more dollars on the hoof than it ever had remotely had in its long and illustrious career. The seventh of those, a tall, handsome man, aquiline-faced, youthful-looking despite his grey hair and clad in immaculate hound's-tooth, was pacing slowly up and down on the roadway. From the looks exchanged among the six men – two doorkeepers, two policemen and two men in plain clothes whose coats fitted awkwardly under their left armpits – his presence appeared to be giving rise to an increasing degree of vexation. Finally, after a low-murmured conversation among them, one of the uniformed men came down the steps and approached him.

He said: 'Morning, sir. No offence, sir, but do you mind moving on. We have a job to do.'

'How do you know I have not?'

‘Sir. Please. You must understand we have some very important people in there.’

‘Don’t I know it. Don’t I just know it.’ The man sighed, reached inside his coat, produced and opened a wallet. The policeman looked at it, stiffened, unmistakably swallowed and deepened his complexion by two shades.

‘I’m very sorry, sir. Mr Jensen, sir.’

‘I’m sorry, too. Sorry for all of us. They can keep their damned oil as far as I’m concerned. Dear lord, what a circus.’ He talked until the officer relaxed, then carried on his to-and-fro strolling. The policeman returned to the steps.

One of the plain-clothes men looked at him without a great deal of enthusiasm. He said: ‘A great crowd mover-on you are.’

‘Like to try?’

‘If I must give you a demonstration,’ he said wearily. He walked down three steps, paused, looked back up. ‘He flashed a card at you, didn’t he?’

‘Sort of.’ The policeman was enjoying himself.

‘Who?’

‘Don’t you recognize your own deputy director when you see him?’

‘Jesus!’ The FBI man’s miraculous return to the top step could have been attributed to nothing other than sheer levitation.

‘Are you not,’ the policeman asked innocently, ‘going to move him on?’

The plain-clothes man scowled then smiled. ‘From now on, I think I’ll leave those menial tasks to the uniformed branch.’

A bell-boy of great age appeared on the top step, hesitated, then went down to the street as Jensen gave him an encouraging wave. As he approached his wizened face was further creased in worry. He said: ‘Aren’t you taking a helluva chance, sir? FBI man up there.’

‘No chance.’ Jensen was unperturbed. ‘He’s California FBI. I’m Washington. Chalk and cheese. I doubt if he’d know the Director-General if he came and sat on his lap. What’s the word, Willie?’

‘They’re all having breakfast in their rooms. No sleepers-in, all on schedule.’

‘Let me know every ten minutes.’

‘Yes, sir. Gee, Mr Jensen, aren’t you taking one godawful chance? The place is swarming with fuzz and not only just inside. Those windows across there – there’s a rifle behind a dozen of them and a man behind each rifle.’

‘I know, Willie. I’m the man in the eye of the storm. Dead safe.’

‘If you’re caught -’

‘I won’t be. Even if I were, you’re clear.’

‘Clear! Everybody sees me talking to you -’

‘Why? Because I’m FBI. I told you that. You’ve no reason to doubt it. There are six men on the top of the steps who believe the same thing. Anyway, Willie, you can always plead the Fifth Amendment.’

Willie departed. In full view of the six watchers Jensen pulled out his walkie-talkie. ‘PI?’

‘Yes?’ Branson was as calm as ever.

‘On schedule.’

‘Fine. PI’s moving now. Every ten minutes. Right?’

‘Of course. How’s my twin?’

Branson looked towards the rear of the coach. The bound and gagged man between the aisles bore an uncanny resemblance to Jensen.

‘He’ll live.’

TWO

Van Effen eased the big coach on to the 280 and headed her north-east up the Southern Freeway. Van Effen was a short, stocky man, with close-cropped blond hair and a head that was almost a perfect cube. His ears were so close to his head that they appeared to have been pasted there, his nose had clearly been at odds with some heavy object in the past, he tended to wear a vacuous smile as if he'd decided it was the safest expression to cope with the numerous uncertain things that were going on in the uncertain world around him and the dreamy light blue eyes, which would never be accused of being possessed of any powers of penetration, served only to reinforce the overall impression of one overwhelmed by the insoluble complexities of life. Van Effen was a very very intelligent person whose knife-like intelligence could cope with an extremely wide variety of the world's problems and, although they had known each other for only two years, he had indisputably become Peter Branson's indispensable lieutenant.

Both men sat together in the front of the coach, both, for the nonce, dressed in long white coats which lent them, as drivers, a very professional appearance indeed: the State Department frowned on Presidential motorcade drivers who opted for lumber-jackets or rolled up sleeves. Branson himself generally drove and was good at it but, apart from the fact that he was not a San Franciscan and Van Effen had been born there, he wished that morning to concentrate his exclusive attention on his side of the coach's fascia which looked like a cross between the miniaturized flight instrumentation of a Boeing and those of a Hammond organ. As a communications system it could not compare to those aboard the Presidential coach, but everything was there that Branson wanted. Moreover, it had one or two refinements that the Presidential coach lacked. The President would not have considered them refinements.

Branson turned to the man in the seat behind him. Yonnie, a dark, swarthy and incredibly hirsute person who, on the rare occasions he could be persuaded to remove his shirt and approach a shower, looked more like a bear than a human being, had about him the general appearance – it was impossible to particularize – of an ex-pugilist who had taken not one but several hundred punches too many. Unlike many of Branson's associates Yonnie, who had been with Branson since he'd embarked upon his particular mode of life all of thirteen years ago, could not be classed among the intellectually gifted, but his patience, invariable good humour and total loyalty to Branson were beyond dispute.

Branson said: 'Got the plates, Yonnie?'

'The plates?' Yonnie wrinkled the negligible clearance between hairline and eyebrows, his customary indication of immense concentration, then smiled happily. 'Yeah, yeah, I got them.' He reached under his seat and brought up a pair of spring-clipped number plates. Branson's coach was, externally, exactly the same as the three in the Presidential motorcade except for the fact that those were Washington DC plates while his were Californian. The plates that Yonnie held in his hands were Washington DC and, even better, exactly duplicated the numbers of one of the three waiting coaches in the garage.

Branson said: 'Don't forget. When I jump out the front door you jump out the back. And fix the *back* one first.'

'Leave it to me, Chief.' Yonnie exuded confidence.

A buzzer on the fascia rang briefly. Branson made a switch. It was Jensen, the Nob Hill stakeout.

'P1?'

'Yes?'

'On schedule. Forty minutes.'

'Thanks.'

Branson closed the switch and flipped another.

'P4?'

‘P4.’

‘Move in.’

Giscard started up the stolen police car and moved up the Panoramic Highway followed by the second car. They didn’t drive sufficiently quickly to attract attention but they didn’t linger either and had reached the Mount Tamalpais radar stations in a matter of minutes. Those stations dominated the mountainous countryside for miles around and looked like nothing in the world as much as a couple of gigantic white golf balls. Giscard and his men had the entire layout committed to heart and memory and no trouble was envisaged.

Giscard said: ‘There’ll be no need to lean. We’re cops, aren’t we? The guardians of the people. You don’t attack your guardians. No shooting, the boss says.’

One of them said: ‘What if I *have* to shoot?’

‘You’ll lose half your cut.’ ‘No shooting.’

Branson flipped another switch.

‘P3?’ P3 was the code of the two men who had recently booby-trapped one of the motorcade buses.

‘P3.’

‘Anything?’

‘Two drivers, is all.’

‘Guards?’

‘Okay. No suspicions.’ ‘Wait.’

Branson flipped a switch as another buzzer rang.

‘P5,’ the speaker said. ‘On schedule. Thirty minutes.’

‘Thank you.’

Branson made another switch.

‘P2?’ The code for Johnson and Bradley.

‘Yes?’

‘You can go now.’

‘We go now.’ The voice was Johnson’s. He and Bradley, immaculate in their naval air uniforms, were sauntering casually along in the direction of the US Naval Air Station Alameda. Both men were carrying smooth shiny flight bags into which they had transferred the contents of the valise. As they approached the entrance they increased their pace. By the time they reached the two guards at the entrance they were giving the impression of two men who were in a considerable hurry. They showed their cards to one of the guards.

‘Lieutenant Ashbridge, Lieutenant Martinez. Of course. You’re very late, sir.’

‘I know. We’ll go straight to the choppers.’

‘I’m afraid you can’t do that, sir. Commander Eysenck wants you to report to his office at once.’ The sailor lowered his voice confidentially. ‘The Commander doesn’t sound very happy to me, sir.’

‘Damn!’ Johnson said, and meant it. ‘Where’s his office?’

‘Second door on the left, sir.’

Johnson and Bradley hurried there, knocked and entered. A young petty officer seated behind his desk pursed his lips and nodded silently towards the door to his right. His demeanour indicated that he had no desire whatsoever to participate in the painful scene that was about to follow. Johnson knocked and entered, head down and apparently searching for something in his flight bag. The precaution was needless. In the well-known demoralization ploy of senior officers deepening their intimidation of apprehensive junior officers, Eysenck kept on making notes on a pad before him. Bradley closed the door. Johnson placed the flight bag on the edge of the desk. His right hand was concealed behind it. So was the aerosol gas can.

‘So kind of you to turn up.’ Eysenck spoke in a flat drawling accent: Annapolis had clearly failed to have any effect on his Boston upbringing. ‘You had your strict orders.’ He raised his head in

what would normally have been a slow and effective gesture. 'Your explanations -' He broke off, eyes widening, but still not suspecting anything untoward. 'You're not Ashbridge and Martinez.'

'No, we're not, are we?'

It was clear that Eysenck had become suddenly aware that there was something very very far untoward. His hand stretched out for a desk button but Johnson already had his thumb on his. Eysenck slumped forward against his desk. Johnson nodded to Bradley who opened the door to the outer office and as he closed it behind him it could be seen that his hand was fumbling in the depths of his bag. Johnson moved behind the desk, studied the buttons below the phone, pressed one as he lifted the phone.

'Tower?'

'Sir?'

'Immediate clearance Lieutenants Ashbridge and Martinez.' It was a very creditable imitation of Eysenck's Boston accent. Branson again called P3, the two watchers by the garage.

'And now?'

'Filling up.'

The three buses inside the garage were indeed filling up. Two of them, indeed, had their complements of passengers and were ready to go. The coach that had been booby-trapped was given over mainly to newspapermen, wire service men and cameramen, among them four women, three of indeterminate age, the other young. On a platform at the rear of the bus were three mounted ciné-cameras, for this was the coach that led the motorcade and the cameras would at all times have an excellent view of the Presidential coach which was to follow immediately behind. Among the passengers in this coach were three men who wouldn't have recognized a typewriter or a camera if it had dropped on their toes but who would have had no difficulty whatsoever in differentiating between a Walther, Colt, Biretti, Smith & Wesson and other such paraphernalia generally regarded as superfluous to the needs of the communications media. This was known as the lead coach.

But there was one passenger in this coach who would have recognized a camera if he had seen it – he was, in fact, carrying a highly complicated apparatus – but who would also have had no difficulty at all in differentiating between a Walther, Colt, Biretti and Smith & Wesson, any of which he was legally entitled to carry and not infrequently did. On this occasion, however, he was unarmed – he considered it unnecessary; between them his colleagues constituted a veritable travelling arsenal – but he did carry a most unusual item of equipment, a beautifully miniaturized and transistorized transceiver radio concealed in the false bottom of his camera. His name was Revson and as he had repeatedly proved in the past, in the service of his country although his country knew nothing of this – a man of quite remarkable accomplishments.

The rear coach was also well occupied, again by newspapermen and men with no interest in newspapers, although in this case the ratio was inversed. The greatly outnumbered journalists, although they realized that the Presidential coach would soon, in terms of the realizable assets of its passengers, be nothing less than a rolling Fort Knox, wondered if it were necessary to have quite so many FBI agents around.

There were only three people aboard the Presidential coach, all crew members. The white-coated driver, his 'receive' switch depressed, was waiting for instructions to come through the fascia speaker. Behind the bar, an extraordinarily pretty brunette, who looked like an amalgam of all those 'Fly me' airline advertisements, was trying to look demure and inconspicuous and failing miserably. At the rear, the radio operator was already seated in front of his communications console.

A buzzer rang in Branson's coach.

'P5,' the speaker said. 'On schedule. Twenty minutes.'

A second buzzer rang.

'P4,' the speaker said. 'All okay.'

‘Excellent.’ For once Branson permitted himself a slight feeling of relief. The take-over of the Tamalpais radar stations had been essential to his plans. ‘Scanners manned?’

‘Affirmative.’

A third buzzer rang.

‘P1?’ Johnson’s voice was hurried. ‘P2. Can we go now?’

‘No. Trouble?’

‘Some.’ Johnson, seated at the helicopter controls, engines still not started, watched a man emerge from Eysenck’s office and break into a run, rounding the corner of the building. That could only mean, Johnson realized, that he was going to look through Eysenck’s office window and that could only mean that he had failed to open the door which he and Bradley had locked behind them: the key was at that moment in Johnson’s pocket. Not that looking through Eysenck’s window was going to help him much because he and Bradley had dragged the unconscious Eysenck and petty officer into the windowless washroom leading off the Commander’s office. The key of the washroom door was also in his pocket.

The man came into sight round the corner of the building. He wasn’t running now. In fact, he stopped and looked around. It wasn’t too hard to read what was going on in his mind. Eysenck and the petty officer might well be going about their lawful occasions and he was going to look pretty sick if he started to cry wolf. On the other hand if something had happened and he didn’t report his suspicions he was going to make himself highly unpopular with his superiors. He turned and headed in the direction of the Station Commander’s office, obviously with the intent of asking a few discreet questions. Halfway towards the office it became clear that his questions weren’t going to be all that discreet: he had broken into a run.

Johnson spoke into the walkie-talkie.

‘Bad trouble.’

‘Hold on as long as possible. Leave in emergency. Rendezvous remains.’

In coach P1 Van Effen looked at Branson. ‘Something wrong?’

‘Yes. Johnson and Bradley are in trouble, want to take off. Imagine what’s going to happen if they do, if they have to cruise around ten minutes waiting for us? A couple of hijacked helicopters with the President and half the oil in the Middle East in the city? Everybody’s going to be as jittery as hell. They’ll take no chances. Panic-stricken. They’ll stop at nothing. The choppers will be shot out of the sky. They have Phantoms in a state of instant readiness on that base.’

‘Well, now.’ Van Effen eased the coach to a stop at the back of the garage which held the motorcade. ‘Bad, but maybe not as bad as all that. If they have to take off before schedule, you could always instruct them to fly over the motorcade. It would take a pretty crazy air commander to instruct his pilots to fire machine-guns or rockets at a chopper hovering above the Presidential coach. Bingo – no President, no Arabian oil kings and sheikhs, no Chief of Staff, no Mayor Morrison. Chopper might even crash down on to the top of the Presidential coach. Not nice to be a sacked Rear Admiral without a pension. If, that is to say, he survives the court-martial.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’ Branson sounded half convinced, no more. ‘You’re assuming our air commander is as sane as you are, that he would react along your line of thinking. How are we to know that he is not certifiable? Extremely unlikely, I admit, but I have no option other than to accept your suggestion. And we’ve no option other than to go ahead.’

The buzzer rang. Branson made the appropriate switch.

‘P1?’

‘Yes?’

‘P3.’ It was Reston from the garage. ‘Lead coach has just moved out.’

‘Let me know when the Presidential coach moves.’

Branson gestured to Van Effen, who started up the engine and moved slowly round the side of the garage.

The buzzer rang again.

‘P5. On schedule. Ten minutes.’

‘Fine. Get down to the garage.’

Again the buzzer rang. It was Reston. He said: ‘Presidential coach is just moving out.’

‘Fine.’ Branson made another switch. ‘Rear coach?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Hold it for a couple of minutes. We’ve a traffic jam here. Some nut has just slewed his articulated truck across the street. Pure accident, I’d say. But no chances. No panic, no need for anyone to leave their seats. We’re coming back to the garage for a couple of minutes till they decide on a new route. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

Van Effen drove slowly round to the front of the garage, nosed it past the front door until the first third of the coach was visible to the occupants of the rear coach inside, still parked where it had been. Branson and Van Effen descended unhurriedly from the opposite front seats, walked into the garage: Yonnie, unobserved by those inside, exited via the back door and began to clamp the new number plate on top of the old.

The occupants of the rear coach watched the approach of the two white-coated figures curiously, but without suspicion, for endless frustrating delays were part and parcel of their lives. Branson walked round to the front door opposite the driver’s side, while Van Effen wandered, aimlessly as it seemed, towards the rear. Had there been any cause for concern on the part of the occupants, it would have been allayed by the sight of two blue-overalled figures busily doing nothing by the main doors. They were not to know they were Reston and his friend.

Branson opened the front left-hand door and climbed up two steps. He said to the driver: ‘Sorry about this. It happens. They’re picking out a new route, a safe route, for us to go up to Nob Hill.’

The driver looked puzzled, no more. He said: ‘Where’s Ernie?’

‘Ernie?’

‘Lead coach driver.’

‘Ah! That’s his name. Taken sick, I’m afraid.’

‘Taken sick?’ Suspicion flared. ‘Only two minutes ago -’

The driver twisted round in his seat as two minor explosions occurred in the rear of the coach, less explosions than soft plops of sound, to the accompanying sounds of breaking glass and a hiss as of air escaping under pressure. The rear of the coach was already enveloped in a dense, billowing and rapidly mushrooming cloud of grey smoke, so dense that it was impossible to see the now closed rear door and the figure of Van Effen leaning against it and making sure it stayed that way. Every man in the bus – or those who were still visible – had swung round in his seat, reaching for a gun in an automatic but useless reaction for there was nothing to be seen to fire at.

Branson held his breath, threw two of the grenade-shaped gas bombs in rapid succession—one in the front aisle, one at the driver’s feet—jumped to the garage floor, slammed the door and held the handle, a somewhat pointless precaution as he knew, for the first inhalation of that gas produced immediate unconsciousness. After ten seconds he left, walked round the front of the bus where he was joined by Van Effen. Reston and his companion had already closed and bolted the main entrance. Now they were stripping off their overalls to reveal the conservative and well-cut suits beneath.

Reston said: ‘Over? So soon? Just like that?’ Branson nodded. ‘But if one whiff of that can knock a man out, surely it’s going to kill them—if they keep on sitting there, I mean, inhaling the stuff all the time?’

They left via the side door, not too hurriedly, locking it behind them. Branson said: ‘Contact with oxygen neutralizes the gas inside fifteen seconds. You could walk inside that bus now and be entirely unaffected. But it will be at least an hour before anyone in that bus comes to.’

Harriman stepped out of a taxi as they came round to the garage front. They boarded the coach – now the new rear coach of the motorcade – and Van Effen headed for Nob Hill. Branson made a switch in the fascia.

‘P2?’

‘Yes.’

‘How are things?’

‘Quiet. Too damned quiet. I don’t like it.’

‘What do you think is happening?’

‘I don’t know. I can just see someone on the phone asking for permission to launch a couple of guided missiles at us.’

‘Permission from whom?’

‘The highest military authority in the country’

‘Could take time to contact Washington.’

‘Take damn-all time to contact Nob Hill.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Momentarily, even Branson’s habitual massive calm was disturbed. The highest military authority in the country was, indeed, in the next suite to the President in the Mark Hopkins hotel. General Cartland, Chief of Staff and adviser extraordinary to the President, was indeed participating in that day’s motorcade. ‘You know what happens if they do contact him?’

‘Yes. They’ll cancel the motorcade.’ Chief of the Armed Forces though the President might be, he could be overruled in matters of security by his Chief of Staff. ‘Hold it a minute.’ There was a pause then Johnson said: ‘One of the guards at the gate is on the telephone. This could mean anything or nothing.’

Branson was conscious of a slight dampness in the region of his neck collar. Although he had given up the habit of prayer even before he’d left his mother’s knee, he prayed it was nothing. Perhaps the call to the guard was perfectly innocuous: perhaps the outcome of the call might be innocuous: if it were not, the many months and the quarter million dollars he’d spent in preparation for this *coup* was so much irrecoverable water under the bridge.

‘P1?’

‘Yes?’ Branson was dimly aware that his teeth were clamped tightly together.

‘You’re not going to believe this but tower has just given us permission to lift off.’

Branson remained silent for a few moments while someone lifted the Golden Gate Bridge off his back. He was not one much given to brow-mopping but this, if ever, seemed a warranted occasion. He refrained. He said: ‘Never look a gift horse in the mouth. How do you account for this?’

‘The guards must have said that they’d checked our identity papers and that they were in order.’

‘Start up, will you? I’d like to find out if I can hear you over the racket of the rotors.’

Twin lines of security men, back to back at a distance of about six feet and facing outwards, formed a protective lane for the short distance between the hotel and the waiting Presidential coach, which seemed rather superfluous as the streets had been barricaded off from the public for a hundred yards all around. The visiting dignitaries from the Persian Gulf seemed to be in no way put out by this nor to be suffering from any claustrophobic sense of imprisonment: in their own homelands, where the fine art of assassination had reached peaks as yet undreamed of in the United States, this was part and parcel of their everyday lives: not only would they have felt naked without this overt show of protection, they would have been offended if not humiliated by the very concept that they were sufficiently unimportant not to merit the massive security precaution.

The President led the way, looking almost wistfully from side to side as if disappointed that there was no one there for him to wave at. He was a tall, rather portly figure, immaculately attired in a tan gaberdine suit, with a patrician face vaguely reminiscent of one of the better-fed Roman emperors and a splendid head of the purest silver hair which was widely supposed to be his especial pride and joy. One had but to look at him to appreciate that he had been doomed from the cradle

to end up in the Oval Office: that anyone else should aspire to be – or be – the Chief Executive was quite unthinkable. Better brains there might be on Capitol Hill, but that magnificent presence was unique. As far as politicians went he was a man of the utmost probity – the fact that he was a multi-millionaire may have helped him in this-intelligent, humorous and was loved, liked, admired or held in genuine affection to an extent that had been achieved by no other President in the previous half century, a remarkable but far from impossible achievement. As always, he carried a stout cane, a relic from that occasion when he had required it for almost two days after tripping over the leash of his Labrador. That he had no need of the cane was quite indisputable. Perhaps he thought it rounded off his image, or lent him a slightly Rooseveltian aura. Whatever the reason, he was never seen in public or private without it.

He reached the coach, half turned, smiled and bowed slightly as he ushered the first of his guests aboard.

Precedence and pride of place went inevitably to the King: his vast kingdom held as much oil as the rest of the world put together. He was a tall, imposing figure, a king from the floor-sweeping skirts of his dazzling white robes to the top of the equally dazzling burnous. He had an aquiline dark face, with a splendidly trimmed white beard and the hooded eyes of a brooding eagle. Supposedly the wealthiest man in all history, he could easily have been a tyrant and despot but was neither: against that his autocratic rule was absolute and the only laws he obeyed were those he made himself.

The Prince came next – his small sheikhdom had never rated and never had had a king. While his territorial holdings came to less than five per cent of the King's, his influence was almost as great: his sheikhdom, an arid and barren expanse of some of the world's most inhospitable sands, was literally afloat on a sea of oil. An extrovert and flamboyant personality, who owned a Cadillac for every four miles of his principality's hundred miles of road – it was said with some authority that if one of his cars had the slightest mechanical trouble it was regarded as obsolete and never used again, a fact which must have given some small satisfaction to General Motors – he was an excellent pilot, a remarkably gifted race-car driver and an assiduous patron of many of the most exclusive nightclubs in the world. He went to considerable lengths to cultivate his reputation as an international playboy, an exercise which deceived nobody: behind the façade lay the computerized mind of an outstanding businessman. He was of medium height, well built and wouldn't have been seen dead in the traditional Arab clothes. He was Savile Row's best customer. 'Dapper' was the only word to describe him, from the pointed crocodile shoes to the almost invisible hairline moustache.

They were followed by Sheikh Iman and Sheikh Kharan, the oil ministers respectively of the King and the Prince. They looked remarkably alike and were rumoured to have the same grandfather, which was not at all impossible. Both wore Western clothes, both were plump, smiling almost to the point of beaming and extremely shrewd indeed. The only way to tell them apart was while Iman sported a tiny black goatee beard Kharan was clean-shaven.

The next to board was General Cartland. Although wearing civilian clothes – an inconspicuous blue pin-stripe – he was unmistakably what he was. If he had been wearing only a bath towel he would still have been immediately recognizable as a general. The erect bearing, the precise movements, the clipped speech, the cool blue eyes that never asked a question twice – everything marked him out for the man he was. Even his grey hair was shorn. Although Cartland had more than a peripheral interest in oil – he did, after all, require some form of fuel for his ships, tanks and planes – he was not along because of any special expertise in the oil business. He was along primarily because the President refused to cross the street without him. The President – and he made no bones about it – was heavily dependent on Cartland for his advice, far-ranging width of experience and solid common sense, a fact which had given and still gave rise to considerable if wholly misplaced jealousy in Washington. Cooler judgements in that city regarded him as being virtually irreplaceable as Presidential adviser, and although his duty left him with less and less time to run his army, navy and air force Cartland

seemed to cope with both tasks effortlessly. He would have made an excellent politician or statesman but had unfortunately been cursed from birth with an unshakable incorruptibility and moral integrity.

The next man to board was Hansen, the President's energy czar. He was the latest appointee to the post and as yet a largely unknown quantity. His qualifications for the post were impeccable but his experience so far slight. Energy was one thing he appeared to possess in abundance. He was a darting, nervous, volatile individual, painfully thin, whose hands and dark eyes were never still. He was reputed to have a first-class brain. This was his biggest – indeed almost his only – confrontation with great oil barons and his awareness of being on trial was painful.

Muir went next. He was a very rubicund man, almost bald, and the number of his chins varied from two to four according to the angle of his neck. Unlike most fat men he had a permanently doleful expression. He had a positively bucolic appearance about him, an unsuccessful farmer who concentrated less on the production than the consumption of what he grew on his farm. This proposed deal with the Arab nations could raise as many political as physical problems, which was why Under-Secretary of State Muir was along. Although it was almost impossible to believe he was unquestionably the country's leading expert on the Middle East.

The President waved the last man aboard but John Morrison, waving his hand in turn, declined. The President acknowledged the gesture, smiled and preceded him up the steps. Morrison, a burly, genial man of unquestionably Italian ancestry, was not along for his energy expertise. Energy concerned him but not to the extent of causing him sleepless nights. He was along partly as a guide, partly because he conceived it to be his duty to accept the Presidential invitation. Although the President was the official host to his guests, this was Morrison's parish and here he was both host and king. He was the Mayor of San Francisco.

In the rear coach, some fifty yards away, Branson saw the Presidential coach door close. He made a switch.

'P2?'

'Yes?' Johnson.

'We go now.'

'Now it is.'

The motorcade moved off, led by a police car and motor-cycle outriders. They were followed by the lead coach, the Presidential coach, the rear coach, a second police car and two more outriders. There was no attempt to make any scenic tour of the town, that had been attended to the previous afternoon soon after Air Force 1 had landed at the International Airport. This was strictly a business trip. The motorcade went along California, right down Van Ness, left along Lombard, angled right up Richardson Avenue and so into the Presidio. From this point onwards the roads had been closed that morning to all normal traffic. They took the Viaduct Approach, curving right and to the north until at last, dead ahead, loomed the immensity of the Golden Gate Bridge.

THREE

The Golden Gate Bridge is unquestionably one of the engineering wonders of the world. To San Franciscans, inevitably, it is *the* engineering wonder of the world and as bridges go it must be at once the most spectacular and graceful in existence. To see the two great brick-red – or orange or ochre, according to the quality of the light – towers emerging from the dense banks of fog that so frequently billow in from the Pacific is to experience a profound sense of unreality and when the fog disperses completely the feeling changes to one of disbelief and a benumbing of the senses that men had not only the audacity to conceive of this epic poem in mechanical grandeur but also the technical expertise to bring it into being. Even while the evidence of the eyes is irrefutable it still remains difficult for the mind to accept that it actually is there.

That it is there at all is not, in fact, due to man but to one man, a certain Joseph B. Strauss, who, in the pig-headed fashion of considerable Americans, despite seemingly unsurmountable and political difficulties and the assurances of his architectural colleagues that his dream was a technical impossibility, just went ahead and built it anyway. The bridge was opened in May 1937.

Until the construction of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in 1964, it was the longest single-span suspension bridge in the world. Even now, it is only about twenty yards shorter. The two massive towers that support the bridge soar seven hundred and fifty feet above the waters of the Golden Gate: the bridge's total length is just under one and three-quarter miles. The cost of construction was \$35,000,000: to replace it today something in the region of \$200,000,000 would be needed.

The one sombre aspect about the bridge is that for Americans who find the burdens of life intolerable to bear this is unquestionably the most favoured point of departure. There have been at least five hundred known suicides: probably as many again have gone undetected. There have been eight known survivors. Among the rest, the possibility of survival seems extremely remote. If any did indeed survive the shattering impact of the two-hundred-foot drop to the water, the surging tides and vicious currents of the Golden Gate would swiftly have completed what the jump itself failed to do. Those dangerous tides and currents make their effect felt for some distance on either side of the bridge. Three miles to the east lies what used to be the forbidding prison-fortress of Alcatraz Island. No precise figures of those who attempted escape by swimming are available: but it is believed that only three of those who tried it ever survived.

It is idle to speculate upon the choice of the bridge as a springboard to eternity. Psychiatrists would have it that it is a spectacular and attention-riveting finale to a drab and unspectacular life dragged out in a grey anonymity. But it would seem that there is nothing either eye-catching or spectacular in jumping into the darkness in the middle of the night.

The procession made its stately way under the first of the giant towers. In the upholstered luxury of the Presidential coach, the King, Prince and their two oil ministers gazed around them with a carefully controlled degree of regal and viceregal appreciation, for although there was a marked absence of Golden Gate Bridges in their dusty homelands – and, indeed, no need for them – it would not have done to admit that there were some things better done in the West than in the Middle East. Nor did they enthuse overmuch about the scenery, for although a million square miles of drifting sands might not be without its attractions for a homesick Bedouin, it could hardly be said to compare with the lush and fertile greenery of the farm land and forest land that stretched ahead of them across the Golden Gate. Indeed, the whole of the Bay Area could not have looked better than it did on that splendid June morning, with the sun already climbing high to their right in a cloudless sky and sparkling iridescently off the blue-green waters below. It was the perfect story-book setting for a day which, the President and Hansen, his energy czar, devoutly hoped would have a story-book ending.

The Prince looked around the coach, this time in open admiration, for he was very much a man of his own generation and possessed of a passion for all things mechanical and said in his clipped Oxford accent: 'My word, Mr President, you do know how to travel in style. I wish I had one of those.'

'And so you shall,' the President said indulgently. 'My country would be honoured to present you with one, as soon as you return to your homeland. Equipped to your own specifications, of course.'

The King said drily: 'The Prince is accustomed to ordering his vehicles by the round dozen. No doubt, Achmed, you would like a couple of those to go with it.' He pointed upwards to where two naval helicopters were hovering overhead. 'You do take good care of us, Mr President.'

The President smiled non-committally. How could one comment upon the obvious? General Cartland said: 'For decorative purposes only, your Highness. Apart from your own security men waiting on the other side and an occasional police car, you will see nothing between here and San Rafael. But the security is there all the same. Between here and San Rafael the motorcade will be under heavily armed surveillance literally every yard of the way. There are crackpots everywhere, even in the United States.'

'Especially in the United States,' the President said darkly.

In mock seriousness the King said: 'So we are safe?'

The President regained his smiling composure. 'As in the vaults of Fort Knox.'

It was at this point, just after the lead coach had passed the halfway mark across the bridge, that five things happened in almost bewilderingly rapid succession. In the rear coach Branson pressed a button on the console in front of him. Two seconds later a small explosion occurred in the front of the lead coach, almost beneath the driver's feet. Although unhurt, the driver was momentarily shocked, then swore, recovered quickly and jammed his foot on the brake pedal. Nothing happened.

'Sweet Jesus!' It took him all of another second to realize that his hydraulic lines were gone. He jammed his handbrake into the locked position and changed down into first gear. The coach began to slow.

Branson abruptly lifted his right arm, as abruptly lowered it again to reinforce the left in bracing himself against the fascia. Behind him his men did the same, outstretched arms, slightly bent at the elbows as they had learnt in frequent practices, braced against the backs of the seats in front: nobody sat in the front seats. Van Effen slipped the gear into neutral and kicked down on the brake pedal as if he were trying to thrust it through the floor.

The fact that Van Effen had recently and with malice aforethought seen fit to deactivate his rear brake lights did little to help the plight of the hapless driver of the police car behind. The motorcade was travelling slowly, about twenty-five miles an hour, and the rear police car was trailing the coach by about the same number of feet. The driver had no reason to suspect that anything might be amiss, for the bridge was closed to all traffic except the motorcade: there was no earthly reason to expect anything should interfere with the smooth and even tempo of their progress. He may even have spared a momentary side glance to admire the view. However it was, when he first realized that all was not what it should have been the distance between them had halved. An incredulous double-take cost him another few feet and, skilled police driver though he was, his reactions were no faster than those of the next man and by the time his foot had hit the brake the gap between himself and the now stationary coach had lessened to not more than five feet. The effect of a car's striking a solid and immovable object at twenty miles an hour has a less than humorous effect on the occupants of that car: the four officers in the car were no exception.

At the moment of impact Branson touched a second button on the fascia. The lead coach, slowing only by its handbrake, was now doing no more than ten miles an hour when another small explosion occurred in the drinks cabinet at the rear, an explosion followed immediately by a pronounced hissing as if caused by compressed air escaping under very high pressure. Within seconds the entire compartment was filled with a dense, grey, obnoxious and noxious gas. The coach, almost immediately out of control as the driver slumped forward over the wheel, slewed slowly to the right

and came to a rest less than two feet from the side of the road. Not that it would have mattered particularly if it had struck the safety barriers on the side of the bridge which were of a nature to withstand the assaults of anything less than a Chieftain tank.

The Presidential coach came to no harm. The driver had seen the lead coach's brake warning lights come on, braked, pulled left to avoid the slewing coach ahead and came to a rest beside it. The expressions of the twelve occupants of the coach expressed varying degrees of unhappiness but not, as yet, of alarm.

The police car and two motor-cycle outriders leading the motorcade had been curiously slow to observe the confusion behind them. Only now had they spotted the slewed coach and were beginning to turn.

In the rear coach everything was taking place with the clockwork precision that stemmed from a score of practice runs that had covered all conceivable potentialities. Van Effen jumped down from the left-hand door, Yonnie from the right, just as the two motor-cycle outriders pulled up almost alongside. Van Effen said: 'You better get in there fast. Looks like we got a stiff on our hands.'

The two patrolmen propped their machines and jumped aboard the coach. They could now no longer be seen by the returning lead police car and outriders so it was safe to take swift and efficient action against them, which was done with considerable ease not least because their attention had immediately been caught up by the sight of the bound figure lying sprawled on the floor in the rear aisle.

Seven men emerged swiftly from the doors of the coach. Five of those joined Van Effen and Yonnie and ran towards the other coaches. Two more ran back towards the crashed police car. Two others inside the coach swung wide the rear door and mounted what appeared to be a relatively harmless length of steel tubing on a tripod stand. Branson and Jensen remained where they were: the bound man on the floor, whose identity Jensen had taken over, regarded them all severally with a baleful expression but, beyond that, the options open to him were rather limited.

The two men who had run back towards the crashed police car were called Kowalski and Peters. They didn't look like criminals, unless a couple of prosperous young commuters from the stockbroker belt could be called criminals. Yonnie apart, none of Branson's associates bore any resemblance whatever to the popular concept of those who habitually stepped outside the law. Both men, in fact, had killed a number of times, but then only legally – as far as the term 'legal' could be interpreted – as members of a highly specialized Marine commando unit in Vietnam. Disillusioned with civilian life they'd found their next best panacea with Branson, who had a splendid eye for the recruitment of such men. They had not killed since. Branson approved of violence if and when necessary: killing was not permitted except as a last resort. In his thirteen years of upsetting law officers in the United States, Canada and Mexico, Branson had not yet had to have recourse to the last resort. Whether this was due to moral scruples or not was unclear: what was clear was that Branson regarded it as bad business. The degree of intensity of police efforts to catch robbers as opposed to murderers differed quite appreciably.

The windows of both front doors of the car were wound down – obviously they had been so at the moment of the crash. The four uniformed men seated inside had not been seriously injured but clearly had been badly shaken and had suffered minor damage, the worst of which appeared to be a broken nose sustained by the man in the front seat next to the driver. For the most part they were just dazed, too dazed, in any event, to offer any resistance to the removal of their weapons. Working in smooth unison Kowalski and Peters wound up the front windows. Peters closed his door while Kowalski threw in a gas bomb and closed his in turn.

None of any of this action had been witnessed by the returning police car's crew or the motorcycle outriders. The policemen left their car and machines and were cautiously approaching the lead coach when Yonnie and Van Effen with the five others came running up. All had guns of one kind or another in their hands.

‘Quickly!’ Van Effen shouted. ‘Take cover! There are a couple of crazy bastards back in that coach there, one with a bazooka, the other with a Schmeisser. Get behind the bus!’

Given time to consider the matter the policemen might have queried Van Effen’s statements but they weren’t given the time and the instinct for immediate if irrational self-preservation remains always paramount. Van Effen checked quickly to see if they were hidden from the view of the Presidential coach. They were. Not that he feared anything from that source, he just wanted to be spared the chore of blasting open the lock of the door that would be surely locked against them if their actions were observed.

He nodded to Yonnie and walked away with another man towards the rear of the bus. Whatever might be said, and had unkindly been said, about Yonnie’s cerebral limitations, this was the situation he had been born for, a basically elemental one in which action took precedence over thoughts. Long training had even given the vocabulary appropriate to the occasion. He said: ‘Let’s kinda put our hands up, huh?’

The six men turned round. Their expressions ran through the gamut of astonishment, anger and then resignation. Resignation was all that was left them. They had, with reason enough, not yet thought it time to produce their own weapons, and when the wise man is confronted at point-blank range with a pair of submachine-pistols he does what he is told and just kinda puts his hands up. Yonnie kept them covered while another man relieved them of their pistols. The remaining two men began to run back towards the rear coach as soon as they saw Van Effen and another climb aboard the Presidential coach.

The reaction of those aboard this coach had, so far, amounted to no more than an amalgam of perplexity and annoyance, and even that was slight enough. One or two were making the customary laborious effort to rise when Van Effen mounted the steps.

‘Please relax, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Just a slight delay’ Such is the authority of even a white coat — in a street accident a crowd will make way for a man in a butcher’s apron — that everybody subsided. Van Effen produced an unpleasant-looking weapon, a double-barrelled 12-bore shotgun with most of the barrel and stock removed to make for easier transport, if not accuracy. ‘I am afraid this is what you might call a hold-up or hijack or kidnap. I don’t suppose it matters very much what you call it. Just please remain where you are.’

‘Good God in heaven!’ The President stared at Van Effen’s moonface as if he were a creature from outer space. His eyes, as if drawn magnetically, went to the King and the Prince, then he returned his incredulous, outraged gaze to Van Effen. ‘Are you insane? Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know you’re pointing a gun at the President of the United States?’

‘I know. You can’t help being what you are any more than I can help being what I am. As for pointing guns at Presidents, it’s a long if not very honourable tradition in our country. Please do not give any trouble.’ Van Effen looked directly at General Cartland — he’d had him under indirect observation from the moment he had entered the coach. ‘General, it is known that you always carry a gun. Please let me have it. Please do not be clever. Your .22 can be nasty enough if it is accurate enough: this whippet will blast a hole the size of your hand through your chest. You are not the man, I know, to confuse courage with suicide.’

Cartland smiled faintly, nodded, produced a small, black, narrow automatic and handed it across.

Van Effen said: Thank you. I’m afraid you will have to remain seated for the moment at least. You have only my word for it, but if you offer no violence you will receive none.’

A profound silence descended. The King, eyes closed and hands folded across his chest, appeared to be communing either with himself or with the All-powerful. Suddenly he opened his eyes, looked at the President and said: ‘Just how safe are the vaults in Fort Knox?’

‘You’d better believe me, Hendrix,’ Branson said. He was talking into a hand-held microphone. ‘We have the President, the King and the Prince. If you will wait a minute or two I’ll have the President

himself confirm that to you. Meantime, please don't attempt anything so stupid or rash as to try to approach us. Let me give you a demonstration. I assume you have some patrol cars near the south entrance and you are in radio contact with them?

Hendrix didn't look like anyone's conception of a Chief of Police. He looked like a professorial refugee from the campus of the nearby university. He was tall, slender, dark, slightly stooped and invariably immaculately groomed and conservatively dressed. A great number of people temporarily or permanently deprived of their freedom would have freely if blasphemously attested to the fact that he was very very intelligent indeed. There was no more brilliant or brilliantly effective policeman in the country. At that moment, however, that fine intelligence was in temporary abeyance. He felt stunned and had about him the look of a man who has just seen all his nightmares come true.

He said: 'I am.'

'Very well. Wait.'

Branson turned and made a signal to the two men at the rear of the coach. There was a sudden explosive whoosh from the recoilless missile weapon mounted at the rear. Three seconds later a cloud of dense grey smoke erupted between the pylons of the south tower. Branson spoke into the microphone. 'Well?'

'Some kind of explosion,' Hendrix said. His voice was remarkably steady. 'Lots of smoke, if it is smoke.'

'A nerve gas. Not permanently damaging, but incapacitating. Takes about ten minutes' time before it oxidizes. If we have to use it and a breeze comes up from the north-west, north or northeast – well, it will be your responsibility, you understand.'

'I understand.'

'Conventional gas-masks are useless against it. Do you understand that also?'

'I understand.'

'We have a similar weapon covering the northern end of the bridge. You will inform police squads and units of the armed forces of the inadvisability of attempting to move out on to the bridge. You understand that too?' 'Yes.'

'You will have been informed of the presence of two naval helicopters hovering over the bridge?'

'Yes.' The rather hunted look had left Hendrix's face and his mind was clearly back into top gear. 'I find it rather puzzling, I must say.'

'It needn't be. They are in our hands. Have an immediate alarm put through to all local army and naval air commanders. Tell them if any attempt is made to dispatch fighters to shoot down those helicopters they will have very unpleasant effects on the President and his friends. Tell them that we shall know immediately whenever any such plane does lift off. The Mount Tamalpais radar stations are in our hands.'

'Good God!' Hendrix was back to square one.

'He won't help. They are manned by competent radar operators. No attempt will be made to retake those stations whether by land or airborne assault. If such an assault is made we are aware that we have no means of preventing it. However, I do not think that the President, King or Prince would look kindly upon any individual who was responsible for depriving them of, say, their right ears. Please do not think that I am not serious. We shall deliver them, by hand, in a sealed plastic bag.'

'No such attempt will be made.' Captain Campbell, a burly, sandy-haired, red-faced and normally jovial character whom Hendrix regarded as his right-hand man, regarded Hendrix with some surprise, not because of what he had just said but because it was the first time he had ever seen Hendrix with beads of sweat on his brow. In an unconscious gesture Campbell reached up and touched his own forehead, then looked with a feeling of grave disquiet at the dampened back of his hand.

Branson said: 'I hope you mean what you say. I will contact you shortly.'

'It will be in order if I come down to the bridge? It would appear that I have to set up some kind of communications headquarters and that seems the most logical place for it to be.'

‘That will be in order. But do not move out on to the bridge. And please prevent any private cars from entering the Presidio. Violence is the very last thing we want but if some arises I do not wish innocent people to suffer.’

‘You are very considerate.’ Hendrix sounded, perhaps justifiably, more than a little bitter.

Branson smiled and replaced the microphone.

The gas inside the lead coach had vanished but the effect it had had on the occupants had not. All were still profoundly unconscious. Some two or three had fallen into the aisle without, apparently, having sustained any injuries in the process. For the most part, however, they just remained slumped in their seats or had fallen forward against the backs of the seats in front of them.

Yonnie and Bartlett moved among them but not in the capacity of ministering angels. Bartlett, at twenty-six, was the youngest of Branson’s men, and looked every inch a fresh-faced college boy which he every inch was not. They were searching every person in the coach, and searching them very thoroughly indeed, those who were being subjected to this indignity being in no position to object. The lady journalists were spared this but their handbags were meticulously examined. It said much for the standards that Branson imposed that none of the several thousand dollars that passed through the hands of Yonnie and Bartlett found its way into either of their pockets. Robbery on a grand scale was big business: robbery on a small scale was petty larceny and not to be tolerated. In any event, they weren’t looking for money, they were looking for guns. Branson had reasoned, and correctly as it turned out, that there would be several special agents in the journalists’ coach, whose assignment would be not the direct protection of the President and his guests but the surveillance of the journalists themselves. Because of the worldwide interest aroused by the visit of the Arabian oil princes to the United States, at least ten of those journalists aboard were from abroad – four from Europe, the same from the Gulf States and one each from Nigeria and Venezuela, countries which might well be regarded as having a pressing interest in any transactions between the major oil states and the United States.

They found three such guns and pocketed them. The three owners of the guns were handcuffed and left where they were. Yonnie and Bartlett descended and joined the man who was guarding the six still largely uncomprehending policemen who were handcuffed together in single file. Another man was seated behind one of the bazooka-like missile firers that was guarding the north tower. Here, as at the southern end, everything was completely under control, everything had gone precisely as Branson had meticulously and with much labour planned over the preceding months. Branson had every reason to be feeling agreeably pleased with himself.

Branson, as he stepped down from the rear coach, looked neither pleased nor displeased. Things had gone as he had expected them to and that was that. His followers had often remarked, although never in his hearing, on Branson’s almost staggering self-confidence: on the other hand they had to admit that he had never, as yet, failed to justify his utter trust in himself. Of Branson’s permanent nucleus of eighteen men, nine of them had spent various times in various penitentiaries up and down the country reflecting upon the vagaries of fortune. But that was before they had been recruited by Branson. Since then not one of the eighteen had even got as far as a courtroom far less the prison walls: when it was taken into account that those included such semi-permanent guests of the United States Government as Parker this record could be regarded as an achievement of no little note.

Branson walked forward to the Presidential coach. Van Effen was standing in the doorway. Branson said: ‘I’m moving the lead coach ahead a bit. Tell your driver to follow me.’

He moved into the lead coach and with Yonnie’s help dragged clear the slumped driver behind the wheel. He slid into the vacant seat, started the engine, engaged gear, straightened out the coach and eased it forward for a distance of about fifty yards, bringing it to a halt with the use of the handbrake. The Presidential coach followed, pulling up only feet behind them.

Branson descended and walked back in the direction of the south tower. When he came to the precise middle of the bridge – the point at which the enormous suspension cables were at their lowest

– he looked behind him and again in front of him. The fifty yards of the most central section of the bridge, the section where the helicopter rotors would be most unlikely to be fouled by the cables, even if subjected to the unseen and unforeseen vagaries of wind, was clear. Branson walked clear of the area and waved to the two machines chattering overhead. Johnson and Bradley brought their naval helicopters down easily and with the minimum of fuss. For the first time in its long and august history the Golden Gate Bridge was in use as a helipad.

Branson boarded the Presidential coach. Everyone there was instinctively aware that he was the leader of the kidnapers, the man behind their present troubles, and their reception of him did not even begin to border on the cordial. The four oil men and Cartland looked at him impassively: Hansen, understandably, was more jittery and nervous than ever, his hands and eyes forever on the rapid and almost furtive move: Muir was his usual somnolent self, his eyes half-closed as if he were on the verge of dropping off to sleep: Mayor Morrison, who had won so many medals in the Second World War that he could scarcely have found room for them even on his massive chest, was just plain furious: and so, indisputably, was the President: that expression of kindly tolerance and compassionate wisdom which had endeared him to the hearts of millions had for the moment been tucked away in the deep freeze.

Branson said without preamble but pleasantly enough: ‘My name is Branson. Morning, Mr President. Your Highnesses, I would like –’

‘*You would like!*’ The President was icily angry but he had the expression on his face and the tone in his voice under control: you don’t have two hundred million people call you President and behave like an unhinged rock star. ‘I suggest we dispense with the charade, with the hypocrisy of empty politeness. Who are you, sir?’

‘I told you. Branson. And I see no reason why the normal courtesies of life should not be observed. It would be pleasant if we were to begin our relationship – an enforced introduction on your side, I agree – on a calmer and more reasonable basis. It would make things so much more pleasant if we behaved in a more civilized fashion.’

‘Civilized?’ The President stared at him in a genuine astonishment that swiftly regressed to his former fury. ‘You! A person like you. A thug! A crook! A hoodlum! A common criminal. And you dare suggest we behave in a more civilized fashion.’

‘A thug? No. A crook? Yes. A hoodlum? No. A common criminal? No. I’m a most uncommon criminal. However, I’m not sorry you adopt this attitude. Having you express yourself with such hostility to me doesn’t mean that it eases my conscience in what I may have to do to you. I don’t have any conscience. But it makes life that much simpler for me. Not having to hold your hand – I don’t speak literally, you understand-makes it all that much easier for me to achieve my ends.’

‘I don’t think you’ll be called upon to hold any hands, Branson.’ Cartland’s voice was very dry. ‘How are we to regard ourselves? As kidnapers? As ransom for some lost cause you hold dear?’

‘The only lost cause I hold dear is standing before you.’

‘Then hostages to fortune?’

‘That’s nearer it. Hostages to a very large fortune, I trust.’ He looked again at the President. ‘I genuinely do apologize for any affront or inconvenience caused by me to your foreign guests.’

‘Inconvenience!’ The President’s shoulders sagged as he invoked his tragic Muse. ‘You don’t know what irreparable damage you have done this day, Branson.’

‘I wasn’t aware that I had done any yet. Or are you referring to their Highnesses here? I don’t see what damage I can have caused there. Or are you referring to your little trip to San Rafael today-I’m afraid we’ll have to postpone that for a bit-to inspect the site of what will be the biggest oil refinery in the world?’ He smiled and nodded towards the oil princes. ‘They really have you and Hansen over a barrel there, don’t they, Mr President – an oil barrel? First they rob you blind over oil sales, accumulate so much loot that they can’t find homes for all of it, conceive the bright idea of investing it in the land of the robbed, come up with the concept of building this refinery and petro-chemical complex on the

West Coast and running it themselves – with your technical help, of course – on their own oil which would cost them nothing. The foreseeable profits are staggering, a large portion of which would be passed on to you in the form of vastly reduced oil prices. Bonanzas all round. I'm afraid international finance is beyond my scope – I prefer to make my money in a more direct fashion. If you think your deal is going to slip through because of the offence now being given to those Arabian gentlemen you must be an awful lot more naïve than a President of the United States has any right to be. Those are not gentlemen to be swayed by personal considerations. They have tungsten steel where their hearts should be and IBM computers for brains.' He paused. 'I'm not being very polite to your guests, am I?'

Neither the King nor Prince Achmed were quite so impassive now: their eyes, as they looked at Branson, were expressive of a distinct yearning.

Cartland said: 'You seem to be in no great hurry to get on with whatever you intend to get on with.'

'How right you are. The need for speed has now gone. Time is no longer of the essence except that the longer I spend here the more profitable it is going to be for me. That I shall explain later. In the meantime, the longer you remain here the more time it will give both you and your peoples both here and in the Gulf States to appreciate just what a pretty pickle you find yourselves in. And, believe me, you are in a pickle. Think about it.'

Branson walked to the rear of the coach and spoke to the blond young soldier who was manning the massive communication complex.

'What's your name?'

The soldier, who had heard all that had gone on and obviously didn't like any of it, hesitated, then said grudgingly: 'Boyann.'

Branson handed him a piece of paper. 'Get this number, please. It's just local.'

'Get it yourself.'

'I did say "please".'

'Go to hell.'

Branson shrugged and turned. 'Van Effen?'

'Yes?'

'Bring Chrysler here.' He turned to Boyann. 'Chrysler has forgotten a great deal more about telecommunications than you've learnt so far. You think I hadn't anticipated meeting up with young heroes?' He spoke to Van Effen. 'And when you bring him take Boyann here out and have him thrown over the side of the bridge into the Golden Gate.'

'Right away'

'Stop!' The President was shocked and showed it. 'You would never dare.'

'Give me sufficient provocation and I'll have you thrown over the side too. I know it seems hard but you've got to find out some way, some time, that I mean what I say'

Muir stirred and spoke for the first time. He sounded tired. 'I think I detect a note of sincerity in this fellow's voice. He may, mark you, be a convincing bluffer. I, for one, wouldn't care to be the person responsible for taking the chance.'

The President bent an inimical eye on the Under-Secretary but Muir seemed to have gone to sleep. Cartland said in a quiet voice: 'Boyann, do what you are told.'

'Yes, sir.' Boyann seemed more than happy to have had the decision taken out of his hands. He took the paper from Branson who said: 'You can put it through to the phone by that chair opposite the President's?' Boyann nodded. 'And patch it in to the President's?' Boyann nodded again. Branson left and took his seat in the vacant armchair.

Boyann got through immediately: clearly, the call had been awaited.

'Hendrix,' the voice said.

'Branson here.'

‘Yes. Branson. Peter Branson. God, I might have guessed!’ There was a silence then Hendrix said quietly: ‘I’ve always wanted to meet you, Branson.’

‘And so you shall, my dear fellow, and much sooner than you think. I’d like to speak to you later. Meantime, I wouldn’t be surprised if the President didn’t want to have a word with you.’ Branson stood up, not without difficulty, and offered both the telephone and seat to Morrison who in turn struggled to his feet and accepted the offer with alacrity.

The President ran true to the form of any President who might have been so unfortunate as to find himself in his position. He ran through the whole gamut of incredulity, outrage, disbelief and horror that not only the Chief Executive but, even more important, foreign potentates should find themselves in a situation so preposterous as to be, in his opinion, without parallel in history. He laid the blame, predictably, entirely at Hendrix’s door – security cover, as the President knew all too well, was arranged by Washington and the local police forces did precisely what they were told to do, but the President’s memory, logic and sense of justice had gone into a state of shock-and ended up by demanding that Hendrix’s duty was to clear up the whole damnable mess and that he should do something about it immediately.

Hendrix, who had a great deal longer time to consider the situation, remained admirably calm. He said: ‘What do you suggest I do about it, sir?’

The incoherent splutterings that followed were indication enough that constructive suggestions were at that moment some light years away from the President’s mind. Morrison took advantage of the momentary hiatus.

‘Bernard? John here.’ Morrison smiled without meaning to. ‘The voters aren’t going to like this, Bernard.’

‘All one hundred and fifty million of them?’

Again the same smile. ‘If we think nationally, yes.’

‘I’m afraid this is going to turn into a national problem, John. In fact, you know damn well it already is. And on the political side it’s too big for either of us.’

‘You cheer me up greatly, Bernard.’

‘I wish someone would cheer me. Do you think our friend would let me speak to the General?’

‘I’ll ask.’ He asked and Branson nodded amiably enough. The other occupants of the coach eyed one another with a mounting degree of suspicion and apprehension, both directed against Branson. The man was too utterly sure of himself. And, as matters stood at that moment, there seemed to be little reason why he shouldn’t be. He just didn’t hold all the aces in the pack – he held a pack full of aces.

Hendrix said: ‘General Cartland? Hendrix. The way I see it, sir, this is going to be as much a military operation as a police one. Much more so, if I’m any judge. I should call in the senior military officers on the coast?’

‘Higher than that.’

‘The Pentagon?’

‘At once.’

‘Local action?’

‘Damn all. Wait until the situation stabilizes itself – and we find out what this madman wants.’ Branson smiled politely but as usual the smile never touched his eyes. ‘According to what he says himself – if you can believe a word he says – time is not of the essence. I think he wants to talk to you.’

Branson took the phone from Cartland and eased himself comfortably into the armchair. ‘One or two questions and requests, Hendrix. I think I am in a position to expect answers and compliance with whatever I want. Wouldn’t you agree?’ ‘I’m listening.’

‘Has the news been broken yet?’

‘What the hell do you mean broken? Half of San Francisco can see you stuck out on that damned bridge.’

‘That’s no way to speak of my favourite bridge. Nationwide is what I mean.’

‘It’ll get around fast enough.’

‘See that it gets around now. The communications media, as those people term themselves nowadays, are going to be interested. I am prepared to allow, no, that’s wrong, I insist that you put a helicopter, no, two helicopters at the disposal of some of the hundreds of news cameramen who will wish to record this historic event. The Bay Area is thick with suitable machines, both military and civilian.’

There was a silence then Hendrix said: ‘What the devil do you want those for?’

‘Obvious, surely. Publicity. The maximum exposure. I want every person in America and indeed every person in the world who is within reach of a television set to see just what a predicament the President and his Arabian friends are in. And they are in a predicament, wouldn’t you say?’

Another silence. ‘This publicity, of course, you will use as a lever to get public opinion on your side, to help you obtain what you want, whatever that might be?’

‘What else?’

Hendrix said heavily: ‘You wouldn’t like me to send a coach-load of reporters on to the bridge, would you?’

Branson smiled into the telephone. ‘A coachload of reporters I wouldn’t mind but I don’t much fancy a coach-load of FBI men armed to the teeth and disguised as reporters. No, I think we’ll pass that one up. Besides, reporters we have, our own coach-load.’

‘What’s to prevent me from loading those helicopters up with troops, maybe paratroopers?’

Branson sighed. ‘Only your own common sense. We’ve got hostages, or had you forgotten? A bullet can reach the President far more quickly than a paratrooper ever could.’ Branson glanced at the President, whose expression indicated that he clearly didn’t care to be used as a bargaining counter.

‘You wouldn’t dare. You’d defeat your own ends. You’d have nothing left to blackmail us with.’

‘I’d still have a king and a prince. Try me and see. You’re whistling in the dark and you know it. Or do you want to go down in history as the man responsible for the deaths of a president, a king and a prince?’ Hendrix made no reply. It was clearly not a role he envisaged for himself. ‘However, it hasn’t escaped me that there might be some death-or-glory hotheads who would stop at nothing in taking blind gambles, so I’ve got my second request to make now. This area is crammed with military stations – the Presidio itself, Fort Baker, Treasure Island, Forts Funston, Miley and Mason, Fort Barry, Cronkite – you name them, they’re around and all within easy reach of here by road. I’d be very surprised if between them they can’t rustle up the two mobile self-propelled rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns which I want on the bridge within the hour. Plenty of ammunition, of course – and the army will test them out first. You know how some of that hardware gets afflicted with all kinds of jinxes.’

‘You’re quite mad.’

‘A divine sort of madness. Instructions now.’

‘I refuse.’

‘You refuse? General Cartland?’

Cartland heaved himself upright and walked heavily down the coach. He took the phone and said quietly: ‘Do what the madman asks. Don’t you recognize megalomania when you hear it?’

‘That was very unkind, General.’ Branson smiled and retrieved the phone. ‘You have the message, Hendrix?’

‘I have the message.’ Hendrix sounded as if he were being strangled.

‘My third request. Call up a couple of squads of army engineers. I want two sets of steel barriers built on the bridge, one under either tower. They are to be strong enough to stop a tank and high enough – barbed at the top, of course – to prevent anyone from climbing over. The north barrier is to be unbroken, the south with a hinged central section, wide enough to permit the passage of a jeep, and capable of being opened from the inside – our side – only. The barriers will be anchored to the sides of the bridge by bolting or welding and secured to the roadway by pneumatically driven

spikes. But the army will know a great deal more about such things than I do. I shall supervise the operations personally.'

Hendrix seemed to be having some difficulty with his breathing. Finally he said: 'Why?'

'It's those nasty fogs that come rolling in from the Pacific all the time. More often than not they cover the bridge – in fact I can see one coming in right now.' Branson sounded almost apologetic. 'It would be too easy to rush us under fog cover.'

'And why the hinged section in the south barrier?'

'I thought I told you. To permit the passage of a jeep. For such things as negotiating committees, a doctor if need be and the transport of the best food and drink in town.'

'Jesus! You have your nerve, Branson.'

'Nerve?' Branson was hurt. 'This humanitarian consideration of the well-being of my fellow man? You call that nerve? Kings and presidents are not accustomed to going hungry. Among other things you don't want to go down in history as, Hendrix, includes I'm sure being the man responsible for starving kings and presidents to death. Think of the verdict of history.'

Hendrix was silent. He may or may not have been thinking about the verdict of history.

Branson went on: 'And we must not forget the delicate sensibilities of royalty. Before the barriers are in place we'd like to have a couple of mobile latrine vans in position. Equipped, of course, to the very highest standards – and that does not include being loaded to the gunwales with FBI agents. You have all that, Hendrix?'

'It's been recorded.'

'Then set the wheels in motion. Or must I call in General Cartland again?'

'It will be done.'

'Now?'

'Now.'

Branson cradled the phone on his knee and looked at it wonderingly. 'And he didn't even tell me I couldn't get off with it.' He lifted the phone again. 'Last request, Hendrix, but the most important one. The President is temporarily incapacitated. How can one talk to the leader of a leaderless nation?'

'The Vice-President is already in Chicago. He's on his way to O'Hare airfield now.'

'Splendid. Splendid. Co-operation without even asking for it. But I'm afraid I'll also have to ask for the co-operation of one or two other senior members of the government. I know it's asking for a lot but I feel -'

'Spare me your schoolboy humour, Branson.' There was an edge to Hendrix's voice now but it was a tired edge. 'I suppose you have some people in mind?'

'Just a couple, that's all.' Branson had a gift for sounding eminently reasonable when making the most unreasonable demands.

'And if you get them and the Vice-President together here I suppose you'll make all three of them hostages too.'

'No. You've only got my word for it, of course, but no. You're losing whatever grip you had, Hendrix. You don't kidnap negotiators. If you did you'd have to negotiate with someone else and so on down the line until we came to someone like you.' Branson waited for comment but Hendrix appeared to be beyond comment. 'I want the Secretary of State.'

'He's on his way.'

'A mind-reader, no less! From where?'

'Los Angeles.'

'How very convenient. How come he was there?'

'An IMF meeting.'

'IMF? Then that means -'

Branson replaced the receiver. 'Well, well, well. Little Peter Branson *vis-à-vis*, the Secretary of the Treasury. What a *tête-à-tête* this should be. I thought the day would never come.'

‘Yes,’ Hendrix said wearily. ‘The Secretary of the Treasury was there. He’s flying up with him.’

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