

Chapter VII

Gregory Maxwell had not made much headway when the helicopter came to pick up Soblen. The G-man was certainly not very far from Madame Atomos's lair, but he was progressing so prudently that he was virtually crawling.

From the crest of a rise Maxwell saw the minuscule fire lit by the little doctor, then heard the regular throb of the helicopter just as it came into his field of vision. For a moment, he dreaded that it might attempt to reach him, but the machine took off shortly thereafter and vanished into the gloom.

The G-man breathed out. He suspected vaguely that Madame Atomos might have a great deal of difficulty realizing his presence. It seemed reasonable to think that the Japanese woman would find it impossible to detect a lone man, because her radar apparatus would only react to the sound of motors and the movements of massive objects.

Maxwell crept along the side of a workshop and emerged on the edge of a large open space that must have been a crop-field. He went around the field, moved like a shadow between two rows of small trees, and suddenly froze. The silence was so dense that it was becoming oppressive. Maxwell had never known anything like it. Even in the densest jungles there was always the chatter of a monkey, the cry of a bird. Here, there was nothing.

This patch of land drowned by the Pooley prefigured the future of the United States, if no one intervened.

Maxwell moved forward again, went through a small wood and emerged a hundred yards from Cal Pooley's store. The telegraph poles set alongside 175 no longer carried their wires, but still indicated the exact position of the road. Maxwell adopted it as a point of reference, quit the edge of the wood and sprinted as far as 175. There he stopped again, knelt down and got his breath back.

He thought that if Soblen had got it right, the electromagnetic ray must be passing a few feet over his head. From this moment on, therefore, he had to go on his hands and knees as far as old Cal's store, and then crawl as far as possible.

As far as possible would put him within range of Madame Atomos's lair. For Maxwell, that range was limited by the strength necessary for a twenty-yard throw. To be sure, he was capable of throwing an object further than that, but the sticks of dynamite had short fuses. He had, in consequence, to get as close as that maximum.

Maxwell checked his satchels, emerged from his hiding-place, and crossed the road on all fours. Still in that position, he went as far as the gas pumps, and moved on to old Cal's property.

Then he lay down on his belly and started crawling slowly. At the far end of the yard he could make out the dark mass of the shed, the surrounding fence and then, to the right and the left, the trees bordering the property.

Abruptly, a metal tube emerged from the Pooley a few inches from his face. Maxwell froze, holding his breath. His heart was beating furiously.

The tube looked like a tobacco-pipe, and the black hole of its bowl was angled toward the G-man. Maxwell lowered his head instinctively, then started when a derisive laugh split the darkness.

"Mr. Gregory Maxwell!" said a feminine voice, in an ironic tone. "The chief of the Dallas office of the FBI in person! I didn't think I'd capture such a big prize!"

The laughter rang out again, and Maxwell, seized by an abrupt fit of rage, tried to get up. He tensed his muscles, but experienced the sensation of being caught in a matrix of steel. His chin settled into his two hands, and remained stuck there in spite of all his efforts.

"Futile, Mr. Maxwell," said the vice. "You are the target of my paralyzing ray, and no force in the world could extract you from that unfortunate situation. Dr. Soblen proved to be more intelligent than you. I don't know what aberration led you to believe that you could get to me without my being aware of it, but you must recognize that you've signed your own death-warrant. Last year, the G-man Sam Forbes made the same mistake. You know what happened to him, don't you?"

Maxwell tried to speak, but was incapable of separating his jaws. He understood then that he was entirely at the mercy of Madame Atomos, and was submerged by a vague despair. How, indeed, had he been able to believe that he could out an end to this diabolical woman?

"You are going to ask yourself many questions, Mr. Maxwell," the voice went on. "Certainly as many as the atomized people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki whom your bombs didn't murder on the

spot! Do you know that Japanese people are still dying in consequence of their burns? Do you know that the children of those injured people do not know whether they will die prematurely?"

Maxwell heard heavy breathing, then Madame Atomos, having calmed down, continued: "You are a murderer, Mr. Maxwell! The United States is inhabited by a population of murderers! Your country is a realm of corruption, gangsterism, vice, racism and crime! Your women do the housework for you and get drunk in bars! You kill men like Lincoln and Kennedy, when no foreigner would have touched a hair on their heads! Mr. Maxwell, you will die slowly, and you will be able to watch yourself die! Your muscles are already dead. Soon, your nerves will be; then your blood will coagulate in your veins. Your heart will cease to beat, but for a few seconds, your brain will continue to function. Those few seconds will be horrible, Mr. Maxwell—horrible! And I hope you enjoy them!"

The demented laughter tormented the G-man's eardrums as well, and the hate-filled voice of the sinister Japanese woman threw at him, by way of farewell: "Compliments of Madame Atomos, Mr. Maxwell!"

Then there was silence—an interminable and profound silence, which was to become, for the man nailed to the ground, an eternal silence.

Already, the G-man sensed that his extremities were losing sensation. He felt as if his chin was resting on a block of ice, and no longer felt the weight of the satchels on his back or the contact of the butt of the thirty-eight under his arm.

His death-throes were exactly as Madame Atomos had described. The man suffered horribly, and his body was cold by the time his soul departed. Providence, however, had shown him the mercy of leaving him ignorant until the end of the death of his sons, and Gregory Maxwell's final thought was for them and May.

As for May, the tranquil little housewife of Balch Springs had lost all her reasons for living in less than an hour.

Yosho Akamatsu ran toward the helicopter as it landed and rapidly brought Beffort up to date with the discovery of the tunnel. In spite of his fatigue, the federal agent decided that it was worth immediate verification. He asked General Stuart to accompany Dr. Soblen to the laboratory, and climbed back into the apparatus with the Tokkoka man.

Seen from the sky, Dallas resembled a city gone mad. A dense crowd was flowing through the streets, fleeing the Pooley—which had, however, clearly slowed down. In fact, hundreds of flamethrowers were spitting water at the accursed plant, and veritable streams were preventing the roots from getting a grip on the ground. The city was being defended foot by foot, but in spite of its inhibition, the "red tide" was nevertheless continuing to advance. Then again, if its development had been halted in Dallas, it was continuing freely in a northward direction. Rose Hill and Rowlett were submerged and Garland under threat. Inhabitants were fleeing everywhere. The roads were disappearing beneath a flood of vehicles, and monstrous gridlocks were blocking the traffic in places.

The water-supplies were diminishing at a prodigious speed, and it was obvious that the city could not be defended indefinitely.

He helicopter flew over the whole covered extent, left Forney—which the Pooley had brushed but not engulfed—to its left and landed next to the indicated farm. Smith Beffort instructed the pilot not to get out of his machine, and drew away with Akamatsu.

The two federal agents came to meet them; they declared that one had gone into or come out of the barn, and that no vehicle had approached the farm.

"Have you been here long?" asked Beffort.

"Since two o'clock, or thereabouts. The most difficult part was to get a message to you. Do you intend to go into the tunnel?"

"Naturally."

The man turned his head toward the barn. "In that case," he said, "and if it won't inconvenience you, I'd like to go with you. My parents were atomized last year in New York...."

Sam turned him around again. "What's your name?"

The man forced a smile. "Eddie Witter," he said. "My father was a motor-cycle cop. He's the one who was disintegrated on Route 22—remember?"

Beffort remembered. He had only just escaped the deadly ray of the thermal weapon wielded by Lydia Watanabe himself.

“As for my mother,” Witter went on, “she was in the street when Madame Atomos’s walking dead headed for Plum Island. Needless to say, if I could corner that damnable Jap....”

He did not finish his sentence, but his large hands mimed strangulation. It was sufficiently explicit.

“Okay,” said Beffort. “You can come with us.” He turned to the second agent. “I suppose you must also want to take a trip in the tunnel, but you’ll have to give up on that, old man. Someone has to warn the Boss if things turn sour.”

“All right,” said the man. “What are the orders?”

“First of all, prevent anyone from getting into the barn. Then, wait for us to come back. If none of us gets back here in two hours, climb into that helicopter and go back to Dallas airport. Then find a way to contact the Boss....”

“The telephone lines are down,” the man objected.

Beffort gestured impatiently. “Listen,” he said. “Get this straight: if we disappear, you become the most important person in the territory. If we’re kayoed, Madame Atomos, knowing that she’s in danger, will be in a tearing hurry to take flight. Thus, you have to move very quickly. Use a radio, requisition a jet-fighter, but the Boss has to know what the situation is within an hour. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Beffort made sure that Witter had an electric torch, and headed for the entrance to the tunnel.

While Smith Beffort, Witter and Akamatsu set off into the bowels of the earth, May Maxwell arrived at FBI headquarters in Dallas.

The Tangleys, trapped in their car, had not been able to escape the current dragging them westwards, and May had been obliged to cross the city, sometimes struggling furiously. The young woman was virtually stupefied. She could not get rid of the vision of her sons going into the house, and of the Pooley settling conclusively over the windows and the front door.

May tried to focus her thoughts on her husband. She knew that she would go mad if she continued thinking that Jack and Greg Jr. were not yet dead. It was necessary to consider them as such. They would asphyxiate slowly, with frightful suffering. How long would it take for the oxygen contained in a two-story house to be completely polluted? May had no idea.

In a film, she had once seen a submarine resting on a bed of sand at the bottom of the ocean. Little by little, its oxygen supply had been exhausted, and the men had died choking. Their mouths had been wide open. Sweat had inundated their bodies, and their hands had clutched their throats. It had been atrocious. Then, still in the same sequence, a diver had gone down to the submarine and rapped on the hull. The survivors had recovered hope and....

May uttered a scream, and stood still, leaning against the wall.

The telephone!

The electricity was no longer working, but that did not mean that it was the same for the telephone.

May ran up the stairs, forgot to knock and came into the office like a whirlwind. The room was full of smoke. Men were going in and out continually. Others were shading a map of the region and sending radio messages, and deputy director George Cooper was on the telephone.

As no one paid any attention to her, May crossed the room and planted herself in front of Cooper. The man raised his eyes, smiled wearily and removed his cigar from his mouth. “Good evening, Mrs. Maxwell,” he said, hoarsely. “You’ve been forced out too?”

May leaned toward him. “Mr. Cooper,” she said, “I need to phone my home.”

Cooper raised his eyebrows. “Hold on,” he said. “If your house is under the Pooley....”

“My sons are in the house,” May said, in a voice that seemed to come from a long way away. Tears ran down her taut face. She made no move to wipe them away, and Cooper was quite certain that she was unaware that she was weeping.

He got up, offered her his chair and pointed to the telephone. “Go on,” he said. “Some lines are working, others aren’t. We don’t know why. You might have a chance, but it would surprise me....”

“Where’s my husband, Mr. Cooper?”

“On a mission,” he deputy director replied. “He’s with a man named Soblen. I don’t think he’ll be long....” He drew away in the direction of the rest room. May picked up the phone and dialed her own number. She waited for some time, her heart hammering, and during that terrible moment her gaze

remained fixed on a photograph pinned to the notice-board. It was a portrait of a Japanese man. The caption said that his name was Mikonosuke Watanabe, that he was thirty-eight years old and that he was one of Madame Atomos's collaborators.

The silence on the line was complete, and May hung up without ceasing to study the Japanese man's face. She thought that the windows of the house had still been open, that the Pooley would certainly have penetrated into the upstairs rooms, and quickly invaded the entire dwelling. Jack and Greg Jr. must have been dead for some time, and it was better thus.

Yes, that was much better.

The telephone rang, and May picked it up mechanically, putting the receiver to her ear. She was still looking at the photograph of Mikonosuke Watanabe, unconsciously memorizing every aspect of his physiognomy.

"Hello?" said a harsh voice. "Is this the office of Deputy Director Cooper?"

"Yes," said May, indifferently.

"Then put him on! What are you waiting for?"

"He's gone out for a moment."

"In that case tell him that one of Mother Atomos's spiders has deposited Gregory Maxwell's corpse in no-man's-land. Hello? Hello? Did you get that?"

The telephone was dangling at the end of its wire, and May resembled a marble statue.