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CHECK AND CHECKMATE

By Walter Miller, Jr.

Project Gutenberg's No Shield from the Dead, by Gordon Rupert Dickson

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NO SHIELD FROM THE DEAD

By Gordon R. Dickson

No conceivable force could penetrate Terri's shield. Yet he was defenseless.

I

It was a nice little party, but a bit obvious. Terri Mac saw through it before he had taken half a dozen steps into the apartment. A light flush staining his high cheek-bones. "This is ridiculous," he said.

The light chatter ceased. Cocktail glasses were set down on various handy tables and ledges; and all faces in the room turned toward a man in his late fifties who sat propped up invalid-wise on pillows in a chair in a corner of the room.

"The Comptroller is perspicacious," said the old man, agreeably, waving one hand in a casual manner. "On your way, children."

And the people present smiled and nodded. Quite as if it were an ordinary leave-taking, they pushed past Terri Mac and filed out the door. Even the blonde, Terri had picked up at the embassy ball and who had brought him here, strolled off casually, but in a decidedly less drunken fashion than she had exhibited earlier in the evening.

"Sit down," said the old man. Terri Mac did so, gazing searchingly at the skinny frame and white eyebrows in an unsuccessful effort to connect him with something in memory. "This is ridiculous," he

repeated.

"Really?" The old man smiled benignly. "And why so?"

"Why—" the situation was so obvious that Terri fumbled—a little at a loss for words. "Obviously you intend some form of coercion, or else you would have come to me along recognized channels. And any thought of coercion is obviously—well, ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Why? You senile old fool, don't you know that I'm shielded? Don't you know all government officials from the fifth class up wear complete personal shields that are not only crack-proof but contain all the necessary elements to support life independently within the shield for more than twenty hours? Don't you know that I'll be missed in two hours at the most and tracked down in less than sixty minutes more? Are you crazy?"

The old man chuckled, rubbing dry hands together. He said, "I'm shielded too. You can't get at me. And now the room's shielded. You can't get out of it."

Terri stared at him. The initial shock was passing. His own statements anent the completeness of his protection had brought back confidence, and his natural coolness was returning. "What do you want?" he asked, eyeing the other narrowly.

"Pleasure of your company," said the old man. "There are some very strong connections between us. Yes, very strong. We must get to know each other personally."



t occurred to Terri that he had misinterpreted the situation. Relief came, mixed with a certain amount of chagrin at the way in which he allowed himself to show alarm. He had looked ridiculous. He leaned back in the chair and allowed a note of official hauteur and annoyance to creep into his voice. "I see," he said. "You want something?"

The old man nodded energetically.

"I do. Indeed I do."

"And you think you have some kind of a bargaining tool that is useful but might not be so if it became known to official channels."

"Well—" said the old man cautiously.

"Don't waste my time," interrupted Terri, harshly. "I'm not an ordinary politician. No man who works his way up to the fifth level of the government is. I didn't get to where I am today by pussy-footing around and I haven't the leisure to spend on people who do. Now *what* do you want?"

The other cackled. "Now, what do you think?" he said, putting one finger to his nose cunningly.

"You are old," Terri said. "And therefore cautious. Consequently you would not risk trying to force something from me, but are almost certainly trying to sell me something. Now what do I want? Not the usual things, certainly. Within my position I have all the material things a man could want; and within my shield I enjoy complete immunity. No one but the Central Bureau, itself, can crack this shield. And no one but they can prevent the conditioned reflex that stops my heart if for some reason the shield should be breached. I have a hold on every man beneath me that prevents him from knifing me in the back. There could be only one thing that I want that you could give me—" he leaned forward, staring into the deep-pouched eyes—"and

that is a means of getting at the man above me. Am I right?"

"No," said the old man.

Terri stiffened.

"No?" he echoed in angry incredulity.

Their eyes locked. For a long time they held, and at last Terri looked away.

The old man sighed—sipped noisily from a drink on the table beside his chair.

"Wait!" said Terri. To his own surprise, his voice was eager, even a little timorous in its hopefulness. "Wait. I've got it. There will be a test. There always is a test every time a man moves up. His superiors watch him when he doesn't suspect it. It will be that way for me when I am ready for the fourth level. And you have some kind of advance information. You know what the test will be. Maybe you know the man who will administer it. You want to sell me this information."

The other said nothing.

"Well," Terri spread his hands openly. "I am interested. I'll buy. What do you want. Money? A favor? Protection?"

"No."

"No?" Terri shouted, starting up from his chair. "What do you mean by no? Can't you say anything but 'no'?" A rage possessed him. He flung himself forward two furious steps to stand threateningly over the aged figure. "You doddering idiot! Say what you want, and quickly! My two hours are nearly up. I'll be missed. They'll be here in a few minutes—the Bureau Guards. They'll crack the room shield. They'll rescue me. And they'll take you into custody. To be questioned. To be executed. At my order. Do you understand? Your life depends on me."

After a little, the old man chuckled again. "Yes," he muttered, in a high-pitched old voice. "That's the way it'll be."

Terri stared at him. "You don't seem to understand. You're going to die."

"Oh yes," said the old man, nodding his head indulgently. "I'll die. But I'm an old man. I'd die anyway in a year or so—maybe in a day or so. But for you—for a young man like you—the up and coming young governmental with everything to lose—" he leered slyly at Terri. "Your death won't be so easy for you to take."

"I die?" echoed Terri, stupefied. "But I'm not going to die. They're coming to *rescue* me."

"Oh, are they?" said the old man, ironically.

"Of course!" said Terri. "Of course, why shouldn't they?"

The old man winked one faded eye portentously.

"Fine young man," he said. "Up and coming young man. Brilliant. Never a thought for the people he trampled on the way up the ladder. Dear me, no."

"What do you mean?" said Terri.

The old eyes, looking up suddenly, pierced him.

"Do you remember Kilaren?"

"K-Kilaren?"

"Kilaren," recited the old man as if quoting from a newspaper. "The beautiful young secretary of a provincial governor whose lecherous and unnatural pursuit drove her to suicide. So that one day to escape the governor, she jumped or fell from a high window. And the people

of the province, who had for a long time heard ugly stories and rumors, finally mobbed the office and lynched the governor, hanging him from the same window from which the girl had jumped. They said that even the fall had not spoiled her beauty, but that was probably false." The old man's words dwindled away into silence.

"If so what of it?" said Terri. "What's that to do with me?"

"Why, you were there. You were the governor's aide, and when the mob had gone home and feeling had slackened off, you stepped into the gap and seized up the reins of government, handling matters so skillfully that you were immediately promoted to an under-post at Government City."

"What of it?"

"Why it was all your doing," replied the other, in a mildly reproving voice, "the rumors, the stories, the mob, even the suicide. Poor Kilaren—a pitiful pawn in your ruthless game to eliminate the governor in your mad dash up the ladder."

"I never touched her!" cried Terri, his voice cracking. "I swear it."

"Who said you did? The type of mind that stoops to murder would never have gotten you this far. But you were the one who hired her, knowing the governor's tendencies. You were the one that gave her work that kept her, night after night, alone with the man. You preyed upon her fear of losing her job. You threw the sin in her face after she had committed it. You told her what she might have been, and what she was, and what she would be. You broke her, day after day. In the sterile privacy of the office you reviled her, scorned her, brought her to believe that she was what she was not, a creature of filth and dishonor. You blocked off all avenues of escape but the one that led through one high window. *You killed her!*"

"No!"

"Yes!"

T

Terri brought his quivering hands together and clenched them in his lap. He stared at the old man. "Who are you?"

"I was a friend of hers. We lived in the same hotel-apartment. She had no family. I believe you knew that when you hired her."

"I see," said Terri. He drew a long, deep, shuddering breath, and leaned back in the chair. "So that's the story," he said, his voice strengthening, "I might have known it. Blackmail. There are always fools that want to try blackmail."

"No," said the old man. "Not Blackmail, Comptroller. I want your life."

Terri laughed shortly, contemptuously. "No knowledge that you have can threaten my life."

"They will come," said the old man, leaning wearily back against his cushions. "As you said, the Bureau Guards will come; and I think I shall kill myself when I hear them starting to crack the shield around this room. They will come in and find you with a dead man. What will you tell them, Terri?"

"Tell them? Anything I choose. They won't question *me*."

"No. The guards won't. But the Bureau will. How can they raise a man to the fourth level when there is a two-hour mystery in his background? They will want to know what you were doing here."

"I was kidnapped," said Terri.

"By whom? Can you prove it? And why?"

"I've been held a prisoner here."

"By a dead man? No, no, Terri. The circumstances are suspicious. You walk away from the embassy under your own power. You disappear and are found in a shielded room with a man who has committed suicide. This must be explained, and in the end you will have to tell them the truth."

"And what if I do?" said Terri, truculently.

"But the truth is so fantastic, Terri. So uncheckable. I am dead, and I am the only one who could have supported your story. These people who were here when you came in are common actors. They have no idea why I wanted you decoyed here. These are my rooms. And there is no obvious connection between me and the dead Kilaren. And perhaps I will decide to live just long enough to denounce you as a traitor when they enter."

Ashen-faced, Terri stared.

"The Bureau will have to question you. They will clamp a block on your mind so that you can't operate the reflex that stops your heart. And they will question you over and over again, because the Bureau cannot afford to take chances. You will go into a private hell of your own, Terri Mac. You will tell the story of your own evil to that girl over and over again, pleading to be believed. And they will not believe you. And in the end they will kill you, just to be on the safe side. Because, you see, you *might* have been doing something traitorous in these two shielded hours."

Terri's head bobbed limply, like a drunken man's. He made one last effort. "Why?" he said. "Why do you do this? Your life. For a girl who

was no connection to you?"

The old man folded his hands.

"I was a little like your governor," he said. "We all have our sins. I loved Kilaren and the shock of her death wrecked my health." He cocked his head suddenly on one side. "Listen," he said.

From beyond the closed door of the room, a high-pitched humming was barely audible. It grew in volume, going up the scale. Terri leaped to his feet; and for the space of a couple of seconds, he lunged first this way then that, like a wild animal beating against its trap. Then, as if all will had at last gone out of him, he stopped in the middle of the room and closed his eyes. For a fraction of a moment he stood there, before a faint convulsion seized him and he fell.

With a faint smile on his face, the old man reached out to a hidden switch and cut the shield about the room. Uniformed guards tumbled through the door, to pull up in dismay at the sight of the body on the floor.

"I'm sorry," said the old man, "I must have turned the shield on by mistake. I was trying to signal someone. The Comptroller seems to have had a heart attack."

THE END



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