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CHECK AND CHECKMATE

By Walter Miller, Jr.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Last Gentleman, by Rory Magill

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The LAST Gentleman

By Rory Magill

Illustrated by TED SPEICHER

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No one knew, no one cared. For a great lethargy was overcoming the people and their only salvation was—

The explosion brought Jim Peters upright in bed. He sat there, leaning back on the heels of his hands, blinking stupidly at the wall. His vision cleared and he looked down at Myra, just stirring beside him. Myra opened her eyes.

Jim said, "Did you feel that?"

Myra yawned. "I thought I was dreaming. It was an explosion or something, wasn't it?"

Jim's lips set grimly. After ten years of cold war, there was only one appropriate observation, and he made it. "I guess maybe this is it."

As by common agreement, they got out of bed and pulled on their robes. They went downstairs and out into the warm summer night. Other people had come out of their homes also. Shadowy figures moved and collected in the darkness.

"Sounded right on top of us."

"I was looking out the window. Didn't see no flash."

"Must have been further away than it seemed."

This last was spoken hopefully, and reflected the mood of all the people. Maybe it wasn't the bomb after all.

Oddly, no one had thought to consult a radio. The thought struck them as a group and they broke into single and double units again—hurrying back into the houses. Lights began coming on here and there.

Jim Peters took Myra's hand, unconsciously, as they hurried up the porch steps. "Hugh would know," Jim said. "I kind of wish Hugh was here."

Myra laughed lightly—a calculated laugh, meant to disguise the gravity of this terrible thing. "That's not very patriotic, Jim. If that was the bomb, Hugh will be kept busy making other bombs to send back to them."

"But he'd know. I'll bet he could tell just by the sound of it." Jim smiled quietly in the darkness—proudly. It wasn't everybody who had a genius for a brother. A nuclear scientist didn't happen in every family. Hugh was somebody to be proud of.

They turned on the radio and sat huddled in front of it. The tubes warmed with maddening slowness. Then there came the deliberately impersonal voice of the announcer:

"—on the strength of reports now in, it appears the enemy bungled badly. Instead of crippling the nation, they succeeded only in alerting it. The bombs—at this time there appear to have been five of them dropped—formed a straight north-south line across western United States. One detonated close to the Idaho-Utah line. The other four were placed at almost equi-distant points to the south—the fifth bomb, according to first reports, exploding in a Mexican desert. We have

been informed that Calas, Utah, a town of nine hundred persons, has been completely annihilated. For further reports, keep tuned to this station."

The fifth "one" exploded in the Mexican desert.

A dance band cut in. Jim got up from his chair. "They certainly did bungle," he said. "Imagine wasting four atom bombs like that."

Myra got up also. "Would you like some coffee?"

"That'd be a good idea. I don't feel like going back to bed. I want to listen for more reports."

But there were no more reports. An hour passed. Another and another. Jim spun the dials and got either silence or the cheerful blatherings of some inane disc jockey who prattled on as though nothing had happened.

Finally Jim snapped the set off. "Censorship," he said. "Now we're going to see what it's really like."

In the morning they gathered again in groups—the villagers in this little community of five hundred, and discussed the shape of things to come, as they visualized them.

"It'll take a little time to get into action," old Sam Bennett said. "Even expecting it, and with how fast things move these days—it'll take time."

"If they invade us—come down from the north—you think the government will let us know they're coming?"

"You can't tell. Censorship is a funny thing. In the last war, we knew more about what was going on in Europe than the people that lived there."

At that moment, old Mrs. Kendal fainted dead away and had to be carried home. Three men carried her and Tom Edwards was one of them. "Kind of heavy, ain't she?" Tom said. "I never thought Mary weighed much more than a hundred."

That night the village shook. In his home, Jim staggered against the wall. Myra fell to the floor. There were two tremors—the second worse than the first. Then things steadied away, and he helped Myra to her feet.

"But there wasn't any noise," Myra whispered. The whisper was loud in the silence.

"That was an earthquake," Jim said. "Nothing to worry about. Might be one of the bomb's after effects."

The quake did no great damage in the village, but it possibly contributed to old Mrs. Kendal's death. She passed on an hour later. "Poor old lady," a neighbor told Myra. "She was plain weary. That was what she said just before she closed her eyes. 'Hazel' she said, 'I'm just plumb tuckered.'"

The neighbor wiped her face with her apron and turned toward home. "Think I'll lie down for a spell. I'm tuckered myself. Can't take things like I used to."



Now it was a week after the earthquake—two weeks after the falling of the bombs, and the town went on living. But it was strange, very strange. Art Cordell voiced the general opinion when he said, "You know, we waited a long time for the thing to happen—we kind of visualized, maybe, how it'd be. But I didn't figure it'd be anything like this."

"Maybe there isn't any war," Jim said. "Washington hasn't said so."

"Censorship."

"But isn't that carrying censorship a little too far? The people ought to be told whether or not they're at war."

But the people didn't seem to care. A deadening lethargy had settled over them. A lethargy they felt and questioned in their own minds, but didn't talk about, much. Talking itself seemed to have become an effort.

This continued weariness—this dragging of one foot after another—was evidently the result of radiation from the bombs. What other place could it come from? The radiation got blamed for just about everything untoward that happened. It caused Jenkin's apples to fall before they were half-ripe. Something about it bent the young wheat to the ground where it mildewed and rotted.

Some even blamed the radiation for the premature birth of Jane Elman's baby, even though such things had happened before even gun powder was invented.

But it certainly was a strange war. Nothing came over the radio at all. Nobody seemed to care, really. Probably because they were just plain too tired. Jim Peters dragged himself to and from work in sort of a daze. Myra got her housework done, but it was a greater effort every day. All she could think of was the times she could drop on the lounge

for a rest. She didn't care much whether a war was going on or not.

People had quit waiting for them to come down from the north. They knew that the places where the bombs had fallen were guarded like Fort Knox. Nobody got in or out.

Jim remembered the flash, the color, the rumors, the excitement of World War Two. The grim resolution of the people to buckle down and win it. Depots jammed. Kids going off to join.

But nobody went to join this war. That was funny. Somehow Jim hadn't thought of that before. None of the kids was being called up. Did they have enough men? Washington didn't say. Washington didn't say anything.

And the people didn't seem to care. That was the strange thing, when you could get your tired mind to focus on it.

The people didn't care. They were too busily occupied with the grim business of putting one foot in front of the other.

Jim got home one evening to find Myra staring dully at a small handful of ground meat. "That's a pound," she said.

Jim frowned. "What do you mean? That little bit?"

Myra nodded. "I asked for a pound of hamburger and Art put that much on the scale. In fact not even that much. It said a pound. I saw it. But there was such a little bit that he felt guilty and put some more on."

Jim turned away. "I'm not hungry anyhow," he said.



At ten that night, after they were in bed, a knock sounded on the door.

They had been in bed three hours, because all they could think of as soon as they had eaten was getting into bed and staying there until the last possible minute on the following morning.

But the knock came and Jim went down. He called back upstairs with more life than he'd shown in a long time, "Myra—come down. It's Hugh. Hugh's come to see us."

And Myra came down quickly—something she hadn't done for a long time either.

Hugh seemed weary and drawn, but his smile was the same. Hugh hadn't changed a great deal from the gangling kid who never studied mathematics in school but always had the answers. It came natural to him.

During the coffee that Myra made, Hugh said, "Had quite a time getting here. Trains disrupted. All air lines grounded. But I wanted to see you again before—"

"Then there *is* a war," Jim said. "We've been kind of wondering out here. With the censorship we don't get any news and the people hereabouts have almost forgotten the bombs I guess."

Hugh stared into his coffee cup for a long time. "No—there isn't any war." Hugh grinned wryly. "I don't think anybody in the world has got enough energy left to fight one."

"There *was* one then? One that's over?" Jim felt suddenly like a fool, sitting here on a world that might have gone through a war stretching from pole to pole, and asking if it had happened as though he lived on Mars somewhere—out of touch. But that's the way it was.

"No there wasn't any war."

"You mean our government shot off those bombs themselves? You

know I thought it was funny. Landing out in the desert that way like they did.

"Old Joe would have hit for Chicago or Detroit or New York. It was silly to say bombs dropped on the desert came from an enemy."

"No—the government didn't fire them."

Myra set her cup down. "Jim, stop asking Hugh so many questions. He's tired. He's come a long way. The questions can wait."

"Yes—I guess they can. We'll show you where your room is, Hugh."

As she opened the window of the spare bedroom, Myra stood for a moment looking out. "Moon's certainly pretty tonight. So big and yellow. Wish I wasn't too tired to enjoy it."

They went to bed then, in the quiet home under the big yellow moon over the quiet town. A moon over a quiet country—over a weary, waiting, world.

Jim didn't go to work the next day. He hadn't planned to stay away from work, but he and Myra awoke very late and it was then that he made up his mind. For a long time, they lay in bed, not even the thought of Hugh being around and all the things they wanted to talk about, could bring them out of bed until they felt guilty about not getting up.

Hugh was sitting on the front porch watching the still trees in the yard. There was a breeze blowing, but it wasn't enough to move the leaves. Every leaf hung straight down, not stirring, and the grass seemed matted and bent toward the earth.

Myra got breakfast. She dropped the skillet while transferring the eggs to a platter but she got her foot out of the way so no harm was done. After breakfast the men went back outside. Jim moved automatically

toward a chair.

Then he stopped and frowned. He straightened deliberately. He turned and looked at his brother. He said, "Hugh. You're a man that knows. What's wrong? What did those bombs do to us? Tell me. I've got to know."

Hugh was silent for a time. Then he said, "Feel up to a walk?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

They went to the edge of town and out into a pasture and stopped finally by a brook where the water flowed sluggishly.

After a while, Hugh said, "I'm not supposed to tell anybody anything, but somehow it doesn't seem decent—keeping the truth from your own brother. And what difference does it make—really?"

"What's happened, Hugh."

"There weren't any bombs."

"No bombs."

"It happened this way. Long before this Earth was formed, a million light years out in space, a white dwarf died violently."

"You're talking in riddles."

Hugh looked up into the blue sky. "A dwarf star, Jim. So incredibly heavy, it would be hard for you to conceive of its weight. This star blew up—broke into five pieces and the five pieces followed each other through space. This world was formed in the meantime—maybe even this galaxy—we don't know. So the five pieces of heavy star had a rendezvous with a world unborn. The world was born and grew old and then the rendezvous was kept. Right on schedule. On some schedule so huge and ponderous we can't even begin to understand it."

"The five bombs."

"They hit the earth in a line and drove deep into the ground. But that was only the beginning. It all has to do with magnetism—the way they kept right on burrowing toward the center of our earth—causing the earthquakes—causing apples to fall from trees." Hugh turned to glance at Jim. "Did you know you weigh around six hundred pounds now?"

"I haven't weighed myself lately."

"We checked and found out what the stuff was. We'd never seen anything like it before. That star was a real heavyweight. All the pieces are drawing together toward the center of earth. But they'll never get there."

"They won't."

"We're doomed, Jim. Earth is doomed. That's the why of this censorship. We didn't want panics—mass suicide—a world gone mad."

"How's it going to come?"

"If allowed to run its course, the world would come to a complete standstill. Nothing would grow. People would move slower and slower until they finally fell in their tracks and could not get up. Eternal night on one side of a dead planet—eternal day on the other."

"But it's not going to happen?"

Hugh's mind went off on another track. "You know, Jim—I've never been a religious man. In fact I've only had one concept of God. I believe that God—above all, is a gentleman."

Jim said nothing and after a moment, Hugh went on. "Do you know what they do when they execute a man by firing squad?"

"What do they do?"

"After the squad fires its volley, the Captain steps up to the fallen man and puts a bullet through his brain. The man is executed for a reason, but the bullet is an act of mercy—the act of a gentleman.

"We are being executed for a reason we can't understand, and the bullet has already been fired, Jim. Another ten hours—eleven hours."

"What bullet?"

"Look up there. See it? The Moon."

Jim looked dully into the sky. "It's bigger—a way bigger."

"Hurling in toward us at ever increasing speed. When it hits—"

Jim looked at his brother with complete understanding at last. "When it hits—we won't be here any more."

"That's right. A quick, easy death for the world—from the bullet fired by the Last Gentleman."

They turned back toward the house. "Shall I tell Myra," Jim asked.

"What do you think you should do?"

"No—no, we won't tell her. We've got ten hours."

"Yes—we've got ten hours."

"Let's go home and have some coffee."

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