



## PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

**B**EN MARROW closed the door to his office quietly, carefully, but with a definite twist of his wrist. Marching down the hall toward the Head's office he looked like a modern Napoleon, a little absurd with his back so stiff and unswaying. He'd walked like that since Army basic training and now it was a part of him, setting him off as a perfectionist.

But in the outer Physics office he waited timidly for his appointment time. The crackerbox room penned him in. There were no comfortable chairs, just a hard wooden bench, so Ben remained standing. He smoothed his moist palms over his thinning hair, shined the crystal in his special Army watch unconsciously and held his body very straight and still—waiting.

The small room reminded him of his own office in which he felt tied and gagged. It had a small, dirty lab adjoining. Little windows; little rooms, cramped with books and invariably strewn with papers. He continually harped at the laboratory assistants and students about tidiness. Muddled rooms muddled his thoughts. The students needed regimenting, Ben thought. They were still too young to know the value and satisfaction of orderly living. Although he loved the challenges of science, messy labs and spilled experiments irritated him, and when he finished the work on his Doctorate, students razed him behind his back, "All that and no dirt under his fingernails."

His small, pale eyes caught the calendar hanging crookedly on the wall. He would have straightened it but a voice called out from behind the opaque glass door. "That you, Marrow? Come in!"

The Head was going to ask Ben to remain on the staff full time. It was no secret to Ben nor the rest of the faculty. He thought of the seasons passing the smudged laboratory window, falling leaves shutting out the light, drifted snow packed against it at the basement level, sheets of rain, some trickling through to stain his good maps and

charts. Old Doctor Garret, the department head, had worked in that same lab for fifteen years. "And where did it get him? In another one, a little bigger, a little messier. In my three years in the Army I had a larger office every six months, more rank and more pay." It's easy!

Ben heaved a sigh of resignation. His whole body felt heavy as he opened the glassed door but he stepped crisply into the low, gray office with its gilt-framed documents on the walls. Ben stood rigid, almost at attention, yet knowing that Old Garret did not share his liking for formality. Old Garret merely nodded toward a chair, offered a battered cigar box and cleared his throat several times.

While he waited for the Professor to begin the conversation he tried to analyze the doubt he felt. It had been with him off and on for weeks but he couldn't name it. A strange longing to start life again in a different place, different faces, different conditions. He wanted quiet evenings at home with Ann. Maybe she would be her old self if she had a nice place of her own. Ben shook his head to clear it of mugginess. Why didn't Ann like Army life? The question crept into focus. He felt Old Garret's piercing eyes sparking out from under bushy brows. The old professor said nothing to him but began riffling through the mess of papers on his cluttered desk. Ben's eyes followed to the piles of student papers, thesis notes and writeups overflowing onto the floor and other furniture. A younger and more expressive person might have said "Phew!" out loud. Ben swore it softly to himself. He certainly didn't envy Old Garret's job, no eight-hour day for a scientist, no clean clothes, not shutting it out of your mind at home in the evening or on weekends. All those conferences that sounded like Robert's Rules of Order in Chinese. Just grab a cup of coffee and hurry back to the lab.

Ben longed for a colorful parade, the noise and dash of it. The low ceilinged room grew grayer and quieter, he wanted to get out of there and walk fast, anywhere with his head up and his shoulders back. The Army life felt nearer to him than it ever had since Ann persuaded him to come back to school on the GI Bill. He'd never have left the army if it hadn't been for Ann. Ben hadn't seen a battle but he'd felt he was a vital part of one from his desk in

Washington. The names on the lists he checked each day were real men to him; he made them seem so to himself. "I'm helping each one find his place." He had consoled himself with the monotony of the office hovering over him. "Let the others apply for overseas, I am important here." He felt prouder still, sitting in the reviewing stand or riding in a staff car with other officers.

"Hut, two, three, four." He could hear a distant voice from the drill field across the tree-lined campus.

"Damn, I can give the Army as much as I can give this musty old fool." Ben rationalized, "I'm wasting my youth and energy here in this smelly hole. Even I smell like it. Besides I'm tired of worried students, worried faculty and work, work, work."

"Well, Marrow, I'll dispense with preliminaries. You know why I called you. What's your answer? Going to help me put over this new government nuclear physics program?" Old Garret's voice pierced the stale air. He paused, watching Ben intently for a second and then went back to his papers. Ben felt the pause as if it had been a blow. Old Garret wouldn't waste words about this. Must be quite an important job—and a hard one, if he knew Garret. Ben knew his value academically, he knew they needed him. He heard Doctor Garret snort somewhat to himself. He knew the old man was extremely proud of the government work they were undertaking and that he found pride in what he liked to call "Americanism." An old horse still in the harness. Ben recognized. He wanted to snort back at him but he always kept spontaneous reactions far below the surface. He liked to appear calm and sophisticated although he never used the word himself. Old Garret was still waiting for Ben to answer as he shuffled papers jerkily.

"Well, Sir, you see—" Ben wet his lips nervously, his middle aged body still rigidly posed. "I'm not quite sure I'd fit in."

"Fit in?" Old Garret was argumentive but his voice sounded remotely interested.

"Well, yes, Sir," Ben gasped, "I thought I might go back into the Army, ah, uh, that is, if I can keep my rank."

"Eh, and what was that?"

"Major, Sir." Ben answered proudly and wondered

why he was calling this weazened old man "Sir." He commanded no dignity, had probably never even thought of *serving in the Army*.

Ben felt the clipped reply from Old Garret bounce off the concrete walls. The old man rose impatiently from his worn swivel chair. The interview was over. Ben had the feeling the old man had known all along what he was going to say about the job. But he still wants to argue, Ben observed. "Well, I'm old enough to know my own mind." Old enough! The word had slipped up to the surface again and in his private mind embarrassed him.

Ben let himself out the door quietly, carefully but with a definite twist of his wrist. He was already at home, his uniform fitted over his trim body snugly, orderlies hurried about obeying his beck and call, his car drew up at the curb for him and far off on the parade ground some poor, dumb sergeant was worrying over the new recruits. Well, Major Marrow would have it easy.

—*Beverly Muckler, H. Ec. Sr.*



## H E A T

**H**HEAT lies like a sticky hand over the little Nebraska town. The last drop of moisture has been wrung out of the barren earth, and with nothing left to hold it, the dust whirls before the wind. It sifts into the cracks of the wind-slanted houses and coats the tabletops in the town's one restaurant, where the elbows of ranchers and farmers make islands in the greyness. The hands and faces above the elbows are like the land—eroded into deep crevices by the eternal wind. Dry, dusty voices float on the waves of heat, patient and resigned, but still tinged with the hope that makes the farmers plant again each spring after a crop failure.

"Ain't seen such a drought in forty years. Reckon the last time was in 1909 when the grasshoppers came."

"Think it will rain, Cy?" Even the young voices crack.

"It always has, and I reckon it will agin, Bob, but I don't know when."