

On The SlopesOf Vesuvius

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FOREWORD

When the USSR refused our proposals for controlling the A-bomb, I swore off “World-Saving.” No more preaching. No more attempts to explain the mortal peril we were in. No, sir!

A year and a half later, late ‘47, I backslid. If it could not be done by straightforward exposition, perhaps it could be dramatized as fiction.

Again I fell flat on my face.

Fifteen years later there was a tremendous flap over Soviet medium-range missiles in Cuba. Then they were removed—or so we were told—and the flap died out. Why? Why both ways? For years we have had Soviet submarines on both coasts; are they armed with slingshots? Or powder puffs?

This story is more timely today, over thirty years later, than it was when it was written; the danger is enormously greater.

And again this warning will be ignored. But it won’t take much of your time; it’s a short-short, a mere 2200 words.

ON THE SLOPES OF VESUVIUS

“Paddy, shake hands with the guy who built the atom bomb,” Professor Warner said to the bartender. “He and Einstein rigged it up in their own kitchen one evening.”

“With the help of about four hundred other guys,” amended the stranger, raising his voice slightly to cut through the rumble of the subway.

“Don’t quibble over details. Paddy, this is Doctor Mansfield. Jerry, meet Paddy— Say, Paddy, what is your last name?”

“Francis X. Hughes,” answered the barkeep as he wiped his hand and stuck it out. “I’m pleased to

meet any friend of Professor Warner.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Hughes.”

“Call me Paddy, they all do. You really are one of the scientists who built the atom bomb?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“May the Lord forgive you. Are you at N.Y.U., too?”

“No, I’m out at the new Brookhaven Laboratory.”

“Oh, yes.”

“You’ve been there?”

Hughes shook his head. “About the only place I go is home to Brooklyn. But I read the papers.”

“Paddy’s in a well-padded rut,” explained Warner. “Paddy, what are you going to do when they blow up New York? It’ll break up your routine.”

He set their drinks before them and poured himself

a short beer. “If that’s all I’ve got to worry about I guess I’ll die of old age and still in Thy rut, Professor.”

Warner’s face lost its cheerful expression for a moment; he stared at his drink as if it had suddenly become bitter. “I wish I had your optimism, Paddy, but I haven’t. Sooner or later, we’re in for it.”

“You shouldn’t joke about such things, Professor.”

“I’m not joking.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I wish I weren’t. Ask him. After all, he built the damned thing.”

Hughes raised his brows at Mansfield who replied, “I’m forced to agree with Professor Warner. They will be able to do it—atom-bomb New York I mean. I know that; it’s not a guess—it’s a certainty. Being able to do it, I’m strongly of the opinion that they will do it.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?” demanded the bartender. “The Russians?”

“Not necessarily. It might be anybody who first worked up the power to smash us.”

“Sure,” said Warner. “Everybody wants to kick the fat boy. We’re envied and hated. The only reason we haven’t been smeared is that no one has had what it takes to do it—up to now, that is!”

“Just a minute, gentlemen—” put in Hughes. “I don’t get it. You’re talking about somebody—anybody—atom-bombing New York. How can they do it? Didn’t we decide to hang on to the secret? Do you think some dirty spy has gotten away with it while we weren’t watching?”

Mansfield looked at Warner, then back at Hughes and said gently, "I hate to disturb your peace of mind, Mr. Hughes—Paddy—but there is no secret. Any nation that is willing to go to the trouble and expense can build an atom bomb."

"And that's official," added Warner, "and it's a leadpipe cinch that, power politics being what it is, a dozen different nations are working on the problem right now."

Hughes had been looking perturbed; his face cleared. "Oh, I see what you mean. In time, they can dig it out for themselves. In that case, gentlemen, let's have a round on the house and drink to their frustration. I can't be worrying about what might happen twenty years from now. We might none of us be spared that long what with taxicabs and the like."

Mansfield's brows shot up. "Why do you say twenty years, Paddy?"

"Eh? Oh, I seem to remember reading it in the papers. That general, wasn't it? The one who was in charge of the atom-bomb business."

Mansfield brushed the general aside. "Poppycock! That estimate is based on entirely unwarranted national conceit. The time will be much shorter."

"How much shorter?" demanded Hughes. Mansfield shrugged.

"What would you do, Paddy," Warner asked curiously, "if you thought some nation—let's say some nation that didn't like us—had already managed to manufacture atom bombs?"

The saloon cat came strolling along the top of the bar. Hughes stopped to feed it a slice of cheese before replying. "I do not have your learning, gentlemen, but Paddy Hughes is no fool. If someone is loose in the world with those devil's contraptions, New York is a doomed city. America is the champion and must be beaten before any new bully boy can hope to win—and New York is one of the spots he would shoot at first. Even Sad Sack—" He jerked a thumb at the cat. "—is bright enough to flee from a burning building."

"Well, what do you think you would do?"

"I don't 'think' what I'd do, I know what I'd do; I've done it before. When I was a young man and the Black and Tans were breathing down the back o' my neck, I climbed on a ship with never a thought of looking back—and any man who wanted them could have my pigs and welcome to them."

Warner chuckled. "You must have been quite the

lad, Paddy. But I don't believe you would do it—not now. You're firmly rooted in your titt and you like it—like me and six million others in this town. That's why decentralization is a fantasy."

Hughes nodded. "It would be hard." That it would be hard he understood. Like leaving home it would be to quit Schreiber's Bar-Grill after all these years—Schreiber couldn't run it without him; he'd chase all the customers away. It would be hard to leave his friends in the parish, hard to leave his home—what with Molly's grave being just around the corner and all. And if the cities were to be blown up a man would have to go back to farming. He'd promised himself when he hit the new country that he'd never, never, never tackle the heartbreaking load of tilling the soil again. Well, perhaps there would be no landlords when the cities were gone. If a man must farm, at least he might be spared that. Still, it

would be hard—and Molly's grave off somewhere in the rubble. "But I'd do it.

"You think you would."

"I wouldn't even go back to Brooklyn to pick up my other shirt. I've my week's pay envelope right here." He patted his vest. "I'd grab my hat and start walking." The bartender turned to Mansfield. "Tell me the truth, Doctor—if it's not twenty years, how long will it be?"

Mansfield took out an envelope and started figuring on the back of it. Warner started to speak, but Hughes cut him off. "Quiet while he's working it out!" he said sharply.

"Don't let him kid you, Paddy," Warner said wryly. "He's been lying awake nights working out this problem ever since Hiroshima."

Mansfield looked up. "That's true. But I keep hoping I'll come out with a different answer. I never do."

"Well, what is the answer?" Hughes insisted.

Mansfield hesitated. "Paddy, you understand that there are a lot of factors involved, not all of them too

clear. Right? In the first place, it took us about four years. But we were lavish with money and lavish with men, more so maybe than any other nation could be, except possibly Russia. Figured on that alone it might take several times four years for another country to make a bomb. But that's not the whole picture; it's not even the important part. There was a report the War Department put out, the Smyth Report—you've heard of it?—which gives anyone who can read everything but the final answers. With that report, with competent people, uranium ore, and a good deal less money than it cost us, a nation ought to be able to develop a bomb in a good deal less time than it took us."

Hughes shook his head. "I don't expect you to explain, Doctor; I just want to know your answer. How long?"

"I was just explaining that the answer had to be indefinite. I make it not less than two and not more than four years."

The bartender whistled softly. "Two years. Two years to get away and start a new life."

"No, no, no! Mr. Hughes," Mansfield objected, "Not two years from now—two years from the time the first bomb was dropped."

Hughes' face showed a struggle to comprehend. "But, gentlemen," he protested, "it's been more than two years since the first bomb was dropped."

"That's right."

"Don't blow your top, Paddy," Warner cautioned him. "The bomb isn't everything. It might be ten years before anybody develops the sort of robot carrier that can go over the north pole or the ocean and seek out a particular city with an atom bomb. In the meantime we don't have too much to fear from an

ordinary airplane attack.”

Mansfield looked annoyed. “You started this, Dick. Why try to hand out soothing syrup now? With a country as wide open as this one you don’t need anything as fancy as guided missiles to pull a Pearl Harbor on

it. The bombs would be assembled secretly and set off by remote control. Why, there might be a tramp steamer lying out there in the East River right now— Warner let his shoulders slump. “You’re right, of course.

Hughes threw down his bar towel. “You’re telling me that New York is as likely to be blown up right now as at any other time.”

Mansfield nodded. “That’s the size of it,” he said soberly.

Hughes looked from one to the other. The cat jumped down and commenced rubbing up against his ankle, purring. He pushed it away with his foot. “It’s not true! I know it’s not true!”

“Why not?”

“Because! If it was true would you be sitting here, drinking quietly? You’ve been having a bit of fun with me, pulling my leg. Oh, I can’t pick the flaw in your argument, but you don’t believe it yourselves.”

“I wish I didn’t believe it,” said Mansfield. “Oh, we believe it, Paddy,” Warner told him. “To tell you the truth, I’m planning to get out. I’ve got letters out to half a dozen cow colleges; I’m just waiting until my contract expires. As for Doc Mansfield, he can’t leave. This is where his lab is located.”

Hughes considered this, then shook his head. “No, it won’t wash. No man in his right mind will hang on to a job when it means sitting on the hot squat, waiting for the Warden to throw the switch. You’re pulling my leg.”

Mansfield acted as if Hughes had not spoken. “Anyhow,” he said to Warner, “the political factors might delay the blow off indefinitely.”

Warner shook his head angrily. “Now who’s handing out soothing syrup? The political factors speed up the event, not delay it. If a country intends to defeat us someday, it’s imperative that she do it as quickly as possible, before we catch wind of her plans and strike

first. Or before we work out a real counter weapon—if that’s possible.”

Mansfield looked tired, as if he had been tired for a long time. “Oh, you’re right. I was just whistling to keep my courage up. But we won’t develop a counter weapon, not a real one. The only possible defense against atomic explosion is not to be there when it goes off.” He turned to the barman. “Let’s have another round, Paddy.”

“Make mine a Manhattan,” added Warner.

“Just a minute. Professor Warner. Doctor Mansfield. You were not fooling with me? Every word you had to say is God’s own truth?”

“As you’re standing there, Paddy.”

“And Doctor Mansfield—Professor Warner, do you trust Doctor Mansfield’s figuring?”

“There’s no man in the United States better qualified to make such an estimate. That’s the truth, Paddy.”

“Well, then—” Hughes turned toward where his employer sat nodding over the cash register on the restaurant side of the room and whistled loudly between his teeth. “Schreiber! Come take the bar.” He started stripping off his apron.

“Hey!” said Warner, “where you going? I ordered a Manhattan.”

“Mix it yourself,” said Hughes. “I’ve quit.” He reached for his hat with one hand, his coat with the other, and then he was out the door.

Forty seconds later he was on an uptown express; he got off at 34th Street and three minutes thereafter he was buying a ticket, west. It was ten minutes later that he felt the train start to roll under him, headed out of the city.

But it was less than an hour later when his misgivings set in. Had he been too hasty? Professor Warner was a fine man, to be sure, but given to his little jokes, now and again. Had he been taken in by a carefully contrived hoax? Had Warner said to his friend, we’ll

have some fun and scare the living daylights out of the old Irishman?

Nor had he made any arrangements for someone to feed Sad Sack. The cat had a weak stomach, he was certain, and no one else gave the matter any attention at all. And Molly’s grave—Wednesday was his day to do his gardening there. Of course Father Nelson would see that it was watered, just for kindness’ sake, but still—When the train paused at Princeton Junction he

slipped off and sought out a telephone. He had in mind what he meant to say if he was able to reach Professor Warner—a good chance, he thought, for considering the hour the gentlemen probably stayed on for a steak. Professor Warner, he would say, you’ve had your fun and a fine joke it was as I would be the first to say and to buy a drink on it, but tell me—man to man—was there anything to what you and your friend was telling me? That would settle it, he thought.

The call went through promptly and he heard Schreiber’s irritated voice. “Hello,” he said.

The line went dead. He jiggled the hook. The operator answered, “One moment, please—” then, “This is the Princeton operator. Is this the party with the call to New York?”

“Yes. I—”

“There has been a temporary interruption in service. Will you hang up and try again in a few minutes, please?”

“But I was just talking—”

“Will you hang up and try again in a few minutes, puhlease ?”

He heard the shouting as he left the booth. As he got outdoors he could see the great, gloriously beautiful, gold and purple mushroom still mounting over where had been the City of New York.