

Third Movement

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Sweat popped from his forehead, coursed down the crevices to the light stubble of his beard, gathered weight, itched its way around the promontory of chin, surged in rivulets down the leathery neck, collected in a pool at the base of his throat, spilled over on the breast, was absorbed by clothing, became a source of future irritation—unnoticed at the moment. His Tommy negligently tucked in the crook of his right arm, some hundred and fifty pounds of equipment stowed about his person, weight pressed into the cable-guard, he stood with feet spread wide on the loading ramp of the transport. With lack-luster eyes and vacuous expression, he waited for the men ahead to move—waited. This was H hour minus twelve.

He was twenty and the monotonous rhythm of the past twelve months had inured him to all feeling and made him unconscious of all sound. The repetitious chorus of his preparation hummed within him, lulling his senses to sleep: flourish of reveille, stumble of dressing, splatter of washing, bark of roll call, sleepy-stupid quiet of inspection; clash-clang-clatter of chow, swish of mop, snik-slak-rapp of piece, hup, tup, rip, hore! hup, tup, rip, hore! spaatt, spaatt, spaatt . . . craack! of line, puwhennng! of butts, zip-zwhip of jeep, throaty roar of six by six, rumbling clangor of Sherman tank, crack-whiinn of carbine, bruff, brupp! of Tommy gun, wahupp! wahupp! of mortar, wahroom! of 105, hup, tup, rip, hore! hup, tup, rip, hore! a hundred synchronized snores, flourish of reveille, stumble of dressing, splatter of washing . . .

All about him now were the sounds of embarkation, unnoticed in their familiar-

ity: forty thousand men converging on the docks, whistle of top-kick, bark of captain, shuffle of men, roar of jeeps, rumble of trucks, whine of winch, groan of wood, screech of metal, mutter of dock, gulp of ship.

The man ahead moved up and he followed. With the ease of long practice he found a place on the crowded deck and disposed of himself and his gear. Men settled down to the interminable click of dice and slap of cards. Some desultorily checked gear. Here and there the scratch of pen on paper could be heard. Muttering engines developed a deeper throb, and the flotilla nosed its way out of the harbor. The molten copper disk of the sun dropped into the caldron of the sea and the resulting steam shrouded the ship protectively. Seduced by the blended sounds of the sea and of the engines, the men succumbed to sleep.

An hour before daylight he was up and fed. His furtive glances about and his fumbling attempts to straighten his gear betrayed his nervousness—this was real and new. The sounds he anticipated would be familiar but would have a different treatment. He realized now that the familiar music was only the opening movement and that the monotony of its rhythm was deliberate; destruction was the real motif of his Martian Symphony. Something cold and seeking moved about in his stomach, and his diaphragm heaved in anticipation. The thunderous opening measured of the second movement shocked him into retaining the appearance of courage.

Far to his right and left he felt, rather than saw, the blinding flashes of the battle-wagons' broadsides and was shaken by the

concussion that followed. Shore defenses answered in kind and the wails and sighs in the sky became a threnody to Apollo, beseeching his appearance. Accompanied by a restless, higher note, a steady, deep thrum announced the appearance of the air arm. During the crescendo of shelling and bombing that followed, he took his place in the waiting LCI. The huge shells passing overhead reminded him of freight trams heard in the distance. An octavian conversation of death was in progress between the ship and shore batteries, and the antiphonal chorus of the planes was deafening.

Coincidental with the appearance of the faint light forecasting dawn, he realized that the engines of ship had stopped, the shelling and bombing had ceased, and the only sounds to be heard were the grating of the bottom on the coral below and now hazy murmur of the planes above. Fear returned to the attack with the advent of silence, her cold and clammy fingers oozing about his entrails, searching for (and this time finding) a firm grip. As the front of the ship dropped, he realized he was powerless to move, held fast in an icy paralysis of fear.

In the crush of movement about him, he was carried forward without volition. He found himself in water up to his hips, floundering about in an attempt to maintain his balance on the jagged coral bottom. Stopping for a moment to regain his breath, he looked at the island before him, now clearly visible in the growing light. Beyond ten yards of dull, slate-gray water was a sandy beach perhaps three hundred feet in depth, against a backdrop of what had been palm trees but which now resembled nothing more than tumbled jackstraws and denuded, frazzled posts. Nothing moved, no leaf stirred—there were no leaves. This would be an easy landing;

nothing could have lived through that punishment.

The tenacles of fear slipped away and he carefully moved forward in line with the men to his right and left. Hearing the man on his right thrashing about, he turned to him and heard the rattle of the tommy gun at the same time he felt the slap of the slug beneath his chin.

The back of his head mushroomed out and leafed back as he fell forward on his face. The battle moved inland and he lay in a silence only a little more complete than the one within him.

As the sun rose higher, the silence was broken by a low, meandering, but persistent buzzing. After a short and seemingly aimless search, the buzzing increased in volume and finally settled over what appeared to be an over-ripe melon that had been idly kicked open by a passing urchin, fully exposing to view its soft gelatinous meat. The rays of the sun bent by the prism of a distant wave, caused the glistening interior to shimmer with all the colors of the rainbow—a delectable morsel for any carrion. Descending in a body the green-bottle flies gorged themselves until the tide, pushing forth inquisitive fingers interrupted the feast. Sluggishly rising in a body, the flies moved off. A concerted buzzing traced their erratic search for another melon, less dangerous but no less succulent. The sound often mounted to an angry war as they fought over the choice tid-bits.

For the first time the mad music of the third movement became apparent, flowing all about him. Only he and his fellow dead sensed the dissonance inherent in the scavenger music. The warning cry of his violated corpse was lost in the wild, clashing, cacophony of the living intently brawling over the victims and the spoils of war.