

THE STARS ARE WAITING
by MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

Everything was top secret except in India. There everything was plain secret, with the top entirely off.

ON A CERTAIN street in Washington, there is a certain building which makes the Pentagon, by comparison, look like Open House. I'm not going to tell you even what street the building is on. If I did, a certain very secret division of the FBI would be breathing down my neck, before you could say "Security." So; on this certain street, in this certain building, is a certain room, and I sleep in that room.

My name is David Rohrer, and I am an M. D. with certain other qualifications. If you're getting bored with these equivocations, read on; I'll be specific enough in a minute or two.

It was on a Tuesday night in 1964; that's close enough to the actual date. If you're curious, it was six months to the day after India closed all her frontiers. Of course, you didn't read about that in the newspapers, but if you were a tourist or a missionary going to India, you found out about it the hard way.

As I say, on a Tuesday night in 1964, about eleven-thirty, the phone in my room suddenly rang. I swore, sat up, grabbed the thing and put it to my ear. I knew it would be important; there are no outside lines in the building, except a specially sealed off and scrambled wire which goes to the White House, and another one to a room on the top floor of the Pentagon. The room telephones are all inside communication, easier, and more private, than a public address system.

"Rohrer," I said curtly.

I recognized the voice that answered. You would too; you've heard it often enough, telecast from the floor of the Senate. "Get down here, Doc, right away. *Flanders is back!*"

I didn't even waste time answering. I dropped the phone cradle, shoved feet into my shoes, hauled on trousers over my pajamas, grabbed my bag and ran downstairs.

The Senator's room was on the second floor. I could see lights around the crack beneath his door and heard muted voices coming from inside. I shoved the door open.

"It's the Doc!" someone said as I pushed my way through the crowd.

The Senator, in striped pajamas that would have looked better on a film star, was sitting on the edge of the bed, and a group of men whom even the president wouldn't recognize were gathered around. In the bed which had obviously been occupied, not long ago, by the Senator, a man was lying.

He was fully clad—socks, overcoat, but someone had pulled off his shoes, which were filthy with mud. His head lolled back on the pillow. I could see at that distance that he wasn't dead; his chest rose and fell heavily, and his breathing was a stertorous noise in the room. I pushed some of the police aside and took up his lax hand.

"What happened here? What's the matter?" I asked to nobody in particular. I didn't actually expect an answer, but curiously enough I got it from the Senator, of all people. "Nothing. He just walked up the front steps and in. Bagley, in the hall, recognized him and sent him up to my room. He knocked—the regular code knock—so I got up and let him in, and he collapsed."

I glanced at his overcoat while I felt the, thumping pulse. "He's bone-dry. It's pouring rain outdoors. Even if he came in a cab, how did he get here without so much as his hair getting wet?"

"That's what I'd like to know," one of the men growled.

"There's something funny going on..." someone murmured.

"Damned funny." I let the man's hand drop and opened my bag.

AFTER A brief examination, I straightened up. "There isn't a wound anywhere on him. Not even a bump or concussion on his head. Either he's fainted from shock—which, judging from his pulse and heartbeat, seems unlikely, or at least a typical—or he's doped. And I don't know of any drug that would

do that." I pushed up his eyelid. The eye seemed normal, the pupils neither dilated nor contracted.

As I frowned in puzzlement, the man's eyes suddenly opened. He stared around rationally for a moment, and his eyes came to rest on me. I asked quietly, "How do you feel now?"

"I—don't know."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Certainly." He seemed to make an attempt to sit up; gave it up.

"What is your name?" I asked him quietly.

"Julian Flanders." He smiled, and added, "Of course."

The Senator interceded with a question, "How did you get here without getting wet?"

A faint look of distress came over his face.

"I don't know."

Another man, who was in at least temporary authority, put in, "When did you leave India, Flanders?"

"I don't know."

"Amnesia," I said low-toned, "partial aphasia."

The man in authority grabbed my arm. "Rohrer, listen! Can you bring him out of it? You've got to bring him out of it!"

I answered, "I don't know. Certainly not now. The man's in no condition—"

"He's got to be in condition."

I said with some sternness, "His heartbeat is so far above normal that it's dangerous even to try to make him talk. I'm going to give him a sedative," bending over my bag, I began to loacra hypodermic, "and he must rest in quiet for some hours. After that, perhaps we can question him. He may, of course, come out of it with memory completely restored, if his heart doesn't fail."

I gave the injection. Flanders' heavy breathing gradually stilled a little; the heartbeat diminished infinitesimally, but went on thud-thudding at a dangerous rate.

A doctor has privileges. I managed to clear everybody out of the room except the top man of the secret police, and told the Senator to go upstairs and climb into my bed; I'd stay with Flanders. Eventually, the building quieted down. To make a long story short, I sat by Flanders, smoking and thinking, until dawn. He slept, breathing heavily, without moving even a finger or foot, until morning. I knew how odd that in itself was; a normal sleeper, even the one who vows that he sleeps like a log, turns over some eighteen times in a normal night. Flanders did not stir. It would have been like watching a corpse, except for the rasping breaths, and the steady thump-thump of his heart when I bent and put a stethoscope to his chest.

It would be both foolish and futile to write down the events of the next few days. Important faces came and went, on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. I had to report; No Change. Flanders woke now and then. He knew his name, answered ordinary questions, about his early life, recognized his wife when a plainclothesman brought her secretly into the building, asked about his children. But whenever anyone asked a question about anything which had happened since the day he had left this house with a secret pass which would smuggle him into India, the answer was always the same; the look of acute distress; the quickened breathing, and the muttered, disturbed "I—don't know—"

On Saturday morning, the Senator called me out of the room. "The Chief wants to see you downstairs, Rohrer," he told me, and I scowled. "I can't leave my patient—"

The Senator looked disgusted. "You know as well as I do, there won't be any reason you'd have to stay. I'll baby-sit with him myself." He gave me a little shove, "Go on, Doc. I think this is important."

THE CONFERENCE room downstairs was so elaborately soundproofed that it might have been on the moon. There were good reasons for that, of course. But it always made me nervous.

Secrets have been told in that room far which twenty governments would give anything short of their plutonium stockpiles. After I came in, a guard, at the door went through a careful ritual of locking it again, and I turned to look around the table.

Some of the men I knew by name. Others I knew by reputation or because their faces were familiar to the newspapers. The man at the head of the table, who seemed to be in charge, was one of the top

men in the FBI, and it was he who spoke first.

"Sit down, Dr. Rohrer," he said courteously, "Can you tell us anything about Mr. Flanders?"

I took a seat and told them briefly what I knew of the case. I was perfectly candid about admitting that the circumstances baffled me. When I had finished, the Chief cleared his throat and looked around the table. "I just wanted to add," he put in unobtrusively, "that there is no use in suggesting that we summon other medical advice." He coughed, "Dr. Rohrer is probably better qualified than any man presently in the United States, and everyone at this table will realize the impossibility of calling in anyone from outside."

He looked back at me, "Is there any chance of restoring Mr. Flanders' memory and his ability to speak within a few days?" he asked me bluntly. "I may as well add now, Doctor, that for these purposes we must consider Flanders as expendable. Provided that you can restore his memory and powers of speech in time to avert what we believe will be a major military catastrophe, you need not worry about the eventual consequences in the terms of Flanders' health."

I didn't like that. No medical man would. At the same time, I realized that the Chief meant exactly what he said. The cold war which America has been fighting, on and off, for the past twenty-two years, was in a stage of minor retrenchment. Our soldiers were not wearing uniforms and carrying bazookas and badger-jets; they were dodging, like Flanders, in and out of the nets of intrigue. Flanders was not a private in this hierarchy of strategy; in fact, he probably ranked as a brigadier general had there been any way to evaluate worth. I knew, then, how desperate the situation must be.

I told them slowly, "We can try narcosynthesis, hypnosis, electric shock if that fails. I must warn you, however, that Flanders' heart may fail at any moment."

"It mustn't!" one man barked, "Not until we know what happened!" He stood up and pounded on the table with something which could have mere irritation or actual hysteria, "Chief, can't you tell Rohrer *why* we have to wring out what's inside Flanders' head before he conks out?"

The man at the head of the table turned toward him and spoke placatingly, "Of course. I have already said that Dr. Rohrer is to be trusted implicitly."

There were a few minutes of silence; then the Chief began to talk.

I HAD KNOWN, of course, when India closed her frontiers. In this certain house in Washington that kind of news comes in as a matter of course, although not a whisper of it gets into the papers or even reaches the Pentagon. I had not known that India's first move had been to cancel all her munitions orders.

I learned it now for the first time. Nearly eight months ago, India had quite suddenly cancelled all orders outstanding, in England and in the United States, for munitions, armaments and the flood of war supplies which the United States has poured out in the name of a prepared Free World united against a sudden move from the other side of the Steel Curtain. With the exception of a sudden recession in the Wall Street tickers, this had had little effect on the world. One of the Indian representatives in the United Nations had made one of the perennial Disarmament Speeches which come from India. This resolution had been shouted down without a vote. Then India had just quietly closed her frontiers.

Americans, Englishmen, all foreign citizens, were asked politely to leave the country. At first, we had been fearful that this heralded a sudden shifting of the Indian influence to the Russo-Chinese coalition; however, angry radio messages filtering out, announced that Russian, Chinese and Korean nationals had been expelled even less politely from India.

Then the news blackout had begun.

India did not withdraw from the U. N., although all outstanding Indian troops were withdrawn from the world's various fronts. To angry questions, Hindu and Moslem diplomats returned equivocal answers; they had decided that disarmament was the only way to world peace. Naturally, for the sake of morale, this had been kept out of the newspapers; fake speeches and photographs were concocted to keep any hint of the true situation from filtering down to the restless public. Planes which crossed the frontier into India were challenged and turned back, without violence but with unquestionable menace. The sea harbors were closed, and from the north came word that the northern entrances to India had all been

closed by dynamiting the rocky and treacherous passes of the Himalayas.

To all intents and purposes, India had simply seceded from the planet Earth.

It was, apparent to any politician, the Chief continued, what really had happened. India had simply discovered some great secret weapon and was working for world domination in one great master stroke. If the brainless fools in the U. N. had any sense, he continued, they would have made terms with Russia, to unite and wipe out this menace to Free World and Russo-Chinese coalition both. India, he ranted on, was obviously a traitor to the Free World, and must suffer a traitor's punishment. He glowered around the table and went on in a little more muted mutter; public opinion still had a few fools who kept contending, in loud-mouthed idiocy, that India had simply been seized by some sort of Hindu revival of non-violence and Neo-Gandhiism, and was actually disarming behind its curtain of silence. And while we were stalling, he shouted, Norway had suddenly cut off all munitions orders. Her frontiers would be closed any day, and already the slump in the armament industries was threatening a serious world depression!

After a ferocious scowl, he continued, directly at me, not orating now but talking like a badly scared man, "So you can understand, perhaps, Doctor, why we have to know what has happened to Flanders. We sent him secretly to India to find out what's really been happening. He managed to radio back a code message that he was on the trail, only a week ago Monday. This is Sunday. They tell me that he turned up on the steps here Tuesday night. You've got to find out what Flanders knows about what's been happening in India!"

He rose in dismissal. I sat still, staring in dismay. I hadn't believed that anything like this was possible!

I said hoarsely, "I'll do my best, Chief."

I TRIED everything I dared. There wouldn't be much point in detailing the things we tried, because the details wouldn't mean much to a layman, and besides, most of them are still marked *Classified*. Things like that may not mean much now, but I want to stay on the outside of the Federal prison until the day comes.

Anyhow, eventually, on a Tuesday night—another rainy Tuesday, almost exactly a month after the night when Flanders appeared in dry clothing and muddy shoes in the Senator's bedroom, I knew that he was going to talk, I signalled to the Chief and the Senator, who had been present at all tests, to switch on a dictaphone. There might not be time for much questioning, and there certainly was no margin for recovering ground which Flanders might go over sketchily. We'd have to get it down, word for word, just as he said it, while his strength lasted.

The dictaphone began to hum. I gave Flanders the shot, and asked him a few preliminary test questions. Almost abruptly, his stertorous breathing stopped; he began to breathe normally and quietly, although the pounding heartbeat continued, on and on, a thunder in my stethoscope. He wouldn't last long under this dosage. But he'd remember, and we might be able to get his story down.

He began to talk....

THE ROOM was silent. There was only the heavy pounding in the stethoscopes and the occasional rasp as one of the listeners shifted his weight. Flanders was a tall, lean man, normally, and he had lost so much weight that he resembled a skeleton. His face was a death-mask molded in yellow wax, and his lips barely moved while his voice was a racking whisper in the stillness.

"Chief—Senator—Doc. I've got something to say—don't interrupt me—important I say it. I won't last long. I'm a—kind of booby-trap. A puzzle. They sent me back—a locked puzzle—if you could unlock me, then you're fit to have the answer. Sort of a final test."

The whisper receded for a moment, and he took up the story as if there had been no interval, "...went to India, like I was sent, and found out where they kept the government now. Chief, there isn't any government any more. Just a lot of happy people. No government. No famine. Bright colors...food you never tasted, and the ships that come and go, every day ...ships—"

I thought he was delirious, and felt for his pulse. He jerked his hand away in irritation, and I said

gently, "What ships, Flanders? All the sea harbors are closed."

And the man smiled, a curiously sweet smile, and murmured, "Not those harbors. I mean the ships from the stars."

The Senator muttered, "He's mad as a Hatter!"

"No, Doc, Chief—listen," Flanders' broken whisper went on, "I seen them. Big ships, whooshing down in the plain. Big spaceport—north of Delhi. I saw one of the men from the stars. I'm a—" he paused and sighed wearily, "God, I'm tired—I'm a volunteer. He asked me if I felt like dying to bring the message back. He said I couldn't go out and live, because if they didn't believe me—I mean if you folks didn't believe me—then they couldn't have anybody spreading stories Can I give you the message? Will you make a record of it Then I can—quit—and I'm so tired—"

The Chief started to rise. Imperatively, with the authority of a medical man, I gestured him sharply back. "Sit still!" I said humoringly to Flanders, "Tell us. We've got a dicta-phone."

He muttered in that terrible racked whisper, "Show me—got to see it—hooked up—my own words—"

Over the Chief's angry gesture, I showed Flanders the dictaphone.

He leaned back on his pillows, smiling. I have never seen a happier smile on the face of a child. He stirred a little and put out his hand, and incredibly felt the terrible racked heartbeats slowing and easing. And abruptly the emaciated body heaved itself upright, and Flanders suddenly spoke in a new, a strong and sharp voice.

"Men of America, of the planet which you call Earth," he said strongly, "This man Flanders is a volunteer whom we are using to bring you our message. And this is what we have to say. The stars are waiting for you. The stars are waiting."

A moment's pause; then that sharp, strong inflexible voice continued, "A hundred thousand years ago, men's ancestors lived on this world and were a part of the great empire which stretches from sun to sun and has so stretch since before your planet was born out of the womb of your little yellow star. Great cataclysms of nature wrecked your planet. Many were evacuated, but many chose to stay with their home world, with the floods, the sunken continents the deluges and tidal waves. For this they paid a price. They reverted to savagery. And savages know no space."

Another, long, quiet pause, while the Senator said in the sharp stillness, "Impossible! This is—"

"Shut up!" the chief snapped, for Flanders, or rather, the curiously alien voice through Flanders, was speaking again.

"...assume that you have re climbed most of the distance from savagery, and the stars are waiting for you. We have been watching. We are ready to reclaim your world. We make only one condition; there is no war in space. We insist upon trust and sufferance. We insist. We do not show ourselves until we know that you are ready.

"Whatever country will totally remove and destroy all weapons of disaster, whatever country will close off their frontiers and withdraw completely from a world torn by war, that nation and that people will be received into the Commonwealth of the Stars. It is so with the state you call India. It is so with the state you call Norway, which today has closed its frontiers.

"The invitation is extended equally to all. Lay down your arms. You will be protected in ways you cannot even imagine. You need not fear that your enemies on this Earth will be permitted to harm you, for they, and not you, are the truly isolated.

"Display your trust and your will to nonaggression. Disarm yourselves. Lay down your arms. The stars are waiting."

The voice trailed off, was silent. The thunder in the stethoscopes began again. Flanders slumped; the rattling breath, tortured, tore through the room, stopped.

I let my hand drop from his wrist.

"He's dead, sir," I said.

Before the words were out of my mouth, the Senator was clawing at the telephone.

"Get me the President!"

THE END