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# **T H E R U M B L E**

*The noise was too much for him.*

*He wanted quiet—at any price.*

**BY STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW**

**W**HEN JOSEPH got to the office his ears were aching from the noise of the copter and from his earplugs. Lately, every little thing seemed to make him irritable. He supposed it was because his drafting department was behind schedule on the latest Defense contract. His ears were sore and his stomach writhed with dyspepsia, and his feet hurt.

Walking through the clerical office usually made him feel better. The constant clatter of typewriters and office machines gave him a sense of efficiency, of stability, an all-is-well-with-the-world feeling. He waved to a few of the more familiar employees and smiled, but of course you couldn't say hello with the continual racket.

workers, so Joseph was no one to object, even though he did wonder if anyone could ever actually listen to it over the other noise.

In his own office the steady din was hardly diminished despite soundproofing, and since he was next to an outside wall he was subjected also to the noises of the city. He stood staring out of the huge window for awhile, watching the cars on the freeway and listening to the homogeneous rumble and scream of turbines.

*Something's wrong with me,* he thought. *I shouldn't be feeling this way. Nerves. Nerves.*

He turned around and got his private secretary on the viewer. She simpered at him, trying to be friendly with her dull, sunken eyes.

## **A N D T H E R O A R**

This morning, somehow, it didn't make him feel better. He supposed it was because of the song they were playing over the speakers, "Slam Bang Boom," the latest Top Hit. He hated that song.

Of course the National Mental Health people said constant music had a beneficial effect on office

"Betty," he told her, "I want you to make an appointment with my therapist for me this afternoon. Tell him it's just a case of nerves, though."

"Yes sir. Anything else?" Her voice, like every one's, was a high pitched screech trying to be heard above the noise.

Joseph winced. "Anybody want to see me this morning?"

"Well, Mr. Wills says he has the first model of his invention ready to show you."

"Let him in whenever he's ready. Otherwise, if nothing important comes up, I want you to leave me alone."

"Yes sir, certainly." She smiled again, a mechanical, automatic smile that seemed to want to be something more.

Joseph switched off.

*That was a damn funny way of saying it, he thought. "I want you to leave me alone." As if somebody were after me.*

He spent about an hour on routine paperwork and then Bob Wills showed up so Joseph switched off his dictograph and let him in.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make it brief, Bob," he grinned. "I've a whale of a lot of work to do, and I seem to be developing a splitting headache. Nerves, you know."

"Sure, Mister Partch. I won't take a minute; I just thought you'd like to have a look at the first model of our widget and get clued in on our progress so far . . ."

"Yes, yes, just go ahead. How does the thing work?"

Bob smiled and set the grey steel chassis on Partch's desk, sat down in front of it, and began tracing the wiring for Joseph.

It was an interesting problem, or at any rate should have been. It was one that had been harassing cities, industry, and particularly air-fields, for many years. Of course, every one wore earplugs—and that helped a little. And some firms had

partially solved the problem by using personnel that were totally deaf, because such persons were the only ones who could stand the terrific noise levels that a technological civilization forced everyone to endure. The noise from a commercial rocket motor on the ground had been known to drive men mad, and sometimes kill them. There had never seemed to be any wholly satisfactory solution.

But now Bob Wills apparently had the beginnings of a real answer. A device that would use the principle of interference to cancel out sound waves, leaving behind only heat.

It should have been fascinating to Partch, but somehow he couldn't make himself get interested in it.

"The really big problem is the power requirement," Wills was saying. "We've got to use a lot of energy to cancel out big sound waves, but we've got several possible answers in mind and we're working on all of them."

He caressed the crackle-finish box fondly.

"The basic gimmick works fine, though. Yesterday I took it down to a static test stand over in building 90 and had them turn on a pretty fair-sized steering rocket for one of the big moon-ships. Reduced the noise-level by about 25 per cent, it did. Of course, I still needed my plugs."

Joseph nodded approvingly and stared vacantly into the maze of transistors and tubes.

"I've built it to work on ordinary 60 cycle house current," Wills told him. "In case you should want to

demonstrate it to anybody.”

Partch became brusque. He liked Bob, but he had work to do.

“Yes, I probably shall, Bob. I tell you what, why don’t you just leave it here in my office and I’ll look it over later, hm?”

“Okay, Mr. Partch.”

Joseph ushered him out of the office, complimenting him profusely on the good work he was doing. Only after he was gone and Joseph was alone again behind the closed door, did he realize that he had a sudden yearning for company, for someone to talk to.

Partch had Betty send him in a light lunch and he sat behind his desk nibbling the tasteless stuff without much enthusiasm. He wondered if he was getting an ulcer.

Yes, he decided, he was going to have to have a long talk with Dr. Coles that afternoon. Be a pleasure to get it all off his chest, his feeling of melancholia, his latent sense of doom. Be good just to talk about it.

Oh, everything was getting to him these days. He was in a rut, that was it. A rut.

He spat a sesame seed against the far wall and the low whir of the automatic vacuum cleaner rose and fell briefly.

Joseph winced. The speakers were playing “Slam Bang Boom” again.

His mind turned away from the grating melody in self defense, to look inward on himself.

Of what, after all, did Joseph Partch’s life consist? He licked his fingers and thought about it.

What would he do this evening

after work, for instance?

Why, he’d stuff his earplugs back in his inflamed ears and board the commuter’s copter and ride for half an hour listening to the drumming of the rotors and the pleading of the various canned commercials played on the copter’s speakers loud enough to be heard over the engine noise and through the plugs.

And then when he got home, there would be the continuous yammer of his wife added to the Tri-Di set going full blast and the dull food from the automatic kitchen. And synthetic coffee and one stale cigaret. Perhaps a glass of brandy to steady his nerves if Dr. Coles approved.

Partch brooded. The sense of foreboding had been submerged in the day’s work, but it was still there. It was as if, any moment, a hydrogen bomb were going to be dropped down the chimney, and you had no way of knowing when.

And what would there be to do after he had finished dinner that night? Why, the same things he had been doing every night for the past fifteen years. There would be Tri-Di first of all. The loud comedians, and the musical commercials, and the loud bands, and the commercials, and the loud songs . . .

And every twenty minutes or so, the viewer would jangle with one of Felicia’s friends calling up, and more yammering from Felicia.

Perhaps there would be company that night, to play cards and sip drinks and talk and talk and talk, and never say a thing at all.

There would be aircraft shaking the house now and then, and the

cry of the monorail horn at intervals.

And then, at last, it would be time to go to bed, and the murmur of the somnolearner orating him on the Theory of Groups all through the long night.

And in the morning, he would be shocked into awareness with the clangor of the alarm clock and whatever disc jockey the clock radio happened to tune in on.

Joseph Partch's world was made up of sounds and noises, he decided. Dimly, he wondered of what civilization itself would be constructed if all the sounds were once taken away. *Why*, after all, was the world of Man so noisy? It was almost as if—as if everybody were making as much noise as they could to conceal the fact that there was something lacking. Or something they were afraid of.

Like a little boy whistling loudly as he walks by a cemetery at night.

Partch got out of his chair and stared out the window again. There was a fire over on the East Side, a bad one by the smoke. The fire engines went screaming through the streets like wounded dragons. Sirens, bells. Police whistles.

All at once, Partch realized that never in his life had he experienced real quiet or solitude. That actually, he had no conception of what an absence of thunder and wailing would be like. A total absence of sound and noise.

Almost, it was like trying to imagine what a negation of *space* would be like.

And then he turned, and his eyes fell on Bob Wills' machine. It could

reduce the noise level of a rocket motor by 25 per cent, Wills had said. Here in the office, the sound level was less than that of a rocket motor.

And the machine worked on ordinary house current, Bob had said.

Partch had an almost horrifying idea. Suppose . . .

But what would Dr. Coles say about this, Partch wondered. Oh, he had to get a grip on himself. This was silly, childish . . .

But looking down, he found that he had already plugged in the line cord. An almost erotic excitement began to shake Joseph's body. The sense of disaster had surged up anew, but he didn't recognize it yet.

An absence of *sound*? No! Silly!

Then a fire engine came tearing around the corner just below the window, filling the office with an ocean of noise.

Joseph's hand jerked and flicked the switch.

And then the dream came back to him, the nightmare of the night before that had precipitated, unknown to him, his mood of foreboding. It came back to him with stark realism and flooded him with unadorned fear.

In the dream, he had been in a forest. Not just the city park, but a *real* forest, one thousands of miles and centuries away from human civilization. A wood in which the foot of Man had never trod.

It was dark there, and the trees were thick and tall. There was no wind, the leaves were soft underfoot. And Joseph Partch was all alone, *completely* alone.

And it was—quiet.