

# Astounding

# SCIENCE FICTION

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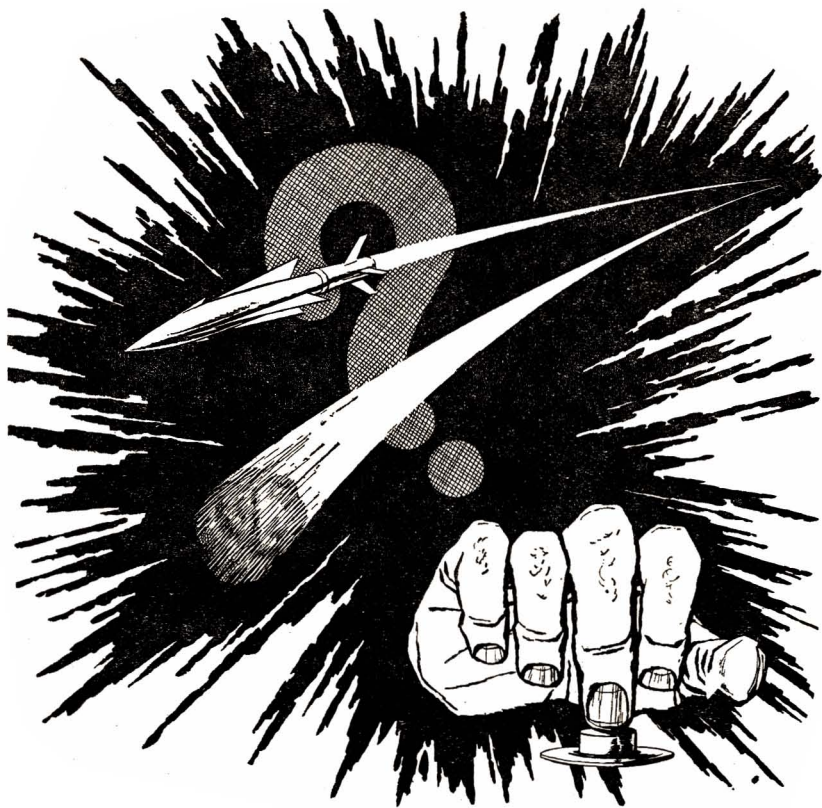
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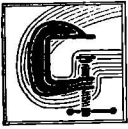
# TRIGGERMAN



*The essential requirements of a first-class triggerman are two: that he know how to pull the trigger—and when not to!*

BY J. F. BONE

Illustrated by van Dongen



GENERAL Alastair French was probably the most important man in the Western Hemisphere from the hours of 0800

to 1600. Yet all he did was sit in a windowless room buried deeply underground, facing a desk that stood against a wall. The wall was studded with built-in mechanisms. A line of twenty-four-hour clocks was inset near the ceiling, showing the corresponding times in all time zones on Earth. Two huge TV screens below the clocks were flanked on each side by loud-speaker systems. The desk was bare except for three telephones of different colors—red, blue, and white—and a polished plastic slab inset with a number of white buttons framing a larger one whose red surface was the color of fresh blood. A thick carpet, a chair of peculiar design with broad flat arms, and an ash tray completed the furnishings. Warmed and humidified air circulated through the room from concealed grilles at floor level. The walls of the room were painted a soft restful gray, that softened the indirect lighting. The door was steel and equipped with a time lock.

The exact location of the room and the Center that served it was probably the best kept secret in the Western world. Ivan would probably give a good per cent of the Soviet tax take to know precisely where it was, just as the West would give a similar amount to know where Ivan's Center was located. Yet despite the fact that its location was remote, the man be-

hind the desk was in intimate contact with every major military point in the Western Alliance. The red telephone was a direct connection to the White House. The blue was a line that reached to the headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to the emergency Capitol hidden in the hills of West Virginia. And the white telephone connected by priority lines with every military center and base in the world that was under Allied control.

General French was that awesome individual often joked about by TV comics who didn't know that he really existed. He was the man who could push the button that would start World War III!

French was aware of his responsibilities and took them seriously. By nature he was a serious man, but, after three years of living with ultimate responsibility, it was no longer the crushing burden that it was at first when the Psychological Board selected him as one of the most inherently stable men on Earth. He was not ordinarily a happy man; his job, and the steadily deteriorating world situation precluded that, but this day was a bright exception. The winter morning had been extraordinarily beautiful, and he loved beauty with the passion of an artist. A flaming sunrise had lighted the whole Eastern sky with golden glory, and the crisp cold air stimulated his senses to appreciate it. It was much too lovely for thoughts of war and death.

He opened the door of the room precisely at 0800, as he had done for

three years, and watched a round, pink-cheeked man in a gray suit rise from the chair behind the desk. Kleinmeister, he thought, neither looked like a general nor like a potential executioner of half the world. He was a Santa Claus without a beard. But appearances were deceiving. Hans Kleinmeister could, without regret kill half the world if he thought it was necessary. The two men shook hands, a ritual gesture that marked the changing of the guard, and French sank into the padded chair behind the desk.

"It's a beautiful day outside, Hans," he remarked as he settled his stocky, compact body into the automatically adjusting plastifoam. "I envy you the pleasure of it."

"I don't envy you, Al," Kleinmeister said. "I'm just glad it's all over for another twenty-four hours. This waiting gets on the nerves." Kleinmeister grinned as he left the room. The steel door thudded into place behind him and the time lock clicked. For the next eight hours French would be alone.

He sighed. It was too bad that he had to be confined indoors on a day like this one promised to be, but there was no help for it. He shifted luxuriously in the chair. It was the most comfortable seat that the mind and ingenuity of man could contrive. It had to be. The man who sat in it must have every comfort. He must want for nothing. And above all he must not be irritated or annoyed. His brain must be free to evaluate and decide—and nothing must distract the

functioning of that brain. Physical comfort was a means to that end—and the chair provided it. French felt soothed in the gentle caress of the upholstery.

The familiar feeling of detachment swept over him as he checked the room. Nominally, he was responsible to the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but practically he was responsible to no one. No hand but his could set in motion the forces of massive retaliation that had hung over aggression for the past twenty years. Without his sanction no inter-continental or intermediate range missile could leave its rack. He was the final authority, the ultimate judge, and the executioner if need be—a position thrust upon him after years of intensive tests and screening. In this room he was as close to a god as any man had been since the beginning of time.

French shrugged and touched one of the white buttons on the panel.

"Yes, sir?" an inquiring voice came from one of the speakers.

"A magazine and a cup of coffee," said General French.

"What magazine, sir?"

"Something light—something with pictures. Use your judgment."

"Yes, sir."

French grinned. By now the word was going around Center that the Old Man was in a good humor today. A cup of coffee rose from a well in one of the broad arms of the chair, and a magazine extruded from a slot in its side. French opened the magazine and sipped the coffee. General Craig,

his relief, would be here in less than eight hours, which would leave him the enjoyment of the second best part of the day if the dawn was any indication. He hoped the sunset would be worthy of its dawn.

He looked at the center clock. The hands read 0817 . . .

At Station 2 along the Dew Line the hands of the station clock read 1217. Although it was high noon it was dark outside, lightened only by a faint glow to the south where the winter sun strove vainly to appear above the horizon. The air was clear, and the stars shone out of the blue-black sky of the polar regions. A radarman bending over his scope stiffened. "Bogey!" he snapped, "Azimuth 0200, coming up fast!"

The bogey came in over the north polar cap, slanting downward through the tenuous wisps of upper atmosphere. The gases ripped at its metallic sides with friction and oxidation. Great gouts of flaming brilliance spurted from its incandescent outer surface boiling away to leave a trail of sparkling scintillation in its wake. It came with enormous speed, whipping over the Station almost before the operator could hit the general alarm.

The tracking radar of the main line converged upon the target. Electronic computers analyzed its size, speed and flight path, passing the information to the batteries of interceptor missiles in the sector. "Locked on," a gunnery officer announced in a bored tone, "Fire two." He smiled,

Ivan was testing again. It was almost routine, this business of one side or the other sending over a pilot missile. It was the acid test. If the defense network couldn't get it, perhaps others would come over—perhaps not. It was all part of the cold war.

Miles away two missiles leaped from their ramps flashing skyward on flaming rockets. The gunnery officer waited a moment and then swore. "Missed, by damn! It looks like Ivan's got something new." He flipped a switch. "Reserve line, stand by" he said. "Bogey coming over. Course 0200."

"Got her," a voice came from the speaker of the command set. "All stations in range fire four—salvo!"

"My God what's in that thing! Warn Stateside! Execute!"

"All stations Eastseaboard Outer Defense Area! Bogey coming over!"

"Red Alert, all areas!" a communications man said urgently into a microphone. "Ivan's got something this time! General evacuation plan Boston to Richmond Plan One! Execute!"

"Outer Perimeter Fire Pattern B!"

"Center! Emergency Priority! General, there's a bogey coming in. East-seaboard sector. It's passed the outer lines, and nothing's touched it so far. It's the damndest thing you ever saw! Too fast for interception. Estimated target area Boston-Richmond. For evaluation—!"

"Sector perimeter on target, sir!"

"Fire twenty, Pattern C!"

All along the flight path of the bogey, missile launchers hurled their

cargoes of death into the sky. A moving pattern formed in front of the plunging object that now was flaming brightly enough to be seen in the cold northern daylight. Missiles struck, detonated, and were absorbed into the ravening flames around the object, but it came on with unabated speed, a hissing roaring mass of destruction!

"God! It's still coming in!" an anguished voice wailed. "I told them we needed nuclear warheads for close-in defense!"

More missiles swept aloft, but the bogey was now so low that both human and electronic sensings were too slow. An instantaneous blast of searing heat flashed across the land in its wake, crisping anything flammable in its path. Hundreds of tiny fires broke out, most of which were quickly extinguished, but others burned violently. A gas refinery in Utica exploded. Other damage of a minor nature was done in Scranton and Wilkes Barre. The reports were mixed with military orders and the flare of missiles and the crack of artillery hurling box barges into the sky. But it was futile. The target was moving almost too fast to be seen, and by the time the missiles and projectiles reached intercept point the target was gone, drawing away from the fastest defense devices with almost contemptuous ease.

General French sat upright in his chair. The peaceful expression vanished from his face to be replaced by a hard intent look, as his eyes flicked

from phones to TV screen. The series of tracking stations, broadcasting over wire, sent their images in to be edited and projected on the screens in French's room. Their observations appeared at frighteningly short intervals.

French stared at the flaring dot that swept across the screens. It could not be a missile, unless—his mind faltered at the thought—the Russians were farther advanced than anyone had expected. They might be at that—after all they had surprised the world with sputnik not too many years ago, and the West was forced to work like fiends to catch up.

"Target confirmed," one of the speakers announced with unearthly calm. "It's Washington!"

The speaker to the left of the screen broke into life. "This is Conelrad," it said. "This is not a test, repeat—*this is not a test!* The voice faded as another station took over. "A transpolar missile is headed south along the eastern seaboard. Target Washington. Plan One. Evacuation time thirty seconds—

Thirty seconds! French's mind recoiled. Washington was dead! You couldn't go anywhere in thirty seconds! His hand moved toward the red button. This was it!

The missile on the screen was brighter now. It flamed like a miniature sun, and the sound of its passage was that of a million souls in torment! "It can't stand much more of that," French breathed. "It'll burn up!"

"New York Sector — bogey at

twelve o'clock—high! God! *Look* at it!"

The glare of the thing filled the screen.

The blue phone rang. "Center," French said. He waited and then laid the phone down. The line was dead.

"Flash!" Conelrad said. "The enemy missile has struck south of New York. A tremendous flash was seen fifteen seconds ago by observers in civilian defense spotting nets . . . No sound of the explosion as yet . . . More information—triangulation of the explosion indicates that it has struck the nation's capitol! Our center of government has been destroyed!" There was a short silence broken by a faint voice "Oh my God!—all those poor people!"

The red phone rang. French picked it up. "Center," he said.

The phone squawked at him.

"Your authority?" French queried dully. He paused and his face turned an angry red. "Just who do you think you are colonel? I'll take orders from the Chief—but no one else! Now get off that line! . . . Oh, I see. Then it's my responsibility? . . . All right I accept it—now leave me alone!" He put the phone gently back on the cradle. A fine beading of sweat dotted his forehead. This was the situation he had never let himself think would occur. The President was dead. The Joint Chiefs were dead. He was on his own until some sort of government could be formed.

Should he wait and let Ivan exploit his advantage, or should he strike? Oddly he wondered what his

alter ego in Russia was doing at this moment. Was he proud of having struck this blow—or was he frightened. French smiled grimly. If he were in Ivan's shoes, he'd be scared to death! He shivered. For the first time in years he felt the full weight of the responsibility that was his.

The red phone rang again.

"Center—French here . . . Who's that? . . . Oh yes, sir, Mr. Vice . . . er Mr. President! . . . Yes sir, it's a terrible thing . . . What have I done? Well, nothing yet, sir. A single bogey like that doesn't feel right. I'm waiting for the follow up that'll confirm . . . Yes sir I know—but do *you* want to take the responsibility for destroying the world? What if it wasn't Ivan's? Have you thought of that? . . . Yes, sir, it's my judgment that we wait . . . No sir, I don't think so, if Ivan's back of this we'll have more coming, and if we do I'll fire . . . No sir, I will not take that responsibility . . . Yes, I know Washington's destroyed, but we still have no proof of Ivan's guilt. Long-range radar has not reported any activity in Russia. . . . Sorry, sir, I can't see it that way—and you can't relieve me until 1600 hours . . . Yes, sir, I realize what I'm doing . . . Very well, sir, if that's the way you want it I'll resign at 1600 hours. Good-by." French dropped the phone into its cradle and wiped his forehead. He had just thrown his career out of the window, but that was another thing that couldn't be helped. The President was hysterical now. Maybe he'd calm down later.

"Flash!" the radio said. "Radio

Moscow denies that the missile which destroyed Washington was one of theirs. They insist that it is a capitalist trick to make them responsible for World War III. The Premier accuses the United States . . . hey! wait a minute! . . . accuses the United States of trying to foment war, but to show the good faith of the Soviet Union, he will open the country to UN inspection to prove once and for all that the Soviet does not and has not intended nuclear aggression. He proposes that a UN team investigate the wreckage of Washington to determine whether the destruction was actually caused by a missile. Hah! Just what in hell does he think caused it?"

French grinned thinly. Words like the last were seldom heard on the lips of commentators. The folks outside were pretty wrought up. There was hysteria in almost every word that had come into the office. But it hadn't moved him yet. His finger was still off the trigger. He picked up the white phone. "Get me Dew Line Headquarters," he said. "Hello Dew Line, this is French at Center. Any more bogeys? . . . No? . . . That's good . . . No, we're still holding off. . . . Why? . . . Any fool would know why if he stopped to think!" He slammed the phone back into its cradle. Damn fools howling for war! Just who did they think would win it? Sure, it would be easy to start things rolling. All he had to do was push the button. He stared at it with fascinated eyes. Nearly three billion lives lay on that polished plastic surface, and he could snuff most of

them out with one jab of a finger.

"Sir!" a voice broke from the speaker. "What's the word—are we in it yet?"

"Not yet, Jimmy."

"Thank God!" the voice sounded relieved. "Just hang on, sir. We know they're pressuring you, but they'll stop screaming for blood once they have time to think."

"I hope so," French said. He chuckled without humor. The personnel at Center knew what nuclear war would be like. Most of them had experience at Frenchman's Flat. They didn't want any part of it if it could be avoided. And neither did he.

The hours dragged by. The phones rang, and Conelrad kept reporting—giving advice and directions for evacuation of the cities. All the nation was stalled in the hugest traffic jam in history. Some of it couldn't help seeping in, even through the censorship. There was danger in too much of anything, and obviously the country was overmechanized. By now, French was certain that Russia was innocent. If she wasn't, Ivan would have struck in force by now. He wondered how his opposite number in Russia was taking it. Was the man crouched over his control board waiting for the cloud of capitalist missiles to appear over the horizon? Or was he, too, fingering a red button debating whether or not to strike before it was too late.

"Flash!" the radio said. "Radio Moscow offers immediate entry to any UN inspection team authorized by the



General Assembly. The Presidium has met and announces that under no circumstances will Russia take any aggressive action. They repeat that the missile was not theirs, and suggest that it might have originated from some other nation desirous of fomenting war between the Great Powers . . . ah Nuts!"

"That's about as close to surrender as they dare come," French murmured softly. "They're scared green—but then who wouldn't be?" He looked at the local clock. It read 1410. Less than two hours to go before the time lock opened and unimaginative Jim Craig came through that door to take his place. If the President called with Craig in the seat, the executive orders would be obeyed. He picked up the white phone.

"Get me the Commanding General of the Second Army," he said. He waited a moment. "Hello George, this is Al at Center. How you doing? Bad, huh? No, we're holding off . . . Now hold it, George. That's not what I called for. I don't need moral support. I want information: Have your radiac crews checked the Washington Area yet? . . . They haven't. Why not? Get them on the ball! Ivan keeps insisting that that bogey wasn't his and the facts seem to indicate he's telling the truth for once, but we're going to blast if he can't prove it! I want the dope on radioactivity in that area and I want it now! . . . If you don't want to issue an order—call for volunteers . . . So they might get a lethal dose—so what? . . . Offer them a medal. There's always someone

who'd walk into hell for the chance of getting a medal. Now get cracking! . . . Yes, that's an order."

The radio came on again. "First reports of the damage in Washington," it chattered. "A shielded Air Force reconnaissance plane has flown over the blast area, taking pictures and making an aerial survey of fallout intensity. The Capitol is a shambles. Ground Zero was approximately in the center of Pennsylvania Avenue. There is a tremendous crater over a half mile wide, and around that for nearly two miles there is literally nothing! The Capitol is gone. Over ninety-eight per cent of the city is destroyed. Huge fires are raging in Alexandria and the outskirts. The Potomac bridges are down. The destruction is inconceivable. The landmarks of our—"

French grabbed the white phone. "Find out who the Air Force commander was who sent up that recon plane over Washington!" he barked. "I don't know who he is—but get him *now*!" He waited for three minutes. "So it was you, Willoughby! I thought it might be. This is French at Center. What did that recon find? . . . It did hey? . . . Well now, isn't that simply wonderful! You stupid publicity crazy fool! What do you mean by withholding vital information! Do you realize that I've been sitting here with my finger on the button ready to kill half the earth's population while you've been flirting around with reporters? . . . Dammit! That's no excuse! You should be cashiered—and if I have any influ-

ence around here tomorrow, I'll see that you are. As it is, you're relieved as of now! . . . What do you mean I can't do that? . . . Read your regulations again, and then get out of that office and place yourself under arrest in quarters! Turn over your command to your executive officer! You utter driveling fool! . . . Aaagh!!" French snarled as he slammed the phone back.

It began ringing again immediately. "French here . . . Yes, George . . . You have? . . . You did? . . . It isn't? . . . I thought so. We've been barking up the wrong tree this time. It was an act of God! . . . Yes, I said an act of God! Remember that crater out in Arizona? Well, this is the same thing—a meteor! . . . Yes, Ivan's still quiet. Not a peep out of him. The Dew Line reports no activity."

The blue phone began to ring. French looked at it. "O.K., George—apology accepted. I know how you feel." He hung up and lifted the blue phone. "Yes, Mr. President," he said. "Yes, sir. You've heard the news I suppose . . . You've had confirmation from Lick Observatory? . . . Yes, sir, I'll stay here if you wish . . . No, sir, I'm perfectly willing to act. It was just that this never did look right—and thank God that you understand astronomy, sir. . . . Of course I'll stay until the emergency is over, but you'll have to tell General Craig . . . Who's Craig? —why he's my relief, sir." French looked at the clock. "He comes on in twenty minutes . . . Well, thank you, sir. I never thought that

I'd get a commendation for not obeying orders."

French sighed and hung up. Sense was beginning to percolate through the shock. People were beginning to think again. He sighed. This should teach a needed lesson. He made a mental note of it. If he had anything to say about the make-up of Center from now on—there'd be an astronomer on the staff, and a few more of them scattered out on the Dew Line and the outpost groups. It was virtually certain now that the Capitol was struck by a meteorite. There was no radioactivity. It had been an act of God—or at least not an act of war. The destruction was terrible, but it could have been worse if either he or his alter ego in Russia had lost control and pushed the buttons. He thought idly that he'd like to meet the Ivan who ran their Center.

"The proposals of the Soviet government," the radio interrupted, "have been accepted by the UN. An inspection team is en route to Russia, and others will follow as quickly as possible. Meanwhile the UN has requested a cease-fire assurance from the United States, warning that the start of a nuclear war would be the end of everything." The announcer's voice held a note of grim humor. "So far, there has been no word from Washington concerning these proposals."

French chuckled. It might not be in the best taste, and it might be graveyard humor—but it was a healthy sign.