

# **The Edge of the Knife**

**by**

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# THE EDGE OF THE KNIFE

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Chalmers stopped talking abruptly, warned by the sudden attentiveness of the class in front of him. They were all staring; even Guellick, in the fourth row, was almost half awake. Then one of them, taking his silence as an invitation to questions found his voice.

"You say Khalid ib'n Hussein's been assassinated?" he asked incredulously. "When did that happen?"

"In 1973, at Basra." There was a touch of impatience in his voice; surely they ought to know that much. "He was shot, while leaving the Parliament Building, by an Egyptian Arab named Mohammed Noured, with an old U. S. Army M3 submachine-gun. Noured killed two of Khalid's guards and wounded another before he was overpowered. He was lynched on the spot by the crowd; stoned to death. Ostensibly, he and his accomplices were religious fanatics; however, there can be no doubt whatever that the murder was inspired, at least indirectly, by the Eastern Axis."

The class stirred like a grain-field in the wind. Some looked at him in blank amazement; some were hastily averting faces red with poorly suppressed laughter. For a moment he

was puzzled, and then realization hit him like a blow in the stomach-pit. He'd forgotten, again.

"I didn't see anything in the papers about it," one boy was saying.

"The newscast, last evening, said Khalid was in Ankara, talking to the President of Turkey," another offered.

"Professor Chalmers, would you tell us just what effect Khalid's death had upon the Islamic Caliphate and the Middle Eastern situation in general?" a third voice asked with exaggerated solemnity. That was Kendrick, the class humorist; the question was pure baiting.

"Well, Mr. Kendrick, I'm afraid it's a little too early to assess the full results of a thing like that, if they can ever be fully assessed. For instance, who, in 1911, could have predicted all the consequences of the pistol-shot at Sarajevo? Who, even today, can guess what the history of the world would have been had Zangarra not missed Franklin Roosevelt in 1932? There's always that if."

He went on talking safe generalities as he glanced covertly at his watch. Only five minutes to the end of the period; thank heaven he hadn't made that slip at the beginning of the class. "For instance, tomorrow, when we take up the events in India from the First World War to the end of British rule, we will be largely concerned with another victim of the assassin's bullet, Mohandas K. Gandhi. You may ask yourselves, then, by how much that bullet altered the history of the Indian sub-continent. A word of warning, however: The events we will be discussing will be either contemporary with or prior to what was discussed today. I hope that you're all keeping your notes properly dated. It's always easy to become confused in matters of chronology."

He wished, too late, that he hadn't said that. It pointed up the very thing he was trying to play down, and raised a general laugh.

As soon as the room was empty, he hastened to his desk, snatched pencil and notepad. This had been a bad one, the worst yet; he hadn't heard the end of it by any means. He couldn't waste thought on that now, though. This was all new and important; it had welled up suddenly and without warning into his conscious mind, and he must get it down in notes before the "memory"—even mentally, he always put that word into quotes—was lost. He was still scribbling furiously when the instructor who would use the room for the next period entered, followed by a few of his students. Chalmers finished, crammed the notes into his pocket, and went out into the hall.

Most of his own Modern History IV class had left the building and were on their way across the campus for science classes. A few, however, were joining groups for other classes here in Prescott Hall, and in every group, they were the center of interest. Sometimes, when they saw him, they would fall silent until he had passed; sometimes they didn't, and he caught snatches of conversation.

"Oh, brother! Did Chalmers really blow his jets this time!" one voice was saying.

"Bet he won't be around next year."

Another quartet, with their heads together, were talking more seriously.

"Well, I'm not majoring in History, myself, but I think it's an outrage that some people's diplomas are going to depend on grades given by a lunatic!"

"Mine will, and I'm not going to stand for it. My old man's president of the Alumni Association, and...."

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That was something he had not thought of, before. It gave him an ugly start. He was still thinking about it as he turned into the side hall to the History Department offices and entered the cubicle he shared with a colleague. The colleague, old Pottgeiter, Medieval History, was emerging in a rush; short, rotund, gray-bearded, his arms full of books and papers, oblivious, as usual, to anything that had happened since the Battle of Bosworth or the Fall of Constantinople. Chalmers stepped quickly out of his way and entered behind him. Marjorie Fenner, the secretary they also shared, was tidying up the old man's desk.

"Good morning, Doctor Chalmers." She looked at him keenly for a moment. "They give you a bad time again in Modern Four?"

Good Lord, did he show it that plainly? In any case, it was no use trying to kid Marjorie. She'd hear the whole story before the end of the day.

"Gave myself a bad time."

Marjorie, still fussing with Pottgeiter's desk, was about to say something in reply. Instead, she exclaimed in exasperation.

"Ohhh! That man! He's forgotten his notes again!" She gathered some papers from Pottgeiter's desk, rushing across the room and out the door with them.

For a while, he sat motionless, the books and notes for General European History II untouched in front of him. This was going to raise hell. It hadn't been the first slip he'd made, either; that thought kept recurring to him. There had been the time when he had alluded to the colonies on Mars and Venus. There had been the time he'd mentioned the secession of Canada from the British Commonwealth, and the time he'd called the U. N. the Terran Federation. And the time he'd tried to get a copy of Franchard's *Rise and Decline of the System States*, which wouldn't be published until the Twenty-eighth Century, out of the college library. None of those had drawn much comment, beyond a few student jokes about the history professor who lived in the future instead of the past.

Now, however, they'd all be remembered, raked up, exaggerated, and added to what had happened this morning.

He sighed and sat down at Marjorie's typewriter and began transcribing his notes. Assassination of Khalid ib'n Hussein, the pro-Western leader of the newly formed Islamic Caliphate; period of anarchy in the Middle East; interfactional power-struggles; Turkish intervention. He wondered how long that would last; Khalid's son, Tallal ib'n Khalid, was at school in England when his father was—would be—killed. He would return, and eventually take his father's place, in time to bring the Caliphate into the Terran Federation when the general war came. There were some notes on that already; the war would result from an attempt by the Indian Communists to seize East Pakistan. The trouble was that he so seldom "remembered" an exact date. His "memory" of the year of Khalid's assassination was an exception.

Nineteen seventy-three—why, that was this year. He looked at the calendar. October 16, 1973. At very most, the Arab statesman had two and a half months to live. Would there be any possible way in which he could give a credible warning? He doubted it. Even if there were, he questioned whether he should—for that matter, whether he *could*—interfere....

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He always lunched at the Faculty Club; today was no time to call attention to himself by breaking an established routine. As he entered, trying to avoid either a furtive slink or a chip-on-shoulder swagger, the crowd in the lobby stopped talking abruptly, then began again on an obviously changed subject. The word had gotten around, apparently. Handley, the head of the Latin Department, greeted him with a distantly polite nod. Pompous old owl; regarded himself, for some reason, as a sort of unofficial Dean of the Faculty. Probably didn't want to be seen fraternizing with controversial characters. One of the younger men, with a thin face and a mop of unruly hair, advanced to meet him as he came in, as cordial as Handley was remote.

"Oh, hello, Ed!" he greeted, clapping a hand on Chalmers' shoulder. "I was hoping I'd run into you. Can you have dinner with us this evening?" He was sincere.

"Well, thanks, Leonard. I'd like to, but I have a lot of work. Could you give me a rain-check?"

"Oh, surely. My wife was wishing you'd come around, but I know how it is. Some other evening?"

"Yes, indeed." He guided Fitch toward the dining-room door and nodded toward a table. "This doesn't look too crowded; let's sit here."

After lunch, he stopped in at his office. Marjorie Fenner was there, taking dictation from Pottgeiter; she nodded to him as he entered, but she had no summons to the president's office.

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The summons was waiting for him, the next morning, when he entered the office after Modern History IV, a few minutes past ten.

"Doctor Whitburn just phoned," Marjorie said. "He'd like to see you, as soon as you have a vacant period."

"Which means right away. I shan't keep him waiting."

She started to say something, swallowed it, and then asked if he needed anything typed up for General European II.

"No, I have everything ready." He pocketed the pipe he had filled on entering, and went out.

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The president of Blanley College sat hunched forward at his desk; he had rounded shoulders and round, pudgy fists and a round, bald head. He seemed to be expecting his visitor to stand at attention in front of him. Chalmers got the pipe out of his pocket, sat down in the desk-side chair, and snapped his lighter.

"Good morning, Doctor Whitburn," he said very pleasantly.

Whitburn's scowl deepened. "I hope I don't have to tell you why I wanted to see you," he began.

"I have an idea." Chalmers puffed until the pipe was drawing satisfactorily. "It might help you get started if you did, though."

"I don't suppose, at that, that you realize the full effect of your performance, yesterday morning, in Modern History Four," Whitburn replied. "I don't suppose you know, for instance, that I had to intervene at the last moment and suppress an editorial in the *Black and Green*, derisively critical of you and your teaching methods, and, by implication, of the administration of this college. You didn't hear about that, did you? No, living as you do in the future, you wouldn't."

"If the students who edit the *Black and Green* are dissatisfied with anything here, I'd imagine they ought to say so," Chalmers commented. "Isn't that what they teach in the journalism classes, that the purpose of journalism is to speak for the dissatisfied? Why make exception?"

"I should think you'd be grateful to me for trying to keep your behavior from being made a subject of public ridicule among your students. Why, this editorial which I suppressed actually went so far as to question your sanity!"

"I should suppose it might have sounded a good deal like that, to them. Of course, I have been preoccupied, lately, with an imaginative projection of present trends into the future. I'll quite freely admit that I should have kept my extracurricular work separate from my class and lecture work, but...."

"That's no excuse, even if I were sure it were true! What you did, while engaged in the serious teaching of history, was to indulge in a farrago of nonsense, obvious as such to any child, and damage not only your own standing with your class but the standing of Blanley College as well. Doctor Chalmers, if this were the first incident of the kind it would be bad enough, but it isn't. You've done things like this before, and I've warned you before. I assumed, then, that you were merely showing the effects of overwork, and I offered you a vacation, which you refused to take. Well, this is the limit. I'm compelled to request your immediate resignation."

Chalmers laughed. "A moment ago, you accused me of living in the future. It seems you're living in the past. Evidently you haven't heard about the Higher Education Faculty Tenure Act of 1963, or such things as tenure-contracts. Well, for your information, I have one; you signed it yourself, in case you've forgotten. If you want my resignation, you'll have to show cause, in a court of law, why my contract should be voided, and I don't think a slip of the tongue is a reason for voiding a contract that any court would accept."

Whitburn's face reddened. "You don't, don't you? Well, maybe it isn't, but insanity is. It's a very good reason for voiding a contract voidable on grounds of unfitness or incapacity to teach."

He had been expecting, and mentally shrinking from, just that. Now that it was out, however, he felt relieved. He gave another short laugh.

"You're willing to go into open court, covered by reporters from papers you can't control as you do this student sheet here, and testify that for the past twelve years you've had an insane professor on your faculty?"

"You're.... You're trying to blackmail me?" Whitburn demanded, half rising.

"It isn't blackmail to tell a man that a bomb he's going to throw will blow up in his hand." Chalmers glanced quickly at his watch. "Now, Doctor Whitburn, if you have nothing further to discuss, I have a class in a few minutes. If you'll excuse me...."

He rose. For a moment, he stood facing Whitburn; when the college president said nothing, he inclined his head politely and turned, going out.

Whitburn's secretary gave the impression of having seated herself hastily at her desk the second before he opened the door. She watched him, round-eyed, as he went out into the hall.

He reached his own office ten minutes before time for the next class. Marjorie was typing something for Pottgeiter; he merely nodded to her, and picked up the phone. The call would have to go through the school exchange, and he had a suspicion that Whitburn kept a check on outside calls. That might not hurt any, he thought, dialing a number.

"Attorney Weill's office," the girl who answered said.

"Edward Chalmers. Is Mr. Weill in?"

She'd find out. He was; he answered in a few seconds.

"Hello, Stanly; Ed Chalmers. I think I'm going to need a little help. I'm having some trouble with President Whitburn, here at the college. A matter involving the validity of my tenure-contract. I don't want to go into it over this line. Have you anything on for lunch?"

"No, I haven't. When and where?" the lawyer asked.

He thought for a moment. Nowhere too close the campus, but not too far away.

"How about the Continental; Fontainebleu Room? Say twelve-fifteen."

"That'll be all right. Be seeing you."

Marjorie looked at him curiously as he gathered up the things he needed for the next class.

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Stanly Weill had a thin dark-eyed face. He was frowning as he set down his coffee-cup.

"Ed, you ought to know better than to try to kid your lawyer," he said. "You say Whitburn's trying to force you to resign. With your contract, he can't do that, not without good and sufficient cause, and under the Faculty Tenure Law, that means something just an inch short of murder in the first degree. Now, what's Whitburn got on you?"

Beat around the bush and try to build a background, or come out with it at once and fill in the details afterward? He debated mentally for a moment, then decided upon the latter course.

"Well, it happens that I have the ability to prehend future events. I can, by concentrating, bring into my mind the history of the world, at least in general outline, for the next five



thousand years. Whitburn thinks I'm crazy, mainly because I get confused at times and forget that something I know about hasn't happened yet."

Weill snatched the cigarette from his mouth to keep from swallowing it. As it was, he choked on a mouthful of smoke and coughed violently, then sat back in the booth-seat, staring speechlessly.

"It started a little over three years ago," Chalmers continued. "Just after New Year's, 1970. I was getting up a series of seminars for some of my postgraduate students on extrapolation of present social and political trends to the middle of the next century, and I began to find that I was getting some very fixed and definite ideas of what the world of 2050 to 2070 would be like. Completely unified world, abolition of all national states under a single world sovereignty, colonies on Mars and Venus, that sort of thing. Some of these ideas didn't seem quite logical; a number of them were complete reversals of present trends, and a lot seemed to depend on arbitrary and unpredictable factors. Mind, this was before the first rocket landed on the Moon, when the whole moon-rocket and lunar-base project was a triple-top secret. But I knew, in the spring of 1970, that the first unmanned rocket would be called the *Kilroy*, and that it would be launched some time in 1971. You remember, when the news was released, it was stated that the rocket hadn't been christened until the day before it was launched, when somebody remembered that old 'Kilroy-was-here' thing from the Second World War. Well, I knew about it over a year in advance."

Weill had been listening in silence. He had a naturally skeptical face; his present expression mightn't really mean that he didn't believe what he was hearing.

"How'd you get all this stuff? In dreams?"

Chalmers shook his head. "It just came to me. I'd be sitting reading, or eating dinner, or talking to one of my classes, and the first thing I'd know, something out of the future would come bubbling up in me. It just kept pushing up into my conscious mind. I wouldn't have an idea of something one minute, and the next it would just be part of my general historical knowledge; I'd know it as positively as I know that Columbus discovered America in. 1492. The only difference is that I can usually remember where I've read something in past history, but my future history I know without knowing how I know it."

"Ah, that's the question!" Weill pounced. "You don't know how you know it. Look, Ed, we've both studied psychology, elementary psychology at least. Anybody who has to work with people, these days, has to know some psychology. What makes you sure that these prophetic impressions of yours aren't manufactured in your own subconscious mind?"

"That's what I thought, at first. I thought my subconscious was just building up this stuff to fill the gaps in what I'd produced from logical extrapolation. I've always been a stickler for detail," he added, parenthetically. "It would be natural for me to supply details for the

future. But, as I said, a lot of this stuff is based on unpredictable and arbitrary factors that can't be inferred from anything in the present. That left me with the alternatives of delusion or precognition, and if I ever came near going crazy, it was before the *Kilroy* landed and the news was released. After that, I knew which it was."

"And yet, you can't explain how you can have real knowledge of a thing before it happens. Before it exists," Weill said.

"I really don't need to. I'm satisfied with knowing that I know. But if you want me to furnish a theory, let's say that all these things really do exist, in the past or in the future, and that the present is just a moving knife-edge that separates the two. You can't even indicate the present. By the time you make up your mind to say, 'Now!' and transmit the impulse to your vocal organs, and utter the word, the original present moment is part of the past. The knife-edge has gone over it. Most people think they know only the present; what they know is the past, which they have already experienced, or read about. The difference with me is that I can see what's on both sides of the knife-edge."

Weill put another cigarette in his mouth and bent his head to the flame of his lighter. For a moment, he sat motionless, his thin face rigid.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. "I'm a lawyer, not a psychiatrist."

"I want a lawyer. This is a legal matter. Whitburn's talking about voiding my tenure contract. You helped draw it; I have a right to expect you to help defend it."

"Ed, have you been talking about this to anybody else?" Weill asked.

"You're the first person I've mentioned it to. It's not the sort of thing you'd bring up casually, in a conversation."

"Then how'd Whitburn get hold of it?"

"He didn't, not the way I've given it to you. But I made a couple of slips, now and then. I made a bad one yesterday morning."

He told Weill about it, and about his session with the president of the college that morning. The lawyer nodded.

"That was a bad one, but you handled Whitburn the right way," Weill said. "What he's most afraid of is publicity, getting the college mixed up in anything controversial, and above all, the reactions of the trustees and people like that. If Dacre or anybody else makes any trouble, he'll do his best to cover for you. Not willingly, of course, but because he'll know that that's the only way he can cover for himself. I don't think you'll have any more trouble with him. If you can keep your own nose clean, that is. Can you do that?"

"I believe so. Yesterday I got careless. I'll not do that again."

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