**The Tercentenary Incident**

Isaac Asimov

July 4, 2076-and for the third time the accident of the conventional system of numeration, based on powers of ten, had brought the last two digits of the year back to the fateful 76 that had seen the birth of the nation.

It was no longer a nation in the old sense; it was rather a geographic expression; part of a greater whole that made up the Federation of all of humanity on Earth, together with its offshoots on the Moon and in the space colonies. By culture and heritage, however, the name and the idea lived on, and that portion of the planet signified by the old name was still the most prosperous and advanced region of the world…And the President of the United States was still the most powerful single figure in the Planetary Council.

Lawrence Edwards watched the small figure of the President from his height of two hundred feet. He drifted lazily above the crowd, his flotron motor making a barely heard chuckle on his back, and what he saw looked exactly like what anyone would see on a holovision scene. How many times had he seen little figures like that in his living room, little figures in a cube of sunlight, looking as real as though they were living homunculi, except that you could put your hand through them.

You couldn’t put your hand through those spreading out in their tens of thousands over the open spaces surrounding the Washington Monument. And you couldn’t put your hand through the President. You could reach out to him instead, touch him, and shake his hand.

Edwards thought sardonically of the uselessness of that added element of tangibility and wished himself a hundred miles away, floating in air over some isolated wilderness, instead of here where he had to watch for any sign of disorder. There wouldn’t be any necessity for his being here but for the mythology of the value of “pressing the flesh.”

Edwards was not an admirer of the President-Hugo Allen Winkler, fifty-seventh of the line.

To Edwards, President Winkler seemed an empty man, a charmer, a vote grabber, a promiser. He was a disappointing man to have in office now after all the hopes of those first months of his administration. The World Federation was in danger of breaking up long before its job had been completed and Winkler could do nothing about it. One needed a strong hand now, not a glad hand; a hard voice, not a honey voice.

There he was now, shaking hands-a space forced around him by the Service, with Edwards himself, plus a few others of the Service, watching from above.

The President would be running for re-election certainly, and there seemed a good chance he might be defeated. That would just make things worse, since the opposition party was dedicated to the destruction of the Federation.

Edwards sighed. It would be a miserable four years coming up-maybe a miserable forty-and all he could do was float in the air, ready to reach every Service agent on the ground by laser-phone if there was the slightest

He didn’t see the slightest. There was no sign of disturbance. Just a little puff of white dust, hardly visible; just a momentary glitter in the sunlight, up and away, gone as soon as he was aware of it.

Where was the President? He had lost sight of him in the dust. He looked about in the vicinity of where he had seen him last. The President could not have moved far.

Then he became aware of disturbance. First it was among the Service agents themselves, who seemed to have gone off their heads and to be moving this way and that jerkily. Then those among the crowd near them caught the contagion and then those farther off. The noise rose and became a thunder.

Edwards didn’t have to hear the words that made up the rising roar. It seemed to carry the news to him by nothing more than its mass clamorous urgency. President Winkler had disappeared! He had been there one moment and had turned into a handful of vanishing dust the next.

Edwards held his breath in an agony of waiting during what seemed a drug-ridden eternity, for the long moment of realization to end and for the mob to break into a mad, rioting stampede.

— When a resonant voice sounded over the gathering din, and at its sound, the noise faded, died, and became a silence. It was as though it were all a holovision program after all and someone had turned the sound down and out.

Edwards thought: My God, it’s the President. There was no mistaking the voice. Winkler stood on the guarded stage from which he was to give his Tercentenary speech, and from which he had left but ten minutes ago to shake hands with some in the crowd.

How had he gotten back there? Edwards listened

“Nothing has happened to me, my fellow Americans. What you have seen just now was the breakdown of a mechanical device. It was not your President, so let us not allow a mechanical failure to dampen the celebration of the happiest day the world has yet seen…My fellow Americans, give me your attention—”

And what followed was the Tercentenary speech, the greatest speech Winkler had ever made, or Edwards had ever heard. Edwards found himself forgetting his supervisory job in his eagerness to listen.

Winkler had it right! He understood the importance of the Federation and he was getting it across.

Deep inside, though, another part of him was remembering the persistent rumors that the new expertise in robotics had resulted in the construction of a look-alike President, a robot who could perform the purely ceremonial functions, who could shake hands with the crowd, who could be neither bored nor exhausted-nor assassinated.

Edwards thought, in obscure shock, that that was how it had happened. There had been such a look-alike robot indeed, and in a way-it had been assassinated.

October 13, 2078

Edwards looked up as the waist-high robot guide approached and said mellifluously, “Mr. Janek will see you now.”

Edwards stood up, feeling tall as he towered above the stubby, metallic guide. He did not feel young, however. His face had gathered lines in the last two years or so and he was aware of it.

He followed the guide into a surprisingly small room, where, behind a surprisingly small desk, there sat Francis Janek, a slightly paunchy and incongruously young-looking man.

Janek smiled and his eyes were friendly as he rose to shake hands. “Mr. Edwards.”

Edwards muttered, “I’m glad to have the opportunity, sir—” Edwards had never seen Janek before, but then the job of personal secretary to the President is a quiet one and makes little news.

Janek said, “Sit down. Sit down. Would you care for a soya stick?”

Edwards smiled a polite negative, and sat down. Janek was clearly emphasizing his youth. His ruffied shirt was open and the hairs on his chest had been dyed a subdued but definite violet.

Janek said, “I know you have been trying to reach me for some weeks now. I’m sorry for the delay. I hope you understand that my time is not entirely my own. However, we’re here now…I have referred to the Chief of the Service, by the way, and he gave you very high marks. He regrets your resignation.”

Edwards said, eyes downcast, “It seemed better to carry on my investigations without danger of embarrassment to the Service.”

Janek’s smile flashed. “Your activities, though discreet, have not gone unnoticed, however. The Chief explains that you have been investigating the Tercentenary Incident, and I must admit it was that which persuaded me to see you as soon as I could. You’ve given up your position for that? You’re investigating a dead issue.”

“How can it be a dead issue, Mr. Janek? Your calling it an Incident doesn’t alter the fact that it was an assassination attempt.”

“A matter of semantics. Why use a disturbing phrase?”

“Only because it would seem to represent a disturbing truth. Surely you would say that someone tried to kill the President.”

Janek spread his hands. “If that is so, the plot did not succeed. A mechanical device was destroyed. Nothing more. In fact, if we look at it properly, the Incident-whatever you choose to call it-did the nation and the world an enormous good. As we all know, the President was shaken by the Incident and the nation as well. The President and all of us realized what a return to the violence of the last century might mean and it produced a great turnaround.”

“I can’t deny that.”

“Of course you can’t. Even the President’s enemies will grant that the last two years have seen great accomplishments. The Federation is far stronger today than anyone could have dreamed it would be on that Tercentenary day. We might even say that a breakup of the global economy has been prevented.”

Edwards said cautiously, “Yes, the President is a changed man. Everyone says so.”

Janek said, “He was a great man always. The Incident made him concentrate on the great issues with a fierce intensity, however.”

“Which he didn’t do before?”

“Perhaps not quite as intensely…In effect then, the President, and all of us, would like the Incident forgotten. My main purpose in seeing you, Mr. Edwards, is to make that plain to you. This is not the Twentieth Century and we can’t throw you in jail for being inconvenient to us, or hamper you in any way, but even the Global Charter doesn’t forbid us to attempt persuasion. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you, but I do not agree with you. Can we forget the Incident when the person responsible has never been apprehended?”

“Perhaps that is just as well, too, sir. Far better that some, uh, unbalanced person escape than that the matter be blown out of proportion and the stage set, possibly, for a return to the days of the Twentieth Century.”

“The official story even states that the robot spontaneously exploded-which is impossible, and which has been an unfair blow to the robot industry.”

“A robot is not the term I would use, Mr. Edwards. It was a mechanical device. No one has said that robots are dangerous, per se, certainly not the workaday metallic ones. The only reference here is to the unusually complex manlike devices that seem flesh and blood and that we might call androids. Actually, they are so complex that perhaps they might explode at that; I am not an expert in the field. The robotics industry will recover.”

“Nobody in the government,” said Edwards stubbornly, “seems to care whether we reach the bottom of the matter or not.”

“I’ve already explained that there have been no consequences but good ones. Why stir the mud at the bottom, when the water above is clear?”

“And the use of the disintegrator?”

For a moment, Janek’s hand, which had been slowly turning the container of soya sticks on his desk, held still, then it returned to its rhythmic movement. He said lightly, “What’s that?”

Edwards said intently, “Mr. Janek, I think you know what I mean. As part of the Service—”

“To which you no longer belong, of course:”

“Nevertheless, as part of the Service, I could not help but hear things that were not always, I suppose, for my ears. I had heard of a new weapon, and I saw something happen at the Tercentenary which would require one. The object everyone thought was the President disappeared into a cloud of very fine dust. It was as though every atom within the object had had its bonds to other atoms loosed. The object had become a cloud of individual atoms, which began to combine again of course, but which dispersed too quickly to do more than appear a momentary glitter of dust.”

“Very science-fictionish.”

“I certainly don’t understand the science behind it, Mr. Janek, but I do see that it would take considerable energy to accomplish such bond breaking. This energy would have to be withdrawn from the environment. Those people who were standing near the device at the time, and whom I could locate-and who would agree to talk-were unanimous in reporting a wave of coldness washing over them.”

Janek put the soya-stick container to one side with a small click of transite against cellulite. He said, “Suppose just for argument that there is such a thing as a disintegrator.”

“You need not argue. There is.”

“I won’t argue. I know of no such thing myself, but in my office, I am not likely to know of anything so security-bound as new weaponry. But if a disintegrator exists and is as secret as all that, it must be an American monopoly, unknown to the rest of the Federation. It would then not be something either you or I should talk about. It could be a more dangerous war weapon than the nuclear bombs, precisely because-if what you say is so-it produces nothing more than disintegration at the point of impact and cold in the immediate neighborhood. No blast, no fire, no deadly radiation. Without these distressing side effects, there would be no deterrent to its use, yet for all we know it might be made large enough to destroy the planet itself.”

“I go along with all of that,” said Edwards.

“Then you see that if there is no disintegrator, it is foolish to talk about one; and if there is a disintegrator, then it is criminal to talk about one.”

“I haven’t discussed it, except to you, just now, because I’m trying to persuade you of the seriousness of the situation. If one had been used, for instance, ought not the government be interested in deciding how it came to be used-if another unit of the Federation might be in possession?”

Janek shook his head. “I think that we can rely on appropriate organs of this government to take such a thing into consideration. You had better not concern yourself with the matter.”

Edwards said, in barely controlled impatience, “Can you assure me that the United States is the only government that has such a weapon at its disposal?”

“I can’t tell you, since I know nothing about such a weapon, and should not know. You should not have spoken of it to me. Even if no such weapon exists, the rumor of its existence could be damaging.”

“But since I have told you and the damage is done, please hear me out. Let me have the chance of convincing you that you, and no one else, hold the key to a fearful situation that perhaps I alone see.”

“You alone see? I alone hold the key?”

“Does that sound paranoid? Let me explain and then judge for yourself.”

“I will give you a little more time, sir, but what I have said stands. You must abandon this-this hobby of yours-this investigation. It is terribly dangerous.”

“It is its abandonment that would be dangerous. Don’t you see that if the disintegrator exists and if the United States has the monopoly of it, then it follows that the number of people who could have access to one would be sharply limited. As an ex-member of the Service, I have some practical knowledge of this and I tell you that the only person in the world who could manage to abstract a disintegrator from our top-secret arsenals would be the President…Only the President of the United States, Mr. Janek, could have arranged that assassination attempt.”

They stared at each other for a moment and then Janek touched a contact at his desk.

He said, “Added precaution. No one can overhear us now by any means. Mr. Edwards, do you realize the danger of that statement? To yourself? You must not overestimate the power of the Global Charter. A government has the right to take reasonable measures for the protection of its stability.”

Edwards said, “I’m approaching you, Mr. Janek, as someone I presume to be a loyal American citizen. I come to you with news of a terrible crime that affects all Americans and the entire Federation. A crime that has produced a situation that perhaps only you can right. Why do you respond with threats?”

Janek said, “That’s the second time you have tried to make it appear that I am a potential savior of the world. I can’t conceive of myself in that role. You understand, I hope, that I have no unusual powers.”

“You are the secretary to the President.”

“That does not mean I have special access to him or am in some intimately confidential relationship to him. There are times, Mr. Edwards, when I suspect others consider me to be nothing more than a flunky, and there are even times when I find myself in danger of agreeing with them.”

“Nevertheless, you see him frequently, you see him informally, you see him—”

Janek said impatiently, “I see enough of him to be able to assure you that the President would not order the destruction of that mechanical device on Tercentenary day.”

“Is it in your opinion impossible, then?”

“I did not say that. I said he would not. After all, why should he? Why should the President want to destroy a look-alike android that had been a valuable adjunct to him for over three years of his Presidency? And if for some reason he wanted it done, why on Earth should he do it in so incredibly public a way-at the Tercentenary, no less-thus advertising its existence, risking public revulsion at the thought of shaking hands with a mechanical device, to say nothing of the diplomatic repercussions of having had representatives of other parts of the Federation treat with one? He might, instead, simply have ordered it disassembled in private. No one but a few highly placed members of the Administration would have known.”

“There have not, however, been any undesirable consequences for the President as a result of the Incident, have there?”

“He has had to cut down on ceremony. He is no longer as accessible as he once was.”

“As the robot once was.”

“Well,” said Janek uneasily. “Yes, I suppose that’s right.”

Edwards said, “And, as a matter of fact, the President was re-elected and his popularity has not diminished even though the destruction was public. The argument against public destruction is not as powerful as you make it sound.”

“But the re-election came about despite the Incident. It was brought about by the President’s quick action in stepping forward and delivering what you will have to admit was one of the great speeches of American history. It was an absolutely amazing performance; you will have to admit that.”

“It was a beautifully staged drama. The President, one might think, would have counted on that.”

Janek sat back in his chair. “If I understand you, Edwards, you are suggesting an involuted storybook plot. Are you trying to say that the President had the device destroyed, just as it was-in the middle of a crowd, at precisely the time of the Tercentenary celebration, with the world watching-so that he could win the admiration of all by his quick action? Are you suggesting that he arranged it all so that he could establish himself as a man of unexpected vigor and strength under extremely dramatic circumstances and thus turn a losing campaign into a winning one?…Mr. Edwards, you’ve been reading fairy tales.”

Edwards said, “If I were trying to claim all this, it would indeed be a fairy tale, but I am not. I never suggested that the President ordered the killing of the robot. I merely asked if you thought it were possible and you have stated quite strongly that it wasn’t. I’m glad you did, because I agree with you.”

“Then what is all this? I’m beginning to think you’re wasting my time.”

“Another moment, please. Have you ever asked yourself why the job couldn’t have been done with a laser beam, with a field deactivator-with a sledgehammer, for God’s sake? Why should anyone go to the incredible trouble of getting a weapon guarded by the strongest possible government security to do a job that didn’t require such a weapon? Aside from the difficulty of getting it, why risk revealing the existence of a disintegrator to the rest of the world?”

“This whole business of a disintegrator is just a theory of yours.”

“The robot disappeared completely before my eyes. I was watching. I rely on no secondhand evidence for that. It doesn’t matter what you call the weapon; whatever name you give it, it had the effect of taking the robot apart atom by atom and scattering all those atoms irretrievably. Why should this be done? It was tremendous overkill.”

“I don’t know what was in the mind of the perpetrator.”

“No? Yet it seems to me that there is only one logical reason for a complete powdering when something much simpler would have carried through the destruction. The powdering left no trace behind of the destroyed object. It left nothing to indicate what it had been, whether robot or anything else.”

Janek said, “But there is no question of what it was.”

“Isn’t there? I said only the President could have arranged for a disintegrator to be obtained and used. But, considering the existence of a look-alike robot, which President did the arranging?”

Janek said harshly, “I don’t think we can carry on this conversation. You are mad.”

Edwards said, “Think it through. For God’s sake, think it through. The President did not destroy the robot. Your arguments there are convincing. What happened was that the robot destroyed the President. President Winkler was killed in the crowd on July 4, 2076. A robot resembling President Winkler then gave the Tercentenary speech, ran for re-election, was re-elected, and still serves as President of the United States!”

“Madness!”

“I’ve come to you, to you because you can prove this-and correct it, too.”

“It is simply not so. The President is-the President.” Janek made as though to rise and conclude the interview.

“You yourself say he’s changed,” said Edwards quickly and urgently. “The Tercentenary speech was beyond the powers of the old Winkler. Haven’t you been yourself amazed at the accomplishments of the last two years? Truthfully-could the Winkler of the first term have done all this?”

“Yes, he could have, because the President of the second term is the President of the first term.”

“Do you deny he’s changed? I put it to you. You decide and I’ll abide by your decision.”

“He’s risen to meet the challenge, that is all. It’s happened before this in American history.” But Janek sank back into his seat. He looked uneasy.

“He doesn’t drink,” said Edwards.

“He never did-very much.”

“He no longer womanizes. Do you deny he did so in the past?”

“A President is a man. For the last two years, however, he’s felt dedicated to the matter of the Federation.”

“It’s a change for the better, I admit,” said Edwards, “but it’s a change. Of course, if he had a woman, the masquerade could not be carried on, could it?”

Janek said, “Too bad he doesn’t have a wife.” He pronounced the archaic word a little self-consciously. “The whole matter wouldn’t arise if he did.”

“The fact that he doesn’t made the plot more practical. Yet he has fathered two children. I don’t believe they have been in the White House, either one of them, since the Tercentenary.”

“Why should they be? They are grown, with lives of their own.”

“Are they invited? Is the President interested in seeing them? You’re his private secretary. You would know. Are they?”

Janek said, “You’re wasting time. A robot can’t kill a human being. You know that that is the First Law of Robotics.”

“I know it. But no one is saying that the robot-Winkler killed the human-Winkler directly. When the human-Winkler was in the crowd, the robot-Winkler was on the stand and I doubt that a disintegrator could be aimed from that distance without doing more widespread damage. Maybe it could, but more likely the robot-Winkler had an accomplice-a hit man, if that is the correct Twentieth-Century jargon.”

Janek frowned. His plump face puckered and looked pained. He said, “You know, madness must be catching. I’m actually beginning to consider the insane notion you’ve brought here. Fortunately, it doesn’t hold water. After all, why would an assassination of the human-Winkler be arranged in public? All the arguments against destroying the robot in public hold against the killing of a human President in public. Don’t you see that ruins the whole theory?”

“It does not—” began Edwards. “It does. No one except for a few officials knew that the mechanical device existed at all. If President Winkler were killed privately and his body disposed of, the robot could easily take over without suspicion-without having roused yours, for instance.”

“There would always be a few officials who would know, Mr. Janek. The assassinations would have to broaden.” Edwards leaned forward earnestly. “See here, ordinarily there couldn’t have been any danger of confusing the human being and the machine. I imagine the robot wasn’t in constant use, but was pulled out only for specific purposes, and there would always be key individuals, perhaps quite a number of them, who would know where the President was and what he was doing. If that were so, the assassination would have to be carried out at a time when those officials actually thought the President was really the robot.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“See here. One of the robot’s tasks was to shake hands with the crowd; press the flesh. When this was taking place, the officials in the know would be perfectly aware that the hand shaker was, in truth, the robot.”

“Exactly. You’re making sense now. It was the robot.”

“Except that it was the Tercentenary, and except that President Winkler could not resist. I suppose it would be more than human to expect a President-particularly an empty crowd pleaser and applause hunter like Winkler-to give up the adulation of the crowd on this day of all days, and let it go to a machine. And perhaps the robot carefully nurtured this impulse so that on this one Tercentenary day, the President would have ordered the robot to remain behind the podium, while he himself went out to shake hands and to be cheered.”

“Secretly?”

“Of course secretly. If the President had told anyone in the Service, or any of his aides, or you, would he have been allowed to do it? The official attitude concerning the possibility of assassination has been practically a disease since the events of the late Twentieth Century. So with the encouragement of an obviously clever robot—”

“You assume the robot to be clever because you assume he is now serving as President. That is circular reasoning. If he is not President, there is no reason to think he is clever, or that he were capable of working out this plot. Besides, what motive could possibly drive a robot to plot an assassination? Even if it didn’t kill the President directly, the taking of a human life indirectly is also forbidden by the First Law, which states: 'A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.'”

Edwards said, “The First Law is not absolute. What if harming a human being saves the lives of two others, or three others, or even three billion others? The robot may have thought that saving the Federation took precedence over the saving of one life. It was no ordinary robot, after all. It was designed to duplicate the properties of the President closely enough to deceive anyone. Suppose it had the understanding of President Winkler, without his weaknesses, and suppose it knew that it could save the Federation where the President could not.”

“You can reason so, but how do you know a mechanical device would?”

“It is the only way to explain what happened.”

“I think it is a paranoid fantasy.”

Edwards said, “Then tell me why the object that was destroyed was powdered into atoms. What else would make sense than to suppose that that was the only way to hide the fact that it was a human being and not a robot that was destroyed? Give me an alternate explanation.”

Janek reddened. “I won’t accept it.”

“But you can prove the whole matter-or disprove it. It’s why I have come to you-to you.”

“How can I prove it? Or disprove it either?”

“No one sees the President at unguarded moments as you do. It is with you-in default of family-that he is most informal. Study him.”

“I have. I tell you he isn’t—”

“You haven’t. You suspected nothing wrong-Little signs meant nothing to you. Study him now, being aware that he might be a robot, and you will see.”

Janek said sardonically, “I can knock him down and probe for metal with an ultrasonic detector. Even an android has a platinum-iridium brain.”

“No drastic action will be necessary. Just observe him and you will see that he is so radically not the man he was that he cannot be a man.”

Janek looked at the clock-calendar on the wall. He said, “We have been here over an hour.”

“I’m sorry to have taken up so much of your time, but you see the importance of all this, I hope.”

“Importance?” said Janek. Then he looked up and what had seemed a despondent air turned suddenly into something of hope. “But is it, in fact, important? Really, I mean?”

“How can it not be important? To have a robot as President of the United States? That’s not important?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Forget what President Winkler might be. Just consider this. Someone serving as President of the United States has saved the Federation; he has held it together and, at the present moment, he runs the Council in the interests of peace and of constructive compromise. You’ll admit all that?”

Edwards said, “Of course, I admit all that. But what of the precedent established? A robot in the White House for a very good reason now may lead to a robot in the White House twenty years from now for a very bad reason, and then to robots in the White House for no reason at all but only as a matter of course. Don’t you see the importance of muffling a possible trumpet call for the end of humanity at the time of its first uncertain note?”

Janek shrugged. “Suppose I find out he’s a robot? Do we broadcast it to all the world? Do you know how that will affect the Federation? Do you know what it will do to the world’s financial structure? Do you know—”

“I do know. That is why I have come to you privately, instead of trying to make it public. It is up to you to check out the matter and come to a definite conclusion. It is up to you, next, having found the supposed President to be a robot, which I am certain you will do, to persuade him to resign.”

“And by your version of his reaction to the First Law, he will then have me killed since I will be threatening his expert handling of the greatest global crisis of the Twenty-first Century.”

Edwards shook his head. “The robot acted in secret before, and no one tried to counter the arguments he used with himself. You will be able to reinforce a stricter interpretation of the First Law with your arguments. If necessary, we can get the aid of some official from U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation who constructed the robot in the first place. Once he resigns, the Vice-President will succeed. If the robot-Winkler has put the old world on the right track, good; it can now be kept on the right track by the Vice-President, who is a decent and honorable woman. But we can’t have a robot ruler, and we mustn’t ever again.

“What if the President is human?”

“I’ll leave that to you. You will know.”

Janek said, “I am not that confident of myself. What if I can’t decide? If I can’t bring myself to? If I don’t dare to? What are your plans?”

Edwards looked tired. “I don’t know. I may have to go to U. S. Robots. But I don’t think it will come to that. I’m quite confident that now that I’ve laid the problem in your lap, you won’t rest till it’s settled. Do you want to be ruled by a robot?”

He stood up, and Janek let him go. They did not shake hands.

Janek sat there in the gathering twilight in deep shock. A robot!

The man had walked in and had argued, in perfectly rational manner, that the President of the United States was a robot.

It should have been easy to fight that off. Yet though Janek had tried every argument he could think of, they had all been useless, and the man had not been shaken in the least.

A robot as President! Edwards had been certain of it, and he would stay certain of it. And if Janek insisted that the President was human, Edwards would go to U. S. Robots. He wouldn’t rest.

Janek frowned as he thought of the twenty-seven months since the Tercentenary and of how well all had gone in the face of the probabilities. And now?

He remained lost in somber thought.

He still had the disintegrator but surely it would not be necessary to use it on a human being, the nature of whose body was not in question. A silent laser stroke in some lonely spot would do.

It had been hard to maneuver the President into the earlier job, but in this present case, it wouldn’t even have to know.