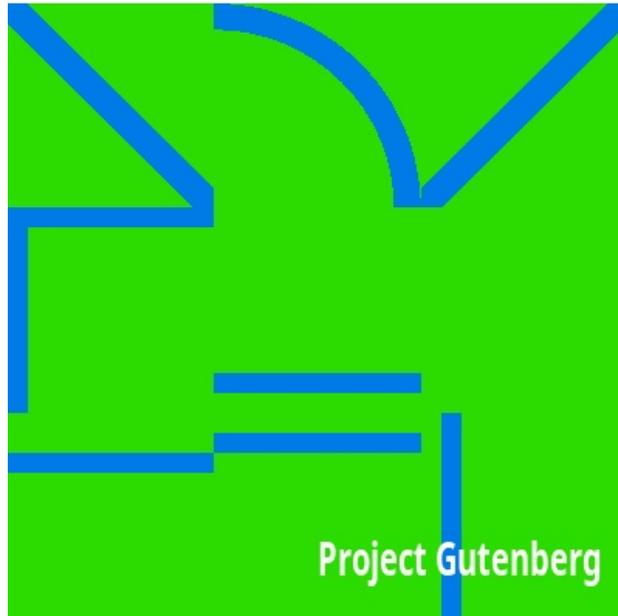

Minor Detail

Jack Sharkey



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MINOR DETAIL ***

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General Webb had a simply magnificent idea for getting ground forces into the enemy's territory despite rockets and missiles and things like that. It was a grand scheme, except for one

MINOR DETAIL

By JACK SHARKEY

THE Secretary of Defense, flown in by special plane from the new Capitol Building in Denver, trotted down the ramp with his right hand outstretched before him.

At the base of the ramp his hand was touched, clutched and hidden by the right hand of General "Smiley" Webb in a hearty parody of a casual handshake. General Webb did everything in a big way, and that included even little things like handshakes.

Retrieving his hand once more, James Whitlow, the Secretary of Defense, smiled nervously with his tiny mouth, and said,

"Well, here I am."

This statement was taken down by a hovering circle of news reporters, dispatched by wireless and telephone to every town in the forty-nine states, expanded, contracted, quoted and misquoted, ignored and misconstrued, and then forgotten; all this in a matter of hours.

The nation, hearing it, put aside its wonted trepidations, took an extra tranquilizer or two, and felt secure once more. The government was in good hands.

Leaving the reporters in a disgruntled group beyond the cyclone-fence-and-barbed-wire barriers surrounding Project W, General Webb, seated beside Whitlow in the back of his private car, sighed and folded his arms.

"You'll be amazed!" he chortled, nudging his companion with a bony elbow.

"I—I expect so," said Whitlow, clinging to his brief case with both hands. It contained, among other things, a volume of mystery stories and a ham sandwich, neatly packaged in aluminum foil. Whitlow didn't want to chance losing it. Not, at least, until he'd eaten the sandwich.

"Of course, you're wondering where I got the idea for my project," said "Smiley" Webb, adding, for the benefit of his driver, "Keep your eyes on the road, Sergeant! The WAC barracks will still be there when you get off duty!"

"Yes, sir," came a hollow grunt from the front seat.

"Weren't you?" asked General Webb, gleaming a toothy smile in Whitlow's direction.

"Weren't I *what*?" Whitlow asked miserably, having lost the thread of their conversation due to a surreptitious glance backward at the WAC barracks in their wake.

"Wondering about the project!" snapped the general.

"Yes. We *all* were," said the Secretary of Defense, appending somewhat tartly, "That's why they *sent* me here."

"To be sure. To be sure," General Webb muttered. He didn't much like tartness in responses, but the Secretary of Defense, unfortunately, was hardly a subordinate, and therefore not subject to the general's choler. Silly little ass! he said to himself. Rather liking the sound of the words—albeit in his mind—he repeated them over again, adding embellishments like "pompous" and "mousy" and "squirrel-eyed." After three or four such thoughts, the general felt much better.

"I thought the whole thing up, myself," he said, proudly.

"I wish you'd stop being so ambiguous," Whitlow protested in a small voice. "Just what *is* this project? How does it work? Will it help us win the war?"

"Sssh!" said the general, jerking a quivering forefinger perpendicular before pursed lips. "Security!"

He closed one eye in a broad wink and wriggled a thumb in the direction of the driver. "He's only cleared for Confidential material," said the general, his tone casting aspersions on the sergeant's patriotism, ancestry and personal hygiene. "This project is, of course, *Top Secret!*" He said the words reverently, his face going all noble and brave. Whitlow half-expected him to

remove his hat, but he did not.

They drove onward, then, in silence, until they passed by a large field, in the center of which Whitlow could discern the outlines of an immense bull's-eye, in front of a tall, somewhat rickety khaki-colored reviewing stand, draped in tired bunting.

"What's that?" asked Whitlow, relinquishing his grip on his brief case long enough to point toward the field.

"Ssssh!" said "Smiley" Webb. "You'll find out in a matter of hours."

"Many hours?" Whitlow asked, thinking of the ham sandwich.

General Webb consulted a magnificent platinum timepiece anchored to his thick hairy wrist by a stout leather strap.

"In exactly one hour, thirty-seven minutes, and forty-three-point-oh-oh-nine seconds!" he said, proudly.

"Thank you," Whitlow sighed. "You're certainly running this thing—whatever it is—in an efficient manner."

"Thank you!" General Webb glowed. "We like to think so," he added modestly.

Passwords, signs, countersigns, combination-locks and electronic recognition signals were negotiated one by one, until Whitlow was despairing of ever getting into the heart of Project W. He said as much to General Webb, who merely flashed the grin which gave him his nickname, and opened a final door.

For a moment, Whitlow thought he was going deaf. The shrill roar of screeching metal and throbbing dynamos that pounded at his eardrums began to fuddle his mind, until General Webb handed him a small cardboard box—also stamped, like every door and wall in the place, "Top Secret"—in which his trembling fingers located two ordinary rubber earplugs, which he instantly put to good use.

"There she is!" said General Webb, proudly, gesturing over the railing of the small balcony upon which they stood. "The Whirligig!"

"What?" called Secretary of Defense Whitlow, shaking his head to indicate he hadn't heard a word.

Somewhat piqued, but resigned, General Webb leaned his wide mouth nearly up against Whitlow's small pink plugged ear, and roared the same information at the top of his lungs.

Whitlow, a little stunned by the volume despite the plugs, nodded wearily, to indicate that he'd heard, then asked, in a high, piping voice, "What's it for?"

Webb's eyes bulged in their sockets. "Great heavens, man, can't you *see*?" He gestured down at his creation, his baby, his project, as though it were self-evident what its function was.

Whitlow strained his eyes to divine anything that might give a clue as to just what the government had been pouring money into for the past eight months. All he saw was what appeared to be a sort of ferris-wheel, except that it was revolving in a horizontal plane. The structure was completely enclosed in metal, and was whirling too fast for even the central shaft to be anything but a hazy, silver-blue blur.

"I see it," he shouted, squeakily. "But I don't understand it!"

"Come with me," said General Webb, re-opening the door at their backs. He was just about to step through when, with a quick blush of mortification, he remembered the "Top Secret" earplugs. Hastily, averting his face lest the other man see his embarrassment, he returned his plugs to their box, and did the same with Whitlow's.

Whitlow was glad when the door closed behind them.

"My office is this way," said Webb, striding off in a stiff military manner.

Whitlow, with a forlorn shrug, could do nothing but clutch his brief case and follow.

"It's this way," General Webb began, once they were seated uncomfortably in his office. From a pocket in his khaki jacket, Webb had produced a big-bowled calabash pipe, and was puffing its noxious gray fumes in all directions while he spoke. "Up until the late fifties, war was a simple thing ..."

Oh, not the March of Science Speech! said Whitlow to himself. He knew it by heart. It was the talk of the Capitol, and the nightmare of military strategists. As the general's voice droned on and on, Whitlow barely listened. The general, Top Secret or no Top Secret, was divulging nothing that wasn't common knowledge from the ruins of Philadelphia to the great Hollywood crater ...

All at once, weapons had gotten *too* good. That was the whole problem. Wars, no matter what the abilities of the death-dealing guns, cannon, rifles, rockets or whatever, needed one thing on the battlefield that could not be turned out in a factory: Men.

In order to win a war, a country must be vanquished. In order to vanquish a country, soldiers must be landed. And that was precisely wherein the difficulty lay: landing the soldiers.

Ships were nearly obsolete in this respect. Landing barges could be blown out of the water as fast as they were let down into it.

Paratroops were likewise hopeless. The slow-moving troop-carrying planes daren't even peek above the enemy's horizon without chancing an onslaught of "thinking" rockets that would stay on their trail until they were molten cinders falling into the sea.

So someone invented the supersonic carrier. This was pretty good, allowing the planes to come in high and fast over the enemy's territory, as fast as the land-to-air missiles themselves. The only drawback was that the first men to try parachuting at that speed were battered to confetti by the slipstream of their own carriers. That would not do.

Next, someone thought of the capsules. Each man was packed into a break-proof, shock-proof, water-proof, wind-proof plastic capsule, and ejected safely beyond the slipstream area of the carriers, at which point, each capsule sprouted a silken chute that lowered the enclosed men gently down into range of the enemy's rocket-fire ...

This plan was scrapped like the others.

And so, things were at a stalemate. There hadn't been a really good skirmish for nearly five years. War was hardly anything but a memory, what with both sides practically omnipotent. Unless troops could be landed, war was downright impossible. And, no one could land troops, so there was no war.

As a matter of fact, Whitlow *liked* the state of affairs. To be Secretary of Defense during a years-long peace was a soft job to top all soft jobs. And Whitlow didn't much like war. He'd rather live peacefully with his mystery stories and ham sandwiches.

But the Capitol, under the relentless lobbying of the munitions interests, was trying to find a way to get a war started.

They *had* tried simply bombing the other countries, but it hadn't worked out too well: the other countries had bombed back.

This plan had been scrapped as too dangerous.

And then, just when all seemed lost, when it looked as though mankind was doomed to eternal peace ...

Along came General "Smiley" Webb.

"Land troops?" he'd said, confidently, "nothing easier. With the government's cooperation, I can have our troops in any country in the world, safely landed, within the space of one year!"

Congress had voted him the money unanimously, and off he'd gone to work at Project W. No one knew *quite* what it was about, but the general had seemed so self-assured that— Well, they'd almost forgotten about him until some ambitious clerk, trying to balance at least *part* of the budget, had discovered a monthly expenditure to an obscure base in the southwest totalling some millions of dollars. Perfunctory checking had brought out the fact that "Smiley" Webb had been drawing this money every month, and hadn't as much as mailed in a single progress report.

There'd been swift phone-calls from Denver to Project W, and, General Webb informed them, not only was all the money to be accounted for, but so was all the time and effort: the project was completed, and about to be tested. Would someone like to come down and watch?

Someone would.

And thus it was that James Whitlow, with mystery stories and ham sandwich, had taken the first plane from the Capitol ...

"... when all at once, I thought: Speed! Endurance! *That* is the problem!" said Webb, breaking in on Whitlow's reverie.

"I beg your pardon?" said the Secretary of Defense.

Webb whacked the dottle out of his pipe into a meaty palm, tossed the smoking cinders rather carelessly into a waste-basket, and leaned forward to confront the other man face to face, their noses almost nudging.

"Why are parachutes out?" he snapped.

"They go too slow," said Whitlow.

"Why do we use parachutes at all?"

"To keep the men from getting killed by the fall."

"Why does a fall kill the men?"

"It— It breaks their bones and stuff."

"*Bah!*" Webb scoffed.

"Bah?" reiterated Whitlow. "Bah?"

"Certainly bah!" said the general. "All it takes is a little training."

"All *what* takes?" said Whitlow, helplessly.

"Falling, man, falling!" the general boomed. "If a man can fall safely from ten feet— Why not from ten times ten feet!?"

"Because," said Whitlow, "increasing height accelerates the *rate* of falling, and—"

"*Poppycock!*" the general roared.

"Yes, sir," said Whitlow, somewhat cowed.

"Muscle-building. That's the secret. Endurance. Stress. Strain. Tension."

"If— If you say so ..." said Whitlow, slumping lower and lower in his chair as the general's massive form leaned precariously over him. "But—"

"Of *course* you are puzzled," said the general, suddenly chummy. "Anyone would be. Until they realized the use to which I've put the Whirligig!"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so ..." said Whitlow, thinking longingly of his ham sandwich, and its crunchy, moist green smear of pickle relish.

"The first day—" said General Webb, "it revolved at *one* gravity! They withstood it!"

"What did? Who withstood? When?" asked Whitlow, with much confusion.

"The men!" said the general, irritably. "The men in the Whirligig!"

Whitlow jerked bolt upright. "There are *men* in that thing?" It's not possible, he thought.

"Of course," said Webb, soothingly. "But they're all right. They've been in there for thirty days, whirling around at one gravity more each day. We have constant telephone communication with them. They're all feeling fine, just fine."

"But—" Whitlow said, weakly.

General Webb had him firmly by the arm, and was leading him out of the office. "We must get to the stands, man. Operation Human Bomb in ten minutes."

"Bomb?" Whitlow squeaked, scurrying alongside Webb as the larger man strode down the echoing corridor.

"A euphemism, of course," said Webb. "Because they will fall much like a bomb does. But they will not explode! No, they will land, rifles in hand, ready to take over the enemy territory."

"Without parachutes?" Whitlow marveled.

"Exactly," said the general, leading the way out into the blinding desert sunlight. "You see," he remarked, as they strolled toward the heat-shimmering outlines of the reviewing stand, its bunting hanging limp and faded in the dry, breezeless air, "it's really so simple I'm astonished the enemy didn't think of it first. Though, of course, I'm glad they didn't— Ha! ha!" He oozed self-appreciation.

"Ha ha," repeated Whitlow, with little enthusiasm.

"When one is whirled at one gravity, you see, the wall—the outside rim—of the Whirligig, becomes the floor for the men inside. Each day, they have spent up to ten hours doing nothing but deep knee-bends, and eating high protein foods. Their legs will be able to withstand *any* force of landing. If they can do deep knee-bends at thirty gravities—during which, of course, each of them weighed nearly three tons—they can jump from any height and survive. Good, huh?"

Whitlow was worried as they clambered up into the stands. There seemed to be no one about but the two of them.

"Who else is coming?" he asked.

"Just us," said Webb. "I'm the only one with a clearance high enough to watch this. You're only here because you're *my* guest."

"But—" said Whitlow, observing the heat-baked wide-open spaces extending on all sides of the reviewing stand and bull's-eye, "the men on this base can surely watch from almost anywhere not beyond the horizon."

"They'd *better* not!" was the general's only comment.

"Well," said Whitlow, "what happens now?"

"The men that were in that Whirligig have—since you and I went to my office to chat—been transported to the airfield, from which point they were taken aloft—" he consulted his watch, "five minutes, and fifty-five-point-six seconds ago."

"And?" asked Whitlow, casually unbuckling the straps of his brief case and slipping out his sandwich.

"The plane will be within bomb vector of this target in just ten seconds!" said Webb, confidently.

Whitlow listened, for the next nine seconds, then, right on schedule, he heard the muted droning of a plane, high up. Webb joggled him with an elbow. "They'll fall faster than any known enemy weapon can track them," he said, smugly.

"That's fortunate," said Whitlow, munching desultorily at his sandwich. "Bud dere's wud thig budduhs bee."

"Hmmf?" asked the general.

Whitlow swallowed hastily. "I say, there's one thing bothers me."

"What's that?" asked the general.

"Well, it's just that gravity is centripetal, you know, and the Whirligig is centrifugal. I wondered if it might not make some sort of difference?"

"Bah!" said General Webb. "Just a minor detail."

"If you say so," Whitlow shrugged.

"There they come!" shouted the general, jumping to his feet.

Whitlow, despite his misgivings, found that he, too, was on his feet, staring skyward at the tiny dots that were detaching themselves from the shining bulk of the carrier plane. As he watched, his heart beating madly, the dots grew bigger, and soon, awfully soon, they could be distinguished as man-shaped, too.

"There's— There's something wrong!" said the general. "What's that they're all shouting? It *should* be 'Geronimo' ..."

Whitlow listened. "It sounds more like 'Eeeeeeyaaaaa'," he said.

And it was.

The sound grew from a distant mumble to a shrieking roar, and the next thing, each man had landed upon the concrete-and-paint bull's-eye before the reviewing stand.

Whitlow sighed and re-buckled his brief case.

The general moaned and fainted.

And the men of the Whirligig, all of whom had landed on the target head-first, did nothing, their magnificently muscled legs waving idly in a sudden gentle gust of desert breeze.

THE END

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