

# Big Beck

He lived in a dim world where nothing  
was certain except his conviction  
that the Doctor was a dangerous enemy

BY TED BAWER

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDREW CALAFATELLO

HE'D FINISHED IN PSYCHO around 2 A.M. After that he had begged God to please let him sleep. Now it was almost 4 o'clock and he was still tossing in the half-sleep of overwhelming fatigue, tormented by the sharpened sense of hearing which is the real hell of insomnia.

The ship's engines somewhere far below seemed to be pounding in the next room, so that a part of him tensed against the gradual approach of imaginary heavy artillery. Once he sat up at the sound of distant screaming. Way aft, it must have been, and very faint, and as he lifted himself on an elbow to listen, it stopped. Then, after a pause, and almost in response to his anticipation, the dark silence was startled by the phone in the next compartment. He could hear Jacoby's voice, sluggish with sleep, and indistinct through the intervening wall, responding, first dazedly, then muttering profanely about lousy, goddamned dressings, why don't people leave them alone who don't know the first thing about them. A receiver was slammed on its hook, and there were the sounds of a man dressing in a hurry, then an abruptly opened door, a slam, and footsteps on the double, quickly dying in the direction of the surgical wards.

And silence again.

And the throbbing of engines, the rushing sound of the ocean against the hull, and a rhythmic pulsation which could only have been his own heart's beating.

And artillery again, men falling, rising, blood on their faces, grotesque faces without eyes, massive, ugly men with tear-streaked, bloody faces and broken bodies, trying to rise against the rhythmic gun-butt blows on their skulls, their backs, against the guns which fired point-blank into the mud where they crawled and bled and tried to move again and again and again—

His wire-tight body jumped convulsively as his own phone shrieked in the dark. He grabbed for the receiver

in a swift, automatic motion before it could ring again, held it limply, exhausted and drenched with cold sweat. He could hear the voice at the other end, lifted the receiver slowly to his ear, his body trembling with the effort.

"Dr. Criscuolo?"

"Yuh . . ."

"Corporal Gaines, sir."

"What is it?"

"It's Beck, sir. The amytal's wearing off."

"Yuh . . ." Silence.

"You'll be down, sir?"

"In a minute. Set up another dose."

"Yes, sir."

Click.

He missed the phone cradle, found it.

He'd been waiting for that call, a part of him refusing to sleep until it came. Now suddenly he wanted nothing more in this world than to sink into the softness of the bed. He didn't want to go to psycho. He hated the idea of it. Couldn't take it. Not as tired as this. . . .

If he could only sleep. . . .

But Beck—it had taken four men to hold Beck down for that last shot. Now he was coming out of it.

He swung out of the bed, found the table lamp.

You had to expect it with guys like Beck. With guys like any of them in psycho. You just had to settle on an every-third-hour routine and give up sleeping like a human being for the duration. A shot in the vein every three hours, and more often when they're Beck's size. Keep them under until they behave. You don't dare let them wake up. Not in psycho. Not these poor bastards living in a world of their own, not a guy like Beck, anyway—big Beck, six-foot-four Sergeant Beck, Killer Beck, Beck the Monster, Beck the former goodnatured grocer turned soldier, who passionately murdered his way across the enemy-infested countrysides of France and Germany until he forgot that there were sides and, like a military robot gone haywire, began killing his own men.

He was part of the "cargo" Cris had supervised in its transportation from the hospital in Salisbury to Scotland. Cris had felt sorry for him, and when the other America-bound casualties had been accounted for, he spent a little time with him. That was the first time Beck attempted to kill him. Cris put him out with sedatives and kept him under until the hospital train was unloaded. In Glasgow they boarded the *Queen Mary*, and Cris stowed Beck into the makeshift mental ward with the other psycho cases, glad the ordeal was over. He hadn't slept at all that first leg of the journey. A train ride is no picnic for badly wounded men or their doctors.

And he hadn't slept since. Now it (Continued on page 70)