

If Phelan was right, all worlds in the cosmos were freaks; only this one behaved as a world should. And its spectacular inhabitant was . . .



SNUFFLES

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Illustrated by HARRINGTON

I

"I ALWAYS said we'd find one of the them that was fun," remarked Brian. "There's been entirely too much solemnity in the universe. Did you never panic on thinking of the multiplicity of systems?"

"Never," said Georgina.

"Not even when, having set down a fine probability for the totality of worlds, you realized suddenly that you had to raise it by a dozen powers yet?"

"What's to panic?"

"Not even when it comes over you, 'This isn't a joke; this is serious; every one of them is serious.'?"

"'Cosmic intimidation,' Belloc called it. And it does tend to minimize a person."

"And did you never hope that out of all that prodigality of worlds, one at least should have been made for fun? One should have been made by a wild child or a mixed-up goblin just to put the rest of them in proper perspective, to deflate the pomposity of the cosmos."

"You believe this is it, Mr. Carroll?"

"Yes. Bellota was made for fun. It is a joke, a caricature, a burlesque. It is a planet with baggy pants and a putty nose. It is a midget world with floppy shoes and a bull-roarer voice. It

was designed to keep the cosmos from taking itself too seriously. The law of levity here conspires against the law of gravity."

"I never heard of the law of levity. And Mr. Phelan believes that he will soon have the explanation for the peculiar gravity here."

"The law of levity does not apply to you, Georgina. You are immune. But I spoke lightly."

The theory that Bellota was made for a joke had not been proved; no more were the other theories about it. But it was a sport, a whole barrellful of puzzles, a place of interest all out of proportion to its size, eminently worthy of study. And the six of them had been set down there to study it.

SOCIABILITY impels — and besides they weren't a bad bunch at all. Meet them now, or miss them forever. They were six.

1. John Hardy. Commander and commando. As capable a man as ever lived. A good-natured conglomerate of clanking iron who was always in control. A jack of all techniques, a dynamic optimist. He had the only laugh that never irritated, however often heard, and he handled danger cavalierly. He was a blue-eyed, red-headed giant, and his face was redder than his hair.

2. William Malaquais (Uncle

Billy) Cross. Engineer, machinist extraordinary, gadgeteer, theorist, arguefier, first mate, navigator, and balladier. Billy was a little older than the rest of them, but he hadn't mellowed. He said that he was still a green and growing boy.

3. Daniel Phelan. Geologist and cosmologist, and holder of heretical doctrines about field forces. "Phelan's Corollary" may be known to you; and, if so, you must be both intrigued and frustrated by the inherent contradictions that prevented its acceptance. A highly professional man in the domain of magnetism and gravity, he was also a low amateur rake and a determined wolf. A dude. Yet he could carry his share of the load.

4. Margaret Cot. Artist and photographer, botanist and bacteriologist. Full of chatter and a sort of charm. Better-looking than anyone deserves to be. Salty, really the newest thing in salinity. A little bit wanton. And a little kiddish.

5. Brian Carroll. Naturalist. And natural. He had been hunting for something all his life, but did not know what it was, and was not sure that he would know it when he found it, but he hoped that it would be different. "O Lord," he would pray, "however it ends don't let it have a pat ending. That I couldn't

stand." He believed that anything repeated was trite. And it was for that reason that there were pleasant surprises for him on Bellota.

6. Georgina Chantal. Biologist and iceberg. But the capsule description may be unjust. For she was more than biologist and much more than iceberg. Frosty only when frostiness was called for, she was always proper and often friendly. But she was no 'Margie Cot, and in contrast perhaps she was a little icy.

Actually there wasn't a bad apple in that basket.

THE MOST obvious peculiarity of Bellota was its gravity, which was half that of Earth's, though the circumference of the globe was no more than a hundred miles. It was on account of this peculiarity that Daniel Phelan was on the little planet in the first place. For it was held by those who decide such things that there was a bare chance that he could find the answer; no one else had found it. His own idea was that his presence there was fruitless: he already had the answer to the gravity behavior of Bellota; it was contained in Phelan's Corollary. Bellota was the only body that behaved as it should. It was the rest of the universe that was atypical.

And in other ways Bellota was a joker. Fruits proved noisome and thorns succulent. Rinds and shells were edible and heart-meat was not. Proto-butterflies stung like hornets, and lizards secreted honeylike manna. And the water — the water was soda water — sheer carbonated soda water.

If you wanted it any other way, you caught rain water, and this was so highly nitric that drinking it was something of an experience also; for the thunder storms there were excessive.

No, they were not excessive, claimed Phelan, they were normal. It was on all other atmospheric planets known that there was a strange deficiency of thunder showers.

Here, at least, there was no deficiency: it rained about five minutes out of every fifteen, and the multi-colored lightning was omnipresent. In all their stay there, the party was never without the sound of thunder, near or distant, nor of the probe of lightning. For this reason there could be no true darkness there, not even between the flashes; there were flashes between the flashes. Here was meteorology concentrated, without dilution, without filler.

"But it is always different," said Georgina. "Every lightning flash is entirely different, just as

every snowflake is different. Will it snow here?"

"Certainly," said Phelan. "Though it did not last night, it should tonight. Snow before midnight and fog by morning. After all, midnight and morning are only an hour apart."

At that time they had been on the planet only a few hours.

"And here the cycle is normal," said Phelan. "It is normal nowhere else. It is natural for humans and all other creatures to sleep for two hours and to wake for two hours. That is the fundamental cycle. Much of our misbehavior and perversity comes from trying to adapt to the weird day-night cycle of whatever alien world we happened to be borne on. Here within a week we will return to that normal that we never knew before."

"Within what kind of a week?" asked Hardy.

"Within Bellota's twenty-eight-hour week. And do you realize that the projected working week here would be just six and two-thirds hours? I always thought that that was long enough to work anyhow."

There were no seas there, only the soda-water lakes that covered a third of the area. And there were flora and fauna that burlesqued more than they really resembled Earth's and kindred worlds'.

The trees were neither deciduous nor evergreen (though Brian Carroll said that they were ever-green), nor palm. They were trees as a cartoonist might draw them. And there were animals that made the whole idea of animals ridiculous.

And there was Snuffles.

SNUFFLES was a bear — possibly — and of sorts. The bear is himself a caricature of animal-kind, somehow a giant dog, somehow a shaggy man, an ogre, and also a toy. And Snuffles was a caricature of a bear.

Billy Cross tried to explain to them about bears. Billy was an old bear man.

"It is the only animal that children dream of without having seen or been told about. Moncrief by his recall methods has studied thousands of early childhood dreams. Children universally dream of bears, Tahitian children subject to no ursine influence in themselves or their ancestry, Australian children, town tykes before they ever saw a bear toy. They dream of bears. The bear is the boogerman. Bears live in the attics of old childhood houses. They did in my own and in thousands of others. Their existence there is not of adult suggestion, but of innate childhood knowledge.

"But there is a duality about

this boogerman. He is friendly and fascinating as well as frightening. The boogerman is not a story that adults tell to children. It is the only story that children tell to adults who have forgotten it."

"But how could you know?" asked Margie Cot. "I had no idea that little boys dreamed of bears. I thought that only girls did. And with us I had come to believe that the bear dreams symbolized grown man in his fundamental aspect, both fascinating and frightening."

"To you, Margie, everything symbolizes grown man in his fundamental aspect. Now the boogerman is also philologically interesting, being actually one of the less than two hundred Indo-European root words. Though *Bog* has come to mean God in the Slavic, yet the booger was earlier an animal-man demiurge, and the Sanscrit *bhaga* is not without this meaning. In the sense of a breaker, a smasher, it is in the Old Irish as *bong*, and the early Lithuanian as *bang*. In the sense of a devourer, it survives in the Greek root *phag*, and as one who puts to flight it is in the Latin *fug*. We have, of course, the Welsh *bwg*, a ghost, and *bogey* has been used in the meaning of the devil. And we have *bugbear*, which rounds out the circuit."

"So you make God and the Bear and the Devil one," said Georgina.

"In many mythologies it was the bear who made the world," said John Hardy. "After that he did nothing distinguished. It was felt by his devotees that he had done enough."

Snuffles was not a bear exactly. He was a pseudo-ursine. He was big and clumsy, and bounced around on four legs, and then up on two. He was friendly, chillingly so, for he was huge. And he snuffled like some old track-eating train.

He was a clown, but he seemed to observe the line that the visitors drew. He did not come really close, though often too close for comfort. He obeyed, or when he did not wish to obey, he pretended to misunderstand. He was the largest animal on Bellota, and there seemed to be only one of him.

"**W**HY DO we call him he?" asked Brian Carroll, the naturalist. "Only surgery could tell for sure, but it appears that Snuffles has no sex at all. There is no way I know of that he could reproduce. No wonder there is only one of him; the wonder is that there should be any at all. Where did he come from?"

"That could be asked of any

creature," said Daniel Phelan. "The question is, where is he going? But he shows a certain sophistication in this. For it is only with primitives that toy animals (and he is a toy, you know) are sexed. A modern teddy bear or a toy panda isn't. Nor were the toys in the European tradition except on the fringes (Tartary before the ninth century, Ireland before the fifth) since pre-classical times. But before those times in its regions, and beyond its pale even today, the toy animals are totems and are sexed, exaggeratedly so."

"Yes, there is no doubt about it," said Brian. "He does not have even the secondary characteristics of mammal, marsupial, or what you will. But he has characteristics enough of his own."

Snuffles was, among other things, a mimic. Should a book be left around, and they were a bookish bunch, he would take it in his forepaws and hold it as to read, and turn the pages, turn them singly and carefully. He could use his padded paws as hands. His claws were retractable and his digits projective. They were paws, or they were claws, or they were hands; and he had four of them.

He unscrewed caps and he could use a can opener. He kept the visitors in firewood, once he understood that they had need

of it, and that they wanted dry sticks of a certain size. He'd bite the sticks to length, stack them in small ricks, bind them with lianas, and carry them to the fire. He'd fetch water and put it on to boil. And he gathered bellotas by the bushel.

Bellota means an acorn, and they had named the planet that from the profusion of edible fruit-nuts that looked very like the acorn. These were a delicacy that became a staple.

And Snuffles could talk. All his noises were not alike. There was the "snokle, snokle, snokle" that meant he was in a good humor, as he normally was. There was a "snook, snook" and a "snoof." There were others similar in vocables but widely varied in tone and timbre. Perhaps Billy Cross understood him best, but they all understood him a little.

In only one thing did Snuffles become stubborn. He marked off a space, a wild old pile of rocks, and forbade them to enter its circle. He dug a trench around it and he roared and bared foot-long fangs if any dared cross the trench. Billy Cross said that Snuffles did this to save face; for Commander John Hardy had previously forbidden Snuffles a certain area, their supply dump and weapons center. Hardy had drawn a line around it with a mattock

and made it clear that Snuffles should never cross that line. The creature understood at once, and he went and did likewise.

THE PARTY had been set down there for two Earth weeks—twelve Bellota weeks—to study the life of the planetoid, to classify, to take samples, tests, notes, and pictures; to hypothesize and to build a basis for theory. But they ventured hardly at all from their original campsite. There was such an amazing variety of detail at hand that it would take many weeks even to begin to classify it.

A feature there was the rapidity of enzyme and bacterial action. A good wine could be produced in four hours, and a fungus-cheese made from grub exudations in even less time. And in the new atmosphere thoughts also seemed to ferment rapidly.

"Every person makes one major mistake in his life," said John Hardy to them once. "Were it not for that, he would not have to die."

"What?" quizzed Phelan. "Few die violently nowadays. How could all die for a mistake?"

"Yet it's a fact. Deaths are not really explained, for all the explanations of medicine. A death will be the result of one single much earlier rashness, of one weakening of the mind or

body, or a crippling of the regenerative force. A person will be alive and vital. And one day he will make one mistake. In that moment the person begins to die. But if a man did not make that one mistake, he would not die."

"Poppycrack," said Daniel Phelan.

"I wonder if you know the true meaning of 'poppycrack'?" asked Billy Cross. "It is poppy-talk, opium-talk, the rambling of one under the narcotic. Now the element 'crack' in the word is not (as you would imagine) from either the Norwegian *kok*, a dung heap, nor from *coquarde* in the sense that Rabelais uses it, but rather from—"

"Poppycrack," said Phelan again. He disliked Billy Cross's practice of analyzing all words, and he denied his assertion that a man who uses a word without feeling its full value is a dealer in false coinage, in fact a liar.

"But if a person dies only by making a mistake, how does an animal die?" asked Margie Cot. "Does he also make a mistake?"

"He makes the mistake of being an animal and not a man," said Phelan.

"There may be no clear line between animal and man," Margie argued.

"There is," said Phelan, and three others agreed.

"There is not," said Billy Cross.

"An animal is paradoxically a creature without an *anima* — without a soul," said Phelan. "This comes oddly from me because I also deny it to man in its usual connotation. But there is a total difference, a line that the animal cannot cross, and did not cross. When we arrive at wherever we are going, he will still be skulking in his den."

"Here, at least, it is the opposite of that," said Brian Carroll. "Snuffles sleeps in the open, and it is we who den."

IT WAS TRUE. Around their campsite, their supply dump and weapons center, there were three blind pockets, grottoes back in the rocks. Billy Cross, Daniel Phelan, and Margie Cot each had one of these, filled with the tools of their specialties. Here they worked and slept. And these were dens.

John Hardy himself slept in the weapons center, inside the circle where Snuffles was forbidden. And the hours that he did not sleep he kept guard. Hardy made a fetish of security. When he slept, or briefly wandered about the region, someone else must always take a turn at guard, weapon at hand. There was no relaxation of this, no exception, no chance of a mistake.

And Snuffles, the animal, who

right out slept in the open ("Is it possible," Brian asked himself, "that I am the only one who notices it? It is possible that it happens?") did not get wet. It rained everywhere on that world. But it did not rain on Snuffles.

"The joy of this place is that it is not pat," said Brian Carroll. As previously noted, he hated anything that was pat. "We could be here for years and never see the end of the variety. With the insects there may be as many species as there are individuals. Each one could almost be regarded as a sport, as if there were no standard to go by. The gravity here is cockeyed. Please don't analyze the word, Billy; I doubt myself that it means rooster-eyed. The chemistry gives one a hopeful feeling. It uses the same building blocks as the chemistry elsewhere, but it is as if each of those blocks were just a little off. The lightning is excessive, as though whoever was using it had not yet tired of the novelty; I never tired of the novelty of lightning myself. And when this place ends, it will not have a pat ending. Other globes may turn to lava or cold cinders. Bellota will pop like a soap bubble, or sag like spaghetti, or turn into an exploding world of grasshoppers. But it won't conform. I love Bellota. And I do hate a pat ending."

"There is an old precept of 'Know thyself,'" said Georgina Chantal. They talked a lot now, as they were often wakeful, not yet being accustomed to the short days and nights of Bellota. "Its variant is 'Look within.' Look within, but our eyes point outward! The only way we can see our faces is in a mirror or in a picture. Each of us has his mirror, and mine is more often the microscope. But we cannot see ourselves as we are until we see ourselves distorted. That is why Snuffles is also a mirror for all of us here. We can't understand why we're serious until we know why he's funny."

"We may be the distortion and he the true image," said Billy Cross. "He lacks jealousy and pomposity and greed and treachery — all the distortions."

"We do not know that he lacks them," said Daniel Phelan.

So they talked away the short days and nights on Bellota, and accumulated data.

II

WHEN IT happened, it happened right in narrow daylight. The phrase was Brian's, who hated a pat phrase. It happened right in the middle of the narrow two-hour Bellota day.

All were awake and aware. John

Hardy stood in the middle of the weapons center on alert guard with that rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Billy and Daniel and Margaret were at work in their respective dens; and Brian and Georgina, who did not den, were gathering insects at the open lower end of the valley, but they had the center in their sight.

There was an unusual flash of lightning, bright by even Bellota standards, and air snapped and crackled. And there was an unusual sound from Snuffles, far removed from his usual "snokle, snokle" talk.

And in a moment benignity seemed to drain away from that planet.

Snuffles had before made as if to cross the line, and then scooted off, chortling in glee, which is perhaps why the careful John Hardy was not at first alarmed.

Then Snuffles charged with a terrifying sound.

But Hardy was not tricked entirely; it would be impossible for man or beast to trick him entirely. He had a split second, and was not one to waste time making a decision, and he was incapable of panic. What he did, he did of choice. And if it was a mistake, why, even the shrewdest decision goes into the books as a mistake if it fails.

He was fond of Snuffles and he gambled that it would not be necessary to kill him. It was a heavy rifle; a shoulder shot should have turned the animal. If it did not, there would not be time for another shot.

It did not, though, and there was not. Commander John Hardy made one mistake and for that he died. He died uncommonly, and he did not die from the inside out, as meaner men do.

It was ghastly, but it was over in an instant. Hardy's head was smashed and his face nearly swiped off. His back was broken and his body almost sheared in two. The great creature, with the foot-long canines and claws like twenty long knives mangled him and crushed him and shook him like a red mop, and then let go.

It may be that Brian Carroll realized most quickly the implications. He called to Georgina to come out of the valley onto the plain below, and to come out fast. He realized that the other three still alive would not even be able to come out.

INCONGRUOUSLY, a thing that went through Brian Carroll's mind was a tirade of an ancient Confederate general against ancient General Grant, to the effect that the blundering fool had moved into a position that commanded both river and

hill and blocked three valley mouths, and it could only be hoped that Grant would move along before he realized his advantage.

But Brian was under no such delusion. Snuffles realized his advantage; he occupied the supply dump and weapons center, and commanded the entrances to the three blind pockets that were the dens of Billy Cross and Daniel Phelan and Margie Cot.

With one move, Snuffles had killed the leader, cornered three of the others, and cut off the remaining two from base weapons, to be hunted down later. There was nothing unintentional about it. Had he chosen another moment, when another than John Hardy was on guard, then Hardy alive would still somehow have been a threat to him, even weaponless. But, with Hardy dead, all the rest were no match for the animal.

Brian and Georgina lingered on the edge of the plain to watch the other three, though they knew that their own lives depended on getting out of there.

"Two could get away," said Georgina, "if a third would make a rush for it and force Snuffles into another charge."

"But none of them will," said Brian. "The third would die."

It was a game, but it couldn't last long. Phelan whimpered and



tried to climb the rock wall at the blind end of his pocket. Margie cajoled and told Snuffles how good friends they had always been, and wouldn't he let her go? Billy Cross filled his pipe and lit it and sat down to wait it out.

Phelan went first, and he died like a craven. But no one, not sure how he himself might die, should hold that overly against a man.

Snuffles thundered in, cut him down in the middle of a scream, and rushed back to his commanding spot in the middle of the weapons center.

Margie spread out her hands and began to cry, softly, not really in terror, when he attacked. The pseudo-bear broke her neck, but with a blow that was almost gentle in comparison with the others, and he scurried again to the center.

And Billy Cross puffed on his pipe. "I hate to go like this, Snuff, old boy. In fact, I hate to go at all. If I made a mistake to die for, it was in being such a pleasant, trusting fellow. I wonder if you ever noticed, Snuff, what a fine, upstanding fellow I really am?"

And that was the last thing Billy Cross ever said, for the big animal struck him dead with one tearing blow. And the smoke still drifted in the air from Billy's pipe.

THEN it was like black thunder coming out of the valley after the other two, for that clumsy animal could move. They had a start on him, Brian and Georgina had, of a hundred yards. And soon their terror subsided to half-terror as they realized that the shoulder-shot bear animal could not catch them till they were exhausted.

In a wild run, they could even increase their lead over him. But they would tire soon and they did not know when he would tire. He had herded them away from the campsite and the weapons. And they were trapped with him on a small planet.

Till day's end, and through the night, and next day (maybe five hours in all) he followed them until they could hardly keep going. Then they lost him, but in the dark did not know if he was close or not. And at dawn they saw him sitting up and watching them from a quarter of a mile away.

But now the adversaries rested and watched. The animal may have stiffened up from his shot. The two humans were so weary that they did not intend to run on again till the last moment.

"Do you think there is any chance that it was all a sudden fury and that he may become friendly again?" Georgina asked Brian.

"It was not a sudden fury. It was a series of very calculated moves."

"Do you think we could skirt around and beat him back to the weapons center?"

"No. He has chosen a spot where he can see for miles. And he has the interceptor's advantage — any angle we take has to be longer than his. We can't beat him back and he knows it."

"Do you think he knows that the weapons are weapons?"

"Yes."

"And that all our signal equipment is left at the center and that we can't communicate?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he's smarter than we are?"

"He was smarter in selecting his role. It is better to be the hunter than the hunted. But it isn't unheard of for the hunted to outsmart the hunter."

"Brian, do you think you would have died as badly as Daniel or as well as Billy?"

"No. No to both."

"I was always jealous of Margie, but I loved her at the end. She didn't scream. She didn't act scared. Brian, what will happen to us now?"

"Possibly we will be saved in the nick of time by the Marines."

"I didn't know they had them any more. Oh, you mean the ship. But that's still a week away,

Earth time. Do you think Snuffles knows it is to come back for us?"

"Yes, he knows. I'm sure of that."

"Do you think he knows when it will come?"

"Yes, I have the feeling that he knows that too."

"But will he be able to catch us before then?"

"I believe that all parties concerned will play out the contest with one eye on the clock."

SNUFFLES had now developed a trick. At sundown of the short day, he would give a roar and come at them. And they would have to start their flight just as the dark commenced. They ran more noisily than he and he would always be able to follow them; but they could never be sure in the dark that he was following, or how closely. They would have to go at top panting, gasping, thumping speed for an hour and a half; then they would ease off for a little in the half hour before dawn. And in the daytime one of them had to watch while the other slept. But Snuffles could sleep as he would, and they were never able to slip away without his waking instantly.

Moreover, he seemed to herd them through the fertile belt on their night runs and let them rest on the barrens in the daytime.

It wasn't that food was really scarce; it was that it could only be gathered during time taken from flight and sleep and guard duty.

They also came on a quantity of red fruit that had a weakening and dizzying effect on them, yet they could hardly leave it alone. There was a sort of bean sprout that had the same effect, and a nut, and a cereal grass whose seed they winnowed with their hands as they went along.

"This is a narcotic belt," said Brian. "I wish we had the time to study it longer, and yet we may get all too much of studying it. We have no idea how far it goes, and this method of testing its products on ourselves may be an effective one, but dangerous."

From that time on, they were under the influence of the narcotics. They dreamed vividly while awake and walking. And they began to suffer hallucinations which they could not distinguish from reality.

It was only a Bellota day or so after their dreaming began that Brian Carrol felt that the mind of Snuffles was speaking to him. Carroll was an intelligent amateur in that field and he put it to the tests; there are valid tests for it. And he concluded that it was hallucination and not telepathy. Still (and he could see it coming) there would be a time

when he would accept his hallucination and believe that the ursine was talking to him. And that would signal that he was crazy and no longer able to evade death there.

Carroll renounced (while he still had his wits) his future belief in the nonsense, just as a man put to torture may renounce anything he concedes or confesses or denies under duress.

YET, whatever frame it was placed in, Snuffles talked to him from a distance. "Why do you think me a bear because I am in a bear skin? I do not think you a man, though you are in a man skin. You may be a little less. And why do you believe you will die more bravely than Daniel? The longer you run, the meaner will be your death. And you still do not know who I am?"

"No," said Brian Carroll aloud.

"No what?" asked Georgina Chantal.

"It seems that the bear is talking to me, that he has entered my mind."

"Me also. Could it be, or is it the narcotic fruit?"

"It couldn't be. It is hallucination brought on by the narcotics, and tiredness from travel, and lack of sleep — and our shock at seeing our friends killed by a toy turned into a monster. There

are tests to distinguish telepathic reception from hallucination: objective corroboration, impossible at this time (with Snuffles in his present mood) and probably impossible at any time; sentient parallelism — surely uncertain, for I have more in common with millions of humans than with one pseudo-ursine; circumstantial validity and point-for-point clarity — this is negative, for I know myself to be fevered and confused and my senses unreliable in other matters. By every test that can be made, the indication is that it is not telepathy, that it is hallucination."

"But there isn't any way to be sure, is there, Brian?"

"None, Georgina; no more than I can prove that it is not a troupe of Boy Scouts around a campfire that is causing pain and burning in my gullet, that it is really the narcotic fruit or something else I have eaten conspiring with my weariness and apprehension to discomfort me. I cannot prove it is not Boy Scouts and I cannot prove it is not telepathy, but I consider both unlikely."

"I don't think it is unlikely at all, Brian. I think that Snuffles is talking to me. When you get a little nuttier and tired, then you'll believe it too."

"Oh, yes — I'll believe it then — but it won't be true."

"It won't matter if it's true or

not. Snuffles will have gained his point. Do you know that Snuffles is king of this world?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"He just told me he was. He told me that if I would help him catch you, he would let me go. But I won't do it. I have become fond of you, Brian. Did you know that I never did like men before?"

"Yes. You were called the iceberg."

"But now I like you very much."

"You have no one else left to like."

"It isn't that. It's the mood I'm in. And I won't help Snuffles catch you unless he gives me very much better reasons for it."

Damn the girl! If she believed Snuffles talked to her, then for all practical purposes he did. And, however the idea of a trade for her life had been implanted in her mind, it would grow there.

Now Snuffles talked to Brian Carroll again, and it was somehow a waste of time to intone the formality that it was hallucination only.

"You still do not know what I am, but you will have to learn it before you die. Hardy knew it at the last minute. Cross guessed it from the first. Phelan still isn't sure. He goes about and looks

back at his body lying there, and he still isn't sure. Some people are very hard to convince. But the girl knew it and she spread out her hands."

In his fever, that was the way the bear animal talked to him.

They ate leaves now and buds. They would have no more of the narcotic fruits even if they had to starve. But narcosis left them slowly, and the pursuit of them tightened.

It was just at sunset one day that disaster struck at Brian. The bear had near hypnotized him into immobility, talking inside his head. Georgina had started on before him and repeatedly called for him to follow, but for some reason he loitered. When Snuffles made his sudden sundown charge, there seemed no escaping him. Brian was trapped on a rim-rock. Georgina had already taken a winding path to the plain below. Brian hesitated, then held his ground for the bruin's charge. He believed that he could draw Snuffles on, and then break to the left or the right at the last instant, and perhaps the animal would plunge over the cliff.

But old Snuff modified but did not halt his charge at the last minute. He came in bottom-side first, like an elephant sliding bases, and he knocked Brian off the cliff.

There are few really subjective

accounts of dying, since most who die do not live to tell about it. But the way it goes is this:

First one hangs in space; then he is charged by the madly rising ground armed with trees and rocks and weapons. After that is a painful sleep, and much later a dazed wakening.

III

HE was traveling upside down, that was sure, and roughly, though at a slow rate of speed. Perhaps that is the normal way for people to travel after they are dead. He was hung from the middle in an odd doubled-up manner, and seemed supported and borne along by something of a boatlike motion, yet of a certain resilience and strength that was more living than even a boat. It had a rough softness, this thing, and a pleasant fragrance.

But, though it was bright morning now, it was hard to get a good look at the thing with which he was in contact. All he could see was grass flowing slowly by, and heels.

Heels?

What was this all about? Heels and backs of calves, no more.

He was being carried, carried slung like a sack over her shoulder by Georgina. For the

"Did any of you ever make a world? I tell you that there are a million things to remember all at once. And there can be no such thing as a bad world, since each of them is a triumph. Whether it was that I made the others and I forgot them is only a premise; or whether I will make them in the future, and they are only now talked of out of their proper time. But some of your own mythologies indicate that I made your own.

"I would tell you more, only you would not understand it. But after I have conserved your matter, then you will know all these things."

"**S**NUFFLES is cranky with me today," said Georgina Chantal. "Is he also cranky with you?"

"Yes," said Brian Carroll.

"He says that he made Bellota. Did he tell you that too? Do you believe it?"

"He told me. I do not believe it. We are delirious. Snuffles cannot communicate."

"You keep saying that, but you aren't sure. He told me that when he chews us up he will take a piece of me and a piece of you and chew them together and make a new thing, since we are belatedly taken with each other. Isn't that nice?"

"How cozy."

"I wonder why he made the grass so sharp, though. There is no reason for it to be like that."

"Why, and what?"

"Snuffles. Why did he make the grass so sharp? My shoes are nearly gone and it's killing me."

"Georgina hold onto what's left of your mind. Snuffles did not make the grass or anything else. He is only an animal, and we are sick and walking in delirium."

So they walked on a while, for evening had come. Then the voice of Snuffles came again inside the head of Brian.

"How was I to know that the grass should not be sharp? Are not all pointed things sharp? Who would have guessed that it should be soft? If you had told me gently, and without shaming me, I would have changed it at once. Now I will not. Let it wound you!"

So they lived with it, and continued on for several short days and nights.

"Brian, do you think that Snuffles knows the world is round?"

"If he made it, he must know it,"

"Oh, yes, I had forgotten."

"Dammit, girl, I was being ironic! And you are now quite nutty, and I hardly less so. Of course he didn't make it. And of course he doesn't know that it's round. He's only an animal."

"Then we have an advantage back again."

"Yes. I'd have noticed it before if I hadn't been so confused. We are more than halfway around the little planet. He is no longer between us and our weapons center, but he behaves as though he thought he was. We have no more than forty miles to go to it. We will step up our pace, though gradually. Our old camp valley is prominent enough so that we could recognize it within several miles either way, and we can navigate that close. And if he seems to say in your mind that he is onto our trick, do not believe him. The animal does not really talk to our minds."

BUT THEIR narcosis still increased. "It isn't a narcotic belt" said Brian. "It is a narcotic season on all Bellota — a built-in saturnalia. But we have not been able to enjoy the carnival."

"Snuffles shows up well as a carnival king, though, don't you think? It is easier to believe in time of carnival that he made the cosmos. I went to the big carnival once in Nola when I was a little girl. There was a big bear wearing a crown on one of the floats, and I believe that he was king of the carnival. It wasn't an ordinary bear. I am sure now that it represented Snuffles, though I was only six years old

when I saw it. Do you think that Snuffles' explanation of the law of gravity here is better than Phelan's?"

"More easily understandable at least than the corollary, and probably more honest. I always thought that the corollary also embraced a simple mathematical error and that Phelan stuck to it out of perversity."

"It is one thing to stick to an error. It is another to build a world to conform to it. Brian, do you know what hour it is?"

"It is the three hundred and twelfth since we were set down."

"And they return for us at the three hundred and thirty-sixth. We will be back at our campsite and in control by then, won't we?"

"If we are ever to make it back and be in control, we should make it by then. Are you tired, Georgina?"

"No. I will never again be tired. I have been walking in a dream too long for that. But I never felt more pleasurable than now. I look down at my feet which are a sorry mess, but they don't seem to be my feet. Only a little while ago I felt sorry for a girl in such a state, and then I came to half realize that the girl was me. But the realization didn't carry a lot of conviction. It doesn't seem like me."

"I feel disembodied myself.

thing of the pleasant fragrance was Georgina Chantal.

She set him down then. It was a very rough valley they were in, and he saw that they had traveled perhaps four miles from the base of the rim-rock; and Snuffles had settled down in the morning light a quarter of a mile behind them.

"Georgina, did you carry me all night?"

"Yes."

"How could you?"

"I changed shoulders sometimes. And you aren't very heavy. This is only a half-gravity planet. Besides, I'm very strong. I could have carried you even on Earth."

"Why wasn't I killed by the fall?"

"Snuffles says he isn't ready to kill you yet, that he could kill you any time he wanted to with the lightning or rock or poison berry. But you did hit terribly hard. I was surprised to be able to pick you up in one piece. And now Snuffles says that I have lost my last chance."

"How?"

"Because I carried you away from him before he could get down the cliff in the dark. Now he says he will kill me too."

"Snuff is inconsistent. If he could kill me any instant with the lightning, why would he be angered if you carried me away from him?"

"I thought of that too. But he says he has his own reasons. And that lightning — do you know that it doesn't lighten all the time everywhere on Bellota? Only in a big circle around Snuffles, as a tribute to him. I've noticed myself that when we get a big lead over him, we almost move clear out of the lightning sphere."

"Georgina, that animal doesn't really talk to us. It is only our imaginations. It is not accurate to so personify it."

"It may not be accurate, but if that isn't talk he puts out, then I don't know talk. And a lot of his talk he makes come true. But I don't care if he does kill me for saving you. I'm silly over you now."

"We are both of us silly, Georgina, from the condition we are in. But he can't talk to us. He's only an animal run amok. If it were anything else, it would mean that much of what we know is not so."

BRIAN had the full effect of it one sunny afternoon a couple of Bellota days later. He was dozing and Georgina was on guard when Snuffles began to talk inside his head.

"You insult me that you do not recognize my identity. When Hardy said that in many mythologies it was the Bear who made

the world, he had begun to guess who I was. I am the creator and I made the world. I have heard that there are other worlds besides Bellota, and I am not sure whether I made them or not. But if they are there, I must have made them. They could not have made themselves. And this I did make.

"It isn't an easy thing, or all of you would have made them, and you have not. And there is pride in creation that you could not understand. You said that Bellota was made for fun. It was not made for fun. I am the only one who knows why it was made, for I made it. And it is not a little planet; it is a grand planet. I waited for you to confess your error and be amazed at it. Since you did not, you will have to die. I made you, so I can kill you if I like. I must have made you, since I made all. And if I did not, then I made other things, red squirrels and white birds.

"You have no idea of the achievement itself. I had very little to work with and no model or plans or previous experience. And I made mistakes. I would be the last to deny that. I miscalculated the gravity, a simple mathematical error that anyone could make. The planet is too small for the gravity, but I had already embodied the calculated gravity in other works that I did

not choose to undo, and I had no material to make a larger planet. So what I have made I have made, and it will continue so. An error, once it is embodied, becomes a new truth.

"You may wonder why my birds have hair. I will confess it, I did not know how to make feathers, nor could you without template or typus. And you are puzzled that my butterflies sting and my hornets do not? But how was I to know that those fearfully colored monsters should have been harmless? It ill befits one who has never made even the smallest — but why do I try to explain this to you?

"You wonder if I am talking to you or if it is only a delusion of your mind. What is the difference? How could there be anything in your mind if I did not put it there? And do not be afraid of dying. Remember that nothing is lost. When I have the pieces of you, I will use them to make other things. That is the law of conservation of matter as I understand it.

"But do you know that the one thing desired by all is really praise? It is the impelling force, and a creator needs this more than anyone. Things and beings are made to give praise, and if they do not, they are destroyed again. You had every opportunity to give it, and instead you jeered.

But I don't believe that this comical old body that I observe will carry me much farther."

"Snuffles is trying to talk to us."

"Yes, I feel him. No, dammit, Georgina, we will not give in to that nonsense. Snuffles is only a wounded old bear that is trailing us. But our hallucination is coming again. It will take a lot of theory to cover a dual hallucination."

"Hush, I want to hear what he says."

Then Snuffles began to talk inside the heads of the two of them.

"If you know and do not tell me, then you are guilty of a peculiar affront. A maker cannot remember everything, and I had forgotten some of the things that I had made before. But we are coming on a new world now that is very like Bellota. Can it be that I have only repeated myself, and that I did not improve each time? These hills here I made once before. If you know, then you must tell me now. It may be that I cannot wait to chew your brains to find out about it. How will I ever make a better world if I make them all alike?"

"He has forgotten that he made it round, Brian."

"Georgina, he did not make anything. It is our own minds trying to reassure us that he does not know we are ahead of him

and going toward our weapons."

"But how do we both hear the same thing if he isn't talking to us?"

"I don't know. But I prefer it the way it is. I never did like easy answers."

THEN there came the evening when they were within sight of their original valley; and if they moved at full speed through the night, they should reach their campsite very soon after dawn.

"But the weariness is beginning to creep up through the narcosis," said Brian. "Now I'm desiring the effect that we tried to avoid before."

"But what has happened?"

"I believe that the narcotic period of the planet is over. The carnival is coming to an end."

"Do you know something, Brian? We did not have to go around the world at all. At any time we could have separated and outmaneuvered him. He could not have intercepted both of us going toward the weapons pile if we went different ways. But we could not bear to part."

"That is a woman's explanation."

"Well, let's see you find another one. You didn't want to be parted from me, did you, Brian?"

"No, I didn't."

It was a rough, short night,



but it would be the last. They moved in the agony of a cosmic hangover.

"I've become addicted," said Brian, "and the fruit has lost its numbing properties. I don't see how it is possible for anyone to be so tired."

"I'd carry you again if I weren't collapsing myself."

"Dammit, you couldn't! You're only a girl!"

"I am not only a girl! Nobody is only an anything. Our trouble here may have started with your thinking that Snuffles was only an animal, and he read your thoughts and was insulted."

"He did not read my thoughts. He is only an animal. And I will shoot his fuzzy hide full of holes when we get to our campsite. Let's keep on with it and not take any chances of his catching or passing us in the dark."

"How could Phelan's corollary apply to this planet and no other when he had never been here then?"

"Because, as I often suspected, Phelan had a touch of the joker in him and he composed it sardonically."

"Then he made it for fun. And do you still think that Bellota was made for fun?"

"The fun has developed a grotesque side to it. I am afraid I will have to put an end to a part of that fun. The dark is coming,

and there is our campsite, and we are in the clear. I'll make it before I drop if I have to bust a lung. There's an elephant gun with a blaster attachment that I'll take to that fur-coated phony. We're going to have bear steak for breakfast."

HE ACHIEVED the campsite. He had reached the wobbly state, but he still ran. He was inside the circle and at the gun stack, when a roar like double thunder froze his ears and his entrails.

He leaped back, fell, rolled, crawled, snaked his way out of reach; and the sudden shock of it bewildered him.

And there was Snuffles sitting in the middle of the supply dump and smoking the pipe of Billy Cross.

And when the words rattled inside Brian's head again, how could he be sure that it was hallucination and not the bear talking to him?

"You thought that I had forgotten that Bellota was round? If you knew how much trouble I had making it as round as it is, you would know that I could never forget it."

Georgina came up, but fell to her knees in despair when she saw that Snuffles was there ahead of them.

"I can't run any more, Brian,

and I know that you can't. I am down and I can never get up again. How soon will they get here?"

"The Marines?"

"Yes, the ship."

"Too late to help us. I used to wish they would be late just once. I am getting that wish, but it isn't as amusing as I anticipated."

SNUFFLES KNOCKED out his pipe then, as a man would; and laid it carefully on a rock. Then he came out and killed them: Georgina, the friendly iceberg, and Brian, who did hate a pat ending.

And Snuffles was still king of Bellota.

THE REPORT of the ship read in part:

"No explanation of the fact that no attempt seems to have been made to use the weapons, though two of the party were killed nearly a week later than the others. All were mangled by the huge pseudo-ursine which seems to have run amok from eating the local fruit, seasonally narcotic. Impossible to capture animal without unwarranted delay of takeoff time. Gravitational incongruity must await fuller classification of data."

THE NEXT world that Snuffles made embodied certain improvements, and he did correct the gravity error, but it still contained many elements of the grotesque. Perfection is a very long, very hard road.

— R. A. LAFFERTY



SNUFFLES