And It Was Good

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Illustrated by ADKINS

A moving tale of a second chance for man—and for his maker.

WHEN she came back he looked at her and put down the piece of wood which he had been carving.

He always carved in anxious moments. Many years before he had been apprenticed to a carpenter. He still loved the smooth, creamy feel and the warm tang of a good piece of wood. Usually he whittled away at it until it suggested a design to work on. More often than not it turned out to be a face, rugged peasant features with the simple wisdom of age engraved on them, or the chubby whorls of a child dimpled

with delight. Today, he thought, it might make a tree heavy with fruit and the crown of leaves.

"He's decided to do it, then"? he said, and she nodded without looking at him. She did not want to see the pain in her son's eyes. He got up and stood beside her and put his arm round her shoulders.

"When"? he asked her softly, patiently.

"Right away".

"Did you ask him if he would let me go again instead"?

"I couldn't"! she said and pulled him to her. "I couldn't bear it again after what they did to you last time".

"Am I any the worse for it"? he smiled at her. "Besides, it was a long time ago and people have changed."

"You'd suffer and you'd be away for years", she said. "I couldn't go through that. Not again".

"Is he very sad about it"? he asked.

"You know how he is when he has to do a thing like that", she said. "He said you weren't to worry too much. I was to tell you he'd like to talk to you about it later. He might want you to go there for a short visit while it's on".

He went back to his whittling, but his mind was busy with other things and the tree would not take shape.

SPRING had been late before. As the *Times* pointed out, there had been snow as late as mid-May in 1569 and at the end of April in 1782, yet the chronicles recorded bumper crops for both years. Agricultural experts advised closer pruning of fruit trees to speed budding, and an American firm of Artificial Fertilizer Manufacturers brought out a new product called 'Shoot-boost'. But the correspondence columns of the newspapers carried letters pointing out that, while spring might have been late before, this time the weather was entirely spring-like, yet still there was no sign of shoot, blossom or bud. Excessive radiation resulting from nuclear tests was blamed.

It was mid-May before the people and their governments became seriously alarmed. Trees still stood bare as in the depth of winter, lawns bore the bruising of last season's mowing but no new growth, flower beds showed the unbroken rills of after-seed raking. Farmers walked their fields day after day and crouched down to silhouette the furrows against the sky, the better to see the green whiskers when they sprouted. They prodded their heifers and ewes and went down to the villages to consult the vet. Their wives searched the hen-houses and put down extra grain and bricks of chalk.

The Pope's call to world-wide prayer and the British Government's announcement of the introduction of rationing fell on the same day. In most countries, the Pope's call found little response because the people were too busy lining up at food stores trying to lay in stocks. There were bread riots in Teheran.

RUMORS of a cattle disease began to circulate several days before official news of the full extent of the additional catastrophe was released. That night, the British Prime Minister spoke on the BBC. "With Her Majesty's consent", he said after reviewing the 'grave and disquieting situation', "I have given instructions for all available ships of the Royal Navy to put to sea immediately as an emergency fishing fleet". Meanwhile, he continued, divers and frogmen were asked to place their services at the disposal of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. They would be required to "glean nourishment for the nation from the laden larders of the deep". "Human ingenuity, skill and tenacity will conquer yet", he concluded. The Prime Minister's broadcast was followed by the announcement of emergency regulations for the disposal of dead cattle.

On 16th June, the President of the United States informed an Emergency Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations that Professor Braunweiler of Columbia University had perfected a method of extracting carbon sugar from wood. All suitable industrial plants throughout America were to be geared to the mass-production of the necessary equipment. The United States was prepared to supply the whole world with this equipment and with power-operated tree-felling implements on a lend-lease basis. Teams of instructors in the use of the equipment would be available to proceed to all parts of the world by the end of the month. The offer, which became known as USASAW, (USA SUGAR AID TO THE WORLD), was accepted with gratitude by all but the Soviet delegation.

Shortly after Sugar-Aid started, a Frenchman named Dr. Muller discovered, (in desperation, vineyards stood barren), that tree-sugar caused a fermentation in the still-plentiful needles of coniferous trees which, when distilled, resulted in a drink rich in alcohol and vitamins. He gave the drink the name 'BOIGNAC' in melancholy memory of happier days. Within six weeks, France had a surplus in the World Bank, and a French admiral was appointed to command the NATO Mediterranean fleet. Undoubtedly, boignac helped; yet, by the end of August, even that could not arrest the death rate.

ON 3rd September, a Soviet Task Force landed troops and armor at sixteen places along the East-African coast. Moscow Radio informed the world that 'the glorious forces of the USSR have taken this step under the personal command of Mr. Kruschchev to safeguard Africa's rich resources in animal life against the depredations of the Capitalist Warmongers'. Thus, the world was told, all peaceloving peoples would be assured an equitable and adequate supply of meat in the hard months to come.

At an Emergency Meeting of the NATO Council immediate counter-measures were agreed upon, but it was decided to confine retaliation to Africa and not to use nuclear weapons unless Russia did so first. The 'British Left', which had come into being after the Labor Party had split, withdrew from the House of Commons in protest, and the workers of the largest motor works in Italy assembled outside their long-closed factory to call for strike action.

By mid-December, the war in Africa had settled down to a stalemate. There was a good deal of patrolling; the opposing armies 'lived off the land', in other words on what game they could bag before the other side got it. Food-finding became more important than fighting, and hunger closed the eyes of higher command to the proximity of the enemy, except of course when the enemy was engaged in tracking the same game. Reports from the front recorded these 'patrol skirmishes', and gave account of the really violent artillery duels. Loading and firing guns required less waning energy than infantry slogging in the heavy country. The fact that the wide no-man's-land between the opposing armies formed the main hunting-ground exposed friend and foe to the same gunfire. Casualties were consequently high. The Neutral Investigating Commission appointed after much veto-ing by the United Nations—it consisted of delegates from Costa Rica, Kashmir and Monaco—found the situation rather confusing and withdrew to Cannes to consider its findings.

Early in January, a British scientist invented a Very-High-Frequency Lamp, regular exposure to which substituted a certain amount of the energy normally absorbed in food. The equipment was fantastically expensive to produce and was therefore available to very few people. A portable, cheaper and far less efficient model was mass-produced for the armed forces and essential workers. The dashing victories in Africa, forecast by enthusiastic politicians as a certain result of the new machine, did not however material-

ize. The new energy induced in picked units was expended in a redoubled quest for food. The papers reported increased patrol activity.

An agent planted by the Communists in the Ministry of Defense in London succeeded in photographing the plans of the ray-lamp. Within six weeks, a Russian version of the equipment reached the Red forces in Africa. As a result, the stalemate became staler still. Both sides began to lose control of their troops, which scattered over wide areas of Africa well outside the zone of battle; game had become scarce, and pursuit led both sides further and further afield.

ON a swampy peninsula, formed by a hairpin bend of a crocodile-infested river, a British and a French soldier had established their laager. They had joined forces to hunt for edible snakes, and a few hundred yards up-river one of them had trodden on a carelessly buried anti-personnel mine. The soggy ground had prevented the contraption from jumping as high as the designer had intended, and the dense, though leafless undergrowth had screened them from the worst of the blast.

They took it in turns to fetch water in their hats from the river and to bathe each other's wounds. Starving and feverish, neither of them knew for certain when the stranger joined them. He was not in uniform; he spoke English and French so well that they both claimed him for a fellow-countryman. He did not enlighten them, and they did not persist in their questions. He insisted on nursing them and waiting on them. He fetched water for them from the river, and he put clay from the river bank on their septic wounds; he said it would heal them. The Englishman was embarrassed to see that the stranger had tears in his eyes while he did it. To pretend that he had not noticed, the Tommy talked about the flipping bastards who strew flipping mines all over the flipping place. The stranger smiled at that and said he would try to get them some fish from the river. He was away a long time, and when the Englishman crawled down to the river to see what had happened, he saw the stranger on his knees on the river bank. He wanted to shout that one could not catch flipping fish that flipping way, but then he changed his mind and crawled back to the Frenchman. The stranger turned up a little later with his hat full of fine fish. He wanted to light a fire to cook them, but the Frenchman pointed up to where shells from both sides were hissing over them, and they ate the fish raw. It tasted wonderful.

The stranger settled down to stay with them and brought fish and water as often as they felt hungry or thirsty. When he was not otherwise engaged, he used one of their bayonets to whittle away at pieces of wood. Their wounds were clearing up fast and did not hurt any more. The Frenchman insisted on giving the stranger his gascape to sleep in because he had nothing else, and the Tommy pulled out his only spare pair of socks because the stranger's were walked to shreds.

Sometimes the stranger left them for a few days, but he always made sure that they had enough water and fish before he left. He came back dusty and dirty and tired out, but he did not seem to need much sleep. Once, when the Tommy woke in the middle of the night and wanted a drink, he saw the stranger kneeling under a nearby tree. Flipping shell-shock, probably. Poor bastard.

THE Russian soldier stumbled into their laager one evening just as they were getting ready for sleep. He dropped his rifle in his surprise and then held his hands up high because the Frenchman was groping for his bayonet. They stood for a while looking at each other until the Frenchman put his weapon down and the Russian's arms fell slowly to his sides. He watched them for a few minutes, then he saw a fishtail lying on the ground and picked it up and began to gnaw it. The Tommy glanced at his companions and crawled to the hole in the rocks behind them where they kept their supplies and gave the Russian a whole fish. The Russian grinned and took it, and while he was eating it he sat down and gradually wriggled his way closer to them. They showed him another fish and he said 'da' and they gave it to him. "First time I knew a flipping Ivan could say yes too", the Tommy said.

To their amazement, the stranger spoke to the Russian with the same ease with which he spoke English and French.

The Russian spent the night with them, and in the morning, after more fish, he wandered off. He came back dragging mounds of branches with which he built a shelter for the wounded men under one tree, and another one for the stranger. He grinned all over his broad face, pointed to the fish, to them, to himself and to the shelters. Then he shook hands all round.

That afternoon a Russian fighting patrol passed close by. The officer heard their voices, crept up behind them and threw a hand grenade among them. The stranger threw himself on top of it just as it went off. The

Englishman shot the officer through the head before the dust and smoke had cleared, and the remainder of the patrol withdrew.

WHEN they turned the stranger over, the ants were already swarming in his blood. At first they tried to brush them off with twigs, but more and more ants came. The Russian pointed to the river and gestured that it would be kindest to throw the body in. The Frenchman shook his head, and the Englishman started to drag the body to the hole in the rocks. They laid the stranger inside and rolled a rock against the entrance and sealed the gaps with clay.

They missed him a great deal. Not only because of the fish and water.

Next day the Russian left them. Before going, he banged them on the back and shook hands with them several times and tears left streaks on his dirty face.

SHE was overjoyed to have her son back with her. She could not stop looking at him for the sheer joy of it.

"Was it very terrible"? she asked.

"No", he smiled at her. "In a way it was wonderful".

"But the suffering and the killing", she said.

"I saw more than that", he said.

"Did you tell him all of it"? she asked.

"All of it". He picked up his knife and whittled away at the wood.

"And"? she insisted.

"He's angry, and sad. And at the same time he's pleased", he said, and that was all he would tell her. But she felt comforted and she knew it was going to be all right.

He shaved the last of the bark of the wood and looked at the grain and set to work. This time it would be a child, with fat round cheeks and the dimples of laughter in them. **THE END**

EDITORIAL *(Continued from page 6)*

One, find something worthwhile to stand up for now (unlike the monkeys) besides unadulterated nationalisms and sheer power to overkill. Two, stop spending so much time looking for fruit in the forest (or money in the marketplace) or, like the gorilla, we will not be able to see the woods for the trees. Three, be kind to any tree shrew you happen to meet. NL