



**E**LPHEN DeBeckett lay dying. It was time. He had lived in the world for one hundred and nine years, though he had seen little enough of it except for the children. The children, thank God, still came. He thought they were with him now: "Coppie," he whispered in a shriveled voice, "how nice to see you." The nurse did not look around, although she was the only person in the room besides himself, and knew that he was not addressing her.

The nurse was preparing the injections the doctor had ordered her to have ready. This little capsule for shock, this to rally his strength, these half-dozen others to shield him from his pain. Most of them would be used. DeBeckett was dying in a pain that once would have been unbearable and even now caused him to thresh about sometimes and moan.

DeBeckett's room was a great twelve-foot chamber with hanging drapes and murals that reflected scenes from his books. The man himself was tiny, gnome-like. He became even less material while death (prosey biology, the chemistry of colloids) drew inappropriately near his head. He had lived his life remote from everything a normal man surrounds himself with. He now seemed hardly alive enough to die.

DeBeckett lay in a vast, pilared bed, all the vaster for the small burden he put on it, and the white linen was whiter for his merry brown face. "Darling Veddie, please don't cry," he whispered restlessly, and the nurse took up a hypodermic syringe. He was not in unusual pain, though, and she put it back and sat down beside him.

The world had been gentle with the gentle old man. It had made him a present of this bed and this linen, this great house with its attendant horde of machines to feed and warm and comfort him, and the land on which stood the tiny, quaint houses he loved better. It had given him a park in the mountains, well stocked with lambs, deer and birds of blazing, spectacular color, a fenced park where no one ever went but DeBeckett and the beloved children, where earth-moving machines had scooped out a Very Own Pond ("My Very Own Pond/Which I sing for you in this song/Is eight Hippopotamuses Wide/And twenty Elephants Long.") He had not seen it for years, but he knew it was there. The world had given him, most of all, money, more money than he could ever want. He had tried to give it back (gently, hopefully, in a way pathetically), but there was always more. Even now the world

showered him with gifts and doctors, though neither could prevail against the stomping pitchfire arsonist in the old man's colon. The disease, a form of gastroenteritis, could have been cured; medicine had come that far long since. But not in a body that clung so lightly to life.

He opened his eyes and said strongly, "Nurse, are the children there?"

The nurse was a woman of nearly sixty. That was why she had been chosen. The new medicine was utterly beyond her in theory, but she could follow directions; and she loved Elphen DeBeckett. Her love was the love of a child, for a thumbed edition of *Coppie Brambles* had brightened her infancy. She said, "Of course they are, Mr. DeBeckett."

He smiled. The old man loved children very much. They had been his whole life. The hardest part of his dying was that nothing of his own flesh would be left, no son, no grandchild, no one. He had never married. He would have given almost anything to have a child of his blood with him now — almost anything, except the lurid, grunting price nature exacts, for DeBeckett had never known a woman. His only children were the phantoms of his books . . . and those who came to visit him. He said faintly, "Let the little sweetlings in."

THE nurse slipped out and the door closed silently behind her. Six children and three adults waited patiently outside, DeBeckett's doctor among them. Quickly she gave him the dimensions of the old man's illness, pulse and temperature, and the readings of the tiny gleaming dials by his pillow as well, though she did not know what they measured. It did not matter. She knew what the doctor was going to say before he said it: "He can't last another hour. It is astonishing that he lasted this long," he added, "but we will have lost something when he goes."

"He wants you to come in. Especially you—" She glanced around, embarrassed. "Especially you children." She had almost said "little sweetlings" herself, but did not quite dare. Only Elphen DeBeckett could talk like that, even to children. Especially to children. Especially to these children, poised, calm, beautiful, strong and gay. Only the prettiest, sweetest children visited Elphen DeBeckett, half a dozen or a score every day, a year-in, year-out pilgrimage. He would not have noticed if they had been ugly and dull, of course. To DeBeckett all children were sweet, beautiful and bright.

They entered and ranged themselves around the bed, and DeBeckett looked up. The eyes

regarded them and a dying voice said, "Please read to me," with such resolute sweetness that it frightened. "From my book," it added, though they knew well enough what he meant.

The children looked at each other. They ranged from four to eleven, Will, Mike, blonde Celine, brown-eyed Karen, fat Freddy and busy Pat. "You," said Pat, who was seven.

"No," said five-year-old Freddy. "Will."

"Celine," said Will. "Here."

The girl named Celine took the book from him and began obediently. "Coppie thought to herself—"

"No," said Pat. "Open."

The girl opened the book, embarrassed, glancing at the dying old man. He was smiling at her without amusement, only love. She began to read:

Coppie thought to herself that the geese might be hungry, for she herself ate Lotsandlots. Mumsie often said so, though Coppie had never found out what that mysterious food might be. She could not find any, so took some bread from Brigid Marie Ann-Erica Evangeline, the Cook Whose Name Was So Long That She Couldn't Remember It All Herself. As she walked along Dusty Path to Coppie Brambles's Very Own Pond—

Celine hesitated, looking at the old man with sharp worry, for he had moaned faintly, like a flower moaning. "No, love," he said. "Go on." The swelling soft bubble before his heart had turned on him, but he knew he still had time.

The little girl read:

—As she walked along Dusty Path to Coppie Brambles's Very Own Pond, she thought and thought, and what she thought finally came right out of her mouth. It was a Real Gay Think, to be Thought While Charitably Feeding Geese:

They don't make noise like little girls and boys,  
And all day long they're aswimming.

They never fret and sputter  
'cause they haven't any butter,  
They go where the water's  
wetly brimming.

But say—  
Anyway—  
I  
Like  
Geese!

There was more, but the child paused and, after a moment, closed the book. DeBeckett was no longer listening. He was whispering to himself.

On the wall before him was painted a copy of one of the illustrations from the first edition of his book, a delightful picture of Coppie Brambles herself, feed-

ing the geese, admirably showing her shyness and her trace of fear, contrasted with the loutish comedy of the geese. The old man's eyes were fixed on the picture as he whispered. They guessed he was talking to Coppie, the child of eight dressed in the fashions of eighty years ago. They could hardly hear him, but in the silence that fell on the room his voice grew stronger.

He was saying, without joy but without regret, "No more meadows, no more of the laughter of little children. But I do love them." He opened his eyes and sat up, waving the nurse away. "No, my dear," he said cheerfully, "it does not matter if I sit up now, you know. Excuse me for my rudeness. Excuse an old and tired man who, for a moment, wished to live on. I have something to say to you all."

The nurse, catching a sign from the doctor, took up another hypodermic and made it ready. "Please, Mr. DeBeckett," she said. Good humored, he permitted her to spray the surface of his wrist with a fine mist of droplets that touched the skin and penetrated it. "I suppose that is to give me strength," he said. "Well, I am grateful for it. I know I must leave you, but there is something I would like to know. I have wondered . . . For years I have wondered, but I have not

been able to understand the answers when I was told them. I think I have only this one more chance."

HE felt stronger from the fluid that now coursed through his veins, and accepted without fear the price he would have to pay for it. "As you know," he said; "or, I should say, as you children no doubt do not know, some years ago I endowed a research institution, the Coppie Brambles Foundation. I did it for the love of you, you and all of you. Last night I was reading the letter I wrote my attorneys—No. Let us see if you can understand the letter itself; I have it here. Will, can you read?"

Will was nine, freckled darkly on pale skin, red haired and gangling. "Yes, Mr. DeBeckett."

"Even hard words," smiled the dying man.

"Yes, sir."

DeBeckett gestured at the table beside him, and the boy obediently took up a stiff sheet of paper. "Please," said DeBeckett, and the boy began to read in a high-pitched, rapid whine.

"Children have been all my life and I have not regretted an instant of the years I devoted to their happiness. If I can tell them a little of the wonderful world in which we are, if I can open to

them the miracles of life and living, then my joy is unbounded. This I have tried, rather selfishly, to do. I cannot say it was for them! It was for me. For nothing could have given me more pleasure."

The boy paused.

DeBeckett said gravely, "I'm afraid this is a Very Big Think, lovelings. Please try to understand. This is the letter I wrote to my attorneys when I instructed them to set up the Foundation. Go on, Will."

"But my way of working has been unscientific, I know. I am told that children are not less than we adults, but more. I am told that the grown-up maimers and cheats in the world are only children soiled, that the hagglers of commerce are the infant dreamers whose dreams were denied. I am told that youth is wilder, freer, better than age, which I believe with all my heart, not needing the stories of twenty-year-old mathematicians and infant Mozarts to lay a proof.

"In the course of my work I have been given great material rewards. I wish that this money be spent for those I love. I have worked with the heart, but perhaps my money can help someone to work with the mind, in this great new science of psychology which I do not under-

stand, in all of the other sciences which I understand even less. I must hire other eyes.

"I direct, then, that all of my assets other than my books and my homes be converted into cash, and that this money be used to further the study of the child, with the aim of releasing him from the corrupt adult cloak that smothers him, of freeing him for wisdom, tenderness and love."

"That," said DeBeckett sadly, "was forty years ago."

HE started at a sound. Overhead a rocket was clapping through the sky, and DeBeckett looked wildly around. "It's all right, Mr. DeBeckett," comforted little Pat. "It's only a plane."

He allowed her to soothe him. "Ah, loving," he said. "And can you answer my question?"

"What it says in the 'Cyclopedia, Mr. DeBeckett?'"

"Why— Yes, if you know it, my dear."

Surprisingly the child said, as if by rote: "The Institute was founded in 1976 and at once attracted most of the great workers in pediatric analysis, who were able to show Wiltshauer's Effect in the relationship between glandular and mental development. Within less than ten years a new projective analysis of the growth process permitted a re-

orientation of basic pedagogy from a null-positive locus. The effects were immediate. The first generation of—"

She stopped, startled. The old man was up on his elbow, his eyes blazing at her in wonder and fright. "I'm—" She looked around at the other children for help and at once wailed, "I'm sorry, Mr. DeBeckett!" and began to cry.

The old man fell back, staring at her with a sort of unbelieving panic. The little girl wept abundantly. Slowly DeBeckett's expression relaxed and he managed a sketchy smile.

He said, "There, sweetest. You startled me. But it was charming of you to memorize all that!"

"I learned it for you," she sobbed.

"I didn't understand. Don't cry." Obediently the little girl dried her eyes as DeBeckett stretched out a hand to her.

But the hand dropped back on the quilt. Age, surprise and the drug had allied to overmaster the dwindling resources of Elphen DeBeckett. He wandered to the phantoms on the wall. "I never understood what they did with my money," he told Coppie, who smiled at him with a shy, painted smile. "The children kept coming, but they never said."

"Poor man," said Will absently, watching him with a child's uncommitted look.

The nurse's eyes were bright and wet. She reached for the hypodermic, but the doctor shook his head.

"Wait," he said, and walked to the bed. He stood on tiptoe to peer into the dying man's face. "No, no use. Too old. Can't survive organ transplant, certainty of cytic shock. No feasible therapy." The nurse's eyes were now flowing. The doctor said to her, with patience but not very much patience, "No alternative. Only kept him going this long from gratitude."

The nurse sobbed, "Isn't there *anything* we can do for him?"

"Yes." The doctor gestured, and the lights on the diagnostic dials winked out. "We can let him die."

LITTLE Pat hiked herself up on a chair, much too large for her, and dangled her feet. "Be nice to get rid of this furniture, anyway," she said. "Well, nurse? He's dead. Don't wait." The nurse looked rebelliously at the doctor, but the doctor only nodded. Sadly the nurse went to the door and admitted the adults who had waited outside. The four of them surrounded the body and bore it gently through the door. Before it closed the nurse looked back and wailed: "He loved you!"

The children did not appear to notice. After a moment Pat

said reflectively, "Sorry about the book. Should have opened it."

"He didn't notice," said Will, wiping his hands. He had touched the old man's fingers.

"No. Hate crying, though."

The doctor said, "Nice of you. Helped him, I think." He picked up the phone and ordered a demolition crew for the house. "Monument?"

"Oh, yes," said another child. "Well. Small one, anyway."

The doctor, who was nine, said, "Funny. Without him, what? A few hundred thousand dollars and the Foundation makes a flexible world, no more rigid adults, no more —" He caught himself narrowly. The doctor had observed before that he had a tendency to over-identify with adults, probably because his specialty had been geriatrics. Now that Elphen DeBeckett was dead, he no longer had a specialty.

"Miss him somehow," said Celine frankly, coming over to look over Will's shoulder at the quaint old murals on the wall. "What the nurse said, true enough. He loved us."

"And clearly we loved him," piped Freddy, methodically sorting through the contents of the dead man's desk. "Would have terminated him with the others otherwise, wouldn't we?"

—FREDERIK POIL &  
C. M. KORNBLUTH