

ace
double

Things from space, things from time...

STRANGER THAN YOU THINK



G.C. EDMONDSON

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SECRETS THE WORLD MUST NEVER LEARN

If you have a friend to whom strange things happen, you can never lack for excitement. And if your friend happens to be the famous Mad Friend of G. C. Edmondson's remarkably authentic accounts of improbable but possible happenings, then you can always count on the unexpected.

This particular friend had a knack for turning up the unearthly, the off-the-record, the things that were "stranger than science." He could spot a time traveler across a restaurant—and then produce the sort of proof that would be more potent than tequila. He could find just where the meteor fell—and show you that it is not just a rock from space but far, far more ominous. He could . . .

But read **STRANGER THAN YOU THINK** for yourself and then start looking around your supposedly workaday world. Things may look different!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



**STRANGER
THAN YOU
THINK
G.C. EDMONDSON**

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THE MISFIT

AFTER A POINTLESS discussion of mushrooms which the waitress called *champignons* and I thought should have been *hongos*, my mad friend returned to the subject

"Theology has nothing to do with it," he said, waving a forkful of *filet mignon*. "The Church has never voiced an opinion on time travel." *Viajes temporales* was the term he used, which carried unfortunate connotations of Renaissance diplomacy and the endless intrigues of Borgia popes

From across the narrow room a gentleman who dined on pancakes gazed covertly at us with an eagerness in odd contrast to the splendor of his many starred tunic.

"What's his rank?" my friend asked *sotto voce* and in English. "I never can keep track of all the stars."

"I think he's a major," I said in the same language. I was trying to remember where I'd seen him before.

There was a keening of sirens, a clanging of bells, and an antiquated fire engine roared to a stop practically next door. Our waitress dashed out to watch. Our cook shot from the kitchen, abandoning priceless *filets* to cremation. Our wives

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stopped talking about whatever it is wives talk about and rushed out into the chill, November evening.

When firemen and a feeble stream of water were silhouetted in dancing outlines on the shipfront across the street, my mad friend also ran out. The magnificent major got up, bowed, and muttered the complicated *ronde* of gallant apology with which strangers approach in Latin lands.

"One cannot help admiring the *sang-froid* of the Manxman," he said.

I shrugged. "Picture postcards to the contrary, Sonora is old in winter. I shouldn't be surprised if those unhappy *romberos* became covered with icicles. Besides," I added, "a fire, I can see any day. But a good *filet mignon*—"

My friend returned with our wives and they sat amid a great chattering of teeth. The major brought his plate of pancakes and joined us. "We were wondering about your bank," my friend said with his usual directness.

But I wondered about something else. The major knew I was Manx and most majors have never heard of the Isle of Man. Then I remembered the *Princess Elizabeth* last summer. Not a luxurious transatlantic liner, but an ancient, coal-burning bucket which transports tourists and their automobiles between Vancouver Island and Port Angeles.

"You wore a different uniform and a different accent the last time I saw you."

"Also you," the major said with a smile. I had come unprepared for the frigidity of a Thanksgiving in Nogales and was wearing my friend's loden coat.

"I was interested in your theories about *viajes temporales*," the major said, turning his dazzling smile on my friend.

My friend muttered something rude in Arabic acquired during the stay in North Africa which contributed so much toward his madness. One of his redeeming qualities was the virulent hatred he felt for anything which remotely approached science-fiction. "Time travel stories divide themselves into two classes," he pontificated. He sang a few bars of "I'm My Own Grampaw." "In the others we're overrun by peartoting hordes of our own ancestors—as if any modern

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couldn't defeat his ancestors practically by definition! You're not Mexican, are you?" he shot at the major.

"He had a Sephardic accent the last time I ran across him," I said.

"Also you," the major smiled.

It was true that my first Spanish had been learned from Sephardim, a colony of the confused in Constantinople whose Friday evenings were spent wailing not for Zion but for the happy land from which Their Catholic Majesties expelled them in that same year which had seen royal money finance a Genoese mapmaker's impossible scheme for reaching the Indies. Small enclaves of Sephardim survive in the carved up remains of the Ottoman Empire, still speaking a Spanish barely understandable to modern Latin-Americans. Apart from florid archaisms of an almost Shakespearean quality, its main characteristics is a tendency to turn every "s" into an "esh."

"Are you from Istanbul or Rhodes?" I asked the major.

"I'm from New Rome," he said sadly.

"That would make you approximately 1600 years old," my friend said equably. "When did they stop calling it that?"

I riffled a mental file cabinet for a moment. "I think Justinian still said New Rome in 550. But Byzantium, New Rome, or Constantinople, it's all Istanbul now."

"Then you are familiar with the history of the Eastern Empire?" the major asked.

"Superficially," I shrugged, "Everybody's heard of Theodora, the whore empress."

"Would you like to hear a story about time travel?"

"My own grampaw or barbarian hordes?" my mad friend asked.

While I was searching for an indirect, Latin way to say 'no' the major made cabalistic signs. The waitress disappeared into the adjoining bar and returned with small glasses of cognac bearing a carefully separate layer of cream. My mad friend eyed his with an air of ineffable sadness and took another sip of coffee, which was all he drank nowadays.

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"In the year of Our Lord 2461," the major began, "two students sat in the courtyard before the restored ruins of the Hagia Sofia. 'What do you suppose it looked like in the days of Justinian?' the physicist asked.

"The historian shrugged. 'Probably less magnificent than our modern version. Still, I'd willingly give several years of my life to see the Emperor Belisarius at the head of his armies'."

"Wait a minute," I protested to the magnificent major. "After he reconquered the empire, Count Belisarius was blinded by the emperor he'd faithfully served."

"Like a certain general of our own time," my mad friend added parenthetically.

"In my story," the major replied, "Belisarius overthrew Justinian, and the whore empress went back to her brothel."

I glanced out to where firemen still squirted their ineffectual streams at a blazing *licoreria*.

The major sipped at his creamed cognac and continued, "How much would you really give to see him in person?" the physics student asked.

"Another minute," my friend protested, "If this is an alternate time track story, you're beginning it all wrong. What kind of world do these students live in whenever it was or will be?"

"Ah," the major said with no trace of thinness in his smile. "As you know, Constantine abandoned Rome to the Barbarians and established a new capital which he called New Rome or Constantinople. In 570, Count Belisarius, after retaking Old Rome from the Goths and Africa from the Vandals, overthrew Justinian and became emperor of the Eastern Empire. The fabulous corruption of Justinian's court vanished with Belisarius. Through his reforms, religious controversy disappeared. Nestorians, Romans, and Coptics were reunited into one central church. Due to this revitalized Christianity there was no Islam. In this time track, a certain Mohammed was Bishop of Mecca and Medina."

My friend nodded his thanks. "And what was the status in your time?"

"New Rome ruled the world," the major said. "Or more

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specifically, the world's elected representatives convened at an assembly over which a Belisarian emperor presided."

"The whole world?" I asked.

"Japanese Christians, sailing from Hawaii, discovered this continent in 1361. Since the immigrants hit California first, the rest of the United States never became very heavily populated."

My friend gave me that smirk which Arizonans save for residents of San Diego.

The major gave a quick glance at our wives, who were lost in a discussion of the botch look—or whatever it was women were wearing last November. "Returning to the story," he said, speaking English for the first time, "the physics student produces his machine and overpowers the ohs, ahs, and it-can't-be-dones of his friend. Eventually the historian prepares for a trip back to 550 A.D."

"How?" my friend asked.

The major snapped his fingers and our waitress brought more cognac. "First, by running a representative assortment of drachmae and obols through the duplicator. After this, a trip to the museum where costumes appropriate to the period were duplicated. Fortunately, the historian was conversant with Byzantine Greek and even knew Latin, should the occasion rise to use it. He took the usual immunizations which any traveller takes before going to a strange planet."

"Oh, you had interplanetary travel?"

The major nodded and snapped his fingers again. This time the waitress brought the bottle. "The Moon, Mars, and one of Jupiter's satellites," he said shortly. "Sounding rockets had given very discouraging information about other parts of the solar system."

Across the street, more than lifesized silhouettes still squirted futile streams of water. I nibbled at the strip of bacon which had been toothpicked around my *filet mignon* and noticed that the major's voice had thickened. After another drink he abandoned English. The "esh" became more frequent in his archaic Spanish.

"Now," he continued, "arrive we at the true heart of the

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story: Our historian steps into the machine, a strange affair of gleaming coils and heavy insulators—”

“With sparks flying and much fluorescence,” my friend added, straight-faced.

“*Exactmente*,” the major nodded. “An instant later he stands rather dazed by a waterfront which I soon recognized as the Golden Horn.”

I had wondered how long it would take the major to slip into first person and now he'd done it.

“It was early evening and as I wandered along the dock a great many things crossed my mind. Was I in the proper period? Was my clothing correct? What tricks had time and research played on my accent? I entered a tavern and sat in the corner beneath a smoky light which smelled of rancid olive oil. ‘Wine,’ I said, limiting myself to one word.

“The fat innkeeper's wife waddled away with a nod which gave no clue to pronunciation. The wine was sweet and sirupy—the kind the Ancients had drunk well watered, but around me, swarthy men with a vague seafaring look drank it neat. Across the room one played *kottobos*, trying to splash the dregs of his bowl in a regular pattern on the floor. The general stickiness and sour smell told me many games of *kottobos* had been played since the floor last saw water.

“‘What news of Belisarius?’ I asked the innkeeper's wife. I wanted to ask what year this was but was afraid the question would sound odd. They might be having one of their periodic spy scares.

“The fat woman looked at me strangely. ‘Africa, Italy, who knows?’ She shrugged. I paid for my wine and left. There might be danger after dark but with my shield and weapon I felt secure. I didn't know the year, but if Belisarius rated only a shrug I was much too early.

“I returned where I'd first landed on the waterfront and felt about until I blundered into the time machine. My physicist friend had explained that anyone but myself was out of phase and would walk right through it. I set the controls for a year ahead and threw the switch—into blinding sunlight and facing a haggard wisp of a man who

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started at my sudden appearance. He gave a wild scream and fell backward. In the instant before disappearing another year into the future, I saw little except bodies stacked like firewood along the mole.

"It was early morning at my next stop, and a trireme waited for guards to open the floating chain which barred entrance to the Golden Horn. After several minutes the *kybernetes* abandoned his steering oar and sprang from the trireme's high stern to the end of the boom. He opened it himself. The trireme approached the mole, backed oars smartly, and tied bow and stern lines. As several important looking men in half armor stepped ashore, I saw my chance.

"Been asea a long time," I said, stepping into the nearest tavern, "What year is this and why does everyone look so dead?"

"The tavernkeeper looked at me with dull eyes. 'I don't know whence you come, sailor,' he mumbled. 'But if plague's not struck your city yet, the smartest thing you can do is get out quick.'

"Plague! I'd read of it but never seen it. As I wandered about the city that day I felt a great affection for the peaceful and sanitary era in which I was born. It's one thing to read ancient accounts and another thing entirely, I learned, to watch an emaciated city die. My own immunity could not overcome the revulsion I felt for piles of corpses and apathetic, suppurating survivors with neither strength nor will to bury them.

"What year is this?" I asked an emaciated, yellow skinned man who squatted in the antrium of the Hagia Sofia.

"'563' he mumbled, 'Are your wits gone too?"

"When did the plague start?"

"Last year,' he said.

"I hurried on, fighting down a prickle of horror. For in my histories there had been no plague in the time of Justinian. I returned to the time machine and moved ahead twenty years.

"What news of Belisarius?" I asked the young man who now ran the tavern where I'd first drunk wine and watched sailors play *kottobos*.

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“Who?”

“‘Belisarius,’ I said, ‘Who’s emperor of all Christendom?’

“The young man gave a sour laugh. ‘All Christendom’s undergone several divisions since Belisarius was scragged. Surely you don’t believe in that old jazz any more, do you?’”

The major sighed and poured himself another drink from the almost empty bottle.

“Good penny-a-word stuff,” my mad friend said, “But I fail to see anything new or different about it. Why don’t you take him back to his own time and straighten the mess out?”

“That’s just it,” the major said sadly. The Sephardic accent was growing stronger. “I came back slowly, in twenty year jumps, recording and photographing each time I stopped. There are no multiple time tracks. There’s only one.”

“What’s the point?” my friend insisted. “You can’t sell a story nowadays without a message.”

The major glanced up from his empty glass with an expression of mild exasperation. “At the present time,” he said with an air of ludicrous pedantry, “You have a strain of flies which grows fat on DDT. There also exist pneumococci, gonococci, staphylococci, and a great many other microbes which laugh at penicillin. On the other hand, those of us alive today are invariably descended from the survivors of every plague and epidemic which has ever afflicted our ancestors. Do you begin to get the picture?”

I did. “Then it was your historian who started the plague of 562?”

“And another one in 1348,” he said with a sad smile, “The one which culminated in Wat Tyler’s rebellion.”

“Well, it’s certainly a novel theory for epidemics,” I said thoughtfully, “Do you happen to know who started the 1918 flu epidemic, or virus X, or the Asiatic?”

The major shook his head. “Whoever did it came not from my future.” He was back in first person again.

My friend was somewhat restless, for he alone still drank coffee. “But this historian,” he said, striving to get the whole business back on an impersonal third person plane, “came

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from a time considerably ahead of ours. Why not go ahead in our time to where he'd be more at home?"

The major poured the last drops of cognac in his glass and gulped them down. "Another fable of these times," he said irrelevantly. "Statistics would have us believe mankind lives longer each year. Can you guess the average lifespan of our historian's era?"

We waited.

"Forty years," the major said. "Oh, you can lower infant mortality. Get all those babies over the first year and you raise the average. But Cicero and a great many other ancients lived into their 80's and 90's.

"And what are we all but children of the misfits—the marginals who should have died before they reached the age of reproduction? With every step forward medical science shortens the lifespan. In two more years I will be forty."

My wife had been nudging me for some time. "*¿Nos vamos?*" she asked.

As we paid the check I saw the firemen were making no progress next door. If anything, the fire seemed to be spreading. "Well, it's a good story," I told the major in what I hoped was a sincere tone. "But I don't think much of the ending."

"In 1960 I shall be dead," the major said to no one in particular.

As we walked toward the car our wives still discussed the botch look in that fall's styles. Suddenly mine turned. "I don't believe they're ever going to put it out," she said, pointing at the firemen who now looked very tired.

And suddenly, the chill Thanksgiving wind seemed colder.



"FROM CARIBOU TO CARRY NATION"

"Reincarnation and transmigration/From caribou to Carry Nation," my mad friend strophed.

A llama spat, scoring a hit on my No. 3 boy. A wife performed prophylaxy and we returned to the subject. "I don't care if St. Catherine was a Buddhist," my mad friend said, "the whole idea's in direct opposition to the doctrine of free will."

I sighed and we moved on before the llama could score again. It was spring and my mad friend was retaliating for the incident of several months ago when I and mine had descended in visitation upon him and his. With his arrival, we had immediately faced the Great American Problem: What shall we do with the children?

An always resourceful wife came up with the standby: Why not take them to the zoo?

No sooner said than, two and one-half hours and many facewashings later, it was done. The Berlin zoo was larger, someone said. But bombed out and much farther, someone answered, so we went to San Diego's which was now the world's largest. And only four miles away. Here, overlooking the Galápagos tortoises, I had vocally wondered what sort of sin could penalize a transmigrationist into several centuries of amphibian exile.

"FROM CARIBOU TO CARRY NATION"

"The most objectionable facet to any belief in reincarnation," my mad friend continued, "is that it relieves us of any obligation to better the world. As for transmigration, a renegade uncle of mine died outside the Church."

I had not believed such a thing could be possible.

"*Myself, when young, did eagerly frequent,*" my mad friend quoted as we meandered down the greensward where alligators and crocodiles obligingly yawned beneath a sign which pointed out their variant maxillary and dental structures. "To cut it short," he continued, "like Menotti, I once wasted four bits on a spook raiser."

This was so alien to my friend's normal behavior that I immediately sensed what was coming. "Please continue, Mr. Bones," I murmured.

"A typical setup: a large, rundown house set back in an overgrown weedy yard, a gingerbread anachorism plumped between a second-rate nightclub and a small Japanese-owned bakery with a tremendous thumping machine which pressed out Chinese fortune cookies.

"I was ushered into the seance by a be-turbaned Hiberno-Nubian. After some preliminary fumbings with the wrong light switch I was speaking to my transmigrationist and totally fictitious uncle."

"'It's wonderful over here, nephew,' he said in a cadaverous, echo-chamberish voice. 'The fields are green, the sun always shines, and I've nothing to do all day long but lie in the grass, surrounded by females who gaze at me with large, adoring eyes.'

"It must be wonderful in Heaven," my mad friend had interjected.

"Then suddenly, the cadaverous echo-chamberish voice shifted in timbre. 'Heaven! Are you nuts?' it demanded, 'I'm a Jersey bull on a farm in Iowa.'"

"Not up to standard," I said.

"I was afraid not," my mad friend sighed. "I won't use it again."

We had progressed by this time to the monkeys, who seemed vaguely amused by us and our offspring.

There was a scream from No. 3 boy—the same who had

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already been target to a llama's displeasure. Some time was consumed in removing the stinger without injecting more poison. After the first bright flame of agony, the boy settled into his usual observant silence. “He's the only one I worry about,” I said in confidential tones. “The others are cast-iron-stomached little monsters, each thoroughly capable of giving the world a bad time.”

“¿And this?”

“Causes me much preoccupation,” I answered in the same tongue. “As you have just observed, a llama and a bee select him from the crowd. He falls heir to all the world's evils. ¿Is he an accident prone or does he have a poor karma rating?”

My mad friend shrugged.

“Timid as he seems, there's something in him. One of these days he'll burst like Attila or Pizarro onto an unsuspecting world. If the world doesn't destroy him first.”

My mad friend gazed at the boy, who still limped but ignored his wounds as he stared into the eyes of a puma who regarded him with equal interest. “Probably grow up to be a writer,” my friend muttered.

We moved on to the pachyderms, where our offspring listened to the muted rumblings of digestive processes and stared in fascination as a bull emitted a tremendous ball of steaming sparrow fodder. My mad friend stared with equal fascination at the elephant's forehead. “Almost ready to go *musht*,” he said.

“Let's make sure we have our terms correct,” I observed. “Kindly define.”

“A reincarnationist believes the soul is born into decreasing or increasing opportunities as reward or punishment for his past life. A transmigrationist, on the other hand, returns as an ape, ivory bearer, or peacock.”

At this point the elephant trumpeted deafeningly. From the monkey house came additional comment.

“I had a grandfather who believed in transmigration—”

“Please continue,” my mad friend murmured. He had a woman-like ability to listen while simultaneously explaining the differences between camels and dromedaries to children

"FROM CARIBOU TO CARRY NATION"

and wives.

"My grandfather lived to an old age. And the older, the riper. Though virile enough to participate in the Klondike rush and actually make a little money out of it, his declining years brought on one idiosyncrasy after another.

"First, he stopped eating pork. Some time later he learned beef and lamb were unhealthy. By age sixty he was strictly a fish eater. At sixty-seven my grandfather became a full-fledged vegetarian—by which I mean one who eschews milk, butter, eggs, and all animal products. Had plastic been available, I'm sure he'd have given up woolen suiting and leather shoes."

"A Transcendentalist among Calvinists," my mad friend said. The musk ox nodded and continued chewing.

"Transcendentalist was not the word we used. My family thought he was nuts. But such was the force of the old man's personality that twenty-five years later he was still going strong, and had restricted his diet to a daily two pounds of boiled carrots."

"No kidding?" my mad friend asked. "A girl in England tried that not long ago. She turned yellow."

"Grandpa was redhaired to begin with," I continued, "but he did have an unusual color in his last few years."

"And he was a transmigrationist?"

"Among other things. Of course, I've never tried to contact him. Colorful I'll admit he was, but he was pushing a hundred and had become something of a problem." I pointed at my llama bespat and bee-stung offspring. "There was his only mourner. The child had an uncanny habit of appearing from nowhere with a match just as the old man reached for a cigar."

"Fascinating," my mad friend said. "And nothing but carrots?"

"For the last three years," I indicated the child, who now communed with a condor. "He also devours them."

Our arches had sagged from triumph through uncertainty to despair before our iron-stomached extroverts decided they'd seen enough. Four miles and several cloverleaves later supper was being prepared.

“FROM CARIBOU TO CARRY NATION”

“I fully intend to excoriate the next beast I see with an elephant gun,” my mad friend observed.

From the relative comfort of a gibson, I could afford to be charitable. “You should never have sworn off,” I said.

“Dinner is served,” said a voice from the kitchen.

And it was, if not superb, at least satisfactory. Though hours had elapsed since the last ice cream and pop, there were the usual difficulties between children and vegetables. “Odd,” my wife was saying, “He usually loves carrots. . . .No, darling, you can’t trade it for another one.”

We were nearing the end of a long and tiresome day. I decided it was time something definite was done. “Eat your carrot!” I thundered, “Or I shall descend upon you like a wrathful god!”

No. 3 boy made an agonizing reappraisal of how much he could get away with before company. After one quick look he ingested the carrot, meanwhile putting on his pale, drawn act.

“We grew these in the back yard,” a wife remarked. “Since the first one sprouted he’s had some odd idea that he couldn’t eat these particular carrots.”

Late that night, after children had been shuffled around into the makeshifts necessary when two families occupy an *Einfamilianhous*, my mad friend returned once more to the subject. “Like most heresies,” he said, “there is a certain dark logic which runs through these two doctrines. And therein lies the danger.

“The reincarnationist is born king or beggar and feels no need to complain about the excesses of the former or the miseries of the latter. Thus man lives complacent in the midst of evil.

“Transmigration is even more absurd. Because a man likes cats, should he be reborn as one? I like filet mignon, but I sincerely hope I shall never be a steer.”

There was no sound but a quickening of parental instinct made me suddenly get up. No. 3 boy was crying in his quiet, apologetic manner. “I’m not a cannibal, Grandpa,” he whispered into the darkness, “he *made* me do it.”



THE GALACTIC CALABASH

THE AFFAIR of the galactic calabash began one Sunday almost a year ago when, after much wheedling, I had induced my mad friend to abstain from suppressing coastal carpet-baggers for one weekend. We were bruising tires and nerves slightly south of the place where U.S. 101 becomes *Carretera Federal Número 2*, when he applied brakes with soul-shattering suddenness.

The cow gazed at us with the equanimity of a Methodist bishop while my friend applied the horn. At imminent risk of impacting a sinus, he lowered the window and shouted raucous Arabic into the damp, maritime air. It sounded like something an Arab might say to a Jew.

But the cow took no offense until my mad friend nudged her gently with the grill. As she trotted away a turgid udder swung, and I was struck with the resemblance to a Wagnerian soprano we had once known, and said so. My mad friend laughed uproariously.

THE GALACTIC CALABASH

"What's so funny?" a wife asked from the rear seat.

"A play on words," I explained.

"You'd have to speak Gaelic to understand it," my friend added.

The wives returned to their discussion of whatever it is that wives discuss.

"You'll find him interesting." I referred to the man we were going to visit. I went on to explain how the meteor-stricken Señor Galindo had arrived ten years ago from some pauperous tropic. He had brought little, save an immensely fertile wife, to this brawling, wideopen land of opportunity and inflation far up in the northwest corner of the republic. And now he was a power to be considered.

My mad friend placed his forefinger stiffly to one side of his nose and inhaled with difficulty through the other. "Serves me right for leaving Arizona," he muttered.

"If you're immune to neosynephrine I have some Scotch snuff."

He shook his head and continued driving. There was a tremendous bump where rain had undermined a bridge approach. My friend registered suffering as he thought of martyred tires.

"Back to the subject," he continued; "man is a theomorph. Therefore, any intelligent being is sure to be anthropomorphic. And please can if you will any hoopla about binary planets with tides being necessary before an air-breather climbs out of his tidal pool. We still haven't made peace with Darwin."

"But you will concede that dogma is not overthrown by admitting these possibilities?"

"We outlived Galileo."

"Turn here," I interrupted. We hurdled a culvert. Yesterday's cloudburst had removed all the topsoil so we crept with agonizing slowness over a jumble of headsized boulders for the next kilometer. Just over the rise of the hill we came to *La Granja Galindo*.

"Thank God he doesn't call it *hacienda*," my mad friend muttered, "but what's the difference between *granja* and *ranchos*?"

THE GALACTIC CALABASH

"All same: farm and ranch."

The central core of Sr. Galindo's house was a marvel of decrepitude and slipshod construction. Surrounding it concentrically were the additions which fertility and increasing opulence had forced him to. Though he fully intended someday to erect a palace more in keeping with his present station in life, so far every peso had gone into more of the narrow, corrugated iron edifices which covered the down wind portion of his *granja*.

As I alighted from the car, Sr. Galindo detached himself from the sons, daughters, and employees who were unloading and tallying a truck. He was a large, bald-headed man, much whiter than I or my mad friend, and made a perfect picture of a jovial, Irish bartender until he opened his mouth to shout, "¡Hola! ¿What is new in the *plátivolo* factory?"

"We've converted to cups," I said.

"I thought flying saucers were *platos voladores*," my friend muttered.

"Newspaper jargon," I explained. The Saucer Works gag referred to the place where I work—about which no more. We passed a bare, grave-like mound adjoining the kitchen garden and once more I admired the Mexican's practicality. How many men would let a meteorite do the spadework for a new septic tank?

I presented my mad friend and his wife to Sr. Galindo, whose own wife arrived, wearing kneelength rubber boots and carrying a clipboard. She favored us with a grin and took our wives in tow toward the kitchen where they could supervise a young *tortillera* and discuss the new botch look which none dared as yet to wear.

"Thank God you speak Spanish," Sr. Galindo said to my friend. "I dislike to inflict my English on persons of discernment."

Galindo's English was fully as bad as he described it. It had been learned mostly during hours spent puzzling over bulletins from the U.S. Dep't. of Agriculture.

After outfitting us with specially disinfected galoshes, he took us on a tour of the long, sheet-iron buildings and ex-

THE GALACTIC CALABASH

plained with loving thoroughness the workings of his fully automated factory. Conveyor belts brought compounded feeds directly from the mill to galleries where 7 kilograms of feed plus measured amounts of antibiotics and water could be counted upon to produce 3 kilograms of dressed-out fryer at the end of 8 weeks. But there was a slightly careworn look about the fryers' beady eyes, also little trilling noises and ruffled plumage. I wondered if my mad friend's aura was incompatible with avian contentment. Sr. Galindo disembarassed me. "Since that accursed aerolith fell," he muttered.

I pressed him for particulars.

"For the past few months they've been a little slow making weight."

"Genetic difficulties?"

Galindo shrugged. "Maybe the strain's playing out. So far it's not serious."

We passed to another gallery where fertile eggs rolled gently from hens to another conveyor, through grading and candling machinery to incubators whence, twenty-one days later, they would be recycled into the eight week grain-to-meat process.

"All this I owe to the *gringos*," Sr. Galindo said expansively. He was a great admirer of Americans with their beautiful machinery and assembly line processes.

"Horse manure!" I spoke with the familiarity of long friendship.

Sr. Galindo glanced at me with a slight, quizzical smile.

"I imagine some small part of it can be laid to Yankee ingenuity," my mad friend said placatingly.

"Damn small," I said, for I remembered the long bouts of legal skirmishing which had built Señor Galindo's business. Before his time every chicken and egg consumed in this territory had been imported from Yankeeland. When the government, in misguided eagerness to protect and promote local industry, had forbidden the importation of eggs and chicken feed, Sr. Galindo had been close to ruin.

But by paying the fantastic interest rates prevalent in an unregulated economy, he had floated and juggled stock is-

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sues with an abandon far wilder than any bluesky railroad pirate's. By dint of frantic prestidigitation and prevarication Sr. Galindo bought out his American suppliers and transported their equipment to his own side of the border.

Thanks to a total absence of income tax, the Americans were now almost paid off and Sr. Galindo would soon be in the black. Though he admired American efficiency and often talked of emigrating, the jovial Mexican was never quite fool enough to do it.

"What's the new building?" I asked.

"Ah, this you must see." We waded through trays of disinfectant and took off the galoshes. On the way we passed through the *sacrificadora* where fryers were placed on the hooks of a chain which delivered them via scalding tank to a revolving drum with dozens of rubber fingers which plucked feathers and rapped the unwary knuckle which came too near.

Farther down was a table where the fryer's less appetizing portions were removed to ride another conveyor to the cooker which sterilized them before relaying to a far corner of the *granja*.

Señor Galindo's unbelievably handsome son gave me a smile of recognition as his clever did things worthy of a Samoan sword dancer. A daughter and another girl I did not recognize were stuffing dismembered fryers into plastic bags which they shrunk tight with the aid of a vacuum cleaner. A third girl snapped a rubber band over each bag and packed it in a square stacking carton.

A smaller son followed us, plucking periodically at Galindo's sleeve and whispering.

Galindo led us into the new building which was, of course, a freezer. "Let's see those cuckolds"—*cabrónes* was the word he used—"try it again." He was referring to the time a conspiracy had been organized to down the price just when he had thirty-thousand fryers ready to kill and gobbling tons of feed each day.

"What's that thing?" my mad friend asked, pointing at a frostrimed sphere in one corner of the vast freezing compartment.

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Sir, Galindo picked it up with a puzzled air. He jiggled it gingerly from hand to hand as we hurried from 60° below out into the watery February sunshine. He placed the sphere atop a bird bath he'd started two years ago and never had time to finish. While he clapped his hands and blew on them the frost began melting. "Ah," he said with a sudden smile, "Now I remember. *Es una calabaza.*" Which, owing to a linguistic peculiarity, could mean pumpkins or several kinds of squash, but not calabash.

"Last summer just before the *aerolito* fell," Galindo explained, "my wife planted some. When the freezer room was finished I needed something for a trial. I saw this magnificent *calabaza* had come unconnected from its vine. 'It will spoil,' I thought, as I put it in the freezer. You like *calabaza*?"

I don't, and I'm sure my mad friend doesn't, but we both assured him we did.

"Tell your mother to put it in the oven," Sr. Galindo said to his offspring who followed us.

"I never heard of baking one whole," I protested.

"You'd need a hacksaw to slice it," my mad friend laughed.

"We always bake them whole where I come from," Galindo explained. "They burst and the seeds fall out. With grated cheese and *salsa picante*—" He raised eyebrows and kissed his fingertips.

I knew the rest of the meal would be good anyhow. We had progressed by this time to the hammermill where Sr. Galindo compounded a mash of seeds ranging from rye to kaffir corn, with exact amounts of oyster shell, bone meal, fish meal, and vitamins. Some of the latter came from Germany by routes more devious than a shipment of heroin but their presence spelled the difference between profit and loss for Sr. Galindo's grain-to-meat conversion.

I wondered what the small boy had wanted.

Galindo showed some embarrassment. "You know how hard it is to get anything fixed in this country. The TV's been acting up." He looked at me hopefully. I promised to do what I could—which, without tools, would probably be very little.

We were admiring a microtome and staining apparatus

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which augmented the microscope I had donated some years ago. Galindo was explaining to my mad friend the auguries performed over sliced liver in his constant war against the diseases which could wipe him out overnight.

My stomach had finally reached the conclusion that my throat was cut when the small boy who had taken the *calabaza* returned with the news that dinner and the ladies awaited.

But as usual, dinner and the ladies needed several finishing touches so I glanced into the front room where the Galindo brood was acquiring its English in painless, Lone Ranger-sized doses, and immediately knew I was off the hook.

"There's nothing wrong with your TV," I told Galindo. "See how the picture tears and the sound razzes in perfect unison? Something around here's setting up interference."

"The refrigeration—" Galindo began hopefully.

I shook my head. There were no neon signs within 10 km. I wondered what could be causing the pulsation. But dinner was finally served so I forgot about it.

Dinner was indeed delicious—young fryers barbecued and drenched in a sauce not so fiery as might be expected from Señora de Galindo's native state of Tabasco. Galindo ate much bread and salad. He ignored the chicken with an intensity which brought to mind the bitter days when he must have eaten little else. The meal was nearly over when he suddenly remembered and asked, "¿y la calabaza?"

Galindo's wife shrugged. "Like a rock," she said.

"¿After two hours in the oven? ¡How strange!"

Galindo was buttering a final *birote*, that Mexican creation which looks like a roll and tastes like bread used to taste, when it happened: There was a muffled explosion, more felt than heard, and the oven door flew open.

"¡La calabaza!" my wife shrieked, "We forgot to turn off the oven!"

"Those seeds and pulp will stick like glue," Mrs. Galindo moaned. She turned off the oven and we settled down for a final round of coffee, still twittering slightly, like poultry after a fox has been flushed from the hen-house.

The gentlemen retired to another room and discussed the

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role of the Church in Mexican history. This was interesting for Sr. Galindo was a Mason, while my mad friend was an apologist of such brilliance that I suspected he might someday follow the path of Giordano Bruso. They were nearing the gauntlet and card exchanging stage when we were interrupted from the kitchen.

"What kind of *calabaza* was that?" Galindo's wife asked. We followed her to the now cool oven.

There were spatters of melted plastic, shattered bits of ceramic, and some extremely miniaturized devices at whose function I could only guess. Intermixed with the whole were rent sections of the covering which had resembled some sort of *calabaza*. I began to wish I'd seen it after the frost melted away.

"¡Aja!" Galindo said with something of a twinkle, "You Americans and your fantastic new weapons."

I started to protest but I knew Sr. Galindo's faith in the American Way would permit no other explanation.

One of the older children came from the front room. "*La televisión funciona perfectamente,*" he reported.

I had a sudden suspicion that I knew the exact moment when it had started functioning perfectly. "Do you mind if I take two or three of those little things that look like they're not broken?" I asked.

"It's yours." Galindo smiled. He didn't have to clean the oven.

Wishing they were mine, I slipped two of the small things into my pocket.

Late that night as we retraced our path over *Carretera Federal Número 2* to the border, our wives again discussed the botch look, and what effect it would have on eye makeup.

"I can see where Galindo owes something of a debt to the U.S.," my mad friend said.

"Not half what the world owes him," I muttered.

"How come?"

"You know how in those science-fiction yarns you hate so much, some mad scientist always saves the world from destruction?"

My friend made an interrogatory noise.

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"Sr. Galindo just did."

"Did what?"

"Saved us from invasion."

"You write so much of that jazz you're beginning to believe it."

I remembered the unhappy condition of Sr. Galindo's fryers. "Wasn't it established several years ago that UHF radiation seems to foul up the compass arrangements in homing pigeons?" I asked.

"Not in the kind of stuff I read," my mad friend said.

"I don't know much about telemetering," I said, "But I've seen enough around the Saucer Works to know this isn't ours." I handed him something scraped from Galindo's oven. "It isn't Russian either."

"So?"

"Funny about you mentioning that tide-pool evolution bit today," I said. "I wonder," I wondered, "Just how often a binary system like Earth and Moon occurs? It might pose all sorts of conjectures about climatic conditions for anyone unfamiliar with such a system."

"What *are* you running on about?" my mad friend inquired. Green eyes flared suddenly on the roadway and he braked just in time to miss a cow.

"Let me put it this way: If you dumped a weather station on an unknown planet and got a normal reading for several days, then a sudden drop to 60° below for six months, then in a matter of minutes the temperature climbed into a range that melted your transmitter, wouldn't you decide that planet wasn't worth invading?"

My mad friend placed a stiff forefinger to one nostril and inhaled noisily through the other. But he was very quiet all the way home.



THE SIGN OF THE GOOSE

I FELT GUILTY about leaving Shapiro in a bind but a man needs a rest so, after several false starts, we were finally leaving. "Hold it," I yelled, "Here's the mailman."

"So what?" a wife inquired from the back seat.

"Anyone," my mad friend mumbled, "who'd make a remark like that knows nothing of writers."

The flimsy brown paper envelope was unstamped but bore the franking of an official communication from the government of a neighboring country. My mad friend pulled away while I opened it. "Do we know a Señora Epifania López Viuda de Fuentes?" I asked.

Backseat discussion of whether the new botch look could be worn with open-toed sandals continued with interruption. I crumpled the letter and violated California's anti-litter law. Three blocks later a wife asked, "Who?"

"Epifania López, Vda. de Fuentes. I think it was."

"My aunt."

My mad friend braked and wordlessly retraced the three block. While he turned around again I rescued the crumpled letter from beneath a muzzled Volkswagen.

"She's going to be evicted if we don't stop by the *Re-caudacion de Rentas*."

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"Really my great aunt. I only saw her once when I was a child."

"Back to the subject," my mad friend said. "In spite of Dogma and Eve, serpents are relatively unintelligent. As villains they're even less plausible than bug-eyed monsters. What d'you think of Sauerbraten?" he continued with his usual change of subject.

"Then why? More logical that the fruit be offered by a politician. I'll bet the serpent's a Hebrew symbol of evil because some polytheistic neighbor worshipped his rat-trapping house snake. Sauerbraten's fair but the Wiener Schnitzel's better."

It being neither a horse nor dog racing day, traffic was light. Twenty minutes later my friend clenched teeth at the transition to the highways of a country which I charitably refrain from naming. "I can't think of a more unlikely place for German cooking," he mumbled. "Incidentally, does Recaudacion de Rentas have anything to do with rent?"

I shook my head. "It's where you pay taxes and water bills and buy sheets of sealed paper whenever you need a copy of your *ezcuintle's* birth certificate."

"My *ezcuintles* were born in Gringoland," my friend said.

"It is not possible that my great aunt Epifania be evicted," a wife said from the rear seat.

"Why?"

"She's dead."

"An excellent reason," my mad friend observed.

"This will bear investigation," I said prophetically. "Do you mind?"

"I faint from hunger," my friend answered, but he turned. We parked with some difficulty in a thoroughly dug up street.

Recaudación de Rentas was a long narrow room on the ground floor of the *Palacio*. We stood before the counter for several minutes. Eventually *Recaudación's* single occupant finished filing her nails and swayed toward us like a vintage vamp. "*Digame*," she said apathetically.

"It treats of this matter which I do not clearly understand—" I smoothed the crumpled letter.

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"Ah. First one goes to the Panteon Number Two."

"¿May one know where finds itself the Graveyard Number Two?"

"Any gendarme will advise."

"¿May one ask where everyone went?" my mad friend inquired.

"All gawk at an object which fell on the hill behind Cemetery Number Two."

"Egad!" my mad friend groaned.

I suppose I should have called Shapiro and told him where our lost weather balloon fetched up. But there was no phone handy so we got in the car.

"At least we can follow the crowd," my friend said.

"When do we eat?" a wife asked.

"Soon," I said hopefully.

Four bum steers later we parked at *Panteón* Number Two. A multitude clambered from mound to headstone to sarcophagus, descending the hill behind the cemetery.

"What of the UFO?" I asked a plump young man who pushed a three-wheeled-bicycle load of ice cream.

"Gone," he said in English. "They've even blotted out the tracks where it landed."

"Something really came down?" my mad friend asked.

"About midnight, with a scream like a communist lawyer."

A small girl with a large copper coin approached, so we left.

A toolshed stood in the center of the graveyard. In its doorway sat a thin, pockmarked man in pith helmet, leather puttees, and *guaraches*. "*One may perhaps seek information?*" I asked.

"¿How not?"

I handed him the crumpled letter.

"Epifania Lopez, widow of Fuentes," he mused, and riffled through a ledger. "She'll be leaving tomorrow."

"This whole affair has taken on an aspect of unreality," my mad friend said in English.

The pockmarked man gave him an apologetic smile. "No spik."

"We were under the impression that the lady was dead," my friend added.

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"She is." He glanced again at the ledger and memorized a number. Two of our wives got out of the car as we trailed him up the rocky slope. "Two-forty-two," he mumbled, consulting a small numbered stake. We walked down one row and backtracked another before he stopped. The mound was nearly hidden between a marble atrocity and a granite phallic symbol. Scrabbling through the weeds, the caretaker found a stake with faded typewriting under celluloid.

"Here's your aunt, "I called the wives who were catching up.

"And the lady is to be evicted?" my mad friend asked.

"Five years have elapsed and the plot has not been paid for."

"Where does she go from here?" I asked.

The caretaker mumbled vaguely and I deemed it best not to pursue the subject.

"How much are the fees?" my wife asked.

"Two hundred pesos."

Which, at 12½ to a dollar works out to, uh—

"Well, let's see," my friend said, "A peso's worth eight cents. Times two hundred—"

"Where's your slide rule?" a wife asked.

"Sixteen dollars," the caretaker said.

Both wives were looking at me.

"I could eat the blastoderm out of a nematode," my mad friend said.

Resignedly, I reached for my wallet.

"I am not permitted to accept money."

My mad friend slapped a hand to his forehead.

"One must go to *Recaudación*, taking the name, date and plot number." He scribbled necessary data on the back of the crumpled letter. "It would be well to hurry," he added. "The graveyard locks itself at seventeen hours."

Walking at the maximum permitted men with wives, we returned to my friend's auto and bounced our way back. "The average snake," my friend continued, "has little intelligence. For reasons having nothing to do with theology, he's in an evolutionary blind alley and will never be smarter than a moderately precocious rutabaga."

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"I knew you were a theologian but when did you become a herpetologist?"

"Satan's evil knowledge can often be turned against him."

There are times when I believe my mad friend could have jansenized St. Ignatius Loyola. We arrived again at *Recaudacion*. There were now twelve girls in the office, filing nails, applying lipstick, knitting, reading the lonely hearts ads in *Confidencias*. One was typing an answer. The sole *secretario* finally deigned to notice us.

"We would like to pay the necessary fees for the tomb of Sra.—" I consulted the letter again.

"¿Another five years or in perpetuity?"

"That depends on how much it costs," I hedged.

"It's costing me malnutrition," my mad friend mumbled.

"One hundred and fifty pesos for five years. Two hundred *a la perpetuidad*."

"I wouldn't go through this again for four dollars."

He X-ed a square in a form and copied the name and plot number from the crumpled letter. He took my name, address, age, marital status, place of birth, nationality, native tongue, and occupation.

"What about political affiliation?" my mad friend asked.

"As a government employee I naturally belong to the Revolutionary Institutions Party," the *secretario* said loftily.

My friend sighed.

"And now the receipt, if you please."

"¿What receipt?"

The *secretario* controlled himself. "For the two hundred pesos," he said raggedly, "Didn't you stop at the cashier's office first?"

My friend and I looked at each other. "I'm dying," he moaned.

"And I'm dieting."

"Over there," the *secretario* said tiredly. "And you'd better hurry."

We sprinted up an iron, fire-escape-like stairway to the *Palacio's* 2nd story. "*Recaudacion* sends us for a receipt for two hundred pesos," I panted.

Counting audibly, a middle aged lady finished knitting a

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row then began a receipt in triplicate. I reached for my wallet and extracted two \$10 bills.

"National currency," the lady said firmly.

"Quick!" my mad friend yelled. We dashed downstairs, across the patio looking for a place to buy some funny money. The *casa de cambio* across the street was closed. The next money changer was four blocks away. . . .

"I'm too exhausted to be hungry," my friend wheezed as we sprinted back with a fistful of tattered, inflation colored paper.

A small eternity later we were again rattling toward *Panteón Number Two*. The crowd had thinned by this time and I suddenly remembered that I hadn't as yet called Shapiro. "Funny how these stories grow," I said, remembering the ice cream vendor, "As if a weather balloon could make a noise coming down!"

"In nordic countries the saucer is invariably noiseless," my friend explained "but Latins cannot tolerate the existence of silence. Nor, apparently, can my stomach."

Several wives descended from the car and followed us. We stood around the mound, each thinking his own thoughts. By now Aunt Epifania was definitely part of the family.

"A small marble stone would look nice," a wife said.

My fingers closed convulsively over my billfold. "Hasn't Aunt Fannie any issue of her own?"

"How much would a headstone cost?"

"A chemise and two pairs of alligator pumps with matching handbags ought to handle the down payment."

There was no answer.

"Verily, life is for the living," my mad friend muttered.

"I wonder where that caretaker is."

I was still wondering when an elderly lady attracted our attention by descending the graveyard's upper reaches with a recklessness hardly proper for her years and widow's weeds. Hopping from mound to mound, she skittered downhill knocking wreathes and headboards askew. "*¡Ay Dios, señor!*" she babbled, clutching at my lapels and snagging a stray wisp of beard. "There is fresh digging and a hand extends

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itself from the ground, making perfectly the sign of the cross!"

"Oi Gewalt!" my mad friend moaned. "A skeleton I'll be yet."

Sure enough, the plot adjoining the agitated widow's husband's had a hand sticking out. My friend and I viewed it circumspectly, avoiding each other's eyes from fear that suppressed smiles might erupt into something uncontrollable. Several wives were having a similar difficulty.

"Truly, *señora*, the hand makes the sign of the cross," my mad friend began. "But—" Abruptly, he buried his face in his handkerchief and coughed.

"What my friend wishes to say," I explained, "is that each country has its own language of gestures. Note, *señora*, that, though thumb and forefinger make the sign of the cross, little and ring fingers are also clenched."

My friend recovered from his coughing fit. "In our land, *señora*, the clenched fist with middle finger extended is a gesture without religious significance. It does, of course, have a secular meaning."

By this time the caretaker had appeared. "God forbid!" he wailed. "The notifications to proper authorities, the paper work—" He clutched his head in bony hands and the pith helmet rolled several meters downhill.

"*Calma*," I said. "Some saucer gawker has a perverted sense of humor." I shook the gravel out of the latex-glove hand, rolled it, and stuffed it in my pocket.

We were nearly back to the car when he caught up with us. "I thank you," he said. "You cannot imagine the hours of bureaucrat anguish you have saved me."

"Like hell I can't!" my friend said grimly. "My royalties for an overripe mango."

"I shall remove the weeds from your great aunt's grave. I shall plant *jacintos* and *claveles* and water them daily."

"We shall be eternally grateful," I said, rushing through the *ronde* of Latin leavetaking. We made our escape.

After Supper and Kartoffel Salat we settled down to a leisurely gorge of Bavarian potroast which, due to our lateness,

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was the only thing not crossed off the menu. Only a purist could have distinguished it from Sauerbraten. Halfway through my second hard roll I remembered. "Oh gad!"

A waiter appeared. "Yah?"

Not knowing whether this was German for "what do you want?" or Spanish for "are you already finished?" I asked for a telephone in English. "Got to call Shapiro," I explained.

When I returned my mad friend was arguing with his favorite wife about whether Spanish with a German or German with a Spanish accent sounds worse. A busboy removed some of our litter. A baldheaded Bavarian unveiled a trayful of assorted Schmaltzenmacherei and a bowl of whipped cream.

"Now where were we?" my mad friend asked. He sipped coffee with a longing look at my glass of Rhenish rotgut.

"The serpent," I reminded him. "Where does dogma assure us that reptiles cannot develop intelligence? If our fishy ancestors could, why not a snake?"

"I've often suspected piscine ancestry on your side," a wife interjected, "But I disclaim it for my own."

"Oho!" my mad friend laughed, "The grunnon bit, Mr. Bones."

Wives looked at us expectantly.

"Stripping the story and ourselves to bare essentials, we've all hand-caught them during the monthly high tides. As veterans of these fullmooned beach bacchanalia, we can swear before any and all tourists that the little fish is neither mysterious nor mythical."

"All right," a wife said tiredly, "so we've all come home in the wee small hours with a case of sniffles and a bucket of grunnon. So what?"

"Mme. Grunnon's marvelous little instinct makes her lay eggs high enough on the beach so they won't get wet before hatching time twenty-eight days later. Can you, God's finest creature, with all your Vapours and Lunar Humours, disclaim a kinship with this tiny tidebound female?"

All wives became thoughtfully silent.

"And thou, mad friend of Celtic breed?"

"I grow less sorry by the minute for having taken the

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pledge. Returning to your argument, I see no point in dragging theology into a simple affair of two chambered hearts versus the four chambered pump of a viviparous species. Small things like these distinguish us from the fish and warm the connubial bed. By the way, what'd Shapiro have to say?"

"Oh, there's a mixup somewhere. The telemetering gear started working again and they've zeroed in on it somewhere in New Mexico."

My mad friend thoughtfully slopped another dollop of whipped cream into his coffee. "Then what do you suppose the local saucer gawkers were looking at?"

I pulled the obscenely gesturing glove from my pocket and unrolled it. "Odd," I said. "See the holes where the fingernails ought to be? More like a claw than a human hand. That new grave must have been directly below where the whatever-it-was landed."

"I suppose so," my friend mumbled.

"Say, feel of this."

My mad friend ran his fingers over the rough surfaced glove with its faint hint of scaliness. "Strange," he said. "Doesn't feel exactly like latex. More like a sloughed lizard skin."

"I suppose a skin-shedding would require more squirming space than could be found in the average flying saucer," I said, "but why was he digging around that new grave?"

"Please," a wife said, "not while I'm eating."

My mad friend frowned. "If it's true I'll sue Him for breach of Covenant," he said distinctly.

And suddenly nobody was eating.



THE COUNTRY BOY

SIT IN a sidewalk café long enough and the whole world will walk by. Hah! A half hour had passed without one familiar face. I was glowering into a French beer, gaining a new insight into the Gallic preference for wine when someone sat uninvited at my table. "Feelthy peectures?" he asked.

It was my mad friend. I stared incredulously, then laughed. "You first," he said.

I shrugged. "A world power pays me not to talk." Not that there was any real secret. Millions knew IT was going to start a few days after the inauguration. This time America had selected the original Aw-shucks kid. His supporters gleefully described him as the ugliest president since Lincoln. They hinted he was more everything than the Emancipator. So far he was only uglier.

The other side of the world gave him ten days to snafu. Then they'd deliver the Ultimatum and he was going to muff it. I knew it; my mad friend knew it; so did everybody else. But, business as usual, so here I was for this crummy geophysical fizzle where I'd probably get mine an hour before the optimists who'd voted for the wonder boy.

My mad friend read my mind. "He can't be real," he

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groused. "So he was a doctor at 19. So he wiped out disease and lengthened the lifespan 20 years. But why, in his 35-year-old decrepitude does he have to take up politics? I say it's all done with mirrors."

"We'll know in three weeks," I gloomed. The waiter hovered.

"*Café*," my mad friend said. He glanced distastefully at my bock. "Remove this urine and bring my friend a bottle of Munchener Lowenbräu."

"*Sí, señor*," the waiter answered.

"No wonder that troglodyte couldn't understand French!"

"Refugee," my mad friend clarified. "It never occurred to you to try Spanish?"

"Never," I admitted. "But why do you endanger your sinuses in this rainwashed realm of international iniquity?"

"An extradition."

"A what?" The last I knew he'd been playing Great White Father to the autochthonous population of an Arizona town which only the threat of legal reprisals keeps me from naming. I could not imagine a Yaqui Indian in Paris. Much less could I imagine one being wanted bad enough to send my mad friend here.

The waiter returned with coffee for my friend and a potable, non-local beer for me. "*¿Los señores desean algo más?*" he asked.

"I desire to know why you didn't speak Spanish in the first place."

The waiter shrugged apologetically. "You look like a god-dam."

My mad friend laughed. "Where did you ever get those tweeds?" he wondered.

But I was not going to be led down the garden path. "You mentioned an extradition—"

He saw what I was driving at. "I don't work there any more."

"What! Those ungrateful wretches turned you out as soon as you'd ticketed enough tourists to build a new jail and squad room?"

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"Not exactly," he explained. "I went into business for myself."

I have heard of private investigators but never of a private traffic cop. "Did you buy up a stretch of highway or do you have the toll concession on Brooklyn Bridge?"

"Bring any women?" my friend asked with his usual mercurial change of subject.

I nodded. "I don't imagine anyone would foot the bill for your harem as long as it's an extradition matter."

"You're so right," my mad friend agreed.

Two furtive men in shabby overcoats sat down at the next table. Without asking, the waiter brought a half bottle of Valdepeñas to one and something which looked like cider to the other. They began a political discussion in Catalán.

"This seems to be a Spanish Republican hangout," I said nervously.

"It is," my mad friend admitted.

"Shades of McCarthy!" I exclaimed, "I'll be investigated!"

"Relax," my friend said. "Have another beer."

"You know they're harmless and I know it but do the hatchet men?"

"What hatchet men?"

"That scientific congress. I'm supposed to know Secrets."

"Do you?" my mad friend asked.

"That's beside the point. Hired assassins have their job and they're singularly unimaginative about doing it."

"If I'm not mistaken," my mad friend said, "here comes one now."

"How would you know?"

"He flashed his tin in the consulate when I was there yesterday."

The man who approached our table was definitely not the FBI type. He was of medium height, with a nondescript, faintly Byzantine look, and splendid teeth which his dark skin made even whiter. He wore a trench coat and *boina*, which is cut so like a beret that only a Spaniard recognizes the difference. Accompanying him was a rather attractive Mexican girl, wearing what I guessed was the new botch look. The mere thought of its cost made me acutely unhappy.

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"Look who I've found!" she said, then did a double take as she recognized my mad friend.

"How many wives did you bring?" my mad friend asked.

"Just this one." We made room at the table and the waiter reappeared.

"*Avez-vous une Coca-Cola?*" the girl asked.

"He speaks Spanish," I said.

"You want I should ask for Tequila already?"

My mad friend sighed and inspected the man in trench coat and *boina*. The Byzantine stared back. Without looking, he took a glass of cognac from the waiter's hand and tossed it off. "I know you," he said.

The last time I'd seen him he was resplendent in a Mexican cavalry officer's uniform. The time before that he'd spoken archaic Sephardic Spanish. Now he was speaking English. "Are you really an FBI man?" I asked.

"Want to see my papers?" he tossed them on the table.

"They look real," I conceded. "Except these say you're a native American. Last time I saw you, you were born in Istanbul."

"Dear me," he said, switching momentarily from American to British. "In those days I drank more than I should."

"Getting in the FBI would be easy," my mad friend said. "If I believed in time machines."

One of the Byzantine's little quirks was that he did. From what I'd been able to guess he wasn't born an American and had never stood still long enough to acquire citizenship, save in Istanbul. And since he wouldn't be born there for another 300 years, that could lead to complications. But how easy, with a time machine, to materialize at midnight in some courthouse and doctor a birth record. Ditto with the yellowing archives of the little red schoolhouse up to the big, carefully non-red university. I looked at the man in the *boina* and suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?" the Mexican girl asked.

"I imagine," the Byzantine said in his archaic Spanish, "that he's visualizing the situation in an office which had too many desks one morning. Hawkshaw greets everyone as though he'd been there for the last nine years. There

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would have been much innocent amazement on one hand and furtive checking of records on the other. But everything was there: vouchers and cancelled pay checks for nine years, dossier in order. And when Himself had gone through his own sealed files and read glowing semi-annual efficiency reports signed in his own hand—"The Byzantine shrugged.

"They occupy sensitive positions," he continued. "It would never do to flap off to a psychiatrist over a little lapse like not remembering the man at the desk next to yours all these years. If such a thing ever got out it might undermine public confidence in the Department."

"This is the kind of thing you should write," my mad friend said.

"Who'd believe it?" I muttered.

The Byzantine tossed off another cognac. Abruptly, he stood and, excusing himself, disappeared in the general direction of the men's room.

"About this extradition," I probed.

My mad friend drew himself up magnificently. "I am now police chief of Speedtrap, Ariz.," he said.

"There ain't no such town," I protested.

"You want to see *my* papers?" He tossed an open billfold and an extradition warrant on the table. Again, they looked entirely too real. "Go over the seal with a low power microscope and you'll find we incorporated only two months ago," he volunteered.

"But actually to christen a town Speedtrap?"

"Desert rats have a perverted sense of humor. Something to do with the vitamin content of Gila monster."

It couldn't be the booze, I decided, for my mad friend has not touched the stuff since a certain experience in North Africa. . . . But the FBI had returned from a *pissoir* somewhere in the café's subterranean portion. He had a 10° list to starboard.

"It may be impolitic to mention it," my mad friend said, "but you once told us your only trip to the past had created havoc by planting antibiotic-hardened microbes back where no one had any immunity. Wasn't once enough to make you swear off?"

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The Byzantine looked about with exaggerated caution. "Who said I had a time machine?"

"You did, winter before last."

The Byzantine looked at us suspiciously.

"You were eating pancakes in the only decent steak house in Nogales," I reminded.

"And as I recall," my mad friend contributed; "you were going to be 40 about now. There was conjecture as to whether you'd make it."

The Byzantine showed teeth in a dazzling renewal of confidence. "Things have changed," he said. "I may live several more years."

"That's heartening. I was afraid you had timed your career to end about the time the world did."

The Byzantine made a nervous hair-patting gesture and knocked his *boina* askew. Before he could lower his hand another cognac was thrust into it. The smile returned. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"He," my mad friend said, pointing at me, "is already overloaded."

The Byzantine made a dog-bedding-down-in-highgrass movement. I hoped his story would be better than the last he'd tried to foist onto me.

"When I discovered," he began, "that the world would end in 1960 my initial reaction was an *On the Beach* syndrome. Then I thought, why not tamper again? My own world was gone and yours headed for destruction. What could be lost?"

"What indeed?" my mad friend wondered.

"But there remained the question: Whence the fatal spore which grew into that planet sterilizing mushroom?"

"Wasn't that obvious?" my mad friend asked. "Your alleged world was unified, prosperous, and pan-Christian some three or four hundred years hence, until you unwittingly planted the plague in 562 AD."

"Sharp," the Byzantine said in English. "But you forget." He lapsed into Spanish again and I noticed his Sephardic tendency to convert 's' into 'esh' was growing stronger. "There is only one time track. When I created this world I

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destroyed my own. My problem now was to go back and find the focal point which started man off on atomic research."

"Well, obviously you didn't scrag Einstein in his infancy," I said.

"Pointless," the Byzantine said. "There would still have been Rutherford."

"And Cavendish."

"And Curie."

"And Democritus."

"Heretics all," my mad friend growled.

"You might have started with Thales of Miletus," I said. The Byzantine spread his hands in a helpless gesture and the waiter thrust a cognac into one. "Somewhere in history was a beginning—a nexus point whence all atomic research must stem. I visited many civilizations."

"Babylonia?" my mad friend asked. "Those temples were to get closer to the sun. If you walked E down the main street of one of those towns you went up a ramp right to the top of the ziggurat."

The Byzantine looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Wearing a look of impossibly eager innocence, my mad friend pointed at me. "The man from the Saucer Works says launching ramps should always face E to take advantage of rotational velocity."

"You were looking for a nexus," I reminded.

"Ah sí. By now I knew the time machine a little better and could flicker at the low edge of visibility. Also, I had enclosed it and carried my own air. I always drenched it with disinfectant before going back, and thus caused no new plagues."

"But the nexus?" I insisted. "Where did atomic research begin?"

The Byzantine gave an eloquent shrug. "There is none," he said. "It seems to be an inalienable part of your civilization."

I was annoyed. "You seem singularly carefree for a man who's going to travel beyond Saturn without a space suit any day."

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"I am," the Byzantine said. "I don't believe I'm tampering when I tell you that all is not lost."

"I shall light a candle for you," my mad friend said.

"When I was convinced that nothing short of destroying the human race could prevent it from annihilating itself I began sleeping in a foetal position. Then curiosity came to my rescue. Although he was no longer in style, I decided to find the Missing Link."

My mad friend began mumbling an exorcism.

"Did you find him?" I asked.

"No. The machine's range is limited to thousand year jumps. By the 3rd jump Byzantium-New Rome-Constantinople-Istanbul—the polynomial city of my youth had shrunk to a trading depot inside a log stockade."

"1000 BC is a trifle late for missing links," I ventured.

The Byzantine nodded and made that nervous gesture which knocked his *boina* askew again. Before he could lower his hand the waiter thrust another cognac into it. "Some Phoenicians were pouring blazing pitch down onto a band of savages. The savages were howling antisemitic slogans as I flipped the switch."

"Never sell this one," my mad friend muttered.

The Byzantine turned on his chalice-poisoning smile and permitted the interruption. "*¿Por qué?*" he asked.

"You've got a time machine. You go back and back and nothing happens. So what?"

"So the next jump," the Byzantine continued, "also nothing happened. The Golden Horn was still there but wider and shallower. A frigid wind made me suspect the ice cap lay not far N of the Caucasus. One look told me the Phoenician subdivision was yet to come. It also told me something I should have thought of in the first place; that, though excellent for *viajes temporales*, the time machine was useless for geographical voyaging."

"A plumber never brings the right wrench," I sympathized.

"Nor did I," the Byzantine agreed, "I went back, wondering what changes I had inadvertently caused."

"The Bomb and the Ultimatum are still with us," my mad friend groused. "You didn't change that."

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"My germicidal precautions were satisfactory and, remaining virtually invisible, I startled no one into flapping up a new religion."

"The Missing Link," I pressed.

"Still missing."

"Anyone," my mad friend pontificated, "who would make such a statement is abysmally ignorant of contemporary politics."

"And religion," I added.

"I'll get to that later," my friend retorted.

"How big is this time machine?" I asked.

Again the Byzantine unveiled his skatophagous smile. "Too small for a Land Rover. Thanks," he continued, "to my FBI connections, I acquired a nuclear powered, folding back pack copter—one of those new ones with silenced ramjets so as not to apprise the enemy of his impending vertical envelopment."

There had been hints of this gadget at the Saucer Works but the Byzantine had apparently anticipated even the Russian version of Popular Mechanics.

"It was a tight fit but after dousing it with germicide I milleniskipped five thousand years back past the previous stop."

"Which put you approximately 7000 BC," my mad friend surmised.

"*Al grano*," the Mexican girl suggested, "let's get to the point."

The Byzantine was unruffled. "If I did not find the Missing Link, I contented myself that I had discovered Eden.

"The ice cap had shuffled half a hundred leagues backward in its agelong waltz across the northern hemisphere. My many-named homeland was wooded, but no longer frigid. There was a difference which I felt immediately. It was like that *frisson* which come on first reading Homer—on finding oneself transported beyond the dawn where the air is still unbesmogged and the gods have, perhaps, created man but have not as yet gotten around to inventing sin.

"The forest was shaggy, like your unmanicured American

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woods, but five thousand years newer than Troy. The Golden Horn was choked with reeds and roofed with a milling mass of screeching waterfowl. There was a cry which repeated endlessly—some sort of crane, I suppose, but the spell of the moment made me expect something between man and goat to step tootling from the reeds. But if Pan was born, he was not present that day."

"Another theory shot to hell," I grunted.

The Byzantine shot me an inquiring look.

"According to this theory," my mad friend said, "Europe was overrun by Bushmen or, as we of the Hibernian persuasion call them, Firbolgs."

"Ah sí." *Lepreón* was the nearest the Byzantine could approximate to the trumpeted Gaelic vowels.

"A relict of paganism," my mad friend said disapprovingly.

"Also extinct save in the Kalahari."

"We don't live in South Africa," the Mexican girl said.

The Byzantine lurched abruptly to his feet and made for the *pissoir*. More unsteadily than last time, I noted.

"This Speedtrap, Ariz., jazz," I prodded. "If you're so newly incorporated, how come the extradition?"

"We couldn't afford a large municipal payroll so the offices of auditor and treasurer were combined."

"Oh gad!" I muttered. "Say an Ave Maria for the traditional checks and balances."

"R.I.P. would be better," my friend conceded. "It was all checks and no balance."

"You're here to recover the municipal funds?"

"If she hasn't spent them."

"She?"

"If I hear it again I'll shout soprano but, in Algonquin, Polynesian, or Baluchistani, I *cherche* for the woman."

The Byzantine returned. His roundabout progress brushed him against the table where Catalán revolutionaries still conversed. They glanced up and lapsed into silence. A moment later one got up and left hurriedly without paying the check.

"Where was I?" the Byzantine asked, sitting down and giving us a fuzzy look.

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"You had just discovered that the Golden Horn was populated neither by Bushmen nor Pan."

"*Ah sí pues*, I left the time machine beneath an oak, perhaps a hundred meters from the water's edge, and turned on its radio beacon. Then I unfolded the copter. It went together like an erector set, all with wing nuts. Guaranteed to assemble without wrenches in less than ten minutes. Two hours later I was finally heading NW."

"Exactly opposite from where I'd have gone," my mad friend observed.

The Byzantine gave a faintly superior smile. "I was familiar with the parking problem in Babylon," he said. "I was looking for a country boy."

"NW of Istanbul," the Mexican girl mused, "would be somewhere in Germany."

"The Neander Valley, to be exact."

"The plot agglutinates," my mad friend said unenthusiastically.

"Why not take the time machine along and save a trip back?" I wondered.

"The power comes from a connection in a basement workshop in a New Rome suburb which will never exist. Moving it might pull out the plug."

My mad friend sipped coffee and stared morosely at the table vacated by the Catalán.

"The trip was uneventful. The climate was slightly balmy than nowadays. Europe had not been logged off but the Carpathian Alps were still mountains and the Schwarzwald was still the Black Forest."

"Full of elves making Volkswagens?" my friend baited, but the Byzantine did not rise.

"Stilt houses in a few lakes were inhabited by brown-skinned burrheads whom I took for Cromagnons. I pushed on in my search for a real country boy."

"To Neanderthal?"

"Empty."

My mad friend looked up incredulously.

"He had been there but a raid, a plague, a bad winter, had come. Ashes in the caves were several years old."

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Someone collapsed in the table's single empty chair. I glanced up and recognized one of my mad friend's wives. "I thought you didn't bring any," I exclaimed.

Ignoring me, he whipped the warrant from his pocket and proclaimed, "I arrest you in the name of the people of Speedtrap, Arizona."

"Does that mean we have to go home?" his wife asked.

"Probably take another couple of weeks to arrange passage," my mad friend answered.

"Is *she* the embezzling treasurer?" But the Byzantine was talking again.

"Being at loose ends, I decided to go up to Schleswig-Holstein and see if it was true about the amber traders having a marine railway across the isthmus so they wouldn't have to sail around Denmark."

"Did they?" I asked absently. I wanted to question the newly arrived wife but she was deep in a discussion of the other wife's new botch look.

The Byzantine spread his hands. "I never got there," he explained. "The booklet clearly stated that the copter could be assembled without wrenches but hand-tight was not tight enough. I fluttered along, tightening first one wing nut, then another. Somewhere between the Elbe and the Oder, a dozen loosened simultaneously. I decided to land and bang them all tight with a rock. I had nearly reached the ground when one flew off and I found myself holding things together with one hand.

"Miraculously, the glide flattened. I progressed nearly a half kilometer into a box canyon before the second nut dropped off. I was moving slowly now, only a meter above ground, but I was frantic for fear the rotor would be damaged unless I could stop its windmilling. After another hundred meters of hoppity-skipping through a bramble patch I made it. The jet pods were less scratched than I.

"It turned visibly darker as I merthiolated the worst of my scratches. It was late summer from the looks of the berries, so I wouldn't freeze. I couldn't hunt for the wing nuts after dark so I decided to build a fire to keep away whatever carnivores lurked nearby.

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"I realized next morning that those last hundred meters had taken more out of me than was apparent at first glance. But the Trinity of my youth still looked after its own for, though I had built no fire, I was alive and, despite numerous aches, could walk.

"After breakfasting on a Hershey bar, I started back-tracking for my missing wing nuts."

"Talk about needles in haystacks," I grunted.

The Byzantine smiled. "I had a pocket radar which would make a solid pip whenever I got close to that much metal." He stuck out his hand and the waiter immediately filled it. "It wasn't until I had retraced my glide through the briar patch that I saw the tracks and thought to load my Mendoza-McGirr.

"Oh, you don't have them yet," he remembered. ".25, with a triangular plastic cartridge. The slug is a gob of contact explosive."

"Nice thing to carry around in your pocket," my mad friend observed sardonically.

"The explosive is inactive until the propelling charge compresses it through a choke bore," he explained. "But even with a Menmac I was not eager to round a bush and face a bear large enough to leave these tracks.

"I proceeded slowly out of the canyon with one eye on the scope and the other carefully peeled for the berry-eating bear. Crossing a mud creek-bank, I learned my bear walked on two feet and was accompanied by several smaller bipeds. I came very carefully out of the brambles, through low scrub timber to a meadow where I caught a flicker of motion in the distance.

"They were big, tangle-haired, and naked. The meadow was a half kilometer across and perhaps twice as long. I was torn between a desire to see these things up close and to continue searching for my missing wing nuts. I was distinctly worried by now for the radar's metal readings hinted that any natives who settled here would exist in a permanent stone age. Resignedly, I started around the meadow.

"Dodging from tree to tree, I came within meters of them and squatted behind a log. They were big, heavier than a

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Russian wrestler, and, stretched out, would have been as tall as a Texan's story. But they crouched like apes and this made their arms seem longer than a man's.

"Sparse reddish hair covered the males' shoulders and chests. It ran down in a bristling line to a tuft which nearly concealed their masculinity. Both sexes had long yellow hair which streamed in a tangled mass from their skulls. This convinced me, even more than the flints they carried, that they were not apes. Uglier than usual they might be, but these things were men.

"They poked along, moving toward me. The big male grunted mightily as he strained at a rotten log. Two females joined him and they turned it over. Females and cubs made eager clucking sounds as they scrabbled for beetles. The boss male sucked a snail from its shell while half-grown bucks watched from a safe distance and perhaps dreamed of a day when they'd be bigger and the boss older. But his stiff beard betrayed no grey and it would take a long fang to reach that throat.

"Minutes passed while I lay behind the log watching them, wondering what sort of necklace the boss was wearing. It didn't look like the shell and acorn strings the others had.

"Suddenly there was a 'whuff' as he stood, little eyes glaring suspiciously toward me. I could see now what the necklace was. He was wearing my wing nuts!

"He made sounds which might have been language and his subjects scurried away while he bared teeth and made threatening gestures at me. One young female carried a baby which couldn't be more than a month old but, instead of disappearing like the others, she put the baby down some distance back and returned to join the male. I wondered if she was curious or had decided I'd be an easy kill.

"I faced several possibilities—all unpleasant. Either I got the wing nuts from around his neck or I would have to walk across Europe. Something in his attitude told me now was not the moment to dicker. Even if his mind had been capable of entertaining notions of trade, what had I to offer?

"A neat problem in morality: Had I the right to kill a man merely to save myself a long walk home?"

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"There was," my mad friend suggested, "the moot point of whether you could survive the walk. It might have been as simple as your life or his."

"That occurred to me," the Byzantine said soberly, "but I did not consider it valid for, as long as I had my weapon it seemed possible that I might eventually return to New Rome with little more than blistered heels."

"You considered these problems in a calm, detached manner while this ogre glared at you?" the Mexican girl asked.

The Byzantine smiled. "One can consider an amazing number of things in an instant. However, an instant was all I had, for the 'ogre' carried a crude flint blade and was stalking me like the Sicilian Avenger in some third rate melodrama. I made a threatening motion with my pistol. He and the female who advanced with him ignored it. I suspect threats would have been useless, even had he known what a pistol was.

"By now they were too close for the obvious tactic of blowing a house-sized hole between us. Also, if I frightened them I'd never see those wing nuts again. I retreated, walking slowly backward while they continued their inexorable advance. Soon it became obvious that I could not backpedal as fast as they could aggress.

"A moment later I also learned I could not run forward as swiftly as their shambling lope could close between us. They were scarcely four meters behind when I cast moral scruples to the wind and turned."

"Oh gad!" my mad friend groaned.

The Byzantine looked knowingly at him. "Quite," he said. "Those bullets were not meant to detonate that close to their user.

"From the sun I should guess it was well past midday when I came to and picked myself from the meadow's saw-like sedge. I ached in every joint and my ears rang like a carillon. I had lost considerable blood through the nose.

"There was nothing of the male, save bits of bone and hair. The female had been blown clear but something—it looked like the male's mandible—had gone through her chest.

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"Of my wing nuts, there was not a sign. I fumbled through my pockets and found the radar which, thanks to potted circuitry, still worked. Hours passed before I had recovered the nuts. I pried one from the bark of a Norway pine over 100 meters away. Then I came back to complete the more gruesome part of my task. The indicator had shown metal embedded somewhere inside the female.

"By this time my ears had stopped ringing and it appeared that I would someday hear again. I removed the final nut from a corpse now advanced in rigor mortis and was about to go reassemble the copter when I heard a faint wail.

"I had subconsciously supposed the rest of them had taken the baby. They hadn't. It had lain wailing and starving in the grass all this time and only now was I beginning to hear it."

My mad friend smiled approvingly. "As Arthur Miller once observed, a play always tells how the birds came home to roost."

"Exactly," the Byzantine agreed. "Having murdered his parents, what were my duties to the offspring? For in spite of all extenuating circumstances, I could not help thinking of it as murder.

"My rations contained neither milk nor pablum. I tried making baby food as primitive mothers do, chewing a mouthful thoroughly, then feeding it to the child. But he was too young to swallow semi-solids. I carried him back, listening to his gradually weakening wails while I struggled to reassemble the copter. Several nuts had been damaged and it was only with a great deal of hammering that I got things back together.

"Nevertheless, two hours later I was back at the time machine and a microsecond after that I had returned to an era where bottles and formula were available."

"And now the real problem," I suggested.

"Did you baptize him or give him to a zoo?" my mad friend asked.

"After a week it became obvious to both of us that I was not a fit mother. He seemed perfectly normal but he most assuredly would not be when he grew up. Could I wish him

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onto some childless couple and break two innocent hearts?"

"Wouldn't he die anyhow when he got a whiff of modern, antibiotic-hardened germs?" I asked.

"That too occurred to me but I could not take the easy way out. And then, I was curious. Wolf children, you know. What could this creature be in normal surroundings?"

"But I did not expect to live more than six months. Nor would the baby, even if he survived after losing his postnatal immunity."

"I wish you wouldn't make those disconcerting statements about when the world's going to end," my mad friend said.

"So I went back thirty five years," the Byzantine continued, "and doctored a birth record. I placed little Caliban with a middle-aged couple and told them he was my wild oat on a brilliant but unstable actress. I set up a trust fund."

The Byzantine's account abruptly ended. His eyes crossed and he laid his head on the table.

"Interesting," I said to my mad friend. "But what's with the extradition? I've heard some weird ideas to get a tax-free Paris vacation but what do the property owners have to say?"

"In addition to being police chief of Speedtrap, I am also mayor," my mad friend said.

"But don't you have to answer to the city council?"

"Not after she's absconded," a wife said.

"I should think the citizens would protest these high-handed tactics."

"Since the mine closed down I am the sole property owner of Speedtrap," my mad friend said.

"And one half of the total electorate," a wife added.

I began to see it but I still couldn't quite believe it. "How do you live?" I asked, then I remembered.

"As long as I can ticket two tourists a day we won't starve," my mad friend said. "But, just assuming God would permit such things, what do you think of the FBI story?"

I frowned. "He'd be 35 now, almost 36. With all the eightballs in existence I suppose he could find a place somewhere."

"A nice comfortable hole in civil service?" my friend needed.

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"Well," I said thoughtfully, "it's of, by, and for the people and I've heard that the only difference between us and the Neanderthaler is accumulated experience."

"Assuming he had a soul," my mad friend injected.

"Cavemen were as smart as you?" a wife asked.

"Not exactly," I said, thinking it over. "Civilization protects the oddballs and freaks who, little by little, breed us back up into the trees. Primitive man, on the other hand, may not have believed in survival of the fittest, but he practiced it."

My mad friend made a rude noise.

"He had neither fang, claw, horns nor hooves. Nor was he crutched with 70 centuries of accumulated gadgetry. Your adult Neanderthaler was either very smart or very dead."

The errant Catalán—he of the shabby overcoat—returned with an immense, pouter-pigeon-breasted woman. He caught his partner's eye and they converged on our table. "Yankees go home!" the virago shrilled. With the ease of long practice, she lifted the Byzantine to his feet, reoriented his *boina*, and slapped him awake.

My mad friend produced a pistol with a suddenness which amazed me. "Hold it!" he growled, "I've seen that kind of commie snatch before."

"You want to see *my* papers?" the second Catalán asked in Brooklynesse. The Tugboat Annie type suddenly lapsed into English and offered her credentials too. My mad friend hid his pistol.

I took a closer look. "Take it out again," I told my friend. "These amateur snatch artists have gotten the FBI and the Secret Service confused."

The Catalán smiled wickedly. "Kindly remind yourself of the Secret Service's principal function. And by the way," he added, "the director of the Saucer Works will take a dim view of your future if this gets out."

The Byzantine was awake now and stared blearily, mumbling. I bent closer and listened. "Fine boy," he was saying. "Proud of my son." His eyes came momentarily into focus and he remembered us. "By the way," he asked, "Did any of you vote for him?"

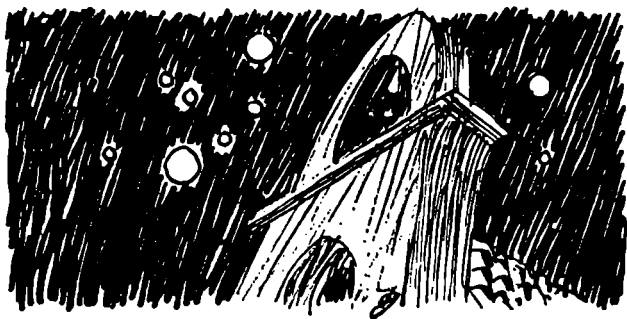
THE WORLD MUST NEVER KNOW

A beer and a half later I was still worrying about the Byzantine's attitude toward reality. "Do you think our boy Ug is going to take that Ultimatum in stride?" I asked.

"To be a man," my friend was muttering, "one must have an immortal soul."

"But is possession of one's soul a requisite for political office?"

"Probably not," my mad friend admitted.



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IT WAS VERY late of a dark and moonless night. My mad friend was near exhaustion and I had arrived. Crouching in a thicket of some thorny desert flora, we listened for sounds of pursuit. After a moment my friend stopped panting. "You suppose it really worked—like he said it would?"

I shrugged and a thorn raked my shoulder. "Want to go back and see?"

He climbed to his feet and helped me up. "Better get to the car before daylight," he said. We began trotting. A half hour later we collapsed in a dry arroyo and he was

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pecking at it again. "God would ne. thing," he complained.

"He permits this," I panted. "As for the res. Must Never Know."

"About the icebox or about the writer?"

A horse neighed somewhere so we began running again.

The trip had been one undiluted disaster. First, the transmission had exploded. Then my agent had phoned at the last minute and stuck me with this fool's errand. About that time the only wives on friendly terms with us had decided they'd had enough Mexican desert to last the rest of their lives. In another month this town would be uninhabitable. Already, the mirages were carrying parasols.

We sat on a backless bench under the scant shade of the military society's *ramada* and surveyed the dancers who tramped and spun monotonously. My mad friend sipped asphaltum-like coffee and looked surreptitiously for a place to spit. Finding none, he swallowed. "It is my considered opinion," he pontificated, "That we pursue the wild goose."

I tasted *tizwin* and agreed. With neither ice, head, nor maturity, the *tizwin* offered little, apart from bits of fermenting maize and possibly less danger than the local water. "I only knew him by reputation," I said.

"So what makes your literary skill think he'd end up in a place like this?"

I shrugged. "Last known address."

My friend waited in silence.

"Apparently he was living in one of those Truman Crackerbox developments, skinning mules or missiles up in California when he first started dumping his frustrations into the typewriter."

My mad friend gave me a sharp glance. "Sounds familiar."

"He had one of those weird, gingerbread styles," I continued, "Unreadable until somebody performed an adjectivotomy."

A strident chirping issued from the church as *cantoras* antiphoned their distaff portion of the mass back at the

I NEVER KNOW

—one of the dancing clowns—
garette and began a long, rambl-
s quicker than I, but the punch
neighbors, seemed to involve a

ne.
it?" my friend asked.
was as ungrammatical as Heming-

he left Utopia-on-the-Freeway?"

of which, ar...
d a job, a wife, two daughters—none
he cared much for."

"Gauguin syn... ne," my mad friend observed. "What
caused him to bolt?"

A small brown man with a large canvas musette bag ap-
peared on the opposite side of the plaza. Standing between
the cross and the whipping post, he peered uncertainly
through the dancers' dust. Spotting the only foreigners, he
advanced, unconsciously parodying the sacred steps as he
wheeled to avoid a gyrating platoon whose skirts fooled no
one, save possibly the Boy-Stealing-Devil for whom they
were intended.

Having safely skirted the skirts, the small brown man
stopped at our bench beneath the military society's ramada.
He removed an immense hat and fanned himself before
rummaging in the bag and extracting a much handled post
card. "Meester EeYAHree?"

This was vaguely reminiscent of my mad friend's patrilineal
handle so he took the plunge. "Ehui."

The small brown man brightened. "You speak the lan-
guage!"

My friend lapsed into Spanish. "Not well," he admitted.
"I can never remember when the double vowels should
have a glottal stop in between." He turned the post card
over."

"May we buy you a drink?" I asked.

The mail carrier rearranged the one or two letters in
his bag, searching for a graceful way to apprise me of my
gaffe. "I am *pweplum*," he said, which meant he belonged
to the club whose shade we used, and was a citizen of this

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city-state where we barbarians gaped. "You are *yorim*?" The word referred to races less favored by God—people of degenerate religious practice who are not quite human—and presumably excused me from knowing that Drink came from the Great Mother and was neither bought nor sold.

My mad friend said something in Arabic. It sounded like an old window shade being ripped down the middle.

"Qué hubo?" I asked.

"They twist the dagger in a still bleeding wound!"

The post card had squares for "x's" after *Was your car ready on time? Were our employees courteous? Were you satisfied with the work performed? Was the steering wheel clean?*

I sympathized, for my mad friend was acutely unhappy with the re-transmissioned and re-radiated behemoth which languished at Road's End some 100 km below us.

"Just wait," he muttered, "Until one of those courteous, cheerful, clean-steering-wheeled pirates tools into my speed trap!" He remembered the mail man. "Will you honor us by sitting?"

The small brown man gave a furtive Indian smile and sat. A boy brought him a glass of *tizwin*.

Still shrilling, the purple crowned *cantoras* emerged from the church, surrounding Virgin & Child. Age and an unsophisticated wood-carver had given these statues a color and ethnic cast more probable than that of the Aryan travesties one encounters among Nordic Faithful.

"Murphy was lacerating his duodenum up in California," my mad friend prompted.

"Ah yes. My city slicker spent a great deal of time showing him the ropes. About the time the slicker was ready to get his money back, prestol!"

My mad friend sighed.

"At first my shill thought he'd been lured away by some other razor merchant. But after several months he received a letter—"

My mad friend began dictating: "I take the liberty of enclosing a MS which you may find marketable. Should

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you decide to handle me, I must stipulate that my whereabouts remain secret.

“Should any unusual conjecture cross your mind, please be assured I have excellent reason for conducting my affairs in this fashion. Sincerely, Joe Blow.”

“You got it all right but the name,” I conceded. “He signed himself S. Murphy.”

The mailman coughed and blew a fine spray of *tizwin* in the general direction of the dancers. “Something wrong?” I asked. He shook his head and continued gasping. My mad friend thumped him on the back and after a couple of agonized wheezes the mailman was himself again. “You are writers!” he said.

“I demand trial by jury,” my mad friend hastened.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” I wondered.

“You spoke of S. Murphy. I have read his works.”

“Has he been translated?”

“I read him in English,” the mail carrier said.

I raised my eyebrows but did not manage to cover my bald spot. “Obviously,” my friend said, “You are a man of parts.”

The *cantoras* had by now escorted Virgin and Child to the Mother cross next to the whipping post. After some complicated footwork and flag waving by the village’s little girls, they returned the images to the church.

“This Murphy,” my mad friend prompted.

I managed another sip of *tizwin*. “You’re the crime crusher. You put the clues together. He pulled the plug on his instalments and in-laws and disappeared in a transparent but satisfactory manner since the joy and fruits of his gonads didn’t bother or think to trace him through his agent.

“When he incarnated as Murphy, his kookie gingerbread style was unchanged, the subject matter still autobiographical. Previous stories had dealt with an Outsider type trying rather desperately to establish some contact with his family. The new run was beach-comber-remittance man genre—about the lonely stranger who nobly bears his white man’s burden through some dark and secret corner of existence.”

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"My old sabre wounds are throbbing," my mad friend grunted.

The mail carrier took a deep breath. "I would write," he said, "if only I could find more time."

My friend flinched from the look in my eye.

"I have many ideas," the little man continued.

My mad friend glanced upward at the *ramada* which shaded us, reminding me that as guests we were duty bound to hear out the club bore. "You didn't know S. Murphy?" I asked.

The mailman was swallowing *tizwin*, throwing his head back chicken fashion. He waggled a finger in the Latin negative.

"And you obviously know everyone in this district," my mad friend added.

The mail carrier nodded and spat the taste of *tizwin* toward the plaza where men danced in eternal penance for having slept when the Romans came to arrest their Saviour.

"Your agent's never met Murphy?" my friend asked.

I shook my head. "In this racket those who know your most intimate secrets are people you've never seen outside of an envelope."

"Why the sudden interest in looking him up?"

I fanned myself and wished either the weather or the *tizwin* were cooler. "Our errant scribe underwent some sort of metamorphosis once he escaped the strictures of Organizationville. Maybe it was a spiritual rebirth; maybe his typewriter got gummy. (He began hitting the keys a lot harder.) But he started leaving out all those adjectives. Suddenly, he had one of those simple, effective styles which makes Genesis read rather like a comic book. Of course, he loused it up by going off on some sort of phonetic spelling kick but writers never can spell anyway.

The low slanting sun was beginning to reach us beneath the *ramada* whose shade was now transposed to the plaza where *chapyecas* in needlenosed demon masks waved wooden swords in mute menace at children who made faces at them.

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"What kind of stories do you write?" the little brown ail carrier asked.

"Mostly, I write the kind everybody was buying last year." "*Principalmente*," my mad friend contributed, "He writes counts of the fantasy scientific."

"—so, about this time, S. Murphy—"

The mailman had taken the bit in his teeth. Though the Spanish language was no more native to him than to me, he had a certain way with words. "It was on the island," he began, "Which lies in the sea two days N from the river mouth. There had been a burning. The people accused him being *ñagual*. The Mexicans got wind of it and I was taken along to interpret when they arrested the headman."

"¿*Nagual*?" my mad friend asked, "You believe that?"

"Certainly not," the mail carrier said. "A man is a man and bear is a bear. They do not trade shapes. But these island people—"

"But there are no bears on this island," I protested, "How could the belief have drifted over there?"

The mail carrier shrugged. "No one ever got to the bottom of it. I could not understand their language so finally the Mexicans shot the headman and we left.

"On the way back, after the Mexicans had gone their way and I mine I decided to pass the night at—" He hisked through the double voweled stutterings which mean Jackrabbit Drinking Place Where the American Killed Many Mexicans Before They Cut Off His Head. "You have been there?"

We nodded.

"I watered my horse and hobbled him, a large *alazán* which I had acquired from a Mexican who no longer needed him."

No longer needed was a euphemism which I understood. But you were working for the Mexicans," I protested.

"For their money," the mail carrier corrected. "This was some years ago, before they learned to respect us.

"It was early spring and there were still a few green weeds inside the hacienda's house garden. I led my sorrel in and was getting ready to boil coffee when a light came on inside

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the ruined building. It startled me," the little man continued, "For I had not seen many electric lights. Since then I have been in large cities and seen the colored lights which twist into letters but I have never seen light like this. It came from everywhere, like sunlight through fog. Though there was enough to sight a rifle, it cast no shadow."

A *chapyeca* came to the *ramada* and gestured with his wooden sword. While men were bringing out the drum I studied his needlenosed mask of fresh deerhide. Around the neck, his rosary strung up and was hidden under the demon face. I glanced at my mad friend.

"Vow of silence," he explained. "They keep the crucifix in their mouth for the entire week."

The mail carrier sensed that we were not particularly interested and began speeding up his story. "He was very white. His face had the pale, corpse color—like the part of a white man which is always covered by trousers. It was hard to know where clothing ended and skin began. He had no pockets. Carried a bag like this, only smaller." The mailman smiled momentarily. "His trousers were tight but showed no bulge at the seat of courage. His hair was like dried corn silk and bristled a half centimeter over face and head. His eyes were pink, like those of a horse I stole once. He was not Mexican so even though he was alone, I did not kill him.

"I accepted his invitation. His food came in square pieces like that tasteless bread you Americans eat. I did not care for it but since I had only a handful of *piñole* and three more days to ride . . . His beer was cold. Have you ever seen a small box from which one takes soft bottles and bites off the end?"

"No, but I've seen this story."

"About once a month for the first twenty years after Stanley G. Weinbaum's *floruit*," my mad friend suggested.

"You speak of stories," the mailman protested. "This really happened."

All the more reason for its suppression, I thought, but the little man was off again. "That night he took a small thing from his knapsack. It made a noise like beans when

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they are first dumped into a hot skillet, then a voice in some language I didn't know and he answered questions."

"How big was this radio?" I asked.

"It was like the cigarette pack radios the *turistas* carry now."

"And this really happened?" my mad friend asked, "In what year?"

The Indian thought a moment. "1926," he said.

"I know the Indian has a flexible concept of time," my friend said, "But this is carrying things too far."

"Later that night I woke and rolled a cigarette. It was that time of year when Woman Who Plants Squash is high in the sky. While I watched, the tip of her digging stick flared for just an instant, then suddenly the star was much tinier."

"Were any novae recorded in 1926?"

"Search me," my friend said, "I thought they lasted for days or months."

"I had seen falling stars," the mail carrier continued, "But this was the first time I had seen a fixed star change. I turned to see the all white man also sitting on his blanket. 'Two minutes early,' he grunted."

The sun had finally set and it was becoming endurable beneath the *ramada*. In ten minutes it would be dark and we had not yet decided where to spread our sleeping bags. The dancers and officials of the various societies had been on their feet and fasting since dawn. Soon they would eat and those whose vow of silence relaxed at sundown would be enjoying themselves before the tiny fires which rimmed the boundaries of sacred ground.

"I dislike to freeload on people who can ill afford it," my friend said, "But we'll create a bad impression if we uncork K rations in front of them."

"You will be welcome at my house," the mailman said.

"We couldn't impose on you like that." Mentally, I was calculating how many times this offer must be refused to strike a balance between politeness and necessity. The mailman was the only one in this village who had regarded us with other than a faintly hostile curiosity. "You must dine and pass the night with me," he repeated.

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A boy brought *tizwin*. My long empty stomach regarded it somewhat coldly. I wondered if its taste had something to do with the village custom of constant and indiscriminate expectation.

"So what's with S. Murphy?" my mad friend inquired.

"Ah yes, the errant scribe. Well, along with that stark and simple style he suddenly developed at plot sense. I read the first few chapters of his magnum opus as it came in. They were (and I say it with a wrenching in the cardiac region) far superior to anything I'll ever do."

"So what's the difficulty?"

"They were good enough," I continued, "To get the granddaddy of all contracts. The prepublication campaign on this one will make the *Peyton Place* business sound like the hard sell on some starving poet's slim volume."

My mad friend was still mystified.

"The time is overripe," I said. "If I can't find this guy and talk him into completing those last three chapters within 60 days my shill may be forced to subsist exclusively on Brand X."

"Zo vot's in it for you?"

"If the wheels fall off his pushcart my apples also scatter," By now I had fallen into the habit of automatically spitting after each sip of *tizwin*. The postman, apparently unused to stronger waters, had lost his Indian gravity and would soon by all portents approach orbital velocity.

"S. Murphy," he slurred, "A wonderful writer."

Somewhere across the plaza a harp tinkled and falsetto voices raised in plaint to the Great Mother. "I have read his books," the mailman continued in a voice from which *tizwin* had dissolved all roughness. "Have you read one—I remember not the title under which it publishes." He began sketching in plot and characters, using that verbal shorthand one writer employs with another. I decided he must know Murphy quite well to have picked it up. "Could you take me to see him?" I asked.

The mailman shook his head. "Impossible. Much distance."

My mad friend listened boredly. The plot with a bumbling Ugly American type who settled in a village remarkably like

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this one—a man whose roots became large and clumsy feet when he attempted to plant them. My mad friend became more apathetic as he listened to garbled authorese. "What happened to the all-white man who was using pocket radios and predicting stellar catastrophes in 1926?" he asked.

Without hesitation the mailman shifted stories in mid-sentence. "It frightened me that this man with the pink eyes could know a star was going to die. I had always thought only Our Lord or Earth Mother could do these things. I thought of killing him but if he were what I thought, my bullets were of the wrong metal. For a moment I wondered if he might be the same one the island people burned.

"The all-white man sensed my inquietude. 'Everywhere it is the same,' he said. 'Most people are good. They hire someone to protect them from the bad and the foolish.' "

"Always around when you don't need one," I grunted.

My mad friend whistled from Gilbert and Sullivan to the effect that a policeman's lot was not a happy one. While the postman had droned on with this utterly predictable bit of sf I had been thinking deep thoughts about the Murphy plot he'd been detailing. "Jy Murphy?" I asked.

Murphy's style seemed to have rubbed off on the mail carrier though, of course, all Spanish in literal translation has that florid, bigger-than-life quality.

"There was a man in the village who could read," the Indian continued, "so he received a salary from the Mexicans, ostensibly as mail carrier, though really they thought they were hiring a Judas. Since no one else could read, his job was a sinecure. To make ends meet on his microscopic salary he also kept store, burro-training back those bits of civilization—cartridges, matches, coffee—which cannot be grown in fields.

"The postman and the stranger became friends. Both were initiates into the sacred mysteries of Alphabet. Both knew tales of the great world below. And there was the postman's daughter, in imminent danger of becoming an old maid. She sat in inconspicuous corners while the white man told stories of a world which mountain-bred beauty would never see.

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"Murphy's eyes seared the brown body which bulged beneath an all-concealing dress. The postman was optimistic. But . . .

"Perhaps she reminded the white man too much of his own daughters who by now must have been considerably older. He made no overture. Meanwhile, young men of the village stayed away, knowing they could not compete with this blond Othello who held a maid enthralled with tales of distant lands." The mailman spat again.

It was totally dark now with that velvety blackness of the tropics, unrelieved at this altitude by any flicker of love-frenzied fireflies. From the tiny fires that ringed Sacred Ground came appetizing smells of coffee and broiling meat. "I don't know about you," I said to my friend, "But I could eat the gastric contents of a *ñagual*."

"There will be food at my house," the mailman said.

I slung saddle bags of emergency rations over one shoulder and loaded down the other with the gadget bags and cameras which I had learned earlier would be reduced to powder if I so much as popped a flashbulb toward Sacred Ground. My mad friend shouldered the sleeping bags and we trudged behind the mailman, across the plaza, up the widest of the streets which wriggled octopus-like away from it.

A couple of hundred meters uphill we entered a larger than usual compound, fenced with the usual jumble of cactus and *pitahaya* stalks. With no great surprise, I recognized the store in Murphy's novel. We passed through it into the patio between the Mother Cross and a drying rack for chiles, into a low, rambling structure whose wattle and daub walls were high enough for privacy, but lacked a full meter of reaching the oval shaped palm thatch which shaded the house, stored maize out of the hog's reach, and sustained its own ecological cycle from cockroach to scorpion via mouse to snake. We suffered a visitation of mosquitoes.

"Burn a candle for whoever invented atabrine," I muttered.

My mad friend nodded and crossed himself.

The postman's wife was a tall, mahogany colored woman who wore abundant hair in a *molote* like Mrs. Katzenjammer.

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She greeted her minuscule husband with a respectful affection which explained the equanimity with which he faced a large and confusing world. She extracted a palm leaf from beneath the baby in her rebozo and knelt to revive the fire in the patio. A stairstep set of daughters joined her and the eldest began slapping tortillas while others brought out the best dishes.

Soon my mad friend and I faced steaming bowls of the stewed squash blossoms which are one reason why I return regularly to this desolate land. We were poured countless cups of the asphaltum-like coffee which, after one disremembers American brews stands on its own peculiar virtue. There was chicken stewed in *mole*, a dark brown sauce made of 21 different chiles, peanut flour, ground *chocolatl*, and Ometecuhtl knows what else. When *tamales de dulce* appeared, made of fresh roasting ears macerated with stick cinnamon and loaf sugar, I began to suspect some runner had forewarned the household of our impending visit. The *tizwín* began to rest more comfortably.

After a terminal plate of beans with tortillas of the local, paper thin and yard wide variety, we stretched legs and tilted vertical backed rawhide bottomed chairs to a comfortable angle. I glanced at my mad friend who was more cognizant of local custom than I. He nodded so I extracted some emergency ration.

A daughter brought glasses. The mailman regarded the label on my rations with respect and said something which astounded us: "I'll bring some ice."

The wife had long since retired to her own part of the immense rambling structure. We were alone in the patio, save for the 15 year old daughter who bulged in all the proper places and was learning how to pose and project her protuberances. I wondered if this were instinct or sophistication. It occurred to me that this might be the same young lady who in her quiet way was giving Murphy the business.

My mad friend was oblivious to her. "Where in the name of Our Lord and Saviour did he ever get ice?" he wondered. It flabbergosed me too; the nearest natural ice was hun-

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dreds of miles higher in the sierra and the nearest machine at least 100 km below us at Road's End.

The postman returned with a dish of ice cubes and Desdemona ceased her siren act. My mad friend sipped resignedly at his coffee while I and the postman tried to forget the taste of *tizwin*. "This Murphy plot," I pursued, "What did you say was the name of the book?"

Beguiled by the smoothness of my K ration, the postman was underestimating its effect. "Don't know," he slurred, "Not finished yet."

My mad friend raised eyebrows and I nodded, "He's been describing the one my shill sent me here to get finished," I turned back to the postman, "Now when," I insisted, "do I see S. Murphy?"

The little man's eyes flickered and he was suddenly cautious. "Not possible. Much distance."

The siren remained silent and watchful in her corner. I sneaked a glance at her and wondered why Murphy had hesitated. The postman caught me looking so I hastily poured him another drink. "What happened," my mad friend asked, "To the pink-eyed cop who shrinks stars?"

"He doesn't." I marvelled at the mailman's ability to switch subjects as rapidly as my mad friend. He skipped hurriedly through the rest of the story: "The good people paid him to watch out for the bad ones—*delincuentes juveniles*—he called them." Abruptly, the mailman lurched to his feet and staggered past the Mother cross into the darker portion of the patio. I heard sounds which suggested an incompatibility between squash blossoms and emergency ration.

My mad friend glanced meaningly to my left as a mezquite twig flickered I saw the 15 year old still studying us unblinkingly from her dark corner. "I think," I said in English, "We observe the reason why Murphy has not finished his book."

My friend reflected a half second. "Still making up his mind how to end it?"

"Where do you suppose he's hiding and why won't he see us?"

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I grinned. "Even without badge and nightstick there is in your freudian corpus a certain aura which probably shows—even through binoculars."

My mad friend sighed and again began whistling Gilbert and Sullivan. "So what do we do?" he wondered.

I shrugged. "There's at least one member of the family who'd love to have us stay."

My friend glanced worriedly at her. The siren protuberated visibly when she saw him looking.

Wiping away the remains of a cold sweat, the mailman returned to sit between us. "The pink-eyed man asked me," he continued, "if I had ever sat by a fire as someone in drunken glee galloped a horse through it. I remembered when Mexican soldiers amused themselves that way at the expense of the meal my mother was cooking. Thinking about it, I was almost ready again to kill the pink-eyed man when he asked, 'How would you like it if someone rode a great horse—' ". The mailman stopped perplexed and looked at us. "I've seen horses drag men and cows but what kind of horse can drag a whole field with it?"

My mad friend looked blankly at me.

"The pink eyed one spoke of galloping too close to the sun and one field interfering with another until the fire flared and went out just as when the soldiers used to ride through our village. It was annoying when people had to leave their earth and synthesize new homes. It could even be dangerous for people who do not— ¿what means *teleport*?"

My mad friend sipped coffee. "Well, Dr. OneStone, there's the missing link in your Unified Field Theory."

I looked at the mailman. "Possibilities," I said. "I can't remember it's being used in sf before. Where did you get this idea?"

"That's what the pink-eyed man said. I don't understand it." He threw a stick on the fire.

"After smoking a cigarette I went back to sleep. At dawn the all-white man's radio began sizzling like frying beans. He asked questions in that other language and finally put the small radio away. He opened the cold box and took out beer. 'I must leave,' he said, handing me one and bit-

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ing the top from his own. 'Do you like cold drinks?' I nodded for the sun had been up 10 minutes and the day was already hot. 'Keep the box,' he said, 'Do not open the bottom and it will never harm you. Treat it with respect and it will run forever. Anything you put in it will be cold.'

"I am poor," I protested, 'What can I give you?' The all-white man gave a strange, twisted smile. 'To me, nothing. But next time you're ready to kill a cop, stop and think how your world would be if there were none.'

"I tried to understand what he meant. I was asking him to explain when I noticed that he was gone. I looked all around the hacienda buildings but did not find him."

My mad friend sipped coffee and whistled Policeman's Lot in a minor key. It was quite late and I wondered where we would unroll our sleeping bags. A mezquite twig flared and illuminated the mailman's mahogany face. Some trick of the light reminded me of an idol on a vine-tangled trail halfway between Persepolis and San Francisco.

"*Naguales*," my friend grunted, and halfheartedly mumbled an exorcism. I decided to make a final lunge toward the main chance. "By Murphy?"

The brown man emerged from his white study. "Wonderful writer." He fished a melting ice cube from the dish and bathed it with K ration. I admired his fortitude. He took a long swallow which wavered briefly in his gullet before going down. "The ending is written. The pages will leave for New York whenever the post office makes up a bag."

"Didn't he send them airmail?"

"Is there need for haste?"

"Much need," I groaned, "Also much need to see Murphy."

The postman ignored this. "Two endings," he continued, "Which is most artistically satisfying? Should the bumbling stranger marry the girl and live happily or should he be consistent and put his foot in this as in everything else?"

My mad friend and I waited with unbated breath. The postman took another swallow and continued more slowly: "The stranger did not even realize that to visit the girl's father so often constituted a form of engagement. If he

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did not marry her, the girl would never find another husband in the village."

My mad friend yawned. "And you never saw the pink-eyed cop again?"

The mailman wagged his finger.

"Good idea," I said "But it has the same defect as Murphy's book. You'll never get away with these up-in-the-air endings. Pin it down now—what happened to your all-white cop?—just as Murphy'll have to pin down what happened to his multiple-thumbed hero."

"Murphy had an ending," the mailman said.

My mad friend fanned himself and assassinated a brace of mosquitoes. "Might drag that wireless icebox back into the plot somehow," he maundered, "By the way, where're you getting all this ice?"

"From the icebox?"

"That one?"

"Couldn't be," I said in English. "No electricity; he's probably got a kerosene powered Servel."

The postman shook his head.

"Please," my mad friend said tiredly, "No extraterrestrials at this hour of the morning."

"I'll bring it," the mailman said. He staggered to his feet and left the circle of firelight. In a moment I heard the sound of K ration leaving by that same door wherein it went.

"I wonder what Monkey Ward Marvel he's going to palm off on us?" my friend mused.

I shrugged. "You may have noticed certain obvious parallels in this Murphy book," I began, "Also, a certain talent in our host."

My friend nodded. "Suppose he learned all his English in the last year from Murphy?"

"Probably chopped beets or picked lettuce in the States between revolutions."

"Have you considered," my friend asked, "How far we are from civilization and/or law enforcement?"

I nodded. "Suppose they've burnt any *ñaguales* around here recently?"

My mad friend tossed a gnarled mezquite branch on the

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fire and waited till it blazed. Somewhere in the darkness I could hear the mailman retching.

"You mentioned that Murphy's style changed. What about his typing?"

"Suddenly every letter was slammed home as if he were whacking them out with a chisel."

"Sure mark of a one finger typist."

The retching had stopped and I could hear the postman rumaging somewhere in his house. The branch flared up and I saw the fifteen year old still regarding us unwinkingly from the shadows. She commenced protuberating.

"He said Murphy *had* an end," I mused. "Also mentioned that a visit constitutes formal engagement." From the house I heard footsteps as the postman approached us. My mad friend looked at me and I looked at him. We both glanced at the hopeful sprite.

The postman stepped into the circle of firelight bearing a rectangular box, subtly different from anything I'd ever seen. "This is the refrigerator which works forever without fuel," he said.

The girl stretched and protuberated some more. I caught my friend's eye and we shared a common thought about an uncommon discovery. Suddenly we knew why Murphy's typewriter was being one-fingered, why his spelling had suddenly gone to playing by ear, and what had happened to S. Murphy. My mad friend tilted his straight backed chair forward and began rising.

But I beat him out the door.

It was very late of a dark and moonless night. Crouching in thorny desert flora, we listened. "I don't believe it," my mad friend muttered.

"So what are we running for?" I whispered back.

Somewhere in the distance a bit clinked. We shrank behind an ocotillo while a rider with rifle at ready light-footed down the trail. "They're ahead of us now," I whispered.

My mad friend pointed sky-ward. I sighted along his forearm at a line of minor but fixed stars which was slowly

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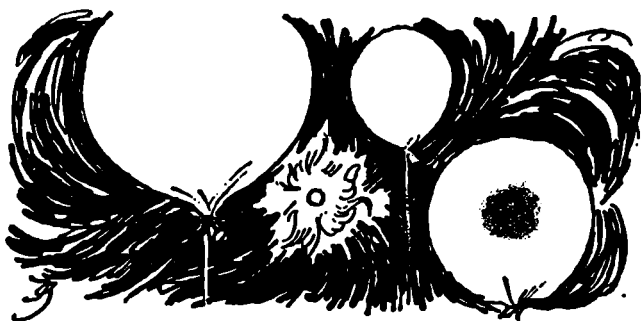
winking out. "Coming this way," I whispered. "You suppose that starcop was for real?"

My friend was muttering something in Latin.

"Maybe we could teleport?" I suggested.

"Please," he hissed "I've got enough troubles already!"

We started running again.



THE THIRD BUBBLE

THE YOUNG MAN wore a white shirt opened nearly to his navel and tight black trousers. With the disdainful deliberation of a matador he aimed the blunt end of an ax. The turtle ceased moving and faced the end with a stoicism marred only by a hissing sigh and large oily tears.

The ax crunched like a claw hammer hitting a ripe cantaloupe. Flippers thrilled. "The life is in the head," a policeman standing next to me said, somewhat unnecessarily, I thought.

"Or occasionally in the gonads," my mad friend added *sotto voce* and in English.

With an effortless flourish the young man cut around the

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bottom shell and lifted it to disclose an interesting array of innards and seven assorted hearts, all still beating. A semi-cylindrical swipe removed head and neck. Two slashes removed front flippers. The young man's white shirt remained immaculate despite the welter of blood.

I wondered at his flamboyance until I saw her. She was about seventeen, with long hair which would have looked more natural north of a southbound palomino. She wore a white blouse like the turtle butcher's save that hers bulged more attractively. Her capris fit like epidermis burnished with stove blacking. She was witnessing the rite with none of those minuscule shrieks and head turnings which Anglosaxon females employ to disguise their taste for blood.

Another magnificent slash and the turtle butcher lifted legs and tail. A shred of flesh held. He twisted. A sizeable sac of body fluids wrung out and wrought posthumous vengeance on his white shirt, face, and most of his trousers.

"Ay ay ay!" the palomino exclaimed between giggles.

My mad friend raised an eyebrow. "*Pocha*," I muttered. My judgment was vindicated when she spoke California Spanish to her progenitors.

Utterly crushed, the matador of sea turtles sloshed himself with clean water. He finished butchering silently, without flourishes.

"He jests at scars who never felt a wound," my friend quoted. I sighed and we trudged on through soft sand. The humidity approached turkish bath proportions. "What ever induced you to come to this Latin Limbo before we got the magazine launched?" my friend asked.

"The Mohorovicic Discontinuity achieves a record thinness some miles due W of here."

My friend gazed at breaking surf and as we passed a cross where some fisherman had washed ashore he crossed himself. "How do you hold still long enough to drill a hole?"

"Four engines," I explained, "Propellers pointing in different directions. One man sits before a radarscope pushing buttons.

"My feet," I groaned, "How much farther?"

My mad friend hailed a capitalist with two burros.

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Built since the last hurricane, our hotel already showed signs of decay. Holes in its palm frond walls admitted mosquitoes, bats, and small pterodactyls. I glanced at the newspaper on a table across from the bar. It was in Spanish and its front page was filled with poorly reproduced pictures and misspelled names of the astronauts in the Russ-American two-weeks-in-orbit shot. "Outer space!" I groused, "When'll we get enough money for some work on Inner Space?"

My mad friend shrugged.

"You should be on my side. The seas'll fill more stomachs and save more souls than all that hardware. How long d'you think this *Bruderschaft's* going to last before the comrades go off on a new kick anyhow?"

"I didn't vote for him," my friend said.

The barman was frantically sloshing booze into a row of glasses. His assistant struggled to extricate himself from a bulletheaded football type who was telling a story in some language the assistant didn't know. He escaped and I saw he was the self-petarded turtle butcher.

"*Café*," my friend said, "And do you have some *Noche Buena* left from Christmas?"

"I shall see." The young man ducked the bulletheaded giant's embrace on his way into the back room. The giant began staggering in our direction.

"The End of a Perfect Day," my friend growled, but a pair of companions hastily steered the giant back to the bar. One was dressed in subtly ill-proportioned trousers and a flowered sport shirt with a vaguely muscovite look. The other athletic looking young man had splurged himself for some American clothes. "Off some iron curtain freighter," my friend hazarded.

I heard occasional vowels, each within a fortification of high explosive consonants. "Couldn't be," I said, "No ships in except my tender."

The turtle butcher brought bituminous coffee and a bottle with a bright poinsettia label. "Real beer!" I marvelled. My mad friend smiled wistfully. "They only make it once a year," he said.

Two rather attractive latin women stood in the doorway.

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The sun made it apparent that they wore no slips. They removed wraparound skirts to reveal bermudas and the athletic types at the bar lost interest.

"That wasn't exactly cricket," my mad friend said as they collapsed at our table. "If they don't like it," one replied, "Send a gunboat."

"*Noche Buena!*" the other wife exclaimed, "Where did you get it this time of year?"

"Millinery secret," my friend grunted.

"Keeps it under his hat," I explained.

"Speaking of secrets," my friend continued, "Why aren't you still out on Blaspheme II?"

"After months of mud, silt, strata of this'n thata, we hit something hard. I brought the tender in to pick up some diamond drill heads."

Wives abruptly ceased discussing whether haystack hair went with the new botch look. "Did somebody say diamonds?"

"Too cheap to smuggle," I said, "And you'd look better with a string of carborundum around your neck."

There was sudden laughter at the bar. "That short one," a wife said, "Is a woman." My mad friend glanced at me and laughed.

"*Que hubo?*" a wife asked.

"Everybody was well into the third reel of Eisenstein the Terrible before I could sort the boys from the girls."

A shadow fell across the table. The entire band of bullet-heads was smiling hopefully.

"Blow," my friend said pleasantly in English. "These ladies don't need any Cuban rubles."

They stared in mute Slavic incomprehension. The one in American clothes was opening his mouth when a small dark man elbowed through them and bared brilliant teeth in a coprophagous grin.

"I don't believe it," a wife said.

The Byzantine had a way of popping up just as we were getting comfortable. No one had ever learned more of his past than he cared to divulge. These usually conflicting stories centered about a time machine and his birthdate

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some 500 years in a nonexistent future. I had seen him once as mate on a seagoing ferry, once as a Mexican army officer, once as an alleged Secret Service man. "What," I asked, "Are you up to now?"

In archaic Sephardic Spanish he said, "I conduct a tour."

A bullethead winked at a wife. The wife withered him. My mad friend coughed into his handkerchief.

"You could pass for American," I told the withered one.

With drunken solemnity he said, "My primary allegiance, sub, is to the sovereign State of Texas."

What kind of travel agency would mix up a group like this?

The Byzantine bullied them into seats at the next table. After a wistful glance at the wives, they reverted to some plosive squabble where each sentence sounded like an ultimatum. The Byzantine wiped his face with a scented handkerchief before muscling a chair into our table. "Some wild cattle," he said, using the latin term for streetwalkers, "Will drift in and keep them happy."

The turtle butcher deposited a half empty bottle. Over poorly drawn terriers was printed GENUINE SCOCH WISKY. The Byzantine gulped a gleason-sized belt. His eyes widened like a freshly alimonied Californian's, then he smiled again. "Poor children," he sighed, "They get restless in this climate."

"Why bring them to this third rate Fort Zinderneuf?"

Given half a chance, the Byzantine would never stop. "What," my friend hastily asked, "Will you accomplish with this Mohole?"

"Search me. My job is just keeping the radar going so we can center over the hole." I sipped beer and tried to answer his question. "We ought to break through any day. Maybe it'll tell us how the earth was created."

"It's all in Genesis," my mad friend said, and made a ritual gesture of exorcism.

Wives snatched bags from the table. Staring, the Byzantine overfilled his glass and was still pouring booze over the table. It wasn't like him to get potted this early in the story. "Is your liver giving out?" I asked.

There was a deafening silence at the next table. Bullet-

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heads stared at the doorway where the late sun silhouetted an anatomical ensemble.

"Tiger, tiger burning bright," my mad friend muttered.

"Rascuachitlan has joined the 20th Century," I decided.

"How?" a wife inquired.

"Wild cattle who must face the magistrate without consul or counsel actually dare appear without skirts."

The silhouette was joined by two thicker ones. As they fumbled their sunblinded way across the floor I realized it was the palomino. The turtle butcher sidetracked his tray and rushed to escort them. Some instinct told me that the tight trousered palomino was communicating.

Bulleheads returned resignedly to their drinking, save one who gazed regretfully at what might have been. Even iron curtain countries issue dresses for female tourists. I wondered if this one had lost her luggage.

"Break through what?" my mad friend asked. I wrenched myself back to the Mohole.

"The mantle; Earth's outer covering."

"What do you expect to find?"

"No two geologists agree."

The Byzantine glared morosely into his glass. "Is not good scotch," he growled.

"Could you do an article on it for the new magazine?" my friend asked.

The Byzantine brightened. "I have a story," he said.

"We don't plan to run fiction."

"At least we won't call it that."

"But this is true."

My mad friend said something in Arabic. The sound alone could have provoked another crusade.

"It starts with an astronaut just beginning turnover to go into orbit," the Byzantine persisted.

"At least it isn't sf," a wife said.

"Then just at the moment of substitution—"

"The moment of *what*?"

"When the Great Ones pull him through the inspection hole and start the whirligig so radar will think he's orbiting."

My friend flagged frantically and the turtle butcher came

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to our table. Not, I noted, without a swift glance at the palomino. "This sheep dip," my friend said, "Is doing permanent damage to the small gentleman's cerebrum. Kindly bring something less noxious." He slopped the Byzantine's glass on the floor and tossed a match. There was a sputtering whoosh. "Won't even burn with a blue flame," my friend grunted.

The Byzantine screwed his *boina* down on his head. "The Great Ones," he said, "Are not too different. They're just waiting for us to catch up."

"I demand immediate integration," my mad friend murmured.

"Where do these Great Ones come from?" a wife asked.

The turtle butcher deposited a bottle. My mad friend studied the seal and label. He passed it to me, looking exactly as someone might who had not had a drink since a soul shattering episode in Nord Afrique. I poured a short snort. "*Legitimo*; the leprechauns washed their feet in this poteen."

The Byzantine poured another gleason-sized belt. "*Primoroso!*" he exclaimed, "But why tastes Irish so different from scotch?"

While my mad friend explained how smoke is flued under the Irish floor and boils up through the rye in Scotland I studied the menu. It consisted of turtle. "Hungry?" I asked. My friend nodded.

"*Cahuama!*" a wife exclaimed, "It makes years that I do not taste."

"Is it fit for human consumption?" my friend asked.

"It has six flavors," the wife continued, "Part tastes like beef, some like veal, some like pork, some like chicken. Once during difficult times we made *chorizo*."

The palomino progenitor leaned toward me and in English said, "I know *cahuama* is turtle but could you tell me about it?" He shrugged apologetically and continued in California Spanish, "First time I've ever been here."

"This wife," I cautioned, "Grew up in an isolated fishing village. If you've been eating naught but fish it's possible that hawkbill sea turtle will taste like beef, lamb, chicken, or *consumé madrilenó*. If you've eaten these regularly, I'm

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afraid it's going to taste fishy. As for the *chorizo*, I prefer my sausage of dog or iguana."

The palomino was turning green.

"I still want some," a wife insisted.

"And you shall have some," my friend said, "But let's cut out where the rest of us can have something approved by Good Housekeeping and Leviticus."

"Dees gawhamma," a bullethead asked in what was probably English, "Ees tortull?"

I nodded.

They turned on the Byzantine with angry expostulations. My friend flagged the assistant bartender, and said, "We wish to eat elsewhere."

"I don't know my way," the palomino progenitor said, "Do you mind if we go along?"

"Why not?" As long as the bulletheads and the Byzantine had attached themselves . . .

"In ten minutes," the turtle butcher said, "I finish."

We finished our drinks and, after endless waits before the door marked DAMAS, exited. Under bug-haloed streetlights waited three *calandrias*, the open carriages which handled most of the local transportation problem.

"Courage," I consoled, "The horses look tired."

The turtle butcher had shed his apron and combed his hair. He maneuvered the old folks into a calandria and crowded next to the palomino. My mad friend and I made room for the Byzantine. "After the astronaut has been pulled through the hole," he said, "We flashback and explain about the Great Ones."

"*Vamonooooooooos!*" the turtle butcher shouted in imitation of a train conductor. Drivers flicked whips and whistled between their teeth. We passed to an older part of town. Open air restaurants sweltered astraddle the cobbled street's central gutter. "*La zona*," our hackman said.

"Did he say *Zona*?" a wife asked.

"*Zona de Tolerancia*," the turtle butcher explained.

My friend and I looked at each other in growing consternation. "Wrong appetite," my friend muttered.

"What's wrong," the palomino progenitor twittered.

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"We are enfiladed by whorehouses," I grunted.

"*No importa*," the turtle butcher said, "Excellent restaurants. Families come."

The palomino abruptly stooped. "Eight to five," my mad friend murmured. She straightened again and though strained, the capris had not burst. From the gutter she held a small neatly wrapped package.

A policeman strolled down the street, gravely acknowledging greetings from the open doorways. "Everything managed with decorum," my friend said. "T'was indeed a sad day when the Parlor House disappeared from the Land of the Free and the Home of the Women's Club.

"So." He turned to the turtle butcher. "Which eating establishment gives you a kickback or just happens to belong to your uncle?"

The young man led us through a heavy door into the patio of a large building with heavy windowless walls to shut out the noisome stinks of the Great World. Its two stories gave onto a cool central patio where an ancient woman fussed over washtub sized copper cauldrons. A small grizzled man in loose white trousers and *guayabera* was digging. His spade liberated a jet of steam. My friend absently hummed a snatch of *Te Deum*.

"The young man deserves his commission," I said.

"And a lifetime indulgence," my mad friend added.

We were served, one recalcitrant wife with *cahuama*, the rest of us with beef just emerging from its banana leaf shroud after forty-eight hours underground. "Real *barbacoa*," my friend exulted.

I wrapped beef in a hot tortilla, pausing only to slosh it with red-green sauce made of tiny magma-flavored *chiles serranos* macerated with onion, *jitomate*, *oregano*, and fresh coriander leaves. "True *barbacoa*," I agreed, "Not that fraudulent pap from the backyard brazier which ulcerates our invincible homeland."

The bulletheads performed heroic sleight of mouth. The ubiquitous small boys trotted beer and iced glasses of instant insanity from across the street. "After the Great Ones pull the

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astronaut through the hole," the Byzantine continued, "They indoctrinate him into the nature of the universe."

A wife stared morosely at turtle stew. "This tastes like fish," she complained. While my mad friend and I laughed a boy removed her plate and brought *barbacoa*.

"You will like this story," the Byzantine told us.

"Like a strawberry pizza," I said, but he was continuing.

"In this story we prove that space travel is impossible. After all space is solid!"

My mad friend grinned. "Now I know why the *Index* bans Galileo."

"But what, then, is Earth?"

"A bubble in the gently flowing solid of space."

"And the Great Ones?" I asked, "Where do they live?"

"On other spheres."

"Don't you mean *in*?"

"On," he insisted, "Earth is a sphere inside a sphere. We live on outer surface of inner sphere. How else could we see stars?"

"How indeed?" my mad friend wondered.

The mortal gorge was ending. The old woman brought a fleeting memory of Act I, Scene 1, Macbeth as she ladled up coffee and the inevitable final course of beans from her cauldrons.

The palomino rummaged in her purse and discovered the green wrapped package. "*Que sera?*" she wondered.

It looked like sheets of unseparated banknotes. Then I realized they were lottery tickets, perforated to tear each into its hundred separately saleable *cachos*.

"What date?" I asked. She handed me a sheet. "Last week. Winners ought to be posted by now."

The progenitor was recalling stories of 8 million peso winners. "How do you cash them?" he sputtered. "Help me and you'll get a split. Everybody gets a split!" Across the patio the ancient man and woman regarded us.

The palomino progenitor made a magnificent gesture and said "This is on me." He handed the old woman a note whose denomination precluded any hope of change and grandilo-

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quently hold her to keep it. I wondered how much would revert to the turtle butcher.

That young man appeared with more *calandrias*. It was ten P.M. Officers and stores had just closed and the local people were hurrying home to supper. I wondered how much of a dent we had made in what the inhabitants of this *pension* were going to get.

Momma sat beside the palomino. Her husband shouted back to us regarding the division of spoils. "Why not wait and see if the tickets won?" my mad friend shouted back.

"If space is solid why don't we fall up?" I asked.

The Byzantine leaned forward with sudden intensity and I saw he was not as drunk as I'd thought. "A planet is a one way screen. Gravity is the relentless seep of space pushing in."

The *calandria* lurched over a missing cobble. My friend cast a jaundiced eye at the moon's direction and said, "We progress from Penn Station to the Battery *via* Brooklyn."

"Oh, give the poor boy a chance," a wife said.

In the lead carriage the turtle butcher's dyspeptic grimaces were soulful.

"If gravity seeps in," I said, "The bubble will get full."

"It's been happening since the Ur-bubble burst to create an expanding universe. Have you noted the circular bubble sign in primitive religions, erroneously called the sun disc?"

"A yard like that would sure as Kennedy put me on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. What time's your boat leaving?" my friend asked with his usual mercurial change of subject.

"8 AM."

He glanced at his watch. "How much farther to that miserable hotel?"

The turtle butcher's soulful looks made me wonder if he was passing a stone. "We expect to hit the Discontinuity any time," I said. "Maybe I can get away from this Turkish bath soon." I slashed at the gnats which descended each time we passed a street light.

"*Mira alli!*" a wife exclaimed. Walls were draped with numbers printed on muslin. "*Alto!*" I yelled. We scrambled

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into the lottery office. The Byzantine made explosive noises and his bulletheads stood quiet. "How long are you stuck with them?" I asked.

"Thirteen more days but our plans may change. Would you care to join the tour?"

"Afraid not. I've got work to do."

"Where're you going?" my friend asked.

The Byzantine got that glassy look again and I suddenly noticed a hearing aid. He had once told me he expected to die at 40. He must be around 42 now. His eyes focussed and he put his hand on my arm. "*En serio*, I have a fondness for you. I will happily bear the expense for you and wives."

Bulletheads crowded around, arguing like poorly carburated Vespas. "Right proud t'have y'll come along," said one. The one a wife had insisted was female edged closer. "Danger if you not," she added. "We needing badly women."

My mad friend had been watching the gambling crazed palominos. "Those tickets are complete?" he asked, "Nothing torn off?" They nodded. "If the stubs weren't handed in for the drawing your discarded, unsold tickets are about as valuable as a Nixon button," my friend said.

Seeing his bubble burst, the progenitor tried to laugh but looked more as if his ulcer had just gone septic. He was remembering his 'this is all on me'. As horses clopped toward our hotel even the turtle butcher sensed that the evening's magic had departed.

"These Great Ones," I asked, "Why such a hurry to pull the astronaut through the hole? Do they have to close it quick to keep from leaking gravity?"

The Byzantine had lost interest in his own story. "How do they get from one planet to another if it can't be done with spaceships?" I insisted. He came to with a jerk and I wondered if he were drunk or tired. "Time machine," he said, "That's how I met the Great Ones."

Back in first person, I noted.

"In an expanding, universe," the little man continued, "The only way to travel is to go back to that instant when the Ur-bubble has just burst and step to one's chosen destination. It's easy to move forward again in time."

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"A good idea for a story," my mad friend said thoughtfully. "Too bad I can't use it."

"Too late," the Byzantine said, and went to sleep. Moments later we arrived and as the turtle butcher watched his palomino depart I knew somebody else's bubble had burst. The floor was crowded now and an orchestra industriously ground out a mambo while the locals, a tourist or two, and the wild cattle twisted. As we crossed the floor someone released a mass of balloons. Dancing turned to bedlam as hairpins and cigarettes popped them. The Byzantine caught my arm. "You will come?" he pleaded.

"Sorry." I felt sudden shame when the little man I had always regarded as a figure of fun shook my hand and spun so abruptly that I could see tears fly. A balloon rocketed across the floor and slapped me wetly in the face.

The wives had put up their hair and gone to bed. I sat on the balcony watching the moon sink into the sea just about where Blaspheme II was tethered to its column of drill steel. My mad friend silently passed a rosary through his fingers. "Too bad about the lottery tickets," he finally said.

"Did you notice how the Byzantine lost interest right in the middle of his story?"

My friend nodded. "Wasn't drinking much either. I wonder if he's on the needle. Notice that glassy stare and the way he was Hearing Voices?"

"Be funny if that hearing aid was a radio. I wonder what instructions the Great Ones would give him."

Beneath our balcony the bulletheads erupted with packed bags. They trotted toward the ocean for a farewell swim. "Two out of three will step on sting rays," my mad friend guaranteed, But there was only laughter as they splashed into the quietly lapping ocean.

I had a sudden thought. "Could we find that paper that was on the table this afternoon?" My friend made an interrogatory grunt. "The pictures," I said, "They look like that mixed bag of astronauts."

My mad friend snorted and began thumbing his rosary.

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"This'd sure be the place to hole up if somebody wanted to pretend he was in orbit."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" my friend snapped, "Give up sf for a while. Try knitting, or smoking pot. Besides, the Great Ones pull them up through the hole."

"Right," I grunted.

"I'm bushed," my mad friend said. "In case you sail before I get up, I'll be here another week. Think you'll break through by then?"

"Could be," I said.

"Well, good night. Don't forget the article." He disappeared and I sat watching the bulletheads come out of the sea. Still in bathing gear, they set off with their bags. Why had that female thought it dangerous if we didn't go?

And why didn't the Byzantine want to peddle his crazy theory any more? The palomino progenitor had lost something he never really had. So had the turtle butcher. But what bubble had burst for the Byzantine? I yawned and gazed at the gibbous moon through half closed eyes. What were they celebrating downstairs popping all those balloons? "To hell with it," I decided. The night was half gone and tomorrow I'd be out on that barge again.

Drilling the Mohole.

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