

The
Meadows
of
Fantasy

Archie
Mercer

Meadows of Fantasy

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The Meadows of Fantasy (The Story of the Golden Age)

Devised, written, stencilled, proofread,
duplicated, assembled, bound & published by
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A Mercatorial Publication
Yngvi is a louse

For Beryl

She helped to delay it. If there's ever a sequel, though, she'll help
to write it.

The principal characters in this story are fictitious (albeit most of
them probably bear a surprising resemblance to their author).

In order to provide a modicum of much-needed verisimilitude,
however, a number of eminently non-fictitious individuals have
been introduced in suitable places. I trust that this matter will do
nothing to disturb our friendship.

Any suspicious-looking red marks on the paper are strictly by
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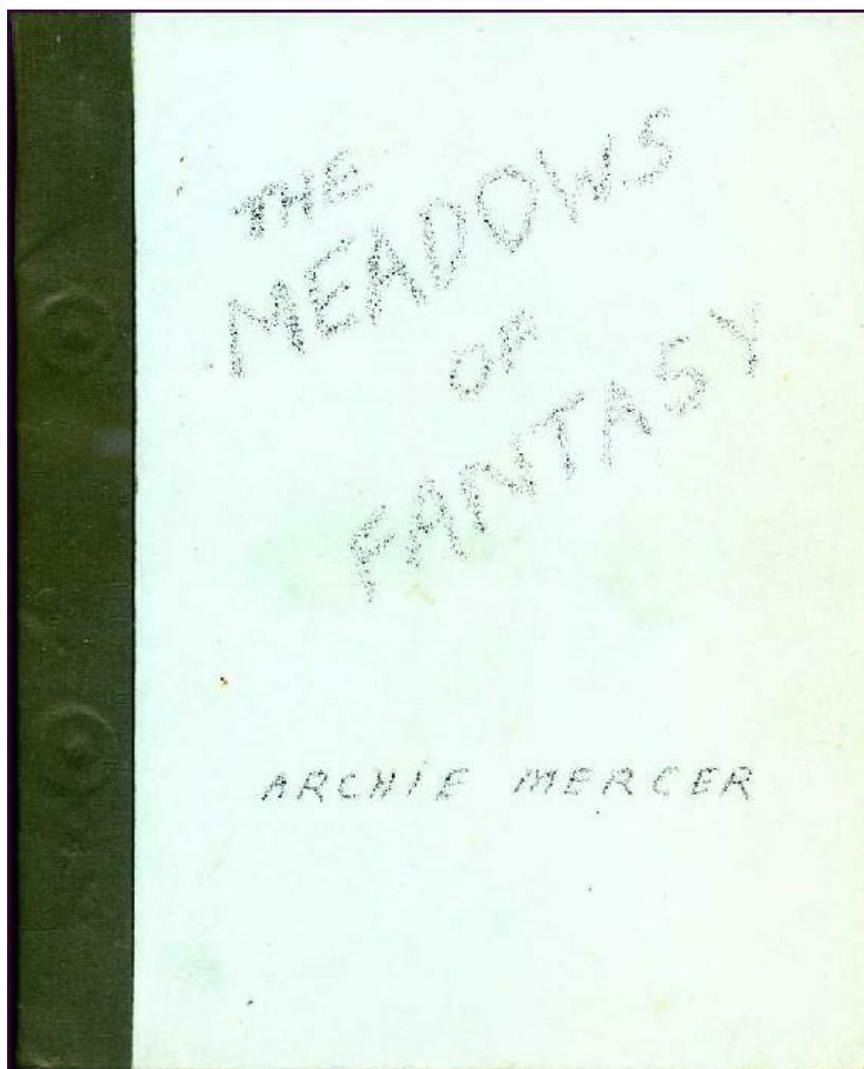
Notes on Pronunciation

There are several ways of pronouncing “Thisbury”.

The locals reckon to use a sharp “Th” (as in “think”) and a soft “z” for the “s”.

Strangers to the district, however, usually pronounce the “This-” as in “this and that”, so if that’s the way you find yourself saying it you’ll be in good company.

Certain scholastic pedants maintain that the true pronunciation is actually “Thessbury”. Personally, I think they’re being ridiculous.



*The original cover (1965)
Scan by Greg Pickersgill*

Chapisode One

Fandom Joins the Ladies

“There was a bird in Jonesy’s shop yesterday dinnertime,” said Dave Portable. (“Bird lives,” intoned Ian Omlet ritually.) “And...”

“Now what sort of bird would one be likely to find in a bookshop?” put in Owen Mole.

“Dunno,” said Bert Duckbarrow. “Some sort of literary vulture perhaps.”

“Perhaps a Moorcock?” suggested Ian.

“Or a Swift?”

“Or even a Penguin?”

“Have you quite finished?” asked Dave loudly.

“All right, all right, keep your whatsit on,” Owen soothed him. “Let’s hear about this tart in Jonesy’s. Was she buying of?”

Dave seemed somewhat taken aback at this. “Who said anything about a tart?” he demanded. “I said a bird – you know, feathers and things. Sparrow or something. When I went in it was flying backwards and forwards across the room, then it suddenly dived past me and was out of the door while I had it open. Old Jonesy was looking absolutely furious – ‘If I catch that perisher in here again, I swear I’ll wring its neck with my own two hands, so help me,’ he was muttering. ‘Why,’ I asked – ‘what’s it done?’ ‘Done?’ growls Jonesy. ‘Done is right. Thing comes in here, bold as brass, perches right on the sign over the prestige display, and lets go its breakfast right plop all across the thirty-guinea Michelangelo book. Then it looks me straight in the eye, winks at me, and says Cheap. Just like that. I’ll give it cheap...’”

The oration broke up in laughter all around.

“Anyway,” said Owen presently, “does Jonesy ever sell anything from his prestige display?”

“Of course not,” said Bert quickly. “It’s just for the birds.”

Tom, Dick and Harry came in at this point, and when everybody was settled Dave called the meeting to order.

“Objection,” said Owen immediately.

“Oh what grounds?”

“Lack of quorum.”

Dave Portable spoke slowly and carefully. “I freely and frankly admit,” he announced, “that I don’t happen to have Robert’s Rules of Order – or anybody else’s – off by heart – in fact, I don’t think it’s even in the library. But if precisely one hundred percent of the paid-up membership in good standing does by any chance not constitute a legitimate and acceptable quorum, I’d very much like to know what does.”

“We need a fem-fan,” said Owen. “You know – a female-type member of the opposite sex.”

“Just because we happen to be meeting in a Women’s Institute,” put in Tom quietly, “there’s no need to adopt protective colouring you know.” Tom was middle-aged, and – it was understood – heavily henpecked, and raised a sympathetic laugh.

“Perhaps somebody can remember to borrow one next time,” said Dave. “But in the mean time...”

And further proceedings were thereupon promptly interrupted by a knock at the door. Owen, who happened to be nearest, went to answer it, to find himself confronted by a girl or young woman wearing a crash-helmet. She peered rather dubiously at him, then past him at the patently all-male gathering seated around the far end of the little hall.

“Er –” she began “– have I got the wrong department? I’m looking for the Upside Down Women’s Institute.”

“That’s us,” said Owen. “That is – you’ve come to the right place. Anything we can do for you?”

“Well, I’m supposed to be speaking here tonight.”

“She’s supposed to be speaking here tonight,” Owen called back to the others, and one or two of them got up and drifted down towards the front door.

“First thing we’ve heard about it,” said Dave as he joined them. “Are you sure you’ve got the right day – er, night?”

“I think so, er...”

“I’d better see if I can find my aunt or somebody,” said Dave.

“There’s a notice-board over in the corner,” Ian suggested, and they all – their visitor included – drifted over to that. “Here we are,” said Owen. “Saturday the 2nd – cookery demonstration by Mrs. King, knitting competition entries blah blah blah. Thursday the 7th – talk by guest speaker, Miss M. Smith, subject The Women’s Institute of the Future, One Hundred

Years From Now. Satur..."

"That's it," said their visitor. "I could have sworn she said Tuesday." She stopped, while everybody gave her a puzzled sort of look.

"But today's Wednesday," said Dave quietly.

At this their visitor gave a start, and her hand flew to her mouth. For a moment absolute silence reigned. Then – "You don't happen to have somewhere where I can go and be quietly hysterical for half an hour, do you?" she asked.

"Do it here if you like," said Owen. "We're broadminded."

"Hey," said Bert Duckbarrow, "That's my line you're pinching."

"Shut up you fools," said Dave under his breath.

"You'll think me seven different kinds of an idiot," said their visitor, who didn't seem to notice this exchange. "School started back yesterday, and I've been going on all the time thinking it was the beginning of a full week. Don't ever take up teaching, any of you – it rots the brain before its time."

"Excuse my being curious," said Dave, "but I do understand from all this that you're the lady who's going to give a talk about Women's Institutes of the future?"

"Yes."

"You don't happen to be at all interested in science fiction I suppose?"

The visitor gave him a long look. "I suppose you could say I am rather, really. Why?"

"I just wondered. Because this happens to be a meeting of the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle."

Several assorted prozines and things were held up by way of evidence, and at last her face broke into the beginnings of a smile. "Well," she said. "If that's so, perhaps I could stay and listen for a bit." Assent was naturally unanimous, so she lifted off her crash-helmet and hung it on a peg alongside the notice-board. A mass of long hair tumbled about her shoulders, framing a face that seemed to be somewhere in its middle twenties. Dave, as Chairman, conducted her to a seat – next to his, everybody noticed – and they all sat down again. "I don't know if you can remember all of us at once," said Dave, "but my name's Dave Portable, this is Ian Omlet..." and so on round the group.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, It Says Here," said the girl. "I'm Mine Smith."

A chorus of “Huh?” “Didn’t catch” and the like was now heard. “Would you mind repeating that?” Dave asked her.

The girl was openly smiling now. “Mine Smith.”

“What was your first name again?”

“Mine.”

“Yes, yours.”

The girl laughed delightedly. “I’m used to this,” she explained. “My name is Mine – M – I – N – E.”

“Why?” asked Owen Mole rudely.

“Well,” she began, “once upon a time I used to be a plain Mary Smith. But I had a boy-friend, oh, he was the sweetest little thing. And one day he came up to me when I was alone, went down on his knees in front of me, took one of my hands between his, and whispered – ‘Mary, if only you’d change your name to Mine I’ll be the happiest man in the world’. Well, of course I couldn’t possibly ignore such a heartrending plea, so I got up straight away and went to my solicitor, and we drew up a deed there and then changing my name from Mary Smith to Mine Smith.”

“You didn’t!” Owen exclaimed.

“I’m not going to argue,” stated the girl with mock hauteur. “My name really is Mine, and you can take it or leave it.”

They took it. Indubitably, Miss Mine Smith had the makings of a fan. Furthermore, when the meeting broke up she readily agreed to come back the following week.

•

And duly, one week later, she steered her scooter on to the little patch of parking-space adjoining the Institute and presented herself at the door again. It was not locked, so she walked straight into a deserted hall. For a moment there she thought she was the first, then she dimly recalled having seen a bicycle or two outside. She spoke loudly; “Either I’ve got the wrong day again, or somebody’s coming the mickey.”

“Right the first time,” came a muffled voice from somewhere.

“What are you doing here, then?” she asked it, interested.

“It’s my turn.”

“For what?”

“To watch for you. We’re all taking it in turns, to see what day you come. The one that gets you first keeps you.”

“How frightfully exciting. And who is the lucky watcher?”

“Me.” “Me.” “Me.” “Me.” Annexe-doors and cupboard-doors all around her slid open a crack, and she found herself all of a sudden surrounded by four grinning youths. “Welcome to the Wednesday night’s entertainment,” said Dave Portable. “Have a pew.”

“Be a devil – have the entire floor,” amended Owen Mole.

“And spoil her floorless perfection?” asked Bert Duckbarrow.

“Hello, everybody, anyway,” said Mine. “By the way, I’ve got something to show you.” She snapped open her handbag and pulled out a long piece of pinkish paper. “Proof positive.” The four crowded around to look at the proffered birth certificate. “And when you’ve quite finished doing the mental arithmetic,” she added, “you might have a look at the next column.”

And there, sure enough, was officially acceptable evidence that upon a certain date a certain Mrs. Smith, wife to a certain Mr. Smith, had given birth to a female child upon which had been bestowed, alone and unqualified, the first name of Mine. The inevitable mental arithmetic also indicated that Mine was some twenty-four years of age, a good three years older than anybody else then present. But what the hell, they thought – we’re not marrying her.

“But really – why are you called Mine?” asked Owen.

“I was found abandoned in a colliery shaft near Doncaster at the very early age of some six and a half minutes,” said Mine, and somehow that seemed to close the subject for the present.

“At least there’s one good thing about it,” said Bert. “You’ll always be Mine.”

“Very much on the contrary,” returned the girl. “I’ll always be Mine.” She made a face at Bert. Somehow she found herself strangely drawn to these people. Then the door opened again and Tom, Dick and Harry trooped in, and the meeting was soon underway.

Presently Ian Omlet held up a hand, interrupting a ding-dong argument about the Brunner series that was currently running in *New Worlds*. “I hear sounds,” he declared. “Methinks another visitor is upon us.” Everybody listened, and indeed movement could be heard among the bicycles. “Hope it’s another girl,” mooted Owen. “Hope it’s another musical type,” countered Ian. “Are you musical?” Mine asked him. “Utterly,” said Ian. “What sort of music d’you like?” “Madam, there is only one sort of music – to wit, the sort that is sometimes termed modern jazz.” “Do you take drugs, too?” “Modern jazz is a drug,” said Owen. “He’s taking a long time to find the front door,” said

Dave. "I'll go and look," said Bert, and he went and looked. He opened the door, peered outside. Then he went right out and round the corner. Then he dashed back.

"Owen!" he shouted. "Your bike's gone!"

It should be mentioned here that three bicycles were regularly pedalled up the long hill to Upside Down every Wednesday – Bert and Ian had their own, and Owen usually managed to borrow his sister's. For the rest of them, Tom, Dick and Harry always arrived together on the bus, and Dave, who lived in the village anyway, had no need of transport. And now, of course, Mine had her scooter. But whatever their transport arrangements, those present were on their feet as one man – or woman. Headed by the panicking Owen, they stampeded for the door. It was true. Where three bicycles had leaned in the darkness, now were only two. Ian and Bert made for theirs at once.

"Which way d'you think he went?" asked Bert.

"Down into town, of course," said Dave. "It's too early for the airmen." (It was, of course, an understood thing that bicycles that vanished overnight were usually found the next morning near the RAF station down the road.)

Mine had unlocked her scooter, and was straddling it. "Come on, Owen," she called. "Get up behind me." She kicked the starter, and the engine roared cosily into life at once – some people can do that. "Sit close up – that's right." And she moved neatly into gear and out onto the road, turning downhill towards the town. She hadn't bothered to get her crash-helmet, and Owen yelled "It's a woman's bike!" into her naked ear. "OK!" she yelled back, and her headlight beam leaped ahead as she changed into top and piled on the revs.

It was a wild, furious ride. Round left-hand corners – far too many and far too sharp. Round right-hand corners – likewise. And all the time tending downhill. An occasional vehicle passed sedately by in the other direction. Owen hung on to the passenger-strap, Mine's hair blowing in his face, craning to see over her shoulder. Then all of a sudden the headlight picked out a bicycle travelling equally furiously ahead of them. Mine slowed her headlong pace somewhat as she drew level. Owen took a good look – or as good a look as was possible in the darkness.

"Looks like it!" he screamed into his pilot's ear.

Mine brought her speed down lower still, edging her machine skilfully into the other to bring them both to a stop. Then the bicycle was lying on the

verge, and its rider was leaping desperately up the bank. Owen slid off and raced in pursuit. There was a crashing from the hedge at the top of the bank. A gasp. A shout of "I've got 'im!" Another gasp. Then – "I think it's a girl."

Two figures, one in front of the other, slid down the bank. The squeal of more bicycle brakes heralded the arrival of Bert and Ian on the scene. Ian lifted his wheel and spun it to work the light. What it disclosed was indubitably a girl – a very young girl, possibly a schoolgirl even. She was crying softly.

"I suppose it's no good saying I didn't – wasn't going to keep it – only wanted to get home," she observed bitterly.

"Not really," said Mine, who had switched off her engine preparatory to going up the bank to help if necessary. "The point is, now we've got you, what are we going to do with you?"

"Well," said Owen, who was holding her arms behind her. "I'd suggest that as she's ridden my sister's bike all this way downhill, it's only fair if she rides it back up again."

"I suppose it would be, really, come to think of it," said Mine. "However, I think this time it'd be better if you rode it back up yourself." She moved back to her scooter, heaved it off its stand, and remounted. "Come on, kid – get up behind me. And don't try sliding off or anything stupid – I'll be going slow enough for these young men to follow right behind, and you won't get very far."

Sullenly, the other girl mounted as she was bid. Mine kicked the engine to life again, and the cavalcade slowly wended its way back up the long hill to the Women's Institute, where Tom, Dick and Harry – and of course Dave – were waiting to usher everybody back inside.

"That's right," said Mine, as they shut the door. "Let's get her into the light where we can have a proper look at her. Leave go, Ian – Owen – she can't escape unless we want her to." The young girl stood dejectedly in the middle of the hall, with everybody around her. She was dressed in a soft-leather jacket, a flannel skirt and flat shoes, and looked about fifteen.

"Hey," said Dave suddenly, and made a grab for her pocket, lifting out several science fiction prozines. "Which of us did she pinch these off?"

"Didn't," said the girl, who was silently sobbing again. "They're mine – I bought them."

For a moment nobody believed that, but when asked, everybody disclaimed proprietorship of those particular issues.

“Where did you get them from, then?” asked Mine.

“Chipping Melton. It’s early closing in Thisbury,” she volunteered, “so I took the bus over to visit the market. I didn’t take a return ticket, because I thought I could thumb a lift back. So I spent all my money. Then I got a lift back as far as Laymans Cross, but couldn’t get one any farther, so I walked from there.” (“Nearly ten miles,” murmured Dave.) “Then I got here and I saw these bikes, and I was late already, so I b-borrowed one. And you caught me. And h-here I am.” Her tears stopped flowing momentarily, and she looked vaguely defiant. Then she deflated again. “Are you going to turn me over to the police? I wish you wouldn’t. You can b-beat me if you like. I’m sorry I took it. My m-mum and dad will be expecting me. Please?”

“Just as a point of academic interest,” Tom interrupted, “where is the nearest police station?”

“There isn’t one,” said Dave. “Nearer than town. Spoil the meeting.”

“You think we’d better let her go, then?” asked Mine.

“There’s just one point, though,” said Owen, turning to the younger girl again. “Why did you buy all this science fiction?”

“To read of course.”

“Then you like it?”

“Y-yes.” Defiant again.

“I think you’d better go home,” said Mine. “Any dissenters?”

There weren’t.

“How’s she going to get home?” asked Harry.

“A very good question,” said Mine. “The same way she came here, I think.”

“She’s a bit young to be out walking alone at this time of night,” Tom protested.

“Not walking. On the back of my scooter. It’s all right, boys – I’ll be back later on. You can carry on without me in the mean time.”

“Why not bring her back with you?” asked Owen.

Mine looked at him hard. Then she swung her gaze slowly round each of the others. What she saw there seemed to reassure her.

“Or you could try to persuade her to come up next week,” Dave suggested.

“Why?” put in the subject under discussion, understandably enough.

“I’ll see what her parents say,” said Mine. “Come along then – by the way, we don’t even know your name.” But the girl was sobbing openly now.

Mine collected her crash-helmet and propelled her gently in the direction of the door. The younger girl suddenly stopped and turned. "I – I don't quite..." she wailed. "Are you d-doing me a favour? Sh-should I thank you – you?"

"Come along, dear," said Mine. "I'll try to explain." And they went out of the door together, Mine closing it gently behind them.

"Right," said Dave. "Where were we, if anywhere?" And then the door opened again, and Mine was back, and her face was a study.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," she announced. "My scooter's gone."

Pandemonium really broke loose this time. "And I only left it unlocked for a minute..." Mine wailed by way of Famous Last Words or something as the massed ranks of the Circle surged out the door. Then they were milling around the parking-space.

"It's no use going after it on a bike," said somebody.

"I'll go for the police," said Owen.

"Why not use the telephone?" suggested Tom – or possibly Harry – reasonably. This was an idea, so Mine started back for her bag, remembered that "999" calls are free, and went into the phone box that stood just outside the Institute. Owen, Bert, and Ian got their bikes and stood vaguely in a group wondering what they ought to do with them. Tom, Dick and Harry stood in another group wondering equally vaguely what they ought to do without them. Dave joined the first group.

"Lend me your bike a mo, Bert."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like a ride, of course."

Bert hadn't decided on any particular use for the thing himself, so he obliged. Dave mounted, and pedalled off into the night. He turned downhill towards town. And before he'd gone a quarter of a mile he found what he was looking for. She was walking briskly along the roadside. She turned at his approach, then looked at the hedge uncertainly.

"It's all right," said Dave, coming to a stop but not dismounting. "I only want to talk to you."

"I – I want to get home."

"It'll take you a good hour. By that time the bus will have beaten you to it."

"But I told you, I haven't got any money."

"These things can be arranged," said Dave gently. "If you don't like

accepting money from strangers you can leave a couple of your magazines as security.” (Accepting money from strangers was, of course, vastly different from hi-jacking their unattended bicycles.) He dismounted now, and swung the machine around. “I’ll try and explain what it’s all about. Come on.”

His friendliness, plus the lack of condescension, seemed to convince her. With a shrug of her shoulders she turned slowly round and, side by side, they began to stroll back to the Institute.

•

They never did find who took Mine’s scooter – though the scooter itself was found easily enough. The police rang her at school the next morning to tell her it was in the next town towards the coast, and the headmistress rather grudgingly gave her the early afternoon off to go and fetch it. And next Wednesday evening as before she piloted it competently up to the Upside Down Women’s Institute.

This time, though, she brought a pillion passenger.

Chapisode Two

Fandom Is Sold up the River

Mine Smith was not a native of Thisbury, but simply worked there, living for the purpose in a flat she shared with two other girls.

“Do they ever read any sf?” asked Owen.

“I’m not even sure that they can read,” said Mine. “Though on second thought, they both work as secretaries, so I suppose they must be able to.”

“Perhaps they don’t care for you, either,” suggested Cynthia.

Cynthia Daytime was both the newest and the youngest member of the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle, having only recently left school – not the one that Mine taught at – as soon as she possibly could after her fifteenth birthday. Once it had sunk in that none of the other members would go out of their way to refer to bicycle-stealing or to avoid referring to it, she settled perfectly happily and naturally into the niche that the rest of the “hard core” had left open for her. She showed as yet no interest in boys as such, but boys who read science fiction didn’t count as boys so much as people in their own right, and the four male members of the circle’s “hard core” were only too glad to have her around for possible future reference, as well as being able to appreciate her meanwhile at her own current valuation.

At twenty-four, Mine was the oldest member of the “hard core”. Dave Portable, at twenty-one the next oldest, was the Circle’s chairman and, in fact, sole officer. Bert Duckbarrow, also twenty-one, sometimes seemed to have been placed upon the earth with the specific function of doing nothing else except make puns – sometimes quite good ones. Owen Mole, a bouncy and irrepressible eighteen, was a useful counterweight to the somewhat more sober-minded Dave. That left Ian Omlet, who at seventeen had never been able to make up his mind as to whether he liked science fiction because it reminded him of modern jazz, or liked modern jazz because it reminded him of science fiction. He was the only member of the Circle with such outrageous musical tastes – most of the rest of the “hard core” preferred trad in reasonable doses. Ian, though he had outgrown it a couple of years since, disconcertingly appeared to know more about trad and its practitioners than did the rest of them put together. As a result, they seldom discussed music

when Ian was present.

The Circle's membership roster was completed by Tom, Dick and Harry – who virtually formed another little “hard core” of their own. Harry and Tom were middle-aged and long married, and it was difficult to think of Dick as anything but middle-aged too, despite his being in fact only eighteen. He had a middle-aged sort of mind.

“As a matter of fact,” said Mine, “I'm not trying to be catty about them – they're both very nice girls.”

“Why don't you chuck them out?” Owen asked. “Then you could install a couple of us instead.”

“Install the whole lot of us why not?” Ian suggested.

“Have a sort of harem in reverse, in fact,” Owen amplified. “We could hold our meetings there and everything.”

“Yeah,” said Cynthia. “That's a point, you know. Why don't you have a more central sort of clubroom or something, anyway?”

“And what's wrong with this one?” protested Dave, who lived only five houses away.

“Well,” said Mine, “you must admit it's rather far out – I'm surprised you've managed to collect even this crowd. If we had somewhere more central we might start looking round seriously for increased membership.”

“In a word,” said Dave, “prices.”

“But surely we ought to be able to find something not unreasonable somewhere?”

“The boys know this,” said Dave, “but you new girls might as well be told. You know old Jonesy at the bottom of High Street? Jonesy the bookseller? Well, he recently cleared out his attic and offered it to us. But he said he daren't take less than a couple of quid a week for it – his rates were high enough as it was, and if they found out he was letting it they'd raise his assessment. And there was some Bible Reading Group that was offering him a fiver a session for it. He'd have let us have it for a hell of a lot less than that – and it's nothing fancy as accommodation goes, either. But it was still way out of our price-range. So the Bible-readers got it.”

“Do rich people read Bibles?” Owen wondered.

“Must do,” said Mine.

“And in the mean time,” Dave finished, “we get this place for seven-and-six a throw.”

“But only because you've got Connections,” said Owen. To the girls he

amplified: “His aunt’s the chairman or something.”

“They wouldn’t let this place at all except to someone with Connections,” said Dave. “Seriously, if either of you girls does happen to hear of anything suitable in town going for a pound a week at the outside – and that’s probably overdoing it with our present resources – we’d be extremely interested to hear of it.”

•

It was the following week.

“My dad’s been doing a job down at Sid Black’s boatyard,” Cynthia told them. “And he says there’s a couple of converted barges going at twenty quid apiece. That is, one of them’s already been promised to the Sea Scouts. But the other one’s still going, last I heard.”

“Going where?” asked Bert.

“Going, you know, lying there – oh, you.”

“But what would one of us do with a twenty-pound barge?” somebody asked.

“For a clubroom, stupid.”

Light dawned. “Twenty quid,” said Dave. “Sounds damned cheap – but what’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one. They’re sort of towing-barges – not canal-boats – getting a bit old, and smaller than they like them nowadays. The hull’s being done over to stop them leaking, what happens to the insides will be up to the customer to do what he likes with.”

“But where would we put it? And how much would we have to pay to keep it there?”

“We could keep it moored in Galley Meadows. And we wouldn’t have to pay a sausage – it’s absolutely free.”

“Huh?” Owen exploded. “How come?”

“Dunno. One of those things. Always has been.”

Harry spoke up now. “Still,” he mused, “Galley Meadows isn’t exactly central, either.”

“It’s more central than this place is though,” said Ian. “It’s only half a mile out of town instead of three, and more or less on the level instead of right on top of a hill.”

“The more I hear of the idea,” said Mine, “the better it sounds. If some of you boys could do a bit of handiwork around the place, I could help with curtains and things. There – you’ve got me making plans already.”

“But twenty pounds,” Dave reminded them. “That’s more than two pounds apiece from each of us.”

“It’s easier for some of us than others, of course,” put in Tom. “I daresay I could put a fiver or so on the q.t.”

“I don’t know what the wife’ll say,” said Harry – who, though not hen-pecked as was Tom, liked to pretend he was. “But I think I might match that all right.”

“I’m not precisely rolling in it of course,” Mine offered, “but I could probably manage two or three quid.” And almost before they realised it, the entire twenty pounds had been assessed and promised and the way ahead seemed clear.

“Anyway.” Dave spoke for them all. “Certainly there can’t be any harm looking into it.”

So Dave, Mine and Harry were designated as a Committee To Look Into It. This they did promptly at just after five o’clock the following evening, and looked at in close-up the project appeared every bit as encouraging as it had seemed the night before. In fact Harry paid five pounds by way of deposit on the spot, and the boatyard man assured them that the hulk would be ready for moving within a fortnight.

Already it was virtually theirs.

Next arose the question of what to name it. Bert immediately suggested Fan-To-Sea. “Well, we’re sf fans,” he argued. “And even if we aren’t actually going to sea, it’s really much the same thing.”

Dave somewhat hesitantly suggested Sandwich Lady, wondering how many of them would get the reference. Mine surprised him with enthusiastically seconding it. Then Owen took the floor. He pointed out that (a) that the Circle ought to honour its traditions, (b) that by tradition it held its meetings in Upside Down, (c) that the nautical equivalent of turning upside down was turning turtle, and that therefore (d) the barge should obviously be named the Turtle. Even Bert could find no fault with this chain of reasoning, so the suggestion was promptly put to the vote and carried.

There thus remained only to pay over the balance of the money, and to take possession.

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The next Saturday but one turned out fine; and they managed to achieve almost a full muster down at the boatyard. Tom wasn’t able to come – nobody really expected that he would be – but everybody else had managed

to be there bright and early, and Harry had brought his younger son, a twelve-year old answering to the name of George, by way of makeweight.

Everything was ready. All the money had been paid over, and Galley Meadows had been prospected for a suitable mooring. It was now simply a matter of moving the Turtle to her new berth. This, they had decided, could be done with optimum ease and financial convenience by hiring a rowing-boat for the day and towing her themselves. They selected a large boat shipping three pairs of oars, and plenty wide enough to allow for one body to each oar. That left three people over. A couple of them, they thought, ought to travel on the barge, just in case. Dick and George were selected for this. Cynthia seemed the obvious choice for cox, so she was duly stationed in the smaller boat's stern and commissioned specifically to watch where they were going.

The other six would play galley-slave. Places were taken, the tow-rope took the strain, and slowly and majestically the Turtle swanned her way into the boatyard lock and was decanted on to the surface of the River Wray. The nose of the rowing-boat turned upstream.

The voyage had begun.

The Wray follows a meandering course in its extreme lower reaches. Although Galley Meadows lies right on the edge of town, the river doesn't run from there direct to the boatyard but saunters in a wide loop some three or four miles out of its way, via a couple of locks, in order to avoid a stray outcropping of the downs. On a day like this, though, a row of three or four miles should be no hardship. They found, as they'd thought, that once they got a bit of momentum going it was comparatively easy to keep up. Those with the tenderest hands – which was most of them – had wisely brought along expendable cheap gloves, which kept them from blistering up straight away, and it seemed no time at all before they were entering the Wray Bridge Lock.

Out of the lock they continued as before, keeping correctly to the right as they went. Presently Cynthia, who had been conducting the performance excellently so far, sang out “Easy on the port oars.”

“What does that mean?” asked Owen.

“It means you. No, not you Bert, keep rowing. Dave, Mine, Owen – slack off, or we'll foul some angler's lines.”

Dave, stroking on the port side, obediently did as he was told. Mine, sitting behind him, took not the slightest notice and carried on rowing. Owen,

in the bows, hesitated a moment before taking his cue from Mine.

“Mine! Owen!” said Cynthia sharply. “Have some sense. There is such a thing as courtesy on the river.”

“I’ve never noticed anglers showing much courtesy to the fish,” said Mine.

Harry, who was sitting next to her, turned his head. “You eat fish, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes – but not ones caught by sticking hooks in their mouths.”

“They’ll tell you the fish can’t feel it,” said Harry.

“They must do,” said Owen, backing the girl up. “Stands to reason.”

“To prove it,” said Harry, “they throw a little one back and it keeps returning to the hook again, time after time, not in the least discouraged.”

“If that doesn’t make you want to throw up...” Mine tailed off as Dave turned to face her. “Have some sense, Mine, for pete’s sake,” he argued. “We’ve got to live with this.” Cynthia was practically jumping up and down with impatience, so he dug his oar hard in and pushed it the wrong way, so that it not only retarded that side of the boat but fouled up Mine’s oar too. Mine and Owen surrendered to the inevitable, and the boat swung broadside on to the stream. They were almost up among the anglers now, so it was a case of broadside or nothing. Slowly the barge behind them responded to the new angle of pull, and they finished the manoeuvre with the whole equipment straddled broadside across almost the entire width of the stream at that point.

“What’s that noise?” someone asked. For a moment everybody stopped rowing to look. And round a bend, going at a good speed, swept a small and powerful motorboat, and trailing behind it...

“Water-skier,” said Dave.

“On the river?” Mine protested.

“Isn’t there some sort of limit...” suggested Harry.

As soon as the motorboat’s driver saw them he throttled sharply, but it was too late to stop in time now. He had a choice between hitting one of the banks, hitting one of the boats, hitting the rope between them, or cutting around the barge. He chose the latter, and shot towards the narrow gap between barge and bank and straight in amongst the anglers’ lines. Amidst all the shouting between anglers and motorboat, those in the motorboat became suddenly aware that the water-skier had either cast off, or been cast off, and was heading at what looked like an uncomfortably fast clip straight for the gap between the two slower craft.

Cynthia showed astonishing quickness of both thought and action. Making a dive for the tow-rope where it was hitched round the stern seat, she had it unhitched almost quicker than the eye could follow, and literally threw the end overboard. The water-skier slid rapidly but harmlessly between her and the barge, was picked up by his motorboat again, and with the anglers still shouting impotently behind them the motorboat and tow swept on downstream.

“Look back in angler,” Bert grinned.

There was a sort of crunching, grating noise, and the crew of the rowing-boat were suddenly made aware that they’d run aground on some foreign body that shouldn’t have been there.

“Ware croc,” said Owen.

“Hippo,” contributed Ian.

“Hippo, hippo, hippo Wray,” amplified Bert.

“How do we get off?” Mine wondered.

“Can’t we sort of row off?” suggested Dave.

This proved to be entirely feasible, and with nothing more fearful than a repetition of the crunching grating noise they soon had themselves extricated.

“Look at the barge,” said Ian.

“Oh hell,” said Mine.

During the short time that it had taken the rowing-boat to clear the obstruction, the barge, under her own momentum and that of the current, had turned her head downstream again – but down a different stream. It was the weir channel, the weird corresponding to the Wray Bridge Lock being, due to the demands of the local topography, some half-mile upstream from the lock itself. Rapidly the rowing-boat’s complement discussed this new development. It seemed that the two aboard the barge were not actually in any danger, because the Turtle drew too much water to go over the weir. The rowing-boat, if it went that way, might go over, but everybody said they could swim, so Cynthia gave the necessary directions and the rowing-boat, with nothing to retard its progress, positively zoomed into the weir channel and in a trice had overtaken the barge. Cynthia examined the latter’s bows in perplexity.

“Where’s the rope?” she asked young George, who stood on the barge’s deck looking down at them.

“I cut it,” George explained. “When that skier.” He held aloft a fearsome school-boy type jackknife.

This was clearly too much. One quick-thinking-quick-acting person on the job was very much to the point, but two of them was evidently something else again. “Take to the boats!” Cynthia wailed.

As it happened, the answer was simple – break out another rope. They had brought several, to have plenty with which to moor the Turtle to the bank when – if ever – they arrived. So with the two boats restored to their rightful positions relative to the current and to one another, the expedition nosed out of the weir channel and again safe and sound to resume its interrupted course.

For a time all was plain sailing – or rowing. Eventually the party became aware of another noise – a different sort of noise this time, and coming from the opposite direction. There seemed to be involved a combined rhythmic shouting and banging. No, not a jazz band – nothing like that at all. It was hard to tell what it was. They asked Dick, on the barge, to report.

“I think it’s the Sea Scouts,” he told them. “They’re doing the same as we’re doing.”

Doing it considerably faster, too, it transpired. It was indeed the Sea Scouts. Instead of having one six-oared boat to provide the motive power, they had a quartet of four-oared ones, travelling two abreast each with its own separate tow-rope husky-dog style. A couple of spare boys adeck held long poles, ready for fending off anything that might need fending off. Also on deck was a youngish man – the scoutmaster, one presumed – with a megaphone which he alternately raised and lowered as the mood took him. “In! Out! In! Out! Port – port! Steaaaaady – In! Out! Now starboard!” He howled the words through the megaphone in a high, sharp voice. Beside him stood a little sea scout with a side-drum, upon which he constantly drummed out the tempo – Brrrr, rrrrr, Brrrr, rrrrr, Brrrr, rrrrr. Crisply the scoutmaster gave his directions as they swung out to overtake the Turtle. The Turtle’s rowing-boat lost way as several of its rowers caught crabs through lack of attention to the business at hand.

The scoutmaster turned to face them, and his megaphone came up smartly. “Having a spot of trouble, chaps?” he bawled. Cynthia turned a pretty nose at him.

“What sort of ‘chap’ does he take me for?” demanded Mine indignantly of her fellow-crewmen as they rocked in the Sea Scouts’ wake.

“Man,” said Ian expansively. “Just dig that utterly depressing rhythm section.”

The sound of the Sea Scouts on the march gradually grew less as they

forged ahead.

“I don’t know,” said Owen. “Their way may be more efficient. But ours is certainly more interesting.” This, for no obvious reason, broke them up with laughing.

“I wonder how they’d have coped with the water-skier though,” said Mine when she’d recovered sufficiently.

“Probably court-martialled him at the drumhead on the spot,” suggested Dave. “And then gone back for a yard-arm to hang him from.”

And so in due course they came to the upper lock. They had promised themselves a mealbreak there, so they approached it in good spirits. Before they had got up to it, though, it had become evident that all was not in order. Considerable shouting seemed to be going on, the scoutmaster being a leading participant. They couldn’t at first see what was happening, as the lock was at a high level. By common accord they pulled into the bank, and Cynthia skipped lightly out and ran up to see what was what. They saw a delighted smile spread over her face, and she beckoned them. Ian tied the painter to a post, and they all scrambled ashore and went to have a look.

What they found caused them no little amusement. The Sea Scouts’ barge had somehow got jammed across the lock at high level, each end of it stuck firmly into the fabric of the wall. The boys, at their master’s frantic direction, were trying to rock the boat free. “One – two – three!” the scoutmaster was howling into the inevitable megaphone. “One – two – three! Keep it up, lads – one – two – three! One – two – three!” And so on. Another man, who seemed to be the lock-keeper, was shouting at him to stop – entirely unavailingly. Several more bystanders stood quietly round, watching with considerable interest.

“Portage, anyone?” asked Owen facetiously.

“What’s that mean?” asked Ian.

“Portage, you know – carry it round by hand.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Frankly, yes.”

Dave stepped forward, taking advantage of a temporary lull in operations. “Anything we can do to help?” he asked the scoutmaster.

The latter was desperate enough to stop to consider this. “I think we have sufficient hands, thanks all the same,” he decided.

“Afraid he’d have to pay us salvage,” said Owen.

Dave pondered. He turned to the apparent lock-keeper, and asked him if

this was indeed so.

“Yes,” said that worthy. “That is, I’m his relief. Lock-keeper’s on holiday. Boating on the Grand Union Canal if you please. This would have to go and happen while I’m in charge here.”

This was encouraging, if anything. “I’ve been thinking,” said Dave. “I don’t know much about this sort of thing – but might it help to let a little of the water out?”

The relief lock-keeper looked as if he was going to indignantly reject the idea – and then suddenly seemed to change his mind. “Yes,” he agreed. “It might. It well might.” And without more ado he walked over to the lock gate and began operating the sluice. There was a perceptible change in the overall sound, and the scoutmaster turned to see what was happening, megaphone at the ready. “Hi! You!” he bawled. “Stop that!” The boys had stopped rocking, and were watching the water level – which was perceptively receding from the level of the deck.

“Do you hear me? Stop it this instant!”

All of a sudden the barge gave a lurch, and one end fell away, followed promptly by the other. The scoutmaster danced a ludicrous hornpipe trying to keep his balance – he kept it, but at the expense of his megaphone, which fell overboard and promptly sank. That would be no loss, at any rate. Then the barge was floating free again, clear of the lock walls. The relief lock-keeper shut the sluice off, and within ten minutes the Sea Scouts, order of battle restored except for the thrice-blessed loss of the megaphone – the relief lock-keeper absolutely refused to let one of the boys dive for it – were once more on their all-conquering way.

The Thisbury Circle brought their boats through the lock, and then stopped for a leisurely and much-needed meal. It was mid-afternoon before they felt like resuming their journey. There wasn’t far to go now, though. The six oarsmen pulled with a will, and the expedition soon debouched into the open water of Galley Meadows.

Galley Meadows – its name was said by some to hark back to the Vikings, though others doubted that on the not unreasonable grounds that the locks hadn’t been there in the Viking days – had at one time been a sort of swamp lying between Thisbury and the river. Eventually someone had got round to sorting it out, which had been accomplished by in effect putting all the land on the one side of it and all the water on the other. This meant that the river at that point took on the appearance of a lake, and was flanked on

the town side by a considerable area of ground that was too uncertain for building on but entirely adequate for recreational purposes. And it was here that the moorings lay. There were several craft moored there more or less permanently – houseboats and the like. And...

“Oh, look,” said Owen. “The Sea Scouts have pinched our spot.”

They had. On the other hand, as it was entirely unmarked, obviously the Sea Scouts were perfectly entitled to it if they got there first – which they had done. “Never mind,” said Dave. “There’s plenty of room for all. Let’s scout around.”

“Let’s round a scout,” amended Bert. Not one of his better efforts, obviously – nobody laughed.

They tied the Turtle to the nearest available spot, and rowed over to the reconnoitre. “Don’t look now,” Mine suddenly murmured, “but I think they’re in trouble again.” With one accord the rowers turned the boat’s head and scudded across to where the Sea Scouts’ barge lay. A boatload of Sea Scouts moved to intercept them.

“What’s up?” asked Dave.

One of the boys grinned. “A little matter of nobody having brought a gangway along,” he informed them. “Skipper’s doing his nut.”

“Take me to your – er – skipper,” said Dave.

Dave’s idea was simple enough, and met with general approval. They had a plank, and if the Turtle could be moored for the present on the outward side of the other barge, the one plank would suffice for both vessels. Furthermore, Dave was thinking ahead, and the “skipper” was persuaded to stop doing his nut long enough to be introduced to the Circle at large. If the two barges could be kept permanently in the same general vicinity, Dave suggested, both groups could keep a friendly eye open for each other’s interests.

“So long,” Mine qualified as they rowed back to fetch the Turtle, “as he doesn’t get another megaphone.”

“If he does,” said Ian, “I’ll get a saxophone.”

“If you do,” countered Owen, “that’s going overboard too.”

Having left the Turtle moored securely to the scout barge, and surreptitiously checked that that was moored securely to the bank, they all piled in the rowing-boat and returned downstream. It was easy rowing with the current, and they stowed one pair of oars and all took turns to row with the remaining two pairs. Even Dick – no child of the great outdoors at the

best of times – took a turn.

At one point, Dave found himself sitting in the stern next to Harry's son George. He turned to him. "Well," he said conversationally. "Now you've met us, how d'you like us? Want to become a member?"

The boy considered for a moment.

"No thanks," he answered seriously. "I think I'd like to join the Sea Scouts."

Chapisode Three

Fandom Goes Underground

“Hi, Dave,” Owen greeted him as the former dropped down the ladder into the Turtle’s interior. “How’s the publication plans going?”

Dave Portable straddled a chair.

“I’ve got one item promised,” he returned. “John Berry’s offered a story that’s already on stencil, which he’ll run off himself if we accept it. It’s already appeared in some zine with a strictly limited circulation, apparently.”

“H’m,” Owen grunted noncommittally. “That’s the only reply then?”

“Well, Archie Mercer’s replied – says he’d like to do something for us, but he can’t think of anything worth writing about. Once they can see visible proof that we’re capable of putting out a magazine, they’ll perhaps have more reason to trust us.”

Dave struck a pose. “The Women’s Institute of the Future, One Hundred Years From Now. By Mine Smith,” he intoned.

“Oh dear – I’d was hoping everybody’d have forgotten about that.”

“Can’t you adapt it to the Fan Club of the Future or something?”

“Now I’ve met you lot, I’m beginning to wonder how I ever had the face to inflict it on a Women’s Institute audience, let alone a science-fictional one.”

“Stefnic,” Owen corrected.

“Shouldn’t sit in a draught then,” put in Bert Duckbarrow.

“Bert can compose an original pun for the occasion,” Owen suggested.

“We can give it a double-page spread all to itself, all out of the way of everything else – what there is of everything else, that is.”

“You’re making a lot of noise, Owen,” said Mine. “Perhaps you can write something brilliant to help out.”

“Well,” Owen hesitated. “I’ve been sort of thinking of writing a short story. Not a serious short story – more of a fantasy thing. You know...”

“The Were-Vampire of Castle Frankenstein sort of?”

“Not exactly. No, it’s about a man who’s spent his life wandering about the world trying to find the crock of gold at the end of a rainbow – you know. He’s been all over, following every rainbow he sees. Anyway, somewhere

out in the wilds of Tibet or Inner Mongolia, one of those sorts of places, he sees this rainbow. And does his usual, like. And somehow, this time he sorts of manages to catch up with the end. He finds his crock of gold – only it’s going tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock – because it was a Chinese rainbow.”

The Circle had put in a couple of strenuous months reconditioning the Turtle, which had metamorphosed into a pleasant little clubroom. The Sea Scouts, with whom they remained on excellent terms, had been a great help – having precisely the same problem themselves, they had had no hesitation about employing a youth-club’s prerogative and going round town openly on the cadge for usable wood and other materials. In the event they had rounded up considerably more than they could use on their own vessel, and the balance had been quietly handed over for the Turtle. Besides panelling the walls and constructing one or two necessary cubicles in the process, the Circle had run up a couple of rough but strong tables. Everybody had rallied round with old chairs and benches and things, Mine had pressed Cynthia (who preferred hammering to sewing) into service in the soft furnishings department, and the whole thing was now generally shipshape. They even had some portholes – protected by wooden shutters when not in use, as they hadn’t got round to having them glazed yet. Reconstruction had now slackened off, and the air was humming with plans for the future – of which a club fanzine was one.

“To change the subject for a mo,” Harry the Second changed the subject, “is anybody doing anything about the library?”

“Doing what about the library?” asked Dave.

“The public library – letting them know we exist, and all that. Now what are you all grinning at? Have I said something wrong?”

“Should we tell him?” said Owen.

“I suppose so,” Dave responded with a mock sigh. “There’s no privacy nowadays. No, Harry – it’s just that I work there.”

“Most of us originally contacted each other through there,” Owen amplified.

“We’ve been in his good books ever since,” said Bert – who, to give him his due, had never even heard of *Willis Discovers America*.

“Never mind,” said Harry the Second agreeably. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have bothered to open my big mouth.”

Harry the Second – called that to distinguish him from the Circle’s other Harry – was a large, lazy young man who earned his living driving a delivery

van – a sort of miniature pantechnicon. As he possessed unrestricted right of access to this vehicle at all times, they found him a particularly useful addition to their strength.

“Call the meeting to order, Dave,” Owen suggested. “Most of us are here, and anybody who isn’t ought to be.”

“Right – the meeting is hereby called to order.” Ian and Cynthia, who had been nattering at the other end of the barge, swivelled their attention.

“Can I make a suggestion?” Cynthia asked.

“Don’t answer that question,” said Owen.

“Thank you. The suggestion is – why don’t we arrange a picnic or something while it’s still sort of summer?”

“It would sound more official, Cynthia,” Tom reproved her jokingly, “to call it a club outing, or a circle outing.”

“OK,” Owen spoke up once again. “Let’s arrange a circle outing and call it a picnic.”

“Cynth can organise the catering arrangements,” said Mine slyly.

“Out of order,” Dave ruled. “We can’t trust her – she’s not housebroken yet. OK, Mine, now that’s settled...”

Mine made a face at him. Cynthia thought it more prudent not to.

“Proposal seconded,” Ian volunteered. “Right – where shall we go?”

“That depends,” said Dave, “on how we’re going to get there Harry.”

Once again the Circle achieved almost a full turnout for the occasion, Tom as usual being (for reasons already explained) the sole absentee. On the other hand, the numbers were augmented by the presence of three extra ladies. Harry the First had brought his wife and daughter – the latter twin to son George – and Harry the Second had brought his current girl-friend. This made a round dozen, who, perched for the most part on assorted Turtle furniture in the back of Harry the Second’s van, set off gaily the following Sunday up the hill to Upside Down en route for Tackton Castle.

“Have we got everything?” wondered Dave as the van ground into low gear for the long uphill drag.

“Remember the sandwiches, Mine?” asked Owen.

“Remember to pack enough glasses, Mine?” supplemented Ian.

“Remember to bring the mustard, Mine?” continued the interrogation.

“The salt...”

“And the tin-opener...”

“The bottle-opener, Mine – the bottle-opener?”

“Excuse my being nosy,” asked Mrs. Harry the First – who was a small, plain-featured, pleasant woman – “but why do they keep calling you ‘Mine’?”

Mine smiled – she liked the woman. “Because it’s my name.”

“Well why don’t they call you by your Christian name?”

“It is my Christian name.” The woman looked blank. “You see, when I was born, the midwife liked the look of me right away, and said ‘I wish she was Mine’. So they decided to make her wish come true, and I’ve been Mine ever since.”

“Is that right?” said Mrs. Harry earnestly. “I once used to know a...” She broke off doubtfully at the semicircles of grins facing her.

“Nevertheless,” said Mine, “it is my real name, I assure you.” And with that Mrs. Harry had to be content, though she did question her (equally ignorant) husband pretty closely on the subject when they got home.

The van turned sharp left at Laymans Cross, then peeled off into a narrow side-road and was soon winding through the dense woodland that was all that remained of the once-notorious Tackton Chase. The woodland road seemed never-ending, until suddenly the van pulled up with a unnecessarily ostentatious gravelly skid. Dave fell off his stool.

“Here we are, people,” announced Harry the Second through the hatch. “Tackton Castle.”

“Famed in song, story, and the Ministry of Works,” said Dave. “Or whatever it’s called nowadays.”

“Song, story, the Ministry of Works, or Tackton Castle, d’you mean?” Owen demanded.

“Yes,” said Dave. And they all tumbled out and went to have a look.

Tackton Castle is only a small specimen as castles go, but a well-preserved one. It is set on a knoll in the heart of the Chase, surrounded by a genuine water-filled moat (fed by a stream) up to the outside edge of which the woodland now extends. The village which once clustered about its walls (within the moated area) has long since disappeared, leaving only the gaunt ruin of the stronghold itself to hold a timeless sway over the scene. There is a wooden bridge over the moat, and a small booth where an official sells tickets, postcards and official guides, but they are the only concessions to the twentieth century in the vicinity. Even the car-park is concealed amongst the trees. Viewed from the north-west, the castle gives the illusion of the past veritably come to life. From any other direction however it can be seen that

the north-eastern tower stands Pisa-like at an angle, having parted altogether from the neighbouring curtain-walls.

Owen, Bert and Cynthia contemplated the delinquent tower from the bailey within.

“Honestly, mister,” Cynthia murmured. “All I did was lean against it.”

“Try leaning against me, Cynth,” said Owen. “I call for you any time.”

Cynthia, of course, promptly did. Owen just as promptly lost his balance, and teetered on the brink. Cynthia gave a little cry, made a grab at him, and missed. Owen sort of tottered over the edge. He had his wits about him, his hands bounced him harmlessly off the tower itself and he landed on his feet about three yards lower down.

“Hey!” he called back up. “There’s a passage down here.”

“I wonder if the keepers know about it?” Cynthia speculated.

“Must do,” said Bert. “Surely.”

“I’m coming down,” Cynthia decided.

“No, don’t,” said Owen, but Cynthia was already on her stomach and sliding over the edge. Owen was vouchsafed a brief glimpse of far more of her legs than was good for him, then she was beside him.

“Wonder where it leads?” she said.

“Dunno – but now we’re both here, I suppose there’s no possible alternative but to investigate.”

“Wait for me!” called Bert.

“Go away, Bert,” Owen called back. “Remember, two’s company.”

“And three’s a jolly good fellow,” Bert returned as his long frame slithered down to join them.

The passage seemed sound enough – what they could see of it, which was only a few feet. Owen led the way gingerly into the interior. In next to no time he was having to feel his way at each step.

“You still there, Owen?” Cynthia called.

Owen stopped, and she banged into him. “Let’s hold hands, or link arms, or something.” They did the latter, Cynthia between the two youths, and side by side they continued forward. Owen and Bert each had contact with one wall with his free hand. Then Cynthia’s right arm was nearly wrenched out of its socket, and a clatter of loose change on the floor sent little echoes tinkling into the darkness. Bert gave a smothered curse.

“There goes my week’s wages,” he commented ruefully. “Now I wonder...”

“Who’s got a light?” asked Cynthia.

“Not me,” Owen told her. “I left all my makings in the van with my jacket.”

“I can’t find my bloody lighter,” Bert grumbled. “Damn – I bet it’s on the deck too. Let’s see what we can do anyway.” The three of them scabbled in the dust. Several assorted coins were successfully recovered by sundry questing fingers, but no lighter.

“Hey!” said Cynthia suddenly, in an odd little voice. “There’s something here.”

“What?” “Yes?”

“I think it’s some sort of well.”

“Well I never.” (Bert of course.)

The boys moved forwards to investigate. A well indeed it appeared to be, of depth unknown. Owen sacrificed one of Bert’s pennies in the cause of science, to be rewarded by an agonisingly long interval with a faint clunk.

“I don’t entirely care for this,” he announced. “I think we’d better go back.”

“Which way is back?” asked Cynthia.

“Let’s see – there ought to be a wall here.” There wasn’t. “Or perhaps a little further – here, say.” There still wasn’t. “But – yes, I mean no. There certainly shouldn’t be one here, anyway. That’s odd.”

“I think I’ve got a passage,” said Cynthia. “But is it the right one?”

“Or is it this one?” asked Bert.

“Where the hell’s that well gone?”

They were – as Bert was sooner or later bound to remark – well and truly lost.

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Dave and Mine, a guide-book shared companionably between them, stood on the high walkway and surveyed the castle’s interior.

“It certainly brings out the sense of wonder in one,” said Mine. “I can just imagine them bringing in the boar’s head from the kitchen in the great hall. Over there, in that space, my lord and his lady slept. There was a floor there then of course.”

“It’s just the right size,” Dave decided. “One can more or less take in the whole layout at once – it doesn’t ramble all over the place whichever way you turn. Quarters, kitchens, store-rooms, stables – the works. You can see Norman sentry patrolling along here. The master-at-arms comes past – goes

in that door, there.” He turned and gestured over the wall. “There’s a wagon waiting outside the drawbridge – he’s going to let it down so that the wagon can come in.”

“I wonder,” Mine mused, “why they called a chamber a ‘solar’ when it only has two little windows both facing north?”

“Dunno. Bert would probably say it was because it was part of the System. Why, come to that, should a toilet be described as a ‘garderobe’?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Mine. “Elementary French. ‘Garder’, to watch, or mind, or beware. ‘Robe’ – a robe is a robe is a robe. Translation – mind your clothing. Eminently practical advice in the circumstance, I’d say.”

“Oh. I thought it was just a sort of synonym for wardrobe. Euphemism.”

“Well – you may possibly be in the habit of committing euphemisms in your wardrobe...”

They both laughed. Ian emerged from the putative master-at-arm’s doorway and joined them. (1)

(1) *Mine’s suggested etymology of “garderobe” is certainly ingenious. However, my own researches tend to confirm that Dave’s more prosaic explanation is probably the correct one. Cf “cloakroom”. AM*

“What’s become of the rest of the gang?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Dave told him. “There’s Dick and Harry and Co. over there. I rather got the impression that Harry the Second wouldn’t be coming in – he’d sooner lie on the greensward.”

“That’s all right for him,” Ian grunted. “He’s got something worth lying on the greensward with.”

“Now that’s not chivalrous,” Mine chaffed him.

“The trouble with you, Mine,” Ian returned, “is that there’s not enough of you to go round.”

“That,” said Dave, “sounds positively pornographic.”

“Anyway,” Ian went on, “you haven’t seen the others then?”

“No. Oh, they’ll be up in the keep or down in the dungeons or somewhere. Probably skulking somewhere to take us by surprise. Let’s hunt them up.” And the party dispersed.

•

Meanwhile back in the bowels of the earth...

“Damn this darkness,” complained Bert as his head grazed a sudden wall.

“It’s the shortage of light that causes it,” Cynthia gratuitously informed

him.

“Don’t I know it? Here, Owen – you’re a mole, can’t you lead us to safety?”

“No,” said Owen succinctly.

“Anyway,” said Cynthia, “wouldn’t it be more to the point to stop and wait for someone to send a search-party? We haven’t a clue where we’re going. And they’ll be missing us sooner or later.”

This seemed to make sense, so they leaned against a handy wall – the place seemed full of handy walls – and began to wait.

“Cynth,” said Owen.

“Yes?”

“Are you going to burst into tears?”

Cynthia considered this for a moment. “No – I don’t think so. Why?”

“D’you mind if I do then?”

“Talk about babes in the wood,” said Cynthia.

“All right,” said Bert, “if you want me to. Once upon a time there were two little babes who lived in a wood.”

“One of them was named Fred.” Owen took up the story.

“And the other was named – er, Fred.” (That was Cynthia.)

“In fact they were both named Fred.”

“They were absolutely no relation to each other.”

“Except on the mother’s side, which didn’t count, as the wood was strictly deciduous.”

“Does that follow?”

“Were they little boy-babies or little girl-babies?”

“Yes.”

“One of each.”

“Freda? Frederika?”

“Winifred.”

“And one day they suddenly grew up and got married.”

“To three other people who just happened to be riding by on a four-humped camel at the time.”

“And they all lived happily ever after.”

“Except for the camel, who suffered dreadfully from insomnia whenever there was a Tuesday in the month.”

“So one day they sent for the camel-doctor.”

“Who was a Tibetan llama with two Ls.”

And so on.

They were just getting to the part where the male midwife bails out of the Martian submarine with a waterproof parachute when a sudden echoing bawl of “Anybody at home?” made them all jump. Then they began shouting simultaneously “Hooray!” and “Rescue!” and “Who is it?”

“Where are you?”

“Here!” and “Dunno!” and “Who is it?”

“Sounds like Dave,” said Owen then.

“Careful!” called Cynthia in a penetrating voice. “There’s an unfenced well somewhere!”

“It’s OK – got a torch!” A flash of light from somewhere in the erstwhile darkness confirmed this, and a moment later the three of them were scrambling to their feet in the presence of both Dave and Mine.

“How the hell did you get here?” asked Mine.

“That’s a stupid question,” said Cynthia scornfully. “D’you think we’d still be here if we knew?”

“How did you find us, anyway?” asked Owen.

“Simply followed the guide-book, believe it or not. You weren’t anywhere else, so you had to be here. Q.E.D.”

“How far do these things go?” Owen continued.

“Further than you think from the size of the castle. Anyway, we’d better be getting back – Ian’s keeping K.V. for us.”

They all wondered why.

“Because we’re utterly out of bounds, of course,” said Dave. “Didn’t you read the notice?”

“Huh?” “What notice?”

“Climbing strictly prohibited on pains of prosecuting, or words to that effect.”

“Who’s been climbing?” Owen demanded.

Owen, Bert and Cynthia were thoroughly surprised to find what a short distance they had actually travelled underground, and at Ian’s urgent beckon they emerged thankfully into the daylight again, scrambling quickly to ground level before a keeper spotted them.

“You three’d better keep out of Harry the Second’s way for a bit,” Dave told them. “We had to beat the woods for him, to get the key to the van so that we could get a torch. Lucky he had one.”

•

A dozen hungry humans eventually assembled at the van. Even Harry the Second and his girlfriend were there – or perhaps they deemed it wiser to be there when wanted this time – and a heavily laden human pack-train was soon wending its way along the banks of a little woodland stream in search of a suitable picnic-spot.

“I wonder why they call this a ‘chase’?” asked Cynthia.

“Because it’s where the wicked baron used to chase all the local vir... er, maidens,” Owen suggested.

“‘Virgins’ is good enough, surely. I do speak English, you know.”

“The local virgins were always chased,” put in the inevitable Bert.

Mine decided to enlighten them. “In the middle ages,” she told them, “all forests belonged to the king. Any forest – such as this one – that through some oversight didn’t belong to the king was called a chase, just so that the king would know the difference.”

“I wish you’d been my history master, Mine,” said Owen.

They duly found a suitable spot, and the repast got under way. Mine had proved more than adequate to the organisation of the feast, and it was perfectly set off by the pleasant leafy surroundings. In course of time the speed of consumption slowed down, and a dozen bodies settled back one by one, replete.

“Let’s leave the rest for this evening,” suggested Mrs. Harry the First.

“It’s nearly that now,” said someone. “Ah well.”

“Somebody’s coming,” said someone else.

Somebody was coming. And talking as she came, which seemed to indicate more than one person. Only one person hovered into sight, though – a slender woman in a print blouse and tweed skirt. Her eyes were tight shut, her outstretched hands held a forked twig more or less parallel to the ground, and she was muttering to herself something on the lines of: “I know there’s water here somewhere, I’m sure there is, there must be water here, I feel it,” and so on.

And she was heading straight for the picnic-party – and the stream that lay just beyond them.

“Look out!” sang out Cynthia and Harry the First’s daughter together. The woman gave a convulsive jerk, pulled up sharply, and opened her eyes to regard them.

“Oh dear,” she said. “So near and yet so far. If only I could have gone a pace or two further.”

This was manifestly impossible without her trampling the remains of the feast in the process. They sat and looked at her. She was aged maybe fifty, though it was difficult to tell. Her face – untouched by human hand so to speak – was clear and almost unlined, and looked younger than did her grizzled hair. She parted her hands and let them fall to her sides.

“I’m sure I have the Gift – if only the conditions were right,” she sighed. “If I could have reached the stream, I would have known. But it was not to be. Another day, perhaps.”

Cynthia was the first to find her voice. “Have a sandwich,” she offered, handing up a plate that happened to be within reach.

“Thank you my dear,” said the woman, taking one. She bit into it. “You are hospitable. And by the way, I’m not as silly as you’re probably all thinking.”

“There’s nothing silly about dowsing.” Dave spoke up. “I hope you’ll be successful another time.”

“Thank you. May I be so bold as to enquire – have you been visiting the castle?”

“Yes – this morning.”

“What did you all think of it?”

“There are twelve of us,” Mine pointed out. “And we probably reacted in twelve different ways. Personally, I found it fascinating.”

The women’s eyes lit up. “Oh, it is,” she confirmed. “Utterly fascinating. In more than one way. Godfrey de Morlac built it of course. You know who he was?”

“The bastard son of Rufus’ seneschal,” Mine said promptly. After all, she had read the guide-book.

“Yes,” the woman said darkly. “That’s what some say. And there wasn’t a wickeder man in England – no, not under three reigns. They used to say of him that instead of selling his soul to the Devil, he bought the Evil One’s. You know the legend of the wall?”

“No.”

“The well is located deep underground – nobody’s allowed to go there nowadays. The story is that if you throw money that has been cursed, and an unlit candle, down the well then foul fiends will appear before you, shining with an unholy light.”

Owen, amongst others, stiffened perceptively at this. The woman saw it, and misinterpreted. “Well may you shudder,” she told him. “Evil is still

rampant amongst us, and it does us all good to face it frankly and fearlessly. But I don't want to outstay my welcome. Thank you for your hospitality. May the Elements preserve you. Perhaps some of us may meet again." And she turned and strode resolutely off beside the little stream.

"Crackers," confirmed Harry the Second's girl-friend as the woman passed out of ear-shot.

"Eccentric," Harry the First corrected her gently.

Owen leaned across and felt Mine's wrist. He moved his hand up her arm, squeezed it hard.

"You don't feel like a foul fiend, Mine, anyway," he told her. He subjected Dave to similar maltreatment. "Nor do you."

Mine and Dave, as well as most of the others, looked at him blankly.

"That legend. Bert fell over and dropped all his loose change. And swore at it. At least some of it went down the well – I dropped it there, to see how deep it was."

Dave began to see.

"As far as unholy light is concerned – you ought to have heard what Harry said when I routed him out to ask if he had a torch in the van."

Harry's girl-friend giggled.

"But that leaves the – what was it? – unlit candle," Mine pointed out. "Bert doesn't carry unlit candles around in his pocket, I suppose?"

"My lighter!" Bert gasped. Everybody looked at him. "I think it went down the well too."

"We don't know for sure," Owen amplified, "but anyway we couldn't find it."

Mine let out her breath in a soft whistle.

"Well I'm damned," she said weakly.

Chapisode Four

Fandom Is Conspicuous by Its Absence

Cynthia Daytime angrily slapped another brushful of paint on the panelling.

It was Easter Sunday. The others would be whooping it up at the Convention now. But not Cynthia. It was her parents, of course. If her friend Mine (whom they liked and trusted) brought back a favourable report, she could probably go next year. She'd be seventeen by then, anyway. But on this occasion, no. Bloody no. She slapped on another brushful. What a way to spend a week-end – all by herself painting the Turtle's interior. She'd spent the whole of Saturday behind the counter – that was another thing. One free Saturday in four wasn't her idea of civilised hours. She was taking typing and shorthand classes now, Tuesday and Friday evenings, and by next Easter, she sincerely hoped, she'd have become a steady five-day-week girl.

Still, painting the Turtle was preferable to hanging around at home all the time, helping her mother with all the hundred and one things that would never be entirely done, whether with or without her assistance. It wasn't much fun all by herself, even so. With the gang around, she'd thoroughly enjoy helping them paint. Or sitting around idly while they painted. Or sitting around equally idly with them while they should have been painting. Or even, now and then perhaps, painting while they sat around idly. It was the company more than the painting – or whatever else they might be doing – that she enjoyed.

Why had she got to be sixteen and a girl?

Damn it – there weren't even any Sea Scouts to talk to. Any evening there were usually one or two around their barge, doing something or other there. But now they were all away at their week-end camp upriver. Sea Scouts weren't fans – fen – of course, but some of them were moderately intelligent. She caught a trickle of paint that was heading towards the floor. Deck. Smoothed the brush over a patch that stood out. Turned back to the paint-pot.

The Nullgray Mouser was sniffing gingerly around the pot. The Nullgray Mouser was the Turtle's resident caretaker, a brownish-sandish-

stripish sort of kitten who rated as a full honorary member of the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle. Cynthia's thoughts veered. "My cat is but a kitten yet," she murmured, then began improvising to the old tune: "His ears have not been bitten yet, his Lives are still unwritten yet, he's gonna be a great big Tom pom pom". Or was he? He was just as likely to be a hen, or a nanny, or whatever the females were called. They'd only know for sure when she started having kittens – or when he didn't.

She laid down the brush and scooped up the kitten in one fluid movement. It – whether he or she – started purring. She held it gently on its back, innocently inspecting its nether regions. It looked female – but then so did all cats at that age, Cynthia understood. Personally she hoped it would be a Tom – she liked kittens, but didn't relish the thought of having to deal with surplus specimens in the traditional fashion. Steps Could Be Taken, of course, but she gathered that enlightened opinion – what she regarded as enlightened opinion – didn't care for that either.

"It's a shame, isn't it, Nullie," she murmured. "Just the two of us left, all by our little selves. There ought to be a Cats' Convention for you to go to – talks by feline professionals, a fish banquet, all-night parties on the tiles. But then, your parents would stop you going or something. That's what they're for. Never mi..."

At that moment a crash shook the barge from stem to stern, and something went bump, bump, bump as the vessel rocked heavily. In an instant Cynthia had laid down the kitten and was shooting up the ladder like a rocket. A motor-launch was slowly backing away from the Turtle. Cynthia materialised on the barge's deck in shirt and jeans and took in the scene.

"That was a damn stupid thing to do," she blazed.

"That's all right," said one of the youths from the launch. "We do damn stupid things at times. We're like that."

"If somebody like you popped up each time," added his friend, "we'd do damn stupid things more often."

They didn't look more than twenty, either of them. Both were well-built and athletic-looking, one with light-brownish hair and an impudent grin, the other with dark curly hair and an equally impudent grin. The launch stopped and began to move slowly forward again, coming round to lie parallel with the barge.

"Are you alone?" continued the second youth.

"Well – yes – so to speak, for the time being."

“Why not come for a spin? It’s fabulous out on the river now.”

Cynthia made a split-second decision. They certainly didn’t attract her as boys – she was as yet somewhat retarded in that department. She doubted if she’d find them particularly interesting as people. But what the hell – she was bored, and a short spin up an down the river would make a break.

“OK,” she agreed cheerfully, and leaped nimbly down onto the launch, taking her balance automatically as she landed and ignoring the proffered hand. A couple of steps and she was sitting on the stern, her feet dangling into the cockpit. The light-haired youth put the motor into gear and the vessel began to move forward. His curly-haired mate slipped down beside Cynthia.

“Come down where we can all talk comfortably,” suggested the driver. She shrugged, and descended to the seat, a youth on either side of her.

“That’s better,” the driver approved. “I’m Brian and he’s Don. What do they call you?”

Cynthia played cautious. If she told them her name, ten to one they’d start calling her “Cynth” or “Cyn”. Her closest friends – mainly the gang – called her Cynth, but that was a privilege. And as for Cyn, anybody called her that strictly at his peril. So she chose the first name that came into her head. “Connie,” she told them.

“You don’t look like a Connie to me,” commented Don – the curly one. “I’d say that you were more like a Pat.” Conversation seemed to come easily with them. Brian steered the boat out into the Meadows lake. They by no means had it to themselves – several sailing-dinghies and rowing-boats were dotted about, and a cabin cruiser was nosing her way upstream. The town bank was lined with assorted craft moored temporarily or permanently, and the Meadows themselves contained a fair number of people, kicking balls around or picnicking or angling or simply digging the scene. Brian swung the boat’s head downstream, towards where the river narrowed into its more regular width. They exchanged washes with the cabin cruiser, then momentarily they had the lower end of the lake to themselves.

Don threw an arm over Cynthia’s shoulder.

“Give us a kiss, Con,” he urged. “Don’t worry about him – he won’t mind, he’s my mate.”

Brian’s arm in its turn slipped round her waist.

“It’s share and share alike on this jalopy,” he announced.

“Fair enough, Bry-oh,” assented Don. “Give us a kiss, Con, then you can give him a kiss.” His hand began gently to guide her face in his direction.

Cynthia slipped a shapely young arm round the neck of each of them. Then in an instant her fingers had clamped tightly about both necks, and her head moved neatly out of the way as their two skulls came together with a perceptible clunk. Like a flash she was out of the cockpit and cleaving the water, making for the nearer bank – the out-of-town bank. A nuisance that, but it seemed the obvious place to make for. It was not to be, however. The launch came up in a narrow turn and nosed between her and the bank.

Don was standing up rubbing his head. “No hard feelings, Con,” he called, reaching down a hand. “It was only a game. Honour bright.”

Cynthia promptly turned about and began to make for the town bank. Momentarily she lost sight of the launch as she concentrated on her swimming. Then it was looming over her again, and a strong hand closed round her wrist.

“Come on, Con – we were only larking about.”

“Let go,” she breathed fiercely.

“Don’t be a little goose – we won’t hurt you.”

Somehow, it never occurred to Cynthia to call for help. Not that she would necessarily have done so even if it had – after all, she had walked into this business with her eyes open, and it was up to her to get herself out of it again. She caught hold of the side of the cockpit with her free hand and began to rock it.

“No – come of it Con – be a sport. Con! Stop it!” Don nearly lost his balance and was forced to leave go of her wrist. Cynthia caught hold of the cockpit with both hands now, and rocked all the harder. For a moment it looked as if Don would have to assault her. Then the corner of the launch dipped right under for a moment. Don kept his station only with difficulty. Cynthia gave the boat another violent rock, and the corner went under again – easier now, and it would be still easier the next time. Already the boat was perceptively lower in the water.

She would dearly have liked to sink it completely. However, caution prevailed, and she let go, turned hard about and struck out once more for the distant town bank. As she swam, she noticed that the engine had suddenly cut out. Good. Give them something to think about.

She was a fair enough swimmer, and had no trouble in gaining the desired bank. A couple of the sailing-dinghies had wandered down and were observing her. She gave them a cheerful wave. The motor launch seemed to have drifted further downstream while she was swimming – both its

occupants could be seen bailing furiously. Dripping, she plodded along the bank. It was decidedly chilly – there was quite a lot of sun about, but a wind brisk enough to shudder in, clad as she was.

Gaining the Turtle, she dropped down into the interior and promptly stripped herself to the buff. She rummaged in a locker among several bathing-costumes – left over from the previous summer – for one of her own. It was a trifle on the small side now – had been last year, she remembered – but it was one-piece, and thus somewhat warmer than Mine’s two-piece. She strung all her clothes out on a line up on deck – they’d soon dry in this breeze – then plumped herself down in the lee of the hatch and inspected the water for signs of the launch. She thought she could just discern it vanishing into the narrow river.

The Nullgray Mouser strolled daintily up to her.

“I don’t care what sex you are, Nullie,” she told it. “I’m not having you crawling all over my naked limbs.” By way of precautionary measure she picked it up, held it before her with both hands, and gravely regarded it.

“It’s a monotonous life, Nullie,” she commented with absolute seriousness. “The place is half dead without the gang to help liven things up.”

Chapisode Five

Fandom Goes to the Dogs

The car was maybe a trifle old, and maybe a trifle shabby. Not outrageously so in either case, but old enough and shabby enough nevertheless to stand out among the stream of traffic. It was Theo Trunkard's car, after all, and that was the way Theo Trunkard liked it.

Theo, as usual, was driving. Tallish, slimmish, fairish, youngish – to describe him fully would be to compile a veritable catalogue of “-ishes”. Specifically, he was about five-foot-ten, fairly well-proportioned, sandy-haired with short full beard to match, and thirty-one years of age. He was dressed in sandals, shorts and open-necked shirt. He liked wearing sandals, shorts and open-necked shirt. He wasn't unreasonable about it though – when he reached the hotel he'd probably change into sandals, longs and open-necked shirt. And his heart was light, for that moment was not far off now.

He was on his way to attend the annual B.S.F.A. Convention.

Beside him, eyes gazing straight ahead, was Barker. Barker, too, was on his way to attend the Con.

Barker was a large and handsome mongrel. He was about the size of a collie – though his ancestry was untraceable. He was an old convention-dog. He hadn't been able to make last year's – that snooty hotel in Oxford had refused to allow him on the premises under any circumstances whatsoever. Luckily Brian Aldiss had come to the rescue and found him a good home for the week-end. But Theo had been furious. However, there would be no trouble this year – he had it in writing that there was no objection to a well-behaved dog in either the public rooms or the bedrooms.

This year both Theo and Barker were determined to enjoy themselves.

They were beginning to get into the built-up area now. Theo reached a hand into the glove compartment to pull forth the last bulletin, the one with the map. “Be a mate and hold this for me,” he said to the dog beside him. Barker obligingly took hold of the bulletin in his teeth, and allowed his head to be positioned where Theo could see the map. Theo identified the first roundabout, turned correctly left then right, and some five minutes later the car rolled gently to a stop in the yard of the Bird in Hand Hotel.

There were several vehicles parked in a line against the far wall, and Theo reversed into the parade between Phil Roger's car and Ken Slater's car. Idly he wondered whose was the big delivery-van at the end. Surely that was Archie's scooter over there.

"Out we come, Barker," he told the dog. And side by side man and dog strolled round to the main entrance and entered the hotel.

The lobby was full of fans.

"There's Theo."

"Hi, Theo. Hi, Barker."

"Hello, Theo," said Ethel Lindsay. "Good to see you again. And very good to see you again, Barker." She fondled the dog's ears. Barker – entirely sedately – rested his front paws on her waist and reached to lick her face. "No – get doon, you silly thing."

"Here, boy," said Bruce Burn.

"Hello, Barker mate," said Ken Cheslin.

Barker's tail – he had a long, graceful, furry tail – thumped happily against his legs and furniture as he moved round in his dignified way, renewing old friendships and making new ones.

Presently Theo excused himself and went over to the register at the desk, then fetched his luggage and started upstairs. At the second landing he paused and looked over the bannister.

"Aren't you coming to see your bedroom, Barker?" he called softly.

There was a rapid patter of canine footsteps as the dog joined him, and they went in to get sorted out.

Downstairs again, somebody told Theo that they were registering in the con hall so he wandered round there. Pat Whatsit was officiating, and she took his money and handed him the name-tag and programme with her usual brisk efficiency. "Look at page six, Theo," she told him as he turned away. Idly he fingered the pages. Two – four – six – INTRODUCING BARKER TRUNKARD, he read, FOUR-LEGGED TRUFAN. He scanned down the item – AT PAST CONVENTIONS AND OTHER FANNISH SOCIAL OCCASIONS HAS BEEN THE LIFE AND SOUL OF A PARTY ... HOUND OF SAINT FANTONY ... UNIVERSALLY POPULAR, EVEN CAT OWNERS LIKE HIM ... UNFORTUNATELY WAS UNABLE TO BE WITH US LAST EASTER ... AS A MARK OF THE AFFECTION IN WHICH WE ALL HOLD HIM, THIS YEAR WE ARE MAKING HIM FANDOM'S FIRST EVER CANINE GUEST OF HONOUR.

Theo looked up.

“Barker!” he called. “Barker!” The dog trotted in. “Here – have a look at this.”

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“It’s not fair,” said Ron Bennett loudly. “It never happened to Cecil.”

“Now I ask of you,” said Archie Mercer. “How can an elephant be a canine guest of honour?”

“I never thought of that,” said Ron, mollified. “It’s a good point.”

•

An enthusiastic youngster with an armful of fanzines buttonholed Theo.

“One-and-six each,” he chanted. “Worth at least a tanner.”

“Why?” asked Theo. “What are they?”

The youngster held one up. “*Son of the Turtle*,” he amplified. “Believed to be the world’s only floating fanzine.”

Theo swivelled his eyes to the youngster’s name-tag. “Owen Mole,” he repeated. “Thisbury. Here, I’ve been wanting to meet you lot – any more of you here?”

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This Thisbury delegation numbered eight all told – Owen Mole, Dave Portable, Bert Duckbarrow, Ian Omlet, Mine Smith, Dick, Harry the Second, and the latter’s latest girl-friend. They had all travelled up together in Harry’s delivery-van, riding in comfort on a brand new three-piece-suite. “Don’t anybody dare spill a drop of anything on it, mind,” Harry had warned them. “It’s for delivery first thing Tuesday morning. It was supposed to be delivered yesterday, but I got the despatch bloke to reorganise the schedules a bit.” Of course a three-piece-suite will only hold five normal adults – or near-adults – so with Harry’s girl-friend sitting up front that still left six people to share five seats, but Mine wasn’t really a heavy girl, and it’s doubtful if anybody would have objected all that much had she been twice the weight. It was a pity Cynthia hadn’t been able to make it – it would have been an ideal opportunity to initiate her into the innocent pleasures of lap-sitting.

“Ah,” said Owen as an attractive-looking female materialised beside him. “Here’s one of them. This is Mine.”

“That doesn’t mean what it sounds,” quoth the female in question.

“Somebody,” said Theo Trunkard, “is being obscure.”

“Let’s start again,” Owen suggested. “This young lady goes under the name of Miss Mine Smith.”

“Why?” asked Theo reasonably.

The girl laughed.

“I was supposed to be christened Minnie,” she explained, “but the vicar got drunk on holy water and forgot how to spell it.”

“That,” said Theo, “sounds so unlikely it might even be true. That is your name then?”

“As it happens, yes – though not necessarily for that reason.” She peered at Theo’s tag. “Talking of names though, you don’t seem to be doing badly yourself. Short for Theophilus, I suppose?”

“No, Theodore. As in Sturgeon. You’ll have to overlook the surname though – except that it sometimes comes in handy for making puns on.”

“Just wait till you meet Bert – he’ll make you wish you hadn’t been born.” She paused. “Or that he hadn’t,” she amended.

Owen had slipped away to flog some more *Sons of the Turtle*. Presently Dave Portable came up and told Mine that the gang were going out for a bite to eat. Theo called Barker and they went along too, and soon all the humans were getting stuck into assorted foodstuffs round a couple of adjacent tables.

“Much Wenlock?” asked Bert Duckbarrow. “Is there much fandom in Much Wenlock?”

“Not when I’m away,” said Theo.

“Pity – then I could say that much fandom in Much Wenlock is better than too much wedlock in fandom. Or something.”

“Er – is that supposed to be a pun?”

“Not really. Just the Edge of one.”

“Hey,” said Ian Omlet. “Why won’t this dog won’t sit up and beg?”

Theo turned to him. “Would you?” he asked.

“If I was a dog, yes.”

“When they begin, the beg-Ian,” Bert broke into song.

“Anyway,” Ian went on, “why won’t he?”

“Mainly because he’s never either been taught to or found it necessary.”

“Don’t you believe in training dogs then?”

“Barker’s trained to come when he’s called – unless he has an acceptable reason not to. He’s been trained to be clean around the house, never to start a fight, never to chase cats – or any animal to which he’s been properly introduced, always to look both ways before crossing a road – that’s about all. He’d no more think of sitting up and begging than of saluting the Queen, or dying for his country.”

“What d’you mean by properly introduced?” asked Mine.

“Well, if you had a tame rabbit, and he was shown it, told it was a friend, allowed to get a good sniff at it – then that rabbit would be safer with him than it would be with you. Or a mouse or an elephant or anything. Here, Barker – have a sausage.”

Barker accepted it gratefully.

•

When Theo started to clue Thisbury fandom into the rules of the party system, they confirmed that they’d read about fannish parties and had a vague idea of possibly throwing one of their own. As the grapevine didn’t promise much else the first night, it was decided that they might as well set up shop in the vacuum. Harry the Second volunteered his room as the obvious place – they could whoop it up all night, he said, just so long as they didn’t necessarily expect him to be on the spot all the time. And thus it was arranged. Word was passed around, and by half past eleven there was quite a crowd of happy fans in Harry’s room. Somebody had brought a tape recorder – but no tape – and somebody else had brought some records – but no record player – and so it started quietly enough, but somehow the spark caught and burned steadily. Theo sat in the middle of the bed, leaned back against Brian Burgess (who was apparently asleep) and found himself discussing by turns the supernatural with the Grays, OMPA with Roles and Mercer (they were unable to persuade Theo to take on the job of Association Editor for the second year in succession), and finally the West Indies with Alan Rispin – a subject that both participants freely admitted they knew nothing about, but which kept them going for a hectic quarter of an hour nevertheless. Down by his feet, Guntram Omacht and Barker were lying on the floor making faces at each other. Burgess was getting a bit of weight, so when a nearby chair went vacant Theo moved smartly over. Suddenly Mine materialised in front of him, bottle in hand.

“Doesn’t Barker drink?” she asked.

“No – he’s TT – like me.”

Mine contemplated Theo’s half-empty glass rather doubtfully. “What’s in there then?” she wondered.

“Gin and something I think.”

“But you just...”

Theo indicated his name tag, and the message clicked. “Well, I’m MS,” she told him, “so I suppose you can read me like a book.”

“Not exactly,” returned Theo. “But it’d be a pleasure to set you in type.”

Mine moved aside to let somebody squeeze past, and caught sight of Dave Portable’s face breathing heavily from the bottom of the bed. The rest of him was hidden from view by Burgess and the others. “Why, Dave,” she exclaimed delightedly – this was the first time she remembered him looking really undignified. “What are you doing down there?”

“Me,” said a matter-of-fact female voice, and Pat – the girl from the registration table – appeared beside him. A smooth arm slid round Dave’s neck, and Dave had to push stoutly against her chest to hold her at arm’s length.

“There will now be a break of one minute,” he told her. “To get one’s breath.”

“You ought to breathe through your nose like me,” said Pat.

“Yes, but I forgot,” was Dave’s excuse.

Mine did the obvious thing and settled herself on Theo’s lap. “The number of laps I’ve been on today is positively disgusting,” she commented as she arranged herself comfortably.

“Already?” asked Theo, somewhat surprised. Mine explained about the seating arrangements for the journey.

“But they’re all younger than me,” she reflected. “So it really doesn’t count.”

“How old are you, if it isn’t being rude?” he asked her.

“Just twenty-five – and I’ve got a certificate in my bag to prove it.”

“Ah,” said Theo. “This does count then.”

•

Some time after midnight, Owen Mole found himself in the lobby, watching the card school.

“Can you play brag?” asked Ron Bennett as he reshuffled the cards between rounds.

“No,” said Owen. “What’s one supposed to do?”

Norman Shorrock swivelled his head. “It’s easy,” he explained. “All you do is take a hand of cards, throw them away again, and give all your money to Ron Bennett.”

“Well I like that,” Ron protested. “How much have I won from you tonight, Norman? The truth, mind.”

“Can’t you leave Ina as a deposit?” someone suggested.

“What d’you think we’re playing for now?” Phil Rogers demanded.

•

When Harry the Second finally returned to his room (he didn't say precisely when), he found nobody left but Brian Burgess, who was stretched out on the bed with his feet on the pillow, still fast asleep.

•

The programme made a good start the next morning with Phil Rogers, who had clanged for Con chairman, repeating the previous night's general welcome to the Bird in Hand.

"Bird lives," chanted Ian Omlet audibly. Jim Linwood looked round, grinned and raised both thumbs. Ian returned the gesture. Contact had been made.

"Before we get on with the programme proper," Phil continued, "there's a little ceremony I'd just like to perform. Where's Barker?"

Ella Parker, who had been talking with Ian McAuley at the back of the room, looked up. "Hello? Did somebody want me?" she called.

"No, not you Ella – Barker, not Parker."

"A dog, Ella," McAuley said pointedly.

"Where is he – anybody know?"

"He's baby-sitting out at the back," somebody volunteered.

"Could somebody call him?"

"He's with the Barton baby – I don't think there's anybody else there."

Neither adult Barton being in evidence, Ina Shorrock got up. "I'll go," she offered. "You want him in here you say?"

A minute or two later, Barker strolled in and made a bee-line for Theo. "Up on the platform," said Theo, and Barker trotted obligingly up. "Come on, boy," said Phil. "On the stand. That's a boy – now face the audience. Ladies and gentlemen – it gives me very great pleasure to introduce our canine guest of honour – Mr. Barker Trunkard." Amid general applause he slipped a decorated ribbon over the dog's head. "Speech!" somebody called. "Woof!" said Barker. "Woof! Woof! Woof!" His oration was greeted with a barrage of delighted cheers and clapping. Barker's tail thumped madly against the table as he sat there, thoroughly enjoying every minute of it.

It was definitely his convention.

•

Shortly before lunch the first auction began, and Theo found himself on the stand conducting the proceedings. Half a dozen lots were quickly disposed of, when he announced a run of the first six issues of *Nebula*, offered as one

batch. Mine's hand suddenly shot up.

"Five bob!" she called.

"Six," called somebody else.

"Seven and six," offered somebody else again.

Mine raised her offer to eight bob, then to ten, and was ultimately successful at one pound five. She carried the little pile triumphantly back to the Thisbury encampment.

"But," she exclaimed in dismay as she reached them. "I didn't want these!"

"Why did you bid for them then?" asked Dave.

"But it wasn't *Nebula*."

"He said *Nebula* pretty distinctly, Mine. Several times."

"Yes, I know. But I was thinking of *Galaxy*."

•

It was a Saturday afternoon. Ron Bennett, Theo Trunkard, Archie Mercer and Barker stood in a row looking in a stationery shop window. A policeman who had been watching them strolled over.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is one of you gentlemen in charge of this dog?"

Theo acknowledged his responsibility.

"I'm afraid you'll have to put him on the lead, sir. There's a by-law."

"Oh," said Theo. His hand went into his pocket and came out with his room-key, which he handed to the dog. Barker accepted it between his teeth. "D'you think you could go and get your lead, Barker?" he asked. Barker bounded off before the policeman had managed to do more than splutter ineffectually.

"It's all right, officer," said Theo. "I'll wait right here until he comes back."

"I think you'd better, sir," said the policeman ominously.

"Where is it, anyway?" Ron wondered.

"In a suitcase in his – our room. He'll find somebody to get it all right."

And sure enough, some twenty minutes later the dog came bounding back, lead and room-key both held firmly in his mouth. "Thank you, Barker," said Theo gravely as he took them and snapped the lead onto Barker's collar.

"I'd keep him under control, sir, while you're in this town if I was you," said the policeman. And he strolled away with assumed nonchalance, his face – as the saying says – a study.

Ron, Archie and Theo could hardly stand upright.

•

Later that evening, to the strains of the Shorrock tape-recorder, the fancy dress party began to get under way. Mine looked fetching in a somewhat scanty uniform as she examined her fellow-masqueraders. There was one fairly tall individual who seemed to be covered from head to foot in stringy black hair, with a moth-eaten fur coat draped incongruously over his shoulders. Momentarily she wondered who it was, until the sight of a smaller animal-shaped being similarly covered gave the game away. She approached.

“Excuse my curiosity,” she asked the tall hairy bem, “but would I be correct in assuming that you are responsible for the disappearance of one Theo Trunkard from the scene?”

The bem nodded. “That is indeed so,” it confirmed. “What, by the way, are you – this year, next year, some time or never?” This last referred to the official theme of the costuming that year.

“Next year or some time I suppose,” said Mine. “We’re all supposed to be the crew of a spaceship – I’m the stewardess.”

“Well, stewardess,” the bem suggested, “you can start by getting me a vessel of punch. The bowl seems to be in action.”

“Can you hold a glass?” she asked.

A tentacle snaked out through the front of the fur coat. “I can have a damn good try.”

Keeping in character, Mine fetched two glassfuls on a tray. The bem was indeed capable of manipulating a glass, not to mention drinking from it.

“That’s apparently a woman’s fur coat,” Mine remarked. “Does that mean you’re supposed to be a female bem?”

“Female?” said the bem doubtfully. “What does the word ‘female’ mean?”

“Oh – one of those. Would you like me to explain it to you? I used to be a teacher – before I was a stewardess – so you’ve come to the right person.”

“Yes please,” said the bem enthusiastically. “This sounds as if it might be very interesting.”

“Well now. You know what a flower is?”

•

Owen Mole was attired as the spaceship’s ordinary crewman – being a year older than Ian, he had escaped being cabin-boy. Pat Whatsit wasn’t really in fancy dress – just her ordinary clothes with a large notice hung around her

neck saying MAMMAL. Owen grabbed her arm. “Dance,” he suggested.
“Twist.”

“Can’t you jive?”

“You jive and I’ll twist. See who wins.” And they took the floor together.

•

Bill Gray – a magnificent Gandalf-figure – walked over to the hairy-bem Theo. “That poor animal of yours will be stifled,” he told him.

“I don’t think so,” said Theo. “He knows he can have it off whenever he wants to.” He raised his voice. “Barker! Come here a mo!”

Barker trotted up, tail waving gently from side to side through a convenient gap in the overgrowth.

“How’re you doing? Ready to take your costume off yet?”

The tail drooped despondently.

“OK – only wanted to know.” He patted the dog’s head. The tail went slowly up again. “Thanks for the reminder though Bill.”

Bill returned to Bobbie – who was in her standard female-warrior getup. “That’s a dog in a million,” he said.

“I’m not so sure,” said Bobbie. “I’d have said Theo was a master in a million, myself.”

“Yes – there’s that of course,” Bill agreed.

•

When it was time for the judging, the Thisbury spaceship-crew made a gallant showing as, Captain Dave Portable at their head, they paraded in a bunch round the ring. Nevertheless they were completely outclassed. The top prizes went – quite fairly – to the Liverpool Group, against hot competition from the two hairy bems, Gandalf the (Bill) Gray having contrived as usual not to be around.

The prizes were given out, and the merrymaking re-commenced. Dave found himself talking to bat-woman Ina Shorrocks. He found her remarkably easy to talk to.

“I’m supposed to be the captain,” he was explaining. “That’s more or less because I’m the chairman. Bert’s the engineer, Dick’s the astrogator, Ian’s the cabin-boy, Harry’s the cook, Owen’s the crew, and Mine’s the stewardess.”

“Yours?” said Ina. Then – “Oh – of course, her name. Odd name that. Even more than m... – I nearly caught myself. Even more than ‘Ina’.”

“Isn’t it. It really is her name though.”

“Has she ever said why?”

“Frequently. I’ve never heard her tell the same story twice though.” He paused, looked across the dance floor to where she sat with her hairy bem.

“She seems to have made a conquest this week-end.”

“Theo’s one of the best,” said Ina obliquely, then as Harry the Second and his girl danced past them: “That girl’s one of yours, isn’t she? Where does she fit into the crew?”

“She doesn’t,” said Dave. “She’s just a passenger.”

•

Gradually the fancy-dress party slowed down and dispersed to reassemble upstairs as various room-parties. Owen and Pat, arms linked firmly together, strode down the corridor en route for Ella Parker’s room. Dave, nattering on the stairs with the Jeeveses, waved to them as they went by. They both waved back.

•

“Brian,” said Theo severely. “If you were to ask me nicely, I wouldn’t mind lending you my bem costume. But that one you’re trying to get into happens to be Barker’s. And I know he’s a big dog – but not that perishing big.”

•

Mine sat sedately on Theo’s lap in Ella’s room – or it may have been Ethel’s, or even Eddie’s. Room, not lap. The latter was definitely Theo’s. Barker lay on the dressing-table surrounded by half-empty bottles, and watched them.

“Doesn’t he ever get jealous?” she asked. “I mean, dogs do.”

“No more than I do when other people pet him. He’s a civilised animal, aren’t you Barker mate?”

“Woof,” said Barker. His tail was wagging slowly – but he never touched a bottle. Mine sat and regarded him – and marvelled.

•

Sunday morning. A pleasant morning – if you happen to like church bells. By twos and threes the more or less weary fans assembled for the B.S.F.A. business meeting. It was an interesting meeting – they usually are, what with one thing and another. Eventually they got round to the subject of the next year’s convention. Theo Trunkard was given the floor.

“Is there a hotel in Much Wenlock?” somebody asked.

“Several, as a matter of fact. But not our size. No –” he looked round, addressing the room at large “– Barker and myself have been investigating

the situation in a town that's not very far from Much Wenlock – a very attractive town, I may say – you've maybe heard of it – name of Shrewsbury..."

"Don't you mean Thisbury?" called somebody, raising a general laugh.

"No – I'm keeping that to myself. Anyway, as I say, we've been investigating, and if the meeting gives us the go-ahead I don't anticipate any difficulty in closing a suitable deal. I know the manager of the place I'm thinking of personally, by the way – business acquaintance. Thank you." He sat down.

No rival bids being forthcoming, the chairman asked for a formal proposal.

"Proposed," said Ron Bennett.

"Proposed by Mr. Ronald Bennett. Anyone want to second it?"

"Woof!"

"And seconded by Mr. Barker Trunkard."

It was unanimous.

•

Ken Slater conducted the auction in the late afternoon. It was a wild time, with mixed lots of largely crud going for whatever was offered – seldom more than half a crown. Alan Rispin's egg-timer (why Rispin should see fit to bring an egg-timer to a convention is not relevant) went for four and sixpence. Barker's fancy dress (as misused by Brian Burgess) was bought by Ella Parker. ("It'll do to hang on the wall – no, not that wall.") A pencil, alleged to have once been used by John Phillifent to write down an address, went for twopence – bid up from a penny. A bottle of Guinness, autographed by Harry Harrison, went to Ken McIntyre for approximately its shop value.

Mine made a bid on an original "New Worlds" cover.

"Are you sure you want it, Mine?" called Owen from across the room.

"No, I'm not," Mine called back. "I don't even know what it is."

She didn't get it, anyway. It was somewhat beyond her budget.

•

Dick, it may be noted, seemed to have found his level at last – most of that afternoon he'd been in the company of the pro-circus. Bert Duckbarrow, with whom he was sharing a room, came in search of him to borrow the key.

"Actually," Brian Aldiss was saying, "she's a damn good writer."

"Yes," Harry Harrison agreed. "It's a shame the way she chooses to prostitute her talent in the women's mags."

“You mean,” said Bert as he came up to the table, “that she’s a member of the Aldiss profession?”

“What’s the name of your friend?” asked Harrison when Bert had disappeared again. “Duckbarrel? Dogpaddle?”

“Duckbarrow,” said Dick.

“Ah yes. Obviously he’s got some sort of grudge against the entire human race that he’s vainly endeavouring to work off. With a name like that one can almost understand why.”

“He’s not the one who wrote that story about a rainbow, is he?” Brian Aldiss asked.

“Rainbow? Oh – no. That’s Owen. Owen Mole.”

“I’ll have to have a word with him,” said Brian. “It’s a surprisingly good anecdote to find in a fanzine.”

“Surprises me that he was able to sit still long enough to write it,” said Dick.

•

Later, Owen was watching the brag-school again. Bert Duckbarrow was among the players.

“Come on in,” Norman invited. “It’s quite painless.”

Owen shook his head. “Not this year.”

“He can’t,” explained Bert. “He’s still Owen.”

•

Theo and Mine lay side by side on Theo’s bed.

It was perfectly respectable – they were more than adequately chaperoned. Barker wasn’t there, as it happened – he was baby-sitting again, in the Bartons’ bedroom. But plenty of other assorted fans were down on the floor to one side of them, Pat Whatsit and one of the London bachelor-fen were wrapped efficiently round each other. The other side, Dave Portable was talking quietly with Daisy Barton, the baby’s mother. (She could sing, too.) Several other fans occupied chairs or floor-space.

Suddenly Brian Burgess’s bulk loomed over the bed.

“I’m sorry if I strained that costume, Theo,” he announced.

Theo looked up. “You don’t want to apologise to me, Brian,” he told him. “Apologise to Barker.”

“Uh – I’ve already done that.” Brian paused. “He licked my face.”

“Did you remember to lick his face in return?” asked Mine, in an interested voice.

Brian beamed. "I'm afraid I didn't think of it," he admitted.

Monday morning, Easter Monday morning, is always a bit of an anti-climax. The fans sit around in the downstairs lounge desultorily drinking coffee and things, and every time one looks up somebody else seems to be leaving. The Thisbury contingent had agreed to postpone their departure until after lunch, and Mine sat with Theo in a not very secluded corner. Barker lay at their feet. The bathos affected him, too.

"I suppose you'll be pretty busy now you're next year's convention chairman," Mine was saying.

Theo shook his head. "Wherever did you get the idea that I'd be Con chairman?" he demanded.

"Well – but – I thought..."

"You made an wild and erroneous guess, you mean." Theo snapped his fingers, and the dog looked round. "Allow me to present the chairdog of the Shrewsbury convention."

Barker sat up, rested his jaw on the girl's knee, and looked soulfully into her eyes.

Mine made a recovery. "Oh," she murmured. "Of course. I should've realised. But then – you won't be all that busy then."

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly – I imagine Barker will leave me to handle a lot of the routine work."

"I was sort of wondering really if you – both of you of course – mightn't be able to drop over to Thisbury one of these week-ends. See the Turtle. And other things."

"I'd been sort of wondering about that myself," Theo admitted. "And on the other hand, would it be beyond the bounds of possibility for you – any of you, you especially perhaps – to perhaps drop over to Much Wenlock? My establishment's capable of coping with any number of people within reason, so long as they don't all expect spring beds. And incidentally, I imagine Barker will be looking round for suitable characters to co-opt on to the Con Committee. I shouldn't be surprised if he's already wondering whether Thisbury fans mightn't be useful to know."

This, thought Mine, is what they call conversation on more than one level. She was in the process of framing a suitable reply when Owen erupted among them.

"Mine!" he chortled. "You'd never guess!"

“All right. So I’d never guess. What do I do now?”

Owen was just about boiling over. “Brian Aldiss. He bought – buying ‘The Rainbow Man’. For an anthology. I just can’t get over it. Me.”

Mine’s reaction to this was completely spontaneous. She sprang to her feet with a little glad cry and kissed him full on the mouth. And that, as she was careful to point out when she’d sat down again, was the first time she’d ever kissed – or been kissed by – a Thisbury fan.

“Well,” said Theo philosophically, “they say there’s always a first time. Come to think of it, I hadn’t ever kissed a Thisbury fan until this week-end, either. Rather pleasant, isn’t it.”

Mine winked at him. It was the most adequate reply she could think of.

End of Part One

(A matter of no particular significance except to members of OMPA, who are Special.)

Chapisode Six

Fandom Is at Home

“In the summer,” declaimed Owen Mole as he marched slowly round the table laying down quarto sheets, “a young fan’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of hibernation.”

“Hibernation in summer,” said Mine from across the table, “unfortunately happens to be an etymological impossibility.”

“Nevertheless,” Owen returned, “that does not prevent one’s thought turning to the subject.” He started down the other side, following in the footsteps of the individual in front of him – who happened to be Bert Duckbarrow. “Here we are, four magnificent red-blooded specimens of young British manhood. And what good does it do us? You’ve got an excuse, Mine, perhaps. But Cynth won’t so much look at us. So what else is there to think about?”

“That’s a lie to start with, Owen,” Cynthia put in from her place in the procession. “I distinctly remember looking at you twice this evening already. I looked at Ian a couple of times, too.”

“So I noticed,” said Ian Omlet. “You seemed to be measuring me up for the oven.”

“It was the refrigerator, so there,” Cynthia snapped at him.

“Cool, man,” said Ian. “Sorry Bert. That should’ve been your line.”

“Anyway,” said Dave Portable, “you can’t complain, Owen. You had your share of Pat Whatsit last week-end.”

“Yes – about an eighth.”

“That, I imagine,” said Cynthia carefully, “is about as much of her as anybody ever gets.”

The week-end in question had been Whit week-end, and the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle had played host to a mixed bunch of fans from out of town. This had been Cynthia’s first experience of non-Thisbury fandom – and theirs of her. She had liked them right enough – particularly Barker – whilst watching Pat’s permutations with an air of cynical detachment.

“An eighth is better than nothing,” Ian protested.

“Come to that,” said Bert, “so is any vulgar fraction.”

Dave suddenly stopped. “Hey!” he exclaimed. “Why am I putting Page Twenty-four on top of Page Twenty?”

“A very good question, Dave,” Owen agreed. “Why are you? Can’t you concentrate?”

“Who’s got Page Twenty-two?” Dave wanted to know.

“Er,” said Mine. “I have.”

“Well what the hell are you doing behind me then you nit? Get in front of me. Hang on, everybody – we’ve got to sort this mess out first.”

Presently the collating procession resumed its march, this time with the pages in their correct order.

“What is her name, anyway?” asked Ian.

“Whose?” wondered several people.

“Pat’s. Pat Whatsit.”

“Watson,” said Owen.

“Wantsit,” said Bert.

“Wantstrett,” said Mine. She spelled it. “There’s the Bennett Directory in the book-case, if you don’t believe me.”

“If she’s in the Bennett Directory,” was Owen’s comment, “she’s got something that none of us have.”

“Naturally,” said Dave. “The Directory’s always a year in arrears. We’ll be in next year’s though.”

“Half of us’ll have got fed up waiting, or grown up or something in the mean time,” said Ian.

“Like to bet?” asked Mine with a grin.

“Anyway,” Cynthia pointed out, “we don’t have to wait a year to see our names in print.”

“On a strictly do-it-yourself basis,” Dave agreed, “you’re undoubtedly right.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

Dave laid down the last sheet from his pile, and the procession shambled to an empty-handed halt. “OK, Cynth,” he said. “Be obscure if you want to. We’ve got all night.”

“There’s probably nothing in it,” said Cynthia off-handedly. “As Chairman you’ll have thought of it months ago and decided against it.”

“Very likely so.”

“Put the poor boy out of his misery,” urged Mine.

“Not to mention the rest of us,” said Ian.

“No need,” Dave declared. “As chairman I’ll have thought of it months ago and decided against it. We have Cynth’s word for it – whatever it is.”

“I’m sorry I mentioned it,” Cynthia murmured contritely.

“Mentioned what?” Owen exploded.

Cynthia swung to face him.

“So somebody’s interested,” she observed.

“Always,” Owen confirmed. “But specifically – would it be asking too much for you to explain precisely what you’re talking about?”

“Not at all. I was simply wondering whether it mightn’t be possible to invite the Press down here and have a look at us some time.”

This was obviously an idea well worthy of consideration, and it was received as such.

“The *Echo*?” asked Mine.

Dave recaptured the initiative. “That’s one possibility. Or even the *County Gazette*.”

“The *Echo*’s the best bet to begin with, surely?” Mine argued. “It’s strictly interested in Thisbury and its immediate environs.”

“But the *Gazette* comes out six times a week,” Dave pointed out, “and has far more space to bestow on trivialities.”

“We’re trivialities of course,” said Cynthia.

“First catch your paper,” Owen suggested. “Does anybody know anybody on either?”

Nobody present admitted to doing so.

“Never mind,” said Dave. “We can write to them. Who should do it, Mine – me or you?”

“You as Chairman I think – you should sign it, anyway.”

“Fair enough. Let’s adjourn the collating to draft it, while we’re in the mood.”

“Oh, goody,” put in Bert. “I could just do with a draught.”

“I thought Bert had been strangely silent,” said Mine.

“I was drafting some silence fiction.”

“Secretary,” said Dave.

“Aye-aye, sir?” responded Mine promptly.

“Take a note. Mr. Duckbarrow and the Press to be segregated from each other with the utmost rigour.”

“Mortis,” added Owen. Bert swept him an ironical bow.

•

Both papers replied almost by return. The *Echo* simply sent a printed acknowledgement with the message (unsigned) that the Editor would be writing shortly. The *Echo* was known to be strictly a two-men-and-a-typist sort of outfit, so this was fair enough. The *County Gazette*, however, indicated its willingness to cover the Circle on any convenient evening. Dave rang them up from work, and the negotiations were completed there and then – a reporter and a photographer would be down the following Wednesday.

Dave on his new scooter, and Owen on his sister's bicycle, between them passed the word around, and the club achieved a strong and early turnout for the occasion. All the aboriginal pre-Turtle gang were there, even Tom who'd been getting lax in his attendances of late, besides several newcomers – not all of them strictly members though – who'd been recruited during the winter. John Russell. Harbottle (his real name) had brought along his girl-friend Jean, and Carolyn Redfern had dragged along her husband who was known to grudge every second that was spent neither in his garden nor on his allotment. George Morley, a regular but silent attendee on club nights, had brought a friend – a Mr. Low or Lowe (or it might even have been Mr. Lo, the introduction being of course purely verbal). Dave started the proceedings by chairing a general discussion among not far short of twenty people all told.

Cynthia, who was sitting at the top of the ladder keeping lookout, kicked peremptorily on the panelling. "Visitors," she announced as she swung herself inside and dropped lithely to the lower deck. The Nullgray Mouser scooted down its plank and ensconced itself in its favourite position of safety atop the bookcase. Dave adjourned the discussion and went up to welcome the new arrivals. These were two in number, a man and a woman. The woman was holding open the door of their car while the man extricated a load of equipment. Most of this he slung over one shoulder and, the woman in the lead, they advanced to where Dave awaited them at the end of the gang-plank.

"The *Gazette*?" asked Dave, then "I'm Dave Portable, the Chairman."

The woman – she might have been in her middle or late twenties – held out a tidily gloved hand and shook his firmly. "I'm Ruth Welby. This is Bill Williams. I don't think he has a hand free to shake."

"Well come on down. I hope you don't mind climbing ladders."

"I was in the Wrens," said the woman. Dave helped the man with his

effects, and then the three of them were standing surveying the interior while the two newshounds were being thoroughly surveyed in their turn.

Mine, in her several capacities as Secretary, First Lady, and general number two to Dave, could hardly avoid joining the group – and Dave, in his turn, could hardly avoid introducing her. “This is – er – Miss Mine Smith,” he announced. Ruth Welby looked blank for a moment. “M-I-N-E,” Mine amplified hastily. “It’s my name. Don’t ask me to explain.” Ruth Welby obligingly didn’t. “Why don’t you take your coat off?” Mine continued.

“Good idea. I’ll do that. Can you start casing the joint then, Bill?”

“Fair enough,” Bill the photographer agreed amiably, and moved towards a table to dump the rest of his gear. Ruth Welby, for her part, allowed Mine to hang her coat among the others while she peeled off her gloves and stuffed them into a capacious handbag that hung from the crook of her elbow. Mine found herself thinking that the other woman would look a lot better either with less make-up on her face or with a more vivid colour on her nails – or possibly both.

“Right,” said Ruth Welby. “How are we playing this? D’you want to talk while I interrupt, or shall I ask you questions, or what?”

“Well, I think it’d...” began Dave, then tailed off as Owen caught his eye and indicated a group of three chairs that he’d just placed together in the least-occupied corner of the room. This rated as a Good Idea, and the trio adjourned there forthwith. Then Ruth Welby began to learn all about the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle.

She seemed to be reasonably knowledgeable and broad-minded – though that is probably characteristic of reporters generally. She asked most of the obvious stock questions of course – “What do you actually do here?” and “Do you all believe in flying saucers?” – but also some shrewd and informed ones – “Do science fiction authors take their writing seriously?” and “But would H.G. Wells have had the same influence if his works had been channelled into a pulp market rather than a more respectable market?” She was given a gratis copy of the second issue of *Son of the Turtle* – the first was out of print – and discussed it briefly with them. She inspected the club library – mainly recent magazines and paperbacks of course – and other various aids to gracious living (fannish and otherwise) which the Turtle incorporated. Then they sat down again and the inquisition proceeded.

Meanwhile, Bill Williams had not been idle. Having cased the joint as directed, he suggested that some of those present might care to arrange

themselves naturally about the outer deck while it was still light. The younger element – Owen, Ian, Cynthia, Russ Harbottle and his Jean – scrambled to comply, and a couple of their elders were impressed for the sake of balance. Bill took several shots of the barge from various positions, and then the company adjourned downstairs where he laid his equipment aside again.

“Aren’t you going to take any interiors?” asked Cynthia.

“Not yet. There’s no hurry.”

“Why don’t you take one of that huddle in the corner?” Owen suggested. “That girl of yours is certainly photogenic.”

The photographer – he didn’t look more than twenty-five himself – shook his head, and winked. “Never!” he declared. “That’s as much as my job’s worth – she’s the boss’s aunt. Or niece or something.”

Owen kept the floor. “You should’ve had your stuff set up when she came down,” he grinned. “That shot would’ve been worth losing two jobs for.”

“Laid on deliberately,” said Bill Williams. “Helps to break the ice.”

When the tripartite conference in the corner momentarily flagged, Dave suggested that Ruth Welby might like to mingle a bit and hold converse with some of the others. She agreed readily to this; after that, she said, she’d like to have them all pose for some real-life photographs. So she got up and moved over to the nearest other with whom she might mingle.

That other just happened to be Mr. Redfern, husband to Carolyn.

“Well,” she greeted him breezily. “You enjoy coming here, do you?”

“Not in the least – since you ask,” Mr. Redfern returned flatly.

Ruth Welby was momentarily taken somewhat aback. Only momentarily. “I shouldn’t have expected quite that answer,” she said non-committally.

“On an evening like this,” declared Mr. Redfern, “it’s a sin to be indoors.”

“Oh? A gardener, perhaps? Or a sportsman?”

“Right first time.”

“I see. Well then – might I ask what brings you here tonight, if that isn’t being too nosy?”

“I came to oblige the wife.”

“She’s a lucky woman then,” said Ruth Welby. “Still, you have my sympathies – fancy being cooped up indoors on a perfect evening for bedding out the snapdragons.”

“What did you say?” came a female snort from behind the woman reporter’s shoulder. She looked round. It was Carolyn, and her face was furious. This time Ruth Welby really was taken aback. She couldn’t for the life of her think what was wrong. When at last she began to get some glimmering of the trouble, it was too late.

“Er – is this your wife, Mr. Er?” she asked, for the want of anything better to say.

“This most certainly is his wife,” announced Carolyn in ominous tones. “Are you going to apologise?” She stood facing her now, blazing with anger. She was a bigger woman than Ruth Welby, too.

“But...but I...I’m not...” Ruth Welby stood her ground, but that was all. Mr. Redfern at last collected his wits, which had been scattered by his wife’s sudden eruption. “Dear,” he began. “I think you’ve got hold of the wrong...”

“You stay out of this,” Carolyn snapped at him. “I heard perfectly well what this woman said. She said she sympathised with you for being married to a dr.. – a snapdragon.”

Now Ruth Welby fully understood. She wanted to howl with laughter. She suppressed the urge somehow. “Madam,” she stated quietly, “I assure you I said nothing of the sort.”

“You...said..what? Then you’re a bloody liar,” screamed Carolyn, and raising her hands she grabbed hold of a handful of the other woman’s hair on each side, where it was pinned above the ears.

“Ouch!” gasped Ruth Welby, now definitely on the losing side. Help, however, was on its way. Cynthia grabbed one of Carolyn’s wrists, and although rewarded with a savage kick from a narrow heel, hung on grimly. Ian Omlet secured the other wrist, and as Carolyn loosened her grip for a moment she was pulled away and held firmly by several people. For an instant all was deadly silence. Then a heavy tread sounded on the deck above, and Harry the Second’s head poked through the hatch.

“Am I missing something?” he enquired casually.

As if waiting for this signal, Carolyn dissolved into a torrent of near-hysterical tears.

Mine was standing by with Ruth Welby’s coat. Ruth Welby entirely agreed with her. She caught Bill the photographer’s eye. “I think it’s time we were going, Bill,” she told him. Then, as Mine attempted to take her arm – “I’m all right thanks. Hadn’t you better attend to your lady member?”

Dave, therefore, escorted the pair off the premises as he had escorted them on. He tried to stammer an apology, but he wasn't very successful inasmuch as he didn't have a clue how the fracas had started. Ruth Welby let him take her arm over the gang-plank, then she turned to face him. She looked a bit flushed and more than a bit dishevelled, but she seemed to be entirely composed.

"There's no need to worry about this," she told him. "It's sort of an occupational hazard. I'm sorry we couldn't get any interior shots." Then she'd turned, and was helping Bill the photographer get his equipment into the car. Dave felt entirely at a loss, so he just stood there and left them to it, watching them as (the photographer driving) they bumped across the Meadows and vanished into the gloaming.

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As soon as Carolyn had got over her weeping fit, Harry the Second drove her and her husband home – and that was the last that the Circle ever saw of the Redferns. Once they'd gone, everybody else started to hold an excited inquest on the affair. Mr. Redfern had managed to pass on the truth about the snapdragons, with the result that nobody knew quite whether to laugh or cry. The face of Mr. Lowe (Or Lowe or Lo) in particular was a study.

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't know. The scoop of the year – and I daren't use it."

This called for further explanations, which he willingly gave. "I trust," he said, "you'll excuse the decent obscurity in which I've hitherto been wrapped. Allow me to introduce myself – Frank Lowe, assistant editor and chief reporter of the *Thisbury Echo*." He handed Dave a card to confirm this. "I got your letter, but knowing that George was a member of your club I thought if I could get him to bring me as just a friend, I might get a rather more intimate picture of things. I would have declared myself of course before leaving. So I come here incog. And what happens? I see the ace girl reporter of the rival paper get her hair pulled. And my readers – bless 'em – will never know. Not from me, at any rate." He chucked deeply.

"That, I think," put in Bert, "is known as the power of suppress."

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The *Echo* duly reported upon the Turtle and her crew – entirely favourably, as befits the attitude of a small provincial weekly to local activities. The Circle was pleasantly surprised to find that the *County Gazette* likewise reported on them favourably. The article, though it lacked a byline, was

clearly the work of Ruth Welby, and it was supported by a good exterior shot of the Turtle. It concluded by recommending all local science fiction enthusiasts to visit the barge on Wednesday evenings, where they would be assured of a lively time.

Which, one and all agreed, was remarkably fair of her.

Chapisode Seven

Fandom Is Deflated

Dave's front tyre went flat just as they were entering Shropshire.

It had to be Dave's tyre, of course. Dave had only had his scooter a couple of months. Mine had had her machine for over four years, but had never had a single puncture in all that time. So they ran both scooters into a farm gateway, the verges thereabouts consisting mostly of ditch, and took stock.

"I haven't got a puncture outfit of course," said Dave. "They don't supply 'em."

"Nor have I," said Mine. "But seeing as how you had the foresight to buy the same model as I have, I suppose you'd better do the obvious thing and borrow my spare."

"I was hoping you'd say that," returned Dave gratefully.

"You know me – I'd sell my grandmother into slavery to help a friend. However, I'm not volunteering to dirty my beautiful hands in the process." She handed him her keys. "The padlock's the second smallest. Get cracking, son of toil."

Actually she did help – mainly by reading the relevant instructions out of the booklet while Dave and Owen performed the manual labour. For a trio of complete novices they made the exchange in a surprisingly short time, and prepared to remount.

"What happens if we get a second puncture now?" Owen asked pessimistically.

"We'll at least have a complete working machine to carry the defective parts to the nearest service station," the girl countered. "Which is more than can be said of a car that gets two punctures in succession." Owen balanced himself behind her, and the two machines pulled back on to the road and continued their interrupted journey.

Since Dave had not yet passed (or even taken) his test, he was not allowed to carry an unqualified passenger. This meant that the expedition had perforce to be three-handed rather than four, and the extra seat was wasted, which was a shame. Cynthia was working, but Bert or Ian could otherwise

have come. However, the law said no, and so three Thisbury fen on two scooters chugged into the ancient little town of Much Wenlock some time in the middle of the afternoon and started looking for the right street. It wasn't hard to find, being right in the centre of town, and the machines came to a slightly doubtful rest outside an antique shop.

"Is it an antique shop we're looking for, Mine?" asked Dave.

"I don't think this town has any other sort," said Owen. "They even sell antique groceries."

Their doubts were resolved when the shop door opened and out sauntered a large mongrel, followed a moment later by a tallish figure clad in shirt, shorts and beard. "Howdy, all," Theo greeted them briefly. "If you carry on round, there's an alley – Barker will show you, I've got a customer. Take 'em round the back, Barker – OK?" And he retired indoors again and left them to his partner.

After nuzzling each of the three in turn Barker trotted off along the pavement, looking back every couple of yards to make sure that his visitors were following. He guided them through a narrow entrance into a branching passage, and the scooters rolled gently to a halt alongside a car that was easily recognisable as Theo's. The dog waited, tail gently a-wave, while they gathered up their overnight luggage, and then he led the way through an open door. And in an instant there could be no doubt whatsoever that they had come to the right address, as they stepped into a comfortably crowded living-room that was clearly dedicated to the enjoyment of the fannish way of life.

A coloured Atom original hung on one wall, depicting a large canine creature driving a ramshackle car whilst a bearded near-human sat beside it on the front seat. Further along there was a blown-up photograph from some fannish occasion or other, which perfectly captured the atmosphere of the traditional overcrowded smoke-filled bedroom. The central subject was Ina Shorrock, with a somewhat dishevelled Pat Whatsit sprawled across her lap, and the expression of sheer but-this-isn't-what-I-ordered! astonishment on Ina's face was truly wonderful to behold. Despite herself, Mine felt a ridiculous triple-pang of jealousy as she looked at this picture – jealousy not only of the two girls for having their picture on Theo's wall (which was absurd enough) but also of Theo, for being able to secure such a magnificent item for his room. There was also a blown-up coloured shot of an American riverboat (Don Ford?)

But the biggest and best picture hung over the mantelpiece. It depicted

some battle or other between a force of centaurs and a force of amazons, in fabulously intricate detail, and the ornate rococo frame that surrounded it fitted the mood of antiquity to such a perfection that it came as a distinct shock to see Jim Cawthorn's signature in the corner.

The walls, were, after all, only a sideline. So were the ornaments that stood around the place filling the mantelpiece and the windowsill and the tops of a couple of big glass-fronted bookcases without being thick enough to clutter. There was a Hugo (best fanzine of two or three years back), two Saint Fantony statuettes (Knight and Hound), a miscellaneous jug of some description marked A PRESENT FROM KETTERING, and a sort of seraph wearing a propeller beanie. Close examination revealed the propeller as an interpolated addition – nevertheless it looked highly effective. There was also a proportion of objets d'art of no apparent fannish significance.

In one corner stood a duplicator – not an electric model, but a newish-looking rotary. An enormous roll-top desk held a standard office typewriter, amongst an assortment of tidily-arranged litter. Reams of paper, filing cases, piles of envelopes and other such stuff stood around in odd corners – just like the Turtle, the Thisbury fen reflected. I wonder who keeps it so clean though? thought Mine, with another pang of jealousy. Not that the room was spotless, but neither had it gone to seed. It was just comfortably so-so.

It seemed no time at all – though it was probably a bit longer – until they heard a bell clang somewhere, and Theo breezed into the room. “Right,” he said. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Shop's closed for the day now.”

“You haven't closed it simply on our account, have you?” asked Dave, feeling a trifle guilty.

“No. Strictly on my account. I keep hours to suit myself. It doesn't suit me to keep hours right now. Other times I may stay open all evening. Depends on things in general.”

Dave held up his hand. “Before we go any further,” he put in, “is there a garage or something where we could have a puncture mended by tomorrow?”

There was, and Barker was perfectly agreeable to escorting Dave and Owen there without further ado. The back door was still open, and as the shoes rang on the cobbles of the alley, Mine and Theo stood there in the room looking at each other. What happened next was entirely mutual, as their bodies moved together and their mouths met in a long, intimate and satisfyingly unsatisfying kiss. when at last they pulled away from each other, Mine's fingers were slowly stroking Theo's beard.

“I don’t know about you,” said Theo slowly, “but I enjoyed that.”

“So did I. Let’s do it again some time.”

So they did it again there and then.

“I’d been wondering,” said Theo when the second kiss was at last over, “how long it would be before I was able to tempt you into this den of fantiquity.”

“Do you run the place entirely by yourself?” asked Mine – frankly fishing.

“No – Barker helps.”

“Oh of course.”

“Then there’s the woman who cleans the place up now and again of course. She’s officially a shop assistant, so she counts against expenses. She knows even less about antiques than I do.”

“Thus speaks the enthusiast.”

“Thus doesn’t speak the enthusiast. Do you enthuse?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Mine answered truthfully. “I don’t know anything about the subject to speak of. I suppose it has its fascinating side.”

“That’s what all the girls say...”

“All what girls?”

“Any girls. They say ‘So you’re an antique dealer. How utterly fascinating’. It’s about all most of them can say, I think.”

“Don’t you like the trade, then?”

“It’s not a case of liking it. I like the freedom it gives me to organise my time in my own way. I know enough about it to bumble along somehow – if I was really interested I could probably be quite well-off, at any rate according to my non-mundane standards. As it is, I make about as much as a fairly well-paid labourer – and work a damn sight less hard than he would for a fraction of his hours. Of course I like it – even if only a negative sort of way.”

“How did you get into the business in the first place – if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I inherited it. From my father’s mistress – we’re that sort of a family. Or were. I’m about the only one left nearer than second cousin. Shortly before she died – I was about thirteen then – I remember her telling me that the shop’d eventually be mine, and that in about five years’ time I’d be able to start earning it. As I was living and working there most of the holidays anyway, I didn’t quite see what she meant about the five years’ time business. I’m still not entirely sure – but I have some rather interesting suspicions.”

Mine laughed, and turned her mouth up again invitingly – they'd been chattering away there where they stood, without bothering to sit down. After they'd disentangled this time, they stood side by side looking down into an ornate mirror inspecting their faces for evidence. When the other three returned, Theo and Mine were sitting sedately opposite each other on a pair of non-matched but surprisingly comfortable antique sofas.

"Hel-lo," said Owen as he regarded them. "What's been going on in our absence? Mine, you look like the canary that's just swallowed a cat."

"I don't think we're supposed to notice," said Dave with a shrug. "Bennett ought to be interested though."

"Don't start jumping to conclusions on an empty stomach," said Theo easily. "Talking about which, is anybody ready for eating yet? Because I am."

Barker ambled over and sat down in front of Mine, resting his beautifully-shaped head on her knee. "I haven't said hello to you properly yet, Barker-boy, have I," she said as she fondled his ears. Barker's tail swept the floor behind him slowly and contentedly.

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Presently they were all sitting round the kitchen table tucking into heaped platefuls of all-in salad.

"How's the filthy prodom these days, Owen?" asked Theo. "Sold any more stories yet?"

"Never a one," said Owen ruefully. "I think that one must have been an absolute flash in the pan. The things come rolling back almost as fast as I send them out. Another half dozen years and I'll begin to feel discouraged." He paused. "Dick's had three accepted by Carnell though."

"Dick?" asked Theo. "Dick? Oh, Dick, yes."

"I suppose," Dave hazarded, "you'll have made quite a collection of rejection slips in your time, Theo?"

"As it happens," said Theo, "you suppose wrong. I've never had a rejection slip in my life. Mainly, I think, because I've never submitted anything anywhere – except to fanzines of course. The trouble with me is that I don't like writing – and know it."

This brought his listeners up short.

"But surely..." "As a fan..." "Your OMPAazine..." "But every fan..."

"Not quite," Theo grinned. "Fans don't have to like writing. I know several who don't. Archie Mercer's one – thought he says it took him several

years to realise it. Yes, I know I do things in fanzines. That's different. If there's something I want to say – what I think of the book I've just read, or fanzine, or the Conservative Party, or Liverpool Bank Holiday part, or things in general – that's fair enough. I can just sit down and type. But if it's a case of writing for the sake of writing rather than simply to say something, then I daren't even think of it."

"Why not?" Owen asked.

"Probably because I'm the ultimate perfectionist. All right. Say I sit down to write something. I compose a sentence. Right. I look at it. Immediately I want to switch the words round. Then I want to change a word here, a word there. Stick in an additional phrase. Cut out an existing one as unnecessary. Then, perhaps, I prefer the altered words in their original order. But I'm still not satisfied. I'm never satisfied. I get it on to stencil – I still want to change it. I see it in print – and that's the worst of all. Absolutely essential alterations leap out of the page at me, screaming to be made. And I can't do a thing about it."

"But surely," said Mine, "I mean – some of your things are supposed to be classics. That thing about the antique flying saucers in that *Orion* – I loved that."

"So did most fans, apparently," said Theo with a shrug. "But they don't ever realise how infinitely much better it would have been if I'd taken time to make another twenty-five revisions in every line. Or fifty."

"But if you don't mine my saying so," put in Dave, "isn't that rather a ridiculous attitude to take? Few sentences of anybody's are so perfect that they're absolutely incapable of being improved. But a line has to be drawn – otherwise nothing would ever get written at all."

"Probably so. I'm like that though."

"What a frustrating life though," said Owen.

"One thing," Mine pointed out. "You don't exactly look frustrated."

"Don't I?" said Theo with a shrug. "Wait till you see me when you're not around."

Nobody was quite sure how to take that, so they left it alone. "When's the next *Schlafenfest* coming out, anyway?" Owen asked.

"Sleeping-feast," Dave translated.

"Sleeping-festival," translated Mine almost simultaneously. "Is there such a thing?"

"Of course there is," said Theo. "I publish it. Didn't your mother ever

tell you?”

“No, but really,” wondered Owen.

“My stock answer here,” said Theo, “is that if there isn’t one there most certainly ought to be.”

“H’m. When is it coming out, anyway?”

“Have a heart. I put one out only last February.”

“Any publication which appears at intervals greater than six months,” Mine pontificated, “begins to look suspiciously like an annual.”

“Now that, Mine,” said Theo, “is a most profound statement. Allow me to bestow upon you my heartiest congratulations.”

“He noticed!” beamed Mine in a sort of mock-aside.

“How far along is the next one, anyway?” asked Owen.

“I suppose we couldn’t...” began Dave.

“Hardly, I’m afraid – there’s only about two stencils cut. No, you won’t be seeing another *Schlafenfest* until after the Con I’m afraid. Even I haven’t got unlimited time, and I’m trying to keep the Plot going full blast.”

“Plot?” Owen queried. “You mean the Con?”

“*Plot to Take Over the Universe*,” Dave explained.

“His OMPAazine,” amplified Mine. Both she and Dave were on the OMPA waiting-list.

“Oh of course.”

“Talking about the Con...”

“Yes – how are things going?”

“Well...”

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Anything he might tell them, said Theo, should be treated as strictly confidential.

“Can’t we even tell the gang?” Owen asked.

“None of us’ll tell a soul if you’d rather we didn’t,” Mine promised. Dave and Owen endorsed this.

“Right. Well, first of all, I’m planning on shifting the film show to Sunday morning.”

“Will anybody be up?” somebody wondered.

“Precisely,” said Theo. “It’s usually the AGM Sunday morning – and hardly anybody is up. It starts late, with about half its wheels missing and causes confusion – not to mention consternation – by over-running the dinner hour. Now most people seem to make a point of seeing the film show – it’s

possibly the most popular item. So if they want to see it, they can damn well get up Sunday morning.”

“I like films,” said Owen. “I like my sleep too, though. That doesn’t sound such a good idea.”

“So do I,” Mine concurred. “Some of them, anyway. I don’t know about when I’m only half-awake though.”

“I was only half-awake the whole time,” said Dave. “I nearly went to sleep during this year’s film show. Particularly with the smoke-filled lack of ventilation.”

“One thing,” said Mine. “Doing as you suggest would help to clarify how popular the film show actually is.”

“What I’m hoping to prove,” Theo declared, “is that a mid-morning film performance is a bigger draw than a mid-morning AGM.”

Owen grunted. “You may be right at that. Was anybody at the AGM this year?”

The other three had been. So had Barker.

“What happens to the AGM then?” asked Mine. “You’re not thinking of abolishing it, are you?”

“Certainly not. Whatever its position in the top ten, it is actually the heart of the Convention, and should be given the best spot with a minimum of interruptions. So it’s being shifted to Sunday afternoon, three o’clock sharp. At that time, just about everybody will be there. Refreshments will be laid on free at half-past four or so, and the meeting will be given every facility to run on indefinitely just as long as it seems to be going somewhere. Usually it’s sandwiched between a late start and lunch, and too much important business tends to get strangled at birth. I want to try to restore it to its rightful significance.”

“That sounds fair enough, anyway,” said Mine.

“Any more radical innovations?” asked Dave.

“Well, there’s the auctions. They tend to run on, too. I’m trying to marshall them into short sweet bouts of exactly ten minutes each, between the other items. In fact I’ve got a vague notion of timing them with a stopwatch – whatever item’s being auctions when the ten-minute bell rings, it’s cut off in mid-flight and the highest bidder so far gets it unchallenged. I’m not quite sure how that’d affect the receipts though – it could be that this way may keep the takings up by stimulating more interest than would otherwise have been – er – stimulated.”

“Might almost be worth trying even if the takings did go down,” said Dave. “What happens to everything that’s left unsold at the end though?”

“Oh, after the AGM there’ll have to be the usual final clearance session of course – but there’ll be no more programme to follow, so it won’t matter so much.”

“I wish we could take that idea up in the Club,” said Mine. “We might be able to get some sort of consensus of opinion about it.”

“This is a club,” Theo told her. “The Science Fiction Club of Much Wenlock. What d’you think I asked you all here for?”

“I’d hate to give an authoritative opinion,” said Owen ambiguously, “but I like the idea.”

“So,” Dave agreed, “do I – but I’m afraid of snags.”

“So am I, unfortunately. I’ll have to try it out on my official advisory committee.”

“Have you got a committee then?” (Mine)

“An advisory committee – several past con-organisers who have agreed to answer my letters if I write to them but won’t have to take any responsibility. The actually committee proper is strictly as listed on the front of the progress report.”

That, they remembered, had read simply: CHAIRDOG, Barker Trunkard; SECRETARY-TREASURER AND ASSISTANT CHAIRDOG, Theo Trunkard.

“Strictly a one-dog-and-his-man show then,” said Owen.

“So far. Part of the reason I asked you up here though was with a view to doing a bit of recruiting. As it happens you’re about the three most active Thisburians.”

“Except for Cynth,” Dave corrected, whilst Mine asked almost simultaneously: “What’s all that smoke?”

“Cynth? Smoke? Oh – hot air charged with grains of carbon mostly. Huh? What smoke, anyway?” Theo swung round to face towards the back alleyway, into which a considerable amount of smoke was billowing. He was on his feet in an instant, and through the passage into the yard, Barker beside him. Then he was back. “Stay here, everybody,” he told them curtly. “Stay here, Barker.” Then he was through the shop, there was a rattle of keys, a pause – and then he was back again, all in one continuous movement.

“This is going to be fun,” he said. “It’s the shop next door but one – where I get all my paraffin from.” Consternation promptly ensued. “It’s

things like this,” he went on, “that make life almost worth living. It’s all right – I’ve seen the proprietor, there’s nobody in there. In the mean time, this isn’t the best...”

A loud rat-tat-tat on the shop door fetched him out again, to be confronted by a policeman in a hurry. The policeman obviously knew Theo. “I’d advise you to evacuate the premises at once,” he announced. “I’ll have to ask you not to leave anything outside I’m afraid – front or back. It’ll obstruct the brigade.” In view of the extreme narrowness of both thoroughfares this was obviously an eminently practical request, so Theo readily agreed to comply, and the policeman moved on to the next house.

The others joined Theo in the shop.

“Anything we can take?” asked Dave.

Theo ran an eye over the stock. “Can you take that chest thing?” he asked. “Mine – there’s a couple of vases in the corner of the next room under the stand thing, could you bring them? Thanks – Owen, can you manage this armchair? It’s genuine Sheraton – the pair to it’s in Australia unfortunately, but a thing like that’s worth saving in its own right. Out the back and turn left – I’ll join you in a minute.”

Dave, Mine and Owen staggered out with their various burdens in the direction indicated, setting them down in a tributary alley where, they hoped, they’d be in nobody’s way but their own. Theo was more than the minute he’d mentioned, but not much more – in one hand he held the Cawthorn centaurs-and-amazons picture, whilst the other grasped the ends of a large and laden curtain. When the others had a chance to inspect the contents later, they found them to include such fannish irreplaceables as the small Atom picture and the Saint Fantony statuettes.

“Where’s Barker?” Dave asked suddenly.

“Just coming – he had to go upstairs.” Barker galloped up to them a moment later, a large black volume between his jaws.

“What’s he carrying?” asked Owen.

“A *Sense of FAPA*,” said Theo without looking.

“You mean he went and fetched it on his own?”

“Of course.”

“But – that’s ridiculous.”

“It does sound a bit far-fetched,” Dave agreed. “Are you sure you’re not having us on? I mean I know the dog’s a genius, but this is ridiculous.”

“Not in the least,” said Theo equably. “Every now and then I take the

book out of its place on the shelf, show it to him, and tell him its name. So he knows perfectly well what the words *A Sense of FAPA* denote. I believe in being prepared for this sort of thing.”

Even so, his preparations had not – so it turned out – been perfect. The shop where the fire had started was a burned-out shell, and one of those immediately adjoining had also been damaged, but thanks to the prompt arrival of the fire brigade the rest of the row had been saved, and after a couple of hours of hanging about Theo was allowed to return home. The back door had not been locked – in case the firemen wanted to get in in a hurry – but simply closed. Opening it, Mine found herself paddling inches deep in water.

“What – the – hell...” she began.

“Hell,” echoed Theo who was just behind her. “And damnation into the bargain. I left all the windows open. And the front ones too...”

They waded into the interior. The whole floor was awash, and the furniture and stock had all been thoroughly soaked. Theo ran upstairs – it was the same there. Water, and sodden effects, everywhere one turned.

“But why?” demanded Mine. “Why turn the hoses on this house?” Then she answered her own question – “Of course, I supposed they wanted to make it less inflammable in case the fire spread this way. Strikes me you could do with the entire Thisbury and District Circle to help clear this lot up.”

It could have been worse, of course – a lot worse. All Theo’s books were behind glass – even the special shelf from which Barker had retrieved *A Sense of FAPA* had somehow shut or been shut before the dog carried the book off. His fanzines were for the most part in metal filing cabinets, which were effectively showerproof. Several hung pictures had been infiltrated and would never be the same again, but the Cawthorn was safe.

Theo picked up a wet block from the corner of the living-room. “Duping paper,” he said sadly. “Reams of it – mostly awash to the eyeballs.”

“It’ll dry better if the sheets are separated,” said Dave. “Not that there’s anywhere dry to put them to dry.”

“There’s a couple of reams here that seem to be fairly dry,” said Owen, who had started rummaging in the same corner. “Let’s put out a waterlogged one-shot or something.”

Theo hurled the ream he was holding at the couch with a dramatic gesture. The packet fell with a sodden squish, and water sprayed up.

“Boys and girls,” he said. “The next *Schlafenfest* will be produced

forthwith, here and now. Only a small one, mind – but a genuine *Schlafenfest* nevertheless. I'll subtitle it 'The Fanzine That Is There When It Happens'. Four eye-witness accounts of the Much Wenlock firthquake. Five if I can persuade Barker to contribute. Bennett'll be positively redundant when he sees it."

"Have we time?" Mine wondered practically. "There's all this floor water wants mopping up, and all sorts of things."

"To hell with that. That can wait – floor needed a wash, anyway. This is an important fannish occasion." He swept a sheet of water off the working-surface of the roll-top desk with one arm. "The stencils are behind you, Owen – in that cupboard. Give the duper a rub down, Dave – dunno what with though. Mine – if you must try your hand at woman's work, see if you can find any dry food or wet drink out there."

And amid the watery chaos all around, he sat down at the typewriter and began to type.

•

What with all the assorted excitement, they very nearly forgot to collect the delinquent wheel from the garage the next morning. Owen remembered however, and brought the thing triumphantly round to the back door as the others were loading the scooters.

"Shall we change it back now?" he asked.

Mine considered. "I don't see why we should bother," was her verdict. "Dave may have another puncture before we get back, in which case it'll just be extra work. Leave it down there, Owen – I'll stick it on my carrier for the time being." And she went in to say goodbye to Theo properly.

Shortly afterwards the two machines were straddled by their three riders. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything, Theo," said Dave, to which both Owen and Mine added their concurrence.

"Next time you come," Theo returned, "I hope I'll have some dry beds you can sleep in."

"I'll bring my gum-boots," said Owen.

"We'll just bring the Turtle and leave it at that," said Mine.

One after the other the two engines roared into life. Theo waved. Dave and Owen waved. Mine blew Theo a kiss. Theo winked. Barker woofed. And off they went.

About half-way home, Dave's back tyre went flat.

"At least you're having a bit of variety," Owen pointed out as they came

to a halt. "It was your front one before."

"Naturally," said Dave. "The tyre on the front at present is Mine's. Mine's tyres never get punctures."

Everybody dismounted and prepared to go into action. And they all three saw it virtually as one. The spare-tyre holder underneath Mine's carrier was empty.

"Right," said Dave. "Who had it last?"

"I – I'm afraid I did," Mine confessed. "I – I'm sorry, Dave. I..."

"Take to the boats," sang out Owen.

Dave wasn't quite sure if the situation called for anger, or tears, or hysterics – and if so, on whose part. He collected himself with an effort. "There's a thing," he said slowly. "A sort of syndrome. Something to do with double standards between the sexes. No matter how clever and sensible a girl is normally, when faced with eligible male company she goes all stupid and helpless and poor-little-female on it. I'm beginning to believe there's something in it after all."

"But," Mine could not help pointing out – "with all due respect to those present, I am not right now in eligible male company."

"You mean you didn't leave the tyre lying out there right by Theo's back door?"

Mine blushed scarlet.

"Well, I can't very well go back for it now," she said. "We'll be late enough as it is. But – come to think of it, I might possibly run up there next week-end to recover it. It's an ill wind and all that jazz."

"Well I hope you have a puncture every five miles," said Dave – but he said it with a grin. All the world loves a lover, and all that jazz.

"Well," she said. "I was wondering if one of my friends wouldn't lend me one of his for a spare. If he doesn't particularly need his own machine that week-end that is. I'd promise to bring it back safely."

Curiously enough, she did.

Chapisode Eight

Fandom Goes to Coventry

At the confluence of the Everest and the Alamo, set like an antique pearl in the midst of prosperous sun-washed farmlands, stands the ancient city of Sargasso. And there in her palace of Minehall, clad in a long blue undress robe, Queen Helmine of Minland was taking counsel.

“You must see him at once, my lady,” urged Iano, Secretary for the Four Provinces. “The Governors will not send an ambassador all this way for fun.”

“What’s this talk of an ambassador?” asked the Queen icily. “A Governor – even a quartet of Governors – does not send an ambassador to his sovereign.”

“Ambassador – emissary – envoy – call him what you will, my lady,” put in the Chancellor, Baron Pordave. “We have reason to believe that his message is of urgent import.”

“All right,” the Queen agreed. “Have this – er – messenger summoned.”

The individual in question was of comparatively small stature, with the yellowish cast to his skin and the slant eyes of his race. He stood before the throne and bowed. This was an outright breach of protocol – one does not bow to a queen regnant, but salutes her from the waist as if she were a man. However, his demeanor otherwise was correctly deferent.

“My lady,” he announced in excellent Minnish. “I bring you loyal greetings from the Governors of the Four Provinces of Old Cathay, New Cathay, Chingford and Sangley Marches.”

“We acknowledge their loyal greetings,” said Queen Helmine with a gracious inclination of her shapely head, “and would greet them in return as befits us.”

“Thank you, my lady,” said the emissary. “May I speak frankly?”

“You may.”

“Thank you, my lady,” the man repeated. “The Governors wish, as a matter of extreme urgency, to combine their governorships under unified control that the integrity of the Four Provinces may be the better protected.”

The Queen sighed. “That is an old cry,” she returned. “Our answer remains as it has always been – and as that of our father before us. The least

of the Four Provinces has over twice the population of the Minnish motherland. Were they to be combined under one rule, 'twould be too great a temptation for any man – or woman. We cannot allow it.”

“But – my lady,” protested the emissary. “I would remind you that the Four Provinces are even now under one rule – that of your gracious self.”

Queen Helmine heaved another sigh – this was such a hoary old chestnut. “That is so,” she agreed. “But from a safe distance. A Governor on the spot with such unlimited power would be a different kettle of fish, and we fear that in such circumstances the Minnish tie would not long hold.”

“I would like to point out, my lady,” said the emissary, “with the greatest respect, that the way things are going there is a distinct possibility that the tie will not long hold in any event. For one thing – if their request for unification is not to be granted, the Governors say that they will be unable to stop our young men trading into The Doldrums.”

The Queen gasped audibly and visibly at this – and so did her counsellors.

“That,” she pronounced, “sounds dangerously akin to treason.”

“No treason is in my thoughts, my lady,” said the emissary soothingly, “nor yet in those of the Governors who sent me here. What I said was simple fact – that unless their request is granted, the Governors will be physically unable to restrain the people. The people want unity – and always have done. If they cannot have unity under the Minnish flag, then they will look for it under the Doldrumese flag or any other that comes to hand. And that,” he added with the merest trace of sarcasm, “I am sure your ladyship does not want.”

The Queen considered a moment. “You may leave us,” she told the man. “We would take counsel. You will be summoned anon.”

The emissary bowed again – surely he knew the correct custom? However, she would ignore the matter in this instance. Then he withdrew.

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It was Bruce Pelz’s fault. Having considerable surplus of stocks of “Coventry”-oriented fanzines, he had sent a mixed bundle to Dave Portable. Dave had been first perplexed, then definitely interested, and had passed them around. The upshot had been the creation of Thisbury’s own fantasy world.

The world had no name – any more than this one has. It was broadly similar to this one in other ways, too, such as atmosphere, climate, the land-

to-water ratio, the physical types of the flora and fauna, and so on. The one basic difference was that floating continents, instead of being a simply a geological theory, were a fact of major importance – for not only did the continents float, but they could manifestly be seen to float. Each continent or archipelago, with its attendant continental shelf, moved all the time with the ocean currents – which in their turn, of course, were continually changing as the position of the land-masses changed. The result was a cartographer’s nightmare – and, scientifically tenable or no, was proving to be great fun to dabble in.

Technologically, the floating world was two or three centuries behind this one – though sociologically they were much the same. Minland was situated on one coast of Capricorn, the largest continent. The Four Provinces were located on the opposite coast of the same continent. Between them stretched the vast wastes of the great Karelian Desert, which made communication overland virtually impossible. Minland this controlled her distant provinces by sea – a sea constantly changing as various other territories approached and receded with the currents. More of this anon.

There were seven of them in the game – Dave, Owen, Ian, Bert, Mine, and Cynthia from Thisbury, and also Theo – it being impractical to leave him out if Mine was in, things between those two being what they were. With Theo living at a distance from the rest of them, special arrangements had to be made for his participation. The other six had an arrangement whereby each controlled a country, and each also had an alter ego in everybody else’s country – this wherever the action happened to be, everybody could always legitimately take part. Mine, for instance, besides being the Queen of Minland, was Mistress Mine, State Bookkeeper-General to Master David, the High Admiral and Merchant-General of the Free City of Port Able. In Moland, she was the Lady Hervomai, tutor and advisor to Prince Owen. On the Punic Puninsula, where ran King Baroduc’s writ, she was the Countess of Minehead. In the Grand Duchy of Detheim, ruled by the Grand Duchess Peracynth, she was the Grand Dowager. And in Kulistan she was a slave in the palace of the Sultam Om. She alone had a permanent alter ego in the mysterious and antique land of Wenlock, where Trun the Warlock ruled. There she was the Princess Carmine, the Minnish ambassador and younger sister to Queen Helmine. (“Being one’s own grandfather is passe these days,” she said. “I’m my own younger sister.”)

Besides the seven countries above-named, the floating world contained a

plenitude of others. These, such as The Doldrums and Renigard, were manipulated by common consent as circumstances seemed to warrant.

Meanwhile, back at the palace of Minehall...

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Five heads of state sat round a table in Queen Helmine's withdrawing-room. Courtiers and counsellors hovered anxiously at a discreet distance. Only two things would bring together such an assembly – good news and bad news. And the news that had brought them was far from good.

"I have given in to the demands of my subjects in the Four Provinces," Helmine was saying, "and appointed a Governor-General of the entire domain, with over-riding authority. That may help to hold The Doldrums at bay for a time – though they come ever closer. It is also the first step in the abdication of Minnish rule over those parts I fear – but one can only choose the lesser evil."

"Minland was a great nation before ever she spread her rule to distant lands," David of Port Able consoled her. "Minland will still be a great nation without a single overseas Province to her name."

"Thank you, cousin," said the Queen sincerely. "If the Doldrums were one's only trouble, I would have no problems. But nearer to hand there is the question of Renigard. And that, cousins, troubles us all alike."

"Not all alike, cousin," Peracynth of Dethein pointed out. "Renigard daily looms more directly between our lands, tis true, and all are threatened. But not for long do our lands march so close – and my oceanographers tell me that Renigard is likely to be more your problem than ours."

"Aye, that is so," said David. "Any assistance we can render to each other whilst we be neighbours we should do so. But once the tides divide us, distance will make a mockery of our efforts I fear."

"I am ready to place my entire weaponry at the common disposal," offered Baroduc. "Though 'twill be of little avail."

("Not while you make puns like that, anyway," said Mine.)

Om of Kulistan spoke. "As one who is bound to the same continent as Minland and her Provinces," he stated, "I find that my country draws great benefits from the stability that this arrangement imposes. Thus anything that Kulistan can do to help preserve the status quo in any particular, that will she do."

"And what of ancient Wenlock in the mysterious continental heartland, Helmine?" asked David. "Are you not in alliance with the Warlock?"

“I am, and thence I have sent for succour. But many leagues of mountain and desert lie between us, and time is short. It may be that there is no answer, and the League will be smitten by the gathering vultures.”

“Courage, cousin Helmine,” said Peracynth. “We must lay the best plans we can, and await with fortitude what is to be.”

“Oh, don’t let’s be so bloody ridiculous,” Mine burst out suddenly. “Games are games but this is life. I’m not married, I’ve no family ties, I’m employed by the county education authority, and if they tell me to go and teach in Chipping Melton – or in Tackton Castle or anywhere else – if you gotta go, you gotta go, and that’s that. I’ll be able to get over here at week-ends...”

“Instead of Much Wenlock?” asked Ian.

“Or probably not. I can still see you all now and again, anyway. I certainly won’t lose touch.”

“I’ve told you before that you should tell them to go to hell and get a job somewhere else,” said Cynthia.

“And I’ve told you before that if I wasn’t planning to leave here anyway before very long that’s precisely what I would do,” Mine snapped back. “But since it’s only a matter of months – what’s the use fighting it?”

“In that case, what the hell else is there to say?” asked Dave. “You know we’ll be sorry as hell to lose you...”

“We’ll even be sorry to lose you to Much Wenlock,” put in Bert with surprising sincerity.

“We’ll hold wakes aboard the Turtle twice nightly,” said Cynthia. “People will come from miles around simply to watch. You’ll be doing us a good turn actually – bring in no end of lolly to the Club.”

Mine sat and glared at her.

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Far away on the other side of the continent, on the Forbidden Isle of Orinoco, Mors Ambulans, Despot of the Doldrums, played host to a group of his fellow despots. Mors Ambulans was a giant of a man, seven foot tall and broad to match, with a bristling black beard that was always kept scrupulously clean by his long-suffering women. Warl Ord, the Tyrant of Renigard, was smaller, neater, and considerably more devious in his ways, though equally tough. Utan, the Orang of Turlang, not only looked like a great ape but spelled suspiciously like one too. Finally there was Baron Freiherr, the young Molish exile – not yet a despot in his own right but who

seemed to entertain high hopes of becoming one if he played his cards aright.

“So that, friends, is the plan,” finished Mors Ambulans, casting aside the beef bone he had been gnawing. “I will let the Minlanders think that my forces are bent on attacking the Four Provinces, then sail right past them and into the homelands of the League. In return, I claim a free hand in Kulistan which lies athwart my line of communication, and the rest of you can carve up the more distant lands between you as you wish.”

Baron Freiherr glanced surreptitiously at Warl Ord for a moment, then at Utan the Orang.

“I should like to point out, Despot,” he said with a trace of nervousness, “that the success or failure of this plan depends utterly and entirely upon myself and my Molish friends. Had I not sought you out to being with in the first place, then there would have been no alliance ’twixt The Doldrums, Turland and Renigard, and all our chances would this have been that much less.”

“That, Baron,” put in Warl Ord coolly, “is, I think, exactly what the Despot meant. If your influence with Moland is as great as you claim, then Moland will be yours besides as much additional territory as you are able to hold. If, on the other hand, you hope simply to ride to power on our shoulders – well,” – he smiled nastily – “we may still find a use for you.”

“Most excellently put,” grunted Utan the Orang.

“You may see with your own eyes what powerful influence I have within my native homeland,” said Baron Freiherr – who was nothing if not tautological. His nervousness seemed to have left him. “Tyrant of Renigard, Orang of Turlang – may your realms increase, but not at the expense of Moland.”

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Stateless ships and masterless men came flocking from the wilder places of the floating world to join the already vast fleets and armies of the Black Alliance. Baron Freiherr sailed to Renigard on the Tyrant’s own ship; then, with a handful of followers and a considerable amount of money, the latter contributed by the three despots in equal portions and which he would be expected to pay back sooner or later, he was landed one night at a lonely spot on the Molish coast and left to fend for himself. Warl Ord had offered him troops, but the Baron had refused them with the reasonable excuse that whilst many Molanders might be expected to flock to his personal standard, the presence of alien forces behind him would cause many to think again. From

the first, he met with the expected success. Lured by his name and – it must be admitted in at least some cases – his money, the people came over to him in droves. The Government still ruled in the capital, but the countryside almost to a man accepted the orders of the returned exile. Whole regiments were reported to have joined him en masse. He quickly acquired ships, too, and by the time the mightily augmented navy of the Doldrums hove off to the Renigard coast, he was fully ready for the next stage in the campaign.

By general agreement, the main landing was made slightly to clockwise of the Minnish Mouths – the delta of the Everest. Kulistan was already under full blockade by non-Doldrumese auxiliaries, and with both Minland and Moland ruled by the Black Alliance disposal of the remaining territories would be laughably easy. With a heavy heart – for she had hoped until the last that her country would be spared from becoming a battlefield – Queen Helmine gave the order for her yeomanry to muster. From all over Minland came the companies – from the cities of Sargasso, Sahara and Forth; from the coastlands; from the fertile croplands around the capital; from the grassy plains of higher and lower Lanthey; from the arid steppe-lands of Aquetas; and from the furthest marches of the kingdom they came. Even the crews of ships trading from the Four Provinces answered the call of their Queen. Minland's allies, seeing the way the situation was developing, sent their best to fight beside the Minlanders under Helmine's command; so crack brigades from Detheim, Port Able and the Punic Puninsula took their places in the line that faced the dread invader.

Mors Ambulans, for his part, chose to station his Doldrumese legions on the left flank, allotting the opposite flank to Warl Ord and his Renigards. The wild men from Turlang were in the left-centre, and the right-centre of the Black Alliance army being held by a surprisingly large force of well-equipped Molanders. And so the opposing armies closed for combat. Mors Ambulan's strategy – or, rather, Warl Ord's strategy, for if the former was the natural leader the latter was the natural power behind the throne – was to outflank the Minlanders and their allies by steamroller tactics for which he Doldrumese were numerically well fitted. From the first, in order not to make things too obvious, the attack was pressed hard on both flanks, but the real pressure was sustained on the left until Queen Helmine's forces were ousted from their positions and the drive was on.

Mors Ambulans did not, however, have everything his own way by any means. The well-disciplined companies of the Minnish forces fell back in

good order, carrying their wounded with them, and fresh troops came forward to oppose the Doldrumese. They got moving again and the fresh troops fell back in turn – and suddenly the steamroller came to halt, turned about and caved inward as the allied contingents under King Baroduc took them completely by surprise in the rear. Urgently Mors Ambulans sent horsemen to his own allies to ask for speedy assistance. But none was forthcoming – for the Despot’s allies were in enough trouble of their own. It appeared that the Molanders had changed sides in a body and attacked the men of Turlang and Renigard in their rear. Furthermore, the surprise move by Baroduc’s forces seemed to indicate that this reversal of allegiances had not been unexpected. And so a day that had started by looking grim for the defenders of Minnish soil ended in the complete rout of those by their attackers who were able to escape with their lives and liberty.

Mors Ambulans, Warl Ord and Utan the Orang were among those who escaped of course – they made damn sure of that, anyway, as is a despot’s privilege. Many of their followers were slain, and many more taken prisoner. An officer high in the Doldrumese command was brought before Baron Freiherr as the latter surveyed the field from a handy eminence. The captive voiced his opinion of his indignity in no uncertain terms.

“To be captured by the effete men of these waters is insult enough,” he spat. “But to be captured by a traitor is thrice an insult.”

“I am no traitor, fellow,” said the Baron not unkindly. “I promised your despot that when I landed in Moland the Molanders would flock to my standard – and they did. They could hardly have done otherwise, since they knew what you obviously did not – that I am Prince Owen, their sovereign ruler, and a staunch ally of Queen Helmine.”

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There was dancing in the streets of every Minnish city, town and village when the news reached them, and likewise throughout the League, continuing by the light of bonfires far into the night. In Thisbury, too, they celebrated – by holding an impromptu party aboard the Turtle. The Nullgray Mouser took reluctantly to the open air as the drinks were poured.

Owen waved his glass aloft, spilling a good half-inch of the contents. “I give you a toast,” he declaimed, “to the object of our affections – your very good friend and mine – Mine.”

The rest of the party responded with cheers.

“It’s all very well to lead the toasting,” commented Mine as the glasses

were lowered. “But where were you in my darkest hour, when my friends gathered to offer their sympathies?”

“Out behind the scenes,” said Owen. “Fighting a lone battle on your behalf.”

Considerable consternation ensued at this. Mine had been reprieved – that much was known, and it had been sufficient to the occasion. All eyes were on Owen.

“S’right,” he said. “I probably shouldn’t say anything – but to hell with it, I’m bursting to tell somebody. Mind – I didn’t actually do anything – that is, not like do something. I saw a possible – possibility that might’ve happened anyway, and sort of nudged things along in that direction. That’s all. It may well’ve happened in any case.”

“I think you’d better make things a bit clearer, Owen,” Dave suggested.

“Well I,” said Owen. “That is, I sort of had an idea in my mind that seemed to be worth looking into. So I hopped over to Chipping Melton, to investigate conditions there at first-hand. I found what I was looking for right away – there’s a chemist’s shop, only a small one, but it’s right on the market-place. So I went in and bought something. Then I started chatting-up the girl behind the counter, and sure enough, the place was owned by the pharmacist himself – he’s an old man, and only keeps at it because he’d rather that than sell out to the multiples. The place was absolutely ripe for a takeover bid from the right quarter.”

“Chemist’s shop?” asked Cynthia with a puzzled frown. “Might as well say a candle-wax factory. I thought it was a school that was giving trouble.”

“Wait a wai – let me explain. So back I came to Thisbury, and dropped in at the Co-op chemist’s. Pharmacist there’s Bert Peters – he’s an old boyfriend of my sister’s, so I know him quite well. Got married six months ago to a teacher – in the same line of business as Mine.” (Five breaths were let out simultaneously.) “And I’d heard over the grapevine that he was on the lookout for a place of his own.

“So I started asking all about this new home colour developer thing” (for Owen had recently become something of a shutterbug, and now regularly made a considerable nuisance of himself over it) “and sort of got on to how things were with him. He confirmed what I’d heard about him looking for his own place. Thisbury was all sewn up by the multiples, eh said – Boots and the Co-op and that – so he had his eye on a place in one of the nearby villages.

“So I asked him sort of conversationally – why not think big? Why not pick some place a little further away like, for instance, there was Chipping Melton. It’s bigger than Thisbury, and it’s got a market that would bring extra trade – and it wasn’t all that far away, so his wife wouldn’t feel completely cut off from her parents.

“‘Yes,’ he said – ‘but we’ll be counting on Brenda’s earnings to start with – she couldn’t very well commute to Thisbury, and it may not be so easy to find her a suitable job somewhere else.’

“‘That is a point,’ I agreed. ‘Of course, they might be crying out for women teachers in Chipping Melton – but anyway.’ So I left it at that. I didn’t tell him about the chemist’s shop in the market place. I didn’t tell him about the teacher’s vacancy. I just sort of hoped he’d find them for himself. And I heard this afternoon for sure that he did. And believe me – nobody can be more surprised than I was when I – when it worked.”

Mine, for one, was now frankly looking at Owen with a growing respect in her eyes. “That – and that’s the truth, Owen?” she asked.

“Uh-uh. Like I said – it might’ve happened anyway. But I thought there was no harm in trying to help it along a little – sort of just in case.”

“Owen,” the girl declared, “I could kiss you.”

“Well why don’t you then?” asked Owen mischievously. “You’ve done it before, and it didn’t kill you.”

“In fact,” said Mine, “I damn well will.”

And she made a very thorough job of it, too.

Chapisode Nine

Fandom Is Beset by Pirates

“Do me a favour, Mine?” asked Owen.

“Mm-hm. Depends what is is.”

“When Helmine becomes officially Warlockess of Wenlock, get her to send the Princess Carmine to Moland so that Prince Owen can have a chance at her.”

Mine pinched together the surplus cloth at Owen’s waist, and made a couple of quick chalk-marks on the fabric. “When Helmine becomes officially Warlockess of Wenlock – have to think of a better title than that – the Princess Carmine will get married to Eodor, the Wenlockish ambassador to Minland,” she returned thoughtfully.

“Huh?” said Owen. “Wouldn’t have thought those two had much opportunity for getting to know one another.”

“Their paths first crossed in a sandstorm in the middle of the Karelian Desert,” Mine improvised. “They were both on the way back to their respective homelands to report at the time and they spent three passionate hours – I mean days – together with no chaperon other than a four-humped camel named Baca. They met again on the return journey, and plighted – plought – plighted – their undying troth. Turn around.” Owen obliged. “When Helmine goes to live permanently in Wenlock, Carmine will of course have to return to Minland as regent. Wenlock will still require an ambassador to the palace of Minehall, so there out to be ample opportunities for the two of them from then on.” She carefully unwound the piece of cloth and draped it over a chair.

“Right,” she called. “who’s next for a fitting?”

It was the millenary of Thisbury’s original charter as a borough, and all over town similar activity was taking place as the citizens prepared to celebrate one thousand years of corporate history in appropriate style. The climax of the festival was to be a pageant, with everybody in authentic Anglo-Saxon-type costume for the occasion. Much trouble was being taken over this. Every week the *Echo* printed a double-page spread of material approved by the pageant’s directory – who was also the curator of the local

museum: typical tenth-century costume, props, and backgrounds. (This, incidentally, had acted as a useful if temporary shot in the arm for the paper's circulation.) The director was determined to get everything as completely authentic as it could be made – mechanically-propelled vehicles were ruled out of order as a matter of course, for instance, and just about every horse in the county had been booked for the Day. And the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle was officially entering a float in the parade.

It had been Owen's idea originally. Cynthia had promptly poured scorn on it, with remarks about authentic Anglo-Saxon rocket ships. "Well," Bert had put in, "they have Viking rockets..." Then Dave had got on to something. "No," he had said – "the idea of the pageant is supposed to be for everybody to sort of portray what their equivalents have been? What would the sort of people we are have done in those days?"

He had a point there, it had been conceded. Of course, the analogy was not to be pursued too far – for one thing, the sort of heroic fantasy that fans often particularly enjoy was no minority matter then but was the nearest thing to popular fiction that they had. From the strictly sf angle, there were distinct possibilities – no doubt some people have always dreamed of the future. Whilst specifically interplanetary travel was maybe a bit far-fetched, flight in general was the sort of thing that tenth-century Wellses or Gernsbacks might have speculated upon. then communications – ways, perhaps, of making one's voice travel further, which in those days of horse and beacon would have been a boon indeed. Even more elementary, perhaps, but no less stefnic to Anglo-Saxon minds, would be the horseless carriage itself.

"That's easy," said Cynthia – who had now been converted. "A handcart. Or a wheelbarrow. Bert could push it."

"Better still," Dave had suggested, "Bert could sit on it. then we could just push it down to the Meadows and duck barrow and Duckbarrow simultaneously."

"No," Bert had promptly come back with. "You should sit on it, Dave – you're Portable."

The general idea of fannish participation had been agreed to, and Dave had been delegated to ask the pageant director about it. Rather to his surprise, the director had been just as enthusiastic as any of them. "Do you know," he asked Dave, "that that's the first idea of any originality that's been suggested? I was beginning to wonder if I'd have to do everybody's thinking for them. The local Master Builders' Federation want to march past in

costume carrying antique trowels and adzes and things. The Girls' High School want to file past dressed as Anglo-Saxon schoolgirls – at least their headmistress wants them to, which is the same thing. All very historical and instructive no doubt – but so uniformly unenterprising as to depress me. Then there's the Townswomen's Guild. They want to enter a float on the theme 'Women Could Make It – Then As Now'. I'm keeping a careful eye on them – I have the strongest suspicion that they're going to try and pass off some of the most outrageous anachronisms in the name of group-participation, and they'll do that over my dead body. Your idea sounds entirely reasonable – go right ahead, and I'll give you any help I can, and thank you very much indeed for coming forward."

So the project got under way.

And Mine was sewing costumes.

•

At last came the day. All the week there had been a succession of concerts, public speeches, specially-arranged sports events (some with a contrivedly archaic flavor that would have sent the museum curator up the wall had they fallen within her province) and the like. And now it was Saturday, and the spirit of carnival was abroad. Even a lot of the shops had closed for the week-end at midday, and the scattered elements of the grand procession assembled themselves ready for the off.

There were ten people participating in the S.F. Circle entry. There would probably have been more but for rival commitments, either within Thisbury or elsewhere. Dick, for instance, was now an undergraduate at Sidcup College, Oxford, and was not replying to letters. Harry the First had recently been elected to the Borough Council and would be marching amongst his fellow-councillors at the head of the procession. Tom was wanted by his wife for some reason. Still, ten wasn't a bad turnout. Six of the ten were, of course, the standard sextet of Dave, Owen, Ian, Bert, Mine and Cynthia, augmented on this occasion by Harry the Second, Russ Harbottle and Jean, and a newcomer, Geoff McNab. All the males now sprouted full beards – in common with many other townfolk – and Owen, for one, had declared his intention of keeping his.

The exhibit itself was mounted on a long narrow cart, pulled by two stalwart carthorses. In charge of them was a young woman of perhaps twenty, costumed as became a female waggoner of the tenth century. Her name was Shirley Gould and she lived at Laymans Cross, which is as much as one

needs to know about her. Temporary stabling for all the horses had been fixed up at one end of Galley Meadows, which was to be the scene of the final review and subsequent jollification, so the Turtle was ideally situated as a base for loading up prior to moving to the assembly point the other side of town. The Nullgray Mouser looked on with a sardonic eye – although it didn't quite know what to make of the horses, it was prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt so long as they refrained from actually boarding the vessel. Theo Trunkard saw the wagon off – he had come down for the weekend, although he declined to participate in the event itself. Barker could ride in the procession of he pleased (which naturally he did) – Theo preferred to exercise his visitor's right to see the whole show as a spectator. Owen shot him with his camera as the cartload of assorted props and fans moved jerkily over the uneven turf of the Meadows and merged into the distance.

The procession that marched and rumbled off at two p.m. sharp was divided into three sections, each headed by a band. The first section comprised the Corporation and the various trades and professions, the second section was devoted to clubs and societies, and the third section was for schools. The director had had a good bit of trouble over the bands, and had laid down that sound rather than appearance was to be the criterion for the inclusion or exclusion of any particular instrument. All modern brass instruments were out – about the only one which possibly bore any tonal relevance to the period was a hunting or coaching horn, which was not a band instrument. Wooden flutes and recorders were the staple, with a trio of bagpipes in a band of their own. Guitars – strictly unamplified of course – and mandolins were permitted on the grounds that the Anglo-Saxons had almost certainly had string instruments that might reasonably be supposed to have sounded similar. Side-drums there were, covered in assorted fabrics to disguise the modern appearance.

The clubs-and-societies procession was headed by the pipe band – the three pipers with a couple of drummers. Behind the band walked the Sea Scouts, decked out as sailors – not simply as Anglo-Saxon sailors, but as sailors from far and near who might have turned up at a small river-port not far from the coast. The variety of their costuming was extremely effective. They had with them a couple of non-floating mock-ups of small boats, that were pushed on handcarts, and every sailor carried an oar over his shoulder. the S.F. Circle's cart followed immediately behind the Sea Scouts, they being in turn followed by The amateur Dramatic Society's float. with a tableau

representing Thor and the Devil cowering before a cross-wielding friar. Other floats – the allotment-holders, the Townswomen’s Guild, the United Nations Association and so on – followed behind ad infinitum.

At the front of the S.F. Circle cart, just behind the girl driver, stood Bert Duckbarrow, resplendent in huge leather bird-shaped wings that he flapped as fetchingly as the period would reasonably allow, supported his arms on either side. Behind him, reaching over his head, was a gigantic three-stage megaphone into which Harry the Second intermittently bawled various gibberish. Due to the law of diminishing returns or something a three-stage megaphone was no more noticeably effective than an ordinary one-stage model would have been – but it looked and sounded good. Behind Harry was an equally non-functional arrangement of large toothed wheels that Dave, Owen and Ian by turns kept revolving. And finally as a tailpiece, following the cart, was a long specially-built wheelbarrow pushed by Russ Harbottle and Geoff McNab, in which sat Jean waving aloft a pole with a notice that read HORSELESS CARRIAGE Mk. I. Further notices on the megaphone barrel and on a banner overhead proclaimed the identity of the Circle and the nature of the entry. The notices were all in plain block lettering with standard spelling, as laid down by the director – true Anglo-Saxon was obviously useless for the purpose, and fake archaisms were prohibited.

And to the skill of the bagpipe trio the procession rumbled its slow way through the crowded streets of Thisbury.

Barker wandered forward and laid his head on the driver’s shoulder. The girl looked around.

“It’s all right,” Mine reassured her. “he won’t hurt you.”

“Oh, I don’t mind dogs,” said Shirley Gould, when she’d seen who was touching her. “Prefer horses though.” And she turned back to her driving. Presently Barker rose and placed his forepaws on her shoulders, to get a grandstand view of the marching Sea Scouts or something. Harry the Second noticed him.

“Here, boy,” he encouraged. “Come and earn your keep.”

Barker dropped back to the deck and ambled amiably round to Harry. Harry told him “Up,” and the dog placed his front paws where indicated. “Good boy. Now say a few words to the audience.”

Barker uttered an experimental amplified “woof” into the three-stage megaphone, pondered for a moment on the result, decided it was rather effective, and did it again.

“You can see he’s a born orator,” said Ian, as Owen levelled his camera oblivious of Dave’s peremptory gesture.

“Woof (amplified)” said Barker.

“Get that anachronism out of sight,” said Dave.

“Woof (amplified)” Barker repeated.

“Here,” said Owen, as he re-stowed his camera. “let’s try him on the treadmill.”

Dave surrendered his place at the controls of the non-functional machine, and guided Barker’s paw to the treadle. Barker soon got the idea, and though he didn’t seem to see much point in it, he kept it up for a couple of minutes to oblige his friends. After that he knocked off without waiting for permission, turned around, put his forepaws up on the megaphone-stand again and woofed loudly into it simultaneously with a gibberish announcement from Harry the Second, to the latter’s momentary consternation.

“Sing a duet,” Owen suggested.

“OK,” said Harry. “Ready, boy? One – two – Kimmeries a sunny jim (‘Woof’) cool sling (‘Woof’) duckoo (‘Woof’), koo ith sled an’ (‘Woof’) iddis bed an’ haggis rooly goo.” (“Woof. Woof. Woof”)

“Cool, man,” said Ian appreciatively. “Just dig that bird-dog.”

Owen, meanwhile, had caught sight of something behind the crowd ahead. He attracted Dave’s attention.

“Whatever’s that?”

“That”, whatever it was, chose that moment to let forth with a brief pip on a motor-horn. The crowd in front of it looked round and edged away, and the S.F. Circle was able to get a good look at it. It comprised a small pick-up lorry, heavily draped, with a large rocket-ship model upright on the back and several men standing around it in very smart-looking spacesuits. A banner across the front, in the forbidden ye-olde-type lettering, proclaimed

A VIFION
OF
YE FUTURE

Everybody spoke at once, or almost.

“But they can’t...” “but that’s...” “it’s all...” “What the hell do they...” “Does the...”

“What are they trying to do?” Dave demanded of no-one in particular. “Collide?” He moved forward to stand behind the girl driver. She had seen

the interloper, but had made no move to check or alter the placid forward movement of the cart. For a moment, indeed, it seemed as if the truck was intent on colliding with the S.F. Circle wagon as they came abreast of it. But it swung round parallel to them, and for a space the two vehicles continued along the none too wide thoroughfare side by side.

Dave leaned across to the nearest spaceman.

“What the hell’s all this?” he asked.

The spaceman said nothing. For a moment Dave wondered if it was a dummy, then decided it wasn’t. Nevertheless, for all the good he seemed to be doing, it might have been. Then Mine, abandoning Bert’s left arm, was beside him.

“They’re trying to overtake,” she opined.

“To hell with that for a lark,” said Dave. “Can the girl hold our own?”

“I’ll ask her.” Mine moved round again. Owen, Ian, Harry and Barker all ranged along the left-hand side of the wagon, ready to support Dave in anything that seemed to require it. The pirate float was unmistakably trying to cut in now, but Shirley Gould nonchalantly held her team steady and it remained stalemated. Away in front the pipe band still wailed undauntedly forth. And then all of a sudden there was a commotion in the crowd right of the procession, and out erupted a small army of hirsute skin-clad figures. Cynthia was the first to spot them, and she lost no time in calling the others.

The skin-clad figures – there might have been ten or twenty of them, it was difficult to tell at first glance – seemed to hesitate, uncertain of the next move. Then – “Yes, I think so,” one of them was heard to say, and they came swarming. The defending forces transferred their attention from port to starboard. The savages whooped, brandished the ugly-looking clubs that they carried, and started to climb aboard the wagon. The defenders promptly pushed them off again. Cynthia stepped coolly on the fingers of one who tried to assail the starboard bow – not hard, just enough to make him let go. He fell off in a hurry, nearly falling under the wheel, but a comrade dragged him clear. Barker, Dave noticed, seemed to have acquired a chunk of false hair from somewhere.

“Here, what’s all this?” came a high carrying tenor above the general sounds of the melee. “Cut it out, you lot. Go away at once.” It was the scoutmaster, Mr. Horton, splendidly attired as a blond-bearded sea-captain of old, come at the head of most of his troop to intervene. Dave let his breath out, spared a glance at the pirate float. This had taken the opportunity to push

into the procession in the spot vacated by the Scouts. he didn't get it. It all seemed so utterly pointless. And what connection had skin-clad savages with a space-rocket?

"What's your college?" asked one of the savages of the Scouts.

"That is none of your business," said Mr. Horton. "Go away."

"Let's get 'em," a savage suggested, and the whole band advanced menacingly upon the Sea Scouts. "Steady, lads," said Mr. Horton over his shoulder. One of the savages took the opportunity to bring down his club on Mr. Horton's head. He may have struck harder than he intended, or Mr. Horton's headgear may have been less solid than it looked, but Mr. Horton promptly slumped to the ground. The savages seemed temporarily at a loss, and made no objection when two of the Sea Scouts picked their skipper up and lifted him bodily aboard the wagon, where the S.F. Circle ministered to him. This left the savages face to face with the sailors. The savages were armed with clubs. The sailors, however, were armed with oars – and in a mood to use them. "Be prepared!" sang out a coal-black sailor (in real life a coal black Sea Scout), raising his weapon aloft with a flash of white teeth. The savages fell back, muttering among themselves.

All this time, Russ and Geoff had continued to push Jean along in the wheelbarrow, for want of anything better to do. They weren't at all sure what was going on, but no alternative course had so far seemed to indicate itself. Now, however, they turned to take evasive action as one of the savages said "Let's get the dame," and the gang moved in on them.

"Up here," said Dave. "Quick." He was standing at the tail of the wagon. he have a hand to Jean, and in a trice she was aboard. Dave made a split-second judgement. "now the barrow," he decided. There was time – just. The two youths handed the thing over the tail, then swarmed over themselves. The Sea Scouts, too, were swarming aboard. The wagon was now distinctly crowded, but the horses responded nobly and never faltered in their steady plod. Sea Scouts and fans took their stations all round, ready to repel boarders from whichever direction they might materialise. And gradually the situation stabilised itself. The pipe band still led boldly, followed by a half-dozen of the Sea Scouts with their two handcarts. then came the pirate float, then the S.F. Circle wagon, the savages in a bunch followed the wagon at a discreet distance, and the Amateur Dramatic Society and the others continued as before.

Dave wormed his way up to the front of the wagon again, and laid his

hand on Shirley Gould's shoulder.

"How you doing?" he asked. "OK?"

"Bit of a load," she said. "What's going on, anyway – or shouldn't I ask?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Dave. "Looks like an organised attempt to break up this part of the procession – though I can't imagine why. Anyway, I think I see a way out. Can you follow the band – wherever they go?"

The girl nodded. "if the cart will go through."

"Fair enough." Dave gave her shoulder a squeeze, and moved back down the wagon again. Mine looked at him interrogatively.

"Don't look now," he told her "– but I think I see a chance."

Mr. Horton was now sitting up, wearing a somewhat dazed expression and rubbing his head. Dave spoke a few urgent words to him. Mr. Horton nodded, and clambered unsteadily to his feet, a Sea Scout supporting him.

"What are you trying to do, Dave?" Mine asked as Dave squatted beside her.

"I want to try to turn the procession into the Puritan's Arms yard. Mr. Horton's an expert with the megaphone – he's just the man for the job."

"And then?"

"Well. Either the pirate float goes in too, or it stays outside. If it goes in, then it'll have to come out the same way again – it's too high for the arch at the end. If it carries on along the road, then it'll be isolated and the marshals or somebody can deal with it at their leisure."

"And the wild men?"

"I'm not sure – but I've a hunch that they're somehow connected with the float. That's what I'm banking on, anyway. The float is the key piece – I hope." He rose again and stood by the megaphone. He judged the distances ahead.

"Ready, Mr. Horton?"

"Aye-aye, sir."

"Right then – now."

Mr. Horton took a breath, put a hand on the mouthpiece to steady himself. "Baaaaand – aaaand – draaaahms... laaaaft – wheel!" the last word came out in a short sharp squeak. Dave looked ahead anxiously. Would they respond? Technically they would be perfectly justified in taking no notice – in which case the uneasy status quo would probably last all the way to the

Meadows. His heart sank – they didn't seem to. Then one drummer wheeled round smartly. That was enough. the others took his lead, and the crowd parted ranks as the five-piece band marched through them into the open end of the inn yard.

“Follow the band, lads,” sang out Mr. Horton through the megaphone. “Follow the band!” The two handcarts obediently followed in the pipers' wake.

Now came the turn of the pirate float.

Momentarily, the float made as if to follow the handcarts. Then it wavered, as if the driver suspected that he was being led into a trap, and turned back again into the direct line of march. Shirley Gould swung her horses to the left, and the wagon turned into the yard. Dave looked anxiously back at the savages now. What would they do? They seemed to be unsure of themselves. They looked at the pirate float, then at the S.F. Circle wagon, then back at the pirate float again.

“That's them!” declared one of the savages suddenly.

“Let down their tyres!” shouted another.

And next moment the whole gang had broken into a run and was swooping on the pirate float. The legitimate displays were free and intact. Another pair of horses was entering the yard now – it was the amateur Dramatic float. Dave called to Shirley Gould to woah her team.

“Right, Mr. Horton,” he said as the wagon ground to a halt. “I suggest that you take the opportunity to re-form your squad. I'd be obliged, though if you yourself would be so good as to stay aboard until we get back on course.” he was not deliberately guying the scoutmaster by addressing him thus – it just seemed the obvious way to express things in the circumstances.

“Aye-aye, sir,” Mr Horton responded readily, and at his word, the Sea Scouts promptly abandoned ship again and marched off after their handcarts.

“Away all wheelbarrows,” sang out Dave, and the tailpiece of the Circle's exhibit was restored to its rightful station. “Driver – forward!” and the horses, now relieved of much of their previous burden, plodded through the low arch and continued on their way.

Some ten minutes later, the wagon swung back on to the official route once more. there was no sign of either the pirate float or the savages. Behind followed the Amateur Dramatic Society, the Townswomen's Guild, and all the other club-and-society entries. Bert flapped his wings energetically. Barker woofed happily into the three-stage megaphone. Ian pumped the

treadle of the non-functional machine. Before them the Sea Scouts marched proudly, each bearing his oar. The band came to the end of a number, and the procession continued to the roll of the two drums.

Thisbury Fandom had come through with flying colours, and everybody was happy. Particularly Owen, who had a full record of the proceedings on film. Both the *Echo* and the *County Gazette* would be very interested in what he had to offer them.

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The wagon debouched at last on to the Meadows, paraded past the judging stand, and joined the huddle of entries that had already arrived. The rest of the club-and-society entries crowded in on top of it, the schools procession duly arrove, the judges retired to consider their verdict over a couple of crates of appropriate refreshment, and then it was time for the prizegiving. “I am going to call out the names of the prizewinners,” the announcer bumbled over the echoing loudspeakers. “Would each exhibit please proceed straight to the judging stand as it is called. I will repeat that...”

The first prize, amid loud and enthusiastic applause, went to the float from the Over-Sixties Club, which duly moved forward to receive the trophy and paraded round the perimeter to sustained huzzahs. The second prize went to the Sea Scouts, who, Mr. Horton striding proudly at their head, marched their handcarts across and then round as the old people had done. And then the third prizewinner was announced – the Licensed Victuallers’ Association float. “Who paid for the drinks?” somebody called as they moved out to follow in the wake of the Sea Scouts.

The Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle heaved a collective sigh.

“Nobody loves us,” said Owen. “Still, it’s been fun and all that jazz.”

“Well, I ask you,” put in Cynthia “– how could they possibly have given us a prize when you were waving your pet anachronism blatantly in their faces as we went past?”

“Yes, Owen,” added Mine. “You might at least have lain down out of sight with it if you wanted to get a picture.”

“The camera cannot lie,” Bert intoned.

The Licensed Victuallers completed the circuit, and the arena was momentarily deserted. Then the loudspeaker blared into echoing life again. “That was the prizewinners,” it bumbled. “There are also a couple of special commendations. Would they please come to the stand as their names are

called. I will repeat that...”

“Too late,” said Ian. “The acoustics have beaten him to it.”

The first of the special commendations went to the children of the Joseph and Mary Convent School in an entirely secular representation of a troupe of child entertainers. The children’s float moved over to the judges; stand amid applause.

“and now...” bumbled the loudspeaker.

“The Townswomen’s Guild,” said Mine.

“The Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle,” the announcer corrected her.

This was something, anyway. Heartened by this late egoboo, the participants took their places on the wagon which moved out into the arena. Owen managed to remain reasonably concealed as he photographed the stand this time. Dave stepped forward to shake hands with the president of the judging panel – the local M.P., Mr. Martin St. Martin – and receive the scroll, the wagon paraded round the perimeter – and the show as over until it was time for the evening fireworks and ox-roast.

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An hour or so later, Theo dropped down the Turtle’s ladder into the clubroom. It was occupied by Dave, Cynthia and Barker, the last of whom thumped his tail a couple of times in lazy greeting to his partner. The Nullgray Mouser, still somewhat apprehensive of Barker albeit needlessly, was safely in position on top of the bookcase. Dave and Cynthia were still in costume – costumes were to be worn all evening by special request. Theo had hardly had time to sink into a convenient chair when there were footsteps on the gangway, and a knock on the hatch.

It was the pageant director cum museum curator, who was readily welcomed aboard. Dave sat him down and poured him a drink. There was plenty on hand, it having been laid on for consumption that evening. The whole Circle would be there, including Tom. Shirley Gould had also accepted an invitation to attend – although she admitted that she had not the slightest interest in science fiction. “Unless there are horses in it of course,” she had added as an afterthought.

“I’ve come to give a personal word of thanks for the effort your lot took,” said the director. “I’m sorry you didn’t get a proper prize – still, you had some stiff competition I’m happy to say. And also I’d like to apologize for the bit of extra-curricular activity in which you were involved. I

understand you kept your heads in most praiseworthy fashion.”

“Er – it was the Sea Scouts more than us,” said Dave, and watched Cynthia’s face – she was sitting behind the director – go quietly deadpan. “We were just along for the ride.”

“So I understand,” said the director. “I’ve just been speaking to Mr. Horton about it. He surprises me, that man – certainly has a cool head for an emergency.”

Dave agreed. “By the way,” he asked. “What was it? – we’re dying to know.”

“Students from Oxford, so I’m given to understand,” the director told him. “An unruly lot at the best of times. I’m a Cambridge man myself of course.”

Oxford. That rang a bell. Dick was at Oxford. Dick seemed hardly the type to organise a students’ rag. There might be a connection though...

They afterwards learned that Dick had been the unwitting cause of the trouble. He had talked about his town’s millenary celebrations to his fellow-undergraduates, and some of them had conceived the idea of gatecrashing the proceedings. Now Sidcup College, as any Oxford man will tell you, is situated next door to Boswell College, and the two colleges have a tradition of undergraduate rivalry going right back to the middle ages. Sidcup’s plans had somehow leaked – or, more probably, been leaked – to Boswell, and the latter institution was thus morally bound to take a hand itself. So the two gatecrashing parties had taken shape. Sidcup had smuggled in the space-rocket float, and attempted to crash the procession at what seemed the appropriate point. Boswell had chosen to represent the tenth century B.C. rather than A.D., and their main objective had been to sabotage the Sidcup float. The two adjacent sf-slanted displays had confused them, and they had picked on the wrong one. The Sea Scouts promptly rallying to the aid of their allies had confused them still more. Dave’s happy idea of arranging for the procession to excrete the Sidcup float had finally straightened everything out, the Boswell savages had demolished the Sidcup float, and both groups of students had made a successful getaway in the confusion, leaving only the (hired) pickup lorry standing with flattened tyres amid the debris.

“I still think you ought to have taken the credit for what you did, Dave,” Cynthia told him after the director had departed. “It’s a shame to see that ninny of a nincompoop grab all the credit for simply doing what he was told.”

“He did bring his boys to our rescue,” Dave pointed out.

“What’s all this?” asked Theo, interested. “Somebody been stealing our egoboo?”

“No,” said Dave. “We’re giving it away free. It’s our good deed for the day.”

“Whatever for?”

“Well, the Sea Scouts are our friends – and they can always do with that sort of publicity. Whereas it doesn’t really matter to fandom either way.”

“We didn’t even get a proper prize thought,” Cynthia lamented.

“So what? We kept our exhibit intact, so that anybody who would have benefited by seeing it got a chance to see it. That’s the main thing. You must learn to take a fannish view of things. Theo’ll agree with me anyway.”

“Of course,” Theo duly agreed. “So will Cynth when she begins to grow up.”

Cynthia put her tongue at him. “By the way,” she changed the subject. “As you’re here, you might as well put your great brain to work on Dave’s problem.”

“What – another one?” Theo asked.

Dave explained. “I’m trying to straighten out an incipient anomaly. Master David of Port Able has just brought his flagship safely to port through pirate-infested waters. Now this he has accomplished largely by the magnificent display of seamanship that is only to be expected of the High Admiral and Merchant-General of the Free City. However, he has been rendered valuable assistance by a mysterious fleet of small-boat mariners known as the Watchers – or possibly the Observers – of the Ocean Ways. Now the point is – how can they be most conveniently accounted for?”

Theo leaned back in his chair.

“Now let’s see,” he mused. “In which direction was Turlang last seen heading?”

Chapisode Ten

Fandom Displays Its Sense of Civic Responsibility

Mr. Martin St. Martin, Member of Parliament for the Thisbury Division, was made a Baron in the New Year's Honors. For reasons of high state the parliamentary writ was applied for immediately, and Thisbury was thus plunged into a winter by-election.

Thisbury itself is a town of small industries, and its population tends to be pretty evenly balanced between Conservative and Labour supporters. The constituency, however, takes in a large rural area to one side of the town, and thus as a whole constitutes a safe Conservative seat. The interest in the election was therefore based not on who would win – which was a foregone conclusion – but on how great a majority the Tories would be able to romp home with.

The Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle included various shades of political opinion. Harry the First sat on the Borough Council as a member of the so-called Municipal Party, by which designation was indicated by the conservatively-minded element of the local citizenry. Harry the Second, on the other hand, was a staunch and voluble Labour supporter. Owen declared that if he'd been old enough to vote he'd have voted Liberal like a shot if there'd been a Liberal candidate – which there wasn't. Dave, who was old enough but lived at Upside Down which was in the next constituency, tended to distrust the Conservatives on principle but admitted that their practice was usually better than their principles. Cynthia, who was in any case far too young to have the vote, held somewhat similar ideas in a more extreme form and maintained that the whole thing was a farce – it wouldn't matter which party won. And Mine, who both had the vote and had it in the right constituency, couldn't care less on the grounds that her heart was now in Much Wenlock and her body would be following before many months.

It was Tom who dropped the bombshell – nice gentle Tom, whom unfortunately they seldom saw nowadays. He wandered along every now and again, however, when he could get away – there was somebody aboard the

Turtle most nights, and he needed the refreshing company. He clambered gingerly down the ladder, found a sextet in occupation, was welcomed aboard, and grabbed a chair.

“D’you know who’s been picked for the Conservative candidate?” he asked them when he was comfortable.

Everybody admitted ignorance.

“Arnold Horton.”

This was received in silence. Then...

“Who’s Arnold Horton?” Owen voiced the thoughts of the company.

“You know – the scoutmaster.”

Pandemonium broke loose at this. “You mean him?” – “That Horton?” – “Our Mr. Horton?” – “Didn’t know he had a Christian name.” – “Never!” – “Tom, you’re kidding!”

“I am not kidding,” Tom assured them. “That’s what I thought, too, when I heard. No, it’s the truth all right. So it looks as if we’ll have a bit of influence in high places from now on.”

“But fancy,” said Dave. “Him of all people. Oh, he’s harmless, and well-meaning, and...”

“And a nincompoop,” Cynthia finished for him. “How bloody ridiculous can you get – I ask you? He won’t understand the first thing...”

“Our Cynth sounds worried,” said Owen. “I thought you said it was all a farce anyway, Cynth.”

“Oh, that. But this is worse than a farce – sort of like a farce within a farce.” She spoke forcefully. “What party they belong to doesn’t matter a damn – but at least they can look as if they know the difference between a – a foreign policy and a duck-billed platypus.” Bert seemed to be about to make a pun, but (for once in a way) thought better of it. “Damn it – he might give the order that starts the third world war.”

Mine had not, so far, contributed anything to the conversation. Now she took the opportunity to put her spoke in.

“I very much doubt it,” she said quietly. “I can see him in Parliament all right – but only on the back benches. They need back benchers as well as front benchers, you know – and he’s almost the ideal type when you come to consider. He’s got the right accent, and harbours the right well-bred sympathies, and knows how to take orders...” – here she glanced at Dave for a moment – “...and can be relied on either to parrot off the right responses or dry up and let someone else come to the rescue. Admittedly, any of my kids

would be more of an asset to the country...”

“Oh, what’s the use arguing?” put in Cynthia again. “It makes me sick, that’s all, just to think of it. That nincompoop...”

“Anybody know what the Labour bloke’s like?” Dave asked.

“An estate-agent,” said Ian.

“Accountant,” Tom corrected. “Keen and young and if he does well here they’ll let him try somewhere else next time. Perhaps.”

“They should’ve had a woman,” said Ian. “At least that’d have given us something to look at.”

Mine shook her head. “If they ever find a woman they think is a suitable candidate,” she explained, “they hang on to her carefully and run her where she has some chance of getting in. Otherwise there’d be no women M.P.s at all.”

“Somewhere like Much Wenlock, for instance?” Owen suggested.

Mine blushed scarlet, then laughed. “Much Wenlock isn’t a constituency,” she told them. “It’s in The Wrekin. And it has a man M.P., anyway.”

“I wrekin Mine’s been investigating the locality,” said Bert.

“That pun,” Dave rejoined, “is positively wrekin.”

“Let’s talk about something cheerful,” said Owen. “Are we getting a block booking for the front row at the Woodlice?”

The Woodlice were of course one of the best-known segments of Merseyside’s contribution to the national entertainment scene. It transpired that one of the quartet, hight Stan Oliver, had been born not on Merseyside but in Thisbury, his parents having moved to Liverpool when he was nine (or possibly eleven – accounts differed). So, although Thisbury had no hall anywhere near the break-even size for a top hit group, it had been deemed good publicity to arrange a concert in Stan’s old home-town. The Town Hall had been booked, and the youth of Thisbury and district had queued all night for tickets. Needless to say, there were now no singles to be had – let alone block bookings.

Ian shuddered expressively. “Better death,” he intoned.

“Oh, they’re not all that bad,” said Cynthia. “Quite fun as these things go. At least they’re alive – which is more than can be said for Sinatra and those.”

This was deliberately intended to needle Ian, which was duly the case. “There’s more life in Sinatra,” he informed her, “that in both of us put

together.”

“Oh,” said Cynthia disinterestedly. “We’ll have to try it some time and see.”

“They’re better than the Beatles, anyway,” said Bert.

“Only because they have crew-cuts,” said Owen. “So they can actually see their instruments when they play.”

“Only one of them can even read music,” Ian argued. “And that’s the drummer.”

“Yes,” said Owen with a wicked grin. “They tell me he plays the drums trumpet style – like Louis Armstrong.”

After which they talked mildly about sex for an hour or so.

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Worse was to follow, however. After the Woodlice concert had been sold out weeks in advance, it was discovered that it was timed for the eve-of-poll night – and both candidates wanted the Town Hall for their final meetings. If there had been any question of any one other building in Thisbury being of sufficient size, the concert would probably have been cancelled. However, inasmuch as only one party at a time would have been able to use the Town Hall in any case, the concert gave the Town Clerk a valid excuse to avoid having to decide between rival political claimants whose applications arrived virtually simultaneously. So the concert was On, and the politicians were out in the cold – literally. Both candidates protested loudly and volubly, not to mention at considerable length, until somebody pointed out to them that their exasperation was giving them an anti-pop-music image that would probably cost them both a good slice of the early-twenties vote. So with a bad grace they settled for the inevitable and arranged to hold their rallies in the open air – the Labour Party in the Square, the Conservatives on Galley Meadows.

There was less than a week to go before polling day when Owen, still handsomely bearded, climbed down into a nice warm Turtle to find Cynthia holding forth to an audience of Ian, Russ Harbottle and his Jean, and Geoff McNab. She looked up. “Come and hear the latest,” she invited.

“What latest?”

“About Arnold.” Since they’d realised that Mr. Horton had a given name, Thisbury fandom had unanimously begun to call him by it – strictly behind his back, of course.

“What’s he done this time?”

“Oh – he was only going to have the Sea Scouts operating a hot dog stall

at the Tory rally next Wednesday.”

“Well – that’s a legitimate way of earning themselves a bit of the necessary, surely? Like their bob-a-jobbery lark.”

“And having the Labour parents withdrawing their sons from membership en masse? It’s annoyed a parent or two finding that Arnold’s a Tory anyway.”

“Well, what’s to prevent them having two stands – one at each rally?”

“Only the little matter of Arnold’s reluctance to help warm the bellies of the other mob. Anyway, he’s been sat on, and the Scouts aren’t getting their feet wet at all.”

“And so the noble and merciful task of providing succour to frosted supporters is to be left to crass commercial interests, is it?”

“Private enterprise,” said Geoff. “Tories are all for it. Haven’t you ever noticed?”

Owen had hold of the germ of an idea, though. “Where were the Scouts going to get the stall from?” he asked.

“They’ve already got it,” said Cynthia. “Part of their camp equipment. They eat them at night while singing clean songs round the old camp fire.”

“D’you think they’d let us borrow it?”

Cynthia stared at him. “Are you suggesting that we should soil our splendid souls by flogging hot dogs to chilled Conservatives?” she demanded. “Because if you are, it’s the best idea I’ve heard since the seat became vacant. We could pay rent for it, too – they wouldn’t have to know officially why we wanted it.”

“Would Arnold allow it?” Russ Harbottle put in.

“So long as we promised to keep it in the Meadows I think he’d jump at it,” said Cynthia. “Anyway, it’s only a sort of large open pot over a burner. If it’s no sale next door, we shouldn’t have any trouble in laying one on from somewhere. And since we’re right on the spot to start with, we’ve got a perfect pitch. We can’t lose.”

Dave, when he heard the plan, was not so enthusiastic. Whilst an election’s a necessary evil, he grumbled, there was no point in encouraging them to make a habit of it. Even Mine’s more humane instincts were not such as to prompt her to spend an evening standing around in the open at that time of year for no better reason than a political pep-talk she couldn’t even listen to. “What you mean,” Cynthia informed her point-blank, “is that you’re beginning to feel your age. The lot of you. Talk about life beginning at forty

– in Thisbury it stops at twenty.” She grinned engagingly to take the sting out of her taunt. “But it’s true, Mine. It’s only the younger element that’s keeping us going. If you old ’uns can’t handle it, we will.”

“With the youngest of all in full command, eh?” said Dave.

“Ultimogeniture comes into its own at last.”

“Ultimogeniture with the light brown hair,” warbled Bert Duckbarrow. So with one accord the two girls joined forces to take what they considered to be appropriate action. Owen grinned at the others.

“I guess Mine’s still young at heart after all,” he stage-whispered.

•

Even so, it was only those who were indisputably young in body who chose to participate in the hot-dog kitchen. And not even all of those – Ian wasn’t interested, and Jean was going to the concert with a party of girls. But Cynthia managed to muster a trio of male assistants to stand beside her – Owen, Geoff, and Russ Harbottle. The not-quite-so-young element had at least raised no objection to the Circle’s treasure-chest being invested in hire of a plant and purchase of raw materials, and everything was assembled in good time. The weather was ideal – there was snow on the ground and ice on the water, but virtually no wind, and the stars sparkled brilliantly in a clear black sky. The meeting had been set up for the landward side of the Meadows, and a battery of floodlights illuminated the site. The hot-dog kitchen – a large open pot on a glowing brazier, the whole barricaded by three benches – was erected on the back right at the head of the Turtle’s gangway. There was, it had been decided, no need to advertise the project in any way either before or during the event – the brazier’s friendly glow coupled with subsequent word-of-mouth should soon start bringing in the custom in satisfactory quantity.

Cynthia removed her mittened hands from her duffle-coat pockets in order to spread them sensuously before the blaze.

“There is a terrible famine in Detheim,” she improvised. “The Grand Duchess Peracynth has ordered Wenmo, her palace steward, to throw open the grand ducal kitchens to the populace.” She spoke in the third person, as had become customary when they operated in the floating world.

“What about these two?” asked Owen (alias Wenmo above-mentioned). “They’re not in it.”

“We are now and away,” said Geoff. “Nab MacGeoff, soldier of fortune, liable to turn up in anybody’s country without warning.”

“What was it Mine called me?” Russ reflected. “Bottle-nose the Hard, the notorious international spy and cattle-thief – at your service, your Gross Grace.”

“The famine was probably caused by his depredations in the first place,” said Owen.

“But I – I mean he – has unconditionally donated ten per cent of his haul to his noble light-o’love in order that her subjects may not starve.”

“Do you mind?” put in Cynthia abruptly. “What’s all this ‘light-o’love’ business?”

“Well, dark-o’love then. They still nourish an uncontrollable passion for each other, although they are unable to marry owing to too marked a discrepancy in their ancestry. Also of course, Jean wouldn’t let me – him.”

“Not accepted,” Cynthia ruled (as was her right), this correcting the record on that particular matter.

“How does Jean come into this?” Geoff asked.

“She gets the other ninety per cent of the takings, of course.”

“And all that Nab MacGeoff gets out of it,” remarked his alter ego, “is the knowledge that he is serving his fellow-mortals as best he may. That and a brief tumble with a stray serving-wench behind the corn-bins, of course.”

“The palace serving-wenches are entirely at his disposal,” Cynthia announced graciously. “One or two of them may cast roguish eyes on Bottle-face...”

“Bottle-nose, please.”

“Correction accepted. But fearing the wrath of the maiden Jean, currently occupied elsewhere in combating arthropodic infestation with her powerful magic, he turns his eyes virtuously away.”

“He seeks audience with her Grand Duchesty.”

“Audience granted – he may kiss the hem of the Grand Duchess’s gown while he prostrates himself.”

“Look out,” said Owen. “Customers.”

“Fuzz,” said Geoff as a couple of helmeted figures loomed up in the starlight. “Oh-oh – bet there’s a by-law against flogging hot dogs after six o’clock or something.”

The police greeted them affably enough, though. “This is your boat?” the spokesman asked, which they freely admitted. Then; “How long have you been here this evening?”

“I’ve been here the better part of two hours,” Owen told them.

“Been outside all that time?”

“No – one of us has been at the brazier continuously for about three quarters of an hour.”

“You haven’t noticed anybody you didn’t know in the vicinity of any of the boats, I suppose?”

They hadn’t – nor, come to that, anybody they did know. There was nobody aboard the Turtle now, and Cynthia thought that one or another of them had looked in every compartment aboard.

“Who are you looking for?” asked Owen.

“Geordie Watts – late of Dartmoor. He’s been seen in Thisbury this afternoon.”

Just to be on the safe side, Owen showed the two constables over the Turtle, then, since under a long-standing arrangement for mutual protection they had a key to the Sea Scouts’ barge, he showed them over that as well. There was nobody at home, by invitation or otherwise, on either vessel. The police spokesman thanked Owen as they moved on to look over the next boat. “If you should happen to see anything suspicious, there’s a sergeant over by the platform,” was his parting message.

Owen rejoined his confederates, who by now had made the first sales of the evening.

“What’s Watts doing in Thisbury, anyway?” asked Russ through a mouthful of perks.

“Supposed to be on his way to Glasgow,” Owen retailed. “He comes from there.”

“I thought he was a Geordie,” said Cynthia as she slopped mustard on the finished product. “Ninepence, please. Thank you. So why Glasgow?”

“He is a Geordie – but not the Tyneside variety.”

“I didn’t know there was any other variety.”

“Any Scot will answer to Geordie if his name’s George.”

“Oh, damn,” said Geoff. “And me a hundred per cent quarter-breed Scotsman.”

“Shut up and pass some more rolls,” said Cynthia.

For a while the quartet concentrated on the trade. Then: “Look who’s here,” said Owen as Harry the Second materialised in front of the stall.

“Ninepence each, Harry. Or seeing as how you’re a friend, sixpence.”

“Whatever are you doing here, anyway?” Cynthia asked.

“Heckling. What else? I’ll have three please – and I’ll pay for two of

them. The other's for me."

"If you have three you'll pay for three – unless you care to come backstage and help us instead."

"Oh all right then. Sorry, mates – no time to stop and talk." So he was served, paid his money, and was away back to the meeting.

Both trade and politics were now distinctly brisk. There seemed to be a reciprocal relationship, though. It went in waves – a few minutes of relative quiet on the political front brought the customers swarming like flies, for them to fall away again as the meeting livened up. All of a sudden things became really noisy – and the entire queue melted away almost like magic.

"That's our Harry," said Owen. "Taking all the trade away from us again. I've half a mind to put in a supplementary bill for the extra three threepences."

"Excuse me, boys..."

Everybody turned to face the newcomer. This was a woman, fortyish and somewhat frail, who lived in a houseboat a short distance along the bank – they knew her as Miss Stokes.

"Ninepence each, Miss Stokes," said Owen cheerfully. "Or eightpence for a resident."

"No – it's not that," said Miss Stokes – who sounded a trifle out of breath. "I – I think there's somebody on my boat."

They looked at one another again for an instant. "Ge..." said somebody. "Wa..." said somebody else – but neither of them completed the word. "There shouldn't be," Owen told the woman. "There were a couple of policemen looking all along the bank just before the meeting got going."

"I think there must be. The latch seems to be broken."

Owen put down the tongs.

"Let's go and look, lads."

"What about the..." Geoff began.

"Never get through the crush," Owen pronounced. "Hang on to the stall, Cynth. Come on..."

"I'm coming too," said Cynthia, stuffing half a hot dog into her mouth as she spoke.

"No you're not," said Russ cruelly. "Get back to your woman's work."

"You master-minded the stall," Geoff pointed out. "We'll only be a mo."

Cynthia almost followed them as it was – only the thought that three

would be as much use as four dissuaded her. Russ's crack hurt. She was, she considered, every bit as much use in a scrap as a boy of her age. This was an exaggeration – muscle for muscle, the average boy should be her master. On the other hand, an opponent would tend to make undue allowances for her sex, also perhaps let her get away with tricks he wouldn't take from another male – thereby giving her an advantage that the others wouldn't have. On balance, then, her estimate of her prowess was probably not far from wrong – though not for quite the reasons she supposed. So she stood fuming over the boiling sausage-pot while her three confederates advanced stealthily on Miss Stoke's uninvited guests.

The latch was indeed broken, and the door swung inwards into the hatchway. Below, all was pitch darkness. Owen stood poised at the top of the steps.

"Who's in there?" he called.

The three youths – Miss Stokes had remained at a safe distance – heard the sound of a sharply-drawn breath. Nothing else.

"Come on – we know you're down there. And you're on the wrong boat."

Silence.

"Anybody got the torch?" asked Owen.

"Here," said Russ. "Shall I put it on?"

"No. Be ready when I say though. You down there – come on out."

There was a stirring now, the sound of movement. Owen drew back imperceptively from the edge. Then something creaked. And again. The intruder was coming up.

"Now, Russ," Owen hissed. The beam of light stabbed out into the darkness, to reveal a close-cropped head over a wild and unshaven visage. The visage hesitated where it stood.

Owen's gaze dropped momentarily from the scene illuminated by the flashlight. His hand, gloved in undressed sheepskin, wandered along the railing at the edge of the gangway. He thought so – barbed wire. He gave an experimental tug, then another – the single strand came away easily. The wire continued along the railing of the boat itself, and when the further end came away he had a useful length of some eight or ten feet in his hand. He returned to the main focus of attention, which had stayed in obliging tableau the while.

"OK," he snapped. "Come up."

The visitor came up. Momentarily Owen stood facing him. Owen was

the shorter of the two, he noticed, by a good head. The flashlight beam never wavered. Behind Owen, Geoff and Russ stood side by side across the gangway.

“Put your hands behind you,” snapped Owen again. “Behind you I said.” He was sure it was the elusive Geordie Watts, as in fact indeed it was. “Right – now turn around and don’t move. If he moves, Geoff, you know what to do to his head.” Geoff didn’t – nor had he anything to do with it. Still, it sounded good. And it worked. Meekly, his hands behind his back, the uninvited guest swivelled round and stood there. “Cross your wrists.” He obeyed. In a trice Owen had whipped one end of the wire round both wrists at once, round again, and given the ends a sharp twist to hold them. “There. If you don’t struggle it won’t hurt you.” Briskly he stooped, slipped the other end between the man’s legs. This was the most dangerous part. But if the man had intended to make use of his feet while he still had them to himself, it was too late. Owen gave the wire another couple of twists, then stood up.

“So far so good,” he commented. “What do we do next?”

“Take him back to the camp-fire,” suggested somebody. “Then the lady can have her boat back.”

“Good idea.” Owen took a firm grip on the trailing end of the wire. “Can you hop? Well hop then.”

His prisoner hopped.

The meeting was still showing good form, and the hot dog stand was deserted except for Cynthia when the three youths returned with their haul.

“Should we take him to the sergeant, or bring the sergeant to him?”

Owen wondered.

“Right now,” Cynthia appraised the situation, “we can hardly do either. Can’t we get him into town somehow and deliver him ourselves?”

“How?” asked Geoff.

“Harry’s van of course,” Owen exclaimed. “It’ll be out there somewhere – and I can sort of drive it.”

“How do we get in it?” Geoff then wanted to know.

Owen rattled his key-chain. “With keys of course. We’re an organised club, Geoff. Keys for everything – within reason.”

“We’ll never be able to get near the cop-shop while the Labour meeting’s going on,” Russ pointed out. “Tonight the lawbreakers walk with impunity.”

“Pity we can’t deliver him to the Town Hall while we’re about it,” Owen

mused. “He’d look gear on stage with the Woodlice.”

Cynthia let out her breath sharply.

“But we can!”

“Never get in. All the police that aren’t on duty at the rallies will be barricading all exits.”

“We can get in through the Institute for Further Education though.”

“And how,” demanded Russ, “is one supposed to get into the Institute for Further Education?”

“Just walk in, silly. It’s open every night – that’s what it’s for.”

Her enthusiasm took hold of the others. Objections were brushed aside like ninepins. They had – they hoped – transport. The Institute entrance should not be blocked by the rally. Cynthia swore she knew the way. And if it could be done, it would be a giggle. Owen momentarily took the reins again.

“I’ll go and find the van,” he told them. “Meet you at the end gate. Er – who’s going to mind the stall though?”

“Cynth?” suggested Geoff half-heartedly – he didn’t want it to be himself.

“I know the way though,” Cynthia pointed out. “Owen’s got to drive. What about Russ though? He seems to know a lot about woman’s work...”

“Touché, Russ,” Owen grinned. “I’m off. See you in five minutes.”

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Geoff and Cynthia threaded their arms through those of their captive, and half-carried him as he hopped his way across the Meadows. He was shivering, Cynthia noticed, and it occurred to her that had he been reasonably warm and better-nourished than he apparently now was, his resistance to capture and subsequent transportation would probably have been considerably stiffer – even, possibly, successful. She felt a pang of compassion for him – after all, she didn’t even know what he was in prison for in the first place. However, she consoled herself that it was probably something violent and anti-social, and in any case he would shortly be warmed and fed by the local constabulary. There was nobody about in the vicinity of the end gate, although several cars were parked nearby. Then with a grind of low gears Harry’s van drew up alongside them. Cynthia gave Owen a “thumbs-up” sign as the latter threw open the rear door, and they hoisted their captive unceremoniously into the back, face down, clambering in to crouch beside him. Geoff knocked on the panel, and the vehicle ground back into movement again.

The prisoner attempted to lean up on one elbow, a difficult manoeuvre that was probably nullified as the van cornered abruptly. It was not going fast, by any means – Owen never took the gear-level above second – but the road was slippery and the corners sharp. The prisoner slewed his face round first to one side, then to the other.

“Wheer’re ye tekkin’ me?” he asked, facing towards Geoff. It was the first time he had spoken.

“Never you mind,” Geoff told him – not unkindly. “We’re nearly there, I think, anyway.”

The van cornered again, then swung round a gentle crescent. For a moment the blare of a loudspeaker could be heard – that’d be the Labour meeting in the Square. Then they drew up with a sudden jerk that knocked both Cynthia and Geoff off their balance, and the motor cut out. Owen dashed round and opened the rear door again. There was a dust-sheet or something hanging over one of the slats.

“Let’s cover him with that,” he suggested. “Then we can carry him between us.”

Cynthia suppressed a giggle as she took hold of the lower end of the sheet-draped form. Then, Owen in front of her on the same side and Geoff opposite to them in the middle, they hoisted. It was clumsy, but functional. The outer doors of the Institute gaped wide. They shouldered their way through the inner swinging doors, and then, scarved and balaclava’d to a useful anonymity, they were safely within the building.

Nobody seemed to be about. “Look,” said Cynthia. “Anybody challenges us, we put him down and run. We’ve rendered him harmless anyway. OK?” The others grunted assent. “To the left, Owen – down that long corridor.” And they moved off again. A lecturer in full cry could be clearly heard as they passed one of the classrooms. Cynthia distinctly heard the word “Quantitativistic”, and wondered briefly whether it actually meant anything, never mind what. “Round the corner,” she directed. “There, Owen – that door, with the green baize.”

They key was in the lock, and Owen turned it with his gloved fingers, pulling the door towards them. All at once the sounds of a beat group became discernible, with audience-noises not very far in the background. Cynthia stretched out a hand to pull the door to again, and the party found itself in another long corridor.

“Which way’s the stage end?” Owen whispered – albeit there was no

need for whispers under the circumstances.

“Left again – I think.” They set off to the left. Another corridor joined theirs, and the roar from the auditorium was suddenly let loose at full throttle. “Carry on,” said Cynthia as they momentarily halted. They carried on. And suddenly there in front of them were the heavy drapes screening the stage from the wings. The heavily-amplified poundings and plunkings of the Woodlice overbore the audience noises. Cynthia automatically lowered their burden’s feet to the ground, the other two accepting this as their cue to push him upright. Cynthia peeped through the curtains, then turned back with a wild and exultant grin.

“Perfect!” she enthused. “Let’s push him through.”

She seized one elbow and Owen the other, while Geoff hovered behind to help if needed. He wasn’t. Their prisoner seemed to be entirely bemused by the turn events had taken, and made no resistance as they propelled him through the curtains. “Go on,” Cynthia urged him in a penetrating whisper. “Forward.” Her two comrades-in-arms squeezed against her, looking for eyeholes. The captive stood there in full view of half the audience. One by one the instruments faltered and cut out as their drivers became cognisant of the interruption. For one short moment the noise of the audience fell away to utter silence, to break out again a moment later on a note of bewilderment.

“Come on,” said Owen, and the three of them turned and pelted back the way they’d come.

Again, there was nobody to challenge them. Owen locked the green baize door behind him again, and followed his friends down the Institute corridor. Round the corner – through the swing doors again, and there was the van parked where they’d left it. Cynthia pulled on the handle of the passenger’s door, but it was locked so she scrambled into the back again with Geoff and the dust-sheet. Owen switched on and with a grinding of gears they were away on the return journey. Very little was said, because they were out of breath. And in – it seemed – next to no time the van had drawn up again and Owen’s face appeared at the hatchway.

“Back to the banger-shop,” he told them. “I’ll follow when I’ve parked properly.”

The conservative meeting still sounded healthy and lively as Cynthia and Geoff slipped breathlessly back into the stall. “What happened?” demanded Russ. “Where’s Owen? What...?” The other two collapsed helplessly on one of the benches, supporting each other. Geoff did manage to

get through the message that everything had gone perfectly, then they clammed up as some more custom approached. All of a sudden there was a noticeable stir in the crowd, which seemed to be splitting apart. Then a party could be seen approaching at a run. Owen bobbed up just in time to meet the police sergeant, with Mr. Horton and several other eager-eyed helpers. Then they were surrounded. “What happened?” (echoing Russ). “Where is he? What did...”

“He got away,” Owen told them succinctly. “Over there somewhere. We lost him.” There was a rustle as of wings, and the eager-eyed ones were gone again.

“Oh, help!” exclaimed Cynthia weakly. “We have – been constructive! Just imagine what it would have been like if Arnold had caught the man – just on the eve of election!”

“So what?” returned Owen. “He’d still have got in.”

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Precisely how much of the story the police succeeded in learning has never been publicly revealed – though since Geordie Watts was capable of talking, it had been surmised that there wasn’t much that they didn’t soon get to know. Be that as it may, the precise means whereby the said Geordie Watts suddenly materialised on the Town Hall stage in the middle of the Woodlice concert never reached the Press – nor were any of those involved ever invited to account for their activities. Which on the whole was just as well, because certainly the latter part of those activities was somewhat lacking in mature level-headedness – to say the least. As Dave said afterwards, surely there must be some crime or other involved in what they’d done, even if there was the undoubted fact of their having captured a wanted man to be offset against it.

And even Cynthia had to admit that it could come in handy to be well in with one’s M.P.

Chapisode Eleven

Fandom Is Supposed to Be Taken for Granted

The potentates were on the move.

From mystic Wenlock, set amidst the Lands of Antiquity in the heart of the Karelian Desert, the edict had gone out and from coast to coast and beyond the kings and queens, the sultans and the samovars, made the perilous journey to assemble in full conclave at Trun the Warlock's behest. From north and south they came, from east and west, from clockwise and anti-clockwise. Even, 'twas rumoured, the terrible Mors Ambulans of The Doldrums, the hated Warl Ord of Renigard, and Utan, the detestable Orang of Turlang, would be there – for not even such as these might with impunity say Trun the Warlock nay. The conclave had been called for the time of the spring festival, when folk made holiday even from affairs of state, so few sovereigns regnant could have occasion to decline the invitation. All in all, the conclave promised to be a brave and a noble spectacle.

In the caravan of Hari the Secant, merchant and camel-driver, travelled no less than six crowned or elected heads of state with their retinues. Master David, High Admiral and Merchant-General of the Free City of Port Able, may have looked comparatively insignificant beside the puissant Queen Helmine of Minland, but according to diplomatic usage they were exactly equal one to the other – besides being personal friends and old allies to boot. Owen of Moland possessed no title higher than that of Prince – but he was his own master, and King Baroduc of the Punic Puninsula might sit no higher than he. Om, Sultan of Kulistan, ruled over a large and populous territory where womenfolk had little more than chattel status – yet he could claim no precedence over the Grand Duchess Peracynth of Detheim, who was so young that never before had she attended a conclave. And so the six rulers travelled together in friendship. With them travelled Nab MacGeoff, soldier of fortune and friend to them all, in the office of Master-at-Arms to the caravan. The merchant Hari's personal retinue included, of course, his current concubine.

The heads of state bestrode their four-humped camels on saddles carved

from the inner shell of the great turtle that dwells in the ocean meadows, each to his own saddle – for any arrangement more economical of seating-space had been deemed inappropriate to the dignity of the occasion. Even so, ruler jostled with ruler as they rode, for the caravan was by no means over-large – and the desert ways could hardly with justice be described as “royal”. Furthermore, owing to the peripatetic nature of the continent of Capricorn there were no easily ascertainable seasons of climatic inclemency. But luck was with them – no sandstorms, no camel-sickness, nothing unduly untoward occurred to mar their progress and on schedule they entered the ancient lands.

They did not linger in the city of Wenlock itself for the Warlock’s residence of Trunhold, albeit in the least of its stones as steeped in the lore of the ages, was of pitifully insufficient size to accommodate so vast a gathering. Instead, pavilions had been provided upon the slopes of the nearby mountain known as Schroppenberg, that all might be housed in fitting style. The caravan wended its way across the Seven Bridges to the foot of the mountain, and presently the six rulers and their escort were mingling with other mighty ones from far and near in the Hall of Reception.

The Warlock himself was there to bid them welcome, as was his familiar. This familiar, hight Kerbar, took the form of a gigantic hound, and possessed the power of omnipresence. Indeed, there were those who would maintain that the hound was the true Warlock and the apparent Warlock merely the familiar. Be that as it may, man and hound together greeted their guests in appropriate fashion. One guest was inevitably and deservedly singled out for special treatment – Minland’s Queen Helmine, the Warlock’s betrothed. Upon her person the Warlock and his familiar bestowed their favours openly for all to see.

“Have you decided, Warlock, on the title your consort is to bear?” asked the Prince of Moland.

“That indeed I have not,” answered the Warlock readily. “It is a vexatious question, and even my arts are not without their boundaries. However, in the presence of all now assembled I hereby bestow upon her the interim title and dignity of Myde Arling, by which style I shall refer to her henceforth.” And again he kissed the queen soundly, amid approbatory regard from all who were there – except possibly for the Master of the Pavilions, a joyless fellow like his kind most all the world over.

They moved among the throngs of their fellow-rulers as they passed towards their allotted quarters, stopping briefly as they went to greet old

friends. King Ben of Ronagate bore down beamingly upon them, Queen Parel of Kilburnia regarded them with regal approval, and King Norock and Queen Narock, joint sovereigns of the Curious Kingdom of Lig, paused in their earnest discussion with the Archduke of Mercia to give a friendly wave. The Warlock himself escorted his consort-to-be, leaving Kerbar his familiar to bid a formal welcome to further new arrivals. And it is a curious thing that although Kerbar talked in no human tongue, whatever he might say was always instantly comprehensible to anyone to whom he spoke.

Having relinquished his travelling robes and donned a semi-formal undress uniform, Master David of Port Able rejoined the gathering in the Hall of Reception. Kerbar was bidding welcome to Kensel the Fantastic, the renowned Merchant Prince of Maylorde, who had just arrived in his own caravan bearing with him, as was his wont, many costly samples of his merchandise which would be available for purchase during the conclave. Since his retinue was small and his stock large, he craved extra hands for the unloading, and Master David himself went with his following to assist in this enterprise. Long files of bearers could presently be seen passing through the Hall on their way to the spacious chamber that was to be given over to the merchandising. Then the last bale had been borne, and after having made prudently sure that his camelry was adequately stabled, Kensel the Fantastic retired behind locked doors to superintend the unbaling and display.

Within a few minutes, however, he was back in the Hall of Reception seeking the Warlock. Kerbar departed to summon his master, with whom he returned speedily. Kensel the Fantastic was long of visage as he addressed his host.

“I appear to have been robbed, Warlock,” he announced without preamble.

Politely the Warlock bade him continue.

“That bale in which I placed all those goods of greatest value is no longer with the others.”

“Are you sure, friend Kensel?” the Warlock asked with good humour. “Might not the bale have remained in advertence in the courtyard, if indeed it ever left your emporium?”

“It is not in the courtyard,” said Kensel with emphasis, “nor yet anywhere along the route ’twixt there and the chamber of merchandising. And as for your other suggested possibility, I myself affixed the bale in its panner and checked frequently as I journeyed. My Joyous Consort will bear

me out on this.”

The Warlock considered for the space of a moment. “Then indeed it sounds to be a matter of some gravity,” he agreed. “I will have enquiries of the utmost practicable diligence instituted forthwith. Where is the Lord Lanri Spin?”

The Lord Lanri Spin was near at hand, and approached at the Warlock’s summons. Certain other notables who were also present came forward in case of need.

“Ah, friend Lanri,” said the Warlock. “It would seem that a bale of costly merchandise has been spirited away from Prince Kensel’s hands, and he would fain recover it. Noticed you...”

“I would have it known, Warlock,” Lanri cut in, “that in matters of complaint I am available only between the first and the last stroke of one o’clock each morning.”

“This,” returned the Warlock grimly, “is no ordinary matter of complaint. Prince Kensel claims to have been robbed, and robbed most grievously, whilst on my territory. Search must be made at once. Whilst dallying in the Hall of Reception, noticed you anything untoward?”

“Upon my mutilated head-dress I swear,” declared the Lord Lanri Spin using a private and esoteric oath, “that nothing crossed my eyes that did not seem entirely in order. However, Warlock, I will myself look into this matter, and that with all speed.” And he departed on his errand.

The Archduke of Mercia spoke up. “In what way is this robbery so especial, cousin Kensel?” he asked. “You have, so I understand, been not infrequently robbed in the past whilst in conclave, and so long as those of Turland, Renigard and The Doldrums are at large you may expect the robberies to continue indefinitely.”

“True, cousin,” returned Prince Kensel. “But petty pilfering from the displays is a minor matter, to be as you rightly say expected so long as the Black Alliance is amongst us. This time an entire bale has disappeared betwixt the courtyard and the chamber of merchandising – and my most precious bale at that. This, therefore, is of a somewhat different complexion.”

“Should not we summon the Master of the Pavilions?” suggested King Terisog of Stensog.

“Or even the Reeve’s men?” added Queen Parel of Kilburnia.

“I think not,” pronounced the Warlock slowly. “When the high heads of state stop to seeking assistance from such sources, it is an unpleasantly

degrading spectacle. The honour of Wenlock may yet demand that such be done – in the mean time, let us attempt to set affairs in order on our own level. Friend Kensel, I would converse with you in private.”

And all for the time being went their various ways.

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Kensel the Fantastic, at the Warlock’s request, produced some merchandise of similar aura to that of the missing consignment, and followed by Kerbar they strode purposefully to the courtyard of the unloading. There the Warlock exhibited the merchandise to his familiar.

“O Kerbar,” he intoned. “Say in which direction goods such as these might have been transported.”

“This way, o Master,” replied the hound in his instantly-comprehensible speech. “The very direction, in fact, from which we have come.” He would have led them back to the Hall of Reception had not the Warlock restrained him. The Warlock flourished the merchandise once more.

“But I told you, o Master...” said the hound.

“That is as may be,” the Warlock conceded, staring hard at his familiar as he spoke. “Such goods have indeed travelled the way you indicate, as well as we know. But could any small consignment perhaps have gone by some other route?”

The familiar considered. He genuflected to this side and to that. Then again he spoke.

“Yes,” he told the Warlock. “You are right. Some of them have gone this way.”

“Then lead us thither.”

The great hound led the party across the courtyard and into one of the pavilions of the commissariat, coming to an abrupt halt before a sealed portal. The Warlock summoned a passing valet.

“What lies beyond yon portal?” he demanded.

“O m-mighty Warlock,” stammered the wretch. “Beyond lies nothing but the buttery-vault.” And at a nod from the Warlock he hastened thankfully about his business once more.

“The buttery-vault, eh?” the Warlock mused. He paused impressively. “This gives me to think, friend Kensel. Could it be that the wrappings for your bale had in the past been attached to some other commodity, whose signs and seals they still bore?”

“Indeed, ’tis so,” exclaimed the Merchant Prince with a start. “I can see

the wrappings before me in my mind's eye this minute, and they once had surrounded wine-flagons."

"How come they to be so speedily united with their brethren still in such service though?" the Warlock continued. "My arts at present tell me nothing of this matter."

Master David of Port Able, who had followed behind the party, spoke. "As to that," he said, "it may be that I can throw some light. Whilst our cousin Kensel's caravan was being unladen, a vintner's dray desired access to the commissariat pavilions and Hary the Secant, Master of the caravan in which I myself had ridden hither, arranged for the removal of some of Kensel's camels from the roadway. If perchance this bale had remained in the vicinity of the dray, that would seem to account for it all."

"Where," asked Kensel, "is the Master of the Pavilions?"

That functionary was fetched, and with the expected show of reluctance he admitted the Warlock, Kensel and the hound to the vault. None, however, was as amazed as he went the secret senses of the familiar Kerbar unerringly picked out one bale which contained not wine-flagons, but costly merchandise. Many were the protestations of inadvertence with which he restored the bale to its rightful owner, and then once again the vault was securely locked and the participants dispersed.

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The rulers who had travelled with Hari the Secant's caravan had been assigned honorary tasks, as befitted their status, in connection with the conclave. Helmine of Minland and Peracynth of Dethin had the ordering of the rolls in their care, a duty which they shared betimes with Queen Narock of Idg, the Lady Jilada of Thampen, and Patwant, Duchess of Strett. David of Port Able was acting as Marshal of Chronology, in which capacity he controlled the sequence of the ceremonies. Owen of Moland worked with him as alternate. Om of Kulistan and Baroduc of the Punic Puninsula had a roving commission to keep a royal eye on anything that the Warlock might suggest. Freed thus from many vexatious details of his hostly duties, the Warlock himself was enabled to oversee the whole with the least inconvenience. Potentates were still arriving from distant parts, and he liked to be on hand to welcome in person as many of them as possible. There was in fact no end to them, for more would be arriving on each of the days following. The ceremonies were not to be postponed indefinitely, however, and towards evening those that were available convened in the Grand Hall of

Assembly for the formal opening of the conclave.

The rituals having been complied with, the Warlock demonstrated one of the many powers that were available to adepts such as he. A magic lamp of vast antiquity, which had lain for many years in Trunhold, was activated to recapture scenes from past conclaves and other notable occasions. The great ones of the world were suitably impressed by the demonstration. Both before and after, ten-minute periods had been set aside for offerings to the Golden Goddess, who rewarded her devotees with specimens from her vast collection of ancient scrolls and parchments. Then the proceedings were adjourned, but feasting and merrymaking continued in the pavilions far into the night.

One there was amongst them who had travelled further than any – for he came in fact from another planet whence he had been brought by the Warlock’s arts (for all magic in the ancient land of Wenlock must of necessity be ascribed to the Warlock thereof). Warlford the Elect his name was, and few indeed were those who could outclass him in sheer physical stature. Though not so mighty an imbiber of beverages as some, he was clearly no slave to his pillow, for having sat till dawn wagering against King Ben of Ronagate and the others he was by mid-morning leading a debate in the Grand Hall of Assembly on the general question of interplanetary visitations. The consensus of opinion was that these were on the whole beneficial, and should be continued to the maximum extent that might be practicable. After another ten minutes of homage to the Golden Goddess, a bard of some little renown took the stand – not to demonstrate his bardly prowess, for that was known to all, but to discourse on certain aspects of bardship and allied matters. His discourse was well received, a number of the mighty subsequently raising various pertinent questions in an unsuccessful attempt to baffle the bard, after which proceedings were subjected to the midday adjournment.

At a nearby refectory which specialised in the serving of exotic dishes from the Four Provinces, the Warlock presently sat at meat. With him at table were Helmina his betrothed, Peracynth of Dethein, and Walford the Elect. The familiar Kerbar also hovered nearby.

Walford the Elect considered Helmine and the Warlock for a while, then addressed the Grand Duchess. “Your High Grace is young to reign,” he offered.

“That is so,” Peracynth agreed gravely.

“Yet you have a regal way with you. Would that I were a ruler of this

planet, that I might pay court to you in the approved style.”

Peracynth smiled. “Indeed,” she said, “thought your principality lies beyond my ken, the hopes it entertains are evidently high indeed. However, in any case such a thing might not be, for I perceive that you are old, o Elect One – as old, virtually, as the Warlock here.”

Helmine spoke. “In truth, Elect,” she said, “The Grand Duchess Peracynth even holds at a distance princes of her own age. I sometimes fear me that there will be strife over her hand betwixt my allies ere many years have flown.”

“Alas, Your Majesty,” sighed Walford. “The hands of eligible regnant ladies are few and far between, on my planet as well as here. Too many of us must always seek alliance with females of lesser stamp – or celibate remain. I trust that the passage of a year or three will see our young friend suitably matched – she was not made to sleep alone.”

The Grand Duchess Peracynth stuck out a high-born tongue at him.

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The proceedings were resumed by a consort of princes whose subjects were possessed of especial skills in the dissemination of matters disseminable. Not all the princes the services of whom had been requested were in fact present at the start of the debate, but Master David and Prince Owen, both of whom had dined quickly though adequately, sought out their missing cousins and argument soon waxed fast and furious. After the usual period of homage to the Goddess, a noble ruler to whom (by the Warlock’s decree) particular honour was that year due addressed a crowded hall. Proceedings were thereafter once again adjourned, for refreshments and enrobement. No formal robes of state, these, but thoroughly outlandish attire – for such was customary upon the second evening of a conclave. The Warlock and his Helmine appeared together richly enough clad in all conscience – but as personages of some far distant time or planet. Prince Owen and the Grand Duchess Peracynth also partnered each other in matching costume, though in their case more strange than sumptuous, with sky-blue hands and with sea-green hair. Om of Kulistan appeared as a musician from some future time, whilst King Baroduc personated some lowly artisan – a smith or a cordwainer, nobody seemed to be sure. David of Port Able arrayed himself as some strange and probably nameless beast, Hari the Secant had the appearance of some form of two-legged machine, and Kerbar the familiar had taken upon himself for the occasion the semblance of a unicorn. Although by

no means all the assembled company was thus arrayed, sufficient of them were so for their procession round the Grand Hall of Assembly to be a truly impressive spectacle. The wine flowed freely, and the company made splendidly merry. Prizes were awarded to the wearers of some of the most spectacular or original costumes, after which the finery was set aside and the masqueraders gradually dispersed to the pavilions for further conviviality.

In the chamber of the merchandising, Kensel the Fantastic stood long over his wares as they were much in demand. To him came Hari the Secant. “My lord Kensel,” the latter addressed him. “Where are the flagons?”

“What flagons mean you, friend merchant?” enquired Kensel. “I wot of none of which I ought to wot.”

“Did you not see them, my lord Kensel? Whilst in the courtyard yesternoon, I did venture to exchange a bale of trinkets from your stocks for a similar bale of the vintner’s goods, the back of the drayman being at the time towards me. I will pay you a fair price for your lost baubles. Where then, are the flagons?”

Kensel the Fantastic appeared to be bereft momentarily of the power of speech. “They are there, in yonder corner,” spoke up his Joyous Consort. “I knew not for when they would be required, so I had them placed where they would be least hindrance.”

“But... but...” spluttered Kensel, who was finding his tongue again with much difficulty. “They should not... it is not meet... tchah!” He expelled his breath, and began over again. “Merchant Hari, were you indeed to pay me a fair price for the baubles, as you call them, you would not have a camel left upon which to return to your emporium – and would be yourself in bondage for a goodly year. For, know you, those ‘baubles’ were the costliest of all my merchandise. And even had they not been so, since what hour have you been vested with the right to trade my goods – or those of any other person save only your self?”

Hari the Secant was taken somewhat aback. “I did not intend, my lord Kensel... I am quite... I assure you...” he babbled. Then he recovered himself somewhat. “I intended only to make a simple and profitable trade – I am no robber, my lord...”

“No?” Kensel exploded. “You did not intend to rob the vintner, nor the Master of the Pavilions? Has robbery a different meaning in your land than in mine?”

Hari the Secant could do naught but reiterate that he had intended no

harm, and would even now seek to set matters to rights. Everything could, he was sure, be passed off as a simple case of mistaken identity in the confusion of the unlading. Kensel would soon have his merchandise returned to him.

“That, happily, is needless,” declared Kensel. “For the loss of my most precious bale was speedily discovered, and, thanks to the Warlock’s arts, my property has already been restored to me.”

Hari the Secant’s face brightened up again.

“Then in that case...”

“We will go at once to the Master of the Pavilions and return to him his missing flagons,” said Kensel. And with a word to his Joyous Consort about the conduct of any business that might arise during his brief absence, he had Hari the Secant catch hold of the vintner’s blade and between them they bore it from the chamber.

The Master of the Pavilions had retired for the evening, but the Bearer of Sundries By Night was on duty and to him the treasure was taken. Such nocturnal presentations were not within his normal experience – nevertheless he was entirely agreeable that if indeed the bale had strayed from the buttery-vault, thence should it be returned forthwith, and the keys were fetched. Kensel the Fantastic looked somewhat askance at Hari the Secant, then shrugged his shoulders and went his way, leaving Hari to assist the Bearer in the deposition of the goods in their rightful location. Hardly had they descended the lowest step, however, when the tocsin went. Some potentate desired the Bearer’s immediate presence. And the Bearer hastened to answer the summons.

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Filrog, Khan of Khardistan, was not in his pavilion – but many others were, for the Khan had decreed it to be this night open to all. Hari the Secant’s concubine sat patiently on a seat, idly fending off with practised hand a brace of hot-blooded princelings. Upon one end of the Khan’s own couch, Grand Duchess Peracynth was deep in animated conversation with one Lord Lanri Spin and his ally Jimlin of the Wood. Patwant, Duchess of Strett – dubbed by some “the inaccessible” – lay at full length upon the same couch, in dalliance with Walford the Elect. The latter stretched, gently removed the Duchess’s arm from around his neck, and sat himself upright. Patwant pouted petulantly.

“Truly Your Grace sets a man’s pulses pounding,” declared Walford. “Nevertheless, my time is not entirely my own – I feel I cannot, in my present

status, monopolise the company of any one person, however pleasant that person may be. It is time I sought a further pavilion.” And he arose from the couch. One of the princelings, observing this, promptly transferred his attentions from Hari’s concubine to the Duchess Patwant, his company being most gratefully received by the latter.

As Walford the elect drew aside the curtain to leave the pavilion, Hari the Secant staggered merrily in. “Salvage from the wreck!” he announced blithely as he seated himself abruptly upon a vacant corner of the couch. One by one he patted various folds and recesses of his robe, which did indeed seem somewhat over-stuffed. “I promised you free beverage, and free beverage I have for you. Yea – even for you, o youthful Peracynth. The Bearer of Sundries By Night is indeed a trusting soul. Tankards to the fore!”

It is probable that his hearers understood little, if any, of his meaning. But as they merrily flourished their tankards aloft for replenishment, one and all agreed that it was indeed a most thoroughly excellent conclave. (1)

(1) Exegesis

Whilst I would expect any regular attendee of British sf conventions during the early nineteen-sixties to have little if any trouble following this Chapisode, others might. I therefore append the following explanatory remarks:

- THE SHROPPENBERG – It will be recalled that the convention is supposed to be taking place in Shrewsbury, county town of Shropshire situated on the middle reaches of the River Severn
- THE MASTER OF THE PAVILIONS – The manager of the hotel
- KING BEN OF RONAGATE – Ron Bennett (Harrogate)
- QUEEN PAREL OF KILBURNIA – Ella Parker (Kilburn)
- KING NOROCK AND QUEEN NAROCK OF THE CURIOUS KINGDOM OF LIG – Norman & Ina Shorrock, long-time leading lights of the Liverpool Group (“LiG”)
- THE ARCHDUKE OF MERCIA – Me
- KENSEL THE FANTASTIC, MERCHANT PRINCE OF MAYLORDE, & HIS JOYOUS CONSORT – Ken and Joyce Slater. Ken is managing director and virtual proprietor of “Fantast (Medway)

Ltd” (75 Norfolk Street, Wisbech, Cambs, England – PLUG) the mail-order sf specialists. Every year he sets up shop at the Convention, every year he suffers from petty pilferage. But still he perseveres...

- THE LORD LANRI SPIN – Alan Rispin. It was the 1962 Harrogate convention that first appointed him to the post of “complaints dept” – without, of course, telling him in advance. I forget which convention it was that his hat was cut up into pieces which were then sold for some fannish cause or other. I never got one, either – though I’m sure I paid for one...
- KING TERISOG OF STENSOG – Terry Jeeves, creator of the “Soggies” cartoons
- THE REEVE’S MEN – The police.
- THE LADY JILADA OF THAMPEN – Jill Adams (Southampton)
- WALFORD THE ELECT – Meant to represent a typical TAFF winner
- THE BEARER OF SUNDRIES BY NIGHT – The night porter
- FILROG, KHAN OF KHARDISTAN – Phil Rogers, a regular member of the all-night card school
- JIMLIN OF THE WOOD – J(h)im Linwood

All other characters (E&OE) are strictly fictitious. *AM*

Chapisode Twelve

Fandom Takes the Waters

“The male sex may be dominant in fandom – as it is everywhere else,” declared Mine as she deftly shelled another hard-boiled egg. “But I think there can be no question that the female sex is the superior one.”

“I don’t know, Mine,” said Dave as he sat and watched her. “I’d say that allowing for the difference in numbers, we’re much of a muchness.”

“So why am I making these sandwiches, rather than you?” Mine retorted.

“Huh? Because you volunteered, I suppose. Why else?”

“Supposing I hadn’t volunteered? What then?”

Dave glanced at Cynthia. “Well – er – somebody would have. I suppose. Somebody always does.”

“And her name’s usually Mine,” Cynthia put in slyly, the ambiguity of such usage having long ceased to cause them any bother.

“What are you trying to get at?” Dave asked.

“Look,” said Mine, warming to her theme. “For a male to be recognised as a good all-round BNF, he has to be able to do certain things. He must be able to think and speak fairly sensibly. He must be able to talk and write passably good English. He must be able to help run a duplicator, a club or a convention as and when necessary. Efficiently, I mean. So far so good. A female, on the other hand, who wishes to attain equivalent status must be able to do all these things as well as the male can. And – in addition – she must be able and willing to drop everything at any given moment and perform with equal efficiency any normal household-type chore such as cooking or mending clothes. Which makes her, if she can measure up to the double-standard, the superior sex. Er – no applause, please. Now if somebody would pass that other pat of butter...”

Dave considered for a moment. “Ye-es,” he conceded with reluctance. “But then, there are things that men do that women can’t – normally.”

“OK – name one thing that you can do that I can’t,” Mine shot at him.

“Shave,” Dave shot straight back at her, and the conversation broke up in laughter in which even Mine had to join. When the laughter had subsided a

bit, she continued:

“You may say that you know how to classify library books. Fair enough. I, on the other hand, know how to instil the rudiments of literacy into your future customers – which is just as technical and at least as important. Dave, I’m sorry to have to say this –” (not that she sounded it in the least) “– but compared to me – I – you’re only a second-class fan.”

“I think,” Owen put in, “that it’s all a Ghastly Plot to boost the female ego at our expense. Though here’s a thing though – if what Mine says is true, it could help explain why there are comparatively few females in fandom, and yet the ones that we do have are usually top-grade. Present company excepted of course.” There was another interruption while Cynthia hit him. “The mediocre male has only to do fannish things – write, talk, administer – within his limits. The mediocre female can do these things equally well – but not if she’s expected to do woman’s work at the same time. So the few who survive are the cream of the crop – shut up, Cynth, I’m being serious for once. Anyway, Mine – speaking as one who’s made the grade –” (“Curtsey to the nice gentleman” from Cynthia) “– how do you feel about your position – as opposed to ours?”

“That’s a tall order,” Mine admitted. “I don’t, a lot of the time. I suppose I simply accept it as part of the general disadvantage to being a woman. I tend to resent it at times – but that’s pretty pointless, so I try not to, and console myself that I can occasionally dodge out of getting my hands dirty or something. And then at the other extreme, I often feel a fierce pride that I can face the challenge that has been thrown at me – a challenge that would be irrelevant to a man – and beat it.”

Silence ensued briefly while the others digested this. Then: “Help!” said Dave. “I feel I’ve just been sat on.”

“Never mind, Mine,” Owen offered. “Even if you are a certificated superman, we still love you.”

Cynthia looked thoughtful but said nothing.

“By the way,” Dave changed the subject. “I had a letter from Wal Elliford yesterday. He suggests I ought to stand for TAFF – trying to drum up a slate.”

“You going to?” asked Owen.

“Highly doubtful. I don’t think I’m well-enough known or anything. Theo, now...”

He tailed off, for inadvertently he had touched on a sore point. Mine and

Theo were no longer Like That. Earlier that year, just at the end of the Easter holidays before Mine's school reopened for the summer, the two of them had gone away for a camping holiday together. By the time Mine returned to Thisbury, it was apparently all over between them. She was supremely uncommunicative on the subject, her sole pronouncement on the matter having been to absolve Theo from any suspicions of having done or attempted anything unforgiveable. But precisely what had happened was a matter that neither she nor Theo would reveal. Theo was still on good terms with Thisbury fandom – several of them (not Mine though) had in fact spent a recent week-end in Much Wenlock. Harry the Second had formed one of the party, which took care of all their transportation problems. For once in a way he had brought no girl-friend with him – “resting between engagements” was Cynthia's somewhat inapposite description of the un-Harry-the-Second-like situation, which had however reverted to normalcy by the week-end following.

Whatever had happened, though, it had clearly hurt both of those involved, and the others had tacitly avoided referring to Theo when Mine was around. However, she grinned bravely.

“He's one of the few really first-class potential candidates we have left,” she declared with heat. “I'd love to see him make the trip – though he won't, of course, because it'd mean leaving Barker behind. Even so, Dave – you're not all that much of a neo now, and I think Walford the Elect had a good point. Why don't you?”

“Why don't you?” countered Dave. “Particularly with you belonging to the superior sex and all.”

“You're better-known than I am.”

“Only because I'm the nominal editor of *Son of the Turtle*. You contribute just as much to it in one way and another, and also to fandom in general. I think you'd go over well, too.”

“And it might help to restore to me the happy laughing girlhood I once had, perhaps? No, skip it – that wasn't fair of me. I do appreciate you lot – more than you might think. And give me two or three years, I might even consider running for TAFF at that.”

“I'll sign your nomination like a shot,” said Dave.

“Tracer, of course,” contributed Bert as he clattered down the ladder with Ian. “What's this – grub still not up? Never mind – it's the early grub that gets caught by the early bird.”

“Bird lives!” Ian intoned in his turn.

“Hello, you two,” said Owen. “Where’ve you been all my life? And while you’re here – meet Superman.” He gestured towards Mine. “She can prove it, too.”

“Oh?” Ian asked blandly. “Where d’you change into your red coms, Mine?”

“In the kitchen,” Cynthia answered for her. “Any sign of Harry’s van up there yet?”

Three sharp blasts of horn chose that precise moment to announce the van’s arrival.

“No,” said Ian, still poker-faced. “We didn’t see it anywhere.”

Russ Harbottle and his Jean were still to arrive, but they rolled up not long afterwards, by which time the commissariat had caught up with the front line and all was ready for departure. It was a hot summer Sunday, and the Thisbury and District Science Fiction Circle had arranged to borrow two rowing-boats from the Sea Scouts for the day. The Sea Scouts themselves were off on some sort of route-march, their new skipper having a somewhat broader view of their curriculum than had Mr. Horton. To start with, the fans arranged themselves in two equal boatloads. Their plan was to row upstream for a suitable time, then stop for lunch. Lunch having been duly consumed, those who wanted to lie in the sun or the shade could do so whilst those who wished to explore even further upstream would take one of the boats and carry on rowing. The two parties might meet again on the way down, or they might not – there was no hard-and-fast arrangement.

The Nullgray Mouser watched them embark. He – for he was definitely a he, and fully functional at that – even followed them on to the scouts’ barge – but no further. He waved his handsome tail in disdain as the two boats pulled away on to the bosom of the river. He’d never quite been able to make up his mind about these humans. Oh, he liked them OK as people. But all this constant rushing around they did, seldom remaining aboard the Turtle for more than two or three hours at a time – almost as bad as dogs they were, honestly. And with these and similar thoughts in his mind he walked sedately back along the bank to his own craft and curled up on the cabin roof to enjoy the sunshine.

Meanwhile, back at the expeditionary flotilla:

“And so,” Dave improvised, “the little squadron set sail on the top of the tide. By the way – is this boat mine, Mine, or yours, or what? Master David’s

flagship? Or Helmine's state barge? Or are both of them guests of the Observers of the Deep? Or perhaps..."

"Shut up and row," said Harry the Second.

Both Mine and Cynthia liked rowing, and demonstrated their equality – if not their superiority – by taking their turn with the males on the two pairs of oars that each craft possessed. Jean and Harry's partner-of-the-moment (who was also named Jean) were stationed permanently at the two steering-positions, and sometimes even remembered to try to steer. Indeed, Russ's Jean once tried a few minutes at the oars, but soon gave it up because she was afraid of blisters and the only available pair of gloves (Mine's) was in the other boat. Nobody tried to over-exert themselves, and with the aid of frequent and copious draughts from numerous bottles that had with admirable foresight been incorporated in the cargo they made pretty good time upstream. It had been decided, after much vocal inter-vessel communication, that they were indeed embarked as guests of the Observers of the Deep, in order to investigate an archipelago that had recently been approaching home waters. They were in their Minnish identities for the occasion – Queen Helmine, Baron Pordave, Secretary Iano, and so on. And Harry the Second, who thought it all a lot of nonsense anyway despite his constantly being "written-in", shrugged his shoulders and winked at his Jean.

"At length," said Mine as they hovered off a secluded stretch of accessible bank, "the squadron hove in sight of land. Or vice versa – I forget which. The shipmasters consulted together, then side by side the vessels coasted along searching for a suitable landfall." She raised her voice. "'Anchors aweigh!' called the commodore." In the other boat, Owen and Russ looked at each other, then with one accord they promptly grabbed Cynthia and unceremoniously dumped her into the water. And thus landfall was duly made.

No harm was done, of course, Cynthia already being clad in nothing much more than shorts and a top, and presently most of them were in the water with her. And after that it was time for a hearty lunch, augmented by further copious supplies of assorted water-cooled beverages. Then, replete, they relaxed in the sun for a while, idly chatting now and again as something worth saying crossed somebody's mind. Harry the Second was the first to arouse himself.

"I feel like a stroll," he announced. "Coming, Jean?"

“Yes,” said both Jeans together. Russ grabbed his by the arm and pulled her down again beside him. “Not the weather for a pair of Jeans,” said Bert as Harry and Harry’s Jean sauntered off looking entirely unconcerned. But the calm had been broken.

“Right,” said Owen. “Who’s coming further up-river?”

“Me, I suppose,” Cynthia offered as she shrew another small stone into the water with another equally small plop. “Someone’s got to show an example to these old fogeys.”

“Might as well, I suppose,” said Mine. “Help to keep the youngsters out of mischief.”

“If that’s where all the spare talent is going,” said Ian, “I guess you’d better count me in.”

“Oh, I’ll come,” Dave put in. “Come on, Bert – let’s all go and leave these snogging couples in peace.” So pausing only to divide the remainder of the provisions – with the lion’s share of potable liquids accruing to those who had chosen the more energetic part – the six of them once again embarked. Bert and Owen took the oars, the two girls crowded together on the seat in the stern, and they pushed on upstream.

By and by they came to a lock. There being six of them, they portaged around it and carried on. It was now mid-afternoon, and the sun blazed down upon them with all it had. Dave and Mine were at the oars now, while Owen operated the steering-ropes and Cynthia, beside him, trailed her fingers idly in the water. Dave rested his oars for a moment and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“Now mop mine,” said Mine. Dave turned to comply, but Ian had got there first.

“I feel ready for another dip,” Dave announced. “Let’s make landfall again.”

“Are you sure there’s nobody watching?” asked Bert.

“Whyever shouldn’t there be?” Mine wondered.

“Because the Observers of the Dip might not like it.”

“Oh, boo,” said Mine. “Anyway, though, I think we have gone about far enough for today.”

“It’s a shame,” declared Cynthia. “It’s always more exciting round the next bend – that’s half the fun of boating.”

But there’s always another next bend round the next bend, too, and they pulled in to a shady spot and tied up to a sapling. Cynthia was first overboard

again – but under her own steam this time. The others followed briskly. They all still wore their swimming-costumes, and it was merely a question of throwing off the odd shirt or whatever and immersing themselves. Cynthia and Owen – who were both lively swimmers – chased each other across to the opposite bank and back. At last everybody climbed out, spread their towels to lie on, and lay half in shade, half in sunshine, fanning themselves with fronds of bracken to keep the flies off.

“I wish we could take a week of this,” Mine mused. “Carry on upstream all the time – always wanting to see what lay round the next bend, as Cynth says. In this weather it’d be just about perfect, too. A couple of tents to sleep in’d be all we’d need – one for me and Cynth, one for the rest of you, you lecherous louts. Though to even things out, I suppose we could tolerate some responsible male suitably sleeping-bagged sharing our shelter – after all, we’d outnumber him two to one. Oh, this is delicious.” She wriggled sensuously under the caress of the brilliant sunshine. “Trouble is,” she continued thoughtfully, “it wouldn’t last all week. We’re lucky if we get a fine day-off like this per year.”

“That’s one thing we’ve never got round to planning yet, is it,” said Dave. “A joint holiday, I mean. It’s something we can think about – perhaps we could try it next year. As many of us six as could manage to synchronise, plus anybody else who seemed indicated.”

“Talking about anybody else,” said Cynthia, “here they are. Listen.”

They listened. Somebody else was indeed coming – and making plenty of noise about it, too, by means of both foot and mouth. “Water,” said the mouth, as the feet pushed aside or trampled whatever lay athwart in their passage. “There must be water. This time it must go right. I have the Gift – I knew it – I feel water...”

Dave looked at Mine. Mine looked at Cynthia. Cynthia looked at Ian. They all looked at each other in turn, swivelling towards the source of the disturbance. “Haven’t we been here...” somebody murmured and left it hanging. And straight towards them came a woman that they well remembered from a previous encounter. Her face was unlined and unpainted but certainly not unattractive. Her hair, braided and plaited and bound round her head, was grey. She wore a summer frock of a medium blue that revealed a surprisingly trim figure underneath. Her shoes were practical rather than beautiful, with low broad mannish heels, and – as before – her eyes were screwed tight so that she did not see the diviner’s twig she held before her as

she walked. “Water – big water – deep water...”

In a moment she would start to trip over them, so Gift or no Gift she had to be stopped. Mine, with the others’ unspoken but unanimous instant assent, performed the honours. “Stop – please stop,” she called.

A spasm of annoyance crossed the woman’s face – but she stopped with an abrupt jerk, opening here yes and letting her hands fall to her side as she did so.

“Have a drink,” offered Owen, handing up a half-full bottle of cool beer.

The woman’s eyes widened, and she smiled. “Gracious,” she said. “We have met before. Tackton Chase.” She named a date. “I remember you very well indeed – you were fittingly called the hospitable ones. Have you milk, perhaps?”

Milk they had – equally cool. Mine located a clean mug, Cynthia poured it full and handed it up to the woman who accepted it gratefully, with a ritual murmur. She drained it almost at a gulp, so without a word Cynthia gave her a refill and she almost drained that too. There was still some in the bottom, however, as she handed the mug back the second time.

“Thank you once again,” she said. “It must be fate – unless you are of the order of water-elementals, sent to succour me in my perplexity.”

Nobody was quite sure what to say next. Mine, as spokeswoman, began somewhat hesitantly. “How – how is – the Gift?”

“I have it,” said the woman simply. “That I know. But it is so very difficult – so very, very difficult.”

“But – surely...” began Mine again. Dave, however, cut in:

“You lack the full revelation of your talents still, then?”

“Unfortunately I do. I know not why – one many not know, one may only accept. But still I keep trying. I thought that if today I was to come to the river herself, she might show me what I have. But something always intervenes.”

Mine had collected her thoughts somewhat. “You mean –” she said “– that you have all this time been trying bigger and bigger bodies of water?”

“In essence, yes,” replied the woman. “If necessary I will try the Sea himself. But not in fact all this time. I have tried other things too.”

Everybody looked quietly attentive.

“I became a medium,” said the woman.

Everybody continued to look quietly attentive, so she elaborated. “I have conducted seances. I have the full medium’s potential – I know it. I have a

spirit guide – an Indian from Tibet.”

“And your mediumship is, I hope, attended with more success than is your divination by wood?” asked Mine.

“Unfortunately, no. I also have an Opponent, who blockades me from my Indian. Every seance I took was a complete fiasco. So I had to quit.”

Up to this point, the conversation had been conducted on an entirely serious level. Now, however, smiles had to be repressed with an effort. Mine swallowed hard, and turned a bland face up to the woman. “I am sorry,” she said. “We all are.”

“More was to come,” the woman continued unexpectedly. “I bought a tarot pack and studied fortune-telling. And there, I foretold correctly precisely one half of what I attempted. No – you may smile, but it is not that simple – and” (severely) “nor am I. Whenever I told a future event from the cards, I knew within myself that the cards lied. But only half the time they lied. The other half, my inner voice lied. A lady friend of mine was big with child, and I with the cards foretold twin boys. But I knew – I just knew – that she would have one of each.” She paused dramatically for a moment. “She had the twin boys. Then I attempted to foretell the result of the Thisbury by-election last winter. I myself do not dwell in the constituency, so I could not be swayed by self-interest. The cards said that Socialist would get in. But I knew that the Conservative would win again. And so he did.”

That, nobody could help but reflect, was hardly a fair test. However, the woman hadn’t finished yet. “Then the cards foretold snow on polling-day. I knew there would be none. There was none.”

There seemed to be a loose end here, and Mine seized on it. “So you have precog – that is, precognition, too? And have you tried it without the cards, on its own?”

“Without the cards, my dear, I have no precognition. It is both or neither – but since I cannot tell which is right, it has so far been quite futile.”

“How very frustrating,” Cynthia murmured.

“Indeed it is. If it would not cause me to lose karma, I would frequently be most aggravated. Most. But I know I have the Gifts. They run in the family. My great-grandmother, on my dear father’s side, had them too. I know this, because she has told me about them in dreams.”

Bart spoke up at this. “Sort of Mendel telepathy?” he enquired slyly.

The woman completely missed the dig, however. “That’s exactly it!” she exclaimed. “Mental telepathy! It’s all part of it. It all fits together –

somehow. There must be a Pattern. If only – if only I could discern just one little corner of it!”

“But perhaps you can,” said Mine. “On two occasions now, you have been approaching water but have been stopped by us. Supposing you were to go back into the woods a few yards and try again? We won’t interrupt this time – unless you’re actually in danger of falling in.”

The woman smiled at Mine. “You have my sympathy, my dear. I will do that.” And turning sharp about as she stood, she strode off back into the shadows.

“That’s a bit cruel, isn’t it?” Owen muttered. “Tantalising the poor old girl like that.”

“No more so than it would have been if we hadn’t been here at all,” Mine muttered back. “It’s what she wants, I think. Look out – here she comes.”

The woman was mumbling under her breath now – they were unable to catch the words. Her eyes were tight shut again. The sunbeams, still like the draught from a furnace, poured full-strength on to the sparkling water and slopped over on to the bank, to be lost under the thick foliage. Everybody moved aside as she came. The light shone full on her slowly-moving legs, and then on the outstretched twig. Would it drop, at the critical moment? They held their collective breath. The twig quivered. Quivered – and moved. And all of a sudden it was pointing not downwards, but upwards.

And the next instant the thundercloud, which had crept up unseen behind the trees, burst right overhead and in a trice everybody was drenched to the skin.

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It was maybe an hour later. The worst of the storm had passed, and only a light drizzle remained. Still, there was a goodly stretch of river to be negotiated ere nightfall, and the boat with its six sodden occupants proceeded downstream as rapidly as Bert and Owen could move it. Ian was crammed into the stern seat with Cynthia – and for once didn’t feel particularly like making the most of his opportunities. Dave and Mine were located at the sharp end.

“I’ve been thinking, Mine,” said Dave.

“Congratulations.”

“You’re right, you know. Women are the superior sex.”

Mine walked right into it. “And what, may I ask,” she queried

innocently, “has caused you to see the light?”

“Because only a woman could be like that and get away with it.”

Mine took a deep breath.

“Now only a man,” she said slowly, “could possibly make a remark like that.”

Chapisode Thirteen

Fandom Resolves the Equation

“I’m going to marry Theo,” said Cynthia.

Mine crossed and uncrossed her ankles as she lay on the bed.

“Do you know what I thought you said, for a minute?” she eventually managed with a semblance of nonchalance. “I thought you said you were going to marry Theo.”

Now it was Cynthia’s turn to fidget. Nevertheless, she at least didn’t flinch, but looked Mine straight in the eyes.

“I did,” she said. “Say that, I mean. Because I am. Oh, Mine –” for the latter had now visibly turned a shade whiter under her tan “– I had to tell you first. I just had...” Her words tailed off as she crossed the room, plonked herself down on the bed beside her friend, and laid her small hand impulsively over Mine’s noticeably larger one. “I – er – well, that’s it, I am, and you can kick me hard if you want to.”

The ghost of a smile flickered momentarily at the corners of Mine’s mouth.

“Does he know?” she asked gently.

“Y...yes. Of course.” The idea had taken Cynthia by surprise. “He asked me this afternoon.”

“He – he’s in Thisbury then?”

“No...no. We met in Chipping Melton. I... there isn’t a ring yet. He – we – my mum and dad – you know. First, like.”

Mine slowly expelled her breath. Then she smiled again – quite a fair attempt, this time. “Th...thanks, Cynth,” she murmured. For an instant she patted Cynthia’s hand with her free one. “Actually, you’ve done me more of a favour than you probably realise. It’s just sort of that it hurt all at once like – but it would have done anyway. No – it’s silly, but it’s me. I know perfectly well that it’s all over between us – really, I mean – but I still kept on hoping that a miracle would happen. One minute ago – when you said that he’d asked you – I realised that it wouldn’t. So now I can begin to get over it properly – I hope.” She smiled once more, and freed her thumb to squeeze Cynthia’s hand in hers. “You mentioned your mum and dad just now. How

are you going to get round them, anyway?”

“Oh, they’ll come round soon enough.” Cynthia was no longer hesitant. “Theo’s got his own shop – a very respectable line of business to be in, far more classy than being just a butcher or a greengrocer – quite the little plutocrat, by their standards. And he’s easy to get on with – they’ll like him OK. And he’s not all that old – oh, it’ll be easy enough. They won’t too much care for the idea of my going away to live out of Thisbury – but they’ll swallow that too. They’ll have to. And they’ll be as pleased as all getout on the whole.”

“I can imagine them marvelling over how satisfactorily normal their wayward daughter has become all of a sudden.” Mine actually chuckled. Then she sobered again. “But – you are sure, I suppose? I mean – stop me if I’m wrong, but I wasn’t under the impression that you and Theo had seen all that much of each other to date.”

“I’m sure,” confirmed Cynthia readily. “I’m very sure, yes. We haven’t actually met very often, no – we’ve had a couple of secret meetings around the place that we haven’t let on about, though. But we’ve written and written and written – he sends them to me at the office, and I take them out when I sort the post in the morning. You know, Mine – it’s silly – but the first time I wrote to him, shortly after you – you know – I had the idea in my mind that somehow I could work round – if he replied – to trying to mend things between you and him. Only it didn’t work round that way at all. The more we wrote, the more we found we had in common – it was uncanny. And – we both began to get the idea that something more ought to be done about it. So it is being.”

“Yes,” Mine mused. “He writes lovely letters, doesn’t he. And yet he says he doesn’t like writing...”

“Yes, but that’s only when it’s sort of composed writing. But of course – you know that.”

Mine re-crossed her ankles again. “Tell me,” she said in a business-like voice. “Has he ever told you anything about –” the voice abruptly became less business-like – “– why we broke it off?”

“No,” Cynthia admitted. “I did sort of ask, of course. And he did say that there was no possible chance of you two coming together again. He’s going to tell me later – he’ll know when, he says.”

Mine considered this. “I’m going to tell you now,” she decided. “I see Theo’s point, I think. But this is my secret rather than his – and you have a

right to know now. It's – it was – well, trouble over Barker.”

“Barker!” exclaimed Cynthia. “But – that's ridiculous! He's a lovely dog. And you love him – and he loves you, too.”

“I know,” said Mine. “He is, and we do. But – that's part of the trouble. He's too much of a friend. It's sort of like – say – like making love to somebody while you're in the room, or Dave or somebody. And I – I just can't do it.”

“But...” Cynthia protested. “But I thought...I mean...” She found herself in an uncharacteristic state of embarrassment. Had the conversation not been so loaded emotionally, she would have found not the slightest difficulty in discussing such a subject with Mine, or Theo, or any of them of whichever sex. However, Mine made the connection and skated blithely over the gap.

“Oh, that was different. At Much Wenlock there's a whole houseful of rooms. And at the Con, Barker was usually at somebody else's room party. But when there's just a tent, and a field – well, there isn't anywhere else for him to go. One can't tell him to run away and play for half an hour – he lives wherever Theo happens to be, and when he's finished doing whatever he's doing he comes home. Oh, I suppose we could have put an old coat or something across the other side of the field and told him to watch that. And he would have done. But it would have been just an excuse to get rid of him – and I think Barker would have known it was just an excuse, too. Anyway – that's when I realised it wouldn't work. Theo isn't the least embarrassed at Barker's presence, and was surprised to find I was. But I am – and that was the end of it.”

“Oh,” said Cynthia. For the life of her, she couldn't think of anything else suitable to say right at that minute. There was a perceptible pause. “But,” she continued, “do you mean – think – I don't know – never thought of it – but anyway I'm younger than you, and more adaptable... Oh, Mine – I don't mean – you're not old, either...”

Mine took Cynthia's hand between both of hers. “I know what you mean,” she said gently. “I'm mature and you're not yet. That does make a difference.”

“But...” said Cynthia again. “You – in your case – I'm thinking – wondering – it seems callous to say this about Barker, but he won't live for ever. Couldn't you have waited or something...”

Mine kept hold of Cynthia's hand. “I feel slightly disloyal saying this...” she began.

“Well don’t say it then,” Cynthia retorted with commendable promptness.

“I want to say it. Cynth – I love Theo, as you know, in spite of all. And I love you, too. So whatever there is between you – and I hope it’s the best there is – I want to make sure if I possibly can that it starts right. And again, you’ve a right to know now. But I dare say I know Theo better, probably, than anybody else in the world at present – even you. And I can tell you this as a fact – Barkers may come and Barkers may go, but Theo needs a dog. More, in fact, than he needs a wife – though in a vastly different way of course.”

“Need,” suggested Cynthia, “is a very big word for four letters.”

“It is,” Mine agreed. “Put it this way, then. I can’t imagine him being really happy now, wife or no wife, unless there’s also a dog around the house. Theo gives a very good impression of being a contentedly self-contained character. But he isn’t. He feels the need for somebody to boss around – oh, very humanely and lovingly. But he does. You’re not really fooled by that studied ‘equality’ act that he and Barker always put on, are you?”

“Er – no, I suppose not. Not really. Barker is a dog, after all. But I thought...sort of...”

“It’s an act,” Mine stated bluntly. “A very well-rehearsed act, too, and most effective. But underneath, the relationship between Theo and Barker is entirely that of master and servant. It’s a particularly endearing instance of the master-servant relationship, with the servant undeniably belonging to an inferior order of existence and yet with love on both sides. Theo takes pleasure in giving the orders – Barker knows few greater joys than carrying them out. A classical case of symbiotic relationship in fact. So Theo must have a dog. A wife is no substitute, because devoted service is not what’s he’s mainly looking for in a wife. He’s looking for physical and intellectual companionship. It looks as if he’s found it, too. But even more, he needs to have a dog.”

“In that case,” said Cynthia trying to look unconcerned, “I guess we’ll have to have a dog.”

Mine could have cheered.

They chatted on a while longer, then Cynthia left for it was getting late. As Mine closed the front door, it suddenly occurred to her that she’d never congratulated the younger girl. Still, they understood each other without the formalities. Hard on the heels of that thought came another to the effect that

Cynthia's presence had been keeping her, Mine, from becoming too depressed. Now, with Cynthia gone, depression began to come crowding in upon her. Neither of her flat-mates was at home – they were both at a dance somewhere, and in any case she didn't feel like facing their idle chatter in her present mood. They'd probably be back soon – and the corollary was inevitable, really. Aboard the Turtle she could sit and think interesting thoughts, have a few cups of strong coffee and a few biscuits the while she attempted to put her scattered emotions into some semblance of order. It was a fine autumn night, so she slipped on a sweater and a pair of low-heeled shoes and, disdaining her trusty scooter, on her two feet she sallied forth into the darkness and turned her steps towards the Meadows.

The Meadows, of course, were never closed – it was something vaguely to do with common rights, and anyway there had to be access to the moorings. Mine stepped briskly across the short grass towards the Turtle. There seemed to be a gleam of light showing – surely nobody was up at this hour? She drew nearer – yes, a light there certainly was. And it was one of the basic rules of the Circle that no light was to be left burning when the barge was unoccupied. Possibly it was Harry the Second (and friend). Still, she was so near now she might as well knock – if she wasn't welcome they'd soon tell her. Then she saw the scooter parked on the bank – that would mean either Dave or Owen, for they both had scooters now. Such company, perhaps strangely, she felt by no means unaverse to. As she trod the gangway, she could hear the sound of the duplicator being cranked. Without preamble she opened the door-shaped hatch – it was kept shut against insects despite the good autumnal weather – and dropped down the ladder. Dave looked up momentarily, without pausing in his cranking.

“Hi,” he said easily. “Forgotten something?”

“No,” Mine returned. “That is – no. But I've just heard – Cynth's going to marry Theo.”

Dave stopped cranking on the instant, and swivelled to face her. “Never!” he exclaimed automatically, then paused. “Though on second thoughts – why, with all due respect to yourself, Mine, not? They're the two freest spirits I know. Offhand I'd say they had a damn good chance of making a better-than-usual marriage – in fact I think I rather like the idea. Who told you?”

“Cynth. He asked her this afternoon, in Chipping Melton.”

“Oh. So it's definitely the goods then.” He considered her quizzically.

“Bit hard on you though, isn’t it? I had an idea you still entertained hopes there yourself – if I’m not speaking out of turn.”

“It was rather a – shock, yes. But I’m over the worst now thanks. And I agree with you, Dave – they could make a damn good couple. I have something of an inside picture of things one way or another, and I think they’ve a pretty good chance as you say. Er – anything I can do to help?”

“Not right now, thanks – they’re not ready for collating yet. Unless you care to be an angel and rustle up some coffee or something.”

“Can do.” Mine stuck a kettle of water on the gas ring, ladled a couple of good helpings of the makings into two mugs, and returned to the main room. “I suppose there isn’t any milk?”

There wasn’t, so she picked the top sheet off a pile that lay on the table, plonked herself down in a convenient armchair and began to study it while she waited.

demonstration, as exemplified by the *Methuselah’s Children*, (she read) is vivid indeed.

Let us turn now to another theme which occurs again and again in Heinlein’s works, yet which hitherto seems to have been completely ignored. This is the question of the comparative ages of some of his “paired” characters. First, I’ll quote some examples. The novel *If This Goes On*, also known as *Revolt in 2100*, features the romance between the young and innocent protagonist and a girl several years his senior – whom he eventually marries. Part of the plot of *Beyond This Horizon* hinges on the fact that a couple of minor characters turn out to be secretly married – and again the woman is specifically older than the man. The title-character in the short story “The Menace from Earth” is a youthfully middle-aged Earthwoman who gets a few brief kicks from a Moon-born lad. (In this instance, she does finally hand him back to his regular girlfriend with a brave show of “he’s-not-really-my-typestry”.) And then there is the already-notorious *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Valentine Michael Smith, the “stranger” in question, is during the course of the narrative (on-stage or off) sexually intimate with most of the female characters – most if not all of whom are certainly older than he is, some considerably so.

We have here, then, four instances in Heinlein’s works of – to put it at its lowest common denominator – sexual attraction

between a younger man and an older woman. In at least three of the four instances (if not, indeed, in all four), physical sex is implied. In two cases the parties actually marry. There are probably other instances too that I've overlooked – and if *Stranger* is any guide, even more blatant instances can be expected in the future. This then, I think, qualifies as a running theme within the meaning of the (sexual) act, no?

The point, of course, is that in each case it is explicitly stated that the woman is older (or, to cover all contingencies, the man is younger). A quick look at the state of the subject in real life seems indicated. The accepted convention, as it is generally understood, is that the man should be older than the woman – though not, for preference, too much older. And fiction generally follows this convention. If the comparative ages of a couple are given, the man is normally shown as being older than the woman. If they are not given, one assumes (as one does in real life) that the convention is being followed.

The extent to which the convention is honoured in real life is a matter upon which a little quiet thought may lead to some surprising conclusions. Take my own case – I was born exactly two days before Daisy, but which of us was actually started first is anybody's guess (and neither of us could care less either way). But when an author goes out of his way to state categorically that the convention is not being followed, it can be assumed that he's doing it with some specific purpose in mind. Perhaps he is himself slightly fetishist towards older women (or towards younger men, if the author's a woman). Perhaps he simply tosses it in to help keep the general sexual titillation going full blast, as J.T. McIntosh sometimes seems to. I suspect that Heinlein's reason, however, is somewhat more studiously purposeful than either of the above – particularly as he returns to the theme again and again. (1)

(1) Any readers who wish to extrapolate further at this point do so entirely at their own risk. AM

(Mine turned the sheet over and continued reading:)

The notion that he in fact advocating the reversal of the convention, suggestion that men preferably should mate with women older than

themselves, albeit it helps to cancel out the some extent the effects of women's greater longevity, I reject out of hand. Although this theme of older-women-with-younger-men is very much present as I have shown, the opposite condition is also there in full measure. Plenty of Heinlein's males mate with younger females. No. What I think Heinlein's trying to say is that any conventions on the subject of age are unnecessarily restrictive in their effect, and mankind would be better off without them. If two people are sufficiently compatible in other ways, the question as to which of them is the older, and by how much, is irrelevant and should be ignored.

Whilst much has been written about Heinlein's alleged fascist tendencies (as exemplified in *Starship Soldier/Troopers* and elsewhere), what is surely an equally significant tendency seems to be almost entirely overlooked. I refer to.....

Mine looked up. "Dave," she asked "– who wrote this Heinlein thing?"

"Steve Barton," said Dave without pausing in his cranking. "It was the article I'd been held up for." Of course, Mine thought – if she'd had her wits about her the reference to "Daisy" should have told her that. "You're not forgetting the kettle, are you?" Dave went on. Mine dropped the sheet and fled to the kitchenette, where the kettle was now boiling its head off, and a minute or so later came back carrying two temptingly steaming mugs. Dave ran off a dozen more sheets, whipped the stencil off and dropped it in the waste-box, then gratefully accepted a mug and subsided into the armchair in which Mine had been sitting. Mine shrugged philosophically, glanced at the other armchair which was fully occupied by the Nullgray Mouser, and back at Dave again. "Well," said Mine, following her mood to its logical conclusion. "Armchairs are free, but cats are sacred. So stand by, Mr. Armchairman, to receive boarders." And she slid gracefully on to Dave's lap, coffee in hand, leaned back against him, and took a sip herself.

Their eyes swivelled and met. Dave smiled.

"Careful, Mine," he warned her. "This is what is known as the rebound."

"Well, it was you or Nullie," Mine excused herself. "And one can't get much fun rebounding with a cat. With at cat? From a cat? To or for a cat? Felis, a cat. Felix, a happy cat. Bert really ought to be here – we're trespassing on his Puninsula."

"'We'? Who's 'we'?" Dave delicately manoeuvred an arm round Mine's body in order to take another sip of his coffee.

“Oh, don’t be an old meanie. Eeen, meanie, Miney. I’m Miney – where’s Mo?”

“Half a mo while I drink up, then I’ll make enquiries.”

“Oh – good. You are playing.” She wriggled for a moment to adjust her perch, then brought her drinking-arm up inside Dave’s and took another sip. So did Dave. The coffee was hot, and they continued to sip slowly for a while in a curiously companionable silence, each thinking his own thoughts. Finally Dave laid down his mug on a handy chair-seat, and a moment later Mine sighed and did the same. Again their eyes met, and this time they held. Now Dave sighed too – a silly sort of sigh.

“Happy rebound, Your Majesty,” he saluted her. Her face was very close to his now, and he did the obvious thing. Neither of them seemed to be in any particular hurry to pull away.

“Whew! That was – sort of pleasant,” Dave gasped when they eventually came up for air. “Let’s try it again, shall we?”

Mine said nothing. Nothing, really, needed to be said. And Dave understood perfectly what she mean. They stayed under even longer this time – at least it seemed longer, though in such circumstances it’s difficult to tell for sure.

“It’s funny,” said Mine when they came up for the third time (or was it the fourth?) “– all of a sudden my being three years older than you seems to have become somewhat meaningless.”

“Yes,” said Dave slowly, letting the heady flavour of this stupendous moment roll exquisitely around his palate. “It does, doesn’t it?”

And their searching mouths came together again.

•

The night was still pleasantly warm, and Mine eventually dozed off on Dave’s lap. Dave felt not the least bit sleepy himself, but was content to let her, her head resting trustingly against his shoulder. (She even snored a bit.) All of a sudden she came wide awake again as the Nullgray Mouser let out a shriek of feline alarm and scooted for the hatch. Dave moved one foot – and felt something slosh.

“Huh?” he grunted. “Blasted cat’s upset something. Now what the...”

Mine took one look at the cabin floor and jumped off Dave’s lap with an automatic reflex action. “We’re sinking!” she exclaimed. “Take to the boats!” And she too sprang for the ladder.

And sinking indeed the Turtle was. That much was now obvious.

However, Dave refused to panic. He considered for a moment. “We’ve got about a foot or two of clearance plus a flat bottom,” he reminded her. “The river-bottom is flat too – and we’re tied to the bank at both ends. So we could hardly drown even if we tried.” He swept the duplicated sheets into a pile, added a couple of unrun stencils, and clasped them to himself with his left arm. “Let’s save the perishables. The library next, I think – start at the bottom shelf.”

Mine let go the ladder again, and paddled across the floor. “To hell with that,” she said. “I’ll start with the Heinlein.”

•

When, presently, the barge settled on the mud, the water was up to mid-thigh. Mine, her skirt tucked up around her waist and entirely unconcerned about what she might be showing, pulled out the last batch of submerged volumes and handed them up to Dave. The water hadn’t had a chance to soak through them, so they’d dry out with no worse effects than wrinkled and/or faded covers. Dave spread them out along the deck.

“What else can we do?” Mine asked as she poked her head through the hatch.

“Nothing much, really, until it’s light. We’ll have to get everything ashore as soon as we can of course, but right now I don’t think we can really do anything in particular. Any idea of the time?”

Mine hadn’t. “Pity,” she continued. “We could almost have made a night of it.”

“You cold?”

“Not really.”

“I’m disposed to make a night of it in any case. I don’t exactly object to your company though. And we can start salvage operations again as soon as it gets light.”

“Fair enough then. It’s hardly worth going home at this time either – whatever it is – in any case. The girls’ll be all a-twitter tomorrow, damn them.”

Mine waded back into the interior to extinguish the paraffin lamp that hung from overhead, then joined Dave on deck. Dave had cleared the books and papers away from a suitable spot, and was sitting down leaning against the cabin. Pausing only to let down her skirt – and not particularly demurely at that – Mine sat down beside him. Their arms crept automatically round each other, she sank her head on his shoulder, and he rested his against the

top of hers. For a minute or two they surveyed the field of stats that spread wide before them.

“I dunno,” Mine murmured. “I feel like making plans. Let’s make some.”

“We’ve plenty of time. I don’t want to get married before I’m thirty.”

“Thirty?” she wailed. “Dave – have a heart. When you’re thirty I’ll be thirty-three – and I want to have finished having my babies by then, thank you very much. Er – I’d like three please.”

“Oh.” Dave considered for a moment. “I think I’d sooner stick at two myself,” he decided. “Perhaps we can compromise at two-and-a-half or something. But you’ve got a point there, Mine. I’ll have to think about it.” He paused again. “Has either of us said anything yet that might be construed as a specific proposal, by the way? Or shall I – just for the record, like?”

“Kiss me,” said Mine.

And as the night moved slowly on towards the dawn, they sat there, leaning happily against the cabin and against each other, absorbed in the fascinating game of planning a joint future.

Chapisode Fourteen

Fandom Takes the High Road

Queen Helmine of Minland lay comfortably in amorous dalliance with her old ally Master David, High Admiral and Merchant-General of Port Able. The Minnish state barge floated majestically on the wide and placid waters of the lower Everest – which was flowing north for a season. And betimes they played a game they invented – they constructed, together, a fantasy world.

It had no name – any more than had their own. It resembled their own in many other details also, such as the general climate, flora and fauna, the political, social and technological setup, and so forth. The main difference between the fantasy world and their own, in fact, was that there were no continents whatsoever – simply an ever-changing complex of islands and archipelagoes that jostled each other as they moved at the whim of the equally unpredictable ocean currents.

Helmeth the Fair, High Mistress of the Minerals, ruled with benevolent hand the island of Rockground and its environs. Her rule usually extended over a varying batch of Rockground's temporary neighbours as well as its permanent ones, for the precious stones of Rockground were much sought after and the Rockgroundsmen had to fight hard and continuously to maintain their prized integrity. Once staunch ally, however, stood by Helmeth through thick and thin, and that was Povid, Dey of Taybel, autocrat of the other large island that could just be seen over the horizon from the Rockground coast. No mineral wealth might Taybel boast, yet its mariners fared far and wide amongst the lands of men and it was indeed an alliance well worthy of the name.

Now Povid the Dey came sailing to Rockground to sue for the hand of its High Mistress, and Helmeth the Fair looked upon him with much favour – for he was indeed a handsome figure of a man as well as a true and trusted friend. And so they tarried together long into the night in Helmeth's withdrawing-room, attended by none save at the Mistress's summons. And there they played a game they had invented – they constructed, together, a fantasy world.

It had no name – as indeed their own had none that they knew of. It

resembled their own world in a great many particulars, such as climate, matters biological and sociological, and numerous others. It differed from the world they knew, however, in that the islands were much fewer and larger in number, some even being of such a size that they provided enough land for two or more independent nations. And when the High Principality of Pordapple, one such nation, absorbed the neighbouring land of Silmeth, the High Prince Dayv sought to unite his house with the displaced Silmethic one by paying court to the Princess Samine. The Princess found his proposals agreeable, and was frequently from that time forth closeted in private audience with the High Prince while the formal arrangements were completed to the satisfaction of all. And Dayv and Samine, High Prince and High Princess-to-be, played a game they had invented – they constructed, together, a fantasy world.

It had no name – for their own world had none either. Many were the resemblances that the new world bore to the old – the rocks and the rains, the plant and the animal kingdoms, and the race of mankind itself, were hardly to be distinguished as to the planet of their provenance. And yet there were differences too – for continents, rather than islands, formed the bulk of the land surface. Continents that shifted indeed, according to the currents that they themselves in their journeyings created, but larger by far than the lands that Dayv and Samine knew.

In the land of Thisbria, locked in the heart of a continent called Realm, there lived a peasant lad, Port by name. Now Port loved a dairymaid called Mint, who returned his love, and in the late evenings when the day's work was over they would slip away into the meadows together. There, nestled happily in one another's arms, with none to disturb them (save perhaps other couples on similar errands), they would while away the hours by playing a game they had invented – a game in which they constructed, together, a fantasy world.

It had no name, apart from that pertaining to the earth of which it was composed – neither had their own. There was in fact a great deal of resemblance between the world of their fantasy and the world of their reality, for both had much the same ecology, whether as to the organic of the inorganic, and the way that the people lived and worked was broadly similar in both worlds. Perhaps the world of the lovers' imagination contained more wonders than did that in which they lived, for love brings forth the imagination most strongly – and besides, peasants always yearn for a

lightening of their load. So they filled their fantasy world with fabulous machines – machines that ploughed the sod, cut and baled the grain, even milked the cattle. And there were machines that travelled swiftly between one place and another, carrying thither all who wished to go.

A more important way, perhaps, in which the two worlds differed owed its being to the lovers' living in the midst of a continent. The continent, so they were told, moved. Nevertheless, so far as it made any visible difference to their lives it might just as well have been still. And so the continents – and the islands as well – that rose above the waters of their fantasy world moved not at all, so far as the individual human being was able to discern. Only the waters moved, as the river that ran through the cornfields moved.

In this world there was a land called England, that lay on a large island in the northern hemisphere. And somewhere in the heart of England, upstairs in some remote hostelry – it matters not where nor what – a young scholar by the name of Dave Portable relaxed with his lady-love, the beautiful and intelligent Mine Smith.

Dave opened his eyes.

“Hello darling,” he said. He breathed out with a cross between a gasp and a tender smile. “I’m tired.”

“Mmmmmmm,” said Mine contentedly.

•

Dave and Mine were married quietly in the Thisbury registry office, and after a suitably noisy reception at – of course – the Upside Down Women's Institute, they departed for a Cornish honeymoon.

Theo and Cynthia, on the other hand, went the following spring through the ordeal of a full-scale church wedding with all the trimmings. Neither of them, as may be imagined, wanted it in the least – but it was part of the deal they made with Cynthia's parents. And it bears eloquent testimonial to the strength of Theo's feelings for Cynthia that he agreed to all this with hardly a murmur. The three of them then honeymooned in and around the Lake District for a full month before returning to the antique business in Much Wenlock.

Cynthia settled into her new role as one born to it, and various friends who have visited them report that they seem to be ideally suited to each other. By way of added proof, *Schlafenfest* is almost back on a regular schedule again. There is no sign of any children to date, but they've got a new puppy. They call him Skyrack, for no particular reason except that they happen to

like the name. It's a bit early to tell yet, but apart from the details of colouring he looks as if he'll grow up very similar in appearance to his father. Barker is, of course, the father in question – and one would swear he knows it, the way he acts the proud and loving parent.

Fandom in Thisbury (and District) is currently at a very low ebb. The Circle still formally exists – it even still has a Treasury (in the trusted hands of Harry the First), but it no longer either has a club-room or any active members with the energy to organise one. The Turtle was sold “as she lay” for a fiver – and they were lucky to get that much. All the loose properties – books, furniture, and so on – are scattered around the houses of various members, but nobody is particularly hopeful of ever seeing them all assembled under one roof again. The Nullgray Mouser is now a Sea Scout, a transfer of allegiance that he took with an utterly feline lack of concern.

Harry the First and Tom still see what they can of each other, the municipal obligations of the one and the familial ones of the other permitting. Russ Harbottle is still heavily committed in the courtship of his Jean, and Harry the Second perseveres in the conversion of the local virgins with unabated vigour. Bert Duckbarrow has also started paying serious attention to the fair sex, the lady of his choice being about as mundane as they make 'em – so it looks highly doubtful at present if fandom will play much part in his future existence. And nobody seems to know what's happened to Geoff McNab.

Everybody else of any significance has left town. Cynthia's now living at Much Wenlock, of course. Dick, the “lost” member of the original Tom-Dick-and-Harry trio, is still at Oxford, and has his sights set firmly on an academic career. Owen and Ian now live in London, where they share a flat. Owen, who still sports a handsome growth of beard but has temporarily abandoned trying to write for the professional market, is a member of the Science Fiction Club of London and divides the rest of his free time between patronising the R&B club scene and chasing girls – simultaneously if possible. Ian prefers to haunt the “modern jazz” club scene, and likewise to chase girls – but he also reads considerably more science fiction than does Owen.

This leaves only Dave and Mine to be accounted for, and they are now pillars of Merseyside fandom. Dave has a job in the Liverpool University library. Mine has given up teaching in favour of looking after Cynthia the Second, the Portable first-born. Their flat in Birkenhead ranks closely behind

the Shorrock house as a popular place of local fannish resort. They still have the club duplicator – after Dave had carried it home from the wreck, the rest of the Circle renounced all rights in it by way of an additional wedding-present, and *Son of the Sunken Turtle* has seen three issues in the past twelve months. Which is pretty good going, all things considered.

•

Birkenhead

Thursday

I have been asked if I would clear up a loose end by explaining once and for all the true origin of my given name.

The simple truth, however, is that I don't know. I was orphaned at an early age, and by the time I was old enough to realise just how unusual my name was, nobody who was still around was able to tell me. So I never did find out. My friends, however, will confirm that I have never ceased to speculate upon the matter.

I'm sorry I can't be any more help. It annoys me, too. Yours: Mine

The End

About This Ebook

Archie Mercer's fannish novel *The Meadows of Fantasy* was first circulated in two duplicated instalments in the 43rd (March 1965) and 44th (June 1965) mailings of the British amateur press association OMPA, the Offtrails Magazine Publishers Association. This explains the "End of Part One" and reference to OMPA at the close of Chapisode Five. A one-volume edition followed.

Archie Mercer (1925-1998) was a prolific fanzine publisher in the 1950s and 1960s, and the second winner of the UK Doc Weir Award for general contributions to the fan scene. Publications and other achievements are listed in his [Fancylopedia 3 entry](#).

The Meadows of Fantasy is not a fan allegory like *The Enchanted Duplicator* but a light humorous novel set against the general background of 1960s British science fiction fandom. One character echoes the author's fondness for variously excruciating puns. Although Dungeons and Dragons had yet to be launched, role-playing games – in storytelling rather than dice-throwing mode – had considerable popularity in 1960s fandom: the most famous (and eventually controversial) was the US-originated Coventry, mentioned and elaborated on in [Chapisode Eight: Fandom Goes to Coventry](#). Most of the in-group references are concentrated in the similarly cod-mediaeval account of an SF convention in [Chapisode Eleven](#), to which Archie Mercer added his helpful [Exegesis](#) to explain who's who.

The idea of an online digital version of *The Meadows of Fantasy* was proposed on Greg Pickersgill's "Memory Hole" email list and initially implemented by Brian Jordan as a series of page scans from a copy loaned by Greg. The scans were later transcribed, and for many years *The Meadows of Fantasy* has been hosted at Bill Burns's invaluable fanzine resource eFanzines.com with credits to Brian Jordan for the original scans, Erika Maria Lacey and John Teehan for typing up the scanned text (2001-2002) and Bill Burns for HTML conversion (2005).

In 2019, Sandra Bond suggested that an ebook version should be added to the TAFF library. With virtually all the hard work already done, it wasn't too difficult to prepare an ebook from this existing text. Greg Pickersgill checked a number of dubious transcriptions against a copy of the 1965 print

edition; Bill Burns copied the corrections back into his eFanzines.com version. Thanks to all!

Most of the problematic bits were obvious typos easily corrected from context, but the following three (which Greg Pickersgill confirms are just the same in the print edition) needed editorial decisions. Chapisode Two has the phrase “outting around the barge”: our best guess for the first word is “cutting”. Chapisode Five says that the top prizes for convention fancy-dress went “to the Liverpool”, which has to be the Liverpool Group – extra word duly inserted. Chapisode Ten contains the mysterious remark “He’d look geer on stage with the Woodlice.” Greg comments: “I would bet real money this is a simple typo or misunderstanding of the then popular term ‘gear’ for ‘excellent’.” I have made it so.

David Langford
July 2019

This free ebook is exclusive to the unofficial TAFF website at taff.org.uk. If you enjoy reading it, a donation to TAFF is a fine way to express your appreciation.

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