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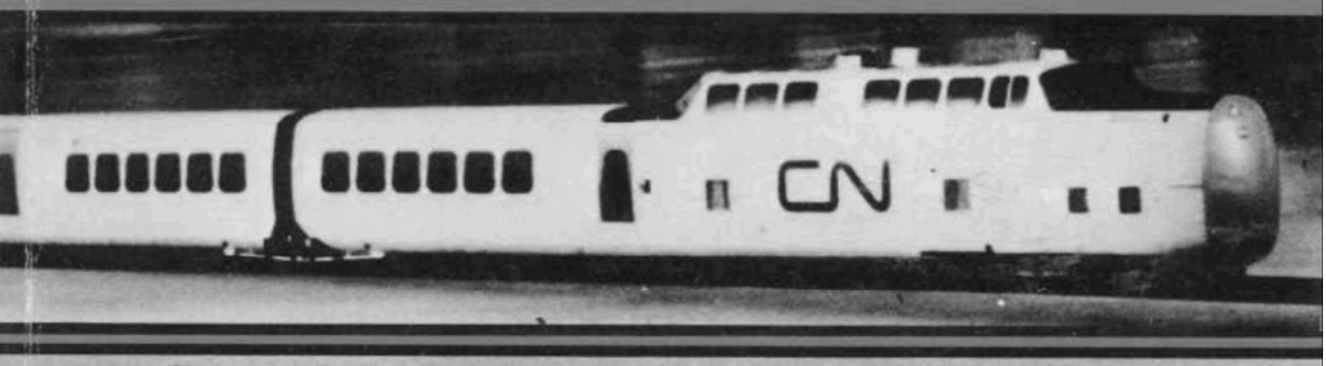
Walter R. Bremner

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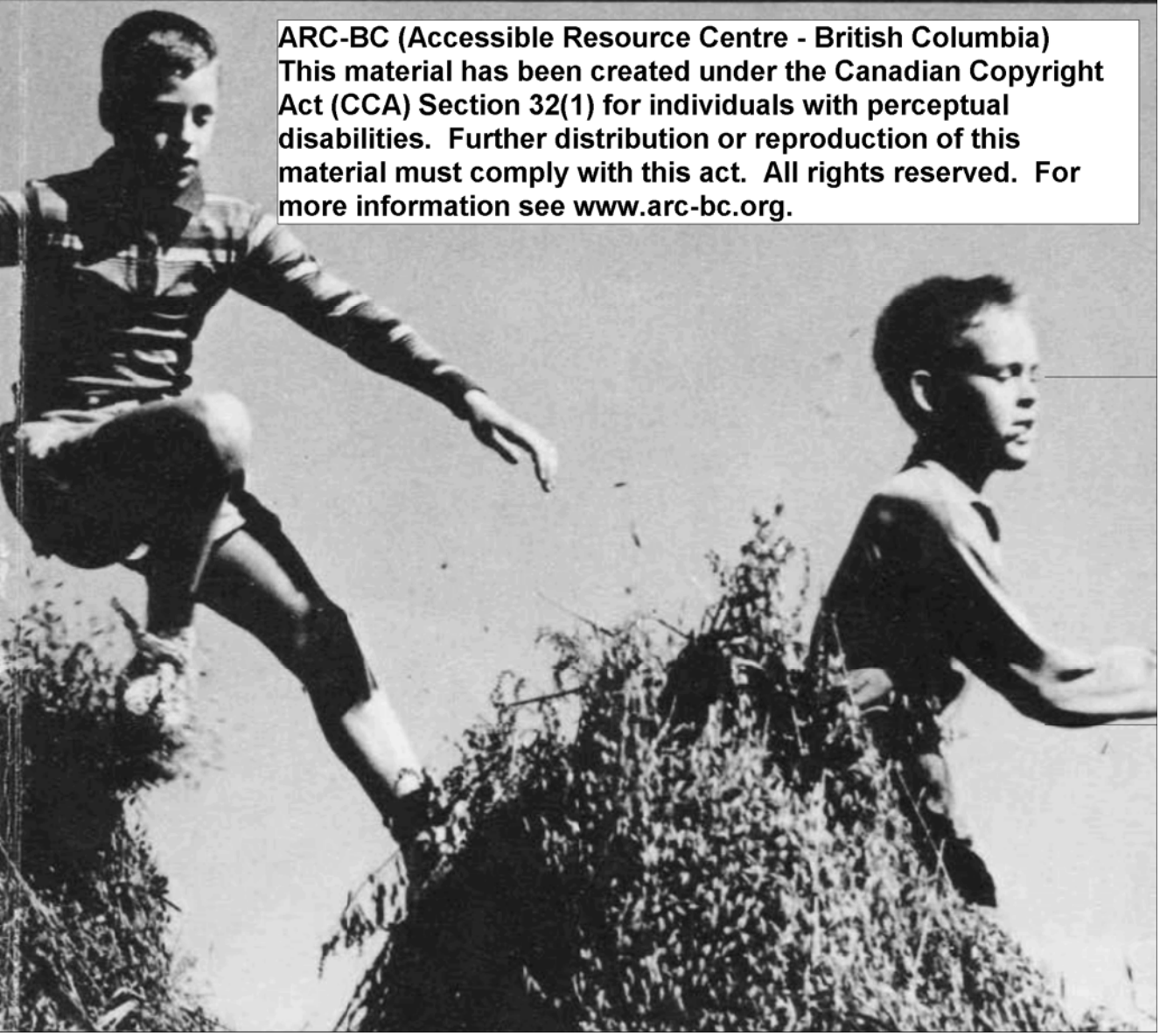

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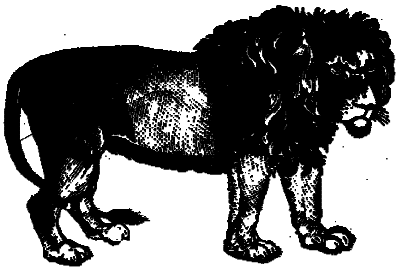

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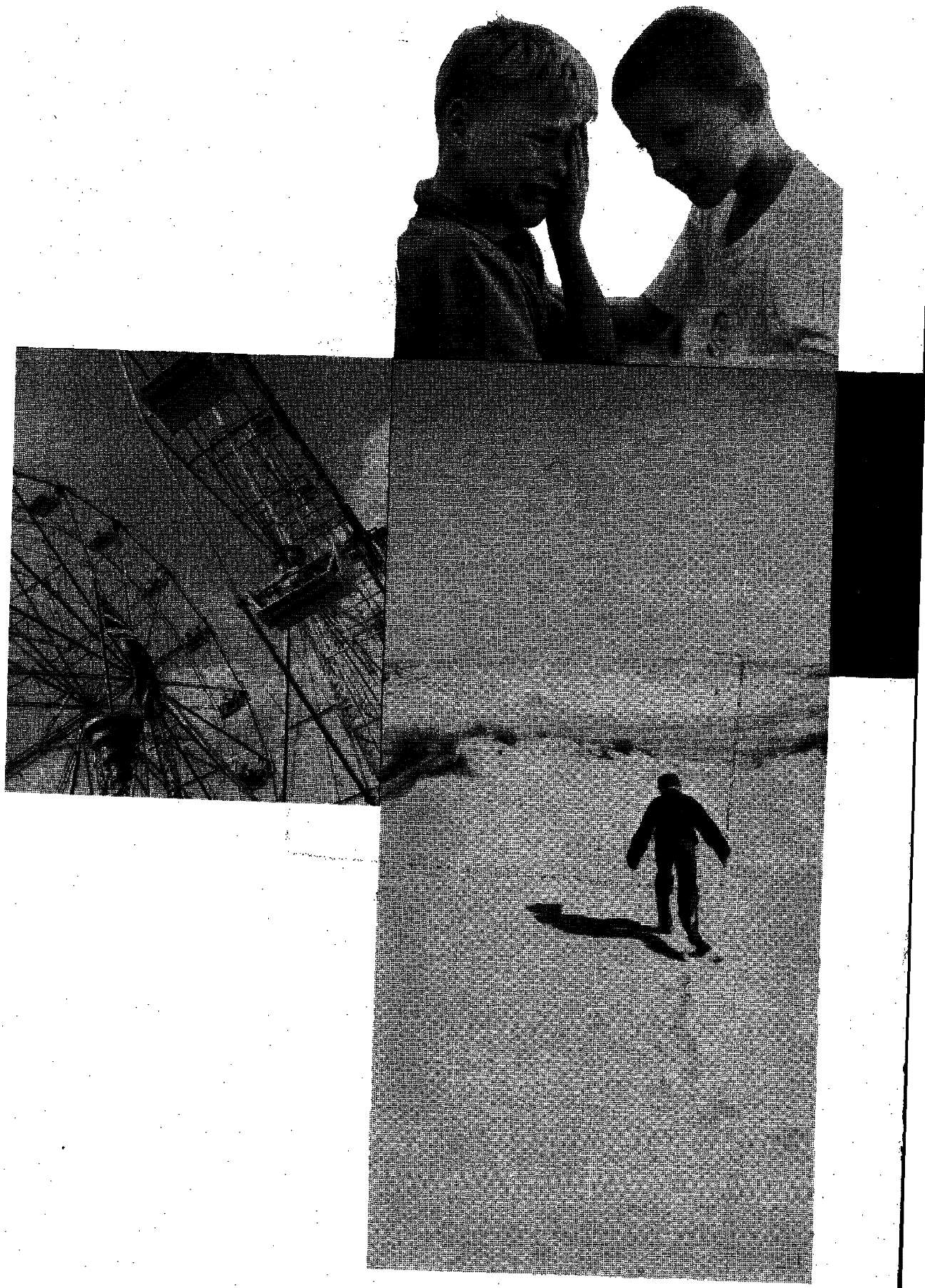

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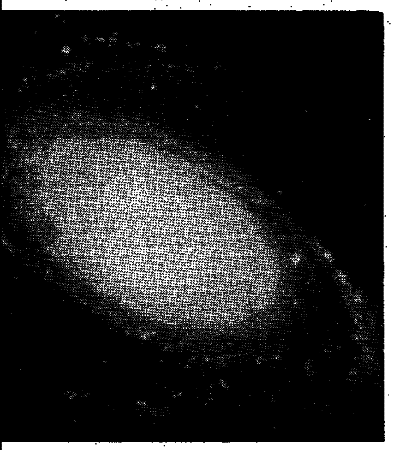

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Walter R. Bremner

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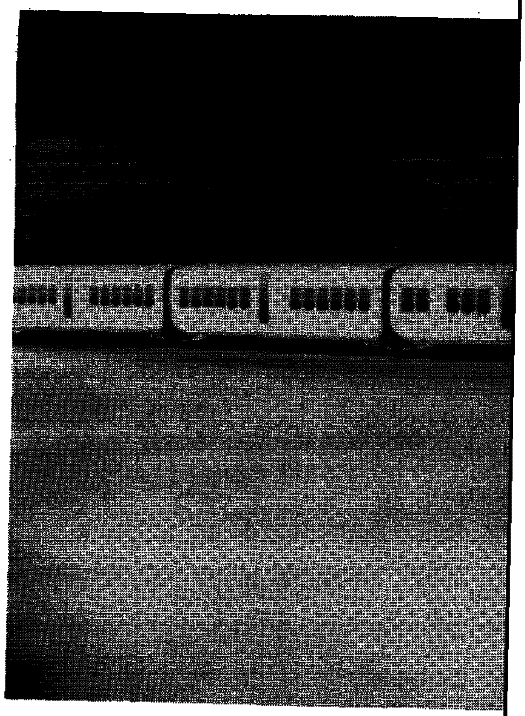

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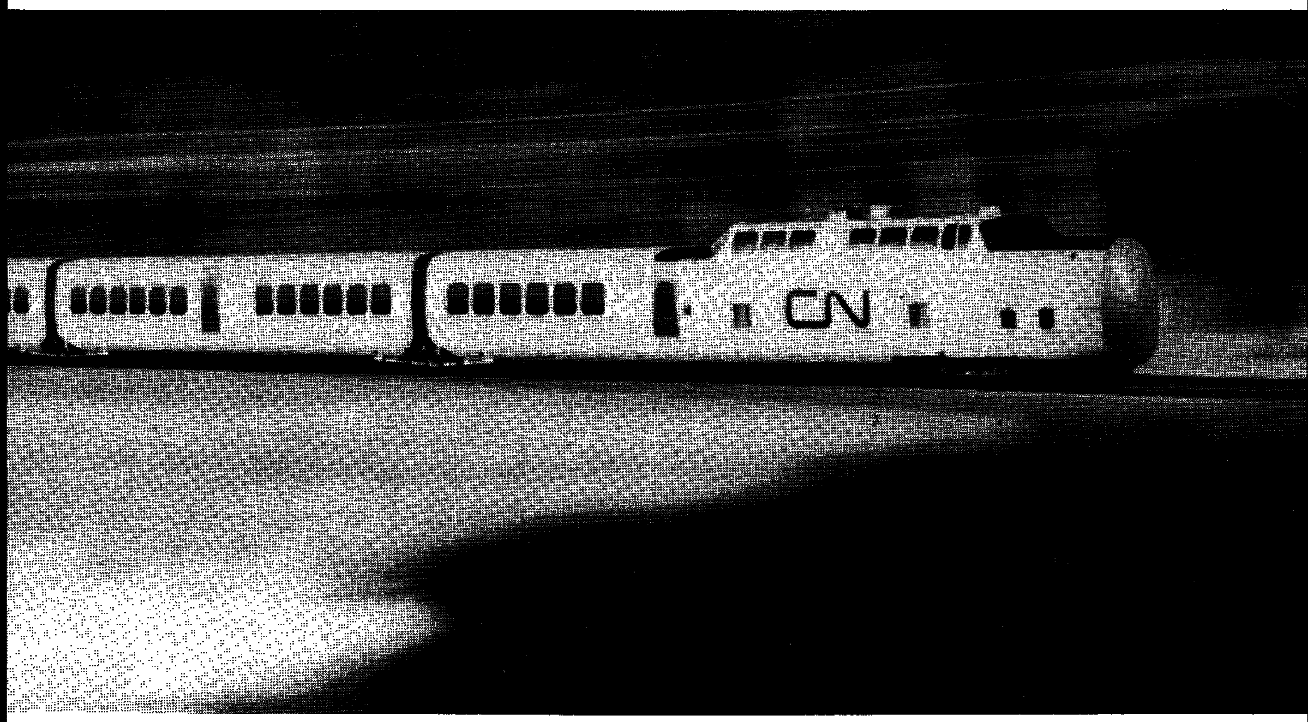

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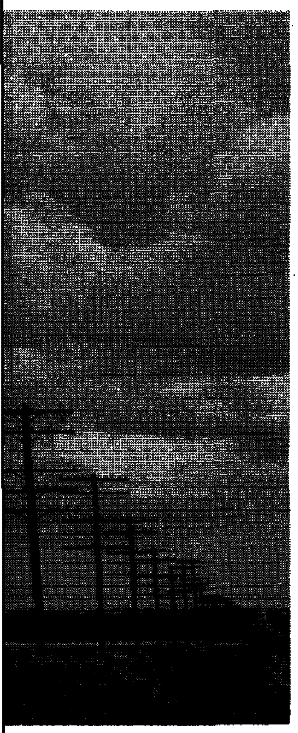

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# The Dog of Pompeii

## LOUIS UNTERMEYER

Tito and his dog Bimbo lived (if you could call it living) under the wall where it joined the inner gate. They really didn't live there; they just slept there. They lived anywhere. Pompeii was one of the gayest of the old Latin towns, but although Tito was never an unhappy boy, he was not exactly a merry one. The streets were always lively with shining chariots and bright red trappings; the open-air theatres rocked with laughing crowds; sham battles and athletic sports were free for the asking in the great stadium. Once a year Caesar visited the pleasure city and the fireworks lasted for days; the sacrifices in the Forum were better than a show.

But Tito saw none of these things. He was blind—had been blind from birth. He was known to everyone in the poorer quarters. But no one could say how old he was, no one remembered his parents, no one could tell where he came from. Bimbo was another mystery. As long as people could remember seeing Tito —about twelve or thirteen years—they had seen Bimbo. Bimbo had never left his side. He was not only dog, but nurse, pillow, playmate, mother and father to Tito.

Did I say Bimbo never left his master? (Perhaps I had better say comrade, for if anyone was the master, it was Bimbo.) I was wrong. Bimbo did trust Tito alone exactly three times a day. It was a fixed routine, a custom understood between boy and dog since the beginning of their friendship, and the way it worked was this: Early in the morning, shortly after dawn, while Tito was still dreaming, Bimbo would disappear. When Tito awoke, Bimbo would be sitting quietly at his side, his ears cocked, his stump of a tail tapping the ground, and a fresh-baked bread—more like a large round roll—at his feet. Tito would stretch himself; Bimbo would yawn; then they would breakfast. At

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noon, no matter where they happened to be, Bimbo would put his paw on Tito's knee and the two of them would return to the inner gate. Tito would curl up in the corner (almost like a dog) and go to sleep, while Bimbo, looking quite important (almost like a boy), would disappear again. In half an hour he'd be back with their lunch. Sometimes it would be a piece of fruit or a scrap of meat, often it was nothing but a dry crust. But sometimes there would be one of those flat rich cakes, sprinkled with raisins and sugar, that Tito liked so much. At suppertime the same thing happened, although there was a little less of everything, for things were hard to snatch in the evening with the streets full of people. Besides, Bimbo didn't approve of too much food before going to sleep. A heavy supper made boys too restless and dogs too stodgy—and it was the business of a dog to sleep lightly with one ear open and muscles ready for action.

But, whether there was much or little, hot or cold, fresh or dry, food was always there. Tito never asked where it came from and Bimbo never told him. There was plenty of rain water in the hollows of soft stones; the old egg woman at the corner sometimes gave him a cupful of strong goat's milk; in the grape season the fat wine maker let him have drippings of the mild juice. So there was no danger of going hungry or thirsty. There was plenty of everything in Pompeii—if you knew where to find it—and if you had a dog like Bimbo.

As I said before, Tito was not the merriest boy in Pompeii. He could not romp with the other youngsters and play Hare-and-Hounds and I-Spy and Follow-Your-Master and Ball-Against-the-Building and Jack-Stones and Kings-and-Robbers with them. But that did not make him sorry for himself. If he could not see the sights that delighted the lads of Pompeii, he could hear and smell things they never noticed. He could really see more with his ears and nose than they could with their eyes. When he and Bimbo went out walking, he knew just where they were going and exactly what was happening.

"Ah," he'd sniff and say, as they passed a handsome villa, "Glaucus Pansa is giving a grand dinner tonight. They're going to have three kinds of bread, and roast pigling, and stuffed goose, and a great stew—I think bear stew—and a fig pie." And

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Bimbo would note that this would be a good place to visit tomorrow.

Or, "H'm," Tito would murmur, half through his lips, half through his nostrils. "The wife of Marcus Lucretius is expecting her mother. She's shaking out every piece of goods in the house; she's going to use the best clothes—the ones she's been keeping in pine needles and camphor—and there's an extra girl in the kitchen. Come, Bimbo, let's get out of the dust!"

Or, as they passed a small but elegant dwelling opposite the public baths, "Too bad! The tragic poet is ill again. It must be a bad fever this time, for they're trying smoke fumes instead of medicine. Whew! I'm glad I'm not a tragic poet!"

Or, as they neared the Forum, "Mm-m! What good things they have in the Macellum today!" (It really was a sort of butcher-grocer-market place, but Tito didn't know any better. He called it the Macellum.) "Dates from Africa, and salt oysters from the sea caves, and cuttlefish, and new honey, and sweet onions, and—ugh!—water-buffalo steaks. Come, let's see what's what in the Forum." And Bimbo, just as curious as his comrade, hurried on. Being a dog, he trusted his ears and nose (like Tito) more than his eyes. And so the two of them entered the centre of Pompeii.

The Forum was the part of the town to which everybody came at least once during the day. It was the Central Square, and everything happened there. There were no private houses; all was public—the chief temples, the gold and red bazaars, the silk shops, the town hall, the booths belonging to the weavers and jewel merchants, the wealthy woollen market, the shrine of the household gods. Everything glittered here. The buildings looked as if they were new—which, in a sense, they were. The earthquake of twelve years ago had brought down all the old structures and, since the citizens of Pompeii were ambitious to rival Naples and even Rome, they had seized the opportunity to rebuild the whole town. And they had done it all within a dozen years. There was scarcely a building that was older than Tito.

Tito had heard a great deal about the earthquake, though being about a year old at the time, he could scarcely remember it. This particular quake had been a light one—as earthquakes

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go. The weaker houses had been shaken down, parts of the outworn wall had been wrecked; but there was little loss of life, and the brilliant new Pompeii had taken the place of the old. No one knew what caused these earthquakes. Records showed they had happened in the neighbourhood since the beginning of time. Sailors said it was to teach the lazy city folk a lesson and make them appreciate those who risked the dangers of the sea to bring them luxuries and protect their town from invaders. The priests said that the gods took this way of showing their anger to those who refused to worship properly and who failed to bring enough sacrifices to the altars and (though they didn't say it in so many words) presents to the priests. The tradesmen said that the foreign merchants had corrupted the ground and it was no longer safe to traffic in imported goods that came from strange places and carried a curse with them. Everyone had a different explanation and everyone's explanation was louder and sillier than his neighbor's.

They were talking about it this afternoon as Tito and Bimbo came out of the side street into the public square. The Forum was the favourite promenade for rich and poor. What with the priests arguing with the politicians, servants doing the day's shopping, tradesmen crying their wares, women displaying the latest fashions from Greece and Egypt, children playing hide-and-seek among the marble columns, knots of soldiers, sailors, peasants from the provinces—to say nothing of those who merely came to lounge and look on—the square was crowded to its last inch. His ears even more than his nose guided Tito to the place where the talk was loudest. It was in front of the shrine of the household gods that, naturally enough, the householders were arguing.

"I tell you," rumbled a voice which Tito recognized as bath master Rufus, "there won't be another earthquake in my lifetime or yours. There may be a tremble or two, but earthquakes, like lightnings, never strike twice in the same place."

"Do they not?" asked a thin voice Tito had never heard. It had a high, sharp ring to it and Tito knew it as the accent of a stranger. "How about the two towns of Sicily that have been ruined three times within fifteen years by the eruptions of Mount

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Etna? And were they not warned? And does that column of smoke above Vesuvius mean nothing?"

"That?" Tito could hear the grunt with which one question answered another. "That's always there. We use it for our weather guide. When the smoke stands up straight, we know we'll have fair weather; when it flattens out, it's sure to be foggy; when it drifts to the east—"

"Yes, yes," cut in the edged voice. "I've heard about your mountain barometer. But the column of smoke seems hundreds of feet higher than usual and it's thickening and spreading like a shadowy tree. They say in Naples—"

"Oh, Naples!" Tito knew this voice by the little squeak that went with it. It was Attilio the cameo cutter. "They talk while we suffer. Little help we got from them last time. Naples commits the crimes and Pompeii pays the price. It's become a proverb with us. Let them mind their own business."

"Yes," grumbled Rufus, "and others', too."

"Very well, my confident friends," responded the thin voice which now sounded curiously flat. "We also have a proverb—and it is this: *Those who will not listen to men must be taught by the gods.* I say no more. But I leave a last warning. Remember the holy ones. Look to your temples. And when the smoke tree above Vesuvius grows to the shape of an umbrella pine, look to your lives."

Tito could hear the air whistle as the speaker drew his toga about him and the quick shuffle of feet told him the stranger had gone.

"Now, what," said the cameo cutter, "did he mean by that?"

"I wonder," grunted Rufus. "I wonder."

Tito wondered, too. And Bimbo, his head at a thoughtful angle, looked as if he had been doing a heavy piece of pondering. By nightfall the argument had been forgotten. If the smoke had increased, no one saw it in the dark. Besides, it was Caesar's birthday and the town was in holiday mood. Tito and Bimbo were among the merrymakers, dodging the charioteers who shouted at them. A dozen times they almost upset baskets of sweets and jars of Vesuvian wine, said to be as fiery as the streams inside the volcano, and a dozen times they were cursed

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and cuffed. But Tito never missed his footing. He was thankful for his keen ears and quick instinct—most thankful of all for Bimbo.

They visited the uncovered theatre and, though Tito could not see the faces of the actors, he could follow the play better than most of the audience, for their attention wandered—they were distracted by the scenery, the costumes, the byplay, even by themselves—while Tito's whole attention was centred in what he heard. Then to the city walls, where the people of Pompeii watched a mock naval battle in which the city was attacked by the sea and saved after thousands of flaming arrows had been exchanged and countless coloured torches had been burned. Though the thrill of flaring ships and lighted skies was lost to Tito, the shouts and cheers excited him as much as any and he cried out with the loudest of them.

The next morning there were two of the beloved raisin and sugar cakes for his breakfast. Bimbo was unusually active and thumped his bit of a tail until Tito was afraid he would wear it out. The boy could not imagine whether Bimbo was urging him to some sort of game or was trying to tell him something. After a while, he ceased to notice Bimbo. He felt drowsy. Last night's late hours had tired him. Besides, there was a heavy mist in the air—no, a thick fog rather than a mist—a fog that got into his throat and scraped it and made him cough. He walked as far as the marine gate to get a breath of the sea. But the blanket of haze had spread all over the bay and even the salt air seemed smoky.

He went to bed before dusk and slept. But he did not sleep well. He had too many dreams—dreams of ships lurching in the Forum, of losing his way in a screaming crowd, of armies marching across his chest, of being pulled over every rough pavement of Pompeii.

He woke early. Or, rather, he was pulled awake. Bimbo was doing the pulling. The dog had dragged Tito to his feet and was urging the boy along. Somewhere. Where, Tito did not know. His feet stumbled uncertainly; he was still half asleep. For a while he noticed nothing except the fact that it was hard to breathe. The air was hot. And heavy. So heavy that he could taste it. The air, it seemed, had turned to powder—a warm pow-

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der that stung his nostrils and burned his sightless eyes.

Then he began to hear sounds. Peculiar sounds. Like animals under the earth. Hissings and groanings and muffled cries that a dying creature might make dislodging the stones of his underground cave. There was no doubt about it now. The noises came from underneath. He not only heard them—he could feel them. The earth twitched; the twitching changed to an uneven shrugging of the soil. Then, as Bimbo half pulled, half coaxed him across, the ground jerked away from his feet and he was thrown against a stone fountain.

The water—hot water—splashing in his face revived him. He got to his feet, Bimbo steadying him, helping him on again. The noises grew louder; they came closer. The cries were even more animal-like than before, but now they came from human throats. A few people, quicker of foot and more hurried by fear, began to rush by. A family or two—then a section—then, it seemed, an army broken out of bounds. Tito, bewildered though he was, could recognize Rufus as he bellowed past him, like a water buffalo gone mad. Time was lost in a nightmare.

It was then the crashing began. First a sharp crackling, like a monstrous snapping of twigs; then a roar like the fall of a whole forest of trees; then an explosion that tore earth and sky. The heavens, though Tito could not see them, were shot through with continual flickerings of fire. Lightnings above were answered by thunders beneath. A house fell. Then another. By a miracle the two companions had escaped the dangerous side streets and were in a more open space. It was the Forum. They rested here awhile —how long he did not know.

Tito had no idea of the time of day. He could feel it was black—an unnatural blackness. Something inside—perhaps the lack of breakfast and lunch—told him it was past noon. But it didn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter. He was getting drowsy, too drowsy to walk. But walk he must. He knew it. And Bimbo knew it; the sharp tugs told him so. Nor was it a moment too soon. The sacred ground of the Forum was safe no longer. It was beginning to rock, then to pitch, then to split. As they stumbled out of the square, the earth wriggled like a caught snake and all the columns of the temple of Jupiter came down. It was the end

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of the world—or so it seemed. To walk was not enough now. They must run. Tito was too frightened to know what to do or where to go. He had lost all sense of direction. He started to go back to the inner gate; but Bimbo, straining his back to the last inch, almost pulled his clothes from him. What did the creature want? Had the dog gone mad?

Then suddenly, he understood. Bimbo was telling him the way out—urging him there. The sea gate, of course. The sea gate—and then the sea. Far from falling buildings, heaving ground. He turned, Bimbo guiding him across open pits and dangerous pools of bubbling mud, away from buildings that had caught fire and were dropping their burning beams. Tito could no longer tell whether the noises were made by the shrieking sky or the agonized people. He and Bimbo ran on—the only silent beings in a howling world.

New dangers threatened. All Pompeii seemed to be thronging toward the marine gate and, squeezing among the crowds, there was the chance of being trampled to death. But the chance had to be taken. It was growing harder and harder to breathe. What air there was choked him. It was all dust now—dust and pebbles, pebbles as large as beans. They fell on his head, his hands—pumice stones from the black heart of Vesuvius. The mountain was turning itself inside out. Tito remembered a phrase that the stranger had said in the Forum two days ago: "Those who will not listen to men must be taught by the gods." The people of Pompeii had refused to heed the warnings; they were being taught now—if it was not too late.

Suddenly it seemed too late for Tito. The red-hot ashes blistered his skin, the stinging vapours tore his throat. He could not go on. He staggered toward a small tree at the side of the road and fell. In a moment Bimbo was beside him. He coaxed. But there was no answer. He licked Tito's hands, his feet, his face. The boy did not stir. Then Bimbo did the last thing he could—the last thing he wanted to do. He bit his comrade, bit him deep in the arm. With a cry of pain, Tito jumped to his feet, Bimbo after him. Tito was in despair, but Bimbo was determined. He drove the boy on, snapping at his heels, worrying his way through the crowd; barking, baring his teeth, heedless of kicks or

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falling stones. Sick with hunger, half dead with fear and sulphur fumes, Tito pounded on, pursued by Bimbo. How long, he never knew. At last he staggered through the marine gate and felt soft sand under him. Then Tito fainted. . . .

Someone was dashing sea water over him. Someone was carrying him toward a boat.

"Bimbo," he called. And then louder, "Bimbo!" But Bimbo had disappeared.

Voices jarred against each other. "Hurry—hurry!" "To the boats!" "Can't you see the child's frightened and starving!" "He keeps calling for someone!" "Poor boy, he's out of his mind." "Here, child—take this!"

They tucked him in among them. The oarlocks creaked; the oars splashed; the boat rode over toppling waves. Tito was safe. But he wept continually.

"Bimbo!" he wailed. "Bimbo! Bimbo!"

He could not be comforted.

Eighteen hundred years passed. Scientists were restoring the ancient city; excavators were working their way through the stones and trash that had buried the entire town. Much had already been brought to light—statues, bronze instruments, bright mosaics, household articles; even delicate paintings had been preserved by the fall of ashes that had taken over two thousand lives. Columns were dug up, and the Forum was beginning to emerge.

It was at a place where the ruins lay deepest that the Director paused.

"Come here," he called to his assistant. "I think we've discovered the remains of a building in good shape. Here are four huge millstones that were most likely turned by slaves or mules—and here is a whole wall standing with shelves inside it. Why! It must have been a bakery. And here's a curious thing. What do you think I found under this heap where the ashes were thickest? The skeleton of a dog!"

"Amazing!" gasped his assistant. "You'd think a dog would have had sense enough to run away at the time. And what is that flat thing he's holding between his teeth? It can't be a stone."

"No. It must have come from this bakery. You know, it looks

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to me like some sort of cake hardened with the years. And, bless me, if those little black pebbles aren't raisins. A raisin cake almost two thousand years old! I wonder what made him want it at such a moment?"

"I wonder," murmured the assistant.

## taking a closer look

1 *Describe briefly the relationship between Tito and Bimbo. In what way was Tito "almost like a dog" and Bimbo "almost like a boy"?*
2 *The author states that "Tito was not the merriest boy in Pompeii". What experiences could he not have because he was blind? What joys, however, did Tito get out of life?*
3 Foreshadowing *is a device used by authors to signal beforehand or to provide clues for a future event of major importance in the story. Find two examples where Louis Untermeyer uses* foreshadowing *to prepare the reader for the catastrophe that struck Pompeii.*
4 *Tito overheard the stranger with the "thin lips" say, "Those who will not listen to men must be taught by the gods." Why might the eruption of Vesuvius have been considered by some people as a "punishment" of the gods?*
5 *Why did Tito fall at the side of the road? How did Bimbo manage to lead him to safety?*
6 *In the last six paragraphs of the story the author moves the action forward some eighteen hundred years (to about 1879). In what way does this device make the story seem more real? Why is this section put at the end of the story rather than at the beginning?*
7 *Although this is not a happy story, it is not a tragic one. What do we find out at the end of the story that gives us a warm feeling? What do you think Untermeyer is trying to say about human nature?*

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## let's get involved

1 *The destruction of Pompeii in 79 A.D. is one of the most famous catastrophes in the history of man. You and a group of five or six other pupils could do research on this topic in your school or public library. Prepare your material in such a way that your presentation to the class will consist of a variety of approaches, such as written (dittoed) material, chalkboard illustrations, and pictures. You could consider the following areas of research:*

*A a simplified explanation of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions (with chalkboard illustrations and/or pictures),*
*B the various ways in which these destructive forces can cause great damage and loss of life,*
*C what excavations have told us about the fate of Pompeii, (there are excellent photographs available),*
*D related material on other volcanic eruptions such as Vesuvius and Etna in Sicily.*

2 *Write an "I Was There" account of some other famous catastrophe. Take yourself back in time and relive the most exciting moments of the event, using vivid images (word-pictures) to bring the past to life. In order to make sure that your historical facts are correct, it will likely be necessary for you to consult an encyclopaedia or other reference book. You could use one of the following topics:*

*A the great London fire (1666),*
*B San Francisco earthquake (1908),*
*C the sinking of the Titanic (1912) or the Lusitania (1915),*
*D the Halifax explosion (1917),*
*E Hurricane Hazel, Ontario (1954).*

3 *Imagine you were a newspaper reporter during the destruction of Pompeii in 79 A.D. Referring to the story for the necessary facts (and using a reference book, if needed) write a typical newspaper article which describes the scene as you have witnessed it. Make your article look and sound as if it has just been clipped from a daily newspaper. (Include such devices as an eye-catching headline, interviews with some of the people, and lively, "action-packed" language.)*

4 *Instead of a newspaper account (as outlined in number 3) create an "on-the spot" radio or television coverage of the disaster. Use either a tape-recorder (with sound effects) or*

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*a classroom dramatization of the highlights of the event in order to bring to your audience the full and vivid impact of this "hot" news story.*

## recommended reading

1 *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton
2 *Lassie, Come Home*, Eric Knight
3 *Big Red*, Jim Kjelgaard
4 *Goodby, My Lady*, James Street

## GROUP WORK

When students work in small groups, they can often accomplish a good deal more than when they work individually or as an entire class. It is necessary, however, that some kind of organization be attempted if the maximum benefit is to be gained from such group work.

The following outline suggests a typical plan for a group work situation. This plan is meant to be very flexible, of course, and refers to only one of several kinds of basic organization.

### Some Points to Keep in Mind

1 *For purposes of effective communication, no one group should exceed 6 or 7 students. Five is perhaps the best number. In order to help decision-making, it is suggested that each group have an odd number of students.*
2 *Each group should be headed by a* Chairman *(appointed or chosen) who is responsible for such tasks as organizing the discussions, assigning research duties, and reporting to the teacher the progress of his group.*
3 *A Secretary may be necessary, should the kind of work involved require a detailed recording. In most group work situations the Chairman might want to keep this job himself.*

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*4 When 25 or more students are talking at the same time in the same room, it is essential that some "ground rules" be established in order to curb excessive noise and to promote worthwhile discussion.*

*No such "rules" will be listed here. It is suggested, instead, that the students themselves, in co-operation with the teacher, agree upon their own standard of conduct.*


A Secret for Two
QUENTIN REYNOLDS

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# A Secret for Two

## QUENTIN REYNOLDS

Montreal is a very large city, but, like all large cities, it has some very small streets. Streets, for instance, like Prince Edward Street, which is only four blocks long, ending in a cul de sac. No one knew Prince Edward Street as well as did Pierre Dupin, for Pierre had delivered milk to the families on the street for thirty years now.

During the past fifteen years the horse which drew the milk wagon used by Pierre was a large white horse named Joseph. In Montreal, especially in that part of Montreal which is very French, the animals, like children, are often given the names of saints. When the big white horse first came to the Provincale Milk Company he didn't have a name. They told Pierre that he could use the white horse henceforth. Pierre stroked the softness of the horse's neck; he stroked the sheen of its splendid belly and he looked into the eyes of the horse.

"This is a kind horse, a gentle and a faithful horse," Pierre said, "and I can see a beautiful spirit shining out of the eyes of the horse. I will name him after good St. Joseph, who was also kind and gentle and faithful and a beautiful spirit."

Within a year Joseph knew the milk route as well as Pierre. Pierre used to boast that he didn't need reins—he never touched them. Each morning Pierre arrived at the stables of the Provincale Milk Company at five o'clock. The wagon would be loaded and Joseph hitched to it. Pierre would call, "Bonjour, vieil ami," as he climbed into his seat and Joseph would turn his head and the other drivers would smile and say that the horse would smile at Pierre. Then Jacques, the foreman, would say, "All right, Pierre, go on," and Pierre would call softly to Joseph, "Avance, mon ami," and this splendid combination would stalk proudly down the street.

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The wagon, without any direction from Pierre, would roll three blocks down St. Catherine Street, then turn right two blocks along Roslyn Avenue; then left, for that was Prince Edward Street. The horse would stop at the first house, allow Pierre perhaps thirty seconds to get down from his seat and put a bottle of milk at the front door and would then go on, skipping two houses and stopping at the third. So down the length of the street. Then Joseph, still without any direction from Pierre, would turn round and come back along the other side. Yes, Joseph was a smart horse.

Pierre would boast, at the stable, of Joseph's skill. "I never touch the reins. He knows just where to stop. Why, a blind man could handle my route with Joseph pulling the wagon."

So it went on for years—always the same. Pierre and Joseph both grew old together, but gradually, not suddenly. Pierre's huge walrus moustache was pure white now and Joseph didn't lift his knees so high or raise his head quite as much. Jacques, the foreman of the stables, never noticed that they were both getting old until Pierre appeared one morning carrying a heavy walking-stick.

"Hey, Pierre," Jacques laughed. "Maybe you got the gout, hey?"

"Mais oui, Jacques," Pierre said a bit uncertainly. "One grows old. One's legs get tired."

"You should teach that horse to carry the milk to the front door for you," Jacques told him. "He does everything else."

He knew every one of the forty families he served on Prince Edward Street. The cooks knew that Pierre could neither read nor write, so instead of following the usual custom of leaving a note in an empty bottle if an additional quart of milk was needed they would sing out when they heard the rumble of his wagon wheels over the cobbled street, "Bring an extra quart this morning, Pierre."

"So you have company for dinner tonight," he would call back gaily.

Pierre had a remarkable memory. When he arrived at the stable he'd always remember to tell Jacques, "The Paquins took

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an extra quart this morning; the Lemoines bought a pint of cream."

Jacques would note these things in a little book he always carried. Most of the drivers had to make out the weekly bills and collect the money, but Jacques, liking Pierre, had always excused him from this task. All Pierre had to do was to arrive at five in the morning, walk to his wagon, which was always in the same spot at the curb, and deliver his milk. He returned some two hours later, got down stiffly from his seat, called a cheery "Au'voir" to Jacques and then limped slowly down the street.

One morning the president of the Provincale Milk Company came to inspect the early morning deliveries. Jacques pointed Pierre out to him and said: "Watch how he talks to that horse. See how the horse listens and how he turns his head toward Pierre? See the look in that horse's eyes? You know, I think those two share a secret. I have often noticed it. It is as though they both sometimes chuckle at us as they go off on their route. Pierre is a good man, Monsieur Président, but he gets old. Would it be too bold of me to suggest that he be retired and be given perhaps a small pension?" he added anxiously.

"But of course," the president laughed. "I know his record. He has been on this route now for thirty years and never once has there been a complaint. Tell him it is time he rested. His salary will go on just the same."

But Pierre refused to retire. He was panic-stricken at the thought of not driving Joseph every day. "We are two old men," he said to Jacques. "Let us wear out together. When Joseph is ready to retire—then I, too, will quit."

Jacques, who was a kind man, understood. There was something about Pierre and Joseph which made a man smile tenderly. It was as though each drew some hidden strength from the other. When Pierre was sitting in his seat, and when Joseph was hitched to the wagon, neither seemed old. But when they finished their work, then Pierre would limp down the street slowly, seeming very old indeed, and the horse's head would drop and he would walk very wearily to his stall.

Then one morning Jacques had dreadful news for Pierre when

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he arrived. It was a cold morning and still pitch-dark. The air was like iced wine that morning and the snow which had fallen during the night glistened like a million diamonds piled together.

Jacques said, "Pierre, your horse, Joseph, did not wake up this morning. He was very old, Pierre, he was twenty-five and that is like being seventy-five for a man."

"Yes," Pierre said, slowly. "Yes. I am seventy-five. And I cannot see Joseph again."

"Of course you can," Jacques soothed. "He is over in his stall, looking very peaceful. Go over and see him."

Pierre took one step forward, then turned. "No . . . no . . . you don't understand, Jacques."

Jacques clapped him on the shoulder. "We'll find another horse just as good as Joseph. Why, in a month you'll teach him to know your route as well as Joseph did. We'll . . ."

The look in Pierre's eyes stopped him. For years Pierre had worn a heavy cap, the peak of which came low over his eyes, keeping the bitter morning wind out of them. Now Jacques looked into Pierre's eyes and he saw something which startled him. He saw a dead, lifeless look in them. The eyes were mirroring the grief that was in Pierre's heart and his soul. It was as though his heart and soul had died.

"Take today off, Pierre," Jacques said, but already Pierre was hobbling off down the street, and had one been near one would have seen tears streaming down his cheeks and have heard half-smothered sobs. There was a warning yell from the driver of a huge truck that was coming fast and there was the scream of brakes, but Pierre apparently heard neither.

Five minutes later an ambulance driver said, "He's dead. Was killed instantly."

"I couldn't help it," the driver of the truck protested, "he walked right into my truck. He never saw it, I guess. Why, he walked into it as though he were blind."

The ambulance doctor bent down, "Blind? Of course the man was blind. See those cataracts? This man has been blind for five years." He turned to Jacques, "You say he worked for you? Didn't you know he was blind?"

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"No . . . no . . ." Jacques said, softly. "None of us knew. Only one knew—a friend of his named Joseph. . . . It was a secret, I think, just between those two."

## taking a closer look

1 *What is the secret shared by the "splendid combination" of Pierre and Joseph? Why does the author not explain the title of his story until the very end?*
2 *How did Pierre manage to fool Jacques for five years?*
3 *"Joseph was a smart horse." Prove this statement by* skimming *(that is, re-reading quickly) the fifth paragraph and summarizing its content. (Try to keep your summary down to one or two sentences.)*
4 *What was the "dreadful news" that was given Pierre one cold morning? In what way was this news connected with Pierre's fatal accident?*
5 *The author provides many clues or hints which lead to the discovery of Pierre's blindness. For example in the sixth paragraph on page 18 , Reynolds writes that Jacques looked into Pierre's eyes and saw "a dead, lifeless look in them."*

*Do some "detective work" by skimming through the story in order to find other such clues.* Quote *phrases or a line to prove your detective work. See how many clues or hints you can find.*
6 *Look up the word* tragedy *in a good dictionary. Does the death of Pierre seem tragic to you? Why, or why not?*

## let's get involved

1 *Working by yourself, or with a small group of students, write about an experience you have had or know about that concerns a close relationship between a person and*

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*an animal. Your "story" need not involve death or tragedy, but it should illustrate a warm bond of mutual friendship and dependence.*

*If you prefer to work alone, write your short story in two or three paragraphs. Should the relationship you are describing concern you personally, write the story from your point of view (that is, from the "I and me" point of view).*

*If you decide to work with a group of students, you might try the following suggestion. Each group member tells briefly of an interesting relationship between man and animal. By vote or by general agreement, the best story is chosen. This story is then either written co-operatively by the group (that is, each member contributes something to the tale) or it is recorded on tape (for the listening pleasure of the rest of the class).*

2 *Discuss with your classmates (in small groups or with the entire class) some movies or television programmes which have explored the theme of man and animal. In order to guide your discussion, you might consider the following questions:*

A *In what way was the relationship between the person (or persons) and the animal close?*
B *Describe ways in which the writer either succeeded or failed in making this relationship sound realistic.*
C *Was the animal given human qualities?*
D *What was the most dramatic or exciting moment of the story?*

3 *If you enjoyed "A Secret for Two", and would like to read another story with a similar theme, read "The Dog of Pompeii" (Page 1 ). Do not read this story, however, without permission from your teacher.*

*When you have read both stories, try comparing them. You may use the following questions as a guide for making your comparison.*

A *In what chief ways are the two stories similar?*
B *Which of the two is more believable, or true-to-life?*

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*C Which one would make a better, more dramatic television programme? Why?*
*D If you had to make a choice, which of the two stories would you choose as the better? Why?*

## recommended reading

1 *National Velvet*, Enid Bagnold
2 *The Yearling*, Marjorie Rawlings

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# August Heat

## WILLIAM FRYER HARVEY

*Penistone Road, Clapham,*
*20th August, 190–.*

I have had what I believe to be the most remarkable day in my life, and while the events are still fresh in my mind, I wish to put them down on paper as clearly as possible.

Let me say at the outset that my name is James Clarence Withencroft.

I am forty years old, in perfect health, never having known a day's illness.

By profession I am an artist, not a very successful one, but I earn enough money by my black-and-white work to satisfy my necessary wants.

My only near relative, a sister, died five years ago, so that I am independent.

I breakfasted this morning at nine, and after glancing through the morning paper I lighted my pipe and proceeded to let my mind wander in the hope that I might chance upon some subject for my pencil.

The room, though door and windows were open, was oppressively hot, and I had just made up my mind that the coolest and most comfortable place in the neighbourhood would be the deep end of the public swimming-bath, when the idea came.

I began to draw. So intent was I on my work that I left my lunch untouched, only stopping work when the clock of St. Jude's struck four.

The final result, for a hurried sketch, was, I felt sure, the best thing I had done.

It showed a criminal in the dock immediately after the judge had pronounced sentence. The man was fat—enormously fat. The flesh hung in rolls about his chin; it creased his huge, stumpy

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neck. He was clean-shaven (perhaps I should say a few days before he must have been clean-shaven) and almost bald. He stood in the dock, his short, clumsy fingers clasping the rail, looking straight in front of him. The feeling that his expression conveyed was not so much one of horror as of utter, absolute collapse.

There seemed nothing in the man strong enough to sustain that mountain of flesh.

I rolled up the sketch, and without quite knowing why, placed it in my pocket. Then with the rare sense of happiness which the knowledge of a good thing well done gives, I left the house.

I believe that I set out with the idea of calling upon Trenton, for I remember walking along Lytton Street and turning to the right along Gilchrist Road at the bottom of the hill where the men were at work on the new tram lines.

From there onwards I have only the vaguest recollection of where I went. The one thing of which I was fully conscious was the awful heat, that came up from the dusty asphalt pavement as an almost palpable wave. I longed for the thunder promised by the great banks of copper-coloured cloud that hung low over the western sky.

I must have walked five or six miles, when a small boy roused me from my reverie by asking the time.

It was twenty minutes to seven.

When he left me I began to take stock of my bearings. I found myself standing before a gate that led into a yard bordered by a strip of thirsty earth, where there were flowers, purple stock and scarlet geranium. Above the entrance was a board with the inscription:

*Chs. Atkinson.* *Monumental Mason.*
*Worker in English and Italian Marbles*

From the yard itself came a cheery whistle, the noise of hammer blows, and the cold sound of steel meeting stone.

A sudden impulse made me enter.

A man was sitting with his back towards me, busy at work on a slab of curiously veined marble. He turned round as he heard

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my steps and I stopped short.

It was the man I had been drawing, whose portrait lay in my pocket.

He sat there, huge and elephantine, the sweat pouring from his scalp, which he wiped with a red silk handkerchief. But though the face was the same, the expression was absolutely different.

He greeted me smiling, as if we were old friends, and shook my hand.

I apologized for my intrusion.

"Everything is hot and glary outside," I said. "This seems an oasis in the wilderness."

"I don't know about the oasis," he replied, "but it certainly is hot, as hot as hell. Take a seat, sir!"

He pointed to the end of the gravestone on which he was at work, and I sat down.

"That's a beautiful piece of stone you've got hold of," I said.

He shook his head. "In a way it is," he answered; "the surface here is as fine as anything you could wish, but there's a big flaw at the back, though I don't expect you'd ever notice it. I could never make really a good job of a bit of marble like that. It would be all right in a summer like this; it wouldn't mind the blasted heat. But wait till the winter comes. There's nothing quite like frost to find out the weak points in stone."

"Then what's it for?" I asked.

The man burst out laughing.

"You'd hardly believe me if I was to tell you it's for an exhibition, but it's the truth. Artists have exhibitions: so do grocers and butchers; we have them too. All the latest little things in headstones, you know."

He went on to talk of marbles, which sort best withstood wind and rain, and which were easiest to work; then of his garden and a new sort of carnation he had bought. At the end of every other minute he would drop his tools, wipe his shining head, and curse the heat.

I said little, for I felt uneasy. There was something unnatural, uncanny, in meeting this man.

I tried at first to persuade myself that I had seen him before, that his face, unknown to me, had found a place in some out-of-

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the-way corner of my memory, but I knew that I was practising little more than a plausible piece of self-deception.

Mr. Atkinson finished his work, spat on the ground, and got up with a sigh of relief.

"There! what do you think of that?" he said, with an air of evident pride.

The inscription which I read for the first time was this:

Sacred to the Memory
of
James Clarence Withencroft.
Born Jan. 18th, 1860.
He passed away very suddenly
on August 20th, 190–
*"In the midst of life we are in death"*

For some time I sat in silence. Then a cold shudder ran down my spine. I asked him where he had seen the name.

"Oh, I didn't see it anywhere," replied Mr. Atkinson. "I wanted some name, and I put down the first that came into my head. Why do you want to know?"

"It's a strange coincidence, but it happens to be mine."

He gave a long, low whistle.

"And the dates?"

"I can only answer for one of them, and that's correct."

"It's a rum go!" he said.

But he knew less than I did. I told him of my morning's work. I took the sketch from my pocket and showed it to him. As he looked, the expression of his face altered until it became more and more like that of the man I had drawn.

"And it was only the day before yesterday," he said, "that I told Maria there were no such things as ghosts!"

Neither of us had seen a ghost, but I knew what he meant.

"You probably heard my name," I said.

"And you must have seen me somewhere and have forgotten it! Were you at Clacton-on-Sea last July?"

I had never been to Clacton in my life. We were silent for

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some time. We were both looking at the same thing, the two dates on the gravestone, and one was right.

"Come inside and have some supper," said Mr. Atkinson.

His wife is a cheerful little woman, with the flaky red cheeks of the country-bred. Her husband introduced me as a friend of his who was an artist. The result was unfortunate, for after the sardines and watercress had been removed, she brought out a Doré Bible, and I had to sit and express my admiration for nearly half an hour.

I went outside, and found Atkinson sitting on the gravestone smoking.

We resumed the conversation at the point we had left off.

"You must excuse my asking," I said, "but do you know of anything you've done for which you could be put on trial?"

He shook his head.

"I'm not a bankrupt, the business is prosperous enough. Three years ago I gave turkeys to some of the guardians at Christmas, but that's all I can think of. And they were small ones, too," he added as an afterthought.

He got up, fetched a can from the porch, and began to water the flowers. "Twice a day regular in the hot weather," he said, "and then the heat sometimes gets the better of the delicate ones. And ferns, good Lord! they could never stand it. Where do you live?"

I told him my address. It would take an hour's quick walk to get back home.

"It's like this," he said. "We'll look at the matter straight. If you go back home to-night, you take your chance of accidents. A cart may run over you, and there's always banana skins and orange peel, to say nothing of falling ladders."

He spoke of the improbable with an intense seriousness that would have been laughable six hours before. But I did not laugh.

"The best thing we can do," he continued, "is for you to stay here till twelve o'clock. We'll go upstairs and smoke; it may be cooler inside."

To my surprise I agreed.

. . . . . .

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We are sitting now in a long, low room beneath the eaves. Atkinson has sent his wife to bed. He himself is busy sharpening some tools at a little oilstone, smoking one of my cigars the while.

The air seems charged with thunder. I am writing this at a shaky table before the open window. The leg is cracked, and Atkinson, who seems a handy man with his tools, is going to mend it as soon as he has finished putting an edge on his chisel.

It is after eleven now. I shall be gone in less than an hour.

But the heat is stifling.

It is enough to send a man mad.

## taking a closer look

1 *What prompted Withencroft to make the sketch in question? Why did it please him?*
2 *Why was Atkinson in a hurry to finish the gravestone that attracted Withencroft's attention? How did he account for the name and dates he had chosen?*
3 *How convincing did you find Atkinson's reasons for asking Withencroft to stay with him for the night? In what way does the author's final picture of Atkinson arouse our suspicions?*
4 *In what way does the diary form of narration make the story seem more realistic and believable? Where in the story, however, does it appear to be less than convincing?*
5 *Indicate the effect of the terrific heat on both the plot and the atmosphere (or mood).*
6 *This story might be called a* fantasy, *since some of the actions and behaviour of the two principal characters do not seem entirely reasonable or logical. Yet it is only a natural aspect of human nature that we should attempt to understand to our full satisfaction* all *of the connecting links of the story, unfinished as it is.*

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*How credible (believable) do you find this story? That is, how much of it can be explained by means of careful analysis and reasonable guesswork? And how much of it seems to defy even the most ingenious use of logic? Your answers to these questions should be expressed in paragraph form, with specific references made to the text in order to support your conclusions. (Your teacher might prefer to have these difficult questions discussed orally by the class, rather than have them answered in written form.)*

## let's get involved

1 *"August Heat" is a famous example of the popular "unfinished" story. Very few of us have the writing ability necessary to create Harvey's masterful suspense and atmosphere, but there is no reason why we all cannot at least try to finish the author's handiwork.*

*Complete this story, then, but in such a way that your "solution" to the mystery is both credible and fully in accord with the framework and details already provided by the author. (In other words, do not change any of Harvey's plot outline. You may, of course, add certain details not already present in the story, so long as they do not contradict other details.) You may continue to use Withencroft's diary, or you may use another form (such as the diary completed by another person, a newspaper article, or a courtroom report).*

2 *Write your own "unfinished" story. Include in it some dialogue and dramatic action, and, if possible, some clues which will help the reader or listener solve your little mystery. Be careful not to invent plot details that are too unreasonable or fantastic. Perhaps your story and several others might be read aloud in class; the rest of the students could then be invited to finish (that is, solve) these mysteries.*

## recommended reading

1 *The Monkey's Paw*, W. W. Jacobs
2 The collected stories of Edgar Allan Poe

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# The Mystery of Monsieur Pliny

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

It took Anatole Blanchette two days to tramp forty miles from Moose Meadows to Lake of the Wolves. Anatole was only fourteen years old, but tough, like his father, and, like his father, wise in the ways of the woods. This silent forest of spruce and birch was his element. If his father, Jules, had come this way, Anatole would find him.

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Jules had been mysteriously missing for three weeks. Mounted police were searching eastward along Cold River Portage, because Jules, promising to be home in a week, had said he would scout fur in that region in order to make plans for next winter's trapping. But he might, Anatole had reasoned, have changed his mind and gone north. So the boy, with a light pack on his back and a light carbine rifle in his hands, had trekked northward alone toward Lake of the Wolves.

Like his father, Anatole was small-boned and slight of figure. His step was soft and quick, and his moccasins made no sound on the trail. His sharp eyes, at every step, looked for the footprints of Jules Blanchette. He would know them at once because anyone else but Jules, in this balmy summer season, would be wearing moccasins. As a rule Jules did so himself, but on this excursion he had left home wearing a pair of knee-high elk-hide boots.

It was just after sunset on his second day out that Anatole saw the cabin. It stood in an open glade of the forest, encircled at a distance on all sides by velvety-blue pines. The cabin was low and squat, with long walls and a sod roof, but smoke bannering from its chimney looked homey and inviting to Anatole. He crossed the glade confidently to the cabin.

Then the door opened, and he saw Pliny standing there—a big slouching man with small greedy eyes. Anatole had seen him once or twice at the Meadows. "Pincher" Pliny, people called him. "He'd sell tickets to his mother's funeral," Sergeant Harn of the Mounties had once said.

Anatole could smell tea boiling on the cabin stove, but this paunchy, loose-jowled man did not invite him in to share it. "What kin I do for you, kid?" he said coldly.

"I'm Anatole Blanchette. Have you seen my pa up this way?"

Pliny's thick-fingered hand stroked the stubble on his two chins. He laughed. But the laugh, Anatole thought, had a crack in it.

Then Anatole saw his father's knee-high elk-hide boots. Pliny was wearing them. Instantly the boy released the safety catch on his carbine. He raised the muzzle till it pointed exactly at Pliny's stomach.

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"Where," he demanded, "did you get my pa's boots?"

Pliny's eyes fixed on the threat of the carbine. He took a backward step into the room and said cautiously, "What boots? See here, boy, don't you go pointin' that gun like that."

"The ones you're wearin'. They're my pa's. You got my pa in here?" With the carbine poked out in front of him, Anatole stepped into the cabin. No one but Pliny was there. The one room was rudely furnished with a tin stove, a table, one chair, and a bunk.

"If you mean these boots I got on," Pliny said, his eyes slipping shiftily to a shotgun on wall brackets beyond the bunk, "I bought 'em. Bought 'em fair and square."

"And where," Anatole cried, "did you get that rifle?" For he could see his father's rifle leaning against the wall. Anatole knew it instantly. It was a Model 70 Winchester, with bolt action and a twenty-six-inch barrel, and made to fire caliber .300 Magnum cartridges. In all this north country there was only one such rifle, and Jules was very proud of it.

"It's pa's rifle!" Anatole punched his carbine closer to Pliny's middle. "Where'd you get it?"

"I ain't seen yer pa," Pliny insisted. "That there rifle, I bought it from an Injun. Ain't touched it since he set it in the corner there, week afore last. He came by with the rifle and these here boots and wanted to sell 'em. So I made him an offer an' he took it."

"Where did the Indian get 'em?"

"He didn't say."

"What Indian was it?"

"Dunno. They all look alike to me. He was a Cree, I reckon." Pliny's face took on a smug "this-is-my-story-and-I'll-stick-to-it" look. At the same time he edged a step nearer to the shotgun on the wall.

"You stand right where you are," the boy ordered, "till I can figure out if you're lyin'."

His mind searched back for all he had ever heard about Pincher Pliny. "Not a killer," Sergeant Harn had once said. "Not even a thief. Just a plain, ornery, pinch-fisted cheat!"

Therefore stealing boots and a rifle while Jules slept by a

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campfire seemed to fit a law-breaking Indian better than it fitted Pliny. And buying the loot for next to nothing would exactly fit Pliny.

The muzzle of his father's rifle, Anatole now noted, was mud-caked as though the rifle had rested, muzzle down, on wet ground. That was not like Jules.

Then the boy's eyes shifted back to the boots. Those boots had been equipped with rawhide laces. But now the left boot was laced with cheap cotton cord. "What," Anatole asked, "did you do with that other rawhide lace?"

Pliny shrugged. "Wasn't any. They was like this when the Injun brought 'em here."

He could be making up the Indian out of whole cloth, Anatole thought. "My pa," he asserted, "wouldn't sell or trade that rifle."

"All I know," Pliny said, "is I bought it fair and square. So you dassent take it away unless you bring an order from the court."

That was true, Anatole admitted. Theft would have to be proved. A point in Pliny's favour was that the rifle was exposed boldly in the room. That would hardly be the case if Pliny had stolen it himself.

The pressing thing right now was to find Jules Blanchette. A stinging fear grew within Anatole. Fear that his father had been murdered. Why that missing rawhide lace? The boy could think of two possible reasons. Both were appalling.

To show his contempt for Pliny, he turned his back on the man and walked out of the cabin. He tramped safely across the open glade to the timber's edge, and it seemed to him that this proved Pliny had not murdered Jules. For if he had, would Pliny not also shoot him down? He would need only to fire at Anatole's retreating back.

Well into the trees, Anatole sat on a log to think. He thought about a missing rawhide lace. He thought about the character of Pincher Pliny.

What was the character of Pliny? He wasn't a trapper. Some said he made his living trading cheap goods to Indians for fine fur, but he always kept inside the law. What would such a man do if he found Jules Blanchette sleeping in the woods, with a

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ninety-dollar rifle leaning against a tree and a twenty-dollar pair of boots drying by the fire? If he came into possession of those boots by either trick or trade, why would he remove one rawhide bootlace?

A cord of rawhide six feet long, Anatole thought, would be just the thing to tie a man's hands behind him. Or to secure a man's ankles so he couldn't run. A thief might do that to prevent pursuit.

But suppose—the thought brought a shiver to Anatole—suppose it were murder! Then the killer must hide the body. He could sink it to the bottom of the nearest lake by tying a heavy weight to it—with a stout rawhide lace from the victim's boot!

The nearest lake was Lake of the Wolves, one mile to the east. Anatole went grimly that way. The tall trees closed in on him. He crossed a narrow tamarack swamp and passed again into dry spruce forest. Then, as spruce gave way to birch and balsam, he could smell the lake. When he came to its beach, the expanse of cold blue water chilled him. The lake was deep and more than a mile across.

Darkness was an hour away, and the boy began searching the beach for prints of his father's boots. The sand was packed hard, and Anatole found no footprints. But a little way back in the birch timber he found the ashes of a fire.

It was the last campfire of Jules Blanchette. Anatole was sure of that, because an old brier pipe which Jules always carried lay at the foot of a birch tree near the fire. Jules would not have broken camp and left the pipe there. Or if he had, he would have returned for it.

With a sore heart the boy began looking for signs of violence. On hands and knees he circled the fire looking for footprints. An Indian, or Pliny himself, would have worn moccasins.

But Anatole found no such prints. He did find several dim tracks of his father's boots, such as Jules might have made while picking up wood for the fire. Then, about twenty paces from the ashes, the boy found an empty brass shell. It was the shell of a Magnum cartridge, caliber .300, and he knew it had been fired from his father's rifle.

The light grew dim, and Anatole made a night fire of his own.

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He unrolled his pack, a light fur-lined sleeping bag enclosing the barest necessities. He boiled tea and ate a chocolate bar. In a little while he slipped into the bag and lay looking up at the stars. He thought about the missing bootlace and the deep cold lake. What would he find tomorrow? The boy twisted in his bag and shivered.

It was five o'clock when he wakened—broad daylight. Doggedly he resumed searching the beach. Hidden under a balsam bush overhanging the lake he found a canoe. It might belong to some Indian who occasionally fished here, or it might belong to Pliny.

The canoe showed no bloodstains. Yet a frightful series of pictures persisted in Anatole's mind—Jules asleep by a fire . . . a thief making off with his rifle and boots . . . Jules waking to give chase . . . the thief whirling twenty paces away to fire one shot . . . and then all evidence sunk in the lake.

The boy embarked in the canoe and paddled about fifty yards offshore. There was no wind, and the water was clear as crystal. He could see bottom to a depth of fully fifteen feet.

As the canoe drifted, Anatole peered fearfully into those depths. He paddled from here to there, near shore, offshore, to the right, to the left, staring down into the transparent water. Farther out, the water was too deep to show bottom. Looking for a body in a lake this deep, Anatole at last decided, was hopeless. He drove the canoe to the balsam mooring and left it there.

Anatole went back to the birch tree where the fire had been made. He heard a squirrel scolding at him from the branches overhead. It made the boy remember he'd eaten no meat since noon yesterday. He aimed his carbine at the squirrel.

But before he could pull the trigger, Anatole saw the stripped skeleton of another squirrel in that same tree. It was wedged in a high fork, and the carcass had been raided by birds of prey. Anatole stood there, thinking.

He moved to the spot where he had picked up the Magnum shell. From here a man would be at just the right angle to shoot the squirrel whose stripped skeleton lay in that high fork.

That meant that his father might have shot the squirrel! If so, and the squirrel had failed to fall, Jules could get it only by

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climbing the tree. Then Anatole saw the snag of a broken limb about thirty feet above ground and near the stripped squirrel. Suppose the limb had broken under Jules's weight and he had fallen from the tree!

Anatole looked at the ashes of the fire again. He realized now that it never had been a campfire! A campfire is made with dry wood. But the unburnt ends around these ashes were green.

This fire had been made of green twigs and leaves. A signal fire!

Anatole saw a few tiny shavings at the base of the tree which his father had whittled for shavings to start the fire. They were birch bark shavings. Then he saw two creamy white rectangles on the tree, about a foot above the ground, where Jules had stripped away bark. The rectangles were the same size, each about four inches wide by ten inches long.

There would have been no need to cut those exact sizes if Jules had merely wanted to whittle shavings. His father had fallen from this tree and broken a leg! That would have left most men helpless, but not Jules Blanchette. Jules had spent a lifetime in the woods. Sitting here with a broken leg, his back to this tree, Jules would first make a smoke fire to call for help. Smoke might be seen by some Indian, or by Pliny at the cabin a mile away.

Once the smoke was drifting upward above the treetops, Jules would do the best job possible on his leg. He would take off the boot from the broken limb and remove its rawhide lace. Then he would strip two rectangles of bark from the tree, each long enough to reach from ankle to knee. Next, whatever the pain and effort, he would set that broken bone. He would slap on the splints, curved by nature to fit the curve of his leg, and tie them securely into place. Around and around those splints he would wrap the rawhide lace.

What then? The boy pictured his father sitting here, his leg in splints, waiting for someone to answer the smoke of his fire. What if no one had come! How long could Jules endure the pain and exhaustion? Anatole bit hard on his lip. His father was tough, like a steel wire. He would wait a reasonable time for an answer to his signal and then—then he would begin crawling toward the nearest habitation.

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Toward the cabin of Pincher Pliny. That was it!

The cabin couldn't be seen from here, but Jules had an unerring sense of direction in the woods. So had Anatole. The boy faced in that direction and walked for fifty yards, then dropped to his hands and knees and began searching for prints.

Soon, in a spot where the soil was bare of gravel and grass, he found them. Not the prints of a crawling man, but the prints of a man upright. The print of the right boot only, and just to the left of this a shallow circular print about an inch in diameter.

Anatole gave a shout of elation. Here was proof! His father had used the rifle as a crutch. The curve of the stock plate would be just right to fit snugly under the left armpit of a cripple. Jules was a small man, only five feet three. The Winchester rifle was four feet long from end to end. Using it as a crutch, Jules had hobbled straight toward Pliny's cabin.

In the narrow tamarack swamp the ground was soft and the prints were deep. This checked with the mud-caked muzzle of the rifle as Anatole had seen it in the cabin.

Beyond the swamp the prints disappeared again. But Anatole found one more set at the rim of the cabin glade, in plain sight of Pliny's door. Jules Blanchette, using his rifle as a crutch, had limped to that doorway.

Therefore Pliny had lied about the Indian. No Indian, but Jules himself, had taken that rifle to the cabin.

Anatole, with his carbine ready, advanced grimly toward the cabin. It stood silent in the noon sunshine, its door open.

Anatole saw Pliny on the bunk, dozing. The man was fully dressed, boots and all. Three steps more and Anatole was pushing his carbine hard against Pliny's hip.

"You lied about my pa!"

The man opened his eyes and blinked. "Oh, it's you again!" He tried to sit up, but Anatole stopped him with the carbine.

"My pa came here," he cried, "with his leg broken. He used his rifle for a crutch." He nodded toward Jules's rifle.

"Guesses are cheap," Pliny said, and tried to grin. But the grin faded as Anatole cocked the carbine. That made Pliny cautious. "I ain't seen yer pa. If he come here, I wasn't home."

Anatole didn't believe it. With a broken leg, his father would

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stay in the cabin while the leg mended.

"I found his camp by the lake," Anatole said. "His tracks lead right here."

"How d'yuh know it was yer pa's camp? Might've been an Injun's."

"Not with this by it." Anatole's left hand delved in a pocket and brought out Jules's brier pipe. "It was right there by the—"

The boy broke off as he suddenly had an idea about the pipe. Jules had not mislaid the pipe! He had purposely left it at the birch tree because it was a personal article, certain to be picked up and examined by anyone finding the camp. Did it conceal a message? In the dim twilight when he had found it, had he missed something?

Anatole forced Pliny to roll over and lie face down on the bunk. He used some stout fish cord in the cabin to tie the man's hands firmly behind him.

Then he stepped back and, from the bowl of the pipe, fished a tiny thimble-shaped cone of paper. He read its message aloud:

*I are break the leg. I rest few days at Plinys. Then maybe I mak it to Musk Charlie's.* *J B*

"How long did he stay here?" Anatole demanded. "And when did he leave for Muskrat Charlie's?" He knew that Charlie's cabin was twenty miles southwest. It would be a logical second stop, because Charlie had a horse and could get quick help from Moose Meadows.

"Looks like he came by here," Pliny suggested, "and found me not at home. So he went right on to Charlie's."

"On one leg?" Anatole scoffed. "Without even staying all night? Get on your feet, Pliny. We'll go to Charlie's and find out."

Pliny turned his head and saw the carbine still cocked. He got to his feet, whining, "They's a law agin kidnapin'."

"You're not gettin' out of my sight," the boy said fiercely, "till I find out if you kilt pa."

Ten minutes later they were trekking southwest through the woods. A cocked carbine at his back, his hands tied behind him,

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Pliny couldn't argue. Hooked to Anatole's pack was his father's rifle.

There was no need to look for tracks. For halfway between Pliny's and Charlie's ran Musk River, and Anatole knew that a crippled man could cross at only one point. The crossing was called Charlie's Ferry because Charlie kept two canoes there, one moored at each bank.

"It's ten miles to the river and we can make it in three hours," the boy said.

"I'll see you jailed fer this," Pliny threatened. But a nervous fright was in his voice now.

"Pliny is hiding something!" Anatole thought. Dread chilled the boy. It might be murder! Murder for what? What could Jules have had, other than boots and a rifle, that Pliny would have wanted?

After three hours their route took a gentle downslope to tamarack bottomland. Then Anatole saw a column of smoke straight ahead.

He poked Pliny on frantically, and soon they saw the river with a dismal smoke fire on the bank. Jules Blanchette lay by the fire, either in a faint or dead.

"Pa!" Anatole called hoarsely. "It's me, Pa! Are you all right?"

He made Pliny lie face down by the fire. Then he knelt by his father and felt his heart. A breath of life still stirred in Jules. His left leg was hideously swollen. Close by him lay a pair of shop-made crutches.

"I didn't do nothin' that wasn't legal!" Pliny bleated. This was a changed tune! It implied that Pliny *had* encountered Jules.

Anatole took a rope from his pack and tied Pliny's feet so the man couldn't get up. He raised his father's head and held a canteen to his lips. "It's Anatole, Pa. You'll be all right now!"

Then he saw why Jules had gotten this far and no farther. The canoe that was nearly always moored here was gone.

The boy chafed his father's wrists until Jules opened his eyes. He smiled faintly when he saw Anatole. Jules' skin was deathly white around the edges of a three weeks' beard. He was wearing moccasins. "You are good boy, Anatole." His voice was thin and tired.

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Anatole fed him a chocolate bar and boiled some tea. A few swallows revived Jules visibly. In a little while he sat up, his back against a birch.

"The leg, she hurts like the poison, Anatole. Mebbe this be the end for Jules."

Anatole wouldn't hear of it. "I'll get you to Charlie's, Pa, and he'll go on a horse for a doctor. How long did you stay at Pliny's?"

"I am there ten day on the bunk while the bone she is grow together a little." Jules seemed to notice Pliny now for the first time. "So you bring him here, Anatole?"

"What did he do, Pa?"

"I didn't do nothin' that wasn't legal," Pliny muttered.

Jules gave a short laugh. "By gar, he is right, Anatole. What he do is all legal."

It came out then, bit by bit. Jules had limped into Pliny's cabin and had rested there ten days while the bone knitted. Pliny had discovered thirty dollars in his wallet, and so had charged him three dollars a day for bunk and board.

"It was a fair price," Pliny whined. "Any horsepital 'd've charged him more'n 'at."

"When I am ready to go," Jules related, "I still cannot put on the boot over splints. So I ask Pliny for moccasins. He trade me pair of moccasins for the boots."

Anatole's stare withered Pliny.

"He got what he wanted, didn't he?" Pliny mumbled. "So what?"

Jules went on: "So then I am want to go to Charlie's. But twenty mile, she is long way for go on one leg. But I see pair of old crutches in the cabin. Pliny has use them once after he step in wolf trap and sprain the ankle. So I ask him to lend me these crutches—and what you t'ink, Anatole? He trade me the crutches for my beautiful rifle."

"He was usin' the rifle fer a crutch, wasn't he?" Pliny whimpered. "So I give him two crutches for one, didn't I? He didn't have to make the deal 'less'n he wanted to, did he?"

"So you see, Anatole," Jules said, "it is lak he say, what he do

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is all so ver' legal. We can say that he is guilty only of the inhospitality."

This truth shocked Anatole. His fingers itched to use the carbine on Pliny. Instead, he placed it in his father's hands. "Watch him, Pa, while I bring a canoe from the other side."

The boy stripped and dived into the river. Expertly he began stroking toward the far bank, where a canoe was moored.

Jules sat holding the carbine with careless aim on Pliny. "I do not tell him," he said softly, "that you try to kill me. He is young and hotblood, and his mother would not lak for him to make you dead with bullets, Monsieur Pliny."

"Me try to kill you?" Pliny protested. "I didn't."

"The river, she has rise two feet," Jules explained, "so Anatole do not see the track of the *boots* here. Me, I have come slow on the crutches, but you follow me and come round me fast and are here first. I find no canoe. I find only the tracks of my own boots in the mud of the river bank—where you untie the canoe and let her drift away.

"Why are you want me to die here, Monsieur Pliny?"

Fear tightened Pliny's eyes and he didn't answer.

"Is it because of the hot day when your wool undershirt itches, and you tak it off? I am asleep, but the pain of my leg wake me and I see the ship on your chest—what you call tattoo? Do you know that I see the tattoo and does it mak you hope I not arrive home safe, so that people know that you are not a trader with Indians, but a sailor who hide out in woods? Do the police have a description of you in far countries, Monsieur Pliny?"

Pliny didn't answer, and Jules could see Anatole paddling a canoe toward him. The boy beached the canoe and quickly put on his clothes and pack. He raised Jules to his feet and handed him the crutches. Jules limped to the canoe.

"What about him, Pa?" the boy motioned toward Pliny.

"Untie him, Anatole, and let him go home. The rifle, she is his. He has mak the legal trade with Jules Blanchette, and I, Jules, am honest man."

Anatole cut the man's bonds. Reluctantly he unhooked the rifle from his pack and gave it to Pliny. Pliny took it truculently and stood up.

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The boy pushed the canoe into the river and shoved off. Paddling toward the far shore, his back was to Pliny. Fifty yards out he heard a sound that made him look over his shoulder. It was a rasping sound made by Pliny as he pumped a shell from magazine to chamber. Deliberately Pliny aimed at Anatole's head.

"Hi, there!" the boy yelled. "Don't go shootin' that rifle!"

Pliny kept his aim and Anatole continued to shout at him. "You better look out! My pa used that rifle for a crutch! It's—"

How was Pliny to know that the boy called out to remind him that the rifle hadn't been cleaned since it had been used as a crutch? That under Jules Blanchette's weight its muzzle had sunk deep into the mud of a tamarack swamp! Having no such code himself, how could Pliny sense that this boy, schooled in the code of the North, must warn even his worst enemy?

When Pliny pulled the trigger, no bullet emerged from the mud-plugged muzzle. The barrel split back like the skin of a half-peeled banana. The bolt sheered off and flew deep into Pliny's breast. His body collapsed on the river bank, and the rifle, bargained from a cripple but no bargain now, lay hard and heavy on his head.

## taking a closer look

1 *Describe briefly your first impression of Pliny. Support your answer by quoting* at least three *words or phrases used by the author near the beginning of the story. Why do you suppose he was called "Pincher"?*
2 *What two possible explanations occurred to Anatole as he thought about the missing boot lace? What other use do you think Pliny might have made of it?*
3 *What two things about his father's rifle aroused in Anatole a suspicion of foul play?*
4 *Describe, step by step, how the boy figured out that his father had broken his leg in the forest. Number each step*

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*and use a point-form means of expression. (That is, use briefly worded phrases or groups of words, rather than complete sentences).*

5 *How were the mysteries of the missing boot lace and the mud-caked rifle finally cleared up?*

6 *Why did Pliny try to kill Jules? Why did the boy try to tell him that the gun would explode? In what way does the ending satisfy you? What could you find possibly to criticize about the story's ending?*

7 *This is a story of many mysteries, not all of which are fully explained in the end. Try to give, either in written or in oral form a possible explanation for each of the following "unsolved" mysteries:*

A *Exactly who was Monsieur Pliny? Had he really been a sailor at one time? If so, why did he desert his ship?*

B *Why hadn't Pliny simply shot Jules, instead of leaving him in the forest to die a slow death?*

C *Why hadn't Pliny cleaned Jules' rifle? (Inexperienced with guns as he was, he must have realized that it was not in proper working condition.)*

*Can you find other "mysteries" that seem to remain unsolved?*

## let's get involved

1 *The authors of mystery stories use quick-witted and clever characters (like Anatole Blanchette) to unravel the strange "secrets" of complicated plots. In order to help their heroes, however, authors must provide them with a more or less generous supply of* coincidence; *clues are so arranged, in other words, that the solutions to mysteries can gradually be pieced together by the intelligent heroes.*

*In "The Mystery of Monsieur Pliny," for example, several such lucky coincidences are arranged by the author: only Jules wears boots in the summer; Jules' rifle is the* only *one of its kind in the north country.*

*Make a list of some* other *coincidences provided by the author to help Anatole solve the mystery. Indicate after each item your opinion as to how justified the author was in using it. (Consider such questions as: Is the coincidence too obvious? Does it insult the reader's intelligence? In*

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*what other and better way might the author have helped Anatole?)*

*You might also examine, by means of a class discussion, the use (perhaps overuse!) of coincidence with respect to television programmes. Keep in mind that such coincidences often occur just before commercial breaks.*

2 *Below are listed two "mysteries", each of which is at first glimpse seemingly impossible to solve. If you think carefully about them, however, and use your imagination, you should be able to come up with some ingenious solutions. Your detective work may be done either orally or by means of a written paragraph. If you choose to write your solution, it is suggested that you pick only one of the mysteries; don't forget to make use of some of the clues provided.*

A *Thirteen-year-old Harold liked to watch the late movies on television. One night he saw* The Wolf Man, *and when it was over at 1:30 a.m., he turned off the T.V. set. He wasn't at all tired, but decided to go to bed, anyway; after thinking about the horror movie for quite a while, he finally went to sleep. Next morning, at the breakfast table, Harold's mother mentioned angrily that the T.V. set was still on when she had got up. Harry, an only child, protested but his mother had the last word: "I intend to tell your father when he returns from his business trip!"*

*Who, or what, had turned the set back on?*

B *As he drove his car transport along the desolate northern highway, Don Blackwell thought about his financial problems; if only his wife hadn't been hospitalized for over a month because of a bad accident, and if only he hadn't forgotten to take out medical insurance! Well, at least this trip would help a lot—Don was to get a big bonus if he could deliver this load of six cars to a distant dealer who had run out of automobiles to sell. He had to deliver the cars before seven a.m. the next morning, but he had plenty of time. In fact, since he was actually ahead of schedule, Don stopped several times to check his load of cars: safe and securely tied down, he mused each time, as he checked the two tiers of cars; these six cars meant a lot of money to him. Suddenly, at about three a.m., the*

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*headlights of his truck went out! His frantic efforts to get them working again failed, and there was not a service station or garage for over 70 miles. Four hours left, and some 200 miles to go. He couldn't wait until dawn—not when the first light of a winter day came just after 7:30 a.m.! He couldn't make it! And yet, at 6:55 a.m., Don rolled his big transport into the dealer's delivery area. He had made it—without the help of a single person! And his headlights were still not working.*

*How had Don managed to travel 200 miles during the night?*

3 *If you enjoy mysteries, you will likely want to read such classics as John Buchan's* The Thirty-Nine Steps *and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series.*

*For a mystery that is never solved, read "August Heat", found on page 22 .*

## recommended reading

1 *The Hidden Treasure of Glaston,* E. M. Jewett

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# Lion-Taming for Beginners

A. CAMPBELL BALLANTINE

"Lumme!" said Leading Aircraftman Smithers J. C. "Look who's 'ere, wouldja."

He stooped, half squatting, and tenderly patted the little sand-coloured kitten's head. He was rewarded by a feline smile and a parting of the lips that might have meant, "Good morning, chum," or perhaps, "Boy, am I ever in trouble!"

"Wotsa matter?" Smithers inquired. "'Ungry?" He took the tiny ball of tawny fluff into his arms: "We'll introduce y' to the cook."

LAC Smithers had a permanent duty at this Air Force station in North Africa; he served with the devotion of an artist and the diligence of a scientist. Punctuality in arriving at his place of employment, which was the septic tank, was a point of probity with him, but this morning he had even a few more minutes than usual to spare—time enough to call at the cookhouse on his way.

As a rule Smithers was not welcome in the cookhouse. Not infrequently his appearance had been the cause of some mass panic and cries of, "Git outa here!" It was not that he was in himself an undesirable character but simply that because of his occupation it was thought that his working clothes exuded the effluvia of his calling. But just now he glowed with the reflected warmth of the attention bestowed on his little pet as cooks, dish-washers, hewers of wood, drawers of water and peelers of potatoes gathered around.

"Blimey!" observed Higgins, the sergeant cook. "A young lion, wot! Where'd you get 'im?"

"Guess 'e's lorst 'is muvver," Smithers conjectured, beaming with almost paternal love upon his treasure.

"More like 'is mother lorst 'im," Higgins suggested.

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It did appear likely. Terrified by the roar of a low-flying plane, the mother lioness might have fled from the strange winged monster with the intention of returning later for her cub. But when the youngster became hungry he went foraging for himself and wandered into the RAF station, almost on the edge of the inhospitable Sahara.

Homeward at evening, like Gray's ploughman, plodding his weary way, LAC Smithers had almost forgotten his little protégé until he found the cub trying to scale the six-inch step of Hut K, where he and eleven other airmen spent most of their off-duty hours. The name Buster was immediately attached to him. Smithers fed him with milk from the kitchen and shielded him from the sins of the flesh—to which he was exposed by unscrupulous airmen who offered him beer.

Although he soon became the station mascot, Buster was universally recognized as Smithers' kitten. Buster himself, though not unfriendly to the rest of the troops, attached himself with touching affection to Smithers, whom he welcomed boisterously whenever they were reunited. Morning and night he was taken for short strolls, and at less regular hours during the day-time. In the beginning he was escorted by his master, but as he grew bolder an open door seemed to invite him into the outside world unattended.

At first he left the hut very cautiously, after tumbling two or three times down the precipitous height from the doorstep to the ground, but he quickly gained confidence. Besides, such heights became less formidable for the cub was growing—in wisdom and in stature and in favour with the troops. But not with the commanding officer, although the C.O. continued to tolerate the lion's unauthorized presence, even at the expense of the troops' rations. After all, if they didn't mind going short by, say, a quarter of an ounce of meat per man per day, why should *he* complain?

But the C.O. was less indulgent by the time the cub had grown to full lionhood and occupied as much cubic footage as the sanitary regulations allowed for two airmen. Furthermore, with no training in such duties, the lion had become an efficient watchdog, growling whenever anyone entered who was not one of the

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regular tenants of Hut K. If he failed to frighten off the intruder by such hostile gestures Buster would rise and roar at the top of his lungs.

It was not until the mascot had thus assumed the offensive against the C.O. at a Saturday morning inspection that the latter suggested the lion ought to be destroyed, turned loose on the desert or otherwise liquidated without further delay.

Smithers simply said, "Very good, sir." But he saw to it with the connivance of the rest of the troops, that at any given moment thereafter the lion was always somewhere the C.O. was not. These efforts at concealment, however, were not completely successful.

"I thought I told you," said the C.O. to Smithers one day, "that your lion had to be got rid of."

"Yes, sir," Smithers said.

"Well?"

"Well, sir. I 'ave took 'im out on the desert, sir. We've even took 'im out on a jeep and ditched 'im. But 'e always came back."

"Then suppose," the C.O. suggested, "we take him up in a kite and drop him."

Smithers felt a catch in his throat.

"Oh, no, sir. Not that."

"Well, if you can think of any more humane way of getting rid of the damn thing—"

"Very good, sir," Smithers said.

It was long after midnight but the station was alert and awaiting the arrival of a giant plane that was to bring the air marshal from London on a hurried inspection trip of African stations. The white beams of many floodlights illuminated the runway. Control had just reported the approach of a plane and the monotonous droning of four motors was already vibrating the air when the terrible thing happened.

At leisurely pace an enormous lion walked out into the centre of the spotlight, lay down, stretched its limbs luxuriously and seemed to be preparing for sleep. After the initial gasp of astonishment some of the troops dared to laugh. But the C.O. was fuming with rage. The hum of the approaching motors had risen

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to a roar and navigation lights were circling the sky, like the gleaming eyes of a bird of prey.

"Where the hell's Smithers?" the C.O. shouted. But the amateur lion-tamer was not to be found.

"Somebody," thundered the C.O., "boot that animal off the runway. *And* out of the camp."

No one moved and the C.O.'s voice rose, choked with indignation.

"Tell control to delay landing. And someone kick the beast off."

The plane could be seen withdrawing as requested. The lion seemed to decide against his first idea of sleep. Instead, he rose, settled on his haunches and proceeded to wash his face in the manner familiar to every cat.

The C.O. was jumping mad, waving his arms to express the murderous thoughts for which he had no words. At last he stepped boldly into the lighted area, walked up to the lion and delivered it a kick in the hindquarters that must have been heard even in the cockpit of the returning plane.

"Ooooo!" the troops gasped in mixed astonishment and admiration. No less astonished, the lion rose, looked offended at the C.O., and walked slowly into one of Africa's darkest nights.

The C.O., obviously conscious that his prowess had not been unnoticed by the troops, walked out of the arena like a victorious gladiator. "Runner!" he called.

"Here, sir," a voice answered from the sidelines.

"Tell control to give 'em the green light now."

"Very good, sir."

Meanwhile the V.I.P. plane had been hovering over the scene, its navigating lights describing circles against the blackness, its engines droning languidly, impatiently awaiting permission to land. Suddenly the drone broke into a roar, the lights retreated, circled in a descending pattern toward the landing field, and the huge bomber came angrily down the strip. While a landing ramp was being brought into position the commanding officer and his adjutant advanced to greet the distinguished visitor.

They saluted smartly. The air marshal raised a forefinger to the peak of his cap in frigid acknowledgement.

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"Good evening, sir," said the C.O.

The air marshal grunted witheringly.

"Good—er, morning. Are you the commanding officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your name?"

"Johnstone, sir."

"Johnstone, eh? Why the devil did you have to keep us hanging in mid air? You knew I was coming, didn't you?"

"Terribly sorry, sir. We were having a spot of trouble with the lights."

"Hadn't you checked them? Oh, never mind. We'll discuss that in the morning. Now show me to my quarters. I hope you haven't forgotten *that*."

At nine o'clock the next morning, while the air marshal was still sleeping peacefully, LAC Smithers J. C. was up before the commanding officer. Having pounded his desk savagely three times, the C.O. said:

"Haven't I told you, Smithers, to get rid of your lion?"

"Yes, sir," Smithers admitted.

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know, sir. 'E wouldn't go."

"Well, after last night's frightful incident I'm not telling you anymore. The air marshal is *terribly* annoyed."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"As luck has it," the C.O. went on, "the beastly creature has gone—forever, let's pray. But Smithers, I'm warning you—if it ever comes back it'll be shot at sight. *Shot*, Smithers. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. But?"

"There are no *buts* about it, Smithers. I won't tell you again."

"No, sir. But, sir—weren't my lion. Mine was locked up in me 'ut."

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## taking a closer look

1 *What was Smithers' job at the air force base? Why was he not welcomed in the cookhouse?*
2 *What is a "mascot"? Why did the station troops not object to the presence of the lion cub?*
3 *Describe briefly the incident which convinced the C.O. that Buster had to go.*
4 *The full impact, or comic effect, of this story depends on one line. What is it? How would you describe this kind of ending? (That is, what one word or two might be used to describe it?)*
5 *Why does the author choose not to add anything more to his ending? Describe briefly the effect that you think Smithers' statement had on the C.O.*

## let's get involved

1 *Having a dog or a cat as a family pet is not at all unusual or odd, but bringing a wild animal into the house is quite something else.*

*Describe in one or two paragraphs one of your attempts to make a house pet of an animal normally considered to be wild. Do not try to include a great number of episodes or details; emphasize, instead, the two or three incidents which stand out in your mind as being amusing (even if they were not so at the time!). If you think you have the literary skill, end your account with a "punch line" or surprise ending.*

*If you have never enjoyed the delightful experience of trying to tame a wild animal, then describe instead how you would go about domesticating a most unusual wild animal—say a crocodile, or a beaver, or even an elephant. Use your imagination! Be careful, however, to make your account seem reasonably logical and free from excessive or ridiculous exaggeration.*

2 *If animals could speak, they would very likely have some unkind things to say about people! One can easily imagine, for example, the comment that might have been made by the lion after he was kicked by the C.O.*

*Imagine that you have just invented a "Sound Translator" which is capable of converting animal sounds into*

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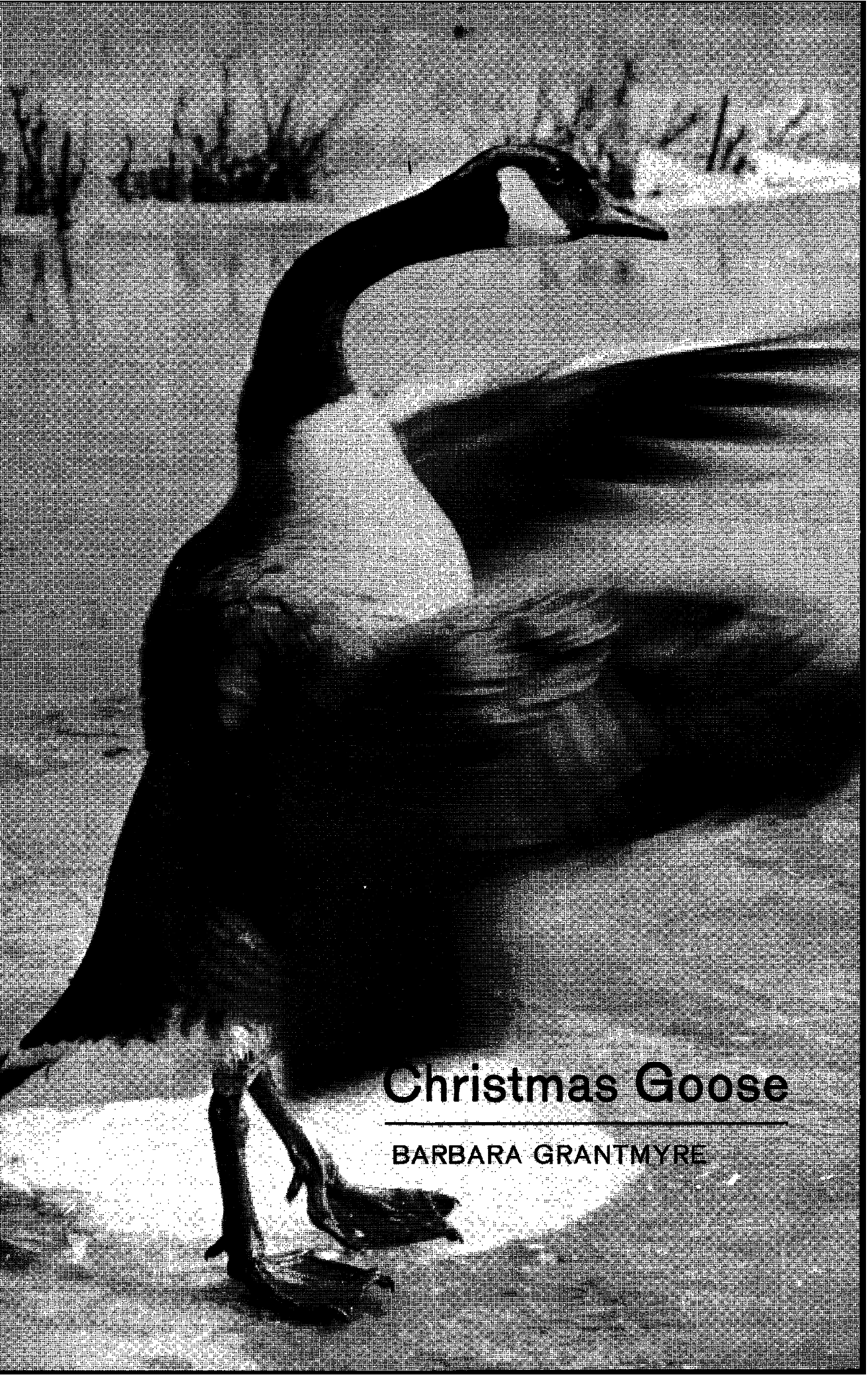
*human speech. Now take your amazing machine to the zoo and record the "conversations" of various animals. You may use either the personal interview approach or rely, instead, on the "overheard conversation" technique. Try to blend into your account a mixture of humour and* satire *(that is, in the sense used in this story, a criticism of human beings as seen by animals).*

## recommended reading

1 *Arctic Wild*, Lois Crisler
2 *Born Free* and *Living Free*, Joy Adamson



# Christmas Goose

BARBARA GRANTMYRE

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# Christmas Goose

BARBARA GRANTMYRE

The first thing Sawkey noticed when he came home that night in late November was the feathered head snaking up from the clothes basket back of the stove. It gave him quite a turn.

"What's going on?"

"A wild goose, Pa. Lem and the twins found it on Berrigan bog."

"It's got a hurted wing."

"We thought it was dead."

"Poor thing! It's remarkable tame, Sawkey. Lem bandaged it with no trouble. He ought to be a veterny, that boy."

"Not hurt bad, Pa. Just a scrape. Some of the long feathers are busted so it can't fly. I guess they'll grow in."

"Stand back, everybody, while I look at the creature." Sawkey pushed two or three youngsters aside and went to the basket.

"Sssst!" Two bright eyes caught the lamplight and tried to stare him down.

Lem had bandaged the injured wing and put straw in the basket for a bed. The goose, black-headed with two white cheek patches, sign of the true Canada goose and not the lesser brant, seemed comfortable enough, though a spark of animosity showed as Sawkey peered down.

Sawkey Mullet was a kind man. He wouldn't kick a dog or prod an ox with a pitchfork, so for a moment he was bewildered at the sudden strong dislike he felt for the hapless bird. Then it came to him.

"Great swith! This goose is the spittin' image of Malvola Piper," he exclaimed.

"Malvola Piper?" repeated Minnie. "One of the back-river Pipers?"

"Nah! Malvola hailed from Cumberland County . . . or maybe

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Yarmouth. She was a mean, spiteful, old maid school teacher who'd rather lick you than learn you. I had her in fifth grade. That term I got more trimmings for less cause than all the rest of my schooldays. Gar! I hated Malvola."

"Malvola's a pretty name, though," put in Lem. "Let's call the goose Malvola."

"Better call her Dinner, boy. She'll make a mighty tasty feed." Sawkey's words caused a wail of dismay. Even Minnie looked distressed.

"We can't eat the poor thing. She's Lem's, and so kind it's amazing."

"She'll hurt somebody. You can't trust a wild creature. Suppose she attacked the baby?"

To prove him wrong, the baby, who had been crawling by the woodbox, hoisted himself to the basket and reached for the bird. The bird with a soft honk arched its neck gently and let the small hand stroke its feathers.

"Look at that, Sawkey. She likes children."

Sawkey raised another tack. "She'll mess your floors."

"I've raised a family," Minnie was smug. "I think I can train a goose."

He would have to give in. He knew that, so his last objection was feeble, although most important. "How'll you feed it? Geese need grain in the winter."

"I'll buy the grain, Pa," Lem promised. "I'll take some of the .22 money." For years Lem had longed and saved for a .22 rifle and always some claim would arise before he could achieve his goal.

"That's reasonable," Sawkey commented. "If you'd had a gun this afternoon and shot down this goose you'd be brag-all proud. Now you want to take your gun money to feed a bird somebody else winged."

"Lem's better off without nasty weapons." Minnie didn't favour firearms. "I'd rather see Lem caring for one of God's creatures than dealing it death. So hush up about the goose. We'll tend it and keep it. Come spring, maybe, it'll want to leave us when the flocks vee north."

"Spring's a good way off," said Sawkey, wishing it wasn't.

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Winter was the lean time with the Mullets.

"Golly, yes. We've got Christmas first," said Elmer, a twin.

Elroy, the other, added ". . . and the Christmas tree and the school concert."

"And Santa," piped Bermuda, the second oldest girl.

"Psssst!" came from the basket. Much as Sawkey disliked the bird, he agreed with the sentiment one hundred per cent. With a wife and eight kids the festive season brought more bills and bitterness than joy to him.

As November gave way to December his antipathy to the goose increased. Malvola Piper had had high white cheek bones and round scornful eyes; so had Lem's Malvola. Miss Piper's neck had been long; she twisted it sideways when she spoke. Malvola Goose had the same trick before uttering her psssst!

Sawkey half expected the bird to say, "Sawkey Mullet! You're the stupidest, laziest, good-for-nothing boy I ever came across. Write 'Idleness in youth brings want in old age' one hundred times."

He supposed Malvola Piper had been right, but it didn't alter his feelings toward Malvola Goose. He grumbled plenty at home, yet as he worked with the men from the Cove as they cut Christmas trees for Jethro Ward, Sawkey made loud brags about their wild pet.

"She's all but human. When the baby crawls near the stove or anywhere dangerous, Malvola heads him off like a flesh-and-blood nursemaid. She plays tricks, too. She'll untie Minnie's apron strings or sneak a handkerchief from your pocket, and then stand back and Honk! Honk! You'd swear she was laughing."

"My woman wouldn't stand for a goose dirtying up her kitchen," Jonas Carter said smugly, though his houseproud wife made his life a misery with her scrub brush and broom.

"Malvola's house broke. First off, Minnie put diapers on her. 'Twasn't needed long. She makes for the door when she wants out. Mighty smart, is Malvola."

"You don't want to sell her, do you? I've got more orders for poultry than I can fill this year." Hal Baines, who raised fowl as a sideline, put the question as a joke.

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"We don't aim to kill her." But Sawkey added under his breath, "More's the pity."

Yes, Malvola was a smart goose and her intelligence brought sorrow. It happened the day before the job was finished, just before Christmas.

Jethro Ward was a man of substance at the Cove. He owned the one general store, sold everything from onions and nets to cheese and cod line; he dealt in fish and lumber, insurance, boats, marine engines—anything and everything that would bring in a dollar. That year he was sending a schooner-load of Christmas trees to the States, but even the Christmas season had no effect on his selfish heart. The wages he paid the men were scandalously low. After settling the store bill, Sawkey had only sixteen dollars. Fourteen were in his wallet for Minnie; a two-dollar bill was hidden in his back pocket. A man needed spending money around Christmas.

Lem and the older children were out getting a tree and evergreens, so the house was fairly quiet when Sawkey entered the kitchen. Minnie, the baby at her hip, was adding water to the soup and the little girls were ripping at a catalogue, watched by the feathered Malvola. The goose gave a loud Psssst! as she saw who it was. A fine welcome.

"Here's your money, Minnie," Sawkey took out his wallet. "Not much left with the store bill paid."

Minnie sighed as she counted the money. "Fourteen dollars. We'll get by, I guess. But I wish—how I wish that some year we could have a real good Christmas. One for the youngsters to remember. Store-bought presents, and chocolates, and a grand Christmas dinner."

The bill in Sawkey's pocket burned like fire and he squirmed uneasily. Still, two dollars would not buy Minnie's dream.

"Children are pampered too much, these days," he blustered uneasily. "Specially at Christmas. I declare, Minnie, you'd ruin our kids if you had a full purse."

"That'll be the day," she said tartly.

Sawkey was stung. "I do the best I can. Not my fault I've no vitality for steady work." The old excuse came quickly, but instead of Minnie's usual contrite, "I know. I'm not blaming you,

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Sawkey," she kept a thin-lipped silence, while Malvola gave an extra loud hiss of contempt.

"Hold your tongue, you feathered witch. If I had my way we'd make dinner of your carcass. Hey! What're you up to?"

Sawkey wheeled and clapped his hand to his back pocket in consternation. Too late. Deft as a professional dip Malvola had whisked the two-dollar bill from its hiding place and was waddling across the kitchen to Minnie. She curved her long neck and gave Sawkey a wicked side glance as she laid the money in Minnie's hand.

Minnie's tone was ominous. "You kept two dollars for yourself. Shame on you, Sawkey Mullet. That you'd stoop so low!"

"I got a right to frolic money. I earned it, didn't I?"

Minnie put the bill in her apron pocket. "Not when your family needs it." She was quite put out and her eyes sparked with temper.

"Psssst!" agreed Malvola.

Sawkey turned on the goose. "You're to blame," he bellowed, snatching her up. "We've had nothing but discord and misery since you came, you eel-necked gabbler. I'll fix you!"

"Don't you kill that goose," screamed Minnie, frightening the children, who began to howl. "Don't you dare, Sawkey Mullet."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. I'd hate to bet she sees New Year's. Keep your two dollars." Sawkey paused at the door. "I'll get that and more from Hal Baines." He slammed the door and was gone.

Smart as Malvola was she didn't know he was taking her to her doom and, accustomed to being carried, she nestled trustingly in his arms.

It was late and dark when Sawkey returned alone—a cold night with a star-filled frosty sky and iron-bound earth. Ice had formed along the shore, muffling the tide so the ear missed the roar of shifting beach rocks, tumbling from position after each rising wave. The black shape of the house was broken by the lamp-lit kitchen window, a yellow oblong that held no welcome. Sawkey paused for a bit outside, leery of the reception he might get and knowing he deserved anything from a tongue-lash to a flung skillet.

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He knew what he would do—get angry. Pound the table, scare the young ones, and act tough with Minnie. At least there would be no sneers from Malvola. He had taken care of that. Bracing himself with a gulp of frosty air, he went into the house.

"Your supper's in the warming oven," Minnie said mildly. "Must be dry as chips by now." So there wasn't going to be a ruckus, after all?

Sawkey grunted and hung up his jacket and cap with a swift look at the boys, Lem and the twins. The younger children had been put to bed so Lem and his brothers could work on the doll's house they were making for Christmas. They were so intent on their work they hardly noticed their Pa. Minnie must have talked to them.

Actually she had said, "We must make the best of it, boys. Don't hold it against your Pa. Don't sulk or be sassy—that'll only set him in his wrath. Be sorry for him. I am."

"Sorry for him? After what he's done?"

"He'll feel bad when his mad's gone."

They were used to doing what Minnie said, so they tried to obey in the next empty days. No sulks, no sass, only a sadness so thick it was like a cold, heavy fog. The Mullets mourned for a Canada goose. All but Sawkey.

He tried to ignore the long faces, the way little Araby stroked a wisp of down from Malvola's basket, the break in Minnie's voice as she sang "The Vacant Chair," the way the boys steered clear of him. Nevertheless it got on his nerves.

Instead of one goose, nine humans gave him the silent reproach. The Christmas tree they had dragged from the wood leaned against the house forgotten; the paper chains lay in a box in the parlour along with the lion's paw and Canada holly wreaths that had been fun to make. The baby tangled the strings of bog cranberries and nobody lifted a finger. All the joy of the season, and of their family life, was as dead as cold fillets.

"What ails everybody?" Sawkey stormed when he could stand it no longer. "Aren't you goin' to set up the tree? And decorate? It's more like a wake than Christmas Eve."

"It is a wake," said Lem bitterly. "Malvola's! Tomorrow at somebody's dinner table she'll have her funeral. Oh, Pa! Why did

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you do it? She didn't harm you." Lem's voice broke and he stumbled towards the door so they could not see him cry.

"Wait, Lem." Sawkey put his hand on the boy's shoulder and faced his solemn, sad-eyed family.

"Malvola Piper used to tell me I was idle and worthless, that I'd be a no-account when I grew up. That there goose, looking so much like Malvola, seemed her very self, gloating about how her words had come true. It riled me—mostly 'cause it's true. I ain't much of a provider; your Ma knows that to her sorrow. I do the best I can but I've been headed the wrong way since I was a lad. I've wound up like the teacher said—a do-less Sawkey Mullet, 'stead of a man of substance like Jethro Ward."

"Heaven forbid," said Minnie, piously.

"But Pa," cried Lem, "that doesn't matter. I mean, you being like you are. We wouldn't want you different. By and by me and the twins will be working and we'll have lots of money. We can have electric lights, Sunday clothes—just everything. You'll see."

Sawkey had a sudden flash of revelation. His children *would* be workers, taking a joy in toil that he had never felt, and having a hunger for possessions that he'd never known. If this were so, why should he worry over a bitter, long gone old maid, or vent his spite on a harmless bird?

He cleared his throat. "If you and the twins take a walk to the Cove and see Hal Baines, I reckon you'll find a Christmas present, Lem."

"Hal Baines?"

"Yep. She's there. I couldn't do away with her so I dickered with Hal to keep her till spring. Go and bring Malvola home for Christmas."

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## taking a closer look

1 *What is the setting for this story? (That is, where does it take place?) In what way does the language help make the setting realistic and true-to-life?*
2 *Why was the name "Malvola" (meaning "evil-wish") given to the goose? Explain Sawkey's particular reason for disliking both the name and the goose.*
3 *Why was winter a difficult time for the Mullet family? . . .*
4 *"She's all but human," said Sawkey. What proof did he offer to back up this boast?*
5 *Why did Sawkey keep two dollars of his wages? ("Spending money" requires an explanation.) How did Malvola "turn the tables" on him?*
6 *How did Sawkey try to establish his behaviour on Christmas Eve? What answer convinced him that he was being too hard on himself?*
7 *The title of this story has two meanings. Can you give both of them?*
8 *For another humorous animal story, read "Lion-taming for Beginners" on page 45 .*

## let's get involved

1 *Although the antics of Malvola the goose may seem a little exaggerated, there is no denying that animals are often very funny.*

*Describe in one or two paragraphs some of the amusing tricks of mischievous pranks that you have witnessed first hand in animals. Your choice may be a family pet, an animal observed in the zoo, or perhaps a wild animal. If you want to give your account some added appeal, write it from the view point of the animal itself. (That is, you become the creature in question.)*

*For presentation in front of the class, you may either read your story, or better, give your account in the form of a prepared speech; you may want to use notes, of course, but don't feel that you have to memorize your story.*

2 *In this story the goose is described in such a way that, to Sawkey, she seems to bear a close resemblance to a much disliked schoolteacher. Most comparisons between animals and people, however, place the unfortunate animals,*

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*rather than the people, in an uncomplimentary position.*

*Working alone, or with a small group of fellow students, examine the following common comparisons and try to explain their origin. You may, of course, include other examples.*

*A "Making a pig of oneself"*
*B "He's just a snake in the grass."*
*C "A wolf in sheep's clothing"*
*D "Don't be a skunk about it."*
*E "She's got bats in her belfry."*
*F "There's something fishy about this!"*
*G "Buzz off!"*

*3 If you enjoy reading literature which describes animals and their humorous behaviour, you will undoubtedly like Farley Mowat's novel,* The Dog Who Wouldn't Be.

## recommended reading

The many animal novels of G. M. Durrell (such as *No Room in the Ark* and *My Family and Other Animals*)

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# The Weapon

## FREDRIC BROWN

The room was quiet in the dimness of early evening. Dr. James Graham, key scientist of a very important project, sat in his favourite chair, thinking. It was so still that he could hear the turning of pages in the next room as his son leafed through a picture book.

Often Graham did his best work, his most creative thinking under these circumstances, sitting alone in an unlighted room in his own apartment after the day's regular work. But tonight his mind would not work constructively. Mostly he thought about his mentally arrested son—his only son—in the next room. The thoughts were loving thoughts, not the bitter anguish he had felt years ago when he had first learned of the boy's condition. The boy was happy; wasn't that the main thing? And to how many men is given a child who will always be a child, who will not grow up to leave him? Certainly that was rationalization, but what is wrong with rationalization when—The doorbell rang.

Graham rose and turned on the light in the almost-dark room before he went through the hallway to the door. He was not annoyed; tonight, at this moment, almost any interruption to his thoughts was welcome.

He opened the door. A stranger stood there; he said, "Dr. Graham? My name is Niemand; I'd like to talk to you. May I come in a moment?"

Graham looked at him. He was a small man, nondescript, obviously harmless—possibly a reporter or an insurance agent.

But it didn't matter what he was. Graham found himself saying, "Of course. Come in, Mr. Niemand." A few minutes of conversation, he justified himself by thinking, might divert his thoughts and clear his mind.

"Sit down," he said, in the living room. "Care for a drink?"

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Niemand said, "No, thank you." He sat in the chair; Graham sat on the sofa.

The small man interlocked his fingers; he leaned forward. He said, "Dr. Graham, you are the man whose scientific work is more likely than that of any other man to end the human race's chance for survival."

A crackpot, Graham thought. Too late now he realized that he should have asked the man's business before admitting him. It would be an embarrassing interview; he disliked being rude, yet only rudeness was effective.

"Dr. Graham, the weapon on which you are working—"

The visitor stopped and turned his head as the door that led to a bedroom opened and a boy of fifteen came in. The boy didn't notice Niemand; he ran to Graham.

"Daddy, will you read to me now?" The boy of fifteen laughed the sweet laughter of a child of four.

Graham put an arm around the boy. He looked at his visitor, wondering whether he had known about the boy. From the lack of surprise on Niemand's face, Graham felt sure he had known.

"Harry"—Graham's voice was warm with affection—"Daddy's busy. Just for a little while. Go back to your room; I'll come and read to you soon."

" 'Chicken Little'? You'll read me 'Chicken Little'?"

"If you wish. Now run along. Wait, Harry, this is Mr. Niemand."

The boy smiled bashfully at the visitor. Niemand said, "Hi, Harry," and smiled back at him, holding out his hand. Graham, watching, was sure now that Niemand had known; the smile and the gesture were for the boy's mental age, not his physical one.

The boy took Niemand's hand. For a moment it seemed that he was going to climb into Niemand's lap, and Graham pulled him back gently. He said, "Go to your room now, Harry."

The boy skipped back into his bedroom, not closing the door.

Niemand's eyes met Graham's and he said, "I like him," with obvious sincerity. He added, "I hope that what you're going to read to him will always be true."

Graham didn't understand. Niemand said, " 'Chicken Little,' I mean. It's a fine story—but may 'Chicken Little' always be

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wrong about the sky falling down."

Graham suddenly had liked Niemand when Niemand had shown liking for the boy. Now he remembered that he must close the interview quickly. He rose, in dismissal. He said, "I fear you're wasting your time and mine, Mr. Niemand. I know all the arguments, everything you can say I've heard a thousand times. Possibly there is truth in what you believe, but it does not concern me. I'm a scientist, and only a scientist. Yes, it is public knowledge that I am working on a weapon, a rather ultimate one. But, for me personally, that is only a by-product of the fact that I am advancing science. I have thought it through, and I have found that that is my only concern."

"But, Dr. Graham, is humanity *ready* for an ultimate weapon?"

Graham frowned. "I have told you my point of view, Mr. Niemand."

Niemand rose slowly from the chair. He said, "Very well, if you do not choose to discuss it, I'll say no more." He passed a hand across his forehead. "I'll leave, Dr. Graham. I wonder, though . . . may I change my mind about the drink you offered me?"

Graham's irritation faded. He said, "Certainly. Will whisky and water do?"

"Admirably."

Graham excused himself and went into the kitchen. He got the decanter of whisky, another of water, ice cubes, glasses.

When he returned to the living room, Niemand was just leaving the boy's bedroom. He heard Niemand's "Good night, Harry," and Harry's happy "'Night, Mr. Niemand."

Graham made drinks. A little later, Niemand declined a second one and started to leave.

Niemand said, "I took the liberty of bringing a small gift to your son, doctor. I gave it to him while you were getting the drinks for us. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course. Thank you. Good night."

Graham closed the door; he walked through the living room into Harry's room. He said, "All right, Harry. Now I'll read to—"

There was sudden sweat on his forehead, but he forced his

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face and his voice to be calm as he stepped to the side of the bed. "May I see that, Harry?" When he had it safely, his hands shook as he examined it.

He thought, *only a madman would give a loaded revolver to an idiot.*

## taking a closer look

1 *What do you think is the "ultimate weapon" on which Dr. Graham was working? Why did Niemand feel that its development might be a catastrophe for mankind?*
2 *What was unusual about Harry? Why did his father no longer feel bitter about the boy's condition?*
3 *What evidence can you find which indicates clearly that Niemand knew about Harry's mental state? Look carefully, for the two proofs given by the author.*
4 *State briefly the scientist's reason for continuing to work on his weapon. Do you accept this reason? (Do not answer merely "Yes" or "No"; explain your answer in some detail.)*
5 *Are you ready for a challenging question? Read again Graham's last thought (printed in italics), and then state as clearly as you can the moral or "lesson" of this story. (Here is one hint to help you: Niemand did not intend that Harry should shoot himself or his father.)*

## let's get involved

1 *"The Weapon" relies for much of its impact on* dialogue *(a conversation between two or more persons). The personal* interview *is a special kind of dialogue familiar to anyone who has watched television or listened to the radio.*

*Choose an historically well-known event and compose a radio or TV kind of personal interview which can later be dramatized at the front of the classroom (or recorded on*

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*tape). Try to make your interview sound convincing and dramatic. Unless you are an expert on world affairs, you will very likely have to use a good history book or encyclopaedia in order to get the necessary background information. You might also want to work together with a small group of students. If at all possible, use real people and names in your interview; this "personal touch" is very important.*

*Here is a list of suggested events:*

*A the dropping of the first atomic bomb (on Hiroshima, August 6, 1945),*

*B the invention of some other major weapon of war (bow and arrow, gunpowder, guided missile, etc.),*

*C the first airplane, automobile, etc.,*

*D an interview with a famous person just before he or she makes a decision of far-reaching importance (examples: Moses, Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, Martin Luther King, Mackenzie King),*

*E an event of great local importance (concerning your own city, community, or school).*

*2 The last line of the story reminds us of the many proverbs and "wise" sayings that we have probably heard and read many times.*

*Let's have a little fun with some of these proverbs or old adages. Using the list given below, or calling upon your own memory, compose a "story" that will deliberately twist the proverb in such a way that the original meaning becomes humorously reversed or made to appear absurd. It is not necessary to write your little story, unless you feel that it is too complicated to give orally.*

*A A stitch in time saves nine.*

*B Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.*

*C A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.*

*D People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.*

*E Don't count your chickens before they hatch.*

*F Children should be seen and not heard.*

## recommended reading

*Alas, Babylon*, Pat Frank

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# The Decision

TOM BURNAM

"That looks like a nice spot," said Myra Bagley hopefully. She was tired, and the boy Kit was irritable; the day's ride had been long and dusty.

"Well, I don't know," said her husband, slowing the car as they studied the grassy meadow ahead. "Maybe we're not supposed to camp there."

"For heaven's sake, we're in Montana," said Myra. "They told us we could camp anywhere that wasn't posted. You know that." She had not meant to sound so sharp.

"We'll flip a nickel," said John Bagley, but then Kit wailed, "Oh, Dad, make up your mind."

John set his lips and stepped on the gas; and though it was too late now, Myra wanted to say, *"Kit, keep quiet!"*

Then a miracle happened. A mile farther, beyond a curve, was a Forest Service marker, "Camp Ground Ahead," and then a triangular sign with an arrow pointing down a narrow winding road which led from the highway to the bank of the stream below.

John slowed the car.

"Will this do?" he asked. Myra bit her lip and didn't answer. The trouble with being married to a scientist, she had long ago decided, was that everything had to be so scientific. First the Hypothesis: This camp ground will serve us well. Then the Examination of the Facts: Is there water? Do poisonous snakes abound? Are there adequate toilet facilities? Will the slope provide surface drainage in case of rain?

Sometimes she protested while they were trying to buy a new car (this one had a good transmission, he would say, but that one has better brakes) or new furniture (will foam rubber stand up?) or even a new can opener for the kitchen (the consumer

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people say it drops metal shavings into the soup). Then John would withdraw in offended silence after pointing out that he had been *trained* to think on all sides of a question before making a decision.

But for once she had no cause for alarm. "We'll camp here," John said, and Myra and Kit sighed in relief.

Somewhat downstream from the Bagley's camp ground, though on the other side of the large creek, a huge rock had for uncounted years squatted on the brow of the narrow defile at the bottom of the canyon where now the railroad ran. The train crew sometimes used it as a kind of informal checkpoint: "There's the rock. Two minutes behind today."

Near the point where the rock hung over the tracks was a small fault. Over the years, this fault had resulted in a slight slippage and settling, so that the rock began to tip just a trifle more toward the tracks some sixty feet below. None of the train crews noticed the almost imperceptible increase in the angle of the rock's inclination; and certainly none of them knew that the rock was now very precariously balanced, so that the slightest further movement in the fault—indeed, perhaps just the right vibration set up by a passing truck on the highway or a locomotive on the tracks—might send it hurtling down.

At such locations as this small canyon where the rock was, the railroad maintained protective fences; any slides or falling chunks would break one or more of the electric wires, setting into operation certain warning devices. An hour or two before the Bagleys found their camp ground, a boy who lived on a nearby backwoods ranch had aimed his new .22 rifle at an insulator atop the electric fence. The bullet shattered the insulator but did not sever the wire, which merely hung an inch or two lower, the electric circuit remaining unbroken.

"Let's not try to push on too fast tomorrow," Myra said after they had pitched the umbrella tent and Kit had set up his own pup tent close by. "I'm tired."

"But—" John started to say. Then he grinned. "Suits me," he said. "I'm tired too. And maybe tomorrow Kit and I can get in a little fishing. This is a nice spot."

The camp ground—they were a little surprised to have it all to

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themselves—was secluded from the highway. Close by tumbled a large creek which rushed through the canyon; on the opposite side were the railroad tracks, and the rock above them.

"Come on, son," said John the next morning. "Let's cross the bridge and see if we can stir up a trout or two."

The bridge was of heavy but ancient timbers; once used by logging trucks, it was now placarded "Unsafe for Vehicles."

"Be careful," said Myra Bagley. "Don't get run over by a train."

"Oh, Mom," said Kit, but he saw that she was joking, or at least mostly joking.

The man and his son picked up their fishing rods and set off.

"Did you hear that old train go past last night, Dad?" said Kit. "I thought it was going right through my pup tent."

John Bagley grimaced. "I think it did go through our tent," he said. "It woke your mother up in fine fashion."

"I bet it did," said Kit, and they grinned together, sharing companionably their masculine delight at the way the noise of the train had alarmed mother.

"I'll bet that's why we had the camp ground to ourselves," said Kit. "Probably all the natives around here know about the trains."

"Probably," agreed his father.

They had reached the other side. The old truck crossing was barricaded now, though a footpath remained, and a sign said "NOTICE. Property of Montana & Pacific Railway. Permission to Cross Revocable at Any Time."

"What's that mean?" said Kit.

"It means the railroad doesn't want to lose its legal title to the right-of-way," said John.

"Oh," said Kit, who was willing to accept his father's explanation even though he did not wholly understand it. "Can we walk up the tracks?"

"I guess the railroad won't care," said his father, laughing. "It's certainly easier than scrambling along the bank."

"Let's go toward that big rock," said Kit. "See? The one above

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the tracks, there. I'll bet there's some good fishing right about there."

"Why?" said his father.

"Well," said Kit, "well, that rock makes a shadow on the water, and trouts like to stay there."

"Trout," said his father. "It's the same, singular or plural."

"O.K.," said Kit, who secretly could not see that it mattered much.

Together father and son walked up the track. It was straight only for a short distance; at either end of the straight stretch the tracks curved away, following the S sweep of the stream and the canyon.

"Better keep our eyes open," said Kit, proud of remembering caution like an adult. "If a train came roaring along, we wouldn't see it."

John looked ahead and behind. For only a quarter-mile or so, until the tracks curved around rock cliffs at either end, did one have a clear view. He smiled at his son. "We'd hear it in plenty of time," he said. The thought of the shattering, surrounding roar the train had made last night caused him only half-consciously to prick up his ears a little. Evidently the trains came through here fast, faster than one would think for mountain country. On a sudden impulse he stopped, went down on one knee, and placed his ears on the rails.

"What are you doing?" asked Kit, astonished.

"An old trick I learned when I was about your age," his father said. "Didn't you ever try it?" Then he realized that, of course Kit, raised in the city, had never learned how to listen for the trains. Kit at once laid his own ear to a rail. "I don't hear nothing."

"Good heavens," said his father. "*Anything*."

"Anything," said Kit. "What are you supposed to listen for?"

"It's a kind of humming," his father said. "I didn't hear anything either, as a matter of fact. But if a train were coming, maybe even five miles or so away, you'd hear it."

"Gee," said Kit. "Five miles?"

"Maybe even more," said his father.

"Here's that old rock," said Kit, pointing up. It did indeed cast

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a shadow on the stream; John noted that there was a small indentation in the bank and the water looked quite deep. There just might be trout, at that.

"Hey, Dad," said Kit. "What's that fence for?"

John looked where Kit was pointing. "Why, I don't know," he said. "It must be electric, from the look of those insulators. Maybe to keep animals off the track."

"Like bears?" said Kit.

"More likely cows," said his father, "Montana's an open-range state. Though I don't know what a cow would be doing on this side of the creek, or what good a fence would do there, between the canyon wall and the track. Anyway, don't touch it."

"O.K., Dad," said Kit. "Let's put some bait on." He pulled out of his pocket the tin of worms he had dug from the bank of the stream before they started. They were standing in the middle of the track directly beneath the rock, Kit intent on impaling a wriggling worm on his hook, his father tying on a black gnat.

At that moment a huge truck with M.A.D. on its side, for "Montana and Dakota"—the "mad-trucks" were a regional joke—hit a sizable chunk hole in the road across the stream out of sight behind the tall thick pines on the opposite bank. The driver swore and slammed into a low gear.

John Bagley felt, or thought he felt, the slightest tremor in the cross-tie under his feet. And something, in a brief split second, struck him as odd about the shadow in which they stood. It was—it was moving, and Kit's scream and John Bagley's instinctive leap as he tried to grab Kit (but instead, because his foot hit a small pebble, got only empty air) were all a part of a kaleidoscopic nightmare of confusion, alarm, and incoherent noise as the great boulder above crashed mightily down, splitting in two with a great cracking sound as it did so, one large chunk stopping inches short of the electric fence in such a position that the other and larger piece falling immediately behind struck it, hurtled into the air, and cleared the fence by the merest fraction of an inch.

Had the bottom chunk not stopped where it did, had the other half not happened to strike it exactly as it did, or had the shattered insulator not permitted just enough slack in the electric

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wire to enable the rock to leap it without touching it, the electric fence would have flashed its warning.

For a confused moment John Bagley stared wildly around. Rock dust hung in the air and he had fallen as he slipped on the pebble and *where was Kit?*

"Dad! Dad!" he heard, and he whirled around.

Kit was half-lying on the track. The great split-off chunk of rock, resting partly on one rail, was across his leg.

John Bagley moved swiftly to his son. With horror in his eyes, he knelt down and took Kit's hand.

"I can't move, Dad!" cried Kit. "I can't move."

John looked at the boulder. Maybe, maybe it had not crushed or broken his son's leg; it appeared to be resting on the rail and a crosstie.

"Does it hurt much?" he asked softly, but Kit was weeping hysterically and could not answer.

"Kit!" He was ashamed of speaking so sharply, but it did what he hoped: Kit stopped crying.

"It doesn't hurt," Kit said. "Not much anyway. But I can't pull loose. Move the rock, Dad. Please, move it!"

John Bagley looked at the rock. "Move it, Dad," Kit whimpered. John put his shoulder to the rock, knowing the futility of it, knowing that no one man could budge it, but knowing too that for his son he had to try. He pushed until his heart pounded and his eyes misted. The rock did not budge, and John hated it for its stolid resistance to his human muscles.

He realized that he must not succumb to hysteria. What he could see of Kit's leg showed no obvious deformation, and thank God there was no blood. He would need to proceed calmly, efficiently, exploring every possibility. Don't lose your head, he said to himself, don't, don't.

Again he knelt beside his son. Apparently the boulder was resting on a rail and the firm ballast beneath the ties, or on a tie itself. The lower part of Kit's leg disappeared beneath the boulder in the small space between the bottom of the boulder, the rail, and the ground.

"I think it's my foot, Dad," whispered Kit. "My leg's all right, but I can't move my foot, I can't pull it out."

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Then the horror struck his father, and his face turned white as he thought, *Oh, God, let me keep Kit from thinking of it.*

"Dad!" cried Kit. "Oh, Dad, what if—what if—"

It was too late. Kit had thought of it too.

"Come on, son," said John. "Let's pull you loose." He seized Kit by the shoulders.

"You're hurting me," said Kit, sobbing again.

It was no use. Only if help could be found, enough help to take the weight of the rock off the rail and open up what (thank the good Lord for this, at least) must be the small pocket in which Kit's foot was caught, would Kit be free.

"Dad," Kit said, "what are you going to do?" He had stopped crying, but he was shaking, shaking all over, violently.

At that moment they both heard, from some indeterminate distance and direction, the faint hoarse blat of a diesel locomotive's air horn.

"It's a train," whispered Kit, his eyes wide with terror. "Oh, Daddy, it's a train." He had not called his father "Daddy" for a long time.

Get control of yourself, thought John Bagley. Don't throw yourself at the rock, don't try to move it, you can't move it, you can't pull him loose, you've tried to the limit of your strength, and more. You haven't even got a knife, or a hatchet. . . . But he could not pursue this thought further.

"Kit," said John, "I'm going to have to leave you here and run up the track and stop the train." He spoke as rapidly as he could, knowing at the same time that he must not communicate the full extent of his fear to the boy. "Then we'll get help from the trainmen and push the rock off."

The hoarse blat of the horn came again. It seemed noticeably closer.

"Dad!" cried Kit. "Where's it coming from? What if you run the wrong way?" He twisted and wriggled as he spoke, pushing and crying as he tried to free himself. "*Where's it coming from?*" Faintly, in the distance, they could hear now a dull rumbling clattering roar, echoing and re-echoing through the canyon.

"It's from that way," said John, and he started swiftly to run toward the direction from which the sound seemed to come

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when his son's cry stopped him.

"No, Dad, no! From there, from there!" Kit pointed in the opposite direction. If only they could see! If only the tracks did not curve out of sight in either direction! If only every rock and tree did not twist and distort and bounce the sound, now seeming much louder, of the train approaching fast and invisible, approaching—but from where? If only diesels made smoke. . . . Now he could not tell at all where the sound originated, and he was afraid his son knew he could not tell, and no matter what happened, this, at least, his son must not know.

Sweating, John Bagley put his ear to the rail and fought down his fear as the loud humming sounded so close by his head.

"You can tell that way, Daddy, can't you?" said Kit. "You can tell where it's coming from?"

John straightened and looked at his son. All his life he had dreaded some such moment as this. He knew—had always known—how to make decisions in the laboratory. Always there was something to go on, a collection of data to assess, or a logical corollary to what had been before, or a table of figures which, even though capable of misinterpretation, was nevertheless *there*. But always he had feared that the time might come when the data or the corollary or the figures simply did not exist, and yet a step had to be taken even though taking it meant plunging ahead in darkness.

"You *can* tell, Daddy?" Kit was nearly hysterical again. John Bagley had tried never to lie, to himself or others.

"Yes, Kit," said John. "Now I know. Don't worry." Then he was running desperately up the track, as fast as he could in the direction from which he and Kit had come, and he prayed incoherently as he ran.

Another bleat of the horn? Was it louder? Less loud? And the rising-fading-rising rumble . . . it seemed farther away. John Bagley almost stopped, but it was too late now, too late: his course was set, the step in the dark had been taken, and for the first time in his life he knew fully what it was to be committed irrevocably to action without evidence, without the slightest shred of proof that the decision was correct. Yet he knew he must go on. There flashed into his mind a crazy picture of him-

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self running frantically first one way, then the other, betrayed by the mountain echoes, like a foolish base runner trapped between second and third.

His feet pounded on the cinders between the ties, which he cursed for being so spaced that now and then he stumbled. Once he fell, tearing the knees out of his trousers, then scrambling to his feet, pounding on. Again the horn, and his heart almost stopped, for it seemed much less loud. But he forced himself on. The decision had been made. Right or wrong, it had been made.

He reached the curve somewhere beyond which—if he was right—would be the train. *Would have to be the train.* Over his shoulder, he caught a last quick look at Kit, pinned by the rock, seeming much too close behind (surely he had covered more ground than that!) and he ran faster, blood-pounding, heart-pounding, sweat-streaming faster. He had hoped that once into the curve he would be able to see (and be seen) a long distance. But the curve was sharp enough, or the walls of the cut through which it ran were close enough to the tracks, so that still he could see nothing.

He stopped, sobbing with exhaustion. He could run no farther. Here he must stand if he was to have even enough strength to wave his arms. But there was no train at which to wave. The twin tracks, shining in the sun, curved mockingly away until they disappeared behind the canyon wall, and they were empty. He strained with terrible intensity to hear something, to hear anything, but only the pounding rush of exhaustion filled his ears. He felt himself waver at the edge of consciousness; and for the first time, trying to fight it off but losing ground, he knew that futility and despair were beginning at last utterly to overwhelm him.

Then suddenly above the roaring in his ears sounded a tremendous alien noise, the rasping blast of an air horn, very close, and three hundred yards away, its great steel snout roaring into view, he saw the train bearing down. Standing squarely in the middle of the track he mustered his final reserves to wave and, foolishly, yell, and he stayed where he was as he heard the increasing roar of the horn, jumping aside so late that for a fright-


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filled moment he was afraid he himself would be the one to be ground beneath the wheels.

Thank God, now, that it *was* a diesel, for that meant a clear view ahead for both engineer and fireman: they *must* have seen him. Then he heard the grinding squeal of brakes, and he saw the sparks fly as wheel after wheel locked and slid on the rails, and before he fainted he thought dimly, *I got through to them, they're going to flatten every wheel, by God. Thank God they saw me, they saw me, and they're stopping.*

He returned to consciousness as the last of the cars ground to a shuddering halt and a trainman, leaping down, ran to him.

"My son," he gasped, pointing. "My son . . . down there."

Later, after the train crew had pried the rock up so that Kit could be pulled free, and the brakeman had put a small splint on Kit's ankle, though it seemed only to be bruised, and they were all back at the camp ground together (the burly brakeman had insisted on carrying Kit all the way), Myra Bagley looked at her husband and whispered, "Oh, John, how could you tell which direction the train was coming from? How could you tell, in mountains like these where everything echoes so?"

"Myra," John started to say, "I—"

Then he stopped. How could he tell her? The imponderable brooding fact of chance, of Fate, the dark reminder that beyond the shining realm of the controlled experiment, the offer of proof, the calculated risk, lay something incalculable—it was too much now for her. Later, maybe, later. Let Myra (and Kit) think now that he *had* known.

"I used an old Boy Scout trick," he said, smiling a little, feeling his strength return. "I put my ear to the rail."

"And you could tell the *direction*?" Myra asked.

"Sure," he lied. "Sure, if you know how."

"I'm so relieved," Myra said. "Oh, John, if you'd had to *guess. . . .*"

He knew then that he would never tell her.

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## taking a closer look

1 *Why did Myra sometimes find it difficult being married to a scientist? How did John usually answer her objections?*
2 *Why was the rock now a serious cause for concern? Why did Kit decide to fish beneath it?*
3 *For what two reasons did the falling rock fail to set off the electric warning?*
4 *Why was it impossible to determine the direction in which the train was moving? How successful was the "Boy Scout trick" of putting one's ear to the rail?*
5 *"All his life he had dreaded some such moment as this." Why did John Bagley, a highly educated and expert scientist, realize that the problem could not be solved scientifically? (Carefully read again the paragraph from which the quotation has been taken.)*
6 *Why did John decide he could never tell his family that he had guessed which way the train had been coming? Do you agree with his decision? (Remember to give a good reason for your answer!)*
7 *One of the many definitions of* irony *concerns the sudden twist, or reversal of meaning, that an author may use in order to add a certain "flavour" to his story. In "The Decision", for example, something that was normally considered amusing suddenly became a source of danger and terror. Can you find this ironical "something"?*

## let's get involved

1 *Very few people are ever required to make the kind of decision made by John Bagley, but everyone is forced, at least once in life, to consider carefully some important decision.*

*For twelve or more years now, each of you has made countless decisions; most of them have concerned simple questions (such as "What socks will I wear this morning?"), but a few have undoubtedly been very important, or so they seemed to be at the time ("Should I smoke this cigarette?" or "I wonder if my teacher will notice that I was skipping school yesterday?").*

*Choose one important decision that you have made and in one paragraph describe the circumstances of that deci-*

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*sion, including the problems and doubts you experienced, as well as your "solution" (the decision itself). Avoid adding unnecessary detail, such as relating all the events that led to your decision; concentrate, instead, on creating a mood of suspense and uncertainty. (But be sure you don't leave your readers "hanging" at the end; tell them what decision you made!)*

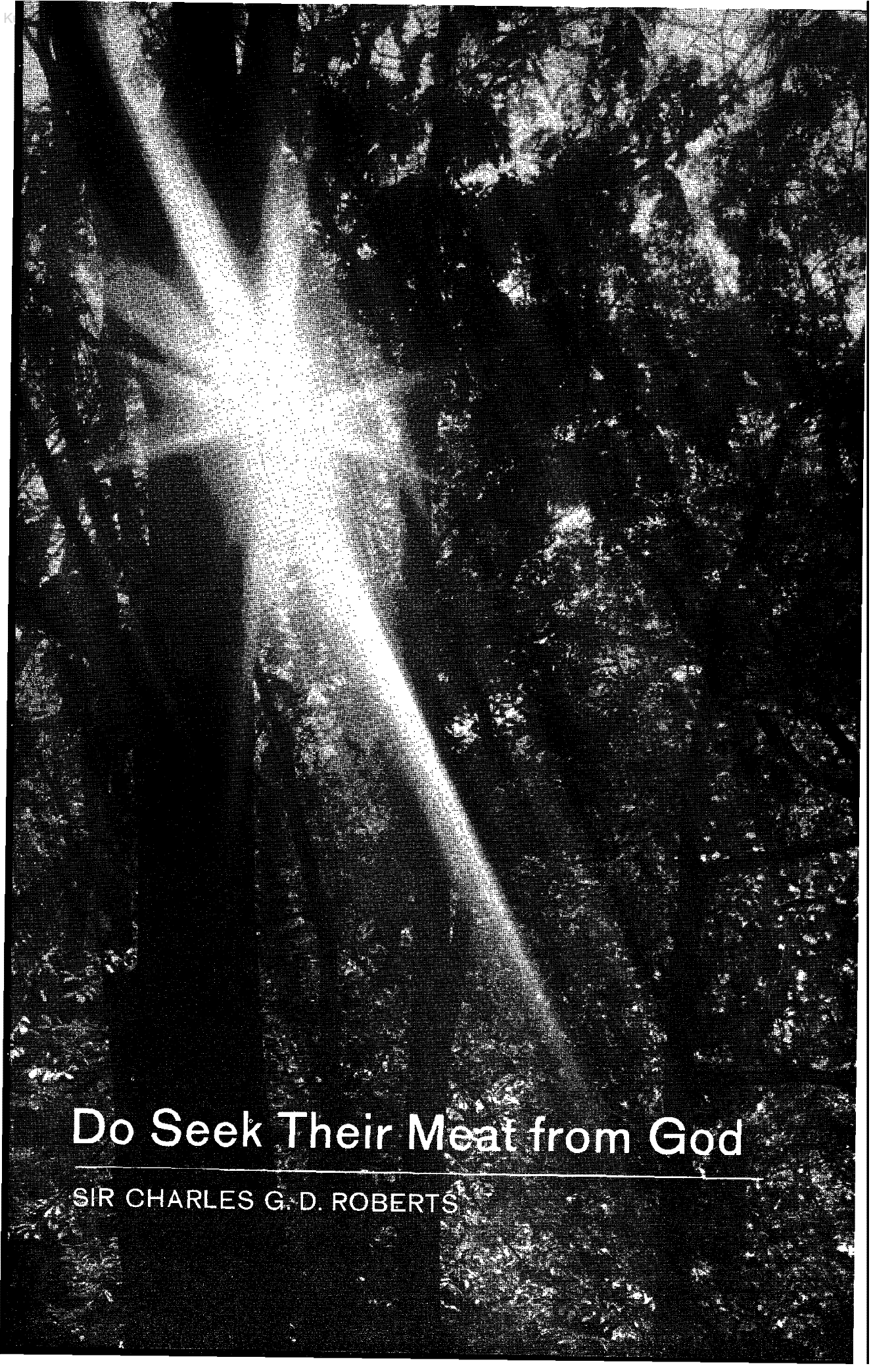
2 *Fate, or chance, plays a very important part in "The Decision". The rock fell at a time when someone "just happened" to be beneath it (and very few people ever visited this particular campsite). A boy "just happened" to alter slightly the wire fence a mere hour or two before the Bagleys' arrival. A train "just happened" to be at hand when the rock fell. And so on—the story has many examples of fateful coincidences.*

*How often has fate or chance played an important role in your life, or in the lives of your relatives and friends? Did your father or mother first meet by "lucky" chance? Did it "just happen" that one day you found a five-dollar bill? And how do you account for the colour of your eyes? (Be careful now, for not everything is determined by haphazard chance.)*

*Working alone, or with a small group of friends, prepare a research report which will describe a number of events or occurrences that were determined entirely by blind fate or chance. In order to prepare this report, it will be necessary to interview a number of persons (friends, parents, teachers, etc.). You might also want to include in your report two or three examples of occurrences which can be explained by means of logic or science. There are a number of ways of presenting your research: published "journal" (on dittoes); reading aloud and subsequent discussion; radio or television news report; and so on. Prepare your presentation carefully; don't leave it to chance!*

## recommended reading

1 *Flight Into Danger*, Arthur Hailey
2 *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Pierre Boulle



# Do Seek Their Meat from God

SIR CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

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# Do Seek Their Meat from God

## SIR CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

One side of the ravine was in darkness. The darkness was soft and rich, suggesting thick foliage. Along the crest of the slope tree-tops came into view—great pines and hemlocks of the ancient unviolated forest—revealed against the orange disk of a full moon just rising. The low rays slanting through the moveless tops lit strangely the upper portion of the opposite steep—the western wall of the ravine, barren, unlike its fellow, bossed with great rocky projections and harsh with stunted junipers. Out of the sluggish dark that lay along the ravine as in a trough rose the brawl of a swollen, obstructed stream.

Out of a shadowy hollow behind a long white rock, on the lower edge of that part of the steep which lay in the moonlight, came softly a great panther. In common daylight his coat would have shown a warm fulvous hue, but in the elvish decolourizing rays of that half-hidden moon he seemed to wear a sort of spectral gray. He lifted his smooth round head to gaze on the increasing flame, which presently he greeted with a shrill cry. That terrible cry, at once plaintive and menacing, with an undertone like the fierce protestations of a saw beneath the file, was a summons to his mate, telling her that the hour had come when they should seek their prey. From the lair behind the rock, where the cubs were being suckled by their dam, came no immediate answer. Only a pair of crows, that had their nest in a giant fir-tree across the gulf, woke up and croaked harshly their indignation. These three summers past they had built in the same spot, and had been nightly awakened to vent the same rasping complaints.

The panther walked restlessly up and down, half a score of paces each way, along the edge of the shadow, keeping his wide-open green eyes upon the rising light. His short, muscular tail

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twitched impatiently, but he made no sound. Soon the breadth of confused brightness had spread itself farther down the steep, disclosing the foot of the white rock, and the bones and antlers of a deer which had been dragged thither and devoured.

By this time the cubs had made their meal, and their dam was ready for such enterprise as must be accomplished ere her own hunger, now grown savage, could hope to be assuaged. She glided supplely forth into the glimmer, raised her head, and screamed at the moon in a voice as terrible as her mate's. Again the crows stirred, croaking harshly; and the two beasts, noiselessly mounting the steep, stole into the shadows of the forest that clothed the high plateau.

The panthers were fierce with hunger. These two days past their hunting had been well-nigh fruitless. What scant prey they had slain had for the most part been devoured by the female; for had she not those small blind cubs at home to nourish, who soon must suffer at any lack of hers? The settlements of late had been making great inroads on the world of ancient forest, driving before them the deer and smaller game. Hence the sharp hunger of the panther parents, and hence it came that on this night they hunted together. They purposed to steal upon the settlements in their sleep, and take tribute of the enemies' flocks. Through the dark of the thick woods, here and there pierced by the moonlight, they moved swiftly and silently. Now and again a dry twig would snap beneath the discreet and padded footfalls. Now and again, as they rustled some low tree, a peewee or a nuthatch would give a startled chirp. For an hour the noiseless journeying continued, and ever and anon the two gray sinuous shapes would come for a moment into the view of the now well-risen moon. Suddenly there fell upon their ears, far off and faint, but clearly defined against the vast stillness of the Northern forest, a sound which made those stealthy hunters pause and lift their heads. It was the voice of a child crying—crying long and loud, hopelessly, as if there were no one by to comfort it. The panthers turned aside from their former course and glided toward the sound. They were not yet come to the outskirts of the settlement, but they knew of a solitary cabin lying in the thick of the woods a mile and more from the nearest neighbour. Thither they bent their

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way, fired with fierce hope. Soon would they break their bitter fast.

Up to noon of the previous day the lonely cabin had been occupied. Then its owner, a shiftless fellow, who spent his days for the most part at the corner tavern three miles distant, had suddenly grown disgusted with a land wherein one must work to live, and had betaken himself with his seven-year-old boy to seek some more indolent clime. During the long lonely days when his father was away at the tavern the little boy had been wont to visit the house of the next neighbour, to play with a child of some five summers, who had no other playmate. The next neighbour was a prosperous pioneer, being master of a substantial frame-house in the midst of a large and well-tilled clearing. At times, though rarely, because it was forbidden, the younger child would make his way by a rough wood road to visit his poor little disreputable playmate. At length it had appeared that the five-year-old was learning unsavoury language from the elder boy, who rarely had an opportunity of hearing speech more desirable. To the bitter grief of both children, the companionship had at length been stopped by unalterable decree of the master of the frame-house.

Hence it had come to pass that the little boy was unaware of his comrade's departure. Yielding at last to an eager longing for that comrade, he had stolen away late in the afternoon, traversed with endless misgivings the lonely stretch of wood road, and reached the cabin, only to find it empty. The door, on its leathern hinges, swung idly open. The one room had been stripped of its few poor furnishings. After looking in the rickety shed, whence darted two wild and hawklike chickens, the child had seated himself on the hacked threshold, and sobbed passionately with a grief that he did not fully comprehend. Then seeing the shadows lengthen across the tiny clearing, he had grown afraid to start for home. As the dusk gathered, he had crept trembling into the cabin, whose door would not stay shut. When it grew quite dark, he crouched in the inmost corner of the room, desperate with fear and loneliness, and lifted up his voice piteously. From time to time his lamentations would be choked by sobs or he would grow breathless, and in the terrifying silence would listen hard to hear if anyone or anything were coming. Then

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again would the shrill childish wailings arise, startling the unexpectant night and piercing the forest depths, even to the ears of those great beasts which had set forth to seek their meat from God.

The lonely cabin stood some distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile, back from the highway connecting the settlements. Along this main road a man was plodding wearily. All day he had been walking, and now as he neared home his steps began to quicken with anticipation of rest. Over his shoulder projected a double-barrelled fowling-piece, from which was slung a bundle of such necessities as he had purchased in town that morning. It was the prosperous settler, the master of the frame-house. His mare being with foal, he had chosen to make the tedious journey on foot.

The settler passed the mouth of the wood road leading to the cabin. He had gone perhaps a furlong beyond, when his ears were startled by the sound of a child crying in the woods. He stopped, lowered his burden to the road, and stood straining ears and eyes in the direction of the sound. It was just at this time that the two panthers also stopped and lifted their heads to listen. Their ears were keener than those of the man, and the sound had reached them at a greater distance.

Presently the settler realized whence the cries were coming. He called to mind the cabin, but he did not know the cabin's owner had departed. He cherished a hearty contempt for the drunken squatter; and on the drunken squatter's child he looked with small favour, especially as a playmate for his own boy. Nevertheless, he hesitated before resuming his journey.

"Poor little devil!" he muttered, half in wrath. "I reckon his precious father's drunk down at 'the Corners', and him crying for loneliness!" Then he reshouldered his burden and strode on doggedly.

But louder, shriller, more hopeless and more appealing, arose the childish voice, and the settler paused again, irresolute and with deepening indignation. In his fancy he saw the steaming supper his wife would have awaiting him. He loathed the thought of retracing his steps, and then stumbling a quarter of a mile through the stumps and bog of the wood road. He was footsore as well as hungry, and he cursed the vagabond squatter with

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serious emphasis; but in that wailing was a terror which would not let him go on. He thought of his own little one left in such a position, and straightway his heart melted. He turned, dropped his bundle behind some bushes, grasped his gun, and made speed back for the cabin.

"Who knows," he said to himself, "but that drunken idiot has left his youngster without a bite to eat in the whole miserable shanty? Or maybe he's locked out, and the poor little beggar's half scared to death. Sounds as if he was scared"; and at this thought the settler quickened his pace.

As the hungry panthers drew near the cabin and the cries of the lonely child grew clearer, they hastened their steps, and their eyes opened to a wider circle, flaming with a greener fire. It would be thoughtless superstition to say the beasts were cruel. They were simply keen with hunger and alive with the eager passion of the chase. They were not ferocious with any anticipation of battle, for they knew the voice was the voice of a child, and something in the voice told them that the child was solitary. Theirs was no hideous or unnatural rage, as it is the custom to describe it. They were but seeking with the strength, the cunning, the deadly swiftness given them to that end, the food convenient for them. On their success in accomplishing that for which nature had so exquisitely designed them depended not only their own but the lives of their blind and helpless young, now whimpering in the cave on the slope of the moonlit ravine. They crept through a wet alder thicket, bounded lightly over the ragged brush fence, and paused to reconnoitre on the edge of the clearing in the full glare of the moon. At the same moment the settler emerged from the darkness of the wood road on the opposite side of the clearing. He saw the two great beasts, heads down and snouts thrust forward, gliding toward the open cabin door.

For a few moments the child had been silent. Now his voice rose again in pitiful appeal, a very ecstasy of loneliness and terror. There was a note in the cry that shook the settler's soul. He had a vision of his own boy, at home with his mother, safeguarded from even the thought of peril. And here was this little one left to the wild beasts! "Thank God! Thank God I came!" murmured the settler, as he dropped on one knee to take a surer aim. There

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was a loud report (not the sharp crack of a rifle), and the female panther, shot through the loins, fell in a heap, snarling furiously and striking with her forepaws.

The male walked around her in fierce and anxious amazement. As the smoke lifted he discerned the settler kneeling for a second shot. With a high screech of fury, the lithe brute sprang upon his enemy, taking a bullet full in his chest without seeming to know he was hit. Ere the man could slip in another cartridge the beast was upon him, bearing him to the ground and fixing his keen fangs in his shoulder. Without a word, the man set his strong fingers desperately into the brute's throat, wrenched himself partly free, and was struggling to rise when the panther's body collapsed upon him all at once, a dead weight which he easily flung aside. The bullet had done its work just in time.

Quivering from the swift and dreadful contest, bleeding profusely from his mangled shoulder, the settler stepped up to the cabin door and peered in. He heard sobs in the darkness.

"Don't be scared, sonny," he said in a reassuring voice. "I'm going to take you home along with me. Poor little lad, *I'll* look after you if folks that ought to don't."

Out of the dark corner came a shout of delight, in a voice which made the settler's heart stand still. "Daddy, daddy," it said, "I knew you'd come. I was so frightened when it got dark!" And a little figure launched itself into the settler's arms and clung to him trembling. The man sat down on the threshold and strained the child to his breast. He remembered how near he had been to disregarding the far-off cries, and great beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead.

Not many weeks afterwards the settler was following the fresh trail of a bear which had killed his sheep. The trail led him at last along the slope of a deep ravine, from whose bottom came the brawl of a swollen and obstructed stream. In the ravine he found a shallow cave, behind a great white rock. The cave was plainly a wild beast's lair, and he entered circumspectly. There were bones scattered about, and on some dry herbage in the deepest corner of the den he found the dead bodies, now rapidly decaying, of two small panther cubs.

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## taking a closer look

1 *Much of the first two pages of this story is devoted to an elaborate, very carefully written description of the northern forest. What effect did this description have on you? Why do you think Roberts devoted so much space to it? (Remember that in a short story the author must be very economical and precise with his use of words.)*
2 *Why were panthers having great difficulty finding sufficient food? For what chief reason was it essential that the female be fed on a regular basis?*
3 *Explain why the five year old boy was alone in a deserted cabin. He was bitterly crying "with a grief that he did not fully comprehend". What was it that he could not be expected to understand?*
4 *What made the settler finally decide to go back to the cabin?*
5 *What discovery of the settler came as an even greater shock than the sudden shooting of the two panthers? There is a literary term to indicate this kind of twist or "accident". Do you know what it is?*
6 *The term* pathos *refers to a quality in a work of literature which arouses in the reader feelings of tenderness, sympathy, or pity. Describe briefly the feelings you experienced for each of the following characters: the child, the panthers, and the cubs.*
7 *On whose side does Roberts seem to be—the child and his father, or the panthers and their cubs? Explain your choice carefully making specific references to the story.*

## let's get involved

1 *"Do Seek Their Meat from God" is a story of fine pathos, or genuine emotion. One might say that it "feels right".*

*Try writing a paragraph which will emphasize one or two feelings or emotions. Since describing emotion is very difficult, even for professional writers, it is suggested that you leaf through some newspapers or magazines in order to find a* picture *which portrays one (or more) emotion. A photograph of a boy looking at his broken bicycle, for example, might suggest bewilderment, anger, or frustration. Try to choose a picture which has few characters and*

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*which portrays clearly one or two emotions. If you are very imaginative and like a challenge, pick an example of modern (abstract) art and see what kind of feeling is suggested by the "odd" shapes and colours. Be prepared, however, for some arguments from your classmates!*

*It is not necessary that you tell a story; the creation of an emotional* mood *or atmosphere is the important thing.*

*Some of the emotions you might consider are love, hate, anger, joy, disappointment, hope, rage, and ecstasy.*

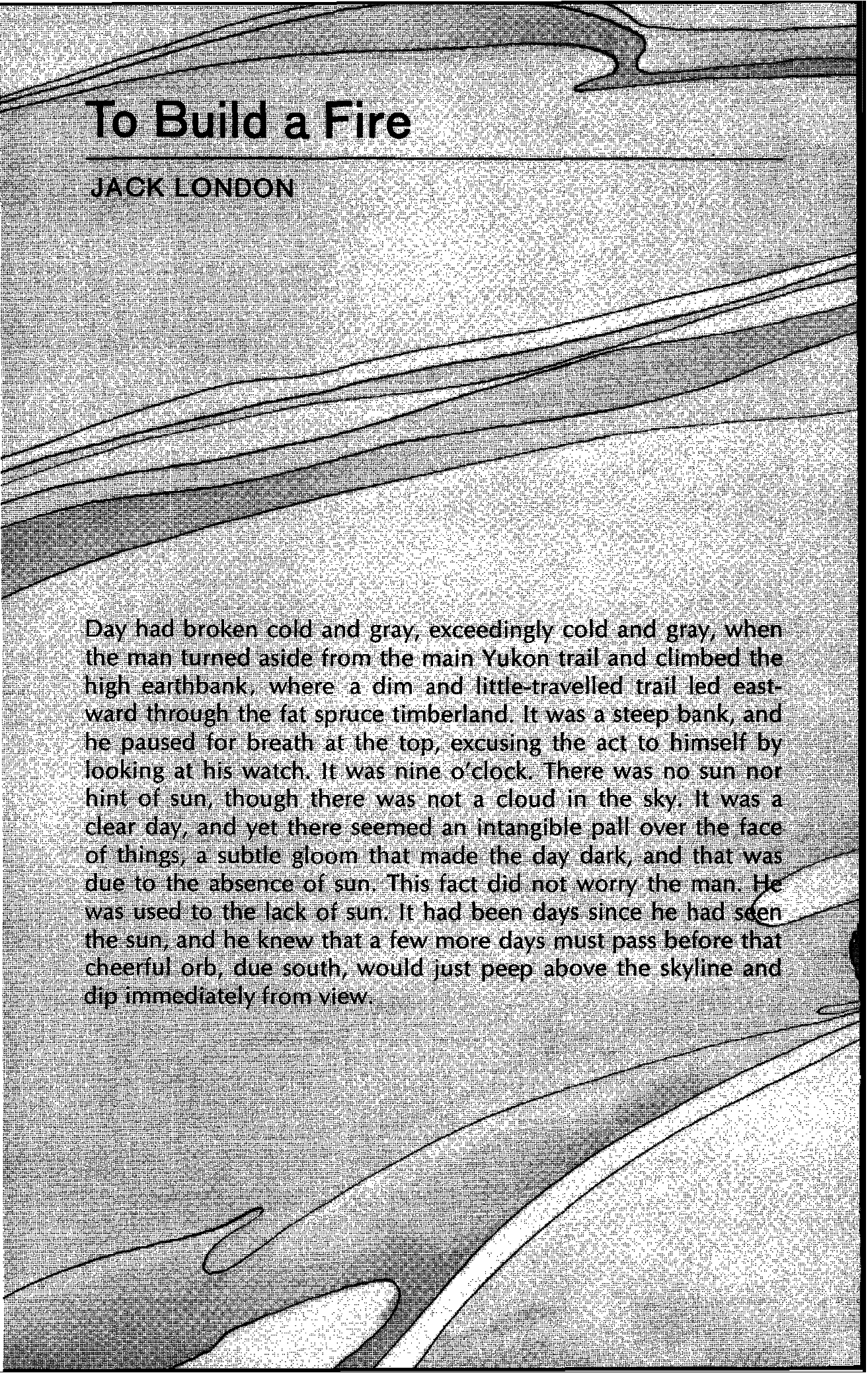
2 *Roberts states in his story that "It would be thoughtless superstition to say the beasts were cruel. They were but seeking . . . the food convenient for them." Why, then, do we still shudder at the mere mention of such animals as wolves, crocodiles, and vultures? Why are these animals, among many others, "picked on" in such popular forms of entertainment as comic books and cartoons? And why, when angry, do we resort to uncomplimentary phrases like "dirty rat", "snake in the grass", and simply "beast"?*

*Alone, or with a group of fellow students, prepare a research paper which will examine, in a scientific and unemotional way, some of the fears and superstitions that people still hold about certain wild animals. You will have to be very selective in your choice of material, since this topic is vast and difficult. It is suggested that you restrict your choice of animals to four or five. Ask your school or community librarian for help with respect to reading material that presents a sympathetic, yet well-argued, view of the unfortunate animals in question.*

*As an alternative exercise, a debate or classroom discussion might be substituted for the research report.*

## recommended reading

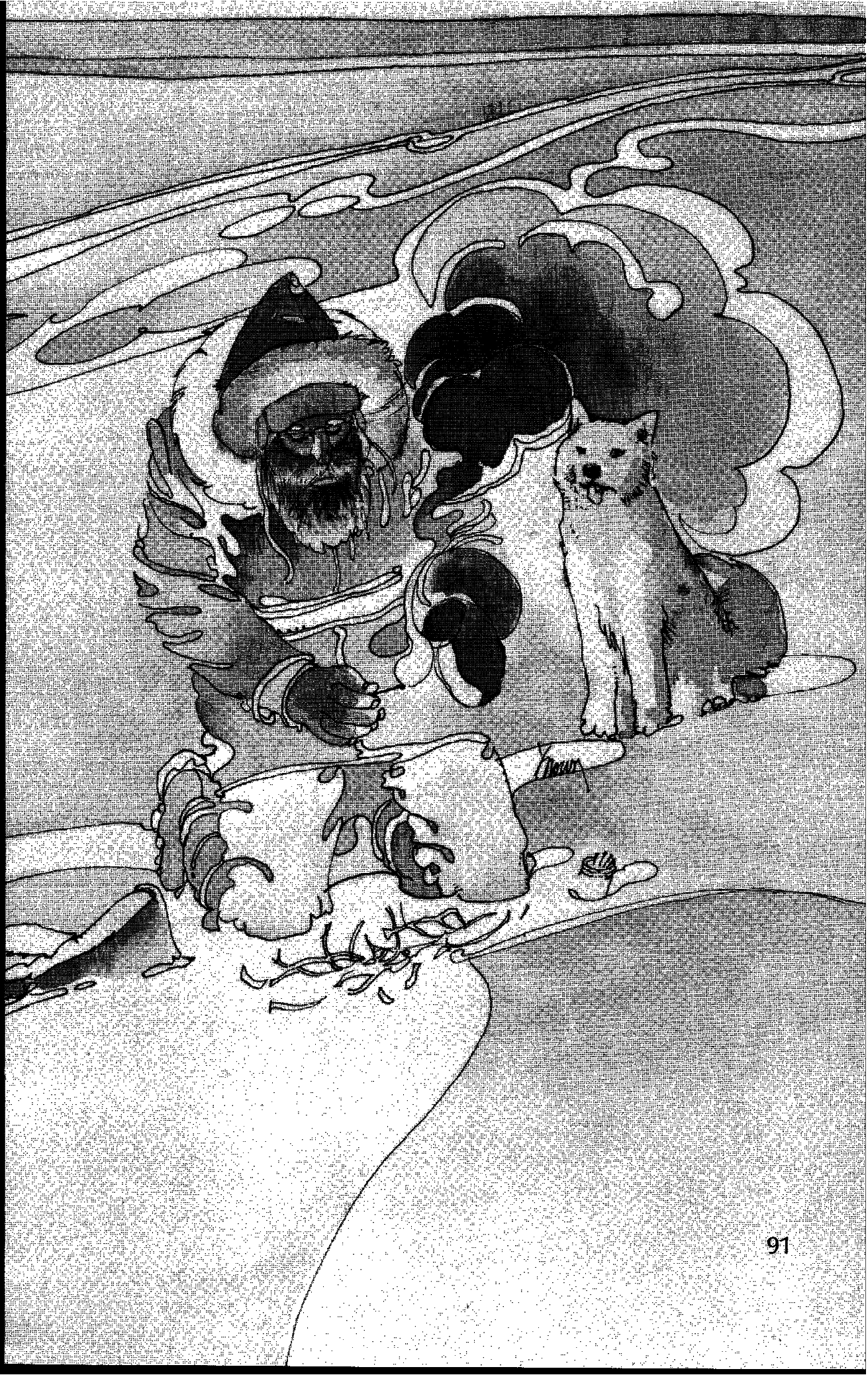
1 *Wisdom of the Wilderness*, C. G. D. Roberts
2 *Wild Animals I Have Known*, and *Two Little Savages*, E. T. Seton



# To Build a Fire

JACK LONDON

Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earthbank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an intangible pall over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the skyline and dip immediately from view.



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The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hairline was the trail—the main trail—that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a *che-cha-quo*, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, earflaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp, explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the 'air.' Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below—how much colder he did not know.

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But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the round-about way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He would be in to the camp by six o'clock; a bit after dark, it was true, but the boys would be there, a fire would be going, and a hot supper would be ready. As for lunch, he pressed his hand against the protruding bundle under his jacket. It was also under his shirt, wrapped up in a handkerchief and lying against the naked skin. It was the only way to keep the biscuits from freezing. He smiled agreeably to himself as he thought of those biscuits, each cut open and sopped in bacon grease, and each enclosing a generous slice of fried bacon.

He plunged in among the big spruce trees. The trail was faint. A foot of snow had fallen since the last sled had passed over, and he was glad he was without a sled travelling light. In fact, he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief. He was surprised, however, at the cold. It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numb nose and cheekbones with his mittened hand. He was a warm-whiskered man, but the hair on his face did not protect the high cheekbones and the eager nose that thrust itself aggressively into the frosty air.

At the man's heels trotted a dog, a big native husky, the proper wolf dog, gray-coated and without any visible or temperamental difference from its brother, the wild wolf. The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained. The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every

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unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.

The frozen moisture of its breathing had settled on its fur in a fine powder of frost, and especially were its jowls, muzzle, and eyelashes whitened by its crystalled breath. The man's red beard and moustache were likewise frosted, but more solidly, the deposit taking the form of ice and increasing with every warm, moist breath he exhaled. Also, the man was chewing tobacco, and the muzzle of ice held his lips so rigidly that he was unable to clear his chin when he expelled the juice. The result was that a crystal beard of the colour and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage. It was the penalty all tobacco chewers paid in that country, and he had been out before in two cold snaps. They had not been so cold as this, he knew, but by the spirit thermometer at Sixty Mile he knew they had been registered at fifty below and at fifty-five.

He held on through the level stretch of woods for several miles, crossed a wide flat, and dropped down a bank to the frozen bed of a small stream. This was Henderson Creek, and he knew he was ten miles from the forks. He looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He was making four miles an hour, and he calculated that he would arrive at the forks at half-past twelve. He decided to celebrate that event by eating his lunch there.

The dog dropped in again at his heels, with a tail drooping discouragement, as the man swung along the creek bed. The furrow of the old sled trail was plainly visible, but a dozen inches of snow covered the marks of the last runners. In a month no man had come up or down that silent creek. The man held steadily on. He was not much given to thinking, and just then particularly he had nothing to think about save that he would eat lunch at the forks and that at six o'clock he would be in camp with the boys. There was nobody to talk to; and, had there been, speech would have been impossible because of the ice muzzle on his mouth. So he continued to chew tobacco and to increase the

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length of his amber beard.

Once in a while the thought reiterated itself that it was very cold and that he had never experienced such cold. As he walked along he rubbed his cheekbones and nose with the back of his mittened hand. He did this automatically, now and again changing hands. But rub as he would, the instant he stopped his cheekbones went numb, and the following instant the end of his nose went numb. He was sure to frost his cheeks; he knew that, and experienced a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks as well and saved them. But it didn't matter much, after all. What were frosted cheeks? A bit painful, that was all; they were never serious.

Empty as the man's mind was of thoughts, he was keenly observant, and he noticed the changes in the creek, the curves and bends and timber jams, and always he sharply noted where he placed his feet. Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse, curved away from the place where he had been walking, and retreated several paces back along the trail. The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom —no creek could contain water in that arctic winter—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such panic. He had felt the give under his feet and heard the crackle of a snow-hidden ice skin. And to get his feet wet in such a temperature meant trouble and danger. At the very least it meant delay, for he would be forced to stop and build a fire, and under its protection to bare his feet while he dried his socks and moccasins. He stood and studied the creek bed and its banks, and decided that the flow of water came

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from the right. He reflected awhile, rubbing his nose and cheeks, then skirted to the left, stepping gingerly and testing the footing for each step. Once clear of the danger, he took a fresh chew of tobacco and swung along at his four-mile gait.

In the course of the next two hours he came upon several similar traps. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing. It had wet its forefeet and legs; almost immediately the water clinging to it turned to ice. It made quick efforts to lick the ice off its legs, then dropped down into the snow and began to bite out the ice that had formed between the toes. This was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being. But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice particles. He did not expose his fingers more than a minute, and was astonished at the swift numbness that smote them. It certainly was cold. He pulled on the mitten hastily, and beat the hand savagely across his chest.

At twelve o'clock the day was at its brightest. Yet the sun was too far south on its winter journey to clear the horizon. The bulge of the earth intervened between it and Henderson Creek, where the man walked under a clear sky at noon and cast no shadow. At half past twelve, to the minute, he arrived at the forks of the creek. He was pleased at the speed he had made. If he kept it up, he would certainly be with the boys by six. He unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and drew forth his lunch. The action consumed no more than a quarter of a minute, yet in that brief moment the numbness laid hold of the exposed fingers. He did not put the mitten on, but, instead, struck the fingers a dozen sharp smashes against his leg. Then he sat down on a snow-covered log to eat. The sting that followed upon the striking of

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his fingers against his leg ceased so quickly that he was startled. He had had no chance to take a bite of biscuit. He struck the fingers repeatedly and returned them to the mitten, baring the other hand for the purpose of eating. He tried to take a mouthful, but the ice muzzle prevented. He had forgotten to build a fire and thaw out. He chuckled at his foolishness, and as he chuckled he noted the numbness creeping into the exposed fingers. Also, he noted that the stinging which had first come to his toes when he sat down was already passing away. He wondered whether the toes were warm or numb. He moved them inside the moccasins and decided that they were numb.

He pulled the mitten on hurriedly and stood up. He was a bit frightened. He stamped up and down until the stinging returned into the feet. It certainly was cold, was his thought. That man from Sulphur Creek had spoken the truth when telling how cold it sometimes got in the country. And he had laughed at him at the time! That showed one must not be too sure of things. There was no mistake about it, it *was* cold. He strode up and down, stamping his feet and threshing his arms, until reassured by the returning warmth. Then he got out matches and proceeded to make a fire. From the undergrowth, where high water of the previous spring had lodged a supply of seasoned twigs, he got his firewood. Working carefully from a small beginning, he soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face and in the protection of which he ate his biscuits. For the moment the cold of space was outwitted. The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed.

When the man had finished, he filled his pipe and took his comfortable time over a smoke. Then he pulled on his mittens, settled the earflaps of his cap firmly about his ears, and took the creek trail up the left fork. The dog was disappointed and yearned back toward the fire. This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. It was the time to lie snug in a

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hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whiplash and of harsh and menacing throat sounds that threatened the whiplash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man. It was not concerned in the welfare of the man; it was for its own sake that it yearned back toward the fire. But the man whistled, and spoke to it with the sound of whiplashes, and the dog swung in at the man's heels and followed after.

The man took a chew of tobacco and proceeded to start a new amber beard. Also, his moist breath quickly powdered with white his moustache, eyebrows, and lashes. There did not seem to be so many springs on the left fork of the Henderson, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, where the soft, unbroken snow seemed to advertise solidity beneath, the man broke through. It was not deep. He wet himself halfway to the knees before he floundered out to the firm crust.

He was angry and cursed his luck aloud. He had hoped to get into camp with the boys at six o'clock, and this would delay him an hour, for he would have to build a fire and dry out his footgear. This was imperative at that low temperature—he knew that much; and he turned aside to the bank, which he climbed. On top, tangled in the underbrush about the trunks of several small spruce trees, was a high-water deposit of dry firewood—sticks and twigs, principally, but also larger portions of seasoned branches and fine, dry, last-year's grasses. He threw down several large pieces on top of the snow. This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch bark that he took from his pocket. This burned even more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of

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the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding them directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure. When it is seventy-five below zero, a man must not fail in his first attempt to build a fire—that is, if his feet are wet. If his feet are dry, and he fails, he can run along the trail for half a mile and restore his circulation. But the circulation of wet and freezing feet cannot be restored by running when it is seventy-five below. No matter how fast he runs, the wet feet will freeze the harder.

All this the man knew. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek had told him about it the previous fall, and now he was appreciating the advice. Already all sensation had gone out of his feet. To build the fire he had been forced to remove his mittens, and the fingers had quickly gone numb. His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold. So long as he walked four miles an hour, he pumped that blood, willy-nilly, to the surface; but now it ebbed away and sank down into the recesses of his body. The extremities were the first to feel its absence. His wet feet froze the faster, and his exposed fingers numbed the faster, though they had not yet begun to freeze. Nose and cheeks were already freezing, while the skin of his body chilled as it lost its blood.

But he was safe. Toes and nose and cheeks would be only touched by the frost, for the fire was beginning to burn with strength. He was feeding it with twigs the size of his finger. In another minute he would be able to feed it with branches the size of his wrist, and then he could remove his wet footgear, and, while it dried, he could keep his naked feet warm by the fire, rubbing them at first, of course, with snow. The fire was a success. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the

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Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone. But it was surprising, the rapidity with which his cheeks and nose were freezing. And he had not thought his fingers could go lifeless in so short a time. Lifeless they were, for he could scarcely make them move together to grip a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The wires were pretty well down between him and his finger ends.

All of which counted for little. There was the fire, snapping and crackling and promising life with every dancing flame. He started to untie his moccasins. They were coated with ice; the thick German socks were like sheaths of iron halfway to the knees: and the moccasin strings were like rods of steel all twisted and knotted as by some conflagration. For a moment he tugged with his numb fingers, then, realizing the folly of it, he drew his sheath knife.

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the

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old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he only had a trail mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail mate could have built the fire. Well, it was up to him to build the fire over again, and this second time there must be no failure. Even if he succeeded, he would most likely lose some toes. His feet must be badly frozen by now, and there would be some time before the second fire was ready.

Such were his thoughts, but he did not sit and think them. He was busy all the time they were passing through his mind. He made a new foundation for a fire, this time in the open, where no treacherous tree could blot it out. Next, he gathered dry grasses and tiny twigs from the high-water flotsam. He could not bring his fingers together to pull them out, but he was able to gather them by the handful. In this way he got many rotten twigs and bits of green moss that were undesirable, but it was the best he could do. He worked methodically, even collecting an armful of the larger branches to be used later when the fire gathered strength. And all the while the dog sat and watched him, a certain yearning wistfulness in its eyes, for it looked upon him as the fire provider, and the fire was slow in coming.

When all was ready, the man reached in his pocket for a second piece of birch bark. He knew the bark was there, and, though he could not feel it with his fingers, he could hear its crisp rustling as he fumbled for it. Try as he would, he could not clutch hold of it. And all the time, in his consciousness, was the knowledge that each instant his feet were freezing. This thought tended to put him in a panic, but he fought against it and kept calm. He pulled on his mittens with his teeth, and threshed his arms back and forth, beating his hands with all his might against his sides. He did this sitting down, and he stood up to do it; and all the while the dog sat in the snow, its wolf brush of a tail curled around warmly over his forefeet, its sharp wolf ears pricked forward intently as it watched the man. And the man, as he beat and threshed with his arms and hands, felt a great surge of envy as he regarded the creature that was warm and secure in its natural covering.

After a time he was aware of the first faraway signals of sensation in his beaten fingers. The faint tingling grew stronger till it

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evolved into a stinging ache that was excruciating, but which the man hailed with satisfaction. He stripped the mitten from his right hand and fetched forth the birch bark. The exposed fingers were quickly going numb again. Next he brought out his bunch of sulphur matches. But the tremendous cold had already driven the life out of his fingers. In his effort to separate one match from the others, the whole bunch fell in the snow. He tried to pick it out of the snow, but failed. The dead fingers could neither touch nor clutch. He was very careful. He drove the thought of his freezing feet, and nose, and cheeks, out of his mind, devoting his whole soul to the matches. He watched, using the sense of vision in place of that of touch, and when he saw his fingers on each side of the bunch, he closed them—that is, he willed to close them, for the wires were down, and the fingers did not obey. He pulled the mitten on the right hand, and beat it fiercely against his knee. Then, with both mittened hands, he scooped the bunch of matches, along with much snow, into his lap. Yet he was no better off.

After some manipulation he managed to get the bunch between the heels of his mittened hands. In this fashion he carried it to his mouth. The ice crackled and snapped when by a violent effort he opened his mouth. He drew the lower jaw in, curled the upper lip out of the way, and scraped the bunch with his upper teeth in order to separate a match. He succeeded in getting one, which he dropped on his lap. He was no better off. He could not pick it up. Then he devised a way. He picked it up in his teeth and scratched it on his leg. Twenty times he scratched before he succeeded in lighting it. As it flamed he held it with his teeth to the birch bark. But the burning brimstone went up his nostrils and into his lungs, causing him to cough spasmodically. The match fell into the snow and went out.

The old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right, he thought in the moment of controlled despair that ensued: after fifty below, a man should travel with a partner. He beat his hands, but failed in exciting any sensation. Suddenly he bared both hands, removing the mittens with his teeth. He caught the whole bunch between the heels of his hands. His arm muscles not being frozen enabled him to press the hand heels tightly against the matches. Then he

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scratched the bunch along his leg. It flared into flame, seventy sulphur matches at once! There was no wind to blow them out. He kept his head to one side to escape the strangling fumes and held the blazing bunch to the birch bark. As he so held it, he became aware of sensation in his hand. His flesh was burning. He could smell it. Deep down below the surface he could feel it. The sensation developed into pain that grew acute. And still he endured it, holding the flame of the matches clumsily to the bark that would not light readily because his own burning hands were in the way, absorbing most of the flame.

At last, when he could endure no more, he jerked his hands apart. The blazing matches fell sizzling into the snow, but the birch bark was alight. He began laying dry grasses and the tiniest twigs on the flame. He could not pick and choose, for he had to lift the fuel between the heels of his hands. Small pieces of rotten wood and green moss clung to the twigs, and he bit them off as well as he could with his teeth. He cherished the flame carefully and awkwardly. It meant life, and it must not perish. The withdrawal of blood from the surface of his body now made him begin to shiver, and he grew more awkward. A large piece of green moss fell squarely on the little fire. He tried to poke it out with his fingers, but his shivering frame made him poke too far, and he disrupted the nucleus of the little fire, the burning grasses and tiny twigs separating and scattering. He tried to poke them together again, but in spite of the tenseness of the effort, his shivering got away with him, and the twigs were hopelessly scattered. Each twig gushed a puff of smoke and went out. The fire provider had failed. As he looked apathetically about him, his eyes chanced on the dog, sitting across the ruins of the fire from him, in the snow, making restless, hunching movements, slightly lifting one forefoot and then the other, shifting his weight back and forth on them with wistful eagerness.

The sight of the dog put a wild idea into his head. He remembered the tale of the man, caught in a blizzard, who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass, and so was saved. He would kill the dog and bury his hands in the warm body until the numbness went out of them. Then he could build another fire. He spoke to the dog, calling it to him; but in his voice was a strange note of

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fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter, and its suspicious nature sensed danger—it knew not what danger, but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man. It flattened its ears down at the sound of the man's voice, and its restless, hunching movements and the liftings and shiftings of its forefeet became more pronounced; but it would not come to the man. He got on his hands and knees and crawled toward the dog. This unusual posture again excited suspicion, and the animal sidled mincingly away.

The man sat up in the snow for a moment and struggled for calmness. Then he pulled on his mittens, by means of his teeth, and got upon his feet. He glanced down at first to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth. His erect position in itself started to drive the webs of suspicion from the dog's mind; and when he spoke peremptorily, with the sound of whiplashes in his voice, the dog rendered its customary allegiance and came to him. As it came within reaching distance, the man lost his control. His arms flashed out to the dog, and he experienced genuine surprise when he discovered that his hands could not clutch, that there was neither bend nor feeling in the fingers. He had forgotten for the moment that they were frozen and that they were freezing more and more. All this happened quickly, and before the animal could get away, he encircled its body with his arms. He sat down in the snow, and in this fashion held the dog, while it snarled and whined and struggled.

But it was all he could do, hold its body encircled in his arms and sit there. He realized that he could not kill the dog. There was no way to do it. With his helpless hands he could neither draw nor hold his sheath knife nor throttle the animal. He released it, and it plunged wildly away, with tail between its legs, and still snarling. It halted forty feet away and surveyed him curiously, with ears sharply pricked forward. The man looked down at his hands in order to locate them, and found them hanging on the ends of his arms. It struck him as curious that one should have to use his eyes in order to find out where his hands were. He began threshing his arms back and forth, beating the

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mittened hands against his sides. He did this for five minutes, violently, and his heart pumped enough blood up to the surface to put a stop to his shivering. But no sensation was aroused in the hands. He had an impression that they hung like weights on the ends of his arms, but when he tried to run the impression down, he could not find it.

A certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him. This fear quickly became poignant as he realized that it was no longer a mere matter of freezing his fingers and toes, or of losing his hands and feet, but that it was a matter of life and death with the chances against him. This threw him into a panic, and he turned and ran up the creek bed along the old, dim trail. The dog joined in behind and kept up with him. He ran blindly, without intention, in fear such as he had never known in his life. Slowly, as he ploughed and floundered through the snow, he began to see things again—the banks of the creek, the old timber jams, the leafless aspens, and the sky. The running made him feel better. He did not shiver. Maybe, if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and, anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys. Without doubt he would lose some fingers and toes and some of his face; but the boys would take care of him, and save the rest of him when he got there. And at the same time there was another thought in his mind that said he would never get to the camp and the boys; that it was too many miles away, that the freezing had too great a start on him and that he would soon be stiff and dead. This thought he kept in the background and refused to consider. Sometimes it pushed itself forward and demanded to be heard, but he thrust it back and strove to think of other things.

It struck him as curious that he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth and took the weight of his body. He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have no connection with the earth. Somewhere he had once seen a winged Mercury and he wondered if Mercury felt as he felt when skimming over the earth.

His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance. Several times he stumbled, and finally he tottered, crumpled up, and fell. When he

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tried to rise, he failed. He must sit and rest, he decided, and next time he would merely walk and keep on going. As he sat and regained his breath, he noted that he was feeling quite warm and comfortable. He was not shivering, and it even seemed that a warm glow had come to his chest and trunk. And yet, when he touched his nose or cheeks, there was no sensation. Running would not thaw them out. Nor would it thaw out his hands and feet. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

And all the time the dog ran with him, at his heels. When he fell down a second time, it curled its tail over its forefeet and sat in front of him, facing him, curiously eager and intent. The warmth and security of the animal angered him, and he cursed it till it flattened down its ears appeasingly. This time the shivering came more quickly upon the man. He was losing in his battle with the frost. It was creeping into his body from all sides. The thought of it drove him on, but he ran no more than a hundred feet, when he staggered and pitched headlong. It was his last panic. When he had recovered his breath and control, he sat up and entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity. However, the conception did not come to him in such terms. His idea of it was that he had been making a fool of himself, running around like a chicken with its head cut off—such was the simile that occurred to him. Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this new-found peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an anesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die.

He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for

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himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

"You were right, old hoss; you were right," the man mumbled to the old-timer of Sulphur Creek.

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long, slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made, and, besides, never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with a great lifting and shifting of forefeet it whined softly, then flattened its ears down in anticipation of being chidden by the man. But the man remained silent. Later, the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers.

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## taking a closer look

1 *The setting for this story is the general vicinity of that part of the Yukon made famous by the Klondike Gold Rush (1898-1900). What kind of atmosphere or mood is created by London's detailed description of the setting? In what way was the man in direct conflict with it?*
2 *Why did the man have a dog with him? Why did the dog feel uneasy and nervous? For what reasons did he feel no love for his master?*
3 *Describe briefly the series of crises, or moments of danger, which in the end proved fatal for the man. Which ones were the direct result of his carelessness or foolishness?*
4 *What is the turning point of the story? That is, at what point did you realize that the man was doomed?*
5 *What "wild idea" suddenly occurred to the man? Why was he unable to carry it out?*
6 *What was the "new-found peace of mind" that seemed to the man such a good idea? How do you account for the strange dream that haunted his last sleep?*
7 *What made the dog bristle and back away from the sleeping man? Why did the dog leave him after waiting only a short while?*
8 *Why does London seem to sympathize more with the dog than with the man? What is he trying to say about human nature? About natural instinct?*
9 *For a somewhat different treatment of the same theme, man against nature, read "Leiningen Versus the Ants" (page 142).*

## let's get involved

1 *Although it is most unlikely that any of you have ever experienced the kind of struggle described in London's story, there have probably been several occasions during which you were pitted against the forces of nature. You might have been caught in a sudden thunderstorm, for example, or in a snowstorm, or even in a forest fire.*

*Choose one such personal conflict with nature, and, writing in the first person (the "I" point of view) compose a paragraph or two that will vividly recapture the emotional and dramatic intensity of that experience. Make sure that*

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*the words you use—especially the adjectives and verbs—represent the effect you want to communicate as precisely as possible. It is suggested that you re-read the first few paragraphs of "To Build a Fire" in order to note London's use of images and "picture" words.*

*Once your composition is finished, you might consider tape-recording a practised reading of it, including, if possible, a few realistic sound effects (use your imagination!). Or you may read it aloud at the front of the classroom, to the accompaniment of a suitable piece of "mood" music (not played too loudly). The first or last movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for example, might be played to reinforce a mood of dramatic conflict.*

2 *The Klondike Gold Rush, which London himself observed and wrote about, is an ideal subject for research. Your school and public libraries probably carry several reference books that should provide plenty of exciting material. Of particular merit (especially for mood and nostalgia) are Pierre Berton's* Klondike *(available in paperback) and some of the poems of Robert W. Service (the best of which have been recorded by Austin Willis).*

*You could do your research and follow-up work with a small group of interested students; the various reference books will undoubtedly provide many different approaches to the topic.*

*For the purposes of comparison and extending your field of interest, you might also want to investigate some other famous gold rushes, such as those taking place in California and Australia.*

3 *If you have become an admirer of Jack London, you will enjoy reading two of his novels, each of which describes the conflicts of a dog with nature and civilization.* The Call of the Wild *and* White Fang *should be easily obtainable, either in library editions or in store-bought paperbacks.*

## recommended reading

1 *Lost in the Barrens*, and *Never Cry Wolf*, Farley Mowat
2 *Mrs. Mike*, B. and N. Freedman

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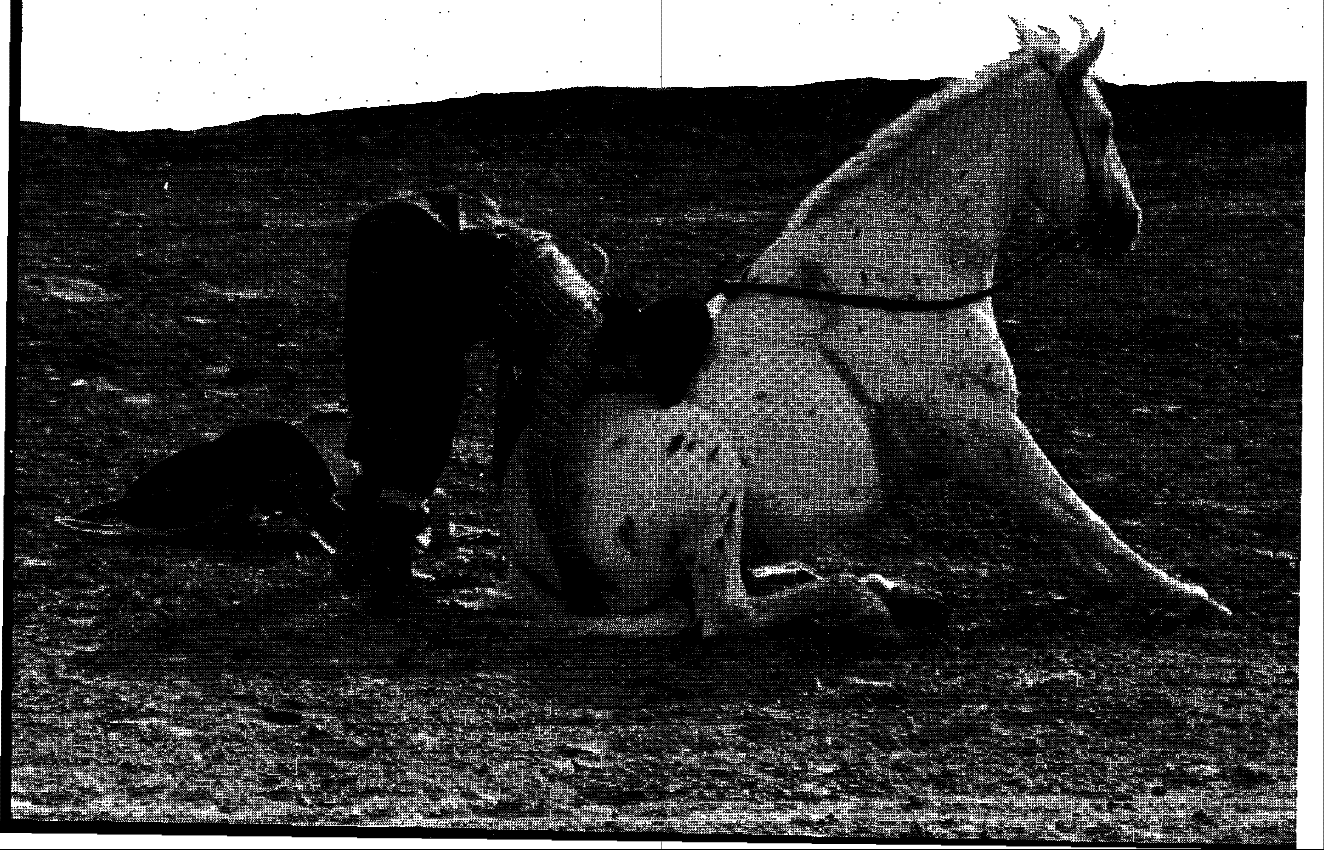
# The White Pony

MORLEY CALLAGHAN

It was a very beautiful white pony, and as it went round and round the stage of the village theatre the two clowns would leap over its back or whistle to it and make it flap its ears and shake its long white mane. Tony Jarvis, like every other kid in the audience



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that summer afternoon, longed to own it, and he wondered if there weren't some way he could get close to the pony after the show and slip his arm around his neck.

If he could persuade the owners to let him ride the pony down the street, or if he could just touch it or feed it a little sugar, that would be enough. After the show he went up the alley to the back of the theatre to wait for the clowns and the pony to come out. But the alley was jammed with kids—all the summer crowd from the city as well as the village boys—and Tony couldn't get even close to the back door of the theatre. First the two clowns came out, their faces still coloured with bright paint; then a big red-headed man, apparently the trainer, led the pony out. It shook its head and neighed, and all the kids laughed and rushed at it.

The big red-head, in blue overalls and an old felt hat that had the brim cut off, yelled, "Out of the way, you kids! Go on, or I'll pull the pants off you!" Then he began to laugh. It was the wildest, craziest, rolling laugh Tony Jarvis had ever heard. The man was huge. His red hair stuck out at all angles under the lopped-off hat. He had a scar on his left cheek and his nose looked as if it had been broken. Whenever the kids came close he swung his arm and they ducked, but they weren't frightened —only a little more excited. As he walked along, leading the white pony, a wide grin on his face, he seemed to be just the kind of giant for the job. If the pony started to prance or was frightened by the traffic, the big man would make a clucking noise and the pony would swing its head over to him and lick his hand with its red tongue.

Tony followed the troupe along the street to the old garage they were using as a stable. Then the red-head yelled, "All right, beat it, kids!" and led the pony inside and closed the door. The kids stood around watching the closed door, wondering if accidentally it mightn't swing open. It was then that Tony left the gang and sneaked around to the back of the garage. When he saw an old porch there, his heart pounded jerkily. He climbed up to the roof and crawled across the rotting shingles to the edge of a big window. At first he could see nothing. Then, when his eyes became accustomed to the comparative darkness, he saw the two

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clowns. Squatting in front of mirrors which they had propped up on old boxes, they were scraping the paint off their faces. With a pail in his hand and singing at the top of his voice, the red-head was walking over to a corner of the garage. Stretching, Tony could just see the pony's tail swishing back and forth.

He couldn't see the pony, but he knew it would be rubbing its nose in the red-head's hand. At last the clowns finished cleaning their faces. One of them took a bottle out of a coat that was hanging on the wall and the red-head joined them and they all had a drink. Then the red-head began to talk. Tony couldn't make out the words, but he heard the rich rumble of the voice and saw the wide and eloquent gestures. The clowns were listening intently and grinning. Day after day he must have talked to them like that and it must have been just as wonderful every time. And all the while the white pony's tail kept swishing, and Tony could hear the scraping of the pony's hoofs on the floor.

But now it was getting dark and Tony had to get home. When he tried to move, he found his legs were asleep. Pins and needles seemed to shoot through his arms. Afraid of falling, he grabbed at the window ledge and his head bumped heavily against the pane. Before he could dodge away, the red-headed giant came over and stared up at him. "Get down out of there!" he yelled. "Get down or I'll cut your gizzard out!"

They were looking right at each other, and then Tony slid slowly off the roof. As he limped homeward, he felt an intimation of perfect happiness. He kept hearing the sound of the voice, kept seeing the swishing white tail.

The next afternoon he went to the theatre with two lumps of sugar in his pocket. At the end of the show, he pushed his way through the crowd of kids and got right up by the door. When the clowns came out, most of the kids started to yell and there was some pushing and shoving, but Tony hung back, keeping well over to one side of the door, ready to thrust the sugar at the pony's mouth before the red-head could stop him.

The big man appeared at the door and you could hear the pony clopping behind. In his hands the big fellow was carrying two water pails, and the rein that held the pony was clutched in

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his right hand also. This time instead of going on down the alley through the path of kids, he stood still and looked around. Then he grinned at Tony. "Come here, kid," he said.

"What is it, Mister?"

"What's your name?"

"Tony Jarvis."

Maybe the big man remembered him from seeing his face at the window, Tony thought. Anyway, the big man's grin was wide and friendly. "How would you like to carry these pails for me?" he asked.

Tony grabbed the pails before any other kid could touch them. And the big, freckled, crazy, blue-eyed face of the giant opened into a smile.

Tony walked down the alley, carrying the pails. The big fellow walked beside him, leading the pony and grinning in such a friendly fashion Tony felt sure he understood why the pony swung his head eagerly to the giant whenever he made the soft, clucking noise with his tongue. While Tony was going down the street, his mind was filled with how it would be in the garage, making friends with the pony. Even now he might have reached out and touched the pony if he hadn't had a pail in each hand. The pails were heavy because they were filled with water-soaked sponges, but Tony kept up with the big fellow all right, and he held the pail handles tight, for they were like a ticket of admission to the garage.

"I guess the pony's worth a lot of money?" he said timidly to the red-head.

"Uh?"

"I guess a lot of people want to ride him."

"Sure."

"I guess a lot of kids have wanted a little ride on him, too," Tony said. And when the red-head just nodded and looked straight ahead Tony was so stirred up he dared not say anything more. It was understood between them now, he was sure. They would let him hang around the garage and maybe even have a little ride on the pony.

When they got to the garage he waited while the red-head opened the door and gave the pony a gentle slap on the rump

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and sent it on ahead. Tony was so full of pride he thought he would choke as he started to follow the pony in.

"All right, son, I'll take the pails," the red-head said.

"It's all right. I can carry them."

"Here, give them to me."

"Can't I go in?" Tony asked, unbelieving.

"No kids in here," the red-head said brusquely, taking the pails.

"Gee, Mister," Tony cried. But the door had closed. Tony stood there with his mouth open, feeling almost sick at his stomach, still seeing the red-head's warm, magnificent smile. He couldn't understand it. He couldn't understand, if the red-head were like that, why the pony loved to swing its head to him. Then he realized that the big fellow had simply used him, that this was the kind of thing they took for granted in the world he had wanted to grow into when he had glimpsed it from the garage window.

"You big red-headed bum!" he screamed at the closed door. "You dirty, double-crossing, red-headed cheat!"

## taking a closer look

1 *You very likely did not enjoy the ending of this story. What observation do you think Callaghan is trying to make about human nature? Do you agree with him? (Give at least one good supporting reason.)*
2 *Why have horses and ponies always been among the most loved animals of boys and girls? Aside from actually owning the pony, how did Tony want to show his affection for the animal?*
3 *In what three ways may the pony's trainer be considered unusual or striking? What was your first impression of him?*
4 *Why, just after being caught eavesdropping, did Tony experience a sense of almost perfect happiness?*

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5 *Describe briefly the series of events and observations that led Tony to believe he would be able to see the pony. Why does the author try so skilfully to convince us, as well as Tony, that his dream will soon come true?*
6 *What was the final realization that stabbed Tony's heart like a sharp knife? Why did this discovery anger him even more than his failure to see the pony?*
7 *Contrast "The White Pony" with* either *"The Dog of Pompeii" (page 1 ) or "A Secret for Two" (page 14 ). Which of the two stories did you enjoy more? Why? Which of the two is more realistic and true-to-life? Which is more important with respect to you as an adolescent growing up in the world of adults? (These questions and others might form the basis for a classroom discussion.)*

## let's get involved

1 *All of us are fated at various times in life to share the kind of painful disappointment experienced by Tony Jarvis. Do you remember the anguish felt upon the discovery that Santa Claus was not quite the flesh-and-blood saint presented to you for so many years? Do you remember finding out that your father was not perfect, after all? Or that a pet animal of yours could suddenly die?*

*Describe in one paragraph a major disappointment that you have experienced. Do not write a story or detailed narrative; concentrate, instead, on re-creating the original* emotional impact *of the event. Your disappointment need not be as "big" as Tony's; sometimes it is the little disappointments in life that bring the most pain.*

2 *As you continue your study of literature, you will gradually discover that* symbols *play important roles in enriching your reading experience. A symbol may be briefly described as something which, because of certain similarities, represents something* else*—usually something important and complicated. The colour red, for example, might symbolize blood, death, or great emotion; a cross might represent Christianity; in television commercials, animals such as tigers and birds might stand for cleansing power, while a complex symbol like Ajax the White Knight represents both strength (Ajax was a Greek military hero) and ab-*

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*solute cleanliness (the colour white).*

*In Callaghan's "The White Pony",* symbolism *(that is, the* use of symbols) *is used to skilful advantage. The white pony itself, for example, symbolizes the pure and innocent object of a typical boy's dream. Now it is* your *turn: see how many of the symbols listed below you can identify. If your literary "detective work" is successful,* all *of your explanations should help to shed light on the meaning of the story.*

*A the great size of the pony's trainer*
*B his red hair*
*C his "crazy" laugh*
*D the window of the garage*
*E the scraping of the paint from the faces of the clowns*
*F the lumps of sugar*
*G the pails of water*

*Can you find other symbols? Be careful not to overdo it, however; not everything was intended as a symbol!*

## recommended reading

1 *The Red Pony,* John Steinbeck
2 *When the Legends Die,* Hal Borland

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# The Circus

WILLIAM SAROYAN

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Any time a circus came to town, that was all me and my old pal Joey Emerian needed to make us run hog-wild, as the saying is. All we needed to do was see the signs on the fences and in the empty store windows to start going to the dogs and neglecting our educations. All we needed to know was that a circus was on its way to town for me and Joey to start wanting to know what good a little education ever did anybody anyway.

After the circus *reached* town we were just no good at all. We spent all our time down at the trains, watching the gang unload the animals, walking out Ventura Avenue with the lions and tigers in their golden wagons, and hanging around the grounds, trying to win the favour of the animal men, the acrobats, and the clowns.

The circus was everything everything else we knew wasn't. It was adventure, travel, danger, skill, grace, romance, comedy, peanuts, popcorn, chewing-gum and soda-water. We used to carry water to the elephants and stand around afterwards and try to seem associated with the whole magnificent affair, the putting up of the big tent, the getting of everything in order, and the worldly-wise waiting for the people to come and spend their money.

One day Joey came tearing into the classroom of the fifth grade at Emerson School ten minutes late, and without so much as removing his cap shouted, Hey, Aram, what the hell are you doing here? The circus is in town.

And sure enough I'd forgotten. I jumped up and ran out of the room with poor old Miss Flibety screaming after me, Aram Garoghlanian, you stay in this room. Do you hear me?

I heard her all right and I knew what my not staying would mean. It would mean another powerful strapping from old man Dawson. But I couldn't help it. I was just crazy about a circus.

I been looking all over for you, Joey said in the street. What happened?

I forgot. I knew it was coming all right, but I forgot it was today. How far along are they?

I was at the trains at five. I been out at the grounds since seven. I had breakfast at the circus table, with the gang.

How are they?

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Great, the same as ever. Couple more years, they told me, and I'll be ready to go away with them.

As what? Lion-tamer, or something like that?

I guess maybe not as a lion-tamer, Joey said. I figure more like a workman in the gang till I learn about being a clown or something. I don't figure I could work with lions right away.

We were out on Ventura Avenue, headed for the circus grounds, out near the County Fairgrounds, just north of the County Hospital.

What a breakfast! Joey said. Hot-cakes, ham and eggs, sausages, coffee. Boy.

Why didn't you tell me?

I thought you knew. I thought you'd be down at the trains same as last year. I would have told you if I knew you'd forgotten. What made you forget?

I don't know. Nothing, I guess.

I was wrong there, but I didn't know it at the time. I hadn't really forgotten. What I'd done was *remembered*. I'd gone to work and remembered the strapping Dawson gave me last year for staying out of school the day the circus was in town. That was the thing that had kind of kept me sleeping after four-thirty in the morning when by rights I should have been up and dressing and on my way to the trains. It was the memory of that strapping old man Dawson had given me, but I didn't know it at the time. We used to take the strappings kind of for granted, me and Joey, on account of we wanted to be fair and square with the Board of Education and if it was against the rules to stay out of school when you weren't sick, and if you were supposed to get strapped for doing it, well, there we were, we'd done it, so let the Board of Education balance things the best way they knew how. They did that with a strapping. They used to threaten to send me and Joey to Reform School but they never did it.

Circus? old man Dawson used to say. Well, bend down, boy.

So we'd bend down and old man Dawson would get some powerful shoulder exercise while we tried not to howl. We wouldn't howl for five or six licks, but after that we'd howl like Indians coming. They used to be able to hear us all over the

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school and old man Dawson, after our visits got to be kind of regular, urged us politely to try to make a little less noise, inasmuch as it was a school and people were trying to study.

It ain't fair to the others, he said. They're trying to learn something for themselves.

We can't help it, Joey said. It hurts.

That I know, but it seems to me there's such a thing as modulation. I believe a lad can overdo his howling if he ain't thoughtful of others. Just try to modulate that awful howl a little. I think you can do it.

He gave Joey a strapping of twenty and Joey tried his best not to howl so loud. After the strapping Joey's face was red and old man Dawson was very tired.

How was that? Joey said.

By far the most courteous you've managed yet.

I did my best.

I'm grateful to you, old man Dawson said.

He was tired and out of breath. I moved up to the chair in front of him that he furnished during these matters to help us suffer the stinging pain. I got in the right position and he said, Wait a minute, Aram. Give a man a chance to catch his breath. I'm not twenty-three years old. I'm *sixty*-three. Let me rest a minute.

All right, but I sure would like to get this over with.

So would I, but don't howl so loud. Folks passing by in the street are liable to think this is a veritable chamber of tortures. Does it really hurt that much?

You can ask Joey.

How about it, Joey? Aren't you lads exaggerating just a little? Perhaps to impress someone in your room? Some girl, perhaps?

We don't howl to impress anybody, Mr. Dawson. Howling makes us feel ashamed, doesn't it, Aram?

It's embarrassing to go back to our seats after howling that way. We'd rather not howl if we could help it.

Well, I'll not be unreasonable. I'll only ask you to try to modulate it a little.

I'll do my best, Mr. Dawson. Catch your breath?

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Give me just a moment longer.

When he got his breath back he gave me my twenty and I howled a little louder than Joey and then we went back to class. It was awfully embarrassing. Everybody was looking at us.

Well, Joey said to the class, what did you expect? You'd fall down and die if *you* got twenty. You wouldn't *howl a little,* you'd die.

That'll be enough out of you, Miss Flibety said.

Well, it's true, Joey said. They're all scared. A circus comes to town and what do they do? They come to school.

That'll be enough.

Who do they think they are, giving us dirty looks?

Miss Flibety lifted her hand, hushing Joey.

Now the circus was back in town, another year had gone by, it was April again, and we were on our way to the grounds. Only this time it was worse than ever because they'd seen us at school and *knew* we were going out to the circus.

Do you think they'll send Stafford after us? I said.

Stafford was truant officer.

We can always run, Joey said. If he comes, I'll go one way, you go another. He can't chase *both* of us.

When we got out to the grounds a couple of the little tents were up, and the big one was going up. We stood around and watched. It was great the way they did it. Just a handful of guys who looked like tramps doing work you'd think no less than a hundred men could do. Doing it with style, too.

All of a sudden a man everybody called Red hollered at me and Joey.

Here, you Arabs, give us a hand.

Me and Joey ran over to him.

Yes sir, I said.

He was a small man with very broad shoulders and very big hands. You didn't feel that he was small, because he seemed so powerful and because he had so much thick red hair on his head. You thought he was practically a giant.

He handed me and Joey a rope. The rope was attached to some canvas that was lying on the ground.

This is easy, Red said. As the boys lift the pole and get it in

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place you keep pulling the rope, so the canvas will go up with the pole.

Yes sir, Joey said.

Everybody was busy when we saw Stafford.

We can't run now, I said.

Let him come, Joey said. We told Red we'd give him a hand and we're going to do it.

We'll tell him we'll go with him after we get the canvas up; then we'll run.

All right, Joey said.

Stafford was a big fellow in a business suit who had a beef-red face and looked as if he ought to be a lawyer or something. He came over and said, All right, you hooligans, come along with me.

We promised to give Red a hand, Joey said. We'll come just as soon as we get this canvas up.

We were pulling for all we were worth, slipping and falling. The men were all working hard. Red was hollering orders, and then the whole thing was over and we had done our part.

We didn't even get a chance to find out what Red was going to say to us, or if he was going to invite us to sit at the table for lunch, or what.

Joey busted loose and ran one way and I ran the other and Stafford came after *me*. I heard the circus men laughing and Red hollering, Run, boy, run. He can't catch *you*. He's soft. Give him a good run. He needs the exercise.

I could hear Stafford, too. He was very sore and he was cussing.

I got away, though, and stayed low until I saw him drive off in his Ford. Then I went back to the big tent and found Joey.

We'll get it this time, he said.

I guess it'll be Reform School.

No, it'll be thirty, and that's a lot of whacks even if he *is* sixty-three years old.

Thirty? That's liable to make me cry.

Me too, maybe, Joey said. Seems like ten can make you cry, then you hold off till it's eleven, then twelve, howling so you *won't* cry, and you think you'll start crying on the next one, but

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you don't. We haven't so far, anyway. Maybe we will when it's thirty, though.

Oh, well, that's tomorrow.

Red gave us some more work to do around the grounds and let us sit next to him at lunch. It was beef stew and beans, all you could eat. We talked to some acrobats who were Spanish, and to a family of Italians who worked with horses. We saw both shows, the afternoon one and the evening one, and then we helped with the work, taking the circus to pieces again; then we went down to the trains, and then home. I got home real late. In the morning I was sleepy when I had to get up for school.

They were waiting for us. Miss Flibety didn't even let us sit down for the roll call. She just told us to go to the office. Old man Dawson was waiting for us, too. Stafford was there, too, and very angry.

I figured, Well, here's where we go to Reform School.

Here they are, Mr. Dawson said to Stafford. Take them away, if you like.

It was easy to tell they'd been talking for some time and hadn't been getting along too well.

In *this* school, old man Dawson said, I do any punishing that's got to be done. Nobody else. I can't stop you from taking them to Reform School, though.

Stafford didn't say anything. He just gave old man Dawson a very dirty look and left the office.

Well, lads, old man Dawson said. How was it?

We had lunch with them, Joey said.

Good. But now down to business. What offence is this, the sixteenth or the seventeenth?

It ain't that many, Joey said. Must be eleven or twelve.

Well, I'm sure of one thing. This is the time I'm supposed to make it thirty.

I think the next one is the one you're supposed to make thirty, Joey said.

No, we've lost track somewhere, but I'm sure this is the time it goes up to thirty. Who's going to be first?

Me.

All right, Aram. Take a good hold on the chair, brace your-

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self, and try to modulate your howl.

Yes sir. I'll do my best, but thirty's an awful lot.

Well, a funny thing happened. He gave me thirty all right and I howled all right, but it was a modulated howl. It was the most modulated howl I ever howled; because it was the *easiest* strapping I ever got. I counted them and there were thirty all right, but they didn't hurt, so I didn't cry, as I was afraid I might.

It was the same with Joey. We stood together waiting to be dismissed.

I'm awfully grateful to you boys, old man Dawson said, for modulating your howls so nicely this time. I don't want people to think I'm killing you.

We wanted to thank him for giving us such easy strappings, but we didn't know how. I think he knew the way we felt, though, because he kind of laughed when he told us to go back to class.

It was a proud and happy moment for both of us because we knew everything would be all right till the County Fair opened in September.

## taking a closer look

1 *"The Circus" was not originally published as a short story, but was part of a full-length book* (My Name is Aram) *first printed over thirty years ago.*
*In what ways is this story "dated?" That is, what evidence can you find that seems to place the setting prior to the Second World War? Why, then, is this story still a favourite with young readers?*

2 *From whose point of view is the story told? Why has the author deliberately used ungrammatical expressions and long, loosely punctuated sentences?*

3 *What painful memory prevented Aram from meeting the*

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*circus train? Why did he decide to play truant, anyway?*

4 *Explain the word "modulation," as used by "old man" Dawson. What does this appeal to the boys tell us about the Principal's character?*

5 *What "funny thing" happened to Aram and Joey when they faced Mr. Dawson again?*

6 *As the boys were preparing to leave his office, Mr. Dawson "smiled in a way that gave us an idea he knew". What did Mr. Dawson know? How has the author prepared us ahead of time for this kind of ending? (One of your other answers should provide a strong clue.)*

7 *By fully sympathizing with the two boys, Saroyan puts the school system and its regulations in a poor light. Why does he sympathize with the boys rather than the school system?*

## let's get involved

1 *It is no secret, of course, that schools are not the only places that provide the kind of learning called education. In "The Circus", Aram and Joey wanted to know "what good a little education ever did anybody". It probably did not occur to them that the circus they wanted so badly to see offered a learning experience which, though quite different from the classroom's, was still in many ways just as important.*

*Choose any out-of-school event (such as a local fair, ball game, or musical group on tour) and in one paragraph write a defence of it as an important learning situation. The following suggestions might help you to develop a strong, persuasive argument.*

A *Begin your defence with a statement that clearly indicates your point of view.*

B *Limit your argument to three or four chief points, saving the best one for the last.*

C *Conclude your paragraph by referring to your opening sentence adding perhaps a short final appeal to the reader.*

D *Try to use different kinds of sentences; be careful, however, with your use of interrogative (question) sentences.*

E *Make sure that you approach your topic with respect for the intelligence of your audience.*

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Note: *It is not suggested that immediate first-hand experience is needed to write this paragraph! Your teacher will probably not appreciate your taking an afternoon off in order to "get the real facts."*

2 *As boys and girls grow up and meet some of the difficult problems of life, it is only natural that they will run into conflicts with adults and the authority these people represent. Like Aram and Joey, young people everywhere feel that now and then they must rebel a little in order to express their growing sense of independence.*

*Choose one of the situations described below (or invent one of your own), and write a dialogue (conversation between 2 or more people) which will vividly and dramatically illustrate a real-life conflict between youth and adults. Try to use the kind of language that is most appropriate to the speakers. It is not necessary that you "solve" your conflict. (Your dialogue might, in fact, serve to generate a classroom discussion of the conflict and its possible solutions.)*

*If you think that you can handle it, try to dramatize your dialogue, or using the language of television, "ad lib" dramatize the situation without the assistance of any written parts. In this case you would have to improvise the dialogue, or using the language of television, "ad lib" the dramatic conflict.*

A *Mother and father are furious because their teenage son or daughter has just returned from a date two hours past the curfew agreed upon earlier.*

B *The Principal (or Vice-Principal, or teacher) is questioning two students about an important school rule they have just broken.*

C *A police officer and parent (mother or father) are trying to discover whether or not a boy (or girl) has been involved in some kind of petty crime.*

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*D A family argument (involving any reasonable number of people) concerning one of the following conflicts:*

*1 raising the allowance,*
*2 driving the family car,*
*3 doing certain household "chores",*
*4 leaving school in order to get a job.*

## recommended reading

1 *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain
2 *The Human Comedy*, and *My Name Is Aram*, William Saroyan

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# Grasshoppers

## ROSE WILDER LANE

The descent of the grasshoppers was, mercifully, a nightmare. It was a horror, but it was unbelievable. Some saving resistance in Charles and Caroline refused to believe it. They refused to believe that they would not save the wheat.

The windless day encouraged them. They could control the fires they lighted. Surely the grasshoppers, with hundreds of miles of prairie before them, would avoid flames. Before the winged creatures had ceased to fall from the sky, Charles had driven the snorting, trembling horses thrice around the wheat field. Three furrows of upturned earth protected the wheat from the fire he set in the wild grass.

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It was Caroline's part to follow the fire along the strip of plowed ground, to keep the flames from crawling or leaping into the wheat. Charles had the harder task of fighting the fire in the grass. If it escaped him, the whole country would be burned over; nothing, then, could keep the grasshoppers out of the field. But there was no wind.

The fire ran merrily crackling, sending up waves of fiercer heat into the heat of the sun. All the glassy air was in motion. Back and forth Caroline ran, gasping, beating at wisps of burning grass, stamping them into the earth with her feet. For moments together she lost sight of Charles. The smoke came in gusts, stinging her eyes, her throat. With the smell of the clean smoke there was another, oilier, smell; grasshoppers, caught by the licking heat, fell wingless into the fire. Their bodies burst with soft, popping sounds.

It seemed that this madness of fighting had never begun, would never end. There had never been and would never be anything but this fierce, relentless and desperate battle. Yet it ended. The last clump of burning grass smoldered on blackened ground.

Caroline dissolved in trembling. Having nothing to lean against, she swayed and the firm earth held her. It was good to lie on.

Charles came striding to her and glanced quickly to see that she was all right. He was grimy with smoke, his eyelashes were gone and the hair was scorched from his arms.

"They don't seem to be eating anything," he said huskily, and coughed. "Maybe it was a false alarm."

Caroline sat up, then got to her feet, steadying her knees. The wheat stood as before, golden-green and beautiful, with a whirring of grasshoppers over it.

You go in and rest," Charles said. "I'm going to keep up a good thick smudge. That'll do the trick!"

She walked through grasshoppers thick as spray around her knees. They crunched sickeningly under her feet; she could not avoid stepping on them. Grasshoppers were in her hair, in her sleeves, in her skirts. Her ears tried to shut out the whirring of their wings.

Mechanically she cared for the baby. At the usual time she

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cooked supper. That night she fed the horses and led them to water. Charles was cutting slough grass and piling it on the burned strip around the wheat field. Thick smoke rose and spread in the motionless air.

Caroline kept supper warm for a long time. At last she let it grow cold. She lay down without undressing and slept a little. Charles came in at last, too tired and restless to eat. He was angry when she urged him to rest.

"I'm not a baby! Losing a little sleep won't hurt me!" he said.

She went with him to the wheat field. In the starlight they stirred the heaps of smoldering grass, buried the flames under masses of dampened stalks, kept the heavy smoke pouring into the air.

Dawn came murky through the smoke hanging above the wheat field. When the sun's first rays struck across the prairie, a sound rose from it. It was a small, vast sound of innumerable tiny jaws nibbling, crunching. A trembling began in the wheat field. Tall stalks shivered; here and there one moved as if it were struggling. It swayed and leaned crookedly against its fellows.

Charles shouted hoarsely and plunged into the field. They had never gone into the wheat, not even to examine it, unwilling to break down one precious stalk. Now Charles trampled them down, he tore them up by handfuls, shouting, "Caroline, quick! Come help! Quick!"

Smudges placed thickly through the field might save some of it. Charles raved, "Fool! Fool! Why didn't I do this sooner?"

It was like tearing their own flesh, to tear up the roots of the wheat, to pile up heaps of the ripening grain and set fire to it. They worked in the smoke, in the heat, destroying the thing they wanted to save. A sacrifice of part might save the rest. They trampled down the thick stalks; they cleared squares; they smothered the flames of burning wheat with the earth on its roots.

Through the smoke, Charles shouted, "Caroline, you get out of this! Go back to the dugout and stay there!"

She went on working till he came to her. She said, "No, Charles, I—"

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Coughing in the smoke, he croaked, "Get out, I tell you! What're we thinking of? You're nursing the baby!" Tears from his reddened eyes smeared the grime on his cheeks.

At the edge of the field she heard again that sound of nibbling. She stood and looked at the wheat. Scores of stalks were moving jerkily, as if they were struggling. The nibbling sound came from the whole prairie. It was not so loud as the flight of grasshoppers before her skirts, but it was continuous. It did not grow louder or softer; it did not stop. The prairie grasses had everywhere a restless movement, not made by any breeze. It sickened her to feel grasshoppers crushing to slime on the soles of her shoes.

The Svensons were burning smudges around their poor little field of sod potatoes and turnips.

Outside the door of the dugout she took off her shoes. In the doorway she took off her dress and petticoat and shook the grasshoppers out of them. The baby lay wailing in his cradle. She talked and sang to him while she bathed in the washbasin, then took him in her arms and lay down to rest. He cried hungrily. When she was cooler she let him nurse, and fanned him till he fell asleep. Then she fetched water from the creek and mixed a generous drink of vinegar, molasses and water to take to Charles.

He drank gratefully, draining the last drop from the little pail. It quivered in his hand. The nibbling sound was all around them, and looking into his bloodshot eyes, she found courage to say:

"Charles, you might as well rest. It's no—"

He shouted, "I'll save it or die trying! I'm not licked yet, not by a darn sight! Good grief, don't *you* turn against me!" He dashed the pail on the ground and left her as though he hated her.

Caroline picked up the pail. Between the smudge fires, patches of wheat were still standing. Their tops lay in ridges, like grass lodged by the wind. Each blade and every bearded head of grain quivered a little. Before Caroline's eyes, one tall stalk fell, then another, and a hollow in the ridged tops slipped lower. A whir of grasshoppers shot up from it.

What she feared was that Charles would be killed by sunstroke.

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Every hour she carried a cool drink to him. She took him food, but he would not stop to eat. His wild look frightened her. She could not persuade him to leave the field where he was working in the heat, under the blazing sun. That evening she did the chores again, and went to the field determined to make Charles rest. He would not listen to her. But the sun was sinking at last.

The baby had the colic; she could not leave him again. She fed him peppermint water and patiently walked up and down, patting his little buttocks while he yelled on her shoulder. She carried him up the patch and looked at smoke rising luridly in the starlight. Every step crushed the loathsome grasshoppers, and even in the night she could hear their nibbling.

Next morning the baby slept, exhausted. Caroline took tea and bread to Charles. He drank thirstily and choked down a few mouthfuls of bread.

"We'll save some of it," he said, looking at the ravaged field. "Not much, but some. I figure near a tenth of it's still standing. They can't take all of it, you know. It isn't possible. Some of it's bound to be left. Enough for flour and seed. If we just have seed—I can get time on those debts, if I put in a crop. I'll save enough for seed. If I just keep up this smudge."

Caroline felt a little hope. If even a few stalks were left, here and there, she and Charles would gather each one carefully. They could live that winter on game and the sod potatoes and put in another crop in the spring.

Then the rising sun struck her shoulders with its heat. Time did not seem to be passing; it stood still, quivering a little under the cruelty of the sun, trembling a little to the ceaseless, metallic nibbling.

That afternoon the grass was no longer standing in the prairie. It lay as if mowed, and still it was restlessly shaken. Bringing a pail of water from the creek, Caroline halted and stared at the little plum trees. Not a leaf was left. She went into the dugout and set about mixing the vinegar and molasses for Charles's drink. The doorway behind her darkened. She was still an instant, then turned.

Charles's eyes were red in his sooty face. He straightened his

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shoulders and tried to speak robustly through a raw throat:

"Well, Caroline, the jig's up. I—can't—" His mouth twisted and he said brutally, "The wheat's gone. Every spear." He dropped heavily onto the bench.

Caroline had known this would happen; she had known it when the first wheat stalk fell. She had known it when the nibbling began. Now it had happened, and something within her cried out that it could not be true.

"Why don't you say something?" Charles raged at her. And covered his face with his hands.

Caroline turned away instantly. She mustn't let him break down.

"I guess if there isn't any wheat, we'll get along without it," she said equably. "You've got along all right without it so far."

But they had never been in debt before.

She measured the molasses, poured the vinegar, stirred the mixture round and round. "I'm mixing up some vinegar and water. You'd better wash up and drink it while it's nice and cool."

To her surprise, she began to cry. Her mouth writhed uncontrollably and tears ran from her eyes. She went on stirring till she heard Charles at the washbasin, then she dried her face and blew her nose.

Charles wiped his blistered arms gingerly, ran the comb through his wet hair, and drained the cup she handed him. "Gosh, Caroline, that hits the spot!"

"You're hot and tired," she answered. Even in the dugout the maddening, ceaseless sound of nibbling gnawed at their ears.

Tears brimmed his raw lids. He drew her against him where he sat on the bench. She felt the sob shake his body when he turned his face against her shoulder, and she knew that, just as she had clung to him when the baby was born, he was clinging to her in this misery too great to bear alone.

"There, there," she said. "It's all right. I was afraid you'd get sunstroke. We're going to be all right."

"Oh, Caroline, if I hadn't been such a fool! Those debts I ran up—How'll I ever pay—in debt almost two hundred dollars—Not even flour for this winter; not even seed."

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"Never mind now. You'll manage all right. You're tired; you're worn out. You'll feel better when you've had some sleep."

He slept heavily, exhausted. Next morning his face was creased and his eyes swollen. After he had done the chores and eaten breakfast, she persuaded him to lie down again. He fell asleep at once, and Caroline sat quiet in order not to disturb him. Her head was heavy and she let it sink against her arm on the table. Dozing, she was all the time aware of Charles in the bunk, of the baby on the floor. Her eyes opened and she saw the baby absorbed in his own pink feet. He frowned intently, staring with slightly crossed eyes at the inexplicable things wavering about him, and patiently he tried to lay hold of the toes that eluded his uncertain grasp.

Suddenly Caroline was aware of a new sound—a rasping, clicking, scratching sound. It crawled up her spine and over her scalp. She started to her feet, and saw the top of the door jamb rippling like a snake. The clean black line was scaly, and rippling, pouring inward.

She snatched up the baby, wrapped him in her apron, covered him with her arms. Then she saw the thing clearly. The grasshoppers were coming into the dugout. The ridged long backs jostled one another. Hundreds, thousands of hard, triangular heads, knobbed with eyes, pointed with nibbling jaws, were coming downward, moving inward over the door jamb.

She screamed, "Charles! Charles!"

The door stood open against the creek bank. She seized the latch. In an instant she saw the whole earth crawling—path, creek bank, prairie—scaly and crawling. The door closed horribly, crunching grasshoppers. "Charles!"

He seized her. "Caroline, what—You're sick!"

Her teeth were chattering.

She screamed, "No, no! Kill them! Kill them!" In the dark she could hear them crawling.

Charles lighted the lamp. She stood trembling while he killed them. He brushed them from ceiling and walls, crushed them with his boots, hunted them out of the hay box and the stove. He shook them out of the bedding and swept them from beneath the bunk. He looked into the water pail.

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"Throw it out!" she cried.

"I don't know—You want me to get more?"

"No, no, don't open the door! I'll boil it!"

He skimmed them out of the water with the dipper.

She was ashamed to be behaving so, and with an effort she ceased to tremble, and relaxed her clenched jaws. Then the baby screamed, a sharp yell of pain. Caroline quickly uncovered him on her lap. From his soft armpit a grasshopper leaped, struck her cheek, stirred its claws there and crawled. She struck it away and began to cry loudly, like a child. For a time she could not stop crying, even in Charles's arms. When she was quiet, they heard the grasshoppers crawling on the paper windowpane. Grasshoppers were a mottled shadow crawling steadily downward across it, and by that they knew that the whole earth was still crawling in the sunlight outside.

All that night the creatures crawled, and all the next day. Charles slipped out to take care of the horses. When he came back, Caroline did not ask him any questions. They sat all day in the dugout behind the closed door.

"The railroad's left," Charles said. "This won't stop the railroad. I'll go back to work on it for awhile. Oh, we're not licked yet, not by a long way! We'll make out all right."

"Of course we will," Caroline said. "We always have."

She knew how he hated to go back to work on the railroad. It had been different when they were starting out. Now for a year he had had his own land; he had been independent. It was hard to go back to obeying other men's orders for wages. But it couldn't be helped. When they were silent, they could hear the claws on the paper pane.

Late that afternoon the oiled paper shone clear. Charles opened the door.

As mysteriously as they had come, the grasshoppers were going. They had ceased to crawl; they had left the ground. A translucent cloud, coloured like mother-of-pearl, swept northwestward across the sun.

The prairie was bald earth; not a blade of grass remained. Dust blew in the evening breeze. A faint stench rose from the creek. The water was solidly filled with drowned grasshoppers,

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rotting. No more clean water remained in all that country.

"I didn't want to worry you," Charles said, "but the horses haven't had water since yesterday morning. They've been two days without water in this heat. Creek was full of grasshoppers when I went out yesterday."

Long after sunset he worked, digging a hole in the slough. Mr. Svenson came, carrying a shovel and a pail and leading his oxen. They worked together, digging. When the hole was deep enough, they had to wait for water to seep into it.

At midnight the horses and the oxen drank, and Mr. Svenson started home with the pail full of water. Caroline was lying awake when Charles came in, mud-stained and cheerful. She sat up eagerly to drink from the brimming dipper he gave her.

"Thank God the horses are all right," he said. "I'll be sure to get a job with the teams."

There had been no use trying to dig a well while the grasshoppers were crawling. "Nothing stopped them," he told Caroline while he took off his boots. "No matter what they came to, they went right on. They were crawling up one side of the barn and down the other. Crawling west. They crawled straight into the creek, never stopped. They crawled into it and drowned till they clogged it up and the others crawled across on their backs. Caroline—" He hesitated. "I wish you'd seen it. A thing like that. It was—They had some idea, or—Would they do a thing like that without knowing why? I tell you they were bound to go west. All the powers that be couldn't've stopped them."

He and Caroline looked at each other for a long moment. She asked, "You don't think—"

"What?" he asked at last.

Neither of them could say what they felt. The grasshoppers—crawling into the creek and drowning till the others crossed on their backs. Grasshoppers, going west—like the railroads, like the people, like cities and settled lands and law and government. Yet grasshoppers were as alien, as indifferent to human suffering, as wind or cold. Perhaps they were no more indifferent to human beings than human fate itself.

"Well, it's good the horses were saved," Caroline said. "We better go to sleep if you're getting up early."

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He drove away next morning before daylight. The nearest railroad camp was twenty miles away, and he said cheerfully that he'd waste no time getting there.

"If I get a job," he said, "—I mean if the foreman puts me to work right away—I'll stay with it. I'll try to find a rider coming this way and send you word, but don't be worried if I don't get home tomorrow night."

"No," she said.

"Svenson'll kind of look out for you. He told me he'd be glad to."

"Yes," she said.

He held her close for a minute, by the wagon wheel in the lantern light. Then he kissed her. She held up the baby, and Charles tickled a gurgle from him. "Be good, little shaver. Take care of your mother."

He climbed to the wagon seat, picked up the reins and drove away. In a little while she heard a whistled tune growing fainter across the dark prairie. She knew he was whistling to cheer her.

## taking a closer look

1 *In what way does the opening sentence of this story excite your curiosity and interest? Why is the word "merciful" used?*

2 *The possible danger of the grasshopper invasion is made obvious at the beginning of the story. What other danger or problem immediately confronted Charles and Caroline?*

3 *Throughout the story, the couple faces a series of crises or obstacles to overcome. The first crisis, for example, is clearly the arrival of the grasshoppers.*

*List in order of their occurrence, the chief crises that require the frantic efforts of Charles and Caroline. Which crisis (other than the first) presents the greatest obstacle?*

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4 *Why did Charles become angry whenever his wife tried to persuade him to get some rest?*
5 *Why was it so important to Charles that he make every possible effort to save his wheat? Why did he not want to return to working on the railroad?*
6 *What did the grasshoppers seem to represent to Charles and Caroline? (In other words, what did they* symbolize?) *Re-read page 138 and "read between the lines". This difficult question will test how well you are able to understand part of the deeper meaning of this story.*
7 *What do you suppose Charles was thinking about as he left his family at the end of the story? What kind of feeling does the story ending give you? Why?*

## let's get involved

1 *Good writers strive to achieve a notable* atmosphere *or* mood *by means of carefully worded descriptions. The second paragraph on page 133, for example, and the fifth paragraph on page 137 provide a realistic and frightening picture of how Caroline felt about the grasshoppers. Take special note of the highly effective way in which the author handles her nouns, adjectives, and verbs.*

*You might want to try your hand at creating vivid word-pictures, yourself. Choose* one *of the following topics, and in* one *paragraph create a colourful and realistic mood or atmosphere. Remember that you must choose your words with care and precision: they should form a clear,* vivid *picture in the mind of the reader.*

A *A Swarming Mass of Army Ants*
B *The Examination Room*
C *Lost In A Strange House at Midnight*
D *Dismissal (last school day in June)*
E *Marooned!*

2 *This short story is particularly notable for the author's description of the* sounds *made by the grasshoppers—the whirring of their wings, for example, as they swarm overhead, and the terrible crunching of their bodies as they are trampled underfoot.*

*Perhaps you are eager to try some special sound effects*

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*of your own. If you are, get together with four or five of your classmates and compose a brief story which relies for much of its appeal on certain sounds. You may, of course, also use a brief selection taken from "Grasshoppers" or one of the topics listed in the first question (above).*

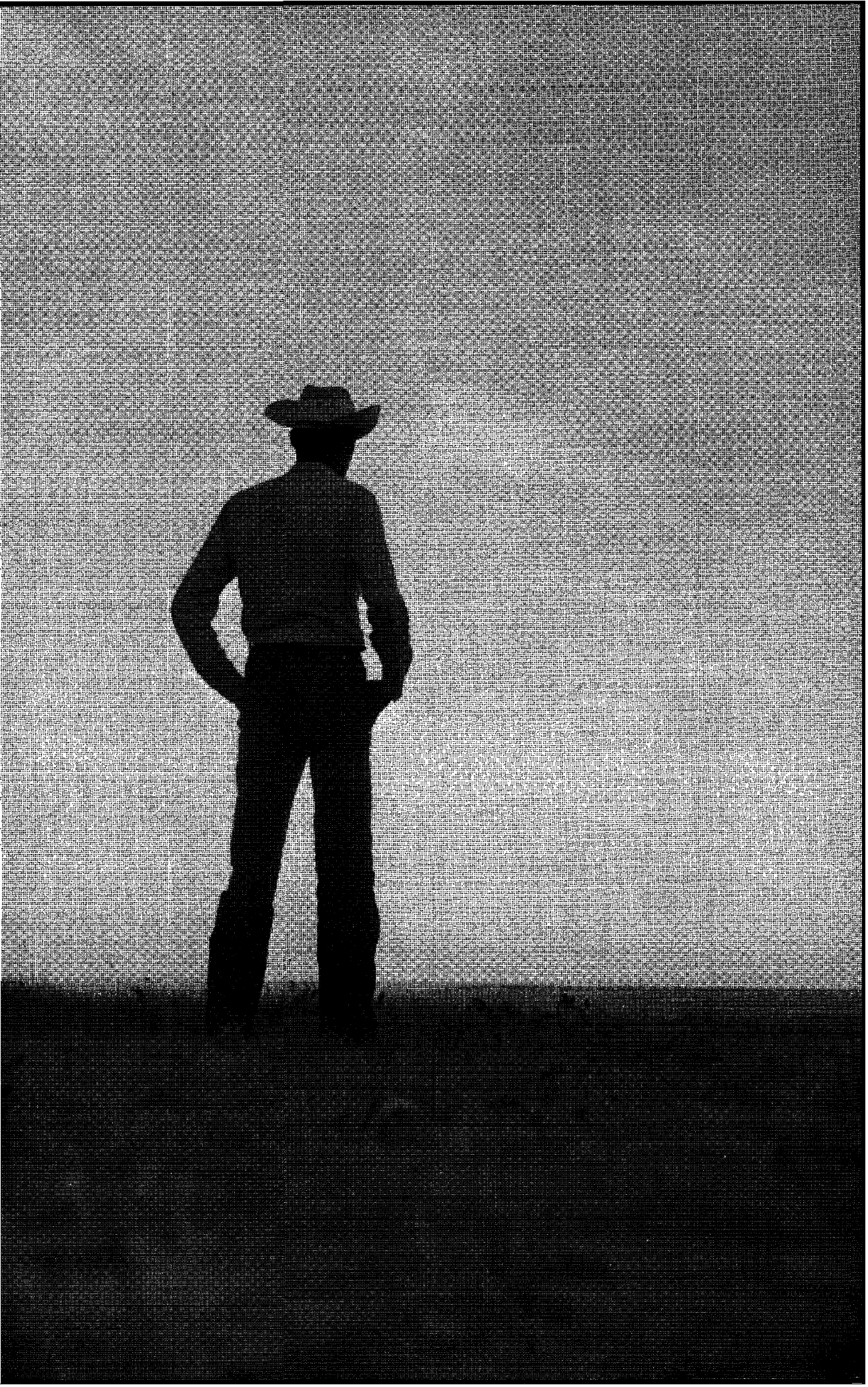
*Before you present your "story" to the class, practise carefully making the precise sound effects you need. Do not use a tape recorder, since the class will want to see the sound production.*

*If you are "stuck" for ideas, the following suggestions might help guide your thinking:*

*A the school band,*
*B loose in the zoo (animal sounds),*
*C five small children eating breakfast (lunch, etc.),*
*D a dragstrip, go-kart track (machine sounds).*

## recommended reading

1 *Let the Hurricane Roar*, Rose Wilder Lane
2 *Call It Courage*, Armstrong Speer



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# Leiningen Versus the Ants

## CARL STEPHENSON

"Unless they alter their course, and there's no reason why they should, they'll reach your plantation in two days at the latest."

Leiningen sucked placidly at a cigar about the size of a corn cob and for a few seconds gazed without answering at the agitated District Commissioner. Then he took the cigar from his lips, and leaned slightly forward. With his bristling grey hair, bulky nose, and lucid eyes, he had the look of an aging and shabby eagle.

"Decent of you," he murmured, "paddling all this way just to give me the tip. But you're pulling my leg of course when you say I must do a bunk. Why, even a herd of saurians couldn't drive me from this plantation of mine."

The Brazilian official threw up lean and lanky arms and clawed the air with wildly distended fingers. "Leiningen!" he shouted. "You're insane! They're not creatures you can fight—they're an elemental—an 'act of God!' Ten miles long, two miles wide—ants, nothing but ants! And every single one of them a fiend from hell; before you can spit three times they'll eat a full-grown buffalo to the bones. I tell you if you don't clear out at once there'll be nothing left of you but a skeleton picked as clean as your own plantation."

Leiningen grinned. "Act of God, my eye! Anyway, I'm not an old woman; I'm not going to run for it just because an elemental's on the way. And don't think I'm the kind of fathead who tries to fend off lightning with his fists, either. I use my intelligence, old man. With me, the brain isn't a second blindgut; I know what it's there for. When I began this model farm and plantation three years ago, I took into account all that could conceivably happen to it. And now I'm ready for anything and everything—including your ants."

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The Brazilian rose heavily to his feet. "I've done my best," he gasped. "Your obstinacy endangers not only yourself, but the lives of your four hundred workers. You don't know these ants!"

Leiningen accompanied him down to the river, where the Government launch was moored. The vessel cast off. As it moved downstream, the exclamation mark neared the rail and began waving its arms frantically. Long after the launch had disappeared round the bend, Leiningen thought he could still hear that dimming, imploring voice, "You don't know them, I tell you! *You don't know them!*"

But the reported enemy was by no means unfamiliar to the planter. Before he started work on his settlement, he had lived long enough in the country to see for himself the fearful devastations sometimes wrought by these ravenous insects in their campaigns for food. But since then he had planned measures of defence accordingly, and these, he was convinced, were in every way adequate to withstand the approaching peril.

Moreover, during his three years as a planter, Leiningen had met and defeated drought, flood, plague and all other "acts of God" which had come against him—unlike his fellow-settlers in the district, who had made little or no resistance. This unbroken success he attributed solely to the observance of his lifelong motto: *The human brain needs only to become fully aware of its powers to conquer even the elements*. Dullards reeled senselessly and aimlessly into the abyss; cranks, however brilliant, lost their heads when circumstances suddenly altered or accelerated and ran into stone walls; sluggards drifted with the current until they were caught in whirlpools and dragged under. But such disasters, Leiningen contended, merely strengthened his argument that intelligence, directed aright, invariably makes man the master of his fate.

Yes, Leiningen had always known how to grapple with life. Even here, in this Brazilian wilderness, his brain had triumphed over every difficulty and danger it had so far encountered. First he had vanquished primal forces by cunning and organization, then he had enlisted the resources of modern science to increase miraculously the yield of his plantation. And now he was sure he would prove more than a match for the "irresistible" ants.

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That same evening, however, Leiningen assembled his workers. He had no intention of waiting till the news reached their ears from other sources. Most of them had been born in the district; the cry "The ants are coming!" was to them an imperative signal for instant, panic-stricken flight, a spring for life itself. But so great was the Indians' trust in Leiningen, in Leiningen's word, and in Leiningen's wisdom, that they received his curt tidings, and his orders for the imminent struggle, with the calmness with which they were given. They waited, unafraid, alert, as if for the beginning of a new game or hunt which he had just described to them. The ants were indeed mighty, but not so mighty as the boss. Let them come!

They came at noon the second day. Their approach was announced by the wild unrest of the horses, scarcely controllable now either in stall or under rider, scenting from afar a vapor instinct with horror.

It was announced by a stampede of animals, timid and savage, hurtling past each other; jaguars and pumas flashing by nimble stags of the pampas; bulky tapirs, no longer hunters, themselves hunted, outpacing fleet kinkajous; maddened herds of cattle, heads lowered, nostrils snorting, rushing through tribes of loping monkeys, chattering in a dementia of terror; then followed the creeping and springing denizens of bush and steppe, big and little rodents, snakes, and lizards.

Pell-mell the rabble swarmed down the hill to the plantation, scattered right and left before the barrier of the water-filled ditch, then sped onwards to the river, where, again hindered, they fled along its bank out of sight.

This water-filled ditch was one of the defence measures which Leiningen had long since prepared against the advent of the ants. It encompassed three sides of the plantation like a huge horseshoe. Twelve feet across, but not very deep, when dry it could hardly be described as an obstacle to either man or beast. But the ends of the "horseshoe" ran into the river which formed the northern boundary, and fourth side, of the plantation. And at the end nearer the house and outbuildings in the middle of the plantation, Leiningen had constructed a dam by means of which water from the river could be diverted into the ditch.

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So now, by opening the dam, he was able to fling an imposing girdle of water, a huge quadrilateral with the river as its base, completely around the plantation, like the moat encircling a mediaeval city. Unless the ants were clever enough to build rafts they had no hope of reaching the plantation, Leiningen concluded.

The twelve-foot water ditch seemed to afford in itself all the security needed. But while awaiting the arrival of the ants, Leiningen made a further improvement. The western section of the ditch ran along the edge of a tamarind wood, and the branches of some great trees reached over the water. Leiningen now had them lopped so that ants could not descend from them within the "moat."

The women and children, then the herds of cattle, were escorted by peons on rafts over the river, to remain on the other side in absolute safety until the plunderers had departed. Leiningen gave this instruction, not because he believed the non-combatants were in any danger, but in order to avoid hampering the efficiency of the defenders. "Critical situations first become crises," he explained to his men, "when oxen or women get excited."

Finally, he made a careful inspection of the "inner moat"—a smaller ditch lined with concrete, which extended around the hill on which stood the ranch house, barns, stables and other buildings. Into this concrete ditch emptied the inflow pipes from three great petrol tanks. If by some miracle the ants managed to cross the water and reach the plantation, this "rampart of petrol" would be an absolutely impassable protection for the besieged and their dwellings and stock. Such, at least, was Leiningen's opinion.

He stationed his men at irregular distances along the water ditch, the first line of defence. Then he lay down in his hammock and puffed drowsily away at his pipe until a peon came with the report that the ants had been observed far away in the South.

Leiningen mounted his horse, which at the feel of its master seemed to forget its uneasiness, and rode leisurely in the direction of the threatening offensive. The southern stretch of ditch—the upper side of the quadrilateral—was nearly three miles long;

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from its centre one could survey the entire countryside. This was destined to be the scene of the outbreak of war between Leiningen's brain and twenty square miles of life-destroying ants.

It was a sight one could never forget. Over the range of hills, as far as eye could see, crept a darkening hem, ever longer and broader, until the shadow spread across the slope from east to west, then downwards, downwards, uncannily swift, and all the green herbage of that wide vista was being mown as by a giant sickle, leaving only the vast moving shadow, extending, deepening, and moving rapidly nearer.

When Leiningen's men, behind their barrier of water, perceived the approach of the long-expected foe, they gave vent to their suspense in screams and imprecations. But as the distance began to lessen between the "sons of hell" and the water ditch, they relapsed into silence. Before the advance of that awe-inspiring throng, their belief in the powers of the boss began to steadily dwindle.

Even Leiningen himself, who had ridden up just in time to restore their loss of heart by a display of unshakable calm, even he could not free himself from a qualm of malaise. Yonder were thousands of millions of voracious jaws bearing down upon him and only a suddenly insignificant, narrow ditch lay between him and his men and being gnawed to the bones "before you can spit three times".

Hadn't his brain for once taken on more than it could manage? If the blighters decided to rush the ditch, fill it to the brim with their corpses, there'd still be more than enough to destroy every trace of that cranium of his. The planter's chin jutted; they hadn't got him yet, and he'd see to it they never would. While he could think at all, he'd flout both death and the devil.

The hostile army was approaching in perfect formation; no human battalions, however well-drilled, could ever hope to rival the precision of that advance. Along a front that moved forward as uniformly as a straight line, the ants drew nearer and nearer to the water-ditch. Then, when they learned through their scouts the nature of the obstacle, the two outlying wings of the army detached themselves from the main body and marched down the western and eastern sides of the ditch.

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This surrounding maneuver took rather more than an hour to accomplish; no doubt the ants expected that at some point they would find a crossing.

During this outflanking movement by the wings, the army on the centre and southern front remained still. The besieged were therefore able to contemplate at their leisure the thumb-long, reddish black, long-legged insects; some of the Indians believed they could see, too, intent on them, the brilliant, cold eyes, and the razor-edged mandibles, of this host of infinity.

It is not easy for the average person to imagine that an animal, not to mention an insect, can *think*. But now both the European brain of Leiningen and the primitive brains of the Indians began to stir with the unpleasant foreboding that inside every single one of that deluge of insects dwelt a thought. And that thought was: Ditch or no ditch, we'll get to your flesh!

Not until four o'clock, did the wings reach the "horseshoe" ends of the ditch, only to find these ran into the great river. Through some kind of secret telegraphy, the report must then have flashed very swiftly indeed along the entire enemy line. And Leiningen, riding—no longer casually—along his side of the ditch, noticed by energetic and widespread movements of troops that for some unknown reason the news of the check had its greatest effect on the southern front, where the main army was massed. Perhaps the failure to find a way over the ditch was persuading the ants to withdraw from the plantation in search of spoils more easily attainable.

An immense flood of ants, about a hundred yards in width, was pouring in a glimmering-black cataract down the far slope of the ditch. Many thousands were already drowning in the sluggish creeping flow, but they were followed by troop after troop, who clambered over their sinking comrades, and then themselves served as dying bridges to the reserves hurrying on in their rear.

Shoals of ants were being carried away by the current into the middle of the ditch, where gradually they broke asunder and then, exhausted by their struggles, vanished below the surface. Nevertheless, the wavering, floundering hundred-yard front was remorselessly if slowly advancing towards the besieged on the

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other bank. Leiningen had been wrong when he supposed the enemy would first have to fill the ditch with their bodies before they could cross; instead, they merely needed to act as stepping-stones, as they swam and sank, to the hordes ever pressing onwards from behind.

Near Leiningen a few mounted herdsmen awaited his orders. He sent one of them to the weir—the river must be dammed more strongly to increase the speed and power of the water coursing through the ditch.

A second peon was dispatched to the outhouses to bring spades and petrol sprinklers. A third rode away to summon to the zone of the offensive all the men, except the observation posts, on the near-by sections of the ditch, which were not yet actively threatened.

The ants were getting across far more quickly than Leiningen would have deemed possible. Impelled by the mighty cascade behind them, they struggled nearer and nearer to the inner bank. The momentum of the attack was so great that neither the tardy flow of the stream nor its downward pull could exert its proper force; and into the gap left by every submerging insect, hastened forward a dozen more.

When reinforcements reached Leiningen, the invaders were half-way over. The planter had to admit to himself that it was only by a stroke of luck for him that the ants were attempting the crossing on a relatively short front: had they assaulted simultaneously along the entire length of the ditch, the outlook for the defenders would have been black indeed.

Even as it was, it could hardly be described as rosy, though the planter seemed quite unaware that death in a gruesome form was drawing closer and closer. As the war between his brain and the "act of God" reached its climax, the very shadow of annihilation began to pale to Leiningen, who now felt like a champion in a new Olympic game, a gigantic and thrilling contest, from which he was determined to emerge victor. Such, indeed, was his aura of confidence that the Indians forgot their stupefied fear of the peril only a yard or two away; under the planter's supervision, they began fervidly digging up to the edge of the bank and throwing clods of earth and spadefuls of sand into the midst of

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the hostile fleet.

The petrol sprinklers, hitherto used to destroy pests and blights on the plantation, were also brought into action. Streams of evil-reeking oil now soared and fell over an enemy already in disorder through the bombardment of earth and sand.

The ants responded to these vigorous and successful measures of defence by further developments of their offensive. Entire clumps of huddling insects began to roll down the opposite bank into the water. At the same time, Leiningen noticed that the ants were now attacking along an ever-widening front. As the numbers both of his men and his petrol sprinklers were severely limited, this rapid extension of the line of battle was becoming an overwhelming danger.

To add to his difficulties, the very clods of earth they flung into that black floating carpet often whirled fragments towards the defenders' side, and here and there dark ribbons were already mounting the inner bank. True, wherever a man saw these they could still be driven back into the water by spadefuls of earth or jets of petrol. But the file of defenders was too sparse and scattered to hold off at all points these landing parties, and though the peons toiled like madmen, their plight became momently more perilous.

One man struck with his spade at an enemy clump, did not draw it back quickly enough from the water; in a trice the wooden haft swarmed with upward scurrying insects. With a curse, he dropped the spade into the ditch; too late, they were already on his body. They lost no time; wherever they encountered bare flesh they bit deeply; a few, bigger than the rest, carried in their hindquarters a sting which injected a burning and paralyzing venom. Screaming, frantic with pain, the peon danced and twirled like a dervish.

Realizing that another such casualty, yes, perhaps this alone, might plunge his men into confusion and destroy their morale, Leiningen roared in a bellow louder than the yells of the victim: "Into the petrol, idiot! Douse your paws in the petrol!" The dervish ceased his pirouette as if transfixed, then tore off his shirt and plunged his arm and the ants hanging to it up to the shoulder in one of the large open tins of petrol. But even then the fierce

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mandibles did not slacken; another peon had to help him squash and detach each separate insect.

Distracted by the episode, some defenders had turned away from the ditch. And now cries of fury, a thudding of spades, and a wild trampling to and fro, showed that the ants had made full use of the interval, though luckily only a few had managed to get across. The men set to work again desperately with the barrage of earth and sand. Meanwhile an old Indian, who acted as medicine-man to the plantation workers, gave the bitten peon a drink he had prepared some hours before, which, he claimed, possessed the virtue of dissolving and weakening ants' venom.

Leiningen surveyed his position. A dispassionate observer would have estimated the odds against him at a thousand to one. But then such an onlooker would have reckoned only by what he saw—the advance of myriad battalions of ants against the futile efforts of a few defenders—and not by the unseen activity that can go on in a man's brain.

For Leiningen had not erred when he decided he would fight elemental with elemental. The water in the ditch was beginning to rise; the stronger damming of the river was making itself apparent.

Visibly the swiftness and power of the masses of water increased, swirling into quicker and quicker movement its living black surface, dispersing its pattern, carrying away more and more of it on the hastening current.

Victory had been snatched from the very jaws of defeat. With a hysterical shout of joy, the peons feverishly intensified their bombardment of earth clods and sand.

And now the wide cataract down the opposite bank was thinning and ceasing, as if the ants were becoming aware that they could not attain their aim. They were scurrying back up the slope to safety.

All the troops so far hurled into the ditch had been sacrificed in vain. Drowned and floundering insects eddied in thousands along the flow, while Indians running on the bank destroyed every swimmer that reached the side.

Not until the ditch curved towards the east did the scattered ranks assemble again in a coherent mass. And now, exhausted

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and half-numbed, they were in no condition to ascend the bank. Fusillades of clods drove them round the bend towards the mouth of the ditch and then into the river, wherein they vanished without leaving a trace.

The news ran swiftly along the entire chain of outposts, and soon a long scattered line of laughing men could be seen hastening along the ditch towards the scene of victory.

For once they seemed to have lost all their native reserve, for it was in wild abandon now they celebrated the triumph—as if there were no longer thousands of millions of merciless, cold and hungry eyes watching them from the opposite bank, watching and waiting.

The sun sank behind the rim of the tamarind wood and twilight deepened into night. It was not only hoped but expected that the ants would remain quiet until dawn. But to defeat any forlorn attempt at a crossing, the flow of water through the ditch was powerfully increased by opening the dam still further.

In spite of this impregnable barrier, Leiningen was not yet altogether convinced that the ants would not venture another surprise attack. He ordered his men to camp along the bank overnight. He also detailed parties of them to patrol the ditch in two of his motor cars and ceaselessly to illuminate the surface of the water with headlights and electric torches.

After having taken all the precautions he deemed necessary, the farmer ate his supper with considerable appetite and went to bed. His slumbers were in no wise disturbed by the memory of the waiting, live, twenty square miles.

Dawn found a thoroughly refreshed and active Leiningen riding along the edge of the ditch. The planter saw before him a motionless and unaltered throng of besiegers. He studied the wide belt of water between them and the plantation, and for a moment almost regretted that the fight had ended so soon and so simply. In the comforting, matter-of-fact light of morning, it seemed to him now that the ants hadn't the ghost of a chance to cross the ditch. Even if they plunged headlong into it on all three fronts at once, the force of the now powerful current would inevitably sweep them away. He had got quite a thrill out of the fight—a pity it was already over.

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He rode along the eastern and southern sections of the ditch and found everything in order. He reached the western section, opposite the tamarind wood, and here, contrary to the other battle fronts, he found the enemy very busy indeed. The trunks and branches of the trees and the creepers of the lianas, on the far bank of the ditch, fairly swarmed with industrious insects. But instead of eating the leaves there and then, they were merely gnawing through the stalks, so that a thick green shower fell steadily to the ground.

No doubt they were victualing columns sent out to obtain provender for the rest of the army. The discovery did not surprise Leiningen. He did not need to be told that ants are intelligent, that certain species even use others as milch cows, watchdogs and slaves. He was well aware of their power of adaptation, their sense of discipline, their marvelous talent for organization.

His belief that a foray to supply the army was in progress was strengthened when he saw the leaves that fell to the ground being dragged to the troops waiting outside the wood. Then all at once he realized the aim that rain of green was intended to serve.

Each single leaf, pulled or pushed by dozens of toiling insects, was borne straight to the edge of the ditch. Even as Macbeth watched the approach of Birnam Wood in the hands of his enemies, Leiningen saw the tamarind wood move nearer and nearer in the mandibles of the ants. Unlike the fey Scot, however, he did not lose his nerve; no witches had prophesied his doom, and if they had he would have slept just as soundly. All the same, he was forced to admit to himself that the situation was now far more ominous than that of the day before.

He had thought it impossible for the ants to build rafts for themselves—well, here they were, coming in thousands, more than enough to bridge the ditch. Leaves after leaves rustled down the slope into the water, where the current drew them away from the bank and carried them into midstream. And every single leaf carried several ants. This time the farmer did not trust to the alacrity of his messengers. He galloped away, leaning from his saddle and yelling orders as he rushed past outpost after outpost: "Bring petrol pumps to the southwest front! Issue spades to every

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man along the line facing the wood!" And arrived at the eastern and southern sections, he dispatched every man except the observation posts to the menaced west.

Then, as he rode past the stretch where the ants had failed to cross the day before, he witnessed a brief but impressive scene. Down the slope of the distant hill there came towards him a singular being, writhing rather than running, an animal-like blackened statue with a shapeless head and four quivering feet that knuckled under almost ceaselessly. When the creature reached the far bank of the ditch and collapsed opposite Leiningen, he recognized it as a pampas stag, covered over and over with ants.

It had strayed near the zone of the army. As usual, they had attacked its eyes first. Blinded, it had reeled in the madness of hideous torment straight into the ranks of its persecutors, and now the beast swayed to and fro in its death agony.

With a shot from his rifle Leiningen put it out of its misery. Then he pulled out his watch. He hadn't a second to lose, but for life itself he could not have denied his curiosity the satisfaction of knowing how long the ants would take—for personal reasons, so to speak. After six minutes the white polished bones alone remained. That's how he himself would look before you can—Leiningen spat once, and put spurs to his horse.

The sporting zest with which the excitement of the novel contest had inspired him the day before had now vanished; in its place was a cold and violent purpose. He would send these vermin back to the hell where they belonged, somehow, anyhow. Yes, but how was indeed the question; as things stood at present it looked as if the devils would raze him and his men from the earth instead. He had underestimated the might of the enemy; he really would have to bestir himself if he hoped to outwit them.

The biggest danger now, he decided, was the point where the western section of the ditch curved southwards. And arrived there, he found his worst expectations justified. The very power of the current had huddled the leaves and their crews of ants so close together at the bend that the bridge was almost ready.

True, streams of petrol and clumps of earth still prevented a landing. But the number of floating leaves was increasing ever

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more swiftly. It could not be long now before a stretch of water a mile in length was decked by a green pontoon over which the ants could rush in millions.

Leiningen galloped to the weir. The damming of the river was controlled by a wheel on its bank. The planter ordered the man at the wheel first to lower the water in the ditch almost to vanishing point, next to wait a moment, then suddenly to let the river in again. This maneuver of lowering and raising the surface, of decreasing then increasing the flow of water through the ditch was to be repeated over and over again until further notice.

This tactic was at first successful. The water in the ditch sank, and with it the film of leaves. The green fleet nearly reached the bed and the troops on the far bank swarmed down the slope to it. Then a violent flow of water at the original depth raced through the ditch, overwhelming leaves and ants, and sweeping them along.

This intermittent rapid flushing prevented just in time the almost completed fording of the ditch. But it also flung here and there squads of the enemy vanguard simultaneously up the inner bank. These seemed to know their duty only too well, and lost no time accomplishing it. The air rang with the curses of bitten Indians. They had removed their shirts and pants to detect the quicker the upwards-hastening insects; when they saw one, they crushed it; and fortunately the onslaught as yet was only by skirmishers.

Again and again, the water sank and rose, carrying leaves and drowned ants away with it. It lowered once more nearly to its bed; but this time the exhausted defenders waited in vain for the flush of destruction. Leiningen sensed disaster; something must have gone wrong with the machinery of the dam. Then a sweating peon tore up to him—

"They're over!"

While the besieged were concentrating up on the defence of the stretch opposite the wood, the seemingly unaffected line beyond the wood had become the theatre of decisive action. Here the defenders' front was sparse and scattered; everyone who could be spared had hurried away to the south.

Just as the man at the weir had lowered the water almost to

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the bed of the ditch, the ants on a wide front began another attempt at a direct crossing like that of the preceding day. Into the emptied bed poured an irresistible throng. Rushing across the ditch, they attained the inner bank before the slow-witted Indians fully grasped the situation. Their frantic screams dumbfounded the man at the weir. Before he could direct the river anew into the safeguarding bed he saw himself surrounded by raging ants. He ran like the others, ran for his life.

When Leiningen heard this, he knew the plantation was doomed. He wasted no time bemoaning the inevitable. For as long as there was the slightest chance of success, he had stood his ground, and now any further resistance was both useless and dangerous. He fired three revolver shots into the air—the prearranged signal for his men to retreat instantly within the "inner moat". Then he rode towards the ranchhouse.

This was two miles from the point of invasion. There was therefore time enough to prepare the second line of defence against the advent of the ants. Of the three great petrol cisterns near the house, one had already been half emptied by the constant withdrawals needed for the pumps during the fight at the water ditch. The remaining petrol in it was now drawn off through underground pipes into the concrete trench which encircled the ranchhouse and its outbuildings.

And there, drifting in twos and threes, Leiningen's men reached him. Most of them were obviously trying to preserve an air of calm and indifference, belied, however, by their restless glances and knitted brows. One could see their belief in a favorable outcome of the struggle was already considerably shaken.

The planter called his peons around him.

"Well, lads," he began, "we've lost the first round. But we'll smash the beggars yet, don't you worry. Anyone who thinks otherwise can draw his pay here and now and push off. There are rafts enough and to spare on the river and plenty of time still to reach 'em."

Not a man stirred.

Leiningen acknowledged his silent vote of confidence with a laugh that was half a grunt. "That's the stuff, lads. Too bad if you'd missed the rest of the show, eh? Well, the fun won't start

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till morning. Once these blighters turn tail, there'll be plenty of work for everyone and higher wages all round. And now run along and get something to eat; you've earned it all right."

In the excitement of the fight the greater part of the day had passed without the men once pausing to snatch a bite. Now that the ants were for the time being out of sight, and the "wall of petrol" gave a stronger feeling of security, hungry stomachs began to assert their claims.

The bridges over the concrete ditch were removed. Here and there solitary ants had reached the ditch; they gazed at the petrol meditatively, then scurried back again. Apparently they had little interest at the moment for what lay beyond the evil-reeking barrier; the abundant spoils of the plantation were the main attraction. Soon the trees, shrubs and beds for miles around were hulled with ants zealously gobbling the yield of long weary months of strenuous toil.

As twilight began to fall, a cordon of ants marched around the petrol trench, but as yet made no move towards its brink. Leiningen posted sentries with headlights and electric torches, then withdrew to his office, and began to reckon up his losses. He estimated these as large, but, in comparison with his bank balance, by no means unbearable. He worked out in some detail a scheme of intensive cultivation which would enable him, before very long, to more than compensate himself for the damage now being wrought to his crops. It was with a contented mind that he finally betook himself to bed where he slept deeply until dawn, undisturbed by any thought that next day little more might be left of him than a glistening skeleton.

He rose with the sun and went out on the flat roof of his house. And a scene like one from Dante lay around him; for miles in every direction there was nothing but a black, glittering multitude, a multitude of rested, sated, but none the less voracious ants: yes, look as far as one might, one could see nothing but that rustling black throng, except in the north, where the great river drew a boundary they could not hope to pass. But even the high stone breakwater, along the bank of the river, which Leiningen had built as a defence against inundations, was, like the

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paths, the shorn trees and shrubs, the ground itself, black with ants.

So their greed was not glutted in razing that vast plantation? Not by a long chalk; they were all the more eager now on a rich and certain booty—four hundred men, numerous horses, and bursting granaries.

At first it seemed that the petrol trench would serve its purpose. The besiegers sensed the peril of swimming it, and made no move to plunge blindly over its brink. Instead they devised a better maneuver; they began to collect shreds of bark, twigs and dried leaves and dropped these into the petrol. Everything green, which could have been similarly used, had long since been eaten. After a time, though, a long procession could be seen bringing from the west the tamarind leaves used as rafts the day before.

Since the petrol, unlike the water in the outer ditch, was perfectly still, the refuse stayed where it was thrown. It was several hours before the ants succeeded in covering an appreciable part of the surface. At length, however, they were ready to proceed to a direct attack.

Their storm troops swarmed down the concrete side, scrambled over the supporting surface of twigs and leaves, and impelled these over the few remaining streaks of open petrol until they reached the other side. Then they began to climb up this to make straight for the helpless garrison.

During the entire offensive, the planter sat peacefully, watching them with interest, but not stirring a muscle. Moreover, he had ordered his men not to disturb in any way whatever the advancing horde. So they squatted listlessly along the bank of the ditch and waited for a sign from the boss.

The petol was now covered with ants. A few had climbed the inner concrete wall and were scurrying towards the defenders.

"Everyone back from the ditch!" roared Leiningen. The men rushed away, without the slightest idea of his plan. He stooped forward and cautiously dropped into the ditch a stone which split the floating carpet and its living freight, to reveal a gleaming patch of petrol. A match spurted, sank down to the oily surface—Leiningen sprang back; in a flash a towering rampart of fire encompassed the garrison.

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This spectacular and instant repulse threw the Indians into ecstasy. They applauded, yelled and stamped, like children at a pantomime. Had it not been for the awe in which they held the boss, they would infallibly have carried him shoulder high.

It was some time before the petrol burned down to the bed of the ditch, and the wall of smoke and flame began to lower. The ants had retreated in a wide circle from the devastation, and innumerable charred fragments along the outer bank showed that the flames had spread from the holocaust in the ditch well into the ranks beyond, where they had wrought havoc far and wide.

Yet the perseverance of the ants was by no means broken; indeed, each setback seemed only to whet it. The concrete cooled, the flicker of the dying flames wavered and vanished, petrol from the second tank poured into the trench—and the ants marched forward anew to the attack.

The foregoing scene repeated itself in every detail, except that on this occasion less time was needed to bridge the ditch, for the petrol was now already filmed by a layer of ash. Once again they withdrew; once again petrol flowed into the ditch. Would the creatures never learn that their self-sacrifice was utterly senseless? It really was senseless, wasn't it? Yes, of course it was senseless —provided the defenders had an *unlimited* supply of petrol.

When Leiningen reached this stage of reasoning, he felt for the first time since the arrival of the ants that his confidence was deserting him. His skin began to creep; he loosened his collar. Once the devils were over the trench there wasn't a chance in hell for him and his men. God, what a prospect, to be eaten alive like that!

For the third time the flames immolated the attacking troops and burned down to extinction. Yet the ants were coming on again as if nothing had happened. And meanwhile Leiningen had made a discovery that chilled him to the bone—petrol was no longer flowing into the ditch. Something must be blocking the outflow pipe of the third and last cistern—a snake or a dead rat? Whatever it was, the ants could be held off no longer, unless petrol could by some method be led from the cistern into the ditch.

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Then Leiningen remembered that in an outhouse near-by were two old disused fire engines. Spry as never before in their lives, the peons dragged them out of the shed, connected their pumps to the cistern, uncoiled and laid the hose. They were just in time to aim a stream of petrol at a column of ants that had already crossed and drive them back down the incline into the ditch. Once more an oily girdle surrounded the garrison, once more it was possible to hold the position—for the moment.

It was obvious, however, that this last resource meant only the postponement of defeat and death. A few of the peons fell on their knees and began to pray; others, shrieking insanely, fired their revolvers at the black, advancing masses, as if they felt their despair was pitiful enough to sway fate itself to mercy.

At length, two of the men's nerves broke: Leiningen saw a naked Indian leap over the north side of the petrol trench, quickly followed by a second. They sprinted with incredible speed towards the river. But their fleetness did not save them; long before they could attain the rafts, the enemy covered their bodies from head to foot.

In the agony of their torment, both sprang blindly into the wide river, where enemies no less sinister awaited them. Wild screams of mortal anguish informed the breathless onlookers that crocodiles and sword-toothed piranhas were no less ravenous than ants, and even nimbler in reaching their prey.

In spite of this bloody warning, more and more men showed they were making up their minds to run the blockade. Anything, even a fight midstream against alligators, seemed better than powerlessly waiting for death to come and slowly consume their living bodies.

Leiningen flogged his brain till it reeled. Was there nothing on earth could sweep this devils' spawn back into the hell from which it came?

Then out of the inferno of his bewilderment rose a terrifying inspiration. Yes, one hope remained, and one alone. It might be possible to dam the great river completely, so that its waters would fill not only the water ditch but overflow into the entire gigantic "saucer" of land in which lay the plantation.

The far bank of the river was too high for the waters to escape

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that way. The stone breakwater ran between the river and the plantation; its only gaps occurred where the "horseshoe" ends of the water-ditch passed into the river. So its waters would not only be forced to inundate into the plantation, they would also be held there by the breakwater until they rose to its own high level. In half an hour, perhaps even earlier, the plantation and its hostile army of occupation would be flooded.

The ranchhouse and outbuildings stood upon rising ground. Their foundations were higher than the breakwater, so the flood would not reach them. And any remaining ants trying to ascend the slope could be repulsed by petrol.

It was possible—yes, if one could only get to the dam! A distance of nearly two miles lay between the ranch house and the weir—two miles of ants. Those two peons had managed only a fifth of that distance at the cost of their lives. Was there an Indian daring enough after that to run the gauntlet five times as far? Hardly likely; and if there were, his prospect of getting back was almost nil.

No, there was only one thing for it, he'd have to make the attempt himself; he might just as well be running as sitting still, anyway, when the ants finally got him. Besides, there *was* a bit of a chance. Perhaps the ants weren't so almighty, after all; perhaps he had allowed the mass suggestion of that evil black throng to hypnotize him, just as a snake fascinates and overpowers.

The ants were building their bridges. Leiningen got up on a chair. "Hey, lads, listen to me!" he cried. Slowly and listlessly, from all sides of the trench, the men began to shuffle towards him, the apathy of death already stamped on their faces.

"Listen, lads!" he shouted. "You're frightened of those beggars, but you're a damn sight more frightened of me, and I'm proud of you. There's still a chance to save our lives—by flooding the plantation from the river. Now one of you might manage to get as far as the weir—but he'd never come back. Well, I'm not going to let you try it; if I did I'd be worse than one of those ants. No, I called the tune, and now I'm going to pay the piper.

"The moment I'm over the ditch, set fire to the petrol. That'll allow time for the flood to do the trick. Then all you have to do is to wait here all snug and quiet till I'm back. Yes, I'm coming

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back, trust me"—he grinned—"when I've finished my slimming-cure."

He pulled on high leather boots, drew heavy gauntlets over his hands, and stuffed the spaces between breeches and boots, gauntlets and arms, shirt and neck, with rags soaked in petrol. With close-fitting mosquito goggles he shielded his eyes, knowing too well the ants' dodge of first robbing their victim of sight. Finally, he plugged his nostrils and ears with cotton-wool, and let the peons drench his clothes with petrol.

He was about to set off, when the old Indian medicine man came up to him; he had a wondrous salve, he said, prepared from a species of chafer whose odor was intolerable to ants. Yes, the odor protected these chafers from the attacks of even the most murderous ants. The Indian smeared the boss's boots, his gauntlets, and his face over and over with the extract.

Leiningen then remembered the paralyzing effect of ants' venom, and the Indian gave him a gourd full of the medicine he had administered to the bitten peon at the water ditch. The planter drank it down without noticing its bitter taste; his mind was already at the weir.

He started off towards the northwest corner of the trench. With a bound he was over—and among the ants.

The beleaguered garrison had no opportunity to watch Leiningen's race against death. The ants were climbing the inner bank again—the lurid ring of petrol blazed aloft. For the fourth time that day the reflection from the fire shone on the sweating faces of the imprisoned men, and on the reddish-black cuirasses of their oppressors. The red and blue, dark-edged flames leaped vividly now, celebrating what? The funeral pyre of the four hundred, or of the hosts of destruction?

Leiningen ran. He ran in long, equal strides, with only one thought, one sensation, in his being—he *must* get through. He dodged all trees and shrubs; except for the split seconds his soles touched the ground the ants should have no opportunity to alight on him. That they would get to him soon, despite the salve on his boots, the petrol on his clothes, he realized only too well, but he knew even more surely that he must, and that he would, get to the weir.

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Apparently the salve was some use after all; not until he had reached halfway did he feel ants under his clothes, and a few on his face. Mechanically, in his stride, he struck at them, scarcely conscious of their bites. He saw he was drawing appreciably nearer the weir. The distance grew less and less—sank to five hundred—three—two—one hundred yards.

Then he was at the weir and gripping the ant-hulled wheel. Hardly had he seized it when a horde of infuriated ants flowed over his hands, arms and shoulders. He started the wheel—before it turned once on its axis the swarm covered his face. Leiningen strained like a madman, his lips pressed tight; if he opened them to draw breath. . . .

He turned and turned; slowly the dam lowered until it reached the bed of the river. Already the water was overflowing the ditch. Another minute, and the river was pouring through the near-by gap in the breakwater. The flooding of the plantation had begun.

Leiningen let go the wheel. Now, for the first time, he realized he was coated from head to foot with a layer of ants. In spite of the petrol, his clothes were full of them, several had got to his body or were clinging to his face. Now that he had completed his task, he felt the smart raging over his flesh from the bites of sawing and piercing insects.

Frantic with pain, he almost plunged into the river. To be ripped and slashed to shreds by piranhas? Already he was running the return journey, knocking ants from his gloves and jacket, brushing them from his bloodied face, squashing them to death under his clothes.

One of the creatures bit him just below the rim of his goggles; he managed to tear it away, but the agony of the bite and its etching acid drilled into the eye nerves; he saw now through circles of fire into a milky mist, then he ran for a time almost blinded, knowing that if he once tripped and fell. . . . The old Indian's brew didn't seem much good; it weakened the poison a bit, but didn't get rid of it. His heart pounded as if it would burst; blood roared in his ears; a giant's fist battered his lungs.

Then he could see again, but the burning girdle of petrol appeared infinitely far away; he could not last half that distance.

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Swift-changing pictures flashed through his head, episodes in his life, while in another part of his brain a cool and impartial onlooker informed this ant-blurred, gasping, exhausted bundle named Leiningen that such a rushing panorama of scenes from one's past is seen only in the moment before death.

A stone in the path . . . too weak to avoid it . . . the planter stumbled and collapsed. He tried to rise . . . he must be pinned under a rock . . . it was impossible . . . the slightest movement was impossible. . . .

Then all at once he saw, starkly clear and huge, and, right before his eyes, furred with ants, towering and swaying on its death agony, the pampas stag. In six minutes—gnawed to the bones. God, he *couldn't* die like that! And something outside him seemed to drag him to his feet. He tottered. He began to stagger forward again.

Through the blazing ring hurtled an apparition which, as soon as it reached the ground on the inner side, fell full length and did not move. Leiningen, at the moment he made that leap through the flames, lost consciousness for the first time in his life. As he lay there, with glazing eyes and lacerated face, he appeared a man returned from the grave. The peons rushed to him, stripped off his clothes, tore away the ants from a body that seemed almost one open wound; in some places the bones were showing. They carried him into the ranch house.

As the curtain of flames lowered, one could see in place of the illimitable host of ants an extensive vista of water. The thwarted river had swept over the plantation, carrying with it the entire army. The water had collected and mounted in the great "saucer," while the ants had in vain attempted to reach the hill on which stood the ranch house. The girdle of flames held them back.

And so imprisoned between water and fire, they had been delivered into the annihilation that was their god. And near the farther mouth of the water-ditch, where the stone mole had its second gap, the ocean swept the lost battalions into the river, to vanish forever.

The ring of fire dwindled as the water mounted to the petrol trench, and quenched the dimming flames. The inundation rose

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higher and higher: because its outflow was impeded by the timber and underbrush it had carried along with it, its surface required some time to reach the top of the high stone breakwater and discharge over it the rest of the shattered army.

It swelled over ant-stippled shrubs and bushes, until it washed against the foot of the knoll whereon the besieged had taken refuge. For a while an alluvium of ants tried again and again to attain this dry land, only to be repulsed by streams of petrol back into the merciless flood.

Leiningen lay on his bed, his body swathed from head to foot in bandages. With fomentations and salves, they had managed to stop the bleeding, and had dressed his many wounds. Now they thronged around him, one question in every face. Would he recover? "He won't die," said the old man who had bandaged him, "if he doesn't want to."

The planter opened his eyes. "Everything in order?" he asked.

"They're gone," said his nurse. "To hell." He held out to his master a gourd full of a powerful sleeping draught. Leiningen gulped it down.

"I told you I'd come back," he murmured, "even if I am a bit streamlined." He grinned and shut his eyes. He slept.

## taking a closer look

1 *Why did Leiningen refuse to leave his plantation? What did he consider to be his greatest single weapon?*
2 *Make a simple sketch or map of Leiningen's plantation and indicate on it the ranch building and the main lines of defence created by the owner. Mark also, by means of arrows or dotted lines, the chief breakthroughs made by the invading ants. (See also question 6.)*

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3 *Which parts of the author's first description of the ants impressed you most? What one "thought" was believed to drive them forward?*
4 *How did the ants try to overcome their first obstacle, the water-ditch? Did this and other "maneuvers" prove that the ants really possessed some kind of intelligence? (Give good reasons for your answer.)*
5 *Why does Stephenson include in his story (twice) the terrible fate of the pampas stag?*
6 *Rule a line down the middle of your page, making two columns. Title your left column "Attacks" and your right column "Defences". Using numbers and brief point-form descriptions (sentence fragments), indicate on this chart the main breakthroughs of the ants and the manner in which each was answered by Leiningen and his men. Space your work so that each attack and its matching defence are set apart from the others. It is suggested that your chart be included on the same page as the map drawn for the second question.*
7 *In what way were Leiningen's first words after regaining consciousness typical of his whole way of life?*
8 *Read again Leiningen's life-long motto, printed in italics on page 144. Why was Leiningen the only man among some four hundred able to live up to it? How true do you consider the author's statements that the Brazilian Indians were "slow-witted" because of their "primitive brains"?*
9 *If you enjoy reading spirited accounts of man in conflict with the forces of nature, read "Grasshoppers" (page 130) and "To Build a Fire" (page 90 ). Do not read these stories, however, without permission from your teacher.*

## let's get involved

1 *Although it is unlikely that you will ever visit the back country of Brazil, and even more unlikely that a horde of savage ants will attack you and your companions, you can still take an imaginative journey to the scene of Leiningen's life-and-death struggle.*

*Get together with four or five of your more adventurous classmates and "run down" to Leiningen's plantation; you will be able to reach it either by helicopter (from Brasilia,*

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*the new capital), or, if you are in no particular hurry, by riverboat. Don't forget to take along a portable recording outfit.*

*You are now ready for a live, dramatic, "You Are There" broadcast. By means of personal interviews, "rumours", and direct commentaries on various aspects of the battle, you should be able to convey to your "home" audience a vivid sense of immediate involvement. It will be necessary, of course, to have certain students undertake the roles of some of the people involved in the story (Leiningen and three or four of the native Indians). For the classroom presentation of this documentary, you may either set up a radio studio, with two news reporters commenting on the taped material coming in from Brazil, or you may "televise" the actual interviews (in which case some convincing acting will be called for).*

*You might consider some of the following subject ideas for the documentary broadcast:*

*A Personal Interviews:*
- *1 Leiningen describing the attack on the pampas stag,*
- *2 Leiningen's discovery that the petrol trench cannot hold back the ants,*
- *3 the first peon (Indian) to be attacked by the ants,*
- *4 an "unknown" native who has panicked and is about to flee the plantation.*

*B Direct Commentaries:*
- *1 the first glimpse of the ant army,*
- *2 the failure of any one of the defences,*
- *3 the flooding of the plantation.*

*2 In this story there are several ideas or statements expressed which are controversial enough for some lively debating. Five students (four debaters and a chairman) might choose one of the topics listed below (or one of their own choice), and after completing the necessary research, present vigorous "pro" and "con" arguments. The rest of the class should decide the winner by means of a vote (for the Affirmative side or the Negative), after which all the students may continue an "open house" discussion of the topic.*

*A Properly used, the intelligence of man can overcome any force of nature.*

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*B The native Indians of Brazil (or any other country) possess primitive mental faculties.*
*C Ants (or bees, grasshoppers, etc.) act only according to instinct; they are incapable of true thought.*
*D The army ants of Brazil can reduce a man to mere bone in six minutes.*

## recommended reading

1 *The Birds*, Daphne du Maurier

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# Agnes

## GREGORY CLARK

"Is that you, Agnes?"

About once a week, or every ten days, and sometimes twice a week, a hoarse, commanding female voice would ask the question in my ear over the telephone.

"No, ma'am," I would reply sharply, "this is NOT Agnes. You have the wrong number."

"Stupid!" I would hear her mutter, as she banged down the receiver.

I think she meant me, not her.

Do I sound like an Agnes? Well, by Jiminy, I can summon a thousand men out of the past, old soldiers, who will testify I sound more like a buzz saw. Little Brass Belly, they used to call me. Sometimes, Sneaky Clark. But not Agnes.

The last time she called, I inquired sweetly what number she wanted. My number is 3-4378.

"I want," asserted the old battle-axe loudly, "4-3783."

You see? It bears no resemblance to my number, which she dialled. It has the right digits. But in any old order.

Goodness knows how many other people she disturbs in the course of a week calling Agnes.

But I can just picture her. A grizzled old biddy, maybe fifty, maybe sixty, possibly seventy. When a woman is destined to be a battle-axe, it usually begins to transpire in her later forties. By the time she is fifty-five, destiny has her all honed up, sharp as the files of life can make her.

"Is that you, Agnes?"

Sure, I can picture her. Her hair done up in two or three different kinds of curlers. (She's got a box of assorted curlers, collected, lost, mislaid, over the years, on her dressing table.) And what a dressing table it is! Like a dog's breakfast, all over

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the place. For she is a slithery, through-other, tousy, slummocky, heedless, disdainful woman, with patience for nobody, not even for herself.

So she slumps down, probably in a dark hallway, at the telephone; and peering casually at the dial, sticks her arrogant old finger in the holes, any old holes, and dials what she hopes will turn out to be 4-3783.

"Is that you, Agnes?" in a hoarse voice.

"Yes," I replied, in a moment of inspiration.

"What's the matter? Got a cold?" she demanded.

"A slight one," I responded. "Quinsy, I think."

"You sound dreadful," sympathized the old battle-axe. "Well, dear, I just couldn't wait to find out what you think about Walter and Ella."

"I think it's wonderful," I declared.

"You what?" barked the old biddy.

"Wonderful," I repeated, firmly and hoarsely. "It's a pity they didn't think of it years ago!"

There was a distinct pause. I imagined she was shifting the receiver from one ear to the other.

"Agnes! Are you all right?" husked the old battle-axe. "Have you got a temperature or anything?"

"Never felt better in my life," I announced heartily.

"And you really think," demanded the old buster, slowly and menacingly, "that it's wonderful? About Walter? And ELLA?"

"Best thing that could have happened," I asserted.

Another pause, while, I am sure, the receiver was changed back to the other ear, probably the good one.

"But," came the hoarse voice, aghast, "what about George and the children? What about the store? What's going to happen at the bank?"

"What does that matter?" I inquired airily, "so long as they're happy? And furthermore, what business is it of yours? Or mine?"

I heard a clicking sound, as of a telephone receiver being pushed against metal curlers to shove the hair away from the ear.

"Agnes!" came the accusing voice. "Have you been drinking?"

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"Who? Me?" I protested piously.

"I'm coming right over," barked the arrogant old termagant. "There's something WRONG!"

"Before you come," I cut in, "you had better telephone George. AND Ella. And tell them how I feel about it."

"I certainly," she rasped, "will NOT!"

"Then the least you can do," I insisted, "is call two or three of the others, and see how they feel. Maybe I'm not alone!"

"I certainly will!" her voice fairly cracked with indignation. "I'll call Gert and Madge and Eddie, too!"

"Go ahead!" I agreed.

"Eddie?"

"Yes, Eddie, too!" I defied her.

"Well!"

Her "Well!" came from those depths of chest and diaphragm which battle-axes develop after long years of swinging.

She banged the phone down.

I laid mine down sweetly.

Poor Agnes. I wonder who she is.

And who's Eddie?

And what's it all about?

I don't know. But the reason I write this now is that not fifteen minutes ago, after a week's absence, the phone rang.

"Is that you, Agnes?"

The voice was cautious, and still hoarse.

"Why, hello, dearie!" I responded.

"Wrong number!" gasped the old battle-axe, hastily, and slammed the receiver down.

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## taking a closer look

1 *Why is "Agnes" not a typical short story? In what way might it be described as a "mystery"?*
2 *Describe briefly Clark's solution to his problem. (In other words, what was his "moment of inspiration"?)*
3 *Using your imagination and the little information supplied in the story, describe what you think really happened to Walter, Ella, and George (from the female caller's point of view).*
4 *Read again the three paragraphs following the sentence, "Sure, I can picture her," (page 169 ). Why did the author imagine that his caller must present this kind of picture?*
5 *Look up the word* satire. *At what aspect of human nature is Clark poking some gentle fun?*

## let's get involved

1 *The "wrong number" kind of telephone call is a common event in our lives. Re-create in writing a humorous call of this nature that you or another member of your family has received. (If you are unable to remember one, then make up one.) In order to achieve an extra touch of realism, include a good deal of dialogue (conversation); don't forget to use a new paragraph whenever you switch from one speaker to another.*
2 *The telephone has often played a dramatic role in literature and other art forms. In the movies* Dial "M" for Murder *and* Sorry, Wrong Number, *for example, the telephone is transformed into an instrument of terror and revenge.*

*You, too, can have the telephone lines carry a message of mystery and drama. Get together with a few of your classmates and write a short mystery, which relies on the telephone for much of its dramatic appeal. You may, or may not, choose to "solve" your mystery, but by all means try to make your story line as convincing and realistic as possible.*

*In order to dramatize your story, you might tape-record it (with the appropriate sound effects, of course) or you might consider acting it, making full use of toy or real telephones. (If you live in an urban area, the local tele-*

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*phone company might be able to lend you a set. You could also bring to school a couple of telephones that are connected at home by means of plug-like jacks. Be very careful not to lose them, however; telephones cannot be bought!)*

## recommended reading

1 *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, Jean Kerr
2 *Life Among the Savages*, Shirley Jackson
3 The collected short stories of O. Henry

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# The New Food

## STEPHEN LEACOCK

I see from the current columns of the daily press that "Professor Plumb, of the University of Chicago, has just invented a highly concentrated form of food. All the essential nutritive elements are put together in the form of pellets, each of which contains from one to two hundred times as much nourishment as an ounce of an ordinary article of diet. These pellets, diluted with water, will form all that is necessary to support life. The professor looks forward confidently to revolutionizing the present food system."

Now this kind of thing may be all very well in its way, but it is going to have its drawbacks as well. In the bright future anticipated by Professor Plumb, we can easily imagine such incidents as the following:

The smiling family were gathered round the hospitable board. The table was plenteously laid with a soup plate in front of each beaming child, a bucket of hot water before the radiant mother, and at the head of the board the Christmas dinner of the happy home, warmly covered by a thimble and resting on a poker chip. The expectant whispers of the little ones were hushed as the father, rising from his chair, lifted the thimble and disclosed a small pill of concentrated nourishment on the chip before him. Christmas turkey, cranberry sauce, plum pudding, mince pie—it was all there, all jammed into that little pill and only waiting to expand. Then the father with deep reverence, and a devout eye alternating between the pill and heaven, lifted his voice in a benediction.

At this moment there was an agonized cry from the mother.

"Oh, Henry, quick! Baby has snatched the pill!" It was too true. Dear little Gustavus Adolphus, the golden-haired baby boy, had grabbed the whole Christmas dinner off the poker chip and

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bolted it. Three hundred and fifty pounds of concentrated nourishment passed the œsophagus of the unthinking child.

"Clap him on the back!" cried the distracted mother. "Give him water!"

The idea was fatal. The water striking the pill caused it to expand. There was a dull rumbling sound and then, with an awful bang, Gustavus Adolphus exploded into fragments!

And when they gathered the little corpse together, the baby lips were parted in a lingering smile that could only be worn by a child who had eaten thirteen Christmas dinners.

## taking a closer look

1 *What is a "concentrated" form of food? What is usually added to it in order to make it both appetizing and safely digestible? Name some of today's foods which are prepared in a similar way.*
2 *What fatal mistake was made when it was discovered that the baby had swallowed the pill? Why was it a "natural" mistake?*
3 *Humour may take many forms: slapstick, satire, exaggeration, wit (clever conversation), and so on. What form of humour is Leacock employing throughout this story? When did you first discover that the author intended to treat his subject humorously? (Quote from the text.)*
4 *Why, despite its sixty-year age, is this story still read with genuine pleasure?*

## let's get involved

1 *When "The New Food" was first published in 1910, the idea of concentrated food was considered to be just so much scientific daydreaming. Today, however, we have not only concentrated food products (cake mixes, soup cubes, etc.), but a great number of other scientific "breakthroughs".*

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*Choose one modern invention of wide public use and in one or two paragraphs write a short story which will highlight the humorous possibilities of the appliance or gadget. For the best comic results, your story should end with a surprise or "twist". You may, of course, want to dramatize your story, perhaps including one or two television or radio commercials which describe some "new" and "revolutionary" scientific advance.*

*The following list of modern inventions might help to suggest a story topic.*

*A a food blender*
*B automatic washer, dryer, garbage disposal, or dishwasher*
*C self-cleaning oven (which works by means of intense heat)*
*D freezer (as a separate unit, or as part of a typical refrigerator)*
*E gas or electric lawn-mower*
*F automobile "extras" (power equipment, convertible top, backseat television, etc.)*

2 *As an* alternative *to the activity described above, try basing your story on a scientific gadget* not yet invented. *Beware of letting your imagination run wild; describe your invention in such a way that it sounds convincing and realistic. Your ending might humorously indicate that all of the gadget's "bugs" have not yet been eliminated.*

## recommended reading

1 *The Mouse on the Moon*, Leonard Wibberley
2 The published work of Stephen Leacock (such as *Literary Lapses, Nonsense Novels*, and *Laugh With Leacock*)

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# Sentry

## FREDRIC BROWN

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold and he was fifty thousand light-years from home.

A strange blue sun gave light, and gravity, twice what he was used to, made every movement difficult.

But in tens of thousands of years this part of war hadn't changed. The flyboys were fine with their sleek spaceships and their fancy weapons. When the chips are down, though, it was still the foot soldier, the infantry, that had to take the ground and hold it, foot by bloody foot. Like this damned planet of a star he'd never heard of until they'd landed him there. And now it was sacred ground because the aliens were there too. *The* aliens, the only other intelligent race in the Galaxy . . . cruel, hideous and repulsive monsters.

Contact had been made with them near the centre of the Galaxy, after the slow, difficult colonization of a dozen thousand planets; and it had been war at sight; they'd shot without even trying to negotiate, or to make peace.

Now, planet by bitter planet, it was being fought out.

He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold, and the day was raw with a high wind that hurt his eyes. But the aliens were trying to infiltrate and every sentry post was vital.

He stayed alert, gun ready. Fifty thousand light-years from home, fighting on a strange world and wondering if he'd ever live to see home again.

And then he saw one of them crawling toward him. He drew a bead and fired. The alien made that strange horrible sound they all make, then lay still.

He shuddered at the sound and sight of the alien lying there. One ought to be able to get used to them after a while, but he'd never been able to. Such repulsive creatures they were, with only two arms and two legs, ghastly white skins and no scales.

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## taking a closer look

1 *How does the author build up sympathy for the lonely sentry? Why do we take it for granted that he is a human being from our own planet?*
2 *At what point does your sympathy suddenly change to shock, or even horror?*
3 *The "twist" or "reversal" ending provides some meagre clues as to the physical appearance of the sentry. Using the last two lines as a rough guide, describe this member of an intelligent, non-human race.*
4 *To the sentry, the "alien" Earthman seemed repulsive and hideous. The Earthman undoubtedly felt the same way about the sentry. Why do people find it difficult to accept things or ideas that are quite unlike their own? Be careful with your answer; it should indicate the deeper meaning of this story.*

## let's get involved

1 *This very short story (sometimes called a "short short") is a good example of* science-fiction *literature. This form of literature requires an intelligent use of imagination both on the part of the writer and the reader. Science fiction has become widely popular today—in books, movies, and television.*

*By means of a class or small panel discussion (four or five students) conduct a "literary investigation" into some of today's popular science-fiction. Consider those books, movies, and television programmes which are most likely to have been read and seen by the majority of the class.*

*The following questions are intended to serve only as a general guide. You will likely want to change the wording of some of them and to make up some of your own.*

A *What are the most common science-fiction ideas or plot-lines found in today's novels, movies, and television programmes? How often, for example, do you find the idea of world-wide destruction? How often, also, do you notice the idea of a near-at-hand catastrophe that is averted at the last minute?*
B *How realistic is the idea or story? Is it too far-fetched? How important is it that the story be true to life?*

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*C Do the human characters behave the way they would in real life? How "human" are the non-human or "alien" characters?*

*D When does science-fiction tend to become absurd or deserving of little serious attention?*

*E Why is science-fiction so popular today, more so than at any other time? Why do some people, especially girls, care little for it?*

*2 If you are interested in science-fiction and would like to know more about it, see the Appendix at the back of this book.*

## recommended reading

1 *R Is for Rocket*, Ray Bradbury
2 *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells
3 *The Lost World*, A. C. Doyle

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