

*Crucible*

1952

The



CRUCIBLE

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## Table of Contents

COMPANY .....	Amber Goodlander	1
CEDRIC AND THE SERGEANT .....	John Dinsmore	4
ELLA .....	Amber Goodlander	9
APRIL .....	Amber Goodlander	12
MASQUERADE .....	Richard T. Trexler	14
"DO YOU SOLEMNLY SWEAR" .....	Donald L. Schiele	16
THE CECILS AND THE CHEESE .....	Joanna Waite	18
ESCAPE .....	Joan Danneker	20
TREXLER STEPS OUT .....	Richard T. Trexler	22
TONIGHT .....	Edward A. Fraser	24

My mother got up from the table and started mixing up noodle dough, kneading the eggs and flour into the round pats that were to be rolled to paper thinness with the rolling pin. Aunt Sally cleared off the table and put on a clean white cloth and spread the noodle cakes out to dry. Uncle Wes moved his chair over beside Grandma's rocker.

"Now then, Grandma," he said, "what makes an old sinner like you think you'll ever get to heaven?"

"Now, Ves, chest don't start that asiest talk again. This whole year I have prayed for you, still you are an asiest! Ach, my, my, my," Grandma rolled her eyes heavenward and touched her Bible on the table beside her. We children caught our breath in excitement as Uncle Wes pitched his chair forward and leaned his long face closer to hers, forcing her back in her chair. As he warmed to his subject, he began quoting Scripture to bolster his arguments, and Grandma said the devil could quote Scripture to lead her astray. She asked me to find her glasses and when she had them adjusted halfway down her nose she started to feel frantically through her Bible.

Dad came in the back door and was sent back out to kill two chickens immediately. When he brought them in, the two women started working to get them ready for the oven. Grandma offered to cut up the bread for filling, ending the argument with Uncle Wes by advising him to "carry in Cheres'gen until his beard was grown."

The water in the run was shin-high in the deeper parts, so Sara and I had taken off our shoes and stockings to wade across. On that side of the run the bank rose gradually to the ancient oak tree that guarded Schrack's Spring. Here, on the first warm days, the knife thrust of speckled leaves told us that the trout lilies were blooming. We were pulling out the delicate yellow flowers from among the eaves, careful not to break the stems that were white on the ends where they had been underground.

Sara suggested that we lay our flowers in the run and go up beyond the grove of sumacs to see if there were any minnies in the little dark pool under the shelf where the run had cut into the bank. I agreed, and as we left the high ground and started back down to the run, Sara saw a car over by the house.

"It's Uncle Wes and Aunt Sally!" Sara yelled.

We ran back and got our flowers, and then we splashed to the other side of the run where we left our shoes and stockings. We hastily pulled them on, and cut through the field, heedless of the stubbles of golden-rod that poked at our legs.

Grandma was in her rocking chair in the kitchen, her lap full of presents. My mother was pulling the coffee pot to the front of the cook stove, keeping up her end of a three-way conversation that really was a trio. No one ever stopped while someone else was talking, and no one ever missed a word. Half of the conversation was in Dutch, for Grandma never could remember her English when she was excited.

Mother told us to put our flowers in the drain-sink and give Aunt Sally a kiss. Aunt Sally took one look at us and made us wash our hands and tie our shoe laces properly. Then she kissed us and gave us our presents. New dolls! Delicate city dolls with real hair.

Uncle Wes came from the car with more boxes and bags. He stooped to put them on the floor, and his hands flew out at our ribs. He tickled us so hard that tears were very close on the heels of our laughter. Aunt Sally told him to stop his foolishness and sit down and drink his coffee.

Sara and I sat on the wood box beside the stove, happy with our dolls, and listened to the talk. My mother brushed crumbs off the table with nervous fingers as she urged Uncle Wes to have to start soon. The two cats jumped up beside busy planning the company dinner she would rave to start soon. The two cats jumped up beside us and Aunt Sally shrieked to my mother that we shouldn't be "noaching those dirty cats." "Isabel, those cats should not be allowed in the kitchen at all where you eat and handle food." My mother supposed that she was right, and the cats were put out, much to their surprise.

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Old Scout pulled himself out from under the stove where he had been sleeping through all the excitement, too old and deaf to bother about noises, grateful for the warmth of the cook-stove.

Aunt Sally stopped working and watched him drag his half-paralyzed body across the kitchen floor.

"Isabel, is that old dog still in his misery?"

"We just can't seem to get around to doing away with him." My mother was apologetic.

"Well, it's time you do. It's a shame to let a dog suffer like that."

Aunt Sally repeated what she had just said to my mother when Dad and Uncle Wes came in from the summer kitchen where Dad had been showing Uncle Wes the trout flies he had tied during the winter. Dad said he would shoot Scout the first thing in the morning.

"You told me that last year. Why don't you and Wes take him out right now."

"I'm going to take a nap," Uncle Wes announced and retreated to the couch in the parlor. Dad said he'd better chop some more kindling wood, but Aunt Sally insisted he could chop the wood when he got back.

For once there was silence in the kitchen!

Then Dad told Sara and me to go to the post-office for the mail. We gathered up our new dolls and left, glancing uneasily at Scout who was waiting patiently at the door. We were confident Dad would put it off again, but we under-estimated Aunt Sally. When we came back, Scout was gone.

Aunt Sally and my mother were in the parlor. Aunt Sally was wondering why the couch hadn't been moved from the window - - the sun was beginning to fade the upholstery. Uncle Wes groaned at being disturbed and left the parlor before Aunt Sally could ask him to help move the couch. When the two women started tugging the heavy oak furniture around, we left too.

Dad came in the back door with the look on his face that told us we should keep our distance. He went down to the cellar and returned with a dusty bottle of elderberry wine. He reached up in the cupboard for two glasses and silently poured a drink for Uncle Wes and one for himself.

"Look thou not upon the vine ven it is red, for it 'biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder," said Grandma sternly.

The women came back to the kitchen with talk about running up some new kitchen curtains after dinner was over. Aunt Sally said it would take no time at all and it was such a shame to have that nice yellow gingham lying around all this time when these curtains were such a sight.

The chickens roasting in the oven began to smell delicious. Aunt Sally offered to cut the noodles, so my mother helped her fold the cakes over and over and had Dad sharpen the butcher knife so she could cut the rolls in thin strips. We were sent to the cellar for wild strawberry preserves, pears with cinnamon bark, chow-chow, and mustard pickle. My mother filled plates with tomatoes and mangoes stuffed with cabbage from the crocks in the cellarway.

When the dinner was on the table, Grandma settled into her chair and started to say the blessing. "Guddria Gut unser himmlicha tadda -- ." Uncle Wes interrupted to announce that he would say the blessing.

"Ach, Ves, now chust don't make fun," she pleaded.

Uncle Wes raised his hand in an imperative gesture commanding silence and began intoning the blessing at great length with an apparent sincerity that mollified Grandma. She couldn't see the winks he gave us children, because her head was bent reverently. We began to giggle; and had it not been a company meal, we would surely have been sent from the table.

Aunt Sally mentioned how straggly my hair looked and that Sara's looked so neat in braids. She asked my mother why she didn't cut off my curls and cut "nice saucer bangs, and the tip of the ear showing." Dad choked on a bite of chicken. "No!" he shouted, startling all of us. Aunt Sally hastily changed the subject.

After the dishes had been washed and put away, the sewing machine was pulled out of the corner and gingham was spread out on the kitchen table and measured. In a few hours the new curtains were finished and hung at the windows.

Dad and Uncle Wes went uptown to the store for the afternoon, and while they were gone, Aunt Sally mentioned my straggly curls again. My mother had to admit that they were a chore for her and reluctantly agreed they should be cut off. I was lifted onto a kitchen stool and swathed with towels. My mother stood by like a surgeon's assistant and handed Aunt Sally the tools as she requested them. The old lady next door came over to watch and stood there wiping her tears with a corner of her apron as the curls spiraled to the floor.

Dad and Wes came back late in the afternoon, and if dad noticed my haircut, he didn't say anything about it. Aunt Sally said they could not stay for supper if they wanted to get over to the Valley before dark to visit Uncle Jerry and Aunt Ellen. My mother insisted they eat something before they left, so they sat down for coffee and sandwiches.

When they were ready to go Aunt Sally was very pleased with us. With a flurry of last minute instructions about keeping the cats out of the house and being good girls for our mother, she kissed us affectionately. The entire family and the old lady next door stood out front and waved until the car turned onto the highway.

We went back into the quiet house and somehow the cats got in too. Grandma sank back into her rocker, completely unnerved, and hoped if it was God's will, would he make Ves see the light. By the time the dishes were done, the cats were firmly established in old Scout's place under the stove.

Grandma, Sara, and I went to bed early and Mother and Dad went to the William's to play a few hands of 500. It seemed as if we had been asleep only a few minutes when we heard a crash in the parlor. We ran down to find Mother sitting on the floor holding a handkerchief to her nose. Dad said it was broken and told us to find some cloths to hold over it. He said they had come in without turning on any lights and had forgotten that Aunt Sally had rearranged the furniture.

We got Mother into a chair. Then Dad started swearing! Striding up and down the room, he paused now and then to crack his fist down on a table. He knew he shouldn't swear in front of us children, but this time my mother didn't stop him.

## CEDRIC AND THE SERGEANT

Cedric was by all standards of beauty one of the ugliest creatures that ever lived. He was a small dog with sickly red hair sparsely distributed over his long, bony body. His tail was nearly as long as his body, thick at the base and tapered off to a point. His legs were heavy and extremely crooked. Cedric's ears were short and pointed and sat on top of his square head like the horns on a goat. His watery, pink eyes looked melancholy, and at the same time they had about them a quality of evil, as though they were harboring a deep resentment. A long, square jaw housed a set of teeth as sharp as dagger points. His whole appearance struck me as objectionable, but in his ugliness was something which tended to attract me to him.

I first met Cedric in Germany, on a rainy, cold November day. He was wandering around a completely demolished village, the only living thing in the town. When I first saw him, I felt that I ought to shoot him, but that mysterious something overcame my intention. Instead of shooting him, I called him over to share my K-ration pork-loaf dinner. He ravenously devoured the food, and a long, red tongue licked the crumbs from his whiskers.

"Thanks a lot, buddy. I was gettin' pretty hungry," Cedric said. I was dumbfounded.

"What's the matter? Ain't you never seen a dog before?"

"N-o--, not one that could talk," was all I could stammer.

"Oh yeah, that's right I guess I am different, ain't I?"

"You said it! I'll be damned!"

"Probably will be if you don't change your ways." I was sure I detected a slightly derisive chuckle in his voice.

"A talking dog! I can't believe it. Maybe I'm cracking up from that last shelling. How did you learn to talk?"

"You ain't crackin' up. I can talk all right, but I don't know exactly how I learned. Anyway, I found I could speak when I was still in England. You see, I don't remember where I was born. All I remember about my early life is that I used to live down by the docks. I suppose I lived there because I could always find food there if I scrounged around for it. Well, one day I was making my rounds when a big dock hand saw me and took a kick at me. I hollered for him to watch out who he was kicking. I told him I'd take a chunk out of his hind end if he tried that again. You should have seen him! He couldn't say a word. He just turned around and beat it!"

"You said you came from England. What are you doing over here then?"

"That's a long story. Wanna hear it?"

"I sure would. Shoot."

"Well, I was scroungin' around like I always did. A couple American pilots came down to watch a ship unoad and they spotted me. Joe, the guy who brought me here, said to his buddy, 'Hey, Ted! Look at that ugly dog over there! He's the ugliest looking dog I ever saw. Let's stone the son-of-a-bitch.' Joe stooped to pick up a rock to heave at me. so I said, 'Hey, fellas, don't throw no rocks at me. I'm not botherin' anybody.' Well, Joe was just as flabbergasted as you was

when you first heard me talk. He just stood there looking at me, and then at Ted, the rock still in his hand. Ted was kinda taken by surprise, too. They both stared at me. Finally Joe snapped out of it and said to Ted, 'Let's take him back with us if we can manage him. Boy, we can have a lot of fun with him!' Naturally, me bein' a dog, I wanted a master, and when I heard Joe say this, I got pretty excited. I said, 'No kiddin', would you guys take me with you?' Joe said, 'We sure would. We need a mascot at the base, anyhow, and you are made to order for our squadron. We call ourselves the Hell Divers, and you look like you came straight from hell.' After that, I had it made. Joe gave me the name Cedric."

"How did you get here, then?"

"Well, since I was the mascot, Joe used to take me on all his missions. I got twenty-three to my credit, countin' this last one when we got shot down. I guess I'm the only one of the crew that lived through that mess. The crew bailed out and left me in the plane alone. Joe wanted to take me along, but a sudden lurch of the plane threw him out the bomb bay before he could pick me up. That was about a week ago, and this town was still German ground. I suppose those lousy Germans shot Joe and the crew while they were still hangin' in the silk. The Kraut bastards! Anyhow, I came down with the plane and somehow or other it landed right side up in a bunch of brush. The plane was beat to hell but I lived through the crash because I was layin' about half way back in the belly on top of a pile of flying suits. I was knocked out, but no bones were broke. Just bruised. When I came to, I crawled out through the belly gunner's bubble, which had busted open. The plane had crashed about a mile from here, so I wasn't seen by the Germans. There was only about two companies of them and I guess they were too busy tryin' to stop you guys to look for a wreck. I scouted around the plane a little and decided to stay there for awhile, at least until I rested up.

I crawled back into the plane and dug out the emergency rations we had on board. I stayed at the plane until the rations were all gone. That was about two days ago, and by then the Germans had cleared out, so I came here. I was lookin' for food when you saw me."

Just then, our first sergeant, Gorskavitch, the mad Russian of Charley battery, started yelling for everybody to get ready to pull out. I wanted to ask Cedric a great many more questions. I thought the move would be one of the leisurely manuevers of the sort we had been making for the past few weeks and that I'd have plenty of time to get my equipment gathered up after I talked a bit more with Cedric . . . but I was mistaken.

"Hey you!" yelled Gorskavitch, "You'd better get the rag out if you don't want to be left here. The goddam Krauts are counter-attacking and they ain't far from here!"

"Oh-oh, that's your first sergeant. I can tell by the sound of his voice. I don't like them guys," said Cedric.

"Neither do I, but I better go. Wanta come along?"

"Yeah, it'll probably be a lot better than stayin' here, even if you do have a first sergeant."

"Good. Let's take off."

The battery took a position behind a hill just on the outskirts of a small town called Urbach. The 105's were spread out in the usual diamond pattern, about a hundred yards apart. My section was busy digging-in the gun position and getting the ammunition pit dug when the first sergeant came around to prod us on.

"C'mon you guys, we ain't got all day. Let's get those holes dug. This ain't no picnic," grated Gorskavitch. You big chowderhead, why don't you take a flyin' leap at a rollin' doughnut? These guys know the score. They don't need a jerk like you around here. Scram!"

"Who said that? I'll have you diggin' holes till hell freezes over. Who was it?"

"Me - - an' you can't do a thing to me," said Cedric, casually strolling out from under a pile of G. I. overcoats and equipment which had been hurriedly thrown from a truck.

"Well, I'll be a son-of-a-bitch!"

"Naw, I am, but I don't work at it like you do."

The rest of the guys in the gun section had been astonished when they first heard Cedric talk to Gorskavitch, but now their surprise turned to hearty laughter. Gorskavitch was furious.

"Who's dog is that?"

"Mine, I guess. I just picked him up in the last town. Why?"

"Get rid of him right now. I got enough troubles without a talking dog. Shoot 'm, hang 'm, do what you want, but get rid of him."

"Ho, wait a minute. I don't think I have to get rid of him just because you say so."

"Like hell you don't. I said get rid of him, and I meant it," roared Gorskavitch, and tramped off, fuming.

"C'mon Cedric. Let's go see the captain right now. I don't think old Gorskavitch can make me get rid of you."

Captain Buford was amazed at Cedric's ability to talk. He conversed with Cedric for about half an hour, discussing the first sergeant and other subjects. Finally he said it would be okay for Cedric to stay with me but that he should avoid Gorskavitch if possible.

Cedric's dislike for first sergeants was not the type of animosity which is common among soldiers toward men who out-rank them. His was a deep-seated hatred, based on past experiences with top kicks in England. He told me that he hated anyone who used his authority for his own personal benefit, and all first sergeants, he believed, did just that. He said he knew one top kick who sold the company's bread ration for ten pounds, then claimed it was stolen. Another first sergeant he knew stole a colonel's whiskey ration and let a private take a year at hard labor and a dishonorable discharge for it. Cedric said he knew plenty of other dirty tricks pulled by top kicks, too. One even tried to shanghai him to the CBI, but Joe found out about it in time and had the top kick busted.

Cedric didn't like Gorskavitch's looks anyway, and when Gorskavitch tried to make me get rid of him, Cedric decided that Gorskavitch needed to be taught a lesson.

Cedric had overheard someone say that Gorskavitch always carried a bottle of whiskey with him, which he tapped every time he was scared. The fellow said that without the whiskey to brace him, Gorskavitch would be in a bad way. Cedric discovered where the whiskey was hidden. That night Cedric slunk off into the darkness and was gone about fifteen minutes. When he returned, he had a bottle of whiskey in his mouth.

"How would you guys like a little shot?" he said, after he had put it down. "This here's good stuff — right from the states."

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Never mind where I got it. Do you want a drink or don't you want a drink?"

"Sure, pass it over. I could stand a good hooker." The eight guys in my section polished off the quart in a short time. We were all tipsy, but not drunk.

Early the next morning, Gorskavitch, looking rather pale and sickly, came around to see if everything was going all right. That's what he said he came around for, but we knew he came around to see if anyone had a hangover.

"Did you get rid of that dog like I told you to?" he asked me.

"No, and I don't intend to. Captain Buford said I could keep him."

"You mean you went over my head and saw the Captain?"

"Yeah. I can't say much about most of your orders, but when you try and tell me to get rid of my personal property, you're going too far."

"Maybe I can't make you get rid of that dog, but I can make you sure wish you had. You wait and see."

Gorskavitch was mad as a hornet, not only because I had gone over his head and got permission to keep Cedric but also because his whiskey had been stolen and he couldn't do anything about it because he wasn't supposed to have whiskey in the first place. He couldn't even question anyone about it because if he did, no one would hesitate to turn him in to the Captain.

"Somebody has to dig a sump hole for the kitchen today. You know who that guy is?" sneered Gorskavitch.

"Me," I said.

"Yeah, you. Get over there and get busy right now."

"What a rotten bastard you are, Gorskavitch. Why don't you go back to Russia? They

need your type in Stalin's army," said Cedric.

"Shut your face, you lousy mongrel! I'll get my chance at you too."

"You'll have to get up mighty early in the morning if you do. In fact, you'll have to stay up all night," goaded Cedric.

Gorskavitch knew then where his whiskey had gone.

About noon Gorskavitch came back. This time he had a malicious grin on his face, as if he had hatched out the perfect plan for getting rid of Cedric and getting revenge on me at the same time.

"I believe those Krauts are gonna spring a surprise attack tonight, so I think it would be a good idea if we had a machine gun out on the right flank about four hundred yards." He looked at me and said, "You take a 50 caliber and a box of ammunition, and when it gets dark, go out there and set up your position. Take the dog with you. He'll keep you company. That way you can get some sleep; the dog can keep awake and warn you if anything happens."

"Wait a minute, Gorskavitch. You know damn well no one is supposed to go out in that open field. The captain told us to be careful not to get off the paths the Germans left when they pulled out. Old bed-check Charlie comes around every night and he can easily spot any new tracks in that muddy field because he flies so low. He's just waiting for the chance to strafe and bomb anything he sees. You're practically asking me to commit suicide."

"I'll make the decisions. You just do as I say."

"Okay, but you'll have to take the blame if anything goes wrong. The rest of you guys are witnesses to the order he gave me? You all heard him, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we sure did," the guys answered.

Cedric hurried off to complain to the captain, but he came back shortly to report that the captain was up at the O. P. So I knew we would follow Gorskavitch's orders.

When it got dark, I took Cedric and the machine gun and trudged out to the position the first sergeant had chosen, set up the gun, and prepared myself for the long night.

That night the moon came out exceptionally bright. I could see the surrounding landscape very clearly for a great distance. This was the kind of night, I knew, that bed-check Charlie loved. He was a German observation pilot who flew over our lines every night when the weather was favorable and vision was good. His mission was to pick out a target of any kind and shoot at it to attract the fire of American guns so their positions could be spotted by German observers.

About nine o'clock I heard the familiar hum of bed-check Charlie's ME-109 in the distance. I knew that shortly I would either be seen and shot at or not seen and safe.

"We'll know in a couple of minutes if we'll be in for hell or not, Cedric. If we get strafed, beat it back to the gun position. I'll head for that, too. If we get under the net over the gun, we'll be okay. He won't be able to see us there. Good Luck. Here he comes."

Charlie came droning in slowly. He flew over my head, and I felt relieved, but my relief became terrible fright as I looked up and saw Charlie making a banking turn to the right. Of course I still wasn't sure he had seen the position, and I didn't dare leave and thus reveal it for certain. Charlie revved up his motor and climbed higher. Then he headed the plane into a dive and plummeted down toward my position, opening up with his machine guns. I could hear the Zup-Zup-Zup-Zup as the slugs ripped into the mud in a line about four feet from where I had hit-the-dirt next to the machine gun. The line of slugs was about thirty feet long and to the right of the position. Charlie had missed on the first run!

"Run, Cedric! We can make it to the gun position by the time he gets set for another dive.

"Call me speed, brother!" I wasn't conscious of anything except running - - running as I had never before run, until I reached safety of the gun and its protective camouflage net. Just as I fell to the ground with exhaustion, I heard a terrific roar and saw a cloud of flame burst in the air right where the machine gun had been. Panic seized me as I thought of what would have happened if I had not run. My insides twisted and churned and I broke into a cold sweat. For almost five minutes I lay on the ground sucking in deep gulps of the cold night air. The rest of the gun crew had been awakened by the machine gun fire and were scurrying around to find out what was going on. I couldn't tell them. I couldn't breathe. When I recovered some of my breath, I gasped. "Where's Cedric?"

"He's right here, but Ol' Charlie sure raised hell with that fifty," somebody yelled. "He blew 'er to hell with the bomb."

The whole battery was awake and buzzing with activity. Everybody wanted to know what had happened. The field telephone, used to receive fire commands, jingled to life.

"I'll answer it. It's probably the captain. Yes sir, that was bed-check Charlie . . . Yes sir, he blew up the gun . . . The first sergeant said he expected a counter attack tonight and that I was to take the fifty out there as a flank protector . . . Yes sir, I told him what you said, but he said I should do it anyhow . . . Yes sir, I'll be there at eight tomorrow morning . . . Good-night, sir."

"That was the captain. Somebody is goin' to be roasted in the morning, and I think it's going to be the first sergeant," I told the guys. "Boy, is Captain Buford riled!"

The next morning, Cedric and I reported to the C. P., as we had been ordered. Inside I saw Gorskavitch, who looked very worried. I told the whole story — how Gorskavitch had ignored my protest that it was against Captain Buford's orders to leave the regular paths that had been made. Captain Buford asked Gorskavitch if what I said was true.

"Yes sir," answered Gorskavitch guiltily.

"I happen to know some more details of this whole situation," said Captain Buford. "I think I can see why you were sent out there without my knowledge. Now, I don't believe Gorskavitch expected you to be strafed or bombed, but he did want you to know who was boss. As a result, you were lucky to come out of it unhurt."

We lost a valuable gun. But we were lucky at that. If one of those A. A. boys we have with us had opened fire on Charlie, we would be in hot water. As I see the whole situation, Gorskavitch is to blame, but he was driven to it by that dog. In order to insure justice to all concerned, I'll have to ask you to get rid of the dog. Gorskavitch, for your part in this matter you will be reduced to the grade of private. Now, on the matter of the dog, I don't want you to kill him if you can help it. You can give him to someone in one of the other batteries to keep until the war is over. You could see him anytime you would have the chance, but you can't keep him in the battery. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"All right. Gorskavitch, you will report to the kitchen to dig a sump hole. That's all."

I went back to the gun position feeling rather sad. I didn't want to get rid of Cedric. Cedric sensed my sadness and cheered me up considerably.

"Well, guess we're going to have to split up for awhile. But don't worry, the war won't last forever. When it's over, I'll come back with you. I like you a lot. Besides, I know a guy in "A" battery who will keep me. He's the guy who told me where Gorskavitch hid his whiskey. That's where I went when I took off from here a couple times. Hell's fire, you can come over to see me almost every day, because "A" battery is close to us. That won't be bad. It sure was worth it to get rid of Gorskavitch. That's one first sergeant who didn't get away with his dirty work." He paused a little, then said, "You know, I got a hunch 'A' battery is due for a new first sergeant, too." I was sure that it was.

## ELLA

Eddie's mother sliced cold boiled potatoes into the frying pan while Ella set the table. "I hope this is the last time I'll ever set the table in this house," Ella thought as she put the teaspoons in the old glass sugar bowl in the center of the figured oilcloth and put the knives and forks around at the places. "I sure hope Joe makes it tonight."

Ella pulled the high-chair up beside the table and put a pillow on Nora's chair. At five, Nora was still too little to reach the table. Annie was six, and small too. "They take after me for being little," Ella thought, "I sure hope I didn't look like that when I was a kid, though."

She glanced across the kitchen where the two little girls were playing. Annie was saying, "Let's play I'm a woman and you are a wady."

"The poor little devils!" Ella thought. "I wonder if Annie will ever talk right. Nora is beginning to talk just like her. They look like a pair of drowned rats with their hair stringing about their necks and their scrawny arms sticking out of those god-awful dresses Eddie's mother made for them."

The old woman was in the pantry mixing up the thickening for the gravy. She squeezed her stomach up against the sink to let Ella get by. As Ella reached into the cupboard for a pile of saucers, she caught the woman's little black eyes on her. "The old gal sure hates me!" Ella thought. She sidled past the big buttocks of her mother-in-law on her way back to the kitchen. "Don't worry, old lady," she thought as she put the pile of saucers beside one of the cigarette burns on the oilcloth, "Just don't worry - - It won't be long that you'll have to put up with me, and that will suit me fine. The sooner I get out of this crummy joint, the better."

The baby started to cry and Ella went upstairs to get him. She lifted him out of the ammonia-smelling crib and pulled the covers and sheet up over the sides of the crib to dry out. She diapered the baby on the bed Annie and Nora slept in. She rolled up the wet diaper and tossed it into a bucket that stood in the corner of the room.

As she went downstairs with the baby resting on her hip, she looked into the parlor where the old man was sleeping, his shoes off, stretched out on the sofa. "The old geezer doesn't do anything but sleep. When he isn't at work, he's sleeping or at the movies. He'll sleep his life away, and I don't blame him."

She brought the baby to the kitchen and put him in the high-chair fastening the frayed strap that kept him from slipping out from under the tray. She tied one of the old lady's aprons around his neck and stopped a moment to look closely into his face. "He doesn't look like Eddie at all, but neither did Nora or Annie when they were six months old. It looks as if his eyes might turn brown like Eddie's though. Hound dog eyes, Eddie has. I'll never forget the night he walked in on Joe and me. His head over to one side like that and his mouth hangin' open! Then Joe says to Eddie, 'What's the matter, kid? Didn't you ever see your wife before?'" Joe was a scream! Then Joe says to me, 'Come on, Baby, pack your clothes and let's get the hell out of here.' I wonder what the old lady said when Eddie walked in here with Annie and Nora. I wonder how much he told her."

The old lady sliced an onion over the browning potatoes and stirred the thickening into the gravy while Ella fed the baby from a can of strained carrots. The old lady said, "Never mind opening any more cans of baby food. He can have some of the potatoes mashed up."

Ella looked up and saw Eddie standing in the kitchen doorway looking at her. "I didn't hear you come in," she said. He walked past his mother and went to the pantry to wash the grease from his hands. He had had to quit his job in Bethlehem when he moved back home with two kids. Ella thought he was lucky to have this job at Henry's garage because the factories around town were beginning to lay men off every week. Eddie couldn't expect the old man to support his kids.

He dried his hands on a paper towel and went over behind Ella and put his hands on her shoulders. She leaned forward to cram another spoonful of the yellow mess into the baby's mouth, and his hands slipped off her shoulders and hung loosely at his sides. "Eddie, why don't you take the kids in the pantry and wash their hands?" Ella said. "It's just about time to dish up the supper."

Eddie's mother was looking at her again, she knew, even though she didn't look at the old lady. Just then Andy shambled into the kitchen and diverted the old lady's attention. He had forgotten to close the back door again. He remembered before his mother could say anything. He closed the door and stood there grinning his half-wit's good-natured grin at her. "Andy," she said, "go back out on the porch and take off your muddy shoes. Now don't forget again."

Ella wondered how Andy kept his job. "He must never have any of his fits when he's working. Maybe they don't mind. I guess they like him. The fellows call him Buggy. They have to tell him every day how to throw the garbage up on the truck. He's strong too — perhaps that's why they keep him on so long. He's been working for the city ever since I've known Eddie."

Ella could never forget the times Andy had his fits. "Yah-Yah-Yah!" Andy would lay his head back against something and yell like an animal. Ella felt cold chills go up her spine as she remembered the sound. "Andy hasn't had a fit since I've been here this time. Eight months! Eight months. Oh, my God."

If only she hadn't got pregnant. That had spoiled everything for her and Joe. Joe thought she had better quit her job at the restaurant and go to the farm with her mother and father and have the baby there. But her mother kept nagging at her all the time to go back with Eddie and take care of her kids. Ella kept telling her she didn't want to go back living with Eddie again. She had had enough of living with Eddie's family.

She and Eddie had lived with his family for three years, that first time. Then Eddie got a good job in the steel mill in Bethlehem. After they moved down there and had some money, things were different. For a change, she and Eddie bought some decent clothes and had some fun. They went out every night Eddie didn't work, and the lady in the next apartment looked in on the kids. The first time Eddie could afford it, he took her to the Colony Club. That was where she met Joe.

Ella smiled as she remembered how Joe slid off the bar stool as she went by on her way to the john. "Hello, Baby!" Joe said, smiling down on her. Eddie never did catch on that Joe was hanging around until that night he walked in on them when they thought he was working.

"Mom would have let me stay at home if I hadn't been pregnant. She got all excited about what the neighbors would think, and told me to get out. Then Mom wrote to Eddie to come and get me. He came as soon as he could." Ella remembered the sappy look on his face when she told him she was pregnant. He wanted to know right away if it was his. Ella told him it was — what else could she say? Besides, she wasn't sure, anyway. Eddie had looked at her with a vague smile, not knowing whether to believe her or not. "Honestly, sometimes Eddie looks just like Andy," she thought.

The old woman started dishing up the supper, and Ella carried the meat platter to the table and sent Nora into the parlor to wake up the old man.

She sat at the table, and Eddie slid into the chair beside her and laid his hand in her lap. Ella said sharply, "Eddie!" He took his hand away and started eating, his face low over his plate, spooning food into his mouth rapidly. The old man kept watching Ella, his eyes on the opening of her blouse and the red flash of her fingernails as she buttered a piece of bread.

Ella looked around the table and thought what a kick Joe would get out of this gang. She began to worry again that something might happen and Joe wouldn't be able to make it tonight. It was a shame that Joe had to quit his job down there at Bethlehem, because he made such good money. Joe figured he wouldn't have any trouble getting a job once they got to California. An electrician could always find a job.

She heard the two girls whispering. She smiled when Nora said, "Isn't Mommy pretty?"

"Maybe if I get to Hollywood I could put my name in for an extra. That would be exciting!" she thought.

Eddie pushed his chair back from the table and went into the parlor to read the paper. Annie and Nora went with him and continued to play they were 'wadies' until bed time.

Andy and the baby sat at the table grinning at each other while Ella and the old woman washed the dishes. After they had finished, the old woman asked the old man to go to the movies with her. Eddie left at a quarter of eight to go back to work until midnight.

As soon as the kids were asleep, Ella packed her clothes. She took a leisurely bath and put on the dark silk suit Eddie had bought her last week. She fastened the ankle straps on the high-heeled alligator shoes that matched the shoulder bag. Ella knew that Joe would say, "Baby, you look all right!"

At five minutes before ten she walked downstairs to see where Andy was. She found him in the kitchen, his chair tipped back against the wall. His head was tilted to one side and his eyes stared straight ahead. "Boy, if you're not a nut!" she thought.

She went back to the room for her bags and walked down the stairs as quietly as she could. She softly closed the front door and clicked over the front porch. Out on the street, she started walking fast. "Joe had better be there," she thought. Just then she heard a yell from the house she had just left. She put down her bags and listened. "Yah-Yah-Yah!" she heard Andy yell. Remembering that the children were alone with Andy, she had started back when she saw Joe's car down at the corner — waiting for her. She picked up her bags and walked as fast as she could, almost running as she approached the car. Joe got out when he saw her coming. He took her bags and put them in the back seat. Then he turned and grabbed her by the shoulders till they hurt. "Baby, Baby, Baby!" he said.

He put her in the front seat and looked at her in silence for awhile, the light from the dashboard illuminating her.

"You look all right, Baby."

## APRIL

The sun through the slatted shade  
Hurts eyes that want to sleep and sleep  
In the warm womb of blankets.  
In the next block the crack of a hammer  
Against wood echoes and reechoes  
Through the dream of music,  
Music of water dripping from canoe paddles,  
Of water slapping against the dock,  
The whisper of leaves on the bushes  
And the willow trees along the bank.

Music that tells of sun on water  
Rippled by swimmers,  
Music for us to dance to.  
Whirling, turning, swaying.  
On your toes - - on your toes!  
Leaping, soaring and then crash!  
Laughter behind hands,  
Smiles hidden under beach hats.  
Ballet in cuban-heeled oxfords and checked gingham!

Yes, Oh yes, it's funny - -  
Ballet in cuban-heeled oxfords and checked gingham.  
**Wait for me, wait for me.**  
I must tie the ribbons of satin dancing shoes  
Around my ankles,  
Pink tarleton, pink flowers for my hair,  
**Wait for me, wait for me.**

Top-heavy tulips lean away from the houses,  
Bicycle tracks dent the wet lawns  
And the marks of roller skates beside the walk  
Where the beginners grind to a stop  
A jumping rope slaps against cement:  
"Mable, Mable, set the table."

The blanket is warm against the sharp air,  
And eyes are closed against the sun  
That spotlights dust strings on the ceiling  
And the lumbering gropings of a pregnant black fly  
That has fallen from the curtains.

A bath mat snaps in the sunlight  
And is hung on the window sill of the house next door.  
Up the street buckets of water are sloshed  
On the side walk to erase the chalk marks  
Of the never-ending hopscotch game  
That has been moved up to the next block.

I stand on the deserted dock.  
Cold water runs deep and sluggish  
Under brown leaves;  
A forgotten dirty towel sags from the railing  
Of the boat house.  
The cottages along the river  
Are boarded up, and brown stalks  
Of geraniums straggle  
Over their window boxes.  
The clamor of a dog's bark comes across the fields  
And I clutch my sweater tight against the wind.

The vibration of the organ  
And the thin high voices of  
Black-and-white-robed children  
Singing Halleluiah.

**Take and eat, this is my body.**  
Red rose buds tortured  
Into a geometric form  
And stabbed to a grey flannel suit.

**I will arise again.**  
Black-and-white-robed children  
Sang in thin high voices against  
The vibration of the organ.

The r-r-r of roller skates interrupts  
The slap of the jumping rope against the walk,  
**Down in the meadow where the green grass grows,**  
**There sat Susie as sweet as a rose.**

The sun hurts eyes accustomed  
To warm darkness  
Reluctant bare feet touch a floor  
Still damp from last night's rain.  
**Wait for me, wait for me.**  
We're having coffee at Madge's.



## MASQUERADE

The carpet felt soft beneath his feet as Michael entered the dimly-lighted room of the Brandon Funeral Home. Under the rays of the floor lamps the bronze casket before him seemed almost to gleam. There was a tightness in his throat and a burning sensation in his eyes. Michael knew that this was the last time he would ever see Cathy Daniels, the woman he had once planned to marry. He lifted his eyes and gazed at the solitary spray of flowers on the foot of the casket, and then he looked at Cathy, at her abundant, chestnut-colored hair. He remembered how he used to smooth it with his hand. It felt soft and silky, and when he had leaned to kiss her, it had smelled like scented soap. And Michael had to remember that last day. Every time memories of Cathy had entered his mind in the past he had pushed them back farther and farther, only to have them haunt him in unguarded moments. But now he had to forget about her for the sake of Cora and his ten-month-old son. He could no longer let his past love for Cathy be a part of him. He must cast her from himself forever.

His wife Cora would be furious if she knew that he was here. She was always jealous of him. After all, he supposed, it was her privilege — she had won him from Cathy a year and a half ago. Michael cringed at the thought of how Cathy must have been jolted when he had never returned, for their last day together had been confirmation of the fact that they would be married the following week.

They had just finished a picnic lunch the two of them, in a small wooded section north of town. A slight breeze waved the foliage of the large maple tree that leaned above their picnic cloth. Their attention had suddenly been caught by an orange-breasted robin that darted into the leaves above them and aroused the instant chirping of what sounded like a large family of baby robins. Cathy's blue eyes sparkled as she tried to peer through the concealing greenery to discover the position of the nest. A wisp of her silky hair, lifted by the breeze, blew against Michael's cheek.

"Michael, can you see them?" she asked.

"No, the foliage is too thick."

"Oh, look! There they are! Come over here and you'll be able to see them."

A slight opening in the leaves allowed the light to sift through and spotlight four erect little heads, all of them hoping for the one worm that their mother had brought to them. Cathy's face gleamed with the excitement of her discovery.

"Now do you see them, Michael?"

"Yes," he answered, resting his chin on the top of her head. Her hair smelled as fresh as the sprouting trees around them. He blew on the top of it so that it fluttered down over her forehead.

"Don't, Michael," she laughed.

He blew again, and a large lock of it spread over her forehead. She moved her head to the side, laughing, and then spun around and pulled her fingers over Michael's head. He laughed and reached for her, but was too late. She had jumped up and started to run down the slope of the hill, making quick twists and turns around the trees and bushes. Michael was following her. Both of them were laughing and panting.

Michael cut off his memories abruptly. He always cut them off at the moment before he caught up with her. Quickly he turned to the face before him.

Cathy's long eyelashes lay in the heaviness of a peaceful sleep. Then such a surge of anguish and guilt swept through him that he felt himself beginning to sway, and he thought he was going to fall. And then, although her lips moved not at all, an angelic smile appeared on Cathy's face and he heard her say, "I'll always love you, Michael," in the same intense way that she had uttered those words that afternoon of the picnic. Then the smile gently faded from her face, and the quiet of her voice from his ears . . .

Outside the funeral establishment, he got into his car and drove to the residence of the Holmeses to pick up his wife Cora and take her home.

"Michael, why did you keep me waiting? You knew that I would be ready to leave at 3:30," she said, as they walked to the car. "What did you do this afternoon, dear?"

"Not much, Cora. What did you do?"

She and Helen Holmes had been to a movie, and she proceeded to tell Michael all about it. When they reached home, Michael climbed from the driver's seat, walked around the car, and elped Cora get out. Then he followed her to the house.

Cora's cat was sitting on the steps, teasing something with its jagged claws. It was a struggling robin. He looked at the nest in the nearby cherry tree where there were four heads poked in the air, waiting for their mother to come and feed them.

"Michael, will you go to the store for me?" asked Cora from the steps.

"What do you want me to get?"

## DO YOU SOLEMNLY SWEAR

"Do you solemnly swear . . ." We had long thought that there is something extraordinarily impressive about being sworn into the service of one's government. We knew, despite hearsay to the contrary, that government employees of all ages, sizes, races, and of assorted aspirations, pledge their sacred honor to the fulfilling of their duties "to the best of your abilities." This is law. Short as the time was, I, too, was a government employee.

We came in, most of us, between 12:45 and 1:00. Some, with a feeling for exaggeration, said they had been there for hours. Great quantities of snow falling in powder form outside gave us conversation of common interest. "Sure will be tough walking if this keeps on!" This platitude was ventured several times, and none of us doubted the fact; but most responded to the situation with enthusiasm, not regret. Here we were: college students on vacation and ready to tackle anything unrelated to John Milton, restrictive clauses, or the mystery of sine and cosine. Temporarily, at least, our books had been relegated to the dining room table or, better still, to the darkest corners of a desk "at school," and we were more like mature men, like sincere recruits, than like schoolboys on vacation. A solemn group for a solemn occasion, the solemnity of which we anticipated to a man.

With no undue ceremony, the door was thrust open by a clerk who ushered us into the oak-paneled room about which I had wondered since early childhood, the *sanctum sanctorum* within which high officials conferred, social reform bills were drawn up and signed, and rebellious mailmen, for all I knew, were drawn and quartered.

Two massive desks stood in the middle of the floor, each overflowing with what appeared to be highly official papers. Seated at one of them and holding a large folded document in his hands was a very dignified gentleman who appeared irritated by our presence. Did we expect to be greeted with open arms and a handshake? No, at least not until after the ceremony, but neither had we looked forward to the scowl which larded on each of us as we stood there, hands jammed into our pockets as if in refutation of the gentleman's inference that we had stolen some U. S. mail. Here was one of the old-fashioned officials, so deeply absorbed in his work that the reason for our being there had probably slipped his mind - - Christmas season was a busy time for such men. We were in no position to argue with or in any way to try to change the demeanor of the Post Office.

Then, in swept a large, rather slovenly dressed gentleman who was so strung with binder twine that he could have passed for the Post Office version of a Christmas tree. Thrusting a paper before us and muttering something about "gub'ment coon tracks," he indicated that we were to affix our names. We did so. Then, pulling upward the hand of the boy nearest him, he gave us to understand that we were to raise our hands. Immediately he went into a monologue of indistinguishable jabbering. We gathered that it had been the words of an oath and, as he had an expectant facial expression, we responded mechanically, "I do." We didn't know what we "did," but we supposed that now we were connected with the federal government.

At another time, I should like very much to write a long humorous essay on the thoughts of a mailman, on how he must look forward to spring, on how he must dread wearing two pairs of pants on muggy days in deference to the dog with a defensive or offensive attitude on the route. It would afford me great pleasure to paraphrase the well-known "Not snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night, . . ." And how vivid and real those words are imprinted in the minds, if not on the tongues, of many mailmen, the true aristocrats of postal service!

But though an attempt at the humorous essay were made, my outstanding reaction to the experience of being a government employee would still be the laxity, the total **disregard for emphasis** of the assistant postmaster, himself perhaps only a symbol of what exists in widespread areas. Idealistically-inclined youth (and we are not without our ideals) had met with actuality, and had, to some extent, been disillusioned, made chary of government institutions. A conception of order and of the respect of government for the individual had been shattered. To those to whom the words "mink coat" and "icebox" still pertained exclusively to a comfortable item of apparel and a luxury of the home, a concrete evidence of insincerity and disinterest had been provided. The aloofness of the man sitting in comfort before a pile of documents had become representative of a man in a senate seat ensconced behind a load of responsibilities, yet oblivious, even disrespectful, to the people for whose benefit many of the documents had been written. To be sure, the scowl so generously bestowed upon us could in no way be compared with the over-affable smiles of our higher national leaders, but here too we might pause for thought. Had our postal official seen entering his office a more mature group of citizens, possibly a more influential faction than we, would he have taken the trouble to rise from his desk? There are many desks throughout officialdom and perhaps the desk of even our highest official has been placed before a man who can be responsive or irresponsive to the people, depending upon just who the people are.

These thoughts would not occur to the casual observer, but we were not "casual observers." We were those who, though only through the exertion of our egos, were to become an **integral** part of something we thought of as "the government." The youngest one of us had been teased by his father who said he had been given a niche in the work of the nation and was "a hero in the eyes of his family." We were, if you wish, the beardless lawyer who had been elected judge; we were the callow governor who had been appointed to the senate; we were the public-spirited citizens who had been appointed to a national committee to study crime in the government. True, these positions were only a dream in the future to most of us, but we were college students home on vacation to relieve many postal employees, the "regulars," during the Christmas rush. And it was we who were a part of a system which (we had been instructed) was smaller than we as individuals. And then, perhaps just as a seed implanted in the minds of some, perhaps as nothing deserving of a second thought to others, and perhaps as the crowning proof of government neglect to others, we were shown how unimportant a federal employee can be, and we were ashamed.

## THE CECILS AND THE CHEESE

"And they poured concrete in the hole under the creamery coal-chute." Cecil's voice shook with indignation.

"Why, that's terrible! How do they expect us to live?" This sharp squeal of protest from Mrs. Cecil startled little Frederick so that he dropped the flake of oatmeal he was nibbling. His little face puckered into a frown and his upper teeth pressed into his lower lip. Mommy and Daddy were worrying all the time about food and other things. Suddenly a bright idea came to his soft little head.

"Maybe we could get our cheese from the trap in the attic."

His hopeful remark met with a strong silence. Then Cecil stared at him through his steel-rimmed spectacles. "This family," he said, "has been honest since Great-grandfather Cedric reformed after he almost died from chewing the laundry soap, and furthermore, as long as I have anything to say about it, the family will remain honest. Harold Greymouse is one of my best friends, and I would no more think of taking cheese from the attic trap than I would of pulling Muff-cat's tail. The cheese in the first-floor trap is ours, but that in the attic belongs to Harold, and that's final."

Little Frederick's nose quivered violently, and a great tear dribbled down his cheek and onto his top left whisker.

"Now you've made him cry, Cecil. Why must you be so grouchy when you come home from the creamery? I know you're worried, but I'm sure everything will turn out all right. Couldn't you and Harold Greymouse find a way to gnaw another hole in the creamery wall?"

"I asked Harold as soon as we found the other one closed, but he says the only reason we had the other hole was that one of the bricks was out. There aren't even any loose bricks now."

"No, I suppose not. Well, something will turn up, I'm sure." Mrs. Cecil sat staring into space. Cecil was becoming much too worked up about this business. His blood pressure would be soaring unless she could get his mind off the creamery. Suddenly she blinked and looked at little Frederick. "I've been thinking, Cecil. Freddy's two front teeth are protruding more and more. Don't you think we ought to see an orthodontist?"

"Nonsense!" Cecil was indignant. "Your two front teeth protrude. My two front teeth protrude. Why shouldn't Freddy's?"

"But he'd look so much better with them straightened," wailed Mrs. Cecil.

"He'd look like a freak. Who ever heard of a mouth with straight teeth? It's ridiculous!"

Freddy had been quiet long enough. "Johnny Greymouse is wearing braces. He says his teeth are going to be nice and straight."

"Harold is making a regular sissy out of Johnny. Why, the child is still wearing short pants! Now let's have no more foolishness. No son of mine is going to go around here with straight teeth. The idea! I've never heard of such a thing!"

Mrs. Cecil sighed and made another attempt. "Mr. Johnson had a new doorbell installed today, and just when I'd finished cleaning the house, the workmen let some plaster fall and I had to start cleaning all over again. That plaster dust is terrible."

"I've never seen such a landlord as this Mr. Johnson. He's always making repairs of some sort. Now, Mr. Scott was my idea of a good landlord. We never had any repairmen spilling plaster on us there. Always calm and peaceful."

"That's so. It's a pity the Scott's house had to burn just when we were comfortably settled, but Mrs. Scott didn't scare nearly as easily as Mrs. Johnson does." Freddy's beady little eyes twinkled. "Johnny and I were running around in the front bedroom the other day, and Mrs. Johnson screamed and threw her dust pan at us. It missed us, but the dust flew all over."

Mrs. Cecil looked alarmed. "Freddy, you didn't tell me you were in the bedroom. I thought I told you not to play on the second floor. Archibald Marmot has been pretty nasty to your father lately. He has been accusing him of robbing the second-floor trap."

"We won't play there anymore, Mommy!" And then he added, "I didn't even see any trap there the other day."

"You don't suppose Mr. Johnson is giving up, do you? I'm glad he's still setting the first floor trap. We can't get along without the cheese from it." Cecil was stroking his whiskers worriedly.

"Don't worry, dear . . ." Just then a loud thump interrupted Mrs. Cecil. "That's in the kitchen. The maid must have dropped something. I heard Mrs. Johnson reprimanding her again today. She certainly must be careless."

"Let's go look, Pop. Maybe it's cheese."

Mrs. Cecil watched them go, their tails held high and scraping the top of the door. Then a loud scream and a crash and the sound of running feet. Mrs. Cecil smiled. The maid was afraid of mice, too.

Looking through the door, she could see Cecil and little Frederick dragging a huge piece of cheese between them. "Get the saw, Mom," shouted Freddy. "It won't fit through the door."

Mrs. Cecil came running with a cutter from a box of wax paper, and they sawed the cheese in half.

"Chin whiskers and incisors!" shouted Cecil. "Now Archibald Marmot will accuse me more than ever of robbing his trap."

"Well, speak up to him! What are you, a mouse or a man?"

Cecil thought a minute. Then he laughed quietly, "I'm very fond of cheese."

## ESCAPE

The dream had been different last night, and for the first time since the phenomenon had occurred to absorb her entire subconsciousness and fascinate her momentarily in the hours of lonely waking existence, it was not perfect. The dominant figure had not appeared, and with that absence the illusion lost half its captivation, symbolized nothing more than the ordinary conscious day-dream which for her was totally inadequate.

The young woman sat upright on the bed, slid the magazine unread onto the desk, and despaired of ever supplanting, with a tangible form of diversion, the sheer wonder of being assimilated in the idealistic. As had become a natural manner for her in the past month, she fumbled a cigarette from the pack on the dressing table, lit it and inhaled with the sort of desperation that she knew typified an individual unnerved by, and yet, peculiarly, sympathetic toward the superhuman force that controlled her.

She would have faced with candor the problem of adjustment failure, perhaps, if it had not been for the dream. The thought of consulting a psychologist did not seem frightening; one month ago it might have seemed the only logical thing to do. She was not too shortsighted to realize that day by day the conscious world was smothering her, waiting only for the timely moment to claim her very life with loneliness. A psychologist would have advised new friends, new interests. He would have nodded professionally at the universality of a plight almost boring in the commonness of its nature — small town girl alone, too shy to make friends, contacts with the old ones gone, no one to love or care or understand — no one since childhood. He would have rambled on in platitudes, made suggestions she was incapable of following, and left her feeling only more futile in her uselessness to herself and to the world in general.

Tonight, alone as she had been countless nights before, she had no desire to seek outside help, not now that she had her dream — the one she could almost control, waking when she wanted, guiding the images by her own command. It had become the single escape from reality which furnished supreme ecstasy to sleep, and which furnished exhaltation, though not so acute to the reliving of the experience when it was finished.

She rose with deliberation, snuffed out the half-smoked cigarette, and moved with the same sort of deliberation toward the bathroom. Pausing at the medicine cabinet, she scrutinized in the mirror, seeming to look there for reassurance that tonight the fantasy would once more be ideal.

Down the grass path — so long from where she stood at the beginning that the other end was scarcely discernible. Moving slowly at first. Gradually hurrying, hurrying. Becoming younger with every leap. There she was a child running toward the only happiness life had ever given her. Into the arms of a young woman, the image of herself, who offered every conceivable wonder of a child's existence. Dancing round and round a glittering Christmas tree, hunting multi-colored Easter eggs, wading barefoot in the brook, taking lunches into the woods, building castles in the damp sand.

The most thrilling experience of the entire dream, however, beyond reveling in the physical delights of a child, was due to the presence of the woman. Somehow through her those pleasures could be experienced with the emotion of an adult, and this was itself the consummate sensation: the complete identification of adult, child, and uninhibited happiness. Last night the woman had been absent, and absent with her had been half the pleasure.

From the medicine cabinet she removed a small bottle of sleeping pills. She considered them essential for the stimulation of the dream, since the illusion had first appeared when she had resorted to this positive solution to restless nights. She shook two of the pills into the palm of her hand, hesitated a moment, and then swallowed them. The hesitation accompanied every swallowing as certainly as did the dream. It signified the alternate fears: that the dream might recur every night regardless of the pills — that would destroy the glorious expectation — and that the dream might not return at all. She was replacing the bottle when a fear chilled her, more overpowering than either of the other two. To have the dream as it was last night with only the child's life was as terrifying as the actuality that offered only the other half, the adult's life. She lowered the bottle, unscrewed the lid, shook out one, two, three — — —

Her eyes squinted down the path, searching for the woman who was not in sight. Slowly, slowly she started toward the other end, trying to move faster as she had always done before. But some unseen force held back her pace. Every drudging step, excruciatingly slow. It was dark, desolate along the way. Then in the distance a figure beckoned, features indistinguishable. Even when she stood directly before it, the figure was a mere silhouette a grotesque silhouette.

"Why that's me, that's me!" she cried. "when I'm old!"

She swung around to run back up the path, breathless, frightened, totally unmindful of the wonders about her. Then the path was gone, and the silhouette was leading her around a Christmas tree, suddenly shorn of all decoration. Past Easter eggs lying in open view about her, shriveled and colorless. Past the brook, a ditch without water. Past a woods encircled with barbed wire. Past sand, hot and dry.

She turned to run again, anywhere. She couldn't move.

"I'll wake myself up," she told herself over and over firmly, calmly.

But she could not concentrate on her desire, for, from every side of her, human voices shrieked, taunted, just as she had imagined they did in reality.

"I'll wake up! I'll throw myself on the ground, and I'll wake up!" But there was no falling down, with her body rigid on the spot. Then the silhouette disappeared, and the voices were mere whispers in the distance. And creeping toward her on every side came all the distorted childhood delights.

"No! No! I'll wake up!" I'll ———"

## TREXLER STEPS OUT

Dear Professor:

It will be impossible for me to attend your class in creative writing on April 20, because of a situation which has developed and which promises to do so much for my pleasure that I cannot think of ever again returning to my erstwhile alma mater and its meager offerings.

Perhaps you would be interested in knowing how I came to find myself in such an advantageous position, and since you were kind enough to help me find myself after the shock of learning that I never will be a writer, I will tell you.

It all started last Saturday night. I was about to enter George's Grill, down near the railroad section of Lock Haven, when I was halted by a small voice saying, "Would you like to buy a flower, Mister?" I had almost passed the little girl standing in the doorway before I noticed her. She was holding a long green box that contained an assortment of flowers: white carnations, gardenias, and a few white roses.

"Why, yes," I replied, almost before I thought. "How much are they?" There was a strange pleading look in her eyes.

"Eighty-five cents a piece, Mister. What kind do you want?" Her soiled dress was too large for her and her hair was straggly. She looked lost in the shadows, almost like a waif strayed from the slums of another world.

"That's a pretty high price for one flower, isn't it?" I asked.

She seemed desolated by my question. I wondered how long it had been since she had had a good meal.

"But Mister, these are special flowers,  
Passports to lands of ancient towers.  
Make a wish when lights are low;  
Make a wish and you will go . . . . ."

Her voice trailed off almost as if she were visualizing the towers that she had spoken of. Then she seemed to come back to me, like one awakening from a dream.

"But Mister, these are special flowers."

I laughed at the silly little rhyme. "Well, all right. I'll take one of those big ones."

Her face gleamed as she handed me a white gardenia. I gave her a dollar bill, then turned, without waiting for change, and entered the grill, where a combo, with amateurish delight, was playing the strains of a popular ballad.

Then the combo changed its theme to something a little slower and what might have been dreamy if the drummer had not been so persistent.

"May I take your order, Sir?" asked a tall, polite-looking young waiter, who had come from the direction of a small archway that separated the room from the bar on my right.

"I might try a zombi," I said.

"A zombi. Thank you." He nodded and headed in the direction of the bar.

The thought of the flower girl came back to me. I could not get her out of my mind. I tried turning my attention to the small dance floor, where a young and rather nice looking girl was dancing with a large greasy looking and obviously sensual man. Attractive as she was, her eyes didn't quite contain that certain sparkle that I tried to find in them. I hoped that the music would soon stop so that the couple would leave the floor. I didn't like to see the two together, but they kept dancing in my direction, and then I noticed that the girl was wearing a wedding ring. It was none of my business anyway. I guessed.

The waiter brought my drink and, as I hastily sipped part of it, I once again could hear the distressed voice of the flower girl:

"But Mister, these are special flowers,  
Passports to lands of ancient towers.  
Make a wish when lights are low;  
Make a wish and you will go . . . . ."

Once again her voice trailed off.

I fell wondering what I would wish for if I could make a wish that would come true. I found myself laughing. Wishes don't come true. And that rhyme, I thought, and took a sip of my zombi - - all of that to sell one little gardenia, a white gardenia. I looked at my gardenia; it was white and symmetrical in structure. I twirled it in front of my eyes and sniffed it. Its perfume seemed to fill my head. I continued to hold it in front of me as I reached for my zombi. "A toast to a gardenia!" I whispered to myself, feeling rather silly, but not able to resist the mood that had come over me. "May you be forever beautiful and forever fragrant to stand as a symbol of - -" The gardenia was gone suddenly. I thought it must have fallen to the floor but I could not find it when I leaned to look for it. I removed the straws from my zombi and took several gulps of it, as if I expected to find the flower in the glass. The glass seemed to become deeper than it had been before, and I noticed a strange thing; the liquid had started to move in a hollow and swirling motion, slowly at first, and then faster and faster . . . falling farther and farther away in a whirlpool, and then with the resonant bong of bronze, it halted suddenly.

"What goes here?" I asked myself. A kind of bewilderment came over me. I turned toward the orchestra, but the orchestra was gone. And everything else was changed.

I was in the alcove of a spacious room, sitting on a marble throne-like chair, and two men were fanning me with purple-plumed fans: each was greasy looking and bore a strong resemblance to the man that had been dancing with the girl. A feather of the fan on my right was broken and hanging down, almost ready to fall off. Heavy lavender hangings covered parts of the rough walls of the room, and, in a place opposite my chair, displayed an elaborately embroidered crest of some sort. Covering most of the crude sandstone floor was a thick, immaculately white rug. Two blacks, with faded green turbans on their heads and faded green sashes around their bulging stomachs, guarded a large archway to the right of the embroidered crest. Two cages of white doves stood by an archway on the left of the crest. A gold-barred gate closed the second archway.

"Where am I?" I asked myself, still bewildered.

A dead-ringer for George's waiter stepped from behind me and said, "Why sir, you are in The Palace of a Thousand Delights."

"A thousand delights, hell. I'm still at George's Grill, and you are the waiter. Bring me another zombi."

"Thou speakest strange words, Master," replied the man.

"What are you trying to pull, anyway? What kind of game is this?"

The man nodded with a pleased expression on his face, as if he had suddenly recognized the meaning of what I had said. "Thou desirest a game?" he asked. He clapped his hands.

Two blacks popped through a door at one end of the room and started to wrestle on the beautiful white rug, twisting about on the floor and scrambling for top position. Above the shuffling noise, I could hear the faint cry of "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!"

"I'm either in Arabia," I thought, "or this is a damned good imitation. I'll remember this for my creative writing class."

Then I turned to the man who reminded me of George's waiter. "Whom do you think you're fooling?"

"No one can fool the prophet of Allah," assured the servant.

"And who is the prophet of Allah?"

"Thou art the prophet of Allah. The Sultan of Bagdad is the prophet of Allah."

I realized that a great something was happening, had happened. Somehow I had been transported. Suddenly I burst out with "If I am the Sultan of Bagdad, how can you prove it to me?"

The man was eager to reply, "My most gracious master has the most lavish harem in the world." Upon the clapping of his hands, a sparsely clothed girl, who strongly resembled the attractive girl back at the grill, appeared at the golden-barred archway on my left.

"Madiene, escort our master to his harem."

As I moved toward her I recognized her definitely as the girl that I had seen back at George's Grill, but now there was a sparkle in her eyes, and her face gleamed as if with pleasure. She swung open the barred gate. Before me was a sight I shall never forget.

So you see, professor, it would be quite foolish for me to return to college and your class in creative writing.

My court magician has projected this letter into your mailbox. Once again I want to thank you for all your patient and painful efforts in trying to teach me to write. You might give my regards to the other men in the class and tell them that I will welcome them as my guests. The little flower girl sells her wares outside George's Grill — down near the railroad section of Lock Haven.

Very truly yours,  
Hiriam El Trexler  
Sultan of Bagdad.

## TONIGHT

When emotion should be  
A carefree combination  
Of warm tenderness  
And light-hearted things,  
It condenses - -  
Like the moisture on the window pane,  
The window pane tic-tac-toe'd  
By the dark branches  
Of some dormant deciduous,  
The window pane reflecting  
The swaying rays of a street light - - -  
And slowly hardens  
Into an icy crust.

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