

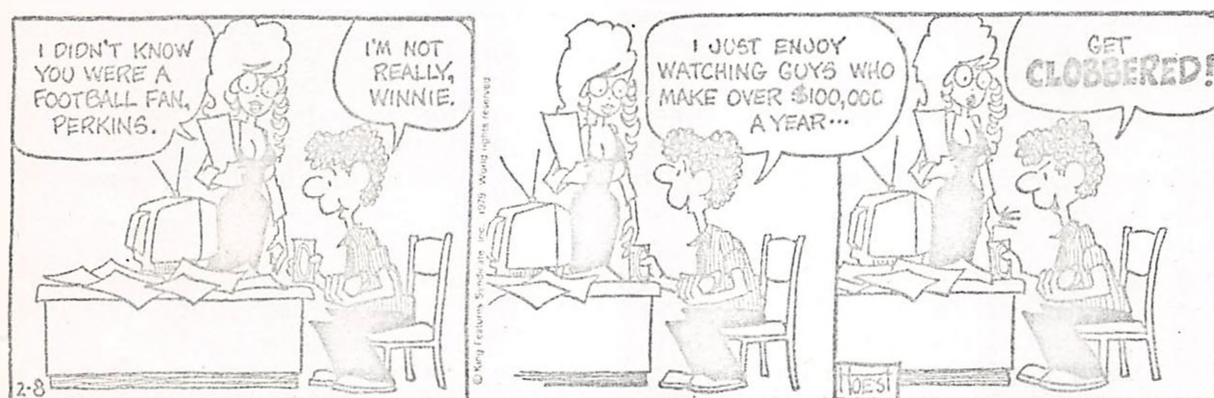


THE PERSIMMON-EATING TYGER
G A Z E T T E

NO, this is not the Persimmon-Eating Tyger Gazette.

This is Melikaphkhaz # 72.

Prepared for SFPA and certain others by Lon Atkins, 9942 Voyager Circle, Huntington Beach, CA 92646. A Zugzwang Publication of long-since indeterminant number. September 1979. "Don't forget, Everybody must give something back For something they get."



Football season arrives every fall to an accompaniment of cheers and groans. I cheer, myself. Kathy doesn't say much, but I suspect she groans. This is the time of year when an Alabama TV broadcast results in frenzy. The Lon grabs off the TV set some several minutes before the game. He brings his arsenal of booze and ciggies, houndstooth hat and Alabama jersey, raucous screams and deep brooding. Alabama will go with their best, and they need The Lon to aid them. Telepathy lives!

I don't want to take full credit for Alabama's success. Their coach, somebody called Paul "Bear" Bryant has a little to do with it. But there's no doubt that without my full telepathic support the team would never be able to rise to the heights of inspiration that have characterized their play since I started pulling for them about the time Bear arrived.

Fans know about the truth in parapsychological phenomena. (Ever since John W. Campbell started stuffing ANALOG with it.) I will modestly admit to being the behind-the-scenes power running Alabama's football team. Just as a mere example, let me cite the famous goal line play by Barry Krauss last year in the Sugar Bowl, when he knocked himself out meeting the Penn State fullback headon in an almost-touchdown hurdle.

I called that one.

It was just bad luck that I had to work the Saturday they played USC. No opportunity to call the key plays or inspire the players. Well, that's life. I suppose I should be happy I could direct the Sugar Bowl.....

Hank Reinhardt directs Georgia Tech.....

So why a big Mel? Vacation is the real answer. Breaking all my long-standing rules, I took 6 working days off at the end of July. Went up to Tahoe while Kathy took a two week tour of the Orient. If this seems

strange, let me assure you that there was no way I could have taken two full weeks off, as much as I wanted to go to the Orient. Kathy had a fabulous time and is making noises about a trip report, but I'll Believe It When I See It. The kids were vacationing too, so I had little to do with my time except lose money at the blackjack tables and do fanac.

Getting a big zine going always inspires me to add some extra material, ergo, mailing comments. While Mel #72 may be bigger than #69, I still think The Cat Show was one of the more enjoyable pieces of fiction I ever wrote. (Enjoyable to write, that is. I don't know how it reads.) Right up there with Smoke and Red As Flame. Getting rolling on a neat wacky yarn is almost like getting stoned -- it alters the borders of perception. The girls (particularly Rachel) have been gently nagging me to do another Soccy story, so SFPA may be subjected to a sequel (or prequel) soon. Lucky devils.

I've also been toying with a serious writing project; "mainstream" stuff maybe, or a thriller novel. This insane urge creeps up on me every few years and I push it back into the unconscious. The twist this time is that I have a bit more confidence in what I have to say, having been an observer of this chess we call life for some few years.

The edge this gives me is not untold wisdom and deep poetic insight. Rather, it's the ability to fake it artfully.

Dave Hulan directs the Rams.....

It's that time of the fiscal quarter again and good little managers at PCC are preparing their freshest budget forecast submittal. Such an exercise demands steel nerves and unwavering concentration to the numbers at hand. Accuracy is demanded, yes, but future adherence to budget is enforced via quaint rituals fully known only to that arm of Accounting known as the Secret Surveillers ("SS") and the Personnel department's exit interviewer.

Because these magic numbers are so intensely important, and because one's own staff always submits such cryptically fascinating inputs, the corporation has arranged special conditions for the accountable managers to work under. The level of ingenuity displayed is remarkable. The cast dedicated to the task is damnably flawless in their execution.



The first distraction squad to hit is usually composed of the opposite sex. They're always strikingly good-looking, revealingly dressed, and have a knowing, teasing manner that concurrently oozes with worshipful respect. The Accounting department seems to participate with gleeful disproportion. Let me give an example....

I am slaving over those funny numbers, behind a closed door, when suddenly that closed door opens and in glides this tall slim girl. Well... not all of her is slim.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Atkins," she breathes, "the controller has to have this invoice verified by noon."

"No problem," I flip off. This lovely is dressed in a slit skirt and halter. She needs a big halter.

"It's hot today," she says with a darling little blush. "I knitted the top myself."

"Uhhhh," I counter with my usual dazzling corruscation of comradely wit.

"Could you check it over carefully and give your approval?"

I stare. "Can't comment on the needlework, but--"

"The invoice, Mr. Atkins. My name is Susie. It's the invoice that needs your approval. ...Before noon."

She steps up to my desk and leans over, bending from the waist, in order to place the invoice directly in front of me. It's a long slow bend. When I finally manage to convince my eyes they should examine the invoice, I find that I've already approved it.

"But I signed this on the 14th," I say.

"One can never be too sure," she says. "Have you been to that cute new little French restaurant over on Main?"

"This invoice is for stationary supplies. It totals to \$34.12."

"Manage the pennies and the dollars will take care of themselves." She leans over the desk again to retrieve the invoice.

"Take the invoice," I say. "I approve it. Then and now."

"I've only been here two weeks," she outs. "And no one has taken me out for a welcome luncheon yet."

"I'm astonished."

"Hope I didn't disturb you."

"Oh, no. No. I'm only doing the budget. Thank you, Susie."

I stare at the input sheets spread across my desk. They are unintelligible swirling numbers, unrelated to where I was before the interruption. I sigh deeply and begin again from scratch.

Female managers of my acquaintance tell me that their door opens and there's the new mail boy. He's deeply tanned, built like a Greek god, and has the bluest eyes since Paul Newman. There's an envelope marked "personal" and he didn't want to entrust it to the secretary.

His shirt is open down to his navel. She always wonders how he managed to get into his denims and how he manages to stay in. As tight as they are through the crotch they must be hell on his obviously generous endowment.

The conversation reveals that his old man has just given him a 40-foot yacht. To make up for getting mad when sonny moved out to his bachelor pad in the most expensive area of Newport. As the mail boy leaves he leans back and confides, in his huskiest voice, that he's a sucker for strong and accomplished older women.

When the distraction squad has finished their first pass, the shock troops move in. I've just coordinated the various cost centers and am about to translate this into a summary sheet when a great huge noise blows through the office. It's hideous! Mind-splitting!

I rush outside and discover the facilities crew has a pneumatic hammer in the hall. "What's going on?" I scream.

"We're taking up the carpet," declares the straw boss.

"Oh, gosh! How long will this go on?"

"Only a few days," he replies with a smirk. "It's a rush job."

Frantically I gather my papers. Flight is clearly indicated. With a stuffed briefcase I repair to a little-known conference room at the rear of the building. I tell no one.

Upon the narrow table I distribute my input sheets, thinking all the while how foreign they look. Have I seen them before, or was it all a dream? That logical connection I had made has departed. With a familiar deep sigh, I begin again the demanding struggle for understanding.

A timid knock distracts me, but I hold my place mentally. It is my secretary. (How did she find me?)

"The General Manager has called a special meeting," she apologizes. "You're wanted immediately in the main conference room. It's urgent."

I scurry through the corridors, imaging horrible things. The baseline has been slashed. My funds have been diverted. A major corporate reorganization has occurred. We've been bought by Amtrak...

The GM looks stern and tight-lipped as his key managers file into the huge paneled room. The magnitude of this sudden occasion catches everyone. Not a single face smiles.

The GM clears his throat and spears the attendees with his steely eyes. "Gentlemen," he begins, then amends with a wry turn of mouth, "and ladies. Today marks a significant event for all of us."

He pauses, strides to the corner coffee pot and warms his java. "We are fortunate to have Mr. Entwhistle from Corporate here to give us a few hours of concise briefing. Today..."

He goes to his notes. "Today we begin the United Fund campaign..."

Two hours later I stagger out of the conference room, Entwhistled to death. It is lunch hour, but I eschew this amenity and hasten back to my conference room. The table is clean.

With horror I recognize that A Meeting has been held. With trembling hands I rescue my input sheets from the trash can, carefully brushing the coffee dregs and cigaret ashes from the precious data. The call for a double scotch is overwhelming in its impact, yet I know that this is Friday. The budget is due Monday.

Slowly and determined, I reconstruct the key elements. I transcribe the summaries -- but half-way through this operation the door flies open and my manager of Sustaining Operations rushes in.

"A customer crisis! A customer crisis!" he shouts.

"Go solve it!" I snarl. The untamed beast within me is surfacing. I could gnaw raw nails, eat Coors bottles.

"It's your account," he screams. "G.W. Krapmonger. You installed the first system 73 years ago. They calling for you in their agony, bouncing your name off the private chamber walls of Vice-Presidents and Telex operators."

The tepid memory of Krapmonger stirs in my brain. They were a sensitive account. Also a \$45,000,000 per year account. Perhaps they merited some special attention. I rise to the clarion call of Duty.

Dignity characterizes my actions. Each input sheet returns to the mother briefcase with careful love. When all is ready, I follow my Sustaining manager into the hall on wooden legs. I feel like an undertaker.

G.W. Krapmonger's problem is operational. When I have made copious notes on the system problem symptoms, I confer with my staff of technical experts. A system is rapidly preempted and the practical experiment begins. Very quickly we verify the nature of the problem.

I walk to the phone, dwarfed by the dread knowledge that I am the only man who can convey this solution to the proud and sensitive customer. I dial the Krapmonger number and ask for their Vice President of Data Processing.

After skillful preliminary chatter, I get to the point. "It is a fact," I pronounce, with all the authority of my technical standing behind my words, "that you must plug the system into a power outlet before it will function properly."

This rescue operation has taken a mere two hours, so I feel confident that the budget can be resolved by midnight. As I return to my office (it being after 11:30 pm the facilities crew has departed), I am stopped by a guard.

"Are you employee number 1254A7739076GG67J?" he asks.

I consult my employee badge. "That's me."

"Sorry, sir, but you're illegally parked. Your car is in an 'H' zone and your badge only authorizes a 'J' zone. Sorry, sir, but you'll have to move your car."

"Tomorrow I'll park properly. This has been a tough day for me."

"We're towing you in twelve minutes," he states.

So I move the car. All of the 'J' parking is full of 'H' stickers so I have to drive six blocks down the line. It takes longer to walk back than expected, because I must skirt the sprinkler have been turned on in order to catch the departing Manufacturing personnel.

As I attempted to enter the lobby door I found that my badge had been forgotten. The receptionist looked at me. I was bedraggled and damp.

"Who are you here to see, sir?"

"I work here. I'm Lon Atkins."

She sniffed. "May I see your badge, sir?"

"Hahaha. I left it with my briefcase in the hall. Had to move my car, you know. Parked in the wrong zone."

"I'm afraid I must see your badge, sir. In order to admit you."

"No. My badge is in the building. I'm a manager here. Those procedures don't apply."

"It's my job, sir," she sniffed. "Surely someone can vouch for you."

"The GM. Call him."

"Not allowed, sir. He can't be disturbed by just anyone."

I looked at her. Later someday I would stroll out with my badge and status to introduce myself. For now, I would walk around the building and enter unchallenged through the receiving door. It was always open.

Once ensconced in my office again, I turned my keen penetrating attention to the budget issues. No doubt my furious mind could dispense of these critical issues by one eye em. But somehow they didn't jell. I got a coffee. Smoked fifteen cigarets. Then got another coffe. It was time, I decided, to go home. Saturday was a calm day. Who worked?

On Saturday I could work without interruption. How nice. For the rest of the day I wrote brief answers to critical memos and preserved my sanity by throwing Corporate Procedures into the wasteban.

Saturday was such a beautiful day. The sky was California blue; the breeze was blowing inland from the seaport of Newport Bay. Even the parking lot seemed festive. The few cars parked there were brightly colored and the trees around the periphery swayed alluringly in the wind. I parked in high spirits, clicked my hedge in the reader, and entered undeterred.

The plant was quiet, as expected. I spread out those enigmatic input sheets and began the serious business of fiscal resolution.

The next sound I hear was remarkably similar to that of a tuba being tuned. That was, of course, my fevered imagination. I'd had only two hours sleep the previous night, requiring a full measure of Jack Black to lull me away. With renewed determination I attacked the budget.

Then the fiddle was tuned. And the clarinet. And the bassoon. I wandered out in search of the source of such unusual sounds. In the lunchroom, right around the corner from my office, a motley assortment of musicians was pickin' up steam. I recognized the lead guitarist.

"Hello, Frank. What's happening....?"

"Hi, Lon!" burred Frank. "The company recreation committee band has got the lunchroom to practice in. Isn't that great?"

"Absolutely smashing, Frank. I thought you guys had other quarters."

"Oh, this got approved Friday. No body expected it, but by golley they're all here! What spirit! What dedication!"

"I can't even express my feelings, Frank. You guys have a good practice."

I staggered back to my office and closed the door. The energetic music still seemed loud, but couldn't it be an inspiration to performance? I settled to the task with new enthusiasm, tempered with melody.

Just as I had made my adjustment and was approaching the critical area of resolution, the door burst open. There was Susie with a sheaf of invoices in her hand.

"I had to work today to catch up," she said. "I desperately need your approval."

"Knitted the shorts too," I ventured, noticing that she had retained the halter but discarded the slit skirt for other coverage.

"Oh, yes," she admitted with only a mild blush. "I didn't have as much yarn as I thought I did when I started, so..."

"No problem," I interjected. "You have improvised magnificently. How did you get past the guard?"

"Beg pardon?" she asked, visibly flustered.

"No matter. It's just that I was planning to finish the budget today."

The phone began to ring, so I motioned Susie to come on in and sit down. (Maybe that would stop her from bending over the desk.) Then I answered the devilish device and was greeted by Bob Entwhistle's cheery voice.

"Glad I caught you in, Lon! Yesterday's meeting was so short that I couldn't cover all the exciting--"

"Not now, Bob. I've got a deadline. I'll call you Monday."

Susie held the sheaf of invoices out. "Are all those account numbers right?" she asked.

I idly took the invoices and thumbed through them. Meanwhile, somebody put the Angels game onto the PA system. Ryan versus Leonard. It would be a good one.

"The accounts look correct to me."

Through the doorway thundered my friend the guard. "You're not authorized to park in the 'F' zone," he stated with mild reproval, disappointed that I should turn out delinquent 2 days running.

Then he noticed Susie. "I'm afraid you don't conform to company dress code, miss." A stern authoritative timbre deepened his voice. "I'm going to ask you to leave the plant."

Down in the lunchroom the band broke into a rendition of "Muskrat Ramble." I looked at the budget input sheets. I looked at Susie. I looked at the guard.

"You may return to your rounds now," I said, drawing the unarguable prerogative of command into my tone. "I'll see that all is taken care of."

He looked at my grubby denims and polo shirt, but I was sitting in a big office and he had seen me, dressed flawlessly in three-piece suit, sweeping through the lobby in the company of General Managers and Vice Presidents.

"Thank you, sir," he said and departed.

"As for you," I said to Susie. "There's no excuse for your scandalous attire and it's my duty as a manager to get you out of it."

She looked at me, wide-eyed, and clutched her sheaf of invoices to her bosom.

"As I recall policy," I continued, "I am required to confiscate the offending garments, tag them, and have them entered in your permanent personnel file. The guards will hold you until the police matron can arrive to search you for illegal narcotic or hallucinogenic substances. Unfortunately, this sometimes takes hours."

Suddenly the game had gotten deeper. My stern demeanor was a wicked contrast to poor Susie's horrified alarm.

"I am going to turn around and carefully consult my Policies Manual," I said with constrained force. "When I have confirmed the necessary actions I will look up. If there is a problem, I will be forced to act." And I winked as I turned to the massive book.

She was gone when I finished my bogus policy search. (That one had me worried, but I'd gauged her correctly.) Next step was the phone. I called a friend who owned a little cafe. He was struggling to get it together. Needed some help to draw customers.

"George!" I said. "Got a dynamite opportunity for you. I know a sweet little jazz band that practices on Saturday afternoons. The guys are good, but they're amateurs. The dedicated type, y'know. Play for the pride of it.

"Now here's the deal. If I put the old charm on 'em, they'll practice at your place for nothing more than the price of drinks. Break open an extra bottle or two and you've got solid Dixieland."

George is such a nice guy. As I headed for the lunchroom I listened to the group doing "High Society." That kid from Receiving was sheer sweet hell on trumpet.

"Frank!" I called out when they broke. "Come listen to this one..."

As the band cleared out, excited and wildly encouraged at this unmatched commercial opportunity, I grinned to myself and repeated an old litany about what an evil man I was.

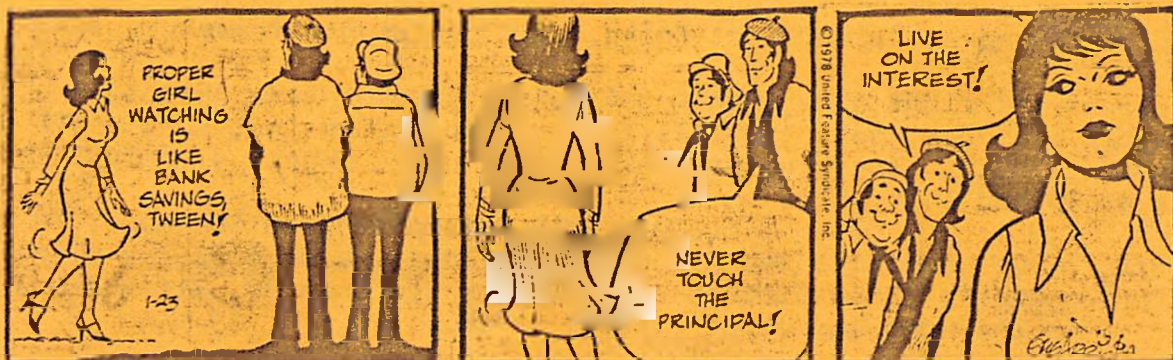
Then I cruised off to find the turkey who'd put the Angels game on the PA. Swiftly through the halls, swinging my flexed biceps, I felt the blood of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee surge in my Alabama arteries.

To hell with parking in the 'F' zone! Let that guard stick his head into my office again and I'd 'F' it over until he wouldn't know which end to wipe when he next hit the john.

As for Susie, the poor naive girl had gotten rather a rough cob in return for her efforts. I had half an urge to mend fences by taking her to lunch Monday at that quaint little new French restaurant on Main.

But the budget... The budget was due Monday morning.

P.L. Caruthers directs the Dallas Cowgirls.....



MAILING COMMENTS



THE SOUTHERNER 90 (AHOE) * A slim mailing but that should be cured this time. Maybe the rollover in membership we've been experiencing lately has something to do with it. Or maybe it's the low output from former stalwarts (present company included). Whatever, it's nothing new to SFPA and each lull has been followed by a new burst of activity. Maybe I should revive the Box Scores and start a P*g* C**nt W*r.

REQUIEM * Yes, I remember Janet. I always will.

SPIRITUS MUNDI 52 (Lillian) * Congratulations on your marriage. Here's wishing the best of times to you and Beth. The years pass swiftly. Kathy and I just celebrated our eleventh anniversary, looking back over some turbulent and exciting years. Didn't seem like eleven.

So you are into John D. McDonald now. You might try contacting Len Moffitt, the spiritual head of the JDM Bibliophiles, for tips on where to find those missing books for your collection. Len has a huge collection lots of connections. Of course if John doesn't want them around...

Dick Francis is another good thriller writer I recently started reading (all of two novels so far -- air travel reading between here and Albuquerque). Francis writes about horses; that is, they figure in his books. Dave Locke I think it was put me onto Francis some years ago. I ignored his advice until last month.

THE NEW PORT NEWS 60 (Brooks) * Did you notice if the postal employee who "examined" your mailing initialed the reclassification? There's only one postal employee I know of who could have known what was in the jetpak without opening it. Mere circumstantial evidence, of course, but mixed loyalties and all that rot....

If that air travel story disturbed you, let me tell about a recent trip to Albuquerque aboard Texas International. The pilot treated us to corny Texas accents the whole way. He called himself "the Red Rider" and was constantly interrupting to announce: "How-dee, folks! This here's the Red Rider again. You folks over on the left of this here airship can poke yore noses up to the window glass and look down on Rattlesnake, Arizona. Rattlesnake is nine miles east of Buffalo Chips, near the most gull-dang rock formations you'd ever see if you could see them from here. We're flying at 31,000 feet folks, case you didn't remember.

For you good people on the right side, don't get awful disappointed. Right up ahead is one of nature's wonder spots and I'll zip down to 29,000 feet so's y'all can have a proper gander. Now this here town coming up is where my Uncle Jake was born back in 19 and 19." Etc.

I could gladly have strangled the man. To cap it with injury, as we came into the Albuquerque airport he waggled the plane and shouted "whoooopee!". I had visions of that late scene in Dr. Strangelove where the Texan rides the bomb downward. Never again....

MARVELOUS MECHANICAL MERKIN (Campbell, etc.) * The incidence of theme one-shots having of late fallen off in SFPA, 'twas a pleasure to see this disgusting and thoroughgoing abhorrent example of the ilk. (Contrary to popular opinion, ilk are not horned mice inhabiting the colder regions of North America and Europe, but are the one-shots written by these creatures on long snowy nights before a roaring fire when the cheese beer is poured freely and fannish spirits soar.) Merkins, however, do not write one-shots....

HUITLOXOPETL (Fiersons) * Or even "Friersons." Sorry to hear y'all didn't enjoy Just Imagicon. I had rather a good time. Never noticed that smoking wasn't allowed in the function rooms, which makes me a violator. Solved the food problem with excursions into Greater Memphis to various exotic and mundane restaurants. Solved the no-beer dilemma with a judicious purchase of Gallo Hearty Burgundy at the nearby Vanishing Liquor Store (courtesy of Steven Carlberg's unerring sense of, err..., navigation). Solved the name tag awkwardness when, to my delight, P.L. produced a pair of ~~Scissors~~ scissors and parted the emblem from the surrounding White Space (embarrassing variety). Avoided the pool problem by plunging into warmer surroundings. Skipped out on Ted Sturgeon's film viewing but caught him later in the bar. Youse guys shoulda stuck with me.

DEAD ESKIMOS... (Bridget) * Thin paper stock. ## The real problem with the White House is managing the corpulent and inertia-bound federal bureau/agency system wherein lies the true government of these United States. Congress is only a minor thorn, with its "purse-string" control highly overrated. The fact is simple: look at our incredible sprawling surfeit of government offices and the enormous cost attached thereto. That cost means inertia. The mundane controls surrendered to those bodies means sluggishness in propagation of policy. Every President in the last XXXX years has tried to enlighten us with his policies via establish of yet another set of agencies. Meanwhile, the entrenched ones grow fatter. It's no accident that the proportion of government workers to private industry workers is steadily growing higher. (And as an aside, unions do twice as well in government, despite the resistance of the armed services, as they do in the private sector.)

Now look again at the President's chore: he must control this chaos and utilize it to effect policy. Nobel Prizes in Economics have little to do with forcing federal employees into line. Nobel Prizes in Mule-Skinning are more like it. It's the magnitude of the chore in front of him that confounds Carter. He just can't cut it. (Could anyone?)

DWERD'S DWELLING 38 (Reed) * The entertainment media seems to have lots of versions of films/cartoons/etc. floating about. Many more so in film than in print (for whatever the reason). Sex and violence seem the key reasons. The spate of American and European versions of a movie received so much publicity that I'm sure it had a lot to do with the "decline" of American morals that saw the upsurge of "respectable" X-rated movies (and hordes of scungy ones as well). TV is now the primary offender against freedom from censorship, raising the banner of "family entertainment" as its justification. That probably explains your Popeye cartoon switch. The rise in pay-TV is also accompanying the rise in "loose" TV, the private channel being the means to escape censorship and offer profanity, nudity, etc. Hang on for awhile and maybe you'll see the volcanic explosion again...

Good luck with the job.

LEARNING TO BE A LEGEND ISN'T EASY (Andre Bridget) * Best of luck to you and Bill in the years to come. As far as I know, you're the first two SFPAs to be hitched with your first mailing. ## The rationale for not sending out mailings along with invitations goes like this: not all invitations are accepted and there are a limited number of mailings. Therefore, a mailing isn't sent until membership is achieved; i.e., with the first participating mailing. The policy is merely one of convenience and tradition. Of course it could be modified.

Who is the "gripe person" you mention in connection with your job? A Personnel Department employee? The way it's put I get the impression that this person's job consists of listening to complaints. If the government has such positions, they might try assigning some "gripe people" to taxpayers. Might be fun.

THIN ICE 37 (Verheiden) * Glad to hear you've found a job that will do for you. What company do you work for? The hours and conditions of work that you give don't seem standard for what little I know about the copy machine industry. Is this an outfit that buys machines and then leases them?

While I ignored the Ellison zine that Guy franked thru, I also object to it. Firstly, I felt that it was simply aggravating an already ridiculous situation. I don't see a need to stir up acrimony, especially with franked material. Secondly, I resented seeing my dues paying postage for the crap -- non-apa material attacking one of our members. Had I been OE, I'd not have put it into SFPA. If Harlan were so interested in reaching SFPA, he could have obtained a roster and mailed out his viewpoint at his own expense, not at mine.

Weren't Durer's charcoal sketches an example of fine art best done in black and white? & statuary isn't tinted flesh tones. Maybe choosing just simple black and white film is a striving for effect or connotation. If the audience rejects it, the film maker goofed. I prefer color movies myself, but there've been some good ones done in b&w.

WEIRD SCENES INSIDE THE GOLD MINE 6 (Whitehead) * Rickie Lee Jones is the hottest thing (disclaimer) in Ellay right now. Her concerts have sold out -- zing!! -- and the media is hyping her. I kinda like her stuff, but it's all pretty much the same. I expect if she has any real talent it'll develop with time. Right now she's a fad, a dangerous occupation. I enjoy her sexy little voice on the FM, but have no intention of purchasing the album.

WHAT IN THE NAME OF HEAVEN (Wells) * If bears get into commercials, no doubt we'll see Smokey telling us that wherever he goes in the world his American Express card is honored. Alabama's football coach could be counted on to do a plug for Christian Athletes, so whatever that group is called. The Russians will of course refuse to let Mischa do American commercials. If we're lucky, the public will soon tire of bear commercials and the next step will be bare commercials. The ultimate bad taste in this fad will offer Gary Mattingly an rare opportunity, the chance to make a quick fortune agenting for his bare bear.

THE 77% SOLUTION (Juge) * Enjoyable one-sided two-pager. As is too often the case with writers who do short trenchant comments with which I tend to agree, it's hard finding a comment hook. Faced with this

situation, I can skip the zine (bad practice unless pressed for time), quibble about some trivial point (and risk being accused of having Lester B.'s writing style), "clarify" a statement of yours (but only by elaborating from my viewpoint), or find a clever dodge to fill space (such as talking about the Dodger game now in progress, the top of the 4th now being broadcast, with Cey just committing his seventh error of the year and Vin telling us...).

With that nice double play just ending the Pirate threat, I'll jump on the third point and chat about "rights." All of us get brainwashed early about the "Rights" bestowed upon us by the Constitution. Theory states that we have the "right" to behave in certain ways and be protected by law in this behaviour. In practice, testing these rights is a lengthy, expensive and nerve-rendering process. One which may easily be accompanied by years in the slammer while your "rights" are being upheld.

Another, I think better, statement of our system of "freedom" is that we're told what we can't do. Exactly as you quipped to Gary: "...becuz I SAY YOU DON'T!" The law enforces behavioral restrictions, it doesn't protect rights.

Perhaps this is unavoidable because of the infringement of "rights" that seem to be an irrepressible part of human culture. It's much easier to define what is "wrong" than what is "allowed" in this world. There are so damn many possibilities; an infinity, perhaps.

This could translate to your "priviledge," but to me "priviledge" implies a consenting party, albeit tacit. Occasional examination of what goes on at the fringes of law convinces me that there is no consent involved, tacit or otherwise. There are two known regions, near the poles of "rights" (the detail interpretation of which is entrenched in a laborious and cost-ridden mechanism that withdraws further from public access every year) and the pole of "enforcement" (which by virtue of the definition problem must focus on "no-no's" rather than sanctioned actions. Acceptable actions are invisible.)

In between the poles is an undefined region of huge area. Does one have the "right" to sexual relations with a consenting cocker spaniel within the confines of one's own home? Is failing to draw the drapes facing the street where kiddies play a "violation"? Why does a corporation have liberty to dump contaminates of severe poisonous properties into our waterways with a small fine as the only penalty, while a citizen doing the same could be prosecuted in criminal court? Is this a violation of the citizen's rights? If so, should the citizen be allowed to spread poison or should the corporation be criminally prosecuted? If the corporation is then convicted, who goes to prison?

At this point I'll drop the topic. I've got no answers to the problems I raise, but I did manage to use a clever dodge to slip in a mailing comment on your zine, which I couldn't leave uncommented. (Meanwhile, in the bottom of the 7th the Dodgers lead 1-0 and Lopes is up...)

AS I DISREMEMBERS HIM (Markstein) * Congratulations on being DSC Fan Guest of Honor. The pleasures of attending a convention in such a capacity can be most gratifying, in many ways. Nice. Let me try a toughie comix trivia question on you, though, to stretch out your payment for the honor. What specific area of the world grows the grass that Howard the Duck smokes by preference?

THE SPHERE 61 (Markstein) * The disperion of topics that an apa undergoes in its aging, as you discuss about FreFanZine, has an element of danger attached. Imho, the true strength of an apa lies in the identification the members make with their fellow members. The driving force in a successful apa is the ingroup spirit. This grows partially out of common topics and partially out of ingroup talk/jokes/history/vocabulary/goals. I can't believe that a common topic is enough, and that's why so many "theme" apas founder after a year or so of life. The problem that felled Stobcler in its last incarnation, again imho, was it's difficulty in getting a group thrust moving. (The problem was compounded by lack of a critical mass -- the apa started with great promise, based on some small but high quality fanzines, but didn't have enough steady contributors to hold up the level. Dave Hulan may also tell you that he got tired of running it, but I notice that he's the mailing editor for Apanage now...)

I've gafiated while keeping my SFPA string alive. (Every other apa went, of course.) Gafiation is a state of mind and can be maintained while doing some small amount of fannish activity, especially if it's material oriented in a non-fannish direction. Also, I don't think non-fannish content per se disqualifies a zine from fannish interest. Witness the frequent appearances in these mailings of zines dealing entirely with some "other fandom" topic as mystery novels, rock music, trips (non-con), various hobbies, around-the-house projects, etc. Steven gafiated and dropped his membership, yes, but I'll bet it was merely to de done with the minor encumbrance that he dropped SFPA. Gafiation doesn't have to emulate death.

Yeah, the current nuclear power situation is a hoax .. structured to cover a rip-off. I think this is primarily because of primitive technology in that area, but the genuine answer to "atomic power" lies in fusion not fission. That's an area to be highly careful in introducing prototype technology. I'm not hoping for a stampede.

FURTHER ADVENTURES AS A STREETWALKER (Hutchinson) * I suppose you'll grow rapidly weary of all the Post Offal jokes and stories fandom will be pushing at you, Alan, but I have to grin at the terrible injustice of it all. No doubt you're doing your best to provide quality postal service and thereby enhance the image of that huge government organization. I feel for you in your agonies to come. To help out (heh! heh!) I'm contributing a couple of stories about my recent PO experiences.

(1) After standing in line for an intolerable seven minutes at the Irvine Post Office, I walked up to the clerk to mail my packet of SFPA zines. My request was simple: first class mail to Florida. I smirked at the thought of dreadful bumbling to come. The clerk weighed it and completed the transaction in record time. She smiled at me and called "Have a good day!" as I left in a daze.

(2) A first class letter took eight days to get from Irvine, California, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, a distance of 880 miles. This was one one of about 55 such correspondences. All the other took two days.

Hutchinson, if this is your subversive influence and you've cost me the richest source of Incompetence stories I'd ever found, I'll sue. Or maybe start working on the EEO Commission.

Tea has caffeine? I thought it had tannic acid? Coca Cola has caffeine (ever since it lost the more potent booster).

UTGARD 34 (Hulan) * Your accounts of the high school reunion have made me hope that my class has one. Over the years as I've gone back to Gadsden the former classmates I've encountered have been mostly changed -- many in ways I wouldn't have expected. Let a few more years pass and the evolutionary paths should be quite clear. Of course having had glimpses of these people over the years, I doubt if the surprises will be as great as those you describe.

BENTFIN BOOMER BOYS REVENGE 4 (Lambert) * Freedom of the press is a two-edged sword (as is restraint of the press) although it's one we theoretically live with. My opinion is that the press should use discretion. Molding public opinion is a huge responsibility, and all too often "news" is really "editorial." There's a lot of responsible journalism in this country; objective accounts of the known facts. There's a lot of "crusading" journalism also; structured reports on abuses and injustices in the world. But there's undeniable abuse of the press -- in fact, I see more of the "sensationalism" than I do the responsible reporting. Sturgeon's Law, it seems, is inescapable.

People being people, I can't envision sensationalism diminishing. There's a market; entrepreneurs will fill it. To combat this sort of thing we have slander and libel laws, for all the good they do. The best answer, and the one which was once a tradition, is to give the press proper freedom and count on the responsible members/media to provide the reliable keynote news releases.

You and Evie are going to bicycles, eh? Keep us posted on how it works out. I recall Huntsville as large and sprawling, with a great dispersion of the shopping, etc. (Of course it's not as bad as the 10,000 square miles of the Los Angeles/OC urban disaster.) I'd be interested in knowing what adjustments you make and what alternate sources of transportation you use.

FINGERTIP REALITY 14, ETC. (Moudry) * Congratulations to clan Moudry on Benjamin's birth. Why isn't his name on the SFPA wait list yet? If you don't start 'em early, how can you expect to propagate Southern fandom? Look at Hank; he didn't begin fandom until he was almost 60, back in 1936. He's had trouble maintaining his apa membership ever since. Lack of proper training during childhood...

Page count level and level of mundane (sorry, Don) involvement do have a specific correlation. One tends to go down when the other goes up. But there's another factor that I've noticed in my own activity patterns. I call it the "creative tear" and it simply means that there are peaks in creative activity which promote a tremendous outpouring of material. Some of my busiest times at work have coincided with big MEL's and side projects to boot.

Conversely, there are periods of my life when nothing much seems to get done. The daily demand consumes all my bandwidth and I feel staid and frustrated. (Biorythms?) The bottom line of it may be that creativity reinforces itself. Get a spark going and it may break into brilliant flames. Slow down the process and it collapses.

Xerox (actually the old SDS organization) left a lot of computers around the country. They were powerful machines in their time. Unfortunately, most of the creative genius of the company had left to form their own enterprises when Xerox took over. Instead of revitalizing the engineering operation, Xerox pushed the sales organization into untenable positions. Ergo, collapse.

TALISMAN 21 (Biggers) * Real estate is about the best investment/ inflation hedge there is. We moved in three years ago and already the "market value" has increased by about 160%. All that money drops straight into equity. The second trust deed was paid off last month, which makes those house payments (so staggering three years ago) less than a week's take-home pay. Add to that the property tax savings created by Proposition 13 and you get a rosy financial picture. No landlord is going to be raising my rent, etc.

The drawback to this situation is more apparent than real: as surrounding property values have escalated at corresponding rates, it'll be a "paper" gain as long as I live in this area. Moving to another house would mean rolling over the investment gain. Of course this doesn't prevent upgrading the residence, for the equity goes to a 20% down payment. The limiting factor becomes house payments. If interest rates ease up in the next few years it would be reasonable (even smart) to move into a bigger, more luxurious manse. It's a strange situation: you have to be in the game to afford the ante. So congratulations on getting into the game.

I'm not sure what the "natural" way of doing things is (pursueing your comment to Mark). Even if "natural" is a buzzword we see lots of today, I read the popular philosophies as being more oriented around "self-interest." This isn't a bad thought, as we all have to think about ourselves, but the plethora of self-teach books out today seem to advocate more. They stress the self's interest at the expense of all others: family, friends, country, race, species. In a very large population this seems a correct procedure. The individual makes out like a bandit and society is minimally impacted. But when that becomes a popular philosophy, cultural collapse is threatened. Today's America is so busy fighting with itself about who will get the last big raise or price increase that inflation spirals and productivity drops. An organism unable to coordinate its resources against external threat is doomed. Our "natural" philosophies may not be so natural. I share your dislike of blanket recommendations.

TWENTIETH CENTURY MAN 20 (weber) * So you had a shortfall of expectations also with THE MUPPET MOVIE. Your comments echo the ones I might have made. The whole movie, it seemed to me, was basically good material spread over too long a time frame. THE MUPPET MOVIE with a screening time of 45 minutes would have been dynamite. At 90 minutes it smelled.

DISCO SUCKS! is a bumper sticker that's appearing in these parts ever more frequently. The rock'n'roll backlash is gathering momentum. A few weeks ago there was a riot at a local disco establishment when a couple hundred delicated rockers invaded the place and ripped it apart. (That's "dedicated rockers", by the way.) The issue came home to me back in April, when I was ~~forfeited~~ privileged to travel to East Lansing, Michigan, to support a critical account (\$55,000 per month rental). I descended into the cellar club of the motel for a drink. Their music was disco and I received my first exposure to "YMCA". The youthful dancers swirled gracefully.

My mental recall mechanism was busy comparing this bloodless exercise to the exhaltations I'd seen on THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY. Now I wasn't even born when Buddy Holly was popular, being now only 22 years of age, but I know those numbers so well it popped my blood vessels when the Holly beat rolled out.

The comparison was staggering in its impli-

cations. The music that Buddy Holly revolted against was smooth and bloodless, innocuous in its presence. He gave us a raw beat that ripped our adrenalin glands into flinders, together with lyrics that hit the basal level of male-female thoughts. Even the class too inhibited to rock replied with "dangerous stuff!" on their lips. Holly drew a line between the open and the closed.

Disco gets its tepid endorsement from the cool. It is an anonymous music. I envision a disco spot in which a lull in the music is arranged. Instead of a smooth plastic disc, the next music is provided by a miracle of time travel. Onto a stage set up for this purpose steps a group rough and uncouth.

Charlie Watts steps over to the drums. Bill Wyman pats his bass. Brian Jones and Keith Richard fondle their guitars as they move toward their positions. Out of the wings comes Mick Jagger. The opening chords of SATISFACTION ring out and The Rolling Stones circa 1961 are blasting to a stunned disco audience....

CUSH 15 (Hutchinson) * What! Unka Scrooge being written-again by mere commercial Philistines! Such heresy would never be permitted with literary giants like Shakespeare, Trollope or Ellison. Go forth and sue! (Class action suit against WED...)

THE VIDEO ADDICT 3 (Bush) * I've never seen the Rocky Horror Picture Show and am wondering if I've missed anything. Almost saw it at JI, but didn't for some reason. The rerun never came off. If you have transcripts of the movie (or segments thereof) I may get a flavor. I can't imagine understanding much that way, tho. Tell me, should I spend my hard earned ca\$h to go see it?

I don't think they censor TV (above the national standard, that is) in California. Public television has shown quite a few daring shots here, mostly featuring the female mammary equipment but on occasion extended to full frontal male/female nudity. The trend in private subscription TV is even further along, I hear. There's a faction that feels they could clean up by pumping assorted X-rated flicks into private homes. As dirty movie houses seem to flourish here, I suppose they're right.

AGAIN NIHILISTIC SLUDGE (Karrh) * Many of the Disney World creations are duplicated in Anaheim at Disneyland. The artistry in those creations (and I particularly like Pirates, as you seemed to) is incredible. I enjoy watching the special effects and figuring out how ingeniously they're executed, or looking at the superb settings and costumes. Disney really pitches his parks for all ages. I enjoy them as if I were a kid again.

Have fun on your trip. I know Dave Hulan is looking toward having a giant Eurotripreport in this mailing. It'll be fun comparing your comments. Although I've only been to France and England, some of the best times of my life were had there. London was the most civilized city I've ever been in (but the thirty days of enjoyment were in 1973, and I hear it's "changed" since then). The countryside is beautiful. You're in for a treat.

FREE FOR ALL # ((Sperhawk) * Try some Dylan Thomas. Read "Fern Hill" aloud and you may decide to explore some poets more recent than Coleridge. I also recommend William Butler Yeats rather highly. And much of Wallace Stevens. You'll find that sounds are indeed honored as

an important element. My own tastes in poetry run across a very wide range of years. The elements I look for ("touchstones" if you will...) are form, content, sound, and presentation (though not in any order of importance). I strongly believe that poetry was meant to be read aloud. If it can't stand up to that test, it's not poetry: it's strangely structured prose.

When I'm stoned it's hard to compose prose, as such. I instead write what might be called an outline, but as a series of sentences. What's lacking is the filler/explanatory material and the "fleshing out" with extra descriptors. I tend to focus on the essential concepts and cast them into whatever metaphor-language I've adopted. Under these conditions poetry doesn't emerge. What lacks is form and sound. I can't hold meter. I don't find rhymes. The "candle" one-shot, if you saw it, is an example. Some people tell me this is because I don't get deeply stoned frequently enough. Somehow I doubt that this is the answer.

SHADOW 14

Bill Bridget: Over a several-mailing span I've been reading your material, Bill, and I'm torn in two directions as to decision. One reaction is enjoyment. You have an interesting trenchant style which brings unmeaning smiles quite often. More on this shortly.

On the other hand I "sense" a bitterness and hostility underlying much of your commentary. Perhaps this is my perception problem. Nevertheless, it is a perception I own at this point. It leads to negative feelings.

Resolution will come with further exposure. In the short term, however, I will risk this comment in hopes of shortening the process. SFPA has a tradition of "friendly insult" perhaps well characterized by the running exchange between Hank Reinhardt and myself (not to mention others). A key to this bantering, however, has been it's open bald-faced lies and fabrications. It's not hostile.

The feuds in SFPA are numerous also. (Unfortunately.) In your case I see great potential for either direction. This comment is aimed at finding out which way you are naturally disposed.

Mike Rogers: A century ago major powers controlled necessary natural resources (remote variety) via military conquest/garrison. That has gone out of fashion. Granted, it may also be impractical. The key question is simple: How do we now prevent extortion tactics? The answer is popular fronts (well... an answer). Get BankAmericaCard into Iran and we're set.

(By the way, you look, in your pix, very much like me when I entered SFPA, 47 years ago. Do you drink bheer?)

Nicki Lynch: Shadow apa started as a way for the waitlisters to get to know each other and to show themselves to the membership. Feedback from the apa proper has never been large, as far as I know. The SFPA Shadow is a good, enjoyable and viable organization. One hopes that this strength will not create "new cliques" as its membership graduates into the parent apa. I don't see that happening. I see a benefit.

I was once a ferocious Putt Putt player. A group of us would go to the local course and gamble at a dime a hole. I once shot a 27 on 18 holes. (Truth!!)

Wind coming up North Pass stirred baby waves into being on the surface of the deep blue lake. Paul Niro observed this minor turbulence with misgivings. Into that azure calmness so recently prevalent on the surface of Quixote Lake he had been surreptitiously dropping memories. An appropriate task for a hard working man on holiday. As each unfortunate memory was allowed into the mind, a mind weakened by idleness, take it and consign it to the deep icy waters. So simple and so effective. Burial at sea was never simpler.

The rippling waters were less helpful. They rejected his mental offerings, sending them backward with disturbing perturbations. Earlier memories, seemingly disposed of, mingled with the reflected panorama. Paul felt cheated. This wind had robbed him of his surcease.

The snap of a dry fallen pine branch signalled Joanne's approach along the east shore of the lake. She threaded her way through the low boughs. Paul noticed how lean and tan her legs were. At 35 she retained the figure of her mid-twenties.

Paul felt the rumple of fat around his waist. It was the desk job, he reasoned; despite the twice-weekly racquetball workouts, desk work told. Joanne said he had love handles. He was half-way up the ladder at the club and still progressing slowly. Agile and quick at 39; he'd settle for that.

Joanne climbed the lakefront stairs up to the redwood deck. She held up a stuffed pillowcase in triumph. "Another load of perfect cones! These will really crackle at Christmas time."

"Why do you use pillow cases? The cones tear them up. Paying for one burlap bag would be cheaper in the long run."

She stopped and lowered the cone sack. "Why this is the way we started, dear. When you had the idea to treat the cones so they'd burn with all those colors. Call me sentimental."

Paul stared out at the expanse of Quixote Lake, as if wondering why memories of the origin of pine cone rituals did not rise and blow like mist toward him. He heard Joanne set the cones down and take a seat beside him.

"I saw the old man at the windmill again," she said. "This time he waved for me to come over. He looks so gentle, Paul, with his long grey beard. I know he wants to talk, but he frightens me somehow. He's always at the door into the mill, like a ghost."

"The windmill's deserted. Desolate. It ought to be torn down. It's a menace. You stay away from there."

"If he's a ghost he must be lonely in these mountains. Maybe he has tales of what the windmill was, of what happened there. A man that old must know the hidden truths of the human soul."

"Ghost! He's just a dirty old tramp living in a condemned mill. I should see sheriff about running him out of the county. Don't paint him with your feeble-brained romanticism!"

"I do wish you wouldn't drink so much in the afternoon," she said. "It makes you nastier than usual."

The half-empty bottle of Bushmills stood between them. "That wasn't a virgin bottle," he replied. "I've not had much. I've been watching the lake."

"Why don't you hike in the woods instead? You talk about getting back to nature but you just drink and brood."

"I don't see ghosts," he snapped.

"Don't you?" she asked. "I'm going to fix some supper. We both need nourishment."

In the morning he awoke uncustomarily soon, earlier than she. For a time he lay unmoving and listened to the bird songs. During his fitful sleep the memories had returned like ghosts, whispering conclusions and prognostications. The birds gave a cleansing sound. They reminded him that morning was a time for action.

Paul slipped carefully from the bed and tried to dress quietly. He put on his denims, boots, flannel shirt. Of course she heard him. "What are you doing?" she asked sleepily.

"Going hiking."

"What a good idea! I'll go with you."

"No," he said. "I need to go alone. We'll hike this afternoon if you like."

"I'll fix us some breakfast first." She bounced from the bed, her gown swirling about her.

He buckled on the gun belt and checked the cartridges in his .22 revolver. "I'm not hungry." From its high rack he took down his Remington .30-06 semi-automatic rifle. A box of cartridges went into his shirt pocket.

"Going hunting?"

"Maybe." He filled the small canteen at the sink. "If I see anything worth shooting."

"Be careful, Paul. Please be careful."

He struck out to the southwest, up the slope. When the cabin had long since vanished behind the dense foliage, he paused to listen. There were no sounds in the forest but natural ones. Joanne was not following. Paul sat on a flat stone and enjoyed a smoke. Thinking calmly now, he began to set into a plan the impulse which had come upon him in the night.

Turning east, he followed the curve of the slope back past the cabin. He was moving slowly, as if stalking game. To his left the lake could be seen, tranquil in the morning air. Squirrels scampered into friendly pines as he passed. Once he startled a deer. A buzzing fly pursued him for a mile as on he went, paralleling the lake front at a quarter-mile distance. When he could see the vanes of the windmill etched against the blue water, he halted again.

Last smoke, he thought while lighting up. Directly below him lay the mill, the vanes on its wind tower turning lazily in the morning breeze. He stomped out the cigarette prematurely, pumped a bullet into the chamber, and began his slow descent of the mountainside.

Eighty yards from the mill he found his position. A stone suitable for sitting was screened from lakeside by a clump of underbrush. In front of the stone a young pine thrust a branch sideways at perfect height to brace the rifle. He surveyed the mill, its weather-stressed boards obviously without benefit of human care for many years. The windows were shuttered with equally dilapidated lumber.

He examined the door with greater care, sighting thru the telescopic sight of the rifle. The crosshatch fixed on the iron latch, flecked with rust, then moved up to the height of a man's chest and panned across the boards. The door was a primitive affair, boards nailed to four cross braces. In the high center was a peephole.

Paul settled to wait. It would be a long morning, he was sure. He alternated his gaze between the mill, the westward approach along the lake shore, and the deep blue of Quixote Lake itself. The only movement was on the lake surface, where fish were rising for insects, and the turning of the languid vanes.

As the sun rose higher and the warmth of the day began to penetrate, all motion slowed. Paul opened another button on his shirt and stood to stretch. He was beginning to regret refusing breakfast. The one chocolate bar he'd picked up was reserved for later. By eleven his blood sugar would be low enough to need recharging. The chocolate would do it.

By noon he was ready. The sense of purpose which had ebbed during the morning vigil was restored with his decision to investigate the mill. No one had come. No signs of human habitation of the mill could be found.

Those last eighty yards were covered in a crouch, rifle at ready. Paul stepped onto the narrow porch of the mill and put his eye to the peephole. It was covered from within. He tried the latch, but it moved with great stubbornness. Nor did the door wish to open. Paul saw that the boards had warped and pressed against the jamb. He heaved a shoulder against the door.

With a cry from the tortured lumber, it burst open. The interior of the mill was dim, weak light from cracks in the shutters and structure being the only illumination. Paul rapidly stepped inside and to the left, out the the silhouette frame of the doorway.

Scurryings across the floor: rats or squirrels. Adaptation to the darkness came quickly and Paul examined the large room, empty save for some broken and rusty machine and a splintered table. At the rear a ladder climbed into the wind tower. Two of the rungs were broken through.

There were no other exits from the room. Paul cautiously walked the perimeter to assure himself of this. As he approached the ladder he levered his rifle upward. The narrow hatch thru which the ladder passed was a black rectangle. Clearly there was a room above this, a small one within the wind tower.

"Come down from there!" he shouted.

Silence. Paul weighed the odds of climbing the ladder. He'd be a pure target

for anyone hiding in the tower. Any of those rungs might break; they all looked rotten. If he'd brought an electric torch he might see enough to venture upward into the murk.

"I'll count to three, then I'll start firing through the floor. Come down now and we can talk."

Paul aimed his rifle at the hatchway. "One!"

Nothing stirred. "Two!"

Paul threw a glance at the door. "Three! Last chance!"

He paused a second, then turned the muzzle downward and fired a shot thru the floor. "Next time I may hit you," he called. "Don't take the chance."

The rifle muzzle slowly turned upward until it again centered thru the hatch. Paul suddenly felt weak. If there were an old tramp hiding up there, let him be. It had taken a healthy shoulder to open that frozen door; no dottering greybeard could duplicate that. Much less close it.

Great effort was required to close that door. Paul was sweating and cursing when he finished. His hands were sore from the ordeal. He stepped off the poarch and looked out over the lake. Three miles across on the opposite shore he saw a camper manuevering into position. At least there was no power boat. He detested the ungodly contraptions.

"What did you shoot in the mill?" came a voice.

Paul whirled, rifle at ready, but it was only a young girl. She was tanned browner than the weathered boards of the mill. Honey-brown hair hung in waves over her shoulders and the blue shorts and halter she wore were not so blue as her eyes. Her eyes were the blue of Quixote Lake.

"What did you shoot?" she repeated.

"A rat," said Paul. "Who are you?"

"I'm Althea. There aren't any rats in the mill, only squirrels and chipmunks. Did you kill a chipmunk?"

"No. I missed. I thought it was a rat at first. I wouldn't kill a chipmunk."

She brightened. "I'm glad! Now I'll ask your name."

"My name is Paul. I'm visiting the lake. How do you know what's in the mill? You saw what that door's like."

"Oh, it wasn't always like that. I've lived here all my life. I know what's in all the places."

He saw from the fullness of her bosom and the maturity of her hips that she was perhaps 19 or 20. A mountain flower. "I've never seen you at the store, Althea. I thought I knew all the folks who lived near the lake. I've been coming here for years."

"Oh, I don't go to the store often," she claimed, wrinkling her nose. "Besides, I avoid violent people. You'd have never seen me if I hadn't thought you'd killed a chipmunk. Maybe you did."

"I'll open the door again," he sighed, "and you can see for yourself. No dead chipmunks. No dead anything."

"I believe you," she said. They stared at each other for a few moments, getting to know a little more.

"I don't think you're really a violent man, Paul," said Althea. "You just use the tools put in your hands. If you could lie on the grass in a mountain lea with a wreath of flowers in your hair, and watch the deer live, you'd throw away those guns."

Paul looked down at the rifle in his hands.

"I come to the mill lots of mornings," she said. "Goodbye."

She ran like a young deer, he thought. Leaping daintily over stones and under boughs, traversing the mountainside with a speed and grace that belonged to nature alone. How beautiful is resilient youth, moving willfully, unrestrained by the accrual of memories man calls age.

Paul moved westward along the lake shore, headed back to the cabin. So strong were the images of his experience that it was not until the redwood deck was near that he realized that in all the mill there had not been a single cobweb, nor a coating of dust.

Joanne must have heard his approach, for she appeared on the deck holding aloft a can of Coors. He waved at her, nodding in approval. That beer tasted fantastic when he got to it. The tepid water from the canteen was no nectar for a hunter. Especially a hunter on the track of exotic game.

"I checked out the mill on my way back," he told her between gulps. "It's a danger zone. Full of rats -- I shot one that attacked me."

"Lord! You're not hurt?"

"Not a bit. I'm more than a match for any rat. And your old man must have been a tramp passing through as I suspected. He wasn't there. Cleared out before we put the law on him, I wager. Still, you shouldn't go near the mill again. Old men like that sometimes turn out to be deperate perverts."

"I don't think he is," she said slowly. "His face is kind. He must have aged gently. But I'll take your advice, dear." She laughed. "I'm not out to prove a woman's intuition is always right."

"My dear, I never believed any of the things you've done were to prove your woman's intuition."

She flushed. "Don't start on that again. Please."

"I'm merely wondering what's for dinner. My man's intuition tells me it's something good."

"Is that a lucky guess or were you spying on me when I was boning the chicken breasts? They're in teriyaki marinade now. We should eat late, about 8:30 or 9."

"Sounds delicious! Deserves one of the good bottles of Cabernet."

He rummaged in the refridgerator for sandwich fixings (Joanne had eaten), then carried a dagwood, the bottle of Bushmills and a huge glass of cracked ice onto the deck. The situation demanded food and reflection. There was something strange about the mill. An illegal operation of some sort, although he'd seen no evidence to support that theory. Althea knew what it was, that much he felt sure of. If she were so concerned about chipmunks, why had she refused his offer to reenter the mill? To minimize risk of discovery.

And that old man... he was a candidate for suspicion. Paul was stumped, however, as to why he would wave to Joanne. If there were a hidden operation in the mill it was folly to invite strangers. What significance did Joanne have to him?

The possibility occurred, and he turned it in the pivot of his mind, that no old man existed. That the mill was innocent, the lack of cobwebs being explained by something as simple as insecticide sprayed by the Rangers or by the poisonous residue of long-ceased operations. If this were so, then the old man was a fabrication intended to keep his eyes on the mill and away from some other activity. It would not be unprecedented.

"Paul...."

He turned his eyes from the lake to Joanne. She had come quietly to sit beside him. "Paul, I'm worried about you. This trip hasn't been the holiday we hoped to find. You drink and you brood. I think--"

"--Joanne! This trip is to give me room to put my head together. To do that I need to think. Not brood, think. Please grant me that freedom."

"It was for us too. So we could be alone together. I'm afraid you're thinking yourself into a box.. About Harry. I swear to you that's over!"

"I know about your infidelities, my dear. I've asked you not to speak of them again."

"You close yourself away from me, Paul. It scares me, honey. Please talk. Tell me what's on your mind. Maybe I can help." She reached out and seized his hand with surprising strength. He did not respond, but turned his eyes again to the lake surface.

In a few minutes she released him and retreated into the cabin. When she re-emerged it was with her pillow case. She went wordlessly into the woods south of the place, walking listlessly.

The next day Paul was off by mid-morning, again armed, again alone. He followed his route of the previous day, but more quickly. As a first step he had decided to see Althea, were she there, and drive harder toward the truth about the mill. He felt that Althea was a key of some sort, but he did not know to what. She kept reappearing in his thoughts, about the edges, like the wild creature she was. Never coming fully into the clearing, but skirting the edges with her wide blue eyes staring in untouched curiosity at this gunman who shot at chipmunks. She knew secrets.

Paul's observation post was unchanged. That same pesky fly even made an appearance. This morning, however, he'd had a substantial breakfast. With a comfortable stomach, he settled onto the rock for some surveillance of the mill. Althea was nowhere in sight, nor was the mysterious old man. He'd had little belief that he'd see anyone. Later, when he approached the mill, Althea might appear to make sure he shot no chipmunks.

Soon the vigil was rewarded. Paul listened to the rustling of underbrush and leaned forward to better conceal himself. Joanne came into view from the west, moving cautiously along the shoreline. She examined the woods around her, but kept her main gaze upon the mill. Stopping fifty feet from the door, she peered about nervously. Five minutes passed while she waited. Then she selected a small stone and threw it toward the mill, missing the door but striking the boards with an audible thump.

When no response was elicited, Joanne decided to leave the mill. Her departure was considerably more rapid than her approach. For Paul, the incident was a disturbing puzzle. Joanne's visit was purposeful; she had tried to rouse some one from the mill. The circumstances implied that a contact already existed. Paul felt that the potential risk factor he'd introduced into the situation should have been adequate deterrent. Yet she came to the mill unprotected.

First temptation was to immediately search the mill. Short reflection ruled this out; no one was there (presumably) and the situation was ripe for further developments (hopefully). Paul decided to rely on his contented stomach as he waited patiently for new inputs for the theorizing which occupied his mind.

Eventually he consumed his chocolate bar and advanced on the mill. Nothing more had happened during the morning. The door of the mill proved equally difficult to open; the interior proved just as bare. Today, however, Paul had brought a powerful flashlight. The tunnel of its beam revealed cobwebs in the windtower. With misgivings, placing his feet at extremes rather than the middle of the rungs, Paul climbed the ladder.

Pistol in hand, he reached the second level of the mill. Dirty flooring surrounded him. The small room was empty. Above, a second hatch beckoned. It was high up, probably the service level for the wheel. Paul ascended.

From the top station he could see far. Cracks and knotholes were positioned to give a commanding view of the surroundings. The observation post he'd used was exposed from this angle. The covering boughs of the tree were not sufficient for total concealment. Perhaps he'd been observed.

The floor was dirty; marked with scuff marks. Something bigger than chipmunks had been up here. Something that was here frequently to judge by the floor patterns.

Paul glanced down the ladder. Was the inhabitant of the mill waiting below? Whatever the answer, descent was necessary; the sooner the better. When he reached the lower level, Paul pushed his head thru the hatch and surveyed the interior of the big room. Althea was standing in the rectangle of light cast by the door opening.

"I haven't shot any chipmunks," he said.

"You're still a snoop," she replied. "I don't like you."

"Hearing that from some one as pretty as you breaks my heart. Hang on. I'll be right down." Paul reversed his field and climbed down the old ladder with gingerly haste. His rifle clacked against the rungs.

"Now why am I a snoop?" he asked. "It's a deserted old mill. I'm a little boy at heart, you know. Just can't stay away from interesting places."

"You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous."

"How? I'm a big boy too, you know. It would take something a lot bigger than a chipmunk to keep coming with a .30-06 slug in it."

That set her back. "You... you wouldn't.." But not for long. "There are forces more powerful than guns! Would you shoot me?"

She threw up her head proudly. "You are a coward! Cowards use guns to kill with needlessly. You are a snoop! Snoops go into places they don't belong. You are a.. a rat! Rats are malicious."

Untutored mountain flower or not, she knew how to strut it. Paul burst into the first relaxed and vulnerable laughter he'd had in years. Tossing his rifle aside he sat abruptly on the floor. "Mercy! Mercy! I fall at your feet. Just please, don't throw me in that briar patch no more!"

"You're making fun of me!" Althea glared, then slumped. "I knew you were a rat."

Paul's laughter slowed. He looked up at her and grinned. Nothing there was to say, nor did he want to.

Althea dropped onto her haunches. "I don't like you at all," she said with a pout. "You cheat. I should put a terrible curse on you."

"Please don't," he begged. "I'd make an awful impression if I were a toad."

"Toad!" She reached out and tweaked his nose.

"Oh, goodness! Do I have warts now?"

They both laughed. "Althea," he said. "Are you a witch?"

Before she could answer he continued: "You bewitch me."

"Paul, you're saying things you shouldn't say."

"Isn't honesty a virtue in your book? Really, I don't shoot chipmunks."

She stood up again. Paul looked up into her lake-blue eyes and waited. "Paul," she finally said. "I know you've got a wife in your cabin. I've seen her, Paul. Your gun doesn't change that."

He pulled himself as erect as a sitting position would allow. "Be careful in your accusations, Althea. A sunset bewitches me. Quixote Lake bewitches me. I respond to beauty; I'm not dead. If you want to draw conclusions beyond that, keep them to yourself. I see so little beauty in the life I lead -- nature's beauty -- that what I do find is precious to me." And then he relaxed his pose and smiled upward. "Can't a poor toad worship a queen from his corner?"

Wrinkling her nose, she nodded. "Poor toads are God's creatures too."

"Yes, poor toads are creatures of this world. I wonder about you, Althea. Are you an earthly denizen or an angel? You appear by magic. You're as innocent as the waters of Quixote Lake. You could be the goddess of flowers."

This time she blushed. "I'm just a poor toad too."

"No. You're a deer. A gazelle! You run like one, you know. Fluid and sure."

"I'm just me," she said, visibly nervous now.

"You must know this area well."

"Yes I do, I think."

"The special places, the beautiful places. Even the dangerous places."

"And where the deer are; where all the animals live. I know where they hide from danger." She grinned. "Sometimes I hide in those places too."

"Then you know all about this area. Do you know about the mill? You come here often."

She turned her body slightly toward the door. "You were trying to trap me with those questions!" He could see her body caught between anger and the flight reaction. Tension of her muscles stressed her supple contours into an essay of primal origin, speaking in simple eloquence about those mystic forces which confound guns or logic.

"I'm interested in the mill," he said, choosing his words carefully. "It's beautiful and unique. I see it as an outpost of the past. The past, in these mountains, can be more acutely present than the future."

"You're still snooping."

"Is the mill posted?" asked Paul. "There aren't any signs telling me to keep away. I can tell you why, Althea."

She stared at him through narrowed eyes. "You just come here in the summer. You're a tourist."

"I'm also a board member of the corporation that owns the mill. We have nearly 600 acres here. If I chose to, little gazelle, I could have this mill torn down and paved like a parking lot."

"No..." The impact was like a physical blow.

"I love the mill. I wouldn't do that." He arose from his cramped position and stepped closer. The pupils of her eyes were the largest orbs in the world.

"Paul," she whispered, "please don't hurt the mill."

Folding her into his arms, he cradled her head on his shoulder. With soft tones he spoke into her ear. "Althea, princess, haven't you learned by now that I don't shoot chipmunks."

She pulled back, but it was to look at him, not escape. "Paul, spirits live in the mill. Spirits of the past you talked about. Nobody has ever seen them because they hurt no one. They're my friends."

"My wife may have seen one. An old man with a grey beard. I was looking for that ghost when you surprised me, Althea. He's never been seen anywhere but the mill."

Suddenly he realized that her eyes were misty and her lips slightly open. She looked up at him with an unfocused intensity that begged for invasion. He kissed her. Their lips met with gentle pressure. Then she was molded to his body and her tongue was pressing in to meet his. With delighted astonishment, he released all sense of time or place.

It ended with her twisting from his grasp. Pulling her halter back into place, she told him, "Not now. We'll go to the little meadows and secret places. I'll take you there."

He realized that he'd reached into her halter and covered her left breast with his palm. The firm impression still tingled through his nervous system, sending messages of readiness to every part of his body. Paul managed to calm his mind, but impassioned breath rushed on.

"I'm sorry, Althea. I had no right..."

She laughed; a lilt of pleasure. "The buck doesn't apologize to his does. Come back here in the morning tomorrow. I'll take you to the high meadows."

Althea was out the mill door on the run. Paul was almost positive she blew a kiss when she turned her head briefly for a last look. The experience, as much desired as it had, was also a bit unsettling. Paul had nursed his goatish thoughts with no expectation of consumation, yet now it was as much as promised. She confused him.

He sat on the steps of the mill to think it out, not bothering to do more than pull the door tentatively closed. He didn't wish to repeat the painful process he'd gone through yesterday. If Althea were such a mountain flower as she seemed, he reasoned, perhaps her blooming body was instinctively searching for pollination.

He grinned. This bee had undergone a vasectomy many years ago. The thought set him to more reasonable thinking. Her kiss wasn't one of inexperience. Nor was her retreat. If memory served, she'd taken a good long time to secure that breast safely inside her halter. He paused to feast on memories of the long brown nipple and the tanned roundness of the breast. Althea, he realized, sunbathed in the nude.

Whistling ineptly from a Bach concerto, he departed for the cabin.

That afternoon the analytical portion of his mind returned to the mystery at hand. He conferred with Joanne about a supplies list, set her to tasks about the cabin, and visited the local store. Old Johansen, the crusty proprietor, had lived in these mountains for the last two hundred years, at least. He had to know all the local gossip and history. Spirits in the mill would be a tasty story with which to terrorize a tenderfoot. Especially a tenderfoot who traded there regularly.

Johansen wasn't much help. "Mill's been closed for longer'n I've been here. Got no filet. Got some nice Porterhouse. Big 'uns."

"I'll take four of the best," replied Paul. He tried again to open Johansen's history file. "But tell me, Ole. Are there ghosts in the mill? I've heard some stories that lift my short hair."

"No ghosts," said Johansen, wrapping four huge Porterhouse steaks in butcher paper. "No spooks. No goblins. Nothin' to drive out folks from the lake."

"What about a grey-bearded old man. Ghost of lumberjack, maybe. Shows up around the mill."

Ole looked pensive. "Could be Crazy Jake. He ain't been seen nigh on three years."

"A maniac, I take it."

Ole scrambled to protect business. "Harmless ole coot. Never hurt nobody. Kept to hisself, did Jake." Then, in an inspired finish: "Jake don't even beg spare change."

"Sounds fascinating. A stalwart of the tourist business. But how about other ghosts. Like a gorgeous young girl who acts like a wild deer. Long brown hair; blue eyes; about 5' 6". A real beauty."

"Nope. You got a real imagination, Mr. Niro. Them chorus girls live there up in Tahoe. Grind you down, though. Can't rest like here at the lake."

"Well, tell me about Crazy Jake, Ole. I'll bet you know the story."

"These steaks come to \$24.88. That OK?"

"Of course. Don't dodge the question."

Johansen settled onto his elbows, bushy mustache thrusting forward with his jaw. Around him on the counter were jars of beef jerky, licorice and hard candy. "I know Crazy Jake been around these parts for more 'n thirty years. Nobody ever seen much of him, Mr. Niro. Jake come in here maybe every year. He bought salt, ammo, other things. Like I said, he ain't been around for close to three years."

"What was Jake's business? How did he make his living?"

"Nobody knows. Jake don't talk. He don't talk. And that's God's truth, Mr. Niro...."

Paul pondered the point. Nothing more would be forthcoming from Ole, of that he was sure. "Well, I thank you for the bountiful information, Ole. You know, I always thought you'd turn out to be a real raconteur."

Johansen's face grew ugly. "I ain't no pervert."

"Ole, you're the last man on earth I'd accuse of that." Paul left with a mild glow. He had the old man bracketed: a drifter, a recluse. The wave to Joanne was a clear prelude to panhandling. If indications were true, that event had

already occurred. No doubt accompanied with a soft soap story to effectively ease the loosening of coins from purse. Now Jake could show up at the store again, to trade anecdotes with the voluble Ole. Three years between soft touches was a long time.

Paul paraded the Porterhouse steaks into the cabin. "Fire up the barbeque! Uncork the Cabernet! Tonight we celebrate the unstultifying of a hidebound mind: my own!"

Joanne hastened. "You're like yourself again!" she ventured. The charcoal came rapidly out of the pantry, where it lived with the lighting fluid. They worked as a trained team to prepare for cooking of the feast.

"Will you share?" she asked.

"Of course," said Paul. "Your old man of the mill is a local vagabond called 'Crazy Jake.' I've ferreted out his identity with some rather impressive detective work, the details of which I won't bore you with. The point is, he's harmless. Cadges coins from gullible tourists. As you know."

Joanne looked startled. "I don't know that, Paul. I've never talked to him. I've been too afraid to approach."

"Nonsense!" he stormed. "Admit your foolishness and all is forgiven. If the old codger had approached me with a tall tale I'd probably have given him a fiver in appreciation."

She stood dejected. "Please, Paul, if this is going to be another issue I don't want to argue."

Defused, he stared at her downcast face. "Well, alright. I'll drop it here and we can just enjoy the steaks. Ole got the finest shipment of Porterhouse received in these parts.... these here parts... in nigh on fifty years. We captured the finest four."

Surface gaiety eroded during dinner. By nine Paul had gone to the bottle and Joanne had gone to bed. He stared at the moonlit lake, the brightness being extreme as the moon was approaching full. That deep blue perceived by day was a black and silver surface by night. It evoked the grandest of mysteries, and for Paul this was himself.

In the morning he abandoned his carbine. This was not a day for weapons. Nevertheless, he buckled on the sidearm and checked all the chambers. Habit, perhaps, or something stirring deep below conscious provision. With jerky, trail mix and cheese to offset the weight of the rifle, he took to the woods. Joanne stood on the deck and waved goodbye.

He went rapidly off toward the mill, thinking that his obvious advance in that direction would serve best as discouragement for other visits. No need to try the hidden approach. He knew how well the wind tower served as an observation post. Just go; and find what waited.

With little try for quiet, he tracked through the short pines toward the mill. His mood elevated as he approached his destination. What he had not sought had approached him. It was a sign or omen. What would be had been long in coming. As he pressed thru the underbrush, smelling the pungent scent of pine, he had never felt younger.

The mill was set in a tableau, framed against blue lake and sky with fleecy fat clouds playing tag with the sun. Paul sat on the porch of the mill to await Althea's magical appearance. He leaned back as best he could and lit a cigaret. Looking out at the lake, partially to not see her come upon him, he blew long grey streamers into the air and pondered his good fortune.

Time drifted along, not an urgent commodity because he was early by his own reckoning. If she came early too there would be more time together. Otherwise, he was content enough.

As minutes passed and the fifth butt joined the first at his feet, Paul's mind turned to Joanne. Last night he'd told her of Crazy Jake, elaborating somewhat on Ole's account. She'd denied contact, shying away from the issue without even evaluating the opportunity to admit falling for the old rascal's con game. It was, he decided, characteristic of her attitude with him since... the fall. Or, he grinned wryly, the discovery...

Such thoughts were not for sitting. He jumped up and strolled the area, kicking stones and and occasional pine cone. If nirvana is ignorance why did man possess intelligence? If nirvana is dreams why are there awakenings? He picked up a flat stone, made for skipping, and hurled it sidearm onto the lake. If happiness is a surface, what lies beneath??

The stone skipped four times, then sank. Quixote Lake smiled on in placid wisdom, unchanged in centuries. Paul checked his watch. It was past eleven and Althea was late. The second stone he threw was rounded. That missile arced over the lake like a swooping gull, yet vanished as thoroughly as its predecessor.

When noon came, he grasped for a tangible task. Pressing the flat of his hand against the mill door, he shoved. Nothing. The door was closed as tightly as on his first venture there.

With quickening breath he surveyed the forest about him. He turned to the door and pulled the latch, put a shoulder to the planks and drove his body inward. With a creak of complaint, the door burst open. He nearly sprawled into the mill.

Inside was darkness, as before. His eyes made the adjustment and he prowled warily into the interior, pistol drawn. Silence greeted him, nothing more. Circling the large room, he spied on the walls and floor for hidden things: doors, peepholes. Ending his circuit he ended his search. Outside the door lay his true interests.

At one o'clock he called Althea's name. The forest caught the sound and muffled it. At one fifteen he left the mill, circled to his observation post and waited another half hour. At one forty-five he returned to the mill. It was a deserted and barren place.

Journeying to the cabin took longer than he remembered. Every stickly vine caught at him; every stone made him stumble. When he emerged from the trees onto cleared land he glanced to the deck and saw Joanne standing there waiting for him. She waved the Bushmills and a glass of ice. The insult enraged him.

"Home is the hunter!" called Joanne.

He kept striding toward the cabin, head down, and deigned no reply.

"I held lunch, Paul. Just snacks, but some of your favorites."

"Thanks!" he snapped. "I'm not very hungry."

She poured amber Irish over the rocks and offered him the glass, but he brushed past her and continued into the cabin to the bathroom. When he emerged, cool water having washed away the grime of the hike, there was little relaxation in his attitude. He accepted the whiskey, but grunted in return. He picked at the snack plates she'd set up on the deck table.

Finally Joanne asked him: "Did something bad happen in the woods? You seem so disturbed..."

"I'm not disturbed!"

She hesitated. "Something is bothering you, Paul. I can tell. I'm concerned."

"If you're so concerned about my state of mind," he said, fixing his sights. "It comes as a great surprise to me. You never minded tearing my guts out before. The perfect little wife, maintaining the household. Light housework in the morning; testing the mattress with some lover in the afternoon. My heart leaps with gratitude at your concern for me."

Silence covered them. Across the surface of Quixote Lake came wafts of sound from the minute disturbances of nature's calm: birds calling, fish leaping, animals calling in the forest. With his outburst, some of Paul's tension had dissipated and he felt oddly placed, exposed, as if he'd doubled at backgammon and now saw the cube in the hands of his opponent.

"Good cheese spread," he said. "Made with Stilton?"

"I'm tired of this, Paul." Her voice was firm but low. "I'm so damn weary of your hostility."

"My unreasoning hostility, don't you mean? My causeless, capricious, self-initiated hostility? Not like you had anything to do with it."

"Even if it was all my fault, for God's sake, do something! Beat me up. Demand a divorce. Kiss me and hug me and let me have a chance to love you. But, please, do something!"

The distain showed clear on his face. He said nothing. However hard she might cry out to him now, he would not hear the meaning.

"Well, I tried." Joanne got up and leaned slightly toward him. "Before long I'll be too tired to keep trying, Paul. I'll go away then, and not blot your life again."

Paul stared bleakly at the wrought woman. "Don't be so dramatic. You never were a good actress."

She left him rapidly, not entering the cabin but striking off into the pines. With some interest, Paul noticed that she was headed in the direction of the mill. Whatever the significance he had no energy with which to follow her. He poured another glass of Bushmills, the sooner to slow his mind as well.

Low hanging clouds filtered the morning light into pale bleakness, accentuating the condition of withdrawal between Paul and Joanne. They spoke in monotones, coordinating a breakfast of scrambled eggs and weak coffee. No rifts had healed during the night. When Joanne retreated to the corner armchair and grew silently absorbed in her needlework, Paul took his rifle down to the shore. He threw tin cans onto the water and shot at them until they sank.

Eastward along the shore lay the mill and his attention turned progressively in that direction. He wandered up the shore; well placed shots behind a Coors can sent it bobbing along before him. Would Althea come on a dreary day like this when she had forsaken yesterday's sunshine? Certainly not for a man with a rifle.

Joanne didn't say a word as he replaced the gun in its rack and collected the canteen and some trail mix. She was thinking private thoughts, not accessible to Paul. He wondered briefly if this new shutdown of communications would have any long term ramifications, but downstream possibilities were not topics he felt able to pursue. He left quietly.

In the suffused light, his journey seemed longer than normal. He marched without much caution, stepping readily wherever his feet might find ground. Branches snapped or rebounded as he pushed thru the little pines. The trees, he felt, were deterring him; slowing his progress as if by design. In return he broke branches needlessly.

Althea wasn't in sight as he approached the mill, but then she never had been. Almost leisurely, Paul walked toward the door. He anticipated a wait. When he was about thirty feet away from the old structure, the door opened smoothly and a long grey beard poked out.

"Looking for somebody?" asked the old man.

It had to be Crazy Jake. The old man emerged fully; he was dressed in faded denim jeans and a checked flannel shirt. Scuffed leather boots and antique suspenders completed the costume. The face behind that attention-getting beard was lined and seamed with years of rough weather.

"I thought the mill was deserted," said Paul. "Do you live in there?"

The old man chuckled to himself and sat down on the porch. "Must have been your gunfire a while back."

"You're the one they call Jake."

"Course. You bag anything?"

The offhand crossing conversation pattern was irritating Paul. He had a premonition also that Jake's presence meant no Althea. He narrowed his gaze on the old man, but the beard never twitched.

"To answer your first question," said Paul, "maybe I was looking for you."

"And maybe not, eh?" contributed Jake.

"You fit the description of a vagrant that's been bothering my wife."

"Old Jake don't bother nobody but claim jumpers." The old man leaned forward sharply. "You a claim jumper, mister?"

Paul flushed, irritation maturing into anger. "I own this land, you relic. Don't threaten me!"

Jake chuckled again. "Man can't claim land he don't live on or work. If you want to quit acting like the King of Prussia and sit down here, we could talk some about what's eating you." The old man moved to the lake side of the mill porch, clearing room for Paul.

Arms folded tight, Paul pursued the interrogation. "Why did you bother my wife? I've no intention of letting a thing happen to her. Either I'll hear your explanation or the sheriff will. Take your choice."

"Sheriff couldn't find a blind coon in his own garbage pail," laughed Jake. "Far as you go, mister, you ain't the only one dislikes threats. Things sure get on a bad footing when two fellows can't sit down easy and just talk about their problems."

Paul suddenly felt foolish glaring. This old coot was clearly eight tenths crazy; humoring him would pay off much better than would threats. With a bending of pride he hadn't allowed in years, Paul sat on the porch.

"That's better," commented Jake mildly. "Jake's the name." He didn't offer his hand.

"I'm Paul."

"Well, Paul, I been in these parts near on forty years, or maybe longer. Come here by way of Alaska. Had no luck there, but I was younger in those days. Expecting the mother lode..."

"What do you do here, Jake?"

"How old you think I am, boy?" Jake swivelled around to give Paul a good look at the seamed face.

"Sixty-five," guessed Paul, discounting for the weather as he played this roundabout game.

"Eighty-six!!" Jake hooted with a kind of hee-haw laughter that rasped along Paul's nerves. The old man was really enjoying this one.

"Born in Virginia City. Weren't nothing left by then, of course. My folks moved into the Warfield mansion; lived like paupers. I was raised right there on the Comstock, young fellow. My old man had been a foreman. Spent the rest of his life looking for another strike.

"I roamed those mountains myself, mostly while he was down at Tonopah. Neither of us ever found nothing in Nevada. I left when I was seventeen. Ma died. Ellie married Hoskins, the saloon keeper. Pa come back and told me I had a job mining in Tonopah, but I had a different itch. Went north with a burro and pickaxe."

"Jake," Paul interrupted mildly. "Eighty-six years later you're here at Quixote Lake."

"So I'm a long-winded old fart, eh?" Jake's beard waggled and his keen blue eyes raked Paul.

"Jake, you read minds." Paul broke into a splendiferous genuine grin. He liked this man. On another day he could have enjoyed tall tales for hours, in a proper bar over whiskey on the rocks.

"Well, then. You'll get Quixote Lake, mister." But the old man had caught Paul's grin. "Then you'll listen to the glories that were Virginia City or I'll boot your ass up between your shoulder blades."

The overcast was breaking, as clouds nudged each other to let beams of sun through. A light breeze felt from across the lake surface. Paul nodded agreement, reserving the time frame for this dissertation to fit his own convenience.

"You're wondering about your missus, ain't you?" asked Jake.

"That's why I'm here."

Jake snorted. "Funny things come out of a man's mouth when.... But what do I know?" He grinned at Paul.

But Paul just leaned back against the mill door and said, "Please continue."

"Saw your missus wandering around these hills. She was a lost woman. Lost, not like you might think, but lost in her head. On the near side of desperate, I guessed.

"Maybe a man digs for a miracle long enough, he knows a kindred soul. I watched that woman for days 'fore I decided. Digging for a strike is pain. The legs grow weak, the back hurts, the hands cry out. I decided to talk with that woman."

Paul glanced at Jake's hands. They were strong and ridged with blood vessels. The callouses showed clearly, proudly, the badge of a laboring man. Under the blunt nails was dirt.

"She talked to me, Paul. Not at first, but later when she came back. I'll bet you know everything she told me. Most of it was about you."

"So?"

"I'm a mining man. Been a miner all my life. Went back down to Tonopah, if you can stand listening to history. Worked the lode there. Mined in Goldfield, too. And lots of places. Prospected more years than you've been alive. Naturally, I give her a mining man's advice."

"What was it you told her, Jake?"

"First thing a miner learns; when a lode's played out you leave it. Find another. What I told your missus, Paul, was that her lode was played out."

"You advised her to leave me." Paul's voice rose rapidly in intensity. "Just where the hell do you get off, trying to destroy other people's lives!"

"Simmer down, son," said Jake. "It's your lode too. What grade of ore are you bringing out of the mine these days? Damn little gold content..."

"A person's not a gold mine," spit Paul. "You don't discard people the way you might an exhausted mineral deposit."

"Is that so? Don't you do it all the time, big boss man?"

Paul jumped up and faced the old miner. "That's business. And, no, I don't just fire people. I work on their problem or find them another position where they can be productive."

"You look for another lode." Jake chuckled again. "People are full of veins of all sorts. People got so much inside of 'em you couldn't mine all the ore in a lifetime."

"Pretty mercenary viewpoint for a hermit."

"There you go mistaking my meaning. I think you know what I'm saying." The old man stood up and stepped into the doorway of the mill. "Good bye, Paul. We'll talk about Virginia City some other time."

Paul watched him close the door. It easily came flush into the jamb, then there was a sound of boards creaking and a muffled "thunk." Paul's momentary impulse was to follow the old man, but it was a useless action. The door would again be jammed -- there must be a lever mechanism inside to warp the frame. The crazy coot would have vanished into his hidey-hole. And there was nothing more to be asked or said.

Great patches of blue sky had opened. Paul stood in a pool of sunlight, feeling the warmth of the rays as nature's healing solace. Rippling waves on the lake surface matched the ripples in his mind. In the lake deep waters were still serene. In Paul's mind the deep waters were in numbing turmoil, as memories struggled to break the confines of conscious interpretation.

Faltering steps led Paul back toward his cabin. Yet he could not return with this chaos in his mind. Always he had purpose in his life; he must identify a purpose. Slowly he turned again toward the mill.

Althea was standing beside a patch of white flowers, watching him silently with a look in her eyes that he took for pity. "Paul," she called softly, "are you looking for a sign?"

That vision of her, so young and beautiful, so caring for him, raised waves of new hope and energy within him. Striding away from introspection, he went to her with "Althea" on his lips as a mantra.

She waited with open palms and lips, inviting embrace.

After the long kiss and body melding, she whispered to him: "Come to the high meadows with me. We'll run with the deer and make wreaths of flowers!"

With kisses to her eyes and the hollow of her throat, he breathed assent. Hand in hand they started up the mountain slope. She set a slow pace, pointing out where animals were hiding in the brush or in the trees. Althea had a sure eye for nature, and such was her own nature that the two of them came closer to wild creatures than Paul had ever been (outside of a zoo).

Flowers too were her province. Althea spied out the bluebells, farewell-to-springs, fairy bells, and meadow rue. She led Paul to clusters of California violets and chocolate lillies. There were more flowers than he'd ever known could be nestling in the woods. He marvelled at her ability to find them. Could she smell them out by the delicate scents on the blossoms he wondered, as again and again she plucked a single flower and held it for him to inspect and sniff in delight.

As they ascended by this prolonged and circuitous route, Paul experienced the unfolding of two related phenomena. His environment penetrated on a purely sensory level, unravelling the codifying mechanisms that protected him in the city. Not a rude penetration, as had been the disarming and paranoid intrusion of his only try at marijuana, but rather a gentle coaxing by the very elementals of life. To his gradual astonishment, he found more than coolness and green comfort in the woodland. He found a balanced beauty of overwhelming impact. Inexorably, his awareness grew that he was part of this deeply practical and superlatively exquisite design. And so grew his wonder.

On a related plane he grew more sharply aware of Althea's heady presence. The miracle of her body assaulted him with glimpses of grace, pressures of the hand, exchanges through the eyes, and quick kisses of unmistakable promise. He felt no hurry or impatience with her happy diversions. What was building was all a part of that design, and he felt desire flowering in his loins in equal measure to the gratefulness of his spirit that she had consented to be his teacher.

"Althea," he asked, "What's this pink flower?" Paul was proud to ask before she pointed to the flower.

"Fireweed," she answered. "It gives its seeds to the wind. Some mornings when the breeze is very strong the air will be red from fireweed. Look." She plucked off the entire top of one plant and offered it for his education.

He examined the red filaments closely. They were designed to hook into the wind. "Nature has a purpose in everything," he said.

"The wild things know their purpose. City people forget theirs."

"Some of us remember," he claimed, taking her again for a kiss.

"Let's go on to the top!" she exclaimed. "I promised you a sign."

With a swifter pace they resumed the climb, coming to a lush grassy meadow in which bloomed profusions of varicolored flowers. The lea was irregular, being perhaps two hundred feet across. It had the look of paradise to Paul. Like magic, the pines fell away to frame the verdant carpet. Butterflies fluttered through the clean air and the tantalizing aura of sensual delight shown like an echo of the sun.

They stepped well out onto the thick grass and together turned to smile their happiness. Paul noted again how blue were her eyes, and he swam into them as if diving into the blue waters of Quixote Lake, pulling downward with sure strokes into the mysteries.

Then she was gone, running like a colt across the meadow. Bemused, he watched her leap and frolic. When she circled back and cast him the "catch me" look he was loose enough to pursue. They ran for a time, she always out of reach and he tiring, until the moment was ripe.

Althea came to earth beside a great burst of yellow flowers. Paul fell beside her. Despite his winded condition, he tumbled her into his arms and kissed her with hearty desire.

"Not yet!" she cried, pulling away in one motion while sending her slim hands to comfort him with short strokes of reassurance. "I must weave your crown of flowers."

Such sensible elegance convinced him. Let her weave and be a feast for his eyes while strength returned. The yellow blossoms went together swiftly under the ministrations of her supple hands. The green and golden chain grew apace.

"Your fingers dart like hummingbirds," he said.

She smiled at him, content in her work, serene with vital purpose. "They hum to make a crown. May it lighten your brow and reawaken your spirit."

"You're a mixture," he said, "of the Song of Solomon and the Psalms."

"Paul, tell me this." She was serious now. Thoughtful. "When you first saw me, was I a sign to you?"

"Like a promise of blue heaven. You were a vision I'd dreamed of on nights of great hope. An houri of the Garden, made flesh."

"Then I am truly chosen," she said in a hushed voice, as if to herself. "May I serve well." Then she looked again at him and smiled like a rainbow. "The wreath is finished! I crown the king!"

She placed the wreath upon his head and fastened it with love. Upon that gold and green display the sun shone from above. He took her fingers in his hands and kissed each one anew. Together then they lay beside that spot where flowers grew.

He kissed her lips and whispered words the butterflies ignored. Each liberty enflamed his soul and primal trumpets roared. She moaned and arched against his chest with softest cones of heat. His hands responded with a will, her burning needs to meet.

The buttons of his shirt were found and opened with a touch. He tore the halter from her breasts, he wanted her so much. Beneath the blue and open sky he took her on the sward, while all around the meadow fringe the tallest pines stood guard.

Adrift in the tranquil aftermath, Paul felt the sunlight on his closed eyelids as a second presence, less immediate than the snugness of Althea's body next to his but equally beneficent. It was a time of repose. In many directions paths led down from this mountain top, yet none were for treading yet. Paul wanted only the softness of Althea beside him in this moment of peace.

Eventually she stirred. "We are almost complete," she murmured, burying her face against the side of his neck. Then she bit him. A clean and painful bite to the side of his neck.

He sat up abruptly, feeling the wound. He'd expected blood but she'd not broken the skin. "Why did you do that?" he asked, not so much angry as puzzled.

"I gave you a sign," she answered simply, gathering her clothes into one hand and rising.

"How the hell will I explain this?"

"Signs are understood, not explained. I'm going now, Paul. Our purposes take us to different places." She bounded away a few yards and turned for a farewell. "Good bye, Friend-of-Chipmunks. You love beautifully."

A few strides were all the pursuit he made. Her graceful figure was nearing the edge of the clearing and he knew he'd never catch her. The episode had ended so quickly that he was caught in the turmoil of emotion. How could he let her escape, yet how could he prevent it?

His right hand crept to the bite on his neck. It was a sign, she'd said, but she had meant it as a mark. He thought of his cabin at the foot of the slope. When he returned it would be with his mark, and the sign would be for Joanne.

Or perhaps, he mulled at an idea, the sign could be for them both. Althea had given him footing on both sides of the line, for now there was no hiding from himself or his realities. Open talk and concert in choosing whatever road would be taken. Quixote Lake could have his yesterdays, but he would keep his tomorrows.

Standing in that mountain lea, naked as Adam, Paul Niro raised his hands to the sun and gave praise for a long-forgotten miracle: that he had been born for life on this earth.

? Trivia ?

By T.T.

Tenacious Turkey here, hosting the First Recurring Trivial Quiz in SFPA history (to my knowledge). Lon has been gracious enough to let me have a place in his crommy fanzine, no doubt in hope of boosting page count, so I accepted. This quiz will run in six installments. Every member or waitlistee of SFPA is eligible to enter. Standings will be published regularly, (each mlg) and a grand and glorious prize will be awarded to the winner.

Here are the Rules. (1) Entries must be received THREE WEEKS PRIOR to the next SFPA deadline. (2) No cheating allowed. (3) Scores will be tallied for six quizzes; the winner is the one with the most points at that point. (4) Oh, yes. All entries must be identified by name.

Here we go.....

1. (2 points) SFPA has been invaded by many nom de plumes in its history. What were the real names of the following:
 - a. David Mitchell.
 - b. Omerd Gremlin.
2. John Salt was the protagonist of what novel?
3. Some literary characters spread to other countries by virtue of their charm. "Picsou" is one such. What do we call him in America?
4. "Herbs and stewed rabbit" was a feast for what two heroic figures?
5. Only two football coaches have more career victories than Paul "Bear" Bryant. What are their names? (Satisfied, Lon?)
6. "Blind Boy Grunt" became famous under another name, not his own. What was the name of fame for this performer?
7. Correct the spelling of the following terms or names:
 - a. Tie stick.
 - b. Leon Park.
 - c. Leonard Skinner.
 - d. "American Fascist Pig."
8. What noble youth rode a sandworm to glory?
9. Who murdered Roger Ackroyd?
10. How many former SFPA OE's were on the SFPA roster as of mailing 90?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Entries should be sent to me (Lon) the stated 3 weeks before the deadline, so I can pass them on to TT. If I get at least four entries I'll continue to run this section. I'm stuck with providing the "prize," so I'll ponder it for a mlg or two. I disqualify myself, but everybody else can enter.