



Small Steps, Giant Leaps

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Consuming Passion . . . Gerald W. Page
Final Encounter John Ulrich
Cries in the Dark . . . Allen H. Greenfield
At Hell's Gate Glen T. Brock
The Last Priest Dawn Early
The Master Thief . . . Susan M. Patrick
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Allen H. Greenfield, Editor

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Address all comments to

Allen H. Greenfield
A.S.G. Memorial Press
2875 Sequoyah Drive NW
Atlanta, Georgia 30327 U.S.A.

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Consuming Passion

by Gerald W. Page

The new consumer trap at the newsstand was such a poor excuse for a consumer trap that it offended Max Gilbert's sensibilities. He picked up a magazine to read there without paying and immediately a lid snapped down over the display, leaving him with the magazine in his hands, just as if he intended to purchase it. All his life Gilbert had been beating better traps than this. He permitted himself a sneer. And simply placed the magazine on top of the sealed display case and walked off, not buying anything. But the consumer trap he found in his apartment was much more insidious.

As he stepped into the spacious one-room apartment of which he was so proud, a beautiful young girl he never saw before ran across the room and into his arms, hugging fiercely against Gilbert's somewhat surprised body.

"Darling," she said. "We're going to have a baby!"
"Huh?"

She stepped back, bouncing gaily on the balls of her feet, her face alight with joyful and expectant motherhood, her hands fluttery with excitement. In one fluttery hand waved a piece of paper.

"A baby," she said, as if that were explanation enough. "I have the approval here from the Family Planning Commission. Doesn't that make you feel proud? It isn't every couple who can start off married life with legal permission to have a baby."

All this time Gilbert was trying to think of something intelligent to say. He compromised with, "Do I live here?"

Smiling angelically, the girl grabbed his arm. "Oh, but how awful I am," she said, pulling him into the room and toward the easy chair. "You just get home and right away I start talking your ear off. A good wife doesn't act that way. I'm sure you had a rough day. You must be very tired. You just sit down here and I'll get your slippers." She looked around and spied them by the bed. "Oh, there they are!"

"Miss, there's been—"

"Now you just sit back and relax," she said picking up the slippers.

"But—"

"I'll dial dinner in no time at all." She held up the slippers and gave them an inspection. She made a very odd face. "My, aren't these old . . ."

"I like them that way," Gilbert said, a trifle defensively. "They're comfortable."

"It doesn't matter if they are old," the girl said, slipping Gilbert's shoes from his feet and replacing them with the slippers. "As long as my hubby's happy. Besides, we can get some new ones. What's this on the bottom of your shoes?"

She held one up for Gilbert to see and it was a second before he realized what she meant. "They've been resoled," he said. "Whenever a shoe wears down, I get it resoled. I sometimes replace the heels too." He saw from her face that the sarcasm of his tone was lost on her.

"Why do you do that? Isn't it easier to buy new ones?"

Max Gilbert was experiencing a very strong sensation as of being left out somewhere. Clapping his right hand to the back of his neck, he groped for words a second, then asked, "Do I know you?"

"Not really," she said. Again, her smile was angelic. "But you will. I'm Serafina Pratt."

"Never even heard of you."

"Maxie, you silly. I'm your new bride."

"That's a pretty lousy reason for not knowing you—."

She was on the floor, hugging his legs tightly. At his words, or maybe his tone of voice, she let go and Gilbert was pleased to feel the circulation return to them. Serafina sat back on her heels and looked up at him. She had large, soft brown doe eyes and they were suddenly filled to their imposing brims with doubt.

"Happy life sent me, Max. The Happy Life Mating Center . . . You requested a bride, didn't you? A computer matched us up and said we were perfect." Her voice caught and her gaze turned downward with sadness. "Of course if you don't like me, I can go back and Happy Life will find you someone better . . ."

Gilbert could feel the beginning of a headache. "I don't want a replacement."

Serafina got to her feet. She turned away so he could not see her face.

"If you're unhappy with me, you have every right to a replacement. After all, you paid real cash—they showed it to me. But even I realize that computers make mistakes and if you don't think we'll be happy, send me back and Happy Life will have its computer find you someone better. It's in the guarantee."

She sat morosely on the edge of the bed, eyes hidden by her thick lashes, her lips on the verge of a pout as if she were about to cry. But she didn't cry.

She was a pretty girl with light brown hair and a nice creamy complexion. Her face was an oval face with a small, rather attractive nose that did not wrinkle up as she pouted. Her mouth was nicely shaped and she used a quiet, tasteful lipstick. She was short—Max Gilbert estimated she was just over five feet tall—but her figure was perfect for her height and the truth of the matter was Gilbert always felt a weakness for petite girls with small, attractive noses.

"I don't want a replacement," Gilbert said, his tone as lame as his words. He got to his feet and began pacing back and forth in his room, a luxury in this crowded world. "There was a mistake. That's right, a mistake. I didn't—"

"Do you mean a *racket*?"

Gilbert stopped pacing. He favored Serafina with a quizical look. "Racket?"

"That's the word for a criminal scheme. Don't you keep up with these things?"

"No. That's a new word to me. No telling what kind of slang they'll come up with these days."

"I don't see how it could possibly be a racket. You paid cash."

"I always pay cash."

"Don't be silly. No one always pays cash. What good would credit cards be then? But anyway, if that's so, then what's wrong? If you—"

"I didn't pay for this in cash."

"But they showed it to me." With a great show of exasperation, Serafina added, "I just don't understand you. There can't be any rackets involving cash. Rackets involve credit cards and like that, but who ever heard of a crook using—or even wanting—real money? For that matter, why would anyone use or want real money? Credit cards are much more valuable."

"I don't happen to own any credit cards," Gilbert said.

He said it more to shut her up than for any other reason and it worked. For a full twenty seconds her mouth hung open, but she said nothing. And that gave Gilbert an opportunity to think.

Finally her mouth closed and when it opened again, almost at once, it was to say, "No credit cards?"

"Not a one."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"I'm Max Gilbert," he said. "Haven't you ever heard of me? The Economic Rebel of the Year?"

"I heard about you when the computer matched up our cards."

"I mean, haven't you read about me in News Journal or the economics magazines or telefax? Or on television. Like that."

"You've been on TV?"

"My picture has. On the news. I'm considered the most economic man in the modern world. I owe no one. I never have. I don't have a grocery credit card. I don't even subscribe to Dial-A-Meal. I spend cash for everything."

Serafina gaped at him as he spoke.

With a great sigh, Gilbert sat down in the chair again. "Look, I didn't buy a wife. I can't afford a wife. Someone else must have paid in my name."

Her pouting lower lip began to tremble. "But if a friend paid the fee, then I don't see why you think you can't afford to keep me."

"It wasn't a friend who paid and that isn't what I meant about affording a wife—though it's a good point. I mean I

can't support one. I only make \$847.00 a week."

"But two can live as cheaply as one."

"Only on credit cards."

He saw she didn't understand him.

"Look, what's happened is that someone, for reasons of his own, is trying to force me to use credit. And there's no better way to force a man into applying for a credit card or two than to get him married. Do you understand that?"

"You don't like me. Well you don't have to. They have a guarantee at Happy Life and if you don't like me, you can get a replacement."

"A replacement isn't what I want."

She was no longer staring down at the floor. Her eyes were no longer hidden by her long lashes. She was not sobbing, but great tears were welling out of her eyes and trickling down her cheeks, smearing her light make-up. She was very pretty and somehow helpless looking and that was an argument against which Gilbert never won. So he gave up.

He took his handkerchief and gently wiped the tears from Serafina's face. He sat down beside her on the edge of the bed and put his arm around her shoulders. She took the handkerchief from him and daubed her eyes again, then blew her nose. She returned the handkerchief to Gilbert and looked up at him. She tried a smile.

"We just had our first argument," she said.

"I hope it's our last."

"Yes. I hope so too. I was very anxious to make a good impression. More than anything else in life, I wanted you to like me."

"But I do like you."

"Then—you don't want a replacement?"

"Of course I don't—"

She snuggled closer. Her face turned up toward his and before he quite realized what he was doing, he kissed her.

"If it's a boy," Serafina said, "let's name him Edgar. I have an uncle named Edgar."

"Serafina, did you ever hear of a guy named Burt Hebron?"

"No. Who is he?"

"Nobody. I just wondered."

Gilbert spent the night in a hotel, leaving his room to Serafina. Her own apartment, she had told him, was about the same size as his, but it was shared with eight other girls, which Gilbert felt was extreme even in this day of crowded one-room apartments.

The following day was not a workday. At Happy Life, he was told just what he expected he would be. A cash deal and no one dealt with the customer personally. All the paperwork except the computer form, which had been mailed in, had been transacted with Serafina. But even so, he was sewn up tightly. He could get a replacement, yes. But getting out of the deal he hadn't made with Happy Life would take legal action. And that could be as expensive as marriage.

In short, getting out of this mess would cost Max Gilbert a lot of money and probably injure his reputation and standing. There was only one person Gilbert could think of who could benefit from that.

Gilbert went to a coffee house to think.

He never thought of himself as a crusader, but now he realized that in a very real way he was. He was a sort of economic rebel, the man who thought the system dangerous and unwieldy and refused to go along with it. His refusal to own credit cards, his spending of real cash money in a world where many people lived their lives never seeing cash were not odd quirks of his, but were actions based on conviction. And he liked to think his actions might occasionally inspire someone else to pay cash.

The world, in these waning years of the twentieth century, was a materialistic place, dominated by the new-car-every month syndrome, built in obsolescence on the grand scale, credit cards and subscription systems to handle everything from stock investments to babysitting. The average man lived well beyond his means and for years had been proud of the fact. But not Max Gilbert. The economists called him a throwback and once he was labeled as a threat of economic chaos. But he believed in the way he lived and more and more, others were coming around to his way of thinking.

That was it, of course. He was becoming a symbol.

And now someone was trying to jeopardize his way of life. It could be the government, of course. But Gilbert was certain it was not. He was certain the culprit was a man named Burt Hebron.

Yes. That made more sense than the government being at the bottom of this. The maneuver was sly and clever, which did not suggest the action of a bureaucracy. Vicious and bull-headed bureaucracies could be. But sly and clever? No. Therefore—

And just as he thought the name again, in walked Hebron himself, pretty much as Gilbert had expected him to eventually.

“Hi there, good buddy,” said Hebron, his face beaming a toothy smile.

“Sit down,” Gilbert said.

Hebron sat, grinning.

Hebron was a plump, soft man. For the past three years, *Newsweek Magazine* had carried an annual poll to determine the economic rebel of the year. It was becoming a big political issue, in fact. And in each poll, Hebron placed second to Gilbert’s first.

“Join me in a cup of coffee?” Gilbert said.

“Sure.” Hebron sat across the table from Gilbert and signaled a robot waiter who rushed hastily over with a cup of coffee. When the robot departed, Hebron asked, “How’s tricks?”

“Fine.”

“Glad to hear that, Max, Old buddy. I trust you’re well on your way to copping the *Newsweek* Poll again? Fourth

straight time. All-time economy champ.” He added a chuckle.

“You really think so?”

Hebron continued beaming and his head moved in great, reflective arcs. “Yeah, that’s quite an honor. You deserve all the praise you can get, good buddy. That’s not an easy poll to top, believe you me.”

“It’s not so hard. There’s only a dozen or so people in the world really trying for the list. It can’t compare with best dressed.”

“But don’t sell it short. So maybe there’s not a lot of competition, but you’re wrong about the world not being economy minded. All this credit stuff, with the population in debt for more money than the country has, is beginning to worry people. In another year or two it’ll be a big political issue. Otherwise *Newsweek* wouldn’t be so interested in printing the names of those few who lived most within their means each year. The more people begin to respect economy, the more they’ll come to respect the people who are economical in handling their own affairs.”

“Maybe some day you’ll run for president.”

“It’s possible. I’d have a good chance—if it weren’t for you.”

“I’m not interested in politics,” Gilbert said. “I can’t afford a big campaign dept.”

When they left the coffee house, Hebron paid the check. And if Gilbert had any doubts about Hebron’s guilt in the Happy Life matter, they dissolved then and there.

Gilbert found Serafina waiting for him at his apartment. She wore a simple, yellow dress and her hair was up in the pseudo-Grecian fashion so popular these days. Gilbert could imagine her hairdresser’s fee. But almost before he could realize what was happening, Gilbert was seated in his favorite chair, with a drink in his hand and Serafina was helping him into his slippers.

“How do you like your synthesteak?” she asked. “Medium or rare?”

“Medium— What do you mean, ‘synthesteak’? I can’t afford synthesteak.”

“Don’t be silly.” Her smile was insouciant. “I charged it.”

Gilbert felt suddenly queasy. “I don’t have an account with any supermarket.”

“You do now.”

Dumbfounded, he watched her deftly unwrap the steaks and toss them into the oven.

That afternoon, Max Gilbert was desperate enough to leave his apartment and walk to a store. Where he actually made a purchase.

Serafina, anxious to please, was waiting for him when he returned. It took him but a minute to explain to her just what she could do to please him. Then he left again. It took him two hours to cross town to Burt Hebron’s apartment.

“Well, what have we here?” said Hebron, as he saw who it was. “What brings the Master to my humble abode?”

"Can I come in? I want to talk."

"Sure. Come on in, good buddy. Want a drink?"

"Thanks. I could use one." He sat down while Hebron poured drinks. "You know, Burt, you're getting mighty generous these days."

"Only to my friends, good buddy." He handed Gilbert his drink.

It was cheap, synthetic scotch distilled from low-grade plancton and aged a week and a half. Gilbert sipped it slowly. "You bought me coffee this morning without even flipping a coin."

"Oh?"

"And you bought me a wife."

Hebron laughed. "You mean you're getting married?"

"Surprising, isn't it?"

"You sure get in some scrapes, Max. How do you do it?"

"I had help."

"You're not trying to say I put something over on you, are you? You mean to say you think I'd pull a dirty trick like that on you?" He started laughing.

Patiently, Gilbert waited for him to stop.

"Now it really isn't all that bad, is it?" Hebron asked, when he finally stifled his laughter. "Now tell me it isn't. She's probably a nice little girl, the kind you've always dreamed of. Those computers are good at that sort of thing these days."

"She's a wonderful girl. That's part of the problem. If it were just me getting hurt, it wouldn't be so bad. But Serafina's getting hurt too. I don't like that."

"Don't take it like that, Max. It's just a joke. You won't have to get married. You can break the contract."

"I'll have to hire a lawyer to do that."

Hebron gave a slow, meaningful, shark's smile. "Well, good legal talent is worth the cost these days."

"All this for a political career, Burt?"

Hebron chuckled again. "Sure. The election is coming up. The feasibility of a credit economy is going to be a big issue. I got a medical bill on my record and you haven't, so you're 'number one'. Only not any more."

Abruptly he became more serious as he went on: "You aren't the type for politics, Max. So I took this opportunity to make sure you wouldn't be drafted or anything. This way you fall back to the number two slot on the *News-world* poll and I'll take over the lead. I think things are beginning to change. I think we'll have a lot of votes for a candidate who stands for economy. The timing's right for one of us to become politically important. And I intend to see it's me."

"Your little trick might fail."

"It can't fail. You marry the girl and your expenses go up. If you try to break the contract, you'll have legal bills to pay. Besides, it'll make you look cheap. There's a fine line between economic and cheap but people tend to prefer economy to cheapness."

Max Gilbert reached into his pocket and took out the

miniature transmitter. "I made a purchase today," he told Hebron.

He held up the radio and then he spoke into it. "Did you hear all that, Serafina?"

Her voice from the radio was small and artificial sounding. "I certainly did! All of it!"

Gilbert switched off the small radio.

"She sounds mad," he said. "But at least she knows who really paid the Happy Life people. I don't think I'll need any lawyers."

When Gilbert returned home, Serafina was gone.

For several minutes he stood in the middle of the room, staring around at the walls, the sparse furnishings, the bare floor. It was a pretty big room. He had never before thought of it as wasteful for one person to have a room this big all to himself.

That evening he found himself knocking on the door to Serafina's apartment.

The girl who came to the door was tall and thin, a gawky thing with hair in curlers. She looked at Gilbert with such wide eyes that his first impression was that her curlers must be too tight.

"Is Serafina in?"

"Yeah," the girl answered. As if the curlers had miraculously loosened, her eyes narrowed and she turned and yelled, "Sera, you got a visitor!"

She looked back at Gilbert and smiled. "She'll be right here."

When Serafina saw him she tensed visibly as if she did not know whether to face him or run. But there's little room for running in a 12 x 12 foot room—at least not one that has nine girls in it. So she stood in the doorway, a dumbfounded look on her face and Gilbert tried to think of something to say and a way to say it.

"Look," he said finally. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Max. I don't blame you. I even explained it all to Happy Life and they say they won't bring action against you. They're happy enough having real money. How'd you find where I live?"

"I looked it up in the phone book. Look, let's go somewhere to talk. Just you and me—the two of us."

"Where?"

Gilbert glanced up and down the hallway. More people than he could count were milling about, talking. "I guess it's a pretty crowded world," he said. "Only place I know to go is my apartment."

"I'll get my wrap."

They walked slowly together through the press of pedestrian traffic and neither said very much. All around them were the noises and smells of the crowded metropolis. Everywhere were stores where people flashed credit cards and loan vouchers, where real money was regarded as a rarity to be commented on if it ever showed up. They passed literally thousands of people and Max Gilbert knew that most of them would die owing money and that their

expenses exceeded their earnings greatly. Max Gilbert felt that was wrong. But that was no longer the only thing he felt profoundly.

So when he and Serafina were alone in the apartment and sipping their drinks slowly, he tried to explain the way he felt and why he lived the way he did.

“You’re a zealot, aren’t you?” she said when he was finished.

“No. Well, not really. It’s just that I think things could be better and that in a couple of years they’ll catch up if someone takes a stand.”

“Do you really think a man like Burt Hebron can become politically powerful?”

“He might. He has some good ideas. But he doesn’t make friends easily. People instinctively dislike him and he’s a hard man to trust.”

“Then how can he be elected to anything?”

“That’s beside the point. The point is that I’m on the horns of a dilemma. I do think the world is in economic trouble and I want to do my bit to fight against it. Like it or not, I have become a leader. A sort of symbol.”

“You really think things will straighten out?”

“Yes. The future could be as bad as today, but I don’t

believe that. Reactions always set in. Look around. A lot of the conditions today are reactions to intolerable conditions twenty years ago. Things change. The reaction always sets in.”

“I see. I think.”

“I want you to understand this, Serafina. It’s important to me. Those computers don’t make mistakes very often. Not at matching people up.”

“Are you trying to say that two *can* live as cheaply as one?”

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” Gilbert said. “We can’t do that. But we can try. I want you to understand that I won’t be able to change. I believe in what I’ve been fighting for. Let the others have the political careers. I’ve got a crusade. Can you understand that, Serafina?”

“Yes, I do.” She threw herself into his arms and kissed him passionately. “Two can live as cheaply as one! How much does the President make a year?”

He laughed at her little joke.

But the next day, without his knowledge, Serafina called Happy Life and ordered a bride for Burt Hebron. And she paid cash.

Final Encounter

by John Ulrich

Billings rubbed his smooth, white hands together. It was cold on the parapet overlooking the city. Overhead, stars gleamed brightly in the frigid January night. Billings was angry because he had forgotten to bring his silk gloves.

He surveyed the massive metropolis beneath him. It gleamed with silent, fearful energy. Its whiteness was ominously dazzling in the cold night. It is my city, Billings thought. My world. The old days were gone, forgotten. They were unreal. Gone were individuality, selfish bickering, and petty competition. The old nation states and cities had fallen before the onslaught which had united the world. London, Paris, Moscow, Peking, New York . . . Billings could hardly believe that they ever had existed. Yet it had not been too long ago when he had been in those forgotten cities. He and his followers had orated and passed out pamphlets and led street brawls until the day of victory had arrived.

Billings reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it and inhaled quickly, letting the smoke curl in his mouth. Most of the members of the Hierarchy rarely smoked, and only then on special occasions. Almost all Civilians completely abstained. However, Billings thought wryly, anyone with my power can certainly afford to indulge in vices once and a while. After all —

His reverie was momentarily shattered by the sound of footsteps approaching him from behind. Yet he didn’t turn around immediately, because he knew who was coming. After all this time, he thought. Soon he turned and beheld two armed guards converging upon him with a third man walking in between them. He was tall and thin and gaunt and made a striking contrast to Billings’ languid obesity. His eyes were swollen from lack of sleep, and there were bruises about his face. He was making a heroic effort to keep himself straight and erect. The guards were silent and terrifying.

They were broadshouldered and wore tight fitting white uniforms. Truncheons and revolvers hung at their sides. Billings could see that they merged in well with the background of the white, antiseptic city beneath them. Yet they were also like gaunt, monstrous specters against the background of the night. Billings dropped his cigarette to the concrete and crushed it quickly underfoot before they arrived. It was not good to allow Civilians to see a member of the Hierarchy indulging in pleasures of the flesh.

The three men stopped before Billings. "Leave this man alone with me," he said to the guards. They turned around and departed silently. Billings surveyed the tall, gaunt man before him for a moment. Then he spoke:

"I suppose you realized that it would eventually come to this. I am also sure that by now you realize that there is absolutely no chance that you may be able to escape from us. We hold you as completely in our grasp as the cat holds the mouse. You are completely defeated."

The tall man said nothing. In fact, he acted as if he had not heard anything.

Billings spoke again. "Why did you rebel against us, Crankshaw? You had helped us so much in the old days. I can still remember seeing you on the college campuses orating and whipping up the student's frenzy to furious outbursts. They idealized you and followed you blindly. The old *Fuhrer* principle, remember? You knew that it would be futile to act against us once we had attained power. Why did you do it?"

The two men were still standing on the parapet. It had gotten noticeably colder. They were alone. Crankshaw, the tall man, coughed and cleared his throat as if to speak. He was obviously in great pain and discomfort. Billings noted with satisfaction that a trickle of blood was flowing down Crankshaw's hands and onto the concrete. Crankshaw's voice finally issued forth in a slight, hoarse whisper. He kept his eyes staring straight ahead, avoiding Billings' face.

"You corrupted the ideals of the Revolution. You instituted tyranny to increase your own power. You substituted pain for happiness, fear for hope. You betrayed us, Billings."

Billings took out two cigarettes and offered one to Crankshaw, who looked at it longingly but refused the offer. Billings smiled and lit up.

"You're a fool, Crankshaw," Billings said. "You stand tall, taking false pride in phony achievements, and prattle about idealism and goals. Look around you! Look below at the city! Do you seriously believe that those people below you are less happy than they were before the days of the revolution. They have virtually nothing to worry about. We have destroyed the emotions which in olden times 'uplifted' mankind. They feel no joy, love, or happiness. They are immune to pity and compassion. They do not have to worry about being kind to their wives or fair to their children or nice to their mother's-in-law. There are no more wives or husbands! Marriage has been abolished. Communal

life has replaced the old family ties which held Western Civilization together for centuries. All people are given some kind of employment, no matter how useless or meaningless. Children are wrenched away from their 'parents' right after birth. People have no responsibility; therefore they have no freedom. But they do have security. For those few misfits who step out of line, we have available drugs and hallucinogenics to raise their already blurred sense of interest to the necessary pitch. And remember this, Crankshaw; we have not destroyed the capability to arouse fear in the hearts of the people. For irreconcilables we can always apply the time-tested method of applying physical pain. Of that I am sure you are well aware."

Billings surveyed Crankshaw again. Crankshaw had lifted his eyes slightly and was looking at the sky. His gaze was detached and distant.

"I know what you are thinking," said Billings. "You believe that one day mankind will once again boldly reach out and touch the stars. You have visions of another society on a distant planet, established by you and your little band of rebels, which will establish a new civilization based on decency, freedom, and compassion. Dismiss such thoughts from your mind, for they are futile and useless. Men are not compassionate, and they are not decent. All past civilizations and cultures in what was once known as the Western World based all their assumptions on one false tenet: that human nature is basically good. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Men are naturally cruel, selfish, and cynical. Even you, Crankshaw. You desire power as much as any other man. You tasted power once, when you were a member of the Hierarchy, and you visibly enjoyed it. Face your own motives, man! Quit deceiving yourself. And face the motives which engendered our movement."

"You're wrong," exclaimed Crankshaw, suddenly roused from his icy lethargy. "I never betrayed the people! I never misused my power. My influence and power was only used to help all the people." As he spoke he gazed fixedly at Billings for the first time.

"You are laboring under the illusion which I just spoke about." Billings replied in a calm, phlegmatic voice. He was quite weary with Crankshaw's rationale, which he considered hypocritical. "The desire to acquire power is common to all human beings in varying degrees. Have you ever read *1984* by Orwell? It was a popular book in the English-speaking world during the latter half of the 20th century. There is a character in that book named O'Brien. O'Brien says that power implies the ability to cause another man to suffer. And he is exactly right. Look at yourself. You are a living verification of my thesis. I can have you cast into a dungeon and flogged. I can let my storm trooper work you over again and again. I can force you to submit to the cruelest electric shocks imaginable.

"But that isn't always needed. Not by a long shot! We have reduced humanity in this age to a mass of apathetic, groveling drudges. We took the youth culture which was so

prevalent in the United States and Europe in the 1970's and 1980's and fashioned a new race of men! We took their phony pride, their conformity, and their potential for fanaticism and transformed the Western World into a totalitarian state more oppressive and crushing than either Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Their descendants live in the city below us today in a constant state of drug induced euphoria. Do you remember their slogans? The young people talked about 'alternate life styles' and 'individualism' and 'power to the people.' What monumental hypocrisy! You remember the mass youth movements of the 1960's and 1970's. Never were a group of people on the face of the earth more prone to submit to tyranny and conformity than these groups of cowardly youth! They masked their false concern for other people behind the cleverest facades. They had no real feeling for anyone else. And we harnessed that force. We are now the masters of the world!"

Billings was so excited that, in spite of the coldness, he was sweating. His eyes gleamed wildly in the black of night. His cigarette was in his hands, but it had long since gone out. He had visions of controlling vast groups of people across the entire planet. Crankshaw, his adversary, was shaking slightly, although the coldness was not the primary reason. His fists were clenched rigidly at his sides. Yet he didn't move or speak for a moment. Finally he burst forth, almost hysterically, in wild frenzy of words.

"You are wrong, Billings. You're lying! It was you and your henchmen that turned the youth into listless automatons. They were good, fine, and idealistic. They wanted to purge the world of racism, imperialism, and capitalistic exploitation. They were against the oppressiveness and injustice which was so rampant in the late era of the industrial 20th century society. The most dedicated and utopian group of thinkers in the world – and you perverted them!"

Billings said nothing at once. He looked at Crankshaw, who was immobile now and close to tears. The two men were not more than 18 inches apart. Billings lit another cigarette (the one he had earlier offered to Crankshaw) and blew smoke into Crankshaw's eyes. The gleam had momentarily left his eyes, but he noted with satisfaction that the smoke was causing Crankshaw visible irritation.

You mentioned an interesting word just a moment ago, Crankshaw," he said, almost gently. "I believe you referred to the youth culture as 'utopian'. Are you familiar with any of the old utopian works? Plato's *Republic*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, Skinner's *Walden Two* are familiar titles to you, surely, since you studied political science in college. These literary works were both a blessing and a hindrance to our movement in the early days. The gentlemen who wrote these utopias were sincere individuals. They genuinely believed that men could make a better world here on earth. They were compassionate and humanistic. But they were small in number, and their myopic view of human nature precluded

any chance that their programs could be successfully implemented. But consider this, Crankshaw: they were frequently willing to use force and coercion to keep human beings in line once their desires had been achieved. Think about it. The members of *Walden Two* were not allowed to discuss the internal affairs of the society with outsiders. Edward Bellamy's world government in *Looking Backward* maintained that citizens who refused to join the industrial army should be put on a diet of bread and water until they gave in and served 'willingly'. And think about the power which Plato's Guardians wielded. And remember Frazier, in *Walden Two*, who had little use for democracy. These men were fanatics of a sort, Crankshaw. And remember the old saying: 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'. How true that always is. How very, very true indeed!

"These men set a precedent. When we were working and consolidating our power, we used force and committed the most barbaric atrocities in the name of 'justice', 'freedom', and 'equality'. We stifled opposition by proclaiming that it was all for the greater good. It was incredible how these 'utopian' young people swallowed it. We instituted whole series of purges in which we cleansed our ranks of non-totalitarian elements. I remember one long-haired youth who insisted that a certain individual in one of our party cells was dis-loyal because he disliked the music of Jimi Hendrix, a rock musician who had been popular during the 1960's. These hypocrites demanded to be able to do their own thing – yet refused to allow anyone else the same right. Finally we purged the movement of those individuals who had joined for their own hedonism and drug-ridden selfishness. We recognized those who craved power for the pure pleasure which they derived from it. Men like Bellamy, More, and Skinner seemed to frequently ignore them. Political and social movements, regardless of the virtuous motives which engender them, almost invariably attract individuals who desire and crave power. Remember how Hitler built the Nazi Party? We had learned our lesson. We weeded out the powerful from the unfit. We knew who desired to make other men suffer. Make no mistake about it. You were one of these men, Crankshaw."

Crankshaw winced visibly when Billings said this. Yet he had managed to remain composed. Billings was still smoking. It was obvious that he hugely enjoyed his monologue at this point. Crankshaw had been bullied and beaten into submission. Sometimes the corners of his mouth moved, as if he meant to reply or object, but he was too weak to say anything. The air had still grown colder, and the first faint rays of dawn were streaking brilliantly through the sky. The light faintly illuminated the faces of the two men, and they peered at one another again. For a moment no one spoke.

"Before you go, Crankshaw, let me say a few other things. We of the Hierarchy have perfected a scientific theory of human politics. We owe this in part to the ideas of Harrington. But we lack his foolish idealism. We have satiated the Civilians with so much heroin, drugs, and mind-

less slogans that we wield complete and absolute power. We can crush you like a flea if we desire to do so. You and your group of misfits could never have toppled our regime. We are the future. Utopia is dead. In fact, it only existed in the minds of well-meaning but muddling fools who were too cowardly to realize what the genuine motives of men were. All that you have stood for has been vanquished. We are victorious. You could have joined us if you had wished to. But you refused to recognize your own motives. You were weak.”

Two guards appeared behind Crankshaw. They were bell-bottomed and did not carry truncheons or pistols. They grabbed Crankshaw, almost gently, and escorted him away from the parapet and back once again in the direction

of the door which would lead him down into the recesses of the building. Dawn had broken. Billings was looking toward the horizon and thinking of the new and powerful world which he was creating and ruling. He looked back at Crankshaw one more time and noticed that the blood on his arm had dried.

It was still cold. Billings swore and again wished that he had remembered to bring his silk gloves along. He lit up another marijuana cigarette and noticed for the first time that they really tasted very poorly. I must switch to another brand, he thought idly. He went on smoking and looked out at the newly risen sun. His eyes were bright with excitement.

Cries In The Dark

by Allen H. Greenfield

Excerpts from a newswire item, April 29, 1979:

“The Chairman of the FCC today announced that following lengthy deliberations, the American Broadcasting Company, last of the three major television networks operating on a private basis, was being removed as a user of the public airwaves.

“The decision came after consideration of ABC’s documentary program, ‘A Look Back At The 70’s’ and follows similar decisions in the case of the other two major private networks, NBC and CBS.”

Excerpts from a newswire item, April 30, 1979:

“Following yesterday’s decision terminating programming by the American Broadcasting Company, the FCC today announced that the Public Television System would, in the chairman’s words, ‘ . . . take up the slack created by expanding PTS news broadcasts from one hour to two, effective immediately.’ The Chairman went on to say that PTS news broadcasts would continue to reflect the FCC’s policy of ‘neutrality and objectivity’ as in the past.”

Excerpts from a news summary, PTS, June 11, 1979:

“In Washington, the Transportation Department announced plans to extend the interstate highway system still further. Transportation Secretary Jefferson stated that the extension should provide ‘thousands of new jobs during the next five years’. Meanwhile on the sports scene, Pittsburgh downed New York 5-3, while the Los Angeles-Braves game was rained out in Atlanta. In other news . . . ”

Excerpts from a shortwave broadcast from an unknown location, June 12, 1979:

“ . . . therefore, as of today, the Emergency Free Radio will broadcast, as part of our nightly program, a point-for-point commentary on the newscasts presented to the American public by the government-operated PTS.

“Towards the end of last night’s newscast, it was announced that the interstate highway system would be extended, and that more jobs would thereby be reduced. *Not* mentioned were the following facts: (A) The already overwhelming interstate highway system has never kept apace of the massive flow of traffic. New extensions of the system will begin to take in parts of America’s national parks. Once the precedent is set, you may be sure that what remains unpaved and green in America will not be so for long. The highways are an unnecessary evil, but the job situation is something else again, because (B) though no exact figures have been released in over a year, it is apparent that unemployment is at an all-time high. Thus the frantic but doomed efforts by the government to provide meaningless or, worse, damaging, make-work jobs.

“PTS broadcasts have, since the closing of the last private television network, gone out of hand in their bias. Even sports stories are corrupted. PTS announced that a baseball game between the L.A. Dodgers and the Atlanta Braves was cancelled due to rain. In reality, the game was postponed following a *food riot* in the area of the baseball

park. A *food riot!* In America!”

Excerpts from a news commentary, PTS September 8, 1979:

“It has been rumoured recently that an illegal radio station, calling itself the ‘Emergency Free Radio’ and operating from a clandestine location, has been broadcasting subversive material via shortwave for some months now. The FCC, when questioned about the matter, denied all knowledge of such a station.”

Confidential communication from the office of the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the office of the FCC Chairman:

Mr. Chairman:

We at the bureau are fully cognizant of your concern with regard to the illegal radio station, but I wish to personally assure you that the matter is well in hand and the operators of this station should be apprehended shortly. They appear to be operating from a boat in international waters off the East Coast of the United States. Pinpointing their location has been made more difficult as they appear to be constantly radically altering their exact location to avoid detection. However the station seems to have a rather weak signal, and as it is a shortwave station, I doubt that many people have heard the broadcasts as such, though subversive newspapers have reprinted some of their material and added fuel to the rumour-mill, which, I think you would agree, constitutes at present the worst of the problem.

Excerpts from a shortwave broadcast from a location in the Atlantic, October 9, 1979:

“There’s no doubt about it they’ve . . . (static) . . . our location and are within site of our little boat. (static) . . . appears to be a number of small, gun-boat type vessels,

don’t know whether they intend to capture us or just blow us out of the water. Keep tuning your dials, people! There are only three of us in this boat, but there are hundreds of millions of you! Somebody else . . . (yell off mike) . . . has got to pick up the ball. Or it’ll be too late for all . . .”

Excerpts from a newswire item, November 11, 1979:

“Sentences were handed out today in the case of the three young men found guilty of subversive activity last week . . . All three received life sentences.”

Excerpts from a feature broadcast, PTS, “A Look At 1979”, December 30, 1979:

“ . . . and then there was that rumour, back during the summer, that an illegal radio station was broadcasting shortwave subversive messages in the dead of night on a regular basis. But in the last couple of months or so, nothing further has been heard about it. Either the station, if it was real, is dead, or the rumour is dead. Or both.”

Excerpt from a news summary, PTS, December 31, 1979:

“ . . . the Department of Labor announced also that at year’s end unemployment had dropped. This was taken as an indication that the worst of the economic crisis is over, and the year ahead should bring further confirmation of this. More good news at year’s end from the Department of . . . ”

Excerpt from a shortwave broadcast from an unknown location, January 1, 1980:

“Happy New Year! This is Emergency Free Radio, again bringing you, after a lengthy but unavoidable intermission, the truth about what’s going on in America today. Sooner or later, we too shall probably be caught, but then, in the ‘last public words’ of our predecessors ‘Somebody else has got to pick up the ball’

Happy New Year, America! Happy New Year, PTS!”

At Hell’s Gate

by Glen T. Brock

The modern south, although developing a cosmopolitan facade, is and has always been indigenously poor, requiring and receiving federal aid since the civil war with prodigious regularity. When my father died, as we had always feared, from his alcoholism, the small parcels of slum property that still remained in his possession, as well as the family estate was left in my hands as the sole surviving son and executor of the estate. Having no interest whatsoever in these relics

of his tormented past I sold the pitiful parcels of land to the federal urban renewal project, rather than face the somewhat expensive prospect of major renovation. I considered the move to be not only economically but also psychologically sound, and the removal of my father’s estate from my consciousness was indeed a relief.

I considered myself absolved of family relations, and after establishing an account for the preservation and main-

tenance of the family plot, I opened an extra account for the balance and returned to my somewhat neglected career in marketing. I thought that the entire affair was behind me and my father's regrettable and heart breaking career as an addict to liquors could now at last be forgotten.

I was absolutely wrong in this assumption. For a year I heard nothing regarding the property and lost no thought upon it, busying myself with my work and the more pleasant pursuits of social intercourse with the more beautiful of the opposite sex. But, with the onset of demolition for the erection of a massive apartment complex, I was notified by my attorneys that something was not in order and my presence at the site of the old family estate would be mandatory. Thoroughly abashed, but still curious as to why my presence should be required a year after the transaction of the land had been concluded, I cancelled all of my appointments for the next day and joined my attorney for a quick cocktail and a jaunt back down to my father's dilapidated brick and shingle home.

I will have to admit that the sight of the street where I was born was somewhat startling. The gigantic oaks, which had once formed an ominous arch across the cobbled street now were mutilated stumps, pushed aside from the broken street like gigantic shrubs pulled by a monstrous gardener. There wasn't much left of the old house either. The roof was completely gone, and the second floor, where I had spent many a pleasant hour, was a skeletal ruin. The first floor was reasonably intact and there we met the foreman of the project, the contractor, and much to my surprise, several policemen.

After brief preliminary introductions, I was led downstairs into the basement by the very nervous contractor. The stairs were rickety and the descent was precarious. Strangely enough, my father had always forbade me access to this particular portion of the house and had always promised immediate and unpleasant rewards should I violate the enforced taboo, so this was the first time I had ever explored this particular section of the house. The place had an unpleasant blend of rotten mustiness and a peculiar sick room odor, which slightly nauseated me. Cursing by vodka collins, which sloshed in my empty stomach, I felt my way through the darkness, hardly aided by the inadequate light of the contractor's electric torch.

Demolition of the house, he explained, had been simple and mechanical. The stubborn wooden frame could never be more than slightly resistant to modern demolition equipment. The old house died a graceless death, torn away from within and pulled down without ceremony. However, examination of the cellar, for the purpose of sealing a sewage line, had led to the destruction of one of the old brick walls, and this destruction brought about a startling revelation, as the foreman revealed.

My eyes had become acclimated to the darkness now, but as the contractor distinctly explained the construction of a facade wall in the basement of my father's house, I could only see the mouldering skeletal remains of the man

who had been buried behind that wall of brick only to be rudely disinterred by the mechanisms of the twentieth century!

I was very visibly taken aback. Quickly I found a place to sit on the rotted stair, the liquor in me swirling in my head. The implications of the horrendous misdeed which had happened in this house were monstrous, and the prospect of discovering that my family was prone to insidious murders as well as the disease of alcoholism was too much to handle at once.

The contractor was a good man and sympathetic. He allowed me a few minutes to sort my thoughts before he finished his explanation. The two policemen had joined us by that time and someone lit a Coleman's lamp, which illuminated the grisly scene with an ungodly dazzling brightness. But even with the light the contractor had to direct my attention to what lay directly behind the corpse in the tiny alcove. Directly behind the unfortunate fellow was a stout metal reinforced door, locked with a sizable bolt with the following inscription carefully painted across its sturdy frame in my father's own hand:

DAMNED FOREVER IS HE WHO OPENS THIS DOOR.

It was this combination of circumstance that demanded my presence in this damned house.

I was carefully cross-examined by the policemen, who were reluctant to accept my testimony of never having been inside the room where we now stood. As for the identification of the corpse I couldn't even guess. The door was a new revelation to me also. My father had always been a secretive person, for which I now was unpleasantly aware of, but I could not, in my memory, recall when he had built the brick wall or any mention of the strange door with the ominous warning.

After questioning me, the policemen busied themselves with the unpleasant task of checking the corpse for identification, which was far more grisly than I could stand in my present state, so I retreated upstairs for fresh air. Surprisingly, one of the police officers came up shortly, with a small leather bound book in his hand. He asked me to examine it and identify it if I could. I couldn't. However, I did strive to unravel some of the mystery by skimming through the little volume.

The book had been found on the person of the man dead in the cellar and was a diary dated from March, 1927 through July of the same year. In briefly scanning the tiny volume, memories of my father's character reemerged from the recesses of my mind where I had forgotten them.

My father, in his earlier years, had been a devotee to the investigation of the black arts. His knowledge and research had gradually become extensive and detailed. I remember my mother's mentioning that he was near the completion of a very important experiment when I was about seven or eight years of age, but, very mysteriously in retrospect, my father abruptly abandoned his investigations in that field and turned first to near religious fanaticism, then shortly to acute alcoholism. He never again mentioned the subject.

The diary was handwritten in that beautiful, but difficult to read, Spencerian hand popular in the twenties, and with the many abbreviations the diary was at first impossible to read. However, after acute observation a coherent monolog developed. Typical were the brief notes excerpted and recorded here: March 17—(the diary read) M. contacts me today. Has very important sorc. volume. Discussions until late hour on occult.

The affair with the books lasted through April, and the lengthy discussions of the occult were strictly over my head. There was an abrupt change of pace in the May, 1927 notations.

May 11—Saw M. again today. Prospect of hyper-dimensional transmission close to reality. Studied geometric patterns reproduced in Alhazred text. We are plunging headlong into taboos which have been enforced for millenia.

May 25—M. says the key to the problem is the pentagram.

June 4—M. called on me at midnight. Said something monstrous had occurred. Hurriedly dressed and rushed to M.'s house. On the floor in the basement library was a demolished pentagram. M. drank rather heavily.

Exactly what the monstrous event was the writer of the diary never explained. My father's researches appeared to tamper with the supernatural and the element of danger was evidently great, as recorded in a later entry by the dead assistant.

June 18—We have finished the reinforced door. M. is assured that no devils will pass through its sound frame. M. is shaken by previous experience. He wants to stop. We cannot stop now that we are on the verge of a breakthrough into another world.

June 22—Another argument with M.. M. wants to stop "ungodly" experiments. Agreed to one final excursion.

July 10—We are finally prepared for the climax of the last few months researches. Tonight we shall see the other world.

That was the last entry.

I explained to the police the context and implications of the diary, which did not settle them to any extent. It was decided that the basement library would have to be entered and examined. I reluctantly agreed to open the sealed and bolted door.

Again I descended the rickety steps into the mouldy basement, and this time the heavy presence of something unholy exuded from its damp interiors. The warning my father had placed on the door seemed to shine in the light of the Coleman, and my imagination sensed an outward bulge in the door at the hinges. Flanked by the two policemen, I advanced on the door and removed the bolt without ceremony.

After a brief cascade of dust, the door swung outward with great difficulty, revealing for the first time in nearly fifty years my father's forbidden library. The rows of books were heavily coated with dust and the papers on the desk

were buried in the decay of age. The dampness was everywhere and the heat stifling. And on the floor in the center of the room was a completed pentagram, drawn in chalk, *from the center of which exuded a pale blue aura filled with boiling smoke! And as we entered the room beings of unspeakable horror emerged from within the mystic symbol!*

We stood frozen in awful amazement. It was if all my childhood fantasy demons had reappeared to torment me. Horned devils and gigantic cats leaped from the aperture and advanced in hordes upon us. Gigantic sinuous serpentine things raised their reptilian heads to the ceiling and monstrous octopods slithered painfully across the floor. As one of the gigantic cats lunged a policeman emptied his service revolver into it at point blank range with no result. The feline's victim died, his throat and head ripped off and swallowed up by the monster even as the spent gun smoked.

It was a time for action and not thought. I grabbed the other policeman and bodily threw him out the door, leaping immediately behind him. As I slammed the heavy door I could feel those creatures from hell impaling themselves on the other side in desperate attempts to force the entrance-way open again. With trembling and sweaty hands, the bolt was secured and our shouts brought help. Within minutes the door had been trussed and Negro brickmen were frantically reconstructing the wall.

For more than just a few tormented minutes we stared at one another in mute disbelief. My mind reeled in a storming passionate seizure of terror, seeing only the warning on the now sealed door. My eyes could only see the minions of hell struggling out of that tiny opening into our world.

As for the identity of the poor wretch who died, securing that door decades ago, no one can guess. His crypt is sealed by masonry and mortar. The entire site has been buried by those huge earth shaking machines of progress, and every day as I come to watch, fearful of renewed discovery of that gate to hell, the skeletal frame of those towering anonymous apartments grows higher, cutting into the skyline like the black denuded roots of the trees that once graced that land.

And as that building takes form I find that my father's knowledge, which drove the tormented man to an alcoholic's death, has been inherited by his only son. It is not a pleasant thing to know that *you* have opened the ancient pandora's box and released again the ancient demons upon the Earth. As I drink tasteless drinks to qualm the dread in my soul I see not the horror of today but of tomorrow. Inevitably, the year will come when that crisp new structure being built today will become shabby and worn, to be condemned and destroyed for the new. *What will the next man do when that apartment house is torn down for progress and the cellar room's gate to hell is once more exposed to the world?*

The Master Thief

by Susan M. Patrick

He appeared in the door of the tavern, and silence dropped like a weighted theatrical curtain. He was not an imposing figure—a slight man clothed in neutral, indefinable tones—nor was his name whispered about, as it would have been were he a famous hero. He surveyed the room with darting, probing eyes and a quizzical half-smile; then he moved to a far table. A murmur grew again in the room, but much subdued.

“So he comes again,” said Parval. “And to the wizard Vandor, too! It will be a mighty prize, I wager!”

“Aye, and without excitement,” said his companion. “He comes, he meets a man, he leaves, and he returns with the prize in a day or so. Nothing more. No one is missing, nobody is searching for him—and he is not fleeing. If he is a thief, I do not see how any other thief maintains a living.”

“He only steals on assignment, and with full public knowledge that he is out for one purpose only. Surely the victim would know what Vandor (or any of the others) is after and be warned. But he always brings the prize, and in the same matter-of-fact, businesslike manner. I have often wondered, Jermyn. But it does no good to wonder.”

“Perhaps there is a way to follow him.”

“We might as well *ask* him his secret!” exclaimed Parval. And the subject was dropped with the arrival of a platter of assorted meat pasty.

Soon the stranger departed and the tavern became again a noisy place where men met. The wizard Vandor remained a while longer, then slipped out unnoticed. And life went on. Yet, two days later the wizard Vandor and the thief Malgreth met again at that tavern, and Malgreth was seen to exchange pouches with the wizard. He was as calm and businesslike as before, speaking to no one but the wizard and coming and going quickly and silently. And Parval and Jermyn watched it all with an air of resignation but an inner sense of speculation. Surely there must be a way to follow this thief and learn his secret.

Later that day, as the two sat pondering how to learn the techniques of the mysterious thief, it happened that one or the other of them remembered a stranger who had watched Malgreth with a somewhat wistful fascination. The man had looked like an average tavern habitue—perhaps somewhat less solvent than they were, if such was possible. But he had an air about him that had registered his presence with them as something unusual.

“The best way to set up Malgreth to be followed is to have some wizard commission him so that we will know

what he’s after and where to go to watch him. If this fellow is as desperate for funds as he seemed, it may be that he could portray the wizard for us.”

“‘T is a good thought, Parval. Let us seek him out and approach him, with some suitable inducement.”

And so they returned to the tavern and searched out the stranger.

“My name is Karwyck, master magician of far Limfrath, and I am in search of a portion of an idol. I have heard that you can steal anything, and that there is no notice taken of your thefts. Is this true?”

“It has been,” replied Malgreth, with his faint smile.

“Can you—will you—bring me one piece, *any* piece of the great forgotten idol Kash, in the ruined temple K’lanth—do you know it?”

“Aye, and I can do your behest.”

“‘T will be a great boon, for I have been unable to reach the temple. Now let us discuss your fee.”

And so Malgreth went to acquire a portion of the great idol Kash, and Parval and Jermyn also. They followed cautiously, and Malgreth went confidently, never looking for followers. And so they came to the temple K’lanth.

“He must be inside, at work,” said Jermyn.

“Aye, but still we would be best to enter as if that were not the likely thing. Perchance his confident ways were but to lure us to his clutches. For surely he guards his secret well, else ’t would be known ere now.”

They edged into the ruins, creeping from stone to stone and straining for a glimpse of he who they sought, or a sound of his work. And yet they were taken unaware, caught up in two great stone hands and lifted to gaze into the unthinkable countenance of Kash, which was now marred by a small chip missing from one huge ear. And their maddened screams brought no answer save a small chuckle and Malgreth’s words:

“I do not steal—I trade.”

The next day Malgreth and Karwyck were seen to exchange pouches in the tavern. Nobody there had missed Parval and Jermyn, save Karwyck. He would have been quite pleased to keep the profits he would get from the sale of the fragment of Kash, but he did not know that the two who had hired him would not return. And so, as Malgreth turned to leave, he asked,

“Master thief, did you see my enemies, who might perchance have followed you to K’lanth?”

Malgreth smiled and turned away, but those around him heard his whisper, “I trade.”

The Last Priest

In a cold black hall, in an old black hall,
Far beneath the ground
An old God sits, and never moves,
And never makes a sound.

Down the corridor comes a man,
Bent, and old, and frail.
An old old God, and an old old man,
Both beyond the pale.

The temple's closed, the way is lost,
No one comes any more;
Time has taken their people away,
And no one cares any more.

Who knows what God, who knows what Priest,
What church or Temple or shrine
Their time is come and gone, my friend,
And no one cares any more.



rock 20

The Watcher's Vale

by Susan M. Patrick

Shimmering through a pastel spectrum the bubble floated on the pool as if awaiting only a breeze to lift it into the air, over the mountains, far above the rings themselves to the outermost moon. Yet the ammonia winds that roared through the pass and around the peaks only raised waves. The bubble was waiting.

In the fifth time of the three-quarter rings after the sixteenth recorded passing of the great comet, a ship landed on the plain beyond the mountains. The bubble brightened to a lavender-rose color and hummed lightly. It reached out and identified the ship's passengers as men from the third planet. Burdened by their protective apparatus, they moved slowly out from the ship. But the bubble could wait. It had waited for eons.

After a time the men discovered the pass and cautiously came through it. They reacted as the bubble knew they would. They were awed by the beauty of the small valley, the fragile-looking bubble shimmering on the pool, the rings reflected all around, the air filled with a clear crystalline music that somehow penetrated the suits the men wore so

that they might hear. The men remained as the moons raced by, hurtling the rings almost as if dancing to the music.

Much later, the men returned to the ship. They had done almost none of their experiments but they sent back reams of details even on the culture of the inhabitants, who had not been even suspected. The sphere watched and saw the message from the third planet, advising the belief that all this was mass hallucination and that the environment was unsuitable for man.

The ship took off and the bubble appeared to rest more lightly on the pool. It shimmered a cool, minty green and hummed a short tune. Overhead the rings opened toward fullness while here below the valley was suddenly full of miniature golden-furred green-eyed creatures. Perhaps had the men from the third planet ever had the opportunity to see them, they would have said they looked something like chipmunks. Beneath the ten moons of Saturn, by the glow of the rings, there was dancing and feasting in the Watcher's Vale.

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