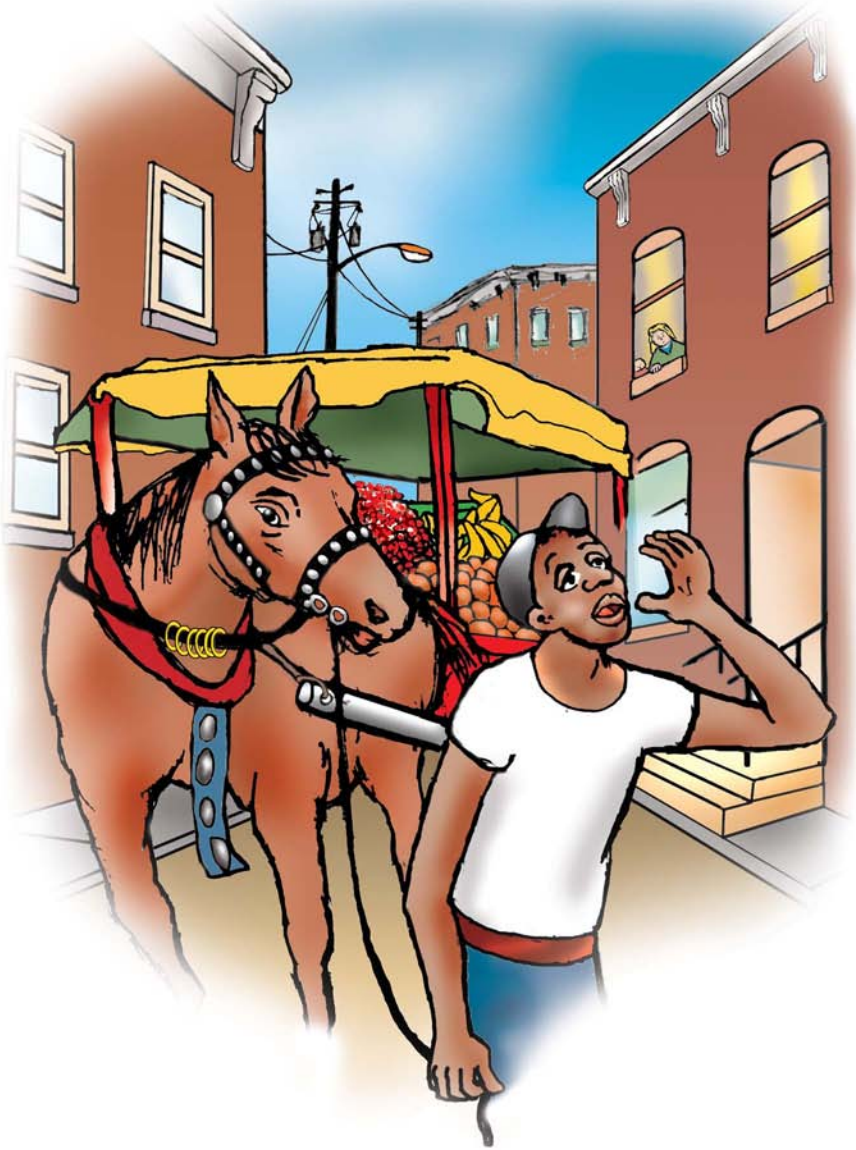


THE IDLER

No.1



a Miscellany by Professor Solomon

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Every man is, or hopes to be, an Idler. Even those who seem to differ most from us are hastening to increase our fraternity; as peace is the end of war, so to be idle is the ultimate purpose of the busy.

There is perhaps no appellation by which a writer can better denote his kindred to the human species. It has been found hard to describe man by an adequate definition. Some philosophers have called him a reasonable animal, but others have considered reason as a quality of which many creatures partake. He has been termed likewise a laughing animal; but it is said that some men have never laughed. Perhaps man may be more properly distinguished as an idle animal; for there is no man who is not sometimes idle. It is at least a definition from which none that shall find it in this paper can be excepted; for who can be more idle than the reader of the *Idler*?

Scarcely any name can be imagined from which less envy or competition is to be dreaded. The Idler has no rivals or enemies. The man of business forgets him; the man of enterprise despises him; and though such as tread the same track of life, fall commonly into jealousy and discord, Idlers are always found to associate in peace, and he who is most famed for doing nothing, is glad to meet another as idle as himself.

—Dr. Johnson

The Last Pedlars

by

Professor Solomon

The residential streets of our cities were once trod by a corps of lowly entrepreneurs. Ill-dressed and unpolished of speech, these men were barely respectable; yet they were welcome in even the best of neighborhoods. Each had a particular skill or commodity to offer. There were chimney-sweeps, broom-sellers, baker's men, strawberry vendors, knife-sharpeners, umbrella-menders, fishmongers, photographers. With wagons and pushcarts and packs, these itinerant tradesmen roamed the town in search of custom. On each street they would signal their approach, and announce their specialty, with a piercing cry. Such a cry—dimly heard at first, then louder and louder as its source drew near—would elicit murmurs of satisfaction from housewives, who loved nothing more than to drop whatever they were doing, thrust some money into an apron pocket, and rush out to hail the fellow. Alas, in recent years these hawkers and handymen have all but disappeared. Rendered obsolete by social and technological change, or else banned by local ordinance, they have faded from the scene. Their distinctive cries are remembered only by the gray-headed among us. The streets have fallen silent; and today's housewife, for all her conveniences and the joy she takes in them, is unacquainted with the unique rapture that a pedlar's approach was apt to inspire in her grandmother.

Unless, that is, she happens to live in Baltimore, where a surprising number of these men have managed to persevere. Bound together in a loose fraternity, and specializing

in the sale of fruit and vegetables, they are known locally as a-rabbers.* A more unlikely relic of our mercantile past would be hard to imagine. Save for their contemporary dress (T-shirt and jeans typically), the a-rabbers resemble the pedlars of old in every respect. Each wanders with his wares from neighborhood to neighborhood; makes known his presence with a cry; and, most extraordinary of all, goes about with a horse and wagon. Alone in the city (except for the mounted police), he has retained the services of *Equus caballus*. Pedlars with horse-drawn wagons, in a modern metropolis! Their survival is remarkable—as much so perhaps as that of the Amish, with whom the a-rabbers share this anachronistic mode of transport.

I recall the first time I saw an a-rabber. With his pony, rickety wagon, and load of fruit, he was driving down a busy street. An odd fish indeed, in that teeming school of motor vehicles, was his antique conveyance, which clattered as it bounced along. (It was as if traffic, like Nature, had its prodigies.) With perfect equanimity, the horse trotted amidst the cars and trucks. Her shoes hammered the pavement, the bells on her harness jingled. New to the city, I watched this picturesque sight go by—and grievously misjudged it. The canopied wagon, the horse with her bells, the pedlar with his fruit, I presumed to be a nostalgic re-creation—a gimmick aimed at the tourist trade, or else at a sentimental streak in the natives. Here, I deemed, was a contrived bit of “ye olde Baltimore,” sponsored by the city no doubt as part of its efforts at self-promotion. (In an attempt to attract conventions, and to raise the morale of its citizens, it had been touting itself as “Charm City.”) I could not have been more wrong. These hucksters, as I eventually learned, were not re-creations at all. With their fresh produce and loud cries, they had been around for as long as anyone could remember. And as for the city encouraging them, the opposite was true: for years now it had been trying to get rid of the a-rabbers.

On a downtown street I would occasionally spot one of these gypsies, with his mobile produce-stand; but he was

* The term derives from *street arab*, or wanderer.

invariably on his way somewhere and not looking for customers. So I had yet to hear the cries the a-rabbers used to announce themselves. Finally, though, one did reach my ear; and I was guilty again of a misperception. There had sounded one afternoon, from an alley near my house, what I took to be a melancholy and inarticulate shout. Periodically repeating itself, the sound drew nigh, receded, and was gone. The plaintive wail of a drunk, I decided, unable to imagine what else it might have been. That the cry had reverberated with a musical quality—had been sung out, not shouted—had had a lilting cadence to it, a rhythmic rise and fall—had scarcely registered on me. I had been privileged to hear, and dull enough not to recognize, a street cry.*

By the time the identity of this sound (which would return to the alley from time to time) became known to me, I had moved to a neighborhood off the route of any pedlar. But one day a melodious refrain drifted to my window. Aha, I murmured knowledgeably as it repeated itself—a street cry. The sense of the cry, though, eluded me; and try as I might, I couldn't make out what it was the man was selling. "Obawahhhweeee!" he bellowed from afar. Some local fruit of which I had never heard? Some ethnic delicacy? Or the esoteric rendering of a familiar comestible? Curiosity gnawed, until I just had to know. Clapping on my cap, I dashed from the house and set off in the direction of the sound. It grew louder, but no more intelligible, as I approached. "Obawahhhweeee!" There was a hypnotic fascination to these syllables that beckoned me on, like the song of a siren. And then there he was: a young black man, standing by his pickup truck. (A heretical minority of the a-rabbers have forsaken the pony cart.) The truck was filled with cantaloupes—was

* My only previous exposure to the phenomenon had come during a Laurel and Hardy movie called *Swiss Miss*. In the opening scene, the pair is seen leading a horse and wagon through an Alpine village, as Ollie calls out: "Mouse-traaaps! Mouse-traaaps!" (They have come to Switzerland because of the abundance of cheese.)

brimming with them: as rich a sight as a chestful of coins. So, cantaloupes. In now on the secret, I listened again as the a-rabber bent his head back and raised his cry.

Yet I continued to hear that nonsensical phrase. It was maddening. Clearly, he was chanting “Cantaloupes!” (or “Cantaloupes here!” or “I got Cantaloupes!”); but there was no convincing my ear of that fact. The sound bore no discernable relationship to its sense (or to anything else for that matter). How had such a linguistic transformation come about? A common explanation is that the a-rabbers purposely obscure their cries, to make people wonder what is for sale, and so come out to look. H. L. Mencken, writing of the Baltimore he had known as a youth, mentions the phenomenon, attributing it, however, to the erosive influence of time:

But when the huge, fragrant strawberries of Anne Arundel county (pronounced Ann’ran’l) appeared at last they went for only five cents a box. All Spring the street swarmed with hucksters selling such things; they called themselves, not hucksters, but Arabs (with the first *a* as in *day*), and announced their wares with loud, raucous, unintelligible cries, much worn down by phonetic decay. In Winter the principle howling was done by colored men selling shucked oysters out of huge cans. In the dark backward and abysm of time their cry must have been simply “Oysters!”, but generations of Aframerican larynxes had debased it to “Awneeeeeee!” with the final *e*’s prolonged until the vendor got out of breath. He always wore a blue-and-white checked apron. . . .*

Or perhaps a kind of Orphic possession had engendered these mutations. So caught up in the act of crying would the pedlars become—so exhilarated to be lifting their voices to the heavens—as to lose touch with the actual syllables of their chants. The result was a purely musical phrase—a stylized riff that would take on a fixed form.

* H. L. Mencken, *Happy Days* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940)

But who were these roving fruit-and-vegetable men? How, if at all, were they organized? What had drawn them to the life of a pedlar? And how had the institution managed to survive, so little altered and on such a scale, here in Baltimore? The more I pondered their presence, the more intriguing it became...until one day I found myself examining, at the library, what little had been written on the subject. This included a file of newspaper clippings that spanned sixty years, and a report commissioned by the city. (Officials had been debating whether to help preserve the a-rabbers—for their “charm”—or to continue to persecute them.) From these sources came a glimpse into their history, character, and present problems.

The a-rabbers had been a local institution, I learned, for over a century. From the start their ranks had consisted almost entirely of blacks. (Drifting up to Baltimore, former slaves must have found peddling one of the few livelihoods open to them.) By 1900 a thousand or so of these men were plying their trade. Produce in those days arrived by ship, at the Camden Market. With their ponies and brightly-colored wagons, the hucksters would show up at dawn to bargain for their stock, buying no more than they deemed saleable by dusk. The crates of produce were heaved onto the wagons; and the a-rabbers set out to unload these perishable goods upon the public. Following routes defined by the rough and tumble of daily competition, they covered the entire town. In the early morning hours, their chants would begin to be heard. Like muezzins calling the faithful to prayer, the pedlars filled the air with their cries. A typical cry would simply name whatever was on the wagon that day: “Tomatoes!” or “Spargus! Sweet potatahhs!” Frequently, though, a more elaborate description was called out:

“Red! Red! Red! Strawbu-e-es!”

“Fresh an’ fine!
Get ’em fo’ a dime!
Strawbu-e-es!”

“Whoa ho ho
Honey, honey, here I come
I got bananas on the run!”

Such chants would join those of the other itinerants for whom the streets and alleys were a vast, rent-free marketplace:

“Hot apple dumplings, hot, hot!”

“Ombreelys t’mend!”

“Broooms!”

Six days a week, in good weather, the city would echo with the cries of its pedlars.

The a-rabbers constituted the vast majority of these men. A thousand-strong, they were a major means of produce distribution, and would remain so well into the twentieth century. Their numbers did dwindle eventually to around half; yet the a-rabbers seemed impervious to the trend that was dealing a death-blow to their fellow street-sellers. Despite the rise of supermarkets, housewives persisted in patronizing them.* Perhaps the sight, the aroma, the very notion of fresh food being sold from a cart was simply irresistible. Also, a kind of loyalty may have been involved, whether to the individual pedlar (with his regular visits to one’s neighborhood) or to the tradition itself. The a-rabbers, for their part, clung to their calling. It was a way of life many had followed since boyhood, offering both a livelihood (however modest) and a sense of independence; and they were not about to give it up. Nor, conceivably, did they wish to part company with their horses, with whom bonds of affection may have formed. Thus, hundreds of hucksters continued to roam Baltimore. The cobbled streets had been covered with

* The more robust of these women are said to have had a standard answering cry, by which they would summon an a-rabber to their door. This sound has been transcribed as “Aw-aw!” and likened to the call of a crow.

asphalt; yet the clatter of hooves and iron-rimmed wheels was still to be heard on many of them.

But in the mid-sixties, the idyll came to an end. City officials decided that the a-rabbers—however venerable an institution—had to go. That horses were still allowed on the streets must have been inconceivable to a certain bureaucratic set of mind. Also, a number of complaints had been filed. Most of these involved the stables (there were 25 of them) from which the pedlars rented their rigs, and out of which they worked. Neighborhood Improvement Associations were protesting the alleged unsightliness and rank odor of these establishments. Complaints had been registered, too, from another quarter: the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It accused the pedlars of mistreating their horses; specifically, of yoking them in an improper fashion and with antiquated gear.*

Bending to these pressures, the city passed a law that forbade the maintenance of a stable within 300 feet of any residence—a measure which would have closed nearly all the stables. Their livelihood at stake, the a-rabbers and stable-owners fought back. An association was formed and a lawyer was hired. In a *reductio ad absurdum*, they argued that Pimlico Racetrack would also have to shut down, under the new law. In the end, the ban stood but was not enforced, no municipal agency having been designated for the task. Defiantly, the stables remained in operation.

The city was determined, however, to see them go; and a few years later, it took sterner action. As part of a new zoning plan, most of the neighborhoods in which stables were located were classified as residential. A zoning board now had jurisdiction; and the stable-owners were ordered to relocate or else fold. Many folded. Others kept a low profile and managed to stay in business at their old locations. Meanwhile, another menace had arrived on the scene: Urban Renewal. To make room for housing projects, entire districts of Baltimore were being condemned

* The a-rabbers denied the charges, insisting they took good care of their animals. The truth of the matter seems to have been that some of the younger, more inexperienced men were guilty of abuses.

and leveled; and a number of stables met their end in this manner. By 1979, only ten remained. The majority of these were not in compliance with one law or another; but an uneasy truce seems to have been reached with the city.

Nor was the attack on the stables the only problem confronting the a-rabbers. In the late sixties the Camden Market had shut down, its waterfront site scheduled for “redevelopment” into little shoppes and eateries. (A “festive marketplace” known as Harborplace.) The produce center had been relocated about five miles away: still within reach of a wagon. But then that site too had been abandoned, for a modern facility midway between Baltimore and Washington. The hucksters were dependent now on a stable-owner, or other middleman, to truck in their fruit and vegetables for them—an additional cost they could ill afford. (They were already paying ten or twenty dollars a day for their rigs, and a similar amount, often, to young helpers who rode along.)

There were problems, too, with the horses and wagons. Veterinarians—wary of the obscure alleys and blighted parts of town in which the stables were located—refused to come out to treat ailing animals. And any major damage to the wagons, such as a broken wheel, could be a calamity. Until 1976, the a-rabbers had availed themselves of the services of a repairman named Simmons. But then, as reported by the *Sun*:

The city zoning board yesterday disapproved the application of an elderly man, who said he is Baltimore’s only surviving wheelwright, to keep the stable north of Patterson Park he has operated for 37 years.

The board took the action as the result of complaints from the city housing department, a city councilman and neighbors that the stable for three ponies in the 500 block North Bradford street was “obnoxious and offensive.”

However, in the course of the hour-long hearing on the application of John R. Simmons, of the 200 block North Milton avenue, it was also testified that the small stable was regularly cleaned and was “not very offensive.”

Mr. Simmons said he uses half the Bradford street

property for the repair of horse-drawn wagons and wagon wheels and the other half to board the ponies used to bring the wagons to the shop.

For repairs, wagons had to be taken now to an Amishman in Pennsylvania.

Finally, there were the perils and indignities of traffic; for while housewives may have retained an affection for the a-rabbers, the city's drivers had not. I once witnessed the following incident. I was at a bus stop, across the street from the Basilica. The afternoon rush hour was on; and motorists, eager to be home, were streaming by. All at once, I heard that familiar clip-clop and clatter...and along came an a-rabber. He halted his pony in front of the rectory and, with a carton of strawberries, went up to ring the bell. His wagon was blocking the far lane; and already traffic had begun to back up behind it. The door to the rectory opened and he passed inside.* Horns began to honk; drivers, to curse and to groan. How it must have irked them, to suffer this delay for the convenience of a pedlar—to have their way blocked by an illegally-parked horse! A tie-up ensued as cars sought to change lanes. Indifferent to the screeching of wheels and blaring of horns, the horse waited calmly and patiently—the very model of a sage. At last the strawberry vendor returned, climbed aboard, and, with a crack of his whip, drove off.

Despite the ills that beset them—official persecution, traffic, an inaccessible market—the a-rabbers were able to survive as an institution. However, their ranks were thinning. A decade ago, the number of active pedlars was down to about 200. Today, according to the Bureau of Collections (which issues the permit required to operate a horse and wagon), only 75 remain. Perhaps three or four stables are left, and it is not clear how much longer these will be tolerated.

Are the fruit-and-vegetable men doomed then? Are

* The strawberries had been expected. It occurred to me that their delivery may have been a tradition of long standing—that an a-rabber may have been stopping at the 165-year-old church since before there were automobiles.

they about to follow the roving broom-sellers, fishmongers, and the rest into oblivion? Are their cries to fade forever from the streets of Baltimore?

At the height of the campaign to close the stables, such seemed to be the case. The a-rabbers themselves were pessimistic. One of them, a veteran huckster known as Saddlehead, was interviewed by the *Sun*. Described as a slight, mellow-voiced man who held his head high when making a point, he was convinced the end was at hand. "It's about finished for all of us," said Saddlehead, who doubted he and his comrades would still be around two or three years hence. Denouncing the actions taken against the stables, he insisted only a small segment of the public was hostile to the a-rabbers. He was referring, of course, to the Neighborhood Improvement Associations and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"The public, they'll suffer. If people push us off the streets, where they gonna get fresh vegetables and fruits?" (Actually, he had a point. In some of the ghetto neighborhoods he visited with his wagon, there were no decent markets.) Nor was the produce all his customers stood to lose. "A lot of people like to see a nice horse, tassels bobbin', harness shinin', and head-piece fancy. It's a sight real pretty."

He denounced, too, the attitude of some motorists to his means of conveyance. "I'll be standing against the wheel and somebody comes by in a truck and blows an airhorn to be funny and the horses take off. I figure horses built this country and got the right to stay. So people like that make me real mad."

Saddlehead revealed that he was the third generation of his family to peddle produce: his father and grandfather had a-rabbed in New York, when horses were still legal there. So this line of work was "just natural." He supplemented his earnings with odd jobs; and for several years he had dropped out of street-selling to operate a bulldozer. But his calling was clearly as a huckster; and though the financial rewards were minimal, they were adequate to his needs. "A-rabbin' teaches a man the value of a dollar and makes him save. Me, I like to keep seven to eight dol-

lars in pocket at all times. That I can do if there's no trouble.... When I got a bill to be paid, that's when I might do a little work. Could be three times a week or so." A typical day's profit, he said, was twenty dollars.

The newspaper described him as a virtual resident of Ashland House, a tavern near the largest of the remaining stables. At least a score of a-rabbers would gather there each morning, to discuss their plans for the day—including whether or not even to set out. "It depends how the day looks. Maybe we need cash. On the other hand, maybe we feel like taking in a movie." At dusk they would return to the tavern, to count their earnings, swap yarns, and partake of its unique camaraderie. "There's a brotherhood there," Saddlehead explained. "If one needs and the other one got, he gives it to him, he sticks with him." He pointed out that nearly all the Ashland House regulars were estranged from their wives. "The women fly. They think they can do better. Sometimes they come back, when they hear a man's got \$80 in his pocket. That can happen for one day's work in summer when you got good weather and watermelons and strawberries on the wagon."

A photograph showed Saddlehead uttering his cry, as he led his pony and wagon down a street. He had on a winter coat, yet seemed oblivious to the cold, so caught up was he in the act of crying. I could almost hear that chant, resounding amidst the rowhouses. Had a note of lamentation crept into it, prompted by the imminent demise (as he believed) of his trade?

But Saddlehead had been wrong. Ten years later, the fruit-and-vegetable men, though diminished in number, were still making their rounds. How were they doing? What were their prospects? And what kind of men were these, to be drawn to so marginal an existence? To find out, I decided to seek out an a-rabber, listen to his story, and put some questions to him. The obvious place to go for such an encounter was a stable. And I happened to know just where one of them was located—for I had stumbled upon it while taking a walk one day.

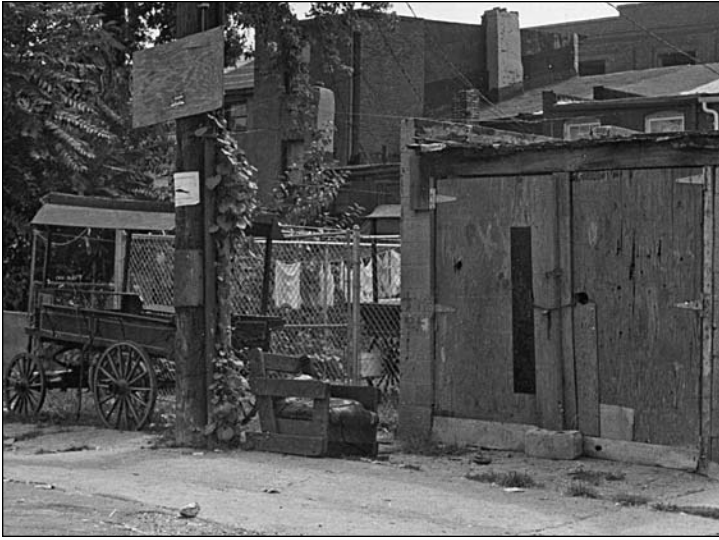
Vivid in memory still were that walk, the stable it had led me to, and the reception I had been accorded there. I had

been strolling along an alley, not far from the H. L. Mencken Museum (his former home, now a literary shrine). Many blocks long, this narrow way was inhabited, with small, dilapidated rowhouses—known locally as “alley houses”—tucked in among the sheds and junk-filled lots. I had been drawn to it by an air of benign neglect, and by the lack of traffic (its narrowness and patches of glass serving to discourage vehicles). Despite the litter and disrepair, a kind of coziness flourished here—a self-contained, almost indoor quality, like that of a medieval lane. Children ran about freely, without fear of being run over; and in warm weather, the residents would spill out of their cramped dwellings. Lounging on stoops or in folding chairs, they would chat, drink beer, play cards or checkers.*

Ambling along like a tourist in a Greek village, I had emerged into an open area: a large vacant lot bordered by a second alley, a side street, and backyards. The houses were as run-down as any I had yet come upon. Ailanthus trees had taken root in the yards. Weeds and litter were everywhere. Its forlorn character caused me to linger in this urban glade. The alley I had been following came to an end, trailing off into a driveway and a courtyard. Aware of a pungency in the air, I had peered into this yard—and discovered a stable.

Parked there had been five or six wagons, of the type used by a-rabbers. No horses were to be seen, but I could smell them. Flies buzzed about. Facing the yard was a brick building with a wide entrance and loft. Bits of straw were scattered on the ground. A working stable, in the heart of the city! Wishing to see more, I had stepped into the yard. Crates, buckets, wagon wheels lay strewn about. Three white men in work-clothes were sitting on a

* An eccentric version of checkers is played in this alley, by the elderly black men for whom the crumbling sidewalk serves as a porch. It is called Spanish checkers; and the rules allow a king to move over any number of unoccupied spaces on the same diagonal. On a previous visit, this feature had been explained to me with bemused tolerance—as to one ignorant of the standard form of the game.



bench. They were rough-looking fellows, but seemed to be at ease and approachable. I had walked over and asked if I might take a look at the stable. Like moonshiners accosted by a revenue agent, they had glared at me darkly. Then, with an almost theatrical menace in his voice, one of them had snarled:

“Get outa here.”

Out I had gotten, turning on my heel and beating a hasty retreat (like one who has wandered into a cave, only to detect a bearlike growl from the depths ahead). Along another alley I had continued my walk. The incident had left me mildly shaken, and puzzled, too. Why had my request to view the stable been so forcefully rejected? What would have been the harm? It was not until I came to examine that file on the a-rabbers, that I learned what the problem had been. The author of the report commissioned by the city had had a similar experience:

We were unable to get interviews with stable owners nor a-rabbers due to resistance on their part....It is felt by some of them that the City may be looking for reasons to cause their demise.

I had been suspected of being an inspector or a journalist—a source of either more legal difficulties or unwanted

publicity. Considering themselves under siege, the stable-owners did not like anyone snooping about.

It was some time later that I determined to interview an a-rabber. Reluctant to return to that inhospitable stable, I headed instead for one near the waterfront, the address of which had been given in the report. I arrived to find it gone. (The entire block had been torn down and replaced with a bakery that made buns for McDonald's.) That left me with no choice. The yard with the benchful of bears would have to be revisited.

A crisp October afternoon found me passing once again along that alley. Though fearing the worst ("You again, pal? What do we have to do to keep you out of here?"), I was not without a strategy. My plan was to avoid the churlish individuals who ran the place; hang out in the general vicinity; and try to strike up a conversation with an a-rabber. Arriving at the yard, I peeked in. Toward the rear a figure—one of the bench-sitters, presumably—was moving about. Not daring to enter, I kept on going as if a mere passerby.

Just beyond the driveway some chairs had been left on the sidewalk. Dozing in one of them was a black man, in shabby clothes and with a gray stubble of a beard. As I halted beside him, he opened his eyes and regarded me languidly from under a cloth cap. I introduced myself as a writer and asked if there were any a-rabbers about with whom I might speak. He shook his head. When would be a good time to find them? Come back on Saturday around five, he said. I thanked him, peeked again into the yard, and departed.

On Saturday that same fellow was there, dozing in the same chair. I sat down next to him and waited. My companion had little to say, though I did learn his name was Jim and he was the stable hand. In the vacant lot a gang of boys were playing. By stacking mattresses on either side of a fence, they had created a pair of makeshift trampolines. Each boy would race up to the first pile and fling himself on it. That would send him flying over the fence, to land harmlessly on the second pile. The more daring would execute a somersault in midflight. Under these

repeated assaults the mattresses were coming apart; and polyurethane foam had become scattered about the lot.

Jim kept dozing off. Now and then, a resident of the alley would stop to talk with us; and at one point a crony of the a-rabbers came by, to see who was around. But of the pedlars themselves there was no sign. The hours dragged on. An urchin asked if we had a wrench he could use to open the fire hydrant. Inhabitants of the houses would stick their heads out the door and call to someone, or walk over to a nearby candy store. With nothing else to do, I scrutinized my surroundings. The houses were ramshackle. The sheds were covered with graffiti. The backyards were piled with debris. Stray cats dined on scraps. I could see how a stable had managed to survive here. The alley was so run-down as to be beyond the redemptive powers of an Improvement Association. Amid such decay, to complain about an unsightly stable or offensive odor would have been meaningless.

Dusk arrived, but still no a-rabbers. Bored and hungry, I was on the verge of giving up and going home—when there sounded that clatter of hooves and wheels. Down the street came a horse and wagon, driven by a figure in white. I took a picture as this apparition made a sharp turn and entered the yard. Jim got up and followed after it. Hoping the dim light would render me inconspicuous,



I trailed after him.

I found myself back in that cluttered yard, with its distinctive aroma. A chicken was running about. The man in charge (who had to be one of the bench-sitters) was off talking with a visitor. The a-rabber was unloading his wagon. Short and in his mid-twenties, he had on a white uniform, like those the drivers of ice-cream trucks used to wear. (This huckster made his rounds in style.) I approached him and asked if it was all right to photograph his rig. He said it was and I snapped away, though doubtful there was enough light. How had he done today? I asked. Not bad, he said with a shrug. I explained my reason for being there and he nodded sympathetically, introducing himself as Pee Wee and offering to talk to me about a-rabbin'. However, he had to leave right now; if I came back on Sunday, he'd be around. I said I'd return and we arranged to meet at noon. Jim unhitched the horse and led it into the stable. The dreaded figure across the yard had eyed me once or twice, but didn't seem to care that a stranger was hanging about. Pee Wee left. Not wishing to stretch my luck, so did I.

On Sunday I was back, with a list of questions to put to him. But Pee Wee never showed up. Had he forgotten our appointment, or else not taken it seriously? Had he thought it over and decided that publicity could only lead to trouble? Or is it simply in the nature of a pedlar to be elusive: a roving, irregular fellow, not about to be pinned down by an appointment? Whatever the case, I never got to interview him—never saw him again.

However, I did pay one further visit to the stable, during which I got to speak briefly with an a-rabber. He had arrived late in the afternoon on an empty wagon and, dispatching his helpers to the candy store, sat down on the curb to rest. I struck up a conversation, asking how far he ranged with his wares. He covered the town, he replied, east side, west side—the wagon could take him anywhere. Did he work the year round? Oh yes, he was out there on all but the coldest days. This sober, middle-aged man spoke with pride of his vocation, insisting that it provided him, and other full-timers, with a steady living. A-rabbin'

had “kept a lot of men in work over the years, a lot of families together, food on tables.” When I asked how many a-rabbers were still active, he said quite a few, though less each year. It was, he acknowledged, “a dyin’ profession.”

Is it? I would ask myself later, staring out the window of my study. Possibly. The pedlars are dependent on the handful of stables that remain. If these go, so will they. They are dependent, too, on a fleet of antique wagons, maintained by a distant Amishman. Their profits are as slim as ever; the summer sun, as merciless. There are easier ways to make a living, and the number of a-rabbers has steadily declined. Half-hidden in obscure alleys, their stables resemble the last retreat of a species on the brink of extinction.

On the other hand, the a-rabbers (like the black-footed ferret and ivory-billed woodpecker) may continue to defy the doom-sayers. As of this writing, there are still 75 of them left, sedulously hawking their produce from the backs of wagons. True, many of these are old-timers (like the pedlar who told a reporter: “I can’t do anything else. I’ve been doing this all my life. Don’t care what they say, some of us will always be hittin’ the streets and somebody will always be buyin’”). But others are young men, having started out as teenage helpers and gone on to rent a rig of their own. Thus, a kind of apprentice system serves yet to replenish the ranks. Nor has the mysterious appeal of a pedlar waned. The most levelheaded among us hears his cry, checks out the wagon, and is soon lugging home a watermelon. Finally, there are signs that the city is interested now in preserving the a-rabbers (if only to include their picture in a promotional brochure).

In any event, the fruit-and-vegetable men are still with us. Their chants are still to be heard on the streets of Baltimore, along with the clip-clop of their ponies and clatter of their wagons. May these sounds endure. Those of the horse may remind us of a less frenetic age; while the chants are among the sole survivors of an urban tradition. Melodious, incomprehensible, compelling, they are the last of our street cries—the final gasp of *vox vagabondi*.

Should the a-rabbers fade, a mode of music will have faded with them.*

* A new shout has been heard of late, though, that could serve to perpetuate the art of crying. While not strictly-speaking a street cry, it resembles one in almost every respect. Once a month, this chant drifts to my window.

“Gaaaaaaas-man!”

It is the cry of the gasman, as he goes about reading meters. On each street he heralds himself, repeatedly and in a booming voice. Why? Because many people are reluctant nowadays to open their door to a stranger. A public cry reassures them that it is a public figure out there.

“Gaaaaaaas-man!”

His shout is for a routine service, yet he belts it out like an opera singer—with verve, gusto, and a musical lilt. If only he were selling something, this Caruso of a crier, how we would welcome his approach. If only he were the baker’s man!

Aesop's Fables

The Fox in the Well

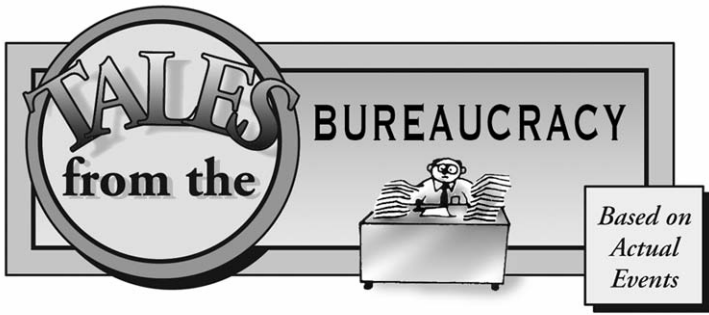
The Fox was on the prowl one summer night;
The moon was full, a pale disc of light.
The rascal sees it reflected in a well
And murmureth: "Now what is that, pray tell?"
He leans and squints and ponders what he sees
And doth conclude at last it is a cheese.
One bucket's down, the other one is up.
Avidly, he jumps in that a-top
And coming to the water, cries "Alack!"
To find the moon, where he had thought a snack.
Yet that's the least, of course, of his ill luck
For in those wat'ry depths, poor Fox is stuck.
How he moaneth, how he shakes his fist
And wishes that a cloud or midnight mist
Had cloaked the moon, whom he is quick to blame
And curse for his own foolish deed, for shame!
Thus in the bucket doth he sit and rave.
"I am entombed—this well shall prove my grave.
How odd that I, for cleverness renowned
In such a pretty pickle should be found.
No doubt on it, this is true distress.
O that I had been wiser...or loved cheese less.
We may come downward, verily, as we please;
It's going up again that's not a breeze.
My only hope: some creature come along
Whose love of cheese than mine is no less strong."

Two days go by, and there the Fox must sit
His home a bucket in a dank, dark pit.
No one passes, not a living soul
To help extract him from that frightful hole.
(And Time doth from the moon a corner eat
So that our “cheese” no longer is complete.)
Then on the third night, lo, there happens by
A Dog, who hears the Fox’s plaintive cry.
“Who’s down there?” quoth he, and the Fox replies:
“Your friend the Fox, and with a most rare prize.”
The Dog peers in and, deep within the well,
Espies that pale moon, reflected still.
“Behold, a tasty cheese,” the Fox calls up,
“Here’s just the ticket for your evening’s sup.
I’ve had a bite, from out the corner here;
The rest of it I’ve saved for you, my dear.
Why do you tarry, with so fond a frown?
Get in the other bucket and come on down!”
The Dog believes him and he scampers in
And draws the Fox back to the top again.



From such friends a distance must we keep
Or find ourselves in waters dark and deep.





“For the Love of God, Montresor!”

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said—

“Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—a very good joke, indeed—an excellent jest.”

—Poe, “The Cask of Amontillado”

Baltimore, like many older cities, has a problem with abandoned buildings. A landlord gives up on a property; and it is soon a semi-ruin—a haven for drug-dealers—an easy target for arsonists. To make entry difficult, the city boards up the doorways and windows of such buildings. A few years ago, on a street of aging rowhouses, it came out to do just that...with unexpected consequences.

The city (according to one of its employees, who passed this story on to us) had received a complaint about a vacant house. Fearful it would attract mischief-makers, neighbors wanted the place boarded up. A bureaucrat had

taken the call and filled out a Complaint Form. This document was routed to an inspector, who drove out to determine if the building was indeed vacant and “open to casual entry.” Finding it so, he issued a 30-Day Notice, in which the owner was ordered to board up the property. Thirty days passed and nothing was done. By law, the task now fell to the city. The inspector forwarded his paperwork to the relevant office.

The paperwork reached the desk of a busy clerk. In due course she issued a Work Order, authorizing that the building be sealed. However, she made a typing error: the address was incorrect. Indicated was the house next door.

The Work Order was sent to the Department of Public Works; and from there a truck was dispatched to that street of aging rowhouses.

It was a lazy summer afternoon. Children were playing in the street. Neighbors were gossiping over fences. Pigeons were cooing from the roofs. The truck pulled up in front of the address on the Work Order; and the crew began to unload their tools, ladders, and sheets of plywood.

Did they notice that the house didn't really look derelict? Or that the one next door—the place with the broken windows, missing door, and trash out front—did? Conceivably, the men were struck by this anomaly and checked their Work Order. But there it was, as plain as day: the address of that house with the lace curtains, plot of flowers, and immaculate walkway.

The crew set to work. Their hammering could be heard for blocks as they boarded up the front door, rear door, and ground-floor windows. When they had finished, the men tossed their tools and ladders into the truck and roared off.

The house glistened in the sun. So, too, did its new ornament: a plywood seal. A pigeon fluttered back onto the roof.

Inside, all was tranquil. A clock ticked away. The refrigerator hummed. And an elderly couple lay dozing in bed, unaware of the alterations to their home. They were taking a nap and the sound of hammering had failed to awaken them—for *both were hard of hearing!*

But at last they roused themselves and went downstairs

for a cup of tea. The house seemed dark for the middle of the day. Was a storm approaching? they wondered. Then they saw the boards over the windows and gasped. What in the world! The husband opened the front door, intending to step out and investigate. He found his way blocked.

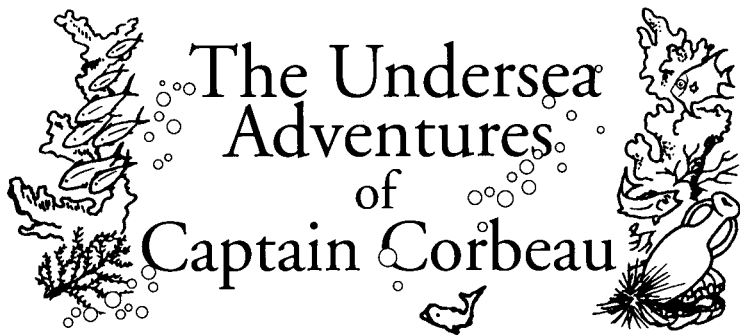
The wife rushed to an upstairs window and shouted for help. The husband, meanwhile—murmuring something about pranksters—telephoned the police.

The police arrived and were soon prying open their living tomb. The couple emerged and were comforted by neighbors.

That night the streetlamp cast an eerie glow upon their house. The lace curtains, plot of flowers, and immaculate walkway glimmered. The lamp shone, too, on the house next door.

And from that empty, blighted place arose a sound. Like low laughter. Or the murmuring of a ghost. A passerby glanced over.

But it was only the wind, flitting through the gaping door and playing with the trash out front.



The Undersea Adventures of Captain Corbeau

A Test for the Andromeda

A tradition of very ancient date still exists among the Chinese respecting a mountain of magnetic ore, rising in the midst of the sea, whose intensity of attraction is so great as to draw the nails and iron bands, with which the planks of the ship are fastened together, from their places with great force, and cause the ship to fall to pieces. This tradition is very general throughout Asia; and the Chinese historians place the mountain in Tchang-hai, the southern sea, between Tunkin and Cochin China. Ptolemy also, in a remarkable passage in his Geography, places this mountain in the Chinese seas. In a work attributed to St. Ambrose, there is an account of one of the islands of the Persian Gulf, called Mammoles, in which the magnet is found; and the precaution necessary to be taken (of building ships without iron) to navigate in that vicinity is distinctly specified.

—J. Timbs, *Stories of Inventors and Discoverers*

A small crowd has gathered on a pier in the south of France, to witness the christening of a ship. On hand are dignitaries, reporters, tourists, a brass band, the ship's crew—and Captain Henri Corbeau, noted oceanographer and explorer. It is a proud day for Corbeau. The tall, hawk-nosed Frenchman is about to assume command of this multimillion-dollar research vessel. At his side is

Alphonse Marco, his long-time assistant. Marco, a short, sturdily-built man, will be serving as first mate. Enlivened by the occasion, the two are grinning and trading comments. The mayor delivers a speech, then shakes Corbeau's hand and passes him a bottle of champagne. The oceanographer looks about for a corkscrew, and must be whispered to that the bottle is for breaking on the prow. "*Ah, bien sûr,*" he laughs, and proceeds with the ceremony.

On a hull that gleams in the intense Mediterranean light, Corbeau smashes the bottle. "*Je te baptise l'Andromeda,*" he declares. A cameraman pans along the length of the ship, and up to a bridge crowned with flags and antennas. The *Andromeda* is 95-feet-long, sleek as a shark, and features the latest in nautical and scientific equipment. Funded by the Institut de la Mer, her purpose in the years ahead will be twofold: to chart the wonders of the sea, and also the ravages it has suffered at the hand of Man. A reporter from the London *Times* asks what the ship's first mission will be.

"We sail this very afternoon for the South China Sea," says Corbeau, "to investigate reports of a Magnetic Mountain to be found there. Our goal is to locate, photograph, and study this remarkable formation. In addition, we shall be conducting a test."*

"What kind of test, Captain?" the reporter asks.

Corbeau gestures toward the *Andromeda*. "Of this brand new ship of ours. We would like to satisfy ourselves as to her structural integrity; and what better means of doing so, it occurred to me, than to pit her against a giant magnet. Do you know the legend of the Magnetic Mountain?"

"No."

"Well, according to your old-time sailors, there is this mountain of magnetic ore, somewhere in the South China Sea. And since ancient times it has been sinking ships. How? By *pulling out their nails*, thus causing them

*Corbeau's English is fluent but heavily accented: for *this* he says "zis"; for *it*, "ect"; for *ship*, "sheep."

to fall apart. That's the claim, at least. Now the *Andromeda* has more than nails to interest such a magnet. She is built from an alloy of steel rich in iron; and we are curious to learn what effect a powerful magnet might have on her. How much of a strain would be induced in her superstructure? Would she be damaged or impaired in any way? Can her engines resist the tug of so potent a lodestone? In short, a Magnetic Mountain provides us with a unique opportunity: to test both the strength of our hull and the capability of our engines."

The spectators move aside to let a truck come through; and Corbeau is presented with a hundred cases of wine, courtesy of the growers of the region. Examining the label, he nods approvingly. "*Perpignon! Formidable. Merci bien.* Ha, we shall test this, too!"

With a round of handshakes, the ceremony concludes. The band strikes up a march. And Corbeau, smiling broadly and waving to the crowd, leads his men aboard. Resembling, in their watch caps, T-shirts, and jeans, a troop of campers, they file up the gangway and take their places throughout the ship.

Corbeau stops in the radio room, to listen to a weather report. His eyes narrow as he takes in the information. "*On va?*"* asks Marco from the doorway. The Captain nods. "*On va,*" he says softly, and instructs his first mate to proceed with the launch.

Now Corbeau moves on to his cabin. Located beneath the bridge, this narrow space is to serve as his home, office, and retreat as he roams the seven seas. The walls are hung with prints of sailing ships. The sole furnishings are a bed, table, and chair. He sits down, opens the logbook, and uncaps a pen. A dreamy look comes over him as he ponders his initial entry.

From the bridge, Marco is barking orders to the crew. "*Soignez-vous!*" † he shouts to those hoisting the wine on board. "*Moteur!*" he bellows into the intercom. "*L'ancre!*"

The engines are fired, the anchor is weighed. With a

* "We go?"

† "Be careful!"

burst of foam, the ship begins to move. The crowd wave. “*Bon voyage!*” they call out. “*Au revoir!* Good luck!”

And with flags flapping, anemometer spinning, ribbons streaming from her mast, and gulls gliding overhead, the *Andromeda* sets out on her maiden voyage. Riding the waves like the stately of whales, she is a sight to behold—a white courser of the deep. Her crew stand proud, each at his assigned post.

But just beyond the harbor is a nude beach; and as they sail past it, the men of the *Andromeda* scramble for binoculars. Unaware of what has prompted the excitement, Corbeau sighs and makes his first entry in the log:

The men are racing by my window, as they crowd on deck for a last view of France. It will be many months before homecoming; and, in a fond adieu, they wave their caps, whistle, and howl at the receding shore. Clad in hills and valleys, she is a fair and bountiful land; and her sons shall miss her.



The *Andromeda* steams eastward, under clear skies and the watchful eye of Neptune. (The god is featured on a “Save the Sea” poster taped to the crow’s-nest.) And the crew tend to their chores. They check and recheck equipment...scrub the decks...tighten knots...polish rails...adjust machinery. Invigorated by the salt air, the

sailors sing and banter as they work. Marco bustles about, making sure nothing has been overlooked; while cameraman Claude Bonnard climbs the mast to capture the action from above.

In his cabin, oblivious to the noise, Corbeau examines a file. Gathered from such sources as Chinese manuscripts, the Arabian Nights, navigational studies, and the accounts of fishermen, it contains every reference to the Magnetic Mountain he has been able to uncover. "Fact or fancy?" he wonders aloud, leafing through these papers. "True accounts...or tall tales?"

Meanwhile, the men busy themselves with that multitude of tasks. No less dedicated than their captain to the *Andromeda's* mission, they welcome the discipline and hard work that will be demanded of them. Yet there is always time, when the pace slackens, to strum on a guitar, admire a sunset, or trade tales of the sea. Engineer Hippolyte Jarry lights up a pipe and regales his comrades with just such a tale:

*"Alors, écoutez. Deux nains traversent l'Atlantique dans une bassine. L'un dit à l'autre..."**

And the work goes on, amidst a calm summer sea. On deck, a pair of rubber dinghies—that will double as lifeboats and exploratory craft—are inspected and loaded with supplies. On the bridge, Marco keeps a sharp eye on the radar. In the radio room, Jean Flammand monitors the short-wave set that is their sole link with the land. In the depths of the ship, Georges Duvallé tends the engines that are propelling them onward.

But suddenly, a bell rings. And each man drops what he is doing and races aft—to the mess-cabin. There, chef Paul Darrieu is serving up an elaborate meal. Steaming platters of *escargots*, *poisson grillé*, *riz à la créole* are passed about, and the wine flows freely. At the head of the table sits Corbeau: beaming, chuckling, palavering with his men. He raises his glass and proposes a toast:

"A la vraie Andromède, cette princesse greque qu'on a dû

* "So listen. Two midgets are crossing the Atlantic in a wash-tub. One says to the other...."

*sauver de notre Marco ici—je veux dire, du monstre!” **

Laughter and good cheer have become the order of the day, as the men of the *Andromeda* enjoy their daily feast. The boisterous sounds drift over the water...and a passing dolphin perks up an ear.

Past the ancient islands of the Mediterranean, the ship plunges on—towards a destination that may or may not exist. A youth waves at her from the shore. Her flags ripple in the wind, as the research vessel speeds along the waves.

Through the Suez Canal, down the coast of Arabia, past the tip of India, the *Andromeda* is drawn by the legend of the lodestone. The waters of the fabulous East surge about her now. In Singapore there is a brief stop, to refuel and take on fresh fruit and vegetables. And at last she enters the South China Sea.

Now begins the search for the Magnetic Mountain. To determine its most likely location, Corbeau will enlist the aid of the ship's computer. Every scrap of information he has been able to gather—every legend, allusion, and rumor—is fed into the machine, which Corbeau calls upon to “make some sense of this melange of vagueness, contradiction, and outright fantasy.” He waits patiently while the computer hums and flashes. Marco joins him to inspect the results, and both men nod intently. An area 200 kilometers north of Borneo has been pinpointed. The *Andromeda's* course is adjusted; and she bears down now on a target. As the news reaches the crew, a murmur of expectation joins the drone of the engines. Even Jip, the Labrador Retriever serving as mascot, seems to know that something is up.

The following afternoon, Corbeau's nap is interrupted by an urgent message from the bridge. The compass is going wild, he is told, spinning like a top; radio communications have been disrupted; and Jip is acting strangely—baying mournfully and chasing after her tail. It is the very set of anomalies he has hoped for. Corbeau orders full steam ahead, in the direction of the disturbance.

* “To the original *Andromeda*, that Greek princess who had to be rescued from Marco here—I mean, from the dragon!”

The *Andromeda* pounds the waves. Her crew speculate on what may lie ahead, while her captain pauses to record his thoughts in the log:

So, we have not come these many miles in vain.

Eagerly, I await the first glimpse of this prodigy of Nature—this strange outcropping of the ocean floor—this Magnetic Mountain, for which we have searched so diligently. Like a barracuda, we are closing in on our prey; and the thrill of it can scarcely be described.

And how different really am I from that barracuda? I ask myself. I, with my lust to plumb the secrets of the sea—she, by hunger driven to prowling its depths. Isn't each of us just doing his thing? Seeking to advance both his own interests and those of his species? Obeying that most fundamental of urges: the impulse to hunt? Yet the fish is denounced for it—slandered as “bloodthirsty”—vilified and avoided; while the oceanographer is heaped with honors.

But let's face it. Corbeau is no less aggressive than the fish. He has simply sublimated such instincts—into scientific and so-called noble pursuits.

O predator pur, mon semblable, mon frère! Brother barracuda!

Joining Marco on the bridge, he scans the horizon. The two men inspect the control panel and fiddle with some knobs.

“Terre! Terre!”

From his high perch André Le Boiteaux has spotted land. Corbeau peers through the telescope and discerns a jagged rock—a small island. He orders the engines halted; exchanges looks of anticipation with Marco; and flicks on the magnetometer. The needle swings, to indicate an intense magnetic field. Corbeau purrs. They have found the Magnetic Mountain. This island is its peak.

He confers with engineer Jarry. Bonnard is filming them as they speak.*

* They converse in English, for the benefit of the international audience Corbeau hopes to reach with this film.

“Hippolyte, I want your opinion. This incredible amount of magnetism—what effect will it have on the ship?”

Jarry looks puzzled. “I was not aware that we carry any sheep,” he says.

“On the vessel, the *Andromeda*,” snaps Corbeau. “What will be its effect?”

“Ah. None. None whatsoever.”

“You foresee no danger, then, as we approach the Mountain? But what about these accounts we have read, of nails and iron bands being pulled from their places?”

“Must I repeat myself? No effect. The most up-to-date methods and the finest materials were used to construct this craft. No cost was spared. For example, each rivet was driven, checked, and initialed by a skilled technician. Believe me, it would take more than a giant magnet to pull her apart.”

“What would it take?”

“Hercules!”

“Okay, okay. What about the possibility, though, that the entire ship—not just some loose rivets—might be drawn in to the island, and get stuck there?”

“I have calculated the force of this magnet. Our engines can resist its pull.”

“Hmm. Well, we’ll soon find out. That’s a main reason, after all, for our being here—to test these things.”

Corbeau is eager to begin the test. But first, along with Marco, Bonnard, and Le Boiteaux, he will reconnoiter the island. The team don their skimpy, Riviera-style swimsuits, climb into one of the dinghies, and set out. On account of the magnetism, the boat has been equipped with aluminum oars instead of a motor; and the men must row the several miles that still separate the *Andromeda* from its destination. Leaping playfully, a dolphin follows in their wake. Finally, it waves at them with a flipper and disappears into the depths.

Twice, the team reaches the island and drags the dinghy ashore. (The first time, in earnest; then again, that Bonnard may stay behind and capture the arrival on film.) A camp is pitched. Each piece of equipment—from tent

pole to frying pan, diving gear to camera—has been selected to contain no iron. After a brief rest, the men explore the island. Corbeau will record his impressions in the log:

What a stark and lonely place, this tiny rock for which we have traveled halfway around the world. The tip of a submerged mountain, it seems barely to be holding its head above water. I wander about, looking for any interesting plants or animals. But the island is devoid of life, save for a colony of gulls; a reddish moss; and an obscure species of crab. (*Callinectes sapidus*? *Corystes cassivellanus*? Whatever, they'd look mighty fine on a platter!)

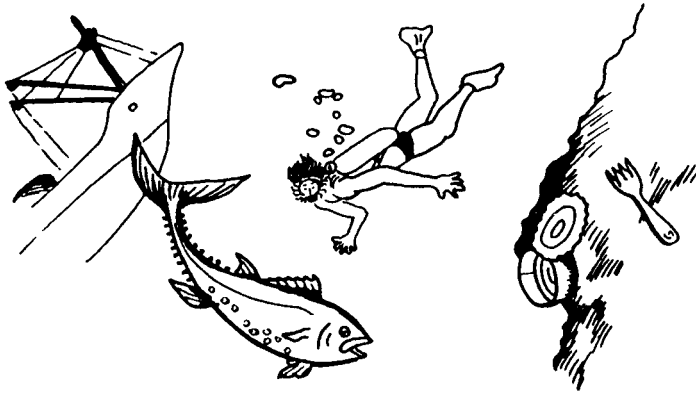
Yet a curious substitute for life has taken root along its shore: a growth of metallic objects. Drawn here by the magnetism, they cling like barnacles to the wave-pounded rocks. Fascinated by the variety of this flotsam, we pick our way along the shore and examine it. Le Boiteaux tugs at a flagpole from some yacht; a thermos (could its contents still be warm?); a U.S. Navy wastebasket. Yet so tenaciously do these items adhere to the rocks, he is unable to budge a single one of them.

Marco dons his diving gear and descends to the underwater portion of the mountain. He is awed by what he sees. The slope is filled with iron-bearing objects: buckets, pulleys, cannons, anchors, chains, a suit of armor, an entire freighter...and, yes, nails. It is a unique and melancholy sight—a kind of junkyard of the sea.

Into this eerie landscape has swum a tuna. She stops to poke at a rusted can that, for some reason, intrigues her. Can she be vaguely aware that her own destiny may be linked with just such a container? But like a man pondering a coffin, the tuna cannot imagine herself thus confined; and at last she swims off, blissfully unaware of the bleak end to which, sooner or later, some cannery will consign her.

How unmindful, too, is Man, of the dark and narrow box that awaits us all!

Avid for a souvenir, Bonnard and Le Boiteaux seek to dislodge a sword from the rock to which it has become affixed. They tug and tug; but the grip of the Mountain



defies them. Finally, the pair give up and decide it is time for a break. In his knapsack Le Boiteaux has brought along paper cups and a gallon of wine. They stretch out in the shade of a rock and pour themselves wine. Emerging from his dive, Marco spots his comrades and murmurs: “*Ça, c’est une bonne idée!*”^{*} He scampers ashore to join them.

Their captain, meanwhile, has trekked to the far side of the island, where he makes a surprising discovery. Anchored offshore is a small junk, the traditional sailing craft of China. A rude shelter has been raised on the beach; and outside it several men, in straw hats, under-shirts, and baggy pants, are having lunch. They beckon him over, and, in pidgin English, invite Corbeau to share their food. He takes a seat and digs in, to a simple but hearty meal of gull’s eggs, seaweed, and rice. His hosts, he learns, are miners from Taiwan, just concluding a week’s stay on the island. They have been mining magnetic ore.

“*Ah oui?*” says Corbeau. “So what drew you here was not the physical tug of the rock, but rather, its market value. A real windfall for you, this place! But tell me, was your vessel affected in any way by the magnetism?”

The miners grin and shake their heads. Their boat is held together, they explain, with wooden pegs, avoiding thus the destructive effects of the lodestone. Corbeau is taken aboard and shown their equipment. They describe

^{*} A good idea, that!”



how they blast the ore, break it up with picks, and gather it in hand-woven baskets. Intrigued, Corbeau asks for a demonstration; and one of the miners leads him to a rock. The man lights a stick of dynamite, gives it to Corbeau to hold, and crouches down to loosen some dirt. The oceanographer frowns at the sparking explosive in his hand. The miner takes it back, wedges it under the rock, and shouts: “*Ki pao!*” Corbeau will ponder his reaction to this shout:

I speak little or no Chinese. Yet there is a common core of meaning—a universality of emphasis, tone, and posture—a kind of poor man’s Esperanto—that transcends even the most obscure of tongues. Instinctively, I knew what this man was saying; and without stopping to wonder how I knew, or to render into French the essence of his cry, I joined him in dashing for cover.

Boom!

The miners applaud the explosion and pour themselves and their guest a round of tea. Corbeau asks how long they have been coming to the island. “For many fathers”—many generations—he is told. In former times, the ore was carved into amulets. Today it is used in the manufacture of magnetic tacks.

Corbeau frowns. “Magnetic tacks?”

“Yeah. You know, for icebox door? Wit’ funny faces ’n’ stuff? Our factory make ’em and sell in every land.”

Who among us does not use his refrigerator as a bulletin board? Has not bedizened its door with the ephemera of daily life—with snapshots, coupons, children’s art, recipes, reminders? Invariably, such items are posted with magnetic tacks. Yet do we dream that these tiny magnets began their existence on a remote island in the South China Sea? Or that a boatload of Taiwanese are our partners in these embellishments? Truly, it is a small world, interconnected by a vast network of cultural and economic bonds. Yet we cling to the illusion that each nation pursues its separate destiny. It is as if I were to poke a hole in the stern of the dinghy, and insist my action did not affect those sitting in the bow. It is one fragile boat we inhabit, one fragile planet; and either we learn to think together...or shall sink together! Let us pray for the former—and work diligently to achieve it.

Corbeau is offered more tea. But he is puzzled that the noise from the blast has failed to attract his team. Worried that something has happened to them, he bids the miners adieu and hastens back to camp. There he finds the men sprawled on the ground, asleep.

Afflicted by a mysterious lethargy, they ignore my efforts to rouse them. I ask myself if this drowsiness can have been induced by the magnetism. Has the iron in their blood somehow become depleted, resulting in an instant anemia? Anxious for their safety, I shake them back to consciousness and order an immediate return to the ship.

The team dismantle their camp and pile into the dinghy. “*Réveillez-vous!*” shouts Corbeau as they row back to the *Andromeda*. “*Ramez! Résistez l’appel de cette île des lotos!*”*

Staggering aboard, they are examined by Dr. Joubert,

* “Stay awake! Row! Resist the spell of this lotus-land!”

the ship's physician. He, too, suspects anemia, and orders each to down a tall glass of wine, to replenish the iron in their systems. The four are soon being quizzed about their adventures on the island. Marco describes the undersea junkyard he visited, and the "strange lassitude" that overcame him, Bonnard, and Le Boiteaux. Corbeau tells of his encounter with the miners. Then he announces it is time to test the *Andromeda*.

"*Commençons avec cette confrontation entre l'oeuvre de l'Homme et celui de la Nature. Tout le monde est prêt?*"*

"*Oui!*" chorus the crew.

The *Andromeda* is made ready. Devices for measuring stress and strain are attached to her hull. The computer is programmed to analyze incoming data. The men are posted at key locations, to observe any unusual phenomena. And with Corbeau himself at the helm, the ship approaches the island. The tension mounts as the rock looms larger. Are the legends true? Is the Magnetic Mountain capable of sinking a ship? Is the *Andromeda* in danger of being pulled apart? Captain and crew solemnly await the outcome of the test.

They are still a mile away when a faint quivering is noted throughout the ship. Accompanied by a hum, it grows in intensity. Half a mile out, the walls begin to shake visibly. The hum has become a loud drone. In the galley, Darrieu is startled to see his knives go sailing out the window. On deck, a wrench is yanked from Jarry's hand and flies off toward the island. Le Boiteaux ducks as a fire extinguisher, then a frying pan, come zipping through the air.

Corbeau orders anything containing iron to be battened down. But it is too late: dozens of objects are flying off, and the crew must scramble to avoid being struck. He throws the engines into reverse; but the ship keeps moving toward the Mountain. Dismayed, Corbeau is calling for more power—when an ominous sound is heard from the bow.

* "Let us proceed with this confrontation between the handiwork of Man and that of Nature. Everybody set?"

Phtt! Phtt! Phtt!

Rushing forward, he peers over the side—and moans. Rivets are popping out of the hull. One after another, they are shooting off in the direction of the island. He turns to Jarry.

*“Mais tu m’as dit qu’il n’y aura pas de conséquence! Et ça, comment que ça s’appelle? O là là!”**

The engineer shrugs philosophically.

Beneath their feet the deck is rumbling. Suddenly, a series of crashes and convulsions rock the ship. The *Andromeda* has begun to come apart. She has failed to withstand the deadly force of the Mountain. Entire sections of her hull are falling away...and the sea is rushing in.

A grim Corbeau knows what he must do. Hastening back to the bridge, he presses a red button. A siren starts to wail. It is the signal to abandon ship.

The men lower the two dinghies and pile in. Along with Marco, Corbeau remains on deck to direct the evacuation. “*Vite, vite,*” he calls out, gesturing like a traffic cop.... “*N’oubliez pas Jip....Allons!*” †

Emerging from the radio room, Flammand reports that an S.O.S. is being broadcast. Corbeau nods gravely, aware there is little chance of its penetrating the magnetic field. Grabbing the logbook, he follows Flammand and Marco down the ladder.

They lower themselves into the boat. Suddenly, Marco cries out and starts to climb back up. Corbeau grabs him. “*Où va tu?*”

“*Le vin!*” groans Marco. “*Il faut sauver le Perpignon!*”

Marco insists they go back and save the wine. It will serve to sustain them, he argues, until rescue arrives. There is no time, says Corbeau, and orders him into the boat.

As they row away from her, the *Andromeda* begins to list. Her flags flap in the breeze, as if nothing were amiss;

* “But you told me there would be no effect! What do you call that? O la la!”*

† “Step lively....Don’t forget Jip....Let’s go!”

and Bonnard—who is filming the disaster—zooms in on them.

Now the ship is rolling over on her side. The siren wails on; and the island's gulls, disturbed by the sound, are swarming into the sky.

A flooded stern passes under water. And now the bow is rising into the air. The *Andromeda* hangs there for a moment, bizarrely upended...then slides into the sea. The waters foam and gurgle and swallow her up.

Abruptly, the siren is heard no more—only the shriek of the gulls. A dark mass is seen to descend.

Bonnard zooms in on the whirlpool that remains. Gradually, its motion subsides; the foam dissolves. And framed in his viewfinder is but the eternal surge of the sea.

The dinghies bob on the waves. Fifteen men and a dog are crowded into them. The sun hovers overhead.

Half a mile away is the island—the sole touchstone in a watery expanse that heaves from horizon to horizon. The men row towards it. Their captain is silent and pensive.

They reach the island and drag the boats ashore. Jip runs off after a gull. The men plop down on the ground, or wander about. Their faces are set with a brave but grim look. The French navy will be searching for them, they know; and the dinghies are well supplied with *rations de secours de luxe*.^{*} Yet the prospect of being marooned on a desert island is not a welcome one.

While the crew ponder their plight, Corbeau hikes across the island...and returns with good news. The miners have yet to depart, he announces, and have offered to tow them to Taiwan. The men cheer, and poke and embrace one another. Marco does a little jig. It has been a harrowing adventure.

At sunset the junk sails over. The dinghies are tied to her, the men pile in. And a curious procession moves across the waves.

Bonnard films the island as it disappears in the distance and fading light.

^{*} Gourmet emergency rations.



The next day Corbeau makes an entry in the log:

For twelve hours the junk has towed us across the sea. Yet only now—as Darrieu tosses each man his croissant (from a can!) and seeks to heat the cappuccino with a solar device—does it really begin to sink in: our bright new ship is gone. Her mission was to explore the sea. Instead, she has joined the wrecks that dot its bottom—has taken her place in that vast flotilla, whose admiral is Davy Jones and whose orders are sealed forever. Fish dart about her corridors; some squid has nested in the galley. The *Andromeda* rests at fifty fathoms, an eerie shadow of her once-proud self.

Yet from this dark event have emerged a few rays of light. Our experience has taught us more about the effects of magnetism on ocean-going vessels. Also, we have uncovered a possible link between magnetism and metabolism. Can it be that refrigerator tacks are a major cause of anemia? Are people being drained of iron at the very moment, ironically, that they approach their food? Finally, we have proven that a research vessel can be successfully abandoned in less than 90 seconds. While not to be undertaken lightly, the abandonment of a ship must remain a viable alternative for the brave men and women who choose to follow the sea.

The *Andromeda* is gone, and it is a staggering blow. Yet we are consoled by the fact that our test has helped to advance the march of knowledge (albeit at considerable cost). At the same time, maybe tests like this tell us too much—tell us things we don't really need to know. It occurs to me that true wisdom may lie with simple souls like these miners. Such men know only what they have to

know—how to run from a stick of dynamite, how to fry a gull's egg—and no more. Yes, they are incapable of repairing a diesel engine, but so what?—their ships are powered by the wind. In a complex and confusing world, we might do well to take lessons from these unlikely sages.

Marco, pressed in beside me here in the dinghy, has just heaved a sigh. I'll bet he is pondering those cases of Perpignon at the bottom of the sea. I could use a drink now myself. But there will be wine shops enough in Taiwan. If we ever get there, that is...a storm seems to be brewing up ahead.

(To be continued)



DOWNSCALE DINING

by Gastronomus

Taki's

Stools at a counter, booths in the back, a wall-menu: this is Taki's Restaurant and Carry-out. Taking a seat at the counter, I order the breakfast special and cast a sidelong glance at my fellow diners. Most of them are old men, gray-haired and weathered of face. Tattoos (blurred by the years) are visible on several arms. The men sit slouched in front of cups of coffee. They have a passive, settled air about them—are clearly here to dawdle. If they have eaten anything, the empty plates have long since been removed. Taki's, I muse, is a kind of pasture. I am among creatures content to be going nowhere and doing nothing—I am grazing with geezers. The men on the stools do not talk much. They seem to be contemplating their coffees, as if the answer to some perplexing question were to be read in the wisps of steam. Slow service wouldn't bother these unhurried souls: they have come to loiter, not to dine.

But the service is swift. Two teenage girls, daughters of the absent owner, are tending the counter this morning. The one scrambling my eggs is dark-haired, slightly overweight, and (to judge from her apron, blouse, and earrings) likes the color red. The other is slender, brunette, and puckish, and is chatting with a young man. She leans on the counter as if on a table they were sharing. Before him is a cup of coffee, and a stack of quarters from which he has been feeding the jukebox.

My breakfast is placed in front of me and I dig in. For 99¢ one can hardly complain, yet the fare is disappointing—

particularly the home fries. Having spotted a pot of boiled potatoes by the grill, I allowed my expectations to rise accordingly. Here was that rare place that hadn't gone over to frozen, pre-cooked potatoes (or to the shredded atrocity, "fried" in a microwave, that has been spreading from the fast-food emporia). I was anticipating, in short, a side of home fries worthy of the name *home*. What I receive, alas, have not been fried to order. They are a lifeless heap, prepared early in the day and kept in a warming tray. Worse yet, the toast is underdone (still white, for Pete's sake!) and the eggs have a piece of shell in them. On the plus side, I was graciously offered a choice of three jellies; the eggs were served hot; and everything came on a traditional breakfast plate—one of those oval platters that frame so nicely the still life that is a morning meal.

Perhaps, though, I was expecting too much of the breakfast special. Has it not a mere utilitarian end: to alleviate the hunger of a frugal clientele? And sipping from the cup that has been slid before me, I understand the higher function of this fare. It is to accompany the coffee. For Taki's java—unadvertised but widely known, I suspect—is the specialty of the house. Freshly and artfully brewed, it is deeply satisfying. Now that's coffee! I watch the steam rise and dissolve, like a morning mist. This dark nectar is served in real china cups, not throwaways. And the cups are mug-sized—no miserly portions for the guests of Taki! It is served, too, in a variety of cups. Mine is wide and white, with a blue stripe; the next one down is tall and green. Checking along the counter, I see that no two cups are alike. They have been assembled haphazardly. Like the old men who hover over it—brooding in silence, their faces somber or quizzical—this miscellany of china has character.

The geezers are known to the sisters, who address one by name, another with an endearment ("More coffee, sweetheart?"), and who banter easily with them. Evidently, these are regulars. What a far cry from McDonald's, where conversation (forbidden the help in any case) is impossible, so machinelike is the processing of customers. From this grill a patron might be tossed a cheerful word or two, and even accorded the status of a name. How many of these men, I

wonder, live alone in some dreary room: a hot plate for a kitchen; their window overlooking a noisy thoroughfare; a television their sole companion? For such urban castaways, luncheonettes like Taki's—cheap, friendly, and tolerant of loiterers—offer an escape from a bleak and solitary lot.

A security guard comes in, orders his usual, and gets into a discussion with the young man about billy clubs. (I learn about the latest advance in their design.) A woman pokes her head in the door and orders french fries—she'll be right back, she says, to pick them up. I watch as a basketful of potatoes are lowered into the oil...and realize that here is what I should have had. The french fries—deep-fried to order, and from freshly-boiled potatoes—are another specialty of the house. Real french fries!

I linger over my newspaper. One of the old men asks to see the sports page and I hand it to him. The girl in red is mixing a pizza sauce, while her sister continues to chat with the young man. Someone enters, studies the menu, and orders a steak-and-onions sub to go. Lunchtime has crept up on us. One by one, the geezers—aware that their seats will be needed for the midday rush—pay and leave. In slow-motion, they ease themselves off the stools and saunter to the door. (Even as they move, these rascals loiter.) One announces he is on his way to a bar where “there's going to be a party all day.” Another—a black man whose straw hat and suspenders give him a quaint, old-fashioned look—says he'll be back tomorrow. With the aid of a cane, he hobbles out onto the sidewalk.

Watching him go, I am struck by the dignity of his carriage. The black man holds himself as upright as a post. To bend beneath the weight of one's years, his posture seems to say, would be a defeat—a diminishing of one's self. From outside he waves to the girls. I sense in this daily visit the rhythms of a ritual. He comes here to escape the gloom of his four walls...and to experience something: a sense of connectedness—of having a place in a particular scheme of things. As he passes from view, I am reminded of some doddering (yet dignified) English lord, who has spent the morning dozing in an armchair, and who salutes the doorman as he shuffles from his club.



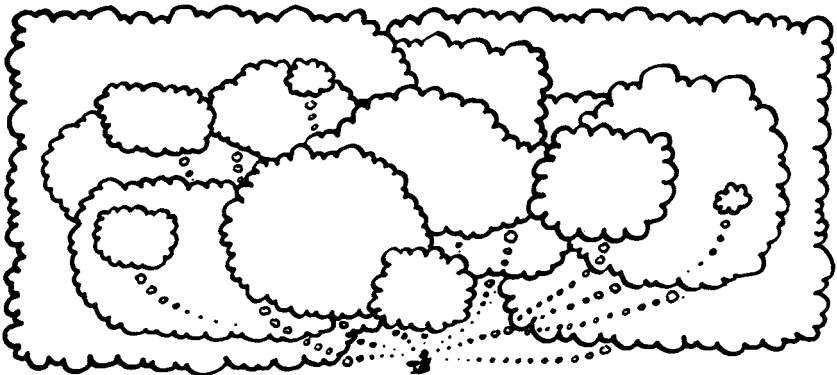
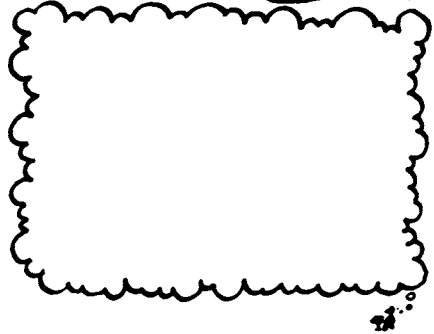
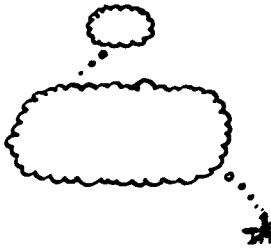
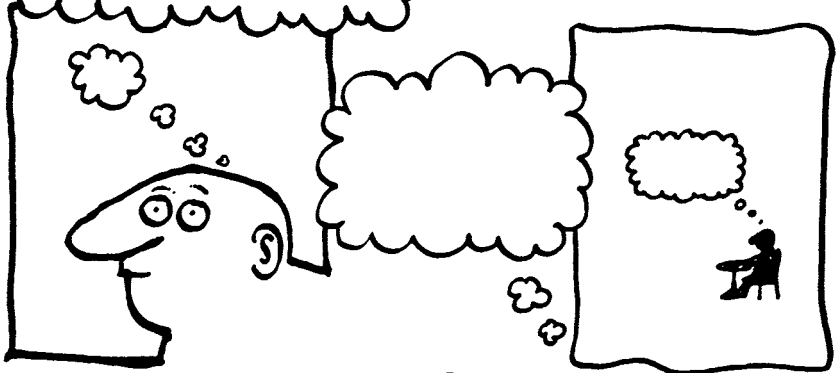
For the dawdlers among whom I have breakfasted, Taki's is just such a club—just such a cozy retreat. Here, beneath the list of sandwiches, they are known and honored. Here, along the Formica counter, each has his regular spot. Here they enjoy a buzz of well-being: from the coffee, the attention of the girls, the presence of their brethren. And here, as in a club to which the members repair daily, their absence would be noted. When the proud figure in the straw hat and suspenders is seen no more—when weeks go by and the sports fan no longer wanders in to claim his seat—when word gets around that another of the regulars will dawdle henceforth on a Celestial Stool—there will be someone to

mourn him, after a fashion. His fellow geezers will repeat what little, if anything, was known about the man; crack a joke or two in his behalf; and perhaps even raise their cups to his memory. (Our days, indeed, are as wisps of steam!)

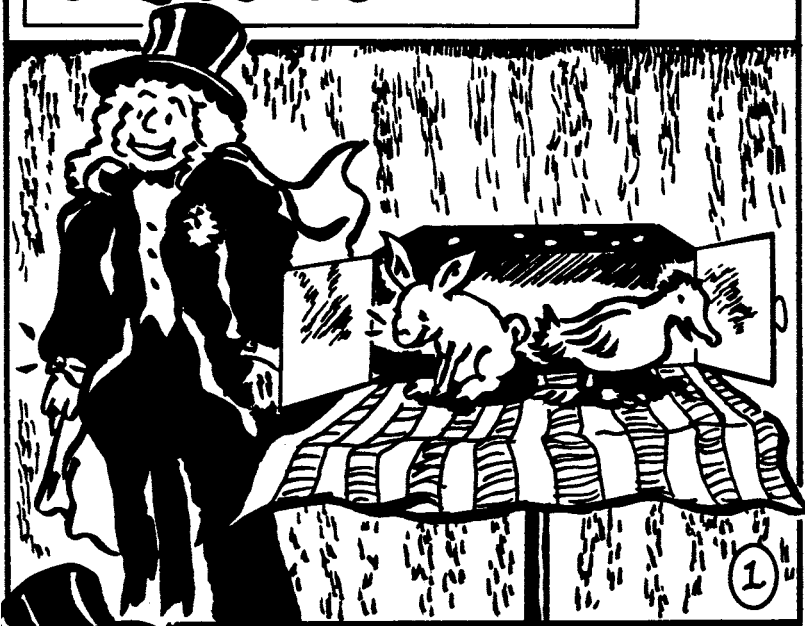
Four stars to Taki's: for its coffee, congenial help, and indulgence of idlers.

Idle Moments

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Mimi by Sol





odds & ends

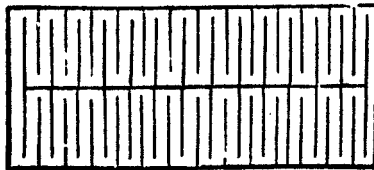


"Et tu, Bruttus?"



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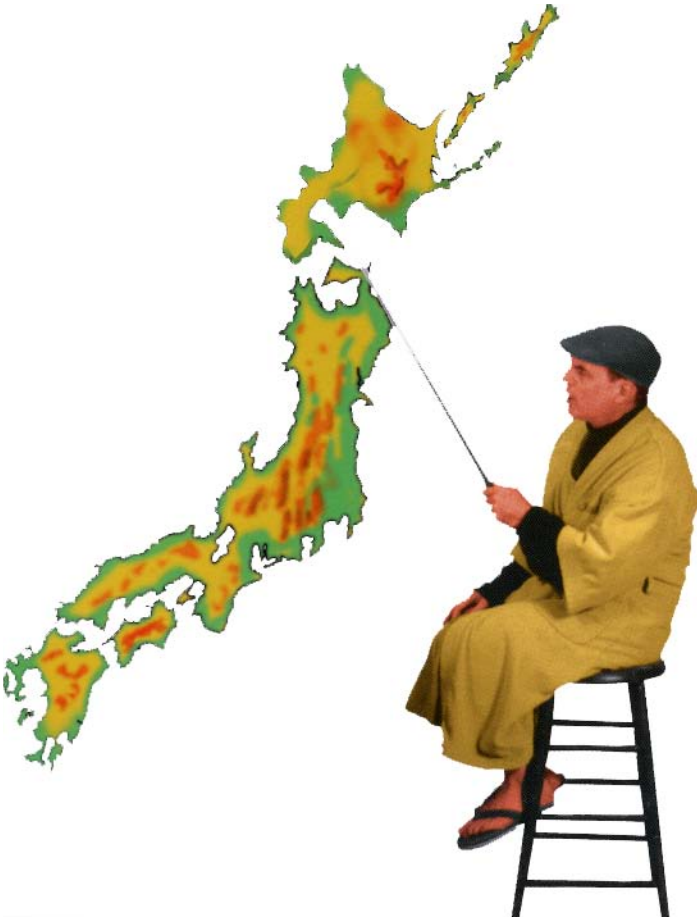
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