

THE IDLER

No. 2



“Inertiae dulcedo.”—Tacitus

FEATURE

“The Wethersfield Meteors” 4

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR’S NOTE 2

AESOP’S FABLE

“The Wolf and the Dog” 16

TALES FROM THE BUREAUCRACY

“Deadwood” 21

THE UNDERSEA ADVENTURES
OF CAPTAIN CORBEAU

“Saved by a Dolphin” 24

DOWNSCALE DINING

“The Cafeteria” 41

MIMI 48

IDLE MOMENTS 50

ODDS & ENDS 52

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Editor's Note

This second issue is a long time overdue; and our readers may have wondered if THE IDLER had not folded. Was it the victim, perhaps, of its own credo? Of insolvency? Of public indifference? Had it struck a rock in those narrow straits through which any newly-launched publication must pass? But no, we are still afloat. Our hull is intact; and our sails flap and flutter, an indulgent muse lending them yet her breath. As for that delay, we can only plead the exigencies of circumstances beyond our control; insist that our habitual roost is a desk chair, not a sofa at the Drone's Club; and promise less tardiness in the future.

Among the regular features of this magazine will be a fable from Aesop. (See page 16.) Little is known of Aesop. A Greek slave of the sixth century B.C., he probably collected, rather than created, the fables ascribed to him. His original work has been lost; and the fables have come down to us only through "the Aesopic tradition"—a succession of renderings, translations, and adaptations, by diverse authors. A number of legends concerning Aesop have also come down. Our favorite is this one:

Aesop's master was about to embark on a journey. The burdens were being distributed among the servants; and Aesop was given his choice of what to carry. He picked the basketful of bread. His fellow servants laughed, for he had chosen the heaviest load. The travelers set out, with Aesop staggering beneath the weight of his basket. But when it came time for the midday meal, he was told to pass out bread to everyone. He did so, considerably lightening his load. And at sup-

vertime, he got rid of the rest. Thus, for the remainder of the journey, Aesop had only an empty basket to carry —while the loads of his fellows seemed to get heavier and heavier.

It is the aim, of course, of any literary work to resemble that basketful of bread: presenting the reader with a task—pages to be perused—that, however daunting when first taken up, becomes increasingly agreeable, and providing both refreshment and sustenance.



The Wethersfield Meteors

by

Michael Solomon

On the morning of April 8, 1971, a meteor slammed through the roof of a house in Wethersfield, Connecticut. The inhabitants, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Cassarino, were both sound asleep; and neither was awakened.

At six o'clock Mrs. Cassarino rose and went to make breakfast. Passing through the living room, she saw plaster on the floor and debris hanging from the ceiling. Fearful an intruder had been in the house, she roused her husband. He summoned the police.

The police arrived and inspected the house. They found a hole in the roof, and another in the floor directly below. Then, from the insulation in the living-room ceiling, they dug out a stone. It was the size of a golf ball, irregular of surface, and charred. The stone puzzled them at first, but was soon identified as a meteorite. After being studied by scientists, it was acquired by the Smithsonian.

Eleven years later, a second meteorite struck a house in Wethersfield.

Bob and Wanda Donahue lived about a mile from the Cassarinos. Bob was an employee of an insurance company in nearby Hartford; his wife, a retired schoolteacher. It was a Monday night, in November of 1982; and the couple was watching their favorite show, "M*A*S*H." But they would miss much of this week's episode. For at 9:17, the Donahues—comfortably settled in their den—were startled by a sound from the front of the house.

"It sounded like a heavy picture had fallen from its hook," Bob Donahue would tell a reporter, "but much louder. We ran through the dining room into the living room and saw a big hole in the ceiling, then went outside and saw a hole in the roof. We then checked the upstairs closet for fire. What appeared to be smoke, dust, and fine particles of plaster filled the air and we suspected fire.

We phoned the police and told them we thought there had been an explosion.”

Only minutes before, the police had received reports of bright lights and explosions in the sky. Now they had an address. Fire equipment was dispatched to the scene; and the street was alive suddenly with loud engines and flashing lights.

Bob and Wanda described the sound they had heard, and the damage to their house. Spotlights were aimed at the roof; and a fireman climbed up to investigate. The chief went inside to examine the hole in the living-room ceiling. From the den came the sounds of the television. It was playing to an empty sofa, as the Donahues watched these real-life proceedings.

The chief poked through the debris, then wandered into the dining room. There he discovered a dent in the ceiling, an overturned chair, and—under the table—a rock.

The size of a grapefruit, it was black and lumpy. The firemen passed it around. Although cool to the touch, the rock appeared to be charred. Someone suggested it might be a meteorite.

The phone rang and Wanda, in a daze, answered it. An out-of-town friend was calling, to ask if they had heard about the fireball.

Fireball?

Yes, said the friend, a news bulletin had just been broadcast. Hundreds of people in Massachusetts and Connecticut had seen a fireball in the sky. And it was supposed to have come down in the vicinity of Wethersfield!

There could be no doubt now as to the rock's identity. The Donahues looked at each other in disbelief. A fireball over Connecticut, and where does it land? In *their* living room. And when? Right in the middle of “M*A*S*H.”

The police wrapped up the rock and took it away for safekeeping. Wanda swept up the plaster. And Bob, that employee of an insurance company? What was his reaction? Surely he was pondering the improbability of such an event. *One's house hit by a meteor.* You did not have to be an actuary to realize how slim were the chances of that happening.



Dan Haar/The Hartford Courant

In the morning reporters began to arrive. And before long a crowd had gathered outside the Donahue home on Church Street. Newsmen, curiosity seekers, and scientists trampled the grass. Among the scientists was Dr. Roy Clarke of the Smithsonian. An expert on meteorites, he would identify the rock as an “L-6 chondrite.”

The Donahues agreed to be interviewed and the reporters filed in. Bob led them on a tour of the meteorite’s

path. He showed them the holes it had left: in the roof, closet, and living-room ceiling. He pointed out where it had splintered the hardwood floor and bounced into the dining room. There it had ricocheted off the ceiling, knocked over a chair, and (like a naughty pet seeking to hide) rolled under the table.

“It sounded like a truck coming through the front door,” said Bob. Wanda said she thought a bomb had been thrown into the house.

By the end of the day, the Donahues had consented to lend the rock to Dr. Clarke. The scientist was eager to subject it to tests—the freshest meteorite ever to be scrutinized. He would return to Washington with the celestial visitor tucked away in his briefcase; and it would soon be yielding its secrets to the multidimensional gamma-ray spectrometer.

Meanwhile, a sensational angle to the story had been uncovered. The press had learned that this was not the first meteorite to have landed in Wethersfield. In the space of eleven years, *two houses in the town had been struck*—a fact so improbable as to border on the bizarre. It was the kind of stuff Ripley used to use in “Believe It or Not.” As one of the scientists pointed out, less than a dozen buildings—anywhere on the earth, ever—were known to have been hit by meteorites.*

Yet it had happened twice now in Wethersfield. The odds against such an occurrence were staggering—incalculable—astronomical! An amazing coincidence, proclaimed the press.

Amazing, yes. But...*was* it a coincidence? Or might some unknown factor have caused this conjunction?

* One of these was the residence of Mrs. Hewlitt Hodges, of Sylacauga, Alabama. In 1954 Mrs. Hodges was napping on her sofa, when an eight-pound meteorite came flying through the roof. It bounced off a radio and hit Mrs. Hodges on the hip, rudely awakening her and leaving a bruise. At the time she was believed to be the only human being ever to be struck by a meteorite. (Several other cases have since come to light.)

Ripley would have reveled in this additional fact: Mrs. Hodges lived across the street from the Comet Drive-in Theater.

Two meteorites, falling on the same small town...as if targeted. A fluke, or a mystery? What exactly was the story here, with these “shooting stars”?*

Certainly, meteors have long been associated with the mysterious, the wondrous, the uncanny. Streaking across the sky, they have been viewed as omens. And any smoking remnant of one, recovered by our ancestors, was apt to be regarded as a magical object. Examples abound. A stone image “that fell from the sky” was venerated at the temple of Delphi. The Black Stone of Mecca—built into a corner of the Kaaba and dating back to pre-Islamic times—is almost certainly a meteorite. (According to legend, the Black Stone was given to Adam upon his fall from Paradise—as a token of God’s grace. It was originally white, we are told, but has been blackened by the countless pilgrims who have touched it, their sins absorbed by the divine artifact.) A meteorite has been found in an Aztec temple, wrapped in a mummy cloth. In 1492 a rock the size of a watermelon fell near the Alsatian town of Ensisheim; and King Maximilian took it as a sign to launch a crusade against the Turks. The Creek and Blackfoot Indians made pilgrimages to a meteorite that had landed on a hilltop. (The sacred stone was said to be growing in size, so that men could no longer lift it as they could in former times.) And as recently as 1880, a fiery object came down near Andhancha, India, to the wonder of the locals. A priest immediately took charge and began to collect money for a temple in which to house the rock.

* Shooting stars, of course, (as astronomers are pained to point out) have nothing to do with stars. They are asteroids and bits of comet debris that have come under the influence of the earth’s gravity, and which incinerate as they plunge through our atmosphere. (Asteroid, or starlike, is another misnomer, murmur the astronomers, who prefer the term *planetoid*.) At each stage of its descent, the rock—often a mere pebble—acquires a different name. Prior to entering our atmosphere, it is called a *meteoroid*. As it burns its way across the night sky, it becomes a *meteor*. And should any portion survive to reach the ground, that chunk of stone or iron is a *meteorite*. A further source of confusion is the term *meteorologist*—weathermen being interested in almost any atmospheric phenomena other than meteors!

Throng of worshippers arrived with offerings of coins, flowers, and rice.

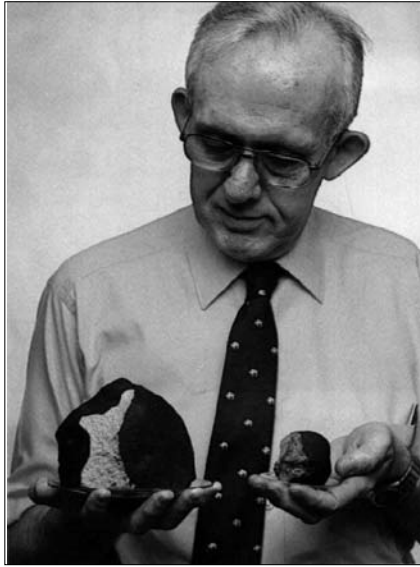
Confronted with a *succession* of falling stones, any of the above cultures (for whom a single instance was phenomenal) would have been quick to declare a supernatural event. The modern mind recoils from doing so—refuses even to consider the possibility. It is willing to be impressed, but not awed. Confirmed rationalists, we scoff at such notions as heavenly signs, hidden causes, a veiled dimension. An event our ancestors would have deemed highly significant, we pronounce “an extraordinary coincidence,” and relegate to Ripley’s. That Hindu priest would have trembled, at so dramatic a token of the divine presence. We but cluck appreciatively at the improbability of it all.

Yet say that our savants were to examine the odds, and conclude that something more than chance had to be involved here—that so radical a deviation from the laws of probability must surely have a cause. What then? Would they admit reluctantly to that supernatural dimension? To causes beyond their ken? To heavenly influences? Hardly. Rather, we would be assured that some natural cause had yet to be identified. That Wethersfield lay along some sort of geophysical path, hitherto unsuspected, down which cosmic debris was prone to travel.

But, as any astronomer will tell you, no such funnels exist. No location on our planet is likelier than another to receive a meteorite. The several hundred stones that reach the earth each year can, and do, fall anywhere (usually in unpopulated areas, from which few are recovered).*

So our pundits are left in a pickle. Asked to explain Wethersfield, they must either insist upon that coincidence—

* A surprising number of meteorites have been found in Kansas, by farmers who would come across them while plowing and sell them to scientists. This abundance was initially perplexing; and it was suggested that some subtle attractive force was operative in the state. But the explanation is that the soil in Kansas is relatively free of terrestrial rocks, making it easier to distinguish the extraterrestrial variety. Also, word spread quickly of the value of such rocks.



Chip Clarke

remind us that unlikely events *do* happen, now and again—or else admit to bafflement. One of Dr. Clarke’s colleagues at the Smithsonian confessed: “Meteorites are always a dramatic occurrence, but to have two strike the same town is, well, almost incomprehensible.”

Yet the fact is there. *Two houses only a mile apart were hit by meteorites.* It is a happening that defies probability, and cries out for an explanation. Of the mere dozen buildings ever to have been struck, why should two be located in Wethersfield, Connecticut? What was there about the picturesque town (with its white steeples, elm-lined streets, and trim Colonial dwellings) that might have singled it out? Lent it a peculiar magnetism? Made it attractive somehow to a plummeting rock?

What conceivable explanation for this enigma?

The Hindu priest would have shaken his head at our puzzlement. “Tsk tsk!” he would have chided us, and pointed a bony finger heavenward. “Are you insensible as to who inhabit that starry expanse out of which these artifacts fell?” Only a supernatural explanation—a divine origin for things that drop from the sky—would have

satisfied him. "A gift from the gods," he would have insisted. "A celestial telegram!"

And why not? But the question remains: Why Wethersfield? Even assuming a divine hand to have flung the stones, why at this particular place?

Our priest might have speculated that the town was unique in some way—that it possessed some singularity or special character, which had roused the interest of the powers that be. And turning to a publication from the area's Chamber of Commerce, we discover that Wethersfield has, in fact, three distinctions:

1. It is the oldest settlement in the state, founded in 1634 by a band of Puritans who had trekked over from Massachusetts.

2. It is the home of many insurance company employees (having become a suburb of Hartford, the Insurance Capital of North America).

3. It was once famous for the Wethersfield red onion.

Might any of the above (incredible as this would seem) relate somehow to the Wethersfield meteors?

It is interesting to find an extraordinary group—the New England Puritans—associated with an extraordinary event. And it is tempting to imagine their reaction to that event. Surely, the pious founders of the town would have dismissed the idea of a coincidence. They did not believe in coincidence. "Nothing in the world is really chance, accident, or blind fate—this was the constant and unshakable conviction of the Puritan," wrote Perry Miller of the early settlers of New England. Fireballs roaring through the sky, and bursting through their roofs? It had to be a sign—a warning, rebuke, or omen—from the God to Whom they were bound in a covenant. Even a less spectacular event might have been so perceived; for the Puritans saw the Divine Hand everywhere. All happenings, large and small, were a manifestation of His Providence. They believed that "the visible universe was under God's direct and continuous guidance, and that though effects seemed to be produced by natural causes—what at the time were called 'secondary causes'—the actual government of the minutest event, the rise of the sun, the

fall of a stone, the beat of the heart, was under the direct and immediate supervision of God.”*

Coincidence, then, was an empty term for the Puritans—a false and pernicious concept. “[There is] no Contingency, or Emergency, or Accident so casual, but it is ordered & governed by the Lord,” wrote Urian Oakes, a clergyman and president of Harvard College. Oakes goes on to give the Christian view of chance:

We see that there is, and there is not Chance in the World. Chance there is, in respect of Second Causes...but no Chance as to the first Cause. That piece of Atheism, and Heathenism ascribing things to Fortune and Chance, is hardly rooted out of the minds of men, that are or should be better instructed and informed. The Philistines when they were plagued, could not tell whether God had done it, or a meer Chance happened to them, 1 Sam. 6.9. They understood not, that what was a Chance to them, was ordered by the Providence of God. Truth is, Chance is something that falls out beside the Scope, Intention, and foresight of Man, the Reason and cause whereof may be hid from him; and so it excludes the Counsel [understanding] of Men; but it doth not exclude the Counsel and Providence of God; but is ordered and governed thereby. And it is so farre from being Chance to God, that there is as much (if not more) of the Wisdom, and Will, and Power of God appearing in matters of Chance and Contingency, as in any other Events.

Chance, Oakes is saying, is the *apparent* lack of design in events. In truth, not a stone falls but God intends it to. His Providence is always at work, though usually outside the scope of our understanding. The uninstructed see only the secondary causes of things—their mechanistic un-foldings. The pious look beyond, to the guiding hand of Providence.†

* Perry Miller, in *The Puritans* (Harper & Row, 1963).

† Boethius, in his *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, defines Providence as the Intelligence that is above all things and directs them.

The founders of Wethersfield shared this outlook, as did their children and grandchildren. The present inhabitants of the town, of course, have a more modern point of view. Many of them are descendants of that original band of Puritans, and are proud of their roots and heritage. They have abandoned, however, the “fanaticism” of their forebears. Long gone is the single-minded pursuit of a godly life. The conviction of having a special relationship with the Almighty. The trust in His Providence. The inheritors of Wethersfield have preserved the houses, furniture, family Bibles, and wise sayings that have come down to them. But they would no more embrace the world view of the Puritan, than go about in his tall black hat.

Yet a significant number of them do boast a unique cap, as far as profession is concerned. Which brings us to the second distinction on our list. Nearly forty insurance companies are headquartered in the area...and many of their employees reside in Wethersfield.

When a suburb of Hartford, Connecticut, was twice struck by meteors, the irony did not go unnoticed. Singled out for this violation of the laws of probability had been, of all places, the Insurance Capital of North America. An amazing coincidence had fallen in the laps of the nation’s actuaries. One wonders what their reaction was. Were the sober statisticians taken aback?

They must have been. For their profession is based on a faith as rigorous, in its way, as that of Urian Oakes. The insurance men trust in the randomness of events. They assume the cosmos to be ordered by blind, impersonal forces. They discern design, in large statistical patterns. According to their numbers, the chances of Wethersfield being struck by a meteor were negligible. And struck twice? Come now! So when it happened, the actuaries must have been flabbergasted. “A bizarre coincidence,” they must have mur-mured, “a fluke.” No other explanation was conceivable.

Clergyman Oakes, though, would not have agreed.

Asked to explain the Wethersfield meteors, he might have declared them a reminder. A rebuke, even.

Consider the facts. New England was settled by a

people inclined to see in all things—in “the rising of the sun, the fall of a stone, the beat of a heart”—the workings of Divine Providence. It was a perception central to their identity. But that world view has faded; and today’s New England is like an old sampler: motto still legible, yet prized only for its quaintness. No longer is Providence looked to as the governing principle of events. Indeed, the chief industry of the region is based on an opposing principle. According to those insurance companies, events are the progeny of chance. All is accidental.

And more than an outlook has faded—a pledge has been forgotten. For here was a people that had entered into a covenant with the Almighty. The Puritans had agreed to serve as the new Israel; to become a light unto the world; to raise a “shining city on a hill.” They had crossed an ocean and braved a wilderness—a *solemn covenant* the source of their resolve. Presumably, it is still in effect. Yet few among the present generation have even heard of it!

How God must have been irked as the new Israel strayed. As it ceased to recognize the Author of its fate, and grew unmindful of its mission. And how He must have been displeased when, looking for that city on a hill, He found instead...the Insurance Capital of North America! For what more vivid symbol, of the modern belief in the rule of chance?

Finally, He had hurled a pair of fireballs at this capital. Why? Surely it was to chide an erring people. To impress them with His power, and remind them that the world is ordered by an Intelligence and a Will, not by chance. As Urian Oakes had preached:

Time and Chance that further or hinder the Designs of men, are under the Rule and Management of the Lord. His Counsel sets the Times, appoints the Chances; His Providence dispenses the Times, and frames the Chances, that befall men....We should learn hence to admire the Power and Greatness of God. It is a lamentable thing, that He that doth all, is thought to do nothing!

Lamentable indeed.

No mere meteorites had come slamming through those roofs. A memo, rather. Addressed to New England, and sizzling with indignation.

Or so they might have been construed by Oakes and his fellow Puritans, who disbelieved in coincidence.

And with that, we shall conclude these speculations. An enigma has been examined in the light of a pious point of view. Whether any illumination has resulted, the reader may decide for himself.

There is, though, an epilogue to our account of the happenings in Wethersfield.

Months after the meteorite had come crashing into their living room, the Donahues were still being sought out by reporters. Asked to recall the event and its aftermath, Wanda told one of them:

“It was a very hectic first few days. We were suddenly caught in a whirlwind and we were carried along with it. When the scientific community got excited, we got excited, too. And we’ve learned a lot. I’d have to say we’ve certainly enjoyed the experience.”

The Donahues mentioned that the hole in the roof had been repaired—and the bill paid by their insurance company. For they had discovered that their homeowner’s policy covered damage from “objects falling out of the sky.”

And Bob related how they had sat down, one recent Monday night, to watch “M*A*S*H”; and a familiar episode had come on.

“It was the one where Winchester falls in love with a French nurse. Wanda nudged me and reminded me that this was the same show we were watching when the meteorite struck. Naturally, we had had other things on our mind and never saw the end of it. At exactly 9:17 we both leaned forward in our chairs in anticipation, and listened. Of course, nothing happened, and we settled back to watch the finish of the show.”

Aesop's Fable

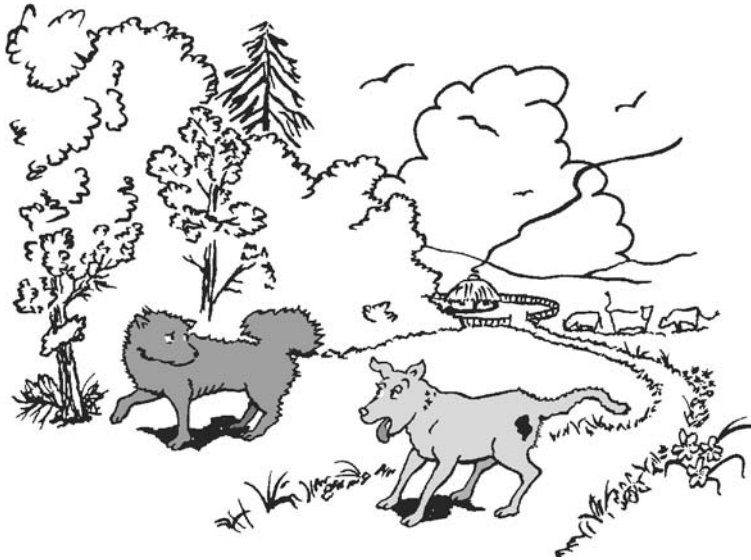
The Wolf and the Dog

A Wolf whose bones are sticking through his skin
(Hunger has left him piteously thin)
Upon the path a well-fed dog doth meet.
The cousins civilly one another greet
And, pausing on their errands, stop to chat.
“You’re looking good,” the Wolf says, “strong and fat,
Thy fortune governed by some god humane.”
“True enough,” the Dog nods, “can’t complain.
But you, Sir Wolf, are haggard, lean, and gaunt;
The victim, it would seem, of caloric want.”
“Aye,” the Wolf says, “times indeed are hard.
The problem is, you dogs keep zealous guard.
Yon grazing cattle, which I fain would take—
That I, my wife and cubs might dine on steak—
Protected are by canines on patrol
And we must settle for some mouse or mole.”
“Hold it not against me,” quoth the Dog,
“If, so that these hindparts he not flog,
My master’s livestock duly I defend,
His cows and calves and other creatures tend.
But harken, coz, to a simple truth:
You could be as fat as I, forsooth.”
Now frowns the Wolf and asks the Dog, “How so?”
“Come live with me. Your footloose ways forego.
What have they brought you, save wretchedness and strife?
Forsake the forest, for a better life.

Leave behind that pack of woes you've got—
 Starvation, traps, the fear of being shot—
 And follow me, back to yonder farm
 Where you may settle, free from care and harm.”
 “Your master'd have me? My presence would not irk?”
 “He'd *welcome* you—you'd join me in my work.
 No more starving, no more ramble and roam.
 You'll eat three squares, and have a decent home:
 A doghouse, bowl, whatever toys you choose;
 A cushion, too, on which to nap and muse.”
 The Wolf is interested, his gray eye gleams
 At what too fine a lot to have hoped for seems.
 “Such luxury,” he murmurs, “would please me, true,
 But in return, what would I have to do?”
 “Almost nothing. Simply chase away
 The thieving rascals that on our cattle prey;
 And fawn upon the master when he comes out.
 You know, wag your tail, dance, and run about
 As if to say: *I am your slave, hooray!*
Name it, sire, I'll hasten to obey.
Toss a ball or stick, I'll bring it back
Leaping and slaving like a maniac.
Take a walk, I'll follow at your feet.
'Man's best friend'—thy slave, let me repeat!
 Once or twice a day I do this shtick,
 And when there's company, perform a trick.
 That's basically it. I tell you, it's a breeze.
 So follow me—come lead a life of ease.
 Like a prince dwell in the farmhouse yard
 Far from all that's grievous, grim, or hard.”
 Replies the Wolf (oppressed from lack of meat,
 He's taken with this tale of Easy Street):
 “Three meals a day! What earthly bliss I've missed.
 Might I ask of what your dinners consist?”
 The Dog lets out a sigh. “Since you inquire...
 All the niceties one could desire.
 Bits of mutton, served with day-old ponies;
 Greasy and delicious chicken bones;
 The remnants of the choicest cuts of lamb;
 Stale bread, with a dab of jam;

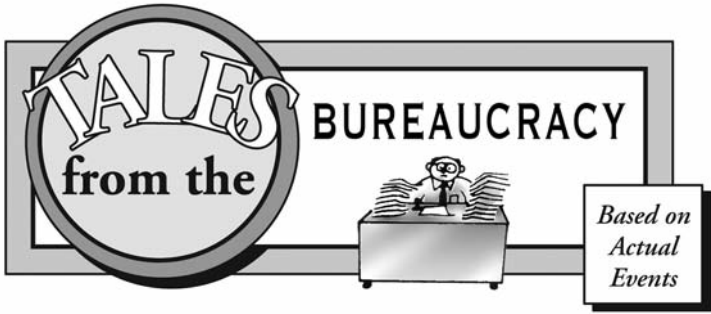
Any morsels that from the table fall;
 Spilt milk and dribbled alcohol;
 Casserole crust, corncobs, scraps of veal
 And other leavings from my master's meal.
 Then, for dessert (if I've any room)
 A bone-shaped cookie I'm given to consume."
 The Wolf declares (with longing in his eye):
 "I envy you the berth you occupy."
 "But wait, there's more. For breakfast every day
 These formulated nuggets come my way—
 A health food that my master (not to brag)
 Buys specially for me, sir, by the bag.
 Plus once a month, they bathe me—would you believe?
 And O the endless sprayings I receive
 (To keep me free of chiggers, fleas, and lice)
 And friendly pats....Sir Wolf, it's paradise.
 I even have a name, I kid you not:
 Among the family, I'm known as Spot."
 "But what about my wife and several cub?
 For them as well would there be room and grub?"
 "Bring 'em all! Your children? Upon my word,
 They'll romp about and help us guard the herd."
 "You're on, then!" cries the Wolf. "We're moving in."
 And all at once, to weep he doth begin,
 So great the joy to leave behind his woes
 (The hunger, danger, insects, freezing toes)
 And join his cousin in a life of ease.
 A house to live in—food—amenities!
 "But come," the Dog says, "to the farm let's wend;
 And for your dear ones this very day we'll send."
 Side by side, they trot along the path.
 The starving Wolf a look most eager hath.
 "Forest," says he, "and your ills—farewell.
 In the farmyard I've resolved to dwell."
 But as they near it, he doth chance to spy
 Something on his cousin's neck awry.
 "What's that mark, that chafing that I see?"
 "O nothing," says the Dog. "Nothing?" "Uh, it be...
 That is to say...a trifle, nothing more.
 From a rubbing is my neck thus sore."

“But rubbed by what?” “Well, that which you have spied
Is from the collar that I wear when tied.”
The Wolf halts in his tracks. “You are constrained?”
“Tis true, within the yard I’m sometimes chained;
But only when my master needs me there.”
“And can’t run free—can’t wander anywhere?”
“Not always, no,” the Dog says. “But...so what?”
“*So what?*” Than to be tied, sooner shot!
Such a state I’d curse with every breath.
An agony, an outrage, a living death!
By Jupiter, my liberty’s a treasure
That I’ll not trade for any earthly pleasure.”
And so bespoke, away the Wolf doth leap
Toward the forest, shadowy and deep.
But for a moment he pauses at its edge
And wonders at the wisdom of his pledge.
Looking back upon his cousin fat
And then into his native habitat
(Those wild woods, where strife and hunger rule),
He asks himself if one be not a fool



For the sake of nothing more than pride
Unrelenting hardship to abide.
“Those pangs of hunger, those nettles I could flee
And with the Dog go live in luxury.”
He wavereth...but finally, shakes his head.
“I cannot do it. Rather free than fed.
I’ll take the forest, with its ups and downs.”
And back into the wilderness he bounds.





Deadwood

The Municipal Employee and a co-worker were taking a break, in a corner of their office; and the conversation turned to the subject of “deadwood.” Their department had its share, agreed the two men, of unproductive employees; but the prime example had to be a certain old-timer—a genial, gray-headed fellow, who had been around for as long as anyone could remember. This drone of a civil servant—Deadwood, let us call him—had yet to be observed by either of them in an act of work. He would show up at his desk each morning; settle in with a newspaper and cup of coffee; take a few calls (of a sociable nature); refill his cup; shmooze with cronies; open his mail; disappear for a lengthy lunch-hour; read another newspaper; doze off; putter about...and collect a paycheck. Presumably, he had once served some useful function in the office, with specific duties to fulfill. If so, they had long since been delegated to others, or forgotten; and nothing was currently required of him beyond his physical presence.

The Municipal Employee chuckled at the shamelessness of it all. His co-worker chuckled, too, but added that maybe they shouldn't be so quick to laugh. “It's amazing,” he said, “but sometimes that guy can come up with information that's invaluable.” Or at least, Deadwood had done so on a particular occasion. Had the Municipal Employee heard about the water main? Glancing at his watch (their break had gone on for some time now), the Municipal Employee said he hadn't, and was told the following tale.

The City, it seems, was about to build a new water main; and a meeting had been called to discuss the plans for its construction. Attending this meeting were personnel from the Department of Public Works, along with representatives of other departments whose input was needed. Among the latter was Deadwood. Apparently, a vestige of his original function was to put in an appearance at such meetings.

A dozen or so men had assembled in a conference room; and the meeting got underway. One of the engineers read a report. It explained that, due to increased water usage in an outlying section of the city, an additional main was needed there. This main would extend for a mile and a half, and would cost three million dollars.

As the report was read, few of those in attendance were even listening. For no question was deemed to exist as to the need for the new main; and no debate was expected. The meeting was perfunctory, having been called simply to lend the project a stamp of approval.

But when the engineer had finished, Deadwood (who had been drinking coffee and staring out the window) spoke up.

“What do you want to go and build that for?” he said. “You’ve already got it.”

His fellows turned to look at him, as at a heckler. With a gesture of impatience, Deadwood elaborated. It wasn’t needed, he said, because the area in question already *had* an extra main. It was just sitting there, waiting to be linked into the system.

A murmur arose. Deadwood took a sip of coffee and went on. This main had been built back in the thirties, he explained, by the WPA—a Depression-era, public-works project. But that outlying section of the city had failed to develop as anticipated; and the main had not been put into service. Instead, it had been capped at both ends; shrugged off as a mistake; and forgotten about. But it was still down there. So there was no need to build a new one.

Derisive laughter now arose. Someone urged Deadwood to wake up and stop dreaming. Unrolling a chart of the water-distribution system for the city, the engineer pointed

out that no such main was indicated. Furthermore, the records had been checked, he assured everyone. Nothing of the sort existed.

But Deadwood just shook his head, and reminded them that he had been around back then. “I *remember* this pipe being built.” He even gave them the number of the manhole that would lead to it. “Go look,” he said. “You’re foolish if you don’t go out and look.”

Looks were exchanged; and their meaning was unmistakable. Clearly, this “WPA project” existed solely in Deadwood’s mind. His boast of having been around for half a century had been taken as a credential, not of knowledge, but of senility. But the possibility of spending three million dollars for something they already had, was daunting even for these seasoned bureaucrats. So approval of the construction was postponed; and a fieldworker was sent out to check.

Prying open the manhole, he climbed down and inspected the tunnel with his flashlight. And there it was, just as Deadwood had said. An unused main, capped and forgotten.

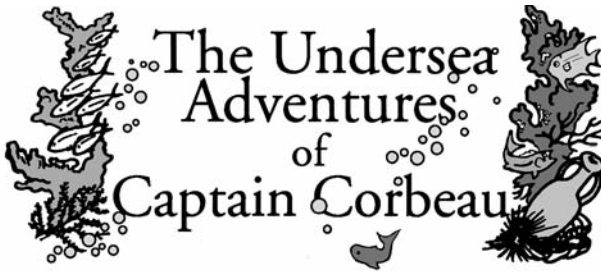
Apparently, the records pertaining to it had become lost. And somehow the main had never been entered on the chart. Over the years all remembrance of it had faded...except in the mind of one old-timer. And had he not insisted upon its existence, a new main would have been built. Unnecessarily. At a cost of three million dollars.

Deadwood had saved the taxpayers a considerable sum.

For years he had puttered about in the office—a superfluous figure, an object of mild scorn. He had sipped coffee, read the newspaper, palavered, dozed off, and collected his paycheck.

But on a single afternoon, the man had earned his keep. It was as if he had been kept on the payroll in anticipation of that hour. As if his *job* had been to know about the WPA pipeline, and to mention it at that meeting.

Deadwood could retire with a sense of accomplishment. He had served the City well.



The Undersea Adventures of Captain Corbeau

Saved by a Dolphin

[During the reign of Periander] a very wonderful thing is said to have happened. The Corinthians and the Lesbians agree in their account of the matter. They relate that Arion of Methymna, who as a player on the harp was second to no man living at that time, and who was so far as we know, the first to invent the dithyrambic measure, to give it its name and to recite in it at Corinth, was carried to Taenarum on the back of a dolphin.

He had lived for many years at the court of Periander when a longing came upon him to sail across to Italy and Sicily. Having made rich profits in those parts, he wanted to recross the seas to Corinth. He therefore hired a vessel, the crew of which were Corinthians, thinking that there was no people in whom he could more safely confide; and, going on board, he set sail from Tarentum. The sailors, however, when they reached the open sea, formed a plot to throw him overboard and seize upon his riches. Discovering their design, he fell on his knees, beseeching them to spare his life and making them welcome to his money. But they refused and required him either to kill himself outright if he wished for a grave on the dry land or without loss of time to leap overboard into the sea. In this strait Arion begged them, since such was their pleasure, to allow him to mount upon the quarterdeck, dressed in his full costume, and there to play and sing, and promising that, as soon as his song was ended, he would

destroy himself. Delighted at the prospect of hearing the very best harper in the world, they consented, and withdrew from the stern to the middle of the vessel while Arion dressed himself in the full costume of his calling, took his harp, and standing on the quarterdeck, chanted the Orthian [a high-pitched hymn in honor of Apollo]. His strain ended, he flung himself, fully attired as he was, headlong into the sea. The Corinthians then sailed on to Corinth. As for Arion, a dolphin, they say, took him upon his back and carried him to Taenarum, where he went ashore, and thence proceeded to Corinth in his musician's dress and told all that had happened to him. Periander, however, disbelieved the story and put Arion in ward, to prevent his leaving Corinth, while he watched anxiously for the return of the mariners. On their arrival he summoned them before him and asked them if they could give him any tidings of Arion. They returned for answer that he was alive and in good health in Italy and that they had left him at Tarentum, where he was doing well. Thereupon Arion appeared before them, just as he was when he jumped from the vessel; the men, astonished and detected in falsehood, could no longer deny their guilt. Such is the account which the Corinthians and Lesbians give; and there is to this day at Taenarum an offering of Arion's at the shrine which is a small figure in bronze representing a man seated upon a dolphin.

—Herodotus

*I*n the South China Sea, north of Borneo, a gale is rising. The winds whip the sea into a frothing mass. The sky has turned dark and threatening. A flock of petrels whirl in confusion. The winds howl, the waves grow higher.

Caught up in this turbulence are three boats: a Chinese junk, and a pair of rubber dinghies. The junk is towing the dinghies. Like flotsam the boats are tossed and buffeted.

Manning the junk are a small band of Chinese—magnet miners, headed home with a cargo of ore.

The miners have lowered their sail, and are glaring apprehensively at the boiling sea. One is crouched before a shrine in the bow. He has lit a stick of incense, and is chanting a prayer.

Crowded into the dinghies are fifteen Frenchmen. It is the crew of the research vessel *Andromeda*. Alas, these sailors will man their ship no more. For the *Andromeda* lies at the bottom of the sea.*

“Bau fon hui! Bau fon hui!” a miner calls out to them, gesturing at the sky.

“Qu’est-ce qu’il a dit?”† says a short, stout man in the dinghy furthest from the junk. It is Alphonse Marco, first mate of the ill-fated *Andromeda*.

Seated beside him is Captain Henri Corbeau, noted oceanographer and explorer. In Corbeau’s lap is the log of the *Andromeda*. The Captain looks up at Marco and shrugs. *“Je suppose qu’il parle du temps,”*** he says, and makes an entry in the log:‡

What an awesome sight is the sea when she is roused!

Gazing upon her, I am spellbound; and even Marco, that pragmatic soul, is agape. Surrounding us is a world of waves, a vast prairie of foam. For as far as the eye can see, whitecaps have sprouted; and they are like blooms in an aquatic wilderness. Overhead, the sky has turned gray and portentous—a menacing yet marvelous hue that only Nature has on her pallet.

Stirring, too, are the sounds of this sea. The water hisses, the wind roars. It is as if they are challenging one another. Two elemental forces are facing off, the water and the wind. Like prizefighters they will spar, while the men and I savor the action from these ringside seats.

Wave after wave comes washing over us; and we are drenched and battered. Yet not a man complains. This is,

* For an account of its demise, see “A Test for the *Andromeda*” in *Idler* #1.

† “What’d he say?”

** “I imagine he is commenting on the weather.”

‡ Corbeau keeps the log in English; for it is to be used in conjunction with the English-language film he is making of their voyage.

after all, a privileged moment; and one can only watch in humility and silence, as the Liquid Planet reminds us of its might.

Meanwhile, the dinghies have taken on water; and a frantic effort is underway to bail them out. With shouts of dismay, the men scoop up water with their hands and dash it over the sides. Absorbed in his writing, Corbeau seems unaware of the mounting danger. Marco shakes him by the shoulder, and points out that the situation is getting serious. Corbeau nods gravely.

“Un moment,” he says, and makes a further entry:

I am reminded of a passage from Homer. How does it go?

*νησι δ' ἐπῶρσ' ἄνεμον Βορέην νεφεληγερέτα Ζεὺς
λαίλαπι θεσπεσίῃ, σὺν δὲ νεφέεσσι κάλυψε
γαῖαν ὁμοῦ καὶ πόντον· ὀρώρει δ' οὐρανόθεν νύξ.
αἱ μὲν ἔπειτ' ἐφέροντ' ἐπικάρσιαι, ἰστία δὲ σφιν
τριχθὰ τε καὶ τετραχθὰ διέσχισεν ἰς ἀνέμοιο.*

Or roughly:

Now Zeus, who gathers clouds, brought the wind, the
North Wind

To rage against our ships, and in a tempest to engulf
them.

Shore and sea alike with clouds were shrouded o'er;
And night from heaven fell. Our ships were driven forth
Until the raging wind their sails had torn to shreds.

The clouds have become denser and darker. The wind tears at the men as they cling to their seats. Swells lift the dinghies, and slam them down. Water comes pouring over the sides. A full gale is upon them; and the boats scud helplessly before the wind.

Satisfied with his translation from the Greek, Corbeau puts away the log. He stands up, surveys the sea that rages about them, and frowns. The situation is indeed serious, he realizes. The dinghies are in immediate danger.

Holding onto his cap, Corbeau ponders a course of action. Marco has gripped him about the waist. For the wind is threatening to blow captain as well as cap into the sea.



Corbeau snaps his fingers—he has an idea. Shouting over the wind, he orders that the dinghies be brought together. Tied side by side, they will become more stable, he insists, and likelier to weather the storm.

A fifty-foot line connects the two boats. It is hauled in, until the dinghies are but a few feet apart. Now they must be brought alongside one another—a maneuver that will call for split-second timing.

As the gale blows about them, the men toil with grim intensity. The stakes are high, and they know it. Corbeau directs them with crisp commands.

At last the boats are maneuvered into position and lashed together. Immediately, they steady themselves.

A cheer goes up from the men.

Corbeau has remained standing; and Marco has continued to hold onto him. But now the first mate loosens his grip, to join in the cheering. He waves his cap and shouts "*Hurrah!*"

At that moment a wave slams into the boats—and Corbeau goes flying over the side. He plunges into the sea and disappears.

The wind and water have drawn him into their quarrel.

He reappears, gasping for breath. The waters swirl about him. He sees the dinghies being swept away.

And he hears an agonized cry—from Marco, who is grappling with the men beside him. Marco wants to leap into the sea and rescue his captain; but they are holding him back.

"Toi aussi, tu vas te noyer!"

*"Ça m'est égal!"**

The wind howls; and nothing more can be heard, as the dinghies are swept out of sight.

Corbeau struggles to remain afloat. His head bobs, a speck in the storm-tossed sea.

He rides the swells, paddles desperately, swallows water. The oceanographer knows he cannot endure for long. He is about to drown.

Corbeau will later describe the experience:

I say to myself: *Hélas*, this is it. There is no way the boats can reach me. The sea is about to swallow me up. Davy Jones will soon be stowing me away in his locker.

Well, at least I'll be getting some rest down there. As William Ellery Channing had it:

Beneath the endless surges of the deep
Whose green content o'erlaps them evermore
A host of mariners perpetual sleep
Too hushed to heed the wild commotion's roar.

I am about to join that slumbering host. My moment is at hand. *Ars est longa, vita brevis*.

Or, to put it plainly, I am a goner!

* "You too will drown!"

"I don't care!"

The waves come crashing over me; and it is all I can do to breathe and stay afloat. Yet even as I struggle, I am aware of a strange sensation.

Of exultation.

For it dawns on me that I am about to merge with the sea. To become one with her. To return to her.

What are we, after all, but wayward molecules—organic matter that long ago departed from the sea? Now a handful of those molecules are headed home. They have served a variety of purposes on land, including a brief stint as “Henri Corbeau.” Now the sea is calling them back.

What use, I wonder, will she find for them? Perhaps they will help to form a periwinkle...an angelfish...a coral reef. May I “suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange.”

Like a bagful of aluminum cans, I am about to be recycled; and it is an extraordinary moment.

True, I would prefer to stay on in my present configuration. So much yet to do. So many creatures to study, and lands to visit.

O to set sail just one more time
With compass, comrades, and plenty of wine!

Yet if my time is up (and bobbing like a cork in this tumultuous sea, it is hard to believe otherwise), I shall make as graceful an exit as possible. Lost at sea! One's grave the briny deep! Is it not a fit end for a sailor?

O sea, take me if you must. You have been like a mistress to me. In your arms alone do I wish to expire.

A wave engulfs me; and I lack the strength to resist. I swallow another mouthful. I am going down!

And so he is about to drown...when Corbeau feels a movement against his shoulder. Flailing out, he strikes something smooth and solid.

He is nudged in the chest and impelled upward. Bursting into the air, the oceanographer gasps and sputters.

A fin emerges in front of him, then a head. And Corbeau finds himself face to face with a dolphin.

“Grab on,” it squawks.

“Excusez-moi?”

“I said grab on!”

Corbeau will register his amazement in the log:

In a lifetime of following the sea, I have met with many wonders: the nautilus, the migrating eel, the giant squid, the ocean-going iguana, the architect fish, and a hundred others.

At the head of my list, though, would be the dolphin. This distant cousin of Man has always amazed me. It is intelligent, graceful, and swift. It can navigate. It can learn. It can entertain us with its antics—leaping into the air, tossing a ball about, tailwalking.

But a *talking* dolphin? One that accosts you in the middle of the sea, and—in a Donald Ducklike voice—enunciates a command? This is something new.

I stare in disbelief. Could my mind be playing tricks on me? In a dire situation, am I seeing and hearing what I would like to see and hear?

But the skepticism can wait. A drowning man will grasp at straws; and one has just arrived—this dubious dolphin. I grab onto the fin that is being thrust my way.

And the dolphin takes off, swimming at full speed with only its brow and dorsal fin out of water.

Corbeau is stretched out on the dolphin, like a man on a sled. He clutches the fin, and—as they plunge through waves—seeks to keep from swallowing water.

What an experience. It is like riding a torpedo!

And what an incredible effort this dolphin is making on my behalf. I can feel him strain as he battles the sea. His problem, of course, is not the weather—it is me. Without a passenger on his back, he could simply submerge and leave the gale behind. But for my sake he braves it. The exertion must be taking a toll on his energies. Yet our speed—twenty knots, at least—has not diminished.

My benefactor has not spoken again. And it occurs to me that those words I heard must have been a delusion—a figment induced by the emotion of the moment. (After all, I was about to be recycled!) Talking dolphin indeed. Next I will be gabbing with ghosts!

Corbeau is faint and exhausted. Yet he must maintain—against the drag of the sea—a tight grip on the fin. At one

point he loses consciousness; so tenacious is his hold, however, that he remains upon his rescuer.

The two of them race through the waves. How much time has elapsed? How far have they come? How much longer will this trial endure? Corbeau has no idea. He senses that the dolphin is seeking the perimeter of the storm.

Rain has burst now from the dark canopy of clouds. Sheets of it pummel him, as Corbeau clutches the fin and struggles to keep his head above water.



Then the rains cease; the wind slackens; and a sea that has been violent turns merely choppy. They have left the gale behind.

My rescuer swims on, at a reduced speed. With the storm ended, he seems to be recouping his energies.

Water and sky. Nothing else, not even a bird, is to be seen. All is gray and dreary. Then I spot something floating—something black and shiny. The dolphin, too, has seen this object; and, altering course, he heads in its direction.

As we approach, I recognize the tube from a tire. Fully inflated, it is bobbing on the waves. Once a plaything for children—a makeshift raft—it has drifted here from some distant beach.

The dolphin paddles up to it. What luck, I am thinking, a resting place for me. I cannot cling forever to this fin.

“Get in,” he squawks.

I clamber aboard; and only as I am making myself comfortable—draping my arms and legs over the tube—do I realize that it has happened again. *This dolphin has spoken to me.*

“Wait here,” he says. “Be right back.” And with a flourish of his tail, he disappears into the sea.

I am too fatigued to make the obvious retort. Cradled in an inner tube, I bob and drift, somewhere in the South China Sea.

As he watches the clouds drift overhead, Corbeau’s thoughts turn to his men. In their junk, the magnet miners were probably safe; but his men in the dinghies? Were they able to weather the storm? He prays that they were.

And he ponders the singularity of what has happened. A dolphin has saved his life.

Yet Corbeau knows that such an event is not unheard-of. Since classical times, reports have circulated of dolphins rescuing men. They are said to push, or to carry, a drowning person into shore. The Greeks told the story of Arion, a master harpist. After being robbed by the crew of a ship, he was ordered to leap overboard. Allowed one last song, Arion played, then leapt into the sea. Whereupon a dolphin—attracted by the music—took him on its back and bore him to land. And a certain Coeraneus was said to have freed dolphins from a fisherman’s net. Years later, the same dolphins returned the favor—rescuing him from a drowning at sea. From legends like these, the dolphin acquired a reputation for altruism. Plutarch remarked:

To the dolphin alone Nature has given that which the best philosophers seek: friendship for no advantage. Though it has no need of any man, yet it is a genial friend to all, and has helped man.

That help continues into the present day. A group of American fliers, shot down during World War II, had their raft pushed to an island by a dolphin. And a Florida woman has told of being caught in an undertow and starting to drown—when “Someone gave me a tremendous shove”; and she wound up on the beach. Looking about for her rescuer, she saw only a dolphin and a large fish, leaping in the water. A passerby came rushing over, and described how the dolphin had pushed her into shore, while protecting her from a shark.

Thus, dolphins have become known as the good Samaritans of the sea...an identity to which Captain Corbeau can now attest.

He is staring out at the waves, when a head pops up in front of him. His rescuer has returned.

The dolphin is back—and has brought me something. In his mouth is an object that he is thrusting toward me. I reach out and take it.

Shaped like a wallet, it has white surfaces, with dark fringes and a pinkish layer in between.

A sea sandwich! I have not seen one in years. A member of the sponge family, this creature is found in underwater caves. By some whim of Nature, it resembles a sandwich—a ham on rye—and makes a convenient lunch for divers.

Famished, I gobble it down.

“Thank you,” says Corbeau.

“S all right.”

It is time for introductions.

“Henri Corbeau,” says the oceanographer, pointing to himself.

“Fred,” squawks the dolphin.

“So you do talk.”

“Yah.”

“Unbelievable. Where did you learn?”

“In Miami. At Sea-O-Rama.”

“You were there? You were part of the show?”



“Yah.”

“For how long?”

“I dunno. Two, three years.”

“Did you enjoy that?”

“Yah.”

“But was it not oppressive, to be confined in a sea circus? I mean, you are a roamer, a denizen of the deep. Did you not miss the open sea?”

“Uh-uh,” says Fred, shaking his head.

“It was not boring for you in Sea-O-Rama?”

“Uh-uh. It was fun. I had hoops. Balls. A hat. An audience.”

“And the company, I suppose, of other dolphins.”

Fred nods. “Yah. There was me, Bozo, Einstein, Samantha, Marge, and Jo-Jo. We were like a troupe.”

“What about, though, when you weren’t performing—when you were confined with your friends. That must have been tedious.”

Fred shakes his head. “Uh-uh. We’d gab. Toss a ball around. Mate.”

“I see. Let me get something straight. It was at Sea-O-Rama that you learned to speak?”

“Yah.”

“How? Were you painstakingly taught to modulate your mew and moans, into intelligible sounds? Was English drilled into you by some psycho-linguistic method?”

“No, I just kinda picked it up.”

“Incredible. But tell me, Fred. Why did you leave Sea-O-Rama?”

“Felt the urge. For a change. Travel.”

“And they let you go?”

“You kidding? I was worth a bundle. Escaped.”

“Really? You escaped?”

“Yah. In the middle of a show. Leapt into the bay.” Fred lets out a rapid series of clicks. “Skedaddled!”

“Do you ever miss the place?”

“Yah. We had it made. Keepers. Medical care. Mullet.”

Corbeau gives him a sly look. “An abundance of mating opportunities.”

“Yah!”

“Not a bad lifestyle—I see your point. So what have you been doing since?”

“Hanging out. Côte d’Azur. That’s where I spotted your ship.”

“You mean, you followed us here? All the way from France?”

“Yah.”

“Why?”

“See where you were going.”

“It was lucky for me you did. I would have been a—”

Corbeau breaks off in mid sentence. He is glaring at a plastic bottle that is floating by.

“Look,” he says in a somber tone. “Even here, in the middle of the South China Sea. Nondegradable waste. Plus all the chemicals, the oil spills—it’s out of control. Fred, the ocean may be dying. What can we do about it?”

“I dunno.”

Corbeau waves his hands in the air. “It’s a real crisis. How can we save the sea?”

“Beats me.”

“But this is serious—and not only for Man. You dolphins *live* in the sea. This is your *habitat* that is being destroyed. Surely you have some thoughts on the subject. Share them with me.”

“Uh....”

“Look, you are intelligent and articulate. Give me some words of wisdom to take back to humanity. A message



from your species to mine.”

“Uh....”

“A bit of dolphin philosophy.”

Fred tilts his head to one side. “*Que sera, sera?*”

“No!” cries Corbeau. “Something has got to be done. We must act!”

“I suppose.”

“*O là là!* My friend, you are no help at all.”

Fred lowers his head and moans softly.

Corbeau slaps himself and murmurs: “What have I said? This dolphin saves my life, and I accuse him of being no help. Fred, my apologies. You have rendered the supreme help. *Je vous remercie mille fois*. Many thanks.”

“S all right.”

Suddenly, Corbeau frowns. He has remembered something.

“Good grief, my men. I don’t know if they are dead or alive; and I sit here worrying about pollution. What do you think, Fred? Can they have survived the storm?”

“Maybe. Hang on a minute.”

The dolphin lowers his head into the water.

Fred seems to be listening for something. Finally, he pokes his head out of the water and says that my men are safe. They have reached land, he assures me. Do I wish to join them? You bet I do, I reply; and Fred says to hop on.

How he has found this out is a mystery. Could he hear the men from a distance? Was he tuning in on some local grapevine—some news service of the deep? Or are dolphins psychic? Who knows? We have so much yet to learn about these remarkable mammals.

Taking hold of the fin, I slide onto his back. Fred tells me to ride sitting up, like a horseman. So I press my legs against his flanks; and we take off—at a sea-gallop! Spray rises behind us, like dust on a cowboy trail.

“Yippee-ya-o!” I shout; and Fred lets out a whoop of his own: an excited series of clicks.

Night is falling as they speed onward. Stars appear...the moon rises...plankton glow in the sea. Finally, Corbeau discerns a light ahead.

It grows larger, and appears to be flickering. A fire. Also



visible now is a dark band. Land.

Like commandos on a night mission, we approach the shore. I can hear voices now, over the surf's roar, and see men moving about the fire.

Fred comes to a halt, and says it is shallow enough to wade in the rest of the way.

The time has come, I realize, for us to part.

"Thanks for the ride," says Corbeau, sliding off into the water. "And the rescue."

"S all right."

"Will I be seeing you again?"

"I may stick around a while."

Au revoir then."

"See ya."

Corbeau waves as Fred swims off into the night.

The sea surges about his waist; and the oceanographer stands there, pondering his encounter with a dolphin.

Then he wades ashore. Marco is the first to spot him.

"Mon Dieu. C'est le Capitain!"

I am not prepared for the wild jubilation that ensues. The men had assumed, of course, that I was drowned. Now they crowd about me, whooping and throwing sand in the air. Jip is there, too, wagging his tail.

Marco hugs me like a bear and cries out: "*Ce spectre est en chair et en os!*"—"This ghost is flesh and blood!" He laughs and weeps, thanks Heaven for my deliverance. Tears are rolling down both our cheeks.

“Is everyone here?” I ask. “Did we all make it?”

“Yes,” says Marco, “everyone is safe—including the magnet miners. Fortune has smiled upon us.”

Indeed she has. It is good to be alive, and in the company of comrades.

The men seat me by the fire, give me a bowl of soup, and ask how I managed to survive. “I was saved by a dolphin,” I tell them. When they look at me in disbelief, I nod vigorously. “By a dolphin.”

“No,” says Jarry.

“Yes.”

I shall refrain, though, from telling them the actual story. It is too incredible—too far-fetched—and will have to wait. A talking dolphin, upon whom I ride about? They would think me delirious.

But Jarry persists. “A dolphin brought you here?” he asks in a skeptical tone.

“That’s what happened.”

“Why not?” says Darrieu. “Dolphins are famous for that. They love to rescue drowning men. They are the lifeguards of the sea.”

“Come off it,” says Jarry, rolling his eyes.

“But it’s true! They push you into shore.”

“Oh, occasionally a dolphin may save someone. But not on purpose.”

Darrieu frowns. “Not on purpose? How then?”

“As a result of its nudging instinct.”

“Explain.”

“Dolphins are both curious and playful,” says Jarry, puffing on his pipe. “Any floating object will attract their attention. Whereupon, their instinct is to roll under and nudge that object. Mindlessly, to push upon it.”

“Yet always they push people in the same direction—toward the shore. So they must mean to rescue them.”

“That’s the fallacy!” cries Jarry, waving his pipe in the air. “The dolphin doesn’t *necessarily* push people into shore. It pushes them at random—this way or that, toward shore, away from shore. But whom do we hear from? *Only those people who got pushed in the right direction.* The others drown, and don’t get to file a report.”

“I’ll bet that’s it,” chuckles Dr. Joubert. “A selective sampling.”

“Always, history is written by the winners,” says



Le Boiteaux.

We all laugh, and the debate comes to a close. Tomorrow, though, I may tell them about Fred.

I urge the men to get some sleep; and changing into the dry clothes I have been handed, I stretch out on the sand. The fire crackles nearby—a cozy companion. A skyful of stars is our roof.

Where are we? I wonder, listening to the surf roll in. Upon what shore has Fortune cast us? And what prizes—or perils—lie ahead?

Too tired to think about it, I sink into a deep and satisfying sleep.

(To be continued)



DOWNSCALE DINING

by Gastronomus

The Cafeteria

Students are assigned to the cafeteria during their lunch periods. Lunch may be purchased, if desired, or brought from home. The cafeteria is a place for students to eat, relax after their morning classes, and engage in social conversation with their classmates. In consideration of students who will be using the cafeteria later in the day, all students are expected to clean up after themselves, and to leave the cafeteria as they found it. We expect that students will comport themselves in the cafeteria as they would in any public eating place. Conversational tones of voice and general decorum are expected.

—from the student handbook of the
Baltimore School for the Arts

*T*he School for the Arts, a public high school with classes in dance, drama, music, and visual arts, has an ambitious curriculum, but a modest cafeteria. This lunchroom is located in the basement, in a drab, windowless space that not even a pair of murals have been able to enliven. The tables and chairs are of standard institutional issue. On the wall are some posters, showing how to put together a balanced meal. There is a bulletin board, a fire extinguisher, a clock.

At ten in the morning the cafeteria is empty, save for a tableful of seniors who hang out down here. But already a

stirring is in the air. Aromas waft from the kitchen. The janitor passes through. The doors to the serving area are opened, by a woman in a yellow uniform. The first of the lunch periods is about to begin.

Then footsteps, shouts, and laughter echo in the hallway. And the lunch crowd starts to arrive. Eager to assemble those balanced meals, the students line up. They make their selections, pay, and head for their usual tables. The lunchroom comes alive, with conversation, the clatter of chairs, horseplay. Needless to say, the students are glad to be here. They are hungry, and the food—though universally denounced—is cheap and filling. But more than hunger has drawn them to the cafeteria. For within these walls, they may give vent to suppressed energies. They may socialize, chatter, indulge in antic behavior. No teacher hovering over them. No dreary textbooks. No instructions on the board. In this subterranean place they have left all that behind; and like a band of outlaws, they feast and frolic.

Yet a teacher is present, even in this liberated zone. In a corner of the room, hunched over a tray, he is eating. That is not his reason, though, for being here. Rather, the poor fellow has been assigned cafeteria duty. As part of his job, he must eat his lunch amid a din of teenagers. He is here to maintain order—a thankless task. It is a lonely one, too; for the man dines alone. Who will join him? The students distance themselves from any supervision; while his fellow teachers avoid the cafeteria—have brought bag lunches, to be consumed in some more tranquil location.

Last year, for nearly a week, that cafeteria cop was me. A substitute teacher at the school, I was filling in for the American Government teacher; and she had lunchroom duty during fourth period. I sat there in her stead, in a room filled with noise and gadding about and mischief. The merriment was to remain within certain bounds; and my responsibility was to see that it did. I had to monitor—and endure—the lively scene in the basement.

By way of compensation, I decided to treat myself to a daily hot lunch. As long as I had to be there in the cafeteria, I would sample its cuisine. Why not? I was tired of the

sandwiches and sunflower seeds I had been packing. An inexpensive, cooked meal, a different entrée each day—something to look forward to as I tended my morning classes.

It occurred to me, too, that I could report back on the experience to the readers of this column. What follows is that report—a firsthand account of dining in a student cafeteria.

Tuesday

The food is served by two middle-aged black women who look mildly harassed. Moving along with the line, I make my selections: spaghetti and meatballs; *au gratin* potatoes; a roll; fruit salad. A student mocks my pedantic pronunciation of *au gratin*. Another wants to know whose place I am taking. I pay and carry my tray to a table.

Spaghetti and meatballs! Starving, I dig in. Do any of the students know I am a vegetarian? If so, they will be scandalized to see me eating this—will ask if I have forsaken my diet. And I shall have the satisfaction of informing them that no meat whatsoever is to be found in these meatballs, and that they (the savvy students!) have been fooled. School cafeterias, I shall explain, regularly use soybean substitutes nowadays. Caveat emptor, I shall add, wagging a finger—that's the lesson here.

But, beyond the misrepresentation, I find no fault with the soy balls. They have a subtle texture of their own, reminiscent of matzoh balls. Alas, the noodles are overcooked. But the roll is excellent—freshly baked and served hot. As for the potatoes, their French name lends them a cachet; and while scarcely a gourmet preparation, they are surprisingly satisfying.

Only about thirty students have lunch this period; so the cafeteria is relatively peaceful. There is, however, one boisterous group: a club of some sort that has convened at a table near me. The *raison d'être* of this club seems to be to levy fines upon its members. Anyone who commits one of numerous infractions, such as arriving late or using bad language, must put a nickel into the kitty. (Are rules

being mocked here?) Both boys and girls belong to the club. Their behavior borders on the unruly. They joke, trade insults, laugh loudly. At one point they throw nickels at each other. Surely that is going too far, and I should restrain them. But I let it pass.

I eat, scan the room, read my newspaper. For the most part, the students are subdued—a few are even studying—and do not require my attention. The forty-five minutes pass agreeably. One could almost be sitting in a cafe somewhere. Three-quarters of an hour, a luxury. Most high schools allow less time in which to eat—as little as twenty minutes; and for the student who must spend half that time waiting in line, it is an early lesson in the disamenities of the workplace.

My replacement—one of the math teachers—arrives. He is carrying a pizza, purchased from the restaurant down the street. Planting himself at an empty table, he begins to devour this treat. Students beg in vain for a slice. A fly lands on the box; and shooing it off, he remarks on the creature's angular velocity. The students ignore his jest, but continue to eye the pizza. Real food, they must be thinking, as the aroma drifts over to them.

Wednesday

The serving women do not banter with the students. They barely acknowledge the presence of those who pass before them, dishing out the food mechanically and silently. I mistake this for sullenness or unfriendliness. But when I offer one of them a greeting, she responds with a smile and shy murmur; and I realize she has retreated into a shell. The students are too much for her. What does she see, after all, in this daily procession? Studious youths, on a break from their studies? Hard-working teenagers, in need of sustenance? No, she sees what is in front of her—a pack of madcaps! Hungry and impatient, they crack jokes, complain, indulge in foolery. With no authority over them, the serving woman is at the mercy of these young people. So she avoids any interaction with them.

I settle in at the same table as yesterday, and contem-

plate the items on my tray. They look good, smell good. My fellow diners would not agree. When I remarked that I was hungry, a student in line said, "You gotta be hungry to eat here." But hunger is the best pickle; and with pangs of it shooting through me, I am not hard to please. Today's entrée is a meatball sub, which I devour with gusto. It is hot, hearty, and filling. It also embodies an old-fashioned virtue: domestic thrift. For yesterday's "meatballs" and tomato sauce have resurfaced here—a creative use of leftovers that is to be commended. Commendable, too, is the freshly-baked sandwich roll. And one appreciates the lettuce, tomatoes, and onions that were available as fixings. My only complaint is that the onions are antique—an abuse of domestic thrift.

I have purchased two side dishes. The french fries are a disaster, having become soggy from the steam used to keep them warm. (They do serve, though, as a vehicle for mayonnaise.) But the collard greens are a triumph. They are as good as any I have ever had. I know they have come from one of those large, institutional cans. Yet I cannot resist the notion that the serving women have prepared these greens, from an old family recipe. It cannot be, but for a moment I am convinced: homemade!

Again today, the club members are carrying on; and I must keep an eye on them. Craving something sweet, I go back and buy a package of cookies. The label describes them as "old-fashioned" and "fresh." They are brittle and stale. But the sweetness is there, and my craving is satisfied. I munch on cookies as I read the newspaper.

Three music majors are sitting together. I wander over and strike up a conversation. I ask Carrie if she has any career plans. Architecture, she replies dreamily, or maybe anthropology. A friend comes up behind her, covers her eyes and says: "Guess who."

At noon I return to the classroom. A hot, ample meal has left me with a buzz of well-being.

Thursday

Pizza today. It has a curious oval shape. Not bad, I

decide. I wonder if the cheese is real. Do the students know that even cheese may be ersatz? Do they care?

The steamed cabbage is tasty. Even better are the “logs” (as they were billed on the wall menu)—deep-fried potatoes, with a crust that is sensational. These could pass for Indian food. I have taken packets of catsup, but the potatoes don’t need it. The best thing I have had yet at the cafeteria. Dessert is pineapple slices.

I go over and chat with those music majors. Carrie drops a bombshell. Did I know, she asks, that the students have a nickname for me? No, I didn’t know, I reply with an air of bemused detachment. What might it be? She pauses for effect, then reveals to me my nickname.

“Mr. Trivial Pursuit.”

She doesn’t have to explain. Seeking to enliven the classes I cover, I occasionally toss out an interesting fact, an odd bit of information, a challenging question. (“What is the southernmost state? No....No....Hawaii.”) Of course, I view this as general knowledge, not trivia. Oh well. The nickname is one I can live with. Carrie goes on to describe some of the other substitutes who have come to the school. One is an older gentleman with snow-white hair—a great mane of it; and he, too, has been given a moniker: Geppetto. Another is a woman who wears a red slip three inches too long, and who falls asleep at the desk.

Our conversation is interrupted by a crashing sound. A chair has been knocked over, by some boys engaging in horseplay. “Fellas, please!” I call over. My nerves are quivering.

Friday

Cheese-steak sub today. The “steak” is ersatz. It has a novel texture that goes well with the melted cheese (if cheese this be). The sandwich roll is freshly baked. Accompanying my sub are hash-brown potatoes and steamed cabbage. The potatoes are all right, although no match for yesterday’s. And though my tray was already crowded with food, I could not resist the bread pudding. For fifty cents you get a generous serving of it, doused with

a sweet yellow syrup.

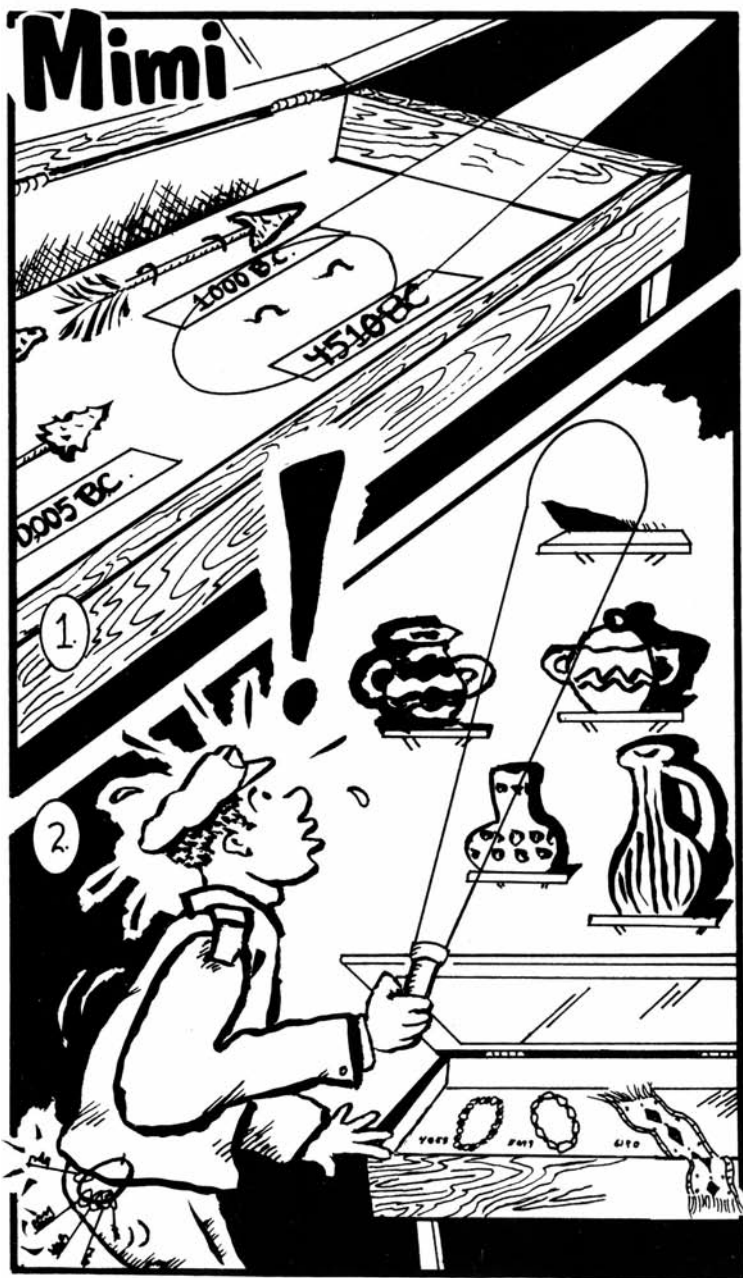
It occurs to me that I have yet to spot anyone with a bag lunch from home. Busy moms have had to cut back on such services; and who will bother to pack his own? I did see students eating out of brown bags. But the bags were not from home. Emerging from them were potato chips, sodas, cookies, and other snack items, purchased on the way to school.

With the weekend approaching, the students are growing restive. At one point a club member lets out a shout, then uses language that is loud and inappropriate to school. "Quiet, please," I tell him. And just before the end of the period, one student throws a wad of paper at another. "Don't throw paper," I say in a reasonable tone.

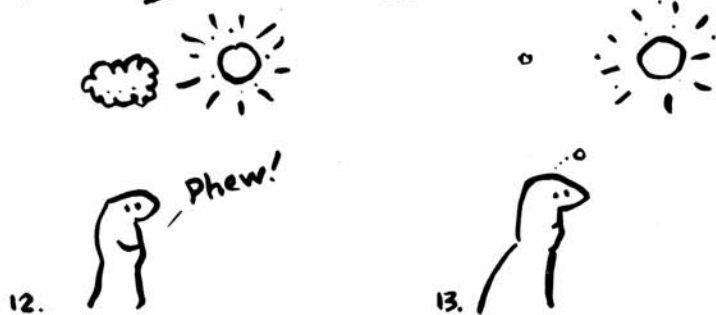
Finally, it is time to go. My stint as a lunchroom monitor has ended. The experience was not so onerous as I had feared. The students did not riot; and I got to eat actual meals, read the newspaper, and chat.

How would I rate the cafeteria? For ambience it must receive low marks. (No windows, unbused tables, flying wads of paper.) But the food has been unjustly maligned. It is plain, hot, and filling, and must surely boost the morale—sagging at midday—of those who gather here "to eat, relax after their morning classes, and engage in social conversation."

I head back to the classroom, with its teacher's chair in which I shall try to make myself comfortable. That buzz of well-being has returned...along with a certain languor. For I have stuffed myself and become drowsy. Like my colleague with the red slip, I may soon (as the students busy themselves with an assignment) be nodding off.







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odds & ends

At a dental clinic in Baltimore, a sign on the front desk instructs patients to make their checks out to:

U.M.F.D.S.P./A.G.D.

When asked what this abbreviation—possibly the world's longest—stood for, the clerk confessed she did not know.

(Subsequent inquiries revealed that payment was being made to the University of Maryland Faculty Dental Services Practice/Advanced General Dentistry.) Practice/Advanced General Dentistry.)

●

Benjamin Franklin offers the following advice to persons wishing to have pleasant dreams:

1. Eat moderately. You will thereby generate less “perspirable matter”—a substance that accumulates beneath one's covers and causes uneasiness during sleep.

2. Use thin blankets. “Perspirable matter” will pass through them more readily.

3. If awakened by that uneasiness, get out of bed and give your covers twenty or more shakes—to air them out. Turn your pillow. Walk about naked (the body, too, must be aired), until the bed has cooled. Now climb back in. Your dreams should be pleasant. Of his own, Franklin claims to be “as agreeably entertained by them as by the scenery of an opera.”

For those too indolent to leave their bed, he suggests lifting the covers with an arm and leg, then letting them drop. This less effective means of airing is also to be repeated twenty times.

Or best of all, Franklin recommends having two beds, side by side in your chamber. Simply shift from one to the other, as needed during the night.

He stresses that one's head and limbs have to be comfortably positioned, or may disturb the imagination.

Franklin concludes:

These are the rules of the art. But, though they will generally prove effectual in producing the end intended, there is a case in which the most punctual observance of them will be totally fruitless. I need not mention the case to you, my dear friend, but my account of the art would be imperfect without it. The case is, when the person who desires to have pleasant dreams has not taken care to preserve, what is necessary above all things,

A Good Conscience

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by **Professor Solomon**



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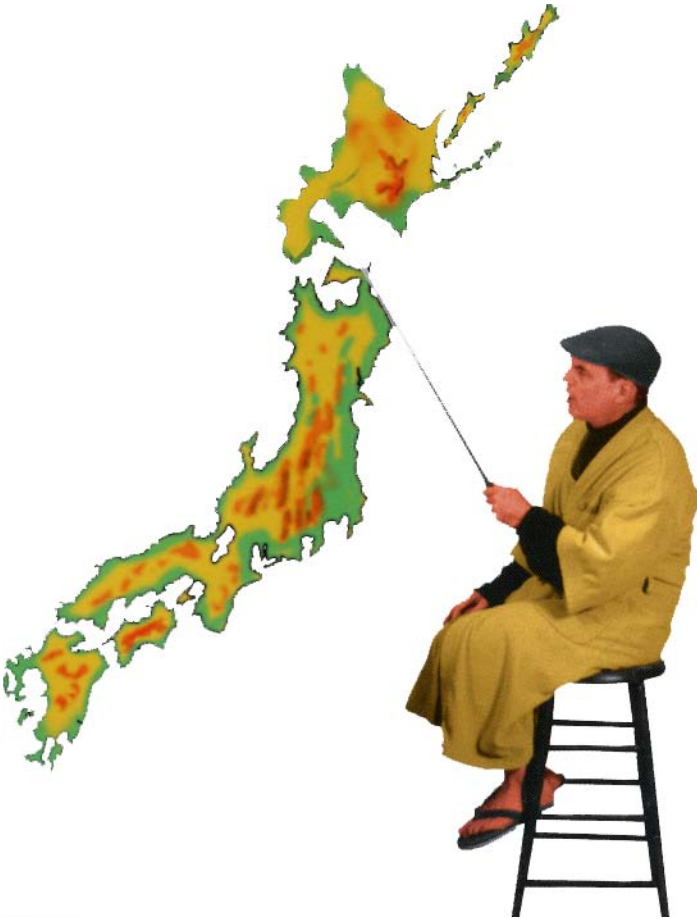
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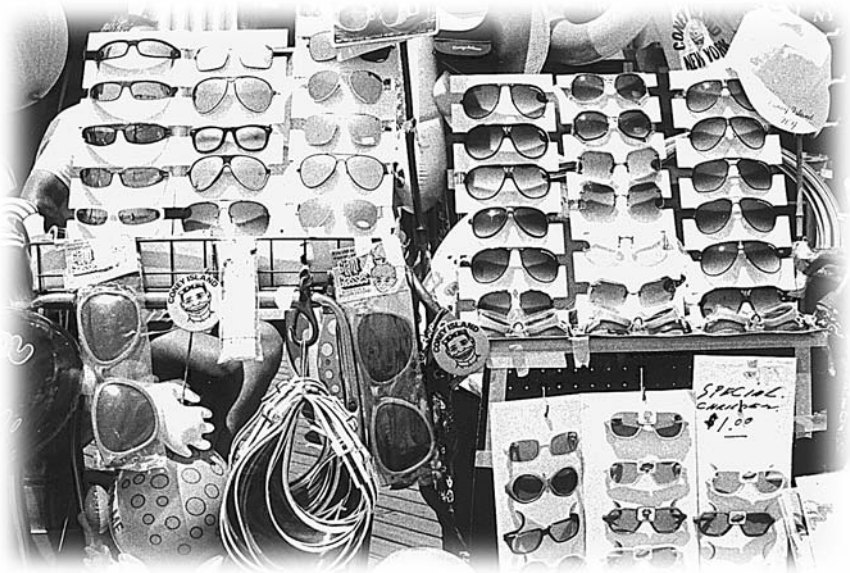


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