

KNIHY OFF-LINE

ALL THE BELLS OF HELENA

Jan B. Hurych

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These short stories first appeared in Hurontaria. All pictures are by author.

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How it happened.

Those of You who never read webzine *Huronaria* may wonder how did it ever come to life. Well, it's rather old story and all I can tell you is that I was tired writing for other magazines so I started one of my own.

It does have a peculiar name though, but it is hardly my fault. Originally, it was called *Huronarian*, since I live in that area between Huron and Ontario Lake, sometimes called *Huronario*. Unfortunately, I have found out that there was once published an attachment to one local newspaper , which was already called *Huronarian*. I surely didn't want to copy the other name and I could not possibly use the name *Huronario*, since you can find it almost everywhere here. So back to the drawing board and up came the name *Huronaria*, the latinized version of Hurontario. After all, there is a place called *Britannia* and it does make the waves - or do they sing "*rules the waves*"?

All jokes aside, the webzine caught the eyes of the readers - it even used to be bilingual, that is One half was in Czech, the other one in English and the contents were different, too. It had several sections, one of them being called "The Short Story". True, some of those stories were written long time ago, when I took the writer's workshop in Saskatoon, but the great majority of them was written while marching - when I started to write I just could not stop. Well, I had about a month for each story, much more than professionals usually have :-) and luckily for me, I never run out of ideas and subjects.

I selected some of those stories for this book and added few electronically graphic pictures, which is my another hobby. I just hope that you will enjoy reading it the same way I was writing them. And if you like it, I may get find the others and get another book out soon,

Yours electronically,
Jan B. Hurych

The Flood.



After those heavy rains, water flooded the countryside. Never before the level in those rivers and creeks raised so high. Animals and people perished. The raiders carrying the news about it were dispatched all around, to bring the help to those unfortunate ones who didn't leave everything behind and run away to the security of the mountains. Many just could not part with their properties, others didn't want to leave their homes or their loved ones. When they realized the mistake, it was too late.

Spencer was one of those who did not possess any property and as far as his home was concerned, he felt home anywhere and nowhere. He helped himself to property any which way he could - namely by cheating at cards or even picking other pockets. He just finished his jail sentence in this damned town's prison. Spencer was actually very lucky, considering he was arrested for disturbance of peace and not for that

stolen purse with money - he just managed to throw it away when nobody was watching.

"Have you ever been in jail?" the sheriff asked him, since nobody in the town knew Spencer anyway. He lied as usual and - also as usual - he got away with it. They were only happy to lock him up and even happier to release him later. The town treasury was not big enough to feed one extra hungry mouth and it was quickly decided that he should find his food elsewhere - which was probably the worse punishment than jail. The jailer was making faces when he handed him his purse, always empty as Spencer's stomach.

Some time ago, when the civil war started, everything looked better and Spencer joined the King's side, mainly because the King was winning. But with his proverbial bad luck, everything turned around and it was parliamentarian side that was now going from victory to victory. After the battle at Wilsonville, Spencer managed to escape, but he didn't want to join victors. Not that he would have any bad conscience, it was just that the soldiers of general Moss considered all deserters as spies and had only one medicine for them - gallows and the noose. What's more: even if he would be enlisted by them, he could still be captured by King's soldiers and be recognized by them. And believe me, their noose was not any better.

Instead, he preferred to hang around and cheat morons at card games. When he was arrested, he didn't like it either and he was happy to get out - if he stayed too long, they might have forgotten he was there. On the other way, it was rather safe in his cell and food was bad, but still regular. After

his release he was facing the problem what to do next and he didn't like that at all. He was just contemplating his bad fate when he overheard somebody crying: "The northern dam busted and the water is coming in town!" The man who was screaming those words was really scared. he was apparently not afraid only for his life, but judging by his rich clothing, he must have left more of it at his home. Spencer soon noticed some other people, running around like spooked chicken. They were all reassuring themselves that the water was coming and that is was terrible.

Spencer approached one woman and asked her: " Is it true, Madame?"

"Where have you been that you still have to ask? we were expecting it now for some days!" She looked him over, made a face and left him without a word. More and more people were running by, some with baggages, others with some handbags. Lonely women were carrying only babies in their arms, their only treasures they cared for. The burgers who were rich enough were harnessing their horses and filled their wagons with more than bare necessities.

He decided to leave the town before it was too late. All people headed south, but it looked like the road was crowded with refugees. Somebody dropped his bag and few pieces of silver cutlery fell out of it. The man looked suspiciously around and quickly picked the pieces. That gave Spencer the right idea: the houses would be deserted! What a great opportunity! His lady Luck was coming back after all. There was no question he could return back to town: there were too many people there and sheriff's deputies would certainly recognize him. So he carried on, but turned left on the next crossroad. He might then find some farmhouses there - he thought - and as they say, the opportunity makes a thief. He couldn't help laughing.

The road went through the valley, along some creek which was already overflowing its banks. Spencer walked about an hour, but didn't see any farm, not even a shack. As he walked he saw the situation was getting serious: in some places water had already reached the road. Then he crossed the bridge which was surprisingly still holding and carried on. He was thinking where he would probably get his lunch when he felt sudden cold - he was walking in the water. Overcome with panic, he run back to the bridge, but it just disintegrated before his eyes.

He was standing there for a while as he wouldn't believe his eyes, but then he quickly realized he was trapped. Now it was his own life which was in stake. He run back again, but he wouldn't get too far: water covered the road entirely. He run up to some hill, where he could look over the countryside. he saw his road covered by water as far as he could see. Then he spotted it: in half a mile distance there was s solitary house. he run for realizing it was his only hope.

The house was deserted - at least it looked like it - but there were no indication that its owners left it in a hurry. There was still some food on the stove, half of roasted chicken, still warm. He sat by the table and fed his hungry stomach. When was the last time he was eating like this? He ate slowly, enjoying every byte. Then he got up, found a bottle of wine and sat down again, to have a decent drink and rest. "Thanks God for this flood!" he made a toast and raised the glass in gratitude. No more hungry, he felt pretty good and the world suddenly looked nice again.

Suddenly he overheard some steps. He wanted to hide somewhere, but when he started to run for the door, he tripped and fell. Spencer screamed in pain. He injured his ankle which reminded him that he

was trapped even more - now he lost all possibility to run away. So what - he thought - one can always pretend he was a victim of the flood. He could hear the steps: somebody was walking down those old, squeaky stairs. The door opened and the person entered. Yes, it was a person, as far as he could say, but the first thing he saw was its face: deformed, maimed, horrific. Spencer shuddered: what he saw looked like a face of death, at least the way he always imagined it. It was only by her dress he recognized it was a woman and judging by her hands, she could not have been very old either. Then he understood all: she was the leper.

"Don't come any closer!" he screamed at her. She didn't answer and only her eyes betrayed there was a living person behind that disfigured face. She looked at him piercingly, but with no enmity. "I injured my foot," he explained, just to say something. The woman did not answer, however. A walking death - it crossed his mind - they left her here because she was too much bother to take her with them.

He looked out through the window: the water spread all around and covered even the footpath he came. "I might still be able to leave," he said and made few steps toward the door, when he realized the pain was excruciated and had to lean on the wall. The woman suddenly opened her mouth, but all he could hear were few unrecognizable sounds. Maybe there was still somebody hidden upstairs and she calls him for help - he thought - and so he exclaimed: "Don't call anybody, I mean no harm!"

Her mute eyes didn't move. With last strength he limped to the door, but when he opened it, he saw water reaching the steps and even threshold, something he couldn't see through the window. His eyes scanned the valley, but he saw only flat, infinite surface of water, quiet and deadly. Since all roads were now flooded, there was *nowhere* to run, they were completely surrounded by water. His bad luck caught up with him again. He sat on stairs and cried. In utter desperation, he stayed there for several hours. When he realized there is nothing he could do, he got up and limped back inside the house. It was almost evening, so he laid down on the bench and fell asleep. When he woke up it was still dark, but his leg was swollen and violent, pulsating pain was tearing his ankle. His eyes were searching for the woman, but she apparently went upstairs. He picked some rug, soaked it with water and wrapped it around his leg. After a while, the pain soothed and he felt asleep again.

He woke up at daylight and realized that somebody put a blanket over him and a pillow under his head. The horrible woman was up already, preparing breakfast. She overheard his yawning and turned around - but said nothing, except few garbled words. Spencer guessed that the sickness apparently destroyed most of her vocal cords and that's why she could not speak. To his relief, he also realized that the pain in his leg was not that bad any more. True, he not well enough for him to leave, but it allowed him to hop around searching the house. He found some food reserves which he divided in two piles and carefully hid his half. Then he realized that he should not worry; it would be him who would, in the case of shortage, robbed the woman. Well, his life taught him one thing for sure: you can disregard all cravings of your body except hunger itself.

Two days went by and all the food was gone. His leg improved but the water outside was still raising and there was no end of it. Spencer was standing by the window, stared into the flooded valley and tried to guess how long he could stay hungry and when in heavens could the water possibly start to recede.

Suddenly he heard some shrieks behind him. He turned around and saw the leper woman, exclaiming some joyful but unrecognizable sounds which apparently were representing some kind of singing. "Shut up!" he yelled at her. He got used talking to her, maybe because he didn't have anybody else to converse with and he was tired of talking to himself. He wasn't sure she understood him, but that didn't bother him too much either. The woman burst in laugh and happily continued in her cackle. "Crazy woman, stop your stupid blubber!" he screamed, but she didn't seem to listen. "Go and sing in your church, you old witch," he added, "you, you can't expect anything better than that, but I do not want do croak here, you know!" Her monotonous whimper, interrupted only when she was inhaling air, was surely getting on his nerves. "You bloody prophet of doom, don't call the death yet! She will find you, don't you worry bout that!" She turned around and looked at him with devoted eyes, but for him they appeared like they were made of glass and reminded him of all the water around the house. he pushed her away from him.

Suddenly he realized he touched her and stepped back with disgust. Still full of horror, he spat on the floor and exclaimed: "I have already seen death, several times - in war, you know. But you are surely the ugliest one I ever saw."

In sudden fit of black humor, he added: "Yes, I saw her! She was a real beauty: nice, smiling face with pearl-white teeth - when she exposed them. Nothing like you, you monster! And she was riding a horse, a pale stallion, a sword in her hand, yes, that was a death for the fellow like me! But here - what can I expect here? This is nothing but drowning slowly in the stinking mud, dying like a bloody dog!"

The creature next to him turned her head. Her look was expressing something he never saw before and didn't understand at all. He shouted at her: "What are you staring at you old crow? Don't you understand? I do not want to kick the bucket yet, don't you get it? All my life I had only some bad luck and I don't want to die like this!" She didn't respond. "Say something, you old misery, don't look so stupid! Don't you understand? We are both going to die here, sister! This is the end of all your troubles. The deluge is coming, hallelujah! Rejoice, the day of last judgement is coming! You will be beautiful again! Yes, you will go right in paradise and me, they send me to bloody hell!" Then he realized how right he probably was: "You see, we have to part here." He crossed himself: "Let us pray, pray, you old witch, pray!"

She creamed, apparently from joy. But he didn't notice and carried on: This is the end, you know, the end! We have to welcome death now. Go and put on your best dress, the one you used to wear to church!" She watched him, but her eyes told him she didn't get it. He motioned to her with his hands, gesturing like he is dressing himself up. She nodded, clapped her hands like a child and went upstairs. "Silly broad," he said to himself, "she doesn't understand anything!". Suddenly, as he was alone, he felt a drilling pain in his stomach. The hunger called again. He went to search the house, but there was nothing left, not even a crumb.

After some time, she came downstairs and stood in front of him. Spencer raised his head and looked at her. She was wearing an old, long dress made from white silk, with wide, richly laced collar. It fit

her well, but one could see it was made some time ago, when she was still young and beautiful. There was a veil across her face, white as well, and while he couldn't see her face - or what was left of it - she looked like a real bride, maybe even attractive one. She was carrying man's suit, all black, folded across her forearm. It apparently belonged to her deceased husband, or maybe a groom, who couldn't stand her being sick and left the altar in horror. Black color- Spencer thought - it will fit well to his funeral.

He got mad again: "You stupid monster, what have you done? You are driving me crazy! This time you really did it! How many times I explained to you that the death is near and instead, you want to go to church! Or maybe you want to go to some wedding, he? But you have to swim to get there, you fool, there is a water all around us." The woman was standing there, understanding nothing. She could not comprehend why he was so mad and in her confusion, she shouted some animal-like, gasping screams, a substitute for weeping..

Exceptionally, this time Spencer understood her quite well: "Don't cry," he said, almost gently, "I know, you are just deaf and I am the stupid one. But you are not smart either, otherwise you would have more food stashed away." That brought back to his mind the desperate situation they were in trouble and was mad at her again. After all, it was only her fault. He pushed her away: "Go, get lost, I can't stand you here any more!" The shove was probably too much or maybe she didn't expect it - she fell down on the floor. Full of anger, he knocked her twice; so much he wanted to get rid of her, so much she reminded him of the approaching death. Slowly, she raised herself up and looked at him with some puzzlement, like she would not believe he really did it. Then she quietly headed upstairs. Half way up she stopped and turned her head like she was waiting for him to change his mind and tell her to stay. He didn't.

Few more days passed and she didn't appear downstairs any more. Then one morning he got up and there she was, sitting in the chair and doing some embroidery. She was still in her wedding dress, but the wail was gone like she wanted to punish him by exposing her horrible face. The picture was almost perfect, all she needed was a scythe in her hand and she would be reminding him the one that was waiting for him, the very deadly bride indeed.

. But the woman had no scythe but a needle instead and carried on with her work, probably not even noticing him. He realized he didn't even know her name, but what was the point of asking her? He will not stay anyway - no, he has to leave, there must be a way out! He came closer, curious about the thing she was making. It was a picture of a countryside, all in all rather pretty, with green forest in the background and light-green meadow in the front, with little house just like the one they were trapped in. The sky was blue, no cloud anywhere, only the yellow, shining sun, with all rays carefully stitched in. At right corner, there was a tiny church, partly hidden by trees. There was no water on the picture, no, nothing reminding their desperate situation. Then he understood: it was her dreamland; it seems that even lepers do have one.

He felt ashamed, but didn't know why and didn't even try to figure it out. Instead, he said: "Stop it, it has no sense - how can I explain to you that it is all useless? Do you know what is in store for both us? We die, die, do you understand? Death - grave - coffin!" He laid on the bench, pretending he was dead, his hands crossed the way the deceased persons have. Suddenly she understood and crossed

herself a smiled again.

That irritated him again. "Yeah, you can't see the horror of it, or you simply don't care, you witch!" He started to feel the excruciating pain in his belly again and in futile attempt to stop it, he started to smash the things around him. He even grabbed her embroidery and threw it into the fireplace. It burned slowly, smoldering without a flame. First the sun blackened out, then the church and finally even the house disappeared in the smoke. He got restless, but soon got tired and finally settled in the chair, his head in his hands.

Next day he attempted to swim away, but was so exhausted he was happy to get back and crawl up the outside stairs, which were now all under the water. The water was not raising any more, but it might take weeks before it would recede again. It also brought some dead animal carcasses, which were slowly floating, almost motionless, on the water's surface. Spencer was trying to push them away, but then he realized he better save his strength. Three or four times he got also got in argument with the woman, but it exhausted him even more. He didn't beat her any more, he had no strength. Finally he stopped talking to her, being tired of it all.

Sun kept running its daily path, but he didn't even realize if it was morning or evening. Instead, he started to hallucinate. He saw himself in large, beautiful house. His servants were bringing him the best food he ever ate and nice girls were entertaining him, day and night. Once a while he came out of his hallucinations, he even felt the pain again, but then mercifully slipped in it again and couldn't distinguish what was real and what was not.

One day he woke up and didn't feel any pain. It was like a miracle: his vision was clear and even his mind was working like it should.. he heard some noises upstairs so he climbed up and saw her rocking an empty cradle, to and fro. She was humming some soothing sounds, probably a lullaby.

Suddenly he felt very tired. "Rock it well, *banshee*, rock it well!" he said and opened the door to attic. He rummaged through the garbage there and discovered a little drum and a wooden rocking horse. He knew that it wasn't what he was looking for, but could not remember what was he searching for. Then he found an old rope and his face lit with recognition. With shaking hands, he tied the noose, but he had to do it several times - it was not so easy as it used to be. Finally he succeeded and threw it over the beam which was conveniently positioned right above those creaky stairs . . .

It was the very next day the water started to recede. The woman cut him down and dressed him in the black, fancy clothing. Then, when water dropped even more, she went to barn and pulled out a little boat and carefully rolled his body into it. She got in and slowly paddled away, until she reached the river, the main stream. She put the paddle down and pulled the dead body closer to her, dragging his upper torso in her lap. She embraced his head and started to rock him, again howling her lullaby without words. And the friendly waves took hold of the boat and rocking it gently in the beat of her lullaby, they carried it downstream, in the direction of setting sun.

Captain Nemo.



He wasn't the underwater hero of Verne's book and there was no mystery around him, at least not when I gave him that nickname. It is my habit, as you may not know, to name the people around me. I have two good reasons for it: first, it will get them a touch of familiarity and secondly I keep forgetting their real names. The problem is that I use those "given" names quite freely in public and it sometimes gets me in serious trouble.

Like the one caused by rather fitting name "R2D2" (from Star Wars), which I assigned to one of my colleagues at work, rather short and funny looking fellow. People liked it and it eventually reached his ears, but he was not too happy about it, as you can imagine.

Nothing like that could of course happen to my captain Nemo, simply because I never revealed it to anybody, for reasons that I still don't quite understand. It was probably chosen more like a joke and only later I have realized that the joke was on me.

I've first met him on the cliff high above the Inverhill Bay, the place I used to walk my dog Tara. This solitary cliff - the next one is too far for a walk - is a fascinating place. For me, that is. You can go there and watch the lake, its color, the clouds and waves. It is all part of its appearance, its mood, which is changing daily. With its huge size, Huron Lake is even larger than some small seas and its storms can be very bad indeed. We have at least three shipwrecks here to prove it and if that's not enough, go and see Tobermory, the graveyard of thirty ships or more.

Next to cliff's edge there is an old *coach road* which runs all the way from Sarnia up to Bruce peninsula, some two hundred miles. Most of it does not exist any more, but the section here is still preserved, partly because it was shielded by surrounding cedar forests, partly because it somehow escaped the claws of progress.

For a long time, it was just me and Tara, who enjoyed the romantic setting of the place. And not just enjoyed: I used to go there and do some painting, in acrylic of course. As I

already mentioned, the panorama is beautiful and if you cannot paint a sea, this place is next best. Not that I am too much of a painter, but the process of creation is so rewarding that the results alone are really not that important. So I enjoyed my little seclusion and made my *randes-vous* with Huron rather regular. And nothing was bothering us until one day we realized that we weren't there alone any more.

It was of course Tara who noticed him first, since I was usually too deep in my endeavors. Due to my limitations, most of my efforts were directed towards the painting skill and talent, probably because I had neither. So I sometimes talked to my picture and what's worse, even to myself. When Tara started to bark, I told her to be quiet or something in that sense, but when she didn't stop I turned around and there he was. Big fellow, slightly bent and leaning on his cane - or maybe walking stick - was standing at a distance. He watched the lake with rather investigating look, not bothering to turn his head in spite of Tara's insistence. That was rather peculiar - not his indifference, but the fact that Tara even bothered to bark. She usually does not bark, not even at strangers.

I was too busy to catch those elusive clouds on my canvas, so I did not realize that the man was approaching. Surprisingly, my dog stopped barking and I looked up again. As he was standing few paces away, he said 'Hello' and without bothering to look at my picture, which was also unusual on its own, he simply said: "It is going to rain in half an hour, I guess." Then he took off and disappeared back on the road. I did not pay too much attention to it - the light was fading and I wanted to catch most of it before it was gone. Yet the first drops of rain soon hit us with mother nature's perseverance and so I put a cover over my painting, wrapped it around and home we went.

Next day, the man came again and as much as he was a nuisance to me so was I probably to him as well. Few days later, when he realized I would not give up my right to the place, he approached me and started to talk. Smalltalk, nothing worth mentioning, nevertheless we have got acquainted and after a period of mild toleration, we actually got used to each other. I believe that he deliberately set his visit on cliff so it would coincide with mine and when he skipped a day or so, I sort of missed him too. Every day, after he spent few minutes watching the lake, he came to us and we talked. He also noticed my picture and had some comments - I should say rather pertinent comments, mostly about my colors. He obviously knew the lake well and while I sometimes didn't like his advises, I usually followed them, because they were mostly correct anyway. That says quite a lot about his observation talent, considering that he never really painted anything, at least that's what he said to me.

There was something about his face, which reminded me the mysterious captain Nemo and not knowing any better, I gave him that nickname. Childish, yes, but come to think of it, it sounded better than Captain Nobody, which - meaning the same - could be rather

offensive. His hair was covered by the cap, which is usually called "Greek" and sometimes "immigrant" cap. While the hair was still black enough, his beard was cut in the style of general Beauregard and was grey all over. Then there were his eyes: deep in their sockets and squinting like Robert Mitchum's, with kind of a sharp look - but not strict, if you know what I mean.

Pretty soon he and Tara became good friends. He brought her biscuits, patted her on head and that was something she didn't allow anybody except me and my wife Ingrid. They say animals can recognize good person, but judging from my experience, you can buy their love by few biscuits any time. I think that's what they apparently consider "good", anyway. After a while, I have got used to him, too, so much that I even told him about the nickname I had picked for him. A hint, I explained, because he looked like a man who spent most of his life on various ships. He laughed and confirmed that I was right. And the name probably fits too, he added.

He used to come there at regular time and before he left, he always checked the time on his golden watch, probably a gift. As we talked more and more, we could not help telling each other some details about ourselves, about our lives and interests. He used to work aboard those large ships on Great Lakes. Ships carrying grain, coal, ore, stone or anything else, where it was cheaper to move it by ship instead of train. Of course, the time of old schooners sailing the lakes is long time gone. Big bulk freighters or ocean ships, which have by the way access to Great Lakes as well, are now staffed with mechanics and electricians rather than sailors. The life on freighters and cargo vessels is rather boring and some chaps may even go restless and quit. Others usually want to have a regular family life and sooner or later leave too. That's why he did, I believe. He didn't explicitly said so, but it was evident from his comments.

Some time later, he opened a fish restaurant, hoping that the little cooking skill he learned on ships will attract customers. You can still find one of that kind in Williston, it's called *Captain Slim's*. Inevitably, the business was bad and after he used up most of his savings, he soon closed it. Back to ships he went again and after some time, he saved little bit of money and with rather substantial loan he bought a fishing boat.

"Rosemary", as he christened it, was actually a fish tug and looked more like a submarine, half surfaced half sunk. Of course, the beauty she was not. However, that was all he needed for catching smelt, herring, trout and what-nots. He sold the fish he caught to different restaurants and supermarkets. He also built a little shack on his backyard which he turned into a smokehouse. His smoked salmon and whitefish were considered by most people the best you could buy, at least around Huron shores. The fishing provided enough money for the whole family and so he could sell the boat and move here, to Inverhill, to retire and rest. His wife died some time ago and his son - well, he is in Michigan.

He ended his story at that. If there was something else, he surely did not volunteer to tell me and I didn't ask either. And so we carried on, me with my recreational painting and no hope for improvement and he with his regular visits on cliff and familiar staring at the lake. Surely, I thought, he missed his days on big ships and his fishing trips probably too, but did he really want it back so badly that he had to dream about it every day? Then, I made a mistake. I mentioned my doubts about it to Ingrid. As soon as I said it I was sorry already, but some things you just cannot turn back, no Sir. She asked about his name and I told her. Little did I know that she would search the records in the public library for information about him. She even found one lady from Bruceville, who remembered his name. Her story confirmed what he already told me but there was also one incident he did not mention to me.

While fishing business was doing better, pretty soon he needed some help, too. So he brought his son Roy on the tug to help him and all went well until the kid grew up. Roy simply got some other plans, like going to college and eventually get married. "Sure," said his father, " just stay one more season, we have to make enough money before you can go." He repeated the same promise for three years, until his son really had enough and decided to leave anyway. Maybe not for school but surely far away from that smelling, fishy business he didn't like anyway. "O.K., I stay till the end of *this* season and I'd be gone then," he told his father, who realized he cannot fool him any more.

It happened during those few last days Roy promised to stay on Rosemary. When fall approaches, Huron becomes quite windy and can be really treacherous. Even skilled fishermen try to stay in familiar water and close to shore, because lake is rather shallow in some places and rocky as well. No wonder that some of ancient lighthouses are still operating, in order to guide ships safely to the haven.

Well, captain Nemo did not always follow that rule, especially when tracing some big school of fish by his radar. Nevertheless, as I already said, he knew his lake well a he always got away with it.

Then it happened: they were caught in one very bad storm. They were both fighting their way back home - and people said that he was probably drunk, too - when his son fell overboard. Huge waves hammered the tug which was moving round and round like a hopeless bucket. Roy's father circled the place many times, he even stayed there all night and the next day. When the storm subsided, there were no traces of his son. The body was never found - the boy simply vanished. How or by whose mistake it happened was never really established, but the investigators were satisfied it was an accident.

So much for the story. His wife died soon afterwards, probably due to loss of their son,

their only child. Sure, one has to separate the facts from rumors, but there it was and it partly explained to me his peculiar behavior. I could understand his watchful observation of Huron waters, day after day, week after week. His eyes were always turned west, toward the place where it apparently happened. I even believed he could have had a fixed idea that one day his son might return back to him. I guess that's why he sold his business and moved here. Surely it was a most probable reason for his daily vigil on the cliff.

As I said, I never asked, never pressed him for details, even after I knew the rest of the story. After all, we all have some skeleton in our closet, his was just at the bottom of the lake. It was not my business and may he rest in peace, Amen.

After some time I noticed he would like to tell me something. I believe now - but did not grasp it then - that he probably wanted to relieve his troubled mind or even to share his ghastly feelings with me. My lack of curiosity - or shall I say my ignorance - was possibly the only reason I did not provide any encouragement for him. I guess he didn't dare to bother me with his confession without me asking him. I know better now. I even felt sorry about it. But then again: not for long, I am not that kind of man.

Then in September, he did not show up for two weeks. I missed him a lot, he surely came as close as one could to become my friend. I figured he was probably sick or something, when he showed up again. Tara was greeting him as usual and I could not help asking him, what kept him at home. "Oh no, I was not at home," he said, "I went back to Bruceville and bought me back my fishing boat."

"Again? Cannot give up fishing, eh? Or is it something else?" It just slipped from my mouth and I was immediately sorry I said that. He looked at me and I knew he suddenly realized I knew.

"Yes," he confirmed, "there is something else."

Still, I did not ask yet. One does not do such things, not until the other person decide it for himself.

"Ehm," I said and pretended I have some problem with my painting. I was thinking what could I possibly tell him, but just could not figure out what should it be.

"Are you a religious man?" he suddenly asked.

"Not that I know about it," I laughed. "But I go to church regularly, if that's what you mean."

"No, that is not what I mean," he replied, "and you know it. Do you believe that we shall be forgiven all bad things we ever did?"

"You are serious, are you?" I pretended that I suddenly grasped his hint. "I suppose I

am the wrong person to ask. We have priests for that but I doubt if they really know themselves," I replied and laughed.

"But what is your opinion - that is if you want to tell me. That's what I would like to know," he insisted.

"An honest answer?" I asked.

"Yes, honest answer," he confirmed.

There is the time in man's life he should tell the truth - I mean when he must tell the truth or bear the consequences. The trouble is that when that moment comes, we may not realize it.

"I honestly think that we don't need to ask for forgiveness. To cry before something happens is too early and to cry afterwards is too late," I recited my famous line without thinking how much cruelty it actually contained for him. Why did I say that, I really didn't know. What I actually wanted to tell him was quite different. I meant that he should not feel guilty any more, that the things simply happen and if we don't mean any harm, there is nothing to forgive.

Suddenly, he withdrew back to his shell. "That was all I wanted to know. Yes, it's too late now," he said. We exchanged few more sentences but he never touched the subject again. I tried to keep the conversation on, but he obviously didn't feel like it. That evening he left earlier, bidding me good night. He never showed up on the cliff again and after few days I learned he left Inverhill. It was obvious that I saw the last of him.

When I told Ingrid, she was quite mad at me. "You fool," she cried, "you certainly know how to hurt a man!" I don't like being criticized, but in that case I knew she was right. It bothered me, too. My cliff visits were still regular only shorter, as the sun was setting earlier. Of course, it could have been also due to the fact that we were there again alone, me and Tara. She probably missed him too, but I was also bothered with the feeling of guilt, something I do not feel very often.

It is the known fact that people hurt others mostly because of stupidity. Your friends and even loved ones can do you real harm and still think it is for your best. No stranger would hurt you without some good reason, unless of course he is crazy. But people you consider dear to you can put you in terrible pain without even knowing it. How come we can be harmed most by the people we love most? Could it be that we feel it like a betrayal, like a misuse of our affection? Or is it simply because we never expected it from them first place?

It bothered me a while, but as I said, I never feel guilty for long. Instead, I imagined

captain Nemo on his tug, searching the waves of lake Huron for his son. Or maybe just looking for forgiveness in places where you find it least. After all, the waters of our lake claimed quite a number of victims and they still do. How can he expect them to have mercy on his soul?

Maybe it was Ingrid who told me to write him a letter to explain my stupid behavior and to apologize. Soon I realized it was impossible to find his new address. I tried desperately in Bruceville and many other places, but there was really no hope. One day, partly as a jest and partly for reasons unknown, I put that letter in the empty bottle and threw it from the cliff. The waves embraced it and then released it again and it went, bouncing up and down on the restless waters of Huron Lake. Silly, I thought, how easy could be to dispose of your mistakes, to beg forgiveness and to get it, too.

Soon I have forgotten about him, especially when my visits on cliff were becoming irregular. Fall weather is unpredictable on Huron and captains from ocean freighters who reach Great Lakes via St. Lawrence waterway are comparing bad storms on Huron to those in North Atlantic.

It was then when somebody brought us the news about captain Nemo. He moved to the other side of the lake, somewhere in Michigan, he brought his boat there and spent his time mostly aboard. Last news were that he disappeared in one of those storms. Coast guard cutters were searching for him for few days and then they gave up.

So he finally found his son after all, I thought. Maybe it was for the best and maybe I could not persuade him otherwise, anyway. You can see I wasn't through with it yet and I had to keep convincing myself I was not guilty. Feeling guilt is a bad thing. It can eat you alive, it can turn man into a ghost. When you start feeling sorry, there is no end of it and it does not matter if you are actually guilty or not. It's the feelings that counts, not the facts. He could not live with it so he did what he did. He could not forgive himself, that's all. But could he still forgive me?

I thought I'd never find the answer to my last question, but I did. September passed and it was in the middle of October, when I went with Tara to our cliff again. I stood there, at the place he used to stand and turned my head west as he used to do. Suddenly, I spotted something black in the water. I walked down to the shore and before I knew it, Tara jumped in the water and fished out the wet "Greek" cap.

Frankly, I don't believe in coincidences, but in this case I am willing to make an exception. After all, even my wife Ingrid believes that it was captain's hat and that his ghost finally finding forgiveness, wanted to tell me he can forgive me too. It surely

makes me feel much better.

Just a Temporary Failure.



He came to me dressed like some insurance man, at least he looked like one: shorter, slightly obese, very much the nagging type.

"Mr. Leblanc," he said, "my name is Calhoun and I represent the company called *Astral Projections*. We are doing some kind of a market research, so I would like to ask you few questions, but you are in no obligation to answer any of them."

Well, I said to myself, he starts with questionnaire, as usual, and then he will end with an offer to sell. So what - I'll let him talk and throw him out later. The salesman who gains your sympathies is usually the most cunning

of them all.

"Ask away," I said friendly, yet his first question took my breath away.

"How much longer do you think you will live?"

"Long enough," I answered, with forced smile.

"Yes," he agreed, but obviously not with me, "most people we asked were thinking the same. But believe me, the statistics for the people of your age are not so encouraging. People with health problems as yours live in average only three more years, most of them do not survive two years. When have you had your last check-up?"

"About a month ago," I lied, "and my doctor found me in perfect health." That was also a lie, of course.

"Yes," he carried on, like an answering machine, "nobody could believe it can develop so suddenly." That made me to think: where could he learn that? My doctor would never reveal such information: if I sue him, he might lose his license.

"If you know everything, why do you ask?" I snapped back without trying to hide my frustration.

"Jerry," he introduced himself, "please call me Jerry. Good question," he added, "very good question."

I ignored his suggestion and carried on: "Would you please stick to the point? What are

you really selling? Some life insurance? Thanks, but no thanks! I am not married."

"I know," he said patiently, "we have checked all your personal data in advance. Now there you have it: we are offering you the contract, which will benefit directly you, actually only you. If you sign the contract, we will guarantee that you will live seven more years, in health and happiness."

I had to laugh: "I do not want to destroy your illusions, but I want to live much longer and without your contract. You bothered yourself for nothing. So good bye to you!"

"I beg your pardon," he interrupted, "but your mother also died because of heart problem and at the same age you are now."

How could he possibly know this? I could not resist wondering: "Listen, I know little about modern medicine and I doubt that even your company can . . .

He quickly cut in: "Maybe some practical demonstration will help here more. Your eyesight is pretty bad, isn't it?"

"So what," I retorted, "five dioptres is five dioptres, that can be fixed by proper glasses."

"Take them off, please," he said. I did what he told me, without actually knowing why. "How do you see me now?" he wanted to know.

"Like a big blurry spot," I laughed. Then something cracked, like if somebody's breaking the pencil.

"What are you doing?" I screamed, hoping, that was not what I had suspected.

"I just broke your glasses," he replied, "you won't need them anymore."

My laugh froze right in my stomach. "No, no, don't worry. It's O.K.," he added, snapped his fingers and the picture started to clear itself. Few more seconds and really: I could see again, even that broken pair of glasses on the table!

"Wait a minute!" I objected. "Another of your tricks, right? It will come back after you leave, right? You better fix those glasses right now or you will have to pay for them!"

"It won't come back, I assure you. Even so, if it does, we will gladly reimburse you." He really knew how to get my attention.

"But," I tried to guess, "if I don't do business with you, it will come back, right? I knew there is a trick somewhere!"

"Definitely not, it will not come back again." He sounded serious. "Consider it the demonstration of our services, something like a *free* sample. By the way," he added, "if you live only one more year or two, your eyesight will be the last thing on your mind."

"Seven years you said," I voiced my thoughts. "Well, and how much it will cost me?"

"It is all in this written agreement," he smiled and handed me a paper, realizing that I was hooked already.

"And what if I want to cancel the deal? Or maybe prolong it?"

"Unfortunately, seven years is the fixed term. You cannot cancel it and later changes of the contract are not permitted, either. I have to stress that here in advance."

"But listen, haven't I heard that before? It may appear ridiculous, but it all sounds more like some contract with devil. But surely you are not one of them . . ."

"But of course I am," he interrupted. "Modern times require modern approach," he said, but it sounded more like an apology than explanation.

"Don't get me wrong, but as I recollect, you used to offer your clients much more: eternal youth, love of women, riches, supreme wisdom . . ."

"And you think that gift of live is something less?" he responded with indisputable logic.

"And what about that signature in own blood?"

"Just artistic cliché," he uttered, "the ink will do. We do not want you to get infection or even die before the end of contract, do we?" He obviously used that joke often, judging by the way he laughed.

"But I still can't believe it," I continued. You want me to sign the contract for a grant of another seven years of life. And then what?"

"Then nothing," he assured me.

"Except that you will take me down to the everlasting hell," I could not help laughing.

"Oh, nothing like that," he assured me. "Hell and heaven are just names, nothing more."

"So what is it you want?" I was losing my patience.

"Nothing too much, just your soul immortal."

"But excuse me," I wondered, "if there is no heaven nor hell, how comes that there is a soul immortal? And how about the God Almighty?"

"But off course, God exists, from eternity to eternity. There is also the devil - actually many of them, not just me," he assured me.

"But what are they doing then?" I asked again. "Are they also helping many good souls to switch sides? Is that the everlasting fight between *good* and *evil*?"

"No, certainly not," he denied it and I could see from the expression on his face how naive my question apparently was. "It is just a difference of opinion. You see, our competition is trying to convince you - by the way not too successfully - that the *goodness* is not what is good for you, but what is good for the others. And after death, that is if you behave, you can get to heaven. But you are not too religious, are you?"

"Maybe," I did not want to admit it, not to the devil, anyway. "But I believe in the good and bad, in that old-fashioned sense, so the people will not eat each other alive, you know."

"I cannot agree more," he tried to calm me down. "Even if for different reason than yours," he laughed. "Then again, if you do not believe in eternal life, the extension of this life is your only alternative. It will do no harm to anybody, don't you agree?"
"Listen," I was again skeptical, "you can cure my vision permanently, but you cannot let me live forever?"

"No, no," he argued, "I didn't say you were cured permanently - only till you die! I thought it was understood! It's like the postponement, if you know what I mean. However," he tried to gain the time, "you do not need to sign it right away. Think it over. We want our customers to be fully satisfied."

I bet you do, I thought but instead, I asked: "When do you need my answer?"
"In a week," was his reply, "in a week. But remember, the answer can be only YES or NO, no exceptions." He said good-bye or rather bad-buy and disappeared. He did not even leave the smell of sulfur behind him, as he should, if I remember correctly. But then again, my religious education was quite far from perfect.

I was always afraid of death. No, I certainly was no coward and I have escaped death several times, but I never tried to provoke her, either. What was bothering me, was that nothing, which follows afterwards. Sure, they say there is a life after death, but nobody yet came back to confirm it. I just couldn't imagine myself as a zero, nonexistent quantity, vacuum. No breathing, no thinking, no life? And forever and ever, Amen?

Neither was I attracted by the image of heaven, full of people in their underwear, listening to the rather boring sounds of harps. If I could choose, I would rather prefer Moslem heaven, full of food, drinks, women . . .

But I do not believe in hell either, hall as a corrective institution, anyway. I just cannot imagine devil being so stupid to build enormous barbecue just to please his nostrils with the smell of burning flesh.

I have to admit, however, that devil's offer was tempting enough - I was just afraid he may be cheating. What if I could actually live longer than seven years? That would be a dirty trick! But then again, he was the devil, after all! And I don't like to make decision, any decision, especially one concerning my own life. There is a reason for it: I seldom make a right choice. To get me in situation where I have to make such a decision was a devilish move itself! I was also mad he impressed me with his cheap magic, the one with glasses. I just could not figure it out. What's more, I really did not need glasses at all, afterwards.

Well, I couldn't decide and as the end of the week was approaching, I was worried more

and more. I couldn't sleep, either. Ten I got an idea and my sixth sense told me that it was the only solution. I also realized that Calhoun didn't tell me when and where we should meet. Suddenly, the phone was ringing.

"My friend," said he, "you are now probably wondering how can you contact me." Oh God, or rather devil I thought, he knows everything! We settled the date for Monday - I still needed the coming weekend to detail my plan.

As soon as he entered the room, he came to the point. "So Sir," he said (smiling, of course), "what it will be?"

"It depends on you," I replied smartly. "If you give me the better deal, my answer is YES."

"But no, no," he was suddenly alarmed, you cannot . . . Didn't I tell you that you must answer only YES or NO?"

"I must, must I?" I was teasing him. "After all those years you still don't know how to treat a customer? Well then, my answer is YES, provided that you give me fifteen years of life."

Suddenly, Calhoun went mad. He was shaking, like a little devil in the puppet show I have seen as a kid. "I already told you. . .".

I jumped in: "Yes, you said that already, but let us put our cards on the table. I can see through you. You guys cannot extend my life at all. Somewhere up there, there is a book and it that book it is written that I have only seven years left. So you are actually offering me nothing and in return are asking for everything. It's a devil of an idea, but otherwise it can be also qualified as an ordinary fraud. Thanks, but no thanks! That's why you always keep your word, my friend! That's why I cannot ask for more! And you have guts to ask me in return to pledge the only thing I have - and up to now I wasn't even sure I had it - my own soul!"

He looked very much surprised, actually I believed he was genuinely surprised. "But this is absurd," he stuttered, "you cannot think that. . ."

"So, they've tricked you, too? My, my, Calhoun..."

He tried to sneak out of it, but couldn't find anything better than: "So I take it that your answer is NO, right?"

"Absolutely not," I insisted. "On the contrary, my answer is definitely YES, but with fifteen years!"

"Such an answer I cannot accept," said the poor devil and he looked sad.

I laughed: "But of course not, you cannot, but your boss can. Why don't you pass it on him, he will certainly know what to do with it. And don't forget to tell him that I know

your bluff!"

That night I could not sleep at all. My insolence got me in trouble many times before, but this time it surely was a top. It did not occur to me when talking to Calhoun, that I should be afraid. He simply wasn't the type that makes people shudder. But now, it was different. Still, I just couldn't let the opportunity pass by, the opportunity, which does not occur to everybody. And what's more, I was still curious what happens next. Come to think of it, I simply could have said NO and would not be bothered any more. Maybe. But then again, I would never know. . .

Mr. Devlin was an older gentleman, or so I thought, with shortage of breath and very lively eyes, so typical for small predators. He introduced himself as a director of *Astral Projections*. "The General Director?" I asked with a tinge of irony. He missed that however and assured me, that there is only one director. "My employees call be the Boss," he said, "but you can call me Lucifer."

"Let's come to the point shall we?" he suggested. "We have to fix that - well, let us say messy situation. Of course, Calhoun suggested to hush it up and I had to demote that mumbling idiot back to boilers.

"But I thought there is no such a thing as boilers, since there is no hell?" I looked surprised.

"Oh," he laughed, "of course not, it's just a figure of speech! But your weird idea, he added, as much as it is untrue, might reach the public and cause damage the reputation of our company."

"Well, it crossed my mind, too," I said in agreement.

"You mean that Calhoun is an idiot?" he asked.

"That, too, of course, but I meant the harm my idea could cause to *Astral Projections*.

He nodded: "That's why I wanted to talk to you in private." He apparently liked my sense of reality, because he smiled and explained it further: "Try to understand: we do not mind if our competition knows it, but we don't want the public to learn it from some newspaper. Public, my friend, is the supreme power in today's world," he added and in that very moment I knew I could not trust him. "I am therefore authorized to offer you anything for your silence. And there is very little we cannot do," he added. "Ask for money, fame, beautiful girls, the post of a minister in any government...Just don't ask for fifteen years of life."

"I beg your pardon," I replied rather politely, "but I thought my requirement is clear enough. You caused me harm by telling me I have only seven years to live. Can you imagine my suffering? Counting the remaining days and seeing them disappear forever?

"Devilish, isn't it" he exclaimed without even trying to hide his satisfaction. That drove me mad: "I will sue you, you had no right to tell me that!" " But we did not tell you, did we? "he said truthfully. "You have found it out yourself," he added.

"So it is true, is it? Well, I knew it all along."

"Just your crazy imagination," he insisted.

"Crazy?" I asked. "Crazy enough to embarrass your company? Crazy enough so people should not learn about it?"

"O.K.," he agreed, "but please be reasonable. Do you want the most beautiful woman in the world? How about some gold or diamonds? All right, maybe you'd prefer the doctorate of the best University. Eternal youth, perhaps?"

I had to laugh: "Eternal youth? Eternal for seven years?"

Suddenly, he was upset. The devil obviously does not like to be laughed at. "Do not underestimate our power," he threatened. "You will be sorry.."

"But no, no - I wasn't laughing at you!" I tried to calm him down. "I believe the reason you came to see me and the fact that you are here, are serious enough. But why do you offer me such ridiculous things? And if I do not pretend I am stupid enough to accept them, you tried to scare the hell out of me, pardon the expression. But I am not afraid. I admit I was always afraid of death, but not any more. Now, when I know when I die, not earlier and not later, I have got tremendous feeling of peace in my mind. That makes me strong, do you understand?" Well, it was not entirely true, but I was gambling he couldn't see my bluff.

He did not give up easy: "But you do not know how are you going to die. You don't know how long it will take and how much pain it will bring."

"Oh no, don't tell me," I stopped him, since my courage had its limits, too. "If you tell me that, we will never make a deal!"

He stopped, realizing that he went too far. "Believe me or not, he said, this never happened to us before. During our whole existence, the existence of our company!

People were trying to beg or outsmart us, but blackmail? Never!"

"Call it as you wish," I shrugged, "yours is hardly a fair play either."

"As you please, but you don't know what happens with the people like you."

Suddenly, I felt goose bumps on my body. That fear I felt that once before: it reminded me one situation in my life I thought I have long forgotten. It was a time for slow retreat:

"Yes, yes - but don't forget I did not sign anything, so you cannot threaten me. Also, I did not tell anybody. But you have to understand: since your deal does not offer me

anything, how can I accept it? You are a businessman, you can understand I am just trying to use that knowledge to my advantage. I simply cannot miss that opportunity!"

I could see he was amazed. "Listen, I like your way of thinking," he admitted. "It is very original. If you want you can be our agent."

"Like Calhoun?" I snapped. "How did you ever get hold of that character? Oh, I forgot, he also signed the contract, right?"

He did not answer, but he really did not have to. The answer was obvious, but I could see, that he was offended. Trying to put the things straight, I started to negotiate again: "But now, when I know that I will live seven more years, I would really like to sign your agreement. Of course, only if you give me few more years on the top," I added quickly. "Really," he said, "you do have a style. Do you know what? I will talk about it with Lord Creator."

"Please do. By the way, he really wants to be called Creator?"

"Oh, no, we just address him that way. He does not like any titles, this is the only one he can stand. Since he created this world, he locked himself in some kind of seclusion and he lives now only to his hobby. It's called cybernetics or *devil* knows what." He stopped abruptly, realizing that he took his own name in vain and explained with the apologetic smile: "The force of habit, you know. In order to keep the world together, he employs us - and the angels, of course. And we have to do all this work now." He shook his head: "Very hard work, Sir! You wouldn't believe how difficult it is; to keep the world in balance, to maintain the things the way they are supposed to be!"

And before I could ask him which way the things supposed to be, he disappeared, not even bothering to use the door.

It was the very next day, when I received the phone call. The man introduced himself as one *Martin Leblanc*. "Sorry," I answered, "you are surely mistaken, that is my name, not yours."

"But it is," he objected, "I am your guardian angel, so it is my name too. You see, we keep the names of people we guard."

"Very practical," I said, "so you are my alter ego, second ego," I added, just in case the angels don't understand Latin.

"No, no," he objected again, "not the second and definitely not ego, my son."

"O.K.," I said, "so you are my guardian angel." The situation was becoming so bizarre that nothing could surprise me any more. "I agree, but could you stop calling me your son? I know whose son I am, by the way. Now come to the point."

"Well," he said with hesitation, "I've heard that you want to make a deal with devil.'

"The grapevine really grows all the way to heaven," I observed, but he obviously did not understand. "So what, is that any business of yours? Are you a guardian angel or a secret policeman? What do you care? You were not there to help me when I had that car accident either!"

I could hear from his voice he was offended. "It was me," he said, " who softened the impact with that truck!"

"But not enough," I fumed, "I had to spend several weeks in a hospital and then I had to pay more for my car insurance. What do you want from me now?"

"Don't do it, Martin," he begged me, "you will be sorry for the rest of your life!"

"Only for seven years," I laughed, " or maybe even more, if I am lucky."

"But you will lose your life eternal," he insisted.

"What eternal life? And I have to die first to live forever? What if you are just bluffing and there is no '*forever*'? Besides, eternal life must be an eternal bore. Tell me, is it true that I have only seven years to live?"

"You see," he started to explain, "that is the whole problem. Imagine that everybody will think that way. People would ask when is their term coming, they would want miracles, some of them even body transplants or at least deep freeze. The rich one, of course, would like to be resurrected and God knows what - " He stopped abruptly and I could hear him whispering: "Pardon me Lord, I did not mean it that way!"

"Look," I said, "that is all entirely your problem. You guys made a mistake and I have found it out. But I give you one advice: tell it to your boss and you can forget the whole thing."

"You want me to tell it to archangel Gabriel himself?"

"No, silly," I retorted, "I mean the Lord Creator himself and that's it." I hung up the phone with utmost satisfaction. I could be proud on myself: the interview with God was now guaranteed from two sources.

I waited whole week, but Creator did not come. Well, I thought, the times when gods were walking this earth are obviously gone. Let's forget the whole thing.

Instead, I have received by mail an invitation or shall we say the warning, to come and dutifully receive my obligatory shot against flu. I called the number and tried to convince the lady there that I did not need any inoculation, since I had another seven years and after that I wouldn't need it any more.

"We are not interested," the lady exclaimed, "how long you will live, Sir. This is a governmental program and that is an order. Do not make it too difficult for me, please. Shots are given on Fridays and you have to come personally," she explained, apparently

in attempt to discourage me from coming any other way.

But I haven't received the shot after all. On my way to their office, actually right on the stairs to subway, somebody pushed me and I felt down. When I recovered, I was in the hospital, covered all over by white bandages and plaster. Several strange tubes were sticking out of my body, connected to some gadget located above my head.

Old man, apparently the doctor or maybe professor, was standing by my bed and was telling the group of medical students I would be lucky if I survive the weekend.

"No, no," I tried to explain, "I will live for another seven years!"

He looked at me rather surprised and then uttered, ironically: "This is not your decision to make!" he then turned to his students and said: "Here you can see what happens when the patient is trying to write his own diagnosis! So - according to them - there is no need for us, doctors!" he laughed at his own joke and his students obliged him with giggles. When leaving the room, the professor turned back to me and announced: "Mr. Leblanc, you have a visitor, but only few minutes, O.K.? You know you mustn't strain yourself!"

Aha, the lady from the health office, I thought, so I will get that shot after all. But I was wrong: who entered, was the Creator himself. You may wonder how I recognized him, but believe me, when it happens, you know.

"My boy," he said and I had no objection, since he had a right to do so, being of course much older than I was and my Creator too, for that matter. "My boy," he repeated, "you are causing us some serious problems." He said '*us*' and I wondered, if he meant somebody else or if it was just '*royal plural*'.

"I know," I admitted, "but I really cannot make my mind."

"Oh no," he smiled, "I mean you falling down the stairs and forcing me to do everything in my power to keep you alive."

"Just because I still have those seven years to go, right?"

"Nonsense," he laughed, "if I can give you a life, I can surely take it away. That, my boy, is so easy, that even you mortals can do it."

"But how about the tale about everybody having his time calculated in advance?" I asked.

"Well," he avoided the direct answer, "he does and he doesn't. But I surely liked your discovery that the devil is bluffing. Where did you learn that?"

"I didn't," I said proudly, "I just figured it out myself." Then, not to look too modest, I added: " I read a lot. I also studied the formal logic, theory of information a artificial intelligence."

"Interesting," he nodded, "and how about that - whatchamacalit - yes, how about the

cybernetics?"

"Affirmative, but we call it by many other names, nowadays."

"Well," he said, rather confused and returned back to his original train of thoughts. "You know, my boy, the life is like a book - it doesn't matter how many pages it has, all that matters how good it is.'

"Agreed," I said, "you are quoting the Greek philosopher Zenon, but he was defending the suicide. And as you probably know, I do not want to die. We all came to this world as silly, screaming little babies and when we learn something, we have to go again. I tell you, if there is no life after death, then this life is just a stupid joke somebody is playing on us." Oh God - I thought - what am I saying?

He was not offended. Instead, he said: "Call me father - after all, I created all there is. And to your point: I have to admit that it is a very interesting opinion; it never crossed my mind that somebody would think about it that way... But listen, what do you want is rather unimportant here. Do you think that I can do what I want? Surely - I could, but I won't. I simply cannot afford it - there are also laws of nature and besides, it all depends on circumstances. If I want to change something, I have to study the situation first and make my mind later. And then comes somebody like you, says he doesn't want to die and bothers me with the questions about the sense of life. If you want one, if you need one, you have to find it for yourself, my son. You can collect stamps or girls, what do I care, but please do it all right, do it sincerely."

Then his face looked friendly again - my face probably looked like the one of a little boy reprimanded by his teacher. "So you do not want to die," he repeated.

"Oh, no, don't get me wrong," I lied, "I just do not want to die so early."

"And when," he asked ironically, "when in your opinion is '*not early*'? After ten, hundred, thousand years?" He certainly knew how to make me feel stupid. "Well," he said and it sounded like an apology, "I am sorry, that was a cheap shot. But seriously, when do you want to die?"

"I do not know," I admitted, "all I know is that I don't want to decide it now. Why do I have to make a decision, if I do not need to make one?"

"But Martin, there are moments in human life, when you have to make a decision, even important decision, say about life or death."

"I know," I agreed, "but I don't want to start counting the remaining days, I simply do not want to know when I am supposed to die. Especially now, when you confirmed, that I have more than those seven years -" I deliberately did not finish the sentence, hoping to learn something, but I couldn't trick him.

"I didn't say anything of that sort," he snapped. "But it is O.K.," he added, "you have

already made your decision."

"I did?"

"Sure," he confirmed, "you decided that you do not want to decide."

"I can do that?" I asked, surprised.

"But of course," he laughed, "you people can do anything, even the mistakes. You see, that is a big difference. Being God, I cannot afford to make any mistakes."

Now it was my turn to laugh. He shook his finger towards me: "Do not criticize, if you do not know why I did it!"

"Now then," he continued, "can you repeat for me exactly what do you want?"

"Sure," I was happy the things started to move. "I want to die without knowing when it happens."

"Granted," he agreed, "what else?"

"I want to die quickly -" and since he was not interrupting, I quickly added: "and without pain..."

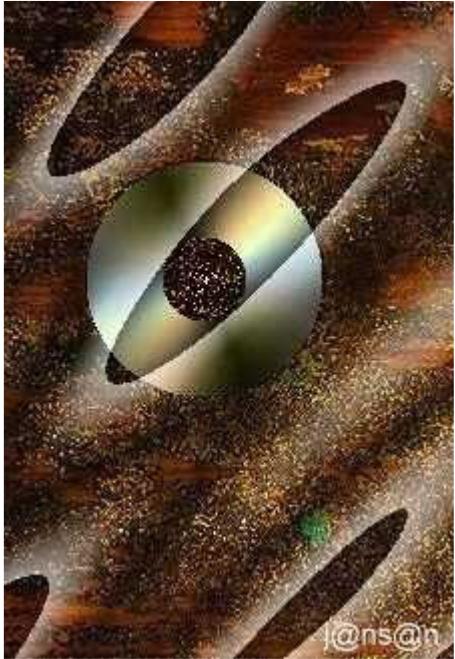
He lost his patience: "Nobody wants to die in pain, Martin, nevertheless most of you do. And as that was not enough, you people had to invent wars and tortures... never mind. But what am I to tell the others?"

Then, suddenly, he exclaimed: "Heureka, I've got it!" His face was suddenly lit with a glorious, friendly smile. And I felt that all my troubles were gone and I was not afraid any more. I was feeling extremely happy - like a child opening his Christmas gifts...

Something disturbed me, however. It was not some special noise, more like the absence of it. Then I realized: the electronic monitor by my bedside stopped its periodical beeps and I could see long uninterrupted green line on its screen.

"That's nothing," said Creator, " just a temporary failure." And from then on we were talking only cybernetics...

Styx, V.R.



"Loneliness is bad for everybody, but especially for widowers," said *Dr. Charon*. "Since when you have been thinking it is the only thing you could do?"

"What thing, doctor?" I asked him, but I knew very well what he meant.

"Well, a suicide, what else?" he answered and smiled happily like somebody who guessed it right.

"But I didn't tell you that I want -" I started, but he interrupted me:

"We know more than you think," he said and added: "we know."

It scared me little bit, but I didn't dare to ask him what he meant by that "we".

"And it is good you admitted it," he carried on, "because as you know, a suicide is still the crime and the punishment for it is very severe." I looked at him in surprise. "Except when the suicide is successful," he laughed, "but this is practically impossible nowadays with all those modern methods of revival. Nobody - I repeat nobody - can escape."

"But I do not want to escape!" I screamed at him.

"You are lying," he said and his voice was irritated, "and lying is a serious crime too!"

"I just came to get some pills against my insomnia or something..." I started again.

"God forbid, that could put you in sleep forever! Mr. Orpheo, do you believe I would help you with suicide? Don't you know that assisting a suicide is the greatest crime of them all?"

"But if I do it myself and you wouldn't know anything about it?" I tried to be smart, but then I realized that I admitted my guilt and was immediately sorry I said that.

"Well, we then simply revive you and you will be sentenced to life everlasting, on this Earth, of course. You will not be - as the others, who served faithfully - terminated after thousand years, your body will not be eliminated and your soul will not be transferred in

the Land of Chosen Ones. No Sir, you will have to live and work here forever and ever.

..."

"God Almighty, what am I supposed to do?" I exclaimed in utter despair.

"If you want the help of your gods then I recommend you to see a priest. I am only a doctor and according to my hypocritical - I mean Hippocratic - oath I am obliged to keep you alive. I am not allowed to assist you with your illegal exit.

"What am I supposed to do than, I just can't live without her!" I cried.

"Without what?" he asked not paying too much attention to me, probably because he was just writing something in my file.

"Without my wife, Eurydice! Tell me: how come she was allowed to die peacefully, but I am not?"

"Well, she hasn't died yet, she was just transferred in Nebula Hades by the order No. 2C375B, Section 6H. As far as you are concerned, we need you more here. So don't even ask me if you can be transferred too, because you cannot. And there is nothing I can do."

"Absolutely nothing?" I groaned in desperation.

"No, but in very difficult cases I can of course recommend the cure by STYX."

"Is that some kind of a drug or what?" I couldn't help asking him.

"Come, come, Mr. Orpheo, you know very well that we cannot use drugs since the time all their resources were destroyed. Many people took overdoses - either knowingly or by mistake - and we had to revive them again. That was very expensive and what's more: most of them became zombies and we had to scrap them anyway. No, no drugs Sir, we do everything electronically nowadays, by *virtuality* only. Yes, and virtuality is not even addictive. We have a system here, we call it *STYX, V.R.* It is the name of that legendary river," he explained," you remember your Greek mythology classes from school, don't you?"

"They don't teach it any more," I said. "That V.R. - is it something like *virtual reality*?" I tried to refresh my memories from elementary school.

"Well, probably not the same they used to teach you about. It is holographic now and we don't use helmets and gloves any more. They were used in old times, when anybody could do it. Then, if you remember, the private use of V.R. was strictly forbidden by law and was restricted for medical purposes only," he explained. "We just insert some electrodes and sensors in your brain and -"

"But does it hurt, that insertion?" I interrupted, because I am rather allergic to pain.

"Not at all! First, as you may know, the brain does not feel its own pain and secondly, the drilling is done by laser. Insertion of electrodes in brain is such a simple operation

like say, for instance, the electronic delivery of babies. You will be able to travel to your wife, virtually of course and you will not feel lonely any more," he assured me.

We discussed the subject for few more minutes, then he gave me a form to sign and told me to come next Wednesday.

I just could not wait: I was thinking what I might tell Deeka (those were our nicknames: Deeka and Oro) when I see her again. How to express my feelings, how to tell her I missed her so much? Should I bring flowers or is it also forbidden?

I expected to be anesthetized, but Dr. Charon just got me in his special chair and put strange earphones on my head. I didn't feel a thing. You see, I don't understand electronics, but if they can do such wonderful things with it, we should thank God for it - as my grandmother used to say. All I could hear was some pleasant music and then doctor appeared again and said: " Well, that's it!" and he took the earphones away.

"Wait, I haven't heard my wife yet!" I tried to stop him.

"Why, you were not supposed to, we just installed the electrodes in your scull. You can go home now, sit comfortably in your armchair and push this button." He pointed to some small box in his hand with the green pushbutton on its top. "This control box is connected by radio to the sensors in your brain," he explained. "And V.R. will cut itself off automatically, after an hour. It is equipped with own watchdog timer, we call it *Cerberus*, ha ha!" he joked, but then he realized I did not know what he is talking about and added: " You don't need to turn it off, actually you will not even be able to." And he laughed again, this time in rather strange way, like he knew something I did not know.

"Only an hour?" I could not hide my disappointment.

"Yes, for safety reasons, but you are allowed to use *STYX* every day," he assured me and winked, as if we were some kind of conspirators.

I put flowers on the table, lit some candles - Deeka was so romantic! - and poured *vin rosé* from the bottle of Cold Duck we bought last summer in New Jersey. I filled two glasses, of course. Actually, I didn't know if we would be allowed to drink a toast, but I did it anyway, just in case we might.

All excited, I pulled the control box from my pocket and pushed the green button. For a while I only heard some noise, more like a buzzing, and then brightly colored pictures

started to flash in front of my eyes. Finally, I saw something like a corridor or tunnel and suddenly I was with her.

Deeka was sitting by small coffee table a reading something. I was watching her lovely profile for a while and I thought I was in heaven. She always looked like an angel when she was reading and suddenly, I was overcome by yearning and I sighed loudly. She raised her beautiful head in surprise and asked me: "How come you are already here, Oro? As far as I know you very always healthy as a fiddle." It was her all right, she was never good with proverbs anyway.

"Well yes, but I only came here through that *virility* or how they call it. You know, I am not here, I mean permanently, I have to go back to Earth." I stuttered, so much I was put off by her cool welcome.

"Oh, I see, this is just some sort of business trip, yeah? I understand," she said ironically. "You are now taking business trips just to see your wife. Well, surprise, surprise," she laughed at me and it was like some cold hand was squeezing my miserable heart.

"I just came to tell you how much I missed you" I tried to explain.

"I missed you too, you fool," she answered, but it was not too convincing.

I wanted to kiss her, but she jerked her head away as she was bitten by snake or something. "What are you doing?" she screamed. "Don't you see I have my hair freshly done? Do you want to mess it up?"

"I thought it did not matter," I said in confusion. No, it could not be her - she was always nice to me, not like this.

"What do you mean: does not matter? You simply don't care, do you? It's all the same to you if I look like a tramp, isn't it? No, you never really cared for me!"

" But *Deekee* - she particularly liked if I called her that way - look, I came here across all that distance just to tell you how miserable I felt -"

She didn't let me finish: "You said that already, you do not need to repeat yourself - I am not so dumb, you know. Besides, don't tell me you actually walked all that distance. I don't think you would ever do something like that for me!"

"Do we have to argue, honey?" I moaned.

"So now I am arguing, am I? Listen to this: I am arguing with him! And tell me: who came to see *me*? Did I come to see *you*, did I?" She was furious: "I was so foolish, all that time I hoped you would change, but you are still the same, without feelings! Don't you remember how much I have suffered because of you?" She started to list all what had happened before and her memory was always very good, unfortunately. Only this

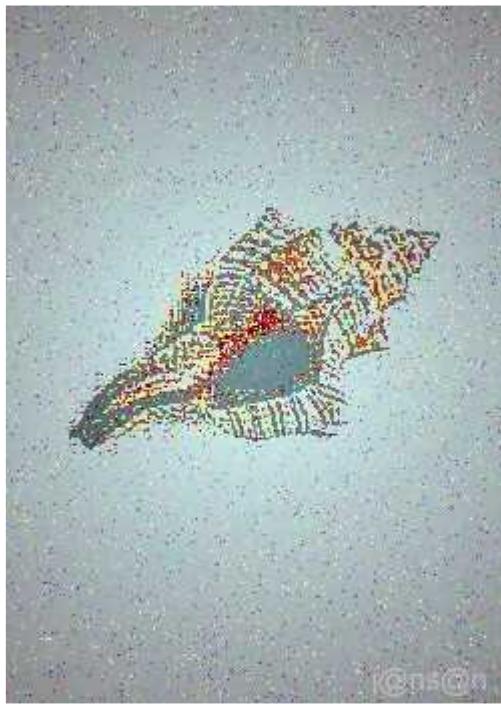
time, something was different: she was neither forgetting *nor* forgiving.

I was listening and listening and after a while I stopped listening at all. Finally, I was saved by that automatic Cerberus, which turned her off. I exhaled with deep relief.

I looked at my table with two glasses still filled with wine we didn't even have time to drink. I picked one of them and gulped it down. Then the other one, only this time rather slowly, the way a wine is supposed to be drunk and enjoyed. And then I filled the first one again and emptied it as well.

I brought the bottle to our bedroom in spite of the fact that Deeka never wanted us to drink there. Before I finished it off, I had made firm decision to return that blasted *virtuality* back to my doctor and the very next day, for that matter. I could almost see his enjoyment and hear his satisfactory remark: "Well, well, another patient completely cured!"

The Island of My Mystery



I always wanted to see some mysterious island and believe it or not, I have found one. I do not claim there are not others, even more mysterious, but none of them was so fascinating as this one - at least to me. It has its own mystery, the mystery I may never solve . . .

It happened on our summer trip to the very tip of Bruce peninsula. Huron Lake, bigger than some smaller seas, has terrible storms, especially at fall and in their severity, they can successfully compete with those in North Atlantic. I got that information from captains of some ocean freighters, who - thanks to Canadian waterways - could get all the way to Huron and as far as Lake Superior and Chicago harbor.

Many books were written about Great Lakes, their harbors and shipwrecks. There are many of them on our side of the lake and few mysterious ships as well, ships that disappeared without trace. One of recent ones, famous Edmund Fitzgerald, was hiding on the bottom for few years before they found him. Once during the single storm, twelve ships sunk near Goderich harbor. Even in our small Kincardine area, there is eleven shipwrecks. One of them, naughty *Erie Belle*, can be still seen partly exposed near our harbour.

Fast schooners from the beginning of this century cannot be seen here any more. There is 19 shipwrecks however in Marine Park called *Fathom Five* near Tobermory. The harbor there is the deepest on Huron, however the entrance is shallow and treacherous. The place is also called "the Mecca of scuba divers" and you can bring there your equipment and gadgets to prove it to yourself. If you are not interested in diving, there is still plenty of other points nearby. You can get there from South (via Toronto) or from North, driving across Manitoulin Island, named after the Great Indian Spirit. It is the largest sweetwater island in the whole world and you and your car can board there the big ferryboat M. S. Chi-cheemaun to sail to Tobermory.

When you get there, you can enjoy a trip to some near islands, the most famous one being the *Flowerpot Island*. No, there are no flowerpots there, just giant rocks of the same shape. We took a cruise ship, but were not heading directly there, first circling the harbor and observing the most famous and visible shipwrecks. Some were so close to the surface that the glass bottom of our boat, provided for better observation, was almost scratching their decks.

Our boat was a little tugboat, later rebuilt for sightseeing trips. Judging by some brown newspaper clippings and old Canadian banknote, both neatly framed, it certainly had its own history. The ship was about 26 feet long but we squeezed there very comfortably. The skipper, young Scot with rather impressive long beard, was commenting on all shipwrecks in great detail. He even stopped the boat above each of them and turned it around for the best view. We could even see the shafts and gearboxes, and at one place, he said in rather tragic voice: "And all passengers of this ship died -," then paused a while and added, to our relief : "- of an old age, of cause."

When we landed on the island, our captain informed us that he would be back and pick us at four P.M., at the landing and we better be there, otherwise we would have to stay on the island overnight. We all laughed to his joke, but he said he is very serious and the island was uninhabited, except for snakes. The sightseeing trail on the island went partly around the shore then it turned inland. After few minutes of walking, we could actually see those famous "flowerpots", about 60 ft high, with diameter 30 ft at the base and of coarse larger at the top. Eroded by water, they stood there on guard, resisting the elements of nature. Further up on our trip, we climbed wooden stairs to reach the island caves. They were actually very large, wide open at the front and protected by overhanging rock. They say the caves were once inhabited, but I don't think the people there stayed very long: the perpetual sound of falling drops of water would probably soon drive them crazy.

The path carried us even higher up on island cliffs, where we could see the lake and its untamed waves, breaking on the rocks. It sounded like somebody was slapping the disobedient child. Water, the powerful element, could not tolerate anything standing in its way. The rocks, on the other hand, were standing quietly and patiently. Only sometimes we could hear the scream of pain, but it was only the seagulls. Down under, rather close to us, a ship was passing but it didn't land. It was almost lunchtime and I started to feel quite hungry. We didn't take any food with us and I soon realized what are the first sensations of some poor shipwrecked sailor...

We continued our journey. The main group of tourists disappeared and only one young

couple stayed with us. They were from Ohio and were our companions for a while, commenting on the island like if they knew it well. Later, they turned left at the intersection and we were alone left us alone. We carried on to the northern side of the island, where we climbed up some stairs chiseled in the stone. Then we finally saw it: the lighthouse, proudly ruling its surroundings, high above the cliffs. Next to it was the solitary house for the keeper, now deserted because the lighthouse was fully automatic. Little lower, there was a wooden terrace, more like a platform or lookout, extended toward the lake, high above the water. You can see from there quite far away and the lake seemed to have no end. On the horizon, we could see one lonely sailboat. Similar one probably came to pick Scottish Bonnie Prince Charlie, when he lost his last battle, "to carry the boy who was born to be king, over the sea to Skye", as the popular song has it. It is also a pun: Skye is pronounced similarly to "sky" - and Charlie never seen his Scotland any more.

At the corner of the platform there was a little plaque:

"This place was chosen by Vicky and Larry Thomson as their wedding place. Two weeks before the wedding however, they drowned in this lake during the storm. Their boat and bodies were never found." We stayed there for a while, deeply impressed with that simple, yet so tragic statement.

Then we turned back and reached the landing place; our tugboat was already waiting for us. As soon as we took off, quite a strong wind was pushing our boat, which started to buck like a bronco on the rodeo, standing back on the stern, then tipped down on its bow, rocking like cradle, not sideways, but to and fro. Water spray was splashing over our backs and then hit our faces again. I tried to remember where could the life jackets be, not realizing that they could not help us too much - prolonged stay in cold water could have only one end - death by hypothermia. All that time, our skipper kept his cool or he was only pretending, one just couldn't tell.

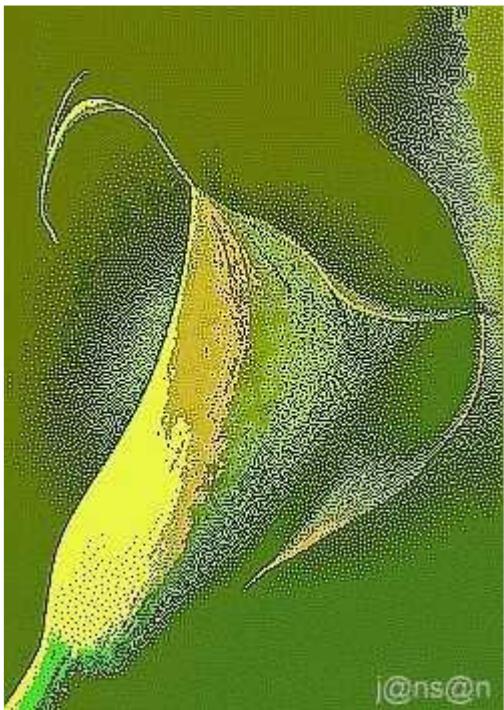
Having reached this point, I should have ended my story, but the tragic death of young lovers was still occupying my mind. How come they had the same family name, even without being married? I also imagined the unhappy father of the bride, who lost his daughter and had to cancel the whole wedding, the dinner and all. . .

One night, he had a dream. His daughter Vicky appeared to him and asked him to carry on with the wedding she had been looking forward so much. As you can see, I took this idea from Ireland, where they celebrate the departed person by the funeral feast called "wake", with the deceased in the room and all mourners drinking to his memory.

Poor father did as he was told and the wedding was of course performed on the island, on

the very same terrace above the lake, the one the young people originally selected. Both fathers were accompanying the invisible newlyweds and maids of honour were carrying invisible wedding gown. All went swell except for the end: when the priest asked groom to say his fatal "I do", the embarrassing silence fell all around. Both fathers looked at each other, rather surprised: who forgot that minor detail? Then, just as it was becoming hopeless, the loud "I do" came from the forest above and later again, in girl's voice. The celebration continued. There was a dance, of course, and afterwards, the parting guests praised the father of the bride for the idea to stage those two actors in the forest. He tried to explain to him that he didn't order anybody, but it was hopeless.

I completely forgot our trip and my unfinished story until Christmas, when my wife was sorting some pictures for our album. Excited, she showed me one photo: "Do you remember that young couple you photographed on that Flowerpot Island? They are not here!" I distinctly remembered I took the picture with them and my wife together, but all I could see was her and the forest in the background. I was still wondering about it, when my wife quietly added: "I remember now: she told me her name was Vicky . . ."



The Last Escape

Of course I had to join them. At first, I could not figure out what they were waiting for, but at least I was sure they all gathered there expecting something or somebody to appear. One thing was sure: they weren't the kind of ordinary tourists, who are only trying to get the best view of the Falls. Most of them didn't even watch the waterfall, so deeply involved in some kind of discussion. They looked to me more like a group of conspirators. Then I remembered: it was all over the newspapers and was talked at length on local television. . .

Yes, they were waiting for him, for Great Houdini, or rather for his ghost, who was supposed to materialize today. It was Halloween and god knows who came

with the idea that he would show up and even right there on that particular rock. And while I am not vulnerable to the psychology of masses - I believe that IQ of the crowd is equal to the lowest IQ in the crowd - the curiosity alone drove me right to them. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I am always fascinated by people who believe in improbable things.

People gathered there on top of the rock, the one on the American side of the Falls. They were standing in small groups and arguing with a high degree of anxiety. The passers-by were coming and going: some of them shook their heads, while the others were just smiling. None of them was of course taking it too seriously, being ready to dismiss the whole thing as a nonsense. Only the believers were staying - and surprisingly - so was I and for some strange reason I just couldn't make myself to leave.

Then right next to me, somebody uttered in apparent condemnation : "Those fools, those bloody fools!" Since I was not sure if it was meant for me, I turned to the man who had spoken the words. He was probably very old, since his white hair was falling in long streams on his shoulders and his short, crew-cut beard was of the same color. Well, I have met in my life many men who looked like Buffalo Bill, mostly in one show or another, so at first I thought he is just some kind of actor.

But something out of order caught my eye: while his mouth was still twisted in ironic grin and his voice had shown his apparent disgust, his small, very blue eyes couldn't hide something else. Yes, I couldn't help thinking that this man was actually admiring those "fools", and as I had to admit, so was I. I took another look at him when he didn't watch me, scanned his long coat and baggy pants - altogether a appearance of the common bum. Not a fellow you want to start conversation with, at least not without keeping your hand safely on your valet. But my curiosity was raised already.

"So you don't believe he will show today?" I asked him in obvious mockery, but he answered very seriously: "Of course he won't, why should he?"

I immediately noticed he didn't say "how could he", as one would expect in such situation and so I asked: " 'Why should he', you said? You are talking like you know his habits very well."

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't," he said quietly and clammed-up. And then we were just standing there and I was about to leave, when he suddenly collapsed. Just like that, without a word, without even a sigh. People helped me to get him to the nearest park bench but he refused our assistance: "It's nothing, really!" But I didn't want to leave him there just like that - I can smell good story miles away and by God there was definitely one right there. Of course I couldn't tell if it wasn't just a good performance on his part, but something told me that inside those worn rags is a gentleman, somebody who remembered much better times.

"Are you ill? I asked, but he shook his head. Then it struck me: "I bet you haven't eaten too much for some time. Why don't we go somewhere and I buy you a dinner..."

"Oh no, I ate all right," he resisted, with faked sincerity, but again, his eyes convinced me he was lying. I insisted and so we went. I took him in my car and drove him to the one place I knew very well, named Vincenzo's, after its owner, of course. Needless to say it was Italian restaurant and while the food was good, the prices were reasonable. I sort of liked the spot and I thought it would be perfect to open the mouth of my companion.

I did not pry to make him talk. Instead, I was watching his hands; they usually tell you a lot about the person they belong to. He had long, thin fingers with trimmed nails and his hands were slightly shaking - but not too much, considering his apparent age. The ways he handled fork and knife were refined, actually too refined for the place we were. Again, it crossed my mind that the old fellow must had witnessed the better times, certainly until he hit the retirement or shall we say, until it hit him. Maybe he was just living off his stingy relatives and sometimes had to con somebody to pay him a supper.

When we finished the beer, his hands were already steady. And then he finally opened his mouth - until then too busy - and said: "Italian food! Oh how I love it! You, Sir, are a real gentleman!"

"Now, now," I resisted, since I wasn't sure he is not making a fool of me," let us say you will explain to me what you said before and we'll be even."

"What was it I said before? Oh, you mean that I talked like I knew him? Actually, I never met the chap."

It was obvious, that he didn't want to tell me his story just for dinner only, so I tried to play it safe: "Suppose you tell me whole story and if I find it worthwhile, Ii will pay you extra.

" He gave me rather deplorable smile: " I do not think you have enough money to pay me - that is if you want to publish the story. No, Sir, it is not for sale."

" All right then, how about if I promise you I will not make it public. What then? "

"No need to promise anything, Sir, I trust you. But still, the answer is no!"

That irritated me: "But of course, there is no story, I knew it all along!"

" Oh no, I didn't say there is no story," he insisted.

"Why, you just admitted you didn't even know Harry Houdini!"

"Erich was his name, he just called himself Harry, and Weiss not Houdini. Like everything, nothing with that chap was just what it appeared to be. And so there is the story and then again it may not be..."

That was as much as I could stand: "You keep talking in puzzles, Mister..., Mister..., or is your name also secret?"

"Benoit," he said quickly," Claud Benoit."

I picked my hat and started to leave."So, Mr. Benoit, what's the deal?"

Suddenly he stopped pretending: "You must excuse me, Sir, I do apologize for my behavior, it really wasn't nice of me. You take me here, treat me like a king and I wouldn't even answer your questions. I must have had looked rather ungrateful to you!"

I didn't go for it: "How much?"

He smiled again:" Nothing, for you - nothing."

" Come on, here you are, playing the games again. Are you telling me you don't want anything in return? Where is the catch?"

"OK,"he said, " I'd tell you the story if you promise you won't tell it to anybody. The dinner was excellent and you surely didn't offer it to me just because you wanted to hear my story." He certainly knew how to make me feel ashamed, then noticed that and quickly added: " Then again, if you pay me another beer..."

"As many as you wish," I agreed, put down my hat and sat down at the table, "I hope it's worth it".

"You won't be sorry, Sir, that I promise you," he assured me, but rather in vain, since I was sorry already. But it was too late, he got me where he wanted. . .

"Back to your question then: No, I never met Harry, at least not personally, no Sir. And yes, I can tell positively what he would or wouldn't do in. Why? I studied Houdini for so many years I can even tell you what he would be telling you right now, word by word. He fascinated me, you know. Not as a magician or showman, but as an innovator. Nothing seemed to be impossible to him. He ventured where no man dared before. He achieved amazing feats and gave incredible performances. But deep down - and I am sure of it - the man was hoping that one day he will do something utterly impossible, even for him. Completely impossible, if you know what I mean." Old man was obviously caught in the web of his own tale and anxiously carried on.

"How can I be so sure? Well, Harry meticulously wrote down everything in his diaries and I mean those few which were not published yet. Every single trick is described there and you can see the man was a real genius."

"But the way he died," I tried to object, "I mean that stupid injury caused by one student in Montreal... ?"

"Oh, you do know about that, too? And you think Houdini bungled that one, do you?" And when I nodded, he asked me: "Did it ever occur to you that was actually scheduled?"

"Planned, you mean?" I asked in disbelief. "Surely you don't want to tell me he planned his own death?"

"Why not? He planned it many times before and don't forget, he was the best escapist who ever lived. He could escape from anything, tied in chains, jailed, submerged or even buried!"

Yes, but then he was very much alive!" I objected.

"You said it, Sir, the illusion wasn't complete, something was still missing - people knew he was alive. But what if he died and was considered dead by everybody? Wouldn't it be rather ultimate achievement - or shall we say a miracle? After all, nobody did it before him. Except for one but he was the son of God, after all. Yes, Houdini aimed much higher. I can't tell you he really believed it possible, for a man I mean, all I know he just wanted to do it, the supreme stunt of them all, his *last escape!* I happened to stumble on some documents - letters to his friend - which made me believe he was determined to do it! "

I was skeptical: "But nobody else knew about it?"

" They were not supposed to, Sir. You would have to know Harry, he never talked openly about his next projects. He was superstitious, you know."

I had to laugh: "Houdini- superstitious?"

"Believe me, he was. And there was of course the competition. He wanted to be the first, well, let's say *the first of men*, anyway."

"And nobody knew," I voiced my doubt," except that friend of his - and I presume he is dead now, too? "

"Except him and me, of course. I just do not have enough facts to prove it."

That surprised me: " And what about those documents you mentioned before? "

"I had to burn them; I promised that to my friend. You see, he asked me in his letter to burn them."

I pretended to be furious: " Man, you destroyed the only proof about Houdini best achievement - how could you? "

He missed my irony: "Yes, I know, it was hounding me ever since. That's another reason I do not want it to become public knowledge. Now, without proof, they will only ridicule me."

"And how about the right of public, the right to know "

" Oh yes, you people from newspaper , you claim it all the time, to justify almost anything. There is no right to know here, you know. Harry didn't want anybody to know, period."

"But still, he could have told some other person you do not know about. If he really succeeded, that is, which I sincerely doubt, anyway." I added.

"Well, he did succeed. You see, I know he did have a plan. First step: he had to be injured, so that his death would look natural. The Montreal injury fulfilled this first task."

" You mean he actually asked the student to injure him so he can fake his death? " I asked in disbelief.

"Of course not, it had to look natural, he couldn't tell the soul."

"Than he actually was not injured at all? "

"Oh no, Sir, he was, but not seriously, you know. Second point: the injury and its consequences had to be become the public knowledge, that's why he did not finish his last performance. By the way, it was not in the Chinese water torture chamber, as it was shown in that movie."

" Oh yes," I nodded," I saw the movie, it was quite convincing."

"And so was Houdini, when he wanted - and he always wanted. Now to the point three: he had to be proclaimed clinically dead, that was the most important but also the most difficult step of the whole scheme."

"Yes, it surely was," I agreed, "but how did he manage that?"
"I do not know, maybe some drug, which extremely slows down the heartbeat or ..." "...or he bribed the doctor!" I interrupted.

"Oh no, not Harry, he could not risk that," old man disagreed.
"And the step number four?" I could not hold my anxiety.
"The resurrection, of course!"
"Or maybe he woke up in his coffin, could not get out and died horrible death!"
"You think doctors will let him suffocate to death? No Sir, you see, that's why he couldn't not take any doctor in his confidence."

"But don't you agree, he could die and the doctor would keep quiet. It's illegal to proclaimed somebody dead if he is not and that fact alone would shut the mouth of any doctor who was implicated. It is quite possible that he is dead after all," I concluded.
"Possible, but hardly probable. Don't forget, Houdini was always ready for all alternatives, he studied all potential problems. For instance, he always carried in his belt a small knife to cut the ropes if everything fails. And there was no customary check of the coffin since he was presumed to be dead anyway."

"So when the worst came to worst, they could dig him out when the time run out, which they would, if it is as you said," I carried on my objections.
"No, he did not have any accomplices," said the old man with strange conviction. ""he was quite ingenious, he did not need them. And I am telling you, he did escape."
"How do you know? You are just guessing, right?"
"No, I do know. It was in the dead man's correspondence: I saw the proof Harry visited him after his burial."
"Oh yes," I exclaimed, "I remember he promised publicly that if there is an afterlife, he would come back to tell us all about it. He would simply had to admit that he was wrong, that there is such a thing as the life after death."
My storyteller suddenly became very angry: "Nothing of that sort, Sir, when I said he escaped from the grave alive, I meant what I said.
"OK, but why nobody us haven't learned about his escape - not even his wife? And what happened then? Where did he live, what did he do? Why didn't he tell even afterwards? Such a feat would bring him the immortal glory! That does not sound like Harry Houdini at all!"

"It does not, does it?" he had to admit. "No, I do not know why he didn't and a no, I do not know the rest of the story. But imagine this: when he got out of the family tomb - you know, the one which was decorated with his bust he ordered and let himself to be photographed with - when he got out, he was most likely overcome with joy. He finally did it: the best escape of them all and there was nothing which could beat it. His first

thought of course was to go home, report it to police and have an interview with the newspapers."

"Then, suddenly, he realized they may not believe him. Old Harry was dead, with all official documents to prove it. They may even consider him to be an impostor, and pretty bad one, for that matter. Yes, old Harry was definitely dead, but there was also another one born again. Free to go somewhere, anywhere. Free from all the ties with this world. He had enough money stashed away, he could get new name a start again. No more perpetual race to surpass himself, that everlasting drive to become better and better, which was getting more difficult, since he already tried everything and was getting old. Now, he could go away, far from the maddening crowd, which was mercilessly asking for more dangerous stunts."

"It was tempting and what's more it was possible!"

I had to interrupt him again: "But I thought he had everything - the glory, the admiration, and of course the money. What more one can possibly ask? Why would he throw it all away?"

My old man did not budge: "Yes, it's hard to understand. But he was also human. We all have, at least once in the lifetime, the urge to leave everything and run away. But most of us cannot - he could and he did. All that was needed was to get up and just keep going. Nobody would ever try to look for him. It was the best escape of them all - his *last escape*, you might say."

I was amazed, I had to admit. still, there was some doubt. " How about his wife, the one he loved so much? "

"She had enough money and she was better off the way it was. Besides, he promised to give her sign after he is dead, but he wasn't dead yet."

"And how about those "fools" as you called them? How could he possibly betray them, desert them? "

He laughed: "He haven't deserted them, he is still in their hearts. Always the illusionist, he tricked them all. And he tricked the death, too. It was nothing but a lie and even I cannot tell the truth about him."

Then it dawned on me: " But surely there was one person he owned the explanation, the student who was blamed for his death, what was his name, Claud..."

He interrupted: "Never mind his name, Sir. Yes, you may say that the boy was probably torturing himself for quite some time, but..."

I pressed furtherd: "Come on, there was no friend and no letters, Mr. Benoit. You are that student and you just invented the whole story to put your conscience at ease.

He didn't deny who he was, but somehow insisted on his story. "You do not need to

believe me, Sir, but he *did* visit me. It was two years after his death, after his official death. He realized he left me with quite a blame. He came and smartly asked me for my forgiveness, before he told me the whole story. I was then happy like a child - imagine, I didn't kill Houdini after all! He gave me my life again and in return, I promised him that I would never reveal his secret to anybody. "

"But you have told it to me ", I chuckled, "what if I *do* make your story public? "
He replied with a smile: "I do not think you will, Sir, you promised not to. But go ahead, do it, nobody will believe you anyway!"

When we left the restaurant, I still had one question I wanted to ask him :" Was he ever tempted to go back, to his former life - to his glory, admiration and big money? "

"He never told me, but he surely was, many times, I guess. At least I hope he did. Because that's the price one has to pay for his freedom, Sir. Don't you agree? " he asked and then he disappeared into the night.



The Old Hundred

When the cannonade was at its height, a Confederate band of music, between the cemetery and ourselves, began to play polkas and waltzes, which sounded very curious, accompanied by the hissing and bursting of the shells."

Lt. Col. Arthur J. L. Freemantle, British military diarist with general Lee at the time of the battle of Gettysburg.

Our band belonged to the 26th Regiment of North Carolina, but we still called ourselves Moravian Brass Band as we used to do back in Salem. Our forefathers actually came from Saxony. They settled first in Georgia, but later moved to North Carolina, where they founded the town they called Salem. But if you asked me what were we doing in Pennsylvania, I would have to say that we came here to teach those darn Yankees to sing our Dixie.

We woke up to the morning of another day, the second day of the battle. The town was under our control, but in the surrounding hills you could see the bluish groups of enemy soldiers. They apparently did not want to give up so easy, since they were fighting on their own playground, so to say. And while their papa Lincoln was getting probably very nervous, we were ready to go and finish the job we had started yesterday.

Our boys were of course poking fun of the Union soldiers picking up their defenses in places such as Devil's Den or Cemetery Ridge, but there was hardly anything to laugh at. Since more of their reinforcements arrived during past night, they clearly outnumbered us. It was clear that getting them down from those hills wouldn't be easy, not easy at all. We were getting up rather slowly, because we had a difficult day ahead and the thought that many of us wouldn't be able to wake-up tomorrow, that thought did not help us at all. Even the reveille, played by regimental bugler, sounded more like an odd fanfare from some other time and place.

As a musical band, we were actually rather special detachment and no one really wanted to be responsible for us. True, we used to play gallops for the cavalry , quicksteps for the infantry or patriotic marches during the parades, but we played mainly at funerals. Otherwise, we did serve the guarding duty like anybody else, sometimes helped the regimental surgeon and of course once a while we were assigned to the kitchen. And today was one of those days.

We all shared the aversion to our cook. Not because of food - he did the best he could - but you can hardly find the soldier who would like the kitchen duty. And while the others went on chopping the wood, our "king of gravy" called me aside and informed me that "somebody had stolen the sack of the sugar and why don't I go to the supply wagon and bring a new one." He then remembered the wagons were on the other side of Gettysburg, but he also said he knew there is one Texas brigade next to us and I "better go there and borrow it and tell them we'll return it later."

I didn't want to go - who would possibly believe such a promise - but he gave me an order and I had to go. Fortunately for me, their cook was a nice fellow, he said OK and "Amos here will go with you and help you". So we went and just to say something, I asked the tall Texan about his rather strange name. He replied that Amos was the name of their bishop Comenius, who lived two hundred years ago and that they are Moravian Brethren from Austin, Texas. "Really? We are also Moravians," I exclaimed, "our folks came to America with bishop Spangenberg!" "Oh yeah?", he said. "Well, our brothers and sisters came with reverend Chomsky. Some stayed in Austin, the others went further west., to the place called Temple."

"And how about the music? " I couldn't help asking, because Moravians were always known to be good musicians. "The music? " he laughed, "Why of course, we do have music band and it is the best in the whole America! I should know, I am the first trumpeter."

Well, I have heard that Texans are everything but modest, so I didn't want to argue. The important thing was that he was a fellow musician. You see, there is that invisible link among us : we get together, play for hours without saying a word and then, when parting, we shake hands and say: "Wasn't it a lovely evening?" I realized I had to show him to our boys; they would never forgive me if I didn't. Fortunately for us, Texan's cook had more understanding for those things and let him go; he wouldn't need him for an hour, he said.

So I introduced Amos to our bandleader, who wanted to know what music they could possibly play down there in Texas. "Well," the tall guy was suddenly shy, "it's mostly square dances or polkas . . ." But our boss just did not give up that easy. "Do you know Bonnie Blue Flag?" he asked. And my cowboy said "Excuse me!", picked the old man's trumpet and from the way he was holding it you could see it was not for the first time. He looked it over, then puckered his face and pressed it to his lips like he would be kissing his girlfriend. And he played, oh God, how he played! Better than archangel Gabriel on the Last Judgement Day, if you ask me.

Our bandmaster was just sitting there, slightly nodding his head, but didn't give any sign that he liked it or not. When his turn came, he took his horn back from Amos and launched another one, our favorite "Maryland, oh Maryland!", but they've got in an argument, since the Texan claimed the melody was from German song "Oh Tannenbaum!". And then our boss challenged him again: "I bet you people down there don't know anything from our Zinzendorf! ". Of course, we were only little surprised when he lost, our old man that is, and then Amos played "The Old Hundred", which is the well known traditional psalm, brought here from our old country. He also added another song, popular with emigrants, named "Shine, my golden sun" or something like that, anyway.

And when we all sat down, he did some explaining: "It runs in our family, you know. We are from Olmutz, and one of our relatives was "kapelmeister" Pawel Josef Wejvanowsky. He also started as a military trumpeter and became the famous composer." Amos obviously knew more about those things and since we wanted to know more, we kept him talking. He also told us how our kingdom was lost in single battle, the battle on White Mountain, where the mercenaries ran away and only the handful of Moravian musketeers stayed and fought to the last man. Shortly afterwards, many true believers had to leave the country and sailed to the New World.

But then it was his time to go. Before he went, he took my music book and wrote down his address. "Come to my place after the war," he said, "all of you; you are most welcome. My wife will prepare for you the real Moravian feast - you never ate anything like that in your life.

The battle was at its best when we spotted our chief commander accompanied by few of his officers, riding alongside our flank and heading to our left. So we picked our brass and played his favorite "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny's Shore" followed by "The 26th Regiment Quickstep". And then, suddenly and quite against his habit, our bandleader had a speech: "Boys, and now something for Amos - it must be pretty hot for them Texans under that Little Round Top! Let's hope he can hear us over there through all that noise."

And we played, first "Come Dearest, the Daylight is Gone", then "Tramp, tramp" and we even added "Juanita", which we figured must be known all over Texas. Somebody suggested "The Easter Gallop", the one we play in Salem on Eastern Sunday in the honor of Jesus Christ's resurrection. That is the time we all gather in the church, joined by all who can play any instrument, and you can hear our chorales down in the valley, far away . . .

Then Julius, without telling anyone, started "The Old Hundred", that ancient hymn which was most likely sung by those brave musketeers on that cursed White Mountain. Yes, when they realized that it was the end, the end of everything. And we all slowly joined him, one after another, and in that magic moment, that song was talking to us, too.

Some time later, maybe due to the fact the battle lasted too long so we run out of our repertoire, but mostly because we didn't want to play all the time only a sad music, we switched again to waltzes and polkas. And believe it or not, we had completely forgotten that all around us people were being killed, the horses were falling and the shells were flying above and across. Many of those shells even dropped right into the cemetery and exploded there among the graves ,like it wouldn't be enough to die only once. Yes, we have forgotten that there was still that war going on, the worst of all wars, because there is actually nothing civil in the civil war . . .

Suddenly an officer arrived; he could have been an Englishman judging by his accent, and he stopped his horse right in the front of us. He answered our salute with a friendly smile: "Laddies, this is the first time I heard anybody play dance music in the middle of battle and next to the cemetery!" To which our Julius replied: "On this day, everybody tries to do what he knows best and what we know best is how to make the music, Sir."

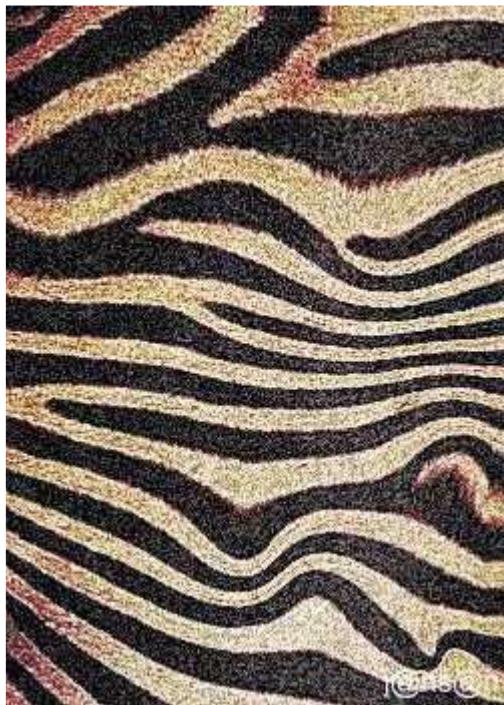
From the dispatch to General Lee, 4th of July 1863: "In the battle of Gettysburg, the 26th North Carolina Regiment suffered heavy losses: out of 800 men, only 83 were counted at the roll-call today."

THE END

Note by author:

The mentioned Freemantle's quotation about the 6th Regiment band can be found in many history books dealing with American Civil War. Recently - and by pure chance only - I discovered those musicians were Moravians from Salem. True to the historical fact, the Texas brigade was attacking the Little Round Top that day and lost there many brave soldiers. The Confederate soldier named Amos was of course my imagination only.

Wapooswayan



There was once an old *mahkeses* (fox), living by the Waskesiu Lake. He did not have any relatives and his *owekimakuna* (wife) died the previous winter, shot by the hunter.

As he grew old, he was losing the strength and speed, but not his appetite. It was more and more difficult for him to catch the prey and he had to resort to trickery. But he knew only one trick however, and that was to put on the *wapooswayan* (rabbitskin robe) and pretend that he was a *wapoos* (rabbit). This decoy usually worked very well, since the *wapoos* is known to be rather silly.

Once in *paskawe-pesim* (June), he spotted a young *wapoos* feeding on the grass. Well, said the *mahkeses* to himself, that would be easy. He ran back home, picked up his *wapooswayan* and slowly approached his victim. "*Tanisi nitotem?* How are you, my friend?" he asked. "*Namoya nantaw*, I am O.K." said the trusting rabbit, "*Tanta ochi keya?* Where are you from?" "I am from those hills over there," replied the *mahkeses*, but as he was pointing to the hills, his *wapooswayan* slipped and revealed his own hair.

The surprised *wapoos* asked in all innocence: "Why do you shed your fur, brother? You look now like the real *mahkeses*!" And the *mahkeses* replied smartly: "This is a new fashion, you fool! That's what they're wearing in the city now. Where have you been lately? Don't you know this is the twentieth century?" But the *wapoos* became suspicious and said: "You might not be the *wapoos* after all, but a *mahkeses* dressed like a *wapoos*! I have heard once about the *mahekun* (wolf) who dressed like a *kohkomimaw* (grandmother), to scare the little red Robin Hood!"

"He didn't want to scare her, you stupid!" explained the *mahkeses*. "Besides, it wasn't red Robin Hood but the *iskwesis* (little girl) named Little Red Riding Hood. Don't you ever read fairy tales?" "Why would the *mahekun* eat *iskwesis* when he can eat *wapoos*?" wondered the little *wapoos*. "And how about you, brother? *Ki moowaw wapoos che?* Do

you eat rabbits?"

The mahkeses shook his head: "*Namoya, ni moowaw wapoos!*" "And what does the mahkeses eat?" asked the wapoos. "Oh, mahkeses is a vegetarian. He eats the grass, see?" and mahkeses took in his jaws the mouthful of grass. And to be even more convincing, he managed a friendly smile.

That, of course, was a big mistake. With his smile, the mahkeses also showed his teeth which, as we all know, look nothing like the teeth of a wapoos. Even the silly wapoos recognized those teeth and quickly run away. Which is to prove that one is never too smart, not even if he is *the twentieth century fox*.

Ekosi, that's all.

Note: This story was written by me for my Cree friends in Saskatchewan.

The Balances.



He thought about it for a week and it all made perfect sense. His doctor gave him only few months to live and there was not too much time to waste. Even if it was the last thing to do, it would be worthwhile: something he should do to balance his account. . . It comes with age: the idea of dying is not a pleasant one, but we all have to face it, sooner or later. Even if we really don't know when is our time due, we should be ready. But what does it really mean, to be "ready"? Well, some people think they should enjoy themselves as much as they can, others are trying to put their finances in order and still others, they start writing their memoirs.

Jason was not planning anything of that sort. Enjoyment? He lived long enough and he has been many places already. He loved and was loved. Money? He had plenty of it. And writing some fairy tales about himself - what a ridiculous idea! His name was good - he thought - at least good enough not to worry about the things people will tell when he's gone.

Still, he wanted to be ready when his day comes. Just to have a feeling that he balanced his account with life, if you know what I mean. That sounded all right, but whom he was actually accounted to? And what for? At first to God, that's for sure. Yes, he got absolution every time he went for confession, but he felt it was rather easy way out. Sure, he was sincerely sorry for his sins, so he deserved His forgiveness. But even with God's forgiveness, how about people? Somehow he felt he needed their pardon as well, since he had sinned against them, too. That's it, he had to balance his account with people. Maybe there was still some debt to be paid, who knows?

He wondered where to start. He figured out that he probably harmed some people at his own will and the others more or less without any intention. Jason decided to search his mind, to find whom did he hurt and do something about it. He never considered himself an evil person and in reality, he was not a bad guy. He simply didn't have enough

reasons, or shall we say stimulations, to do bad things. He was not jealous, ambitious, lazy or even corrupt. He had no vanity, lust for money or desire for the properties of other people. And he had no need to cover-up his past actions or mistakes. Sure, he lied a little bit here and there, but never to harm anybody. Come to think of it, he knew very few people who were as good as he was.

He started to worry if there was anything at all, anything he should settle the account with. In his consciousness, there was nothing serious, nothing really harmful he might have done. Sure, small things, but nothing really big. Could it be however, that he might have done harm without intent?

Well, he was once offered a position of the department head and he accepted. Of course, Jerry Morrow deserved it more than he - not that he was any better, but because he was there longer than Jason. But they chose Jason and that was all. He couldn't possibly say: "No, thanks, give it to Jerry!", could he?

How about his daughter in law? He never really liked her and sometimes he was not enough careful to hide it. She was a good wife to his son a deserved his esteem, but then again: extra friendliness was not expected from him. Or was it?

Then there was that fellow Marcus, his neighbor. One day, backing off his driveway, he hit Jason's expensive convertible. Of course, it was all paid by insurance company, but they also raised Marcus's premiums and he never forgot Jason that he claimed the damages. It was ridiculous, just imagine: Jason getting his car fixed and paying for repair from his own pocket!

Finally, Jason's brother Peter. He wanted to start the business and needed some cash money - a loan, to be accurate. He even offered him a partnership, but Jason refused. Sure, he chickened-out, but wouldn't you? There were good reasons for it: Peter was not particularly good with money and the only cash flow he ever knew was the one dissolving his assets. Still, Jason felt that there surely must be somebody whom he did some wrong. In desperation, he took his whole life, day by day, and examined it very carefully. Finally, it struck him like a revelation: Toby, yes, Toby!

His mind drifted back to days he met June. Always smiling, always happy, she was the most beautiful redhead he ever met. June had a refined sense for the beauty and goodness of everyday life. At that time, she was enamored in Toby. And vice versa, as they say, there was no mistake about it. They were dating for quite a while and even planned to get married. Then entered Jason: man in his best years, who knew women and how to get their attention, how to please them. And last but not least, how to seduce them.

It started as a flirt, innocent short time affair, if you wish or more like another experiment to confirm Jason's irresistibility. Little did he know it would later change in something deeper, more personal, more permanent. It did, however. He toyed with fire and got burned. How? He felt in love with her, deeply, hopelessly and desperately. There is no point to argue that she also yielded to his advances, that she also fell in love, captivated by his charm, his gallantry, his personality. That was excusable, but in Toby's eyes, Jason must have been the only guilty party.

Soon, Jane forgot Toby completely. She had no choice: after all, she married Jason three weeks later and her hands were tied by the ribbon of holy matrimony, as the priest put it. However, Toby apparently couldn't forget - he never married and lived alone and rather quietly in his inexpensive house. The house he was originally building as their love nest and which he later finished, but couldn't offer her any more.

Yes - Jason thought - I had caused him a real pain, real grief - how come it never entered my mind I robbed him of his happiness? Sure, I hardly new him, he wasn't my friend and when it comes to women, every man is just a hunter. Everybody for himself, that's the first law of jungle. And then we had nice eighteen years together with June - nothing could possibly spoil that! Yes, she had to break with Toby and it was not easy, but she calmed down and forgot him for good. Well, all the time till her death, which happened two years ago... Jason started his "balancing act" with Toby rather inconspicuously. He knew he could not go and ask Toby to forgive him, because he wanted to make it up to him. So he first joined Toby's bowling club and time after time he took him for a beer in a local pub. Toby of course still remembered Jason, but it did not seem to worry him. Soon they became friends and instead of drinking in tavern, they drank their beers at home, once at Jason's, next time at Toby's. They talked about anything and everything, but of course they never mentioned June.

As his sickness progressed and his time was running short, Jason was gathering his courage to tell Toby what he is planning to do. He had some money put aside, which he intended to underwrite to Toby in his last will. Surely he would understand that's all he could do. He couldn't give him June back nor all those years Toby was without her! All he wanted to hear in return was that Toby could find in his heart to forgive him. It was rather strange: he didn't feel guilty at all, but at the same time he needed his forgiveness. Just to balance the scale - he thought.

One evening, while sitting in Toby's house, Jason could not resist and finally touched the subject. "Have you ever been married?" he asked.

"No," said Toby, "and you should know why." It was quite obvious hint for Jason to

stop prying, but he felt he had to carry on: "Yes, I know. You must have loved her very much. I can imagine -"

"I loved her more, than you can ever imagine," interrupted Toby, still peaceful, but there was a warning in his smile.

"But of course I can. I loved her too," explained Jason.

"I loved her more than you think I did," insisted Toby and his eyes had rather strange look, as being afraid of something.

"No, no - listen, I know. I realize it now," objected Jason, disregarding the signs of the coming storm. "That's why I would like to make it up to you."

"What did you say?" cried Toby, as he didn't believe what he was hearing.

"I said: I want to make it up to you," Jason repeated, realizing that he couldn't back-off then. He held it all for too long and finally wanted to get it over with.

"To make up what? All those years I hated you for what you have done to me? All those nights I wished you to die? All those years I wanted to kill you?"

Bewildered, Jason was watching the man in front of him. He expected harsh words - after all, there was bad blood between them - but he never realized that Toby would hate him so much.

"What for?" he started in his defense. "It was a fair play. We both had same chances and I won, that's all. What's wrong with that?"

"Same chances?" Toby's face was not peaceful any more, it turned red and his voice was shaking in anger. "You were well-to-do gentleman, with a promise of comfortable life, with nice house, with fancy friends and enough money to travel around the world or entertain in any other way that young, foolish girl! You call that fair play?"

"But it was up to her to make her choice. Why don't you blame her? It was her decision, she made it because she loved me. Actually, you cannot blame her either: it was not her fault she didn't love you any more!"

Toby froze, but just for a moment. He could not control himself any more: "You fool! She didn't love me? You do not know what you are talking about, old man! Do you see this sofa you are sitting on? Take a good look - that's where we made love. Many times, I tell you, so many times I forgot to count! And you say she didn't love me!"

Now it was Jason's time to be surprised: "What are you talking about? She never entered this house - she could not, we were already married when you finished it!"

"That's right, you were already married. So what? That was not a physical disability!"

He laughed, but it sounded more like he was crying instead.

"But how -" Jason's voice broke down.

Toby, now calm again, continued: "About a year after she married you, we met in downtown and she confined to me she wasn't really happy. She made a mistake, she said. It was not what she expected and she didn't know what to do. I begged her to divorce you and to come back to me, but she already had a child, your child and she didn't want to lose it. Then I brought her here, in my house, and she was mine again. I don't remember how it happened, but we agreed to meet here every Wednesday, week after week, year after year. You remember those piano lessons she had? Well, her teacher was my aunt and she agreed to cover up for her. I didn't want to tell you all this, but you forced me. You forced me, with your offer to make it up to me!"

Jason slowly regained his balance and was able compose himself: "You are a liar, bloody liar! How could you spit on the dead woman? Don't you have any decency, man? Spare me your filthy lies about your former fiance and my dear wife!"

"So I am a liar?" asked Toby, his voice normal again. "You want a proof? I'm going to give you a proof, you fool. Here!" He opened his desk's drawer and pulled out a package. Rather thick one - there must have been around fifty letters, all neatly tied together with red ribbon.

Confused, Jason automatically took the stack of letters and with shaking hands undid the string. He opened one letter in the middle of the package, put on his glasses on and started to read. He immediately recognized June's handwriting and the letter was dated, too. After few moments, he folded paper back as it was and put it in the envelope. What he had read was enough to convince him - to convince everybody. Still, he didn't want to give up.

"Supposing those are real letters and not fakes -" he started, but then, realizing that the details in the letter could not have possibly been known to anybody but June and Jason, he added with resignation: "Forget it, I know that they are real."

"You see," explained Toby, "I never really intended to tell you about it. No, neither did I plan any revenge, I really loved her, God is my witness. You may not believe it, but I still miss her!"

"So do I," admitted Jason, hiding his face in his hands . "So do I."

After a while, Toby broke the silence: "Believe me, I soon realized that cheating on you wouldn't solve anything, but she begged me to carry on. Wednesday after Wednesday,

every week, until she died. It became her obsession, like she might think she could be able to undo what she has done. In your words, *to make it up to me*, do you understand? And now you are here, obviously not knowing anything about it and you also ask me to let you *make it up to me*. But as you see, you don't owe me anything any more."

Jason raised his head: "No, I suppose I don't. She must have loved you very much." Toby looked at him in surprise: "Do you think so? Sometimes I think she never really loved me. She had the best of both worlds: your money and my love. And I think you didn't owe her anything either. After all, she didn't love you and she cheated you with me."

"You are wrong, Toby," said Jason slowly. "I think she did love you. And she probably loved me, too. It seems she loved both of us very much. But it's too late now and we will never know." He finished his beer and then, without a word, he opened the door and stepped into the cold December night.



All the Bells of Helena.

High above Helena, which is the capital of Montana, in the middle of Rocky Mountains and near the Great Divide - which splits our continent so that all rivers to the west of it drain their waters to the Pacific Ocean - high up there is MacDonald Pass with the *Frontier Town*. According to the Tourist Guide, the town is a replica of some western pioneer village, and it was created by local enthusiast, sometime at the beginning of this century. He built the whole place, using only lumber and simple tools. No wonder it took quite a number of years to finish it.

We found the place without any problems, but to our surprise it looked deserted. The main gate was locked and only the notice nailed to the door announced that visits

were allowed by appointment only. There was no phone number where we could call, but it didn't matter anyway, as we were supposed to leave Helena for Bozeman the very next day and there was not enough time to make the arrangements. Being inquisitive by nature, I walked around the palisade which surrounded the village, or rather a small fortress containing several houses and a little chapel. After a while I found the rear door and - just in case anybody was in - I pulled the short string hanging from the wall, probably serving as a doorbell. To my surprise the bell which rung was the big bell in the church tower, braking the silence and sounding loud and clear.

I entered and some guardian dog, disturbed by the noise and apparently mistaken about my intentions, came to me wagging its tail and expecting his supper. The doors in one of those houses opened wide and one man appeared and walked toward us. He looked more like *Billy the Kid*, rather young and apparently not too friendly. There of course the similarity ended: he was not leaning on his rifle like Bill did, at least in his famous photograph, and he certainly wasn't dressed to kill, if you pardon the pun.

With a little improvisation, I immediately lied that I came to make an appointment, but our fellow obviously wasn't the social type and informed me that he is not giving any tours. Vlasta - that's my wife - being more practical, came to my help and asked him if we could come in and look around. Or maybe she was just curious about that chapel, but

it does not matter, since she would not admit it to me anyway.

"Well, you are already in," said the man ironically, but surprisingly enough he gave us his permission. "But don't go inside those houses," he added, which was only to show that he didn't have too much trust in us. So we walked around and snapped some photos, while he lit his cigarette with rather shaking hand. He then started to feed his hungry dog and didn't pay any attention to us.

The place was really nice and in good shape, not like the remains of the houses in ghost town called Marysville, which we visited a day before. The fort had two high towers by the main gate, but of course there was no guard there. The flagpole had no flag either - sure sign that the garrison surrendered a long time ago to the attacks of civilization. Curiously enough, it all reminded me a scene from the movie *Beau Geste*, the scene inside the "fortress of dead". Only a little pond full of green algae suggested that there was some life in that place. And no wonder: being almost one hundred years old, the place truly reminded us the times when Indians were still roaming around on their mustangs - with four legs instead four wheels, if you know what i mean. On the second look, even our Billy seemed to be out of place and out of time. When I walked by one of those log cabins and saw a computer behind one of those windows, I somehow felt it did not belong there either.

Outside the fort, there was a large loghouse, which was once serving as a restaurant, but now was empty and the door was locked. Instead of pillars, there were four huge boulders in the corners, supporting the roof. The Travel Guide, where I learned about that place, claimed that through the large windows there one could see as far as seventy miles. We were not able to confirm it however, since we were only allowed to look inside, not the other way around. There were several heavy, oak tables in the dining room, with many chairs which could seat at least a hundred people. There were some photographs on the walls, very old and with very dignified faces, probably those of the guests, who used to sit there regularly or occasionally. There was no fire in the large, stony fireplace and only the setting sun was painting everything red and casting long shadows on the lonely tables, probably deserted for very long time.

On our way back to town we stopped at one of Helena's ice-cream parlors. Vlasta couldn't help asking the owner about that mysterious fortress in the mountains. " Well," said that good man, " it used to be a very famous place, especially the restaurant was popular for the big parties and the chapel, where many wedding ceremonies were performed. People used to come from far away; it was very romantic, you know. And then one day, the owner suddenly died. His widow took over and cared for the place for some time, but then she finally followed her husband as well. For a long time again, the place was deserted. Quite recently however, I heard that some computer wizard bought

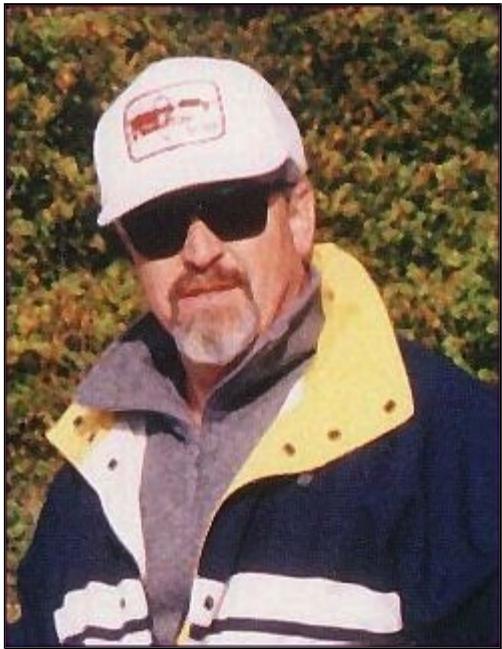
the place. But that's all I know - I haven't heard anything about him not letting people in."

Next day, we were on our way again, but somehow, we were not allowed to forget that boy with his self-imposed seclusion, the boy who, similarly to Billy the Kid, had his quarrel with the society. Later on our travels, by some strange fate, we visited a small town down in New Mexico, called < I>Mesilla, the place where Billy was caught and sentenced to be hanged. Kid somehow managed to break and run away, only to be eventually shot down by *Pat Garrett*, his former friend. At that time, Pat was already on the side of law and Billy wasn't idle either: he already killed quite a number of decent men. And maybe, just maybe, his soul still cannot find peace and hangs around somewhere, maybe right there, in the fort of that Frontier Town.

But it is more likely that we just happened to talk to the real computer *whiz-kid* the shopkeeper was telling us about. And now, when the holiday season is coming, another strange thing happened: I had a dream and in it, I saw our Billy who, driven by some sudden impulse, left his programming terminal, turned off his computer and opened the main gate to his fort. The dream stopped right there, but there is nothing which will prevent me to continue the story as I see it fit. And I see it quite clearly: he will step outside and he'll be watching the northern lights above - for a while anyway - and then he will start shoveling the snow to clear the way to his deserted restaurant. He will bring some firewood and light the fire in the big stony fireplace. After so many years, the flames will be again dancing on the walls and will color everything red as the setting sun did when we were there. He will then sit down in one of those old chairs, right next to the fireplace - one solitary man in the large and empty room. His shaking hands will light the cigarette and the lonely man will throw a big meat-bone to his lonely dog. An maybe, just maybe, he will even pat him on the head.

When that happens, the guests on those old photographs will suddenly step down, sit around those heavy tables and the chap who built this place will be there too. And his widow will be bringing the holiday meal, the very same meal she used to make every Christmas. Then the main door will open and here comes Pat Garrett followed by Billy the Kid. Laughing together the way they used to when they were still friends, they will be knocking off the snow from each other shoulders. And in that very moment, the bell in the chapel will start ringing - suddenly, just by itself - and from the valley, deep below, it will be answered by *all the bells of Helena . . .*

Jan B.Hurych



was born before WWII in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he mostly grew up, well, not too much, only five feet and seven inches. During his younger years, he travelled extensively, mostly by tram No.14, as a student of Prague Technical University. After graduation, he took some job, but soon he returned to University as an Assistant, later Assistant Lecturer. After nine years and one invasion (in 1969), he took his last tram, this time to Ruzyně Airport, where his traces disappeared.

They appeared again in England, where he took an adventurous job of cleaning windows in high-rise buildings. It was during this time he discovered a very efficient method how to wash up to hundred windows a day - this idea was later shamelessly copied as Windows 95. His target was however Canada and again, his footprints disappeared at the airport, called Heathrow.

In the meantime, his "North-West passage" continued as he reappeared in Montreal, Canada. It almost looked like he would settle down: he got job with U.S. computer company, got married and bought the house. Well, you can't get more settled than that and Jan started to count the years remaining to his retirement. After nine years and one separatist election, he got tired of Quebec as well and performed another disappearing act at Dorval Airport.

He landed in Toronto, where he spent ten productive years, mostly with design of power plants and the rest with CSA (Canadian Standard Association), certifying U.S. and Japanese computers, for which he had to travel there - well, most of the time. Surprisingly enough, he got tired of flying as well and moved North of Toronto, to the beautiful shores of Lake Huron, where he worked at Bruce nuclear plant.

He then learned they were looking for design engineers in Saskatchewan and his wanderlust appeared again. True, it was 3000 km away, but it was another North-West passage and he could not say "no". He seated his wife Vlasta behind the steering wheel of their covered wagon Firenza and their dog Tara laid down comfortably on the rear seat. After full 4 days of driving, they finally got there. And they were never sorry, which is rather odd, considering that winter temperatures there were close to minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. After three years, Vlasta returned back to guard their house at Huron against cyclones and Jan stayed another year to finish the contract.

Finally he returned back to Ontario and after another year, he decided to retire with good intention to

age gracefully. Instead, he started two Internet magazines (Hurontaria and Priloznik) and devoted most of his time to writing. He also writes to different magazines - yes, even newspapers - and for one artistic gallery web page (ArtForum). Apparently, that was still not enough and with his friend Michal he created the edition of electronic books KNIHY OFF-LINE (i.e. Books off-line), both in Czech and English (this book being one of them). He also designs electronic illustrations for his webzines and books.

Jan still travels, but this time not on company time and money :-). That may be the reason he is sometimes considered to be a Scotsman, namely when he is tipping in restaurants. He has no account in Switzerland, be it secret or open kind, but he also confessed his sincere regrets about it. He unselfishly shares his rich travel experiences with his friends, mostly at the local pub.
