

THE CATAAAA

By A. E. Van Vogt

A Little Classic By One Of The Most Brilliant Science-Fiction Writers of Our Day. Several years ago this startling story appeared in a Los Angeles publication, FANTASY BOOK, and it immediately created a furor among the local SF faithful. With the resumption of MARVEL, we thought it should be brought to a larger audience, particularly since its author has meantime won recognition as one of America's most brilliant science-fiction writers. We think you'll agree that "The Cataaaa" is a masterpiece.

The cat turned and touched Silkey's face gently.

The usual group was gathering in the bar. Cathy was already pretending she was far gone. Ted was busy putting on his stupid look. Myragiggled three times the way a musician tunes his instrument for the evening. Jones was talking to Gord in his positive fashion. Gord said "Glub!" every few seconds, just as if he was listening. And Morton tried to draw attention to himself by remaining aloof and intellectual looking far down in his chair. No one noticed the slight, slim man sitting on a stool before the bar. The man kept glancing at the group; but just when he joined them, or who invited him, no one had any clear idea. Nor did it occur to anyone to tell him to go away.

The stranger said, "You were talking about the basic characteristics of human nature—" Myragiggled, "Is that what we were talking about? I wondered." The laughter that followed did not deter the newcomer.

"It so happens that I have had an experience which illustrates the point. It began one day when I was glancing through the newspaper, and I ran across a circus advertisement . . . " At the top of the ad (he went on) was a large question mark followed by some equally large exclamation marks. Then:

THE CATAAAA WHAT IS IT?

IT'S THE CAT

COME AND SEE THE CAT

THE CAT WILL STARTLE YOU

THE CAT WILL AMAZE YOU

SEE THE CAT AT THE CIRCUS

FREAK SHOW

In smaller letters at the bottom of the ad was the information that the cat was being "shown under the personal direction of Silkey Travis."

Until that point I had been reading with a vague interest and curiosity. The name made me jump.

"Good lord!" I thought. "It's him. It's Silkey Travis on that card." I hurried to my desk, and took out a card that had come in the mail two days before. At the time it had made no sense to me at all. The words written on the back in a fine script seemed pure gibberish, and the photograph on the front, though familiar, unlocked no real memory. It was of a man with a haunted look on his face, sitting in a small cage. I now recognized it as being a likeness of Silkey Travis, not as I had known him fifteen or so years before, but plumper, older, as he would be now.

I returned to my chair, and sat musing about the past.

Even in those days, his name had fitted Silkey Travis. At high school he organized the bathing beauty contest, and gave the first prize to his cousin and the second prize to the girl who was the teacher's pet of most of the teachers. The students' science exhibition, a collection of local lizards, snakes, insects and a few Indian artifacts was an annual affair, which brought a turnout of admiring parents. Invariably, it was Silkey who organized it. Plays, holiday shows and other paraphernalia of school pastimes felt the weight of his guiding hand and circus spirit. After graduating from high school, I went on to State college to major in biology, and I lost sight of Silkey for seven years. Then I saw an item in one of the papers to the effect that local boy Silkey Travis was doing well in the big town, having just purchased a "piece" of a vaudeville show, and that he also owned a "piece" in a beach concession in New Jersey. Again, there was silence. And now, here he was, no doubt "piece" owner of the circus freak show.

Having solved the mystery of the postcard, so it seemed to me, I felt amused and tolerant. I wondered if Silkey had sent the card to all his former school companions. I decided not to puzzle any more about the meaning of the words written on the back. The scheme behind them was all too obvious.

Sitting there, I had absolutely no intention of going to the circus. I went to bed at my usual hour, and woke up with a start some hours later to realize that I was not alone. The sensations that came to me as I lay there have been described by Johnson in his book on morbid fears. I lived in a quiet neighborhood, and the silence was intense. Presently, I could hear the labored pounding of my heart. Poisons surged into my stomach; gas formed and leaked up to my mouth bringing a bitter taste. I had to fight to keep my breath steady. And still I could see nothing. The dark fears ran their courses, and the first thought came that I must have had a nightmare. I began to feel ashamed of myself. I mumbled:

“Who’s there?”

No answer.

I climbed out of bed, and turned on the light. The room was empty. But still I wasn’t satisfied. I went out into the hall, then I examined the clothes closet and bathroom. Finally, dissatisfied, I tested the window fastenings—and it was there I received my shock. Painted on the outer side of the pane of one of the windows were the letters:

“The cat requests that you come to the circus.”

I went back to bed so furious that I thought of having Silkey arrested. When I woke up in the morning the sign was gone from the window.

By the time breakfast was over, my temper of the night had cooled. I was even able to feel a pitying amusement at the desperate desire of Silkey to let his old acquaintances know what a big shot he was. Before starting off to my morning classes at State, I looked under my bedroom window. I found what looked like footprints, but they were not human, so I decided that Silkey must have taken care to leave no tracks of his own.

At class, just before noon, one of the students asked me whether there was any good explanation in biological science for freaks. I gave the usual explanation of variabilities, nutritional deficiencies [sic], diseases, frustration of brain development affecting the shape of the body, and so on. I finished drily that for further information I would direct him to my old friend, Silkey Travis, director of freaks at the Pagley-Matterson circus.

The offhand remark caused a sensation. I was informed that a freak at this circus had prompted the original question. “A strange, cat-like creature,” the student said in a hushed voice, “that examines you with the same interest that you examine it.”

The bell rang at that moment, and I was spared the necessity of making a comment. I remember thinking, however, that people hadn’t changed much. They were still primarily interested in eccentricity whereas, as a scientist, the processes of normalcy seemed to me far more fascinating. I still had no intention of going to the circus. But on the way home that afternoon I put my hand in my breast pocket, and drew out the postcard with the photograph of Silkey on the front. I turned it over absently, and read again the message that was on it:

“The interspatial problem of delivering mail involves enormous energy problems, which effect time differentials. Accordingly, it is possible that this card will arrive before I know who you are. As a precaution I am sending another one to the circus with your name and address on it, and the two cards will go out together.

“Do not worry too much about the method of delivery. I simply put an instrument into a mail box. This precipitates the cards into the box on earth, and they will then be picked up and delivered in the usual fashion. The precipitator then dissolves.

The photograph speaks for itself.”

It didn’t. Which is what began to irritate me again. I jammed the card back into my pocket, half-minded to phone up Silkey and ask him what the silly thing meant, if anything. I refrained, of course. It wasn’t

important enough.

When I got out of bed the next morning, the words, "The cat wants to talk to you!" were scrawled on the outside of the same window pane. They must have been there a long time. Because, even as I stared at them, they began to fade. By the time I finished breakfast they were gone.

I was disturbed now rather than angry. Such persistence on Silkey's part indicated neurotic overtones in his character. It was possible that I ought to go to his show, and so give him the petty victory that would lay his ghost, which had now haunted me two nights running. However, it was not till after lunch that a thought occurred to me that suddenly clinched my intention. I remembered Virginia.

For two years I had been professor of biology at State. It was an early ambition which, now that I had realized it, left me at a loose end for the first time in my life. Accordingly, for the first time in my rather drab existence the mating urge was upon me. Virginia was the girl, and, unfortunately, she regarded me as a cross between a fossil and a precision brain. I felt sure that the idea of marrying me had not yet occurred to her.

For some time it had seemed to me that if I could only convince her, without loss of dignity, that I was a romantic fellow she might be fooled into saying yes. What better method than to pretend that I still got excited over circuses, and, as a grand climax to the evening I would take her in to see Silkey Travis, and hope that my acquaintance with such a character would thrill her exotic soul.

The first hurdle was bridged when I called her up, and she agreed to go to the circus with me. I put the best possible face on for the preliminaries, riding the ferris wheel and such juvenilia. But the moment of the evening for me came when I suggested that we go and see the freaks being shown by my friend, Silkey Travis.

It really went over. Virginia stopped and looked at me almost accusingly. "Philip," she said, "you're not trying to pretend that you know a person called Silkey? She drew a deep breath. "That I have to see."

Silkey came through beautifully. He was not in when we entered, but the ticket taker called into some rear compartment. And a minute later Silkey came charging into the main freak tent. He was plump with the plumpness of a well fed shark. His eyes were narrowed as if he had spent the past fifteen years calculating the best methods of using other people for his own advantage. He had none of the haunted look of the photograph, but there were ghosts in his face. Ghosts of greed and easy vices, ghosts of sharp dealing and ruthlessness. He was all that I had hoped for, and, best of all, he was pathetically glad to see me. His joy had the special quality of the lonely nomad who is at last looking longingly at the settled side of life. We both overdid the greeting a little but we were about equally pleased at each other's enthusiasm. The hellos and introductions over, Silkey grew condescending.

"Brick was in a while ago. Said you were teaching at State. Congrats. Always knew you had it in you.

I passed over that as quickly as possible. "How about showing us around, Silkey, and telling us about yourself?"

We had already seen the fat woman and the human skeleton, but Silkey took us back and told us his life history with them. How he had found them, and helped them to their present fame. He was a little verbose, so on occasion I had to hurry him along. But finally we came to a small tent within the tent, over the closed canvas entrance of which was painted simply, "THE CAT". I had noticed it before, and the chatter of the barker who stood in front of it had already roused my curiosity:

“The cat . . . come in and see the cat. Folks, this is no ordinary event, but the thrill of a lifetime. Never before has such an animal as this been seen in a circus. A biological phenomenon that has amazed scientists all over the country... Folks, this is special. Tickets are twenty-five cents, but if you’re not satisfied you can get your money back. That’s right. That’s what I said. You get your money back merely by stepping up and asking for it...”

And so on. However, his ballyhoo was not the most enticing angle. What began to titillate my nerves was the reaction of the people who went inside. They were allowed to enter in groups, and there must have been a guide inside, because his barely audible voice would mumble on for some minutes, and then it would rise to a hearable level, as he said, “And now, folks, I will draw aside the curtain and show you—the cat!”

The curtain must have been pulled with a single jerk, on a carefully timed basis. For the word, cat was scarcely out of his mouth, when the audience reaction would sound:

“Aaaaaa!”

Distinct, unmistakable exhalation of the breaths of a dozen startled people. There would follow an uncomfortable silence. Then, slowly the people would emerge and hurry to the outer exit. Not one, that I was aware of, asked for his money back.

There was a little embarrassment at the gate. Silkey started to mumble something about only owning part of the show, so he couldn’t give passes. But I ended that by quickly purchasing the necessary tickets, and we went inside with the next group.

The animal that sat in an armchair on the dais was about five feet long and quite slender. It had a cat’s head and vestiges of fur. It looked like an exaggerated version of the walkey-talkey animals in comic books.

At that point resemblance to normalcy ended.

It was alien. It was not a cat at all. I recognized that instantly. The structure was all wrong. It took me a moment to identify the radical variations.

The head! High forehead it was, and not low and receding. The face was smooth and almost hairless. It had character and strength, and intelligence. The body was well balanced on long, straight legs. The arms were smooth, ending in short but unmistakable fingers, surmounted by thin, sharp claws.

But it was the eyes that were really different. They looked normal enough, slightly slanted, properly lidded, about the same size as the eyes of human beings. But they danced. They shifted twice, even three times as swiftly as human eyes. Their balanced movement at such a high speed indicated vision that could read photographically reduced print across a room. What sharp, what incredibly sharp images that brain must see.

All this I saw within the space of a few seconds. Then the creature moved. It stood up, not hurriedly, but casually, easily, and yawned and stretched. Finally, it took a step forward. Brief panic ensued among the women in the audience, that ended as the guide said quietly:

“It’s all right, folks. He frequently comes down and looks us over. He’s harmless.

The crowd stood its ground, as the cat came down the steps from the dais and approached me. The

animal paused in front of me, and peered at me curiously. Then it reached gingerly forward, opened my coat, and examined the inside breast pocket.

It came up holding the postcard with the picture of Silkey on it. I had brought it along, intending to ask Silkey about it.

For a long moment the cat examined the card, and then it held it out to Silkey. Silkey looked at me.

“Okay?” he said.

I nodded. I had a feeling that I was witnessing a drama the motivations of which I did not understand. I realized that I was watching Silkey intently.

He looked at the picture on the card, and then started to hand it to me. Then he stopped. Jerkily, he pulled the card back, and stared at the photograph.

“For cripes sake,” he gasped. “It’s a picture of me.”

There was no doubt about his surprise. It was so genuine that it startled me. I said:

“Didn’t you send that to me? Didn’t you write what’s on the back there?” Silkey did not answer immediately. He turned the card over and glared down at the writing. He began to shake his head.

“Doesn’t make sense,” he muttered. “Hmmm, it was mailed in Marstown . That’s where we were three days last week.”

He handed it back to me. “Never saw it before in my life. Funny.” His denial was convincing. I held the card in my hand, and looked questioningly at the cat. But it had already lost interest. As we stood there, watching, it turned and climbed back up to the dais, and slumped into a chair. It yawned. It closed its eyes.

And that’s all that happened. We all left the tent, and Virginia and I said goodbye to Silkey.

Later, on our way home, the episode seemed even more meaningless than when it had happened. I don’t know how long I had been asleep before I wakened. I turned over intending to go right back to sleep. And then I saw that my bedside light was burning. I sat up with a start. The cat was sitting in a chair beside the bed, not more than three feet away.

PART TWO OF THE CATAAAA

THERE WAS silence. I couldn’t have spoken at the beginning. Slowly, I sat up. Memory came of what the guide at the show had said... “Harmless!” But I didn’t believe that anymore. Three times now this beast had come here, twice to leave messages. I let my mind run over those messages, and I quailed “ . . . The cat wants to talk to you!” Was it possible that this thing could talk.

The very inactivity of the animal finally gave me courage. I licked my lips and said:

“Can you talk?”

The cat stirred. It raised an arm in the unhurried fashion of somebody who does not want to cause alarm. It pointed at the night table beside my bed. I followed the pointing finger and saw that an instrument was standing under the lamp. The instrument spoke at me:

“I cannot emit human sounds with my own body, but as you can hear this is an excellent intermediary.”

I have to confess that I jumped, that my mind scurried into a deep corner of my head—and only slowly came out again as the silence continued, and no attempt was made to harm me. I don’t know why I should have assumed that its ability to speak through a mechanical device was a threat to me. But I had.

I suppose it was really a mental shrinking, my mind unwilling to accept the reality that was here.

Before I could think clearly, the instrument on the table said:

“The problem of conveying thoughts through an electronic device depends on rhythmic utilization of brain energies.”

The statement stirred me. I had read considerable on that subject, beginning with Professor Hans Berger’s report on brain rhythms in 1929. The cat’s statements didn’t quite fit. “Isn’t the energy potential too small?” I asked. “And besides you have your eyes open. The rhythms are always interfered with when the eyes are open, and in fact such a large part of the cortex yields to the visual centers that no rhythm whatever is detectable at such times.” It didn’t strike me then, but I think now that I actually distracted the animal from its purpose. “What measurements have been taken?” it asked. Even through the mind radio, it sounded interested.

“Photoelectric cells,” I said, “have measured as much (or as little, which is really more accurate) as 50 microvolts of energy, mostly in the active regions of the brain. Do you know what a microvolt is?”

The creature nodded. It said after a moment, “I won’t tell you what energy my brain develops. It would probably frighten you, but it isn’t all intelligence. I am a student on a tour of the galaxy, what might be called a postgraduate tour. Now, we have certain rules—“ It stopped. “You opened your mouth. Did you wish to say something?”

I felt dumb, overwhelmed. Then, weakly, “You said galaxy.”

That is correct.”

“B-but wouldn’t that take years?” My brain was reaching out, striving to grasp, to understand.

“My tour will last about a thousand of your years,” said the cat.

“You’re immortal?”

“Oh, no.”

“But-”

There I stopped. I couldn’t go on. I sat there, blank-brained, while the creature went on:

“The rules of the fraternity of students require that we tell one person about ourselves before we leave the planet. And that we take with us a symbolical souvenir of the civilization of the beings on it. I’m curious to know what you would suggest as a souvenir of earth. It can be anything, so long as it tells at a glance the dominating character of the race.” The question calmed me. My brain stopped its alternation of mad whirling followed by blankness. I began to feel distinctly better. I shifted myself into a more comfortable position and stroked my jaw thoughtfully. I sincerely hoped that I was giving the impression that I was an intelligent person whose opinion would be worthwhile.

A sense of incredible complication began to seize on me. I had realized it before, but now, with an actual decision to make, it seemed to me that human beings were really immensely intricate creatures. How could anybody pick one facet of their nature, and say, “This is man!” Or “This represents man!” I said slowly:

“A work of art, science, or any useful article—you include those?”

“Anything.”

My interest was now at its peak. My whole being accepted the wonderfulness of what had happened. It seemed tremendously important that the great race that could travel the breadth and length of the galaxy should have some true representation of man’s civilization. It amazed me, when I finally thought of the answer, that it had taken me so long. But the moment it occurred to me, I knew I had it.

“Man,” I said, “is primarily a religious animal. From times too remote to be a written record, he has needed a faith in something. Once, he believed almost entirely in animate gods like rivers, storms, plants, then his gods became invisible; now they are once more becoming animate. An economic system, science—whatever it will be, the dominating article of it will be that he worships it without regard to reason, in other words in a purely religious fashion. I finished with a quiet satisfaction, “All you need is an image of a man in a durable metal, his head tilted back, his arms raised to the sky, a rapt expression on his face, and written on the base of the inscription, ‘I believe’.”

I saw that the creature was staring at me. “Very interesting,” it said at last. “I think you are very close to it, but you haven’t quite got the answer.”

It stood up. “But now I want you to come with me.”

“Eh?”

“Dress, please.”

It was unemotionally said. The fear that had been held deep inside me for minutes came back like a fire that had reached a new cycle of energy.

I drove my car. The cat sat beside me. The night was cool and refreshing, but dark. A fraction of a moon peered out occasionally from scurrying clouds, and there were glimpses of star filtered dark blue sky. The realization that, from somewhere up there, this creature had come down to our earth dimmed my tenseness. I ventured:

“Your people—have they progressed much further than we to the innermost meaning of truth?”

It sounded drab and precise, a pedagogical rather than a vitally alive question. I added quickly:

“I hope you won’t mind answering a few questions.”

Again it sounded inadequate. It seemed to me in an abrupt agony of despair that I was muffing the opportunity of the centuries. Silently, I cursed my professional training that made my every word sound as dry as dust.

“That card,” I said. “You sent that?”

“Yes.” The machine on the cat’s lap spoke quietly but clearly.

“How did you know my address and my name?”

“I didn’t.”

Before I could say anything, the cat went on, “You will understand all that before the night’s over.”

“Oh!” The words held me for a second. I could feel the tightness crawling into my stomach. I had been trying not to think of what was going to happen before this night was over. “. . . Questions?” I croaked. “Will you answer them?”

I parted my lips to start a machine gun patter of queries. And then, I closed them again. What did I want to know? The vast implications of that reply throttled my voice. Why, oh, why, are human beings so emotional at the great moments of their lives? I couldn’t think, for what seemed an endless time. And when I finally spoke again, my first question was trite and not at all what I intended. I said:

“You came in a spaceship?”

The cat looked at one thoughtfully. “No,” it replied slowly. “I use the energy in my brain.”

“Eh! You came through space in your own body?”

“In a sense. One of these years human beings will make the initial discoveries about the rhythmic use of energy. It will be a dazzling moment for science.”

“We have,” I said, “already made certain discoveries about our nervous systems and rhythm.” “The end of that road,” was the answer, “is control of the powers of nature. I will say more about that.”

I was silent, but only briefly. The questions were bubbling now. “Is it possible,” I asked, “to develop an atomic powered spaceship?”

“Not in the way you think,” said the cat. “An atomic explosion cannot be confined except when it is drawn out in a series of timed frustrations. And that is an engineering problem, and has very little to do with creative physics.”

“Life,” I mumbled, “where did life come from?”

“Electronic accidents occurring in a suitable environment.”

I had to stop there. I couldn’t help it. “Electronic accidents. What do you mean?” “The difference between an inorganic and an organic atom is the arrangement of the internal structure. The hydrocarbon

compounds being the most easily affected under certain conditions are the most common form of life. But now that you have atomic energy you will discover that life can be created from any element or compound of elements. Be careful. The hydrocarbon is a weak life structure that could be easily overwhelmed in its present state of development.” I felt a chill. I could just picture the research that would be going on in government laboratories. “You mean,” I gulped, “there are life forms that would be dangerous the moment they are created?”

Dangerous to man,” said the cat. It pointed suddenly. “Turn up that street, and then through a side entrance into the circus grounds.”

I had been wondering tensely where we were going. Strangely, it was a shock to realize the truth. A few minutes later we entered the dark, silent tent of the freaks. And I knew that the final drama of the cat on earth was about to be enacted. A tiny light flickered in the shadows. It came nearer, and I saw that there was a man walking underneath it. It was too dark to recognize him, but the light grew stronger, and I saw that it had no source. And suddenly I recognized Silkey Travis. He was sound asleep. He came forward, and stood in front of the cat. He looked unnatural, forlorn, like a woman caught without her makeup on. One long trembling look I took at him, and then I stammered: “What are you going to do?”

The machine the cat carried did not reply immediately. The cat turned and stared at me thoughtfully, then it touched Silkey’s face, gently, with one finger. Silkey’s eyes opened, but he made no other reaction. I realized that one part of his consciousness had been made aware of what was happening. I whispered: “Can he hear?”

The cat nodded.

“Can he think?”

The cat shook its head; and then it said:

“In your analysis of the basic nature of human beings you selected a symptom only. Man is religious because of a certain characteristic. I’ll give you a clue. When an alien arrives on an inhabited planet, there is usually only one way that he can pass among the intelligent beings on that planet without being recognized for what he is. When you find that method, you have attained understanding of the fundamental character of the race.” It was hard for me to think. In the dim emptiness of the freak tent, the great silence of the circus grounds all around, what was happening seemed unnatural. I was not afraid of the cat. But there was a fear inside me, as strong as terror, as dark as night. I looked at the unmoving Silkey with all the lines of his years flabby on his face. And then I stared at the light that hovered above him.

And finally I looked at the cat, and I said: “Curiosity. You mean, man’s curiosity. His interest in strange objects makes him accept them as natural when he sees them.”

The cat said, “It seems incredible that you, an intelligent man, have never realized the one character of all human beings.” It turned briskly, straightening. “But now, enough of this conversation. I have fulfilled the basic requirements of my domicile here. I have lived for a period without being suspected, and I have told one inhabitant that I have been here. It remains for me to send home a significant artifact of your civilization—and then I can be on my way . . . elsewhere.”

I ventured, shakily, “Surely, the artifact isn’t Silkey.”

“We seldom,” said the cat, “choose actual inhabitants of a planet, but when we do we give them a

compensation designed to balance what we take away. In his case, virtual immortality.” I felt desperate, suddenly. Seconds only remained; and it wasn’t that I had any emotion for Silkey. He stood there like a clod, and even though later he would remember, it didn’t matter. It seemed to me that the cat had discovered some innate secret of human nature which I, as a biologist, must know.

“For God’s sake,” I said, “you haven’t explained anything yet. What is this basic human characteristic. And what about the postcard you sent me. And—““You have all the clues.” The creature started to turn away. “Your inability to comprehend is no concern of mine. We have a code, we students, that is all.” “But what,” I asked desperately “shall I tell the world? Have you no message for humankind, something—“ The cat was looking at me again. “If you can possibly restrain yourself,” it said, “don’t tell anyone anything.”

This time, when it moved away, it did not look back. I saw, with a start, that the mist of light above Silkey’s head was expanding, growing. Brighter, vaster, it grew. It began to pulse with a gentle but unbroken rhythm. Inside its coalescing fire the cat and Silkey were dim forms, like shadows in a fire.

Abruptly, the shadows faded; and then the mist of light began to dim. Slowly, it sagged to the ground, and lay for minutes blurring into the darkness.

Of Silkey and the creature there was no sign.

The Group sitting around the table in the bar was briefly silent. Finally, Gord said, “Glub!” and Jones said in a positive fashion:

“You solved the problem of the postcard, of course?”

The slim, professorish man nodded. “I think so. The reference in the card to time differentials is the clue. The card was sent after Silkey was put on exhibition in the school museum of the cat people, but because of time variations in transmission it arrived before I knew Silkey would be in town.”

Morton came up out of the depths of his chair. “And what about this basic human characteristic, of which religion is merely an outward expression?”

The stranger made a gesture. “Silkey, exhibiting freaks, was really exhibiting himself. Religion is self-dramatization before a god. Self-love, narcissism—in our own little way we show ourselves off . . . and so a strange being could come into our midst unsuspected.” Cathy hiccupped, and said, “The love interest is what I like. Did you marry Virginia? You are the professor of biology at State, aren’t you?”

The other shook his head. “I was,” he said. “I should have followed the cat’s advice. But I felt it was important to tell other people what had happened. I was dismissed after three months, and I won’t tell you what I’m doing now. But I must go on. The world must know about the weakness that makes us so vulnerable. Virginia? She married a pilot of big air firms. She fell for his line of self-dramatization.”

He stood up. “Well, I guess I’ll be on my way. I’ve got a lot of bars to visit tonight.” When he had gone, Ted paused momentarily in his evening’s task of looking stupid. “There,” he said, “is a guy who really has a line. Just imagine. He’s going to tell that story about five times tonight. What a set-up for a fellow who wants to be the center of attention.” Myra giggled. Jones began to talk to Gord in his know-it-all fashion. Gord said, “Glub!” every few seconds, just as if he was listening. Cathy put her head on the table and snored drunkenly. And Morton sagged lower and lower in his chair.

