

# Three Stories

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I must lead a fascinating interior life. Although about half of my work comes from conscious thought, the other half simply erupts, complete with all the little details you could swear I spent days researching or polishing. The research in this story consisted of walking over to my album of the Verdi *Requiem Mass* and getting the right Latin spellings for "...nil inultum remanebit" and what precedes it. I may have been playing with a cigarette case; I can't remember. When I was done I had written a one-act, one-set play, and here it is.

Jim Blish, music buff, purchased it for the nonexistent second issue of *Vanguard Science Fiction*. It appeared, complete with his blurb, in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but without the free illustration I had foisted off on my old friend with it. Jim is dead, God damn it, and I have never sold an illustration to an SF magazine, and I never will.

In a way, the following three stories represent Doom and Gloom. But if you twist your mind just so, perhaps not.

## **The Price**

THERE WERE THREE MEN; one fat, one thin, one very old. They sat together behind a long desk, with scratch pads and pencils before them, passing notes back and forth to each other while they questioned him. The very old one spoke most often, in a voice full of the anticipation of death.

"Your name?"

The ugly hunchback in the gray tunic glowered back at them from his uncomfortable wooden chair. "No name," he growled. His knotted fingers were spread to cup his knees. His thick jaw was prognathous even at rest. Now, with the muscles bunched under his ears and his thick neck jutting forward, his lower teeth were exposed.

"You must have a name."

"I must nothing. Give me a cigarette."

The fat man whispered gently: "We'll give you a cigarette if you tell us your name."

"Rumpelstiltskin," the hunchback hissed. He extended his hand. "The cigarette."

The thin man slid a silver case across the table. The hunchback snatched it up, bit the filter from the end of the cigarette he took, spat it out on the floor with a jerk of his head, and thrust the case into the front of his tunic. He glared at the thin man. "A match."

The thin man licked his lips, fumbled in a pocket, and brought out a silver lighter to match the case. The old man covered the thin man's hand with his own.

"I am in charge here," he said to the hunchback. "I am the President."

"You have been that too long. The match."

The President hopelessly released the thin man's hand. The lighter slid across the table. The hunchback touched its flame to the frayed cigarette end. Then he slid it back, grinning without visible mirth. The thin man looked down at it without picking it up.

"I'm not as old as you," the President said. "No one is as old as you."

"You say."

"The records show. You were found in 1882, in Minskva Gubernya, and taken to the Czar. You told him no more than you will tell us, and you were put away in a cell without light or heat until you would talk. You were taken out of the cell in 1918, questioned, and treated similarly, for the same reason. In 1941, you were turned over to a research team for study. In 1956, you were placed in the Vorkuta labor camp. In 1963 you were again made the subject of study, this time in Berlin. The assembled records show you learned more from your examiners than they learned from you. They learned nothing."

The hunchback grinned again. "A equals pi r squared. *Judex ergo cum sedebit, quidquid latet apparebit, nil inultum remanebit.*"

"Don't be so pleased with yourself," the fat man whispered, gently.

The President went on. "In 1987, you were taken to Geneva. In 2005, you were given shelter by the Benedictine monks in Berne, remaining with them through most of the Seven Decades' War. Now you're here. You've been here for the past eight months, and you have been treated well."

The hunchback ground his cigarette into the desk's polished mahogany.

"We need you," the thin man said. "You must help us."

"I must nothing." He pulled the case out of his tunic, took a fresh cigarette, spat out the end, and held the case in his hand. "A match."

The thin man slid the lighter across the desk. The hunchback lit his cigarette and returned the lighter. He ground out the cigarette and took another. "A match." The thin man pushed the lighter across the desk, and the hunchback cackled in glee.

There were heavy drapes on the windows behind the President, who gestured abruptly. The thin man yanked them aside.

"Look," the President said. Sputtering fires and swirling ropes of smoke cast their lights and shadows through the window and into the room. "It's all like that, everywhere. We can't put it out, but if we could learn what let you walk through it out of Europe...."

The hunchback grinned slyly and swallowed the glowing coal from the end of his cigarette. He looked from one man to the other with great delight.

The fat man whispered: "I'll pull you apart with chains and hooks."

The hunchback said: "Once I was straight and tall."

"For God's sake!" the President cried out, "there are no more than a hundred of us left!"

"What do you want?" the thin man asked. "Money? Women?"

The hunchback took the cigarette case and crumpled it over between his hands. He threw it on the table before the thin man. Then he sat back and smiled, and smiled. "I will tell you how you may be saved."

"What do you want?" the thin man whispered breathily.

"Nothing! Nothing!" the hunchback cackled. "I will tell you from the mercy of my own good heart."

"Tell us," the fat man cried. "Tell us, then!"

"*Wait--*" It was the President stumbling over his own urgency. "Wait--this thing, this process--this treatment--will it turn us into something like you?"

The hunchback smiled, and grinned, and laughed. "Inside and out. Yes."

The President hid his face in his hands. Then he gestured importunately to the thin man. "Draw the curtains! Quickly!" His voice was hoarse with emotion.

But the fat man dragged the President from his chair and held him so that he was forced to face the open window. "Look out at it," he said harshly. "Look."

The President hung from the fat man's hands for a moment, and then he mumbled:

"All right. Tell us, hunchback."

And the hunchback leaped from his chair up onto the top of the table. He stamped his feet in joy and bayed his triumph from his open throat. He leaped and capered, his boots splintering the oil-rubbed veneer of the table and scattering the scratch pads. The pencils flew into the comers of the room, and the three men had to wait for him to finish.

This one is easy. My grandfather, the village tailor of Marijampole, Lithuania, was a wonderful man, replete with attributes a child could love. He was magnificent when he filled his mouth with water, sprayed a loud, joyous mist over the clothes on the board, and applied a flatiron from the wood-stove. He had a cow, a well with a sweep, a vegetable garden, a house with a tin roof, and I helped carry the pickets for the new white fence in front of his house. To honor him, I piddled in his galoshes. The Russians took many of his children.

This story is not about him; it is about another man, whom I would not have thought of.

Some Things are Forever

## The Ridge Around The World

STENN HUNCHED HIS shoulders and lifted the plow. With his back against the split-rail fence that marked the end of his field, he swung it around, dropped it, and wiped the back of his heavy wrist across his forehead. Squinting into the sun, he twitched the reins and began following his bony horse back across the cramped field.

As he walked, his bare feet set themselves doggedly in the turned earth. He had walked over every fist of dirt in this hectare, so many times that the earth was like cream. Every stone, every root, had been found and thrown aside long ago. He kept his head down and his eyes on the furrow. He could trust the horse to walk straight. Horses were dependable, though they died too often.

He heard an automobile stop on the crushed-stone road beside his field, and growled to himself. Automobiles meant somebody from outside the village.

"You, there!" a harsh voice called out. "Come here."

He growled to himself again and went on as though he hadn't heard. Sometimes that was good enough. The stranger, whoever he was and whatever he wanted, might simply curse him and then go away.

The automobile door slammed. "You--I said come here!"

Stenn yanked the reins, stopped the horse, wound the reins deliberately, in no hurry, wrapped them around the plow handles, and finally turned around. Scowling out from under his lowered eyebrows, he looked at the man standing impatiently on the other side of the fence.

He was wearing a uniform and boots, with a pistol in a holster at his waist. Stenn shuffled forward, taking off his hat in the way he'd learned from his father, long ago in other times when strangers in uniforms spoke to him. He reached the fence and stopped.

"Didn't you hear me?" the man demanded. His face was set in the hard, angry mask that Stenn expected of such men. Expecting it, he ignored it and grunted to show he was here now.

"What's your name?" the man barked.

Stenn gave it, and the man nodded. "All right. You're coming with me to see the Commissioner."

Stenn hunched his shoulders. Here was half a day wasted.

"Now!" the man rasped.

Stenn kept his face set, looking at the man woodenly. The man was powerful, with his uniform and his Commissioner behind him, so there was no question of not going. The half day was wasted, and that was that.

"I'll stall my horse," he grunted.

The man grinned. "The devil with your horse. You won't have to worry about him where you're going. Get in the car!"

Still expressionless, Stenn bent through the fence and shuffled to the automobile. There was only one seat. The uniformed man took a set of handcuffs out of his packet, pulled Stenn's right wrist across his body, and manacled it to the left-hand assist handle on the dashboard. Then the uniformed man started the automobile, turned it around, and drove them back the way he had come.

Stenn twisted his head to look back at the horse standing in the middle of the field. Then he faced front, his arm hanging by its wristlet, and said nothing all the way into the town on the far side of the village. He had never been in an automobile before. He didn't like riding in one.

In the Commissioner's office, he sat stiffly in the hard chair facing the light, his knotty fingers curled over his knees.

"What is your name?" the Commissioner asked.

Stenn gave it again, and the Commissioner grunted. "That's the name on your papers here. Now, what's your real name? Who sent you here?"

Stenn gave his name again. He didn't understand the second part of the question, so he didn't say anything beyond that.

"Who forged these records?" the Commissioner asked. "What is your assignment--sabotage?"

Stenn looked at him woodenly. He made no sense out of what the Commissioner was saying. This was often true of questions strangers asked. It did not upset him.

"Come, now," the Commissioner said softly, "these records are a ridiculous forgery. Did your masters think that even the former regime here could make such mistakes in its birth archives?"

Stenn had no answer for him.

The Commissioner's voice remained smooth. "Let's be sensible. Your masters obviously couldn't have cared much about your safety if they permitted themselves to be so clumsy. All

I want you to tell me is when you were sent into this country, and who sent you. If you cooperate, nothing more will be made of the matter. It is even possible that the new regime might have a good offer for you. Now, despite your present appearance, you must be an intelligent man. I'm sure we can reach an agreement."

Stenn's expression remained the same. He stared uncomprehendingly and said nothing. Not one word of what the Commissioner had said was in any way understandable. He knew from experience that eventually all strangers grew tired of talking to him, and that sooner or later he would be able to go back to his farm.

"Listen, my friend, you'd better say something fairly soon," the Commissioner said.

Stenn shrugged.

The Commissioner called in another man, who was carrying a truncheon. The new man took a position beside Stenn and waited.

"Now," the Commissioner said, "What is your name?"

Stenn told him again. The Commissioner nodded to the new man, and Stenn was hit across the top of his left shoulder.

"How long have you lived in the village?"

Stenn told him, and the man with the truncheon hit him in the same place.

"Who are your associates?"

"I keep to myself. I live alone." He was hit on the left shoulder again. The Commissioner was growing furious because Stenn showed no reaction.

"Where do you come from?"

"I was born in the village."

He was hit.

"Who were your parents?"

He gave his mother's and father's names, and was hit.

"Where are they?"

"Dead." He volunteered his first piece of information, since the Commissioner was now asking something he understood. "I have no brothers or sisters."

Instead of hitting him, the man with the truncheon felt his shoulder.

"Pardon, Commissioner, but there is something here I don't understand. This man's collarbone should be broken. It is not."

"To hell with his collarbone! If you don't know your business, learn it! NOW, you--again--where are you from?"

Stenn told him, and was hit harder.

Finally, the Commissioner said: "Very well. We're going to put you on a train."

He pulled a blank record card out of his desk and in a taut, savage hand scrawled a few sentences on it in his own language. "By the time you come back, my friend--" He looked at Stenn, who resumed his stare woodenly, just as expressionless now as he had been before he'd worn the stranger down. "By the time you come back, you will be as old again as these ridiculous papers make you out to be."

Stenn spent some years in the labor camp, keeping to himself, and shuffling wordlessly down into the shaft each day. He had noted that men here died even faster than his plowhorses did, but this did not concern him except that sometimes he was asked more questions to which he did not have answers. After a time, the men in charge of the camp had been replaced by crippled men in worn uniforms, and these men also shared his habit of silence, toward him and among themselves.

From time to time he looked up at the airplanes crossing overhead, especially when the camp siren gave the alarm, as it did more and more often. Finally, a day came when the few men remaining in charge of the camp locked themselves in a blockhouse and stayed there. Soon afterward, the other men who worked in the camp got the gates open. One or two of them ventured outside the gate. When the men in the blockhouse showed no reaction, everyone in the camp went wild. Some spilled out onto the snowy plains, and others broke into the blockhouse. Stenn shuffled down the railroad track alone, going back the way he'd come.

In due time, he arrived back at his farm. The house was burned down, and the fence broken. Also, there was a new regime, but very few of these new strangers as yet were able to talk his language, and, in any case, they found a great deal of work to do. Stenn went down to the woods with an ax he'd found, cut down some trees, built new fences, and then a new house. The new regime gave him a plow and a horse. He was satisfied.

Stenn hunched his shoulders and lifted the plow. He put his back against his fence, swung the plow, and twitched the reins. His horse settled into the collar and began to move. It was a very old horse, and it plodded slowly. Stenn growled at it as his bare feet followed the furrow.

He came to the end of the field, pushing the plow stubbornly forward as the horse turned away from the fence. He had seen other men plow, wasting ground at each end of the field because they followed the horse as it turned. He did not, and he knew how much ground he'd gained; an extra half-meter a year for the whole width of the field. If one only considered the time since he'd gotten this old plow; which was now almost worn out, it was still a great gain.

He lifted the plow and turned it around, lifting his head to wipe his face, but not bothering to look past the borders of his field at the buildings that surrounded it. The buildings were no concern of his, since they were low enough on the south side so the sun could fall on his

crops.

As he started forward again, he saw someone standing at the other end of the field, watching him. He growled and walked doggedly forward, his head down.

But the stranger had not gone away by the time he reached the opposite fence. Stenn ignored him and lifted the plow.

"May I talk to you a moment?" At least, that was what Stenn thought it must be the man had said. He spoke peculiarly, pronouncing his words in a different way from Stenn, and he spoke too fast. Stenn grunted and twitched the horse's reins.

The man persisted. "I'll come back later, if you're too busy now."

Stenn stopped the horse and hunched his shoulders. Better to get this over now, in that case. He wrapped the reins and turned around with a grunt.

The man was dressed in soft clothing, and though it was still early Spring and Stenn was wearing a coat, the man only wore that one garment, and a belt with little boxes attached to it.

"I was wondering if you needed anything," the man said. "New clothes, perhaps? You've had those a long time, haven't you?"

Stenn looked at the man. These people had bothered him earlier, when they wanted to buy this land and build buildings on it. He remembered they'd been quick to offer, before they went away and left him alone. For that reason, he distrusted them.

"What do you have to trade?" the man asked.

Stenn grunted. Now, that was better. He looked at the man narrowly. "I have cabbages. I have potatoes. I will have sugar beets."

The man nodded. "What do you need?"

"I need a new horse. And a plow."

"Anything else?"

Stenn shook his head.

The man looked thoughtful. "Well, we can give you a new plow. We can give you one that doesn't need a horse."

"I don't want a tractor." Stenn scowled at the man. The regime that had given him this plow had first tried to explain a tractor to him.

The man, who looked shrewd enough so Stenn could respect him, shook his head. "I don't mean a tractor. I mean a plow that moves by itself. It is very much like your plow. You only have to push and pull on the handles to work it, and that's all. I'm afraid that's the best I can do. There aren't very many horses at all, any more."

"I'll look at it," Stenn grunted. He wasn't surprised. Horses died too often. Furthermore, they



ate and had to be cared for.

"All right," the man said. "I'll bring it over later."

"What do you want for it?"

"Potatoes and cabbages, I suppose," the man said. "Twenty bushels of each."

"Ten."

"Eighteen."

Stenn spat in a furrow and turned away.

"All right, fifteen," the man said.

"Eleven," Stenn said grudgingly.

The man seemed to consider for a moment. "All right," he said.

Stenn grunted to himself. The man was no bargainer, that was certain. "Remember," he said, "it's no bargain if I don't like the plow."

The man nodded. "I'll be over with it tonight." He started to turn away, and then he stopped. "Tell me--what do you eat? Do you eat your potatoes and cabbages and beets?"

"That and my pigs. What else would a man eat?"

"Well, *why* do you eat?"

Stenn looked at the man. Why did he eat? Why did any man eat? He turned away and unwrapped the horse's reins. Giving the reins a twitch, he started the new furrow. He ate because everybody ate. Hadn't his father eaten before him? It was true a man didn't have to, as he'd found out for himself. If food was short he could go without eating. But usually, a man ate. What else were his teeth for?

"I'll see you tonight," the man reminded him, turning to depart.

Stenn ignored him. The man was a fool, as he'd suspected at first. If he brought the plow, well and good. If he didn't, earth could always be spaded.

The man brought the plow. Stenn examined it carefully, and tried it out. There wasn't much to using it--a twist of the handle to the right, a twist to the left, a push for forward and a pull for backing up. The motor was inside the share, and didn't need gasoline. Also, it was obviously handmade, and that made the man an even greater fool for bargaining so poorly on such an expensive thing. Then, in addition, the man threw in some clothes--good, honest clothes--and these were also hand-woven. For his throw-in, the man asked for the horse, and Stenn nodded contemptuously. Now the fool was taking that useless mouth off his hands, and doubtless thinking he'd made a great gain.

The man left, and Stenn's mouth twisted into a grin. Now he had something better than a horse, and furthermore with this plow he could turn a furrow right up to the fences.

The long succession of days that followed were no different from those that had gone before. Sometimes he was left alone, and sometimes he was not. Sometimes there were good regimes. Sometimes not. Several times, he was taken away from his farm, and there were certain times he spent in hospitals. There was also a time he lived in a cage. But he always wore the strangers down in the end.

Stenn stopped his plow at the bottom of the fence surrounding his field. He glared up at the dim sun, its light cut into two halves by the metal structure that sank its one pier into the lawn beyond his fence and then shot up at an angle, thickening out into a joint at a point some kilometers over his head and then fusing into one slender finger that disappeared over the horizon without touching ground.

As he looked up, he saw four of the silent firescythes go across the sky, trailing silver dust that vanished as they left it behind. They touched the four curving masts that rose out of the east and instantly shot back again the way they had come. In a few minutes, the clear chime from the masts came to him across the distance.

In the shrubbery a few meters beyond his field, a bird answered the chime. Stenn turned his plough and touched the handles. As he walked forward, he thought that probably now he would have quiet times all summer. It had been quiet for several years, and he was beginning to think that such quietness was now a permanent thing. For many years before that, quiet times and loud times had alternated unpredictably, and though it made no difference to the crops, it had annoyed him not to know whether to put the plugs in his ears or not.

Still, it wasn't so bad, even in loud times. The new regime left him entirely alone, though he could tell they disliked him. None of them had come near here in a long time, though he knew they had put a great deal of patience into planting the shrubs just so and tending the lawn. The gardener firescythes did that work now--machines, like his plow. He saw *them* often enough, darting back and forth over the lawn and parks that surrounded his field as far as he could see.

He looked up and growled as one of the cloudleaves passed its shadow across the field. They moved with the wind, rising and falling, flowing softly with all sorts of colors, and they never stayed still over his field long enough to hurt the crops. But still they angered him.

Then he saw one of the new regime come into being at the edge of his field. He stopped his plow and stood looking at it, his jaw pushed very sharply forward.

It swayed slightly in the breeze, and began talking to him. As always, it had great difficulty speaking so a man could understand it.

"Listen--listen..." Its voice, as the new regime's voices had always lately been, was bitter and angry. "Listen--day--*your* day has finally come...."

Stenn grunted and looked at it.

"We knew--knew there was no--help for it. Had to come. We fought it--but had to come. I am here to tell you...We knew one--one of us someday must...But why did it have to be me? Listen--I am the last human being alive on Earth. There are no more...not *you*--certainly not

you."

It bent in a ripple of agony. "I am killing the machines." It swam its head around at the horizons. "I am over. All this work--all this beauty--all our life, everything in this world I am leaving--*yours!*" It spat the word out, curling in contempt.

Stenn watched it go out of being. He grunted, started the plow, and moved forward.

At dusk, he looked back along the way he had come. One single dark furrow stretched through the shrubs and the old fence through which he had driven the plow. He would have liked to turn around and put another furrow beside it, but he hadn't yet come to the end of his field.

This was written around an illustration that leaned against the wall at Royal Publications, where I freelanced and illustrated for *Car Speed and Style*, *Custom Rodder*, *Cars Magazine*, *Gunsport*, *Untamed*, *Lion Adventures*, and *Knave*. (I am the author of "Love-Starved Arabs Raped Me Often," as well as "I Shot Down Castro's China-Commie Air Force.") I had the use of a typewriter, the publisher's patience, and the unfailing forbearance of Larry Shaw, the editor. Casting about for something else to sell Irwin Stein, the publisher, I noted the illustration, which he owned but had nothing to publish with, and provided same.

But the illustration, of soldiers in combat, it seems did *not* belong to Irwin. And he was not about to buy it simply so he could then buy my story. I was, incidentally, on diet pills I hadn't yet realized were Dexedrine. I didn't tell that to the people who eventually bought the story and published it unillustrated. The artist was Ed Emshwiller, who probably never knew.

There *was*, somehow, a girl.

## The Girl in the Bottle

THE NEW MAN rolled over with a groan and woke up with his face jammed against the corner of a broken brick. He jerked himself upright in his end of the two-man foxhole, and looked at Folley. "Why--?"

"Hello," Folley said. "My name's Zach Folley."

The man continued to look numbly up from under the brim of his helmet, which had been blackened and blistered by the countless times it had been used as a cooking pot. His eyes were puffy and threaded with blood. From the way in which he was twitching his lips tentatively, like a fish not sure of being in water, Folley could see the man was still nine-tenths asleep.

A missile went by overhead and the new man shuddered, drawing muddy knees up under his bearded chin, and wriggling his back in against the side of the hole.

"It's all right," Folley pacified him, because he was now afraid that the man was completely battlehappy and might become violent. "They're not after you or me. They don't know we're here. It's just our machines fighting their machines, now. It's all being done by the automatic weapons systems. There's nobody alive in the cities anymore. Not since the nerve gas."

The new man muttered something that sounded like: "...alive in the cities..." and Folley, who thought the man was arguing with him, said:

"No. Not anybody. I know it's hard to believe. But they told me last month, when I was a clerk up at Battalion, before Battalion got smashed up, there's nobody alive anywhere in the world except around here in North America." Folley's jaw quivered involuntarily, as it always did when he tried to picture the world empty of life, bare of movement except for the dust-fountains where the automatic missiles kept coming in like meteorites hitting the barren Moon.

"I said," the other man replied with patient distinctness, "I know there's nobody left alive in the cities. But I don't care." He fumbled around behind his back and suddenly held up a bottle--a flat, half-pint glass bottle, unbroken, with only mildewed traces of a label but with most of its contents still there. "Not as long as I've still got *her*."

"What do you mean 'her'?" Folley was badly upset, now. The other man had showed up out of nowhere, last night, mumbling and calling softly to find out if anybody was still alive on the defense perimeter. When Folley answered, he had stumbled down into the hole with him and had fallen in a heap without saying another word. Folley knew nothing about him, except that he obviously wasn't one of the enemy from across the valley, and now he began to wonder whether this might not be some kind of traitor, or propaganda spreader, or at any rate some kind of enemy trying to get him drunk. If Folley got drunk, then the enemy would be able to sneak past him to the rear, without warning. Folley did not know what lay in the rear, anymore--he was deathly afraid there was so little left in the world that if the enemy once got by him, they would have won the war.

Folley could not be clear in his mind about this. He knew he wasn't being completely sane, himself. But he was doing the best he could, for a man who had been a clerk up until last month and had then been given a rifle for the first time since Basic Training, which was ten years ago. He had stayed in his hole, living off the rations of the other men who had been killed on either side of him, and he always fought off the few enemies who were left to make attacks. They would come up through the barbed wire and the minefields, always losing some men, and being driven back at last, but they had been closer and closer to Folley with each attack, even though there were only five of them left.

Folley was practically out of ammunition, and had to choose his shots carefully, and this gave them time to get in close. They had been getting close enough so that he had learned to recognize them as individuals--there was a tall, scar-faced one for instance, who was very cautious but persistent, and a short, stubby one with a nervous grin who shouted insults in pidgin English--and he was sure they knew by now he was all alone on the perimeter. Today they would be braver than ever, and he was down to one clip of eight shots. He had been

hoping the new man--who had been such a great hope, for a while--would have more ammunition, but he didn't have as much as a sidearm. All he had was his bottle, and Folley shied away from it like poison.

"Throw that away!" he cried out.

The man hugged the bottle and hunched himself over it, to protect it from the sweep of Folley's arm. "Oh, no!" he said doggedly. "No--I'm not going to throw *her* away!"

The fact that he did not offer to fight, but only tried to protect the bottle, impressed Folley very deeply. It was such an unusual way for someone to react that Folley decided it must be because the new man really did feel the bottle was more important than anything else in the world.

"What about her?" he asked soothingly.

"The girl," the new man explained, his face as innocent as a child's under the beard, and the dirt, and the blood, and the sallow, doughy texture of his skin. "The girl in the bottle."

On the other side of the valley, Folley could see the enemy moving around, now. It was too far away for an accurate rifle shot, and neither he nor the enemy men had any other weapons. The enemy soldiers did not bother to hide themselves or their movements. Folley would have been badly upset if they had tried.

It occurred to him that if either side--they or he--were to violate established routine in some way, it would be a disconcerting and possibly fatal tactic to the opposition. But he could not seem to draw any conclusions from this thought, or to fully understand what to do with it. It drifted out of his mind as foggily as it had first entered, and he looked at the new man again. "The girl in the bottle," he said. "Is there a girl in there?"

"Always," the new man said. He weighed the bottle in his hand. Earlier, it had seemed to Folley that the glass was brown. Now he saw it was actually a delicate shade of green. A flash of sunlight sparkled on it as the new man held it up. It was like the sudden sideward turning of a young girl's eyes as she walks by on a park path. Folley blinked.

"Who is she?"

The new man said: "The girl." He became shy. "You know," he said under his breath, not because he was trying to keep Folley from hearing but because he was afraid of how Folley would react if he did grasp his meaning.

But Folley only looked at him blankly. "I don't--"

"Here," the man said tenderly, offering him the bottle.

With his hand carefully cupping the bottle, for fear his fingers might shake and lose their grip, Folley uncapped it and touched his lip to the rim. He winced away from the contact. Then, tilting the bottle very cautiously, he took a few swallows. Lowering the bottle, he slowly recapped it and handed it back. The taste slid down the back of his throat, warm, musky, and bittersweet.

He looked around him, at the rubble and the torn-up equipment, and the fly-clustered things like water-logged feather pillows in too-tight dirty olive drab pillowslips, and the cracked old

stumps of trees. He could feel that there was no longer any clear separation between the raw soles of his feet and the glutinous fabric of his socks. He plucked absently at his shirt, and shifted his seat uncomfortably. A V of slow antipersonnel missiles went hunting by overhead, and he cowered, though he knew that the minimum concentration of men required to attract such a missile was twenty within a hundred yard radius. Abruptly, the missiles seemed to lurch in the air. Bits of machinery whirled out of their noses, and then they fell forward and glided steeply into the ground down in the valley bottom. They had run out of fuel, and had jettisoned their warhead fuzes before crashlanding in open territory.

Folley shook his head violently, having followed the missiles' downward arc all the way to the ground. "She was the first girl I ever loved," he said to the new man, his voice confidential. "We were walking hand-in-hand, along the glassy gray lake where the pelicans swam in the park, under the eyes of the buildings. There were forsythia bushes like soft phosphorus explosions beside us, and there were squirrels fat enough to eat that scampered along beside us. She was wearing a pale green gown and black slippers, and her russet hair came down to her shoulders. I remember I was afraid strands of it would catch on the thorny trees which hung their branches low over the walk, like barbed wire.

"My God," he said, staring in awe at the bottle, "it was beautiful!" He sprang to his feet and shouted across the valley: "Beautiful! Beautiful, you sons of bitches! You and your bombs and your gas and your chemicals--you and your war, your death, your rapine! Beautiful, you bastards!"

Folley crumpled back down into the hole, shuddering. He hugged his knees and rubbed his cheeks against the old camouflage cloth stretched over his bones. He had forgotten why he was here, and now that he had been reminded, he was trying desperately to forget, again. But he remained aware that the bottle was infinitely precious, that the new man was perfectly right in having saved it.

"What's your girl like?" he asked the new man.

"As lovely as yours," the man answered. He looked over the side of the hole, down into the valley. "They're coming," he said. "The enemy. It's another attack."

"The last attack," Folley said. "We've got to save her!" he cried out in panic. "I don't care what else they get--we can't let them get her!"

The new man smiled. "There's nothing else."

"*Nothing* else?"

"Just you and I, and the few of them down there. There's nothing else left in the whole world."

Folley believed him. There was no uncertainty in the new man's voice at all. But Folley was so shocked at believing him; at finding himself so ready to give up what he thought to be a proper attitude of confidence, that he burst out indignantly: "What do you mean? Not as long as General Gaunt's still alive. He can save us if anyone can, and we would have heard if he was dead!" He clung bitterly to his belief in the genius of General Gaunt, who was his personal hero of the war.

"I am General Gaunt," the new man said, tears in his eyes. He lifted the bottle in salute.

"General Gaunt?" Folley said.

The new man nodded. He extended the bottle. "Would you like another?" He turned his glance momentarily in the direction of the enemy, who were scurrying across the valley floor like baby spiders. "There's time before they get into range."

"No," Folley whispered, "no, we've got to save her!"

"Save her?" Gaunt pawed brutally with the back of hand under his eyes. "Save?" He stood up, feet apart, back arched arms outflung to embrace the world. "Save!" he cried, and the long echo coursed down the valley. He collapsed forward, the enemy bullet bulging a lump from the inside at the back of his thonked helmet. Folley snatched the bottle as he fell, and patted it.

The enemy were leaping up the rocks, and twisting in behind old guns and trucks, hurdling up over the gassy old bodies and the broken ammunition boxes. The short, stubby one was in the lead, screaming out: "Now die! Now die! Now die!" The scarfaced one was bringing up the rear, and this one Folley shot, the carbine banging his shoulder so hard that he clapped his left hand over the shirt pocket where he had put the bottle.

The other four enemies did not stop, and Folley saw that they had nerved themselves for this attack, and would not stop, but would soak up his ammunition until it was gone, and would overrun him. Two of them were firing at him, keeping him down, while the short one and another man advanced.

Then there was nothing to do, for the short one and his companion would soon be at the lip of the hole, and once they did that, all was lost. Folley carefully put the bottle down and sprang to his feet, firing his carbine. He was immediately hit by shots from the two covering riflemen, but he had known that would happen. He shot at them, and killed them, because it made no difference what happened with the nearer two if the others were alive. Then he turned his gun toward the short one's companion, and shot him, but that was the end of it, for he had used up all his ammunition.

"Now die!" shouted the little enemy. "Now we have your all!" He did not seem to know he was alone, and he held his rifle arched up, ready to thrust down with his bayonet.

Folley pushed him back with a nudge of his carbine butt, like a man stumbling in a crowd, but there was blood running down over his hands, and the carbine slipped away. The little enemy recovered his balance and came forward again. "You die!" he shouted, froth at the corners of his mouth because he was so frightened, "Now you die!"

And it was true. Folley could feel the pain like the teeth of a pitchfork in him, and the cut strings of his muscles would not hold him up.

"Now we rule!" the enemy cried, bayonet flashing down, and for a long moment Folley hung on the point of his rifle, all the wind knocked out of him as it had been once before in his life, when he ran down the long park slope after the girl and tripped over a root, and never afterward could be sure of her admiration.

Then he was flung back, and he lay kicking at the bottom of the hole. "Now ours!" the enemy cried. "All world!" He was straddling the hole, and his victorious glance flashed around him. Slowly, as he looked, dismay crept into it. "All world?"

Folley reached toward the bottle. He began to inch forward very quietly and painfully. Before

the enemy saw what he was doing, he broke the bottle against a stone.

The enemy heard the sound, and stared down. He leaped into the hole and scrabbled at the wet splotch on the ground. Then he whirled up, his fingers bleeding, and slapped Folley's face:

"Why you break? Why you break?" He slapped Folley again, and began kicking him. "I wanted! Why you no give me?" He spun back toward the shards of glass in the sun, trying to find a few drops caught in the hollow of some curved fragment, but whatever had been there was evaporated, and the glass had turned dull brown. Folley saw it through a glistening fog the color of a gray lake.

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