



The Great Potlatch Riots

Lang, Allen Kim

Published: 1959

Type(s): Short Fiction, Science Fiction

Source: <http://gutenberg.net>

Also available on Feedbooks for Lang:

- *Blind Man's Lantern* (1962)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks.

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Oh, leave it to the bureaucrats and they'll figure out new ways to make you buy more and more... . But there was only one way the poor consumer could rise up in his wrath.

"I've sweated for months over the plans for this campaign," Captain Wesley Winfree told the Major. "Just nod, sir; that's all I ask; and I'll throw my forces into the field."

"I admire your audacity, Winfree," Major Stanley Dampfer said, "but don't you think we'd be wise to consolidate our current positions before launching a fresh offensive?"

Captain Winfree, straight in his scarlet-trimmed winter greens, tapped the toe of one boot with his swagger-stick. "With all respect, sir," he said, "I feel that if we do no more than hold the line, we're lending moral comfort to the foes of prosperity. Attack! That's my battle-plan, sir. Attack! And attack again!"

Major Dampfer, seated behind Winfree's desk, stretched out his legs and sighed. "You younger officers, men who've never in your lives tasted defeat, are an inspiration and a trial to us old field-graders," he said. "Captain, a project that failed could set your District back fifteen years."

"I realize that, sir," Winfree said. "I'm placing my career in the balance. If I attempt this, and goof, ship me to the sticks, Major. I'd rather spend the rest of my BSG years as a corporal, a simple Potlatch Observer in a downstate village, than never to have embarked on this campaign."

"Young Napoleon must have been very like you, Winfree," Major Dampfer mused. "Very well, lad. Brief me."

"Yes, sir!" Captain Winfree marched over to the giant calendar that covered one wall of his office and tapped his stick against the three dates circled in red. "We've established this triangle of strong-points," he said. "We control the second Sunday in May and the third Sunday in June in addition to our first and most vital holding, the twenty-fifth of December. I regard these three victories, sir, as only beachheads, only the softening-up phases of a still greater campaign. We must press on toward Total Prosperity."

"How, Winfree?" Major Dampfer asked.

"By adding three hundred and sixty-two days a year to our laurels, sir," Winfree said, sweeping his swagger-stick across the face of the calendar. "My plan is to make every consumer's birthday a Gratuity Day for each of his Nearest-and-Dearest."

Major Dampfer sat up straight. "Captain," he said softly, "this is Thinking Big. This could lend billions a year to the Gross National Product. It could mean a major break-through on the Prosperity front. Are you really proposing that each consumer be required to give birthday presents to the same people, and on the same scale, as he now gives Xmas Gratuities?"

"Precisely, sir," Captain Winfree said. "My staff has in the files the birthdate of every consumer in the District. Enforcement of the new quotas I propose will be no more difficult than the old: the same scale of fines for non-compliance, the same terms of imprisonment for repeated offenses will be imposed. The dates-of-destruction to be marked on Birthday Gratuities will be set as the next Potlatch Day, plus one year. Merchandise will be marked with the year-date precisely as is now done for Xmas, Dad's Day, and Mom's Day gifts. Birthday-cards will be addressed and sent from this office, just like Xmas cards."

Major Dampfer stood and drew on his uniform gauntlets. "May I assume that you've covered the field public-relations-wise?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Captain Winfree said. "I've composed a slogan for this year's drive in my District: 'Make the Magi Come the Year 'Round—Birthday Gratuities for All!'"

"It sings, Winfree," Major Dampfer said. "I like it. Captain, you have my nod. Carry on with this program. If you win the battle for this District, I'll get you a desk in Washington and Divisional Command; you'll help us tailor your plan to fit the entire nation."

"Thank you, sir," Winfree said, grinning. "I won't disappoint you."

"You'd best not," the Major said. He paused by the office door. "Captain Winfree, the word is on the grapevine that you're planning to marry one of the corporals in your office. That right?"

"Yes, sir," Winfree said. "Peggy and I have set the wedding for twenty-three December, the day before Potlatch. We'd be delighted should your duties allow you to attend, Major."

"I'll be there," Major Dampfer promised. "And as a little gift from the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities, Winfree, I order you to move out on your new campaign that same day: twenty-three December." He raised a gauntleted hand. "No, Captain! Don't protest that you'll be needed here. Your work is strategy, not tactics. Your plans can be implemented by your staff while you're off on your honeymoon."

"Whatever you say, sir," Winfree said.

"I'd be further gratified," the Major continued, "if you'd hold the ceremony right here in your Headquarters Building. We of the BSG must establish some traditions, Winfree; the other Services have a century-and-a-half's lead on us in that field. So, if the lovely corporal approves, we'll make yours a proper military wedding."

"All this is very good of you, sir," Captain Winfree said. "I'm certain Peggy will be pleased."

"Good!" Major Dampfer said. "I'll handle all the details. Winfree, you've got the quality we used to know as Old-Fashioned Intestinal Fortitude, back in the day when a spade was called a spade and no apologies about it. We need more men like you in the Bureau." He snapped a salute. "Carry on, Captain; and Happy Potlatch!"

"A Very Happy Potlatch to you, sir!" Winfree said, tossing back the salute. "And a Merry Xmas!"

Captain Winfree walked to the big window in the outer office to watch Major Dampfer driven off in his sergeant-chauffeured, scarlet-and-green BSG Rolls limousine. Then he about-faced without warning to glare at his little command, the eight non-coms, the twenty-seven Other Ranks, the four young lieutenants. They all sat silent, watching him as though waiting for confirmation of an unpleasant rumor. Not a file-cabinet stood open, not a typewriter was moving. "Listen, you people," Winfree growled, pointing his swagger-stick like a weapon, not sparing even Corporal Peggy MacHenery his anger; "We've got a Potlatch Day coming up, the biggest ever. Now get on the ball, dammit! I don't want to see one of you stopping for breath again till Xmas Day." The lieutenants and sergeants flushed; the girl privates jumped their fingers onto typewriter keys. "Corporal MacHenery," Winfree said, "bring your notepad to my office."

Peggy MacHenery, Corporal, Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities, followed her commanding officer and husband-designate into his office. "Close the door, Corporal," Winfree said. Peggy did so, and took her chair next to his desk, the pad open on her knee and her fountain pen at the ready. "No dictation," Captain Winfree said. "Please forgive me for taking valuable official time for a personal matter, Corporal; especially after that little display of tyranny I just put on out there. Peggy, Major Dampfer has ordered us to hold our wedding here at District Headquarters. He'll bring in a transport loaded with BSG brass, fly in a band to give us a

send-off with pibrochs and marches and double-flams; and he'll probably set up an arch of sabers for us to parade through. Do you mind all this very much, Peggy?"

She snapped her notepad shut. "Daddy will be furious," she said.

"Your dad is already so worked up about your marrying me, a BSG-man, that a little extra anger won't even show," Winfree said. "I'm convinced that he's teaching me fencing only in hopes I'll have a fatal accident."

"Nonsense!" Peggy said. She tossed her notebook on the desk and stood to take Winfree's hand. "Don't make Daddy out a monster, Wes. About the other thing, the military wedding, I don't care. I'd marry you in a beer-barrel, if you wanted it that way."

Captain Winfree took the girl's free hand. "Peggy," he said, "you're the greatest! Now the good news. Major Dampfer has approved my plans for instituting Birthday Gratuity Quotas in this District. Aren't you glad for me?"

"Glad?" Peggy demanded, pulling away. "Wes, do you think the consumers of this District will put up with another invasion of their pocket-books, let alone their private sentiments?"

"Peggy, if you're going to gripe every time the Bureau raises the quotas a notch," Winfree said, "you don't belong in that uniform you're wearing."

"Want me to take it off?" Peggy challenged, reaching for the top button of her blouse.

"No, dammit!" Winfree said. "But if you're going to discuss the propriety of every decision I make, please have the grace to wait till we're outside District Headquarters to do it."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," Peggy said. She saluted. "Is there anything more you want to chew me out about, sir?"

Winfree saluted back, then growled at himself for the reflex. "Woman," he said, "once we're married I want to see your request for discharge lying here on my desk. How the devil can an officer run an organization when one of the enlisted personnel, the corporal he's in love with, persists in subordination?"

"I can't quit," Peggy said. "We'll need my salary, Wes, if only to pay off our BSG quotas. What with buying Xmas presents, gifts for Mom's Day

and Pop's Day, and sending Birthday Gratuities to every name on our combined Nearest-and-Dearest lists, we'll be living on rice and soybeans till you make Light Colonel. Quit? Wes, if you expect to eat regular after we're married, you'd best put me in for sergeant's stripes."

"Please, Peggy," Winfree asked. "We'll discuss this all tonight, off duty, if I survive your father's swordplay. For now, please let letters out to all District wholesalers, telling them of the Birthday Quotas and the new dating procedures. Have one of the lieutenants open the *secret* files for you—it's all under 'Operation Nativity.' You can get at it right away."

"Very well, Captain, sir," Peggy said. "Happy Potlatch, sir." She about-faced and marched out, banging the office door behind her.

"Happy Potlatch be damned!" Captain Winfree said, flinging his swagger-stick toward the calendar.

The MacHenery home was all gables and pinnacles and spooled porch-pillars, very like an enormous wedding-cake, every horizontal surface now frosted with a thin layer of snow. Captain Winfree tugged off his gauntlets, rang the bell, and stood straighter than usual to withstand the hostile inspection of Kevin MacHenery, Peggy's father.

Mr. MacHenery opened the door. Captain Winfree, although retaining his smile of greeting, groaned inwardly. MacHenery was wearing his canvas fencing outfit, flat-soled shoes, and carried a foil in one hand. "My you are a gorgeous sight, all Kelly-green and scarlet piping, like a tropical bird that's somehow strayed into the snowfields," MacHenery said. "Do come in, Captain, and warm your feathers."

"Thank you, sir," Winfree said, brushing the snow from his cap. He peeled off his overcoat and hung it on the hall tree, sticking his swagger-stick in one of its pockets. "Peggy busy?" he asked, hoping that her appearance would preclude his being given another unsolicited fencing-lesson.

"After having spent two hours in the bathroom with a curry-comb and a bottle of wave-set," MacHenery said, "my daughter has finally got down to work in the kitchen. We have time for an engagement at steel in the parlor, if you'd care to refine your style, Captain."

"Just as you say, sir," Winfree said.

"Your politeness offends me, Wes," Kevin MacHenery complained, handing him a foil and a wire-mesh mask. "Slip off your shoes. It's a terrible burden you are laying on the shoulders of an aging man, being so

well-spoken when he likes nothing more than an argument. Now assume the *on guard* position, Wesley."

Winfree obediently placed his feet at right angles, raised his foil, and "sat down," assuming the bent-leg position and feeling his leg-muscles, still sore from his last session with MacHenery, begin to complain. "You're holding your foil like a flyswatter," MacHenery said. "Here, like this!"

"None of that, Daddy," Peggy said, appearing from the kitchen. "I'll not have you two sitting down to eat all sweaty and out of breath, like last time Wes was over here."

"She treats me like a backward child," MacHenery said. He took a bottle from a shelf and poured generous dollops of Scotch into two glasses, one of which he handed to Winfree. "Inasmuch as I disapprove of the coming season," he said, "I'll offer you no toast, Captain."

"You don't care even for Xmas?" Winfree asked in a tone of mild reproach.

"Ex-mas?" MacHenery demanded. "What the devil is this nor-fish-nor-fowl thing you call Ex-mas? Some new festival, perhaps, celebrated by carillons of cash-register chimes?"

"*Christmas*, if you prefer, sir," Winfree said. "We in the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities get used to using the other name. We use the word so much in writing that cutting it from nine letters to four saves some thirty thousand dollars annually, in this District alone."

"That's grand," MacHenery said. He sat down with his whiskey. "Simply grand."

"We could drink to a Happy Potlatch," Captain Winfree suggested.

"I'd sooner toast my imminent death by tetanus," MacHenery said.

"I'd like to taste this stuff," Winfree said. "Let's compromise. Can we drink to Peggy?"

"Accepted," MacHenery said, raising his glass. "To my Peggy—our Peggy." He gave the whiskey the concentration it deserved. Then, "You know, Wesley," he said, "if you weren't in the BSG I could like you real well. I'd rejoice at your becoming my son-in-law. Too bad that you wear the enemy uniform."

"The BSG is hardly an enemy," Winfree said. "It's been an American institution for a long time. This is excellent whiskey."

"We'll test a second sample, to see whether its quality stands up through the bottle," MacHenery suggested. "For all we know, they may be putting the best on top." He poured them each another. "Yes, Wesley, the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities has been with the American consumer quite a while. Twenty years it'll be, come next Potlatch Day. You were brought up in the foul tradition, Wes. You don't know what our country was like in the good old days, when Christmas was spelled with a C instead of an X."

"I know that a paltry twenty billion dollars a year were spent on Xmas—sorry, sir—on Christmas Gratuities, back before my Bureau came on the scene to triple that figure, to bring us all greater prosperity."

"Your Bureau brought us the stink of burning," MacHenery said. "It brought us the Potlatch Pyres."

"Yes, Potlatch!" Captain Winfree said. "Potlatch Pyres and Potlatch Day—childhood's brightest memory. Ah, those smells from the fire! The incense of seared varnish; the piny smoke from building-blocks tossed into the flames; the thick wool stinks of dated shirts and cowboy-suits, gasoline-soaked and tossed into the Potlatch Pyre. My little brother, padded fat in his snowsuit, toddling up to the fire to toss in his dated sled, then scampering back from the sparks while Mom and Dad smiled at him from the porch, cuddling hot cups of holiday ponchero in their hands."

"Seduction of the innocents," MacHenery said. "Training the babes to be wastrels."

"We loved it," Winfree insisted. "True, the little girls might cry as they handed a dated doll to the BSG-man; while he prepared it for suttee with a wash of gasoline and set it into the fire; but little girls, as I suppose you know, relish occasions for weeping. They cheered up mighty quick, believe me, when the thermite grenades were set off, filling the night air with the electric smell of molten metal, burning dated clocks and desk-lamps, radios and humidors, shoes and ships and carving-sets; burning them down to smoke and golden-glowing puddles under the ashes of the Potlatch Pyre. Then the fireworks, Mr. MacHenery. The fireworks! The BSG-man touching a flaming torch to the fuses of the mortars; a sizzle and a burst; the Japanese star-shells splitting the sky, splashing across the night's ceiling, scattering from their pods, blossoming into Queen Anne's Lace in a dozen colors of fire."

"Fire and destruction," MacHenery said. "There's your holiday for children—fire and destruction!"

"You missed it, sir," Winfree said. "You don't understand. Potlatch is a wonderful day for children, a glorious introduction to the science of economics. The boys light Roman candles, shooting crimson and orchid and brass-flamed astonishers into the clouds. A soft fog of snow makes fuzzy smears of the pinwheels, of the children racing, sparklers in both hands, across the frozen lawn. Dad lights the strings of cannon-crackers—at our house they used to dangle from a wire strung across the porch, like clusters of giant phlox—and they convulse into life, jumping and banging and scattering their red skins onto the snow, filling the air with the spice of gunpowder.

"The high-school kids come home from their Potlatch Parties ... "

"Wreckage and mayhem," MacHenery grunted. "We used to throw the same kind of parties when I was a tad, but they were against the law, back then. We called 'em chicken-runs."

"But nowadays, sir, those Potlatch Parties contribute to the general prosperity," Winfree explained. "Used-car lots used to border all the downtown streets, anchors on progress. Now those dated cars are smashed, and used for scrap. The high-school drivers work off their aggressions ramming them together. And there's no mayhem, Mr. MacHenery; the BSG-man assigned to Potlatch Parties strap the kids in safe and make sure their crash-helmets fit tight. It's all clean fun."

"Morally," MacHenery said, "Potlatch Parties are still chicken-runs."

Peggy came back, as sleek and crisp as though cooking were an expensive sort of beauty treatment. "Supper will be ready in five minutes," she said. "If you tigers will wash up ... "

"We'll drink up, first," her father said. "This man of yours has been feeding me BSG propaganda. I'm not sure I have any appetite left."

"What started you hating the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities, Mr. MacHenery?" Winfree said.

MacHenery poured them each a drink. "You ever read Suetonius, Wes?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Yours is a generation of monoglots," MacHenery sighed. "It figures, though. There's no profit in having today's youth read the clinical record

of another civilization that died of self-indulgence, that went roistering to its doom in a carnival of bloat."

"Doom?" Winfree asked.

"Doom richly deserved," MacHenery said. "Old Suetonius describes, for example, an instrument that accompanied dinner-parties during the reigns of the last few Caesars. It was a device that accomplished, two thousand years ago, the function of our proud Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities. A feather, my boy. A simple goose-quill."

"I don't understand," Winfree said.

"I'd be hurt if you did, Captain," MacHenery said. "I've set my mind on explaining the point. Now you see, Wes, the late Caesars were pretty good consumers of everything but petroleum, we having that edge on them. They spread a mighty fine table. A gourmet would bring to Rome caviar from the Caucasus, peaches from Majorca, and, for all I know, kip-pers from Britain. Picture it, Wesley: cherries served in golden bowls, heaped on the snow trotted down from mountain-tops by marathons of slaves. A dish called The Shield of Minerva was one of their greatest delights; this being an Irish stew compounded of lamprey-milt, pike-livers, flamingo-tongues, and the tiny, tasty brains of pheasants and peacocks; eaten while viewing the floor-show of strip-teasing Circassian girls or—Galba's invention, this—elephants walking tight-rope. Grand, Wes. No meals like that at the supermarket; no shows like that even on the television."

"But the feather?" Winfree prompted.

"Ah, yes," MacHenery said. "The moment our noble Roman had eaten his fill he'd pick up the feather next to his plate and, excusing himself, adjourn to the adjoining vomitorium. A few tickles of the palate, and his first meal would be only a lovely memory. He'd saunter back to his bench by the table again, ready to set to with another helping of Minerva's Shield."

"Disgusting," Winfree said.

"Yes, indeed," MacHenery agreed, smiling and fitting his fingertips together. "Now attend my simile, Captain. Unlike those feathered Romans of the Decadence, we moderns settle for one meal at a sitting, and let it digest in peace. We have instead our more sophisticated greeds, whetted by subtle persuasions and an assurance that it's really quite moral to ransom our future for today's gimmicks."

"Prosperity requires the cooperation of every citizen," Captain Winfree said, quoting an early slogan of the BSG.

"Your artificial prosperity requires us, the moment we're sated with chrome chariots and miracle-fiber dressing-gowns and electronic magics, the minute our children have toys enough to last them through the age of franchise, to take in hand the feather forced upon us by regulation of the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities and visit the parish Potlatch Pyre, our modern vomitorium, to spew up last year's dainties to make belly-room for a new lot," MacHenery said.

"Daddy!" Peggy MacHenery protested from the living-room doorway. "What sort of table-talk is that?"

"Truth is the sweetest sauce, Peggy," MacHenery said, getting up from his chair. "What delights have you cooked up for us, child?"

"Your favorite dish, Daddy," Peggy said, grinning at him. "Peacock brains on toast."

The next two weeks were too busy for Captain Winfree to partner Kevin MacHenery on the fencing-mat. He was double-busy, in fact; planning the biggest Potlatch Day in twenty years at the same time he started the wheels of his project to make birthdays Gratuity Days for every consumer in his District.

The girls, assisted by two of the male sergeants, had decorated the District Headquarters till it glittered like a child's dream of the North Pole. Against one wall they'd placed the Xmas tree, its branches bearing dozens of dancing elves, Japanese swordsmen, marching squads of BSG-recruits, prancing circus-ponies; all watch-work figures busy with movement, flashing with microscopic lights, humming little melodies that matched their motions. A giant replica of the Bureau's cap-emblem—the Federal eagle clutching between his talons a banderole bearing the motto, *'Tis More Blessed to Give Than Receive*—had been mounted on the center wall, the place of honor. Beneath the eagle stood a bandstand draped in bunting, ready to accommodate the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities Brass-Band-and-Glee-Club, the members of which were to fly in from Washington to grace the bridal day with epithalamiums and martial song.

The big work, the eight-hours-a-day and after-supper-overtime work, was the preparation for Potlatch Day, the festival that meant to the BSG what April Fifteenth means to the Internal Revenue Service. Cases of

fireworks piled up in the brick warehouse next door to Headquarters. Sawdust-packed thermite grenades were stacked right up to the perforated pipes of the sprinkler system. *No Smoking* sign blossomed a hundred yards on every side. The blacklists, naming consumers who'd withheld dated gifts from the Potlatch Pyres of earlier years, were brought up to date and distributed to the Reserve BSG Officers in each township of Winfree's District. These holdouts, it was safe to assume, would be under surveillance on Potlatch Day. Cold-eyed sergeants and lieutenants would make note of the material each of them consigned to the flames, and would cross-check their notes with Nearest-and-Dearest lists to make sure that all post-dated Mom's Day and Dad's Day gratuities, all of last Xmas's gifts, had been destroyed as required by BSG ordinance.

Meanwhile letters piled into Captain Winfree's office, thousands of them each time the Post Office truck stopped outside Headquarters. Several of these were penned in a brownish stuff purported to be their authors' lifeblood; and all voiced indignation against Schedule 121B, Table 12, which set minimum levels of cost for the birthday gratuities they'd have to give each of the fifteen persons on their Nearest-and-Dearest lists. Hundreds of protests were printed in the vox populi columns of District newspapers, recommending every printable form of violence against agents of the Bureau. BSG practice was to regard with benign eye public outcry of this sort. No consumer in Winfree's District, immersed as he was in the debate over Birthday Gratuity Minima, could possibly plead ignorance should he be apprehended in violation of these new regulations.

Finally, it was two days before Xmas, Potlatch Day Minus One. Phone-calls had rippled out from District Headquarters, calling all BSG Reservists to the colors, assigning them to Potlatch Duty in the townships or patrol in the city; telling each officer and non-com where and when to submit his requisition for pyrotechnical devices, gasoline, thermite bombs, and pads of BSG Form No. 217-C, "Incident of Consumer Non-Compliance." And the day was even more than this. It was the day Captain Wesley Winfree was to wed Corporal Margaret MacHenery in the sight of God, man, and the glitteringest crowd of BSG brass ever assembled outside Washington.

By noon the typewriters in Headquarters were covered and shoved with their desks behind folding screens hung with pine-boughs. Every wheel in the District motor pool was on the highway from the airport,

shuttling in the wedding-party. The bride, closeted in an anteroom with a gaggle of envious bachelor-girls, was dressing herself in winter greens, her chevrons brilliant against her sleeves. Peggy had pinned a tiny poinsettia to her lapel; strictly against Regulations; but who'd have the heart to reprimand so lovely a bride? The minister who was to perform the wedding, a young captain-chaplain of BSG, paced amongst the hidden desks, memorizing the greetings he'd composed to precede the formal words of wedding. The guests came laughing through a corridor of potted pines into the District Headquarters, where they were greeted by the BSG Band-and-Glee-Club's rendition of the Bureau's official anthem, "I'm Dreaming of a White Potlatch." As though it had been arranged by Washington, snow had indeed begun to fall; and the tiers of overcoats racked in the outer hall were beaded with melted flakes.

The groom, wearing his dress greens—the winter uniform worn with white shirt and a scarlet bow-tie—was still trapped behind his desk, hardly conscious of the joyful noises from beyond the door. "They haven't shown?" he bellowed into the telephone. "Don't fret your head about it, Sergeant. Those Reservists will damned well be on duty tomorrow morning or we'll have their cans in a courtroom before dark." Slam! An anxious girl Pfc tiptoed in. "Sir, a consumer's delegation wishes to speak with you about the new Birthday Quotas."

"Tell them they're stuck with it," Winfree snapped. "Hand these around that delegation, Soldier," he said, shoving a stack of Schedules 1219B across his desk toward the girl. "Tell that bunch of complainers I'll keep this District's economy healthy if I have to jail every consumer in it."

The phone rang again. "It's me, Wes, Peggy."

"Darling, I'm busy," Winfree said.

"Didn't you write our wedding-date on your appointment list?" she asked. "It'll only take a quarter-hour."

"Don't marry anyone else," Winfree said. "I'll be right out." He hung up the phone and stood at the mirror in his closet to check his uniform. Then he picked up his silver-trimmed dress swagger-stick and marched out into the main office to meet the chaplain, and his wife.

Major Stanley Dampfer, glorious in his dress greens, a Sam Bowie belt equating his belly and supporting the side-arm holstered by one big hip, slapped Winfree on the back as he entered the hall. "At ease!" the Major

shouted, then glanced contritely toward the two BSG colonels who'd been talking the loudest. "Gentlemen, ladies: I want to present the founder of this feast, the brightest star in the Bureau's firmament, the young genius of Birthday Gratuity Quotas. I refer, of course, to Captain Wesley Winfree!"

[Applause, shouts, a few ribald remarks from the officers nearest the bar]

"I just want to tell you all," the Major went on, his arm heavy across Winfree's unwilling shoulders, "before I relinquish this fine young officer to his new commander, a corporal ... "

[Laughter]

"... that here's a man who's going places. Look well at Captain Winfree's face, friends. You will see it yet on the cover of *Time*, above a pair of stars."

[Applause]

The Major freed Captain Winfree, the guests settled down into their folding-chairs, and the chaplain opened his BSG *Book of Authorized Ceremonies*. He and the affianced couple stood alone together in a moment of silence. He opened the service. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here ...

"... Margaret, wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded husband ... so long as ye both shall live? ... by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Corps of Chaplains, Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities, I pronounce that you are Man and Wife. Amen, and Congratulations!"

The first wedded kiss, and the stag-line demanding its similar perquisite. Kevin MacHenery seized his son-in-law's right hand. "I wish you both fifty happy years, Wes," he said. "I hope you'll see the light soon, and spend most of those years in decent mufti." Major Dampfer shouldered Mr. MacHenery aside to tug Winfree and his new wife toward the mountain of gifts, covered like a giant's corpse with a sheet, standing by the base of the Xmas tree. The Major triumphantly pulled a ripcord, and the sheet dropped away. Beneath it were dozens of boxes and bundles and bottles, wrapped in scarlet and green and silver and gold. "Open them!" some guest prompted from the end of the hall.

"Why open them?" Corporal Mrs. Peggy Winfree asked. "Anyone got a match? We'll have our Potlatch Pyre right here and now, burn them right off instead of waiting a year."

"The lady jests," Major Dampfer assumed. "Wedding-gifts, Corporal, aren't subject to Potlatching."

"Goody," Peggy said.

"I'll have some of the enlisted guests carry these gratuities out to your car," the Major said. "You can unwrap them during your honeymoon." He chuckled.

Towing his bride with his left hand, accepting handshakes with his right, Captain Winfree shouldered his way through the mob of brass and chevrons to the door. His car, adorned with a *Just Married* sign that completely obscured the rear window, trailing strings of shoes and empty milk-tins, stood at the end of a corridor formed by two face-to-face ranks of BSG Officer-Candidates. The OCS-men wore dress greens and Academy helmets, and about the waist of each hung a saber. Consumers stood gray and inconspicuous behind the two rows of uniformed men, silent, unsmiling, like onlookers at an accident. Captain Winfree looked over this civilian crowd. Each person wore, pinned to a lapel, perched in a hatbrim, or worn like a corsage, a small white feather. "We'd best hurry, Peggy," he said, urging her toward the gantlet.

The Officer-Candidates, on a signal from Major Dampfer, snicked their ceremonial sabers from their scabbards and presented them, blade-tip to blade-tip, as an archway. The BSG Band-and-Glee-Club, playing and singing, "Potlatch Is Comin' to Town," stood in the doorway. Captain Winfree, clasping Peggy's gloved hand tightly, led her through the saber-roofed aisleway as rapidly as he could. "What's the rush, Wes?" she asked. "We'll get married only once, and I'd like to see the ceremony well enough to be able to describe it to our eventual children, when they ask me what it was like."

Winfree opened the door of their car. "We'd better get out of here," he said. "I smell a riot brewing; and I don't want you to have to describe that to our children."

Peggy scooted into the car just as the District Headquarters building burped out a giant bubble of smoke. An arm reached out to Winfree's lapel and tugged him back from the car. "You're going nowhere, buddy," a civilian growled at him. The man, Winfree saw, was wearing the ubiquitous white feather in his lapel. As Winfree shook himself free from the civilian, the arch of sabers above them collapsed. The BSG-OCS-men were tossed about in a mob of suddenly screaming consumers, waving their weapons as ineffectively as brooms. Fragments were spun off the

whirl of people, bits of BSG uniforms torn off their wearers and tossed like confetti. A huge pink figure, clad in one trouser-leg and a pair of shorts, smeared across the chest and face with soot, dashed toward Winfree, waving a .45 pistol. "Stop this violence!" he screamed at the consumers in his way, leveling his pistol. "Maintain the peace, dammit! or I'll shoot!"

"That idiot!" Winfree said. He slammed the door of the car to give Peggy a little protection, then scooped up a handful of snow from the gutter to pound into a ball and toss like a grenade at the back of Major Dampfer's neck. The Major's boots flew out from under him, and he landed belly-down in the snow, burying his pistol's muzzle. The gun went off, flinging itself like a rocket out of his hand. Winfree snatched it up. "Blanks!" he yelled, waving the .45. "He was only going to shoot blanks."

Three more civilians, wearing the white-feather symbol on their overcoats, advanced toward Winfree. Together, like partners in a ballet, they bent to build snowballs, then stood and let fly. Winfree ducked, found one of the dress sabers ignominiously sheathed in snow, and drew it out. He retreated toward the automobile, the saber raised to protect Peggy. "Stand back," he shouted. "I don't want to bloody-up this clean snow."

Another mitrailleusade of snowballs connected, knocking off Winfree's cap and sending a shower of snow down his collar. The Headquarters building was burning so well that it served as a warming bonfire to the tattered BSG personnel. A squad of civilian youngsters was chasing Major Dampfer down the street, pelting the huge target of his backside with snowballs.

The BSG Band-and-Glee-Club, covering their nakedness by pooling their rags, were a musical rabble. Kevin MacHenery, carrying a saber captured from one of the BSG-OCS-men, shouted to a tuba-player, the bell of whose horn had been dimpled by a hard-cored snowball. "Play the National Anthem," he yelled. The player, chilly and terrified, raised the mouthpiece of the tuba to his lips and, looking fearfully about like the target of a test-your-skill ball-throwing game, puffed out the sonorous opening notes. One by one the other players, a flute behind an elm tree, a trumpet hidden in the back seat of a parked limousine, a snow-damaged snare-drum, joined in; gravitating towards one another through the suddenly quiet crowd. Winfree, like the other men, civil and BSG, stood at attention; but as he felt Peggy's arm slip through his he

spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Get back to the car, Peggy," he said. "Drive like hell out of this chivaree. I'll meet you at your dad's place. Now git!"

"You think maybe I had my fingers crossed when I promised to have and hold you?" she asked. "You're my man, Wes. If you get beat up, I want my eyes blackened to match yours."

The anthem drew to a close just as a new instrument, the siren of a firetruck, joined in. "Stop that truck!" one of the insurgent consumers shouted. "Don't let 'em touch our fire."

The mob went back into action in two task-forces; one dedicated to the extirpation of the BSG-men currently available, the other clustered around the firetruck, thwarting the fire-fighters' efforts to couple their hose to the hydrant. One youngster, wearing the black leather jacket and crash-helmet of a Potlatch Party, ran from the fireworks warehouse with a thermite grenade. Pulling the pin, he tossed the sputtering bomb through a window of the burning building. "Stop him!" the white-helmeted fire-chief shouted.

"Stop him, hell!" a consumer replied. "Man, we got a rebellion going. Don't you guys try to throw cold water on it unless you'd like to be squirted solid ice with your own hose."

The fire-chief, his hands raised in despair, turned to his colleagues. "Stand by, boys," he said. "Nothing we can do till the cops get here to quell this bunch."

"Pretty, isn't it?" one of the firemen remarked, dropping the canvas hose. "We never get to see a building burn all the way. Think of all the papers in there, file-cabinets full of government regulations, lists of all our birthdays, quota-forms; all curling up and turning brown and reaching the kindling point. Nice fire, Chief."

The fire-chief faced Headquarters, a new look replacing his anxiety. "It is kind of pretty," he admitted. He turned to the consumer ringleader. "OK with you if we throw a little water on the fireworks warehouse?" he asked.

"Sure," the man said. "We don't want to blow up the old home-town; we only want to put the BSG out of business." His band of consumers stepped back from the yellow fireplug to let the firemen hook up their

hoses, toggle on the pressure, and begin playing water over the blank face of the fireworks warehouse.

Captain Winfree was buried in hard-fisted civilians, all seemingly intent on erasing him as the most familiar symbol of the Bureau of Seasonal Gratuities. Winfree bobbed to the surface of the maelstrom for a moment, waving his saber, and shouted, "MacHenery! Get these jokers off my back before I'm knee-deep in cold meat." He thwacked another of his assailants across the pate with the flat of his blade.

MacHenery, using his saber as a lever, pried himself a path through the crowd. As he reached Captain Winfree, he raised his saber. The crowd about the two men retreated. "These folks have suffered a lot from you, Captain," MacHenery said. "Think maybe they're due to see a little bloodshed?"

"OK by me," Winfree said, panting, "if you don't mind shedding it." He raised his saber in salute—the only fencing-movement he'd become proficient in—and jumped into a crouch. MacHenery closed, and the two blades met in a clanging opening. Peggy's father, for all his handicap of twenty years, was a fencer; Winfree, in his maiden effort as a sabreur, used his weapon like a club. He allemanded about MacHenery, now and then dashing in with clumsy deliveries that were always met by the older man's blade.

Those firemen not immediately concerned with spraying the warehouse wall mounted the racks of their truck to watch the duel. BSG-men and -women, huddled close to the warmth of the burning building, watched unhappily as their champion was forced to retreat before MacHenery's technique. "He'll kill him!" Peggy shouted. She was restrained from trying to break up the fight by two burly consumers.

Winfree, trying a gambit he'd seen in one of MacHenery's books but had never before attempted, extended his saber and flew forward toward MacHenery in a *flèche*. MacHenery caught Winfree's blade on his own and tossed it aside. He brought back his own weapon to sketch a line down the Captain's right cheek. The scratch was pink for a moment, then it started to bleed heavily. The crowd shouted encouragement, the BSG-troops groaned. "Keep cool, Wes," MacHenery whispered to his opponent as they *dos-à-doed* back into position. "I have to make this look fierce or they'll insist on lynching you."

"Don't make it look too good," Winfree panted. "Cover yourself—I might hurt you out of sheer clumsiness." His chin and throat were

covered with blood, now; blood enough to satisfy the most indignant consumer. The moment the measure was set again, Winfree lunged, trying to slip his blade beneath MacHenery's guard to strike his arm. His foible met the flash of the other man's forte, and his blade bounced aside like a sprung bow.

MacHenery slammed his saber into Winfree's, spinning the weapon out of his hand into the crowd. He lunged then, delivering his point against Winfree's chest. Peggy, released from her captors, burst from the crowd to throw herself against her father. "Stop it, Daddy!" she pleaded, "please stop!"

MacHenery raised his saber in salute. "All right, Pocahontas," he said. "Take your John Smith home and patch up that cut. It's no worse than what he gets shaving." He turned to the crowd, his saber still raised in salute. "Potlatch is over forever!" he shouted.

Urged by a delegation of music-loving consumers, the tubist raised his ravaged horn. The other members of the BSG Band-and-Glee-Club gathered round him, all ragged, some with one eye closed by a purple fist-mark; and they began, on the tubist's signal, "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." The District Headquarters building, gutted, was glowing like an abandoned fireplace. The firemen joined the singing as they coiled their hoses. The Potlatch Riot was over.

Winfree led his wife to their car. The *Just Married* sign was still in place, but the car's train of shoes and milk-cans had been ripped off to furnish ammunition in the fight. "Let's go home, Peggy," Winfree said. "I yearn for a fireside and some privacy."

Kevin MacHenery spoke from the back seat. "You deserve them, Wes," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Peggy demanded, twisting to face her father. "After you cut up my Wes you should be ashamed to show us your face."

"I want to apologize for that unfortunate necessity," MacHenery said. "But if I hadn't scratched him, Peggy-my-heart, the mob might have done more radical surgery. I saw one consumer with a rope, trying different knots."

"Apology accepted," Winfree said. "Now, if you don't mind, Mr. MacHenery, Peggy and I'd like to be alone."

"Of course," MacHenery said. "First, though, I'd like to present you a decoration to commemorate your part in this skirmish, Wes." He took

the little white feather from his hatbrim and attached it to Winfree's tattered, blood-stained tunic.

"What's this for?" Winfree asked.

"For services rendered the Rebellion," MacHenery said. "I've often wondered why it's only the Tom Paines and the Jeffersons who get honored by successful rebels. There's many a revolution, Wesley, that would have failed except for the dedicated tyranny of the men it overthrew."

"I don't understand, Daddy," Peggy protested.

"Wes will probably explain to you sometime how he brought this all on himself," MacHenery said, opening his door to get out. "Now I expect you two have other things to talk about. Thank you, Captain Winfree, for playing so excellent a George the Third to our rebellion."

"Thank you, sir," Winfree said, raising his hand in salute. "I wish you a Merry, nine-letter Christmas."

Loved this book ?

Similar users also downloaded:

- "*The Glory of Ippling*", Helen M. Urban
- "*The Golden Judge*", Nathaniel Gordon
- "*The Hills of Home*", Alfred Coppel
- "*The Fourth Invasion*", Henry Josephs
- "*Gladiator*", Philip Gordon Wylie
- "*The Hunters*", William Douglas Morrison
- "*Blind Man's Lantern*", Allen Kim Lang
- "*The First One*", Herbert D. Kastle
- "*The Happy Unfortunate*", Robert Silverberg
- "*Interplanetary Hunter*", Arthur K. Barnes



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind