

The House the Blakeney's Built  
by Avram Davidson

"Four people coming down the Forest Road, a hey," Old Big Mary said.

Young Red Tom understood her at once. "Not ours."

Things grew very quiet in the long kitchenroom. Old Whitey Bill shifted in his chairseat. "Those have's to be Runaway Little Bob's and that Thin Jinnie's," he said. "Help me up, some."

"No," Old Big Mary said. "They're not."

"Has to be." Old Whitey Bill shuffled up, leaning on his canestick. "Has to be. Whose elses could they be. Always said, me, she ran after him."

Young Whitey Bill put another chunk of burnwood on the burning. "Rower, rower," he muttered. Then everyone was talking at once, crowding up to the windowlooks. Then everybody stopped the talking. The big foodpots bubbled. Young Big Mary mumbletalked excitedly. Then her words came out clear sound.

"Look to here—look to here—I say, me, they aren't Blakeney's."

Old Little Mary, coming down from the spindleroom, called out, "People! People! Three and four of them down the Forest Road and I don't know them and, oh, they funnywalk!"

"Four strange people!"

"Not Blakeney's!"

"Stop sillytalking! Has to be! Who elses?"

"But not Blakeney's!"

"Not from The House, look to, look to! People—not from The House!"

"Runaway Bob and that Thin Jinnie?"

"No, can't be. No old ones."

"Children? Childrenchildren?"

All who hadn't been lookseeing before came now, all who were at The House, that is—running from the cowroom and the horseroom and dairyroom, ironroom, schoolroom, even from the sickroom.

"Four people! Not Blakeney's, some say!"

"Blakeney's or not Blakeney's, not from The House!"

Robert Hayakawa and his wife Shulamith came out of the forest, Ezra and Mikicho with them. "Well, as I said," Robert observed, in his slow careful way, "a road may end nowhere, going in one direction, but it's not likely it will end nowhere, going in the other."

Shulamith sighed. She was heavy with child. "Tilled fields. I'm glad of that. There was no sign of them anywhere else on the planet. This must be a new settlement. But we've been all over that—" She stopped abruptly, so did they

all.

Ezra pointed. "A house—"

"It's more like a, well, what would you say?" Mikicho moved her mouth, groping for a word. "A ... a castle? Robert?"

Very softly, Robert said, "It's not new, whatever it is. It is very much not new, don't you see, Shulamith. What—?"

She had given a little cry of alarm, or perhaps just surprise. All four turned to see what had surprised her. A man was running over the field towards them. He stopped, stumbling, as they all turned to him. Then he started again, a curious shambling walk. They could see his mouth moving after a while. He pointed to the four, waved his hand, waggled his head.

"Hey," they could hear him saying. "A hey, a hey. Hey. Look to. Mum. Mum mum mum. Oh, hey ..."

He had a florid face, a round face that bulged over the eyes, and they were prominent and blue eyes. His nose was an eagle's nose, sharp and hooked, and his mouth was loose and trembling. "Oh, hey, you must be, mum, his name, what? And she run off to follow him? Longlong. Jinnie! Thin Jinnie! Childrenchildren, a hey?" Behind him in the field two animals paused before a plow, switching their tails.

"Mikicho, look," said Ezra. "Those must be cows."

The man had stopped about ten feet away. He was dressed in loose, coarse cloth. Again he waggled his head. "Cows, no. Oh, no, mum mum, freemartins, elses. Not cows." Something occurred to him, almost staggering in its astonishment. "A hey, you won't know me! Won't know me!" He laughed. "Oh. What a thing. Strange Blakeney. Old Red Tom, I say, me."

Gravely, they introduced themselves. He frowned, his slack mouth moving. "Don't know them name," he said, after a moment. "No, a mum. Make them up, like children, in the woods. Longlong. Oh, I, now! Runaway Little Bob. Yes, that name! Your fatherfather. Dead, a hey?"

Very politely, very wearily, feeling—now that he had stopped—the fatigue of the long, long walk, Robert Hayakawa said, "I'm afraid I don't know him. We are not, I think, who you seem to think we are ... might we go on to the house, do you know?" His wife murmured her agreement, and leaned against him.

Old Red Tom, who had been gaping, seemed suddenly to catch at a word. "The House! A hey, yes. Go on to The House. Good now. Mum."

They started off, more slowly than before, and Old Red Tom, having unhitched his freemartins, followed behind, from time to time calling something unintelligible. "A funny fellow," said Ezra.

"He talks so oddly," Mikicho said. And Shulamith said that all she wanted was to sit down. Then—

"Oh, look," she said. "Look!"

"They have all come to greet us," her husband observed.

And so they had.

Nothing like this event had ever occurred in the history of the Blakeney's. But they were not found wanting. They brought the strangers into The House, gave them the softest chairseats, nearest to the burning; gave them cookingmilk and cheesemeats and tatoplants. Fatigue descended on the newcomers in a rush; they ate and drank somewhat, then they sank back, silent.

But the people of the house were not silent, far from it. Most of them who had been away had now come back, they milled around, some gulping eats, others craning and staring, most talking and talking and talking—few of them mumbltalking, now that the initial excitement had ebbed a bit. To the newcomers, eyes now opening with effort, now closing, despite, the people of the house seemed like figures from one of those halls of mirrors they had read about in social histories: the same faces, clothes, ... but, ah, indeed, not the same dimensions. Everywhere—florid complexions, bulging blue eyes, protruding bones at the forehead, hooked thin noses, flabby mouths.

Blakeney's.

Thin Blakeney's, big Blakeney's, little Blakeney's, old ones, young ones, male and female. There seemed to be one standard model from which the others had been stretched or compressed, but it was difficult to conjecture what this exact standard was.

"Starside, then," Young Big Mary said—and said again and again, clear sound. "No elses live to Blakeneyworld. Starside, Starside, a hey, Starside. Same as Captains."

Young Whitey Bill pointed with a stick of burnwood at Shulamith. "Baby grows," he said. "Rower, rower. Baby soon."

With a great effort, Robert roused himself. "Yes. She's going to have a baby very soon. We will be glad of your help."

Old Whitey Bill came for another look to, hobbling on his canestick. "We descend," he said, putting his face very close to Robert's, "we descend from the Captains. Hasn't heard of them, you? Elses not heard? Funny. Funnyfunny. We descend, look to. From the Captains. Captain Tom Blakeney. And his wives. Captain Bill Blakeney. And his wives. Brothers, they. Jinnie, Mary, Captain Tom's wives. Other Mary, Captain Bob's wife. Had another wife, but we don't remember it, us, her name. They lived, look to. Starside. You, too? Mum, you? A hey, Starside?"

Robert nodded. "When?" he asked. "When did they come from Starside? The brothers."

Night had fallen, but no lights were lit. Only the dancing flames, steadily fed, of the burning, with chunks and chunks of fat and greasy burnwood, flickered and illuminated the great room. "Ah, when," said Old Red Tom, thrusting up to the chairseat. "When we children, old Blakeney's say, a hey, five hundredyear. Longlong."

Old Little Mary said, suddenly, "They funnywalk. They funnytalk. But, oh, they funnylook, too!"

"A baby. A baby. Grows a baby, soon."

And two or three little baby Blakeney's, like shrunken versions of their elders, gobbled and giggled and asked to see the Starside baby. The big ones laughed, told them, soon.

"Five hundred ..." Hayakawa drowsed. He snapped awake. "The four of us," he said, "were heading in our boat for the Moons of Lor. Have you--no, I see, you never have. It's a short trip, really. But something happened to us, I don't know ... how to explain it ... we ran into something ... something that wasn't there. A warp? A hole? That's silly, I know, but--it was as though we felt the boat drop, somehow. And then, after that, our instruments didn't work and we saw we had no celestial references ... not a star we knew. What's that phrase, 'A new Heaven and a new Earth?' We were just able to reach her. Blakeneyworld, as you call it."

Sparks snapped and flew. Someone said, "Sleepytime." And then all the Blakeneyes went away and then Hayakawa slept.

It was washtime when the four woke up, and all the Blakeneyes around The House, big and little, were off scrubbing themselves and their clothes. "I guess that food on the table is for us," Ezra said. "I will assume it is for us. Say grace, Robert. I'm hungry."

Afterwards they got up and looked around. The room was big and the far end so dark, even with sunshine pouring in through the open shutters, that they could hardly make out the painting on the wall. The paint was peeling, anyway, and a crack like a flash of lightning ran through it; plaster or something or the sort had been slapped onto it, but this had mostly fallen out, its only lasting effect being to deface the painting further.

"Do you suppose that the two big figures could be the Captains?" Mikicho asked, for Robert had told them what Old Whitey Bill had said.

"I would guess so. They look grim and purposeful ... When was the persecution of the polygamists, anybody know?"

Current social histories had little to say about that period, but the four finally agreed it had been during the Refinishing Era, and that this had been about six hundred years ago. "Could this house be that old?" Shulamith asked. "Parts of it, I suppose, could be. I'll tell you what I think, I think that those two Captains set out like ancient patriarchs with their wives and their families and their flocks and so on, heading for somewhere where they wouldn't be persecuted. And then they hit--well, whatever it was that we hit. And wound up here. Like us."

Mikicho said, in a small, small voice, "And perhaps it will be another six hundred years before anyone else comes here. Oh, we're here for good and forever. That's sure."

They walked on, silent and unsure, through endless corridors and endless rooms. Some were clean enough, others were clogged with dust and rubbish, some had fallen into ruin, some were being used for barns and stables, and in one was a warm forge.

"Well," Robert said at last, "we must make the best of it. We cannot change the configurations of the universe."

Following the sounds they presently heard brought them to the washroom, slippery, warm, steamy, noisy.

Once again they were surrounded by the antic Blakeney face and form in its many permutations. "Washtime, washtime!" their hosts shouted, showing them where to put their clothes, fingering the garments curiously, helping them to soap, explaining which of the pools were fed by hot springs, which by warm and cold, giving them towels, assisting Shulamith carefully.

"Your world house, you, a hey," began a be-soaped Blakeney to Ezra; "bigger than this? No."

Ezra agreed, "No."

"Your-Blakeney? No. Mum, mum. Hey. Family? Smaller, a hey?"

"Oh, much smaller."

The Blakeney nodded. Then he offered to scrub Ezra's back if Ezra would scrub his.

The hours passed, and the days. There seemed no government, no rules, only was and habits and practices. Those who felt so inclined, worked. Those who didn't ... didn't. No one suggested the newcomers do anything, no one prevented from doing anything. It was perhaps a week later that Robert and Ezra invited themselves on a trip along the shore of the bay. Two healthy horses pulled a rickety wagon.

The driver's name was Young Little Bob. "Gots to fix a floorwalk," he said. "In the, a hey, in the sickroom. Need boards. Lots at the riverwater."

The sun was warm. The House now and again vanished behind trees or hills, now and again, as the road curved with the bay, came into view, looming over everything.

"We've got to find something for ourselves to do," Ezra said. "These people may be all one big happy family, they better be, the only family on the whole planet all this time. But if I spend any much more time with them I think I'll become as dippy as they are."

Robert said, deprecatingly, that the Blakeney's weren't very dippy. "Besides," he pointed out, "sooner or later our children are going to have to intermarry with them, and—"

"Our children can intermarry with each other—"

"Our grandchildren, then. I'm afraid we haven't the ancient skills necessary to be pioneers, otherwise we might go ... just anywhere. There is, after all, lots of room. But in a few hundred years, perhaps less, our descendants would be just as inbred and, well, odd. This way, at least, there's a chance. Hybrid vigor, and all that."

They forded the river at a point just directly opposite The House. A thin plume of smoke rose from one of its great, gaunt chimneys. The wagon turned up an overgrown path which followed up the river. "Lots of boards," said Young Little Bob. "Mum mum mum."

There were lot of boards, just as he said, weathered a silver gray. They were piled under the roof of a great open shed. At the edge of it a huge wheel turned and turned in the water. It, like the roof, was made of some dull and unrusted metal. But only the wheel turned. The other machinery was dusty.

"Millstones," Ezra said. "And saws. Lathes. And ... all sorts of things. Why do they-Bob? Young Little Bob, I mean—why do you grind your grain by hand?"

The driver shrugged. "Have's to make flour, a hey. Bread."

Obviously, none of the machinery was in running order. It was soon obvious

that no living Blakeney knew how to mend this, although (said Young Little Bob) there were those who could remember when things were otherwise: Old Big Mary, Old Little Mary, Old Whitey Bill—

Hayakawa, with a polite gesture, turned away from the recitation. "Ezra ... I think we might be able to fix all this. Get it in running order. That would be something to do, wouldn't it? Something well worth doing. It would make a big difference.

Ezra said that it would make all the difference.

Shulamith's child, a girl, was born on the edge of a summer evening when the sun streaked the sky with rose, crimson, magenta, lime, and purple. "We'll name her Hope," she said.

"Tongs to make tongs," Mikicho called the work of repair. She saw the restoration of the water-power as the beginning of a process which must eventually result in their being spaceborne again. Robert and Ezra did not encourage her in this. It was a long labor of work. They pored and sifted through The House from its crumbling top to its vast, vast colonnaded cellar, finding much that was of use to them, much which—though of no use—was interesting and intriguing—and much which was not only long past use but whose very usage could now be no more than a matter of conjecture. They found tools, metal which could be forged into tools, they found a whole library of books and they found the Blakeney-made press on which the books had been printed; the most recent was a treatise on the diseases of cattle, its date little more than a hundred years earlier. Decay had come quickly.

None of the Blakeney's were of much use in the matter of repairs. They were willing enough to lift and move—until the novelty wore off; then they were only in the way. The nearest to an exception was Big Fat Red Bob, the blacksmith; and, as his usual work was limited to sharpening plowshares, even he was not of much use. Robert and Ezra worked from sunrise to late afternoon. They would have worked longer, but as soon as the first chill hit the air, whatever Blakeney's were on hand began to get restless.

"Have's to get back, now, a hey. Have's to start back."

"Why?" Ezra had asked, at first. "There are no harmful animals on Blakeneyworld, are there?"

It was nothing that any of them could put into words, either clear-sound or mumble-talk. They had no tradition of things that go bump in the night, but nothing could persuade them to spend a minute of the night outside the thick walls of The House. Robert and Ezra found it easier to yield, return with them. There were so many false starts, the machinery beginning to function and then breaking down, that no celebration took place to mark any particular day as the successful one. The nearest thing to it was the batch of cakes that Old Big Mary baked from the first mill-ground flour.

"Like longlong times," she said, contentedly, licking crumbs from her toothless chops. She looked at the newcomers, made a face for their baby. A thought occurred to her, and, after a moment or two, she expressed it. "Not ours," she said. "Not ours, you. Elses. But I rather have's you here than that Runaway Little Bob back, or that Thin Jinnie ... Yes, I rathers."

There was only one serviceable axe, so no timber was cut. But Ezra found a cove where driftwood limbs and entire trees were continually piling up; and the sawmill didn't lack for wood to feed it. "Makes a lot of boards, a hey," Young Little Bob said one day.

"We're building a house," Robert explained.

The wagoner looked across the bay at the mighty towers and turrets, the great gables and long walls. From the distance no breach was noticeable, although two of the chimneys could be seen to slant slightly. "Lots to build," he said. "A hey, whole roof on north end wing, mum mum, bad, it's bad, hey."

"No, we're building our own house."

He looked at them, surprised. "Wants to build another room? Easier, I say, me, clean up a no-one's room. Oh, a hey, lots of them!"

Robert let the matter drop, then, but it could not be dropped forever, so one night after eats he began to explain. "We are very grateful for your help to us," he said, "strangers as we are to you and your ways. Perhaps it is because we are strange that we feel we want to have our own house to live in."

The Blakeney's were, for Blakeney's, quiet. They were also uncomprehending.

"It's the way we've been used to living. On many of the other worlds people do live, many families—and the families are all smaller than this, than yours, than the Blakeney's, I mean—many in one big house. But not on the world we lived in. There, every family has its own house, you see. We've been used to that. Now, at first, all five of us will live in the new house we're going to build near the mill. But as soon as we can we'll build a second new one. Then each family will have its own ..."

He stopped, looked helplessly at his wife and friends. He began again, in the face of blank nonunderstanding, "We hope you'll help us. We'll trade our services for your supplies. You can give us food and cloth, we'll grind your flour and saw your wood. We can help you fix your furniture, your looms, your broken floors and walls and roofs. And eventually—"

But he never got to explain about eventually. It was more than he could do to explain about the new house. No Blakeney's came to the house-raising. Robert and Ezra fixed up a capstan and hoist, block-and-tackle, managed—with the help of the two women—to get their small house built. But nobody of the Blakeney's ever came any more with grain to be ground, and when Robert and Ezra went to see them they saw that the newly-sawn planks and the lathe-turned wood still lay where it had been left.

"The food we took with us is gone," Robert said. "We have to have more. I'm sorry you feel this way. Please understand, it is not that we don't like you. It's just that we have to live our own way. In our own houses."

The silence was broken by a baby Blakeney. "What's 'houses'?" he asked.

He was shushed. "No such word, hey," he was told, too.

Robert went on, "We're going to ask you to lend us things. We want enough grain and tatoplants and such to last till we can get our own crops in, and enough milk-cattle and draft-animals until we can breed some of our own. Will you do that for us?"

Except for Young Whitey Bill, crouched by the burning, who mumbltalked with "Rower, rower, rower," they still kept silence. Popping blue eyes stared, faces were perhaps more florid than usual, large, slack mouths trembled beneath long hook-noses.

"We're wasting time," Ezra said.

Robert sighed. "Well, we have no other choice, friends ... Blakeney's ... We're going to have to take what we need, then. But we'll pay you back, as soon as we can, two for one. And anytime you want our help or service, you can have it. We'll be friends again. We must be friends. There are so many, many ways we can help one another to live better—and we are all there are, really, of humanity, on all this planet. We—"

Ezra nudged him, half-pulled him away. They took a wagon and a team of horses, a dray and a yoke of freemartins, loaded up with food. They took cows and ewes, a yearling bull and a shearling ram, a few bolts of cloth, and seed. No one prevented them, or tried to interfere, as they drove away. Robert turned and looked behind at the silent people. But then, head sunk, he watched only the bay road ahead of him, looking aside neither to the water or the woods.

"It's good that they can see us here," he said, later on that day. "It's bound to make them think, and, sooner or later, they'll come around."

They came sooner than he thought.

"I'm so glad to see you, friends!" Robert came running out to greet them. They seized and bound him with unaccustomed hands. Then, paying no attention to his anguished cries of "Why? Why?" they rushed into the new house and dragged out Shulamith and Mikicho and the baby. They drove the animals from their stalls, but took nothing else. The stove was now the major object of interest. First they knocked it over, then they scattered the burning coals all about, then they lit brands of burnwood and scrambled around with them. In a short while the building was all afire.

The Blakeney's seemed possessed. Faces red, eyes almost popping from their heads, they mumbled-shouted and raved. When Ezra, who had been working in the shed came running, fighting, they bore him to the ground and beat him with pieces of wood. He did not get up when they were through; it seemed apparent that he never would. Mikicho began a long and endless scream.

Robert stopped struggling for a moment. Caught off-guard, his captors loosened their hold—he broke away from their hands and his bonds, and, crying, "The tools! The tools!", dashed into the burning fire. The blazing roof fell in upon him with a great crash. No sound came from him, nor from Shulamith, who fainted. The baby began a thin, reedy wail.

Working as quickly as they could, in their frenzy, the Blakeney's added to the lumber and waste and scraps around the machinery in the shed, soon had it all ablaze.

The fire could be seen all the way back.

"Wasn't right, wasn't right," Young Red Bob said, over and over again.

"A bad thing," Old Little Mary agreed.

Young Big Mary carried the baby. Shulamith and Mikicho were led, dragging, along. "Little baby, a hey, a hey," she crooned.

Old Whitey Bill was dubious. "Be bad blood," he said. "The else's women grow more babies. A mum mum," he mused. "Teach them better. Not to funnywalk, such." He nodded and mumbled, peered out of the windowlook, his loose mouth widening with satisfaction. "Wasn't right," he said. "Wasn't right. Another house. Can't be another house, a second, a third. Hey, a hey! Never was else's

but The House. Never be again. No."

He looked around, his gaze encompassing the cracked walls, sinking floors, sagging roof. A faint smell of smoke was in the air. "The House," he said, contentedly. "The House."

The End