

## Occam's ducks

by Howard Waldrop

Producers Releasing Corporation Executive: Bill, you're 45 minutes behind on your shooting schedule. Beaudine: You mean, someone's waiting to see this crap??

-- William "One Shot" Beaudine

For a week, late in the year 1919, some of the most famous people in the world seem to have dropped off its surface.

The Griffith company, filming the motion picture *The Idol Dancer*, with the palm trees and beaches of Florida standing in for the South Seas, took a shooting break.

The mayor of Fort Lauderdale invited them for a 12-hour cruise aboard his yacht, the *Grey Duck*. They sailed out of harbor on a beautiful November morning. Just after noon a late-season hurricane slammed our of the Carribean.

There was no word of the movie people, the mayor, his yacht, or the crew for five days. The Coast Guard and the Navy sent out every available ship. Two seaplanes flew over the shipping lanes as the storm abated.

Richard Barthelmess came down to Florida at first news of the disappearance, while the hurricane still raged. He went out with crew of the Great War U-boat chaser, the *Berry Islands*. The seas were so rough the captain ordered them back in after six hours.

The days stretched on; three, four. The Hearst newspapers put out extras, speculating on the fate of Griffith, Gish, the other actors, the mayor. The weather cleared and calm returned. There were no sightings of debris or oil slicks. Reporters did stories on the *Marie Celeste* mystery. Hearst himself called in spiritualists in an attempt to contact the presumed dead director and stars.

On the morning of the sixth day, the happy yachting party sailed back in to harbor.

First there were sighs of relief.

Then the reception soured. Someone in Hollywood pointed out that Griffith's next picture, to be released nationwide in three weeks, was called *The Greatest Question*, and was about life after death, and the attempts of mediums to contact the dead.

W. R. Hearst was not amused, and he told the editors of his papers not to be amused, either.

Griffith shrugged his shoulders for the newsmen. "A storm came up. The

captain put in at the nearest island. We rode out the cyclone. We had plenty to eat and drink, and when it was over, we came back.”

The island was called Whale Cay. They had been buffeted by the heavy seas and torrential rains the first day and night, but made do by lantern light and electric torches, and the dancing fire of the lightning in the bay around them. They slept stacked like cordwood in the crowded belowdecks.

They had breakfasted in the sunny eye of the hurricane late next morning up on deck. Many of the movie people had had strange dreams, which they related as the far-wall clouds of the back half of the hurricane moved lazily toward them.

Neil Hamilton, the matinee idol who had posed for paintings on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post during the Great War, told his dream. He was in a long valley with high cliffs surrounding him. On every side, as far as he could see, the ground, the arroyos were covered with the bones and tusks of elephants. Their cyclopean skulls were tumbled at all angles. There were millions and millions of them, as if every pachyderm that had ever lived had died there. It was near dark, the sky overhead paling, the jumbled bones around him becoming purple and indistinct.

Over the narrow valley, against the early stars a strange light appeared, It came from a searchlight somewhere beyond the cliffs, and projected onto a high bank of noctilucent cirrus was a winged black shape. From somewhere behind him a telephone rang with a sense of urgency Then he'd awakened with a start.

Lillian Gish, who'd only arrived at the dock the morning they left, going directly from the Florida Special to the yacht, had spent the whole week before at the new studio at Mamaroneck, New York, overseeing its completion and directing her sister in a comedy feature. On the tossing, pitching yacht, she'd had a terrible time getting to sleep. She had dreamed, she said, of being an old woman, or being dressed like one, and carrying a Browning semiautomatic shotgun. She was being stalked through a swamp by a crazed man with words tattooed on his fists, who sang hymns as he followed her. She was very frightened in her nightmare, she said, not by being pursued, but by the idea of being old. Everyone laughed at that.

They asked David Wark Griffith what he'd dreamed of. “Nothing in particular,” he said. But he had dreamed: there was a land of fire and eruptions, where men and women clad in animal skins fought against giant crocodiles and lizards, much like in his film of ten years before, Man's Genesis. Hal Roach, the upstart competing producer, was there, too, looking older, but he seemed to be telling Griffith what to do. D. W. couldn't imagine such a thing, Griffith attributed the dream to the rolling of the ship, and to an especially fine bowl of turtle soup he'd eaten that morning aboard the Grey Duck, before the storm hit.

Another person didn't tell of his dreams. He saw no reason to. He was the stubby steward who kept them all rocking with laughter through the storm with his antic's and jokes. He said nothing to the film people, because he had a dream so

very puzzling to him, a dream unlike any other he'd ever had.

He had been somewhere; a stage. a room. He wore some kind of livery; a doorman's or a chauffeur's outfit. There was a big Swede standing right in front of him, and the Swedish guy was made up like a Japanese or a Chinaman. He had a big mustache like Dr. Fu Manchu on the book jackets, and he wore a tropical planter's suit and hat. Then this young Filipino guy had run into the room yelling a mile a minute, and the Swede asked, "Why number-three son making noise like motorboat?", and the Filipino yelled something else and ran to a closet door and opened it, and a white feller fell out of it with a knife in his back.

Then a voice behind the steward said, "Cut!" and then said, "Let's do it again," and the guy with the knife in his back got up and went back into the closet, and the Filipino guy went back out the door, and the big Swede took two puffs on a Camel and handed it to someone and then just stood there, and the voice behind the steward said to him, "Okay," and then, "This time, Mantan, bug your eyes out a little more."

The dream made no sense at all.

After their return on the yacht, the steward had performed at the wrap party for the productions. An Elk saw him, and they hired him to do their next initiation follies. Then he won a couple of amateur nights, and played theaters in a couple of nearby towns. He fetched and carried around the mayor's house in the daytime, and rolled audiences in the aisles at night.

One day early in 1920, he looked in his monthly pay envelope and found it was about a quarter of what he'd earned in the theater the last week.

He gave notice, hit the boards running, and never looked back.

So it was that two years later, on April 12, 1922, Mantan Brown found himself, at eight in the morning, in front of a large building in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He had seen the place the year before, when he had been playing a theater down the street. Before the Great War, it had been part of Nestor or Centaur, or maybe the Thantouser Film Company. The Navy had taken it over for a year to make toothbrushing and trench-foot movies to show new recruits, and films for the public on how to spot the Kaiser in case he was working in disguise on your block.

It was a commercial studio again, but now for rent by the day or week. Most film production had moved out to the western coast, but there were still a few--in Jersey, out on Astoria, in Manhattan itself--doing some kind of business in the East.

Mantan had ferried over before sunup, taken a streetcar, and checked in to the nearby hotel, one that let Negroes stay there as long as they paid in advance.

He went inside, past a desk and a yawning guard who waved him on, and found a guy in coveralls with a broom, which, Mantan had learned in two years in the

business, was where you went to find out stuff.

“I’m looking for The Man with the Shoes,” he said.

“You and everybody else,” said the handyman. He squinted. “I seen you somewhere before.”

“Not unless you pay to get in places I wouldn’t,” said Mantan.

“Bessie Smith?” said the workman. “I mean, you’re not Bessie Smith. But why I think of her when I see you?”

Mantan smiled. “Toured with her and Ma Rainey last year. I tried to tell jokes, and people threw bricks and things at me ‘til they came back on and sang. Theater Owners’ Booking Agency. The TOBA circuit.”

The guy smiled. “Tough On Black Asses, huh?”

“You got that right.”

“Well, I thought you were pretty good. Caught you somewhere in the City. Went there for the jazz.”

“Thank you--”

“Willie.” The janitor stuck out his hand, shook Mantan’s.

“Thank you, Willie. Mantan Brown.” He looked around. “Can you tell me what the hoodoo’s going on here?”

“Beats me. I done the strangest things I ever done this past week. I work here--at the studio itself, fetchin’ and carryin’ and ridin’ a mop. Guy rented it two weeks ago--guy with the shoes is named Mr. Meister, a real yegg. He must be makin’ a race movie--the waiting room, second down the hall to the left--looks like Connie’s Club on Saturday night after all the slummers left. The guy directing the thing--Meister’s just the watch chain--name’s Slavo, Marcel Slavo. Nice guy, real deliberate and intense--somethin’s wrong with him, looks like a jakeleg or blizzard-bunny to me--he’s got some great scheme or somethin’. I been painting scenery for it. Don’t make sense. You’d think they were making another Intolerance, but they only got cameras coming in Thursday and Friday, shooting time for a two-ruler. Other than that, Mr. Brown, I don’t know a thing more than you do.”

“Thanks.”

The waiting room wasn’t like Connie’s, it was like a TOBA tent-show alumnus reunion. There was lots of yelling and hooting when he came in.

“Mantan!” “Why, Mr. Brown!” “Looky who’s here!”

As he shook hands he saw he was the only comedian there.

There was a pretty young woman. a high-yellow he hadn't seen before, sitting very quietly by herself. She had on a green wool dress and toque, and a weasel-trimmed wrap rested n the back of her chair.

“Somethin’, huh?” asked Le Roi Chicken, a dancer from Harlem who’d been in revues with both Moran and Mack and Buck and Bubbles. “Her name’s Pauline Christian.”

“Hey, Mr. Brown,” said someone across the room. “I thought you was just a caution in Mantan of the Apes.!”

Mantan smiled, pleased. They’d made the film in three days, mostly in the Authentic African Gardens of a white guy’s plantation house in Sea Island, Georgia, during the mornings and afternoons before his tent shows at night. Somebody had called some body who’d called somebody else to get him the job. He hadn’t seen the film yet, but from what he remembered of making it, it was probably pretty funny.

“I’m here for the five dollars a day. just like all of you.” he said.

“That’s funny,” said fifteen people in unison, “us all is getting ten dollars a day! “

While they were laughing, a door opened in the far corner. A tough white mug who looked like an icebox smoking a cigar came out, yelled for quiet, and read names off a list.

Mantan, Pauline Christian, and Lorenzo Fairweather were taken into an office.

“Welcome, welcome,” said Mr. Meister, who was a shorter version of the guy who’d called off the names on the clipboard.

Marcel Slavo sat in a chair facing them. Willie had been right. Slavo had dark spots under his eyes and looked like he slept with his face on a waffle iron. He was pale as a slug, and smoking a Fatima in a holder.

“The others, the extras, will be fitted today, then sent home. They’ll be back Thursday and Friday for the shooting. You three, plus Lafayette Monroe and Arkady Jackson, are the principals. Mr. Meister here--” Meister waved to them and Marcel continued, “--has got money to shoot a two-reeler race picture. His friends would like to expand their movie investments. We’ll go on to the script later, rehearse tomorrow and Wednesday, and shoot for two days. I know that’s unusual, not the way you’re all used to working, but this isn’t the ordinary two-reeler. I want us all to be proud of it.”

“And I--and my backers--want it in the can by Friday night,” said Mr. Meister.

They laughed nervously.

“The two other principals will join us Wednesday. We can cover most of their shots Thursday afternoon,” said Slavo.

He then talked with Lorenzo about the plays he’d been in, and with Mantan about his act. “Mantan of the Apes was why I wanted you,” he said, “And Pauline,” he turned to her. “You’ve got great potential. I saw you in Upholding the Race last week. A small part. but you brought something to it. I think we can make a funny satire here, one people will remember.” He seemed tired: He stopped a moment.

“And-- “ said Meister.

“And I want to thank you. There’s a movie out there right now. It’s the apotheosis of screen art--”

“What?” asked Lorenzo.

“The bee’s knees,” said Mantan.

“Thank you, Mr. Brown. It’s the epitome of moviemaking. It’s in trouble because it was made in Germany; veterans’ groups picketing outside, all that stuff everywhere it plays. There’s never been anything like it, not in America, France, or Italy. And it’s just a bunch of bohunks keeping people away from it. Well, it’s art, and they can’t stop it.”

“And,” said Meister conspiratorily, “they can’t keep us from sending it up, making a comedy of it, and making some bucks.”

“Now,” said Slavo, all business. “I’d like you to make yourselves comfortable, while I read through what we’ve got for you. Some of the titles are just roughs, you’ll get the idea though, so bear with me. We’ll have a title writer go over it after we finish the shooting and cutting. Here’s the scene: We open on a shot of cotton fields in Alabama, usual stuff, then we come in on a sign: County Fair September 15-22. Then we come down on a shot of the sideshow booths, the midway, big posters, et cetera.”

And so it was that Mantan Brown found himself in the production of The Medicine Cabinet of Dr. Killpatient.

Mantan was on the set, watching them paint scenery.

Slavo was rehearsing Lafayette Monroe and Arkady Jackson, who’d come in that morning. They were still in their street clothes. Monroe must have been 7 feet 3 inches tall.

“Here we go,” said Slavo, “try these.”

What he’d given Lafayette were two halves of Ping-Pong balls with black dots drawn on them. The giant placed them over his eyes.

“Man, man,” said Arkady.

Slavo was back ten feet, holding both arms and hands out, one inverted, forming a square with his thumbs and index fingers.

“Perfect!” he said. “Mantan?”

“Yes, Mr. Slavo?”

“Let’s try the scene where you back around the corner and bump into him.”

“Okay,” said Brown.

They ran through it. Mantan backed into Lafayette, did a freeze, reached back, turned, did a double take, and was gone.

Arkady was rolling on the floor. The Ping-Pong balls popped off Lafayette’s face as he exploded with laughter.

“Okay,” said Slavo, catching his breath. “Okay. This time, Lafayette, just as he touches you, turn your head down a little and toward him. Slowly, but just so you’re looking at him when he’s looking at you.”

“I can’t see a thing, Mr. Slavo.”

“There’ll be holes in the pupils when we do it. And remember, a line of smoke’s going to come up from the floor where Mr. Brown was when we get finished with the film.”

“I’m afraid I’ll bust out laughing,” said Lafayette.

“Just think about money,” said Slavo. “Let’s go through it one more time. Only this time, Mantan . . .”

“Yes, sir?”

“This time, Mantan, bug your eyes out a little bit more.”

The hair stood up on his neck.

“Yes sir, Mr. Slavo.”

The circles under Slavo’s eyes seemed to have darkened as the day wore on.

“I would have liked to have gone out to the West Coast with everyone else,” he said, as they took a break during the run-throughs. “Then I realized this was a wide-open field, the race pictures. I make exactly the movies I want. They go out to 600 theaters in the North, and 850 in the South. They make money. Some go into state’s rights distribution. I’m happy. Guys like Mr. Meister are happy--” He looked up to the catwalk overhead where Meister usually watched from, “The people who see the films are happy.”

He put another cigarette in his holder. “I live like I want,” he said. Then,

“Let’s get back to work, people.”

“You tell her in this scene,” said Slavo, “that as long as you’re heeled, she has nothing to fear from the somnam--from what Lorenzo refers to as the Sleepy Guy.”

He handed Mantan a slim straight razor.

Mantan looked at him. Pauline looked back and forth between them.

“Yes, Mr. Brown?” asked Slavo.

“Well, Mr. Slavo,” he said. “This film’s going out to every Negro theater in the U.S. of A., isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll have everybody laughing at it, but not with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is the kind of razor cadets use to trim their mustaches before they go down to the dockyards to wait for the newest batch of Irish women for the sporting houses.”

“Well, that’s the incongruity, Mr. Brown.”

“Willie? Willie?”

The workman appeared. “Willie, get \$2.50 from Mr. Meister, and run down to the drugstore and get a Double Duck Number 2 for me to use.”

“What the hell?” asked Meister, who’d been watching. “A tree’s a tree. A rock’s a rock. A razor’s a razor. Use that one.”

“It won’t be right, Mr. Meister. Mainly, it won’t be as funny as it can be.”

“It’s a tiny razor,” said Meister. “It’s funny, if you think it can defend both of you.”

Slavo watched and waited.

“Have you seen the films of Mr. Mack Sennett?” asked Brown.

“Who hasn’t? But he can’t get work now either,” said Meister.

“I mean his earlier stuff. Kops. Custard. Women in bathing suits.”

“Of course.”

“Well, Mr. Sennett once said, if you bend it, it’s funny. If you break it, it isn’t.”

“Now a darkie is telling me about the Aristophanic roots of comedy!” said Meister, throwing up his hands. “What about this theory of Sennett’s?”

“If I use the little razor,” said Mantan, “it breaks.”

Meister looked at him a moment, then reached in his pocket and pulled three big greenbacks off a roll and handed them to Willie. Willie left.

“I want to see this,” said Meister. He crossed his arms. “Good thing you’re not getting paid by the hour.”

Willie was back in five minutes with a rectangular box. Inside was a cold stainless steel thing, mother-of-pearl handled with a gold thumb-stop, half the size of a meat cleaver. It could have been used to dry-shave the mane off one of Mack Sennett’s lions in 15 seconds flat.

“Let’s see you bend that!” said Meister.

They rehearsed the scene, Mantan and Pauline. When Brown flourished the razor, opening it with a quick look, a shift of his eyes each way, three guys who’d stopped painting scenery to watch fell down in the corner.

Meister left.

Slavo said, “For the next scene . . .”

It was easy to see Slavo wasn’t getting whatever it was that was keeping him going.

The first morning of filming was a nightmare. Slavo was irritable. They shot sequentially for the most part (with a couple of major scenes held back for the next day). All the takes with the extras at the carnival were done early that morning, and some of them let go, with enough remaining to cover the inserts with the principals.

The set itself was disorienting. The painted shadows and reflections were so convincing Mantan found himself squinting when moving away from a painted wall because he expected bright light to be in his eyes there. There was no real light on the set except that which came in from the old overhead glass roof of the studio, and a few arc lights used for fill.

The walls were painted at odd angles; the merry-go-round was only 2 feet tall, with people standing around it. The Ferris wheel was an ellipsoid of neon, with one car with people (two Negro midgets) in it, the others diminishingly smaller, then larger around the circumference. The tents looked like something out of a Jamaica ginger extract-addict’s nightmare.

Then they filmed the scene of Dr. Killpatient at his sideshow, opening his giant medicine cabinet. The front was a mirror, like in a hotel bathroom. There was a crowd of extras standing in front of it, but what was reflected was a distant,

windswept mountain (and in Alabama, too). Mantan watched them do the scene. As the cabinet opened, the mountain disappeared; the image revealed was of Mantan, Pauline, Lorenzo, and the extras.

“How’d you do that, Mr. Slavo?” asked one of the extras.

“Fort Lee magic,” said Meister from his position on the catwalk above.

At last the morning was over. As they broke for lunch they heard loud voices coming from Meister’s office. They all went to the drugstore across the street.

“I hear it’s snow,” said Arkady.

“Jake.”

“Morphine.”

“He’s kicking the gong around,” said another extra.

One guy who had read a lot of books said, “He’s got a surfeit of the twentieth century.”

“Whatever, this film’s gonna scare the bejeezus out of Georgia, funny or not.”

Mantan said nothing. He chewed at his sandwich slowly and drank his cup of coffee, looking out the window toward the cold facade of the studio. It looked just like any other warehouse building.

Slavo was a different man when they returned. He moved very slowly, taking his time setting things up.

“Okay . . . let’s . . . do this right. And all the extras can go home early. Lafayette,” he said to the black giant, who was putting in his Ping-Pong ball eyes, “Carry . . . Pauline across to left. Out of sight around the pyramid. Then, extras. Come on, jump around a lot. Shake your torches. Then off left. Simple. Easy. Places. Camera. Action! That’s right, that’s right. Keep moving, Lafe, slow but steady. Kick some more, Pauline. Good. Now. Show some disgust, people. You’re indignant. He’s got your choir soloist from the A.M.E. church. That’s it. Take--”

“Stop it! Stop the camera thing. Cut!” yelled Meister from the catwalk.

“What?!” yelled Slavo.

“You there! You!” yelled Meister. “Are you blind?”

An extra wearing sunglasses pointed to himself. “Me?”

“If you ain’t blind, what’re you doing with sunglasses on? It’s night!”

“How the hell would anybody know?” asked the extra, looking around at the painted square moon in the sky. “This is the most fucked-up thing I ever been

involved with in all my life.”

“You can say that again,” said someone else.

“You,” said Meister to the first extra. “You’re fired. Get out. You only get paid through lunch.” He climbed down as the man started to leave, throwing his torch with the papier-mache flames on the floor. “Give me your hat,” said Meister. He took it from the man. He jammed it on his head and walked over with the rest of the extras, who had moved back off-camera. “I’ll do the damn scene myself.”

Slavo doubled up with laughter in his chair.

“What? What is it?” asked Meister.

“If . . .if they’re going to notice a guy . . .with sunglasses,” laughed Slavo, “they’re . . . damn sure gonna notice a white man!”

Meister stood fuming.

“Here go,” said Mantan, walking over to the producer. He took the hat from him, pulled it down over his eyes, took off his coat. He got in the middle of the extras and picked up an unused pitchfork. “Nobody’ll notice one more darkie,” he said.

“Let’s do it, then,” said Slavo. “Pauline? Lafayette?”

“Meister,” said a voice behind them. Three white guys in dark suits and shirts stood there. How long they had been watching no one knew. “Meister, let’s go talk,” said one of them.

You could hear loud noises through the walls of Meister’s office. Meister came out in the middle of a take, calling for Slavo.

“Goddammit to hell!” said Slavo. “Cut!” He charged into Meister’s office. There was more yelling. Then it was quiet. Then only Meister was heard.

Lafayette Monroe took up most of the floor, sprawled out, drinking water from a quart jug. He wore a black body suit, and had one of the Ping-Pong balls out of his eye socket. Arkady had on his doctor’s costume--frock coat, hair like a screech owl, big round glasses, gloves with dark lines drawn on the backs of them. A big wobbly crooked cane rested across his knees.

Pauline fanned herself with the hem of her long white nightgown.

“I smell trouble,” said Lorenzo. “Big trouble.”

The guys with the dark suits came out and went past them without a look.

Meister came out. He took his usual place, clambering up the ladder to the walkway above the set. He leaned on a light railing, saying nothing.

After awhile, a shaken-looking Marcel Slavo came out.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Let’s finish this scene, then set up the next one. By that time, there’ll be another gentleman here to finish up today, and to direct you tomorrow. I am off this film after the next scene . . . so let’s make this take a good one, okay?”

They finished the chase setup, and the pursuit. Slavo came and shook their hands, and hugged Pauline. “Thank you all,” he said, and walked out the door.

Ten minutes later another guy came in, taking off his coat. He looked up at Meister, at the actors, and said, “Another coon pitcher, huh? Gimme five minutes with the script.” He went into Meister’s off ice.

Five minutes later he was out again. “What a load of hooley,” he said. “Okay,” he said to Mantan and the other actors, “Who’s who?”

When they were through the next afternoon, Meister peeled bills off a roll, gave each of the principals an extra five dollars, and said, “Keep in touch.”

Mantan took his friend Freemore up to the place they told him Marcel Slavo lived.

They knocked. Three times before there was a muffled answer.

“Oh, Mr. Brown,” said Slavo, as he opened the door. “Who’s this?”

“This Joe Freemore. We’re just heading out on the ‘chitlin circuit’ again.”

“Well, I can’t do anything for you,” said Slavo. “I’m through. Haven’t you heard? I’m all washed up.”

“We wanted to show you our act.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re an impartial audience,” said Mantan.

Slavo went back in, sat in a chair at the table. Mantan saw that along with bootleg liquor bottles and ashtrays full of Fatima and Spud butts, the two razors from the movie lay on the table. Slavo followed his gaze.

“Souvenirs,” he said. “Something to remind me of all my work. I remember what you said, Mr. Brown. It has been a great lesson to me.”

“Comfortable, Mr. Slavo?” asked Freemore.

“Okay. Rollick me.”

“Empty stage,” said Mantan. “Joe and I meet.”

“Why, hello!” said Joe.

“Golly, hi,” said Mantan, pumping his hand. “I ain’t seen you since--”

“--it was longer ago than that. You had just--”

“--that’s right. And I hadn’t been married for more than--”

“--seemed a lot longer than that. Say, did you hear about--”

“--you don’t say! Why, I saw her not more than--”

“--it’s the truth! And the cops say she looked--”

“--that bad, huh? Who’d have thought it of her? Why she used to look--”

“--speaking of her, did you hear that her husband--”

“--what? How could he have done that? He always--”

“--yeah, but not this time. I tell you he--”

“--that’s impossible! Why, they told me he’d--”

“--that long, huh? Well, got to go. Give my best to--”

“--I sure will. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

They turned to Slavo.

“They’ll love it down in Mississippi,” he said.

It was two weeks later, and the South Carolina weather was the crummiest, said the locals, in half a century. It had been raining--a steady, continuous, monotonous thrumming--for three days.

Mantan stopped under the hotel marquee, looking out toward a gray two-by-four excuse for a city park, where a couple of ducks and a goose were kicking up their feet and enjoying life to its fullest.

He went inside and borrowed a Columbia newspaper from the catatonic day manager. He went up the four flights to his semiluxury room, took off his sopping raincoat and threw it over the three-dollar Louis Quatorze knock-off chair, and spread the paper out on the bed.

He was reading the national news page when he came across the story from New Jersey.

The police said that, according to witnesses, during the whole time of the attack, the razor-wielding maniac had kept repeating, “Bend, d--n it, don’t break!”

Bend, d--n it, don't break!"

The names of the victims were unknown to Mantan, but the attacker's name was Meister.

Twenty years later, while he was filming *Mr. Pilgrim Progresses*, a lady brought him a War Bond certificate, and a lobby card for him to autograph.

The card was from *The Medicine Cabinet of Dr. Killpatient, Breezy Laff Riot*. There were no credits on it, but there on the card were Mantan, Pauline Christian, and Lorenzo Fairweather, and behind them the giant Lafayette Monroe in his medicine cabinet.

Mantan signed it with a great flourish with one of those huge pencils you get at county fairs when you knock down the Arkansas kitty.

He had never seen the film, never knew till now that it had been released.

As the lady walked away, he wondered if the film had been any good at all.

For Mr. Moreland, and for Icky Twerp.

Howard Waldrop was born in Mississippi and has been living Texas, for many years. He is the author of three novels but is better known for his brilliant, quirky short stories. His stories are collected in *Howard Who?*, *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past*, and *Night of the Cooters*. He has been a regular contributor to *Omni* since 1982.