

MOULT REVOLT

by

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Some of our greatest discoveries are made by accident; the apple falling on Newton's head, the discovery of vulcanization, lac and his discovery of antigravity – and a young cluike, and the saving of his race.

– Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Ten

Wind whistled and sung through the canyon; it moaned in the distance and hissed between boulders. Symme relaxed at the edge of a plateau, absorbing all the holy music of the wind. Saving his race from total extinction was the last thing on his mind. He looked behind him at the semi-transparent shell from which he had just wriggled free. It was a thin and hollow copy of himself, with a split down the abdomen area. The shell trembled in the wind, but did not topple.

"I don't care!" Symme exclaimed. "Custom be damned; this is right for a Moulth!" He rolled his head from side to side and a small, clear piece of his old exoskeleton clattered to the red, flat ground, stirring a puff of dust. "Never again will I moult with the rest of the Nine. A moult should be private. Special! Here, my shell will resonate to the holy music, which is as it should be." His mother, Eomme, would be furious, but Symme would face that later.

In the distance a passenger ornithopter roared along. It had to be in the distance; machinery was not allowed on or above holy valleys -- except for the rocketships, of course, and they flew above the atmosphere. And the rockets were on a kind of holy mission of their own.

Looking around, the young cluike took a deep breath, expanding his thorax. "My third moult," he thought. "Six more and I will be ancient."

One of his feet dislodged a small rock. It rolled over the edge and bounced its way down the side.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

In some undefinable but intriguing way it seemed to blend with the wind's holy music.

Symme reached out a slender, nine-fingered hand and picked up another rock. With a graceful move, he flipped it over the reddish-brown edge and listened.

Click. Click-click. Click.

No, that wasn't right. He plucked another rock from a cluster further away. As he tossed the rock over the side, he cocked his head and slid back a bony carapace that protected his ear on that side from the blowing sand, and tuned his senses both to the holy music and the sound of the bouncing rock.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

Yes, yes! he thrilled. Yes!

"Oh, man!" he declared with youthful enthusiasm, "that is groovy!"

Of course, he did not say "man" with the same meaning a human being would give it. Symme had never seen or even heard of human beings; he was a young cluike, closer to a cricket in shape, although his body was over six feet long. It was covered by a thin but strong exoskeleton that was a shiny brown casing with joints that allowed flexibility of movement; the six angular and slim legs could fold up and recessed inside the shell when necessary, as in flight. A row of nine short spurs protruded from his back. The neckless head could shift up, down or side-to-side, giving him a wide range of vision. So when Symme said "man", he was referring to those of his own kind.

"Groovy" is the closest equivalent in our language to express his adolescent verve.

His "moult revolt" had suddenly lost its importance. Being careful to exactly duplicate his earlier toss, Symme propelled another pebble over the edge, then another and another, his excitement growing. Repeatedly he heard: Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

"I've got to tell the rest of my Nine!" he declared, and excitedly launched himself into the air. Four wingsets extended themselves from his sides, each of four panels; the brown leading edge of the first panel was the stronger part that covered the three other panels when they were at rest. The other three panels were thin semi-transparent membrane of unusual strength.

As he flew, the adolescent cluike clapped his hands together in rhythm to the holy music made by his wings. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

He had no idea this would lead, eventually, to the salvation of his race.

In one recess of his mind, as he thought of the others of the Nine, he remembered his concern about leaving them out of the Moult Ceremony; after all, it was supposed to be a ceremony for the entire Nine. Yet they were his Nine; all of the same egg cluster, all the same blood. They would surely all understand.

...All except Lomme. Lomme was some kind of throw-back. Others of his Nine were modern, even ahead of their time; Lomme was a slave to custom, to boring routine, to dull tradition. Just like Eomme.

He clapped his hands again. Click-click. He'd deal with Lomme and Eomme later. This was greater than all of them! Click-click. Click-click.

Inspired to fervent joy by his discovery, Symme dove towards the ground and then pulled up to a loop, humming as he went, and clapping. "Just wait till I tell the group -- show the group," he thought with joyous anticipation.

"You're telling me our race is doomed," Eomme said to the director. She said it with forced calm, forcing the appearance of calm not so much because of his information, but because of her dislike of the person in front of her. She disliked the theory proposed, but not as much as she disliked the proposer of the theory. He was one who worked only from facts, who eschewed emotion and -- even worse -- seemed to be an atheist. His office was windowless, not allowing the holy music to enter. He did not hum.

The director nodded. "We're over-breeding."

"But we've been selecting only one nine-cluster out of each rack of eggs! We store the remaining eggs."

"Even so," the director agreed, calmly, "there is only so much storage space on our world. Stacks of stored racks reach up to the limit of our atmosphere, and already cover over one-half of our living space. Thanks to rockets, we can even pile eggs above the atmosphere -- but our control of the rockets is limited, so we just have to drop the racks and let them pile up. That isn't nearly as efficient as stacking and the piles will, one day, become unstable. We are very long-lived and breed every nine years. Adjust it up yourself."

Eomme paused in thought, then suddenly said, "The moons!"

The director looked questioningly at her.

"We have nine moons above us! If the rockets can fly so high, why not send them to our moons with eggs?"

With a sigh, the director shook his head. "As I said, we can't control our rockets that accurately. We could guess at where a moon would be when we got there, but the odds are we could miscalculate. Much fuel would be used adjusting course. The rocket could well end up stranded on a moon, so then we would lose rocket and crew."

"...Why not send the rocket by remote control?" Lomme asked after another pause. "That would not risk the lives of the crew."

"And then what?" the director asked, both sarcasm and curiosity in his manner. "We do not have an endless amount of material to build rockets, you know. Further, what is the point of sending the eggs to the moon if we cannot recover them? Isn't future use the purpose of all this storage?"

"What do you propose we do?" she asked, irritated at having her idea discarded in so casual a manner, then added sarcastically, "destroy our eggs?"

"That would be one solution," the director said, calmly.

"What?" Eomme stiffened with indignity. "That would be murder!"

The director lifted his forearms, indicating a shrug. "It would be suicide not to -- if no other alternative presents itself." He hastily held out his hands to placate Eomme, whose wing-cases were lifting in outrage. "That is what we must explore," he continued, with his voice still calm. "We must look for alternatives."

He did not calm her. "Look for them. Find them!" she snapped, then turned and left.

When Symme reached home, he was exposed to a similar fury. "You moulted without us!" Lomme exploded, quivering with anger. "You slipped off in the middle of the night and moulted alone!" She made it sound worse than mass murder.

The Nine were in their grassy back yard, a yard surrounded by high walls that simulated valley sides. Lomme was near one wall as she verbally accosted Symme. "Just because you hatched a day earlier than the rest of us," she continued, "you think you can do anything!"

"But it was wonderful!" Symme protested. "I was there with the wind and the holy music, and the music sang through my empty shell."

"Selfish!" Lomme accused him. "All you care about is yourself. You wanted the pleasure all alone. The group was humming agreement with Lomme, but their music was soft...almost quiet."

"We should all do it alone," Symme proclaimed. "It's -- well, it's just great!"

Lomme took a pose of shocked disbelief. "You sound like you want to separate the Nine!" she said. "You want us to all be singles!"

"No -- no, you don't understand," Symme disagreed. He reached for the powerful feeling his discovery had given him. "Our Moulting is something that happens to each of us. Others might be around but it is an individual thing. And it gives you not only rebirth, but insight." He looked around. There was Gamme; he had been a constant companion, and followed Symme's lead most of the time. Gamme had a confused look about him, and Symme understood; he wanted to follow Symme's lead, but felt left out -- Symme hadn't told him about his private moulting idea, hadn't taken Gamme into his confidence.

"Gamme, you must do yours alone, too," he said earnestly. "But you must take the new music with you."

"New music?" Gamme asked. His curiosity overcame his uncertainty, swung him back into Symme's camp.

"New music?" Lomme repeated scornfully. "There is no new music!" she declared. "Holy music is...well, it's holy music, and that's all there is to it."

"No!" Symme exclaimed. "The moons in the sky change, the world changes -- and the music changes. I heard it!"

No one was humming, now; he had their attention. "It happened at the end of my Moulting. I can show you!" he said.

"You don't 'show' the holy music," Lomme snapped. "The music is, and that's all there is to it."

"No!" Symme disagreed. "We hum the music all the time, Lomme." His gaze took in all the group. "This is something you all have to experience," he said, his eagerness returning, "and I can demonstrate it right now! Everybody hum The Valley Wind, and I'll show you."

Gamme and a couple of the others started off. More joined them, until Lomme was the only one not humming. "Come on, Lomme," Symme urged. "Take part in this; experience it."

Gamme stopped humming. "Come on, Lomme," he begged. "It won't hurt to take part. Come on!" The word "on" blended in with Gamme's renewed hum.

"Oh -- all right," Lomme muttered, reluctantly giving in. She, too, took up the hum.

Symme waited. He wanted to start immediately, but he also sensed that everything had to be just right. It had to be just right, but -- he couldn't wait too long. Then --

Now! he thought, and rhythmically began clapping. Click-click, went his bony hands. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click. That was it! Click-click. Click-click. Yes, he had it now. Click-click. Click-click. He could tell from the growing attention of the others that they, too, were feeling it. Even Lomme was relaxing and allowing her whole body to join in.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

Gamme began clapping to the same rhythm. One by one the others followed.

Click-click. Click-click.

Soon the bodies of the Nine were swaying in unison. Gamme started lifting his wing casings in time with the rhythm, and the others moved with him. Symme was ecstatic. "Yes. Yes!" he said. "Yes!"

But then a shadow drifted overhead.

"What is all this racket?" Eomme shrieked. "What is going on here?" She had landed beside the wall, and was facing them all.

"Mother, I discovered a new music!" Symme exclaimed with excitement vibrating him. "I heard it in my Moulth."

Eomme glanced quickly around at the others. "Your Moulth?" she asked incredulously. "You Moulth alone -- singly -- by yourself?" Astonishment, laced with strong disapproval, was electric in her words, her stance, in every display of her body language.

"A Moulth should be private," Symme said, then went on before Eomme could erupt. "But this is more important," he continued ebulliently, eyes bright. "I found a new music!"

"Not, I hope, that cacophony I heard just now!" Eomme exclaimed derisively.

Symme hesitated, some of his enthusiasm dimmed. "Well...yes -- but you didn't give it a chance!" he rushed on. "You must hear it all; you must!"

"What I must do is go inside and think," Eomme retorted. "There are grave dangers facing us, and we must try to plan in order that we may overcome them." She brushed through the Nine and strode into the long, wide entranceway to their home.

Symme decided -- and the others agreed -- it would be best to find a secluded place to practice his new music.

Written music was as popular as recorded music to the cluike. Recording was no problem, but Symme had great difficulty with the writing of his new sound. Cluike music had no rhythm, only notes of various values. Even worse, their system of mathematics was -- naturally -- based on units of nine; cluike rhythm was based on units of four. No matter how Symme tried, he could not accommodate his music to cluike math.

So Symme determined to design a math specifically for his music. Then there would be the problem of developing a program for the electronic math machine. It was going to take some time but -- once the program was developed and his music was entered on it -- he could then, using the math machine, transmit the music around the world; everyone would become familiar with the new music! That made

the prodigious effort worthwhile, and inspired Symme to continue, his enthusiasm rekindled.

Eomme entered. "What's your new project?" she asked.

Her interest and curiosity caused Symme to incautiously reply, "I'm working on a math that will allow me to transmit the new music to everyone!"

Eomme bristled, anger quivering her antennae. "I forbid it!" she snapped. "You can't do that in my house!"

Sudden realization of the depth of his transgression caused Symme's wing-cases to pull in tight and, for a second, he froze. A cluike mother owned and controlled everything concerning her children.

-- Her children! The thought freed Symme. "No, Eomme," he said, using her name for the first time in his life. Purposefully using her name instead of her maternal title. "No," he repeated. "I have had my third Moul. I realize that does not make us equals," he added, flexing his wing cases, "but I am no longer your property. I am under your guidance, but I have the right to choose for myself, to take my chances against your advice.

"You," he went on, standing taller, "are no longer responsible for my mistakes; if I am in error, I must pay the price. I do not think I am in error," he said, turning back to the math machine.

"Your music is sacrilege!" Eomme exclaimed. "It defames, it mocks the holy wind."

"We've played it for several other Nines," Symme said with calm that was difficult to maintain. He remained facing away from Eomme. "They all thought it was just as great as we think it is."

"Children!" Eomme said scathingly. "The young are ever revolutionists, lacking in the judgment maturity brings. Who are they to evaluate? I repeat, the music is sacrilege -- trash."

Still striving for composure, Symme said: "When my program is completed, it will be available for all." His conviction buoyed his spirits. "I feel it will be accepted -- joyfully accepted," he added.

Eomme's antennae still quivered with outrage, but her voice was quiet -- an intense quiet that was even more indicative of her displeasure than her antennae. "I want a copy of that program when you are through," she said. "I will take it to the director."

A meteor shower of thoughts raced through Symme's mind. He understood the threat; if the director disapproved, the music could be banned. Forbidden. And yet, the director had always seemed a reasonable and dispassionate man. Surely he would see the worthiness of Symme's discovery.

Memories of the ecstasy on the plateau by the valley flooded over Symme; he quivered with joy, recalling his discovery of the new music.

-- But he had also heard that this director was not musically inclined. Could that mean problems? Could that mean...?

No!

No one could take his music from him; not even the director. No one was going to --

But there was Eomme. Even though she was no longer his absolute ruler, he had to live with her the other Nine until his fourth Moults. While she could not rule him, she could make his life miserable.

Yet the director would have no reason to ban Symme's music; if he was not interested in music then why should he care one way or the other?

These thoughts chased each other through Symme's mind in the briefest of seconds. Eomme was not aware of any significant pause preceding Symme's agreement.

"As soon as I finish my program, you'll have a copy for the director," Symme told her, reaching deep within himself to regain his confidence. The director did not need to approve -- only not disapprove. Everything would be wonderful -- great!

Surely....

In only another minute Symme forgot about Eomme and the director, and was deeply involved in creating his program.

It took Symme over a month of hard work to develop all facets of his program and commit it to recordings through the math machine; a month of intense concentration, frustration, mistakes and restarts -- a month that ended with even more intense elation when success was achieved. As he had promised, Symme gave Eomme a copy of the program for the director. Then he and the other Nine went to a holy valley to celebrate.

Eomme made good on her threat and took Symme's music program to the director. When she entered his office, he looked up at her and said, "Greetings, Eomme." His voice was calm, but there was a hint of irritation. That changed as Eomme took a program cube from a pouch that hung from her neck.

"What's that?" he asked, curiosity in his tone. The hint of irritation was replaced by an equally small amount of hope.

Eomme placed the cube on his desk with disdain. "That," she said with distaste, "is blasphemy. It's a music program Symme has written that is sacrilegious. I want you to listen to it so you can ban it."

"Oh," he said. His voice was so flat that Eomme was surprised.

"Why?" she asked. "What were you expecting?"

Despair settled over the director's frame. "It -- Oh, if you must know, I had the ridiculous thought that maybe, just maybe, you had come up with a solution. Forget it," he said brusquely, brushing the thought aside with a hard and long-fingered hand.

"A solution?" Eomme repeated, so wrapped up in her purpose for coming that she missed the director's meaning.

"The eggs," he reminded her.

Eomme's antennae drooped with shame. "Oh. Oh!" she exclaimed, as she made the connection.

"Oh my. I fear I have been so concerned about Symme's transgression that I let the major concern to the back of my mind. No...no, I have let my preoccupation with this horrible music distract me. I have no thoughts at all as to a solution."

"I also have had no new ideas," the director said. There was a faint emphasis on the word "new" faint, but it caught Eomme's attention.

"You dare not destroy the eggs!" she declared tightly. Her antennae quivered.

Again the director gave the arm-lifting shrug. "It is undesirable," he said, "but what alternative do we have?"

"We have enough room for now," Eomme said. "With Symme's offense dealt with, I can put my mind to the problem."

"Offense?" the director repeated.

Eomme touched the cube. "You will understand, once you have played this," she said. "Let me know when you have done so." With that, she left.

At the holy valley, Symme and the others of his Nine had sang and clapped and flipped rocks a long and into the night, singing as the nine moons rose.

Other Nines joined them and all were enthralled by the new music. The fact that many adults were displeased by "their" music was no deterrent to their enjoyment; in a perverse manner, it increased their pleasure -- proving yet again that adolescents, no matter what their birthplanet, are still adolescents.

Days passed in joyful musical festivity. Then they went home.

"The director wants to see you," Eomme greeted Symme, smugly confident of the meaning of the summons. A shower of cold water could have done no more to bring Symme's spirit down to earth. "Now," Eomme added. "He almost sent a search party looking for you." This did nothing to restore Symme's confidence.

Without a word of response, Symme turned and flew away, heading for the director's office. Better to get it over with than sit and stew.

Symme was baffled by the director's reception. He was greeted warmly, almost enthusiastically. "Come in, my boy, come in!" he said, rising from behind his desk. "I've been most eager to meet you." His antennae was vibrating, but Symme recognized the pattern as one of excitement. Could it be that the director felt the same fervor for the new music as Symme felt? That hope seemed to be verified by the director's next words. "Your music program is marvelous, youngster; absolutely marvelous."

"Yes. Yes!" Symme exclaimed. "It is new!"

"That's it," the director agreed, "it is an entirely new approach; something no one else has ever done."

"I'm glad you appreciate the music," Symme gushed. "It really moves us."

"The music?" the director repeated, momentarily at a loss that puzzled Symme. "Oh, yes -- but the rhythm program to which I refer."

"Of course," said Symme, relaxing. "The rhythm is what is different; the rhythm is what makes it unique. It came to me at my third Moul't."

"I wouldn't have thought music could be detected while nine cluikes Moul't." The position of the director's head indicated amusement.

"But I was alone!" the cluik'e exclaimed. Eager to explain, he rushed on. "A Moul't should be a private thing," he said. "Particularly the third Moul't. The music proves one should be alone; I never would have discovered it if I had waited for the rest of my Nine." Deeply involved in disclosing his discovery, Symme gushed on. "The music is important for more than one reason; first, of course, for itself -- but it's also important as a symbol for change, an expression of individuality, as something to bond all third-Moul't cluikes together. The rhythm is so...so...." Symme stopped, his eyes looking dreamily in the distance beyond the director's walls.

The director paused, looking contemplatively at Symme. Then he said, "Young one, I don't think you understand; I know the rhythm is important to you, but that is not what I mean." Symme was totally at a loss. "Your fascination with the rhythm," the older cluik'e continued, "drove you to heights of sheer genius -- not," he hurriedly added, as Symme's musical pride was pumping the youngster's enthusiasm anew, "the music or the rhythm, but what it inspired you to achieve." Symme's confusion was now complete. "In order to transcribe your music, to record it for all the world, you invented a new form of math!"

"Well...well, of course," Symme spluttered. "I mean, the rhythm is two-four; that cannot be recorded by a math based on nine."

The director shook his head in amusement. "So simple," he said, mockery in his tone. "You, who are not a mathematician, invent a new math -- and see it as nothing but a musical tool."

"Don't you understand?" Symme said, a bit of desperation in his voice. "I had to come up with a math program that would accurately catch the rhythm."

"I know; I understand," the director said reassuringly. "It just amazes me that you don't comprehend the scope of what you have achieved." He put up a long-fingered hand to cut off Symme's attempted reply. "Yes, you think your achievement was your music; that may well be remembered, too. But your math program will revolutionize, will save the world as we know it. It will lead to the salvation of our race."

Symme was immobilized. Thoughts ricocheted in his brain, bounced off each other, and could not coalesce into coherence. "I...the music...it...." His words trailed helplessly away.

The director did something totally out of character: He laughed. His body trembled as the sound rumbled through him. "Yes, my innocent young musician," he finally managed, "you have saved the world. You didn't even know it was in danger, did you?"

Symme, still flabbergasted, could only shake his head.

"Eomme knew," the director went on, managing to regain his serious mien. "Many of us knew. Our eggs are crowding us out of our home."

Mention of Eomme brought Symme's thoughts back into focus. "Then why save the eggs?" he asked.

"Truth from the innocent," the director murmured. "If only it were so simple," he continued. "Most adults regard their eggs as extensions of themselves; doing away with the eggs would, to them, be the same as murder."

"But -- it makes no sense!" Symme proclaimed, disturbed. "Why save something that will cause to die?"

"The young are liberals, the older are conservatives," the director said softly, more to himself than to Symme. "Your logic is clear, unhampered by emotions," he went on, more directly. "I can sympathize with the view of the adults. They see the eggs as other cluikes; they forget they are only potentially citizens -- a long way from being citizens."

"Besides -- wouldn't a good citizen give up his life if it were for the good of the race?" asked Symme.

"Of course!" the director responded. "The adults, however, respond by saying that the eggs cannot make that decision. But," he went on, shaking himself and brightening, "that is no longer a problem. Unwittingly, you have solved that."

"But -- I don't understand how," Symme said.

"We developed rockets to enable us to pile the egg crates higher," the director explained. "However, the rockets are limited. While they can travel above the atmosphere, we cannot send them to the moons; fuel is limited, and our control is minimal. With your math, I have developed a program that can accurately pinpoint where a moon will be and what a rocket's most efficient path is to intercept it."

"Will it work?" Symme asked.

"Wrong tense, young one," the director said, smug satisfaction in his voice and his stance. "It will work. As soon as I realized what you had, and learned to use it, I worked non-stop on a navigation program. I received word of the rocket's return only minutes before you arrived! Now we can stack eggs on the moon. We can even send cluikes to other planets to breed; you have saved not only the world; you have saved your race -- and launched them into space!"

"Director, I am very glad to hear that," Symme said, self-consciously -- and concerned. "But..." he stopped, unsure of himself, uncertain how to express his worry.

"Yes -- yes? Speak up," the director encouraged.

"Are...are you going to ban my music?"

Again the director erupted into laughter.