

THE EIGHT BILLION

by Richard Wilson

The vizier told the King of New York: "It's time to go downtown, Your Majesty."

Because of the throng and the hubbub he spoke with his lips pressed to the King's ear. The vizier, who was old, could remember when the little throne-room had seemed crowded with a mere hundred courtiers in it. Now, 40 years later, there were a thousand. He turned his head half right and the King graciously turned his head to put his lips to the vizier's ear.

"Is it really time?" the King asked. He made a happy, involuntary gesture and dislodged the crown of his Queen. "Sorry dear."

"What?" the Queen said. She retrieved the crown from the shoulder of the first lady in waiting, which was as far as it had been able to fall. "We can't hear a word you say."

The King ignored her. The vizier got his lips back to the King's ear and said, "Yes, Sire. Your gracious presence would be most welcome." He spoke in the pre-arranged code.

The circle of nobles closest to the King became aware that a discussion of import was under way and fell silent. They shifted their feet a quarter inch and inclined their heads.

The vizier glared at them. "Hubba-hubba!" he barked.

"Hubba-hubba!" they responded, and not until their chatter had resumed did he again put his lips to the King's ear. "The Supervisors are thinking of legalizing death," he said, knowing he would be overheard and deliberately reviving an old rumor for the benefit of the eavesdropping nobles.

"We should not be displeased," the King said. "They could start right here."

"Under the plan the nobles would be exempt," the vizier said. "I think a committee of nobles helped draft the plan."

"That would be a pity," the King said, not bothering to get the vizier's ear back. "Our wish would be to distribute such a blessing democratically,

if we may use that word. Hubba-hubba, there!"

The nobles' conversation, which had dropped to a murmur, rose in volume.

"They were thinking of starting at the outskirts," the vizier said. "As you know, the beneficent protection of immortality extends five hundred feet beyond the borders of the county. The thought was to bring it to the very edges, so that if anyone fell off the island he'd be gone, Pfut! like that. There'd be a law against shoving, of course."

"Very sound," the King said. "But what of those whose business takes them beyond the borders? Some are authorized by us to travel to the Kingdoms of Bronx or Richmond. We must not discourage trade, such little as there is."

Chimes sounded and the voice of the Royal Chef said: "Chow is now down." He was a former mess sergeant.

The voices of the nobles automatically rose again and there was a shifting of feet as they braced themselves. Under cover of this the King sought the vizier's ear and said: "Are they through downtown?" He sounded excited.

"Very close, Your Majesty. They wait only your presence."

"We'll go right after chow."

A mist began to descend from the feeder nozzles in the ceiling. "Odd numbers inhale," the voice of the Chef said. "Deep breaths now. Exhale. Even numbers inhale. Now out. Odd in, even out. Even in, odd out. Keep the rhythm or you'll burst the walls." The Royal Chef talked to the nobles as if they were half-witted privates.

"Oh, damn," the King said. "Essence of plankton again."

"Nourishing, though," the vizier said on the exhale. Then he breathed in hungrily.

"We keep forgetting whether we're odd or even," said the King, who had been breathing at random to the discomfort of his chief minister. "We know we have dispensation but we like to cooperate."

"Your Majesty is odd; I'm even."

"How Our Gracious Queen manages to get fat on this stuff I'll never know," the King said. He turned to her. "*Exhale*, dear, while we're inhaling."

"What?" she said.

"Never mind, dear." To the vizier he said: "Holy Moly. Can we start now?"

"To the Board of Supervisors' meeting, Sire?" It was on the agenda, and the King must not seem to be rushing downtown.

The King nodded and inch by inch they left, the vizier starting the cry that the nobles took up: "Gutzin for the King! Gutzin for the King!"

The nobles weren't the only idle ones.

There were few jobs other than those connected with essential services such as Communications (skyvision, grown-in radio), Waste Disposal (the daily garbage rocket into space), Feeding, Health, Subways and Sports.

Sports was really part of Communications but had insisted on its own Dukedown. Thus it managed to perpetuate the fiction that its football, baseball and hockey games were live, contemporary contests. Actually they were all on tape or film and hardly a player was still alive.

There was a sound reason. Spectator sports involving mass transportation of people had long since had to be banned. It was no longer possible to get 100,000 or more people in and out of Central Park Stadium for a game—because there were already 800,000 people living there permanently, stacked up in tiers.

The Board of Supervisors' meeting was scheduled to discuss an incident which had occurred on the Harlem River Overbuild.

The 63 supervisors were jammed erect in their meeting room, which had once been a secretary's office in the County Building.

There was no room to sit down, even for the King, who stood near a window from which he had a good view of the teeming, spiry colossus he ruled.

The supervisors nearest him were all talking at once, taking advantage of the King's rare visit to advance their private causes. The King listened politely but his mind obviously was downtown.

"I said we can handle it," the Chairman shouted to the vizier. "All we have to do is coordinate menus with the King of the Bronx. His people come crowding across the line when we have parabeef mist and they only have plankton. Our people get trampled. Then they fight. That's what happened at the Overbuild. Near-riot."

"I hear there are people who *never* have plankton," the vizier said.

"They circulate around the kingdoms and know just where to be at chowdown. There must be a leak from the Royal Kitchens."

"We'll look into it but it would be better to coordinate. Then it wouldn't matter where they were." The Chairman asked: "Have you visited maternity lately? They're delivering them like shad roe."

"Sounds like an enforcement-problem there," the vizier said impatiently, with a look across to the King, who had obviously had the word that a breakthrough was near in Project Mohole. "Holy Moly," he had said, hadn't he?

"How do you mean, enforcement?" the Chairman asked. "You can't legislate a pregnancy stretchout. Nine months and there they are. And the incidence of multiple births is rising, I might add."

"I'm talking about the mating berths," the vizier said. "I know the permits are supposed to be rigidly controlled but I think a shakeup would be in order among the keepers of the keys."

"That's not it. The problem is I.I."

"I.I.?"

"Illegal impregnation. They tell me it's flourishing. Especially at the compulsory sex education lectures. Jam them in like that, co-ed, and then talk about it, and things are bound to happen."

"Shocking," said the vizier, who was unshockable.

"The younger generation seems to be taking it as a matter of course. I've heard one youngster say to another, 'I got a standing start.'"

"Really, Mr. Chairman?" It was an old skyvision joke, actually.

"Facts are facts, Your Excellency. And people are people. Every last mother's son of the eight billion of them."

"Eight billion? I didn't think we were anywhere near that figure." "As of the noon census estimate," the Chairman said. "It's eight billion, one million forty-two thousand some odd. I tell you, they're like shad roe."

The skyscraper office buildings had long since been taken over as dwellings. This followed naturally after big business fled, driven away by increasing taxes and traffic congestion. No one had really counted noses, but it was considered likely that the office buildings were being utilized at maximum efficiency—between four and eight families could fit comfortably into a suite of offices formerly occupied by one executive and

two secretaries. Maybe even 16 or 32 families could squeeze in if you considered the number of high-ceilinged offices which had been duplexed, at least to the extent of stacking up the sleepers in rooms cut horizontally in half.

The vizier got the King away from the supervisors by crying: "We're late! Gutzin! Gutzin for the King!"

What they were late for was the annual Mingle Day. The King obviously was determined to go through with it on his way downtown.

Its full name was Mingle with the Masses Day. The law decreed that once each year the King and Queen, accompanied by their first minister, the vizier, must go forth among the multitude to see how unbearable things had become and to listen to complaints.

The vizier dreaded every second of Mingle Day and in recent years had tried to beg off on various pretexts, none of which the King had found acceptable. The King rather enjoyed the custom; he slithered amiably through the crush in his Silicoat, smiling, chatting, shaking hands, signing autographs and generally having a royal time. The vizier did the work.

The Queen, who had joined the King after the meeting, was not so good at slithering, due to her girth, but she was game. Her way was to fix a smile on her face and maintain a steady pace, relying on the agility of her subjects to avoid touching her royal person with their hands, as protocol required. She also wore one of the plastic Silicoats which a clever Japanese commuter had developed early in the history of overpopulation. The Queen called it her slipcover.

The vizier had no such protection. His job was to stand still for the populace and record their complaints. These came at him from all sides as he aimed a button mike at the complainer's lips, cutting him off after 15 seconds, then moving on to the next. Thus the vizier constantly fell behind and had to make wild dashes through virtually solid flesh to regain his place behind Her Majesty.

It was unfortunate that the word that it was time to go downtown fell on Mingle Day, but there had been no way of knowing exactly when the breakthrough would take place. The secret project—boring into the bedrock in search of a legendary vast cavern capable of being converted into living space—had been pushed ahead with all possible speed and now only the King's presence was needed to complete it.

But he must give no appearance of haste lest he prematurely reveal the

secret. One could not be sure the Mohole project would be a success, even after the breakthrough.

Within minutes of the time the royal VTO had set the royal party down, the normal crush had progressed from unbearable to next to impossible.

As always, the temper of the crowd changed as it flowed past the King, who received affection, to the Queen, who was accorded respect, to the vizier, who got the complaints.

Some of the complaints were more in the nature of suggestions and used up less than the maximum 15 seconds, such as "Drop dead, Jack," or "Go - - - -, you old - - - -."

The vizier rather welcomed these brief imperatives, which helped him make up the time lost in recording the comments of those who took their full quarter minute.

Another suggestion he had been hearing frequently in recent years was "Invade Brooklyn; they got lots of room there."

Brooklyn was probably worse off than Manhattan. People had been breeding in Brooklyn in greater numbers, and for decades longer, than in Manhattan and, though interborough statistics were secret, it was doubtful whether Manhattan could survive a man-to-man war with Brooklyn, should the unthinkable ever become think-about-able.

It was likely that the invade-Brooklyn advocates had been subtly misled by the titles of the boroughs' respective rulers into thinking Brooklyn would be a pushover for Manhattan. What the confusion stemmed from, probably, was that Brooklyn had only a Prince, whereas Manhattan had a King. (Nobody suggested invading the Bronx, which also had a King.)

The situation went back to the founding of the dynasties, which had their origin in a newspaper promotion.

One year the journalistic colossus, the *Daily News*, turned from the various publicity queens it had sponsored over the decades and let its readers choose a king.

By chance the winner, in addition to being the handsomest of the candidates, possessed a good brain and a fine speaking voice. Thus the mayor, to whom the *Daily News* had given its powerful support in his election campaign, was delighted to agree to turn over to the "king" some of his ceremonial duties.

Now, therefore, it was the "king" who rode with visiting heads of state up Broadway-High (the upper-level road through the financial district) under the simulated ticker-tape showers, who spoke at Knights of

Columbus and United Jewish Appeal functions, who opened new old people's homes, who attended banquets for important business organizations and who went to crucial ball games. As a result the mayor had more time for his job and family.

So well did the "king" carry out his duties that he was overwhelmingly re-elected in the newspaper's poll the following year. In time the quotation marks were withdrawn from around his title, first by the *Daily News* and then even by the more conservative papers, which had given up trying to ignore this creation of their rival. Finally the King, elevated to capitalization and assured of permanent employment and a salary commensurate with his position, became known simply as the King of New York. New York County (Manhattan), that is.

Similarly, after another newspaper promotion, there was elected a Queen of Queens (County), an euphonious title. But naturally the promotion to name a King of Kings (every schoolchild surely knows that Brooklyn is Kings County) had to be aborted as blasphemous. Brooklyn chose a Prince instead. His inferior-sounding title notwithstanding, the Prince of Brooklyn was co-equal with the Queen of Queens and the Kings of New York, Bronx and Richmond.

In New York one year, the mayor failed the city in a crisis which the King quietly solved. Soon afterwards the King ousted the mayor from power in a gentlemanly coup. The four other counties being agreeable, the post of mayor was abolished and the Kings, Queens and Prince took over as heads of the autonomous county governments. Later their children succeeded them, either because they had been treated as royalty anyway or through the lethargy of the electorate, and the posts became hardly hereditary, as in the old-fashioned monarchies.

The current monarch in Manhattan was King V, the fifth in his line. By this time they had dropped their common names and started putting on airs, such as talking in the first person plural.

"The plankton ain't what it used to be," a new complainer said to the vizier. "Look into that, will ya?"

"I certainly shall, sir. Next." He was within a yard of the Queen's ample rear.

"The skyvision stinks lately," another said. "Not to mention the way the stars shine through from the back. They even let the moon get in once in a while. Then you can't see nothing."

"I'll take it up with the Royal Communication Commission," the vizier said. "It's ridiculous to be expected to look at the noon when it's skyvision time, isn't it?"

He was a step closer to the Queen, who was virtually at the King's elbow.

"Holy Moly," a strange voice said in his ear.

The vizier looked around sharply. A grinning, crafty-faced man said: "Means something to you, don't it? What are you trying to hide from us, Viz? You're not digging for gold, that's for sure."

"Digging?"

Others in the crowd echoed the word. The two syllables flew off in all directions.

"*Downtown*," the man said meaningfully. "You know where and why. How about telling the rest of us?"

The King and Queen had gone ahead and were already separated from the vizier by thousands of people.

"What is it?" the crafty-faced man persisted; "an escape-hatch for higher-ups?"

"Whatever is done is done for all," the vizier declared, but the truth sounded unconvincing. He was surrounded by unfriendly faces.

Suddenly a knife appeared in the hand of the crafty man.

The vizier sucked in his breath, less from fear than from shock. Never had he seen a weapon outside the Royal Armory.

"Take us downtown," the man said. "We'll help you dig."

Then, as if miraculously, the broad, beloved, Silicoated figure of the Queen slid majestically through the multitude, who fell back respectfully for her.

She fixed the crafty man with an imperial eye and said: "How *dare* you threaten Our Minister?" To no one in particular she said: "Seize the malefactor."

Instantly, as he tried to hide the knife and slink away, he was grabbed by his erstwhile cronies.

The Queen whispered to the vizier: "We heard everybody saying 'digging' and came at once."

Then the King was also there, at the side of his Queen and minister. The vizier had never loved them more.

"Our people," the King said softly, confident that his words would be carried swiftly through the multitude; "we deplore this attempted violence against our honored minister because we deem any such action an attack on ourselves." There was a horrified murmur from the nearer edges of the vast pack of humanity.

"But worse," the King went on, "our heart is sore to think that anyone would impute to us a selfish motive. Therefore we invite each of you to go downtown with us."

When some of the excitement generated by this statement had died down he continued: "The project has been kept secret for one reason only: the possibility that it would fail, thus dashing hopes prematurely raised."

Somehow they got downtown, the teeming swarm of them, coursing excitedly along.

As they went the King explained Project Moly. His words, carried from group to group, told of the thrilling possibility that there were vast caverns below, where a man and his family might have space—room to breathe—a little privacy.

It mattered little that such space would be underground. Nine-tenths of the people already lived at lower or inner levels of vast surface honeycombs where the sun was never seen.

Finally they were "downtown." At the King's bidding, many hundreds were allowed through the doors of the huge warehouse whose cellar had become a massive excavation. Others formed human pyramids, took turns peering in through windows high above street level and told those below what they saw.

The chief digger led the King down the slope to the excavated depths.

The moment was at hand. The King rolled up his sleeves, grasped the pickaxe firmly with two hands and sank its point into a tissue-thin partition. It went through.

Great cheers went up. The King stepped back and workmen enlarged the hole.

It was obvious, as the scientists had forecast, that there were great caverns below and that they were capable of holding millions —perhaps billions—of people.

For several blessed moments the King and his people stared with awe and silent thanksgiving into the yawning, empty depths.

But soon, first with a whisper, then with a murmur and finally with

shouts and cheers similar to those voiced by the Manhattanites only minutes ago, there issued from the depths of the cavern, from cracks and crevices where they must have been hiding and watching, scores, then hundreds of ugly livid people who looked as if neither they nor their ancestors had ever known the sun.

Sensing daylight above, although only the most diffuse of rays could have penetrated these deep workings, the livid people, their sunken eyes asquint and obviously hurting, streamed up along the sloping tunnel as relentlessly as a rising tide in the Bay of Fundy.

Now there were thousands of them—hundreds of thousands.

Ragged, thin, barefoot, their voices a babble of thanksgiving, they pattered past the King and his subjects, who pressed back against the rock wall as the gray tide flowed by.

Their tongue was strange but some root it had in common with the King's English made it possible for him to understand them.

They were saying that their quest had ended; that their prayers to a dimly-remembered topside god had been answered; that their upward borings had not been in vain and that there was surely room at the surface for the teeming, expanding population of the gray people who had been inhabiting the caverns inside the Earth—all eight billion of them.