

## THE OLDEST SOLDIER

Fritz Leiber

The one we called the Lieutenant took a long swallow of his dark Lowensbrau. He'd just been describing a battle of infantry rockets on the Eastern Front, the German and Russian positions erupting bundles of flame.

Max swished his paler beer in its green bottle and his eyes got a faraway look and he said, "When the rockets lolled their thousands in Copenhagen, they laced the sky with fire and lit up the steeples in the city and the masts and bare spars of the British ships like a field of crosses."

"I didn't know there were any landings in Denmark," someone remarked with an expectant casualness.

"This was in the Napoleonic wars," Max explained. "The British bombarded the city and captured the Danish fleet. Back in 1807."

"Vas you dere, Maxie?" Woody asked, and the gang around the counter chuckled and beamed. Drinking at a liquor store is a pretty dull occupation and one is grateful for small vaudeville acts.

"Why bare spars?" someone asked.

"So there'd be less chance of the rockets setting the launching ships afire,"\* Max came back at him. "Sails burn fast and wooden ships are tinder anyway—that's why ships firing red-hot shot never worked out. Rockets and bare spars were bid enough. Yes, and it was Con-greve rockets made the **red glare** at Fort McHenry," he continued unruffled, "while the 'bombs bursting in air' were about the earliest precision artillery shells, fired from mortars on bomb-ketches. There's a condensed history, of arms in the American anthem." He looked around smiling.

"Yes, I was there. Woody—Just as I was with me South Martians when they stormed Copernicus in the Second Colonial War. And just as I'll be in a foxhole outside Copeybawa a billion years from now while the blast waves from the battling Venusian spaceships shake the soil and roil the mud and give me some

more digging to do.”

This time the gang really snorted its happy laughter and Woody was slowly shaking his head and repeating, “Copenhagen and Copernicus and—what was the third? Oh, what a mind he’s got,” and the Lieutenant was say-ing, “Yah, you vas there—in books,” and I was thinking, Thank God for all the screwballs, especially the brave ones who never flinch, who never lose their tempers w drop the act, so that you never do quite find out whether it’s just a gag or their solemnest belief. There’s only one person here takes Max even one percent seriously^ but they all love him because he won’t ever drop his guard.

...

“The only point I was trying to make,” Max continued when he could easily make himself heard “was the way styles in weapons keep moving in cycles.”

“Did the Romans use rockets?” asked the same light voice as had remarked about the landings in Denmark and the bare spars. I saw now it was Sol from behind the counter.

Max shook his head. “Not so you’d notice. Catapults were their specialty.” He squinted his eyes. “Though now you mention it, I recall a dogfoot telling me Archimedes faked up some rockets powdered with Greek fire to touch off the sails of the Roman ships at Syracuse—and none of this romance about a giant burning glass.”

“You mean,\*” said Woody, “that there are other gaze-bos besides yourself in this fighting-all-over-the-universe-and-to-the-end-of-time racket?” His deep whiskey voice was at its solemnest and most wondering.

“Naturally,” Max told him earnestly. “How else do you suppose wars ever get really fought and refought?”

“Why should wars ever be refought?” Sol asked lightly.

“Once ought to be enough.”

“Do you suppose anybody could time-travel and keep his ‘hands off wars?” Max countered.

X put in my two cents’ worth. \*Then that would make Archimedes\* rockets the earliest liquid-fuel rockets by a long shot.”

Max looked straight at me, a special quirk in his smile.

“Yes, I guess so,” he said after a couple of seconds.

“On this planet, that is.”

The Daughter had been falling off, but that brought it back and while Woody was saying loudly to himself, “I like that refighting part—that’s what we’re all so good fit,” the Lieutenant asked Max with only a moderate accent that fit North Chicago, “And zo you aggshually have fought on Mars?”

“Yes, I have,” Max agreed after a bit. “Though that ruckus I mentioned happened on our moon—expeditionary forces from the Red Planet.”

“Ach, yes. And now let me ask you something—“

I really mean that about screwballs, you know. I don't care whether they're saucer addicts or extrasensory perception bugs or religious or musical maniacs or crackpot philosophers or psychologists or merely guys with a strange dream or gag like Max—for my money they are the ones who are keeping individuality alive in this age of conformity. They are the ones who are resisting the encroachments of the mass media and motivation research and the mass man. The only really bad riling about crack pottery and screwballistics (as with dope and prostitution) is the coldblooded people who prey on it for money. So I say to all screwballs: Go it on your own. Don't take any wooden nickels or give out any silver dimes. Be wise and brave—like Max.

He and the Lieutenant were working up a discussion of the problems of artillery in airless space and low gravity that was a little too technical to keep the laughter alive, So Woody up and remarked, "Say, Maximilian, if you got to be in all these wars all over hell and gone, you must have a pretty tight schedule. How come you got time to be drinking with us bums?"

"I often ask myself that," Max cracked back at him. "Pact is, I'm on a sort of unscheduled furlough, result of a transportation slip-up. I'm due to be picked up and returned to my outfit any day now—that is, if the enemy underground doesn't get to me first."

It was just then, as Max said that bit about enemy underground, and as the laughter came, a little diminished, and as Woody was chortling "Enemy underground now. How do you like that?" and as I was thinking how much Max had given me in these couple of weeks—a guy with an almost poetic flare for vivid historical reconstruction, but with more than that ... it was just then that I saw the two red eyes low down in the dusty plate-glass window looking in from the dark street

Everything in modern America has to have a big plate glass display window, everything from suburban mansions, general managers' offices and skyscraper apartments to barber shops and beauty parlours and ginmills—there are even gymnasium swimming pools with plate-glass windows twenty feet high opening on busy boulevards—and Sol's dingy liquor store was no exception; in fact I believe there's a law that it's got to be that way. But I was the only one of the gang who happened to be looking out of this particular window at the moment. It was a dark windy night outside and it's a dark untidy street at best and across from Sol's are more plate glass windows that sometimes give off very odd reflections, so when I got a glimpse of this black formless bead with the two eyes like red coals peering in past the brown pyramid of empty whiskey bottles, I don't suppose it was a half second before I realized it must be something like a couple of cigarette butts kept alive by the wind, or more likely a freak reflection of tail lights from some car turning a corner down street, and in another half second it was gone, the car having finished turning the corner or the wind blowing the cigarette butts away altogether. Still, for a moment it gave me a very goosey feeling, coming right on top of that remark about an enemy underground.

And I must have shown my reaction in some way, for Woody, who is very observant, called out, “Hey, Fred, has that soda pop you drink started to rot your nerves—or are even Max’s friends getting sick at the outrageous lies he’s been telling us?”

Max looked at me sharply and perhaps he saw something too. At any rate he finished his beer and said, “I guess I’ll be taking off.” He didn’t say it to me particularly, but he kept looking at me. I nodded and put down on the counter my small green bottle, still one-third full of the lemon pop I find overly sweet, though it was the sourest Sol stocked. Max and I zipped up our wind-breakers. He opened the door and a little of the wind came in and troubled the tanbark around the sill. The Lieutenant said to Max, “Tomorrow night we design a better space gun;” Sol routinely advised the two of us, “Keep your noses clean;” and Woody called, “So long space soldiers.” (And I could imagine him saying as the door closed, “That Max is nuttier than a fruitcake and Freddy isn’t much better. Drinking soda pop—ugh!”)

And then Max and I were outside leaning into the wind, our eyes slitted against the blown dust, for the three-block trudge to Max’s pad—a name his tiny apartment merits without any attempt to force the language.

There weren’t any large black shaggy dogs with red eyes slinking about and I hadn’t quite expected there would be.

Why Max and his soldier-of-history gag and our outwardly small comradeship meant so much to me is something that goes way back into my childhood. I was a lonely timid child, with no brothers and sisters to spar around with in preparation for the battles of life, and I never went through the usual stages of boyhood gangs either. In line with those things I grew up into a very devout liberal and “hated war” with a mystical fervour during the intermission between 1918 and 1939—so much so that I made a point of avoiding military services in the second conflict, though merely by working in the nearest war plant, not by the arduously heroic route of out-and-out pacifism.

But then the inevitable reaction set in, sparked by the liberal curse of being able, however, belatedly, to see both sides of any question. I began to be curious about and cautiously admiring of soldiering and soldiers. Unwillingly at first, I came to see the necessity and romance of the spearmen—those guardians, often lonely as myself, of the perilous camps of civilization and brotherhood in a black hostile universe . . . necessary guardians, for all the truth in the indictments that war caters to irrationality and sadism and serves the munition makers and reaction.

I commenced to see my own hatred of war as in part only a mask for cowardice, and I started to look for some way to do honour in my life to the other half of the truth. Though it’s anything but easy to give yourself a feeling of being brave just because you suddenly want that feeling. Obvious opportunities to be obviously brave come very seldom in our largely civilized culture, in fact they’re dear contrary to safety drives and so-called normal adjustment and good peacetime citizenship and all the rest, and they come mostly in the earliest part of a man’s life. So that for the person who belatedly wants to be brave it’s a generally a matter of waiting for an opportunity for six months and then getting a tiny one and muffing it in six seconds.

But however uncomfortable it was, I had this reaction

to my devout early pacifism, as I say. At first I took

it out only in reading. I devoured war books, current and

historical, fact and fiction. I tried to soak up the military aspects and jargon of all ages, the organization and weapons, tile strategy and tactics. Characters like Tros of

Samothrace and Horatio Hornblower became my new secret heroes, along with Heinlein's space cadets and Bu2-lard and other brave rangers of the space-ways.

But after a while reading wasn't enough. I had to have some real soldiers and I finally found them in the little gang that gathered nightly at Sol's liquor store. It's funny but liquor stores that serve drinks have a clientele with more character and comradeship than the clienteles of most bars—perhaps it is the absence of juke-boxes, chrom-ium plate, bowling machines, trouble-hunting, drink-cadg-ing women, and—along with those—men in search of fights and forgetfulness. At any rate, it was at Sol's liquor store that I found Woody and the Lieutenant and Bert and Mike and Pierre and Sol himself. The casual customer would hardly have guessed that they were anything but quiet souses, certainly not soldiers, but I got a clue or two and I started to hang around, making myself inconspicuous and drinking my rather symbolic soda pop, and pretty soon they started to open up and yam about North Africa and Stalingrad and Anzio and Korea and such and I was pretty happy in a partial sort of way.

And then about a month ago Max had turned up and he was the man I'd really been looking for. A genuine soldier with my historical slant on things—only he knew a lot more than I did, I was a rank amateur by comparison—and he had this crazy appealing gag too, and besides that he actually cottoned to me and invited me on to his place a few times, so that with him I was more than a tavern hanger-on. Max was good for me, though I still hadn't the faintest idea of who he really was or what he did.

Naturally Max hadn't opened up the first couple of nights with the gang, he'd just bought his beer and kept quiet and felt his way much as I had. Yet he looked and felt so much the soldier that I think the gang was inclined to accept him from the start—a quick stocky man with big hands and a leathery face and smiling tired eyes that seemed to have seen everything at one time or another. And then on the third or fourth night Bert told something about the Battle of the Bulge and Max chimed in with some things he'd seen there, and I could tell from the looks Bert and the Lieutenant exchanged that Max had “passed”—he was now the accepted seventh member of the gang, with me still as the tolerated clerical-type hanger-on, for I'd never made any secret of my complete lack of military experience.

Not long afterwards—it couldn't have been more than one or two nights—Woody told some tall tales and Max started matching him and that was the beginning of the time-and-space-soldier gag. It was funny about the gag.

I suppose we just should have assumed that Max was a history nut and liked to parade his bookish hobby in a picturesque way—and maybe some of the gang did assume just that—but he was so vivid yet so casual in his descriptions of other times and places that you felt there had to be something more, and sometimes he'd get such a

lost, nostalgic look on his face talking of things fifty million miles or five hundred years away that Woody would almost die laughing, which was really the sincerest sort of tribute to Max's convincingness,

Max even kept up the gag when he and I were alone together, walking or at his place—he'd never come to mine—though he kept it up in a minor-key sort of way, so that it sometimes seemed that what he was trying to get across was not that he was the Soldier of a Power that was fighting across all of time to change history, but simply that we men were creatures with imaginations and it was our highest duty to try to feel what it was really like to live in other times and places and bodies. Once he said to me, "The growth of consciousness is every-thing, Fred—the seed of awareness sending its loots across space and time. But it can grow in so many ways, spinning its web from mind to mind like the spider or burrowing into the unconscious darkness like the snake. The biggest wars are the wars of thought."

But whatever he was trying to get across, I went along with his gag—which seems to me the proper way to behave with any other man, screwball or not, so long as you can do it without violating your own personality. Another man brings a little life and excitement into the world, why try to kill it? It is simply a matter of politeness and style.

I'd come to think a lot about style since knowing Max. It doesn't matter so much what you do in life, he once said to me—soldiering or clerking, preaching, or picking pockets—so long as you do it with style. Better fail in % grand style than succeed in a mean one—you won't enjoy the successes you get the second way.

Max seemed to understand my own special problems without my having to confess them. He pointed out to me that the soldier is trained for bravery. The whole object of military discipline is to make sure that when the six seconds of testing come every six months or so, you do the brave thing without thinking, by drilled second nature. It's not a matter of the soldier having some special virtue or virility the civilian lacks. And then about fear, All men are afraid. Max said, except a few psychopathic or suicidal types and they merely haven't fear at the conscious level. But the better you know yourself and the men around you and the situation you're up against (though you can never know all of the last and sometimes you have only a glimmering), then the better you are prepared to prevent fear from mastering you. Generally speaking, if you prepare yourself by the daily self-discipline of looking squarely at life, if you imaginatively realize the troubles and opportunities that may come, then the chances are you won't fail in the testing. Well, of course I'd heard and read all those things before, but coming from Max they seemed to mean a lot more to me. As I say, Max was good for me.

So on this night when Max had talked about Copenhagen and Copernicus and Copeyawa and I'd imagined I'd seen a big black dog with red eyes and we were walking the lonely streets hunched in our jackets and I was listening to the big clock over at the University tolling eleven . . . well, on this night I wasn't thinking anything special except that I was with my screwball buddy and pretty soon we'd be at

his place and having a nightcap. I'd make mine coffee.

I certainly wasn't expecting anything. Until, at the windy corner just before his place. Max suddenly stopped.

Max's junky front room-and-a-half was in a smoky brick building two fights up over some run-down stores. There is a rust-flaked fire escape on the front of it, running past the old-fashioned jutting bay windows, its lowest flight a counterbalanced one that only swings down when some-body walks out onto it—that is, if a person ever had occasion to.

When Max stopped suddenly, I stopped too of course. He was looking up at his window. His window was dark and I couldn't see anything in particular, except that he or somebody else had apparently left a big black bundle of something out on the fire-escape and—it wouldn't be the first time I'd seen that space used for storage and drying wash and what not, against all fire regulations, I'm sure. But Max stayed stopped and kept on looking.

"Say. Fred," he said softly then, "how about going over to your place for a change? Is the standing invitation still out?"

"Sure Max, why not," I replied instantly, matching my voice to his. "I've been asking you all along." My place was just two blocks away. We'd only have to turn the corner we were standing on and we'd be headed straight for it.

"Okay then," Max said. "Let's get going." There was a touch of sharp impatience in his voice that I'd never heard there before. He suddenly seemed very eager that we should get around that corner. He took hold of my arm.

He was no longer looking up at the fire escape, but I was. The wind had abruptly died and it was very still. As we went around the corner—to be exact as Max pulled me around it—the big bundle of something lifted up and looked down at me with eyes like two red coals.

I didn't let out a gasp or say anything. I don't think Max realized then that I'd seen anything, but I was shaken. This time I couldn't lay it to cigarette butts or reflected tail lights, they were too difficult to place on a third-story fire escape. This time my mind would have to rationalize a lot more inventively to find an explanation, and until it did I would have to believe that something . . . well, alien . . . was at large in this part of Chicago.

Big cities have their natural menaces—hold-up artists, hopped-up kids, sick-headed, sadists, that sort of thing—and you're more or less prepared for them. You're not prepared for something . . . alien. If you hear a scuttling in the basement you assume it's rats and although you know rats can be dangerous you're not particularly fright-ened and you may even go down to investigate. You don't expect to find bird-catching Amazonian spiders.

The wind hadn't resumed yet. We'd gone about a third of the way down the first block when I heard behind us, faintly but distinctly, a rusty creaking ending in a metal-lic jar that didn't fit anything but the first flight of the fire escape swinging down to the sidewalk.

I just kept walking then, but my mind split in two—half of it listening and straining back over my shoulder, the other half darting off to investigate the weirdest notions, such as that Max was a refugee from some un-imaginable concentration camp on the other side of the Stars. If there were such concentration camps, I told my-self in my cold hysteria, run by some sort of supernatural SS men, they'd

have dogs just like the one I'd thought I'd seen . . . and, to be honest, thought I'd see padding along if I looked over my shoulder now.

It was bard to hang on and just walk, not run, with this insanity or whatever it was hovering over my mind, and the fact that Max didn't say a word didn't help either.

Finally, as we were starting die second block, I got hold of myself and I quietly reported to Max exactly what I thought I'd seen. His response surprised me.

“What's the layout of your apartment, Fred? Third floor, isn't it?”

“Yes. Well ...”

“Begin at the door well be going in,” he directed me.

“That's the living room, then there's a tiny short open hall, then the kitchen. It's like an hour-glass, with the living room and kitchen the ends, and the hall the wasp waist. Two doors open from the hall: the one to your right (figuring from the living room) opens into the bath-room; the one to your left, into a small bedroom.”

“Windows?”

“Two in the living room. side by side,” I told him. “None in the bathroom. One in the bedroom, onto an air shaft. Two in the kitchen, apart.”

“Back door in the kitchen?” he asked. “Yes. To the back porch. Has glass in the top half of it. I hadn't thought about that. That makes three windows in the kitchen.”

“Are the shades in the windows pulled down now?”

“No.”

Questions and answers had been rapid-fire, without time for me to think, done while we walked a quarter of a block. Now after the briefest pause Max said, “Look, Fred, I'm not asking you or anyone to believe in all the things I've been telling as if for kicks at Sol's—that's too much for all of a sudden—but you do believe in that black dog, dent you?” He touched my arm warningly.

“No, don't look behind you!”

I swallowed. “I believe in him right now,” I said. “Okay. Keep on walking. I'm sorry I got you into this, Fred. but now I've got to try to get both of us out. Your best chance is to disregard the thing, pretend you're not aware of anything strange happening—then the beast won't know whether I've told you anything, it'll be hesitant to disturb you. it'll try to get at me without troubling you, and it'll even hold off a while if it thinks it will get me that way. But it won't hold off forever—it's only imper-fectly disciplined. My best chance is to get in touch with headquarters—something I've been putting off—and have them pull me out. I should be able to do it in an hour, maybe less. You can give me that time, Fred.”

“How?” I asked him. I was mounting the steps to the Vestibule. I thought I could hear, very faintly, a light pad-padding behind us. I didn't look back. Max stepped through the door I held open and we started up the stairs.



“As soon as we get in your apartment,” he said, “you turn on all the lights in the living room and kitchen. Leave the shades up. Then start doing -whatever you ought be doing if you were staying up at this time of night. Reading or typing, say. Or having a bite of food, if you can manage it. Play it as naturally as you can. If you hear things, if you feel things, try to take no notice.

Above all, don't open the windows or doors, or look out of

them to see anything, or go to them if you can help it

you'll probably feel drawn to do just that. Just play it naturally. If you can hold them ... it ... off that way for half an hour or so—until midnight, say—if you can give me that much time, I should be able to handle my end of it And remember, it's the best chance for you as well as for me. Once I'm out of here, you're safe.”

“But you—“ I said, digging for my key. “—what will you—?”

“As soon as we get inside.” Max said, “I'll duck in your bedroom and shut the door. Pay no attention. Don't come after me, whatever you hear. Is there a plug-in in your bedroom? I'll need juice.”

“Yes.” I told him, turning the key. “But the lights have been going off a lot lately. Someone has been blow-ing the fuses.”

“That's great,” he growled, following me inside.

I turned on the lights and went in the kitchen, did the same there and came back. Max was still in the living room, bent over the table beside my typewriter. He had a sheet of light-green paper. He must have brought it with him. He was scrawling something at the top and bottom of it. He straightened up and gave it to me.

“Fold it up and put it in your pocket and keep it on you the next few days,” he said.

It was just a blank sheet of cracklingly thin light-green paper with “Dear Fred” scribbled at the top and “Your friend. Max Bournemann” at the bottom and nothing in between.

“But what—?” I began, looking up at him.

“Do as I say!” He snapped at me. Then, as I almost flinched away from him, he grinned—a great big com-radely grin.

“Okay, let's get working,” he said, and he went into the bedroom and shut the door behind him.

I folded the sheet of paper three times and unzipped my wind-breaker and tucked it inside the breast pocket Then I went to the bookcase and pulled at random a volume out of the top shelf—my psychology shelf, I re-membered the next moment—and sat down and opened the book and looked at a page without seeing the print.

And now there was time for me to think. Since I'd spoken of the red eyes to Max there had been no time for anything but to listen and to remember and to act Now there was time for me to think.

My first thoughts were: This is ridiculous! I saw some\* thing strange and frightening, sure, but it was in the dark, I couldn't see anything clearly, there must be some simple natural explanation for whatever it was on the fire escape. I saw something strange and Max sensed I was frightened and when I told him about it he decided to play a practical joke on me in line with that eternal gag he lives by. I'll bet right now, he's lying on my bed and chuckling, wondering how long it'll be before I—

The window beside me rattled as if the wind had suddenly risen again. The rattling grew more violent—and then it abruptly stopped without dying away, stopped with a feeling of tension, as if the wind or something more material were still pressing against the pane.

And I did not turn my head to look at it, although (or perhaps because) I knew there was no fire escape or other support outside. I simply endured that sense of a presence at my elbow and stared unseeingly at the book in my hands, while my heart pounded and my skin froze and flushed.

I realized really then that my first skeptical thoughts had been the sheerest automatic escapism and that, just as I'd told Max, I believed with my whole mind in the black dog. I believed in the whole business insofar as I could imagine it. I believed that there are undreamed of powers warring in this universe, I believed that Max was a stranded time-traveller and that in my bedroom he was now frantically-operating some unearthly device to signal for help from some unknown headquarters. I believed that the impossible and the deadly was loose in Chicago.

But my thoughts couldn't carry further than that. They kept repeating themselves, faster and faster. My mind felt like an engine that is shaking itself to pieces. And the impulse to turn my head and look out the window came to me and grew.

I forced myself to focus on the middle of the page where I had the book open and start reading.

Jung's archetype transgress the barriers of time and space. More than that: they are capable of breaking the shackles of the laws of causality. They are endowed with frankly mystical "prospective" faculties. The word itself, according to Jung, is the reaction of the personality to the unconscious and includes in every person both male and female elements, the animus and anima, as well as the persona or the person's reaction to the outside world. . . .

I think I read the last sentence a dozen times, swiftly at first, then word by word, until it was a meaningless jumble and I could no longer force my gaze across it. Then the glass in the window beside me creaked. I laid down the book and stood up, eyes front, and went into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of crackers and opened the refrigerator.

The rattling that muted itself in hungry pressure followed. I heard it first in one kitchen window, then the other, then in the glass in the top of the door. I didn't look.

I went back in the living room, hesitated a moment beside my typewriter, which had a blank sheet of yellow paper in it, then sat down again in the armchair beside the window, putting the crackers and the half carton of milk on the little table beside me. I picked up the book I'd tried to read and put it on my knees.

The rattling returned with me—at once and peremptorily, as if something were growing impatient.

I couldn't focus on the print any more. I picked up a cracker and put it down. I touched the cold milk carton and my throat constricted and I drew my fingers away.

I looked at my typewriter and then I thought of the blank sheet of green paper and the explanation for Max's strange act suddenly seemed clear to me. Whatever happened to him tonight, he wanted me to be able to type a message over his signature that would exonerate me. A suicide note, say. Whatever happened to him ...

The window beside me shook violently, as if at a terrific gust.

It occurred to me that while I must not look out of the window as if expecting to see something (that would be the sort of give-away against which Max warned me) I could safely let my gaze slide across it—say, if I turned to look at the clock behind me. Only, I told myself, I mustn't pause or react if I saw anything.

I nerved myself. After all, I told myself, there was the blessed possibility that I would see nothing outside the taut pane but darkness.

I turned my head to look at the dock.

I saw it twice, going and coming back, and although my gaze did not pause or falter, my blood and my thoughts started to pound as if my heart and mind would burst.

It was about two feet outside the window—a face or mask or muzzle of a more gleaming black than the darkness around it. The face was at the same time the face of a hound, a panther, a giant bat, and a man—in between those four. A pitiless, hopeless man-animal face alive with knowledge but dead with a monstrous melancholy and a monstrous malice. There was the sheen of needlelike white teeth against black lips or dewlaps. There was the dull pulsing glow of eyes like red coals.

My gaze didn't pause or falter or go back—yes—and my heart and mind didn't burst, but I stood up then and stepped jerkily to the typewriter and sat down at it and started to pound the keys. After a while my gaze stopped blurring and I started to see what I was typing. The first thing I'd typed was:

the quick red fox jumped over the crazy black dog . . .

I kept on typing. It was better than reading. Typing I

was doing something, I could discharge. I typed a flood

of fragments: "Now is the time for all good men—", the

first words of the Declaration of Independence and the

Constitution, the Winston commercial, six lines of Ham-

let's "To be or not to be," without punctuation, Newton's

Third Law of Motion, "Mary had a big black—"

In the middle of it all the face of the electric clock that I'd looked at sprang into my mind. My mental image of it had been blanked out until then. The hands were at a quarter of twelve.

Whipping in a fresh yellow sheet, I typed the first

stanza of Poe's "Ravin," the Oath of Allegiance to the  
American Flag, the lost-ghost lines from Thomas Wolfe,  
The Creed and the Lord's prayer, "Beauty is troth; truth,  
blackness—"

The rattling made a swift circuit of the windows—though I heard nothing from the bedroom, nothing at all—and finally the rattling settled on the kitchen door. There was a creaking of wood and metal under pressure.

I thought: You are standing guard. You are standing guard for yourself and for Max, And then the second thought came: If you open the door, if you welcome it in, if you open the kitchen door and then the bedroom door, it will spare you. it will not hurt you.

Over and over again I fought down that second thought and the urge that went with it. It didn't seem to be corn-Big from my mind, but from the outside. I typed Ford, Buick, the names of all the automobiles I could remember Overland Moon, I typed all the four-letter words, I typed the alphabet, lower case and capitals, I typed the numerals and punctuation marks, I typed the keys of the keyboard in order from left to right, top to bottom, then in from each side alternately. I filled the last yellow sheet I was on and it fell out and I kept pounding mechanically, making shiny black marks on the dull black platen.

But then the urge became something I could not resist. I stood up and in the sudden silence I walked through the hall to the back door, looking down at the floor and re-sisting, dragging each step as much as I could.

My hands touched the knob and the long-handled key in the lock. My body pressed the door, which seemed to surge against me, so that I felt it was only my counter-pressure that kept it from bursting open in a shower of splintered glass and wood.

Far off, as if it were something happening in another universe, I heard the University clock tolling One . .  
. two ...

And then, because I could resist no longer, I ruined the key and the knob.

The lights all went out

In the darkness the door pushed open against me and

something came in past me like a gust of cold black wind

with streaks of heat in it,

I heard the bedroom door swing open.

The clock completed its strokes. Eleven ... twelve ...

Nothing . . . nothing at all. All pressures lifted from me. I was aware only of being alone, utterly alone. I knew it, deep down.

After some . . . minutes, I think, I shut and locked the door and I went over and opened a drawer and rum-maged out a candle, lit it, and went through the apart-ment and info the bedroom.

Max wasn't there. I'd known he wouldn't be. I didn't know how badly I'd failed him. I lay down on the bed and after a while I began to sob and. after another while, I slept.

Next day I told the janitor about the lights. He gave me a funny look.

"I know." he said. "I just put in a new fuse this morn-ing. I never saw one blown like that before. The window in the fuse was gone and there was a metal sprayed all over the inside of the box."

That afternoon I got Max's message, rd gone for a walk

in the park and was sitting on a bench beside the lagoon,

watching the water ripple in the breeze when I felt

something burning against my chest. For a moment I

thought I'd dropped my cigarette butt inside my wind-

breaker. I reached in and touched something hot in my

pocket and jerked it out. It was the sheet of green paper

Max had given me. Tiny threads of smoke were rising from it.

I flipped it open and read, in a scrawl that smoked and grew blacker instant by instant:

Thought you'd like to know I got through okay. Just in time. I'm back with my outfit. It's not toy bad. Thanks jor the rearguard action.

The handwriting (thought-writing?) of the blackening scrawl was identical with the salutation above and the signature below.

And then the sheet burst into flame. I flipped it away from me. Two boys launching a model sailboat looked at the paper flaming, blackening, whitening, disintegrat-ing ...

I know enough chemistry to know that paper smeared with wet white phosphorus will burst into flame when it dries completely. And I know there are kinds of invisible writing that are brought out by heat. There are those general sorts of possibility. Chemical writing.

And then there's thoughtwritfng, which is nothing but a word I've coined. Writing from a distance—a literal tele-gram.

And there may be a combination of the two—chemical writing activated by thought from a distance . . . from a great distance.

I don't know. I simply don't know. When I remember that last night with Max, there are parts of it I doubt But there's one part I never doubt.

When the gang asks me, “Where’s Max?” I just shrug.

But when they get to talking about withdrawals they’ve covered; rearguard actions, they’ve been in, I remember mine. I’ve never told them about it, but I never doubt that it took place.