

Elephant With Wooden Leg

John Sladek

Note: Madmen are often unable to distinguish between dream, reality, and ... between dream and reality. None of the incidents in Henry LaFarge's narrative ever happened or could have happened. His 'Orinoco Institute' bears no relation to the actual think tank of that name, his 'Drew Blenheim' in no way resembles the famous futurologist, and his 'United States of America' is not even a burlesque upon the real United States of Armorica.

* * * *

I couldn't hear him.

'Can't hear you, Blenheim. The line must be bad.'

'Or mad, Hank. I wonder what that would take?'

'What what?'

'What would it take to drive a telephone system out of its mind, eh? So that it wasn't just giving wrong numbers, but madly right ones. Let's see: Content-addressable computer memories to shift the conversations...'

I stopped listening. A bug was crawling up the window frame across the room. It moved like a cockroach, but I couldn't be sure.

'Look, Blenheim, I'm pretty busy today. Is there something on your mind?'

He ploughed right on. '... so if you're trying to reserve a seat on the plane to Seville, you'd get a seat at the opera instead. While the person who wants the opera seat is really making an appointment with a barber, whose customer is just then talking to the box-office of *Hair*, or maybe making a hairline reservation ...'

'Blenheim, I'm talking to you.'

'Yes?'

'What was it you called me up about?'

'Oh, this and that. I was wondering, for instance, whether parrots have internal clocks.'

'What?' I still couldn't be sure whether the bug was a cockroach or not, but I saluted just in case.

'If so, maybe we could get them to act as speaking clocks.'

He sounded crazier than ever. What trivial projects for one of the best brains in our century - no wonder he was on leave.

'Blenheim, I'm busy. Institute work must go on, you know.'

'Yes. Tell you what, why don't you drop over this afternoon? I have something to talk over with you.'

'Can't. I have a meeting all afternoon.'

'Fine, fine. See you, then. Anytime around 4:43.'

Madmen never listen.

* * * *

Helmut Rasmussen came in just as Blenheim hung up. He seemed distressed. Not that his face showed it; ever since that bomb wrecked his office, Hel has been unable to move his face. Hysterical paralysis, Dr Grobe had explained.

But Hel could signal whatever he felt by fiddling with the stuff in his shirt pocket. For anger, his red pencil came out (and sometimes underwent a savage sharpening), impatience made him work his slide rule, surprise made him glance into his pocket diary, and so on.

Just now he was clicking the button on his ballpoint pen with some agitation. For a moment he actually seemed about to take it out and draw worry lines on his forehead.

'What is it, Hel? The costing on Project Faith?' He spread the schedules on my desk and pointed to the snag: a discrepancy between the estimated cost of blasting apart and hauling away the Rocky Mountains, and the value of oil recovered in the process.

'I see. The trains, eh? Diesels seem to use most of the oil we get.'

How about steam locomotives, then?’

He clapped me on the shoulder and nodded.

‘By the way, Hel, I won’t be at the meeting today. Blenheim just called up. Wants to see me.’

Hel indicated surprise.

‘Look, I know he’s a crackpot. You don’t have to pocket-diary me, I know he’s nuts. But he is also technically still the Director. Our boss. They haven’t taken him off the payroll, just put him on sick leave. Besides, he used to have a lot of good ideas.’

Hel took out a felt-tip pen and began to doodle with some sarcasm. The fact was, Blenheim had completely lost his grip during his last year at the Institute. Before the government forced him to take leave, he’d been spending half a million a year on developing, rumours said, glass pancakes. And who could forget his plan to arm police with chocolate revolvers?

‘Sure he’s had a bad time, but maybe he’s better now,’ I said, without conviction.

Institute people never get better, Hel seemed to retort. They just kept on making bigger and better decisions, with more and more brilliance and finality, until they broke. Like glass pancakes giving out an ever purer ring, they exploded.

It was true. Like everyone else here, I was seeing Dr Grobe, our resident psychiatrist, several times a week. Then there were cases beyond even the skill of Dr Grobe: Joe Feeney, who interrupted his work (on the uses of holograms) one day to announce that he was a filing cabinet. Edna Bessler, who believed that she was being pursued by a synthetic *a priori* proposition. The lovely entomologist Pawlie Sutton, who disappeared. And George Hoad, whose rocket research terminated when he walked into the Gents one day and cut his throat. George spent the last few minutes of consciousness vainly trying to mop up the bloody floor with toilet paper...

Something was wrong with the personnel around this place, all right. And I suspected that our little six-legged masters knew more about this than they were saying.

Finally I mumbled, ‘I know it’s useless, Hel. But I’d better find out what he wants.’

You do what you think is best, Hel thought. He stalked out of my office then, examining the point on his red pencil.

* * * *

The bug was a cockroach, *P. americana*. It sauntered across the wall until it reached the curly edge of a wall poster, then it flew about a foot to land on the nearest dark spot. This was Uncle Sam's right eye. Uncle Sam, with his accusing eyes and finger, was trying to recruit men for the Senate and House of Representatives. On this poster, he said, 'The Senate Needs men'. So far, the recruitment campaign was a failure. Who could blame people for not wanting to go on the 'firing line' in Washington? The casualty rate of Congressmen was 30 per cent annually, and climbing, in spite of every security measure we could think of.

Which reminded me of work. I scrubbed off the blackboard and started laying out a contingency tree for Project Pogo, a plan to make the whole cabinet - all one hundred and forty-three secretaries - completely mobile, hence, proof against revolution. So far the Security Secretary didn't care for the idea of 'taking to our heels', but it was cheaper to keep the cabinet on the move than to guard them in Washington.

The cockroach, observing my industry, left by a wall ventilator, and I breathed easier. The contingency tree didn't look so interesting by now, and out the window I could see real trees.

The lawn rolled away down from the building to the river (not the Orinoco, despite our name). The far bank was blue-black with pines, and the three red maples on our lawn, this time of year, stood out like three separate, brilliant fireballs. For just the duration of a bluejay's flight from one to another, I could forget about the stale routine, the smell of chalkdust.

I remembered a silly day three years ago, when I'd carved a heart on one of those trees, with Pawlie Sutton's initials and my own.

Now a security guard strolled his puma into view. They stopped under the nearest maple and he snapped the animal's lead. It was up the trunk in two bounds, and out of sight among the leaves. While that stupid-faced man in uniform looked up, the fireball shook and swayed above him. A few great leaves fell, bright as drops of blood.

Now what was *this* headache going to be about?

* * * *

All the big problems were solved, or at least we knew how to solve them. The world was just about the way we wanted it, now, except we no longer seemed to want it that way. That's how Mr Howell, the Secretary of Personal Relationships, had put it in his telecast. What was missing? God, I think he said. God had made it possible for us to dam the Amazon and move the Orinoco, to feed India and dig gold from the ocean floor and cure cancer. And now God - the way he said it made you feel that He, too, was in the Cabinet - God was going to help us get down and solve our personal, human problems. Man's inhumanity to man. The lack of communication. The hatred. God and Secretary Howell were going to get right down to some committee work on this. I think that was the telecast where Howell announced the introduction of detention camps for 'malcontents'. Just until we got our personal problems all ironed out. I had drawn up the plans for these camps that summer. Then George Hoad borrowed my pocket-knife one day and never gave it back. Then the headaches started.

As I stepped outside, the stupid-faced guard was looking up the skirt of another tree.

'Prرت, prرت,' he said quietly, and the black puma dropped to earth beside him. There was something hanging out of its mouth that looked like a bluejay's wing.

'Good girl. Good girl.'

I hurried away to the helicopter.

* * * *

Drew Blenheim's tumbledown mansion sits in the middle of withered woods. For half a mile around, the trees are laced together with high-voltage fence. Visitors are blindfolded and brought in by helicopter. There are also rumours of minefields and other security measures. At that time, I put it all down to Blenheim's paranoia.

The engine shut down with the sound of a coin spinning to rest. Hands helped me out and removed my blindfold. The first thing I saw, hanging on a nearby stretch of fence, was a lump of bones and burnt fur from some small animal. The guards and their submachine-guns escorted me only as far as the door, for Blenheim evidently hated seeing signs of the security he craved. The house looked dismal and decayed -the skull of some dead Orinoco Institute?

A servant wearing burnt cork makeup and white gloves ushered me through a dim hallway that smelled of hay and on into the library.

'I'll tell Mr Blenheim you're here, sir. Perhaps you'd care to read one of his monographs while you wait?'

I flicked through *The Garden of Regularity* (a slight tract recommending that older people preserve intestinal health by devouring their own dentures) and opened an insanely boring book called *Can Bacteria Read?* I was staring uncomprehendingly at one of its pages when a voice said:

'Are you still here?' The plump old woman had evidently been sitting in her deep chair when I came in. As she craned around at me, I saw she had a black eye. Something was wrong with her hair, too. 'I thought you'd left by now - oh, it's *you*.'

'Madam, do I know you?'

She sat forward and put her face to the light. The black eye was tattooed, and the marcelled hair was really a cap of paper, covered with wavy ink lines. But it was Edna Bessler, terribly aged.

'You've changed, Edna.'

'So would you, young man, if you'd been chased around a nuthouse for two years by a synthetic *a priori* proposition.'

She sniffed. 'Well, thank heavens the revolution is set for tomorrow.'

I laughed nervously. 'Well, Edna, it certainly is good to see you. What are you doing here, anyway?'

'There are quite a few of the old gang here, Joe Feeney and - and others. This place has become a kind of repair depot for mad futurologists. Blenheim is very kind, but of course he's quite mad himself. Mad as a wet hen. As you see from his writing.'

'*Can Bacteria Read?* I couldn't read it.'

'Oh, he thinks that germs are, like people, amenable to suggestion. So, with the proper application of mass hypnosis among the microbe

populations, we ought to be able to cure any illness with any quack remedy.'

I nodded. 'Hope he recovers soon. I'd like to see him back at the Institute, working on real projects again. Big stuff, like the old days. I'll never forget the old Drew Blenheim, the man who invented satellite dialling.'

Satellite dialling came about when the malcontents were trying to jam government communications systems, cut lines and blow up exchanges. Blenheim's system virtually made each telephone a complete exchange in itself, dialling directly through a satellite. Voice signals were compressed and burped skywards in short bursts that evaded most jamming signals. It was an Orinoco Institute triumph over anarchy.

Edna chuckled. 'Oh, he's working on real projects. I said he was mad, not useless. Now if you'll help me out of this chair, I must go fix an elephant.'

I was sure I'd misheard this last. After she'd gone, I looked over a curious apparatus in the corner. Parts of it were recognizable - a clock inside a parrot cage, a gas laser, and a fringed shawl suspended like a flag from a walking-stick thrust into a watermelon - but their combination was baffling.

At 4:43 by the clock in the cage, the blackface servant took me to a gloomy great hall place, scattered with the shapes of easy chairs and sofas. A figure in a diving suit rose from the piano and waved me to a chair. Then it sat down again, flipping out its airhoses behind the bench.

For a few minutes I suffered through a fumbling version of some Mexican tune. But when Blenheim - no doubt it was he - stood up and started juggling oranges, I felt it was time to speak out.

'Look, I've interrupted my work to come here. Is this all you have to show me?'

One of the oranges vaulted high, out of sight in the gloom above; another hit me in the chest. The figure opened its faceplate and grinned. 'Long time no see, Hank.'

It was me.

* * * *

'Rubber mask,' Blenheim explained, plucking at it. 'I couldn't resist trying it

on you, life gets so tedious here. Ring for Rastus, will you? I want to shed this suit.'

We made small talk while the servant helped him out of the heavy diving suit. Rather, Blenheim rattled on alone; I wasn't feeling well at all. The shock of seeing myself had reminded me of something I should remember, but couldn't.

'... to build a heraldry vending machine. Put in a coin, punch out your name, and it prints a coat-of-arms. Should suit those malcontents, eh? All they probably really want is a coat-of-arms.'

'They're just plain evil,' I said. 'When I think how they bombed poor Hel Rasmussen's office - '

'Oh, he did that himself. Didn't you know?'

'Suicide? So that explains the hysterical paralysis!'

My face looked exasperated, as Blenheim peeled it off. 'Is that what Dr Grobe told you? Paralysed hell, the blast blew his face clean off. Poor Hel's present face is a solid plate of plastic, bolted on. He breathes through a hole in his shoulder and feeds himself at the armpit. If Grobe told you any different, he's just working on your morale.'

From upstairs came a kind of machine-gun clatter. The minstrel servant glided in with a tray of drinks.

'Oh, Rastus. Tell the twins not to practice their tap-dancing just now, will you? Hank looks as if he has a headache.'

'Yes sir. By the way, the three-legged elephant has arrived. I put it in the front hall. I'm afraid the prosthesis doesn't fit.'

'I'll fix it. Just ask Jumbo to lean up against the wall for half an hour.'

'Very good, sir.'

After this, I decided to make my escape from this Bedlam.

'Doesn't anybody around here ever do anything straightforward or say anything in plain English?'

'We're trying to tell you something, Hank, but it isn't easy. For one

thing, I'm not sure we can trust you.'

'Trust me for what?'

His twisted face twisted out a smile. 'If you don't know, then how can we trust you? But come with me to the conservatory and I'll show you something.'

We went to a large room with dirty glass walls. To me it looked like nothing so much as a bombed-out workshop. Though there were bags of fertilizer on the floor, there wasn't a living plant in sight. Instead, the tables were littered with machinery and lab equipment: jumbles of retorts and coloured wires and nuts and bolts that made no sense.

'What do you see, Hank?'

'Madness and chaos. You might as well have pears in the light sockets and a banana on the telephone cradle, for all I can make of it.'

He laughed. 'That's better. We'll crazify you yet.'

I pointed to a poster-covered cylinder standing in the corner. One of the posters had Uncle Sam, saying 'I Need men for Congress'.

'What's that Parisian advertising kiosk doing here?'

'Rastus built that for us, out of scrap alloys I had lying around. Like it?'

I shrugged. 'The top's too pointed. It looks like - '

'Yes, go on.'

'This is silly. All of you need a few sessions with Dr Grobe,' I said. 'I'm leaving.'

'I was afraid you'd say that. But it's you who need another session with Dr Grobe, Hank.'

'You think *I'm* crazy?'

'No, you're too damned sane.'

'Well you sure as hell are nuts!' I shouted. 'Why bother with all the security outside? Afraid someone will steal the idea of a minstrel show or

the secret of a kiosk?’

He laughed again. ‘Hank, those guards aren’t there to keep strangers out. *They’re to keep us in.* You see, my house really and truly is a madhouse.’

I stamped out a side door and ordered my helicopter.

‘My head’s killing me,’ I told the guard. ‘Take it easy with that blindfold.’

‘Oh, sorry, mac. Hey look, it’s none of my business, but what did you do with that tree you brung with you?’

‘Tree?’ God, even the guards were catching it.

* * * *

That evening I went to see Dr Grobe.

‘Another patient? I swear, I’m going to install a revolving door on this office. Sit down. Uh, Hank LaFarge, isn’t it? Sit down, Hank. Let’s see... oh, you’re the guy who’s afraid of cockroaches, right?’

‘Not exactly afraid of them. In fact they remind me of someone I used to be fond of. Pawlie Sutton used to work with them. But my problem is, I know that cockroaches are the real bosses. We’re just kidding ourselves with our puppet government, our Uncle Sham - ‘

He chuckled appreciatively.

‘But what “bugs” me is, nobody will recognize this plain and simple truth, Doctor.’

‘Ah, ah. Remember last time, you agreed to call me by my first name.’

‘Sorry, uh, Oddpork.’ I couldn’t imagine why anyone with that name wanted to be called by it, unless the doctor himself was trying to get used to it. He was an odd-pork of a man, too: plump and rumpy, with over-large hands that never stopped adjusting his already well-adjusted clothes. He always looked surprised at everything I said, even ‘hello’. Every session, he made the same joke about the revolving door.

Still, repetitive jokes help build a family atmosphere, which was

probably what he wanted. There was a certain comfort in this stale atmosphere of no surprises. Happy families are all alike, and their past is exactly like their future.

‘Hank, I haven’t asked you directly about your cockroach theory before, have I? Want to tell me about it?’

‘I know it sounds crazy at first. For one thing, cockroaches aren’t very smart, I know that. In some ways, they’re stupider than ants. And their communication equipment isn’t much, either. Touch and smell, mainly. They aren’t naturally equipped for conquering the world.’

Oddpork lit a cigar and leaned back, looking at the ceiling ‘What do they do with the world when they get it?’

‘That’s another problem. After all, they don’t *need* the world. All they need is food, water, a fair amount of darkness and some warmth. But there’s the key, you see?’

‘I mean we humans have provided for all these needs for many centuries. Haphazardly, though. So it stands to reason that life would be better for them if we worked for them on a regular basis. But to get us to do that, they have to take over first.’

He tried to blow a smoke ring, failed, and adjusted his tie. ‘Go on. How do they manage this takeover?’

‘I’m not sure, but I think they have help. Maybe some smart tinkerer wanted to see what would happen if he gave them good long-distance vision. Maybe he was so pleased with the result that he then taught them to make semaphore signals with their feelers. The rest is history.’

Dusting his lapel, Dr Grobe said, ‘I don’t quite follow. Semaphore signals?’

‘One cockroach is stupid. But a few thousand of them in good communication could make up a fair brain. Our tinkerer probably hastened that along by intensive breeding and group learning problems, killing off the failures ... it would take ten years at the outside.’

‘Really? And how long would the conquest of man take? How would the little insects fare against the armies of the world?’

‘They never need to try. Armies are run by governments, and

governments are run, for all practical purposes, by small panels of experts. Think tanks like the Orinoco Institute. And - this just occurred to me - for all practical purposes, you run the Institute.'

For once, Dr Grobe did not look surprised. 'Oh, so I'm in on the plot, am I?'

'We're all so crazy, we really depend on you. You can ensure that we work for the good of the cockroaches, or else you can get rid of us - send us away, or encourage our suicides.'

'Why should I do that?'

'Because *you* are afraid of them.'

'Not at all.' But his hand twitched, and a little cigar ash fell on his immaculate trousers. I felt my point was proved.

'Damn. I'll have to sponge that. Excuse me.'

He stepped into his private washroom and closed the door. My feeling of triumph suddenly faded. Maybe I was finally cracking. What evidence did I really have?

On the other hand, Dr Grobe was taking a long time in there. I stole over to the washroom door and listened.

'... verge of suicide ...,' he murmured. '... yes...give up the idea, but... yes, that's just what I...'

I threw back the door on a traditional spy scene. In the half-darkness, Dr G was hunched over the medicine cabinet, speaking into a microphone. He wore earphones.

'Hank, don't be a foo -'

I hit him, not hard, and he sat down on the edge of the tub. He looked resigned.

'So this is my imagined conspiracy, is it? Where do these wires lead?'

They led inside the medicine cabinet, to a tiny apparatus. A dozen brown ellipses had clustered around it, like a family around the TV.

'Let me explain,' he said.

'Explanations are unnecessary, Doctor. I just want to get out of here, unless your six-legged friends can stop me.'

'They might. So could I. I could order the guards to shoot you. I could have you put away with your crazy friends. I could even have you tried for murder, just now.'

'Murder?' I followed his gaze back into the office. From under the desk, a pair of feet. 'Who's that?'

'Hel Rasmussen. Poisoned himself a few minutes before you came in. Believe me, it wasn't pleasant, seeing the poor fellow holding a bottle of cyanide to his armpit. He left a note blaming you, in a way.'

'Me!'

'You were the last straw. This afternoon, he saw you take an axe and deliberately cut down one of those beautiful maple trees in the yard. Destruction of beauty - it was too much for him.'

Trees again. I went to the office window and looked out at the floodlit landscape. One of the maples was missing.

Dr Grobe and I sat down again at our respective interview stations, while I thought this over. Blenheim and his mask came into it, I was sure of that. But why?

* * * *

Dr Grobe fished his lifeless cigar from the ashtray. 'The point is, I can stop you from making any trouble for me. So you may as well hear me out.' He scratched a match on the sole of Hel's shoe and relit the cigar.

'All right, Oddpork. You win. What happens now?'

'Nothing much. Nothing at all. If my profession has any meaning, it's to keep things from happening.' He blew out the match. 'I'm selling ordinary life. Happiness, as you must now see, lies in developing a pleasant, comfortable and productive routine - and then sticking to it. No unpleasant surprises. No shocks. Psychiatry has always aimed for that, and now it is within our grasp. The cockroach conspiracy hasn't taken over the world, but

it has taken over the Institute - and it's our salvation.

'You see, Hank, our bargain isn't one-sided. We give them a little shelter, a few scraps of food. But they give us something far more important: real organization. *The life of pure routine.*'

I snorted. 'Like hurrying after trains? Or wearing ourselves out on assembly-line work? Or maybe grinding our lives away in boring offices? Punching time-clocks and marching in formation?'

'None of the above, thank you. Cockroaches never hurry to anything but dinner. They wouldn't march in formation except for fun. They are free - yet they are part of a highly organized society. And this can be ours.'

'If we're not all put in detention camps.'

'Listen, those camps are only a stage. So what if a few million grumblers get sterilized and shut away for a year or two? Think of the *billions* of happy, decent citizens, enjoying a freedom they have earned. Someday, every man will live exactly as he pleases - and his pleasure will lie in serving his fellow men.'

Put like that, it was persuasive. Another half-hour of this and I was all but convinced.

'Sleep on it, eh Hank? Let me know tomorrow what you think.' His large hand on my shoulder guided me to the door.

'You may be right,' I said, smiling back at him. I meant it, too. Even though the last thing I saw, as the door closed, was a stream of glistening brown that came from under the washroom door and disappeared under the desk.

* * * *

I sat up in my own office most of the night, staring out at the maple stump. There was no way out: Either I worked for *Periplaneta americana* and gradually turned into a kind of moral cockroach myself, or I was killed. And there were certain advantages to either choice.

I was about to turn on the video-recorder to leave a suicide note, when I noticed the cassette was already recorded. I ran it back and played it.

Blenheim came on, wearing my face and my usual suit.

'They think I'm you, Hank, dictating some notes. Right now you're really at my house, reading a dull book in the library. So dull, in fact, that it's guaranteed to put you into a light trance. When I'm safely back, Edna will come in and wake you.

'She's not as loony as she seems. The black eye is inked for her telescope, and the funny cap with lines on it, that looks like marcelled hair, that's a weathermap. I won't explain why she's doing astronomy - you'll understand in time.

'On the other hand, she's got a fixation that the stars are nothing but the shiny backs of cockroaches, treading around the heavenly spheres. It makes a kind of sense when you think of it: *Periplaneta* means around the world, and America being the home of the Star-Spangled Banner.

'Speaking of national anthems, Mexico's is La Cucaracha - another cockroach reference. They seem to be taking over this message!

'The gang and I have been thinking about bugs a lot lately. Of course Pawlie has always thought about them, but the rest of us ...' I missed the next part. So Pawlie was at the madhouse? And they hadn't told me?

'... when I started work on the famous glass pancakes. I discovered a peculiar feature of glass discs, such as those found on clock faces.

'Say, you can do us a favour. I'm coming around at dawn with the gang, to show you a gadget or two. We haven't got all the bugs out of them yet, but - will you go into Dr Grobe's office at dawn, and check the time on his clock? But first, smash the glass on his window, will you? Thanks. I'll compensate him for it later.

'Then go outside the building, but on no account stand between the maple stump and the broken window. The best place to wait is on the little bluff to the North, where you'll have a good view of the demonstration. We'll meet you there.

'Right now you see our ideas darkly, as through a pancake, I guess. But soon you'll understand. You see, we're a kind of cockroach ourselves. I mean, living on scraps of sanity. We have to speak in parables and work in silly ways because *they* can't. *They* live in a comfortable kind of world where elephants have their feet cut off to make umbrella stands. We have to make good use of the three-legged elephants.

'Don't bother destroying this cassette. It won't mean a thing to any right-living insect.'

It didn't mean much to me, not yet. Cockroaches in the stars? Clocks? There were questions I had to ask, at the rendezvous.

* * * *

There was one question I'd already asked that needed an answer. Pawlie had been messing about in her lab, when I asked her to marry me. Two years ago, was it? Or three?

'But you don't like cockroaches,' she said.

'No, and I'll never ask a cockroach for its claw in marriage.' I looked over her shoulder into the glass case. 'What's so interesting about these?'

'Well, for one thing, they're not laboratory animals. I caught them myself in the basement here at the Institute. See? Those roundish ones are the nymphs - sexless adolescents. Cute, aren't they?'

I had to admit they were. A little. 'They look like the fat black exclamation points in comic strips,' I observed.

'They're certainly healthy, all of them. I've never seen any like them. I - that's funny.' She went and fetched a book, and looked from some illustration to the specimens under glass.

'What's funny?'

'Look, I'm going to be dissecting the rest of the afternoon. Meet you for dinner. Bye.'

'You haven't answered my question, Pawlie.'

'Bye.'

That was the last I saw of her. Later, Dr Grobe put it about that she'd been found, hopelessly insane. Still later, George Hoad cut his throat.

* * * *

The floodlights went off, and I could see dawn greyness and mist. I took a

can of beans and went for a stroll outside.

One of the guards nodded a wary greeting. They and their cats were always jumpiest at this time of day.

‘Everything all right, officer?’

‘Yeah. Call me crazy, but I think I just heard an elephant.’

When he and his puma were out of sight, I heaved the can of beans through Dr Grobe’s lighted window.

‘What the hell?’ he shouted. I slipped back to my office, waited a few minutes, then went to see him.

A slender ray came through the broken window and struck the clock on the opposite wall. Grobe sat transfixed, staring at it with more surprise than ever. And no wonder, for the clock had become a parrot.

‘Relax, Oddpork,’ I said. ‘It’s only some funny kind of hologram in the clock face, worked by a laser from the lawn. You look like a comic villain, sitting there with that cigar stub in your face.’

The cigar stub moved. Looking closer, I saw it was made up of the packed tails of a few cockroaches, trying to force themselves between his closed lips. More ran up from his spotless collar and joined them, and others made for his nostrils. One approached the queue at the mouth, found another stuck there, and had a nibble at its kicking hind leg.

‘Get away! Get away!’ I gave Grobe a shake to dislodge them, and his mouth fell open. A brown flood of kicking bodies tumbled out and down, over his well-cut lapels.

* * * *

I had stopped shuddering by the time I joined the others on the bluff. Pawlie and Blenheim were missing. Edna stopped scanning the horizon with her brass telescope long enough to introduce me to the pretty twins, Alice and Celia. They sat in the grass beside a tangled heap of revolvers, polishing their patent-leather tap shoes.

The ubiquitous Rastus was wiping off his burnt cork makeup. I asked him why.

'Don't need it anymore. Last night it was my camouflage. I was out in the woods, cutting a path through the electric fence. Quite a wide path, as you'll understand.'

He continued removing the black until I recognized the late George Hoad.

'George! But you cut your throat, remember? Mopping up blood -'

'Hank, that was your blood. It was you cut your throat in the Gents, after Pawlie vanished. Remember?'

I did, giddily. 'What happened to you, then?'

'Your suicide attempt helped me make up my mind; I quit the Institute next day. You were still in the hospital.'

Still giddy, I turned to watch Joe Feeney operating the curious laser I'd seen in the library. Making parrots out of clocks.

'I understand now,' I said. 'But what's the watermelon for?'

'Cheap cooling device.'

'And the "flag"?' I indicated the shawl-stick arrangement.

'To rally round. I stuck it in the melon because they were using the umbrella stand for -'

'Look!' Edna cried. 'The attack begins!' She handed me a second telescope.

All I saw below was the lone figure of Blenheim in his diving suit, shuffling slowly up from the river mist to face seven guards and two pumas. He seemed to be juggling croquet balls.

'Why don't we help him?' I shouted. 'Don't just sit here shining shoes and idling.'

The twins giggled. 'We've already helped some,' said Alice, nodding at the pile of weapons. 'We made friends with the guards.'

I got the point when those below pulled their guns on Blenheim. As each man drew, he looked at his gun and then threw it away.

‘What a waste,’ Celia sighed. ‘Those guns are made from just about the best chocolate you can get.’

Blenheim played his parlour trick on the nearest guard: one juggled ball flew high, the guard looked up, and a second ball clipped him on the upturned chin.

Now the puma guards went into action.

‘I can’t look,’ I said, my eye glued to the telescope. One of the animals stopped to sniff at a sticky revolver, but the other headed straight for his quarry. He leapt up, trying to fasten his claws into the stranger’s big brass head.

Out of the river mist came a terrible cry, and then a terrible sight: a hobbling grey hulk that resolved into a charging elephant. Charging diagonally, so it looked even larger.

The pumas left the scene. One fled in our direction until Alice snatched up a pistol and fired it in the air. At that sound, the guards decided to look for jobs elsewhere. After all, as Pawlie said later, you couldn’t expect a man to face a juggling diver *and* a mad elephant with a wooden leg, with nothing but a chocolate .38, not on *those* wages.

Pawlie was riding on the neck of the elephant. When he came to a wobbling stop I saw that one of Jumbo’s forelegs was a section of tree with the bark still on it. And in the bark, a heart with PS + HL, carved years before.

I felt the triumph was all over - especially since Pawlie kept nodding her head yes at me - until George said:

‘Come on, gang. Let’s set it up.’

Jumbo had been pulling a wooden sledge, bearing the Paris kiosk. Now he went off to break his fast on water and grass, while the rest of us set the thing upright. Even before we had fuelled it with whatever was in the fertilizer bags, I guessed that it was a rocket.

After some adjustments, the little door was let down, and a sweet, breakfast pancake odour came forth. Joe Feeney opened a flask of dark liquid and poured it in the entrance. The smell grew stronger.

'Maple sap,' he explained. 'From Jumbo's wooden leg. Mixed with honey. And there's oatmeal inside. A farewell breakfast.'

I looked in the little door and saw the inside of the ship was made like a metal honeycomb, plenty of climbing room for our masters.

Pawlie came from the building with a few cockroaches in a jar, and let them taste our wares. Then, all at once, it was a sale opening at any big department store. We all stood back and let the great brown wave surge forward and break over the little rocket. Some of them, nymphs especially, scurried all the way up to the nose cone and back down again in their excitement. It all looked so jolly that I tried not to think about their previous meals.

Edna glanced at her watch. 'Ten minutes more,' she said. 'Or they'll hit the sun.'

I objected that we'd never get all of them loaded in ten minutes.

'No,' said Pawlie, 'But we'll get the best and strongest. The shrews can keep the rest in control.'

Edna closed the door, and the twins did a vigorous tap-dance on the unfortunate stragglers. A few minutes later, a million members of the finest organization on earth were on their way to the stars.

'To join their little friends,' said Edna.

Pawlie and I touched hands, as Blenheim opened his faceplate.

'I've been making this study,' he said, 'of spontaneous combustion in giraffes ...'