

Howard Waldrop

A Better World's in Birth!

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"The Past ain't dead. It ain't even past."

- William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

1 Arise, Ye Prisoners of Starvation!

THE WHOLE THING BEGAN, I AM TOLD, WITH THE sound of falling books in the Peoples' Department of Culture.

In my initial inquiry, I pieced together the following:

Comrade Dichter, the chief clerk, was at her desk when she heard the books fall—one, two, three—inside the office of the Peoples' Minister of Culture. There was the sound of a chair scrap-ing on the floor and a muted cry.

Comrade Dichter rose from her desk, knocked once, and opened the door to the inner office. The Minister of Culture was an old man nearing retirement (he had fought on the barricades of the Revolution as a man of thirty-five) and had not been in the best of health for a few years, though still a tireless worker. Dichter feared to see him slumped over his desk or lying on the floor, victim of a stroke or seizure.

She was more surprised to see him standing, backed to the left-ward wall of his office, staring toward his private bookcase on the right wall, an excited look in his eyes.

His chair was overturned near his desk where he had risen quickly. Several books and the right-hand bookend, which had held them on the corner of his iron desk, lay on the floor.

He breathed heavily, and put out one hand toward the wall, as if reaching for a curtain or to close a window.

"Comrade Minister," asked Dichter. "What is?"

He turned his head toward her. His eyes shone with fear, or something more.

"Karl . . ." he said. "Karl Marx was standing there, wearing his last suit and trailing the rope they hanged him with!"

Only then did the Peoples' Minister of Culture lie down, like a man lowering himself into his usual bed at home, stretch himself out full-length on the floor of his office, and die with a small sigh.

Since this involved the head of the Department of Culture, and one of the original Revolutionaries, the Peoples' Department for Security was called in.

In this case, me.

I went back to Department headquarters to make my initial report to my boss.

I boarded Peoples' Traction Company Tram #4 at the corner of Tannhauser Boulevard and Street of the Peoples, on which all the government departments were located. I looked over my notes of interviews with six Culture workers, and the doctor who had treated the Peoples' Minister for the last twelve years.

Workers on bicycles, a few pedicabs, and one vehicle based on the eastern rickshaw, pulled by two sturdy proles in tandem, passed the steam tram. It was true what people said; Dresden was a more beautiful, quieter, and hygienic city since horses had been banned three years ago, freeing half the street cleaners for more important jobs. (Rome, 2000 years ago, had taken a halfway measure, forbid-ding the city to equine traffic between sunup and sundown, which meant only that it was noisier, and you stepped in road-apples in the darkness.) Here and there one of the new self-propelled vehicles sputtered by, giving off whale-oil fumes.

It was late in the year with a hint of snow in the air under the gray sky. Not the picture people have of Dresden. It was warm in the tram, however, the few blocks I rode, thanks to the new electrical heating coils over the seats.

I stepped out; the Peoples' tram moved away, and I went in and reported to my Section chief.

2 The Union We of All Who Work

DIRKMANN HAD HIS BOOTED FEET UP ON HIS large desk. It had once belonged to some minor functionary in the Old Regime.

"So?" he asked, cocking his head to one side so his good eye was on top.

"The Minister of Culture died of a coronary, or a cerebral hemorrhage. He had been in poor health. Evidently it was triggered when Karl Marx, whom he had known, or rather the *figure* of Karl Marx, stepped out of his bookcase."

Dirkmann raised his eyebrow, the one over the bad eye. He took down his feet and sat upright slowly in his chair.

"He saw Karl Marx." It wasn't a question.

"According to the chief clerk."

Dirkmann reached into his desk files and came up with four blue *pneumatique* letters.

"That makes one Marx, one Engels, and now three Wagners in the last week."

"So ..." I said. "A—"

"—Spectre is Haunting Europe," finished Dirkmann. "Or, spectres. And Dresden, if not the whole of the continent." He looked over the blue forms. "All to current or former officials who knew them. Your case is the only one involving death—the woman who saw Engels has been put to sick-bed by her doctor, though. I've sent copies upward—yours will join them. At least the Leader will not have just statistics to read, if the copies get that far. Right now I need a three-paragraph summary. Then go home. Tomorrow," he said, "don't come here. Go directly to the Peoples' Archives. Start learning everything you can about Wagner."

"But," I said, "surely the Department has some expert, someone it can call on?"

"It does," said Dirkmann. "*He* saw Wagner Tuesday." He pointed to one of the blue letters. "He's been quite drunk since."

"I'm not the least bit musical," I said. "I can't carry a tune, or whistle. Others who can would be better."

"There's irony for you, Comrade," said Dirkmann. "Someone named Rienzi who can't whistle! I said, research everything. The music was only about one-tenth the man. Work your way through *that* on momentum. I want you to know as much about the man as anyone who wasn't there. Talk to whomever you must. Find out why this is happening after twenty-three years."

"Surely *you* can't believe . . ."

"Ah, yes!" said Comrade Dirkmann. "The Peoples' Federated States of Europe does not believe in ghosts or goblins! It believes in the innate perfectibility of Man! *There's* your Hegelian dialectic in a nutshell. We no longer have the Church's Heaven and Hell; we have the Worker's Heaven on Earth!"

"Very well. Why would *you* be interested in this, then?"

Dirkmann looked at me with his bad eye.

"It's personal," he said. "These ghosts are messing with *my* town."

Every school, gymnasium, and university student thinks they know Wagner's story. I thought I did, too, until I was handed this case. The usual precis goes something like this: Born, 1813, Leipzig, his stepfather perhaps his true father; brothers and sisters; bad acad-emia and gambling; desire to write poems and plays, then opera: *Die Feen*; *Das Liebesverbot*; *Rienzi*; *Der fliegende Holländer*; *Tannhäuser*; *Lohengrin*; the start of one on Jesus and one on Buddha; some notes about the Norse. While writing and compos-ing these, a series of itinerant jobs as choral and orchestral leaders in Prague, Riga, and elsewhere. Marriage to the actress Minna Planer; poverty in Paris; escape from creditors in the night, to end up as kappelmeister to the Court of Saxony, 1846; eventual conversion to the revolutionary party, the *Vaterlandsverein*, 1847; hero of the Dresden Revolution, May, 1849; First Leader of the Peoples' Federated Revolutionary State, 1849-1853 (during, and just after which, all Germany became a Peoples' Republic); adoption of a son, 1852; execution by the Prussian forces of the Counter-Revolution, 1853; disinterment and entombment in the Wall of Martyrs, Dresden, 1854, following the collapse of Prussia. In other words, idol and fount from which all European (with the exception of Britain) revolutions and Peoples' Republics sprang.

The night before going to the Archives, I reread Hannebolt's *Richard Wagner: Peoples' Martyr* (we'd all had to read it at Uni-versity), made some notes, and took them with me the following morning.

The chief archivist seemed surprised when I presented my credentials and told him what I was here for.

"Except for a few foreign scholars, sent by their governments to look for specific things Wagner might have said about *their* countries, hardly anyone comes here looking for anything. Most of it, you know, has been printed somewhere—the State Publishing House did forty-nine volumes—copies of those are here, too—and it has been twenty-three years since his martyrdom. For what specifically are you looking? The papers of the Provisional Government? His writings on music theory?"

"I suppose I want to look at it *all*," I said.

The archivist laughed. "Excuse me, Comrade." He gestured for me to follow him. We walked down a short hall and turned. He unlocked the door, revealing four rooms, one after the other, extending into the darkness. There were floor-to-ceiling shelves in the first room, with four reading desks near the door, and in the far corner boxes and map files, all labeled.

"Where would you like to start?" he asked.

I looked at my notes. "His letters to friends, 1849-1850. The official papers by him on the Erfurt Crisis of 1851. Records of the Prussian Counter-Revolution in Dresden of 1853. *Some* of the music."

The archivist pushed a button. Three clerks appeared. He rolled off a series of numbers; they scurried away. He seated me at one of the desks and turned on its new Ruhmkorff lamps, bathing the reading table with a soft blue glow.

"You may leave anything here when you're done for the day," he said. He handed *me* a dozen red ribbons. "Place these on anything you wish kept out for tomorrow. The others I shall return to the stacks myself. If you wish more, or anything, press the button. The *taza de alivio* is the first door on the left. Enjoy your research," he said, and departed.

In a few minutes the clerks had put a dozen boxes, ledgers, and notebooks on the desk, then they too departed.

I was alone with Wagner and history.

3 Fruits of the Peoples' Works Are Buried

IN THE WRITINGS OF ONE OF THE LESSER-KNOWN of the original Revolutionaries, I ran across the following:

Of course, revolutions are fun! You can drop a piano from a fourth-floor window onto some poor conscript—caught between shooting at you, and being shot for not shooting at you—and watch him pop like a tomato. There is a sense of great personal satisfaction—I did *my* part in the collapse of some nodding Charles or Louis or Roderigo, even if it were just to kill some poor fool who'd rather be up here throwing furniture down on me. *He* is dead—Long Live the Revolution! It was not his fault he was the tool of backwardness and repression; it is not my fault I am the agency through which the Forces of Destiny work themselves out. Might as well execute Bösendorfer for making the piano in the first place! I work for a world where people will never have to make a choice between shooting me and being shot for not killing me on sight.

— August Roeckel, 1850

The third day of the Revolution, everyone knows, Wagner borrowed a cart and took his wife, his dog Peps (a monster that could have pulled a cart), and a parrot to his sister's house in Chemnitz, forty kilometers away. He was on his way back next morning when he started meeting refugees from Dresden, telling him to turn around, the Revolution has failed. Then he met the owner of the cart, who was in another with his household goods and two grown sons. Wagner returned his cart and weary horse to the man, and continued on foot back toward the city. He met more and more people, including members of the Revolutionary Council, who told him the Prussians were coming.

What most don't know is that he continued on for another kilometer before his will faltered; that he had in fact retraced his path for two kilometers back toward Chemnitz when he spied, coming in from a side road from the direction of Poland, a large group of armed men, singing and yelling.

They had come from Bohemia to aid the Revolution and had heard no news yet. More than half were

drunk—they had come upon an abandoned wagonload of wine two villages back.

Heartened, Wagner told them he was a member of the Revolutionary Council, out scouting for the reinforcements—and here they were! He put himself at their head, and marched them back into the now-burning city, singing "La Marseillaise." What remained of the Revolutionary Council—that being Bakunin and Roeckel—came out to meet them.

And less than an hour after taking their places on the barricades, word came that their king, the King of Saxony (safely twenty kilo-meters away), had accepted the crown of the constitutional mon-archy offered by the Frankfurt Assembly, in the name of the Peoples' Federated Revolutionary States.

The fighting went on for another two days — the Poles at the forefront—then a miracle. The Prussians were recalled to put down a minor revolution of their own, leaving only the battered army of the Old Regime to withdraw to the nearest border to await develop-ments.

Wagner threw a last grenade at the hindmost of the Saxon army stragglers, from his nest in the bell tower of the Kreuzkirche, and yelled, "Good riddance, running dogs of the bourgeois lick-spittles!"

Up in the tower with Wagner was a new arrival—he'd entered Dresden while Wagner had been turning around for Chemnitz before meeting the Poles. His name was Emil Gaspard, later known to history as Eisenmann.

The first thing Wagner did the next day was send for Engels, who was in Frankfort, and Marx, who was of all places in Prussia.

They came, *toots sweet*.

From Wagner's personal notebook:

Last night, troubled by bad news from *just everywhere*, I fell asleep on my campaign bed while reading dispatches. I had a strange dream, uplifting and nightmarish at the same time.

I was in a strange city filled with water—it must be Venice though I have never been there—and I was an old man. When I moved, my joints ached and my heart was as heavy as lead.

But the strangest aspect was that the woman I was with—Minna was nowhere about—who must be my wife, was Liszt's daughter, whom I met when she was eleven years old five years ago, in 1848; now a grown plain but stylish woman.

I was at a desk in a sumptuous apartment in some villa. And I was writing not party essays or speeches, but music once again, music such as I nor the world had ever heard before! I knew it was my masterpiece. I wrote the last note of the last bar. And at that moment my heart ruptured and I died. Liszt's daughter saw and rushed toward me; her hands grabbed me as all faded to black—

I awoke with a start to find my glasses broken where I had rolled onto them in my sleep, and myself crying—and then Bakunin barging in, singing, already smoking the vilest cigar to be had, and behind him Marx, Engels, and Roeckel, all full of plans for the relief of Erfurt. . .

One day nineteen years before Wagner's revolution, Emil Gaspard (now known as Eisenmann, the Leader of the VDDR) turned a corner in Paris and witnessed a soldier shoot Emil's neighbor, Monsieur J-P Fleury, right between the eyes.

Emil had been heading for his father's *boulangerie* when he heard a great tumult in the street ahead. He'd run and leaned around the corner just in time to see the act.

The fact that M. Fleury had been raising his walking stick at the soldier did not change the violence of the act that ensued.

Immediately several other civilians beat the crap out of the soldier. Then they stepped back to a handy pile of paving stones three meters away and stoned him with enough bricks to make the foundation of a small shop. Someone took his rifle, cartridges, and bayonet, and ran away.

There were sounds of firing up the street; smashing furniture, the screams of women and men, the neighing of horses cut short by musketry. Emil ran toward his father's place of business in time to see soldiers roll a cannon around a farther intersection, then fire it into a mob that crossed from a side street, tearing away limbs and heads, covering the walls with blood and offal.

A second cannonade tore into people beside the bakeshop. Flames spewed from its shattered facade. Emil ran to the shop, slip-ping on a boot and foot. The back door to the place stood open; his father and the baker-boys must have gotten away.

Soldiers marched down the street then, serried out in a wedge, cannon foremost, trundling it before them. Heat and flames grew around Emil.

An officer walked slowly by. Emil grabbed a dough-paddle big-ger than himself and stepped out behind

the man. Emil brought the paddle down with such force that he was lifted from the ground. The officer sank to his knees.

Emil grabbed the two pistols and holsters with their cartridge box from the wounded officer. When he tried to pull the man's saber from its scabbard, it proved too heavy and unwieldy.

"What do you think you're doing there, boy?" asked a sergeant, standing over him, a rifle in his hand.

Emil shot him right between the eyes and grabbed his rifle before it fell to the ground. He ran off toward the end of the street where a barricade was going up.

It had been a hot July day in Paris in 1830, and Emil was ten years old. As he ran down the street, he caught a glimpse of three men watching him from a balcony.

After Charles X had slunk out of the city, and the July Revolution ended, a servant showed up in the Gaspard home with a visiting-card from a famous painter.

So it was that Emil found himself posing beside a half-naked lady, and a student in the green top hat and red velvet coat of the National Guard, while M. Delacroix painted his famous picture "Liberty Leading the People, 28 July 1830," a few days before the painter left on a long-planned trip to Algiers.

Emil was quite bored, standing there in this fashion fifteen minutes at a time, holding up the two pistols, trailing the cartridge box, with that ridiculous beret on his head. But at the end of three days he was paid what amounted to his father's income for a month, and that was the only income the family had seen since the shop had burned down.

As he said goodbye, he realized M. Delacroix was one of the three men who had watched him from the balcony.

From Wagner's personal notebook:

Bakunin said one night: "This revolution's over. I've got other cities to be burning, other soldiers to be depressing. My work here is done; it has been for at least a year, but I've stayed on from good comradeship and a vast sense of accomplishment.

"A toast, comrades" he said. We stood.

"To further revolutions in the minds of men ..." We all lifted our glasses to each other, and placed our hands over our hearts.

It was the saddest, and at the same time, most encouraging leave-taking I have ever had.

4 For Justice Thunders Condemnation

THEY MARCHED WAGNER OUT TO THE WALL behind the Municipal Building the day after they hanged Marx and Engels.

In the tumult of the last few days there had not been time, nor had it been safe enough, for a large crowd to gather, but there was now a respectable and respectful one; some of the men with their hats off; some people holding up children so, as they said according to political leanings, they could see and remember either the death of a peoples' hero, or the just desserts of a rabble-rousing villain.

The firing squad was a handpicked group of Saxons, though the officer was a Prussian.

"Are there any last words, Herr Wagner?" asked the interim bailiff, after reading the death warrant.

Wagner, it is said, had difficulty clearing his throat. His voice was weakened from shouting orders this last week of fighting, and of arguing in court the day before. It barely carried past the firing squad, but then, the first part of the speech was addressed only to them.

"Remember . . ." he said with great trouble, "Remember me, when you, yourself, stand here." And then his voice rose to take in the crowd. "Lady Liberty!" he said. "Show us your tits!"

And then they shot him.

In the crowd stood Eisenmann, with a newly shaved head and a fake beard, and from that moment on his resolve was set.

It took a year of large struggles, small defeats, and then the Con-solidation, before the geopolitics of revolution were settled, and the Peoples' Federated German Republic was a reality, with Eisen-mann at the head of the Peoples' Council, and later the Republic's Leader.

It took a further three years before his first order as head of state came to fruition.

One by one the soldiers who executed Wagner were sought out and arrested, if still in Germany, and brought to the Old Jail, which had miraculously stood through all the strife since 1849. Two men were extradited from Switzerland; one from the new Polish state to the east. One was kidnapped from Paris, when legal means failed, from under the nose of the Sûreté, put on a barge as cargo, and pulled up rivers and down, back to Dresden.

The coffin containing one who was dead was dug up from the burying ground of a small riverside hamlet thirty kilometers away.

At last there were eleven of them, in jail with the coffin, and they were taken out to the wall behind the Municipal Building.

Eisenmann himself read out the death warrants.

One of them yelled, "But what did I do? I was only following orders!"

Then Eisenmann read Roeckel's account of Wagner's last day, ending:

"It is said, with difficulty his last words came. His voice, weak-ened with shouting the last week, and from speaking in court, barely carried past the firing squad, but the first of his speech was ad-dressed to them only.

"Remember . . .' he said, 'Remember me, when you, yourself, stand here.'"

Then they understood history.

Then the firing squad shot them, and the coffin.

5 Behold Them Seated in Their Glory

THE LETTERING ON THE OFFICE DOOR STATED:

Peoples' Department on the Former Monarchy
Hours Mon-Wed, Fri 0900-1500
Thurs 1000-1400

I knocked.

"Come," said a voice.

I went in. It was a one-person office, no clerk; just a desk, some shelves full of documents, a State-issue wastebasket that needed emptying, and a stein full of nibbed steel pens beside an inkwell.

"Comrade Rienzi, from the Peoples' Department for Security." I was wearing my uniform today. "To interview you about Wagner."

"Ah! Yes. I have your letter . . . somewhere here . . . I'm afraid I knew him only as a small boy, as you are no doubt aware, being able to do the math."

"No matter, Comrade King," I said. "Perhaps some small mem-ory will be of help to us."

"Perhaps," he said. He wore his hair in the old fashion. "The poor Minister of Culture and suchlike."

I gave him a look.

"Oh, we have our sources," said Comrade King. "You'd be surprised how much there still is to do, twenty-seven years on. There are still lawsuits and bills of requisition from my grandfather's time. They had a very relaxed view of justice and economics in those days, before the Revolution. We still hear things, of the here and now."

He settled himself in his chair. "I shall miss the Minister of Culture; he was, as they say, a cultured man. He was of great service to the State. I worked closely with him cataloging the palace con-tents several years ago."

"But you did know Comrade Wagner?"

"Yes. What I mostly remember was his height. He had none. Yet he was the *only* adult who never bent over, or kneeled down, to talk to my sister and me —of course he didn't have far to go, but he treated us as adults, worthy of a conversation. More so than with my father, who you know was something of a scatterbrain. The one kingly thing he did was accept the Constitution of the Frankfort Assembly. And he knew it. He and Wagner worked closely for the three years remaining to Wagner's Provisional Government. My father's the one you really should have talked with, the poor man."

"Wagner was originally kappelmeister to your father's court?"

"Wagner was first and foremost *for* Wagner. I read quite a bit about him as I grew up—but after himself he loved music. I've read his proposal for reorganizing the Court Musicians and Theaters—sometime around 1847 or so—quite a thorough piece of work; rejected though by my father's advisors of those times. I'm sure what he really wanted was a good orchestra so *his* operas could be performed—both the ones he'd already written, and those great whap-ping things he was always threatening to do."

"A perfectly logical conclusion," I said.

"What I remember most was that he loved Beethoven, especially the *Ninth*. He performed it every Palm Sunday from 1846 until two weeks before the Counter-Revolution. Every time he did it he came alive, conducting, not like his usual State concerts. Of course, during the original Revolution the Opera House (and so much more) burned down; the next year it was performed in some barn of a place. It was still wonderful. And the Peoples' Federated Revolutionary State was still new. I believe that was when the nation came together, that Palm Sunday of 1850. It's the first time I felt that this thing might really work. All the leaders took some part, including Roeckel—the father of the present State Conductor—who was a musician. I forget what Marx did—but they all sang on 'Ode to Joy,' we all did, in the audience too. It was quite wonderful. I wish every citizen, now, could have been there then, like I was."

"Do you remember Wagner, or Engels, or anyone mentioning the occult?"

"Well, Wagner's early stuff was full of fairies, and magic swans and such. I heard he always wanted to do one about the Norse gods, and was always reading Wolfram von Eschenbach. But the real supernatural? I don't think so. He was more of a mystic than anything. As I said, what he believed in was Wagner." I rose. "Thank you for your time, Comrade King." "Glad to do it, Comrade Rienzi," he said, walking me to the door. "It was nice to get my head out of these musty legal papers this little while."

We shook hands, and I left.

There was a message from Dirkmann at my apartment:

The wind is from the west.

This meant I had to go see him, as the office of the Leader, Eisenmann, had asked him a question, which he had to ask me.

6

"No Rights," she says, "Without Their Duties."

TO CELEBRATE THIS, THEIR CENTENNIAL YEAR OF 1876, the United States of America had driven out its witches, warlocks, and demons, in other words, atheists and spiritualists. Which meant that Europe, and especially the Peoples' Federated States of Europe, was full of them.

Obviously they were all being watched.

I nodded to the police informant on duty at the corner of Engels and Bakunin. He discreetly ignored me. I felt the pressure of his gaze on the back of my neck as I went down the walkway on Bakunin and turned up the path to the second house.

The door had one of the new electric bells. A plate, still new, in the middle of the door, read: MRS V. C. WOODHULL—SITTINGS AND ADVICE. Below this was an engraving of an ancient Greek-Demosthenes, or I miss my guess.

A foreign domestic received me. I presented my card—an assumed name and address, one of the standards issued by the Department. On it I had written, *My soul is troubled. May I have a sitting?* The domestic receded farther into the house like a cuckoo returning to its clock.

I looked around the spacious parlor. There were many photographs, including one of Commodore Vanderbilt and the current American President James G. Blaine (who had evidently been of no help to Mrs. W. in the matter of deportation). Perhaps exile makes the heart grow fonder. On the bookshelves were numerous editions of Demosthenes, both in the original and many foreign translations.

The domestic reappeared and presented me with a folded note on an American Flag tray. *Please join our circle at 2000 hours tonight*, it said, and was signed, *Mrs Vict. C. Woodhull*.

I went back to the Peoples' Department for Security, and went through a few files.

Perhaps it was another police spy on the corner that night, playing a hurdy-gurdy and with a baboon on a chain. Perhaps not.

The baboon walked up to passersby, nudged them in the sides, and held out its hand. When it received a

coin, it tipped its cap, and took the coin to the bucket next to the player. Were the man a spy, it was understood he got to keep all the money the ape collected.

The séance room was on the second floor, in a heavily curtained and tapestried open landing at the top of the stairs.

Seven people were there, three of whom I recognized; two couples I did not. The domestic brought us small cakes and bitter Russian tea. Two of the men waiting, I discerned, had fortified themselves beforehand.

And then Mrs. Woodhull appeared from farther down the landing.

"Welcome," she said, "for any troubled in heart, for those long-ing for advice from those who have crossed over."

She was a stunning woman for whom, in a bourgeois society, middle-age would hold no terrors. Her clothes were somber gray and black; she wore a demure necklace from which hung a simple medallion of hammered bronze. Her hair was swept up and back in the new fashion, but it did not give her a severe appearance, as it did most women.

She looked at each of us in turn.

"Many years ago," she said, "while I was in Cleveland, in the United States of America, I was very troubled like yourselves. As I sat at my desk, a man dressed in a toga appeared to me and told me to go to 17 Great Jones Street in the city of New York. I asked him who he was, and he told me Demosthenes, and then he dematerialized.

"I immediately took my family by train to New York; we arrived at the house with all our baggage, and with no idea of what the future held.

"We knocked, and a woman answered the door, and asked 'Did you come about the house?'

"We entered. The house was furnished but had been emptied of all personal effects of the previous owner. In the entry hall were many bookcases, all empty except one, which had a single book lying open upon one shelf.

"I went to it. It was *The Orations of Demosthenes*.

"From that moment my future changed, always for the better, and now I find myself many thousands of kilometers away, helping those who are troubled as I was before the spirit of Demosthenes appeared to me, and pointed the way."

(Conveniently, I thought, leaving out the ten years of scandal, and exile from her native country.)

"Come," she said, pointing. "Let us go to the Table of Confidence, where we may ask for surcease from worldly torments and doubts."

We went to that Table; beneath its fringed cloth covering, I noticed it was made of oak, and its legs were quite hollow.

7

What Have You Read in All Their Story?

I RETURNED TO MY ROOM TO FIND DIRKMANN SITTING in my desk chair, his feet up, reading one of my volumes of Hegel and smoking a Turkish cigarette. He didn't have a key to my place.

He brought his feet down, brushed ash off the blotter.

"Remarkable man, that," he said, closing the book and putting it back in its place on the shelf. "He should have lived to see the Revolutions. Or stayed around and talked to Marx, after Marx got out of knee-pants. I'm sure he had no idea of the fires he lighted in the minds of men."

"To what do I owe this honor?"

"You remember our little talk yesterday, no?"

"Yes?"

"I'm to take you somewhere."

"What if I hadn't come home?"

"I knew where you were. Learn anything of use?"

"That maybe the Americans had the right idea. I've rarely seen a better cold reading, and a perfect one for the name I used, which implies seven hours of research on someone's part. Also, of everyone else there, I believe there was no more than one stooge out of the eight. The usual noisy accouterments and dim manifestations. Very impressive, with the intellectual content of a good fart."

"So I've heard," said Dirkmann. "No disturbances in the ether? No impending catastrophes? No Day of Judgement coming down on us like a lowering pot lid?"

"Not as far as Frau Woodhull has seen."

He stood up. "Follow me."

It was near 0300 when we stood before an unmarked door. We'd gone through a series of basement corridors, from our Department, to the Department of Justice, to somewhere across the street, and down a couple of blocks, until I assumed we were in or near the Peoples' Department of Agriculture.

Dirkmann knocked once, then twice more. We went in.

Other than a guard in the corner, *he* was alone.

There was a pitcher of water on the desk, one glass, and a bowl of grapes (grown no doubt in the chemical nurseries somewhere upstairs—they say there's a fine experimental wine about to be put on the markets).

We came to attention and Dirkmann saluted for us both.

He waved his hand.

"Your report?" Dirkmann asked me.

"Comrade Leader," I said, for it was he before me. "I've found no reason to believe Peoples' Martyrs Wagner, Engels, or Marx had interest in the occult or expressed any desire to return to this Earth. Of course they all met violent, quasi-legal ends, as you yourself witnessed. Former Leader Wagner was somewhat mystical—but it seems a backward-looking view at the past glories of the German peoples, before becoming leader of the forward-looking Revolution. You may or may not know he wanted to write an opera about it."

He nodded.

I didn't know whether to go on or not.

"Your report on the spiritualists?" prompted Dirkmann.

"As far as the seances I attended, Comrade Leader, business seems to be as usual. I have visited two spiritualists in two nights, the last of whom has a huge foreign reputation as the best and most skilled. There seems to be no disturbance among them—the usual ploys to gain confidence or financial advantage."

His eyes moved to Dirkmann again.

"We have no explanation for the visitations," said Dirkmann. "Other than the medical and the mental."

Comrade Leader sat back, spread his arms and shrugged his shoulders.

"The only conclusion we could come to," said Dirkmann.

Comrade leader opened his hand toward the door. We turned smartly and left.

Comrade Leader Eisenmann had looked exactly like his posters. He had been portrayed since his thirties as being somewhere in his early forties, so he now looked only a few years older than the official portraits; gray at the temples, hair thinning some at the top (he was not wearing his usual Peoples' Guards hat tonight). His eyes were still the same as those in the Delacroix painting. The rest of his face was hardened by time, but still recognizable as the French baker's son.

We were halfway back through the Knossos-like maze of corridors and hallways when I asked Dirkmann, "Does he ever speak?"

Dirkmann lifted his shoulders and sawed his levelled hand back and forth in a sometimes-yes sometimes-no motion.

The next morning the arrests began.

8 No Claims of Equals Without Cause

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY ARRESTS BEFORE, hundreds of them. That's why there is a Peoples' Department for Security.

News of the arrests was on the street when I awakened. Bullermann, Erkeit, and Sensucht. All members of the Peoples' Committee; all in the original Revolution alongside Wagner, Marx, and Engels. Erkeit and Bullermann were in the *Vaterlandsverein* before Wagner, even. Intellectuals all.

The rumor had it that there would be a trial on very grave charges.

Meanwhile, they were being held in our cells, not over at the Department of Justice. The smart ones always end up in our jail.

I entered the headquarters and nodded to the senior officer on duty in the lobby. My gaze went up to the large official State-issue painting on the mezzanine above. It and one other painting ("Night Watch in the Kreuzkirche Tower") were in every government building, and had been reproduced countless times in lithographs and engravings for homes.

This painting was of Wagner's exhortation before the *Vaterlandsverein* two months before the outbreak of the original Revolution, in March of 1849. He stands at the rostrum in the old Assembly Hall, one hand upraised, eyes lifted, giving the famous speech about the need for freedom for the artist and the common man that led directly to the creation of the Citizens' Militia. It is as iconic a moment as you could hope for in the history of the Revolution.

There are many upturned faces in the painting, some recognizable, some not. Roeckel, of course, and, turned slightly away, like Judas in the old religious paintings of "The Last Supper," the three men who had first led the Revolutionary Council but then slunk away to Chemnitz as soon as they got the first whiff of grapeshot. One person near the front raises his copy of *The Communist Manifesto*, hot off the press, so Marx and Engels make in-absentia appearances. Very stirring, very representational of the ideas in the air at the time.

As I said, the painting is so omnipresent it has become like wallpaper in our lives. We have all passed by it a thousand times without looking at it.

Today I stopped and took it in.

I know now he has been there all the time, just a small detail. Over at the edge of the stage, among other excited young men, is Eisenmann—then still Emil Gaspard. You can tell it's him by the floppy red beret he was always depicted in when young (here and in "Night Watch") and the small tricolor pin on his lapel, showing he had still not become a citizen of the adopted land to which he would someday become Comrade Leader. He would at the time have been twenty-nine years old.

I have seen the painting or reproductions of it most of my life (I believe the original was painted in 1854, just after the end of the Prussian Counter-Revolution).

It is only just now, after my time in the Archives, that I know the meeting of the *Vaterlandsverein* took place while Eisenmann was six weeks away from starting toward Dresden. I believe he was still teaching at the Workingman's College and organizing petition drives in Paris, his nose to the wind, sniffing for the next hot spot in Europe, which he and everyone else thought would be Prague.

Perhaps this was artistic license on the painter's part? But then someone who put Marx and Engels present only in spirit would have found a way to put Eisenmann there in-absentia, too.

I walked from one end of the mezzanine to the other, taking in the whole monumental painting, noting faces and figures, the play of light and shadow (there are torches in the audience, besides the early candle-and-gaslight from chandeliers over the stage), the small touches in the painting.

It is, through familiarity, mostly background to office work. As far as such things go, it is a decent piece of Socialist-Realist art—there are far worse examples around. And this is probably the copy of a copy of a copy by a sixth-hand copy of the original from the State Art Studio.

I looked at the Eisenmann figure once more—if you don't know the iconography, he's just one more excitable boy-man, thrilled by Wagner's words, at the edge of the painting.

The eyes are the same as the ones in the Delacroix painting; the same ones I looked into a few hours earlier this morning.

Those eyes saw two full Revolutions, a Counter-Revolution, and the final, successful Second Revolution, which flamed throughout Europe (except Britain). I looked into those eyes in the painting.

They looked back.

I felt nothing.

9

No Room Here for the Shirk

I RETURNED TO THE PEOPLES' ARCHIVES, AND AS I walked into the lobby, I saw the Chief Archivist rise from his desk and hurry toward me.

"Comrade Rienzi," he said, "we wondered when you were coming back to your book."

I misunderstood him for a moment. "I originally had no plan to come back," I said, "though the pull of this place is overwhelming."

"We left your book out, as per instructions," he said.

"My instructions?"

"The one with the marker," he said.

I distinctly remember closing all the books and placing the dozen ribbons in a stack on the left of the table.

"Thank you," I said. "Is there anyone else here?"

"Comrade Roeckel, the younger, looking at Wagner's music. He came in this morning."

"Very good," I said, and went down the hallway into the reading room.

A man in his twenties had three weighty tomes open before him; I could see the staff lines on the pages all the way from the doorway. He was at the third table down. He looked up at me, nodded, and went back to copying with a pencil on one of the stack of loose sheets of paper beside him.

At the desk I had used two days ago lay a notebook with a ribbon marking a place in it. I knew it to be Wagner's last notebook, just before the Prussian Counter-Revolution of 1853—a time of scarcity, this last notebook had not been uniform with his regular notebooks, but purchased from some local source. It was larger and slimmer than the others I had looked at. I had glanced through it on my previous visit—but from what I had seen the contents were mostly hurried jottings—days of battle and unrest everywhere—and weeks would be skipped in some places. The official correspondence from the period was more informative, so I had lain this one aside.

I placed other books atop it later in the day. But I had put all twelve ribbons aside. All the books should have been cleared away that evening.

I sat down in the chair and opened the book to where the ribbon was.

I read the page to the bottom. It was Wagner's thoughts on the reorganization of the government—much like his paper in the pre-Revolutionary days on the orchestra—and the last paragraph began: "But I must warn others here now, or whoever follows me in this office, never to put too much faith or pow—"

I turned the page and read: "As respects the Peoples' De-partment of Goods and Services, the need will be seen for coordi-nating railway and shipping schedules so that essential. . . ."

I turned the page back, thinking I had turned two together and missed one. The page with the ribbon in it was number 89. The next page was number 91. I looked closer. I took a magnifying glass from its holder at one of the empty tables and examined the two pages.

Page number 90 had been very professionally razored out of the notebook.

I opened the notebook back to the first unnumbered front flyleaf and worked my way through it. Pages number 23 and number 39 were missing, but they had no pendant sentences.

I went back to the Chief Archivist.

"You have a list of yesterday's visitors?"

"There were no visitors yesterday," he said.

"No one?"

"Not a mouse."

"And Comrade Roeckel is the only one in this morning?"

"True."

"And you trust your clerks?"

"Explicitly," he said. "Is something wrong?"

"They have no curiosity of their own? I mean, surrounded by the Peoples' Archives?"

"They are products of the State Librarians School. Curiosity has been bred right out of them."

He looked at me. "I sense something is wrong," he said.

"If it is, it's my memory, Comrade Archivist. Thank you."

I went back to the reading room. Might as well kill two birds with one stone.

"Comrade Roeckel," I said, showing my badge. His eyes grew wide, then calm again. He stood.

"I see you're busy. Please sit, This is in the line of another inquiry. You knew Peoples' Martyr Wagner?"

He laughed. "When I was four, he was martyred. Good thing I was only four at the time, or we wouldn't be having this conver-sation." He knew that I knew the Prussian Counter-Revolution had put to death the children of all Revolutionary leaders over the age of ten, figuring children under that age had not been indoctrinated in Revolutionary concepts more so than any other schoolchild.

"I only have one memory of meeting him — people tell me it was just after the last Palm Sunday concert he ever conducted—it was just a bunch of people and music to me at the time. He turned my cap backwards and patted me on the shoulder. Not much to remember of a great leader and composer, but

that's all I have."

"And your father was one of the few to get away during the Prussian Counter-Revolution, was he not?"

"Happily for the Second Revolution," he said, "but it was a miserable time for me. I was six when he and Comrade Leader Eisenmann came back at the head of the Peoples' Army. That was the happiest day of my life."

"If I may ask, what brings you to this place of dead facts?"

"I'm reinstating Comrade Wagner's works into the State Concerts—there was a great vogue for them in the first few years of the Second Revolution, but he's fallen out of fashion, except with small town orchestras. I want people in the capital to appreciate him again as a composer, not as just the leader of the people he was.

"Right now I'm copying some of his unpublished works for the concert after next. I hope eventually, next spring, to have again a full performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*—only not, as in the old days, on Palm Sunday, but for the Peoples' Day, May 8, when the first Revolution succeeded at Dresden, as Wagner and Comrade Leader Eisenmann climbed down from the tower and declared the Peoples' State."

I knew him to be State Conductor for the Peoples' Symphony and Opera, following in the footsteps of his late father. I also knew he had served with distinction as a sailor six years ago on the *Battleship Kropotkin* in the sea war against the Turkomen.

"The present concerts are warm-ups for the next season," he said. "We hope to do them monthly till then. The first is this Saturday—we've been rehearsing it for a month."

"I should very much like to attend," I said. "The Palm Sunday concerts seemed to have quite an effect on everyone who attended them."

"Except me, at the time," he said. "I remember all I wanted to do was play with a rubber spider activated by an air-bulb I had just gotten; instead I had to sit and listen to a bunch of grown-up noise. It was only later, when I learned to read music, that I realized what I had missed. Beethoven, like Wagner, is quite out of fashion, too. There's of course the rage now for symphonies and concerti celebrating battles and treaties. I'll see there are tickets for you, Comrade . . . Rienzi. Saturday evening."

"One more question. Was *that* book there on that table when you arrived?"

He looked toward the table. "I don't know if it's that *exact* one," he said, "but there was a book there when I came in."

"And no one else has been here?"

"Only the Chief Archivist, bringing me these things," he said, pointing with his pencil to the monster books. "No one else."

"Thank you very much. I look forward to the music."

I was halfway back to the office when I realized I had never looked for what I had gone to the Archives for.

On the mezzanine of the Peoples' Department for Security, workmen were moving things around. I went up.

There was a lighter rectangle on the wall where the official painting had been. I saw it over at the left; workmen wrestled it onto a long wheeled dolly.

"What is, Comrades?" I asked.

The workman with the order-book said, "Standard maintenance, Comrade. Your official painting goes in for cleaning. We hang another that's been cleaned, from somewhere else, here. Eventually, yours goes to some other department; any department, in fact, that takes Subject-Size II-B, and so on ad infinitum. We do this every day of the year except State holidays; throughout all the Peoples' Republics there are teams like us doing the same work. You might say we have about the best job security in the Peoples' Federated States of Europe."

"Thank you," I said. "Quite more than I wanted to know."

"We aim to be thorough, Comrade," he said.

I came out of my office later and passed the painting.

It was brighter and cleaner; it seemed to glow as if it were new.

Wagner still orated; Eisenmann was still over there where he shouldn't have been; Marx and Engels's names were still on the book.

Only, in the middle of the audience, where no one ever looks anyway, Erkeit, Sensucht, and Bullermann were gone, their faces replaced by those of nondescript rabble-roused hotheads.

No More Tradition's Chains Shall Bind Us

I SENT AUGUST ROECKEL JR. A PNEUMATIQUE TO confirm my ticket.

He sent me an invitation to meet him for lunch at the Cafe München.

I arrived at one door just as he appeared at the opposite entrance. We sat at a table in the middle of the cafe.

"Most pleasant," I said, as we ate bowls of spicy potato soup. "I had merely wanted to confirm my ticket."

"I remembered another thing I wanted to tell you about," said Roeckel. "Although it was not about Former Leader Wagner, at least, not directly. I had heard rumors about recent ... let us say, visitations, and enquiries. I hope I may be of help."

"These . . . visitations seem to be the worst-kept secret in the history of the Revolution," I said.

"The memory that came to me—I had quite forgotten it—was while my father was away, while the Prussians were here. We children of the Revolutionary leaders were kept at an orphanage—most of us were by that time true orphans, or separated from our mothers while the Junkers decided what to do with them.

"We were getting the usual Prussian-style kindergarten instruction in saluting and close-order drill, along with the rest of the children. At the end of the period, the other children were marched off to watch an instructional Punch and Judy show. We however were double-timed to more instruction, this time from a dead ringer for the later Bismarck.

"We were stood at attention while he explained to us that, as sons and daughters of the original Revolutionaries, we would be denied certain privileges until such time as we proved ourselves worthy as the other children.

"We could hear the laughter and high voices from the other end of the school, and it was more than one of us—I don't remember which of the forty or fifty of us it was—could take anymore.

"'But Herr Professor,' she asked, 'What have *we* done? Why us?'

"The professor grabbed her wrist, jerking her toward him, then opened her palm and smacked it three times with his rod, his face turning crimson and purple.

"'*Here*,' he yelled at her, 'there is no *Why*! There only *Is*!'

"I had forgotten that till an hour ago. The memory is connected with Comrade Wagner. The contrast of being taught under the Revolution, and what we would have had under the Prussians, had there not been the Second Revolution under my father and Eisenmann. Good thing, too, their own people rose up and tossed them out and joined us, and got rid of those soldier-bastards."

Then he looked at me. "Sorry to go on and on. I guess you had to have been there to understand."

"My parents moved here from Italy," I said, "the third year of the Second Revolution, to support the workers' dream. Then they went back to Italy, when the Revolutions spread there, and gave their lives in the assault on the Vatican. I was just too young to have been part, raised here by an uncle and by this State."

We talked more, and he told me the last concert rehearsal had gone swimmingly.

"It will not be the usual thing," he told me. Then he explained.

There was no organ grinder on the corner, nor street-clogger, nor other police spy, that I could tell. I walked directly to the second house, up the walkway, and jerked the bell-pull.

Mrs. Woodhull herself opened the door.

"I was expecting you," she said.

"And why is that?"

"Because you were the only one present under false pretenses. And the only skeptic."

"I needed to determine if you could or could not help me."

"And?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I hope so," I said.

"You are still a skeptic. You know the spirits can sense that? They usually do not respond to doubt."

"Perhaps I am less skeptical today."

"Something has happened since the night before last," she said. It wasn't a question. She reached out slowly and touched my fore-head. "You have been given some sign?"

"Please spare me the professional tricks. I know you would normally give me the answer I want. You will find that very hard, for I can formulate neither the question I need to ask, nor the answer I want."

She looked up at me and widened her eyes: naturally, that is what she would do to convince me my case was different from the many thousands before.

"I see you are very troubled," she said. "I will try to help, though your doubts may hold the truth back."

"I will, of course, pay your usual fee for a private sitting," I said.

"There is no need in this case, Mr. Rienzi," she said.

We sat at the Table of Confidence, next to each other, our hands touching.

"Do you feel the charge of the Spirits?" she asked.

"No. Of course not."

"Do you see the pendant ectoplasm trying to form over our heads?"

"No."

"Do you have a sense of expectation, of breakthrough and release from your dreads?"

"No."

She stood up, pulling me with her, clasping both my hands.

"Come with me," she said.

We had sexual relations in her bedroom, while things that might have been ectoplasmic snakes wriggled and crackled up the walls and across the ceiling, and fell down among the bedclothes, writhing, and changing from blue to green and back again.

11

To Free the Spirit from Its Cell

I WENT INTO HIS OFFICE. Dirkmann sat behind his desk; he was not, as usual, slouched somewhere over it or along it.

He looked at me, then began taking off his shoulder holster, something I had never seen him without in all the years of working with him.

"Did you hear the news?" I asked. "They are going to try The Three on charges of being spies for *both* England and Japan?"

"I have heard the news," he said.

"But England and Japan have been at war for two years! These charges are absurd!"

Dirkmann reached in his pocket and took out his badge and placed it on his desk atop the pistol.

"*What* are you doing?"

"I am making sure I don't do anything rash," he said.

Then he reached up and began pulling at his bad eye. He jerked out a long stringy thing. I started to look away. He moved his hand back and forth, and something resembling colloidon came out with a snap.

Both the eyes that looked back at me were perfectly good.

Only then did he lean back in his chair and put his boots up on his desk, throwing the rubbery stuff into the State-issue wastebasket.

"What is happening?" I asked,

"In just a moment, you should leave," he said. "This will not be a popular place to be seen in. You're a good secret cop. Keep your nose clean, and you'll end up with some cushy job in a tourist town on the Baltic, keeping an eye on rich visitors, who are, of course, never *the* trouble.

"Be prepared to be reassigned—everyone still standing will be given other jobs. You'll probably see Dresden again within five years—don't get antsy or discouraged. There are much worse things than a working exile."

"I want to keep working with you," I said.

"Ha!" he laughed. "No you don't."

"You're the best man who ever held this job."

"Ah, Antonio. Sometimes being the best person for a job *is* the problem."

"But . . ."

"Time to go. It's near the close of business on a Friday. Worry only on late Fridays, and weekend nights," he said.

I came to attention to salute him.

"Cut the crap," he said. As I turned to go, he said, "Some things you don't need to be a psychic to know."

On my way past the painting on the mezzanine, a colonel and six men armed with carbines passed me, going the other way.

I walked through what was usually the beautiful city of Dresden on a gray day much like the one on which I'd gone to make my initial investigation at the Peoples' Ministry of Culture. It seemed weeks ago, and yet was only a few days.

I watched the gas and new electrical lights come on in the State shops and cafes, and in the homes and private establishments. In the government offices, lights showed where people worked late, going about the government's business.

Time to visit a restaurant, and have a hot chocolate, and con-temple this city where Comrade Wagner premiered *Rienzi* thirty-four years ago in those last days of monarchs and aristocrats—that lost world of privilege and class, and indifference to the common man, of which my family had been an example.

I sat bolt-upright in my bed, reaching for my pistol.

I had been almost asleep when the thought came to me, filling me with dread. I had a *frisson* and a horripilation and broke out in a cold sweat.

My automatic pistol was shaking in my hand. I put it down with a clatter beside my holster on the somnoe.

What if there had been no sightings of Wagner, of the other early leaders of the Revolution? What if it were part of some plot, some machination so vast I could not imagine it, by someone, some hand I could not fathom? It would have to be so immense no one person could see it whole. Its reason unknown, involving dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands. Why? Are enemies of the Revolution at work?

Was it easier to believe in ghosts and spirits, or some gigantic plot?

And then: Am I unknowingly part of it?

Then I remember the words of Dirkmann, and of Mrs. Woodhull.

It would seem to be—to believe in ghosts. Of a kind.

12

Earth Shall Rise on New Foundations

I HAVE LEFT A NOTE ON MY NIGHT STAND WHICH explains nothing.

It will be 1800 hours. I will make my way slowly through this beautiful Revolutionary city in the light snowfall, to the Peoples' Concert Hall, where the People are.

I shall take my seat in the great Hall, and we the audience shall settle down. Then Comrade Leader Eisenmann and his entourage will enter his State box, and we shall rise and applaud, and he will join in the applause, as what we are all expressing is not our enthousiasm for him, but what he represents, twenty-seven years of the Peoples' Revolution.

Then after his entourage is seated, the lights will come down and the darkened orchestra will tune up, and then the lights will come up and dim again and Roeckel will come out to applause, and he will raise his baton.

And the curtain will open on four musicians and their instruments:

The twenty-five-year-old Franziska Marx will have her concertina.

Jean-Jacques Engels, child of Engels and either Mary Burns or her sister Lydia—opinions vary—will be on musical saw.

Friededanke Wagner, adopted son of Minna Planer and Former Leader Wagner, also twenty-five, will be at the glass harmonica.

And August Roeckel III, six-year-old son of Roeckel the conductor, will be on ocarina.

And they will begin to play the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

The music will be ethereal.

Only when they finish will the audience rise to its feet and shout. By then I will be elsewhere in the Hall.

Underneath my civilian overcoat I will have on my dress uniform; I will have made my way to the leftward of the hallways leading to the State boxes, and checked my coat with the attendant there, as if I were late.

Everyone knows Comrade Leader Eisenmann attends every performance in the Peoples' Hall; what they don't know is that he always leaves after the first interval of whatever program is being presented.

I will wait in the corridor while the applause for the "Ode To Joy" dies down and the lights dim again, and the orchestra strikes up the "Wedding March" music from *Lohengrin*, and the ushers and soldiers in the hallway come to attention, and Eisenmann and his people leave the State box and come down the corridor toward me.

Perhaps his eyes will meet mine again as they had two days before; he will take me in and categorize me from long experience: security policeman, dress uniform, seen before, some report or other; or maybe more than that.

He will be near me, surrounded by people who would step in front of the Kolm Express if he told them to do so.

The music will swell as a door is opened somewhere.

My machine pistol is a comforting weight in my hat, which is under my arm.

His bodyguards will be fast.

I will be faster.

E. G. EISENMANN 1820 -1876
COMRADE LEADER,
PEOPLES' FEDERATED STATES
OF EUROPE 1854 – 1876
"Death to the Enemies
of the Peoples' Revolution!"

Afterword

IT WAS THE LATE ROBERT AIRMAN WHO SAID something like "Every great civilization—Greek, Roman, Renais-sance, Chinese, Babylonian—has given us a classic ghost story—except one, and that one is the Communist."

If the Godless Reds weren't going to do the job, someone else would have to take up the slack.

Well, you know *me*.

I started making notes for this story, appropriately enough, on Halloween night, 1983. From initial conception to publication in only twenty years is pretty fast for me sometimes, and pretty slow others. In this case, it was just about right.

I believe there were a couple of years when the course of what we call Western History could have been changed. One was 1968, when I did my part; the other was that long ago 1848-1849. Things were so bad then that Britian had averted *all* the troubles the rest of Europe went through by passing the Reform Bill in 1832, which, among other things, *expanded* the voting franchise to maybe seven percent of the adult male population—a great many more than any other country had.

You had things like monarchs calling out troops to fire on crowds expressing *approval* of something the king had done—the monarchs figuring it wasn't the peoples' place to *either* protest or celebrate anything the king had decreed, but rather the peoples' job was to take it and be quiet about it.

The French had had their Revolution in 1789 (with *our* exam-ple to follow), and then subsequent developments proved they didn't *mind* having absolute monarchs; they just wanted to have some say in naming them.

In 1848 a spectre was haunting Europe, indeed.

And what goes into a story the Communists wouldn't do for themselves?

Lots of reading forty years ago on Wagner and *that* bunch. Go back and read some Marx, and view his stuff as a very badly written Romantic novel about the innate perfectability of Man. ("Wouldn't it be pretty to think so?" as Hemingway said in another context.) I first came across Victoria Woodhull in, of all things, Irving Wallace's *The Square Pegs* (1957), a book about American eccentrics (including John Cleves Symmes, of the hollow-earth theory) and knew, in some dim prefigural way, that she would be in some story or other, sometime, somewhen. (There have been several full-length biographies of her lately, most of them empha-sizing her proto-feminist business and political career, and ix-naying the irit-spay apping-ray

and ectoplasmic early adventures . . .)

Ever since the Fox sisters popped their big toes and started the Spiritualism craze (*also* 1849), communing with the dead was a Big Cheese Deal, and then became a forgotten chapter in American (and world) history. (Twain: "If Ralph Waldo Emerson continues to exist on some further plane, I'm sure he's got better things to do than kick over some country bumpkin's kitchen table.") Now there's a renewed interest in the whole movement—it came to full throttle in the Antebellum years (there were seances in the Lincoln White House—don't worry, Steven Utley and I are on *that* case, too) and sort of sputtered to a stop between the two World Wars (thanks in part to Harry Houdini's exposures of fraud. Decades earlier, Robert and Elizabeth Barret Browning were at a seance with Daniel Dunglass Home when the baby they had lost floated toward them. Browning reached out and grabbed it: "It was that rascal's foot!")

So, a lot of reading, a lot of hopes (much like the Revolutions of 1848 themselves). At one time I was going to write *Mars is Red*, a Chinese Communist proletarian SF novel (the template is *Island Militia Women*), a sort of Heinlein-in-reverse juvenile novel (the template is the *didactic* parts of *Citizen of the Galaxy* and *Starship Troopers*)—young kid taught True Mao Thought by crusty old burnt-out Capitalist-Roader. (The opening line was "The American is begging at the airlock again.") Then Mick Farren wrote the KGB-on-Mars novel, and the Chinese became New World Order jerks, and I didn't have to write *that* anymore. Instead, I put all that stuff into *this* one.

Someone brought a statue of Lenin to Seattle in the mid-1990s, and erected it in front of the Fremont Market. (Seattle was once one of America's most radical cities—home of the Wobblies and a fifteen-day General Strike in the teens.) One afternoon someone hung a sign around old Ulyanov's neck. It read: *Workers of the World!— Sorry.*

Which is pretty much the way I feel.

Keep this in mind: in 1848, while all Europe, except Britain, was burning down and shooting itself in the foot, trying somehow to work out its despair and inequalities ("Assassination is the last act of a frustrated electorate."), Big Things were happening over here in the US of A.

Out West, where the future was, somebody was finding gold in Sutler's Creek.

In the Eastern U.S. there *were* riots. *In theaters*. Led by Ned Buntline, who would later go out to that golden West and write dime novels about Wyatt Earp and other frontier scum.

That, and spirit-rapping, was just about it for us. We'd already had our Revolution, thank you. It was time to *make money*.

Howard Waldrop
Cowtown / Austin (*en transitum*)
January 2003

Howard Waldrop was born in 1946 in Houston, Mississippi, and came to Texas in 1950. He had some college, and some Army, and sold his first story in 1969—and he has never looked back since, OR made a decent living at his writing.

After forty-something years in Texas, he moved to the Pacific Northwest, where he lived without a phone all seven and a half years ("I was next door to the Oso General Store, and the pay phone was fifty feet away."), and without a refrigerator for three. People who actually visited were taken aback at the modernity of the place. ("It was not the 'plywood shack nailed to a bait shop' as envisioned by George R. R. Martin.")

Now he finds himself back in Texas, astounded by the Blind Workings of Fate, wreaking catch-and-release havoc on white bass and hybrid stripers instead of trout, salmon, and whitefish.

His work—mostly short stories—has appeared nearly every-where, and is in six collections, the most recent of which are *Custer's Last Jump and Other Collaborations* (Golden Gryphon Press) and *Heart of Whitenesse* (forthcoming, Subterranean Press). His novels are *The Texas-Israeli War: 1999* (with Jake Saunders, 1974) and *Them Bones* (1984). He has won both the Nebula and World Fantasy Award ("and has a pisspot full of them and Hugo nominations, too").

Of *A Better World's in Birth!* he says, "The reason for writing this was to make everybody go out and vote for Trotsky in the next "school-board election." Of the writing of it, he says, "If time spent on this was deducted from my life span, I'd have been dead two years ago."