



The Blue Tower
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Ludovick Eversole sat in the golden sunshine outside his house, writing a poem as he watched the street flow gently past him. There were very few people on it, for he lived in a slow part of town, and those who went in for travel generally preferred streets where the pace was quicker.

Moreover, on a sultry spring afternoon like this one, there would be few people wandering abroad. Most would be lying on sun-kissed white beaches or in sun-drenched parks, or, for those who did not fancy being either kissed or drenched by the sun, basking in the comfort of their own air-conditioned villas.

Some would, like Ludovick, be writing poems; others composing symphonies; still others painting pictures. Those who were without creative talent or the inclination to indulge it would be relaxing their well-kept golden bodies in whatever surroundings they had chosen to spend this particular one of the perfect days that stretched in an unbroken line before every member of the human race from the cradle to the crematorium.

Only the Belphins were much in evidence. Only the Belphins had duties to perform. Only the Belphins worked.

Ludovick stretched his own well-kept golden body and rejoiced in the knowing that he was a man and not a Belphin. Immediately afterward, he was sorry for the heartless thought. Didn't the Belphins work only to serve humanity? How ungrateful, then, it was to gloat over them! Besides, he comforted himself, probably, if the truth were known, the Belphins *liked* to work. He hailed a passing Belphin for assurance on this point.

Courteous, like all members of his species, the creature leaped from the street and listened attentively to the young man's question. "We Belphins have but one like and one dislike," he replied. "We like what is right and we dislike what is wrong."

"But how can you tell what is right and what is wrong?" Ludovick persisted.

"We *know*," the Belphin said, gazing reverently across the city to the blue spire of the tower where The Belphin of Belphins dwelt, in constant communication with every member of his race at all times, or so they said. "That is why we were placed in charge of humanity. Someday you, too, may advance to the point where you *know*, and we shall return whence we came."

"But *who* placed you in charge," Ludovick asked, "and whence *did* you come?" Fearing he might seem motivated by vulgar curiosity, he explained, "I am doing research for an epic poem."

A lifetime spent under their gentle guardianship had made Ludovick able to interpret the expression that flitted across this Belphin's frontispiece as a sad, sweet smile.

"We come from beyond the stars," he said. Ludovick already knew that; he had hoped for something a little more specific. "We were placed in power by those who had the right. And the power through which we rule is the power of love! Be happy!"

And with that conventional farewell (which also served as a greeting), he stepped onto the sidewalk and was borne off. Ludovick looked after him pensively for a moment, then shrugged. Why *should* the Belphins surrender their secrets to gratify the idle curiosity of a poet?

Ludovick packed his portable scriptwriter in its case and went to call on the girl next door, whom he loved with a deep and intermittently requited passion.

As he passed between the tall columns leading into the Flockhart courtyard, he noted with regret that there were quite a number of Corisande's relatives present, lying about sunning themselves and sipping beverages which probably touched the legal limit of intoxicatability.

Much as he hated to think harshly of anyone, he did not like Corisande Flockhart's relatives. He had never known anybody who had as many relatives as she did, and sometimes he suspected they were not all related to her. Then he would dismiss the thought as unworthy of him or any right-thinking human being. He loved Corisande for herself alone and not for her family. Whether they were actually her family or not was none of his business.

"Be happy!" he greeted the assemblage cordially, sitting down beside Corisande on the tessellated pavement.

"Bah!" said old Osmond Flockhart, Corisande's grandfather. Ludovick was sure that, underneath his crustiness, the gnarled patriarch hid a heart of gold. Although he had been mining assiduously, the young man had not yet been able to strike that vein; however, he did not give up hope, for not giving up hope was one of the principles that his wise old Belphin teacher had inculcated in him. Other principles were to lead the good life and keep healthy.

"Now, Grandfather," Corisande said, "no matter what your politics, that does not excuse impoliteness."

Ludovick wished she would not allude so blatantly to politics, because he had a lurking notion that Corisande's "family" was, in fact, a band of conspirators ... such as still dotted the green and pleasant planet and proved by their existence that Man was not advancing anywhere within measurable distance of that totality of knowledge implied by the Belphin.

You could tell malcontents, even if they did not voice their dissatisfactions, by their faces. The vast majority of the human race, living good and happy lives, had smooth and pleasant faces. Malcontents' faces were lined and sometimes, in extreme cases, furrowed. Everyone could easily tell who they were by looking at them, and most people avoided them.

It was not that griping was illegal, for the Belphins permitted free speech and reasonable conspiracy; it was that such behavior was considered ungentle. Ludovick would never have dreamed of associating with this set of neighbors, once he had discovered their tendencies, had he not lost his heart to the purple-eyed Corisande at their first meeting.

"Politeness, bah!" old Osmond said. "To see a healthy young man simply—simply accepting the status quo!"

"If the status quo is a good status quo," Ludovick said uneasily, for he did not like to discuss such subjects, "why should I not accept it? We have everything we could possibly want. What do we lack?"

"Our freedom," Osmond retorted.

"But we *are* free," Ludovick said, perplexed. "We can say what we like, do what we like, so long as it is consonant with the public good."

"Ah, but who determines what is consonant with the public good?"

Ludovick could no longer temporize with truth, even for Corisande's sake. "Look here, old man, I have read books. I know about the old days before the Belphins came from the stars. Men were destroying themselves quickly through wars, or slowly through want. There is none of that any more."

"All lies and exaggeration," old Osmond said. "My grandfather told me that, when the Belphins took over Earth, they rewrote all the textbooks to suit their own purposes. Now nothing but Belphin propaganda is taught in the schools."

"But surely some of what they teach about the past must be true," Ludovick insisted. "And today every one of us has enough to eat and drink, a place to live, beautiful garments to wear, and all the time in the world to utilize as he chooses in all sorts of pleasant activities. What is missing?"

"They've taken away our frontiers!"

Behind his back, Corisande made a little filial face at Ludovick.

Ludovick tried to make the old man see reason. "But I'm happy. And everybody is happy, except—except a few *killjoys* like you."

"They certainly did a good job of brainwashing you, boy," Osmond sighed. "And of most of the young ones," he added mournfully. "With each succeeding generation, more of our heritage is lost." He patted the girl's hand. "You're a good girl, Corrie. You don't hold with this being cared for like some damn pet poodle."

"Never mind Osmond, Eversole," one of Corisande's alleged uncles grinned. "He talks a lot, but of course he doesn't mean a quarter of what he says. Come, have some wine."

He handed a glass to Ludovick. Ludovick sipped and coughed. It tasted as if it were well above the legal alcohol limit, but he didn't like to say anything. They were taking an awful risk, though, doing a thing like that. If they got caught, they might receive a public scolding—which was, of course, no more than they deserved—but he could not bear to think of Corisande exposed to such an ordeal.

"It's only reasonable," the uncle went on, "that older people should have a—a thing about being governed by foreigners."

Ludovick smiled and set his nearly full glass down on a plinth. "You could hardly call the Belphins foreigners; they've been on Earth longer than even the oldest of us."

"You seem to be pretty chummy with 'em," the uncle said, looking narrow-eyed at Ludovick.

"No more so than any other loyal citizen," Ludovick replied.

The uncle sat up and wrapped his arms around his thick bare legs. He was a powerful, hairy brute of a creature who had not taken advantage of the numerous cosmetic techniques offered by the benevolent Belphins. "Don't you think it's funny they can breathe our air so easily?"

"Why shouldn't they?" Ludovick bit into an apple that Corisande handed him from one of the dishes of fruit and other delicacies strewn about the courtyard. "It's excellent air," he continued through a full mouth, "especially now that it's all purified. I understand that in the old days——"

"Yes," the uncle said, "but don't you think it's a coincidence they breathe exactly the same kind of air we do, considering they claim to come from another solar system?"

"No coincidence at all," said Ludovick shortly, no longer able to pretend he didn't know what the other was getting at. He had heard the ugly rumor before. Of course sacrilege was not illegal, but it was in bad taste. "Only one combination of elements spawns intelligent life."

"They say," the uncle continued, impervious to Ludovick's unconcealed dislike for the subject, "that there's really only one Belphin, who lives in the Blue Tower—in a tank or something, because he can't breathe our atmosphere—and that the others are a sort of robot he sends out to do his work for him."

"Nonsense!" Ludovick was goaded to irritation at last. "How could a robot have that delicate play of expression, that subtle economy of movement?"

Corisande and the uncle exchanged glances. "But they are absolutely blank," the uncle began hesitantly. "Perhaps, with your rich poetic imagination... ."

"See?" old Osmond remarked with satisfaction. "The kid's brain-washed. I told you so."

"Even if The Belphin is a single entity," Ludovick went on, "that doesn't necessarily make him less benevolent——"

He was again interrupted by the grandfather. "I won't listen to any more of this twaddle. Benevolent, bah! He or she or it or them is or are just plain exploiting us! Taking our mineral resources away—I've seen 'em loading ore on the spaceships—and——"

"—and exchanging it for other resources from the stars," Ludovick said tightly, "without which we could not have the perfectly balanced society we have today. Without which we would be, technologically, back in the dark ages from which they rescued us."

"It's not the stuff they bring in from outside that runs this technology," the uncle said. "It's some power they've got that we can't seem to figure out. Though Lord knows we've tried," he added musingly.

"Of course they have their own source of power," Ludovick informed them, smiling to himself, for his old Belphin teacher had taken great care to instill a sense of humor into him. "A Belphin was explaining that to me only today."

Twenty heads swiveled toward him. He felt uncomfortable, for he was a modest young man and did not like to be the cynosure of all eyes.

"Tell us, dear boy," the uncle said, grabbing Ludovick's glass from the plinth and filling it, "what exactly did he say?"

"He said the Belphins rule through the power of love."

The glass crashed to the tesserae as the uncle uttered a very unworthy word.

"And I suppose it was love that killed Mieczyslaw and George when they tried to storm the Blue Tower——" old Osmond began, then halted at the looks he was getting from everybody.

Ludovick could no longer pretend his neighbors were a group of eccentrics whom he himself was eccentric enough to regard as charming.

"So!" He stood up and wrapped his mantle about him. "I knew you were against the government, and, of course, you have a legal right to disagree with its policies, but I didn't think you were actual—actual—" he dredged a word up out of his schooldays—"anarchists."

He turned to the girl, who was looking thoughtful as she stroked the glittering jewel that always hung at her neck. "Corisande, how can you stay with these—" he found another word—"these *subversives*?"

She smiled sadly. "Don't forget: they're my family, Ludovick, and I owe them dutiful respect, no matter how pig-headed they are." She pressed his hand. "But don't give up hope."

That rang a bell inside his brain. "I won't," he vowed, giving her hand a return squeeze. "I promise I won't."

Outside the Flockhart villa, he paused, struggling with his inner self. It was an unworthy thing to inform upon one's neighbors; on the other hand, could he stand idly by and let those neighbors attempt to destroy the social order? Deciding that the greater good was the more important—and that, moreover, it was the only way of taking Corisande away

from all this—he went in search of a Belphin. That is, he waited until one glided past and called to him to leave the walk.

"I wish to report a conspiracy at No. 7 Mimosa Lane," he said. "The girl is innocent, but the others are in it to the hilt."

The Belphin appeared to think for a minute. Then he gave off a smile. "Oh, them," he said. "We know. They are harmless."

"Harmless!" Ludovick repeated. "Why, I understand they've already tried to—to attack the Blue Tower by *force*!"

"Quite. And failed. For we are protected from hostile forces, as you were told earlier, by the power of love."

Ludovick knew, of course, that the Belphin used the word *love* metaphorically, that the Tower was protected by a series of highly efficient barriers of force to repel attackers—barriers which, he realized now, from the sad fate of Mieczyslaw and George, were potentially lethal. However, he did not blame the Belphin for being so cagy about his race's source of power, not with people like the Flockharts running about subverting and whatnot.

"You certainly do have a wonderful intercommunication system," he murmured.

"Everything about us is wonderful," the Belphin said noncommittally. "That's why we're so good to you people. Be happy!" And he was off.

But Ludovick could not be happy. He wasn't precisely sad yet, but he was thoughtful. Of course the Belphins knew better than he did, but still... . Perhaps they underestimated the seriousness of the Flockhart conspiracy. On the other hand, perhaps it was he who was taking the Flockharts too seriously. Maybe he should investigate further before doing anything rash.

Later that night, he slipped over to the Flockhart villa and nosed about in the courtyard until he found the window behind which the family was conspiring. He peered through a chink in the curtains, so he could both see and hear.

Corisande was saying, "And so I think there is a lot in what Ludovick said... ."

Bless her, he thought emotionally. Even in the midst of her plotting, she had time to spare a kind word for him. And then it hit him: *she, too, was a plotter.*

"You suggest that we try to turn the power of love against the Belphins?" the uncle asked ironically.

Corisande gave a rippling laugh as she twirled her glittering pendant. "In a manner of speaking," she said. "I have an idea for a secret weapon which might do the trick——"

At that moment, Ludovick stumbled over a jug which some careless relative had apparently left lying about the courtyard. It crashed to the tesserae, spattering Ludovick's legs and sandals with a liquid which later proved to be extremely red wine.

"There's someone outside!" the uncle declared, half-rising.

"Nonsense!" Corisande said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I didn't hear anything."

The uncle looked dubious, and Ludovick thought it prudent to withdraw at this point. Besides, he had heard enough. Corisande—his Corisande—was an integral part of the conspiracy.

He lay down to sleep that night beset by doubts. If he told the Belphins about the conspiracy, he would be betraying Corisande. As a matter of fact, he now remembered, he *had* already told them about the conspiracy and they hadn't believed him. But supposing he could *convince* them, how could he give Corisande up to them? True, it was the right thing to do—but, for the first time in his life, he could not bring himself to do what he knew to be right. He was weak, weak—and weakness was sinful. His old Belphin teacher had taught him that, too.

As Ludovick writhed restlessly upon his bed, he became aware that someone had come into his chamber.

"Ludovick," a soft, beloved voice whispered, "I have come to ask your help... ." It was so dark, he could not see her; he knew where she was only by the glitter of the jewel on her neck-chain as it arced through the blackness.

"Corisande... ." he breathed.

"Ludovick... ." she sighed.

Now that the amenities were over, she resumed, "Against my will, I have been involved in the family plot. My uncle has invented a secret weapon which he believes will counteract the power of the barriers."

"But I thought you devised it!"

"So it *was* you in the courtyard. Well, what happened was I wanted to gain time, so I said I had a secret weapon of my own invention which I had not perfected, but which would cost considerably less than my uncle's model. We have to watch the budget, you know, because we can hardly expect the Belphins to supply the components for this job. Anyhow, I thought that, while my folks were waiting for me to finish it, you would have a chance to warn the Belphins."

"Corisande," he murmured, "you are as noble and clever as you are beautiful."

Then he caught the full import of her remarks. "*Me!* But they won't pay any attention to me!"

"How do you know?" When he remained silent, she said, "I suppose you've already tried to warn them about us."

"I—I said *you* had nothing to do with the plot."

"That was good of you." She continued in a warmer tone: "How many Belphins did you warn, then?"

"Just one. When you tell one something, you tell them all. You know that. Everyone knows that."

"That's just theory," she said. "It's never been proven. All we do know is that they have some sort of central clearing house of information, presumably The Belphin of Belphins. But we don't know that they are incapable of thinking or acting individually. We don't really know much about them at all; they're very secretive."

"Aloof," he corrected her, "as befits a ruling race. But always affable."

"You must warn as many Belphins as you can."

"And if none listens to me?"

"Then," she said dramatically, "you must approach The Belphin of Belphins himself."

"But no human being has ever come near him!" he said plaintively. "You know that all those who have tried perished. And that can't be a rumor, because your grandfather said——"

"But they came to *attack* The Belphin. You're coming to *warn* him! That makes a big difference. Ludovick... ." She took his hands in hers; in the darkness, the jewel swung madly on her presumably heaving bosom. "This is bigger than both of us. It's for Earth."

He knew it was his patriotic duty to do as she said; still, he had enjoyed life so much. "Corisande, wouldn't it be much simpler if we just destroyed your uncle's secret weapon?"

"He'd only make another. Don't you see, Ludovick, this is our only chance to save the Belphins, to save humanity... . But, of course, I don't have the right to send you. I'll go myself."

"No, Corisande," he sighed. "I can't let you go. I'll do it."

Next morning, he set out to warn Belphins. He knew it wasn't much use, but it was all he could do. The first half dozen responded in much the same way the Belphin he had warned the previous day had done, by courteously acknowledging his solicitude and assuring him there was no need for alarm; they knew all about the Flockharts and everything would be all right.

After that, they started to get increasingly huffy—which would, he thought, substantiate the theory that they were all part of one vast coordinate network of identity. Especially since each Belphin behaved as if Ludovick had been repeatedly annoying *him*.

Finally, they refused to get off the walks when he hailed them—which was unheard of, for no Belphin had ever before failed to respond to an Earthman's call—and when he started running along the walks after them, they ran much faster than he could.

At last he gave up and wandered about the city for hours, speaking to neither human nor Belphin, wondering what to do. That is, he knew what he had to do; he was wondering *how* to do it. He would never be able to reach The Belphin of Belphins. No human being had ever done it. Mieczyslaw and George had died trying to reach him (or it). Even though their intentions had been hostile and Ludovick's would be helpful, there was little chance he would be allowed to reach The Belphin with all the other Belphins against him. What guarantee was there that The Belphin would not be against him, too?

And yet he knew that he would have to risk his life; there was no help for it. He had never wanted to be a hero, and here he had heroism thrust upon him. He knew he could not succeed; equally well, he knew he could not turn back, for his Belphin teacher had instructed him in the meaning of duty.

It was twilight when he approached the Blue Tower. Commending himself to the Infinite Virtue, he entered. The Belphin at the reception

desk did not give off the customary smiling expression. In fact, he seemed to radiate a curiously apprehensive aura.

"Go back, young man," he said. "You're not wanted here."

"I must see The Belphin of Belphins. I must warn him against the Flockharts."

"He has been warned," the receptionist told him. "Go home and be happy!"

"I don't trust you or your brothers. I must see The Belphin himself."

Suddenly this particular Belphin lost his commanding manners. He began to wilt, insofar as so rigidly constructed a creature could go limp. "Please, we've done so much for you. Do this for us."

"The Belphin of Belphins did things for us," Ludovick countered. "You are all only his followers. How do I know you are *really* following him? How do I know you haven't turned against him?"

Without giving the creature a chance to answer, he strode forward. The Belphin attempted to bar his way. Ludovick knew one Belphin was a myriad times as strong as a human, so it was out of utter futility that he struck.

The Belphin collapsed completely, flying apart in a welter of fragile springs and gears. The fact was of some deeper significance, Ludovick knew, but he was too numbed by his incredible success to be able to think clearly. All he knew was that The Belphin would be able to explain things to him.

Bells began to clash and clang. That meant the force barriers had gone up. He could see the shimmering insubstance of the first one before him. Squaring his shoulders, he charged it ... and walked right through. He looked himself up and down. He was alive and entire.

Then the whole thing was a fraud; the barriers were not lethal—or perhaps even actual. But what of Mieczyslaw? And George? And countless rumored others? He would not let himself even try to think of them. He would not let himself even try to think of anything save his duty.

A staircase spiraled up ahead of him. A Belphin was at its foot. Behind him, a barrier iridesced.

"Please, young man——" the Belphin began. "You don't understand. Let me explain."

But Ludovick destroyed the thing before it could say anything further, and he passed right through the barrier. He had to get to the top and warn The Belphin of Belphins, whoever or whatever he (or it) was, that the Flockharts had a secret weapon which might be able to annihilate it (or him). Belphin after Belphin Ludovick destroyed, and barrier after barrier he penetrated until he reached the top. At the head of the stairs was a vast golden door.

"Go no further, Ludovick Eversole!" a mighty voice roared from within. "To open that door is to bring disaster upon your race."

But all Ludovick knew was that he had to get to The Belphin within and warn him. He battered down the door; that is, he would have battered down the door if it had not turned out to be unlocked. A stream of noxious vapor rushed out of the opening, causing him to black out.

When he came to, most of the vapor had dissipated. The Belphin of Belphins was already dying of asphyxiation, since it was, in fact, a single alien entity who breathed another combination of elements. The room at the head of the stairs had been its tank.

"You fool... ." it gasped. "Through your muddle-headed integrity ... you have destroyed not only me ... but Earth's future. I tried to make ... this planet a better place for humanity ... and this is my reward... ."

"But I don't understand!" Ludovick wept. "*Why* did you let me do it? Why were Mieczyslaw and George and all the others killed? Why was it that I could pass the barriers and they could not?"

"The barriers were triggered ... to respond to hostility... . You meant well ... so our defenses ... could not work." Ludovick had to bend low to hear the creature's last words: "There is ... Earth proverb ... should have warned me ... 'I can protect myself ... against my enemies ... but who will protect me ... from my friends' ... ?"

The Belphin of Belphins died in Ludovick's arms. He was the last of his race, so far as Earth was concerned, for no more came. If, as they had said themselves, some outside power had sent them to take care of the human race, then that power had given up the race as a bad job. If they were merely exploiting Earth, as the malcontents had kept suggesting, apparently it had proven too dangerous or too costly a venture.

Shortly after The Belphin's demise, the Flockharts arrived en masse. "We won't need your secret weapons now," Ludovick told them dully. "The Belphin of Belphins is dead."

Corisande gave one of the rippling laughs he was to grow to hate so much. "Darling, *you* were my secret weapon all along!" She beamed at her "relatives," and it was then he noticed the faint lines of her forehead. "I told you I could use the power of love to destroy the Belphins!" And then she added gently: "I think there is no doubt who is head of 'this family' now."

The uncle gave a strained laugh. "You're going to have a great little first lady there, boy," he said to Ludovick.

"First lady?" Ludovick repeated, still absorbed in his grief.

"Yes, I imagine the people will want to make you our first President by popular acclaim."

Ludovick looked at him through a haze of tears. "But I killed The Belphin. I didn't mean to, but ... they must hate me!"

"Nonsense, my boy; they'll adore you. You'll be a hero!"

Events proved him right. Even those people who had lived in apparent content under the Belphins, accepting what they were given and seemingly enjoying their carefree lives, now declared themselves to have been suffering in silent resentment all along. They hurled flowers and adulatory speeches at Ludovick and composed extremely flattering songs about him.

Shortly after he was universally acclaimed President, he married Corisande. He couldn't escape.

"Why doesn't she become President herself?" he wailed, when the relatives came and found him hiding in the ruins of the Blue Tower. The people had torn the Tower down as soon as they were sure The Belphin was dead and the others thereby rendered inoperant. "It would spare her a lot of bother."

"Because she is not The Belphin-slayer," the uncle said, dragging him out. "Besides, she loves you. Come on, Ludovick, be a man." So they hauled him off to the wedding and, amid much feasting, he was married to Corisande.

He never drew another happy breath. In the first place, now that The Belphin was dead, all the machinery that had been operated by him stopped and no one knew how to fix it. The sidewalks stopped moving, the air conditioners stopped conditioning, the food synthesizers stopped synthesizing, and so on. And, of course, everybody blamed it all on Ludovick—even that year's run of bad weather.

There were famines, riots, plagues, and, after the waves of mob hostility had coalesced into national groupings, wars. It was like the old days again, precisely as described in the textbooks.

In the second place, Ludovick could never forget that, when Corisande had sent him to the Blue Tower, she could not have been sure that her secret weapon would work. Love might *not* have conquered all—in fact, it was the more likely hypothesis that it wouldn't—and he would have been killed by the first barrier. And no husband likes to think that his wife thinks he's expendable; it makes him feel she doesn't really love him.

So, in thirtieth year of his reign as Dictator of Earth, Ludovick poisoned Corisande—that is, had her poisoned, for by now he had a Minister of Assassination to handle such little matters—and married a very pretty, very young, very affectionate blonde. He wasn't particularly happy with her, either, but at least it was a change.

—EVELYN E. SMITH

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