### The Fights of Spring

Isaac Asimov

We were looking across the river at the college campus on the other side, George and I, and George, having dined to repletion at my expense, was moved to a lachrymose nostalgia.

“Ah, college days, college days!” he moaned. “What can we find in life thereafter to compensate for your loss?”

I stared at him in surprise. “Don't tell me you went to col­lege!”

He favored me with a haughty glare. “Do you realize I am the greatest president the fraternity of Phi Pho Phum ever had?”

“But how did you pay the tuition?”

“Scholarships!” he said. “They were showered on me after I showed my prowess in the food fights celebrating our victories in the coed dormitories. That, and a well-to-do uncle.”

“I didn't know you had a well-to-do uncle, George.”

“After the six years it took me to complete the decelerated program, he wasn't any longer, alas. At least not as much. What money he could save from the wreck, he eventually left to a home for indigent cats, making several remarks about me in his last will and testament that I scorn to repeat. Mine has been a sad and unappreciated life.”

“Sometime in the distant future,” I said, “you must tell it all to me, omitting no detail.”

“But,” continued George, “the memory of college days suffuses all my hard life with a glow of pearl and gold. I felt it in its full force of few years back when I revisited the campus of old Tate University.”

“They invited you back?” I said, almost succeeding in stifling the unmistakable note of incredulity in my voice.

“They were about to, I'm certain,” said George, “but I re­turned, actually, at the request of a dear comrade of my col­legiate years, old Antiochus Schnell.”

Since you are clearly fascinated by what I have already said [said George], let me tell you about old Antiochus Schnell. He was my inseparable pal in the old days, my fidus Achates (though why I waste classical allusions on a nincompoop like you I'll never know). Even now, though he has aged much more drastically than I have, I remember him as he was in the days when we swallowed goldfish together, filled telephone booths with our cronies, and removed panties with deft twists of the wrists to the delighted squeals of dimple-cheeked coeds. In short, we savored all the lofty pleasures of an enlightened insti­tution.

So when old Antiochus Schnell asked me to see him on a matter of great moment, I was there at once.

“George,” he said, “it's my son.”

“Young Artaxerxes Schnell?”

“The same. He is a sophomore at old Tate University, but things are not going well with him.”

My eyes narrowed. “Has he fallen in with a worthless crowd? Is he running into debt? Has he foolishly allowed himself to be entrapped by an elderly beer-hall waitress?”

“Worse! Much worse!” said old Antiochus Schnell in broken syllables. “He has never told me so himself — hadn't the face for it, I suppose — but a shocked letter from one of his classmates, written in the strictest confidence, has reached me. George, old friend, my poor son — let me say it straight out without searching for euphemisms — is studying calculus!”

“Studying calc —” I couldn't bring myself to say the awful word.

Old Antiochus Schnell nodded forlornly. “And political sci­ence, too. He's actually attending class and he has been seen studying.”

“Great heavens!” I said, appalled.

“I can't believe it of young Artaxerxes, George. If his mother should hear of it, it would be her end. She's a sensitive woman, George, and not in good health. I conjure you in the name of our ancient friendship to go to old Tate and investigate the matter. If the boy has been lured into scholarship, bring him to his senses, somehow — for his mother's sake and his own, if not for mine.”

With tears in my eyes, I wrung his hand. “Nothing shall deter me,” I said. “No consideration on earth shall swerve me from this holy task. I shall spend the last drop of my blood, if neces­sary — and speaking of spending, I will need a check.”

“A check?” quavered old Antiochus Schnell, who has always been a quick man at slapping the wallet shut.

“Hotel room,” I said, “meals, drinks, allowance for tips, infla­tion, and overhead. It's for your son, old fellow, not for me.”

— I finally got that check and did not wait long after having arrived at Tate before arranging to meet young Artaxerxes. I barely took the time to have a good dinner, an excellent brandy, a long night's sleep, and a leisurely breakfast before I was calling on him in his room.

It was quite a shock entering that room. On every wall there were shelves filled not with bric-a-brac to catch the eye, not with nutritious bottles replete with the vintner's art, not with photo­graphs of winsome lassies who had unaccountably lost their clothes — but with *books.*

One book lay unashamedly open on his desk, and I do believe he had been fingering it just before I had arrived. There was a suspicious dustiness about his right index finger, and he clumsily tried to hide it behind his back.

But Artaxerxes himself was an even greater shock. He recog­nized me, of course, as an old friend of the family. I had not seen him for nine years, but nine years had not changed my noble carriage or my fresh and open countenance. Nine years before, however, Artaxerxes had been an unimpressive boy of ten. Now he was an unrecognizable but entirely unimpressive youth of nineteen. He was barely five feet five, wore large, round glasses, and had a caved-in appearance.

“How much do you weigh?” I asked impulsively.

“Ninety-seven pounds,” he whispered.

I stared at him in heartfelt pity. He was a ninety-seven-pound weakling. He was the natural butt of scorn and derision.

And then my heart softened as I thought: Poor boy! Poor boy! With a body like that, could he take part in any of the activities essential to a well-rounded college education? Football? Track? Wrestling? Chug-a-lugging? When other youngsters cried out: ‘We've got this old barn, we can sew our own costumes — let's put on a musical play of our own’ what could *he* do? With lungs like that, could he sing anything but a faint soprano?

Naturally he was forced, against his will, to slide into infamy.

I said softly, almost tenderly, “Artaxerxes, my boy, is it true you are studying calculus and political economy?”

He nodded. “Anthropology, too.”

I stifled an exclamation of disgust. I said, “And is it true that you attend classes?”

“I'm sorry, sir, but I do. At the end of this year, I will make the Dean's list.”

There was a telltale tear in the corner of one of his eyes, and in the midst of my horror I found myself able to extract hope from the fact that at least he recognized the sink of depravity into which he had tumbled.

I said, “My child, can you not, even now, turn away from these vile practices and return to a pure and unsullied college life?”

“I cannot,” he sobbed. “I have gone too far. No one can help me.”

I was clutching at straws now. “Is there not a decent woman at this college who can take you in hand? Surely the love of a good woman has wrought miracles in the past and can do so again.”

His eyes lit. I had clearly touched a nerve. “Philomel Kribb,” he gasped. “She is the sun, moon, and stars that beam down upon the sea of my soul.”

“Ah!” I said, detecting the emotion hidden behind his con­trolled phraseology. “Does she know this?”

“How can I tell her? The weight of her contempt would crush me.”

“Would you not give up calculus to wipe out this contempt?”

He hung his head. “I am weak — weak.”

I left him, determined to find Philomel Kribb at once.

It did not take long. I quickly determined at the registrar's that she was majoring in advanced cheerleading, with a strong minor in chorus-line dramatics. I found her in the cheerleading studio.

I waited patiently for the intricate stomping and melodious shrieking to end, and then had Philomel pointed out to me. She was a blond girl of middle height, glowing with health and per­spiration, and possessing a figure that caused my lips to purse in approval. Clearly, buried under Artaxerxes's scholarly perver­sion, there beat a dim realization of a collegiate's proper inter­ests.

After she had emerged from her shower and donned her col­orful and skimpy collegiate dress, she came to meet me, appear­ing as fresh and bright as a dew-sprinkled field.

I got to the heart of the matter at once, saying, “Young Arta­xerxes considers you the astronomical illumination of his life.”

It seem to me her eyes softened a bit. “Poor Artaxerxes. He needs so much help.”

“He could use some from a good woman,” I pointed out.

“I know,” she said, “and I'm as good as they come — or so I am told,” and here she blushed prettily. “But what can I do? I cannot go against biology. Bullwhip Costigan endlessly humili­ates Artaxerxes. He sneers at him in public, pushes him about, knocks his silly books to the ground, all to the cruel laughter of the assembled multitude. You know how it is in the ebullient air of springtime.”

“Ah, yes,” I said feelingly, remembering the happy days and the many, many times I had held the contestants' coats. “The fights of spring!”

Philomel sighed. “I have long hoped Artaxerxes would stand up to Bullwhip somehow — a footstool would help, of course, considering that Bullwhip is six foot six, but for some reason Artaxerxes will not. All that studying," — she shuddered — “weakens the moral fiber.”

“Undoubtedly, but if you helped him out of this slough —”

“Oh, sir, he is, deep underneath, a kindly and thoughtful young man and I would help him if I could, but the genetic equipment of my body is paramount and it calls me to Bull-whip's side. Bullwhip is handsome, muscular, and dominating, and these qualities naturally impress their way into my cheer­leader's heart.”

“And if Artaxerxes were to humiliate Bullwhip?”

“A cheerleader,” she said, and here she drew herself up proudly, offering an astonishing display of frontal obtrusiveness, “must follow her heart, which would inevitably recede from the humiliatee and advance toward the humiliator.”

Simple words that came, I knew, from the soul of the honest girl.

My course was plain. If Artaxerxes ignored the trifling deficit of thirteen inches and a hundred-ten pounds, and ground Bull­whip Costigan into the mire, Philomel would be Artaxerxes's and would convert him into a true-blue male who would age gracefully toward a lifetime of useful beer swigging and TV foot­ball watching.

Clearly it was a case for Azazel.

— I don't know if I have ever told you of Azazel, but he is a two-centimeter being from another time and place whom I can call to my side through secret spells and incantations to which I alone have the key.

Azazel possesses powers far beyond ours, but he is otherwise without redeeming social qualities, for he is an exceedingly self­ish creature who consistently places his own petty concerns over my important needs.

This time, when he appeared, he was lying on his side, his tiny eyes closed and his little whip lash of a tail slowly caressing the empty air before him with soft, languorous strokes.

“Mighty One,” I said, for he insists on being addressed so.

His eyes opened and he at once emitted ear-piercing whistles at the upper range of my hearing. Very unpleasant.

“Where is Ashtaroth?” he called out. “Where is my own pre­cious Ashtaroth who, at this very moment, was in my arms.”

Then he noticed me and said, grinding his tiny teeth, “Oh, it's you! Are you aware that you called me to your side at the very moment when Ashtaroth — But that is neither here nor there.”

“Nor yon,” I said. “Still, consider that after you've helped me out a bit, you can return to your own continuum half a minute after you left. Ashtaroth will then have had time to grow dis­turbed over your sudden absence, but not yet furious. Your reap­pearance will fill her with joy, and whatever was being done can be done a second time.”

Azazel thought for a moment and then said, in what was for him a gracious tone, “You have a small mind, primitive worm, but it is a devious one and that can be of use to us who are of giant mentalities but who are hampered by a candid and lumi­nously straightforward nature. What sort of help do you need now?”

I explained the plight of Artaxerxes and Azazel, considered it and said, “I could increase the power output of his muscles.”

I shook my head. “It is not a matter of muscle alone. There are skill and courage, which he badly needs.”

Azazel said indignantly, “Do you want me to sweat my tail off increasing his spiritual qualities?”

“Have you anything else to suggest?”

“Of course I have. Am I infinitely superior to you for nothing? If your weakling friend cannot assault his enemy directly, what about effective evasive action?”

“You mean running away very speedily?” I shook my head. “I don't think that would be very impressive.”

“I didn't speak of flight; I mean evasive action. I need only greatly abbreviate his reaction time, which is simply done by one of my vast attainments. In order to avoid having him waste his strength needlessly, I can have such abbreviation activated by adrenal discharge. It will be operative, in other words, only when he is in a state of fear, rage, or other strong passion. Just allow me to meet him briefly and I will take care of it all.”

“Certainly,” I said.

In a matter of a quarter of an hour, I visited Artaxerxes in his dormitory room and allowed Azazel to peep at him from my shirt pocket. Azazel was thus able to manipulate the young man's autonomic nervous system at close range, and then to go back to his Ashtaroth and to whatever foul practices he wished to indulge in.

My next step was to write a letter cleverly disguised in a collegiate hand — block lettering in crayon — and slip it under Bullwhip's door. There was not long to wait. Bullwhip put a message on the student bulletin board summoning Artaxerxes to meet him in the taproom of the Guzzling Gourmet, and Arta­xerxes knew better than to refuse.

Philomel and I came, too, and remained at the outskirts of a crowd of jolly collegiates anxious to see the excitement. Artaxer­xes, his teeth chattering, carried a weighty tome entitled *Hand­book of Chemistry and Physics.* Even in this extreme crisis he could not rid himself of his addiction.

Bullwhip, standing tall and with his muscles, under his care­fully torn T-shirt, rippling in a manner fearsome to behold, said, “Schnell, it has come to my attention that you have been telling lies about me. Being a true-blue college lad, I will give you a chance to deny this before I shred you. Have you told anyone you once saw me reading a book?”

Artaxerxes said, “I once saw you looking at a comic book, but you were holding it upside down, so I didn't think you were reading it, so I never told anyone you were.”

“Did you ever say that I was afraid of girls and talked big about what I couldn't do big?”

Artaxerxes said, “I heard some girls say so once, Bullwhip, but I never repeated it.”

Bullwhip paused. The worst was yet to come. “Okay, Schnell, did you ever say I was a closet nerd?”

Artaxerxes said, “No, sir. What I said was you were positively absurd.”

“Then you deny everything?”

“Emphatically.”

“And admit it's all untrue.”

“Vociferously.”

“And that you're a dirty liar, pants on fire?”

“Abjectly.”

“Then,” said Bullwhip through clenched teeth, “I won't kill you. I'll merely break an obscure bone or two.”

“The fights of spring,” called out the collegians, laughing as they made a ring about the two combatants.

“This will be a fair fight,” announced Bullwhip, who, al­though a cruel bully, followed the collegiate code. “Nobody is to help me and nobody is to help him. It is to be strictly one-on-one.”

“What could be fairer?” chorused the eager audience.

Bullwhip said, “Take off your glasses, Schnell.”

“No,” said Artaxerxes boldly — whereupon one of the onlook­ers removed the glasses for him.

“Hey,” said Artaxerxes, “you're helping Bullwhip.”

“No, I'm not. I'm helping *you,”* said the collegiate, who was now holding the glasses.

“But now I can't see Bullwhip clearly,” said Artaxerxes.

“Don't worry,” said Bullwhip, “you will feel me clearly.” Without more ado, he swung his hamlike fist at Artaxerxes's chin.

It whistled through the air and Bullwhip swung half around, for Artaxerxes had faded back at the approach of the blow, which missed him by a quarter of an inch.

Bullwhip looked astonished. Artaxerxes looked flabbergasted.

“That does it,” said Bullwhip. “Now you'll get it.” He moved forward and his arms pumped in alternation.

Artaxerxes danced right and left with a look of extreme anxi­ety on his face, and I really feared he might catch cold from the wind of Bullwhip's mighty flailing.

Bullwhip was clearly tiring. His mighty chest heaved. “What are you doing?” he demanded querulously.

Artaxerxes, however, had by now realized that he was, for some reason, invulnerable. He therefore walked toward the other, and, lifting the hand that was not holding the book, slapped Bullwhip's cheek soundly, saying, “Take that, you *nerd,”*

There was a synchronized sharp gasp from the audience and Bullwhip went into a frenzy. All one could see was a powerful piece of machinery lunging, striking, and whirling with, at its center, a dancing, swaying target.

After interminable minutes there was Bullwhip, breathless, face streaming with perspiration, and utterly helpless with fa­tigue. Before him stood Artaxerxes, cool and untouched. He had not even dropped his book.

He shoved that book, now, hard into Bullwhip's solar plexus, and when Bullwhip doubled up, Artaxerxes brought it down, even harder, on Bullwhip's skull. The book was very badly dam­aged as a result, but Bullwhip collapsed in a state of blissful unconsciousness.

Artaxerxes looked about myopically. He said, “Will the scoundrel who took my glasses return them *now.”*

“Yes, sir, Mr. Schnell,” said the collegiate who had taken them. He smiled spasmodically in a placatory effort. “Here they are, sir. I have cleaned them, sir.”

“Good. Now scram. That goes for all you nerds. Scram!”

They did so, standing not upon the order of going but hurtling over one another in their anxiety to be elsewhere. Only Philomel and I lingered.

Artaxerxes's eye fell upon the panting young girl. With a haughty lift of his eyebrows, he crooked his little finger. Humbly she came to him, and as he turned on his heel and left, she, just as humbly, followed him.

It was a happy ending all around. Artaxerxes, filled with self-confidence, found he no longer needed books to give him a spuri­ous sensation of worth. He spent all his time in the boxing ring becoming collegiate champion. He was worshipped by all the young coeds, but in the end he married Philomel.

His boxing prowess had given him so clear a reputation for collegiate worth that he had his choice of positions as junior business executive. His keen brain made it possible for him to see where the money lay, so he managed to procure the toilet-seat concession for the Pentagon, to which he added the sales of items such as washers that he bought at the hardware store and then sold to government procurement agencies.

It turned out, though, that his studies in his early nerdish days have stood him in good stead after all. He claims that it takes calculus for him to work out his profits, political economy to get his deductions past the IRS, and anthropology to deal with the executive branch of the government.

I stared at George with disbelief. “Do you mean to say that this case of you and Azazel interfering with some poor innocent ended *happily?” “*Certainly,” said George.

“But that means you now have an extremely rich acquain­tance who is beholden to you for everything he has.” “You express it perfectly, old fellow.” “But then, surely, you can put the bite on him.” And here George's brow darkened. “You would think so, wouldn't you? You would think there would exist gratitude in the world, wouldn't you? You would think there would be indi­viduals who, when it is carefully explained to them that their superhuman evasive abilities resulted entirely from the arduous labors of a friend, would see fit to shower rewards upon that friend?”

“You mean Artaxerxes doesn't?”

'That's right. When I approached him at one time with a request that he let me have ten thousand dollars as an invest­ment in a scheme of mine that would surely pay back a hundred­fold — a paltry ten thousand dollars which he makes whenever he sells a dozen cheap screws and bolts to the armed forces — he had me thrown out by a flunky.”

“But why, George? Did you ever find out?”

“Yes I did, eventually. You see, old chap, he takes evasive action whenever his adrenaline flows, whenever he is in a strong passion, such as anger or rage. Azazel explained that.”

“Yes. And so?”

“And so, whenever Philomel considers the family finances and feels a certain libidinous ardor steal over her, she approaches Artaxerxes, who, detecting her intention, feels his own adrena­line flow in passionate response. Then, when she lunges at him in her girlish enthusiasm and abandon —”

“Well?”

“He evades her.”

“Ah!”

“In fact, she can never lay a hand on him any more than Bullwhip could. The longer this goes on, the more his frustration level rises and the more his adrenaline flows at the mere sight of her —and the more efficiently and automatically he evades her. She, of course, in weeping despair is forced to find solace else­where, but when *he* tries an occasional adventure outside the strict bonds of matrimony, he cannot. He evades every young woman who approaches him, even when it's a mere matter of business convenience on her part. Artaxerxes is in the position of Tantalus — the stuff is forever available, to all appearances, and yet forever out of reach.” George's voice grew indignant at this point. “And for this piddling inconvenience, he has me thrown out of the house.”

“You might,” I said, “get Azazel to remove the curse — I mean the gift you wished upon him.”

“Azazel has a strong objection to operating on a particular individual twice; I don't know why. Besides, why should I do additional favors for someone who is so ungrateful for favors already done him? In contrast, look at you! Occasionally you, even though a well-known niggard, will lend me a fiver — I as­sure you I keep track of all those occasions on little scraps of paper I have here and there, somewhere in my rooms — and yet I have never done you a favor, have I? If you can be helpful without a favor, why can't he with one?”

I thought about that, and then said, “Listen, George. Let's keep me without a favor. Everything is all right with my life. In fact, just to emphasize that I don't want a favor, how about a tenner?”

“Oh, well,” said George, “if you insist.”