**The Last Man Left in the Bar**

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You know him, Joe—or Sam, Mike, Tony, Ben, whatever your deceitful, cheaply genial name may be. And do not lie to yourself, Gentle Reader; you know him too.

A loner, he was.

You did not notice him when he slipped in; you only knew by his aggrieved air when he (finally) caught your eye and self-consciously said “Shot of Red Top and a beer” that he’d ruffle your working day. (Six at night until two in the morning is a day? But ah, the horrible alternative is to work for a living.)

Shot of Red Top and a beer at 8:35.

And unbeknownst to him, Gentle Reader, in the garage up the street the two contrivers of his dilemma conspired; the breaths of tall dark stooped cadaverous Galardo and the mouse-eyed lassie mingled.

“Hyii shall be a religion-isst,” he instructed her.

“I know the role,” she squeaked and quoted: ” ’Woe to the day on which I was born into the world! Woe to the womb which bare me! Woe to the bowels which admitted me! Woe to the breasts which suckled me! Woe to the feet upon which I sat and rested! Woe to the hands which carried me and reared me until I grew! Woe to my tongue and my lips which have brought forth and spoken vanity, detraction, falsehood, ignorance, derision, idle tales, craft and hypocrisy! Woe to mine eyes which have looked upon scandalous things! Woe to mine ears which have delighted in the words of slanderers! Woe to my hands which have seized what did not of right belong to them! Woe to my belly and my bowels which have lusted after food unlawful to be eaten! Woe to my throat which like a fire has consumed all that it found!’”

He sobbed with the beauty of it and nodded at last, tears hanging in his eyes: “Yess, that religion. It iss one of my fave-o-ritts.”

She was carried away. “I can do others. Oh, I can do others. I c$n do Mithras, and Ms, and Marduk, and Eddyism and Billsword and Pealing and Uranium, both orthodox and reformed.”

“Mithras, Isis, and Marduk are long gone and the resst are ss-till tii come. Listen tii your master, dii not chat-ter, and we shall an artwork make of which there will be talk under the green sky until all food is eaten.”

Meanwhile, Gentle Reader, the loner listened. To his left strong silent sinewy men in fellowship, the builders, the doers, the darers: “So I told the foreman where he should put his Bullard. I told him I run a Warner and Swasey, I run a Warner and Swasey good, I never even seen a Bullard up close in my life, and where he should put it. I know how to run a Warner and Swasey and why should he take me off a Warner and Swasey I know how to run and put me on a Bullard and where he should put it ain’t I right?”

“Absolutely.”

To his right the clear-eyed virtuous matrons, the steadfast, the true-seeing, the loving-kind: “Oh, I don’t know what I want, what do you want? I’m a Scotch drinker really but I don’t feel like Scotch but if I come home with Muscatel on my breath Eddie calls me a wino and laughs his head off. I don’t know what I want. What do you want?”

In the box above the bar the rollicking raster raced.

VIDEO

Gampa smashes bottle

over the head of Bibby.

Bibby spits out water.

AUDIO Gampa: Young whippersnapper!

Bibby: Next time put some flavoring in it, Gramps!

Gampa picks up sugar bowl and smashes it over Bibby’s head. Bibby licks sugar from face.

Bibby: My, that’s better! But what of Naughty Roger and his attempted kidnapping of Sis to extort the secret of the Q-bomb?

cut to Limbo Shot of Reel-Rye bottle.

Announcer: Yes, kiddies! What of Roger?

But first a word from the makers of Reel-Rye, that happy syrup that gives your milk grown-up flavor! YES! Grown-up flavor!

Shot of Red Top and a beer. At 8:50.

In his own un-secret heart: Steady, boy. You’ve got to think this out. Nothing impossible about it, no reason to settle for a stalemate; just a little time to think it out. Galardo said the Black Chapter would accept a token submission, let me return the Seal, and that would be that. But I mustn’t count on that as a datum; he lied to me about the Serpentists. Token submission sounds right; they go in big for symbolism. Maybe because they’re so stone-broke, like the Japs. Drinking a cup of tea, they gussie it all up until it’s a religion; that’s the way you squeeze nourishment out of poverty-Skip the Japs. Think. He lied to me about the Serpentists. The big thing to remember is, I have the Chapter Seal and they need it back, or think they do. All you need’s a little time to think things through, place where he won’t dare jump you and grab the Seal. And this is it. “Joe. Sam, Mike, Tony, Ben, whoever you are. Hit me again.” Joe—Sam, Mike, Tony, Ben?—tilts the amber bottle quietly; the liquid’s level rises and crowns the little glass with a convex meniscus. He turns off the stream with an easy roll of the wrist. The suntan line of neon tubing at the bar back twinkles off the curve of surface tension, the placid whiskey, the frothy beer. At 9:05.

To his left: “So Finkelstein finally meets Goldberg in the garment center and he grabs him like this by the lapel, and he yells, ’You louse, you rat, you no-good, what’s this about you running around with my wife? I ought to—I ought to—say, you call this a button-hole?’”

Restrained and apprehensive laughter; Catholic, Protestant, Jew (choice of one), what’s the difference I always say.

Did they have a Jewish Question still, or was all smoothed and troweled and interfaithed and brotherhoodooed—

Wait. Your formulation implies that they’re in the future, and you have no proof of that. Think straighter; you don’t know where they are, or when they are, or who they are. You do know that you walked into Big Maggie’s resonance chamber to change the target, experimental indium for old reliable zinc

and

“Bartender,” in a controlled and formal voice. Shot of Red Top and a beer at 9:09, the hand vibrating with remembrance of a dirty-green el Greco sky which might be Brookhaven’s heavens a million years either way from now, or one second sideways, or (bow to Method and formally exhaust the possibilities) a hallucination. The Seal snatched from the greenlit rock altar could be a blank washer, a wheel from a toy truck, or the screw top from a jar of shaving cream but for the fact that it wasn’t. It was the Seal.

So: they began seeping through after that. The Chapter wanted it back. The Serpentists wanted it, period. Galardo had started by bargaining and wound up by threatening, but how could you do anything but laugh at his best offer, a rusty five-pound spur gear with a worn keyway and three teeth missing? His threats were richer than his bribes; they culminated with The Century of Flame. “Faith, father, it doesn’t scare me at all, at all; sure, no man could stand it.” Subjective-objective (How you used to sling them around!), and Master Newton’s billiard-table similes dissolve into sense impressions of pointer readings as you learn your trade, but Galardo had scared hell out of you, or into you, with The Century of Flame.

But you had the Seal of the Chapter and you had time to think, while on the screen above the bar:

AUDIO

VIDEO

Paul: Stop, you fool!

Long shot down steep, cobble-stoned French village street. Pi-erre darts out of alley in middle distance, looks wildly around, and runs toward camera, pistol in hand. Annette and Paul appear from same alley and dash after him.

Pierre: A fool, am I?

Cut to Cu of Pierre’s face; beard stubble and sweat.

Annette: Darling!

Cut to long shot; Pierre aims and fires; Paul grabs his left shoulder and falls.

Cut to Paul.

two-shot, Annette and Paul: Don’t mind me. Take my

gun—after him. He’s a mad dog, I tell you!

Dolly back.

Annette takes his pistol.

Annette stands; we see her aim down at Paul, out of the picture. Then we dolly in to a cm of her head; sheas smiling triumphantly.

A hand holding a pistol enters the cm; the pistol muzzle touches Annette’s neck.

Dolly back to middle shot. Hark-rider stands behind Annette as Paul gets up briskly and takes the pistol from her hand.

Annette: This, my dear, is as good a time as any to drop my little masquerade. Are you American agents really so stupid that you never thought I might be—a plant, as you call it?

Harkrider: Golkov.

Sound: click of cocking pistol.

Drop it, Madame

Paul: No, Madame Golkov; we American agents were not really so stupid. Wish I could say the same for—your people. Pierre Tourneur was a plant, I am glad to say; otherwise he would not have missed me. He is one of the best pistol shots hi Counterintel-ligence.

Cut to long shot of street, Hark-rider and Paul walk away from the camera, Annette between them. Fadeout.

Harkrider: Come along, Madame Golkov.

Music: theme up and out.

To his right: “It ain’t reasonable. All that shooting and yelling and falling down and not one person sticks his head out of a window to see what’s going on. They should of had a few people looking out to see what’s going on, otherwise it ain’t reasonable.”

“Yeah, who’s fighting tonight?”

“Rocky Mausoleum against Rocky Mazzarella. From Toledo.”

“Rocky Mazzarella beat Rocky Granatino, didn’t he?”

“Ah, that was Rocky Bolderoni, and he whipped Rocky Capa-cola.”

Them and their neatly packaged problems, them and their neatly packaged shows with beginning middle and end. The rite of the low-budget shot-in-Europe spy series, the rite of pugilism, the rite of the dog walk after dinner and the beer at the bar with cocelebrant worshippers at the high altar of Nothing.

9:30. Shot of Red Top and a beer, positively the last one until you get this figured out; you’re beginning to buzz like a transformer.

Do they have transformers? Do they have vitamins? Do they have anything but that glaring green sky, and the rock altar and treasures like the Seal and the rusty gear with three broken teeth? “All smelling of iodoform. And all quite bald.” But Galardo looked as if he were dying of tuberculosis, and the letter from the Serpentists was in a sick and straggling hand. Relics of medieval barbarism.

To his left-

“Galardo!” he screamed.

The bartender scurried over—Joe, Sam, Mike, Tony, Ben?— scowling. “What’s the matter, mister?”

“I’m sorry. I got a stitch in my side. A cramp.”

Bullyboy scowled competently and turned. “What’ll you have, mister?”

Galardo said cadaverously: “Wodeffer my vriend hyere iss havfing.”

“Shot of Red Top and a beer, right?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Drink-ing beferachiss . . . havf hyu de-site-it hwat rii dii?”

The bartender rapped down the shot glass and tilted the bottle over it, looking at Galardo. Some of the whiskey slopped over. The bartender started, went to the tap and carefully drew a glass of beer, slicing the collar twice.

“My vriend hyere will pay.”

He got out a half dollar, fumbling, and put it on the wet wood. The bartender, old-fashioned, rapped it twice on the bar to show he wasn’t stealing it even though you weren’t watching; he rang it up double virtuous on the cash register, the absent owner’s fishy eye.

“What are you doing here?” again, in a low, reasonable, almost amused voice to show him you have the whip hand.

“Drink-ing beferachiss ... it iss so cle-an hyere.” Galardo’s sunken face, unbelievably, looked wistful as he surveyed the barroom, his head swiveling slowly from extreme left to extreme right.

“Clean. Well. Isn’t it clean there?”

“Sheh, not!” Galardo said mournfully. “Sheh, not! Hyere it iss so cle-an . . . hwai did yii outreach tii us? Hag-rid us, wretch-it, hag-rid us?” There were tears hanging in his eyes. “Haff yii de-site-it hwat tu dii?”

Expansively: “I don’t pretend to understand the situation fully, Galardo. But you know and I know that I’ve got something you people [think you] need. Now there doesn’t seem to be any body .of law covering artifacts that appear [plink!] in a magnetron on accidental overload, and I just have your word that it’s yours.”

“Ah, that iss how yii re-member it now,” said sorrowful Galardo.

“Well, it’s the way it [but wasn’t something green? I think of spired Toledo and three angled crosses toppling] happened. I don’t want anything silly, like a million dollars in small unmarked bills, and I don’t want to be bullied, to be bullied, no, I mean not by you, not by anybody. Just, just tell me who you are, what all this is about. This is nonsense, you see, and we can’t have nonsense. I’m afraid I’m not expressing myself very well—”

And a confident smile and turn away from him, which shows that you aren’t afraid, you can turn your back and dare him to make something of it. In public, in the bar? It is laughable; you have him in the palm of your hand. “Shot of Red Top and a beer, please, Sam.” At 9:48.

The bartender draws the beer and pours the whiskey. He pauses before he picks up the dollar bill fished from the pants pocket, pauses almost timidly and works his face into a friend’s grimace. But you can read him; he is making amends for his suspicion that you were going to start a drunken brawl when Galardo merely surprised you a bit. You can read him because your mind is tensed to concert pitch tonight, ready for Galardo, ready for the Serpentists, ready to crack this thing wide open; strange!

But you weren’t ready for the words he spoke from his fake apologetic friend’s grimace as you delicately raised the heavy amber-filled glass to your lips: “Where’d your friend go?”

You slopped the whiskey as you turned and looked.

Galardo gone.

You smiled and shrugged; he comes and goes as he pleases, you know. Irresponsible, no manners at all—but loyal. A prince among men when you get to know him, a prince, I tell you. All this in your smile and shrug—why, you could have been an actor! The worry, the faint neurotic worry, didn’t show at all, and indeed there is no reason why it should. You have the whip hand; you have the Seal; Galardo will come crawling back and explain everything. As for example:

“You may wonder why I’ve asked all of you to assemble in the libr’reh.”

or

“For goodness’ sake, Gracie, I wasn’t going to go to Cuba! When you heard me on the extension phone I was just ordering a dozen Havana cigars!”

or

“In your notation, we are from 19,276 a.d. Our basic mathematic is a quite comprehensible subsumption of your contemporary statistical analysis and topology which I shall now proceed to explain to you.”

And that was all.

With sorrow, Gentle Reader, you will have noticed that the marble did not remark: “I am chiseled,” the lumber “I am sawn,” the paint “I am applied to canvas,” the tea leaf “I am whisked about in an exquisite Korean bowl to brew while the celebrants of cha no yu squeeze this nourishment out of their poverty.” Vain victim, relax and play your hunches; subconscious integration does it. Stick with your lit-tle old subconscious integration and all will go swimmingly, if only it weren’t so damned noisy in here. But it was dark on the street and conceivably things could happen there; stick with crowds and stick with witnesses, but if only it weren’t so ...

To his left they were settling down; it was the hour of confidences, and man to man they told the secret of their success: “In the needle trade, I’m in the needle trade, I don’t sell anybody a crooked needle, my father told me that. Albert, he said to me, don’t never sell nobody nothing but a straight needle. And today I-have four shops.”

To his right they were settling down; freed of the cares of the day they invited their souls, explored the spiritual realm, theologized with exquisite distinctions: “Now wait a minute, I didn’t say I was a good Mormon, I said I was a Mormon and that’s what I am, a Mormon. I never said I was a good Mormon, I just said I was a Mormon, my mother was a Mormon and my father was a Mormon, and that makes me a Mormon but I never said I was a good Mormon—”

Distinguo, rolled the canonical thunder; distinguo.

Demurely a bonneted lassie shook her small-change tambourine beneath his chin and whispered, snarling: “Galardo lied.”

Admit it; you were startled. But what need for the bartender to come running with raised hand, what need for needle-trader to your left to shrink away, the L.D.S. to cower?

“Mister, that’s twice you let out a yell, we run a quiet place, if you can’t be good, begone.”

Begob.

“I ash-assure you, bartender, it was—unintenable.”

Greed vies with hate; greed wins; greed always wins: “Just keep it quiet, mister, this ain’t the Bowery, this is a family place.” Then, relenting: “The same?”

“Yes, please.” At 10:15 the patient lassie jingled silver on the parchment palm outstretched. He placed a quarter on the tambourine and asked politely: “Did you say something to me before, Miss?”

“God bless you, sir. Yes, sir, I did say something. I said Galardo lied; the Seal is holy to the Serpent, sir, and to his humble emissaries. If you’ll only hand it over, sir, the Serpent will somewhat mitigate the fearsome torments which are rightly yours for snatching the Seal from the Altar, sir.”

[Snatchings from Altars? Ma foi, the wench is mad!]

“Listen, lady. That’s only talk. What annoys me about you people is, you won’t talk sense. I want to know who you are, what this is about, maybe just a little hint about your mathematics, and I’ll do the rest and you can have the blooming Seal. I’m a passable physicist even if I’m only a technician. I bet there’s something you didn’t know. I bet you didn’t know the tech shortage is tighter than the scientist shortage. You get a guy can tune a magnetron, he writes his own ticket. So I’m weak on quantum mechanics, the theory side, I’m still a good all-around man and be-lieve me, the Ph.D.’s would kiss my ever-loving feet if I told them I got an offer from Argonne—

“So listen, you Janissary emissary. I’m happy right here in this necessary commissary and here I stay.”

But she was looking at him with bright frightened mouse’s eyes and slipped on down the line when he paused for breath, putting out the parchment palm to others but not ceasing to watch him.

Coins tapped the tambour. “God bless you. God bless you. God bless you.”

The raving-maniacal ghost of G. Washington Hill descended then into a girdled sibyl; she screamed from the screen: “It’s Hit Parade!”

“I like them production numbers.”

“I like that Pigalle Mackintosh.”

“I like them production numbers. Lotsa pretty girls, pretty clothes, something to take your mind off your troubles.”

“I like that Pigalle Mackintosh. She don’t just sing, mind you, she plays the saxophone. Talent.”

“I like them production numbers. They show you just what the song is all about. Like last week they did Sadist Calypso with this mad scientist cutting up the girls, and then Pigalle comes in and whips him to death at the last verse, you see just what the song’s all about, something to take your mind off your troubles.”

“I like that Pigalle Mackintosh. She don’t just sing, mind you, she plays the saxophone and cracks a blacksnake whip, like last week hi Sadist Calypso—”

“Yeah. Something to take your mind off your troubles.”

Irritably he felt in his pocket for the Seal and moved, stumbling a little, to one of the tables against the knotty pine wall. His head slipped forward on the polished wood and he sank into the sea of myth.

Galardo came to him in his dream and spoke under a storm-green sky: “Take your mind off your troubles, Edward. It was stolen like the first penny, like the quiz answers, like the pity for your bereavement.” His hand, a tambourine, was out.

“Never shall I yield,” he declaimed to the miserable wretch. “By the honneur of a Gascon, I stole it fair and square; ’tis mine, knave! En garde!”

Galardo quailed and ran, melting into the sky, the altar, the tambourine.

A ham-hand manhandled him. “Light-up time,” said Sam. “I let you sleep because you got it here, but I got to close up now.”

“Sam,” he says uncertainly.

“One for the road, mister. On the house, t/p-sy-daisy!” meaty hooks under his armpits heaving him to the bar.

The lights are out behind the bar, the jolly neons, glittering off how many gems of amber rye and the tan crystals of beer? A meager bulb above the register is the oasis in the desert of inky night.

“Sam,” groggily, “you don’t understand. I mean I never explained it—”

“Drink up, mister,” a pale free drink, soda bubbles lightly tinged with tawny rye. A small sip to gain time.

“Sam, there are some people after me—”

“You’ll feel better in the morning, mister. Drink up, I got to close up, hurry up.”

“These people, Sam [it’s cold in here and scary as a noise in the attic; the bottles stand accusingly, the chrome globes that top them eye you] these people, they’ve got a thing, The Century of—”

“Sure, mister, I let you sleep because you got it here, but we close up now, drink up your drink.”

“Sam, let me go home with you, will you? It isn’t anything like that, don’t misunderstand, I just can’t be alone. These people—look, I’ve got money—”

He spreads out what he dug from Ms pocket.

“Sure, mister, you got lots of money, two dollars and thirty-eight cents. Now you take your money and get out of the store because I got to lock up and clean out the register—”

“Listen, bartender, I’m not drunk, maybe I don’t have much money on me but I’m an important man! Important! They couldn’t run Big Maggie at Brookhaven without me, I may not have a degree but what I get from these people if you’ll only let me stay here—”

The bartender takes the pale one on the house you only sipped and dumps it in the sink; his hands are iron on you and you float while he chants:

“Decent man. Decent place. Hold their liquor. Got it here. Try be nice. Drunken bum. Don’t—come—back.”

The crash of your coccyx on the concrete and the slam of the door are one.

Run!

Down the black street stumbling over cans, cats, orts, to the pool of light in the night, safe corner where a standard sprouts and sprays radiance.

The tall black figure that steps between is Galardo.

The short one has a tambourine.

“Take it!” He thrust out the Seal on his shaking palm. “If you won’t tell me anything, you won’t. Take it and go away!”

Galardo inspects it and sadly says: “Thiss appearss to be a blank wash-er.”

“Mistake,” he slobbers. “Minute.” He claws in his pockets, ripping. “Here! Here!”

The lassie squeaks: “The wheel of a toy truck. It will not do at all, sir.” Her glittereyes.

“Then this! This is it! This must be it!”

Their heads shake slowly. Unable to look his fingers feel the rim and rolled threading of the jar cap.

They nod together, sad and glitter-eyed, and The Century of Flame begins.