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The Sign

By Edward Garry

ROCKBOUND and cold, its great length commanding the smooth, traveled terrain up and down and crosswise for many yards, the iron cyclops stretched in the cheerful light and welcomed warmth of the middle time. When the giant creature winked its emerald eye, as it did at minute intervals, the impatient throng of smaller creatures surged ahead and over, showing no fear despite the nearness of numerous crouching, wide-faced monsters eagerly threatening their safety. For the stern cyclops also controlled the dash and drag of the monstrous things and encouraged the smaller beings to pooh-pooh and scorn their menacing speed and power.

Out of the motley reaching the other side, one individual in black garments separated himself from his fellows and preferred to linger on the brink, a yard above and away from the dark, wide speedbed. He stood watching something, another individual like himself, a man also costumed in black clothes topped by an endless white band around his neck, a taller and heavier and stranger man. The clothes of the smaller man were not unlike those of his tall counterpart, except for the collar, which in his case was a band of white like the usual neckpiece and not turned around, and his cravat was a flat piece of black silk that covered the total front of his shirt.

At a short remove from the side

of the brink, the taller of the two men stood in a small indentation away from the swirling mass of busy bodies and the smell and touch of the monsters. In this shelter he leaned easily against an upright post, his head inclined, looking like a philosopher musing on life and its affairs, or a serious student reflecting on his own problems, unaware that the smaller man watched him.

The smaller man kept watching the tall man, his face intent, the corners of his mouth twitching, his right hand going up occasionally to the back of his head and neck, wondering and amazed at what he saw.

From the topmost button of his form-fitting double-breasted overcoat, a garment of extraordinary length having a black velvet collar and a triangle of white linen barely visible above the top pocket, the tall man let hang an arresting placard three feet square. The sign carried on its surface a series of incredible markings evidently made by a stout brush that had been dipped in scarlet red and coal black paints. The man's left hand held the edge of the singular sign, making sure it wouldn't turn over when sudden gusts of wind now and then blew along the man-made canyon. The smaller man let the words on the sign fall sharply and deliberately upon his mental stencil. The sign read:

Read Your Bible!
 Hear Me
 Bertie Bible
 Richard Waller
 Sunday 11 P.M.
 Station WABS
Read Your Bible!

Vibrating like an alerted anchored organism, the smaller man reached into the side of his black burberry and took out a small book, into which he made scratches with a thin instrument held in his fist. He caused the metal thing to glide rapidly over the surface of the paper getting down the wording of the fascinating sign, as though he was obliged to copy every word in a very short time. Periodically he would hesitate before making a new mark, as though he were debating with himself on some crucial detail, and then write more furiously than before. During the entire time of writing, he managed a grin on his face.

Before the smaller man had completed his writing, he saw with some alarm that the tall man was coming towards him, hurrying as though impelled by an invisible force. It was too late for the small man to turn and go, for the tall man had the jump on him. So he stood where he was and waited, hoping that their meeting would be brief, and that having said something, the tall man would pass on.

The carefree day was too lazy with spring for anyone to enter into controversy. The fresh, heavy fragrance of hyacinths and carnations and roses and *jonquils hung in the*

air from the open-door florist shop, and the seductive odor could disarm the most redoubtable Spartan warrior. So the smaller man waited, wondering, hoping for no conflict, his head bent and hand still, his body shaky.

He was conscious of the large shoes before he saw the face of the tall man in the long overcoat, and they came up to him as black, shapeless congress gaiters, with knobs in the leather that indicated bunions and crooked toes. The feet were those of an old man or one who had walked thousands of miles. But the small man had no time to reflect upon what the shapeless shoes might mean, because a ministerial, disturbing voice stabbed his ear.

"Friend," the voice said in exaggerated tones, "did you read your Bible this morning?"

The small man froze; he couldn't speak; he couldn't move a finger. He could only look at the derby and its jaunty angle, and at the swarthy skin of the lugubrious face, and at the two cold, distant pools of darkness set high in the long swarthy expanse. He could discern very clearly the magnified bristles that shot out from the man's jowls and chin and upper lip, as though he were viewing the saturnine face through the grotesquerie of a magnifying glass. But the distorted face turned from him and the voice came forth again from some place in the man's interior, a stronger sounding-board now, more evangelical, more sepulchral in tone, and as he spoke he held onto his sign so that all who approached might read and all who had ears might hear.

"Folks, did you read your Bible this morning? Everyone, even ministers of the Gospel, must read their Bible every day; it's the only way to worship God."

The small man came out of his seizure and turned to hurry away. He had witnessed sufficient strangeness for one day, even a spring day in the greatest city in the world, and he had enough to think about for his next story. His thoughts therefore told him to flee, to run before the torrent, the flood, the inscrutable powerful thing that weakened his insides and sent a metallic taste high up to his mouth. In the region behind his navel a noisy contraction had his entrails, and the bones in his legs momentarily turned to chalk. But before he could take his second step, his stride was matched by the step of the tall man, who kept shouldering him and throwing his weight and crowding him as they both stepped along the fancy avenue, moving southward towards the great white library that has the two well-known stone lions.

The small man kept his look fixed straight ahead, not looking fully right or left, ignoring his partner-in-stride, hoping to elude him and fearful that he would never succeed. To forget the demon tearing at his vitals, he focused his attention on the passersby. He forced his face to take on a steady wisp of a smile and made his mind hook onto the faces as they came towards him. But his hook slid off the smooth faces, never able to hold onto any crevice of recognition. The well-fed faces of men in business grays and blues and tans were not for his memory's

touch; the easy, gentle, slightly varnished magnets with the bright veily bonnets registered nothing but aloofness. Cool and distant and beautiful they were, like the gem in the Ethiop's ear. But not for him.

He was alone, a solitary traveler on much traversed land, with an enigma nudging him whose absurd sign advertised the carrier's audacity and the small man's unease.

"Are you game?"

That voice again! The disturbance went into his head and shot down into his lower region, and for a moment he double-stepped and lost his stride.

"Will you listen to me on Sunday night?"

Now the bass tones jabbed his brains, turning them over, although he managed to regain his stride. His brains said that there'd never be another Sunday night. From Friday to Sunday is an age, a light-year.

"Are you game? I said."

The strident tones were jarring around in his stabbed head, his punctured interior, his echoing soul. They were making game of him. He thought he might be saying the crazy words himself.

"Will you listen?"

He must take hold of this madness and form words that will make sense and bring him peace. He would put those strong words in line, marshaling them one after the other and make them fight his battle. But his mouth refused to open, his sound box was paralyzed, he did not speak. He could blame it on the small particle of gum between his front teeth, that small thing acting like cement, keeping his teeth together. Words

now would startle himself.

If he could just blurt out anything. A "Shut up!" A wild "Go to hell!" Anything would free him from the sign, the interior sign and the exterior sign. But no ejaculation came out. No sound came forth.

It might be just as well, for the sign would stop and the voice would sound, and the enigma would exploit the hesitation on his part. He didn't want to hear that voice again, that disturbing sound and the rhetorical question. He didn't want to see that sign flaunted again, that obscene display, that pitchman and barker technique.

In his mind's eye he could see the boisterous thing. Paint from it blinded him, the red stung his interior eyeballs, the black muddied his thinking. He moved his eyes to the right without moving his head and placed his thoughts on the fragile softnesses in the window, the delicate pinks and mauves and orchids and salmons, making his mind jump the occasional blacks. The sheer, diaphanous things with the fine workmanship at the heels, the netting for loveliness and mystery, the things that give unforgettable form and shape, the beige and tan and flesh.

These were harbingers of a real world that made sense and could be understood, a world that might help a solitary forget his flight from a mad pursuer. There could be peace and serenity and ease and no fear in such a world. It was a world of consolation and music and softness and shy voices.

And in the other windows his turned eyes could see the comple-

ment to that in the other windows, these brighter, dazzling, stronger windows, where gems and circles and bands and strings and v-shaped lines gave back in a thousand different, despairing ways the gold and white and blue of the sky and sun. This world also could make sense, and those who frequented it; and he met in his mind furtive inhabitants dwelling in the small segment he had known.

Only strangers faced him, distant faces passed him by as though he did not exist, complacent faces looked through him and he never felt so desperate. He had a hundred acquaintances in this Bagdad, this city of homes on cliffs, but the dwellers were oblivious of him.

He thought he was free of his stalker.

"What are you?"

That voice hit against his head. That piercing blow again.

"Jesus?"

He knew he had to escape this darkling occult thing, even if the ground beneath his feet were to open. He had to flee. His liaison with a barker, a mountebank, a fly-by-night revolted him. He was in cahoots with fraud and the banal. He was a confederate to a pitchman. It must not be.

The big blueness struck his eye and cleared his head. He couldn't have wished for a better beachhead to get out of his sea of unease, this sea with its treacherous quicksands and whirlpools. The brightness of the shield and the buttons and the face. The blue of the eyes.

"I wonder if you could help me, officer?" Hold it there, the voice

for the first time, hold it even and steady and low and cool, now that you're out of the waves. Ignore the off-center, off-sound cadences. At ease, you're on the beach.

"Sure, Father, what is it?"

Cool again now, light now again, anything now, anything at all, it doesn't have to be real, to make sense, to be exact, to be your need, as long as you're cool.

"Where can I get a train for Brooklyn?" That's it, now.

"Why, anywhere along here."

The blue sheen of the arm went up and to its right and came around and back and rested at the side.

As if you didn't know that, as if you were a real stranger, as though you were from the hinterlands; and the taller man sees and hears and stands and holds his tongue and his sign and you know he's making that bold front to impress, to keep you under his eye. You must get him now. To speak then, lightly too, with dignity. It's no time to lose.

Look at the blueness. "Can you step in here a minute?"

"Sure, Father."

A step, and his step.

"Is he annoying you?"

A nod of the head. The first flush of retaliation followed by a surge demanding vindication, the passionate exhaust, and the return of strength. No. Stifle the low thing!

"He's a jerk. I'll fix him."

Steady now in leaving, no running, throw off the shackles and take a step and you'll be in a world you understand. To the right then. A glancing blow from a fusillade of words, a staggering, a stop. The stridency again.

"Folks, did you read your Bible this morning? Everyone, even policemen, must read their Bible every day."

A flash of blueness to the left. A sound as decisive as a gunshot.

"Hey, you!"

The sign and the blackness and the derby and the swarthinness came round. Another conflict. Small blueness against tall blackness. Better than small blackness against tall blackness. Much better.

He was free to move leisurely away, free to ease up, free to look from left to right. He could move across the narrow numbered street and then turn to watch. His insides taut still, and the taste not yet lifted from his teeth. The moisture on his broad forehead and upper lip and below the armpits cooling now under the aegis of the breeze along the avenue. The soft faces and their red and blue and dark halos. On some the varnish had cracked and the teeth show, regular, white, strong. The sheen from long hair to shoulders. The smell of pipe smoke and Chanel and all-spice and English lavender and the gray of tweed and the salt-and-pepper and the gabardine skirts and coats in pastel shades. People passed and repassed and stopped before crossing. All his fellows.

From his stand he could see the raised finger from the blue sleeve and it went up and down in deliberate rhythm. He saw the jaunty derby leaning over, the sign swinging now, a plaything of the breeze, dismay on swarthinness. No words came to him; the loose lips did not move, the chin was not working. It

looked like the end of the drama and so he turned to walk towards the lions.

On the Forty-second Street side of the large edifice, the steps to the entrance were busy up and down and he took his time in climbing them, saving what vigor he had. No cause to hurry now, he knew, no reason to move fast, no need for speed.

At the top of the first flight of steps he stopped and put out his foot to look at his shoes and found that the laces were loose and one completely untied. He wondered how that came about. Now, with congress gaiters there were no laces to come untied.

He went down to the shoes in a slight bend that gave a dirk of pain and made him quickly straighten up. His side was acting up. He bent once more, this time slowly and easily, on guard for the slightest sign of stiffness and pain. He tied each shoelace slowly, deliberately, his fingers more clumsy than he had ever noticed before. His whole body felt as though it had been melted and poured into his clothes. The back of his undershirt adhered to his skin.

Now he could stand fully erect and move up the remaining flight to the dark door and push it open. He had to dodge the young men with uncombed hair and short coats and armsful of books. He looked at their young, eager faces, their careless appearance. Someone was at his side, the corner of his eye told him by the blackness. The voice came forth controlled, demanding. "Brother, I'd like a word with you."

He turned his head and directly beheld the man, tall and devoid of the hanging placard. He didn't say a word to answer him.

"I know you'll give it to me."

The tall man was sure of himself, although subdued in tone. His sign was now rolled up and he held it in his long hairy hand, its shape now different but its inherent force still a sort of weapon.

The small man looked away from the furled thing, unpleasant symbol, and from the tall blackness, and he stared across the busy thoroughfare to the far sidewalk, where the sun fondled the gay shapes and the virile forms, escorting them along the bright pathway where they moved with easy cadence and care-free step.

He could see the displays in the windows of the mammoth stores that lined the street, the busy rialto, and the suits and shirts and hats and dresses and shoes placed in the exact position to catch the shopper's eye. He let his eyes close a little and found the yellows and reds and blues and the stripes and the whiteness took on rococo shapes and lines. The whole panorama was a medley of forms, a wild array of color and dark stabs.

He looked back again to the ground at his feet, at the uncleaned steps and the dizzy pattern from the stamped-on cigarettes and paper and tinfoil and the tiny pools of spittle.

Without saying a word, the small man led the way to the low stone bench that was on the right as one entered the building. Down here, a flight below the busy entrance

they would be out of the library traffic. The smell of the black earth came up and over to them, damp and pungent and redolent of leaves long dead and their wetness. Here the morning sun only could touch the ground, but its fugitive glance never had a chance to sweeten the soil.

Boxwood slowly put forth its shy greenness. It could never hope to match the eagerness of the trees and bushes and the blossomy things that thrived in the brightness of the famous avenue. The air was damp and quiet, and the presence of the two in black gave a grimness to the setting.

Their silence was a plodding thing, full of the heaviness of mystery and ignorance. In another middle time and another middle age two similar figures in brown or white or black gowns might have met on stone bench before a temple dedicated to similar pursuits, but they would have a common ground for understanding and discussion. The small man found himself brought up short.

"Why'd you do it?"

He felt the prick in his cuticle, but he kept his eyes averted so that he would not see the face of the tall man, preferring to watch the life in the sun across the chasm, desiring to join the march of shapely limbs and well-shod men, never tiring of looking at the swirling coats and dresses, the speeding business, the walking city. He gave no thought to answering the question. It could answer itself.

"You played a trick on a colleague." He resented the authoritarian tone, *pontifical even* in its

rich quality; he would not answer. He could not get his mind to work and form words. Effrontery iced his mental faculties, the tall man's effrontery.

"We're in the same business and should be one." The small man wasn't certain what was meant by the word *business*. The same business? He hoped not, he could see the connotations of the word, the sordidness of extracting money from people under some sort of compulsion. He could hear rattling of coins and the counting of change. Allied words marched through his mind, words that spoke of the street and the plaza and the great spectaculum, the gate, and the take, and the cut, and the slice. He could put this tall man on the right track.

But what would emerge? An inane discussion on religion? Talk of making a livelihood? He could see the men at the newsstand crying their newspapers, and the speedy trucks rolling along that carried the heavy bundles to throw them out at corners. Li'l Abner and Dick Tracy and Baseball Sports in *The Daily Record*.

He could counter with "Are we?" Or putting the counter-attack another way, "What makes you so sure?" And about being one, he thought that business wasn't the best integrator; neither is roguery, though both are said to make people thick. But he could only think, he couldn't talk.

"Don't you ever talk, friend?"

He looked at the mouth from where the words came, the wide mouth, handsome and cruel and forceful. The mouth of a showman.

He looked away from the dark window of the soul.

"You gave that cop wrong impressions."

The collar of the small man moved up his neck to grab the short hairs and pull at them and make him twitch his neck. An annoying itch. His collar was getting small and his neck too tight. He opened his mouth again, and again words refused to issue. He was a veritable mute. Suppose he might never speak again!

"Before I go to get some lunch, I'd like to tell you something," the tall man said with a show of displeasure and contempt; "you ought to know yourself like I do." He waved the folded sign reprovingly at the small man. "That's why I carry this sign, because I know myself; not one of you could do it."

The small man brought his right hand up slowly and put it to his forehead; and the big blackness got up hurriedly. He spoke as he rose. "No, you don't."

Again the small man was fascinated by the long flow of the coat and the tall man's quick reflexes. He knew how to make his dramatic movements count. He looked down at the small man, who still sat on the white bench. "Friend, I have to eat and it's going to be a problem today, unless like a colleague you'll help me out. Not much money."

He stood in front of the small man swaying with an easy rhythm, keeping slow time by having the furled sign go back and forth on the swivel of his hand, a metronome in largo time.

"Brother, can you spare something,

something that will show your appreciation of our meeting today?"

The small man looked at his face. It was in repose and could have been the visage of a Park Avenue clergyman at the bedside of a dying patron.

The small man's eyes were quizzical, unbelieving. He looked into the tall man's eyes, but the man never flinched. "I've fifteen cents. What could you get for that?" he said.

He stopped moving the sign and held it in his left hand like a drum major holds his baton when he's not swinging it.

The small man felt in the inside pocket of his inner coat, still watching the shoes of the tall man. He took out a large, tooled-leather dark brown wallet and fingered a bill. The tall man's eyes went large at the sight of the expensive wallet and larger still at the bill. The tall man looked earnestly towards the wallet, and at the small man, and at the people coming up and down. He put out his hand before the dollar was free of the leather wallet.

He took hold of the bill without saying a word and moved to descend the steps, with more hurry than seemed necessary. Maybe he was hungrier than he pretended. It was after lunch time.

When he reached the sidewalk, he unfurled his sign and hung it again in its familiar place. From his pocket he brought out a tiny notebook and took it in his right hand. He held his notebook high. The small man stood to watch him, to hear him again.

"Folks," the tall man cried out in his loud voice, "did you read your

Bible today? Even the clergy should read their Bible every day."

When he said "clergy," he turned with his sign so that he could look up to where the small man was standing.

Neither man made any sign that they saw each other. As the tall man walked towards Sixth Avenue, the man at the bench kept his attention on him until he could no longer see him. Then he walked slowly up the remaining steps to the library entrance. Before touching the door to go in, he stopped.

His needs were physical needs, but not food. He let his feet turn, and walked down. He couldn't spend any time in the library this afternoon, nor did he wish to take a walk in the street, or in the park, or along the river.

Some inner voice told him that he would never feel invigorated until he reached his own apartment, and could take off his black clothes, and stepped under the shower. That might help him, would be a sign that the world he knew and lived in was still carrying on.

To Death

(A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning)

By Brother Adelbert

There lie the smoking fields, the gaunt woods, charred
 And choked with demolition where the hand
 Of Fire stripped from them every sheathing band
 Of glory, leaving skeletons with sard
 Smoke rising from stalk brash and seared shard.
 And then He said to me: At your command
 Shall these stalks live, O son of man, and stand
 Forth clothed with leaves and fruit for your regard?
 Only the Vine remains, with long root deep
 Sunk in an ocean of ash; but the fruit of the Vine,
 Touched, tingles the brain like a knife on the teeth;
 Yet the pity of Fire is in this, to make me keep
 Five wits at arm's length while I drink the wine
 Lethal to Death, for whom I wove this wreath.