
I. The Cultural Question

Adventure of a Young Traveler

At first there was only a gray mist. Slowly it faded. I felt my hands reaching involuntarily to my eyes, rubbing them in circular patterns, and with a slight effort I shook my head side to side. I forced my eyes to fully open. Turning my gaze first in one direction, and then another, I observed that I was in a scene with which I was completely unfamiliar.

I was lying supine, in a small clearing. Trees, bushes and grasses surrounded me on all sides. At my feet a creek burred along, the water making small whitecaps on the rocks as it flowed past. Sounds came from the tree branches, and, the sky above was unusually brilliant. Presently, I arose and began to examine my environment more closely. There were no clues as to my actual location, nor how I had arrived there. My memory proved useless as to the chain of events leading up to my present quandary, and as I strove to recall how I had come into this situation, I discovered, to my astonishment, that I could not remember a single thing about my life prior to that moment.

Was I suffering from some strange malady? Had I perhaps struck my head in such a way as to leave me so adrift? I examined my skull, running fingers through my hair and along the back of my neck, searching for some wound which would explain the mental affliction. Nothing—no bumps, bruises or tender spots were to be found. I was compelled to recognize that I possessed no memory of how I had arrived at my present location, nor any clue as to where or what that location might be.

I Acquire a Guide

A few moments passed, or perhaps it was much longer. I became aware of scuffling and thrashing sounds, first faint and then louder, approaching from my left side. I turned in that direction, and shortly a figure emerged from the bushes. The appearance of the creature was quite startling, and it was only after a sustained visual examination that I ascertained my visitor was, in fact, a human being. He—for with the bare chest and unkempt beard it seemed clear this was a person of the male gender—was nearly naked, with only some

woven garment covering him from hips to knees. His hair was long, disheveled and knotted. His skin was a deep copper color, apparently from long exposure to the sun. The source of my confusion in recognizing him as a fellow human, however, was that strapped to his back was a long sheet of what appeared to be a glass-like substance, which extended from above his head almost down to his ankles. Attached to the sheet was a wire that ran down his arm to a cumbersome device wrapped around his wrist, and from his head several spokes of an indeterminate material stood out at all angles from his skull.

The weight of the contraption must have been significant because as he walked he was bent forward at almost a forty-five degree angle. At first he did not see me, but as chance would have it, he glanced up, spied me and halted. I cried out a greeting but received no reply. Venturing a few steps, I approached him and declared again, “Hello.” Something in his manner caused me to halt, so we stood, only feet apart, examining one another. “Who are you?” he asked, and I was greatly relieved to find that he addressed me in my native language.

Despite the extraordinary queerness of his appearance, the creature seemed to be well-meaning, so I proceeded to give a complete account of my present plight, and it was at this moment that I realized I could not even recall my name. That I knew not who I was, where I was, or how I had arrived there I fully confessed to this stranger.

“Yes, it was clear to me, from your ancient garments that you could not be from here,” he stated.

“But what is this place? Where are we?” I asked.

“Why, there is only one place, *Gaia*. Where else would we be?” He seemed astonished by my question.

“*Gaia*? I am not familiar with that name. What sort of place is this?”

“What sort? This is the blessed vessel we all share—and give thanks for.”

The nonsensical nature of his replies was exasperating and failed completely to shed light on my current predicament. I tried a different tack. “Is there a city or a town nearby?” I asked.

“A city? No, there are no cities here, but I am on my way to the Village. Would you like to accompany me?”

I immediately agreed to this suggestion. With no further words passing between us, my new acquaintance turned around, which took some effort with the burden he was bearing, and abruptly set off. I followed behind.

We Begin Our Journey

We proceeded down a narrow dirt path. Our route seemed to wind around, changing direction several times. My companion moved along at a brisk pace, despite his burden. Since he preceded me, this provided an opportunity to examine the glass-like device more closely, but the nature of its purpose completely eluded me. We continued in this manner for some time.

I began to notice that along both sides of the path there appeared to be some sort of fence, although to term it so is certainly an exaggeration, since it was very flimsy, and in places no more than a few sticks laid across one another. I enquired, “Friend, what is the purpose of these twigs and branches bordering the path?” He answered, “Those define Gaia’s limits for our kind. We must keep within the boundaries they set, for on the other side are to be found nature’s creatures, living in their free state, and it is dangerous to mix with them.” “But surely,” I protested, “such meager borders will not protect us from wild creatures.” “You misunderstand,” he exclaimed, “Tis not to protect us from them, but to protect them from us. For it is written that our kind is the greatest enemy of Gaia and all her creatures. Truly, you must have traveled from some very remote place to not know something as important as this.”

As we continued on our journey, I continued to question him, and I learned that many years ago fences had been erected in selected locations to protect wildlife from human intervention, and that over the course of generations the territory within these fenced off areas had been expanded many times over, with the areas for human habitation shrinking accordingly. My companion estimated that humans were now confined to a tiny sliver of the total land area, while wild creatures roamed in complete freedom. Apparently, to cross one of the barriers, which could have been physically accomplished with great ease, was strictly forbidden, and anyone found to have done so was severely punished.

As we continued on our way, I noticed that several paths crossed the one we were on, and at each of these intersections a sign was erected. These were crudely

made, but each one bore the same exact inscription: *Learn from our Fellow Creatures.*

All of these things were, needless to say, extraordinarily strange to me, bordering on the bizarre. I hoped that some explanation might be provided by the inhabitants of the Village.

We Enter the Village

Arriving at the top of a low hill, I viewed in the dale below a settlement, with buildings spreading out in all directions.

“This is *Ehrlick*,” my guide announced.

The path wound down the hill, and we soon found ourselves at the first structures. As we approached, I became aware of a great irritation to my nasal passages, and now, standing at the entrance to the village, the odors which assaulted my senses were unbearably noxious.

“What is this stench?” I proclaimed.

“Why, this is *Ehrlick*,” he answered. “It is the preserve for our species.”

We proceeded into the settlement, and all the while it took strenuous effort on my part to keep from gagging. Upon further prodding of my host, I learned that under the guiding—apparently sacred—maxim of “Learn from our fellow creatures,” it had been decided long ago that just as creatures in the wild defecated, urinated and copulated wherever they chose, that all humans must emulate this behavior. Not only was there no shame attached to performing these functions in public, rather it was considered aberrant if anyone selected privacy for such acts. Although my stay in the village was brief in duration, I was to witness all of these actions many times, sometimes only feet away from where I was standing.

I also learned that a second contributing factor to the overpowering odor was the great scarcity of water. It was carefully rationed, with barely enough for drinking requirements. Regular cleansing of the body or ones garments was not only an impossibility, but, again, would have been considered a violation of the command to “Learn from our fellow creatures.”

I noted that even within the village, the existence of fences persisted. All of the buildings were connected by very narrow fenced-in pathways. My host informed me that every effort had been made to minimize the land use of the human population. Toward that end, regular measurements were carried out as to the widths of the paths, which were progressively made narrower and narrower, to the point now that two people walking in

opposite directions had great difficulty in passing one another. He stated that there was now a proposition, put before the *Guardians*, to narrow the paths further to the width of one person, since it is possible for individuals traveling in opposite directions to hop over one another.

Further Wonders

As we proceeded, other individuals came into sight, although their numbers were not large. Many of them carried the same massive contraption as my companion, but not all. On one pathway, at some distance from where we stood, I spied what I at first thought was a procession of some ungainly four-legged creatures, with mammoth protuberances growing from their backs. They resembled nothing so much as exceedingly ugly and disproportional dromedaries. These creatures were plodding along, heaving from side to side as they placed one, and then another leg forward, each effort accompanied by a grunt so loud it carried even to where we stood.

“What sort of animals are those?” I enquired.

“Those are ones who cannot obtain a unit such as I carry, so they are compelled to use the more primitive units.”

At first, the meaning of his answer was unclear, but as we approached closer, a more careful examination of this grotesque caravan, revealed that these were in fact people, moving forward on hands and knees, supporting huge contraptions, sticking up ten feet or more into the air. Upon further scrutiny, I was amazed to discover that the burdens they carried were none other than small windmills, and I was incredulous not only to make this identification, but also that each person was able to support such a weight.

We continued our route along the path, and shortly we came to a small clearing. Determined to discover the meaning of that which I had observed, I asked my, now apparent, friend to explain.

“The unit you see me carrying,” he said, pointing to the long rectangular flat object on his back, “is my Power Unit. It collects rays from the Holy Sun and is able to convert them to power the *Honker* which you see strapped to my wrist. The spokes you see protruding from my headgear are the means through which my *Honks* are communicated to the *Guardians*.”

“So that which is on your wrist is a communication device?”

He nodded, “Yes, there are buttons which I can press which will convey my *Honks*.”

“What are these *Honks* that you speak of?”

“Why, they are how we decide. Everything is decided by the *Will of the Honks*.”

Only a very small part of this, of course, was intelligible to me, so I asked him about the poor souls who carried windmills.

“These are ones who could not obtain a Power Unit such as mine. They are forced to rely on the primitive Units, which use the power of the Holy Wind to operate their *Honkers*.”

“And what of those I saw with no device, I mean, no power unit?”

Here his appearance turned a little melancholic, and he replied, “The truth is we lost the talent to make these Units long ago, and as they cease to function, we have not enough for everyone.” He paused, and added, “This has become a source of woe, for now, without personal power, many of our people cannot participate in the *Honkings*.”

At my urging, my friend proceeded to tell me more. Apparently, many years ago a decision was made to eliminate all centralized power production, as being a “crime against Gaia.” He stated—with a touch of pride—that this decision was the result of “one of the first Great *Honks*.” It seems that all of the power plants, hydroelectric facilities, generating stations and power lines had been destroyed, or so I surmised from his vague descriptions. At first, individual villages and towns had produced their own power, but then, after another *Honk*, this practice, also, was done away with, and individuals were left to their own initiatives to procure “personal power.”

My companion went beyond the subject of power, to describe how other components of what I had previously considered to be modern civilization, had been eradicated. All of the “river obstacles”—by this I was fairly certain he meant dams—were demolished, so as to give “freedom to the fish.” All forms of powered transportation were halted, since these operations contributed to poisoning the Holy Air and the Holy Soil. At first the use of animals was allowed to transport humans and cargo, but this was later abolished as part of the “*Creature Liberation Honk*,” after which humans were prohibited from interfering with animals in any way.

We resumed our journey and continued along the path, but we encountered very few people and spoke to no one. Subsequently, I was to learn that this was not unusual, and that almost all human interaction was reserved for the *Gathering*, which I was informed we

would join later in the day. First, however, my friend wanted to present me to several of the Village's leaders.

I Meet the Wise Ones

We arrived before a large building which bore on its front door a faded, but clearly recognizable representation of the Sun. "This is the home of the *Wise Ones*," my guide informed me. "It is best we stop here first for an audience."

Before proceeding with what was to transpire within that building, however, let me first describe what I had so far observed as to the nature of the Village itself.

There were many buildings of various sizes and shapes, which extended out as far as I could see. All of them were old and decrepit in appearance. None of the dwellings possessed yards, as the only means of access were the narrow paths leading up to the entrances. The rest of the land was given over to a disorderly growth of wild vegetation, bushes, vines, trees and the like.

Many of the structures could not legitimately be characterized even as buildings. There were a variety of misshapen lean-tos, tents, tee-pees, primitive stone structures, and even dwellings that had been dug into the ground, covered only with branches and leaves. No observable pattern could be ascertained as to how any of this had been arranged.

There was no appearance of commerce of any kind, nor any stores, schools or libraries. I witnessed no social interaction among the few inhabitants I spied—simply solitary meanderings from one building to another. Some of these were women, attired like my companion only in a rough-hewn skirt, their bosoms fully exposed and deeply tanned like the rest of their bodies. At intervals I observed several individuals performing the full gamut of bodily functions, which I have already mentioned.

At the building of the Wise Ones, my companion simply opened the front door and ushered me in. I found myself in a very large, almost cavernous room. Here, the malodor of the village was even more pronounced. On one wall was a huge portrait of a man, attired in what appeared to be a monk's outfit, with the inscription, *Palsarpee*.

Small groups of individuals were to be seen huddled here and there, most squatting on the floor, although a few were occupying benches. I noted that none of the inhabitants were encumbered with the burden my companion wore on his back, and he informed me that the work of the Wise Ones, as well as the Guardians was so sacred, that Power Units had been installed on the roofs of their buildings.

One of the inhabitants approached, in all appearances a quite elderly male, although the unkempt and unwashed habit among them, made such a judgment little more than a guess. My companion addressed him, saying that I was a visitor from a far off place, ignorant of the ways of Ehrlick, and that I wished to learn more.

As with my companion, no names were requested or exchanged. This Wise One asked no questions of me, apparently uninterested in anything I might tell him, and beckoning us, he proceeded into the center of the chamber. Without prompting, he then began to describe the purpose and the function of the activities which took place within the site.

"Over there," he motioned, "are members of the *APCFB*, the Authority for the Punishment of Cruelty to Fellow Beings. Their charge is to ease the lives of our fellow creatures." He described what he called their most recent *Great Success*. One of their number had proposed the adoption of *Creature Carriers*. These were slings to be worn around the neck, large enough for a small animal to lie in comfortably. Any member of the Village who came across an animal that was injured, sick, or even simply too tired to walk, was to place the animal in the pouch and carry it to the nearest *Friends Comfort Station*. Those who successfully provided such succor to fellow creatures would be rewarded by the Guardians. This proposal had been adopted with a recent Honk and was now fully in use.

Although this measure was universally hailed, its implementation had led to unforeseen complications. Several of the Villagers had pointed out that insects residing in hair and beards not only received transportation, but also nourishment from their host's body. The point was well taken, and presently, this group was attempting to devise a way to count the number of lice, fleas and other vermin on the body of each individual villager, so that each carrier could be rewarded accordingly.

Our host next described the names and purposes of the other groups in the room, but much of this I have now forgotten. He then announced that we would visit the most ancient group. "These are the ones who consider Matters of the Greatest Importance," he stated. They were in an adjoining room, and it was there to which he led us.

The Experimental Method

We were ushered into a smaller chamber, where five individuals were to be observed, sitting on the floor in a circle. This, he announced, was the *Human Pestilence Group*. Their charge was to devise means to stop and to

reverse the destructive impact of human existence on Gaia. Our host whispered that this work was too important to disturb them, but he volunteered to provide some examples of their deliberations.

One of their earliest successes, he claimed, was in dealing with the emission of noxious gases from the backsides of bovine creatures, animals which had earlier been bred to large numbers as a food source for humans. At first, the group succeeded in devising a sophisticated contraption—called a *fart-o-meter*—to be attached to the rear hole of the animal. This device converted the gas that was injurious to Gaia into a harmless substance. However, it was then discovered that the same gas was emitted in even greater quantities from the mouths of the creatures, so they devised a similar device—called a *burp-o-meter*—which was strapped over the head, covering the entire jaw. This also worked, and together this was proclaimed as the *Fart-Burp Solution*.

Regrettably, one side effect was that the *burp-o-meter*, since it fully encased the mouth, also prevented the creatures from eating, and in short order they all starved to death, and the species became extinct. Although this unforeseen outcome was lamented by all, it was pointed out that the noxious gases which threatened Gaia had also been eliminated, so the experiment was heralded as a *Great Success*.

Our host explained that, over the course of many generations, this group had devised thousands of experiments to reverse the sins committed against Gaia. Not all of them, he admitted had worked. I questioned him on this, and he went on to enumerate several experiments that had been tried many years ago. One was to grow tails on humans, so “they might return to the trees from whence they came.” Another was to graft gills on to humans, so “they might return to the sea.” Unfortunately, in attempting to swing from branch to branch, the tails had all broken off with subjects plummeting to the ground, and those who were given gills and sent to inhabit the oceans had all drowned. These experiments were deemed *Partial Successes*.

He also described new challenges which have arisen. Since the implementation of an *omnivegetation* diet, many generations ago, humans had undergone a physiological change in their digestive systems, and it had been discovered that they now emitted the same noxious gases that were earlier witnessed with the bovines. The group before me was now fervently attempting to find a way, less drastic than the *Fart-Burp Solution*, to meet this new threat. Their first attempt was to attach a series of hoses, one from the rectum to the

mouth and another from the urinary track to the nose. Mid way, both hoses were bisected and connected to separate large filtration devices, each almost four feet in diameter. The genius of this apparatus was that it not only trapped all the dangerous gases, but that the filtration system was designed to recycle all of the bodily waste into nourishment. When put into practice, however, the volunteers all suffocated and expired, amidst great screams and convulsive flailings about. This, too, was deemed a *Partial Success*.

At this point, our host launched into an agitated description of efforts that had been made to improve the functioning of the various groups. Apparently, at some point in the past, the Wise Ones had determined that what was desired was Greater Wisdom in their deliberations. Toward that end, they had brought other species of creatures into their groups. Alas, they soon discovered that they were unable discern the meaning of the utterances of these fellow beings, and all efforts to devise a means of translation had failed. Thus, the wisdom of these contributions was lost. Even worse, most of the new recruits simply wandered out of the building altogether, since no one was allowed to touch or interfere with them in any way.

Suddenly, one of the members of the group residing on the floor hissed in our direction, which I took to be a signal that we were making too much noise. So with that, we exited back to the main chamber.

It appeared that our visit had reached its conclusion, but our host signaled that he had more he wished to say. His shoulders sagged, and there was an aura of resignation about him. “The truth,” he began, “is that there are still just too many of us. Too many people. The *Mountbottoms* have helped, of course, to restrain our numbers, but it has been years since their last visit.”

“What are the *Mountbottoms*?” I asked.

“Why, they are the plagues and epidemics, which in the past have killed off many of us. I have even heard tales that whole villages were extinguished. We pray for their return.” These final words were accompanied by an incomprehensible gesture, one which involved thrusting both hands above his head. He paused, and added, “The problem is we continue to repopulate.”

He then proceed to explain that all methods of preventing childbirth—by this I took him to mean contraception—had been lost after the “banning of the machines,” and that given the “appetites” of the villagers, more and more babies were constantly being born.

“We attempted one solution,” he declared, “by

urging that males would only couple with males and females with females, thus ending the cause-and-effect mechanics of reproduction, but the proclivities of our people had so evolved that their sexual activity was entirely polymorphous, and they refused to discriminate among those with whom they chose to copulate. The opposition to this experiment was so great we dared not even submit it to a Honk.

“None of the Wise Men has been able to solve this problem,” he confessed. He shrugged his shoulders: “Only the *Gift to Gaia* has forestalled total disaster, and perhaps it is only the *Ultimate Honk* which shall be Gaia’s salvation.”

“What . . .,” I began, but my day’s companion quickly pulled me away. “Not yet,” he whispered. “These matters you shall learn of at the Gathering.”

With that, we thanked our host, bid our good-byes and left the building, returning to the path outside.

Food for Thought

I grabbed the arm of my companion and demanded, “Why did you interrupt me?”

He pulled away and began to walk down the path, but soon he spoke, “There are some things that are not for talking, but for experiencing. You will not be able to comprehend some of these more weighty matters, until we arrive at the Gathering.” He paused, considered, and then continued, “Ever since the *2020 Great Awakening*, many years ago, our kind has attempted to live in harmony with Gaia, to live simply, as the first people did at the dawn of time. But we find that no matter how much we try, the destructive actions of our species prove impossible to eradicate.”

“What is this *Awakening* you speak of?” I enquired.

He shook his head and answered, “No one really knows, for all of the historical records have long since disappeared, but the common view is that it was an ancient event when the old order was overthrown, and a decision was made to rescue Gaia.

“After the *Awakening*, our ancestors sought to remove all of the barriers which separate us from Gaia’s other children. This has been our continuing mission. Not long ago, we granted Honking rights to all over the age of five, thinking that such unsullied youth might show us the correct path. This has produced very good results—the *Creature Carriers* you heard speak of came from a Honk introduced by an eight year old. This purity of vision demanded by the young, however, has also resulted in even more formidable challenges.”

“In what way?”

“These youth have demonstrated a profound devotion to Gaia, and they will stand no compromises. Recently, a group of six year olds have raised a proposal to ban the consumption of all living things. We long ago gave up eating flesh, but these youthful *Nogans*—for that is the name they have adopted—state that killing and eating vegetation of any kind is also a crime against Gaia, and that this is tantamount to murdering Gaia’s offspring. Some have even claimed the ability to communicate with certain varieties of turnips and berries. Their argument is persuasive, and their proposal has been the subject of several Honks. Although it has so far failed to be adopted, each time it receives greater support.”

Despite everything I had seen and heard that day, this proposal of the *Nogans* truly astonished me. “Why, then what will you eat,” I asked.

“The Wise Ones have anticipated the eventual acceptance of this Honk, so they have been hard at work devising alternative nourishments. There are two groups devoted to this—they were actually meeting in the chamber from which we just departed. One is the *Debris Group*; the other is the *Flint Group*. The former of these has attempted to devise a food supply from dead things—fallen leaves, rotted timber and the like. So far this has not been successful. Also, one of the more devout *Nogans* has challenged this line of research, arguing that even deceased matter provides nourishment to Gaia. The *Flint Group* seeks to overcome this objection by creating food from the rocks in the ground. They have devised means to create powders from these rocks and have produced various combinations which they hope will be nutritious, but so far all that have ingested them have sickened.”

My friend continued, “One of the Wise Men proposed that we begin to consume the bodies of our own kind, and this was initially greeted with great enthusiasm. A small group attempted the practice, but it was learned that the change in our bodies from generations of eating plant life had resulted in an inability to digest flesh. Many of the volunteers suffered great agony, but the survivors were hailed as *Warriors for Gaia* and generously rewarded. You will learn more of these matters here, at this our next stop,” and suddenly I realized that we had now come to a halt before another large structure.

I Meet the Guardians

The building before which we stood was a mass of angles and irregular discordant shapes, with parts of the structure resembling *rhombi*, other parts *trapezoidal*. In addition, a large triangular spire ascended upwards

from the roof. Over the doorway hung a simple sign, with the words *Guardians of the Beans*.

Once again, without knocking, my companion opened the door, and we entered. Unlike the large chamber of the Wise Ones, we were now standing in a rather small anteroom. Its shape was one of an uneven and crooked polygon, with narrow passages leading off in many directions. Affixed to the wall over one of the passages was again a large portrait of an individual, this with a nameplate which bore the word *Uklid*.

We were alone, but in one corner of the room there was a small gong and mallet, which my companion walked over to and struck, producing a very loud sound. After what seemed to be a rather long wait, I heard clapping noises coming from one of passageways, and then a figure emerged. His appearance startled me, for it was at great variance to what I had witnessed so far. His face and head—and from what could be ascertained, his entire body—were hairless. As to attire, the short skirt, which I had presumed was the universal garment, was absent, and he was clad only in a type of rectangular barrel, which hung from his shoulders, supported by suspenders.

What was most unusual, however, was that protruding from his left forearm was a device that appeared to be nothing other than an *abacus*. Upon closer inspection, I was shocked to see that the device was not strapped to the arm, but had been grafted into the skin itself.

“What brings you to the *Home of the Sacred Beans*?” our new host intoned.

Once again, my guide explained my foreign origin, as well as my thirst for knowledge. The Guardian, for so I took him to be, nodded repeatedly throughout all of this, and then announced, with a sonorous firmness, “All is open for the curious. Please, if you follow me, I will reveal all of our wonders.”

He led us down one of the very narrow passageways. We made several angular turns and then emerged, to my surprise, into a room even larger than the outer chamber of the Wise Ones. What greeted my eyes was so fantastic, it is difficult, even now, to describe. The chamber was crowded with individuals who, although encumbered by their barrel attire, feverishly waddled from one side of the room to another, and there was a din of shouts and exclamations.

One entire side of the room was taken up with numerous types of what appeared to be antennae, as well as variations of the device my companion wore on his wrist. Crowds stood around these devices fe-

verishly working the *abaci* protruding from their arms. “Whoop!” one yelled. “Shazam!” another exclaimed. Meanwhile, others skipped, hopped and pirouetted from this group to another on the opposite side of the room, and the noise emanating from there was even greater. From this latter group, a chant arose, which seemed to be, “Pass or Fail, Pass or Fail, Pass or Fail . . .”

It was all outlandish, a scene *fantastique*, and the dizzying effect of the goings-on was only exacerbated by the universal noisy emissions of “noxious gases” from the front and rear of almost all those present, the repeated sounds of which, combined with the chanting, had an uncanny melodic effect.

“What is all this?” I yelled, for there was no other way to make myself heard. Motioning me to wait, our host walked over to a table, retrieved a very large blanket, came back and threw it over the heads of our trio. “Now,” he said, “we may converse under the *Muffler*.” We were in darkness, for the heavy blanket reached almost to the floor, our faces only inches apart, but despite the circumstances, I repeated, “What is going on here?”

“One of the responsibilities of the Guardians,” he replied, “is to safeguard the sacred Honks. It is in this chamber that all of the Honks are transmitted, and where all the responses are received. Those you saw on the one side are receiving the responses, which they number on their arm extensions. They then go to the other side where the totals are collected into the final tally. The song you heard is our anthem, and accompaniment is produced by the *Choir of the Guardians*. We call this chamber the *Temple of the Honk*,” he stated with hushed solemnity.

With effort, I restrained the impulse to laugh uproariously, and instead asked, “Who decides what is to be sent out as a Honk?”

“We have a procedure for this,” he replied. “At the Gathering, anyone may propose a Honk. If enough interest is shown, then it is brought before the *Elders of the Guardians* to consider. We frequently consult with the Wise Ones before we announce a Universal Honk, but the final decision rests with us.”

“What do beans have to do with any of this?”

“Why, the Sacred Beans allow us to tabulate the Honks,” he exclaimed, and with that he raised the blanket so I could see the abacus attached to his arm, and to my astonishment I saw that instead of beads, the device was constructed of strings and what appeared to be pinto beans.

“But this is not the most important role the Beans

play,” he continued. “For that you must visit our *Hall of Ledjers*.” He threw off the blanket, and without another word led us back to the passageway from which we had entered.

Apparently, none of the building’s rooms connected to one another, and the only way to get anywhere was to return to the anteroom, and then take another passageway. The clapping sound which had originally alerted me to the approach of our host, was a ritual he repeated on all of these traversals, to alert others coming from the opposite direction to back up, since there was no room for anyone to pass.

Lessons in Economics

Exiting from the second passageway, we emerged into a room—if one can call it that—which was so vast it was difficult to even guess its size. It stretched out in all directions at least one hundred yards or more, and I wondered that I had not observed this size when examining the building’s exterior.

Here, too, I saw a large section devoted to the transmission devices which received and transmitted Honks, but in addition there were large mounds of objects—hundreds of them—dispersed throughout the place. We proceeded to walk through the room, and I excused myself in order to make a closer examination of one of the mounds. I was flabbergasted to find that it consisted entirely of beans. I rejoined the others, just as our host was announcing, “This is the *Hall of Ledjers*. It is here that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished.”

Sweeping his hand, to take in the entirety of the Hall, the Guardian then proceeded to describe the activity which took place within it. “Long ago,” he began, “we eliminated all forms of compulsory labor, as a manifestation of male oppression. This was decided with the Honk to ban *Testosteronism*. The problem then arose as to how we would survive, while acting only in a way which would honor Gaia. The Wise Ones had a stroke of genius, and promulgated the concept of *Good Behavior*. Those who take actions which benefit Gaia are rewarded with beans, and those who harm Gaia in any way, or who disobey one of the Universal Honks, are punished with the confiscation of a portion of their beans.

“For example, if one rescues a Creature of Gaia, this might be rewarded with, say, five Beans. A less dramatic act, such as fanning the face of a tired creature may receive one Bean, or even a half a Bean. On the other hand, a destructive action, like killing an insect, is

punished, with the penalty depending on whether the action was deliberate or accidental. We are constantly reassessing the Bean reward of each action.

“This is the basis for our economy,” he stated. “We have named it the *Skeener System*. It is an arrangement which protects Gaia, and it reinforces right-thinking among our people. The piles of Beans you observe are the individual *Bean Banks* of each member of the village. These Beans may be used to trade for an available Power Unit, or a vacant abode, or other necessities, and they are the only means to partake in many of the activities offered by the *Comrades of Eternal Love*.”

“What about practical needs,” I asked, “such as food or health care?”

“We have no need for health care, for those who are called back to Gaia in the natural way are honored for their service. As for nourishment, those who collect foodstuffs for the people are awarded Beans, but such rewards are smaller than those actions which directly aid Gaia and her creatures, sometimes no more than a quarter or an eighth of a Bean. The same is true for those who discover items which can be used to fix our devices, for we must depend on old parts we uncover to repair and maintain them. This *skavenging*—for so it is called—is now increasingly difficult, since the number of paths is being regularly reduced, and we can obtain only that which is within arm’s reach.”

Our host stopped, and I pondered for several moments all that he had enumerated. “So the only way to obtain beans is through good behavior?” I finally asked.

“One other way exists,” he replied. “There is another room, one we can not enter today because the passageway has crumbled and all access is currently blocked. It is the place of the *Bean Swaps*. You see, we are constantly reviewing what the value of each action is worth in Beans, and these are revised from time to time. The members of the village may negotiate among themselves to exchange Beans based on what they project the future value of a certain action might be worth. More recently, a new practice has arisen whereby even individuals who possess no Beans, or very few, are allowed to place bets on the movement in values of the Beans, and if they are correct they are rewarded handsomely. It is all very confusing, but it is allowed because we are prohibited from interfering with the free flow of Beans.”

With that, suddenly and without warning, he burst into song:

*The Beans are here! The Beans are there!
The Sacred Beans roam everywhere!*

*Are they up? Are they down?
Those with Beans will never frown!*

The rhythm of these utterances was punctuated by loud belches, delivered with gusto at the end of each phrase.

This incredible performance ended as abruptly as it began, and thankfully, his manner indicated that he did not expect any response. I observed a physical signal from my companion that it was time to go. Nevertheless, I asked one final question, “What is the action which has the highest reward in beans?”

“Why, that is the *Gift to Gaia*.”

“What is that?”

“The *Gift* was sanctioned by the *Sacrificial Honk*. It arose from the recognition that there are too many of our species. Long ago we decided that the only solution to the polluting effects of our multiplying was to eliminate some of our numbers. Initially, this was done by lottery and only applied to newborn children, no more than 48 hours old. Later it became so popular that the lottery was abandoned and parents eagerly offered up their children. Over time the age of those donated was extended to 30 months. Those who make this offering are richly rewarded.”

“Do you mean you murder young children?”

“We murder no one! It is done joyfully. In fact, one of the greatest *Warriors for Gaia* who has ever inhabited our Village offered up 17 of her children in this way. It is the holiest of our practices. In addition, the remains of those who are sacrificed are used to nourish our fellow creatures.”

“Do you mean that you feed the bodies to the animals?”

“You must not use that word. It is banned! We are speaking of the *Creatures of Gaia*, of whom we are the most flawed.”

I was dumbfounded and sickened by this final exchange and had no desire to continue the conversation. Taking the arm of my companion, I led him back through the passageway and out of the building.

Ponderings

My guide informed me that our final destination would be *Paradise*, the location where the *Gathering* took place. “*Paradise* is the creation of the *Comrades of Eternal Love*,” he stated. “You will not meet them, for they operate entirely in secret. You will only witness the bonds of love that they have created.” With that, he set out on a new pathway, and I followed behind.

Thankfully, we walked in silence, for this gave me

time to consider all of the conflicting emotions now seizing my mind. Upon awakening this morn, I had been confused by my predicament. Then, as we began to explore the village, my curiosity took hold, and I experienced astonishment and even bemusement at what I observed. Now, I found that wonder had given way to a creeping sense of revulsion, nay, even horror. What sort of place was I confined in? How had humans come to this? Despite my continued loss of memory, I was certain that my native culture could not in any way resemble the mores of this village.

With a growing inner turmoil of spirit, I followed my guide to our final destination.

The Gathering

Our path had taken us to the very edge of the village. We wound down a long hill and emerged into a very large tree-lined clearing. My guide announced, “This is *Paradise*, the refuge granted to us by Gaia where we commune in our natural state.”

There was an entranceway at the edge of the clearing, and I beheld a huge banner which read *Gathering of the Tribes*. We strode into the clearing, and what greeted my senses was both shocking and breathtaking. There were thousands of people in the clearing, they were all naked, and the noise which had been muffled in our approach by the trees and undergrowth, was loud, raucous, discordant, overpowering. The mass of people was heaving to-and-fro, bodies and limbs intertwined, men, women, boys, girls, and to my astonishment, numerous animals of several varieties. The stink that permeated the air was beyond anything I had experienced up to that moment.

My guide turned abruptly to me and declared, “This is the *Gathering*. It is where our people live most of their lives. This is Gaia’s gift to us. Now I must leave you, for I belong with them,” and he gestured toward the throng below. “I have been gone too long, and my spirit needs replenishment.” With that, shedding his Power Unit and skirt, he plunged into the mass of bodies, moving up, down, sideways—eventually disappearing from sight.

There was throbbing music of a sort. I heard wild drums, clashing cymbals, whistles, flutes, windpipes and other instruments. There were chants from several different directions, piercing screams, and howls. Amidst the man-made sounds were the wild screeches and eruptions from different animals. The motion was frenetic and hypnotic, as the throng pulsated in unison, groaning, swaying, never ceasing.

The music, the chants, the shrieks all produced a driving rhythm, which the throng both created and followed. Within the mass of bodies I witnessed, over and over, a full gamut of shameless behavior, too perverse to describe here. The grotesqueness of the scene—of the experience—was stupefying. The sights, the noises, the smells, the shocks—my head began to swim, and I feared I would lose consciousness.

I hurried to the outer edge of the clearing, walking around the perimeter. Here, in several locations, there seemed to be several zones for special activity. I approached one and saw naked men, women and children on their knees being whipped with large tree branches, under a sign which read *Pleasure is Pain*. There were several other such “exhibits,” but I had no appetite for any more of this, so I steered clear. After I had proceeded for some way, racking my mind as to what I should do next, I came upon an exhibit much larger than any of the others.

There were hundreds of people gathered, yelling and gesturing. Before us was a stage upon which was a structure that resembled an altar. Over it hung a banner which read, *Our Gift to Gaia*. Then, I perceived that on one side of the stage a long line of women were approaching. Some held babies in their arms. Others grasped the hands of young toddlers. They methodically, mechanically, marched toward the stage. As I watched, the first woman placed her infant on the altar, and a man holding a large knife, raised high over his head, approached the infant. . . . I ran from the place, my heart exploding, my mind frozen. Behind me, the crowd erupted in a loud cheer, and then, after a minute another cheer . . . and then another.

My God! What was I to do? Was there no escape?

I continued to run, knowing not where. Perhaps I could flee through the woods and find a saner community of humans? Or possibly I could make my way back to where I had awoken this morning and remember how I had arrived there? Get out. Get out. Get out of this Celebration of Death. I continued to run.

Suddenly, a deafening sound overpowered everything, and almost instantly all of the noise and activity ceased within the clearing. I stopped, seized the arm of one standing next to me, and demanded, “What is going on?”

“Why, it is time for the *Ultimate Honk*,” he stated.

The *Ultimate Honk*—this is what my guide had said I would learn of at the Gathering. “What is the *Ultimate Honk*?” I almost yelled.

He seemed stunned that I should ask such a ques-

tion. Giving me a piercing look, he replied, “It is the Honk to decide if we should kill ourselves to free Gaia from our polluting presence. Many are predicting that it will pass this time.” He shook his arm loose. “I must go. I have to make my choice known.”

I delayed him, and demanded, “Which way have you decided?”

“Why, death, of course.”

My mind reeled. My limbs would not respond. . . .

* * * * *

The woman turned to the young boy in the seat next to her, reached out a hand, and ever so gently began to jostle him. The boy’s only response was to switch position and utter a soft sound. Smiling, the woman brushed a strand of hair off his forehead, and with slightly more force, shook him again. His movements stopped, and after a few seconds his eyes opened. Momentarily, his vision was unfocused. Then, abruptly, he jerked his head from side to side, looking first in one direction and then the other. His manner was one of confusion. He returned his attention to the face of the woman, and slowly an expression of recognition entered his eyes. “Mother,” he said.

The woman gazed at him tenderly. “It is time to wake up, Francis,” she said. “We are almost ready to land.”

“Mother! I had the strangest dream!”

“It was only a dream my son.”

“But it was so strange! I was a grown man, and I was in this . . . this place.” Here words momentarily failed him, but he resumed. “It was horrible . . . wild animals and awful people . . . and awful things.”

The woman took the boy’s face in her hands, but he rushed on, “There were all kinds of things.” Here, he paused, but continued, his voice quavering, “There were things I don’t understand. I was so scared.”

With the fingers of her right hand, the woman lifted up his chin, until their faces were in alignment. “It was only a dream,” she repeated. “None of it can harm you. I am with you.” She gently kissed his cheek, and then after a moment kissed the other. She dropped her hand, and taking a different tone, she instructed, “Now you must get ready. We will be landing soon. We will be meeting your father. Won’t that please you?”

The boy nodded aggressively and suddenly beamed a smile. “Oh, yes! I have missed him so.”

With that, their plane—an Earth-Moon X-128 shuttle—glided downward through the clouds toward the spaceport below.