

PARIAH

Rog Phillips

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"I hope you're right, Mary," John said with forced cheerfulness.

"It's still dark enough so they can't see us too well until we get to the door."

They came to the dirt road leading into the fenced-in yard. John figured out how to unlatch the gate. Every farmer, it seems, has his own patented way of making gates.

A couple of dogs came toward them, barking loudly. One of them stopped barking and came forward to sniff cautiously, then wag its tail; the other kept on barking.

The light on the back porch went on. John and Mary skirted it in the shadows until they came to the board steps. They went up, their shoes making loud noises.

The back door opened as they reached the top step. A man stuck his head out. "Howdy, fo—" His greeting snapped off like a light. His face did things. He swam backward through the air, leaped backward, stumbled backward — all in the same movement. He bumped the door, which then banged the kitchen wall so hard the glass window in it broke.

"Get out or I'll shoot!" his hysterical voice came from the kitchen. He was already on his way to the bedroom to get his rifle.

"We'd better go," Mary said sadly.

"I-I guess so," John said.

They hurried back toward the road. They had gone scarcely fifty feet when the rifle barked. They broke into a fast trot — all they could manage just then. The rifle barked again.

They didn't bother with the gate this time. John lifted Mary over, then leaped to her side, using one hand. They ran down the road until they were sure they were out of range. They looked back often, in case the farmer got his car and came after them.

The rifle continued to bark, as though its owner was frenzied.

"Maybe he thinks we're still hiding in the yard and is shooting into bushes," John said.

"I don't think so," Mary put an arm around John's shoulders. They walked close together. "He — I think he's just terribly afraid. He's shooting wild. He'll stop when he calms down. We startled him."

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“Are you hungry?” John said, changing the subject. “I am. I think I smell carrots up ahead.” He slipped through the barbed wire fence, and returned in a few moments with a large bunch of them. They walked slowly, their teeth crunching hungrily into the sweet yellow roots. “Think we should

try again tonight?" he asked casually.

"No, John. I'm too tired. Maybe we can find a barn."

"Yes. We ought to get off the road. That farmer may have thought to call the —"

Headlights turned sharply into the road less than a quarter of a mile ahead. With the smoothness of long practice John and Mary melted into the bushes and weeds alongside the road. They watched when the car went by. It was a highway patrol sedan. They watched its taillights wink into the distance. They became bright suddenly, then dim again as the car slowed to turn into the farmhouse where they had been run off.

"We ought to catch a freight or

something,” John said. “They’ll start looking for us.”

At dawn they came to a railroad track. A freight was on the siding. A train whistled in the distance. It came into view, a streamliner, blurring past them with faces in windows. Then it was gone. The freight started to move slowly.

“I know what line this is,” Mary said. “I think that freight will go through the town where I was born.”

“You’re hungry,” John said.

“I’m used to being hungry by now,” Mary said. She smiled pleadingly. “Please?”

A string of empty boxcars was passing. They went down the bank and onto the track the passenger train had

gone over. The freight was moving at a fast walk now.

John helped Mary into the open door of a boxcar. When she was safely on, he caught the edge of the door and pulled himself up.

“Made it,” he said lightly. Then he saw what Mary was looking at; a man, badly in need of a shave, wearing a dirty faded blue work shirt and Levis. “Hello,” John said. The man leaped to his feet and ran past them. His feet slid in straw that covered the floor of the car. They went out from under him. He got up and went to the open door, took his eyes off them long enough to see what was outside, then jumped.

Mary looked at John and shrugged

cheerfully.

“Well, we have the car to ourselves,” John said.

The freight gathered speed until it was going fifty or sixty miles an hour. John and Mary stood at either edge of the open doors and watched fields and towns go past. Then they grew tired of that, sat down side by side, their backs to the wall, where they could still watch.

“I've made up my mind,” John said.

“Well,” Mary said lightly. “So that was the cause of the long silence.”

The cars went over a crossing. John waited until the clatter of the wheels died down.

“Yes,” he said. “I've made up my mind. We've had enough for a day or

two. Tonight I'm going to steal.”

“What do you call what we've been doing?” Mary said.

“That's different, swiping out of farmers' fields. We can't keep it up. We'll get — worms or something. We need a hot meal. Several hot meals. We can get off the freight outside the city in the suburbs and watch until we see a family drive away from home like they're going to a show or something. Then we'll break in and cook us a nice square meal.”

“I'd like to say no,” Mary said.

“You're outvoted,” John chuckled.
“You — against me and your stomach.”

“It might be just our luck that they were the family that would have taken us

in,” Mary said, but she didn't sound as though she thought it much of an argument.

“Shut up, Flo,” the man said.

“You've been drinking too much again.”

“I have not been drinking too much, my darling sweet husband,” the tall blonde said. “Did you get that?”

Sweet husband.” She laughed hollowly, then added, “And what if I have? What'll you do about it?”

“Maybe I'll do something about this 'sweet husband' business,” Harry said. “I'm getting sick of you.”

He opened the car door and got out. Flo watched him become a vague

shadow on the porch. A screen door slammed. A light went on in the house. She opened the door and slid to the concrete, and went toward the house, staggering a little. She was tall in the moonlight, tall and with a shape. She looked away from the house at the long stretch of lawn and trees as though she didn't like what she saw. She didn't. The nearest neighbor was a city block away — only it wasn't city blocks out here just beyond the edge of town. Just highway.

She went up on the porch and pushed open the screen door. She came to a stop in the doorway, waiting until the screen slammed behind her. Harry was standing near a window. He was looking at the window.

“Go ahead and do something about it then,” Flo said. “I’ll like it better that way. A cash settlement and alimony. And a city apartment.”

“We’ve had burglars,” Harry said.

“Don’t try to change the subject. Huh? Burglars? You’re kidding.”

The window was open. The glass splinters lay on the rug.

“We’d better see what’s missing,” Harry said.

Flo went to the little bar and opened it. “Not our stock, thank God,” she said, pouring half a water glass of Haig and Haig.

Harry looked around the room, then went into the kitchen. When he came out he looked at Flo and chuckled knowingly

but said nothing. She could find the stack of dirty dishes herself. He went into the bedroom. When he came out he flashed her a malicious grin. "Some o f your dresses gone," he said. "You won't miss them. They're those 'old rags' you always talk about. One of my suits is gone too. Why didn't they steal the whole lot?" He turned toward a door a t the end of the living room. Over his shoulder he added, "Oh yes — your mink coat is gone, too!"

"So what?" Flo said. "It's insured. Anyway, maybe I wore it tonight and left it someplace. I don't remember!"

Harry changed his mind in midstep and went to the fireplace. He lifted one of the tiles and inspected the floor safe

revealed. "Guess they missed this," he said. "Not a scratch on it."

He covered it again with the tile square and went to the door and opened it. It was his office — a t home. Flo watched the light go on inside. She sipped her drink with lady-like daintiness. Harry came out holding an envelope. He looked across the room at her.

"It's a hell of a note," he said. "It makes me mad."

Flo finished the half glass of Haig and Haig in a gulp.

"You make me sick," she said in reference to something unrelated.

"They stole the tickets to the masquerade," Harry said. "Fifty bucks

apiece. Now what would they want with tickets to the masquerade?"

"Send the cab to one fifty-six twenty-two Orange Grove Avenue. Tell the driver not to be startled by our appearance. We're dressed for the Masquerade. That's where we're going. We'll be waiting in front. Too uncomfortable to sit down... That's right. Women and their ideas." John hung up and smiled at the phone. He turned to Mary. "We'll have to hurry so we're waiting when the cab comes. That mink looks lovely on you, Mary."

"Thanks, John. Your business suit looks very well on you too."

"Lucky its owner wasn't the slim

type,” John said.

They had slipped from the woods where they had been hiding for the past three days, living sparingly on the remains of the meal they had cooked. The woods came right to the edge of the service station. The phone booth was on the border between station driveway and woods. Ideal. They slipped back into the trees and emerged onto the sidewalk well away from the lights. They met no one.

“You have the tickets, John?” Mary said in sudden panic.

“Of course.” He felt in his pocket, nodded.

Headlights turned into the street. The light at the top of the car advertised it as

a taxi.

“Think he'll be scared off?” John said.

“Of course not. The Masquerade is an annual affair here. I get the hometown papers and know all about it from way back. Half the cabs in town will be taking fares more unusual in appearance than us!”

To prove it, the cab drew to the side of the road. The driver grinned broadly as he opened the door for them.

“It's wonderful,” Mary murmured as the cab sped along a well-lighted arterial. “I'd give my soul to be able to walk into one of those shops.” She stared at a tea ch window filled with female mannequins dressed in the latest fashions. She caught John watching her.

She darted him a quick smile. “Do you think we'll be happy tonight, John?” she asked. Her smile quirked playfully. “Would you mind awfully if I — flirted a little with someone else? Maybe even let him make love to me?” There was a wistful note in her voice.

“The sky's the limit,” John said. “I think I'll pick a blonde. After all, you're a brunette. A man should have something different on his night out.”

The cab came to a stop. Other cabs were ahead of it. They formed a line that disgorged couples, few of them looking human. And those that were, consorted with the unhuman — like the lovely near-nude girl with the life-like rubber snake ... and the man with the demon's

head. John tipped the driver when it was their turn. "Hope you win first prize," the driver said.

"Thanks," John said. Mary smiled at the driver and looked lingeringly at his face. She wanted to remember everything that happened tonight. Every detail.

Spectators formed a wide lane maintained by four policemen. John and Mary crossed the sidewalk nervously. They skipped up the flat marble steps into the building and took their place at the end of the line.

A man in dress suit and a nose that was supposed to look like an elephant's trunk but which looked more like a rope was taking the tickets as the couples

went through the door. Each time he took the tickets he turned and handed them to another man behind him. This man had broad shoulders and a square chin. There was a bulge under his left armpit. He would hold the tickets up and squint at them, glance briefly at the couples, nod, and they would go through the door.

Mary leaned close to John's ear. "He looks like a policeman. I was afraid it was too good to be true. Those numbers."

"Can't be helped now," John said regretfully. "We can't run for it, either. Right in the heart of the city. Keep your chin up, no matter what. And keep your hypnotic barrier up full — even if it tires you excessively. We might still fool

them.”

“Tickets please,” elephant nose said, his lips emerging on either side of the rope in a smile of welcome. John fished out the tickets and gave them to him.

Elephant nose handed the tickets to the other man and put his hand on the door handle in a gesture that implied he would open it for them, but which held the door closed. Mary and John watched the detective squint at the numbers, then nod. Unbelievably elephant nose was opening the door for them.

Inside, another man pointed toward dressing rooms. “You can check your coats in there,” he said.

“I’ll meet you over by that statue,” John said. “Keep them hypnotized!”

They looked into each other's eyes briefly, drawing courage. Ten minutes later they were together again.

“Go all right?” John asked. Mary crossed her fingers and held them up. A loud voice made them turn.

“What's the matter with you halfwits?” a man at the entrance was shouting. His face was livid with rage.

“It's all right!” the doorman elephant nose said loudly. “We've just trapped a pair of famous cat burglars.”

“Cats disguised as a bird and a dog?” another voice said loudly. “How appropriate!”

“He was waiting for those people?” Mary said. “I wonder if—”

“Never mind,” John said, guiding her

toward the wide arch leading into the ballroom. “We're in, and safe for now. We'll have all the fun we can while it —” he took a deep breath —“lasts.”

“I wonder who will be my prince charming,” Mary sighed.

Thick tapering black whiskers were glued individually to Harry's cheeks. A black piece of molded plastic bridged the space between nose and upper lip skillfully. Continuations of his lips reached to his ears, which were covered with pointed extensions. A tail animated by an internal spring construction swept from under his coat gracefully backward. He achieved the effect of a somewhat jaded wolf imperfectly turned

into the form of a man. It was a skillful, an expensive job. He was pacing with wolfish impatience up and down the office off the ballroom. No less than the chief of police sat behind the desk, drumming his fingers impatiently. The door burst open. Squarejaw came in, dragging a squirming peacock and a loose-bodied bird dog.

“Here they are, Chief,” Squarejaw said.

“Them?” Harry said, his wolf whiskers quivering with nervous mirth. “Don't make me laugh. We were with them in half a dozen cocktail lounges while it was happening.

“They had the right tickets,” Squarejaw said indignantly.

“And the city is going to be sued for false arrest,” the limp bird dog snarled.

“Get that damned secretary again,” Harry snarled. “She must have made a mistake in the numbers.”

Ten minutes later the nervous female was there with the books and discovered to her horror that she had let her eyes drop down a line from the name to the numbers.

Another five minutes uncovered the proper tickets. And Squarejaw naturally couldn't remember who had given them to the ticket taker. It did prove, however, that the stolen tickets came.

“They'll have the stubs on them,” Harry said, attempting a wolfish smile. “Why not announce a door prize? Maybe

five hundred dollars. Pretend to draw a number? They might fall for it.”

“I'll suggest it to the committee,” the chief said.

Harry left the room. At the entrance to the ballroom he paused, his finger touching the black wolf whiskers gently. He surveyed the room, his eyes pausing at each female. His wife Flo, in a Siamese cat outfit, was too prominent. She had a drink in her cat paw, and already there were several men around her. She looked his way. He snarled with his whiskers.

There was Margie with her Peacock outfit that showed her cute fanny. But that would be a waste of a good evening. Besides ... Harry forgot Margie as his

eyes went to the girl. It wasn't the way she was made up that arrested his attention. It was the way she was standing, alone, the look in her eyes, the expression on what he could see of her face. The wolf in him recognized what it had been searching for.

A damn cute idea in make-up, too. Original and sexy. He touched his wolf whiskers with a gesture, waited until he caught the girl's eyes on him, nodded at her and smiled. He walked toward her. She looked doubtful, then returned his smile with just a shade of nervousness.

“Hello, my dear little girl,” he said, leering with over-exaggeration to cover his actual leering. “I'm the Big Bad Wolf.”

“Help!” the girl screamed in a whisper. “I would have sworn you were my grandma.”

“That was most unkind,” Harry said with great dignity.

They looked into each other's eyes. Suddenly they laughed.

“I'm Harry.”

“I'm Mary.”

He took her slim cool hand and didn't release it. “Want a drink?”

“I'd love one.”

The dance band began to play a soft number as they left the floor. Mary paused. ‘I should dance this one with my — escort.’”

“Why?” Harry said. “Forget it. Remember, you can tell him the wolf

dragged you away into the forest.”

They had three drinks. Harry debated in his mind the anatomical problems of dancing with her. Then he decided that, since she had dressed that way deliberately, she wouldn't resent an accidental familiarity or two.

They danced the first number when the lights were turned low. Mary stumbled a little. “I'm not used to drinking,” she explained.

“Go to your head a little?” he asked slyly.

Her “mm hm” was a whisper in his ear. He caught her lips with his. They tried to escape, then surrendered.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly. “I'm not used to drinking either.”

She was looking at him with stars in her eyes. He kissed her again.

“No. I'm not sorry,” he said.

“Neither am I, Harry.” She rested her cheek against his shoulder. The dance ended on that note. They went back to the bar. Their conversation was now casual with an intimate casualness. They sat with their backs to the bar, watching other people and commenting on their make-ups.

“I like you, Harry,” Mary said suddenly, impulsively.

“Me too,” he said. “This is too public. Think we could find some corner?”

“Not just yet,” Mary said. “The people. They are so wonderful this night of the year. I want to watch them. Just a

little bit more. Do you mind?"

"I heard they're having something new this year," Harry said quickly. "A door prize. I think it's going to be five hundred dollars."

"Oh?" It was disinterested. Five hundred dollars didn't seem to interest her. Harry sighed with relief. He had to try it a step further though. "You know, you've got quite a stunning make-up. You may win the first prize."

Her laugh was embarrassed. "I certainly hope not, Harry. I would sink through the floor."

"The door prize wouldn't be bad," he said. "What's the number on your ticket stub?"

Her eyes were fixed on something out

in the ballroom. She reached into the pocket in her trunks and brought out a scrap of cardboard, handing it to him.

He read the number and stopped breathing. It was the number.

“I’ll remember it for you,” he said with studied casualness, handing the stub back to her. “Another drink?”

“Huh?” she blinked her eyes and looked at him. “Oh. Yes, another drink, Harry.”

He ordered them. He handed her her drink. “Be back in a minute, darling,” he said with the right implication. “You won’t go away?”

“No, Harry. Hurry back. Please. The evening will be so short.”

The little thief, he thought as he

hurried away. The dirty little thief. Whatta ya know, a female burglar. And stupid enough not to know that fifty-dollar tickets would be registered. He hurried toward the office to get the police chief.

And she hadn't seemed the type. Not the way he would have imagined a female burglar. She was more like a girl student in a convent, dreaming for years of an escapade she could hide in her secret memories. But you couldn't tell about women. Take Flo. If he'd only known what he was getting into with her when he got married...

He could hear Flo's voice now when she found out. "H a h a ! Y o u picked yourself a mouse and she turned out to

be the rat type. And so you wasted the whole evening. What a laugh!” She would say that. He came to an abrupt stop with his hand on the knob to the door to the office. There was another way. Flo wouldn't have the laugh at his expense. He turned and made his way back to the bar. Mary was where he had left her.

“Back so soon?” she asked, smiling up at him.

“No line waiting,” he said, sitting down beside her and taking his drink. “Want to dance again? Or should we...?”

“Let's,” Mary said.

“Let's what?” He grinned wolfishly.

“You know... Dance.”

The music was loud, but the voices

around them were a soft murmur. In the first shadows he swung her around and kissed her brutally. He pulled his head away, still holding her pressed tightly against him.

“You hurt me, Harry,” she said softly.

“You liked it?”

“I like this better.” She crushed her lips against his, held them there. After a long moment she pulled away with a soft laugh.

“You little vixen!” he said. “You know the score!”

“Not that way,” she said. “I’ve dreamed of tonight. You’ll never know how I’ve dreamed. Am I desirable to you, Harry?”

“You want the truth?”

“Yes.”

“I'll give it to you. I don't know you! You could be a-a gun moll. You could be a fugitive from a convent. You could be the most wonderful woman in the world — or the worst.”

“Would it make a difference?”

“No. I want you. No use lying about it. I want every inch of you.”

“Then I'm desirable in your eyes?”

“Damn it — yes.”

Her voice was husky, dreamy. “I wanted to hear you say it, Harry.”

“Why shouldn't I say it?”

The dance ended after a while. Harry caught the eyes of the Siamese cat on him. He smirked. Flo had seen him and Mary kiss. He had wanted her to see.

And when he told her he had known Mary was the burglar all along it would be perfect.

He looked Mary over covertly. Her masquerade make-up was still intact. She looked okay. Something in the back of his mind disturbed him. He shrugged it off.

“One of your whiskers is missing,” Mary said. “The glue where it was looks like a pimple.” She chuckled.

“Dropped at the scene of the crime,” Harry said darkly. “That should make the detective mystified. One wolf whisker. Even the great Holmes would have a hard time finding the criminal from that slim clue.”

Mary's hand reached into the pocket

of her trunks. "Oh dear," she said. "There's another clue. I've lost my ticket stub." She smiled. "But could Mr. Holmes find us from that?"

"He could," Harry said. "You see, the number of that ticket is on the books after my name. I bought it just like that."

"Oh!" It was a gasp.

"There's a way out, Mary," Harry said, "The police are here—"

"I know. How did they miss us? That detective looking at the numbers on the stubs. And then he got the wrong people."

"He got the numbers mixed but he has them right now. I've got a proposition for you. I don't give a damn about your accomplice. We can slip away right

now, go to your apartment or room or wherever you live. I'm not a fool. I don't want a phony address. I want to know. Play along with me. We've had too good a time to drop it! Maybe I'm a fool. Maybe I'm not. I'm crazy about you. I make plenty of money. I can pay your rent and buy your clothes.”

“Your wife—”

“To hell with her. We stopped loving each other long ago. She's got a meal ticket. The courts would give her better than that if I tried to get rid of her. She's a mistake. You won't be.”

“No, Harry.”

“Why not?” he said, surprised.

People were looking at them, so they began dancing. She rested her head on

his shoulder. "Oh, Harry," she said. "I-I wish tonight were forever. But it can't be."

"Then it's the police, Mary."

"Blackmail?"

His voice was husky. "Call it that. I want you."

"I think you do. I really think you do. But what if—"

"Nothing can change that. A man knows. I'll do everything I can, take every advantage I can. If you think I'm bluffing find out. If I can't have you, I'll turn you over to the police. I want you that bad. Look. I'm quite well off. Tomorrow I'll buy you a car. You can drive out in the country, pick out a home you'd like. I'll buy it for you. Or I'll find

one for you and take you there. I can buy off your accomplice or you can ditch him. We can be together a while every day.”

“You want me that much? My body?” Her voice was wistful.

“You're a funny kid,” Harry growled. “Most girls make a pretense of wanting the man to love them for their mind. You seem to want me to be crazy about your body.”

He felt her shiver against him. “I'm afraid,” she whispered.

He chuckled. “You're going to give in,” he said.

Her shivering increased. Then suddenly it stopped. She took his hand. “Let's go up to the balcony, darling.”

Her eyes were bright with tears. She smiled through them. "I — almost — have hope," she said brightly.

They went up the steps to the balcony. Harry was conscious of Flo's eyes following them. Maybe she'd follow them, but what the hell. Maybe a settlement and alimony was the best solution. To hell with Flo. They reached the first shadows. Harry tried to keep on, but Mary stopped him.

"Stand where you are," she said. "No, don't kiss me — or yes, just once now." She yielded her lips. Her arms went around his neck. Then she pushed gently away from him. "Stand there!" she said. "I want to stand a little way from you. I want you to look at me. I want you to see

me — but just in the shadows, for now.”

“Okay!” He was a man humoring the whims of a woman. And it was easy to humor this one. He could look at her forever. He could —

She abandoned her hypnotic aura.

He turned a livid shade of green. “Oh God!” he moaned. He thought of the moments he had had with her in his arms dancing. He knew now what had been troubling him at the back of his mind. He doubled over and gagged, his stomach doing the erasing his mind couldn't accomplish. Mary stood quietly, her arms still held out toward him. Her lips trembled. Tears streamed down her cheeks but she didn't cry. She couldn't cry.

“I'm sorry, Harry,” she said with infinite regret. “I'd hoped. You gave me hope.”

He didn't hear her. Still retching, he stumbled toward the stairs, half stumbled down them.

“Police!” he gasped. The band drowned out his voice. “Police!” he repeated. It was coincidental with a pause in the music. His voice carried through the ballroom.

All eyes went toward him, then past him to the head of the stairs. Mary was coming down. She felt relieved from the terrific strain of holding a hypnotic mental image for so many. Her head was held high. Tears still streaked her cheeks. The band had played a few more

notes, then stopped of itself to watch her. The bandleader turned to see what they were staring at. A gasp of horror rose through the ballroom.

John detached himself from the shadows at the far side of the room and pushed gently through the crowd toward the foot of the stairs. People saw him now, too, as he actually was. Harry staggered away from the stairs toward the office. Squarejaw, his complexion green, had brought a gun out from underneath his dress suit. He was headed determinedly toward the stairs. John held out his hand to Mary. A shudder went through the crowd as Mary took his hand.

“I'm sorry, John,” Mary said. “I had to spoil it. I knew, but I had to spoil it. I thought maybe...”

“It's okay, Mary,” John said.

“We can go back now.”

Mary smiled through her tears. “You didn't dance, John. Didn't you want to?” When he didn't answer she said, “You did this — you escaped with me — just for me?”

“Just for you.”

They went ahead of Squarejaw. The door to the office was open. They could hear Harry's voice.

“She's an escaped ATOMY!” Harry's voice came, shaken and gasping. “God! Can't they keep them out of sight? Can't they catch them when they get out? Why

do they want to get out? It was like holding a cancer in my hands. She put her arms around me—”

“ I don't see how they could have gotten this far from the Atomy Colony,” the police chief's voice sounded. “The female was born here. That's probably why.”

John held back. “We'd better wait out here,” he said. “You won't want to see him again.”

“I won't mind,” Mary said quietly. “I feel sorry for him now. I think that's what I wanted to find. I found it. I feel sorry for all of them, but especially for Harry. I was beautiful and attractive to him. It's more than just how we look. It's a genetic pattern gone haywire like

cancerous tissue, only we are the visible manifestation of cancer of the human race, cropping out now a hundred years after the first Bomb. The race pattern is infected and they're the race. They never know when their children will look like us — or worse. That's what makes them react so. I feel so sorry for them.” She smiled apologetically at John. “I guess that's what I had to see and feel. I-I don't feel sorry for myself. Not any more. Not ever again.”

Her hand rested on his shoulder. She said. “We can go home now, John, and wait. Some day we'll be the race. Some day we'll be the accepted ones. I know that now!”