



Special Delivery
Knight, Damon Francis

Published: 1954

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/32011>

Also available on Feedbooks for Knight:

- *The Worshippers* (1953)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction April 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

Len and Moira Connington lived in a rented cottage with a small yard, a smaller garden, and too many fir trees. The lawn, which Len seldom had time to mow, was full of weeds, and the garden was overgrown with blackberry brambles. The house itself was clean and smelled better than most city apartments, and Moira kept geraniums in the windows.

However, it was dark on account of the firs. Approaching the door one late spring afternoon, Len tripped on an unnoticed flagstone and scattered examination papers all the way to the porch.

When he picked himself up, Moira was giggling in the doorway. "That was funny."

"The hell it was," said Len. "I banged my nose." He picked up his Chemistry B papers in a stiff silence. A red drop fell on the last one. "Damn it!"

Moira held the screen door for him, looking contrite and faintly surprised. She followed him into the bathroom. "Len, I didn't mean to laugh. Does it hurt much?"

"No," said Len, staring fiercely at his scraped nose in the mirror. It was throbbing like a gong.

"That's good. It was the funniest thing—I mean funny-peculiar," she clarified hastily.

Len stared at her; the whites of her eyes were showing: "Is there anything the matter with you?" he demanded.

"I don't know," she said on a rising note. "Nothing like that ever happened to me before. I didn't think it was funny at all. I was worried about you, and I didn't know I was going to laugh—" She laughed again, a trifle nervously. "Maybe I'm cracking up."

Moira was a dark-haired young woman with a placid, friendly disposition. Len had met her in his senior year at Columbia, with—looking at it impartially, which Len seldom did—regrettable results. At present, in her seventh month, she was shaped like a rather bosomy kewpie doll.

Emotional upsets, he remembered, may occur frequently during this period. He leaned to get past her belly and kissed her forgivingly. "You're probably tired. Go sit down and I'll get you some coffee."

Except that Moira had never had any hysterics till now, or morning sickness, either—she burped instead—and anyhow, was there anything in the literature about fits of giggling?

After supper, he marked seventeen sets of papers desultorily in red pencil, then got up to look for the baby book. There were four dog-eared

paperbound volumes with smiling infants' faces on the covers, but the one he wanted wasn't there. He looked behind the bookcase and on the wicker table beside it. "Moira!"

"Hm?"

"Where the devil is the other baby book?"

"I've got it."

Len went and looked over her shoulder. She was staring at a drawing of a fetus lying in a sort of upside-down Yoga position inside a cross-sectioned woman's body.

"That's what he looks like," she said. "*Mama.*"

The diagram was of a fetus at term.

"What was that about your mother?" Len asked, puzzled.

"Don't be silly," she said abstractedly.

He waited, but she didn't look up or turn the page. After a while, he went back to his work. He watched her.

Eventually she leafed through to the back of the book, read a few pages, and put it down. She lighted a cigarette and immediately put it out again. She fetched up a belch.

"That was a good one," said Len admiringly.

Moira sighed.

Feeling tense, Len picked up his coffee cup and started toward the kitchen. He halted beside Moira's chair. On the side table was her after-dinner cup, still full of coffee ... black, scummed with oil droplets, stone-cold.

"Didn't you want your coffee?" he asked solicitously.

She looked at the cup. "I did, but—" She paused and shook her head, looking perplexed.

"Well, do you want another cup now?"

"Yes, please. *No.*"

Len, who had begun a step, rocked back on his heels. "Which, damn it?"

Her face got all swollen. "Oh, Len, I'm so mixed up," she said, and began to tremble.

Len felt part of his irritation spilling over into protectiveness. "What you need," he said firmly, "is a drink."

He climbed a stepladder to get at the top cabinet shelf which cached their liquor when they had any. Small upstate towns and their school boards being what they were, this was one of many necessary financial precautions.

Inspecting the doleful few fingers of whisky in the bottle, Len swore under his breath. They couldn't afford a decent supply of booze or new clothes for Moira. The original idea had been for Len to teach for a year while they saved enough money so that he could go back for his master's degree. More lately, this proving unlikely, they had merely been trying to put aside enough for summer school, and even that was beginning to look like the wildest optimism.

High-school teachers without seniority weren't supposed to be married.

Or graduate physics students, for that matter.

He mixed two stiff highballs and carried them back into the living room. "Here you are. Skoal."

"Ah," she said appreciatively. "That tastes—*Ugh*." She set the glass down and stared at it with her mouth half open.

"What's the matter now?"

She turned her head carefully, as if she were afraid it would come off. "Len, I don't know. *Mama*."

"That's the second time you've said that. What is this all—"

"Said what?"

"Mama. Look, kid, if you're—"

"I didn't." She appeared a little feverish.

"Sure you did," said Len reasonably. "Once when you were looking at the baby book, and then again just now, after you said ugh to the highball. Speaking of which—"

"*Mama drink milk*," said Moira, speaking with exaggerated clarity.

Moira hated milk.

Len swallowed half his highball, turned and went silently into the kitchen.

When he came back with the milk, Moira looked at it as if it contained a snake. "Len, I didn't say that."

"Okay."

"I didn't. I didn't say mama and I didn't say that about the milk." Her voice quavered. "And I didn't laugh at you when you fell down."

Len tried to be patient. "It was somebody else."

"It *was*." She looked down at her gingham-covered bulge. "You won't believe me. Put your hand there. No, a little lower."

Under the cloth, her flesh was warm and solid against his palm. "Kicks?" he inquired.

"Not yet. Now," she said in a strained voice, "you in there—if you want your milk, kick three times."

Len opened his mouth and shut it again. Under his hand there were three explicit kicks, one after the other.

Moira closed her eyes, held her breath and drank the milk down in one long horrid gulp.

"Once in a great while," Moira read, "cell cleavage will not have followed the orderly pattern that produces a normal baby. In these rare cases some parts of the body will develop excessively, while others do not develop at all. This disorderly cell growth, which is strikingly similar to the wild cell growth that we know as cancer—" Her shoulders moved convulsively in a shudder. "*Bluh!*"

"Why do you keep reading that stuff, if it makes you feel that way?"

"I have to," she said absently. She picked up another book from the stack. "There's a page missing."

Len attacked the last of his medium-boiled egg in a noncommittal manner. "It's a wonder it's held together this long," he said, which was perfectly just.

The book had had something spilled on it, partially dissolving the glue, and was in an advanced state of anarchy. However, the fact was that Len had torn out the page in question four nights ago, after reading it carefully. The topic was "Psychoses in Pregnancy."

Moira had now decided that the baby was male, that his name was Leonardo (not referring to Len, but to da Vinci), that he had informed her of these things along with a good many others, that he was keeping her from her favorite foods and making her eat things she detested, like liver and tripe, and that she had to read books of his choice all day long in order to keep him from kicking.

It was miserably hot. With Commencement only two weeks away, Len's students were torpid and galvanic by turns. Then there was the matter of his contract for next year, and the possible opening at Oster High which would mean more money, and the Parent-Teachers thing to-night at which Superintendent Greer and his wife would be regally present.

Moira was knee-deep in Volume I of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, moving her lips; an occasional guttural escaped her.

Len cleared his throat. "Moy?"

"—und also des tragischen—what in God's name does he mean by that—? What, Len?"

He made an irritated noise. "Why not try the English edition?"

"Leo wants to learn German. What were you going to say?"

Len closed his eyes for a moment. "About this PTA business—you sure you want to go?"

"Well, of course. It's pretty important, isn't it? Unless you think I look too sloppy—"

"No. No, damn it! But are you feeling up to it?"

There were faint violet crescents under Moira's eyes; she had been sleeping badly. "Sure," she said.

"All right. And you'll go see the doctor tomorrow?"

"I said I would."

"And you won't say anything about Leo to Mrs. Greer or anybody?"

She looked slightly embarrassed. "Not till he's born, I think, don't you? It would be an awful hard thing to prove—even you wouldn't have believed me if you hadn't felt him kick."

This experiment had not been repeated, though Len had asked often enough. All little Leo had wanted, Moira said, was to establish communication with his mother—he didn't seem to be interested in Len at all. "Too young," she explained.

And still—Len recalled the frogs his biology class had dissected last semester. One of them had had two hearts. *This disorderly cell growth ... like a cancer.* Unpredictable: extra fingers or toes or a double dose of cortex?

"And I'll burp like a lady, if at all," Moira assured him cheerfully as they got ready to leave.

The room was empty, except for the ladies of the Committee, two nervously smiling male teachers and the impressive bulk of Superintendent Greer when the Conningtons arrived. Card-table legs skreeked on the bare floor; the air was heavy with wood polish and musk.

Greer advanced, beaming fixedly. "Well, isn't this nice? How are you young folks this warm evening?"

"Oh, we thought we'd be earlier, Mr. Greer," said Moira with pretty vexation. She looked surprisingly schoolgirlish and chic; the lump that was Leo was hardly noticeable unless you caught her in profile. "I'll go right now and help the ladies. There must be something I can still do."

"No, now, we won't hear of it. But I'll tell you what you can do—you can go right over there and say hello to Mrs. Greer. I know she's dying to sit down and have a good chat with you. Go ahead now, don't worry about this husband of yours; I'll take care of him."

Moira receded into a scattering of small shrieks of pleasure, at least half of them arcing across a gap of mutual dislike.

Greer, exhibiting perfect dentures, exhaled Listerine. His pink skin looked not only scrubbed but disinfected; his gold-rimmed glasses belonged in an optometrist's window, and his tropical suit had obviously come straight from the cleaner's. It was impossible to think of Greer unshaven, Greer smoking a cigar, Greer with a smudge of axle grease on his forehead, or Greer making love to his wife.

"Well, sir, this weather—"

"When I think of what this valley was like twenty years ago—"

"At today's prices—"

Len listened with growing admiration, putting in comments where required. He had never realized before that there were so many absolutely neutral topics of conversation.

A few more people straggled in, raising the room temperature about half a degree per capita. Greer did not perspire; he merely glowed.

Across the room, Moira was now seated chummily with Mrs. Greer, a large-bosomed woman in an outrageously unfashionable hat. Moira appeared to be telling a joke; Len knew perfectly well that it was a clean one, but he listened tensely, all the same, until he heard Mrs. Greer yelp with laughter. Her voice carried well: "Oh, that's *priceless*! Oh, dear, I *only* hope I can remember it!"

Len had resolutely not been thinking of ways to turn the conversation toward the Oster vacancy. He stiffened again when he realized that Greer had abruptly begun to talk shop. His heart began pounding absurdly; Greer was asking highly pertinent questions in a good-humored but businesslike way—drawing Len out, and not even bothering to be the slightest bit Machiavellian about it.

Len answered candidly, except when he was certain that he knew what the Superintendent wanted to hear; then he lied like a Trojan.

Mrs. Greer had conjured up a premature pot of tea and, oblivious of the stares of the thirsty teachers present, she and Moira were hogging it, heads together, as if they were plotting the overthrow of the Republic or exchanging recipes.

Greer listened attentively to Len's final reply, which was delivered with as pious an air as if Len had been a Boy Scout swearing on the Manual. But since the question had been "Do you plan to make teaching your career?" there was not a word of truth in it.

He then inspected his paunch and assumed a mild theatrical frown. Len, with that social sixth sense which is unmistakable when it operates,

knew that his next words were going to be: "You may have heard that Oster High will be needing a new science teacher next fall... ."

At this point Moira made a noise like a seal.

The ensuing silence was broken a moment later by a hearty scream, followed instantly by a clatter and a bone-shaking thud.

Mrs. Greer was sitting on the floor, legs sprawled, hat over her eye. She appeared to be attempting to perform some sort of excessively pagan dance.

"It was Leo," Moira incoherently told Len at home. "You know she's English—she said of course a cup of tea wouldn't hurt me, and she insisted I go ahead and drink it while it was hot, and I couldn't—"

"No, no—wait," said Len in a controlled fury. "What—"

"So I *drank* some. And Leo kicked up and made me burp the burp I was saving. And—"

"Oh, Lord!"

"—then he kicked the teacup out of my hand into her lap, and I wish I was *dead*!"

On the following day, Len took Moira to the doctor's office, where they read dog-eared copies of *The Rotarian* and *Field and Stream* for an hour.

Dr. Berry was a round little man with soulful eyes and a twenty-four-hour bedside manner. On the walls of his office, where it is customary for doctors to hang all sorts of diplomas and certificates of membership, Berry had only three. The rest of the space was filled with enlarged colored photographs of beautiful, beautiful children.

When Len followed Moira determinedly into the consulting room, Berry looked mildly shocked for a moment, then apparently decided to carry on as if nothing outré had happened. You could not say that he spoke, or even whispered; he rustled.

"Now, Mrs. Connington, we're looking just fine today. How have we been feeling?"

"Just fine. My husband thinks I'm insane."

"That's g—Well, that's a funny thing for him to think, isn't it?" Berry glanced at the wall midway between himself and Len, then shuffled some file cards rather nervously. "Now. Have we had any soreness in our stomach?"

"Yes. He's been kicking me black and blue."

Berry misinterpreted Moira's brooding glance at Len, and his eyebrows twitched involuntarily.

"The baby," said Len. "The *baby* kicks her."

Berry coughed. "Any headaches? Dizziness? Vomiting? Swelling in our legs or ankles?"

"No."

"All rightie. Now let's just find out how much we've gained, and then we'll get up on the examination table."

Berry drew the sheet down over Moira's abdomen as if it were an exceptionally fragile egg. He probed delicately with his fat fingertips, then used the stethoscope.

"Those X-rays," said Len. "Have they come back yet?"

"Mm-hm," said Berry. "Yes, they have." He moved the stethoscope and listened again.

"Did they show anything unusual?" Len asked.

Berry's eyebrows twitched a polite question.

"We've been having a little argument," Moira said in a strained voice, "about whether this is an ordinary baby or not."

Berry took the stethoscope tubes away from his ears. He gazed at Moira like an anxious spaniel.

"Now let's not worry about *that*. We're going to have a perfectly healthy wonderful baby, and if anybody tells us differently, why, we'll just tell them to go jump in the lake, won't we?"

"The baby is absolutely normal?" Len said in a marked manner.

"Absolutely." Berry applied the stethoscope again. His face blanched.

"What's the matter?" Len asked after a moment.

The doctor's gaze was fixed and glassy.

"Vagitus uterinus," Berry muttered. He pulled the stethoscope off abruptly and stared at it. "No, of course it couldn't be. Now isn't that a nuisance? We seem to be picking up a radio broadcast with our little stethoscope here. I'll just go and get another instrument."

Moira and Len exchanged glances. Moira's was almost excessively bland.

Berry confidently came in with a new stethoscope, put the diaphragm against Moira's belly, listened for an instant and twitched once all over, as if his mainspring had snapped. Visibly jangling, he stepped away from the table. His jaw worked several times before any sound came out.

"Excuse me," he said, and walked out in an uneven line.

Len snatched up the instrument he had dropped.

Like a bell ringing under water, muffled but clear, a tiny voice was shouting: "*You bladder-headed pillpusher! You bedside vacuum! You fifth-rate*"

tree surgeon! You inflated—" A pause. "Is that you, Connington? Get off the line; I haven't finished with Dr. Bedpan yet."

Moira smiled, like a Buddha-shaped bomb.

"Well?" she said.

"**W**e've got to think," Len kept saying over and over.

"*You've got to think.*" Moira was combing her hair, snapping the comb smartly at the end of each stroke. "I've had plenty of time to think, ever since it happened. When you catch up—"

Len flung his tie at the carved wooden pineapple on the corner of the footboard. "*Moy, be reasonable.* The chances against the kid kicking three times in any one-minute period are only about one in a hundred. The chances against anything like—"

Moira grunted and stiffened for a moment. Then she cocked her head to one side with a listening expression ... a new mannerism of hers that was beginning to send intangible snakes crawling up Len's spine.

"What now?" he asked sharply.

"He says to keep our voices down. He's thinking."

Len's fingers clenched convulsively, and a button flew off his shirt. Shaking, he pulled his arms out of the sleeves and dropped the shirt on the floor. "Look. I just want to get this straight. When he talks to you, you don't hear him shouting all the way up past your liver and lights. What—"

"You know perfectly well he reads my mind."

"That isn't the same as—" Len took a deep breath. "Let's not get off on that. What I want to know is, what is it like? Do you seem to hear a real voice, or do you just know what he's telling you, without knowing how you know?"

Moira put the comb down in order to think better. "It isn't like hearing a voice. You'd never confuse one with the other. It's more—the nearest I can come to it, it's like remembering a voice. Except that you don't know what's coming."

Len picked his tie off the floor and abstractedly began knotting it on his bare chest. "And he sees what you see, he knows what you're thinking, he can hear when people talk to you?"

"Of course."

"This is tremendous!" Len began to blunder around the bed-room, not looking where he was going. "They thought Macaulay was a genius. This kid isn't even born. I *heard* him. He was cussing Berry out like Monty Woolley."

"He had me reading *The Man Who Came to Dinner* two days ago."

Len made his way around a small bedside table by trial and error. "That's another thing. How much could you say about his—his personality? I mean does he seem to know what he's doing, or is he just striking out wildly in all directions?" He paused. "Are you sure he's really conscious at all?"

Moira began, "That's a silly—" and stopped. "Define consciousness," she said doubtfully.

"All right, what I really mean—*why* am I wearing this necktie?" He ripped it off and threw it over a lampshade. "What I mean—"

"Are you sure you're really conscious?"

"Okay. You make joke, I laugh, ha-ha. What I'm trying to ask is, have you seen any evidence of creative thought, organized thought, or is he just—integrating, along the lines of—of instinctive responses? Do you—"

"I know what you mean. Shut up a minute... . I don't know."

"I mean is he awake, or asleep and dreaming about us, like the Red King?"

"I don't *know*!"

"And if that's it, what'll happen when he wakes up?"

Moira took off her robe, folded it neatly, and maneuvered herself between the sheets. "Come to bed."

Len got one sock off before another thought struck him. "He reads your mind. Can he read other people's?" He looked appalled. "Can he read mine?"

"He doesn't. Whether it's because he can't, I don't know. I think he just doesn't care."

Len pulled the other sock halfway down and left it there. In a stiffer tone, he said, "One of the things he doesn't care about is whether I have a job."

"No. He thought it was funny. I wanted to sink through the floor, but I had all I could do to keep from laughing when she fell down... . Len, what are we going to do?"

He swiveled around and looked at her.

"Look," he said, "I didn't mean to sound that gloomy. We'll do something. We'll fix it. Really."

"I hope so."

Careful of his elbows and knees, Len climbed into the bed beside her. "Okay now?"

"Mm... . Ugh." Moira tried to sit up suddenly, and almost made it. She wound up propped on one elbow, and said indignantly, "Oh, no!"

Len stared at her in the dimness. "What—?"

She grunted again. "Len, get up. All *right*. Len, *hurry*!"

Len fought his way convulsively past a treacherous sheet and staggered up, goose-pimpled and tense. "What's wrong?"

"You'll have to sleep on the couch. The sheets are in the bottom—"

"On that couch? Are you crazy?"

"I can't help it," she said in a small faint voice. "Please don't let's argue. You'll just have to."

"*Why*?"

"We can't sleep in the same bed," she wailed. "He says it's—oh!—unhygienic!"

Len's contract was not renewed. He got a job waiting on tables in a resort hotel, an occupation which pays more money than teaching future citizens the rudiments of three basic sciences, but for which Len had no aptitude. He lasted three days at it; he was then idle for a week and a half until his four years of college physics earned him employment as a clerk in an electrical shop. His employer was a cheerfully aggressive man who assured Len that there were great opportunities in radio and television, and firmly believed that atom-bomb tests were causing all the bad weather.

Moira, in her eighth month, walked to the county library every day and trundled a load of books home in the perambulator. Little Leo, it appeared, was working his way simultaneously through biology, astrophysics, phrenology, chemical engineering, architecture, Christian Science, psychosomatic medicine, marine law; business management, Yoga, crystallography, metaphysics and modern literature.

His domination of Moira's life remained absolute, and his experiments with her regimen continued. One week, she ate nothing but nuts and fruit, washed down with distilled water; the next, she was on a diet of porterhouse steak, dandelion greens and Hadacol.

With the coming of full summer, fortunately, few of the high school staff were in evidence. Len met Dr. Berry once on the street. Berry started, twitched, and walked off rapidly in an entirely new direction.

The diabolical event was due on or about July 29th. Len crossed off each day on their wall calendar with an emphatic black grease pencil. It would, he supposed, be an uncomfortable thing at best to be the parent of a super-prodigy. Leo would no doubt be dictator of the world by the

time he was fifteen, unless he would be assassinated first, but almost anything would be a fair price for getting Leo out of his maternal fortress.

Then there was the day when Len came home to find Moira weeping over the typewriter, with a half-inch stack of manuscript beside her.

"It isn't anything. I'm just tired. He started this after lunch. Look."

Len turned the face-down sheaf the right way up.

Droning. Abrasing
the demiurge.
Hier begrimms the tale:
Eyes undotted, grewling
and looking, turns off
a larm, seizes cloes.
Stewed Bierly a wretch
Pence, therefore tchews we. Pons!
Let the pants take air of themsulves.

he first three sheets were all like that. The fourth was a perfectly good Petrarchian sonnet reviling the current administration and the political party of which Len was a registration-day member.

The fifth was hand-lettered in the Cyrillic alphabet and illustrated with geometric diagrams. Len put it down and stared shakily at Moira.

"No, go on," she said, "read the rest."

The sixth and seventh were obscene limericks; and the eighth, ninth and so on to the end of the stack were what looked like the first chapters of a rattling good historical adventure novel.

Its chief characters were Cyrus the Great, his jaunty-bosomed daughter Lygea, of whom Len had never previously heard, and a one-armed Graeco-Mede adventurer named Xanthes. There were also courtesans, spies, apparitions, scullery slaves, oracles, cutthroats, lepers, priests and men-at-arms in magnificent profusion.

"He's decided," said Moira, "what he wants to be when he's born."

Leo refused to bothered with mundane details. When there were eighty pages of the manuscript, it was Moira who invented a title and by-line for it—*The Virgin of Persepolis* by Leon Lenn—and mailed it off to a literary agent in New York. His response, a week later, was cautiously enthusiastic. He asked for an outline of the remainder of the novel.

Moira replied that this was impossible, trying to sound as unworldly and impenetrably artistic as she could. She enclosed the thirty-odd pages Leo had turned out through her in the meantime.

Nothing was heard from the agent for two weeks. At the end of this time, Moira received an astonishing document, exquisitely printed and bound in imitation leather, thirty-two pages including the index, containing three times as many clauses as a lease.

This turned out to be a book contract. With it came the agent's check for nine hundred dollars.

Len tilted his mop-handle against the wall and straightened carefully, conscious of every individual gritty muscle in his back. How did women do housework every day, seven days a week, fifty-two god-dam weeks a year?

It was a little cooler now that the Sun was down, and he was working stripped to shorts and bath slippers; but he might as well have been wearing an overcoat in a Turkish bath.

The faint whisper of Moira's monstrous new electrical typewriter stopped, leaving a fainter hum. Len went into the living room and sagged on the arm of a chair. Moira, gleaming sweatily in a flowered housecoat, was lighting a cigarette.

"How's it going?" he asked, hoping for an answer. He hadn't always received one.

She switched off the machine wearily. "Page two-eighty-nine. Xanthes killed Anaxander."

"Thought he would. How about Ganesh and Zeuxias?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "I can't figure it out. You know who it was that raped Marianne in the garden?"

"No, who?"

"Ganesh."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope." She pointed to the stack of typescript. "See for yourself."

Len didn't move. "But Ganesh was in Lydia, buying back the sapphire. He didn't return till—"

"I know, I know. But he *wasn't*. That was Zeuxias in a putty nose with his beard dyed. It's all perfectly logical, the way Leo explains it. Zeuxias overheard Ganesh talking to the three Mongols—you remember, Ganesh thought there was somebody behind the curtain, only that was when they heard Lygea scream, and while their backs were turned—"

"All right. But for God's sake, this fouls everything up. If Ganesh never went to Lydia, then he *couldn't* have had anything to do distempering Cyrus's armor. And Zeuxias couldn't, either, because—"

"It's exasperating. I know he's going to pull another rabbit out of the hat and clear everything up, but I don't see how."

Len brooded. "It beats me. It had to be either Ganesh or Zeuxias. Or Philomenes, though that doesn't seem possible. Look, damn it, if Zeuxias knew about the sapphire all the time, that rules out Philomenes once and for all. Unless—no. I forgot about that business in the temple. Umm. Do you think Leo really knows what he's doing?"

"I'm certain. Lately I've been able to tell what he's thinking even when he isn't talking to me. I mean just generally, like when he's puzzling over something, or when he's feeling mean. It's going to be something brilliant and he knows what it is, but he won't tell me. We'll just have to wait."

"I guess so." Len stood up, grunting. "You want me to see if there's anything in the pot?"

"Please."

Len wandered into the kitchen, turned the flame on under the silex, stared briefly at the dishes waiting in the sink, and wandered out again. Since the onslaught of *The Novel*, Leo had relinquished his interest in Moira's diet, and she had been living on coffee. Small blessings... .

Moira was leaning back with her eyes closed, looking very tired. "How's the money?" she asked without moving.

"Lousy. We're down to twenty-one bucks."

She raised her head and opened her eyes wide. "We couldn't be! Len, how could anybody go through nine hundred dollars that fast?"

"Typewriter. And the dictaphone that Leo thought he wanted, till about half an hour after it was paid for. We spent less than fifty on ourselves, I think. Rent. Groceries. It goes, when there isn't any coming in."

She sighed. "I thought it would last longer."

"So did I. If he doesn't finish this thing in a few days, I'll have to go look for work again."

"Oh. That isn't so good. How am I going to take care of the house and do Leo's writing for him?"

"I know, but—"

"All right. If it works out, fine. If it doesn't—he must be near the end by now." She stubbed out her cigarette abruptly and sat up, hands over

the keyboard. "He's getting ready again. See about that coffee, will you? I'm half dead."

Len poured two cups and carried them in. Moira was still sitting poised in front of the typewriter, with a curious half-formed expression on her face.

Abruptly the carriage whipped over, muttered to itself briefly and thumped the paper up twice. Then it stopped. Moira's eyes got bigger and rounder.

"What's the matter?" said Len. He looked over her shoulder.

The last line on the page read:

to be continued in our next

Moira's hands curled into small helpless fists. After a moment, she turned off the machine.

"What?" said Len incredulously. "To be continued—what kind of talk is that?"

"He says he's bored with the novel," Moira replied dully. "He says he knows the ending, so it's artistically complete; it doesn't matter whether anybody else thinks so or not." She paused. "But he says that isn't the real reason."

"Well?"

"He's got two reasons. One is that he doesn't want to finish the book till he's certain he'll have complete control of the money it earns."

"Yes," said Len, swallowing a lump of anger, "that makes a certain amount of sense. It's his book. If he wants guarantees... ."

"You haven't heard the other one."

"All right, let's have it."

"He wants to teach us—so we'll never forget—who the boss is in this family."

"**L**en, I'm awfully tired," Moira complained piteously, late that night.

"Let's just go over it once more. There has to be some way. He still isn't talking to you?"

"I haven't felt anything from him for the last twenty minutes. I think he's asleep."

"All right, let's suppose he *isn't* going to listen to reason—"

"I think we'd better."

Len made an incoherent noise. "Well, okay. I still don't see why we can't write the last chapter ourselves. It'd only be a few pages."

"Go ahead and try."

"Not me. You've done a little writing. Damned good, too. And if you're so sure all the clues are there—Look, if you say you can't do it, all right, we'll hire somebody. A professional writer. It happens all the time. Thorne Smith's last novel—"

"It wasn't Thorne Smith's and it wasn't a novel," she said dogmatically.

"But it sold. What one writer starts, another can finish."

"Nobody ever finished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*."

"Oh, hell."

"Len, it's impossible. It is! Let me finish—if you're thinking we could have somebody rewrite the last part Leo did—"

"Yeah, I just thought of that."

"—even that wouldn't do any good. You'd have to go all the way back, almost to page one. It would be another story when you got through. Let's go to bed."

"Moy, do you remember when we used to worry about the law of opposites?"

"Mm?"

"The law of *opposites*. When we used to be afraid the kid would turn out to be a pick-and-shovel man with a pointy head."

"Uh. Mm."

He turned. Moira was standing with one hand on her belly and the other behind her back. She looked as if she were about to start practicing a low bow and doubted she could make it.

"What's the matter now?" he asked.

"Pain in the small of my back."

"Bad one?"

"No... ."

"Belly hurt, too?"

She frowned. "Don't be foolish. I'm feeling for the contraction. There it comes."

"The—but you just said the small of your back."

"Where do you think labor pains usually start?"

The pains were coming at twenty-minute intervals and the taxi had not arrived. Moira was packed and ready. Len was trying to set her a good example by remaining calm. He strolled over to the wall calendar, gazed at it in an offhand manner, and turned away.

"Len, I know it's only the fifteenth of July," she said impatiently.

"Huh? I didn't say anything about that."

"You said it seven times. Sit down. You're making me nervous."

Len perched on the corner of the table, folded his arms, and immediately got up to look out the window. On the way back, he circled the table in an aimless way, picked up a bottle of ink and shook it to see if the cap was on tight, stumbled over a wastebasket, carefully up-ended it, and sat down with an air of *Ici je suis, ici je reste*.

"Nothing to worry about," he said firmly. "Women have kids all the time."

"True."

"What for?" he demanded violently.

Moira grinned at him, then winced slightly and looked at the clock. "Eighteen minutes this time. They're getting closer."

When she relaxed, Len put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it in only two tries. "How's Leo taking it?"

"Isn't saying. He feels—" she concentrated—"apprehensive. He tells me he's feeling strange and he doesn't like it. I don't think he's entirely awake. Funny—"

"I'm glad this is happening now," Len announced.

"So am I, but—"

"Look," said Len, moving energetically to the arm of her chair. "We've always had it pretty good, haven't we? Not that it hasn't been tough at times, but—you know."

"I know."

"Well, that's the way it'll be again, once this is over. I don't care how much of a superbrain he is, once he's born—you know what I mean? The only reason he's had the edge on us all this time is he could get at us and we couldn't get at him. If he's got the mind of an adult, he can learn to act like one. It's that simple."

Moira hesitated. "You can't take him out to the woodshed. He's going to be a helpless baby, physically, like anybody else's. He has to be taken care of."

"All right, there are plenty of other ways. If he behaves, he gets read to. Things like that."

"That's right, but there's one other thing I thought of. You remember when you said suppose he's asleep and dreaming, and what happens if he wakes up?"

"Yeah."

"That reminded me of something else, or maybe it's the same thing. Did you know that a fetus in the womb only gets about half the amount of oxygen in his blood that he'll have when he starts to breathe?"

Len looked thoughtful. "I forgot. Well, that's just one more thing Leo does that babies aren't supposed to do."

"Use as much energy as he does, you mean. What I'm getting at is, it can't be because he's getting more than the normal amount of oxygen, can it? I mean he's the prodigy, not me. He must be using it more efficiently. And if that's it, what will happen when he gets twice as much?"

They had prepared and disinfected her, along with other indignities, and now she could see herself in the reflector of the big delivery-table light—the image clear and bright, like everything else, but very haloed and swimmy, and looking like a bad statue of Sita. She had no idea how long she had been here—that was the dope, probably—but she was getting pretty tired.

"Bear down," said the staff doctor kindly, and before she could answer, the pain came up like violins and she had to gulp at the tingly coldness of laughing gas.

When the mask lifted, she said, "I *am* bearing down," but the doctor had gone back to work and wasn't listening.

Anyhow, she had Leo. *How are you feeling?*

His answer was muddled—because of the anesthetic?—but she didn't really need it. Her perception of him was clear: darkness and pressure, impatience, a slow Satanic anger ... and something else. Uncertainty? Dread?

"Two or three more ought to do it. Bear down."

Fear. Unmistakable now. And a desperate determination—

"Doctor, he doesn't want to be born!"

"Seems that way sometimes, doesn't it? Now bear down good and hard."

Tell him stop blurrrrr too dangerrrr stop I feel worrrrr stop I tellrrrr stop

"What, Leo? What?"

"Bear down," the doctor said abstractedly.

Faintly, like a voice under water, gasping before it drowns: *Hurry I hate you tell him sealed incubator tenth oxygen nine-tenths inert gases hurry hurry hurry*

"An incubator!" she panted. "He'll need an incubator ... to live ... won't he?"

"Not this baby. A fine, normal, healthy one."

He's idiot lying stupid fool need incubator tenth oxygen tenth tenth hurry before it's

The pressure abruptly ceased.

Leo was born.

The doctor was holding him up by the heels, red, wrinkled, puny. But the voice was still there, very small, very far away: *Too late same as death*

Then a hint of the old cold arrogance: *Now you'll never know who killed Cyrus.*

The doctor slapped him smartly on the minuscule behind. The wizened, malevolent face writhed open, but it was only the angry squall of an ordinary infant that came out.

Leo was gone, like a light turned off beneath the measureless ocean.

Moira raised her head weakly.

"Give him one for me," she said.

—DAMON KNIGHT

**Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded**

Miriam Allen DeFord

The Eel

The punishment had to fit more than just the crime—it had to suit every world in the Galaxy!

Raymond Z. Gallun

Stamped Caution

It's a funny thing, but most monsters seem to be of the opinion that it's men who are the monsters. You know, they have a point.

Howard L. Myers

The Reluctant Weapon

A live weapon is a downright liability ... it's all too apt to get qualms of conscience!

Horace Leonard Gold

No Charge for Alterations

Wanta know what's wrong with women these days? Spoiled! The whole kit and kaboodle of 'em. They want to sing in nightclubs and hook up with some millionaire and wear beautiful clothes. Housework is something for gadgets to take care of, with maids to run the gadgets. Afraid to get a few calluses on their dainty hands!

Winston K. Marks

Breeder Reaction

The remarkable thing about Atummyc Afterbath Dusting Powder was that it gave you that lovely, radiant, atomic look—just the way the advertisements said it would. In fact, it also gave you a little something more!

Jean M. Janis

Rough Translation

Don't be ashamed if you can't blikkel any more. It's because you couldn't help framishing.

Richard Stockham

Perfect Control

Why can't you go home again after years in space? There had to be an answer ... could he find it in time, though?

Floyd L. Wallace

Forget Me Nearly

What sort of world was it, he puzzled, that wouldn't help victims find out whether they had been murdered or had committed suicide?

William Douglas Morrison

A Feast of Demons

If you want my opinion, old Maxwell should have kept his big mouth shut ... and then El Greco could not have put Earth in a frame!

Robert Abernathy

World of the Drone

Dworn knew that if his machine failed him in battle he would die. For men fought each other viciously, with no bond of brotherhood, in this— World Of The Drone



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind