

THE FENCE

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

HE came down the stairway into the hushed sanctuary of the lounge and stood for a moment to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the perpetual twilight of the place.

A robot waiter went past, tall glasses balanced on the tray.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Craig," he said.

"How are you, Herman?" asked Craig.

"Will you wish something, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Craig. "I'm going out directly."

Herman left. Craig crossed the room and he walked almost on tiptoe. He realized now, for the first time, that he almost always walked on tiptoe here. The only noise that ever was allowed was a cough, and even then it must be a cough that was most discreet. To have spoken to anyone within the confines of the lounge would have been high treason.

The ticker stood in one corner of the room and, in keeping with the place, it was an almost silent ticker. The tape came out and went into a basket, but the basket was well watched and often emptied and the tape never, never spilled out on the carpet.

He picked up the strand of tape and ran it through his fingers, bending low to read the characters, backing through the alphabet until he came to C and then he went more slowly.

Cox, 108 1/2; Cotton, 97; Colfield, 92; Cratchfield, 111 1/4; Craig, 75... Craig, 75!

It had been 78 yesterday and 81 the day before and 83 the day before that. A month ago it had been 96 1/2 and a year ago 120.

He stood with the tape in his hand and looked out over the room. The place seemed, at first glance, to be deserted. But, as he looked, he saw them. There was a bald head peeking over the back of one chair, and over the back of another rose a telltale of smoke from an invisible cigar. There was one who sat facing Craig, but he was so much a part of the chair that at first he seemed invisible. He sat quietly, with his gleaming black shoes and white shirt front and the folded paper held stiffly before him.

Craig turned his head slowly and saw, with a sinking feeling, that there was someone in his chair, just three removed from the right wing of the fireplace. A month ago it would not have happened, a year ago it would have been unthinkable. His personal satisfaction had been high, then.

But they knew that he was slipping. They had seen the tape and talked about it. And they felt contempt for him despite their mealy mouths.

"Poor Craig," they had said to one another. "Such a decent chap. And so young, too."

They would have been consoling.

"He'll come out of it," they'd said. "It's just temporary."

And they had been quite smug about it,, no doubt, sure that it was the sort of thing that would

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The counselor was kind and helpful, and Craig could see at a glance that he was a man well satisfied and that he liked his work.

"Seventy-five," he said. "That is not good, is it, Mr. Craig?"

"No, it's not," said Craig.

"You are engaged in something?" asked the counselor and he simpered just a little, a professional, polished simper that said he knew that Craig was, of

course, but he had to ask.

"Oh," said the counselor. "A most engaging subject. I have known a number of gentlemen who were quite wrapped up in history."

"I specialize," said Craig. "One acre."

"Acre?" asked the counselor, not a little puzzled. "I'm not quite sure ..."

"The history of one acre," Craig told him. "Trace it back, you know, with a temporal viewer. Hour to hour, day to day. Record in detail, and with appropriate comment and deduction, everything that occurred upon the acre."

"Most novel," said the counselor. "I've never heard of it before."

"You do some screwy things," said Craig.

"Screwy?"

"Well, you strive for effect. You try to be spectacular, but spectacular in a scholarly way, if you understand."

"Yes, I am sure I do," the counselor said, "and yet it seems to me that the study of one acre of the Earth's surface is quite legitimate. There have been others who have limited their studies. There have been histories of families and of cities and of certain rather obscure causes and of the development and evolution of such commonplace things as teapots and coffee cups and antimacassars and such."

"Yes," said Craig, "that is exactly what I thought."

"Tell me, Mr. Craig," asked the

counselor, "have you run across anything spectacular on your ... ah, acre?"

"I have traced the growth of trees," said Craig. "Backwards, you know. From decaying giants to saplings, from saplings to seed. It is quite a trick, this backward tracing. It is a bit confusing, but soon you get used to it. I swear you finally get so that you think in reverse. And then, of course, I have kept a record of birds' nests and the birds themselves. There's one old lame robin that was quite a character. And flowers, naturally. And the action of the elements on boulders and soil. And weather. I have a fine record of the weather over several thousand years."

"Most interesting," said the counselor.

"There was a murder, too," said Craig, "but it happened just outside the boundary line, so I can't actually include it in the study. The murderer, however, did run across the acre after he committed the deed."

"A murder, Mr. Craig?"

"Exactly," said Craig. "One man killed another, you understand."

"How ghastly," said the counselor.

"I suppose it would be," admitted Craig. "But it was done, you know. The records are filled with murders."

"Anything else?"

"Not yet," said Craig, "although I have some hope. I found some old foundations."

"Buildings?"

"Yes, of buildings. Go back far enough and I'm bound to find the buildings before they went to ruin. That might be interesting. There might be people in them. One of the foundations looked like a residence. Had what appeared to be the footing for a fireplace."

"You might hurry it up a bit," suggested the counselor. "Get there a little faster. People are most interesting."

Craig shook his head. "To make the study valid, I must record in detail. I can't slight the detail to get what's interesting."

The counselor managed to look sorrowful. "With such an interesting project," he said, "I can't understand why

your rating should go down."

"I realized," said Craig, "that no one would care. I would spend years at the study and I would publish my findings and I would give copies to my friends and acquaintances and they would thank me and put the book up on the shelf and never take it down again. I would deposit copies in libraries and you know yourself that no one ever goes to libraries. The only one who would ever read the thing would be myself."

"Surely, Mr. Craig," comforted the counselor, "there are other men who have found themselves in a like position. And they have managed to remain relatively happy and contented."

"That is what I've told myself," said

Craig, "but it doesn't work for me."

"We could go into many of the closer aspects of the case," said the counselor, "but I think we should leave that until some future time if it proves necessary. We'll just hit the high points now. Tell me, Mr. Craig, are you fairly well convinced that you cannot continue to be happy with your acre?"

"Yes," said Craig. "I am."

"Not conceding for a moment," said the counselor, with dogged determination, "that your statement to that effect closes our avenue of investigation in that direction, tell me this: Have you considered an alternative?"

"An alternative?"

"Why, certainly. Some other line of work that might prove happier. I have counseled a number of gentlemen who changed their line of work, and it has proved for the best."

"No," said Craig. "I haven't the least idea what I might go into."

"There are a number of openings," said the counselor. "Almost anything you wish. There's snail watching, for example."

"No," said Craig.

"Or stamp collecting," said the counselor. "Or knitting. A lot of gentlemen knit and find it very soothing."

"I don't want to knit," said Craig.

"You could make money."

"What for?" asked Craig.

"Well, now," the counselor said, "that is something I've often wondered, too. There's no need of it, really. All you have to do to get money is go to a bank and ask for some of it. But there are men who actually set out to make money and, if you ask me, they use some rather shady methods. But, be that as it may, they seem to get a great deal of satisfaction doing it."

"What do they do with it once they get it?" asked Craig.

"I wouldn't know," the counselor told him. "One man buried it and then forgot where he buried it and he remained happy the rest of his life running around with a lantern and a shovel looking for it."

"Why the lantern?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that. He never hunted it in daylight. He hunted in the night."

"Did he ever find it?"

"Come to think of it," the counselor said, "I don't believe he did."

"I don't think," said Craig, "that I'd care for making money."

"You might join a club."

"I belong to a club," said Craig. "A very fine old club. One of the very finest. Some of the best names and its history runs back to ..."

"That's not the kind of club I mean," the counselor said. "I mean a group of persons who work for something or who have special interests in common and

band themselves together for the better enjoyment of those mutual interests."

"I doubt," said Craig, "that a club would be the answer."

"You might get married," the counselor suggested. "What? You mean to one woman?" "That is what I mean." "And raise a bunch of kids?"

"Many men have done it," said the counselor. "They have been quite satisfied."

"It seems," said Craig, "on the face of it, just a bit obscene."

"There are many other possibilities," the counselor told him. "I can just run through a partial list of them and see if there is anything you might care to think about."

Craig shook his head. "Some other time," he said. "I'll come back again. I want to mull it over."

"You're absolutely sure that you're sour on history?" asked the counselor. "I'd rather steer you back to that than interest you in an alternative."

"I'm sour on it," said Craig. "I shudder when I think of it."

"You could take a vacation," suggested the counselor. "You could freeze your personal satisfaction rating until you returned. Maybe then you could boost it up again."

"I think," said Craig, "that to start with I'll take a little walk."

"A walk," the counselor told him, "is very often helpful."

"What do I owe you?" Craig asked.

"A hundred," the counselor said. "But it's immaterial to me whether you pay or not."

"I know," said Craig. "You work for the love of it."

The man sat on the shore of the little pond and leaned back against a tree. He smoked while he kept an eye on the fishpole stuck into the ground beside him. Close at hand was an unpretentious jug made of earthenware.

He looked up and saw Craig.

"Come on, friend," he said. "Sit down and rest yourself."

Craig came and sat. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"The sun's a little warm," he said.

"Cool here," said the man. "I fish or loaf around when the sun is high. When the sun goes down I go and hoe my garden."

"Flowers," said Craig. "Now there's an idea. I've often thought it would be fun to raise a garden full of flowers."

"Not flowers," the man said.

"Vegetables. I eat them."

"You mean you work to get the things you eat?"

"Uh-huh," said the man. "I spade the ground and rake it to prepare the seed bed. Then I plant the seeds and watch them sprout and grow. I tend the garden and I harvest it. I get enough to eat."

"It must be a lot of work."

"I take it easy," said the man. "I don't

let it worry me."

"You could get a robot," Craig told him.

"Yeah, I guess I could. But I don't hold with such contraptions. It would make me nervous."

The cork went under and he made a grab for the pole, but he was too late. The hook came up empty.

"Missed that one," he said placidly. "Miss a lot of them. Don't pay enough attention."

He swung in the hook and baited it with a worm from the can that stood beside him.

"Might have been a turtle," he said. "Turtles are hell on bait."

He swung the tackle out again, stuck

the pole back into the ground and settled back against the tree.

"I grew a little extra corn," he said, "and run a batch of moon when my stock is running low. The house ain't much to look at, but it's comfortable. I got a dog and two cats, and I fuss my neighbors."

"Fuss your neighbors?"

"Sure," the man said. "They all think I'm nuts."

He picked up the jug, uncorked it and handed it to Craig. Craig took a drink, prepared for the worst. It wasn't bad at all.

"Took a little extra care with that batch," the man said. "It really pays to do that if you have the time."

"Tell me," said Craig, "are you

satisfied?"

"Sure," the man said.

"You must have a nice P.S.," said Craig.

"P.X.?"

"No. P.S. Personal satisfaction rating."

The man shook his head. "I ain't got one of them," he said.

Craig was aghast. "But you have to have!"

"You talk just like that other fellow," said the man. "He was around a while ago. Told me about this P.S. business, but I thought he said P.X. Told me I had to have one. Took it awful hard when I said I wouldn't do it."

"Everyone has a P.S.," said Craig.

"Everyone but me," said the man.
"That's what the other fellow said, too.
He was some upset about it. Practically
read me out of the human race."

He looked sharply at Craig. "Son," he
said, "you got troubles on your mind."

Craig nodded.

"Lots of folks have troubles," said the
man, "only they don't know it. And you
can't start to lick your troubles until you
see and recognize them. Things are all
upset. No one's living right. There is
something wrong."

"My P.S. is way off," said Craig. "I've
lost all interest. I know there's something
wrong. I can sense it, but I can't put my
finger on it."

"They get things given to them," said

the man. "They could live the life of Riley and not do a tap of work. They could get food and shelter and clothing and all the luxuries that they want by just asking for them. You want money, so you go to a bank and the bank gives you all you need. You go to a shop and buy a thing and the shopkeeper don't give a tinker's damn if you pay or not. Because, you see, it didn't cost him nothing. He got it given to him. He doesn't have to work for a living. He ain't keeping shop, really. He's just playing at it, like kids would play at keeping store. And there's other people who play at all sorts of other things. They do it to keep from dying of boredom. They don't have to do it. And this P.S. business you talk about

is just another play-mechanism, a way of keeping score, a sort of social pressure to keep you on your toes when there is no real reason on all of God's green earth that you should be on your toes. It's meant to keep you happy by giving you something to work for. A high P. S. means high social standing and a satisfied ego. It's clever and ingenious, but it's just playing, too."

Craig stared at the man. "A play world," he said. "You've hit it on the head. That's what it really is."

The man chuckled. "You never thought of it before," he said. "That's the trouble. No one ever thinks. Everyone is so busy trying to convince himself that he's happy and important that he never stops

to think. Let me tell you this, son: No man ever is important if he tries to make himself important. It's when he forgets that he's important that he really is important.

"Me," he said. "I have lots of time to think." "I never thought of it," said Craig, "in just that way before."

"We have no economic worth," the man said. "There's not any of us making our own way. There's not a single one of us worth the energy it would take to kill us.

"Except me," he said. "I raise my own eating and I catch some fish and I snare some rabbits and I make a batch of drinking likker whenever I run out."

"I always thought of our way of life,"

said Craig, "as the final phase in economic development. That's what they teach the kids. Man has finally achieved economic independence. There is no government and there is no economic fabric. You get all you need as a matter of a hereditary right, a common right. You are free to do anything you want to do and you try to live a worthwhile life."

"Son," said the man, "you had breakfast this morning and you had lunch this noon before you took your walk. You'll eat dinner tonight and you'll have a drink or two. Tomorrow you'll get a new shirt or a pair of shoes and 'there will be some equipment that you'll need to carry on your work."

"That's right," said Craig.

"What I want to know," said the man, "is where did all that stuff come from? The shirt or the pair of shoes might have been made by someone who likes to make shirts and shoes. The food was cooked either by robots or by someone who likes to cook, and the drawing set or the typewriter or the power tools that you use might have been made by someone who likes to mess around making stuff like that. But before the typewriter was a typewriter it was metal in the ground, the food was grown, the clothes came from one of several raw materials. Tell me: Who grew the raw materials, who dug and smelted the ore?"

"I don't know," said Craig. "I never

thought of that."

"We're kept," said the man. "Someone is keeping us. Me, I won't be kept."

He pulled in the tackle and twirled the pole to wrap the line around it.

"Sun is getting down a bit," he said. "I got to go and hoe."

"It was good talking to you," said Craig, getting up.

"Nice path over that way," said the man, pointing. "Good walking, lots of flowers and it's shaded, so it'll be nice and cool. If you go far enough, you'll reach an art gallery." He looked at Craig. "You're interested in art?"

"Yes," said Craig. "But I didn't know there was a gallery anywhere around."

"Well, there is," said the man. "Good

paintings. Some wood statuary that is better than average. A few pieces of good jade. Go there myself when I have the time."

"Well, thanks," said Craig.

"Funny-looking building," the man said. "Group of buildings, really. Architect who designed them was crazier than a coot, but don't let it prejudice you. The stuff is really good."

"There's plenty of time," said Craig. "I'll drop hi and have a look. Thanks for telling me."

The man got up and dusted off his trousers seat.

"If you're late in getting back," he said, "drop in and spend the night. My shack is just across the way. Plenty of

grub and there is room for two to sleep."

"Thank you," said Craig. "I may do it."

He had no intention of accepting the offer.

The man held out his hand. "My name is Sherman," he said. "Glad you came along."

They shook hands.

Sherman went to hoe his garden and Craig walked down the path.

The buildings seemed to be quite close and yet it was hard to make out their lines. It was because of some crazy architectural principle, Craig decided. Sherman had said the architect was crazier than a coot. One tune when he looked at them, they looked one way;

when he looked again they were different somehow. They were never twice the same.

They were pink until he decided that they weren't pink at all, but were really blue; there were other tunes when they seemed neither pink nor blue, but a sort of green, although it wasn't really green.

They were beautiful, of course, but it was a disturbing beauty—a brand-new sort of beauty. Something, Craig decided, that Sherman's misplaced genius had thought up, although it did seem funny that a place like this could exist without his ever hearing about it. Still, such a thing was understandable when he remembered that everyone was so self-consciously wrapped up in his

work that he never paid attention to what anyone else was doing.

There was one way, of course, to find out what it was all about and that was to go and see.

The buildings, he estimated, were no more than a good five minutes' walk across a landscaped meadow that was a thing of beauty in itself.

He started out and walked for fifteen minutes, and he did not get there. It seemed, however, that he was viewing the buildings from a slightly different angle, although that was hard to tell because they refused to stay in place but seemed to be continually shifting and distorting their lines.

It was, of course, no more than an

optical illusion. He started out again.

After another fifteen minutes he was still no closer, although he could have sworn that he had kept his course headed straight toward the buildings.

It was then that he began to feel the panic. He stood quite still and considered the situation as sanely as he could and decided there was nothing for it but to try again and this time pay strict attention to what he was doing.

He started out, moving slowly, almost counting his steps as he walked, concentrating fiercely upon keeping each step headed in the right direction.

It was then he discovered he was slipping. It appeared that he was going straight ahead but, as a matter of fact, he

was slipping sidewise as he walked. It was just as if there were something smooth and slippery hi front of him that translated his forward movement into a sidewise movement without his knowing it. Like a fence, a fence that he couldn't see or sense.

He stopped, and the panic that had been gnawing at him broke into cold and terrible fear.

Something flickered hi front of him. For a moment it seemed that he saw an eye, one single staring eye, looking straight at him. He stood rigid, and the sense that he was being looked at grew, and now it seemed that there were strange shadows on the grass beyond the fence that was invisible. As if someone,

or something, that he couldn't see was standing there and looking at him, watching with amusement his efforts to walk through the fence.

He lifted a hand and thrust it out hi front of him and there was no fence, but his hand and arm slipped side-wise and did not go forward more than a foot or so.

He felt the kindness, then, the kindness and the pity and the vast superiority.

And he turned and fled.

He hammered on the door, and Sherman opened it. Craig stumbled in and fell into a chair. He looked up at the man he had talked with that afternoon.

"You knew," he said. "You knew and you sent me to find out."

Sherman nodded. "You wouldn't have believed me if I'd told you."

"What are they?" asked Craig, his words tumbling wildly. "What are they doing there?"

"I don't know what they are," said Sherman.

He walked to the stove and took a lid off a kettle and looked at what was cooking. Whatever it was, it had a hungry smell. Then he walked to the table and took the chimney off an antique oil lamp, struck a match and lit it.

"I go it simple," he said. "No electricity. No nothing. I hope that you don't mind. Rabbit stew for supper."

He looked at Craig across the

smoking lamp, and in the flickering light it seemed that his head floated in the air, for the glow of the lamp blotted out his body.

"But what are they?" demanded Craig. "What kind of fence is that? What are they fenced in for?"

"Son," said Sherman, "they aren't the ones who are fenced in."

"They aren't..."

"It's us," said Sherman. "Can't you see it? We are the ones who are fenced in."

"You said this afternoon," said Craig, "that we were kept. You mean they're keeping us?"

Sherman nodded. "That's the way I have it figured. They're keeping us, watching over us, taking care of us.

There's nothing that we want that we can't have for the simple asking. They're taking real good care of us."

"But why?"

"I don't know," said Sherman. "A zoo, maybe. A reservation, maybe. A place to preserve the last of a species. They don't mean us any harm."

"I know they don't," said Craig. "I felt them. That's what frightened me."

He sat in silence of the shack and smelled the cooking rabbit and watched the flicker of the lamp.

"What can we do about it?" he asked.

"That's the thing," said Sherman, "that we have to figure out. Maybe we don't want to do anything at all."

Sherman went to the stove and stirred

the rabbit stew.

"You are not the first," he said, "and you will not be the last. There were others before you and there will be others like you who'll come along this way, walking off their troubles."

He put the lid back on the kettle.

"We're watching them," he said, "the best we can. Trying to find out. They can't keep us fooled and caged forever."

Craig sat in his chair, remembering the kindness and the pity.