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The Vehicle

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“Unless otherwise stated, any resemblance to living
characters is purely coincidental.”

Robert Mills French
Editor

Mary Ellen French
Assistant Editor

A White Man's Burden

By Robert Mills French

I.

What has gone before:

Tim McCall has quit his teaching job to move south and accept the position of personnel manager of a plant in the small town of Greenville, Mississippi. Tim has no particular feelings regarding Negroes, except that they "should be kept in their place," but when white citizens of the town decide to hold a meeting aimed at keeping Negroes from working in the plant, Tim attends.

At the gathering the men accuse old Jim, a Negro watchman recently fired from the plant, of having kidnapped a white laborer's child, missing since earlier in the day. Caught in the floodtide of mass hysteria, the group descends on Jim's shack. Tim, whom Jim trusts, coaxes the old man from his shack, promising him he will not be harmed. When Jim emerges, the mob seizes him and lynches him, then disperses.

II.

As he turned to go, Tim saw a bright flash from the window of the old Negro's shack that made everything spin wildly into darkness.

"Mister McCall, can you hear me, Mister McCall?" The voice that called him seemed strangely distant. Slowly he became aware of being in pain, and he struggled to raise his head.

The pain of moving caused him to fall back. He tried to see, but everything was blackness. Feeling his forehead, he touched gauze and tape. A terrified gasp escaped him as he pawed wildly at his face.

"Now, now, Mr. McCall, don't go getting all excited," the deep feminine voice went on.

"What the hell?" he cried weakly.

"You were hurt last night, sir. I'm sure you'll be all right. You're in the Central City hospital."

His mind whirled as he recalled the previous night. Sickening visions of what had happened flashed through his mind.

"What happened to _____?" he began.

"The little girl, Mary?" the nurse interrupted. "She came home after dark; it seems she had wandered off somewhere."

"And the old nigger?" Tim asked.

"Dead. Lynched by a mob," came the reply, barely audible. "That's where they found you, lying outside the old man's shack."

"What happened?" he asked, terrified.

"Don't you know?" she replied.

"No, no, for God's sake, tell me what happened," Tim gasped.

"You were shot, probably by someone inside the house, according to the troopers who accompanied the ambulance. The doctor said you have a shotgun wound. You're lucky to be alive!"

"What's wrong with me?" he sobbed. "What's wrong?"

"I'll take over, nurse," came a man's voice. "I'm Dr. Talbot, Mr. McCall; I've taken your case."

"Doctor, just tell me what's wrong!"

"Well, Mr. McCall, you must be prepared to accept the worst. We aren't certain, of course, but——" the doctor's voice died off.

"Go on," Tim pleaded.

"You are blind, Mr. McCall. The shotgun blast ruined both your eyes."

III.

It had been six months since that fateful night of the lynching, and the town of Greenville had once more settled down into a quiet pattern. Only talk of the scandal remained, but today the excitement had begun anew. A crowd had gathered in front of the general store, where several men talked excitedly.

"After all the stink about the lynching, he's coming back," a tall man began.

"I heard he's back already," another joined in. "I suppose we'll have to welcome him back; after all, he could put the finger on half the town for lynchin' that nigger!"

"The only reason he got off without a sentence was that he got shot," the first added.

"Shh," a third interrupted, "here he comes now, and will you look at what he's with?"

Tim McCall was not the same man who had led the lynch mob six months before. No longer young and fresh in appearance, he was gray and his scarred face showed strain and age. Dark glasses covered the empty void where once his eyes had been. He walked heavily, much too slow for a man of his years.

Alongside him walked a woman, the same woman who had been his nurse in the hospital. Through the long agonizing months of his darkness they had fallen in love, and now she helped him; she was his eyes.

As they came up to the crowd, an excited whisper ran through that body and died into nervous silence.

"Is Mr. Alexander around?" Tim asked.

"Here I am," a voice called out from the back of the group of people. Tension grew as the important man pushed his way through the crowd.

"Tim, old man," he began, "glad to see . . . holy hell, what's this?" he boomed as he stepped out of the crowd to stand in front of them.

"How about a job, John," Tim blurted out. "I've got to support myself and my wife."

"Tim, what the _____?" Alexander choked off. "Why?"

"What's wrong, John? Do I get the job? I need help, John! I'm blind! I can't go anywhere else. Answer me!"

"I can't now, Tim, I just can't!"

"What the hell do you mean, *now*?" Tim exploded.

"Your wife, Tim, she _____" Alexander looked down nervously, afraid to look into dead eyes.

"I don't understand, John. What does my wife have to do with a job?"

"I'm sorry, Tim," Alexander answered dogmatically. "We can't allow her in town. She's a nigger."

Realist

By A. B. Carter

About the days when girls were golden
And knights were brave and times were olden
A lot of fancy tales are tolden.

But, for my part, the herring's shotten:
Such folderol is best forgotten;
You may be smitten. I am notten.

The Two Matches

By Louise A. Kemper, E.I.U.

The rat was long and hungry, and the long black hairs in his mustache twitched when his mouth made motions somewhat like a leer. He stopped in the mouth of the burrow that ran from the barn to the feed lot and looked at the man and the woman who were pulling weeds in the fence row. He drew back from the sunlight that flooded the entrance to his hole and waited to see whether the voices neared or retreated. If there seemed no real threat, he would make a dash for the feed stack and go under it.

The voices neared—the gruff, cross one of the man and the patient soprano drawl of the woman.

“I know; I know, Susan,” said the man, pulling up a large broomweed and tossing it onto a growing pile behind them. “I whipped him too hard. But after the luck we’ve had, I want no kid of mine carrying matches. That barn we lost last year set us back three years.”

Susan didn’t answer at once, and then her voice came, clear and a little tired. “I’ll always say it was the green broomcorn that heated and set that barn afire, and not sparks from the orchard where the kids had been roasting marshmallows.”

The man’s voice was much nearer—and loud with anger—when he replied, and the rat took mild alarm and retreated for a time to the barn.

“But just in case it *was* the sparks, I gave him a licking to remind him to be careful. And it wasn’t anything like the one he’s going to get if I find he’s built a fire around here somewhere today.”

Susan’s gray eyes emptied slowly. She straightened and with a work-reddened hand drew behind her ear two strands of graying hair that had escaped from the small bun on the back of her small head. Then she wiped her palms on the flowered apron that covered her long-sleeved blue dress and sighed. She was looking at, but not seeing, the gaunt figure of her husband, whose unshaven face, as he glanced back to see if she would answer, made him look crueller than he was.

She sighed and thought to herself how bitter were the dregs that remain when the sweet dream of abundance dies within a man. And then she thought of her son, Dirk, now a tall fifteen, and how necessary it was to keep that dream of abundance alive in her boy. She would yield in the argument with her husband, of course, but she could not do so without one more show of fight.

"I suppose," she said, bending for another weed, "that if the barn burned tonight, you'd beat the boy to death."

"I'd try," he spat. "We're gettin' too many fools in the family as it is."

Susan said nothing and, after a minute, the man said, pursuing the same thought, but with a little less vehemence. "Where are the matches we found on him today?"

"Here. In my pocket," said Susan wearily.

"Let me have them. None of us—and I mean *none of us*—are going to carry matches until the crop's in."

Susan advanced a pace, and thrusting her hand into her pocket, brought out two matches which she gave her husband in silence. He glanced about for a place to dispose of them. He saw the hole from which the rat had retreated. He dropped the two matches into it and stomped at it with his heel, crumbling a small handful of dry earth over them. Then he and Susan finished cleaning out the fence row in silence.

When they were gone, the rat came back. He found the mouth of his burrow clogged. He raked and pushed the dirt away and among it found two bright sticks tipped with red and blue. One of the sticks he carried in his mouth as he hurried to the stack of dry feed. Darting along beside one of the three by twelves on which the feed was stacked, he scraped the end of the stick against the board—and dropped it. It spished, and blossomed into flame. From her kitchen window a half hour later, Susan looked out in terror. The feedstacks were on fire, and rising in the upsurge were blazing leaves of kaffir that sifted, still glowing, down on top of the shingled barn. Only a miracle could save either.

"Dirk," she prayed. "God help my son Dirk."

Thoughts Upon Looking at a Modern Painting Titled "Grass"

By Thomas McPeak

Poor blade of grass, you stand exposed,
The real you itself has posed.
I see no pleasant green,
No bladed emerald bed,
Only some secret being
That lurks in infrared.

Where naked eye sees graceful lines,
You lie in paint like snarled vines.
If truth be then so stern,
Please paint with liar's breath,
Lest some poor cow should learn,
And will to starve to death.

Beware

By Dennis Lewis, Madison, Wisconsin

Beware the traps of sex and lust,
The love of flesh, the scourge of trust.
These words remember as a rule—
And you will die a virgin fool.

Waves

By Jean Nightingale

Upward—
Rise upward—
Wind frothed,
Shore bound,
Roll quickly
Rushing sound.

Surge nearer
Wash the sky
Crash upon the sand
—And die.

The Spectator

By Kathleen Ferree

*I live in the world rather as a spectator of mankind than
as one of the species.*

—Joseph Addison

I am a spectator of the species—man,
And daily I watch them as they play
And work and busily fulfill a plan,
And find their purpose in each dawning day.
I am not one of them; I am outside
The realm of love and happiness they know.
Each day and week the time I merely bide,
A witness to those who reap and sow.
I must not attempt to be one of them,
Nor laugh, nor love, nor wish for happiness;
For I am not one of the race called men,
But a spectator, doomed to loneliness.

Animal Rug

By Al Brooks

I took Old Yearning to the swampy woods
And with a club I bludgeoned him to death.
He was irascible with years, I told myself,
And lame, and once had bit my present love.

I found I could not leave him, though, at last.
I hung him awkwardly upon a tree
And, messily, with penknife, took his pelt,
To which I left the broken head attached.

The rest was labor hired. I like the rug.
The glass eyes and the snarl are very like.
The coat is glossier than it was in life.
Friends rarely find the club-marks on the head.

And I sleep well, now that Old Yearning's gone—
Except in treacherous hours on windy nights
When, of its own accord, the pelt crawls here
And whimpers at my bolted bedroom door.

Success Comes to Cultureville

By J. B. Young

Precipice Blinkin, Assistant Professor of Education at Claptrap Normal, had always appeared to be happy in his position. He seemingly found the sleepy atmosphere of Claptrap perfect for the research in which he constantly delved—the search for the perfect test. Cultureville was situated amid vast cornfields and deep ravines where it was an easy task to locate meadow-mice for experiments. The student body was also a boon to his work. Good-natured and rather slow, they never taxed his patience with needless questions or objected to his experiments.

His courses, required for all students, were always filled. Thus meager classes, such as plagued some other departments, were never a problem. In this gentle environment "Dr." Blinkin (he had not completed work for the doctorate, but students persisted in using the title and he never objected), carried on in the true manner of his profession.

Forever striving to achieve the perfect teaching method, his days were filled with movies and records applied in such a manner as to motivate the students to learn. In one course movies had become such an integral part that they had completely replaced lectures.

Testing, however, had remained a sore spot with Blinkin. Forever working to develop the infallible test, he had exhausted his store of ideas. Finally he had settled on two standardized tests for each course which were varied in the order in which they were given every semester to avoid plagiarism. Column on column of intricate data made up the content of these tests on which only three students had ever managed to score over fifty per cent.

With pride Blinkin recalled his record of failed students, which remained unchallenged throughout the school. Everyone in his department agreed that "the good teacher was the difficult grader." Recollections of hysterical students who had not memorized sufficient data never failed to bring a good-natured leer to Blinkin's boyish face.

There had been bad times among the good, however. Once a student had continually wrecked every curve which Blinkin charted for his class. This had gone on for almost half the term until Blinkin managed to persuade the avid student to transfer—thus saving his graphic pride.

In another class the Mean, Mode, and Median never corresponded on the curve. Reams of paper had gone in a diligent attempt to discover the cause of this phenomenon, but it remained unsolved in spite of his complex formulae.

Attacking the testing problem from every conceivable angle, he had once administered a battery of Intelligence Quotient, Ink-Blot, and Tinker-Toy tests basing the final grade on performance. This had fallen through when unscrupulous students sent proxies to take their Ink-Blot and Tinker-Toy tests and had answered the I. Q. tests dishonestly.

After this setback Blinkin had retreated to his office where many hours were whiled away in deep thought. Then it had come upon him in a fit of inspiration. Never daring to get optimistic over results, he had gone about scientifically computing data on the performance of the rats and meadow-mice which were run through maze after maze. The mice were disposed of when it was discovered that they built nests in the dead-end alleys of the mazes.

Rats were raced, starved, shocked, over and under-sexed, frustrated, overjoyed, and tampered with to achieve the final product.

Ignoring sabotage attempts on the part of belligerent students who gorged the rats before trials, Blinkin progressed in his work. After several thousand rats had been conditioned to run the maze which he had developed, Blinkin was ready to transfer this new found knowledge to practical application.

In utmost secrecy, carpenters were brought in from a distant town. Blindfolded before arrival and departure, they were under loyalty oath never to disclose what they were doing. An entire floor of Bleep Hall was converted to serve Blinkin's purpose.

At last the project was finished, not a moment too soon, for the term was ending. Calling all the university dignitaries together at the door marked "Finish" of the experimental chamber, Blinkin paced back and forth nervously while explaining the theory behind his new testing idea.

Excusing himself momentarily, Blinkin lined the students of his 9:00 o'clock class up at the door marked "Start" and then raced back to the dignitaries shouting "Go, go, go" to the eager students.

As one by one the students wandered out the door marked "Finish," Blinkin called out their grades exuberantly and offered them cheese. The first one through the maze received an "A" and on down to the last student who, of course, received an "F". (He later attempted to explain that he had been late to class, but to no avail.)

The dignitaries who stood waiting were amazed by the brilliance of this new testing device. (Later it was installed as a screening device for entering students.) Congratulations and praise were lauded upon the young Professor who leered happily.

This was only the beginning for Mr. Blinkin, however. *The Journal of Expensive Psychology* ran the results of his experiment under the title "The Retention Rate of Hungry and Non-Hungry Rats as Correlated to Hypothetical Transfer of Latent Learning in Below-Normal-Frequency Students." Like a snowball rolling downhill the reputation of Assistant Professor Blinkin grew and grew, seemingly knowing no bounds. Job offers were received from everywhere; Claptrap offered a full professorship and increased salary in an attempt to retain his services.

At last Blinkin made his decision, choosing to go to the Army and carry out his testing experiments on recruits. Reports of his progress in this position have been filled with glowing approbation by his superiors.

Greatly sorrowed at losing this potentially great professor, Claptrap recovered admirably, and tearfully wished Blinkin well in his new venture. Most touching of all, however, was the going-away present which Blinkin's students presented to him—a solid-gold rat trap.

On Giving Up Religion in Despair

By The Skeptic

I think your God of love is a myth.
Why? Well, my reason is simple and plain.
Granting the spirit you believe in prevails,
Why must he rule with penance and pain?

For if he is great and if he is good,
Then I see no reason for wrath, my friend.
For if he is beauty and if he is love,
Then disbelievers are God in the end.

The Decision

By George Foster

"Damn her," he muttered under his breath repeatedly, "don't you know enough not to track the carpet up, especially on the day my club meets," he mocked in a half-audible whine. For five years now John Grover's wife had badgered and corrected his every move. From the time he arose to the time he retired she was after him, correcting, reprimanding, never letting him take the initiative in any affair, no matter how trivial it might be.

At first, while he was still in college, he had admired her dominance and primary position in their affairs. Never worrying himself about domestic affairs, he had devoted all his thoughts to his math. But then he had graduated and she had not yielded her position. She had pressured him to leave his research job at the university to take his present position saying that they needed the money and that the warmer climate would be good for her health. Lately she had encroached more and more on his personal affairs.

No longer could he dress as he wished: "It might give the wrong impression." He was told what to read—"Playboy is so vulgar"; what to eat—"Aren't you a little too loose in the jowls to be eating that?"; and, as of the night before, what to think!

Yes, that was the last straw. As he had sat in his study, which was being converted into a sewing room, puzzling over a difficult theorem which had come up at the office that day, she boomed in and towered over him menacingly. Expecting to be reprimanded, he had cautiously raised his eyes to peer at her over his glasses. Then it had come—"Can't you think about *anything* but your silly old arithmetic? Other men are a *help* to their wives, but *all* you do is think about a bunch of worthless numbers!" Then she had laughed a scoffing laugh and gone away.

He had sat a long time without changing his position or expression. Her words raced through his mind, causing him to flinch each time he thought of her calling mathematics a "bunch of worthless numbers."

"Halt!" The command broke his train of thought. "Halt and identify yourself!" This time he became fully aware of the situation. "Oh, it's you, Dr. Grover. I didn't

recognize you with your hat covering your eyes. Go ahead," spoke a youthful figure in a green uniform and shining helmet.

John Grover hardly saw the soldier, so deep was he in concentration. Acknowledging him with only a nod, Grover passed the guard and walked on, returning to his thoughts.

This morning, as he had dressed, she had continued to heckle him. Lying in bed (she never rose until shortly before noon), she had talked loudly, so that he could not help hearing her in the bathroom. "You, an important man, ha! You've got responsibility? If you've got so much responsibility, why don't you *use* it? Why, if it wasn't for me you wouldn't even be where you are today. No high paying position for you. No, you wanted to do *research!* Ha! Well, it's a good thing this job with the government came up. I wouldn't have taken much more! Where would you be without me to make your decisions? You couldn't even make the decision to open your eyes in the morning by yourself. You don't have the guts to really *do* anything. Why, you're such a jelly-fish . . ." He had slammed the door at this point (for which he would later catch hell) and stamped off on his way to work.

The building which his office was in was just a short distance ahead. A squat, windowless structure, it looked like a fruit-box turned upside down on the sand.

Directly behind the building was the main firing range of the long-range missiles which John Grover had worked on for the last three years. A crash program had been ordered on the project when the Russians had succeeded in putting a man into space, and now it was ready. This building housed the central controls of the rockets which were located in remote areas all over the nation. Talk had it that each missile was equipped with the latest warhead, the one which had totally destroyed the Aleutians in testing.

Entering the building, John Grover acknowledged the greetings of his fellow scientists and passed on to his desk.

He had been given a new job since the completion of the research work. It involved sitting behind a huge desk, on which lay panel on panel of red buttons. Perpendicular to each panel was a board of lights, now gleaming a faint amber which turned to bright red as the rocket corresponding to a button and light on a panel, was launched.

For hours, John Grover had sat behind this desk awaiting the order to fire—the decision had to come from Washington. He tried to while away the time as best he could by working problems, but he usually resorted to fancies of his imagination for an outlet. He might be Caesar addressing the People of Rome or Napoleon looking down at his adoring army. The buttons before him were his people; they were his army; he controlled them.

This day, like every day which was not marked by a routine test blast, was to be spent in anticipation of a decision.

Putting on the headset to the central communications, John Grover listened to the exchanges. A woman's voice was calling out orders in a harsh, cutting tone—much like his wife's. John winced. Droning on and on in an interminable monotone, she seemed to be reprimanding those receiving orders.

As John listened, he thought of his wife and what she had said. The voice droned on, and he hated it for sounding like his wife's voice. As he listened, he became infuriated and muttered rebuttals into the disconnected microphone before him.

The voice no longer was *like* his wife's, it *was* his wife's. Each order was a reprimand to him and he choked in his increasing rage.

Then the voice was calling him, "John Grover on firing line, John Grover are you there? Answer John Grover!"

Fumbling desperately to connect the microphone he hastily snapped his answer, "Yes, what is it?"

"Orders from headquarters," came the reply, "there will be no firing today, did you get that Dr. Grover? The decision is, Not to fire!"

"Oh is that so?" he shrieked back, jumping to his feet and throwing the microphone on the floor.

"No decision eh? he he he," he began to giggle impulsively, "the decision is; well I'll show you!"

The hysterical laughter and pounding brought his fellow-workers running to see what was wrong.

John Grover stood over his panels pounding the buttons with clenched fists laughing hysterically. As he did so the "click-click" of engaged buttons contrasted with the high-

pitched laughter; flashing red lights cast an eerie glow over the dark room.

Trembling convulsively, he stopped pounding the buttons and looked up. Giggling without control now, he spoke to the men who stood in the doorway, aghast at what they were witnessing.

"I'll—he he—show her—he he—who—he he—can't make a Big decision—he he he he he . . .!" He turned back to the panel and resumed his frenzied pounding on the buttons.

As each button engaged, a rocket was launched in some remote spot. Everything was pre-set; each would hit a city or factory somewhere in Russia. World War III had begun!

Wisdom Confounded

By James D. Ranne, Pomona, Calif.

The pencil tycoon earned much wealth;
His shrewdness all could see.
At home his teen-age daughter wept;
Unwed, with child, was she.

"Get out, you slut!" the father said,
As daughter cringed in fear.
"You've brought disgrace upon my head,
I will not have you near."

Forgot—the wisdom that he knew
When pencils he had shipped.
For they were made for human use;
Each end—eraser tipped.

Smalltown: 5 A. M.

*By James M. Jenkinson
Albuquerque, New Mexico*

The pre-dawn sits waitful
on drained moonstreets
The color and taste of fresh clay
And the roar of the first truck
intrudes as grotesque as gothic bells
peeling over Antarctic snows

Man of Mettle

By C. E. S.

He came to cleave the golden silence
With his silver tongue;
On the spot the leaden echoes
Ever since have hung.

Glory and splendor, peace for man—
These are the starting lies.
Fear and destruction are part of the game
That gives to death her prize.

—*R.M.F.*

When first she came to college town,
A sweet young thing was she,
But now a change has come about—
'Tis no longer "us" but "me."

—*R.M.F.*

Come by my side; walk with me
Through that valley of dawn and dusk.
The trail I choose has no reward
Save beauty of dawn unfading.

—*R.M.F.*

As the babe clutches his mother,
As the sea caresses the shore,
I would hold and cherish thee
From now until eternity.

—*R.M.F.*

I pulled the wings off flies
And gloried in my sin,
But now that I'm older and better-equipped,
I impale them with a pin.

—*R.M.F.*

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For an anniversary,

Or a new arrival in the nursery.

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