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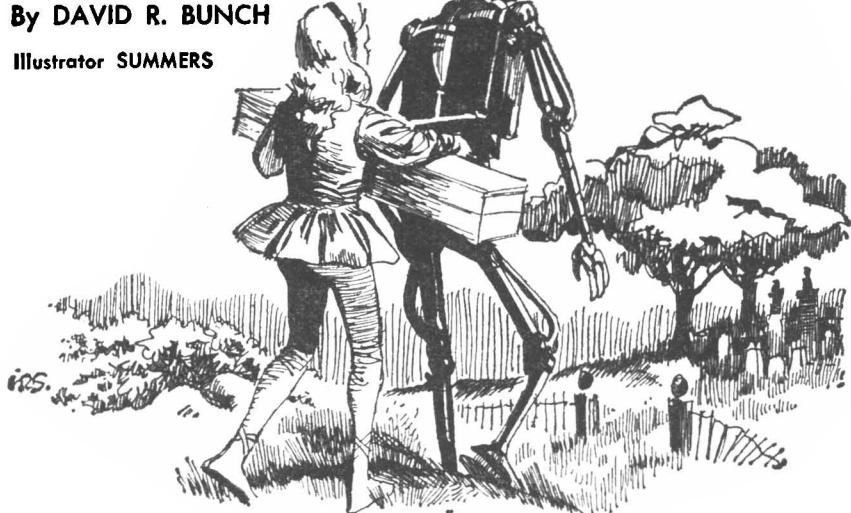
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*There are many things in the Good Long Rest  
that should not be disturbed. Especially in . . .*

# BLACK CAT-WEATHER

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrator SUMMERS



IT was in black cat weather and jack-o'-lantern times that she stood beneath my window, hallooing, holding five long slim boxes stacked in her scabbing arms. A vague iron shadow over by the fence was holding some object that a little resembled a boat.

"Daddy," she yelled, "come see what we have brought to you. And there's lots more. Over in Good Long Rest. And think how

many more—all over, in all the others. And think how many more . . . Come see!"

Of course I knew that her five boxes contained nothing really, at least not anything you could —well, not anything. And of course iron Mox was carrying one of the THINGS out of Good Long Rest. Entirely forbidden . . .

I arose from my hip-patty chair, the good den lounger, the

gentle undulater, where I sit mostly now, one-childed and wifeless, the Calm Waiter, and think on Universal Deep Questions, problems of the world. I chewed at my throat with the fixer, probing and prying, trying to ease some at the place that was worked all in gold against cancer, and I said in my pre-planned speech, working hard with my mouth, following along with the tapes, "Daphalene! you are not to take the iron Mox with you anymore to Good Long Rest. Because he gets the THINGS! Even though I set him on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set, he still somehow changes to Human Set and goes for the THINGS.—I don't care if you want to take those long stocking boxes down there alone day in and day out three hundred and sixty-five days a year for the twenty-five next years and bring back—well, bring back whatever it is you say you find down there. But no more of this stuff of Mox and the big dirty damp THINGS. Understand?

"And Mox!" Mox came lumbering in on his blunt boat-shaped feet, holding a big box lightly out to me as though it contained something I wanted. When I did not take it at once, he dropped it at my feet and shook his arms high up into himself until his iron hands were hanging like calm leaves

from his shoulder beams, a strange shrug. Then he flapped his hands and flashed his bulb eyes on and off in his usual greeting manner. "Skip the fawn stuff," I snapped. "Flick off your Human switch, Mox, and go on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set switch. Now!" He complied. "Pick up that dirty THING you dropped almost on my feet." He did that. "Back to Good Long Rest," I ordered. "And fix! Fix so no one knows you've disturbed."

THEY disappeared into the black-cream night, and my throat being tired from the shouting, and without tape fixed now to yell Daphalene to come back, they both walked away, an iron thought-tape thinker and a little girl wading into the shadowless thick dark under a moonless low sky and clouds on the edge of late October rain. She was Daphalene, my-daughter Daphalene in the monster times, in the times when strange machines and strange mutants roamed the homeless plastic, juggling their switches and angers. In an age past the age for virtue, or even a try, I let her run with the iron tape-fed thinker as the lesser of many evils, in her springtime, gathering what experiences she would against, in our times, the dark tendency toward hopelessness wide and

thick and tall as the rubbery wet sky above us. I tried to teach her nothing. In due time she would grow to "replacements" and part by part her flesh would go for metal and plastic in the new great surgery and what remained would be fed with the intro-ven. But now let her, motherless, go with her stocking boxes into the deep night following the thought-taped thinker, and let her cope with her loneliness and her grow-up problems as best she might until, finally, hard and firm and unshockably "replaced" she'd be a woman to survive!

Good Long Rest was a cemetery.—When she came back, perhaps I would leave my hip-patty chair long enough to go to her. Perhaps, faking, I would take one of her stocking boxes and look inside, pretending interest. And perhaps there would be, for once, lightning bugs fluttering and flashing in the long hollow dark of the stocking box. And then I could say with my fatherly tape, against the gold block for the cancer, "Why Daphalene, how nice. You have been out catching the bug lights in the great night of this cemetery world like a normal little-child-player should. Just as I told you to do. Against the long dark a little spark. How nice! And you have brought them, in boxes burning and chafing your scab-

bing little arms, all up to me, your daddy. How nice nice nice nice . . ."

I find it best to have my speech preset these days, the tape tape-planned, so all will go smoothly around the gold block for the cancer. Sometimes, caught off balance, the tape wrong or not ready, and circumstances changed, my words go past the situation in a kind of silly commentary, and weird beyond all imagining, because circumstances, for which one cannot always preplan, can change speech need. Circumstances should not do that to me, I feel, but they do. And whereas, overall, I should be, cautiously, saying less and less these days, I find myself loudly saying more and more all the time, making my plans in hopes and letting the comments flow up the gold flue in a challenge at black conditions—pleas, really.

A GAINST the noise of iron feet in the night and the soft *chuff-chuff* of little-girl shoes moving I let my monster throat start its trial run. My words beat like flailing clods in the gold stovepipe where should have been supple workings of thought sound. "HELLO," it shouted at the dark. And then they were lumps in view. He was a tall square hump over by the plastic pear tree; she was a much

smaller and slenderer blob in the dark, a little apart from him, toward me. I sprang toward her, my mouth going hard at the words I had planned, "Why Daphalene, how nice nice nice . . . You have been—"

She thrust a stocking box up to me, and for one ice-struck ice-stark moment her eyes fathomed into mine under the rays of the beamo light that was just then circling past from my rooftop. The beamos were cutting across our yard from the other rooftops too, criss-crossing the tops of him and her in alternating shakes of light and thick dark. I saw he was fluttering his hinge arms up and down in his shoulder holes. She was straining quietly as a stone.

The stocking box in my hand was heavy. Nothing fluttered in it; no lights pulsed in its housed darkness. I waited for the next sweep of my beamo, holding the box where I thought the ray would pass. It swept across something white and cold and dead of eye in the box. Daphalene waited, upthrust there like a pedestal, with her scabbed hands wrap-twisted. Mox was hinging and unhinging the full length of his arms still. And my throat, strangely, felt an old ache that was not all from the gold part of my voice trough.

I let the beamo pass again across the white thing in the box, and amid an ice-mist feeling along all of my flesh-strips quivering I suddenly realized. At the third sweep I held it out until I could see the jag places where Mox had sundered it from its spot where it had for five years rested upon a gravestone flower-and-angel-burdened in Good Long Rest. At the fourth sweep I threw it hard as I could at the iron sheet I stood on. The whizzing beamos from the many rooftops caught flashes of shattering white, and my throat ached so from an old ache that I could not finish my preplanned conversation. And a white eye smote me with a smooth chalky stare of cold—cold. Then the iron Mox, suddenly quitting that silly business of hinging and unhinging his arms, bent squarely, through the big hinges in his waist loop only, and lifted a THING from the ground. "It's her!" Daphalene shrieked with a cry of celebration. "You had his switch on Servant, so I just ordered him to do it. He's found Mother!"

As I collapsed quietly across the white dust of an angel, the iron Mox and the frightened little girl again slipped cemetery-ward, into the gummy dark, guessing they had not pleased me.

THE END