

Displaced Person

By Eric Frank Russell

He glided out of the gathering dusk and seated himself at the other end of my bench and gazed absently across the lakes toward the Sherry Netherland. The setting sun had dribbled blood in the sky. Central Park was enjoying its eventide hush: there was only the rustle of leaves and grasses, the cooing of distant and shadowy couples, the muted toot of a bus way over on Fifth.

When the bench quivered its announcement of company I had glanced along it expecting to find some derelict seeking a flop. The difference between the anticipated and the seen was such that I looked again, long, carefully, out one corner of my eye so that he wouldn't notice it.

Despite the gray half-tones of twilight, what I saw was a study in black and white. He had thin, sensitive features as white as his gloves and his shirt-front. His shoes and suit were not quite as black as his finely curved eyebrows and well-groomed hair. His eyes were blackest of all; that solid, supernal darkness that can be no deeper or darker. Yet they were alive with an underlying glow.

He had no hat. A slender walking stick of ebony rested against his legs. A black silk-lined cloak hung from his shoulders. If he'd been doing it for the movies he couldn't have presented a better picture of a distinguished foreigner.

My mind speculated about him the way minds do when momen-

tarily they've nothing else to bother them. A European refugee, it decided. A great surgeon, or sculptor or something like that. Perhaps a writer, or a painter. More likely the latter.

I stole another look at him. In the lowering light his pale profile was hawklike. The glow behind his eyes was strengthening with the dark. His cloak lent him majesty. The trees were stretching their arms toward him as if to give comfort through the long, long night.

No hint of suffering marked that face. It had nothing in common with the worn, lined faces I had seen in New York, features stamped forever with the brand of the Gestapo. On the contrary, it held a mixture of boldness and serenity. Impulsively I decided that he was a musician. I could imagine him conducting a choir of fifty thousand voices.

"I am fond of music," he said in low, rich tones.

He turned his face toward me, revealed a pronounced peak in his hair.

"Really?" The unexpectedness of it had me muddled. "What sort?" I asked feebly.

"This." He used his ebony stick to indicate the world at large. "The sigh of ending day."

"Yes, it is soothing," I agreed.

We were silent awhile. Slowly the horizon soaked up the blood in the sky. A wan moon floated over the towers.

"You're not a native of New York?" I prompted.

"No." Resting long, slender hands upon his stick, he gazed meditatively forward. "I am a displaced person."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you," he said.

I couldn't sit there and leave him flat like that. The choice was to continue or go. There was no need to go. I continued.

"Care to tell me about it?"

His head came round and he studied me as if only now aware of my presence. That weird light in his orbs could almost be felt. He smiled gradually, tolerantly, showing perfect teeth.

"I would be wasting your time."

"Not at all. I'm wasting it anyway."

Smiling again, he used his stick to draw unseeable circles in front of his black shoes.

"In these days it is an all too familiar story," he said. "A leader became so blinded by his own glory that no longer could he perceive his own blunders. He developed delusions of grandeur, posed as the final arbiter on everything from birth to death, and thereby brought into being a movement for his overthrow. He created the

seeds of his own destruction. It was inevitable in the circumstances."

"You bet!" I supported wholeheartedly. "To hell with dictators!"

The stick slipped from his grasp. He picked it up, juggled it idly, resumed his circle-drawing.

"The revolt didn't succeed?" I suggested.

"No." He looked at the circles as if he could see them. "It proved too weak and too early. It was crushed. Then came the purge." His glowing eyes surveyed the sentinel trees. "I organized that opposition. I still think it was justified. But I dare not go back."

"Fat lot you should care about that. You'll fit in here like Reilly."

"I don't think so. I'm not welcome here either." His voice was deeper. "Not wanted—anywhere."

"You don't look like Trotsky to me," I cracked. "Besides, he's dead. Cheer up. Don't be morbid. You're in a free country now."

"No man is free until he's beyond his enemy's reach." He glanced at me with an irritating touch of amusement. "When one's foe has gained control of every channel of propaganda, uses them exclusively to present his own case and utterly suppress mine, and damns the truth in advance as the worst of lies, there is no hope for me."

"That's your European way of looking at things. I don't blame you for it, but you've got to snap out of it. You're in America now. We've free speech here. A man can say what he likes, write what he likes."

"If only that were true."

"It is true," I asserted, my annoyance beginning to climb. "Here, you can call the Rajah of Bam a hyphenated so and so if you want. Nobody can stop you, not even a cop. We're free, like I told you."

He stood up, towering amid embracing trees. From my sitting position his height seemed tremendous. The moon lit his face in pale ghastliness.

"Would that I had one-tenth of your comforting faith."

With that, he turned away. His cape swung behind him, billowing in the night breeze until it resembled mighty wings.

"My name," he murmured softly, "is Lucifer."

After that, there was only the whisper of the wind.