

Amazing

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Even the good wars of Moderan can pall on the new-metal man in his Stronghold. One begins to think, can there be a purpose in life? One begins to make . . .

The FINAL DECISION

By DAVID R. BUNCH

STEEL you can be rid of. Easily. You just lay it by. Metal is a fine thing to leave stacked in corners or along ditches of roads. Or melt it down. When you're THROUGH. Our new-metal alloy "replacements"—what a fine deal . . . to live forever, ho!!!

To live forever; to be our true bad selves. How fine it sounded. What a grand plan! But have you ever lain back at the switch panel in your War Room with your fort on the status of Continuous Blast for weeks on end? *Karoom karoom karoom*. How it palls. How it tires. How you be-

gin to ask yourself, this is for what? what purpose, hey? But you pause once—you rest just a little before the general amnesty goes out with the white flags up and you're dead, your walls flattened, your Stronghold crushed to dust. So what's to do? Year after year you lie back in your Stronghold and ride with the general plan. They want war, you war. They decide to peace it awhile, you send up your white flag along with the jolly rest.

And you smile your teeth at the seasons and let time roll. After all, you have a lot of it—time. In Moderan.

One morning, say—it's a June Wednesday—the vapor shield is blue in memory of those old blue skies, the rockets are firing *arroump arroump arroump*, the walking doll bombs are rolling out toward all the Enemies and the Honest Jakes are homing down just fine to the kill—in fact, it's a perfect war. Then what? Suddenly your heart kicks up in its settings and you feel like doing some poems or sorrowing up on ode or two. Or you want to go love your neighbor and tell him how wrong is the war. Can you do it in this society? In Moderan! You dare! And anyway, what is TRUTH—the poems or the war? telling your neighbor it's wrong, or smiling your teeth bare while his poor green blood spots the plastic?

But before I tell you what I've decided to do concerning this TRUTH-PURPOSE Big Question, let me say I've tasted the sweets. I've been the top war man for many a vapor shield. (A vapor shield is a month, in Moderan, in case you hadn't heard). I've had them all at bay, my rockets beautifully firing for many a Moderan year. I've done the civic thing too. I've helped the poor

struggling Stronghold against the bully one. I've ganged up on the arrogant to blast them down for trees. (A fine metal park now "grows" and glows with shining shrubs where many a bully Stronghold once stood and defied our happy laws). I've trained ever so many boys, refugees from Old Life in Far Wide, made them lean clean citizens for the Program, cleared them of Conscience Clutter and Moral Know, got them ready for Joys. I've sung the hymns on Gads Sonsday, done my prayers to the Needle Building, the Court men, the Hall men, the God-pieces far and wide. And each and every penance day has found me with my little plastic bag of penance tears slung down from a new-metal hand, my latest war medal around my neck, marching with my battle opposites—*plop plip plap* over the homeless plastic—going to the ceremonies, doing penance because as a man I had not, as indeed no man has, been perfect. Yes, I had won all my wars, but—well, who ever wins them as well as he might have won—who ever had as many as he might have had with a little more hard trying?

And now let me try a confession. (I'm not ashamed. I've sought Truth). Let me confess that along with all these high accomplishments of war I've also been a lover. Ah yes, I know it's

unusual. I know I shake you, somewhat. But I reach for Truth—all Truth. I, the greatest of all the Stronghold masters, with my war medals stacked case on case—here on the brink of an Ultimate Decision I confess that I have known, have felt, have been among that unreasonable, unreliable word "love." I am guilty, but I am not sorry; I am not ashamed. Here in this steel-ribbed land, this plastic-coated iron and concrete new-metal place, where we practise strength and speculate on armor, dedicated to the high principle that only hate is reliable and finally true, I was a lover! I seem to brag. Perhaps I do brag.

It started out as Joys. Joys let me say, are fine in Moderan. Joys are what we live for, Joys and wars, and wars are, in a way, of course the ultimate Joys. But when a Joy turns into love, you're on dangerous ground. No longer thinking clean, you may be cluttered. You do not have, perhaps, that sharp precise decision about you that you had when you were clear and knew that hate was the only reliable emotion. Perhaps, in the final thinking, my greatness was truly my temporary downfall.

It began at the great awards festival that year in Warwington, the first year I won the double honors, the one of the crossed missiles and the award of the

eleven steel walls. The award of the crossed missiles was given me because I was the top blaster in Moderan that year, having leveled more recalcitrant Strongholds as cleared places for trees, having fired more nuisance missiles without knockout harm to the Strongholds that lived clear-and-true by the rules of honorable war. The award of the eleven walls was pinned because my inventiveness had come up with a plan that had allowed my servants to be meaner to each other, that is, they had piled up more hate points per capita than had the servants of any other master. —Well there I was, supreme abroad and supreme at home, the acknowledged mean-master of all the lands of Moderan. It was a heady eminence; it was a feat to bloat the ribs and make one stand up taller.

So I went to get my awards that day in Warwington. At the glittering Banquet of Honor I inched out bold when my name was called; *plop plip plap* I wavered toward the dais, slow slow as we go working our hinges and braces. But no one laughed, for they were steel men too. What a price we have paid for our iron durability; what a bounty went to some cruel god of reality when we took the path of "replacements," accepted the new-metal parts and played our

flesh-strips down. How I longed that shining day for one stretch of good striding, one minute with firm young flesh on my steel-rod legs and real feet in my high-polish war boots to reach me forward in a jaunty step.

Amid the heartbreak wailing of the jealous Stronghold masters at last I attained the dais. I stood there waving my joints in a little matter of mockery, lined my leg "replacements" up to stand me to tallest tall, pulled full my new-metal lungs and stared down into the honorable hating faces. Then the applause broke out, salvo on salvo of honor done by steel hands beating steel hands. Outside in the parks the honor missiles fired. Yes, as I said earlier, I have tasted the sweets.

On the dais that day occurred the unusual thing for me the double-honors winner. And it was ultimately my temporary downfall. While I stood chest-proud and tall-up for the pinning on of the honors, someone flicked on the ladies. What I mean to say is, while the ceremonial master was fastening my medals to me, a servant type rose up, a stage hand kind of person, and went all around on the dais and flicked to ON the life-switches of all the new-metal ladies that decorated our ceremonial area. Ordinarily it would have meant

nothing, for our urges along those lines are not usually more than a light lukewarm in Moderan, and we have other things to do of a more consecrated nature. A lady for variety in Joys maybe once or twice a year, but other than that—phoo! But tonight I turned—and of such small things are our lives twisted and warped and arrested, and made full. My medals gleaming in gold, I caught the eye of a charmer. I was stunned to blue-gold and heaven-madness of dreaming, my heart pistoning hard while I stared. Later on in the show, when in eulogy they were giving me Everything—the world for my greatness, all the verbal blah about how a people should be proud, how much truly they owed for my double-win example—I said, trying hard for calm, going big for the cool nonchalance while my heart hammered—pointing, "Throw in the little blue-eyed goldy-blonde one. I've a spot for her in my statuary." So they loaded my wagons with ladies when I readied for my home. All of them I quickly melted down, except the ONE!

But the ONE! Here on the brink of the Final Deciding, after all the eras, after all the monotonous years of tasting the sweets of honor, how I see her, thinking back. Small and gold and blue—how they molded her! how her hinges were set in

smooth! So I had taken her home and had looked at her long and well once and had set her among my statuary and had forgot her—all would have still been safe. Or I could have admired the mechanics at great length, or a little while, rubbed the rivets and weld joints well and then melted her down with my torches. What's to harm?—But no, I couldn't do the prudent thing. Not me!

But I was young then, for Moderan. Perhaps I was feeling a little ego-bloated that night after the gaudy event in Warwington, winning the double honors. Perhaps they had spiked the punch-introven that they served at the Table of Heroes, and not being used to it could be it lingered long in my flesh-strips. Or maybe it was just that lime for something long dead in my heart-box to shudder again to life and confound me. At any rate, I did not take her home, look at her long and well once and then set her among my statuary, the ball men, the string-metal maidens and the other monstrosities of art that delight me. I did not feel her rivets and weld joints well and then melt her down to a lump, either! Ah no, not old double-awards winner mush-head me. I flipped her life-switch to ON! And there stood the goldy-blonde maiden, my

darling, my sweetheart—ONE! I knew all at once, somehow that things would never be the same, not quite, for me.

But I will not bore you with the full-rose song of our love. How it would delight me to tell! How it, perhaps, would pall on you to read, for there are not words for its justice, and where there words—well, who is a master chooser? Let the measure of the event be read by you, between the lines, as it were, of what happened to my fort.

Stronghold 10, my fort, was expected, after the big deal of the double-awards win, to blossom and bloom into the terror of all Moderan. No one would believe otherwise. After all, I was young then (for Moderan) and a world of war and hate seemed full of promise for a young man and his fort. Ultimately we fulfilled all the hopes of our well-wishers, but that was—well, ultimately. Right after the Warwington ceremonies, when I went home with my wagons full of ladies and melted them all down but the ONE! Stronghold 10 passed into almost total eclipse. Disgraceful? Sure! My missiles moulded in their launchers, the walking doll bombs did not walk, the cold winds whirled through the holes the enemy warheads made in my ramparts. But it was warm, warm! in one inmost room of my

Stronghold where I dallied. The head weapons man would beat a tattoo on my door day and night to report the battle damage, to tell of our walls being honeycombed. "In hell's name, sir, shall we fire?" he'd shriek. "Fire? Fire!? What fire?" I'd mumble, warm and dazed with love, and then it'd be back to the lips of my new-metal mistress to work the lever bed in our great ecstasy and leave the head weapons man wringing hands and wailing because I would not give the order to fire. How could I? I, give the order to fire in war! I had the great blaze of my own right there in bed, the big bonfire of love.

But ultimately, of course, I came to my senses. Everything falls in awhile, even the Joys of a new-metal mistress, and you find you want something else, even if she is your ONE-darling, your sweet-honeydoll, the one great bang-boom of your heart. I wanted honors. The way to get honors in Moderan was to let the doll bombs roll, let the Honest Jakes scream out, let the high-up weird shrieking Wreck-Wrecks home to targets far and wide. The morning I finally turned her life-switch to OFF I was a madman; I was everywhere at once, ordering here a wall shored up, here a missile fired and here a doll bomb armed with a greater blaster head. I covered miles

that day in the Stronghold, in my little runabout scoot, and the world shuddered with war. Yes, Stronghold 10 was again in the lists, battle-joined. Just say I made up enough hate ground that year to offset the laggard months and again won on points the award of the crossed missiles and stood down in Warwington for the tinselled Banquet of Heroes. The award of the eleven steel walls, given for internal meanness, eluded me that year, and would until the departure of the ONE. But later we got that fixed up too.

And now perhaps you'll wonder why I stand here on the brink of a Final Decision, as I mentioned earlier, and why I make this Decision, I the greatest, most honored man in all Moderan. Not to be long-winded, just say I'm quitting here to search a larger field. Temporarily, I hope, but it could very well be permanent. Why? Perchance—nay, not perchance—most surely I do not know why, clearly, I go. And surely the conjecturing should rest right here. But something nags me, nay, compels me, as it has man for long, to talk much about that I know of least. It is an urge not to be denied, a thing of must-do, surely.

Not to confuse you at the outset, when I speak of quitting, I

mean QUITTING. I mean DYING!— Oh, didn't it seem fine when first we discovered the trick of "replacements" and knew, with new-metal alloy the bulk of our bodily splendor and our flesh-strips few and played down, we could live, could be, endlessly? How the world in our dreams opened up like a sweet-trance song going forever. What a chance to win honors. How much time for the blasting, and time to improve the techniques of blasting. Well, I think we came through on that point. We have improved the techniques of blasting. And honors—many honors were won. But though we talk on and nibble in for a million words, how blast to the heart of the problem? What's to say? I could say I'm tired. I'm not tired, not physically. New-metal alloy doesn't tire. I could say I'm full up with honors, quite bloated with achievement and have no more worlds to conquer. That's nearer the truth, but that's not quite it—not the last part, at any rate. There is a world left to conquer, or be conquered by, or slip into quietly like a new-metal mouse holing behind a wall. There is a world—

And now I'm faced with it, by my own Decision. I may as well tell you. The greatest in Modern to be the first to crack in Modern? Irony! Irony! Irony! But the years have piled up on

my flesh-strips, the honors have come, have come, the blasting has gone on and goes on year after year, the truth of hate in our land goes beautifully, and yet the final thing comes no closer to a settlement. Purpose? PURPOSE! That I would know. Must know.

By my own hand—and this is MY Decision—I shall disassemble myself. I have one trusted servant. None of you know him. I keep him in a box in a most secret far place. At my signal he will come, at night from that far place through a secret tunnel, along an ancient and forgotten tube, up through a lid in the floor. He will help me with the last rivets. Perhaps we'll jest a bit—who knows? while we're taking my body down. Perhaps a last toast taken in introven. And then we'll—oh Lord, only he will!—the thought disturbs me though I try to mash it down—only he will stack my body along a wall! All except the flesh-strips. Those he will take with him quietly that night, stored in preservative, back through the secret floor hole and along the dim tunnel miles to store "me" (my flesh) with him in the box, all according to my prearrangement of commands on a tape I have prepared. And I will go—who, what knows HOW I will go? somehow at the separation of the last

flesh-strips, the last nerve strand and the last rivet. Who, what knows WHERE I will go?

But I must go. To find out PURPOSE. The years have brought me finally to that decision. My Stronghold I will put on dormant for the planned duration of my departure. I have let my truce credits accumulate until I have, in funds, many white flags. As the top blaster in Moderan, far ahead on war, I have no battle commitments that are crucial.

Will I come back? I plan to. I plan to come back and tell all of you of my travels. If I do not come back? If I am trapped out there, held in some stillborn quietness, some hanging immensity of void, incomprehensible, space-locked stillness of stillness, oh God? Well, that has been arranged for, for indeed it is a possibility. After a certain time, all commanded in the tape of my pre-arrangements, the little servant man will return from the secret box in the far place. I expect to be back then waiting to help him put me, my body, back together. But if I am not back

then, I will not be back, then. (Oh, let us pun a little here even on the brink of Death). My flesh-strips will go to my head weapons man then, in a different arrangement, of course, for he cannot, must not, be me, and Stronghold 10 will go on, almost as before, into a new era of blasting.

So you see this Final Decision is indeed a final decision. But if the risks are high, the stakes are indeed of the highest. I take this course freely here on the eminence of my heaped honors. I have sought TRUTH and found it existed for me not only in the fine clean hates of the Moderan Strongholds but also in the fine hot love of a new-metal mistress long ago, when I was very young. I now seek a higher thing—PURPOSE. Since I have not found out PURPOSE completely in the blasting, the Joys, the loves, the hates, the life of Moderan, I'll seek it across the line. May fortune smile on my venture. Oh yes, for us all!

THE END

