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grandma's lie soap

by . . . Robert Abernathy

Grandma's soap was a miracle of miracles under the stars. If you don't believe it—just try lying to the flying saucer folk.

OF COURSE you'll believe this story. Everybody will. The funny thing is that it *could* be a lie . . .

To make that point clearer: A little while ago I happened to be at a gathering of literary amateurs and critics, one of those sprawling aimless affairs where people mill around with drinks in their hands, congealing in little clusters to talk or listen to somebody talk.

I listened. I heard a serious bespectacled young man discourse not unintelligently on Proust, and I heard a plump gentleman make some safe, sound comments on Faulkner.

Nobody disagreed with them. Nobody argued. Nobody even said, "But—"

I can remember when arguments were the order of the day.

After I'd had a little more of it than I could stand, I spoke up. "Say what you like about those scribblers," I declared firmly, "none of them can hold a candle to Wolf."

"Thomas?" someone asked—not with the air of being about to contradict me, but merely as one sincerely, infuriatingly desiring instruction.

To free Truth from its wrappings with the sparkling irony and engaging insight of a prophetic pen was the self-appointed task of Robert Abernathy in this remarkable story. He's succeeded so well that we'll never see a frail old woman lolling down a country lane or a cake of homemade soap without bracing ourselves against the collapse of our world and the coming of the millennium

"No, *Howling*," I retorted with flamboyant irony. "Do you mean to say you never heard of *Howling Wolf*, the genius of the North Woods, the greatest author of all time? The one writer who grasped the human soul in all its depth, breadth, and angular momentum? Who painted Life in its true colors on a canvas vast as all Nature, with a non-union brush? Who sounded every note of emotional experience, and rang all the bells in belles lettres? Who—"

I ran out of breath, paused, and added, "Of course, unfortunately all of Wolf's mighty works were written in his native language, which happened to be Chinook Trade Jargon, and they've never been translated. So if you don't know the Jargon . . ."

At my age I should have known better. Naturally, every word I uttered was gospel but all I got back were earnest requests for more information about the great Wolf. To explain that I'd just been kidding—that I say such things experimentally and to keep in practice as one of the few remaining liars in a truthful world—would have been worse than useless. It would have been cruelty to talking animals.

I mumbled, "Pardon me," to all the nice, candid, inquisitive, credulous faces. I grabbed my hat and pulled it over my eyes, and ducked out. Not that I imagined I'd get away from the consequences. I could already envisage how the rip-

ples would spread. For a long while to come I'd get inquiries in the mail from literary clubs, collectors, compilers of biographical dictionaries. Probably there'd be a *Howling Wolf Commemorative Society* organized, and if I told them he was buried at the bottom of the Chicago Drainage Canal, they'd go and strew posies there.

But this is not the story of *Howling Wolf*. It is the story of Grandma's lie soap.

When I first remember Grandma, back when I was one of the numerous grandchildren — my brothers, sisters, and assorted cousins who overran the old hill-country farm during vacations—she was already a dried-up little old lady who couldn't have weighed ninety pounds, with a brown, wrinkled face and intolerant black eyes.

She ruled the farm with an iron hand and my two taciturn uncles, who did the heavy work, moved silently about, tending to chores, crops, and stock in obedience to her orders. The farm thrived, too. Even in bad years, when other people's corn was stunted and wells ran dry, nothing of the sort befell Grandma.

Sometimes — though I didn't know this until I was older—the neighbors muttered, and insisted, obviously out of envy, there was something queer about Grandma. Queerness they detected, I suppose, in her fondness for cats—which most of the country people tolerated without affection—and in her

long walks in the woods by herself, gathering plants that she dried and kept in unlabeled jars.

Too, a tradition had it that back in England in the seventeenth century one of her female ancestors had been accused of bewitching cattle by the celebrated witchfinder, Mr. Samson Broadforks, who fell ill shortly afterward of an ailment believed to be foot-and-mouth disease. Be that as it may, the ancestor in question emigrated to America around that time.

But we children, of course, saw nothing odd about our Grandma. Childishly, we assumed that everybody had a grandmother who kept a piece of lie soap on the high shelf over the washstand.

This was a chunk of strong brown soap, like all the rest of the boiled-fat products that Grandma made in the old iron wash-kettle after hog-killing. But it wasn't ordinary soap. It was made separately and privately, from some of the herbs that Grandma had in her jars, from a recipe she kept in her head and nowhere else.

Because, you see, another thing about Grandma was that she couldn't abide being lied to. Not, I'm sure, out of any abstract devotion to Truth, but simply because the idea of anyone fooling *her* made her furious. If somebody tried it, and that somebody was one of her own grandchildren, she knew what to do . . .

For instance, I can still vividly recall the time when my city cousin

Richard first came visiting on the farm. This Richard was a pale, supercilious brat who lived in New York City. As soon as he made sure that no one else on the farm had been similarly blessed, he sized us up for yokels and set about overawing us with the marvels of the metropolis.

Grandma, busy round the kitchen range, listened silently for a while. But we who knew her well could see the storm warnings going up—the tightening lips and the dangerous gleam in her eye. Richard didn't see anything, naturally. He finished describing the George Washington Bridge and went on to the skyscrapers.

That did it. Grandma slammed a skillet down and fastened a harpy grip on Richard's collar. "Come along, young man," she said grimly. "You needn't think you can pull *my* leg!"

And she wagged him off to the washstand, the rest of us trailing after in delighted horror.

"Oliver—" Grandma addressed me, because I was already a gangling thirteen then—"Reach me down the lie soap!"

I did so, gingerly, and before the bawling Richard knew what was happening he was sputtering through a haze of suds, his mouth thoroughly washed out with the strong soap.

"Now!" said Grandma briskly, releasing him and stepping back. "Take a dipper of water, and then answer me: Were you or weren't

you exaggerating when you said there was buildings there ten miles high?"

Richard opened and closed his mouth. He grew red in the face with effort. He said, "N . . . N . . . Yes, ma'am, I was exaggerating."

You could see that he was thunderstruck to find that he couldn't do anything but tell the truth. He had yet to learn what the rest of us knew and took for granted. Once anybody had his mouth washed out with Grandma's lie soap, he could never again in this life speak a falsehood, however much he might want to.

A quarter of an hour later, Grandma had mollified Richard with bread and jam and encouraged him to talk some more. She listened with keen interest as he described the Holland Tunnel, nodding her head occasionally and exclaiming, "My, my! Who would have thought it?"

Now, you see, she knew that every word was true.

If I'd been smarter—but maybe I'm still not smart, except in hindsight—I might have seen the shape of things to come in that incident. But I wasn't, and I didn't.

II

AT ONE time or another, all of Grandma's grandchildren got their mouths washed with the lie soap—all but me. Why I was spared, I've often wondered. It wasn't for lack of provocation, that's certain. I've

thought perhaps Grandma had an intuitive grasp of scientific method, and kept me as a control. Or . . . well, so far as I know, Grandma was the only one of the family in her generation who possessed the secret of the lie soap, and she didn't pass it on to any of her children, who were all sober, truthful, financially unsuccessful citizens. But I'm pretty sure that Grandma herself never got the lie soap treatment as a child.

I grew up, and summers on the farm receded into memory. I went to college, specialized in chemistry, and emerged with rosy visions of science remaking the world. I fell then, naturally into a research job with Gorley and Gorley, who at that time were one of the bigger companies making chemicals, synthetics, cleansers, pharmaceuticals and the like.

The laboratories which I shared with a number of other young and not-so-young research men were magnificent, their chrome-and-porcelain splendor making the university labs where we'd studied seem small and dingy by comparison.

Here I had the facilities and—assigned work being light at the time—the spare time to follow up a project of which I'd become enamored in school—a line on antibiotic synthesis. I almost lived in that lab for some weeks, at the end of which time I had sufficient promising results to make up a summary of them, together with

an urgent request for materials needed to carry the investigation through to a successful conclusion.

I submitted this report to the Coordinator, a fussy, harassed little man, who nervously promised to call it to the attention of the front office, and assigned me to work on the problem of producing a red detergent powder that would not make pink suds.

Time went by, and nothing happened. Naturally I reminded the Coordinator, but he assured me that the matter had merely slipped his mind. To make a sad story short, I finally found out how things worked. Communications between the research department and the front office, i.e. the sales department, went only one way.

When the latter had decided just what sort of epoch-making miracle of modern science the buying public was ripe for, word would come down, and if we happened to have such a miracle on hand, well and good. Otherwise, we could produce it, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, in time for the scheduled start of the advertising campaign.

It was O'Brien who first explained this system in full to me. O'Brien was an Assistant Sales Manager and an advertising man from way back. But he was also a human being.

"Over there with your test tubes, kid," he said bluntly. "You're playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. Sometimes you hit, oftener you

miss. But you're never quite sure in advance. Right?"

I had to admit he had hit on a pretty fair description of scientific research in general.

"But," said O'Brien, "by us in Sales it's *hit, hit, hit*, all the time. We can't wait for you boys to get that tail pinned on straight. But sometimes you do, don't you?" He sighed.

"God help us, some of the characters I associate with don't even know that. They can't see any difference between having something to sell and having to sell something. So when you *do* hit, let me know, and I'll see what I can do at my end."

He was as good as his word, too. A couple of times when we'd fumbled around and come up with a product that people really needed, something to keep them from dying, for instance, or to make not dying worth their while, he went to bat for us in the sales department.

I've described at length the situation at Gorley and Gorley, first because it had a direct bearing on what happened later, and second because it was typical of a way of life which is past, and which the younger generation nowadays has difficulty even in imagining. I'm referring, of course, to the middle of the twentieth century with its feverish atmosphere of compulsory Progress or a reasonable facsimile thereof and of the glitter that was sometimes gold.

It was the era of the false front,

the false rear and the questionable middle, of scandal, slander, and the Hard Sell. It was also the Age of the Big Lie, as somebody called it. But it was even more the age of the little half-truth.

During those years when I was growing up—a painful process then, though it doesn't seem to be so any more—my education progressed along other lines as well.

There was my baptism of politics. I joined with the enthusiasts working for nomination of a reform slate of candidates against those of the city machine. We were too innocent to know that it was an unpropitious time. For one thing, it wasn't a Presidential year and the vote was bound to be light, and for another, the last reform administration was still too fresh in public memory, and the machine was riding high.

The opposition called us idealistic crackpots, conniving scoundrels, and dimwits who didn't know what it was all about. They had the money and they spent it on a flood of lies from the platform, through the mail, and from sound trucks that rolled bellowing through the streets. Finally, our candidates were snowed under in the primaries and not so much as a reform dog-catcher appeared on the ticket.

That was another bruising experience for an easy bruiser such as I was. After the crescendo of activity, the speeches, the leaflets, the house-to-house canvasses, after the starry-eyed phrases about clean-

ing up local government as a first step toward cleaning up the country and the world . . .

I took a freshly disillusioned look at that world. It was a world where the leaders of great nations daily pointed to one another as conspirators plotting to exterminate the human race, and where "security" and fear grew rankly intertwined as the ordinary man learned to swallow the idea that *he* couldn't be trusted with the truth about anything really important. It was a world where, consequently, the scaremongers, the inside scoopers, and the genuine conspirators throve mightily.

And, finally, there was Alice.

Alice was in the bookkeeping department at Gorley and Gorley. She didn't have the kind of looks that make cover photographers and movie scouts drool and lunge. But she had something, a spontaneous allure, a magnetism that must surely have upset the IBM machines she worked with.

I met Alice, was magnetized, polarized, and lost. Lost and happy. When I proposed to her, and she said *Yes*, I felt that my good fortune was *too* good to be true. And it was. Some three weeks later she handed back the ring. She couldn't marry me. It had all been a mistake, and so on.

Two days afterward I encountered her by accident in a corridor at the plant. She wore another ring, with a bigger diamond. I stopped

her, and roughly demanded: "Who?"

Stumblingly, she told me. He was a junior executive, a young-man-who-would-go-far with family connections and stock in the company. Alice was a smart girl, and she'd simply bettered herself. I guess I said some rather bitter things on that subject.

"No, Oliver," she insisted. "It's not like that at all. It's just that I don't love you. I never did." But she wouldn't meet my eyes.

When I'd cooled down a bit, I realized that she was being honest with me after a fashion. She was lying to me in just the same terms she was lying to herself. And at the same time, recalling little details of her behavior, I realized why.

Alice was afraid. Her people had been poor, and she knew what it meant. Anyway, who *wasn't* afraid in those days, except for the feeble-minded and some of the insane? So she was looking for security, a place to hide, in that world of the nineteen-fifties where there wasn't any place to hide. But what was the use of telling her that?

I did some serious drinking, enough to convince me that I wasn't cut out to make a career of it. It was during the sobering-up process that I got the Idea. I wonder how many of the thoughts that changed the world have been fattered by hangovers?

I had some days' vacation with pay coming, so it was comparatively easy. I took a plane, a train, and a

ramshackle bus. I then swung in on a grapevine and there I was, walking up the familiar path to the old farmhouse door, where I hadn't been for a span of years that astonished me when I counted them.

Grandma was out in the back yard hanging out a wash of patched work shirts and faded blue overalls. She said without surprise, "How do, Oliver," and went right on finishing her task, while I watched with suppressed impatience.

Finally she picked up the empty clothes basket and led the way into the house. It was getting dusk, so she lit a kerosene lamp in the kitchen, where supper was simmering on the cast-iron range.

"Grandma," I fumbled, "I came down here—"

"I can see that," Grandma interrupted. "How do you like my new teeth, Oliver?" She grinned at me alarmingly. "Today's my birthday—ninety-first or ninety-fourth or something like that, I forget—so I went to town and got me my new teeth. Pretty, eh, boy? Figure they ought to do me another ten or twelve years."

"Yes, Grandma," I said, a little dazedly.

She peered at me searchingly. "Well, Oliver? Speak up. You've got troubles written all over you."

I'd more or less rehearsed a persuasive speech, but sitting there in Grandma's lamplit kitchen I felt as if the years had fallen away and I was like a little boy who had

run away from home and come back sorry.

In considerable disorder I poured out the story of how I'd gone out into the world and what I'd found it like. I covered all of it, my work and how little it amounted to compared to what it could have meant to me, and my experience with the way people were governed—even Alice. Above all, I told her how at every turning I had been lied to, and had heard people lie to one another, and seen them lie to themselves.

Grandma nodded once or twice as she listened, which encouraged me. I remembered a scrap from the arguments I'd meant to muster: "Some philosopher once said that a lie is the Original Sin itself. Without it, all other crimes become impossible."

"So," Grandma broke in, "you want the recipe for my lie soap."

"Uh . . . yes, that's right," I admitted. "It's the answer. Your ancestors and mine had no right to hold it back this long. Look, Grandma. The company I work for makes mouth washes, toothpastes, and the like. Millions of people use their products; and if a new 'miracle ingredient' were publicized the right way, other companies with more millions of customers would have to adopt it too."

I was counting on O'Brien. I'd explain it to him squarely, and somehow we'd manage to put it over.

Grandma got up to stir a kettle.

She took her time, while I held my breath. Finally she said, "I'm going to give you the recipe, Oliver—"

My heart leaped.

"—but not for ten or twenty years yet. Not until you've learned a mite of caution. I was your age once, myself, and I thought how nice it would be to make the world over tomorrow morning, and sit down and admire it tomorrow afternoon. Now I know better, and so will you."

I pleaded and argued, but it was no use. The old lady was adamant. Finally I fell glumly silent, while Grandma went about setting the table for supper.

On the train coming down I'd bought a newspaper out of sheer habit, and, preoccupied, hadn't even opened it. It lay now on the table, and Grandma picked it up to glance at the headlines. Suddenly I realized she'd been standing motionless, staring at the paper, for a remarkably long time. There was a look I'd never seen before on her wrinkled face.

I heard her whisper to herself, "*The Moon!*" But that didn't make any sense until I looked over her shoulder and read:

*Air Force Rocket Lands
on Moon*

Still I didn't understand Grandma's agitation. I said banally, "Well, we've known for quite a while they were going to try it."

III

"The Moon!" Grandma repeated. She went on wanderingly, "You know, that just reminds me of one night in a buggy . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she brooded darkly, which was strange indeed in her.

Then she let the paper fall, and said briskly, "I've changed my mind, Oliver."

"You mean—"

"Yes. You can have the lie soap. I'll write the recipe out and give it to you for a birthday present."

I said stupidly, "It's not my birthday, though."

"No, it's mine." She cackled with a return of the old merriment. She found a stub of pencil, tore off a corner of newspaper, and began writing in a crabbed hand.

As she wrote she muttered, only half to me: "Evening of the day they dropped the Bomb, your Uncle Henry told me: 'Ma, the time's come.' But I said, 'No.' 'I said, 'People may be crazy, but they're not crazy enough to blow the whole world up and them on it.'

"But now . . . If there's a Man in the Moon, and he's got a Bomb in his hand and all he's got to do is fling it, what's to stop him? *Him*. he's safe in the Moon . . . *There!*" She held out the scrap of paper. "Go on, boy, do what you like with it, and I hope you like what you do! I held back, I never thought I'd live to see times like these. But there's some duties you just can't shirk, boy, I don't have to tell you that."

BILL, Jerry and I slipped into a booth at the tavern near the plant. Looking across the table at Jerry, I marveled at how well he was keeping up the act, the casual off-hours good-fellowship. As for me, I felt sure my tense nerves were showing.

While Jerry called Bill's attention to the waitress' walk, I dropped a little, fast-dissolving white tablet into Bill's drink.

As he picked it up and sipped, I felt a qualm which I ruthlessly stifled. This test *had* to be made. We—Jerry and I, since I'd taken him into my confidence as a man I could trust and a wizard at organic chemistry—had studied the lie-soap formula backward and forward. We'd analyzed samples of it I'd obtained from Grandma, and isolated—or so we thought—the active ingredients. But we had to know, and we could hardly experiment on animals.

Bill set down an empty glass. I grew tenser. Jerry inquired, "Another?" and when Bill shook his head, asked the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. "So—you've decided to quit lushing around, nad get some work done for a change?"

That was one of the trick questions we'd settled on—a variation of the old "Have you stopped beating your wife?" formula. If Bill had been quite normal, he'd have answered, "Hell no," or, "Yeah, guess I better," or some answer as

jocular and meaningless as the question. But if our elixir of lie soap worked, he'd answer—with a peculiar, embarrassed gulp of hesitation:

"But I don't lush around, and I get a good deal of work done."

Which was what he *did* say. Because it was the truth, silly and pompous as it sounded there and then.

I could see Jerry rallying himself to ask some more telling questions, and I knew he was feeling an emotion exactly like mine—exultation curiously mixed with shame.

Both of us realized at that moment, I guess, that it was going to mean no more friendly kidding over a couple of beers, no more harmless insults and bragging, no more fish stories . . . But of course there's always a price.

I went to O'Brien.

He heard me out without changing expression. When I'd laid all the cards on the table, he said slowly, "If this stuff will really do what you say—"

"It will," I assured him. "It has."

"In that case, my young scientific friend, do you realize what you're asking me to do? I've spent twenty years in the advertising game. You might say I've devoted my life to it. Now you want me to help you with a scheme that'll wipe out advertising as we know it—lock, stock, and barrel."

"I—I hadn't thought of it like that."

"In other words," O'Brien went

on, "you're offering me the fulfillment of my fondest dreams. Shake on it, kid!"

Then he settled back and grew thoughtful. "But it isn't going to be easy. I guess you still have trouble believing it, but I can't just walk into a sales conference and say, 'See here, I've got wind of a product that's the greatest boon to humanity since fire and the wheel,' and expect them to fall all over me. We need a good promotion angle."

"There's got to be some way."

"Keep your shirt on. I'll find one. I haven't been in the business for twenty years for nothing. But one thing anyway. Until this deal is swung, keep your witch's brew away from me!"

The convincer came, after all, from an idea I had. But it was O'Brien who saw the possibilities and, by dint of massive doses of double-talk and cajolery, arranged for a test survey of a hundred volunteer subjects. These human guinea pigs were furnished gratis with a thirty days' supply of a new toothpaste—a standard base, plus Grandma's lie soap—and, when the time was up, were quizzed as to their reactions to the experiment.

Almost without exception, they professed themselves well pleased. Of course, that was what the sales department wanted to hear about—satisfied customers.

As to *why* our subjects felt better after trying a new dentifrice, they couldn't say because they didn't know. It was merely that their out-

look on life seemed to have become sunnier, and their personal relations more agreeable—apart from a few unfortunate domestic upsets, about which, however, the victims themselves seemed remarkably cheerful.

I thought I knew why. My pet theory was working out. Though I was no psychologist, I'd always been sure that a lot of people's mental difficulties and prevailing unhappiness was due solely to their inveterate habit of deceiving themselves. But these people who'd tried Grandma's lie soap couldn't even lie to themselves any more.

This outcome made our brave new world look braver in prospect—as well as likelier. A couple of days later the company's directors made the decision to go into production; and it was rumored that another of the biggest firms was already dickering for a look at the formula.

We had no trouble with the Bureau of Standards. After all, we only had to satisfy them that the stuff was harmless. Presumably they tried it on mice . . .

To celebrate the directors' decision, I invited Alice and her new fiancé to dinner. I was rather vague about what we were celebrating, so that they left no wiser than when they came. But they were much more candid, since I had a supply of the little white tablets on hand.

I gave the leaven most of the evening to work, and at eleven o'clock called Alice's apartment. I'd

timed it correctly. She was in. In tears, too—judging by her voice.

"You and he must have said some pretty nasty things to each other," I remarked sympathetically. "Too bad about the engagement."

"Oh, it was awful! He said—he admitted that if it weren't for my b-bosom— And I told him—oh, how could I say *that*? But Oliver, how did you know?"

"I saw it coming. And now you're home all alone, and sort of wishing I was there to console you . . . aren't you?"

There was one of those pauses I'd learned to recognize. Then she said strangledly, "Y-yes. I was. I am. But *Oliver*—people don't—"

"Sometimes they do," I said. "Hold on. I'll be right up."

When a woman has once told the truth to a man, either everything is over between them, or everything has just begun.

From then on the story is mostly history.

Gorley and Gorley's new improved toothpaste with Verolin began outselling all other brands. Other companies saw that the new ingredient—for reasons nobody quite understood—was becoming more indispensable than chlorophyll had been somewhat earlier, and paid through the nose for the right to use it. G and G added a Verolin mouthwash to their line, and it was also a snowballing success. All the time, of course, Verolin was really Grandma's lie soap.

These products blanketed the

country and went into the export market. They went all over civilization, if you define civilization as those regions of the Earth where people use toothbrushes and seek to avoid halitosis—or, anyway, all over what was then called "the free world" by its inhabitants and "the enslaved world" by the publicists of the "free world" on the other side.

The returns began coming in.

IV

A WELL-KNOWN radio news commentator paused for a refreshing gargle in the mid-break of his program, was unable to continue broadcasting, and resigned the same day.

Various other commentators and newspaper columnists suffered more or less similar fates, while a good many newspapers and periodicals underwent violent shifts of editorial policy.

Half a dozen magazines having the word "True" in their titles suspended publication.

Quite a few authors, including some more than usually successful ones, abandoned their profession. Surprisingly, those who quit included some who had been praised by the critics for the stark realism of their work, and among those who did not quit were some whose writings were regarded as sheer imaginative flights.

As for the critics, most of them took up useful trades.

A number of university professors conscientiously resigned, stating that they could not teach "facts" which they did not know to be true.

Several hitherto popular and, to their founders, profitable religious cults abruptly disintegrated. In one case there was a riot, when the Prophet of the Luminous Truth appeared in a mass meeting and told his followers some home truths about himself, his doctrines, and themselves.

Most of the churches lost grievously in membership, though at the same time they enjoyed an accession of new converts. Those whose rites included confession complained that, somehow, the act appeared to be losing its deep significance.

Psychoanalysts at first rejoiced over their sudden wholesale success in overcoming their patients' "resistances," and a little later were appalled by their empty waiting rooms.

The divorce rate skyrocketed, then plunged to a permanent record low. Conversely, the marriage rate at first fell off sharply, then climbed gradually back to normal. The birth rate was unaffected.

Innumerable lawyers took down their shingles.

Congressional investigating committees enjoyed a field day, but fell prey to an increasing nervous frustration as witness after witness refused to perjure himself.

In Washington, D. C., a conservatively-dressed gentleman checked

into a hotel, came down to the lobby after brushing his teeth, and in response to a commercial traveler's casual question said, "My business? Well, I'm a secret agent for the Soviet Union. And you?"

Police in scores of cities were swamped by confessions of offenses ranging from multiple murder to double parking, and were bewildered by the absence of the expected percentage of false confessions.

For the first time in modern history, the number of homicides exceeded the number of suicides. In general, crimes of stealth virtually ceased to occur, while crimes of violence continued at about their previous level and reported cases of rape declined spectacularly.

Numerous government officials admitted themselves guilty of peculation and malfeasance in office. The business bureaucracy was even harder hit. Among the casualties was a prominent board member of Gorley and Gorley.

To my particular satisfaction, the mayor our local machine had elected made a public speech—apparently unaware that he was doing anything out of the way—in which he thanked by name the boys who had purchased the most votes for him in the last campaign, also those who had put in the strong-arm work.

All the F.B.I. agents doing undercover work in the Communist Party were exposed, and as a result the party went bankrupt for lack of dues paying members.

As O'Brien had predicted, the advertising business collapsed, burying many lesser enterprises under the ruins. But somehow no general financial panic took place.

A man from Texas was heard to confess that he sometimes got tired of hearing about Texas, and even admitted it couldn't be twice as large as the rest of the United States.

Events such as these were the convulsions, the death throes of an old world and the birth pangs of a new.

Their final phase was the breakdown of the international situation, which had continued for over a decade in a sort of deadly balance. The balance was destroyed when U. S. and other Western diplomats adopted a new tack which provoked, in their Eastern-bloc opponents, reactions first of suspicious alarm, then of bafflement, and finally of a dazed conviction that the spirit of Marxian history had at long last delivered the enemy into their hands—which last impression led directly to their undoing.

Forgetting the chiseler's basic precept—you can't cheat an honest man—they set about exploiting the situation by extracting from the West all the technical information they coveted, and which was now theirs for the asking. Along with plutonium refinement methods and guided missile designs, they obtained, naturally, the formula for Grandma's lie soap, alias Verolin.

The counterparts of Gorley and Gorley's sales department, in their government-run industries, were also shrewdly alive to the importance of having satisfied customers. Clearly, they reasoned, studying our records, this is a good thing, this is a valuable bit of *kul'tura* . . .

From there on developments followed pretty much the pattern already established in the West. There were some painful incidents, such as the Kiev massacre of former secret police agents, and the three days when *Pravda* shut down to retool. But on the whole, the reaction was more than anything else like that of a man who comes to the top and takes breath at last, after very nearly drowning.

The Iron Curtain sagged, fell apart, and sank into oblivion. Grandma's lie soap had conquered the world.

V

SINCE I retired, I've been using my leisure in exploration and observation of this world which I did a good deal to create, this world which differs so much from the one I grew up in and can remember better than most others even of my own generation. They've had the treatment, and they've changed. But I still brush my teeth with a salt-and-soda mixture.

In many ways, the present era answers to the visions that were called Utopian when I was a boy—called that, usually, with a sneer.

A lot of the social and political reforms we only dreamed about then have been carried out as a matter of course which was inevitable once people stopped lying themselves and one another black in the face.

Mental diseases, tangled lives, crime have all been swept away—not to mention the threat of war that was the Great Shadow overlying all the lesser shadows of the old world.

An election campaign now is carried on in an atmosphere of sobriety and statesmanship that would have given an old-time politician the creeps. None of the old bandstand, circus stuff . . . Speaking of that, one thing I miss is the circus. I used to like to listen to the sideshow barkers—an extinct tribe. I know, they still have circuses, or call them that; but P. T. Barnum would disown them.

But . . . people look one another in the eyes much more than they ever used to. They don't seem afraid. There's confidence—not the ballooning confidence that led to big economic booms and bigger busts, but a trust resting on solid foundations.

Still, sometimes I wonder.

Not long ago I ran into O'Brien, for the first time in years, in a bar. People don't drink as much as they did, but O'Brien had been drinking a good deal.

"How are you?" I said automatically, the sight of such a long-remembered face making me for-

get that that particular greeting wasn't used nowadays.

He began a detailed description of his general state of health and present state of intoxication. "Oh," I said. "You've had it."

"Yeah," said O'Brien. "I broke down and took the treatment. I got like everybody else. I couldn't stand the temptation any more. You know what I mean?"

I knew exactly what he meant. For him, with his background, it must have been much worse.

"Maybe," said O'Brien thickly, "I could have been dictator of the world if I'd wanted. But this way's better." He signaled the waiter, then looked at me curiously. "You—not yet?"

"Not yet," I said. "Maybe never. I like to watch things."

"Watch the sheep run," mumbled O'Brien. "All sheep . . ."

He was drunk, but he'd had Grandma's lie soap, and he spoke the truth.

Perhaps there's too much confidence.

Once in a while I yield a little to that temptation O'Brien mentioned, but always in harmless ways, merely for amusement or out of curiosity to see just how much people *will* swallow. Like in that fabrication of Howling Wolf, the genius of the North Woods, which I told you about in the beginning. More and more I find that they'll believe almost anything, especially the younger generation. Older peo-

ple still have a residuum of skepticism.

Now it's plain—using hindsight—that we should easily have foreseen the secondary effect. But it developed very slowly. No physiological effect, this, but a psychological one—or simply logical. Once people stop lying, they'll also stop suspecting deceit. They'll believe as they expect to be believed. Little by little, particularly as the young ones who don't remember grow up, they'll become totally—gullible, it used to be called.

A while back, down South, there was an unwashed prophet who made converts right and left to a weird sect of his own devising—until somebody seduced him into heathenish ways, and he tried brushing his teeth. But incidents like that don't really disturb me. As the example shows, they all come out in the wash.

Yet there is something that bothers me. Back before Grandma's lie soap, we used to get sporadic reports of "mysterious airships," "flying saucers," or similarly named equivalents for unexplained objects in the sky. We laughed them off, mostly, because people were always starting crazy rumors . . . After the great change, those reports might have been expected to stop coming.

But they didn't.

And more recently there have been some queer phenomena noted by the space station and the bubbles on the Moon.

So suppose we're not alone in the Universe or even in the Solar System? And suppose that whoever is out there—circling us, observing us with immense caution for so long—are beings like *we* used to be—fierce, wary, enormously suspicious as their behavior suggests, capable of any falsehood, any treachery?

Wolves, circling the sheep . . .

Perhaps it's all my imagination. I can't be sure. There's only one way I can be sure even of what I think myself.

Pretty soon now I'll go into the bathroom and wash my mouth with Grandma's lie soap. Then I'll look into the mirror and ask myself, face to face, with no possibility of deception: *Did I do right?*

What will my answer be?