

BEYOND FICTION

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reluctant adam

By **ROBERT RICHARD**

Organizing his Garden of Eden

*was a cinch, but there was a
snake in the grass—himself!*

Illustrated by **DICK FRANCIS**

THE elf materialized in mid-air, hovered for a moment beating its wings gently, then came to rest on the ground beside the sleeping man.

“Good morning,” it said cheerfully.

Rudy felt no answering cheer. “Go away!” he mumbled groggily.

Obligingly, the elf disappeared, but the damage was done. The man reluctantly sat up in his sleeping bag. The sun was already strong and his conscience forbade dallying. After he had wriggled out, he pulled the sleeping bag from beneath the wing of the wrecked plane and rolled it with great neatness, smoothing out the wrinkles

and brushing off the dirt, leaves and grass.

With the water he had brought the night before, he washed and shaved and brushed his teeth, counting the strokes. He put on his uniform carefully and, thus resplendent, sallied forth.

At a discreet distance, a horde of the little people had gathered to gawk through the trees, and his appearance caused a murmur of excitement, which he stolidly ignored. His plane had skidded half-way across the glade, smashing to a halt just in the shade of the towering trees. Another ten feet and he would have been dead. But ten feet less, and the plane would have

been visible to one of the searching planes that had droned their way overhead. It looked like a Latin-American standoff.

HE moved out into the meadow, carrying a few more sticks to add to the huge pile of wood he had built. The ground was charred from previous futile fires, and it had been almost a week since he had heard a plane.

He sternly repelled discouragement and, with a proud back, retraced his footsteps to the shelter of the woods. The friendly elf appeared beside him and matched his pace with a kind of skipping dance.

He made the round of his traps and was surprised to find five of them demolished.

"Some bears around here," the elf informed him.

Methodically, Rudy moved on and found a trapped rabbit. He eyed it dubiously.

The elf was curious. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to eat it," Rudy announced. And, having declared himself, he had no alternative.

He made a messy job of cleaning it, winding up with very little rabbit. He built a fire and proceeded with the cooking, fumbling a great deal. After a time, he gingerly tasted the result. Beneath its charcoaled exterior, the rabbit was still raw. Most unsatisfactory.

The elf made sympathetic

sounds that Rudy found infuriating, but he restrained himself.

"My technique is doubtless very poor," he admitted. "In time, I hope to become more proficient."

He gnawed manfully at the mess. "Would you care to join me?"

The sprite declined hastily. "I just came along because I thought you might be lonely."

Rudy set his obstinate chin. "Loneliness is a state of mind. The fact that I am temporarily separated from the rest of the human race has no effect upon my emotional stability."

The elf became excited. "You mean you're a *human being*?"

"Certainly! What did you think I was?"

"I didn't one way or another. To think that you're a human being! It's just wonderful."

A suspicion touched Rudy. "What's so wonderful?"

"That you're a human. I never saw one before. Of course, I've heard a lot about them."

"From whom?"

"Third Order. They lived with your people, you know."

"I didn't know. Why did they live with us?"

The elf shrugged. "They don't tell us why. It's just something you do when you grow up."

"You mean you're not fully grown?"

The answer came with a giggle.

"Of course not! I'm just a baby—
First Order. Next year I'll make
Second Order and I'll go out."

"And when you come back?"

"Then I'll be Third Order and
have the right to boss the elves
around." He went into a skipping
dance. "You can't do this and you
can't do that," he sang piercingly.

This impromptu entertainment
was cut short by the appearance
of three more elves, who came
flitting madly through the trees.

"Mr. Blodgett is coming; Mr.
Blodgett is coming!" they shrilled
in chorus.

WITH a yelp of pure dismay,
Rudy's companion leaped
into the air and faded into nothing-
ness. The others, their mission
completed, also made haste to dis-
appear, and Rudy found himself
alone in a strangely quiet forest.

He stared thoughtfully at the
vacant space. He was aware that
enforced solitude often resulted in
such hallucinations, but the com-
pleteness of the illusions shook
him. He felt that the safest course
was to accept them without strug-
gle, but with full realization that
they were imaginary.

He finished his meal and made
sure that the fire was completely
out, then made his way back to
the plane and carefully re-ex-
amined the contents of the survival
kit. He hefted the packets of seed,
wondering if the day would ever

come when he could personally
thank the mad genius who had in-
cluded them. It was true that he
had never planted a seed in his
life—but, then, he had never caught
and cooked a rabbit before.

He had crashed the plane in a
glade bordering on a small lake.
The forest hemmed him in and,
beyond it, on all sides, the moun-
tains glowered down intimidat-
ingly.

"A fine place for a farm," he
told himself reassuringly, accept-
ing the fact that he would be there
for some time.

He had just begun to break the
soil when a neat little man ap-
peared. He was about half the
size of a small midget, dressed
smartly and wearing a green derby
hat.

"How do you do?" He extended
his hand. "I am Mr. Blodgett."

A little startled, Rudy took the
tiny hand and shook it gingerly.
"How do *you* do? I'm Major Ru-
dolph Collins of the United States
Air Force."

"I must apologize for not call-
ing sooner," Mr. Blodgett said in
an urbane voice. "Naturally, we
knew that a plane had crashed, but
we had to keep out of sight until
the possibility of your rescue was
negligible. I offer this as a reason,
not an excuse. Military expediency,
you might say. I hope you will for-
give our seeming rudeness. It was
nothing of the sort, you know."

Rudy felt constrained to bow before such blunt formality. "That's quite all right. It is I who should apologize for disturbing your privacy."

Mr. Blodgett rubbed his hands. "Well, I'm glad that polite nonsense is out of the way. Now we can get down to business."

The switch was confusing. "I beg your pardon?"

"Protocol, of course. Now for the smoke-filled room."

"Uh—yes," Rudy said in bewilderment.

The little man eyed him narrowly. "Say! Are you an American?"

Rudy drew himself up stiffly. "Can't you see that I'm wearing the uniform of my country?"

MR. Blodgett nodded. "That's good enough, I guess. I'm strictly from Uncle Sam myself. That's the reason they assigned me to you. Let's start from A. How did you happen to land here?"

"Frankly, I don't think that's any of your business."

"Oh, fine!" Mr. Blodgett complained aloud. "I get all the characters. All right, let's take it from the other end. You're doing some hunting and fishing and making like a farmer, so it looks like you realize that your stay may be permanent."

"I realize no such thing. I have every expectation of eventually returning to civilization."

"So much for the great expectations—now for the hard times. Do you have enough emergency rations, or did the quartermaster slip you cases of socks instead of the hash that you ordered?"

"I have plenty of food," Rudy said in a stiff voice.

Mr. Blodgett sighed. "I can see that all I'll get out of you is your name, rank and serial number. I take it you're from the Canal Zone. How did you happen to get this far south? Was it that major-league storm that kissed the coast about two weeks ago?"

"I did get caught in that storm," Rudy admitted.

"And you got lost! Imagine a major in the United States Air Force getting lost! They'll take away your chicken-inspector badge!"

"I did *not* get lost! I knew where I was at all times, but I had no choice except to ride the storm until I ran out of fuel."

Mr. Blodgett was suspicious. "You're a long way from the corner drugstore, but those rescue planes didn't miss by much. How did they get so close? Is your radio working?"

"Unfortunately, no. They probably placed me from the velocity and direction of the storm and the amount of fuel I had."

"Very clever! Too bad for both of us that they didn't succeed."

"I expect that there will be other

planes, commercial transports and so forth. Eventually, my signal fire will be seen."

Mr. Blodgett shook his head. "These mountains are too mean to play around in. Pan-American routes over them, but not near here. Any plane coming this way has too many troubles of its own to worry about you."

"Then it may be necessary for me to hike out."

"You'd have to be a mountain goat to get out of this crater, and that would only be the beginning. You'd better abandon that idea pronto."

RUDY'S voice grew cold. "You have outside contacts. If you can make it, I can."

"You call that logic? Please notice that you wear your wings on your chest while I wear mine on my shoulder-blades."

"If you're just trying to discourage me, don't bother. It can't be done. According to my calculations, I'm in the Andes. Probably somewhere in Peru. I don't think I'd have to travel far to get help."

"I see. The mayor is waiting right over the next rise with the keys to the city."

Rudy flushed. "Peru has a sizable population . . ."

"Not around here. You could travel for a month and never see an Indian. And if you did see one, you might be sorry."

"Nevertheless, I shall try it as soon as I am certain that rescue is improbable."

Mr. Blodgett showed his admiration. "You're a tough nut, eh, boy?"

Rudy went into his stiffening act. "The United States Air Force . . ."

Mr. Blodgett held up a tiny hand. "If you only knew how many Fourth of July speeches I've listened to, you'd spare me the rest of what you were going to say."

"I take it that you're a native of this region," Rudy said, changing course in hope of a tail wind, so to speak.

"Not really. But there are no true natives, so I'll plead guilty."

"But you are different from the others."

"What others?"

"The little fellows that keep appearing and disappearing."

Mr. Blodgett turned red, then white, then an odd shade of green.

"The elves!" he spluttered. "Every one of them was warned specifically and emphatically. This is impudence! Flagrant insubordination!"

"You mean they weren't supposed to come?"

"Certainly not! Suppose you had been rescued and gone around talking about disappearing elves—"

"Not me!" Rudy spoke with certainty. "I have no desire for a psychoneurotic label."

"Perhaps not. But that doesn't excuse those little monsters. If I've told Oberon once, I've told him a thousand times that he's too easy with them. I can tell you, it was different when I was a youngster."

"Oberon?"

"Our King," Mr. Blodgett explained.

Rudy struggled with his memory for a moment. "You must be fairies!" he exclaimed. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why I'm imagining you. I knew there had to be a basis somewhere, but I couldn't place it before."

MR. Blodgett became indignant. "Now see here, Collins, I had to put up with that nonsense when I was living with you people, but I'm not going to knuckle under in my own territory. I'm as real as my own are."

Rudy ignored him. "It's odd the way my senses collaborate in deluding me. The illusion is so strong that I cannot help talking to you, even though I know you do not exist."

Mr. Blodgett impatiently threw a rock at him.

Rudy stared at the bruise. "Amazing, the extent of self-deception!"

Mr. Blodgett howled with rage. "If I'm a hallucination, then you're a hallucination! What makes you

think that you exist? You could be just a figment of my imagination!"

"You insist you're real?"

Mr. Blodgett drew himself up proudly. "*Cogito, ergo sum!*"

"Then, of course, you'll have a logical explanation for your disappearing friends."

"Now that's more like it. At least your mind is open. Fairies disappear by altering the molecules of their bodies, so that they have the same refractive index as air."

After thinking this out, Rudy said, "I seem to remember my physics instructor making a glass tube disappear in a mixture of liquids. That the sort of thing that you mean?"

"Exactly. You stay here long enough and your hallucinations will educate you."

"What about clothing? Why isn't it left behind when the alleged elves disappear?"

"They don't wear any. They just alter their skin as artistically as they can to simulate clothes."

"But you certainly are wearing clothes."

"Yes, but we older fairies have the ability to alter matter outside of our bodies. So, when I disappear, I just fix what I'm wearing to make it become invisible, too."

Rudy knelt and fingered the coat. "It feels real to me," he declared.

"You think I can't take it with me?"

"That's just what I think."

"Watch me!" And Mr. Blodgett was gone.

Rudy went back to his work with a glance at his watch. "A great deal of time wasted," he muttered. "I never thought I'd reach the stage where I'd have to play tricks on myself!"

FOR a week, there was peace. Rudy outlined his farm, extended his trapping range and built a small lean-to for shelter. He worked methodically and carefully, and kept extraneous thinking to a minimum. Then Mr. Blodgett paid his second visit.

"I wish you'd leave me alone," Rudy complained. "I have a great deal of work to do."

"I bet you think you're some punkins, the way you slicked me."

Rudy grinned. "Will it work again?"

"It didn't work then. I could have reappeared immediately, but there was no point in arguing with you."

"Good! Now that you've reached that conclusion, will you please go away?"

"Can't do it. We have to look after humans—even the stupid, obstinate ones. So, believe it or not, here I am to stay!"

"I'm much happier alone," Rudy insisted, annoyed.

"Nobody's happy alone. We held a long conference and we de-

ecided that what you need is a companion, a helpmeet—someone to share your sorrows and joys."

"And you're it?"

"No, no, a thousand times no! What you need is a female woman—a slick chick—a frail quail."

"Are you telling me that you can provide me with one?"

Mr. Blodgett nodded happily. "I knew that if I made it simple enough, you'd catch on."

"This is more like it," Rudy said, thoughtful. "A man's hallucinations usually take the female form. You had me feeling quite uneasy, you know."

The fairy's eyes sparkled dangerously, but he kept his voice even. "You're agreeable then?"

"If I have to see things, a woman would be preferable to a fast-talking freak."

"Good." Mr. Blodgett ignored the insult. "Now just tell me what kind of female fills your dreams."

"You mean I can have one made to order?"

"Within reason. Once she's here, you have to accept her, to love and cherish and so forth, so we'll do our best to match specifications. But don't get too extravagant. Let's start with the rough dimensions. What height and weight?"

Rudy scratched his chin. "I'd say about my height."

"Mister, you're five-foot-ten!" Mr. Blodgett exclaimed.

Rudy nodded. "She should

weigh about one-sixty, with plenty of muscle."

"Are you talking about a woman or a horse? Why such a big girl?"

"If she is to share life with me in this wilderness, I want her to be able to do her share."

"Very sensible, no doubt. How about coloring?"

"Dark, I think. The sun is quite hot here."

"Well, that makes sense," Mr. Blodgett said. "But five-foot-ten and 160 pounds! That's a lot of woman. Look, I'll tell you what—I'll add a pretty face. You won't notice it, but I'll add it, anyway."

RUDY was satisfied. "That about sums it up."

"You're absolutely sure?" Mr. Blodgett persisted. "No changes or corrections?"

"None that I can think of at the moment."

"It's speak now or forever hold your peace. Okay, we'll do our best."

"You mean you're going to need help?"

"Mister, yours is a tall order, and that isn't just a sickly pun. There's about three thousand adult fairies in this community and every one of them will be working like mad on this project. We may even have to import a couple of experts from Brazil, but I hope not. Those lowlanders are really lowlifes."

"And how will you accomplish this?"

"Transmutation," the little man explained.

"I assume that that's a fancy name for fairy magic."

"Magic, schmagic! I told you we could alter matter to some extent. Surely you will accept the fact that, after our long association with you, we could build a human female correct to the last detail."

"And alive?"

"Well, we can't actually *create* anything. Some fairy will have to supply the life force."

"Just like that?"

"Not quite. It's a difficult process, but we're quite familiar with it, since it's part of our life cycle."

"What does that mean?" Rudy demanded relentlessly. "Be specific."

"I've no doubt you've heard that fairies are immortal. It's not strictly true. What happens is that, when this body wears out, I shall, with the help of my friends, create an elf body and, in time, transmit my life force to it. Of course, this body is then dead and the resultant elf is new-born, with no awareness of previous existence."

"You still haven't told me how it's done."

"The actual act happens to be quite personal. As for the mechanics of it—I hate to admit it, but I've reached the point at which I have to say I don't know. And

what a comedown that is!"

"So all your gibberish comes to nothing," Rudy said, irritated.

"Don't be silly. A bat flies by sonar—would you ask a bat to explain it?"

"I don't think the analogy is at all apt."

"Then I'll give you one that is. Go to a maternity hospital and watch the father look at a newborn baby. They always wear that stupid expression: 'Did I do that?' Well, that's the way it is. We can do it. I don't know how, but we can do it."

"It would be an interesting experiment," Rudy confessed.

"Now *there's* an understatement if I ever heard one."

"And how long would it take to build me a—well, female companion?"

"Two or three weeks."

Rudy's eyes lighted. He would be left alone again. "By all means, go ahead," he said enthusiastically.

IT was a month before the fairy returned. Rudy was just finishing a hard day. He was hot and dirty and tired, and his uniform was soiled. He was in no mood to coddle his errant imagination.

"What do you want?" he challenged angrily.

"I brought the bride, Buster."

"My name is not Buster."

"Stop fretting about what I call you—I'm imaginary. Here's your

imaginary girl friend."

She had been standing behind the plane and, when Mr. Blodgett pulled on her finger, she docilely made an entrance. Rudy stared and the girl stared back, her dark eyes on a line with his. Mr. Blodgett patted her olive skin.

"Isn't this some job? Guaranteed not to burn or peel."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy said.

"A good job. A *very* good job! She's big, but that's what you ordered."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy repeated.

"Don't worry about that silly look she's wearing. She's newborn, you know. All we taught her was how to walk. The rest is up to you. But she's intelligent—smart as they come. You'll find that out."

"She's beautiful!" Rudy said again.

"Beautiful?" the girl repeated doubtfully.

Mr. Blodgett was exultant. "See how quick she is? Say the same word a couple of times and she's got it."

Rudy pulled himself together. "She *is* beautiful," he stated, "but is she real?"

"That's something you'll have to fight out with yourself."

"I wasn't asking whether she's imaginary. I just won't believe that. I mean is she a robot?"

"Certainly not! Real as you and I. If you cut her, she'll bleed. That

sort of thing—she'll pass any test of reality you can think of."

Rudy felt awed. "I begin to remember what you said. She's a transmutation."

"Correct. The cutest little female fairy I ever saw went into the making of this hunk of woman."

"And she's not a fairy?"

Mr. Blodgett was impatient. "She's human all the way. There can be no memory of previous existence."

"Then she *is* real."

"And brand-new. Nobody to spoil her but you."

"I will make her," declared Rudy, "into the most wonderful wife a man ever had."

MR. Blodgett held up a finger. "A word of warning, chum. It will be easy to teach her, but pretty near impossible to unteach her. You can have her any way you want, but you can't change her at will."

Rudy nodded. "I understand. She will accept a basic behavior pattern, but thereafter she will adhere to that pattern and be beyond my influence."

"I think you've got it. To be specific—right now, this new-born baby hasn't even got diapers on. If you explain to her that nice girls wear clothes, she will be a modest maiden forthwith. But if you keep your big mouth shut, she will think nothing of it and con-

tinue to parade around in this bewitching fashion."

Rudy demurred. "I think that in time she would wonder why I wear clothes."

"I wonder myself," Mr. Blodgett confessed. "It's pretty hot right now and the nearest peeping Tom is a long way off, yet you always look as if you expect a blizzard. What's the story?"

"A major in the United States Air Force . . ." Rudy began, but the little hand stopped him.

"Sorry I asked. Let's get back to your baby. I was about to pass out some advice. Before you decide anything definite, just remember that emotions are fickle. Sometimes a man wants a sweet, demure bit of fluff, and other times he wants a girl a little—ah—bolder. You'd better proceed with caution."

Rudy saw no difficulties. "I shall form her into the most wonderful wife a man ever had," he insisted.

If Mr. Blodgett was dubious, he did not show it. "Well, goody for you! What are you going to call her?"

There was no hesitation. "I think Eve would be appropriate. Don't you?"

"By all means. Why be original when you can be appropriate?"

Rudy put his hand on the girl's arm and spoke to her. "Don't be afraid."

She looked at him with wide,

innocent eyes. "Beautiful?"

Mr. Blodgett decided it was time to leave.

He dropped in for a visit a month later.

"How's everything in the Garden of Eden?" he inquired.

Rudy came to meet him, grinning. "Just fine. My crops are starting to come up."

"Where's the bride?"

"Studying her lessons. I have her on a rigorous routine." He consulted his watch. "She has a half-hour to go."

"She catch on fast?"

"Very fast. I have no complaints."

"What does she do after she finishes studying?"

"We work in the field for a while, and then we get something done on the house." He pointed to a cleared space beside the lake.

"I can see you have no intention of spoiling her," Mr. Blodgett said.

Rudy's eyes glowed. "Definitely not. She will be the perfect wife!"

"Glad to hear it. I just dropped by to see if the merchandise was satisfactory."

"A hundred per cent." Rudy hesitated for a second. "I guess I owe you an apology."

"For saying I wasn't so? Forget it. All is forgiven. I'll be around from time to time, to watch the growth of this Utopia."

With a wave of his hand, Mr.

Blodgett disappeared among the trees.

EVE was very intelligent. At six months, she knew many words.

"Pretty house," she said distinctly.

"It's a cute shack," Mr. Blodgett agreed, "but strictly unnecessary in my book. What was the matter with the simple hut you were going to build?"

Rudy looked uncomfortable. "Well, that might have been all right for bachelor quarters, but a married couple needs more space."

Mr. Blodgett's eyebrows went up. "Because I'm a gentleman, I'll stifle the obvious remark. This is, beyond doubt, one slick shanty. You must have put in a lot of labor."

"You forget that Eve works right alongside me. She can do the work of any man."

"Work healthy," Eve pronounced.

"In your case, it must be," Mr. Blodgett admitted. "Roses in the cheeks, and so forth. I came to see if you were set for the winter."

"I didn't think there'd be much winter. We're ten degrees from the equator."

"You forget that this place is two miles above sea-level. The days aren't so bad, but the nights get real mean."

"Well, we have a fireplace. I

guess we can put in a store of wood."

"Then all you'll need is marsh-mallows."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Skip it. It didn't sound half as clever as I thought it would. How about wearing apparel?"

"I've managed to shoot three bears and I'm trying to tan their skins. I hope I'm successful."

"So do I. I certainly hope those bears shall not have died in vain."

"How about you?" Rudy countered. "I've ranged pretty far and I haven't seen any fairy houses yet."

"You won't, either. We have no need of shelters. If the temperature drops, we lessen the heat transmission of our skin. If a wind blows, we latch onto a tree."

"Like wood nymphs," Rudy commented.

"Sure. If we merged with the water, you could call us naiads. We're the *ne plus ultra* of adaptability."

Rudy shook his head. "You can adapt all you like. There's nothing more cozy than a roaring fire on a cold night."

Mr. Blodgett looked at Eve. "Well," he murmured, "one way or another you'll be warm this winter."

AT the end of a year, Eve, being very intelligent, knew a great many words.

"This heat is terrible," she complained.

"With a natural pool a hundred yards from your door, I can't see your squawk," Mr. Blodgett told her.

"I have my work to do," she returned stiffly.

"I see. No slackers here. Nor wind, nor rain, nor heat of sun . . ."

"I cannot abide a frivolous woman," Rudy declared flatly.

"So I notice. Not a scrap of frivolity around here. Not even in the corners."

"I scrubbed them this morning," she asserted.

"They look it," he hastened to reassure her. "I've never seen a cleaner house."

She smiled satisfaction and wiped her beautiful forehead. "This heat is terrible," she informed them again.

Rudy was proud. "She may complain about it, but she certainly doesn't let it stop her. She puts me to shame, the way she keeps going."

Mr. Blodgett frowned remembering. "You used to be pretty much nose-to-the-grindstone yourself."

"I think I have as much determination as any man," Rudy told him. "But I'm not in Eve's class. I have to admit that the lake is pretty tempting to me at times, but Eve will have none of it."

"Very commendable—most find-





able. You'll notice I always come visiting well stocked with superlatives. I need them when I call on two such superior people."

There was a double flush of pleasure. "That's very kind of you," said Rudy. "Are you staying for supper?"

"Supper is at six," Eve told him.

"At six exactly?"

Rudy suspected humor and became stiff. "I believe that meals should be at regular hours."

"I'm with you all the way," Mr. Blodgett was quick to agree. "It's just that I thought of a joke about supper at six."

"A joke?"

"Yes, but I forget how it goes. Just as well. I'm sure it's in poor taste."

"You'd enjoy eating with us," Rudy invited. "Eve is a fine cook."

"I'm sure of it."

"And there's a special satisfaction in eating something that you've grown yourself. The flavor is unique."

"I'll have to give you a blind-fold test sometime—which carrot tastes milder?"

Rudy laughed politely. "I think you're being evasive. Don't you fairies eat the same things we eat?"

Mr. Blodgett hesitated. "We eat some of the things you do, but only in very small quantities. Actually, we know very little about ourselves because, not being plagued with weaknesses, we never had any

need to study ourselves. But I rather imagine that we absorb a great deal of energy directly from the sun. After three or four days of rain, the fairies are a sad-looking bunch."

"Which is a long-winded way of saying that you won't stay."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"This heat is terrible," Eve said.

EVE was remarkably intelligent. At the end of two years, she knew entirely too many words.

"Why does she talk so much?"

Rudy complained.

"She's a woman," Mr. Blodgett reminded him.

"That's not my fault."

"Certainly not."

"And this cleanliness phobia."

"That is."

"Ridiculous! All I did was explain that one's quarters must be kept spotless. No reasonable being could misinterpret that."

Mr. Blodgett eyed him keenly. "I imagine you did more than make a simple statement. In fact, you probably delivered a lecture. You might even have declared that Cleanliness is Next to Godliness. I wouldn't put it past you."

Rudy squirmed. "I may have said a couple of similar things."

"It's entirely your fault."

"No! I never went that far. 'Wipe your feet!' 'Don't dirty that!' 'Put that back where you got it!' I'm afraid to go home any more."

"And if you don't go home, she worries."

"Of course! 'Where have you been? Did you have to stay so long? You never think of me here all alone. You don't care what happens to me!' And then she cries—I didn't teach her to cry."

"Instinctive weapon."

"And to think that I molded her exactly the way I wanted her!"

"And now," Mr. Blodgett remarked, "she's molding you."

Rudy reached a decision. "The time has come for me to assert myself. If I want to go hunting, why shouldn't I go hunting?"

"Why not, indeed?"

"She acts as if I were enjoying myself. There's a lot of work in hunting."

"Sheer drudgery," Mr. Blodgett agreed.

"And we can use fresh meat."

"Naturally. Nobody wants to eat yesterday's meat."

"I shall tell her that tomorrow I am going hunting."

"That's right. Put your foot down."

Rudy laid aside the crude hoe he had been wielding. "I shall tell her right now."

"I'll wait outside," Mr. Blodgett said cautiously.

Rudy pushed through the door belligerently, and Eve came pattering to meet him.

"What is it, dear?"

He faltered. The subject of hunt-

ing, if broached now, would be dealt with at length throughout the night. The whole night.

"I'm hungry," he said, evading the problem.

But he had stumbled unsuspectingly into another one.

"Supper is at six," she reminded him with an angelic smile.

He was uncomfortably aware of Mr. Blodgett's keen ears a few feet away. He had to make a stand.

"I want to eat now," he declared.

"You'll have to wait." She wasn't argumentative, just definite.

He seized her arms above the elbows. "Let's understand each other. *What I say goes around here!*"

She was puzzled and hurt. "Of course, dear."

"Well, I want my supper right now, so get moving."

She shook her head. "Six o'clock."

He was not too angry to realize that she was far too big to take over his knee, so he simply threw her on the bed, face down, and began to whale away. By the third whack, she had analyzed the surprising situation. Coming to her feet, she picked him up and threw him out of the house.

"Supper is at six," she told him.

Mr. Blodgett eyed the fallen hero. "She's a big girl," he said pensively.

Rudy made no reply. He climb-

ed to his feet and dusted himself off carefully. Then, with grim purpose, he began to thread his way through the woods.

MR. Blodgett skipped along beside him. "What's on the agenda, chum?"

"I will not stay where I'm not wanted."

"Where are you going to go?"

"Out." Rudy waved his arm. "Over the mountain."

"Like the bear," Mr. Blodgett observed.

"Perhaps—" Rudy's voice trembled a little—"she will miss me when I am gone."

"Don't worry about that," Mr. Blodgett said in a cheerful tone. "We'll replace you."

Rudy became indignant. "You mean you'd make a man for her?"

"Sorry, chum. No favorites in this league."

There was coolness after that and they walked on without speaking until the trees ended abruptly against a rocky cliff. Rudy stared up and up at the unbroken expanse.

"It looks a little tough to climb," he admitted.

"Worse on the other side," Mr. Blodgett assured him.

Rudy stared at his companion thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "if you and a couple of your friends took hold of me, I'd bet you could carry me up."

"Don't be insulting! That has all the earmarks of manual labor!"

"I only asked a favor."

Mr. Blodgett shuddered. "Don't. Let's never bring up that subject again."

Rudy surveyed the wall again. "I shall just have to climb it," he said manfully.

"It'll be dark before you really get going," Mr. Blodgett pointed out.

"That's true." Rudy looked worried. "And I left Eve unprotected."

"From what I saw, she's capable of taking care of herself. You should have ordered a little kitten of a girl who was good for nothing but cuddling."

"I'd despise such a female!" said Rudy.

"Certainly. But you'd do a lot of cuddling."

"Eve is a fine woman."

"Who says she isn't?"

"And," Rudy continued, as if daring denial, "she is perfectly correct."

"She *is*?"

"Of course! What right have I to break the rules?"

Mr. Blodgett nodded thoughtfully. "Now that you put it that way, I can see you've acted like a skunk."

"I've behaved like a two-year-old."

"And Eve *is* a two-year-old. And two and two are four. And

four rhymes with more. And that reminds me . . ."

"What?"

"Perhaps she has a reason for being unreasonable."

"A reason?"

"Women sometimes behave very oddly. Pickles and ice cream. Nonsense like that."

RUDY was very dense. "What are you talking about?"

Mr. Blodgett looked at him sadly. "You don't know? It's believable. If ever there was a husband who wouldn't know, it's you."

"If you persist in talking in riddles . . ."

Mr. Blodgett's hand went up. "Be patient. I'm dusting off my routine about the patter of little feet."

Rudy's eyes grew wide. "You mean . . ."

"I mean," Mr. Blodgett told him. "Now your eyes light with ecstasy, and your body stiffens with surprise, and your face wears a stupid expression."

"But why didn't she tell me?"

"I can think of two reasons. First, you didn't ask her, so she didn't think you were interested. Second, she doesn't know herself." The fairy exhibited sudden delight. "Is *she* in for a surprise!"

Rudy suddenly broke into a run. "I must get home!" he shouted.

"But what about your trip?"

Rudy turned to glare without

halting. "Do you think I'd desert my wife at the time when she needs me most?"

"You should have tilted your head a bit more and placed your hand over your heart," Mr. Blodgett objected. "But, aside from that, it was very effective."

As they raced through the forest, the fairy was forced to skip madly to keep up with the pace.

"I assure you," he puffed, "you will be in plenty of time."

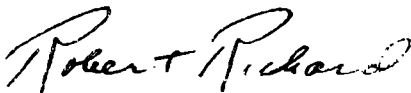
"My son!" Rudy's shout was a

proud vibrato. "I shall raise my son to be the finest man that ever lived!"

Mr. Blodgett stopped abruptly and stared after him in dismay. Rudy sped on to the house.

"I'm home, darling!" he called as he reached the door.

"Don't forget to wipe your feet," she said.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert Richard". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the name.