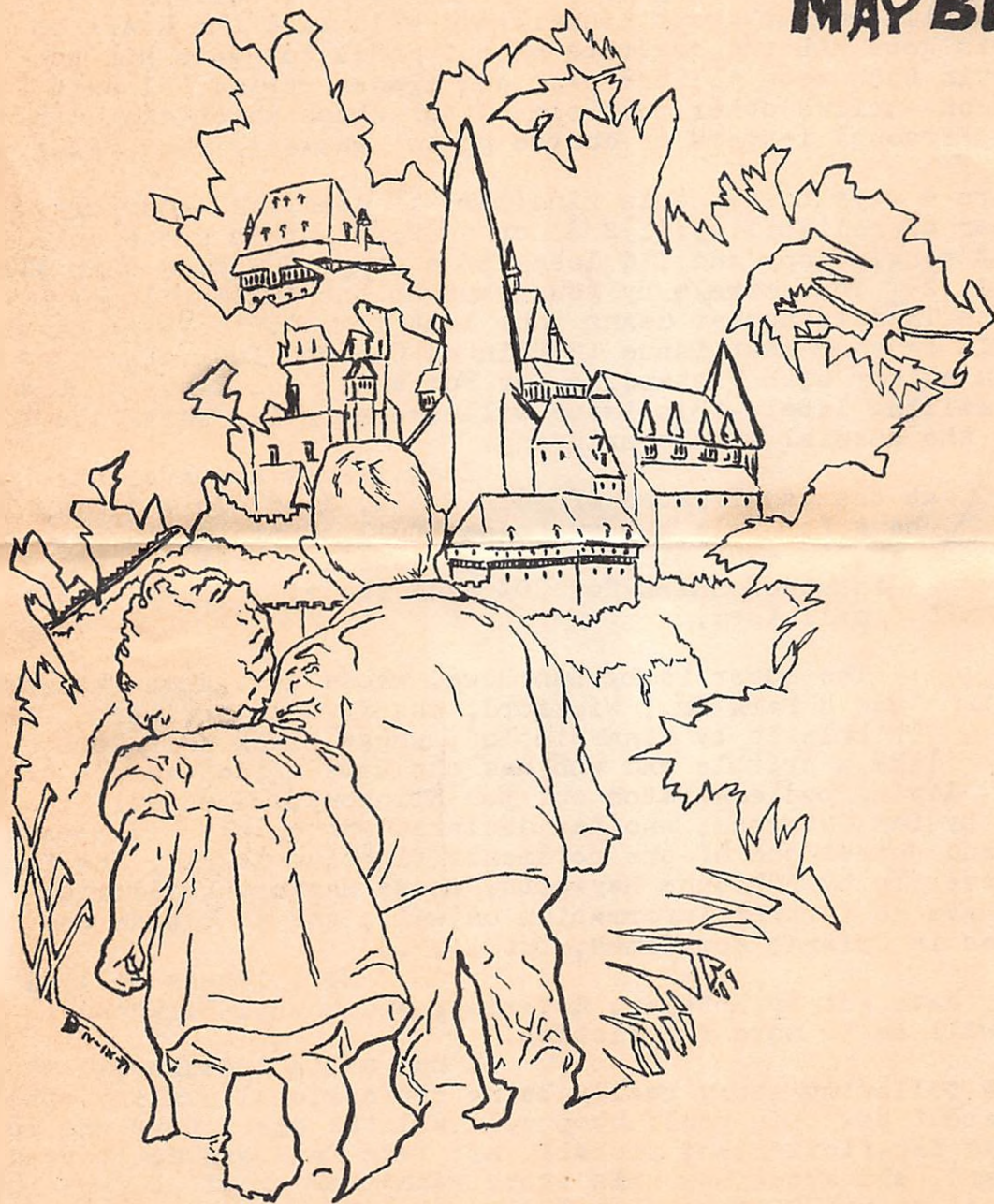


SPECIAL

LAST

FAN FICTION
ISSUE

MAYBE #17



MAYBE
Worlds of Fandom

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This is issue 17, I say bimonthly but average 7 issues per year. . . the next issue will be out about 15April and will mark the start of the Hank Davis gets ALL the contribs except Janet Fox gets ALL the LoCs and Irvin Koch gets all the cash and trades regime. I pass the trades on--unlike other multiple editor zines which demand two for one. Personal letters of course go to whomever you please.

There are 4 ways to get this zine (BABY is dead) and they are, in order of reliability: (1) 2/\$1 or 6/\$2.50 --this issue only is 75¢ single copy and I'd lose 25¢ a copy if I sold them all even! (2) T in a circle by your name on the mailing label means Trade (a number means your last issue or nothing means THIS is your last issue) (3) Printed Contrib/LoC (4) Whim of an editor with F standing for Fox and D for Davis on the mailing label--this issue will see very few whims due to the special offset printing.

Back issues are available at the usual rates of #6, 10, 12, & 16. In addition I have for sale two suitcases full of pbs and prozines at 30¢ each plus postage. I sell copies (not this issue) of MAYBE for 30¢ each too if I don't have to mail them.

The cover is by Dan Rowe, whose last known address was 8 Park Dr., Wickford, Essex, Great Britain. The Tribble is by Nina Nicolof, whose black hair looks like a tribble and who has the same effect as one on living bodies--watch out you Klingons. The Devil is by Dan Osterman, who has declared war on the old creature and joined one of the movements fighting it/him. The back cover is by Adrienne Hayworth, whose Hayworth galleries I have no further information on (well, she is blonde and lives in Orlando sometimes, but . . .).

Next issues will, I think, have art by Rotsler, Osterman, and Sheryl Birkhead. There will be NO more fan fiction.

I had a big lecture all set about the following story really being professional quality with no home, about how this would stop cold all the characters who refuse to read fan-fiction (and probably are fake fans who don't read pro SF either), and about how this story wasn't SF or about fans but was the kind of story FOR fans, but I'll just let you read it instead.

--Irvin

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S N O W C A S T L E

By: MICHAEL STORSLEE /P.O. Box 117/ /Sunnyside/ WA 98944

I, JOHN DIENER, SOON TO BE KNOWN IN SOME LEGENDS AS JOHN OF THE CASTLE AND IN others as John the Barbarian went out to play in the snow.

If anyone had asked me why I was going out to play, I might have had all sorts of answers, all of them true to some extent. But the full truth - it is hard to say. Besides, who asks why a boy goes out to play in the snow? Just because a guy is twenty-four; that's not so old.

I stood on the front step at nine A.M. regarding the day. Sky hazy but bright, air fresh and cool, snow new, white, four inches deep. I bent over and grabbed an experimental mitten-full. It was dense and sticky, not much good for sledding maybe, but terrific for snowballs, snowmen, and - snow forts.

I remembered Fort Victory, that proud stronghold whose forbidding walls had dominated not only my own back yard, but also half of the neighbor's. What a defeat I had handed Big Wayne and his little brother, Fat Joey, from behind Victory's shoulder-high, foot-thick bulwarks when I reduced their Fort Defiance to rubble and drove them off with my hard thrown missiles. If I had built a Fort Victory at only half my present age and with nothing like my present strength and experience, what kind of super citadel could I create now?

It was funny how excited I suddenly became over the whole idea. I suppose it was because it had been so long since I had made anything - the joy of creation, even if it is just a couple of boards nailed together. And snow is a much more satisfying medium than wood or stone or plastic. You can plan the project as you go along, and if you do not like the way it looks you can easily take it apart and rearrange it. Besides, you can feel the snow when you work it. You roll huge hunks of it around and strain to lift big balls of it up to set them gently on thick walls with a satisfying sound, and you pack sticky wads of it into the crevices between the blocks to keep the wall strong and snowball proof.

The first decision a builder must make, and perhaps the most important one, is location. One must consider both the military aspects of the terrain and also the problem of supply. The fort should have the advantage of high ground and the site should have plenty of construction material. A single glance at my own yard was enough to rule it out at once. The new house is nice and all, but the yard is not nearly big enough for the job I had in mind. Fortunately, it is less than a block from our doorstep to a public park.

Scrunch, Scrunch went my dirty old boots in the new snow. Puff came the white clouds of breath out of my mouth, like cannon fire from a Pirate ship. We have an excellent park in our neighborhood. There are plenty of little hills for charging over or rolling down. Plenty of little hills and one big one at the far end. The perfect site for a fortification.

I wished I could build a real castle up there with walls a hundred feet long and twenty feet high - something that would cover the whole top of the hill and defend the slopes in every direction. But a structure like that, even if made of snow, is a task for giants and not for mortal men. I suppose I could build it in a year or so, but our snow never lasts longer than a couple of months. Even my lately-lauded prowess would have to settle for something a bit less spectacular, something about the size of the inner keep of my dream fortress. Yes, a single tower right on top of the hill - foursquare and tall and strong. For this is the second reality a builder must face: the dream must be cut back until reality can cover it.

My rough planning thus completed, the work could begin at once. I packed snow into a firm ball the size of a cantaloupe and began to roll it. Beautiful. I had never seen such sticky snow. The finished ball should be about two feet in diameter, still small enough to be carried. One should never roll up snowballs right where

he plans to build the fort, because all of the snow in the immediate construction area will be needed to cement the building-balls together into the walls.

When my first ball was finished, I carried it across the untouched snow to the center of the hilltop. It seemed rather a shame to mar that perfect surface, but one cannot expect to build civilization's monuments without spoiling some of nature's.

After the first comes the second, and then the third and the fourth. Looking at those four small balls, I felt discouraged. All that work and I had barely begun. Perhaps I would have to settle for something less than a tower ten feet high - maybe a square wall four feet high. But by the time I added a fifth ball to finish the front wall and a sixth to begin one of the sides, I had fallen into the rhythm of the work and no longer worried about how the project would turn out. "I'll work until I'm tired and see what I've got," was my last thought on the subject before my mind wandered to more interesting daydreams.

The next thing I knew, the whole first layer was complete - five balls across the front, five down each side (counting the corner balls twice), and four in the back (center ball left out for a doorway). I did not waste time admiring my handiwork, however, for the more interesting work was about to begin. It is only when you begin working on the second layer that your creation starts to rise off the ground and look like more than just a floor plan. For the first time, you build something, making sure that each ball is set squarely on the one beneath, packing snow firmly into the juncture to weld the two solidly together.

Time seemed to go even faster now that the arduous work of rolling and carrying snowballs was alternated with the more interesting duties of construction. In no time, the second layer was complete, and the third was half done. The trivial was rapidly becoming the monumental.

It was about this time that I saw the boy coming up the hill. He was walking quite slowly; I suppose hesitantly is the word. He had not known there was such a big kid in his neighborhood, and he was not sure what sort of a welcome to expect. And I was not sure what sort of welcome I would give him. I am not fond of children; they are as selfish as adults and less adept at concealing it. Naturally, I have fond memories of my own childhood, but the fact that I enjoyed being a super-ego does not imply that I like to have them around me.

But there he was and there was nothing to be done for it. "Hi," I said noncommittally.

"Hello," he answered.

There followed a brief pause during which we carefully looked each other over. I saw a healthy kid, twelve or thirteen years old. I remember he had brown hair (some of it had been pushed down across his forehead by his cap) and blue eyes. He seemed to be a well behaved kid, and reasonably adult for his age. I do not know what he made of me, but I could see that he was impressed by my tower.

"Boy, that's some fort!"

"Yeh," I replied, my mind made up. "Do you want to help me with it?"

"Okay," was his answer, but the grin that accompanied the word proclaimed his delight more eloquently than any rhetoric.

I returned at once to work, and he pitched in. I was glad to see that he did not insist on working right at my elbow, getting in my way and using up my snow. Instead he picked his own area and worked industriously. I kept an eye on him for the first few minutes to make sure he did not spoil my project with shoddy materials or clumsy workmanship, but there was no need to worry. His snowballs were all about the right size, and he placed and packed them on the walls as well as I could have. It was not long before I was tending to my own part of the job and letting him take care of his half, and it was not much longer until we had finished the fourth tier.

By now the walls were six feet high, and we were both smiling at the magnificence of the structure.

"I figure to add three or four more layers to it," I said, divulging the wild extent of my plans. "It will be more of a tower than a fort."

"Neat!" he exclaimed, caught up by the grandeur of the idea. "But we'll need

some steps or something inside if we're going to be able to see out. I won't even be able to help build the next layer unless I get something to stand on."

"Okay, we'll go to work on the inside and build up a shooting platform," I said. "It'll only have to be three balls long to cover the front wall, and two balls more for each side will take care of both sides and the back too. We'll make them two balls high for now and add more later as we need it."

I tend to be a loner, and it was hard to get over how much faster the job went when two pairs of hands were working at it. I would lug a snowball up the hill to discover with surprise that while I had been away, someone had added a ball to the pile. It was as if the tower were building itself. After awhile I began to depend on it.

The interior work was finished, and we were starting the fifth tier when the next visitor arrived. This time it was a girl. She must have been about the same age as the "kid," but when you looked at him all you could see was the boy - when you looked at her you could see the woman to be. She had that stunning combination of black, black hair and white, white skin that one reads about much more often than one sees, and when you noticed those dark eyes studying you, every fair haired girl in your memory seemed a bit washed-out by comparison.

I speak with such enthusiasm only to give beauty its due. For myself, I viewed her with the disinterested appreciation that any connoisseur of beauty might have shown. I am no cradle robber, and she was just a child for all her promise. Besides, I generally prefer blondes.

She marched up the hill with all of the brashness which beauty shows in the face of man and beast until it learns better. No, it was more than that - she marched up the hill with all the confidence of a kid who knows she can fight as well, throw snow as far, and, if necessary, run as fast as any boy in the neighborhood. I smiled benignly down from the Olympian height of twenty-four years of age and bitter experience and wondered how long she would continue to fight fairly once she learned the proper use of the resistless weapons nature had placed in her dainty hands.

She assumed a challenging stance in front of the tower, her feet planted wide apart. She did not quite put her hands on her hips as she looked up at the two of us vainly trying to ensconce ourselves behind massive walls and masculine dignity, but I expected to be a witness to this final audacity at any moment.

She lanced my companion with her gaze and: "Who's your friend, Steve?" she inquired bluntly.

So his name was Steve. For the first time, I became aware of the fact that the kid and I had not yet gotten around to exchanging names.

"I'm John. Glad to meet you," I said to Steve, holding out my mittened hand.

We shook hands heartily, smiling like idiots. "Glad to meet you," he affirmed.

By the time we got our attention back to our guest, her fists were on her hips. "This is John, Kathy," said Steve apologetically. "John, that's Kathy," he added, glossing over a difficult social situation with diplomatic aplomb.

She threw an Appraising Glance in my direction, and I dropped a Superior Smile on her to even up the score.

"Whose fort is this?" was her next question. Female practicality.

"It's his . . . John's," said Steve, nodding in my direction.

"No, it belongs to both of us: we built it together," I said. I would not have any use for the thing once it was finished; might as well give it to someone who thought he had. And Steve was a good kid.

"Need some help?" This time the question was aimed at me.

"We'd be honored," I replied in my most courtly manner. A quick glance at Steve confirmed my guess that he would be honored - and pleased.

Work resumed. Again, I kept a covert eye on my new partner, although I really dreaded the thought of trying to tell her how to do anything - I got the distinct impression that advice was not solicited. However, once again my worries were unfounded.

Steve and Kathy worked together. I saw him telling her the general plan, and although she strove to be unimpressed I could see that she was as excited about the thing as he was. As I was, for that matter. They both seemed rather shy of me. It was only natural, I suppose, since we were strangers and there was the generation gap and all. Still, I was beginning to feel like an outcast. When just Steve and I were working, it was two independent people; nothing wrong with that. But now it was Steve and Kathy. . . and I. It was society on one side and a crusty old hermit on the other.

I came trudging up the hill with a snowball in my arms and found the two of them talking by the tower. Judging by the occasional pointing of fingers and sweeping of arms, they were discussing the terrain around the fort.

When I reached them, Kathy looked at me and said, "You know, we aren't getting much advantage out of being on top of this hill. The whole hilltop is flat, and by the time anyone gets within snowball range of the tower, they are already up the slope and can attack us from this level ground."

I had to admit it. The same thoughts had been in my mind from the beginning. So, I told them both about the walls a hundred feet long and twenty feet high and the army that would be needed to man them before it would be possible to really take advantage of the hill slopes. Soon, I was the one who was jabbing my finger at imagined strong points and weak points, sweeping the air with grand gestures to describe my dream fort, of which our tower should have been the inner keep - the refuge from which the survivors would put up a last defense after the walls had fallen. By then, all three of us could see the dream more clearly than the bare hilltop before us.

Steve said positively, "But a fort like that could never fall." "If it were properly defended, it would be hard to take," I admitted, "But it would take a lot of men to defend it."

"Well, even if one set of owners were kicked out, the fort would still be there," Steve said. "The attackers from one battle would be the defenders of the next, that's all."

"No," I said. "In the end the barbarians show up and destroy everything - it always happens eventually. The best you can hope for is a glorious end: gallant defenders swept away by a frenzied attack. The Fort can't survive for long, but its legend can."

He did not look convinced, but I felt sure I was right. The world of adults is destructive enough, but the world of children is a thousand times worse. Kids love to wreck things, and never a snow fort was built that was not kicked to pieces by some red eyed little fiend.

Kathy looked mystified by the whole conversation. I could see that only possession was important to her. If it were your fort you held it as long as you could, but if someone else won it, then what difference did it make whether they built it up or knocked it down? The fort as a property was important to her; the fort as a fort or as a legend was meaningless.

The tower was soon finished. Eight tiers high (twelve or thirteen feet) with the inside built up to about eight feet. We had even added an arch over the doorway in the back and an extra ball atop each corner for a medieval effect. It was nothing less than a marvel. The only trouble was - it was finished. We stood inside it for awhile surveying the countryside, then we stood in front of it admiring its massive beauty, and finally we climbed back to the top and just sat.

After a time Steve said slowly, "You know that super-fort of yours?"

I said "Yeh," and he went on, "It would be impossible to build, of course,

but why don't we build the main gate of it, just for fun? We could put it up down the hill here, right where it would be in the real fort."

I stood and looked down where he was pointing. Kathy stood up and looked too. I imagined the gate - not an arch but a big rectangle. We could set up two big pillars, say fifteen or maybe twenty feet apart, lay a bridge of boards on top of them, and cover the boards with a couple layers of snowballs. Well, why not?

"That's not a bad idea," I said to Steve. "Let's go eat lunch now. I'll meet you back here afterwards, and we'll do it."

I turned to look at Kathy. "I'll be back too," she said.

AFTER A FAST LUNCH, I HURRIED OUT TO THE GARAGE WHERE WE HAVE A LOT OF LUMBER saved up in case anyone in the family gets ambitious enough to build something. I pulled three beautiful pieces of 2x4 out of the pile, each eighteen or nineteen feet long. I stacked them up and then picked up one end of the stack, tucked it under my arm, and strolled to the park letting the other end drag along behind me.

When I got to the top of the hill, I found Steve and Kathy waiting for me. Steve and Kathy and eight or ten other kids ranging in age from that twelve or thirteen year old group down to one little girl who could not have been more than three. A couple of them were friends whom Steve had brought along to give us a hand, and the rest were strays who had been out playing or wandering or whatever kids do when they saw the tower and came to marvel. Great, I would put them all to work.

Steve and I laid the boards out on the snow, and I showed him where we would erect the gateposts. Then I told the crowd what we were up to and said that anyone could help who wanted to. They all wanted to.

I intended each gate post to be a square pillar with four snowballs in each layer. That makes for a pretty massive post, but they would have to be massive to support the enormous weight of the two layers of snowballs that I planned to put on the 2x4's.

From the first, I found that my efforts would have to be devoted entirely to supervision. These new kids could not seem to understand the idea of uniform sized balls. Each artist had his own idea of the proper size for a building block, and I was kept busy trying to stack them up evenly - pruning down the big ones and beefing up the ones that were too small. I worked on the right post and told Steve and Kathy to organise the left one.

Our workers were enthusiastic to say the least. Before long they got way ahead of me, and extra snowballs were piled all around. This was all to the good, for I needed something to stand on as my pillar quickly grew to the nine foot mark that I had set for it. Steve and Kathy were a little behind me (they were not so tall as I and had to spend more time building scaffolding as their pillar grew above their reach). I went over to give them a hand, and in no time, Steve and I were bridging the gap between our pillars with the first 2x4.

Kathy stood down the hill to tell us when the board was level. Then we positioned the other two boards - eight or ten inches on either side of our first 2x4. These latter boards were set on top of the top balls of the posts, while the first one was grounded in the cleft between, thus forming a rough cradle or trough to hold the gate's crown of snow.

Once we had our framework set up, the rest was easy. We took two of the sleds and used snowballs to build them up into platforms. Steve would get a snowball, climb to the top of his platform, and place it in the 2x4 cradle. When he got off the platform to pick up another ball, Kathy would drag the sled forward a foot or two so that he could place the next one. I followed along with my sled and stacked a snowball on top of each of his, so that by the time we had traveled from the left post to the right, the gate was completed, and two tiers of snowballs (sagging slightly in the middle) hung suspended in mid-air between the gate posts. An architectural

triumph that was without equal in my experience.

Scattered cheering broke out among the labor force. By now, we must have had twenty kids in service, and they had not been wasting time - we had enough snowballs stockpiled on the hillside to build another gateway.

I looked at Steve, Steve looked at Kathy, and Kathy looked at me. "Well," I said, "We might as well start working on the wall. I'll start at the right gate post and you two start at the left. We'll keep building the wall around the hilltop in both directions until we run out of workers, snow, or daylight."

"Or until we meet at the back of the hill," said Steve.

"You're dreaming," I told him flatly. "The gate was easy because it is hollow, just a frame around an open space. Can you imagine how much snow it is going to take to build a wall eight or nine layers high and gods know how many feet long? No, it's going to be even worse than that. We'll have to build a shooting platform, too; which means the whole wall will be two balls thick up to the fifth or sixth layer."

But Steve just gave me a fat grin and said, "Well, I don't know about your half of the wall, but our half is going to be built halfway around this hill before dark." He turned to Kathy. "Right?"

"Right!" was her definite reply, and with easy laughter they turned their backs on my pessimism and went off to work their half of the miracle.

"Oh, boy," I muttered, "Kids!" And with much head shaking and other theatrical evidences of pitying amusement, I retired to my half of the project. And now it looked as if there were nearly twenty-five kids rolling up snowballs in the park.

I soon gave up my dream of uniform sized balls. I could not put every ball in place myself so I just let each man (each boy or girl, that is) place his own snowballs where he thought fit. I was busy enough as it was; trying to be at the head of the growing wall to make sure that it went in the right direction and at the same time at the tail to see that the outer wall and the shooting platform were of reasonably consistent height. So, the wall had a rather rough-hewn appearance, big balls and little balls, fat ones and flat ones all jumbled together. But it was strong, and it was high.

I guess I will never know where all those kids came from. I am sure we do not have that many in our neighborhood. I suppose when someone got tired of working he would walk around and tell all his friends about what was going on. Or maybe he would use the telephone. Or maybe it was that strange telepathy that children often seem to have, that sixth sense that makes them appear in droves whenever anything interesting is happening. All I know is that we had twenty-five, and suddenly thirty-five, and before long, fifty - and eventually we must have had over a hundred of them slaving away.

It was like watching the building of the pyramids to stand atop the growing wall, and look out over the park teeming with workers. Once the park had been a beautiful field of smooth, peaceful white; but now it looked like a battlefield - the snow all torn and ripped, gouged up by eager hands and trampled down by hurrying feet. And above this scene of busy destruction rose the walls of the Fort. Too roughhewn and raw looking to be beautiful; too proud and mighty to be ugly.

Gradually the workers spread out, forced further and further from the wall in search of untouched snow. Sleds were commandeered to drag loads of snowballs across the park and up the hill. Strange looking balls from far flung quarries were appearing in the walls. That one covered with brown leaves came from under the stand of trees across the park, that dark one must be from the dusty baseball diamond, and this one speckled with gravel was obviously rolled up on the edge of the street.

And how the wall grew! The hours passed, the crowd of workers swelled larger, and that magnificent wall crawled steadily around the curve of the hill like a giant serpent with a head the size of a single snowball and a body twelve feet high.

Late in the afternoon when we came building around the back of the hill and saw

the other party building their wall toward us, the front of the serpent stretched out to incredible thinness - a long line of single balls that reached out like a straining arm to touch that other arm reaching toward us. I met Kathy where the two lines came together - almost came together, for I had them stop about three feet apart to leave room for a back gate. Both of us were grinning like mad when she said, "I told you we'd make it."

"We haven't made it yet," I said. But I was only kidding her. The main bodies of the wall were rushing toward each other like a pair of locomotives, and it was obvious that the fort would be whole within an hour.

AT 5:30 P.M., STEVE AND KATHY AND I COMPLETED OUR INSPECTION TOUR OF THE WALL. All the way around the hill we walked on a shooting platform eight feet high and looked over a twelve foot wall that effectively guarded the whole top of the hill. The child army was still at work: adding an arch to the back gate, numerous internal stairways up to the inner platform, and some corner and gate towers to the wall, but these were just extras - the real job was finished. The three of us went back to our tower, and as darkness closed in we surveyed the dream made real that surrounded us.

To Kathy it was our fort, our idea that we had realized using snow and slave labor as our raw materials. To Steve it was the fort, the biggest thing he had ever been a part of. To me it was the seed of a myth. This monster fort, big as it was, would grow larger every time the story was told - vague rumors of it would reach half the kids in the state this winter, and the kids I could see working here would never see another snow fort in their lives without remembering this one and telling the story. The Legend would pass from generation to generation.

"Thanks for the help," I said to Steve and Kathy. "See you around."

"Goodnight, John," said Kathy. "Yeh, see you, John," said Steve.

I walked down the hill and, I thought at the time, out of the realm of legend.

IT WAS NEARLY A WEEK LATER WHEN THE DEPUTATION ARRIVED AT MY HOUSE.

I had walked over to the park a couple of times to see the Fort, but I had not stopped to play with the kids. No more real work had been done on it - the vast bulk of the thing discouraged puny individuals from trying to make additions, and it was so far from the Fort to fresh, useable snow that it would have been twice as hard to get the snowballs to the site as it was to make the snowballs in the first place. In short, too much trouble.

But if the Fort had not grown it also had not decayed to any appreciable extent. Partially, it was a matter of size again - how much damage could any one person do to something that big? Destruction is only enjoyable in short bursts; after that it is just hard work. Yet, it was more than that. The kids stood in awe of the Fort and were proud of it. So it endured, and minor damage was repaired by pious hands. It was becoming a shrine.

And now the delegation. I opened the front door and found Kathy with three boys and another girl on my doorstep. They were all about Kathy's age, and I recognized most of them as being members in good standing of our Fort-building party.

"They've taken over the Fort," announced Kathy. "About fifty boys from the junior high school, seventh and eighth graders mostly. They just walked in and threw everybody else out. A couple of the guys who helped us build it threw some snow, but they got slaughtered and tossed out anyhow.

She was looking at me expectantly. She plainly considered this to be a clear case of good against evil, and it was obvious that I was supposed to play Saint George and slay the dragon. I could see that she had no doubt about my ability to drive out the heathens if only I would undertake the crusade.

Well, as I said once before, why the hell not?

I want to look the situation over."

"Okay. You all stay here for a minute;

"I'm coming along," said Kathy in a tone that brooked no argument, and I saw that although I might be allowed to command the field maneuvers, Kathy intended to sit at the head of the conference table whenever grand strategy decisions had to be made. Rash male heroism is fine in its place, but hard-headed feminine logic was going to decide exactly where that place would be.

As Kathy and I strode toward the park, I reviewed the facts of juvenile life. Junior high school is the highest sanctum of childhood. The kids in junior high school are the kings and princes of their neighborhoods; their rule is absolute because they are the biggest and most experienced people who want the job. Somewhere in seventh, eighth, or ninth grades they lose interest; they begin to occupy themselves with the teenage goals, and the goals of childhood are put aside. As they seek to break into a new sphere they leave behind the power they held in the old, and this power is snapped up by the next "generation" of junior high students.

Usually, the power of these super children is vitiated by their rivalries, and only a grand objective like the mastery of the Fort could have made them put aside their jealousies and undertake a group effort. If a band of these heroes had taken the Fort, marching against them with an army of fifth and sixth graders would be like leading mortals against the lightning throwing gods in Asgard.

I was going to need all the allies I could find.

"Do you know where Steve is?" I asked Kathy as we entered the park.

"Yeh, he's inside the Fort with those other creeps," she said in a voice tight with outrage and contempt. "He joined them when he saw that they were going to take over. He tried to get me to go along too, but I wouldn't have anything to do with those fat bullies!"

I was surprised at the news and more surprised at the venom in her voice. Even on brief acquaintance, Steve did not seem the type who would switch over to the winning side when things got rough.

"Maybe some of those kids were his friends,"

I suggested.

"We were his friends," she spat at me, dark eyes darker with anger. Again I was surprised - I didn't know she cared.

By now I could see the Fort and the changes. The main gates, which had been wide open the last time I had seen it, now had a four foot high barricade of snowballs blocking all but a narrow entrance on the right side. The wall was lined with defenders.

Kathy and I stopped at the base of the hill and stood looking up at the snow castle that was its crown. And I felt temptation - the lust for power that causes some men to be politicians and some to be student radicals and some never to be men at all, but only big children who can never stop playing with the kids they know they can control. For if these junior high kids were demigods in the world of children, then I was a full god to be feared and propitiated. I could sense their uncertainty as they silently crowded the front walls to see whether this giant had come as friend or as foe.

Just for a second I thought of joining them. I could be King, they would let me, and my army would hold my castle against the world. But then I remembered that this childhood world was only a dream, a landscape populated by phantoms who would soon disappear into other worlds "higher" and more "real." I remembered that I was just a transient here, a dreamer who would stay just a few hours, then re-awaken to a higher reality. I remembered that the Fort itself, apparently so solid and enduring, was a shadow fort that would soon evanesce at the touch of the sun.

So I saw that the things of that world were an illusion, and rejected the path of greed for the path of glory and heroism. But in my soul I knew that I was a servant of greed rather than glory, and I was shamed.

The voice of the Hero rang out against hostile walls. "Send Steven out; I want to parley!"

I saw a conference huddle form by the narrow entranceway to the main gate, and a few seconds later, Steve's familiar bundled figure detached itself from the group and came walking steadily down the hill. I glanced at Kathy to see how she was taking it. She had made no comments or sounds of surprise when I had called Steve out, and now she was gazing icily up at the walls, obviously determined to ignore Steve as she would any other form of noxious low life.

By this time I could see Steve's face. It was not the apologetic face of a shamed traitor or the haughty face of a brazen one, but the troubled face of a man who has made a difficult decision and is wondering if he has chosen correctly.

"Hi, John, I'm glad you came," he started right in. "We want you to join us. Really, it's better this way - the little kids were letting the walls get run down, they weren't organized. I know you don't want any fighting - we don't want the Fort damaged."

I looked up at the majestic walls for a few seconds, glanced over at Kathy again and saw that she was still ignoring us, and then turned to Steve. "Listen, Steve, the Fort has to fall sometime. Wouldn't it be better for it to go in a glorious battle? If I do chase these kids out they will walk right back in the minute I go home for lunch. I can't hold the Fort, so I'm going to raze it. Join me. You helped me build it; no one has more right to help destroy it."

I do not often get a chance to hear people gasp, but when I said I was going to raze the Fort I heard Steve and Kathy do it in unison. They were both looking at me now, and Steve's face was no longer troubled but determined. He was sure of his choice.

"You said the barbarians would come to destroy the Fort some day," he said, looking straight into my face, "But you didn't tell me that you would lead them yourself." He held my eyes a long, silent minute, and then he turned away and began to walk slowly up the hill. He had not looked at Kathy.

I could not have done it better myself. But then, it was only a fantasy to me - it was reality to him. And to Kathy. I turned to her and found her watching Steve's march up the hill. After a second, she looked at me.

"You can still join him," I said.

She said slowly, "But you are going to win."

I said nothing.

She looked up the hill where Steve had reached the gate and was being eagerly questioned - the Fort would be well manned and prepared by the time my army reached it. Then she turned away and began to walk back toward my house. "Let's go," she said.

Three quarters of an hour later I was inspecting my army. I had scattered the delegation to gather up as many people as possible with sleds and wagons (to carry ammunition, since there was not much snow left near the Fort), garbage can lids (for shields), and whatever else they thought might be useful in a seige. The whole mass was to assemble in a vacant lot two blocks from the park.

I was carrying my staff of office - a big, strong stick from our lumber pile that I thought would be useful in tearing down the Fort once we took it. There were about seventy-five kids, mostly boys from third to sixth grade. They looked eager for a massacre followed by some looting and destruction - a barbarian army to warm the coldest heart.

One kid stood out - which is understandable since he stood almost two feet taller than the rest of the crowd and weighed an obese two hundred pounds. A high school kid. He had the kind of face that said he enjoyed beating up smaller people and kicking down snow forts. I could see Kathy near the sleds, and the expression on her face whenever she looked at him confirmed my judgment. Oh well, barbarian chiefs cannot afford to be squeamish. I beckoned both Kathy and King Kong over for a council of war.

"This is Fig," said Kathy with a casual gesture of introduction.

I hesitated for a second, expecting "Pig" to make some sort of protest over this sobriquet, but he slouched calmly. Indeed, he seemed to exude a sluggish pride in his name. "Good," I said, shaking the gloved trotter he extended, "We need all the help we can get."

"I think our best tactic is to keep everyone together, march over to the Fort, and then charge the main gate," I said.

Kathy had a better idea. "Wouldn't it be smarter to split up, march half of our people up to the main gate to draw attention while the other half sneaked into the park from another direction and hit the Fort from behind?"

"Good thinking," I said, "ordinarily. But we're taking fourth and fifth graders up against junior high kids - if we don't keep them all in a group, I'm afraid they'll run. We've got to keep them psyched up."

Kathy nodded, accepting this. Pig was not paying attention. He was too busy watching the army watching him. I was contemptuous; but was I any better?

I took a deep breath and said loudly, "All right, let's move out." It sounded pretty good - confident.

It was one of those dead-quiet winter days. No wind, no birds, the air muffling all sound like thick cotton. For some reason, no one was saying anything, and the only noise was the sound of all those feet scrunching in the snow. There was nothing to see ahead but barren white with occasional punches and splotches of black. To my right marched Kathy and to my left Fig - Beauty and the Beast - and behind me that constant scrunching. I wanted to turn my head to see my army, feel my power; but out of the corner of my eye, I could see Fig doing it.

Out of the corner of my other eye, I could see that Kathy occasionally turned her head too. But she did not look back at the army for reassurance. She looked at me.

We were crossing the street into the park, and I could see the Fort on its hill. And the men in the Fort could see us, because they were all shouting out their defiance. I could feel shivers of excitement playing up my back, but I kept my face blank and my steps steady. The army followed me.

Quite a crowd of kids had gathered in front of the Fort, and now most of them came to join our army, swelling my force to over a hundred.

I had little time to savor my increased power, for the Enemy was coming out of the front gate to meet us on the field. I had not expected this. I had hoped that they would stay inside their walls and give my half-sized soldiers time to throw some snow and insults to work up their confidence before we came to a pitched battle. If they broke us on the open ground and got us running, the war would be over with the first battle. There were nearly fifty of them massed in front of the gate with about ten left on the walls to cover a retreat. They began to shout.

I turned to my men, trying to light my face with a confidence I did not feel. "This is just the lucky break we needed," I emoted. "Everyone keep marching forward and don't make a sound. When I give the word, charge them and yell as loud as you can. They'll run for the walls and we'll follow them right in! Come on."

Without waiting for their reaction, I turned back toward the Fort and began walking again. That reassuring scrunching followed.

Pig had taken off his mittens and was squeezing his snowballs down into rock hard ice balls. Good man! I could see that he was going to be worth a regiment of the little kids no matter what his morals or personal habits.

With redoubled shouting, the frightful fifty came for us.

I wanted to wait for a minute or two to show how cool headed I was - let them run at us until just the proper moment when I would give the signal

that would win the battle. Unfortunately, the proper moment was now; if I did not start a countermovement immediately, they would run right over us. With a hurriedly shouted "Now!" over my shoulder, I broke into a medium speed trot and into the most blood-thirsty yelling I could manage. After a second that loomed huge in embarrassment, my army followed suit as one man.

Screaming like students at a peace demonstration, the armies closed at terrible speed. We ran through snowball range and the first optimistic throws were launched into their high trajectories. Before they reached their targets, we were down to medium range and both sides exploded into massed violence. Everyone was running more slowly now. We stumbled to dead short range and then we were all standing still in that unbelievable barrage.

Usually, large groups fight at long range. If one group charges to medium range, the other falls back. But here were one hundred and fifty people standing damn near toe to toe and letting go with everything they had.

And half of the snowballs were coming straight at me! Pig and I were the prime targets; we were the closest and the biggest. Most of the enemy were ignoring the rest of the army and shooting at us. I was well protected in a long, heavy coat and a stocking cap pulled down over my ears, but I had already taken a hard thrown ice ball on the left kneecap and a soft ball in the middle of my forehead that had pretty well washed my face.

Behind me, I could feel my men firming up. As long as Pig and I were being creamed, they were getting off easy. The junior high kids could throw further, which was a big advantage in most fights, but at this range it did not make much difference. And we had two men throwing for every one of theirs. Soon, my boys had moved up to form a rough line even with the spot where Pig and Kathy and I had made our stand, and the pressure came off the three of us as the enemy realized that we were not the whole army after all. The little kids took up the strain and held fast, and the armies stood at dead range, chewing and blasting at each other.

When neither force broke, the Challenges began. In a Challenge, one hero steps a pace or two ahead of his line. If concentrated enemy fire drives him back again, he has lost face, but if he can hold his ground, he is joined by more and more people until the enemy line is forced back a step. In this way, one army will walk another army off the field. It is not as ignominious as a rout, but it is defeat none the less.

My men could not hold their challenges. As long as they had the protection of greater numbers, they were okay; but whenever one stepped out alone, he was beaten back. Looking down the line, I could see that the Enemy had six or seven challengers out. My people had not yet fallen back, but neither could they drive back those challengers. In another minute, the enemy challengers would double, and then their whole line would be up and we would be forced back: the beginning of the end.

There were two challengers immediately in front of me. For the first time, I saw that one of them was Steve and the other was a tall, vicious looking kid with orange hair and freckles. Steve was standing right next to the other kid - no, maybe half a step back.

It was time for me to meet my responsibility as a leader. I stepped forth in challenge. Immediately, Kathy and Pig stepped up beside me, and then a couple of the older kids. The pressure was back on us again. The enemy realized that if Pig and I could be driven back, it would be the end of the battle; no one else would step out. But as pressure went up on our little salient in the center, it fell off against the rest of our line. My whole army began to edge forward.

Orange hair must have been their leader, for when he saw the balance swinging against his side, he paid the price. He stepped forward again, trying to force us back. He could not have been more than eight or nine feet away. Both Pig and I let him have a couple of hard ones, but he took them and stood fast. Steve stepped up beside him and so did three others.

Then Pig dropped back a pace. It

was not his fault. He was wearing a short jacket with a small shirt under it, and every time he raised his arm to throw, he exposed bare belly skin. A good shot or a lucky one had filled his shirt and trousers with snow and ice. He made a sort of an "Ugh!" sound, and I turned to see what had happened just in time to see him get hit squarely on the ear with a smash that must have driven snow down to his eardrum. He dropped back a pace and I did not blame him. That hurts.

Now everything was storming around my head. I concentrated my fire at Orange and saw that Kathy was still throwing everything she could lay gloves on at Steve, who was still refusing to throw anything back at her. My fire was no longer very effective since I had to keep my left arm up in front of my face - there was too much flying at me for me to duck it all.

I could not keep it up. I was getting plastered. I looked like a snowman, I was sure. Snow was melting down my neck, and my face was burning with it. I either had to fall back or make a suicide charge.

I snarled "Grrr!" through clenched teeth and charged. (I wanted to scream "Haaa!" or "Aiii!" but I was afraid to open my mouth and unclench my teeth - someone would throw a snowball down my throat and that would be it.)

Orange Head was bending over to get some snow when I jumped at him. He never knew what hit him. I ground his face full of snow with an uppercut right and stiff-armed him off his feet with a left to his shoulder.

A kid standing two feet away whammed me on the side of the head with a hard flung ball, and I jammed my still snowy right hand into his face and knocked him down.

With screams of excitement, the center of my army blasted in after me. Steve met the first one hand to hand, threw him down, quickly washed his face with snow, and even crammed a little down the neck of his jacket.

I bent over to get a snowball and someone smacked me in the butt with a stinging piece of ice. I whirled around and caught him on the chin with my return shot. It exploded across his face and backed him up.

The enemy center broke. Steve held his ground for an instant, dealing out frozen destruction with both hands, but then he saw Kathy bearing down on him and ran for the Fort with the others. I would not have been such a gentleman.

When the center collapsed, both flanks began to give ground, but they did not break up in panic. They stayed together and fought delaying actions back toward the Fort. The Enemy left was being rolled up pretty well, but their right flank suddenly took root.

As I said, my army fought well in a mass. Now, however, it was scattered about from all the rapid movement, and isolated warriors on the right were being eaten alive by their larger enemies. We had the center running, and if we could stay on their backs we would be inside the Fort before they could do anything about it. But I could not leave an organized pack of the enemy free to run around behind my scattered troops. They would be wolves among sheep.

So I had to pass up our chance. I called off pursuit in the center and turned to hit the enemy right. Out-numbered three to one, they resumed their steady retreat. But they did not run. By the time my regrouping army had pushed that stubborn right flank up the hill to the Fort's gate, the enemy - center, left flank, and reserve - were all in place, under cover, and ready to beat us back.

That was what they did. Fifty of them were a match for us on open ground. Sixty of them, behind walls and uphill from us, held us off with ease. We rushed the gate once and got blasted. They had stockpiles of snow and ice balls, and when we got in close, they dropped big hunks of the wall on us. I finally got hit in the eye with something and went back down the hill. The army followed me.

My force was ecstatic. True, we could not take the Fort, but we had won the

field, and the pride of the town's junior high school showed no signs of trying to take it back. The enemy was not cowed, however. They yelled at us from those high walls and dared us to take them. Standoff.

I sent some people back to get our support equipment: the sleds of snow, the shields, my stick: and held a conference with my seconds in command. We were a battered group. I fingered my watering left eye while Pig dug his finger in his ear and Kathy licked blood off the back of her hand where an ice ball had skinned her.

Suddenly Pig started giggling. Some sense of humor. But I could not help laughing along with him, and Kathy joined in too. Must have been battle fatigue.

"Anybody got any great ideas?" I asked. Hopefully. No one had.

"Rushing them is no good," Kathy said. "Going uphill takes all the force out of it, and when you get to the top they have all the cover and all the ammo too."

She was right. Further from the Fort there had been patches of snow, but this close to the walls, there was nothing. All the ammunition we had was what was on the sleds and what they threw down at us.

Pig added, "Yeh, and we were charging that dinky four foot wall they've set up inside the gateway. We wouldn't have a prayer against the real wall."

"But we have nothing else to try," I said. "They beat us off from the gate once; they'll do it again as often as we come at them. We'll have to try the walls - see if we can spread them out thin enough to punch through."

"No," Kathy said.

"If you march these kids up to the wall, they'll just stand underneath and get clobbered. Besides, once we spread out, they'll come out of the front gate in a mass and mop us up."

"How about this," I said. "Pig and I will take sticks or something and try to tear down part of the wall. We'll each take along ten or fifteen kids for covering fire and diversion. Kathy, you take the main force and keep them busy at the gate. If you see a chance - if Pig or I break through or if they send away too many men to guard the walls from us -- you smash through the gate. Okay?"

"What have we got to lose?"

said Kathy fatalistically.

Ten minutes later, all units were in place and ready to go. I was off to Kathy's right with an even dozen of our biggest, and Pig was on her left with the same number. We were both about fifty yards from the main body. We could not go any further without losing sight of them around the curve of the wall, and we wanted to be able to see them so that we could rejoin in a hurry in case of a breakthrough by our side or a breakout by the enemy.

Kathy moved in first to take as much strain off Pig and me as possible. From the distance I could clearly see our disadvantage. Throwing from the top of a hill and a wall, the enemy could hit my kids long before they could return fire, and even when we got within range our shots were going up soft and easy - theirs were coming down fast and hard.

Once the slack was taken up in the middle, I moved upslope with my group. It looked as if we had about ten men to oppose us. Soon enough, I was experiencing the devastating barrage that I had been watching.

I charged up to the foot of the wall and rammed my pole into the third tier. Hell broke loose from the defense squad. They all leaned out over the wall and threw things at my bent head and back. This exposed them to my bodyguard, who got in some good shots, but I was still catching it.

I gouged at the wall, but could not really do much to it. I could knock off pieces and even shove the pole through the wall in the gaps between balls, but I could not crack any of the balls in half to bring down the structure. Given time, I could have done some damage, but with fist sized chunks of ice bouncing off my head and foot wide blocks of snow (probably torn from the inner

shooting platform) smashing to left and right of me with neck snapping, back cracking force, I did not have time to spare.

I lifted my stick and drove it into the wall above my head where I knew it was only one layer thick, then I hung with all my weight on it. I could feel something giving! With a crash, one of the thrown blocks mashed my hand on the stick and showered me with broken pieces. It did not break any fingers, but it did crack the stick, and that sudden shock helped break the wall. The stick snapped, and I fell heavily. Then my dozen shouted in triumph as five balls fell out of the top two layers of the outer wall. A breach!

But it was seven feet in the air, and there were three grim and determined looking battlers plugging the hole with their bodies. Nevertheless, two of my bodyguards jumped for it. (One stepped on me in passing.) Both got plastered and thrown back before they could get more than a hand on the platform.

The rest of my squad threw everything they had at those three exposed bodies, and finally forced them to move aside and take cover behind undamaged sections of the wall.

I was up again and rushed the hole. I found one of the broken halves of my staff and stabbed it into the wall for a foothold. Jumping on this, I got my head and shoulders up to the level of the break. And all of them were on me.

Three of them were standing on the ground inside the wall, and they opened fire on my face. Four of them were on the wall within arm's length of me, and they threw things at my head and shoulders. I was being hit by so much so fast that I could not keep track of what was smashing where. I ducked my head, raised my arm, and what felt like a whole boulder of snow landed on me. The cursed stick tore out of the wall and I went crashing down. When I hit the ground, I just kept rolling, trying to escape the constant thudding of rock hard projectiles. I had had it.

Three more of my boys tried it and fared no better than I had. Then we fell back.

They laughed as we went.

Fig had no better luck - worse, in fact. He managed to crack open one of the bottom balls, but the wall did not fall down, it only settled a little. He broke out the one next to it and the same thing happened. Then they dropped something big on him too, and he gave it up.

Kathy dropped back when she saw that we had been driven off. Her people were disheartened by the one-sided battering they had taken from the walls. I judged that one more defeat would finish the whole thing - those kids looked beat.

Conference time again.

"JUST ONE MORE TIME," I SAID. "LET'S TRY THE GATE AGAIN."

"Forget it," said

Kathy. "I've been there and the weather is lousy!" An interesting purple bruise on her right cheek lent credence to her story.

"If you think heading them off at the pass was fun, you should have tried the scenic overmountain route," I said. Fig's gloomy nod backed me up. "And I have another plan," I continued. "Their wall is built just inside the gate. If I can knock down the gateway all the snow will fall right in front of their wall. It'll not only give us unlimited ammunition, it will also form a platform on our side of the wall - we'll just run up and over and chase them out."

"Oh, boy!" said Kathy, rolling her eyes toward a grey and unheeding heaven.

"This is your plan?"

"The best we've got," I answered humbly. After all, it was true.

"You couldn't knock down the wall when only ten people were guarding it; what makes you think you can bring down the main gate with all seventy of them trying to stop you?"

"I'll have you there to fight them off for me," I said with innocent confidence. "And to quote some words of wisdom I heard recently, 'What have we got to

lose?"

Now Pig had something to say. "Let me take my men around to the back gate, maybe we can fight our way in."

"Okay, go ahead," I said. "Take my men along, too. A few people one way or the other won't make any difference at the main gate. Might as well give them something to worry about. Besides," I glanced at Kathy. . .

. . .and: "What have we got to lose?" we said in chorus.

Kathy dug up a smile from somewhere, and I felt sufficiently rewarded for all the aches and bruises of the day. Now that I think of it, that was the second to the last time she ever smiled at me. I should have stuck to blondes.

Pig marched off with his twenty-four picked men, and I gathered together the rest to tell them the plan and to give Pig time to draw off as many of the enemy as possible. I told the army to stay back out of the way until the gate came down and then to charge in and take the Fort. I could tell that they were not really carried away by the brilliance of my idea, but none of them protested. I did not say, "Just one more try and then we'll go home," but we all knew that was what I meant.

This time, I had a seven foot length of 2x4 for a lever - something had to give. I also carried a garbage can lid for a shield in my left hand, and Kathy was to stand close on my right with another shield.

I carefully organized our battle array. Every man in the front rank had a shield. Their only job was to stay in line and hold up those shields. The rest of the army would do the fighting from behind this shelter.

It would have been better to have the battle array go in first and engage the enemy's attention, then Kathy and I could dash in and attack the gatepost before they saw what was going on. But I had the suspicion that our men were far too intelligent to march into anything dangerous unless someone else marched in ahead of them as a trial case. So Kathy and I led the advance with shields held high. We marched ahead of the shield line on the left side. I was going after the left post, since that one was further from the enemy's sally port.

They opened up on us as soon as we started up the hill. About half of them were standing shoulder to shoulder behind the gate barricade, and the rest were manning the walls on each side of the gate. Fifteen or so had marched off around the wall keeping an eye on Pig.

Snowballs and iceballs started splashing and clanging on our shields and whipping past our ears. We did not get hit on the legs very often, since we were downhill from the Fort, and it was difficult for them to throw low enough to get under our shields. I glanced back once to see that shower of missiles breaking against our shield wall and being answered from the rear ranks, and I shared a grin of excitement with my shield-mate.

Like a belligerent turtle, our armored formation stubbornly shoved itself up the hill until it stood for the third time in the teeth of that impassable gateway. For the third time, our battle toughened troops stood their ground and patiently endured a battering from the pitiless walls. The shield wall offered good protection against the men behind the gate barricade, but the men on the walls had a clear shot down into our packed mass. The enemy saw this, too, and many left the barricade and ran up to wall-top positions.

Kathy and I reached the left gatepost. Suddenly, we were sheltered from the men defending the barricade and only had to worry about the troops on the wall to our left. Kathy switched sides to cover me, and I flung down my shield and jammed that hunk of 2x4 between the balls of the third tier - about chest high. Then I threw myself against it. And again. And again.

Kathy could not cover me from all those people on the wall: they were too high and too close. I was getting smacked and thwacked right and left - but I did not care. The 2x4 bent like a butter knife

every time I hit it - but I did not care. Because the ball was piving!

I jumped at the wooden bar a fourth time, and that big block of snow blasted out of the pillar. The pillar did not just settle a little as the wall had done when Pig broke a couple of the bottom balls. No, because this ball was holding up three other balls, which were holding up some boards with five or six hundred pounds of snow on them. For the barest instant, it all held together somehow with that gaping hole in the middle, and then there was a huge, ripping avalanche sound and the whole pillar disintegrated into flying rubble and snow dust.

I jumped and grabbed an open-mouthed Kathy around the neck to drag her out of danger. We stumbled back as the whole gate crashed down with a roar of falling snow and a gunshot cracking of breaking boards.

Suddenly, there was absolute silence. No one moved, no one spoke, no one breathed.

And then the barbarians struck! With savage yells of triumph my massed army charged, running up the rubble and over the barricade more simply, easily, and irresistably than I could have imagined in my wildest daydreams of success.

Half the defenders had left the barricade to man the walls, and those who were left had jumped back from the disaster and were standing in jelly-kneed horror at how close they had come to being buried. When a hundred screaming savages came pouring over the barricade under vollies of snow and ice and dropped right into their laps, they turned and ran.

The men on the walls suddenly found themselves trapped eight feet in the air with their backs to a wall and without any shelter, facing a victory crazed mob that outnumbered them three to one. They also ran for it - either jumping over the wall or running along it toward the back gate where Pig was breaking in against minimal opposition. The Fort had fallen.

The delirious horde fell straight to the work of destruction. Like ants on a birthday cake, they swarmed over the mighty white fortress - kicking, tearing, crushing. Snow blocks ripped from the wall top were flung to the ground where they split open like ripe mellons. Whole sections of wall began to topple and crash down as scores of workers undermined the foundations. The junior high boys, unpursued and sensing that the fighting was finished, came back to share in the rioting. Soon, recent enemies were shouting and sweating side by side in mindless excitement.

I felt no joy in victory; I took no pride in this. This was not my creation; this new Thing had been born before my eyes. Kathy and I were still standing motionless outside the ruined gate. We had opened the way, and then the Thing had brushed past us. We had not led it - it needed no leaders - it brushed them aside. This Thing was devouring our Fort before our eyes.

Well, damn it, I was not going to be left behind! I had started this, and I would stay on top of it until it was finished! Still gripping the fatal 2x4, I strode forward over the pile of snow that had once been an architectural wonder. "I'm going to wreck the Tower," I said over my shoulder to Kathy, "Before someone else does it." She dragged along behind me, unable to think of anything else to do. That was not going to happen to me!

The wreckers were still busy on the walls. No one had thought of the Power yet. No one but Steve. He was at the top, ready to defend it against any and all.

His face was tight and so was his voice. "Keep away," he said.

I kept walking and clenching that 2x4. "I'm going to wreck it, Steve," I said. My voice sounded tight, too.

"Keep away or I'll drop this on you." He had loosened one of those corner balls - remember the medieval effect? He meant what he said.

I stopped a few steps away and looked up at him. I felt awfully tired suddenly.

"Come on down, Steve. It's all over."

He just stood up there and did not move. I looked around helplessly. Kathy was standing behind me, sort of slumped together, looking at the ground or at the base of the tower. Behind her, I could see the ragged, cracked walls and the destroyers hard at work.

"It's all over," I said again.

"They won't stop until they've wrecked everything," I said.

"They'll be here in a minute or two," I said.

Steve just stood on top of the tower. He was not looking at me. He did not seem to be watching the wreckers. He was looking far away; off over the snow.

Suddenly, a face appeared behind Steve's. A fat face.

"Pig," I shouted, and I saw his childish evil smirk as he threw Steve out over the wall of the tower.

Steve landed awkwardly on knees and elbows: but he jumped up again at once. We both stood for a second, glaring speechlessly up at the top of the Tower where Pig was kicking and thrashing around, sending avalanches of destruction cascading down the sides of our creation. I was squeezing that 2x4 so hard, I must have crushed the marks of my fingers into the wood - I came so damned close to throwing it as hard as I could at that leering face. But it was I who had summoned this demon-Thing up from its darkness to the light at the top of my Tower. The piece of wood dropped from my hand.

Kathy walked past me and stood beside Steve. She timidly took his hand. Neither of them said anything or looked at the other. They just stood there.

Somehow, I could tell that neither one really wanted to see me anymore, so I turned and walked out of the ruin, out of the park, and out of the realm of legend forever.

It was only a snow fort, after all.

I SAW STEVE AND KATHY ONCE THIS SPRING. IT WAS A FRESH, WARM DAY, AND THEY WERE wandering through the park. They were not holding hands or anything, but they were obviously together.

The kids call it Battle Park now, and I was sitting on Snow Castle Hill as I do sometimes.

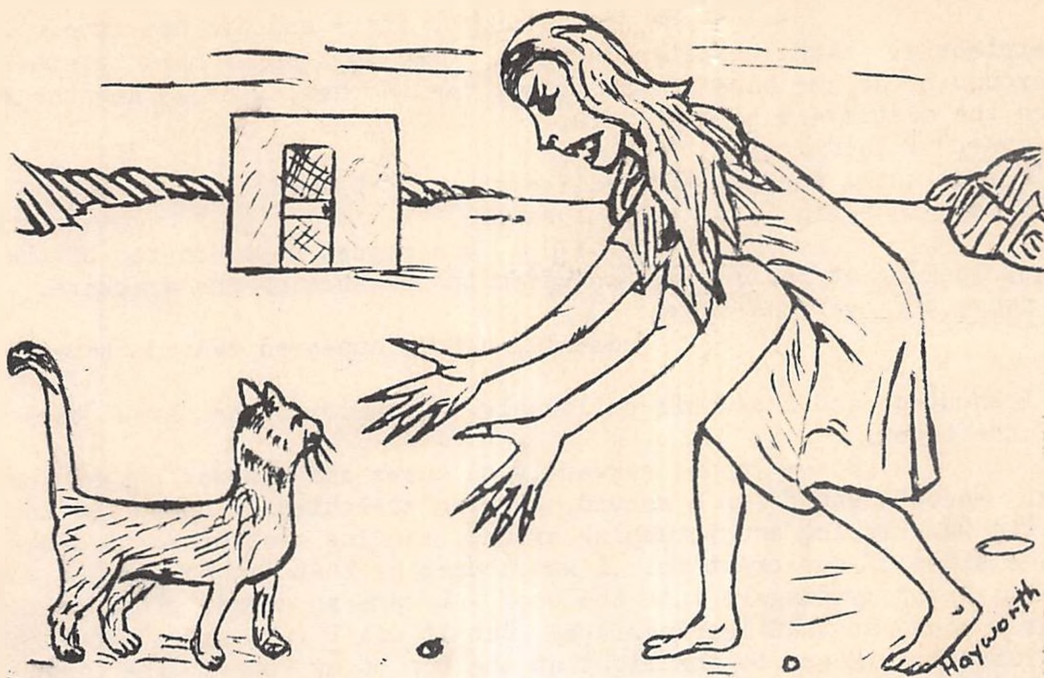
I suppose they saw me, but they did not wave.

-oOo-



MAYBE

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3d Class - Printed Matter

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