

A Little Off the Top

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938-

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„Consider the gecko,“ the doctor said, with a gesture toward the wall at my left. There one of the tiny lizards clung effortlessly, as if painted. „Remarkable for its rather piercing cry, the undoubted source of its name. Remarkable as well for the suction cups at the tips of its fingers and toes, which devices enable it to scurry across the ceiling as readily as you or I might cross a floor. Now a Darwinian would point to the gecko and talk of evolution and mutation and fitness to survive, but can you honestly regard such an adaptation as the result of random chance? I prefer to see the fingerprints of the Creator in the fingertips of

that saurian. It would take a God to create a gecko, and a whimsical fun-loving God at that. The only sort, really, in whom one would care to believe.“

The doctor's name was Turnquist. He was an Englishman, an anomaly on an island where the planters were predominantly Dutch with a scattering of displaced French. He had just given me the best dinner I'd had since I left the States, a perfectly seasoned curried goat complemented by an even dozen side dishes and perhaps as many chutneys. Thus far in my travels I'd been exposed almost exclusively to Chinese cooks, and not one of them could have found work on Mott Street.

Dr. Turnquist's conversation was as stimulating as his cook's curry. He was dressed in white, but there his resemblance to Sidney Greenstreet ended. He was a short man and a slender one, with rather large and long-fingered hands, and as he sat with his hands poised on the white linen cloth, it struck me that there was about him a quality not dissimilar to the gecko. He might have been clinging to a wall, waiting for a foolish insect to venture too close.

There was a cut crystal bell beside his wineglass. He rang it, and almost immediately a young woman appeared in the kitchen doorway. „Bring the brandy,“ he told her, „and a pair of the medium-sized bell glasses.“

She withdrew, returning moments later with a squat-bodied ship's decanter and a pair of glasses. „Very good, Leota,“ he said. „You may pour a glass for each of us.“

She served me first, placing the glass on the tablecloth at my right, pouring a generous measure of cognac into it. I watched the procedure out of the corner of my eye. She was of medium height, slender but full-figured, with a rich brown skin and arresting cheekbones. Her scent was heavy and rich in the tropical air. My eyes followed her as she moved around the table and filled my host's glass. She left the bottle on the table. He said, „Thank you, Leota,“ and she crossed to the kitchen door.

My eyes returned to the doctor. He was holding his glass aloft. I raised mine. „Cheers,“ he said, and we drank.

The cognac was excellent and I said as much. „It's decent,“ he allowed. „Not the best the French ever managed, but good enough.“ His dry lizard eyes twinkled. „Is it the cognac you admired? Or the hand that poured it?“

„Your servant is a beautiful woman,“ I said, perhaps a little stiffly.

„She's a Tamil. They are an attractive race, most especially in the bloom of youth. And Leota is particularly attractive, even for a Tamil.“ His eyes considered me carefully. „You recently ended a marriage,“ he said.

„A relationship. We weren't actually married. We lived together.“

„It was painful, I suppose.“

I hesitated, then nodded.

„Then I daresay travel was the right prescription,“ the doctor said. „Your appetites are returning. You did justice to your dinner. You're able to appreciate a good cognac and a beautiful woman.“

„One could hardly do otherwise. All three are quite superb.“

He lifted his glass again, warmed its bowl in his palm, inhaled its bouquet, took a drop of the liquid on his tongue. His eyes closed briefly. For a moment I might have been alone in the high-ceilinged dining room.

His eyes snapped open. „Have you,“ he demanded, „ever had a cognac of the comet year?“

„I beg your pardon?“

„Eighteen thirty-five. Have you ever tasted an eighteen thirty-five cognac?“

„Not that I recall.“

„Then you very likely have not, because you would recall it. Have you ever made love to a virgin? Let me rephrase that. Have you ever embraced a virgin of mixed ancestry, Tamil and Chinese and Scandinavian? You needn't answer. A rhetorical question, of course.“

I took a small sip of cognac. It was really quite excellent.

„I could tell you a story,“ Dr. Turnquist said. „Of course you'd want to change the names if you ever decided to do anything with it. And you might take care to set it on some other island.“

„I wouldn't have to name the island at all,“ I said.

„No,“ he said. „I don't suppose you would.“

There were, it seemed, two brothers named Einhoorn. One, Piet, was a planter, with large and valuable holdings in the southern portion of the island. The other, Rolf, was a trader with offices in the capital city on the island's eastern rim. Both were quite prosperous, and each had survived the trauma of the island's metamorphosis from colony to independent nation.

Both had been married. Piet's wife had died years ago, while delivering a stillborn child. Rolf's wife deserted him at about the same time, leaving on a Europe-bound freighter with whose captain Rolf had traded for years. The ship still called at the island from time to time, and Rolf still did business with her captain. The woman was never a subject of conversation between them.

Although he saw them infrequently, Dr. Turnquist got along well enough with both of the Einhoorn brothers. He thought them coarse men. They both had a hearty appetite for the pleasures of the flesh, which he approved, but it seemed to him that they lacked refinement. Neither had the slightest taste for art, for music, for literature. Neither gave any evidence of having a spiritual dimension. Both delighted in making money, in drinking brandy, and embracing young women. Neither cared much for anything else.

One evening, Rolf, the trader, appeared at the doctor's door. The doctor had already finished his dinner. He was sitting on the enclosed veranda, sipping a postprandial brandy and reading, for the thousandth time, a sonnet of Wordsworth's, the one comparing the evening to a nun breathless with adoration. A felicitous phrase, he had thought for the thousandth time.

He set the book aside and put his guest in a wicker chair and poured him a brandy. Rolf drank it down, pronounced it acceptable, and demanded to know if the doctor had ever had an 1835 cognac. The doctor said that he had not.

„The comet year,“ Rolf said. „Halley's Comet. It came in eighteen thirty-five. It was important, the coming of the comet. The American writer, Mark Twain. You know him? He was born in that year.“

„I would suppose he was not the only one.“

„He thought it significant,“ Rolf Einhoorn said. „He said he was born when the comet came and would die when it reappeared. He believed this, I think. I don't know if it happened.“

„Twain died in nineteen ten.“

„Then perhaps he was right,“ the trader said, „because the comet comes every seventy-five years. I think it is every seventy-five years. It will be due again in a couple of years, and that is when I intended to drink the bottle.“

„The bottle?“

„Of eighteen thirty-five cognac.“ Rolf rubbed his fleshy palms together. „I've had it for two years. It came off a Chinese ship. The man I bought it from didn't know what he had but he knew he had something. Cognac of the comet year is legendary, my dear Turnquist. I couldn't guess at its value. It is not like a wine, changing with the years, perhaps deteriorating beneath the cork. Brandies and whiskeys do not change once they have been bottled. They neither ripen nor decay. A man may spend a thousand pounds buying a rare wine at a London auction house only to find himself the owner of the world's most costly vinegar. But a cognac—it will no more spoil with age than gold will rust. And a cognac of eighteen thirty-five—“

„A famous cognac.“

„A legend, as I've said.“ He put down his empty glass, folded his hands on his plump stomach. „And I shall never taste it.“

The silence stretched. A fly buzzed against a lightbulb, then flew off. „Well, why not?“ the doctor asked at length. „You haven't sworn off drinking. I don't suppose you've lost your corkscrew. What's the problem?“

„My brother is the problem.“

„Piet?“

„Have I another brother? One is sufficient. He wants the cognac, the Comet Year cognac.“

„I daresay he does. Who wouldn't? But why should you give it to him?“

„Because he has something I want.“

„Oh?“

„You know his ward? She's called Freya.“

„I've heard of her,“ the doctor said. „A half-caste, isn't she?“

„Her mother was half Tamil and half Chinese. Her father was a Norwegian seaman, captain of a freighter that docked here once and has never returned. You haven't seen Freya?“

„No.“

„She is exquisite. Golden skin that glows as if lighted from within. A heart-shaped face, cheekbones to break your heart, and the most impossible blue eyes. A waist you could span with your hands. Breasts like, like—“

The man was breathless with adoration, Dr. Turnquist thought, though not like a nun. „How old is this goddess?“ he asked.

„Fifteen,“ Rolf Einhoorn said. „Her mother died five years ago. Piet took her into his household, made a home for her. People credit him with an act of charity. My brother has never performed an act of charity in his life.“

„He makes sexual use of her?“

„Not yet. The bastard's been *saving* her.“

„Ah,“ said the doctor. „Even as you have been saving your cognac. Waiting, you might say, for the reappearance of the comet.“

„Piet has been waiting for her sixteenth birthday. Then he will make her his mistress. But he wants my cognac.“

„And you want—I’ve forgotten her name.“

„Freya. He has offered a trade. Her virginity for my bottle.“

„And you have accepted?“

„I have accepted.“

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

„It seems unfair,“ Rolf said. The doctor noted a crafty light in his eyes. „Piet will have every drop of my precious cognac. He may drink it all in one night or stretch it out over a lifetime, and if he wishes he may shatter the bottle when he has drained it. And what will I have in return? One night with this beauty. Her maidenhead will be mine, but when I return her to him she will be a far cry from an empty bottle. She will be his to enjoy for as long as he wants her, and I will be left with the memory of her flesh and not even the memory of the cognac. Does it seem fair to you?“

„Can’t you get out of the deal?“

„I could,“ Rolf said. „And yet there ought to be a better solution, don’t you think? The little angel’s birthday is two months from tomorrow. That is when the exchange will take place.“ He lowered his eyes deliberately. „Piet has seen my bottle. He has examined the seal.“

„Ah.“

„You are a clever man. A doctor, good with your hands. Perhaps there is a way to remove the contents from a sealed bottle, eh?“

„You would have to bring me the bottle,“ the doctor said, „and I should have to see what I could do.“

Piet turned up later that week. Coincidentally, Dr. Turnquist was reading another sonnet of Wordsworth’s at the moment of his arrival, the one about the world being too much with us. Old Wordsworth, he thought, had a knack.

Piet, not surprisingly, told essentially the same story as his brother. He spoke quite eloquently of the legendary perfection of the 1835 cognac, then spoke at least as eloquently of his ward. „She has spent five years under my roof,“ he said. „She is like a daughter to me.“

„I’m sure.“

„And now I’ve traded her to my verdammte brother for a bottle of brandy. Five years, doctor!“

„The brandy’s been around for almost a century and a half. Five years seems a short time in comparison.“

„You know what I mean,“ Piet said. „I wonder.“

„What is it that you wonder?“

„I wonder what virginity is,“ Piet mused. „A virgin’s embrace is nothing so special, is it? Ordinarily one wants one’s partner to be schooled, able. With a virgin, one delights in her incompetence. What is so special, eh, about a tiny membrane?“

The doctor kept silent.

„You are a doctor,“ Piet Einhoorn said. „One hears tales, you know. Exotic bordellos whose madams sell a virginity ten times over, tightening the passage with alum, restoring the maidenhead. One hears these things and wonders what to believe.“

„One cannot believe everything one hears.“

„Oh,“ Piet said.

„Still, there is something that can be done. If the girl is a virgin in the first place.“

„I have not had her, if that is what you are implying.“

„I implied nothing. Even if she hasn't been with a man, she could have lost her hymen in any of a dozen ways. But if it's intact—“

„Yes?“

„You want to be with her once, is that right? You want to be the first man to have her.“

„That is exactly what I want.“

„If the hymen were surgically detached before the first intercourse, and if it were subsequently reattached after intercourse has taken place—“

„It is possible?“

„Bring the child,“ the doctor said. „Let me have a look at her, eh?“

Two days later Rolf returned to the doctor's house. This time his visit was expected. He carried a small leather satchel, from which he produced a bottle that fairly shouted its age. The doctor took it from him, held it to the light, examined its label and seal, turned it this way and that.

„This will take careful study,“ he announced.

„Can you do it?“

„Can I remove the contents without violating the seal? I think not. There is a trick of removing a tablecloth without disturbing the dishes and glasses resting atop it. One gives an abrupt all-out pull. That would not do in this case. But perhaps the seal can be removed and ultimately restored without its appearance being altered in any way.“ He set the bottle down. „Leave it with me. There is lead foil here which will not be readily removed, paper labels which might yield if the glue holding them can be softened. It is a Chinese puzzle, Einhoorn. Come back Saturday. If it can be done, it shall be done that day in front of your eyes.“

„If my brother suspects—“

„If it cannot be done safely it will not be done at all. So he will suspect nothing. Oh, bring a bottle of the best cognac you can find, will you? We can't replace cognac of the comet year with rotgut, can we now?“

The following day it was Piet's turn. He brought with him not a leather satchel but an altogether more appealing cargo, the girl Freya.

She was, the doctor noted, quite spectacular. Rolf's cognac had looked like any other cognac, possessed of a good enough color and a perfect clarity but otherwise indistinguishable from any other amber liquid. Freya, her skin a good match for the cognac, looked like no other young woman the doctor had ever seen. Three races had blended themselves to perfection in her lithe person. Her skin was like hot velvet, while her eyes made one wonder why blue had ever been thought a cool

color. And, thought Dr. Turnquist, a man could impale himself upon those cheekbones.

„I'll want to examine her,“ he told Piet. „Make yourself comfortable on the veranda.“

In his surgery, Freya shucked off her clothing without a word, and without any trace of embarrassment. He placed her on his table, put her feet in the stirrups, and bent to his task. She was warm to the touch, he noted, and after a moment or two she began to move rhythmically beneath his fingers. He looked up from his work, met her eyes. She was smiling at him.

„Why, you little devil,“ he said.

He left her there, found Piet on the veranda. „You're very fortunate,“ he told the planter. „The membrane is intact. It hasn't yielded to horseback riding or an inquisitive finger.“

„Have you detached it?“

„That will take some time. It's minor surgery, but I'd as soon sedate her all the same. It would be best if she didn't know the nature of the procedure, don't you think? So she can't say anything that might find its way to your brother's ear.“

„Good thinking.“

„Come back in the morning,“ the doctor told him. „Then you may enjoy her favors tomorrow night and bring her back to me the next morning for repair. Or restoration, if you prefer.“

Piet came in the morning to reclaim his ward. As he led her to his car, the doctor thought not for the first time what a coarse, gross man the planter was.

Not that his brother was any better. Rolf arrived scarcely an hour after Piet had left—there was an element of French farce in the staging of this, the doctor remembered thinking—and the doctor led him into his study and showed him the bottle. Its neck was bare now, the wax and lead foil and paper labels carefully removed.

„Please notice,“ he said, „that the cork is quite dry. If this bottle held wine it would only be fit for pouring on a salad.“

„But since it is brandy—“

„It is presumably in excellent condition. Still, if one attempts to remove this cork it will at once crumble into dust.“

„Then—“

„Then we must be inventive,“ said the doctor. He brought forth an oversized hypodermic needle and plunged it in a single motion through the cork. As he drew back its plunger the syringe filled with the amber liquid.

„Brilliant,“ the trader said.

The doctor drew the syringe from the bottle, squirted its contents into a beaker, and repeated the process until the bottle was empty. Then he took the bottle that Rolf had brought—an excellent flask of twenty-year-old Napoleon brandy—and transferred its contents via the syringe into the ancient bottle. It was the work of another hour to replace the various sealing materials, and when he was done the bottle looked exactly as it had when the trader first obtained it from the Chinese seaman who'd been its previous owner.

„And now we'll employ a funnel," Dr. Turnquist said, „and pour your very old cognac into a much newer bottle, and let's not spill one precious drop, eh?" He sniffed appreciatively at the now empty beaker. „A rich bouquet. You'll postpone your enjoyment until the return of Halley's Comet?"

„Perhaps I'll have one glass ahead of schedule," Rolf Einhorn said, grinning lewdly. „To toast Freya's sixteenth birthday."

The conversation took a similar turn when Piet collected his ward after the surgical restoration of her physical virginity. „I have had my cake," the planter said, smacking his lips like an animal. „And in less than a month's time I shall eat it, too. Or drink it, more precisely. I will be sipping cognac of the comet year while my fool of a brother makes do with—" And here he employed a Dutch phrase with which the doctor was not familiar, but which he later was able to translate loosely as *sloppy seconds*.

Piet left, taking Freya with him. The doctor stood for a moment at the front door, watching the car drive out of sight. Then he went looking for his volume of Wordsworth.

„It's a beautiful story," I told him. „A classic, really. I assume the exchange went according to plan? Freya spent the night of her sixteenth birthday with Rolf? And Piet had the brandy in exchange?"

„All went smoothly. As smooth as old cognac, as smooth as Freya's skin."

„Each had his cake," I said, „and each ate it, too. Or thought he did, which amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?"

„Does it?"

„I should think so. If you think you're drinking a legendary cognac, isn't that the same as drinking it? And if you think you're a woman's first lover, isn't that the same as actually being the first?"

„I would say it is *almost* the same." He smiled. „In addition, these brothers each enjoyed a third pleasure, and perhaps it was the most exquisite of all. Each had the satisfaction of having pulled something over on the other. So the whole arrangement could hardly have been more satisfactory."

„A beautiful story," I said again.

He leaned forward to pour a little more cognac into my glass. „I thought you would appreciate its subtleties," he said. „I sensed that about you. Of course, there's an element you haven't considered."

„Oh?"

„You raised a point. Is the illusion quite the same as the reality? Was Piet's experience in drinking the cognac identical to Rolf's?"

„Except insofar as one cognac was actually better or worse than the other."

„Ah," the doctor said. „Of course in this instance both drank the same cognac."

„Because they believed it to be the same?"

He shook his head impatiently. „Because it was the same," he said. „The identical brand of twenty-year-old Napoleon, and that's not as great a coincidence as it might appear, since it's the best brandy available on this island. It's the very same elixir you and I have been drinking this very evening."

„Piet and Rolf were both drinking it?"

„Of course.“

„Then what happened to the real stuff?“

„I got it, of course,“ said the doctor. „It was easy to jab the hypodermic needle straight through the cork, since I'd already performed the procedure a matter of hours earlier. That part was easy enough. It was softening the wax without melting it altogether, and removing the lead foil without destroying it, that made open-heart surgery child's play by comparison.“

„So you wound up with the Comet Year cognac.“

„Quite,“ he said, smiling. And, as an afterthought, „And with the girl, needless to say.“

„The girl?“

„Freya.“ He looked down into his glass. „A charming, marvelously exciting creature. Genetics can no more explain her perfection than can Darwin account for the gecko's fingertips. A benevolent Creator was at work there. I detached her hymen, had her during the night she spent here, then let her go off to lose her already-lost virginity to Piet. And then he brought her back for hymenal restoration, had me lock up the barn door, if you will, after I'd galloped off on the horse. And now Rolf has had her, gathering the dear thing's first fruits for the third time.“

„Good Lord.“

„Quite. Now if the illusion is identical to the reality, then Piet and Rolf have both gained everything and lost nothing. Whereas I have gained everything and lost nothing whether the illusion is equal to the reality or not. There are points here, I suspect, that a philosopher might profitably ponder. Philosophical implications aside, I thought you might enjoy the story.“

„I love the story.“

He smiled, enjoying my enjoyment. „It's getting late. A pity you can't meet Freya. I'm afraid my description has been woefully inadequate. But she's with Piet and he's never welcomed visitors. Still, if you don't mind, I think I'll send Leota to your room. I know you fancy her, and I saw the look she was giving you. She's not Freya, but I think you'll enjoy her acquaintance.“

I muttered something appreciative.

„It's nothing,“ he said. „I wish, too, that I could let you have a taste of the Comet Year cognac. From the bouquet, it should turn out to be quite nice. It may not be all that superior to what we've been drinking, but think of the glamor that accompanies it.“

„You haven't tasted it yet?“

He shook his head. „Those two brothers have probably finished their bottles by now. I shouldn't doubt it. But I think I'd rather hold out until the comet comes up again. If you're in this part of the world in a couple of years, you might want to stop in and watch the comet with me. I suppose one ought to be able to turn up a telescope somewhere, and we could raise a glass or two, don't you think?“

„I'm sure we could.“

„Quite.“ He winked slowly, looking more than ever like an old gecko waiting for a fly. He lifted the crystal bell, rang. „Ah, Leota,“ he said, when the Tamil woman appeared. „My guest's the least bit tired. Perhaps you could show him to his room.“

