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Title: The Golden Road

Date of first publication: 1942

Author: Cyril M. Kornbluth (1923 - 1958) writing as Cecil Corwin

Date first posted: March 7 2013

Date last updated: March 7 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130313

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE GOLDEN ROAD

By Cyril M. Kornbluth

Albing Publications, 1942

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Out of the myth of night and language there come strange tales told over wine. There is a man known as The Three-Cornered Scar who frequents a village spot famed for its wine and raconteurs, both of which are above the average.

The Three-Cornered Scar favored us by a visit to my table and ordering, during the course of his story, five half-bottles of house red to my account. The wine is drunk up and the story told.

Colt was tired. He was so bone-broke weary that he came near to wishing he was dead. It would have been easy to die in the snow; heaps in the way seemed to beg for the print of his body. He skirted crevasses that were like wide and hungry mouths.

This was Central Asia, High Pamir, a good thousand miles from any permanent habitation of the human race. The nomadic Kirghiz population had been drained away to the Eastern front, civil and military authorities likewise. Colt himself was the tragic, far-strayed end of the First Kuen-Lung Oil Prospecting Expedition, undertaken by a handful of American volunteers on behalf of the Chungking government.

Estimating generously, his assets were five more days of scanty eating. And an eternity of sleep under the glaring stars of the plateau?...

He had struck, somehow, an easier way across the snow-covered, rocky wastes. There was a route to follow, a winding, mazy route that skirted the Alai Range's jagged foothills and slipped through Tengis-Bai Pass. Old memories of maps and trails swirled through Colt's tired head; he bore north for no better reason than that he could guide himself by Polaris, low on the horizon. Colt was headed, with a laugh and a curse, for Bokhara.

Colt marched through the first watch of the night, before the smiting cold of space descended on this roof of the world; then he would sleep, twitching with frost. He would wake eight hours later, a stone, a block of wood, to unkink his wretched muscles, shoulder his pack, and march under the naked, brassy sun.

The Parsees said that this High Pamir was the cradle of human life, that from here had sprung the primals who proliferated into white, yellow, black and brown. To the southwest, at the same thirteen-thousand elevation, was the Valley of the Oxus, a green ribbon in the steel gray and bone white of the plateau. To the northeast were the great peaks—Everest, Kinchinjunga, K-4—that started where other mountains ended, shooting from seventeen thousand up to unthinkable heights, sky-piercing.

Night and day scarcely interrupted the flow of his thoughts. His waking fantasies and his dreams alike were brutish, longing for warmth and comfort, bespelled remembrance of palmier days. He woke to find an ear frostbitten, dead, marble white, without sensation, killed by cold.

It came to him slowly, the idea forcing its way through the numbed machinery of his brain, that he was following a path. This easier way across the plateau could be nothing but one of the historic caravan routes. Over this trail had gone a billion feet of beasts and men, and his own had found their way into the ancient grooves. Colt was content with that; going by the sun and stars was good, compass better, but best of all were the ways that men had taken and found well suited.

There were animal droppings before him now and then, once a fragment of broken crockery. He doubled his pace, from a slow plod to a loping, long-strided walk that took much of his husbanded wind. Finally he saw the print in a snowbank that spelled *man*. It was a shod foot's mark, light and side-stepping. As he watched, a puff of wind drifted it over with dry, gleaming snow.

Colt found a splash of milk against a rock, then the smell of camel clinging about a wiry shrub.

He saw them at last, the tail of a great caravan, and fell fainting into the arms of tall, curious Kirghiz camel drivers.

They carried him in a litter until he awoke and could eat, for nothing was so important or unexpected that it could be allowed to break the schedule of the march. Colt opened his eyes to grunts of satisfaction from his bearers. He accepted the hunks of dried meat and bottle of warm tea they gave him, trying to catch enough of the language to offer thanks.

Coming down the line of the caravan was a large Hindu on one of the small Mongolian ponies. He reined beside Colt and asked in French, "How are you? They passed me word. Can you march with us?"

"But yes! It's like life out of death to find you people here. What can I do to help?"

The Hindu dismounted to walk the pony beside him. "Keep up spirits. Our few Europeans are tired of each other's company. In case of bandit raiding—highly improbable, of course—you'll fight. I'm Raisuli Batar, merchant of the

Punjab. I'm caravan master, whose word is law. Not that it's necessary—the boys are well behaved and we have enough food."

"Where are we headed?" asked Colt, gnawing on the hunk of meat.

"We started for Bokhara. Come up the line to meet the better sort with me. They're agog with excitement, of course, don't dare break line without my permission, which I don't choose to grant. By way of payload we have crates of soap on the camels and drums of flavoring essence on the ponies."

Colt sniffed, finding wintergreen and peppermint on the air. "May you find a good price," he said respectfully.

Raisuli smiled and the American was pleased. The caravan master was big and solid, with a grim, handsome face. It was good to please a man like that, Colt thought.

They quickened their pace, overtaking a hundred plodding bearers and a herd of sheep. Colt was introduced to a pale, thoughtful man named McNaughton, a reader in history at the University of Glasgow, who said he had been doing field work in Asia for three years.

Farther on were Lodz and wife, two young Poles from Galicia who were hoping for government work in Bokhara. The man was quiet, his English heavily accented. The wife spoke French only, but with the vivid dash of a Parisienne. Her lips were touched with scarlet; here in the wilderness of the High Pamir she wore a freshly pressed riding habit. Colt was enchanted.

Raisuli cast a glance at the sky. "Bedding down," he snapped. "Excuse me—*c'est l'heure*."

He left Colt with the Poles, mounting his pony again to gallop down the line barking orders to the various Hindus, Tajiks, Chinese, Abyssinians, Kirghiz and Kroomen who made up the crew. It took no more than a quarter hour to bring the unwieldy line to a halt; in another quarter hour a thousand felt tents were pitched and pegged, fires lighted and animals staked out.

"He times well, that one," smiled M. Lodz. Colt looked up and saw the sky already deepening into black. He shuddered a little and drew nearer to the fire.

"I think," said McNaughton absently, "that I could take a little refreshment." Lodz looked up from under his brows, then clapped his hands. A native boy came running.

"Bring food—some of that cold joint, wallah."

"Yes, sahib."

"Such a night this will be, perhaps," said M. Lodz softly, "as it was in August."

"Just such a night," said McNaughton. "Will you join us, Mr. Colt?"

"Not I," said the American with a sense of guilt. "I was fed when I came to after fainting. Is it safe—may I look about?"

He got no answer. The boy had returned with a great haunch of meat; silently the Occidentals gathered about it, taking out knives. Colt watched in amazement as the dainty Frenchwoman hacked out a great slab of beef and tore at it, crammed it down her throat. Before it was swallowed she was cutting away again.

"Ah—I asked if I ought to look about...."

Lodz shot him a sidewise glance, his mouth crammed with meat, his jaws working busily. Then, as though Colt had never spoken, he returned to the serious business of feeding, with the same animal quality as his wife and McNaughton showed.

"I'll look about then," said Colt forlornly. He wandered away from the fire in the direction of a yellow felt tent. There he was delighted to catch words of Cantonese.

"Greetings, son of Han," he said to the venerable speaker.

The fine old Mongol head turned; Colt felt himself subjected to a piercing, kindly scrutiny by two twinkling little black eyes. The ruddy little mouth smiled. "Sit down, son. It's a long time between new friends."

Colt squatted by the fire obediently; the venerable one took a long pull from a bottle of *suntori*, a vile synthetic Japanese whisky. Wiping his mouth with the back of a wrinkled, yellow hand, he announced, "I'm Grandfather T'ang. This is my son, T'ang Gaw Yat. If you let him he'll talk you deaf about the time he was on the long march with the Eighth Route Army. He claims General Chuh Teh once ate rice with him."

T'ang Gaw Yat smiled obediently and a little tolerantly at his father's whimsy. He was a fine-looking Chinese, big-headed and straight-faced, with little wrinkles of laughter playing about his mouth. "What my father says," he confided, "is strictly true. It was a full thousand miles from—"

"What did I tell you?" broke in the old man. "The slave is his wife, and the smartest one of the lot." He indicated a small Chinese woman of the indeterminate age between twenty and fifty.

She said in English hardly accented, "Hello. You do speak English, don't you? These barbarians don't know anything but their village jargon and Canton talk." The smile took the edge from her harsh words.

Colt introduced himself, and answered endless questions on the state of China, military, political and economic.

"Hold off," ordered the woman at last. "Let him have his turn. Want to know anything, Mr. Colt?"

"Wouldn't mind knowing how long you've been traveling."

"Stupid question," broke in Grandfather Han. "Just what one expects from a foreign devil. The splendor of the night closes about him and he would know how long we've been on the march! Have a drink—a small one." He passed the bottle; Colt politely refused.

"Then maybe you'd like a little game—" There clicked in his palm two ivory cubes.

"Please, Father," said T'ang Gaw Yat. "Put those away."

"Pattern of ancient virtue!" sneered the old man. "O you child of purity!"

"Grandfather is very lucky," said the woman quietly. "He started on the caravan with nothing but those dice and many years of gambling experience. He is now one of the richest men on the line of march. He owns two herds of sheep, a riding camel of his own and the best food there is to be had."

"And drink," said the son somberly.

"Tell you what," said the old man. "You can have some of my V.S.O. stock—stuff I won from a Spaniard a month back." He rummaged for a moment in one of the tent pockets, finally emerged with a slender bottle which caught the firelight like auriferous quartz. "Danziger Goldwasser—*le véritable*," he gloated. "But I can't drink the stuff. Doesn't bite like this Nipponese hellbroth." He upended the bottle of *suntori* again; passed the brandy to Colt.

The American took it, studied it curiously against the fire. It was a thin, amber liquid, at whose bottom settled little flakes. He shook them up into the neck of the bottle; it was like one of the little globular paperweights that hold a mimic snowstorm. But instead of snow there were bits of purest beaten gold to tickle the palate and fancy of the drinker.

"Thanks," he said inadequately. "Very kind of you."

"Curious, isn't it," said the woman, "how much the caravan life resembles a village? Though the wealth, of course, is not in land but in mercantile prospects—" She stopped as Colt caught her eye. Why, he wondered, had she been rattling on like that?

"The wisdom of the slave is the folly of the master," said Grandfather T'ang amiably. "He is happy who learns to discount the words of a woman."

"Suppose," said the woman slowly and quietly, "you learn to mind your own business, you poisonous old serpent?"

"They can't stand common sense," confided the old man.

Colt felt, painfully, that he had wandered into a family quarrel. He bolted with a mumbled excuse, hanging onto the bottle of brandy. He stood for a moment away from the trail and stared down the long line of fires. There were more than a thousand, snaking nearly out of sight. The spectacle was restful; the fires were a little blue, being kindled largely out of night-soil briquettes.

The sky was quite black; something had overcast the deep-ranked stars of the plateau. No moon shone.

Colt settled against the lee of a rock in a trance. He heard winds and the hiss of voices, soft in the distance. It was the quiet and complaining Tajiki dialect. He could hear it and understand it. It was absurdly simple, he thought abstractedly, to pick out the meanings of words and phrases.

"Such a night," one was saying, "as in August. You remember?"

"I remember." Then, dark and passionate, "The limping, bloody demon! Let him come near and I'll tear his vitals!"

"Surely you will not. He is the tearer in his evil work. We are the torn—"

Colt sat up with a start. What the hell! He couldn't understand Tajiki, not one little word of it! He had been dreaming, he thought. But it didn't melt away as a dream should. The memory of the overheard conversation was as sharp and distinct as it could be, something concrete and mysterious, like a joke that hadn't been explained to him.

Then there was a sort of heavenly grumbling, like a megatherial word or more. Colt twisted and stared at the zenith; could see nothing at all. The rumbling ended. Colt saw black little fingers all down the line rise and attend, twisting and staring and buzzing to each other.



He hurried to the fire of his European friends. They were sprawled on blankets, their bodies a little swollen from the enormous meal they had eaten. Colt saw the bare bone of the joint, scraped by knife edges. The Occidentals were unconcernedly smoking.

"What was that racket?" he asked, feeling a little silly. "What was it—do you know?"

"Thunder," said McNaughton noncommittally.

"*Oui*," agreed M. Lodz, puffing a long, tip-gilt cigarette. "Did it frighten you, the thunder?"

Colt pulled himself together. There was something evasive here, something that sought to elude him. "It was *peculiar* thunder," he said with glacial calm. "There was no lightning preceding it."

"The lightning will come soon," said Lodz furtively. "I tell you so you will not be alarmed."

"You have your lightning after your thunder here? Odd. In my country it's the other way around." He wasn't going to break—he *wasn't* going to swear—

"But how boring," drawled the Pole's wife. "*Never* a change?"

He *wasn't* going to break—

Then the peculiar lightning split the skies. Colt shot one staggered, incredulous glance at it, and was dazzled.

It was a word, perhaps a name, spelled out against the dead-black sky. He knew it. It was in some damned alphabet or other; fretfully he chided himself for not remembering which of the twenty-odd he could recognize it could be.

Colt realized that the Occidentals were staring at him with polite concern. He noticed a shred of meat between the teeth of Mme. Lodz as she smiled reassuringly—white, sharp teeth, they were. Colt rubbed his eyes dazedly. He knew he must be a haggard and unseemly figure to their cultured gaze—but they hadn't seen the words in the sky—*or had they—?*

Politely they stared at him, phrases bubbling from their lips:

"So frightfully sorry, old man—"

"Wouldn't upset you for the world—"

"Hate to see you lose your grip—"

Colt shook his head dazedly, as though he felt strands of sticky silk wind around his face and head. He turned and ran, hearing the voice of Raisuli Batar call after him, "Don't stray too far—"

He didn't know how long he ran or how far he strayed. Finally he fell flat, sprawled childishly, feeling sick and confused in his head. He looked up for a moment to see that the caravan fires were below some curve of rock or other—at any rate, well out of sight. They were such little lights, he thought. Good for a few feet of warm glow, then sucked into the black of High Pamir. They made not even a gleam in the night-heavy sky.

And there, on the other side of him and the caravan, he saw the tall figure of another human being. She stood on black rock between two drifts of snow.

Colt bit out the foil seal of the brandy bottle and pulled the cork with his fingers. After a warm gulp of the stuff, he rose.

"Have a drink?"

She turned. She was young in her body and face, Mongoloid. Her eyes were blue-black and shining like metal. Her nose was short, Chinese, yet her skin was quite white. She did not have the eyefold of the yellow people.

Silently she extended one hand for the bottle, tilted it high. Colt saw a shudder run through her body as she swallowed and passed him the tall flask with its gold-flecked liquor.

"You must have been cold."

"By choice. Do you think I'd warm myself at either fire?"

"Either?" he asked.

"There are two caravans. Didn't you know?"

"No. I'm just here—what's the other caravan?"

"Just here, are you? Did you know that you're dead?"

Colt thought the matter over slowly; finally declared, "I guess I did. And all those others—and you—?"

"All dead. We're the detritus of High Pamir. You'll find, if you look, men who fell to death from airplanes within the past few years walking by the side of Neanderthals who somehow strayed very far from their tribes and died. The greatest part of the caravans comes, of course, from older caravans of the living who carried their goods from Asia to Europe for thousands of years."

Colt coughed nervously. "Have another drink," he said. "Then let's see this other caravan. I'm not too well pleased with the one I fell into."

She took his hand and guided him across the snow and black rock to back within sight of his own caravan. He stared, eager and hungry to see. As she pointed with one tapering finger it seemed that many things were clearer than they ever had been before. He saw that the long line of lights was not his caravan but another in the opposite direction, paralleling his.

"There you will see *their* caravan master," she said, putting her face next to his. He looked and saw a pot-bellied monster whose turban was half as high as its wearer. Its silhouette, as it passed before a fire, was indescribably unpleasant.

"Evening prayer," said his guide, with a faint tone of mockery.

He studied them as they arranged flares before a platform flung together out of planks and trestles; he also saw them assemble a sort of idol, fitting the various parts together and bolting them securely. When the thing was perhaps two-thirds assembled he turned away and covered his face, repelled.

"I won't look at the rest of it now," he said. "Perhaps later, if you wish me to."

"That's right," she said. "It isn't a thing to look at calmly. But you will see the rest of it one time or another. This is a very long caravan."

She looked down and said, "Now they are worshipping."

Colt looked. "Yes," he said flatly. They were worshipping in their own fashion, dancing and leaping uglily while some dozen of them blew or saw fantastic discords from musical instruments. Others were arranged in a choir; as they began to sing Colt felt cold nausea stirring at the pit of his belly.

Their singing was markedly unpleasant; Colt, who enjoyed the discords of Ernest Bloch and Jean Sibelius, found them stimulatingly revolting. The choir droned out a minor melody, varying it again and again with what Colt construed to be quarter-tones and split-interval harmonies. He found he was listening intently, nearly fascinated by the ugly sounds.

"Why are they doing it?" he asked at length.

"It is their way," she said with a shrug. "I see you are interested. I, too, am interested. Perhaps I should not discuss this before you have had the opportunity of making up your own mind. But as you may guess, the caravan below us there, where they make the noises, is Bad. It is a sort of marching gallery of demons and the black in heart. On the other hand, the caravan with which you found yourself previously is Good—basically kind and constructive, taking delight in order and precision."

Colt, half-listening, drew her down beside him on the rock. He uncorked the bottle. "You must tell me about yourself," he

said earnestly. "It is becoming difficult for me to understand all this. So tell me about yourself, if you may."

She smiled slowly. "I am half-caste," she said. "The Russian Revolution—so many attractive and indigent female aristocrats, quite unable to work with their hands ... many, as you must know, found their way to Shanghai.

"There was a Chinese merchant and my mother, a princess. Not *eine Fuerstin*—merely a hanger-on at court. I danced. When I was a small child already I was dancing. My price was high, very high at one time. I lost popularity, and with it income and much self-assurance. I was a very bad woman. Not bad as those people there are bad, but I was very bad in my own way.

"Somehow I learned mathematics—a British actuary who knew me for a while let me use his library, and I learned quickly. So I started for India, where nobody would hire me. I heard that there was a country to the north that wanted many people who knew building and mathematics and statistics. Railway took me through the Khaiber and Afghanistan—from there pony and litter—till I died of exposure seven months ago. That is why we meet on High Pamir."

"Listen," said Colt. "Listen to that."

It was again the megatherial voices, louder than before. He looked at the woman and saw that her throat cords were tight as she stared into the black-velvet heavens.

Colt squinted up between two fingers, snapped shut his eyelids after a moment of the glaring word across the sky that followed the voices. He cursed briefly, blinded. Burned into the backs of his eyes were the familiar characters of the lightning, silent and portentous.

"It doesn't do to stare into it that way," said the woman. "Come with me." He felt for her hand and let her pull him to his feet. As sight returned he realized that again they were walking on rock.

"And there's the Good and holy caravan at evening devotions," said the woman, with the same note of bedrock cynicism in her voice. And they were. From his coign of vantage Colt could see Raisuli Batar solemnly prostrating himself before a modestly clad, well-proportioned idol whose face beamed kindly on the congregation through two blue-enameled eyes. There was a choir that sang the old German hymn "Ein Feste Burg."

"Shocking," said the woman, "yet strangely moving to the spirit. One feels a certain longing...."

Bluntly Colt said, "I'd like to join them. You're holding me back, you know. I wouldn't see you as a comrade again if I sang with them." He hummed a few bars of the hymn. "On Earth is not His e-qual—"

"Girding their loins for the good fight," said the woman. She chuckled quietly for a moment. In a ribald tone that seemed barely to conceal heartbreak, she snapped, "Do you care to fall in with the ranks of the Almighty? Or may it be with the Lord of Nothing, Old Angra Mainyu of the sixteen plagues? Pick your sides in the divine sweepstakes! It's for you they do it and of a great love for the soul in you—"

"They want you black and they want you white—"

"How in blazes do you know who's right?"

"It *seems* clear," said Colt doubtfully.

"You think so?" she exploded. "You think so now? Wait and see—with them tearing at your heart two ways and you sure that it'll never hold out but it's going to rip in half, and it never doing that but you going on through the night thirteen thousand meters above the world and never a soft bed and never a bite of real food and never a moment of closing your eyes and sleeping in darkness and night—!"

She collapsed, weeping, into his arms.

The long, starless night had not lifted. Three times more the voices had spoken from the heavens and silent lightning scribbled across the sky. The two in-betweeners had chanted back and forth sacred writings of Asia, wretchedly seeking for answers:

"I will incline mine ears to a parable. I will open my dark sayings upon the harp. Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil when the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about?"

"O maker of the material world, thou holy one! When the good waters reach the left instep whereon does the Drukh Nasu rush?"

There was an explosion of cynical laughter above them, old and dry. Grandfather T'ang greeted them, "Be well, Valeska and Colt. And forget the insteps and the heels of the Upanishad. That is my counsel." He upended the *suntori* bottle and flushed his throat with a half-pint of the stuff.

In reply to Colt's surprised glance she said, "He often visits me. Gaw is a terrible old man who thinks nothing of lying and being untrue to himself."

"A little of that would do you no harm, daughter. I belong out here with you, of course. But out here are no likely candidates for the dice box, and this ethereal gullet refuses to do without alcohol. Though this ethereal brain could do with considerably less of the pious nonsense that invariably accompanies winning at dice."

He painfully squatted by them, keeping a death grip on the quart bottle. "They're going to be at it again," said the old man. "It's just such a night as in August. Tooth and nail, hammer and tongs, no holds barred." He spat on the rock. "Pah! These spectacles disgust a man of my mentality."

"You see?" asked the woman. "He lies and cheats at dice. Yet often he sings with the worshipers. And always he says he spits on them in his mind. He is terrible!"

Colt quoted slowly, "Judge me and my cause against the ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and the unjust man."

"Ah?" asked Grandfather T'ang. "Sacred books? Wisdom of the East? I join your symposium with the following, reverently excerpted from the Shuh King: 'The soil of the province was whitish and mellow. Its contribution of revenue was of the highest of the highest class, with some proportion of the second. Its fields were of the average of the second class.'" He grinned savagely and drank deeply again.

"You can't be right," said Colt. "You *can't* be. There's something that forbids it being right to lie now that you're dead. It doesn't matter which side you choose—whether it's Raisuli's smiling idol or that thing the other side of the ridge. But you have to choose."

"I'm different," said T'ang smugly. "I'm different, and I'm drunk two thirds of the time, so what's the difference if I'm different?" He began raucously to sing, beating time with the bottle, the one and only Confucian hymn:

*"Superiority in a person
Should better not
Nor should it worsen.*

*It should consider everything
From pussycat to honored king.*

*Inferior people
Need a steeple
To climb and shout
Their views about."*

Colt drew a little aside with Valeska. "Should this matter?" he asked.

"He really ought to choose one caravan or another. It's very wrong of him to pretend to be with one when he's really with neither. Either the Good or the Bad...." She stared quaintly into Colt's eyes. "Do you think I'm bad?"

"No," said Colt slowly. "I know you're not. And you aren't good either. Not by nature, practice or inclination. I'm the same as you. I want to sing their devil song and a Lutheran hymn at the same time. And it can't be done."

"And you aren't a liar like that lovable old drunk rolling on the rocks there," she said with a gesture. "At least you aren't a liar."

"I congratulate myself. I can appreciate it to the full. Have a drink, Valeska."

"Yes. There is, you know, going to be a holy war. Which side should we be on?"

"Who knows? Let's take another look at the Bad boys."

There was half a pang of terror in his heart—a formless fear that he might find Badness less repugnant to him than Goodness. He knew the feeling: it was the trial of every human soul torn between one thing and another. Doubt was Hell—worse than Hell—and it had to be resolved, even at the risk of this magnificent creature by his side.

Silently he passed the bottle as the sky lightened and the silence spoke out of the heavens.

"As you wish," she said. Colt felt a sort of opening in his mind, as though unspoken words had passed between them. He had heard her think in sorrow and fear of losing him.

She led him over a ridge to the long line of fires of the Bad caravan, fires blue-tipped before the ugly altar. There was a disemboweled sacrifice in its lap. Colt stared his fill, trying to probe what was in his own heart. It was neither pleasure nor pain, neither pompous virtue nor cackling glee in destruction and death. There were techniques of self-searching now open to him that could never be those of a living man; he shuddered to think of how he had groped in darkness and ignorance before his death.

The caravan master, the squat monster in the mighty turban, greeted him warmly, "We've been watching your progress with considerable interest, my son. We have felt that you were warming to our ideas. How do you feel about our community?"

Colt rolled back his consciousness into the dark recesses of his mind, exploring a new stock of knowledge—things that it seemed he must always have known, but never recognized till now for what they were. "Community"—that meant the mutual practice of evil and destruction. One of the tidbits of wisdom newly in his mind was an awareness that the Bad worked together, sealed in a union that bore death as its bond. The Good practiced alone, rising very seldom to a community of any respectable proportions.

"May I enter the bond tentatively?" he asked.

The master looked pained. "My son of abomination," he said kindly, "I'll have to ask you to be very careful. The balance is beautifully precise; it would be a shame to throw them out of kilter. But since you wish to go ahead, very well. Enter!"

Colt squatted on the ground with numerous others of the Bad people. He sent out a consoling line of thought to Valeska, who stood somberly by, fearing to lose her solitary ally. He smiled a little and ran back a signal of reassurance.

He trembled a little with the effort, then threw back his mind like a door. The inverting flood of black, glistening stuff gave him a warm feeling of comradeship with the others; he yielded and allowed himself to drift with them.

He inspected the attitude of which he was a part, found it consisted of a series of aesthetic balances among eye, ear, touch, smell and taste. The viewpoint was multiplex, dirigible, able to rise, enlarge, focus from infinity to zero, split to examine an object from all vantages.

The viewpoint inspected a rock from about a dozen feet in the air, saw it as a smoothly prolate spheroid. There was a moment of dwelling on the seeming fact of its perfection, a painful moment, then the viewpoint descended slowly and with little waves of pleasure as chips and scars became apparent in the rock. The viewpoint split, correlated its observations and registered the fact that the rock was of an eccentric shape, awkward and unbeautiful.

The viewpoint coalesced again and shrank microscopically, then smaller still. For an ecstatic moment it perceived a welter of crashing, blundering molecules, beetling about in blindness.

It shifted again, swiftly, far away to a point in Hong Kong where a lady was entertaining a gentleman. The viewpoint let the two humans' love, hate, disgust, affection and lust slide beneath its gaze. There was a gorgeous magenta jealousy from the man, overlaying the woman's dull-brown, egg-shaped avarice, both swept away in a rushing tide of fluxing, thick-textured, ductile, crimson-black passion.

The viewpoint passed somewhere over a battlefield, dwelt lovingly on the nightmare scene below. There were dim flares of vitality radiating from every crawling figure below; a massing of infantry was like a beacon. From the machinery of war there came a steely radiance which waxed as it discharged its shell or tripped its bomb, then dimmed to a quiet glow of satisfaction.

A file of tanks crawled over a hill, emitting a purplish radiance which sent out thin cobwebs of illumination. They swung into battle formation, crept down the slope at the infantry mass. Behind the infantry antitank guns were hurrying up—too late. The tanks opened fire, their cobwebs whitening to a demon's flare of death as soldiers, scurrying for cover, one by one, keeled over. As they fell there was a brittle little tingle, the snapping of a thread or wire, and the light of vitality was extinguished, being replaced by a sallow, corpsey glow.

The viewpoint gorged, gloated, bloated on the scene, then seemed to swell immeasurably.

Suddenly, after a wringing transition feeling, it was in a mighty hall, approaching a lightless apse where two little points of radiance gleamed.

There was music, harmonizing ear, eye, taste, touch and smell in a twilight blend of sensations. Colt struggled involuntarily, felt himself bathed in rhythmic complications, subtly off-pleasure, spoiled by the minute introduction of some unharmonious element. With dismay he felt there creeping into his own consciousness, his segment of the viewpoint, a simple little flicker of a theme in C major. He was conscious of a gnat's wing beat of disapproval in response to his untoward disturbance. The viewpoint continued its drift toward the darkened apse.

It lovingly picked out the inhabitant of the lightless space and greeted it, even Colt, even though it was a monster of five legs and incredible teeth which opened wide. Damnably, irritatingly, the little C-major motif persisted; he tried to drive it from his mind, then, in a fatal moment, recognized it as one Oliver's "Flower Song," a sweet little thing suitable for small hands on the pianoforte.

"—*lilies, roses, flowers of every hue*—"

He couldn't lose it after having recognized it that far; the theme spread and orchestrated through the viewpoint. The whole polysensual off-pleasure matrix broke up, tore wide open as it was about to pass down the gullet of the monster in the apse.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising. "I simply couldn't help—"

"I know," said the caravan master sadly. "I know what it was. But you wrecked a full communion all the same. Go in torment, my son of abomination. May your ways be woeful."

Colt thanked him and left with Valeska.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Indescribable," he exploded. "Loathsome—glorious—terrible. I found myself gloating over—" He went into details.

"So did I," she said absently. "I went through it, too. It has a gorgeous kick to it, no doubt. But it isn't right for us. Me, I broke up their communion with a line from Pushkin: *The aged sorcerer in anger said, This queen is evil from toe to head.* You know it?"

The sound of singing came from over the ridge, blurred by the megatherial voices. Colt stared abstractedly at the sky as the words were scribbled again in light.

"Their turn," he said. "The Good boys."

They stepped over ridges of snowy rock and stood for a moment surveying the other caravan. There was a semicircle of faces, gleaming benevolently in the firelight, handsome smiling faces. They were singing, under the pleasant aspect of the blue-eyed idol, a lusty slab from the great Bach's great Mass in B minor. While Valeska smiled a little cynically, Colt sidestepped into the baritone choir and sounded back tentatively for the words and music. They came easily; he was experiencing again, for the first time in many years, the delights of close harmony that move men to form barbershop quartets and Philharmonic Societies.

He sang the hearty, solid language, the crashing chords, from his chest, standing straight, bouncing the tones from his palate like the old glee-clubber that he was. Beside him he saw Lodz, a beatific smile on his face, chanting sonorously. Why were so many small men bassos?

Colt forgot himself and sang, let his voice swim out into the pool of sound and melt into harmony; when need was, he sang up, playing off against M. Lodz's basso and McNaughton's ringing tenor. And then he sang a sinister quarter-tone. It ended the bar on a gorgeously askew chord and got him very severely looked at. Raisuli Batar, baton in hand, frowned. Colt signaled wildly back that he couldn't help it.

It might have been lack of control, but it wasn't. It seemed that musical virtuosity was a gift to the dead. He had no choice in the matter—it was his nature that had dictated the quarter-tone. Raisuli Batar tapped a rock twice with the baton, then swept down, his left hand signaling volume, cuing in the bassos with his eyes.

The brilliant, crashing unison passage rang out. Damn! As though he had no control over his own voice, Colt sang not in unison but sharpening and flattening around the line, botching the grand melody completely.

He strode angrily from the semicircle of singers, back to Valeska. She passed the bottle with a twisted smile on her face.

"You tried to compromise," she said. "It can't be done. They didn't thank you for Stravinskying their Bach."

"Right," he said. "*But what do we do?*"

"It doesn't seem right," she brooded. "We shouldn't be the only in-betweeners. Five thousand years—more—they must appear more often. Then something happens to them. And they go away somewhere."

"Right," crowed Grandfather T'ang, drunker than ever. "Right, m'lass. And I know what happens to them. And I'll tell you what to do."

"Why?" asked Colt practically.

"Because I'm not as far outside as you think, children. Once I was as far in-between as you. I had my chance and I missed it—passed it up for the *suntori* and the dice games around the fires. Grandfather was a fool. I can't tell you any more than this: Get into the battle and observe rather closely. When you discover a very important secret, you will ascend to the Eighteenth Orbit and dwell forever, dancing and singing on the rings of Saturn. Or, to discard the gibberish, your psychic tissues so alter that you recognize a plane of existence more tenuous than ours; a plane, one suspects, more delectable. The mythological name for it is Heaven." He hugged his bottle and crooned affectionately to it:

*"Superiority in a person
Should better not
Nor should it—"*

"Does he know?" asked Colt, looking out into the long night.

"He wasn't lying this time. Shall we do it?"

"We shall. This waiting blasts my ethereal soul."

"You're an impatient cuss," she smiled at him. "You haven't seen me dance yet. I was a well-paid dancer once. It should be worth your while."

"Dance, then," he said, settling himself against a rock.

"You make the music. You know how."

He thought for a moment, then uncovered another bit of technique known to the dead. He began to send out mentally Debussy's *Claire de Lune*. She heard it, smiled at him as she caught the music, and began to dance.

Her body was not very good; certainly not as good as it had been. But as he studied the dancing, sometimes with eyes closed so that he could hear only the rustle of her feet on the snow and sometimes so abstracted that he could hear only the displacement of air as she moved, Colt was deeply stirred.

He tuned in on her thoughts, picking out the swiftly running stream, the skittering little point of consciousness that danced over them.

"Now I am a swan," said her thoughts while she danced to the music. "Now I am a swan, dying for love of the young prince who has wandered through the courtyard. And now I am the prince, very pretty and as dumb as a prince could be. Now I am his father the King, very wrathful and pompous. And now, and through it all, I was really the great stone gargoyle on the square top tower who saw all and grinned to himself."

She pirouetted to an end with the music, bowing with a stylized, satirically cloying grace. He applauded lustily.

"Unless you have other ideas," she said, "I would like to dance again." Her face was rosy and fresh-looking.

He began to construct music in his mind while she listened in and took little tentative steps. Colt started with a split-log-drum's beat, pulse speed, low and penetrating. He built up another rhythm overlaying it, a little slower, with wood-block timbre. It was louder than the first. Rapidly he constructed a series of seven polyrhythmic layers, from the bottom split-log pulse to a small, incessant snare-drum beat.

"I'm an animal now, a small, very arboreal animal. I can prick up my ears; my toes are opposed, so I can grasp a branch."

He added a bone-xylophone melody, very crude, of only three tones.

"My eyes are both in front of my face. My vision has become stereoscopic. I can sit up and handle leaves. I can pick insects from the branches I live in."

Colt augmented the xylophone melody with a loud, crude brass.

Valeska thought, "I'm bigger—my arms are longer. And I often walk little distances on the ground, on my feet and my arm knuckles."

Colt added a see-sawing, gutty-sounding string timbre, in a melody opposed to the xylophone and the brass.

"I'm bigger—bigger—too big for trees. And I eat grubs as well as leaves—and I walk almost straight up—see me walk!"

He watched her swinging along the ground, apish, with the memory of brachiation stamped in every limb. He modified the bone-xylophone's timbre to a woody ring, increased the melodic range to a full octave.

With tremendous effort Valeska heaved over an imaginary rock, chipped at it. "I'm making flint hand-axes. They kill animals bigger than I am—tigers and bears—see my kitchen heap, high as a mountain, full of their bones!"

He augmented with a unison choir of woodwinds and a jangling ten-string harp.

"I eat bread and drink beer and I pray to the Nile—I sing and I dance, I farm and I bake—see me spin rope! See me paint pictures on plaster!"

A wailing clarinet mourned through the rhythmic sea.

Valeska danced stately. "Yes—now I'm a man's woman—now I'm on top of the heap of the ages—now I'm a human—now I'm a woman...."

Colt stopped short the whole accumulation of percussion, melody and harmony in a score of timbres, cutting in precisely

a single blues piano that carried in its minor, sobbing-sad left hand all the sorrow of ages; in the serpentine-stabbing chords splashed gold by the right sang the triumph of man in his glory of metal and stone.

Valeska danced, sending out no words of what the dance was, for it was she, what she dreamed, what she had been, and what she was to be. The dance and the music were Valeska, and they ended when she was in Colt's arms. The brandy bottle dropped from his grip and smashed on the rock.

Their long, wordless communion was broken by a disjointed yell from the two sides of the ridge as fighting forces streamed to battle. From the Bad caravan came the yell, "Kill and maim! Destroy! Destroy!" And the Good caravan cried, "In the name of the right! For sanctity and peace on Earth! Defend the right!"

Colt and Valeska found themselves torn apart in the rush to attack, swept into the thick of the fighting. The thundering voices from above, and the lightning, were almost continuous. The blinding radiance rather than the night hampered the fighting.

They were battling with queer, outlandish things—frying pans, camp stools, table forks. One embattled defender of the right had picked up a piteously bleating kid and was laying about him with it, holding its tiny hooves in a bunch.

Colt saw skulls crack, but nobody gave way or even fell. The dead were immortal. Then what in blazes was this all about? There was something excruciatingly wrong somewhere, and he couldn't fathom what it was.

He saw the righteous and amiable Raisuli Batar clubbing away with a table leg; minutes later he saw the fiendish and amiable chief of the Bad men swinging about him with another.

Vaguely sensing that he ought perhaps to be on the side of the right, he picked up a kettle by the handle and looked about for someone to bean with it. He saw a face that might be that of a fiend strayed from Hell, eyes rolling hideously, teeth locked and grinding with rage as its owner carved away at a small-sized somebody with a broken-bladed axe.

He was on the verge of cracking the fiend out of Hell when it considered itself finished with its victim, temporarily at least, and turned to Colt. "Hello, there," snapped the fiend. "Show some life, will you?"

Colt started as he saw that the fiend was Lodz, one of the Good men. Bewildered, he strayed off, nearly being gouged in the face by Grandfather T'ang, who was happily swinging away with a jagged hunk of *suntori* bottle, not bothering to discriminate.

But how *did* one discriminate? It came over him very suddenly that one didn't and couldn't. The caravaneers were attacking each other. At that moment there came through a mental call from Valeska, who had just made the same discovery on her own. They joined and mounted a table, inspecting the sea of struggling human beings.

"It's all in the way you look at them," said Valeska softly.

Colt nodded. "There was only one caravan," he said in somber tones.

He experimented silently a bit, discovering that by a twiddle of the eyes he could convert Raisuli Batar into the Bad caravan leader, turban and all. And the same went for the Bad idol—a reverse twiddle converted it into the smiling, blue-eyed guardian of the Good caravan. It was like the optical illusion of the three shaded cubes that point one way or the other, depending on how you decide to see them.

"That was what Grandfather T'ang meant," said the woman. Her eyes drifted to the old man. He had just drained another bottle; with a businesslike swing against a rock he shattered the bottom into a splendid cutting tool and set to work again.

"There's no logic to it," Colt said forlornly. "None at all." Valeska smiled happily and hugged him.

Colt felt his cheek laid open.

"Bon soir. Guten Tag. Buon giorno. Buenos dias. Bon soir. Guten Tag. Buon—"

"You can stop that," said Colt, struggling to his feet. He cracked his head against a strut, hung on dazedly. "Where's—"

He inspected the two men standing before him with healthy grins. They wore the Red Army uniform under half-buttoned flying suits. The strut that had got in his way belonged to a big, black helicopter; amidships was blazoned the crimson star of the Soviet Union.

"You're well and all that, I fawncy?" asked one of the flyers. "We spotted you and landed—bunged up your cheek a bit—Volanov heah *would* try to overshoot."

"I'm fine," said Colt, feeling his bandage. "Why'n hell can't you Russians learn to speak American?"

The two soldiers exchanged smiles and glances. They obviously considered Colt too quaint for words. "Pile in, old chap. We can take you as far as Bokhara—we fuel at Samarkand. I—ah—suppose you have papers?"

Colt leaned against the strut and wearily shoved over his credentials. Everything would be all right. Chungking was in solid with the Reds at the moment. Everything would be all right.

"I fawncy," said Volanov, making conversation while his partner handled the helicopter vanes, "youah glad to see the lawst of all that."

Colt looked down, remembered, and wept.

"I find," I said as dryly as possible, "a certain familiarity—a nostalgic ring, as it were—toward the end of your tale." I was just drunk enough to get fancy with *The Three-Cornered Scar*.

"You do?" he asked. He leaned forward across the table. "*You do?*"

"I've read widely in such matters," I hastily assured him, pouring another glass of red wine.

He grinned glumly, sipping. "If I hadn't left half my spirit with Valeska that night I was dead," he remarked conversationally, "I'd smash your face in."

"That may be," I assented gracefully.

But I should say that he drank less like half a spirit than half a dozen.

[The end of *The Golden Road* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]