

ASTOUNDING

JAN. '43

Science Fiction 25¢



FOR VICTORY
BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS

**OPPOSITES
REACT**

by

WILL STEWART

JANUARY • 1943

A STREET AND SMITH PUBLICATION

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Title: Nothing but Gingerbread Left

Date of first publication: 1943

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

Date first posted: May 12, 2021

Date last updated: May 12, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210521

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NOTHING BUT GINGERBREAD LEFT

By
Henry Kuttner

First published *Astounding*, January 1943.

A story of a rhyme, of perfect rhythm, and the complete disruption of military machinery by a nursery jingle that could not be forgotten.

The only way to make people believe this story is to write it in German. And there's no point in doing that, for the German-speaking world is already starting to worry about gingerbread left.

I speak figuratively. It's safer. Very likely Rutherford, whose interests are equally divided between semantics and Basin Street, could create an English equivalent of gingerbread left, God forbid. As it is, the song, with its *reductio ad absurdum* of rhythm and sense, is meaningless in translation. Try translating Jabberwocky into German. So what?

The song, as Rutherford wrote it in German, had nothing to do with gingerbread, but, since the original is obviously unavailable, I'm substituting the closest thing to it that exists in English. It's lacking in that certain compelling perfection on which Rutherford worked for months, but it'll give you an idea.

We'll start, I suppose, with the night Rutherford threw a shoe at his son. He had reason. Phil Rutherford was in charge of semantics at the University, and he was battling a hangover and trying to correct papers at the same time. Physical disabilities had kept him out of the army, and he was brooding over that, wondering if he should gulp some more Sherman units of thiamin, and hating his students. The papers they had handed in were no good. For the most part, they smelled. Rutherford had an almost illicit love for words, and it distressed him to see them kicked around thus. As Humpty Dumpty had said, the question was which was to be the master.

Usually it wasn't the students. Jerry O'Brien had a good paper, though, and Rutherford went over it carefully, pencil in hand. The radio in the living room didn't bother him; the door was closed, anyhow. But, abruptly, the radio stopped.

"Hi," said Rutherford's thirteen-year-old son, poking his untidy head across the threshold. There was an ink smudge on the end of the youth's nose. "Hi, pop. Finished my homework. Can I go to the show?"

"It's too late." Rutherford said, glancing at his wrist watch. "Sorry. But you've an early class tomorrow."

"*Nom d'un plume,*" Bill murmured. He was discovering French.

"Out. I've got work to do. Go listen to the radio."

"They make with corn tonight. Oh, well—" Bill retreated, leaving the door ajar. From the other room came confused, muffled sounds. Rutherford returned to his work.

He became aware, presently, that Bill was repeating a monotonous, rhythmic string of phrases. Automatically Rutherford caught himself listening, straining to catch the words. When he did, they were meaningless—the familiar catch phrases of kids.

"Ibbety zibbety zibbety zam—"

It occurred to Rutherford that he had been hearing this for some time, the mystic doggerel formula for choosing sides—"and out goes *you!*" One of those things that stick in your mind rather irritatingly.

"Ibbety zibbety—" Bill kept chanting it in an absent-minded monotone, and Rutherford got up to close the door. It didn't quite stop. He could still hear just enough of the rhythmic noises to start his mind moving in a similar rhythm. Ibbety zibbety—the hell with it.

After a while Rutherford discovered that his lips were moving silently, and he shoved the papers back on his desk, muttering darkly. He was tired, that was it. And correcting exams required concentration. He was glad when the bell rang.

It was Jerry O'Brien, his honor student. Jerry was a tall, thin, dark boy with a passion for the same low-down music that attracted Rutherford. Now he came in grinning.

"Hi, prof," he greeted the older man. "I'm in. Just got my papers today."

"Swell. Sit down and tell me."

There wasn't much to tell, but it lasted quite a while. Bill hung around, listening avidly. Rutherford swung to glare at his son.

"Lay off that ibbety-zibbety stuff, will you?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. I didn't know I was—"

"For days he's been at it," Rutherford said glumly. "I can hear it in my sleep."

"Shouldn't bother a semanticist."

"Papers. Suppose I'd been doing important precision work. I mean really important. A string of words like that gets inside your head and you can't get it out."

"Especially if you're under any strain, or if you're concentrating a lot. Distracts your attention, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't bother *me*," Bill said.

Rutherford grunted. "Wait'll you're older and really have to concentrate, with a mind like a fine-edged tool. Precision's important. Look what the Nazis have done with it."

"Huh?"

"Integration," Rutherford said absently. "Training for complete concentration. The Germans spent years building a machine—well, they make a fetish out of wire-edged alertness. Look at the stimulant drugs they give their raiding pilots. They've ruthlessly cut out all distractions that might interfere with *uber alles*."

Jerry O'Brien lit a pipe. "They are hard to distract. German morale's a funny thing. They're convinced they're supermen, and that there's no weakness in *them*. I suppose, psychologically speaking, it'd be a nice trick to convince them of personal weakness."

"Sure. How? Semantics?"

"I dunno how. Probably it can't be done, except by blitzes. Even then, bombs aren't really an argument. Blowing a man to bits won't necessarily convince his comrades that he's a weakling. Nope, it'd be necessary to make Achilles notice he had a heel."

"Ibbety zibbety," Bill muttered.

"Like that," O'Brien said. "Get some crazy tune going around a guy's skull, and he'll find it difficult to concentrate. I know I do, sometimes, whenever I go for a thing like the Hut-Sut song."

Rutherford said suddenly, "Remember the dancing manias of the middle ages?"

"Form of hysteria, wasn't it? People lined up in queues and jitterbugged till they dropped."

“Rhythmic nervous exaltation. It’s never been satisfactorily explained. Life is based on rhythm—the whole universe is—but I won’t go cosmic on you. Keep it low-down, to the Basin Street level. Why do people go nuts about some kinds of music? Why did the ‘Marseillaise’ start a revolution?”

“Well, why?”

“Lord knows.” Rutherford shrugged. “But certain strings of phrases, not necessarily musical, which possess rhythm, rhyme, or alliteration, do stick with you. You simply can’t get ‘em out of your mind. And—” He stopped.

O’Brien looked at him. “What?”

“Imperfect semantics,” Rutherford said slowly. “I wonder. Look, Jerry. Eventually we forget things like the Hut-Sut. We can thrust ‘em out of our minds. But suppose you got a string of phrases you *couldn’t* forget? The perverse factor would keep you from erasing it mentally—the very effort to do so would cancel itself. Hm-m-m. Suppose you’re carefully warned not to mention Bill Fields’ nose. You keep repeating that to yourself ‘Don’t mention the nose.’ The words, eventually, fail to make sense. If you met Fields, you’d probably say, quite unconsciously, ‘Hello, Mr. Nose.’ See?”

“I think so. Like the story that if you meet a piebald horse, you’ll fall heir to a fortune if you don’t think about the horse’s tail till you’re past.”

“Exactly.” Rutherford looked pleased. “Get a perfect semantic formula and you can’t forget it. And the perfect formula would have everything. It’d have rhythm, and just enough sense to start you wondering what it meant. It wouldn’t necessarily mean anything, but—”

“Could such a formula be invented?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Combine language with mathematics and psychology, and something could be worked out. Could be, such a thing was accidentally written in the middle ages. What price the dance manias?”

“I don’t think I’d like it.” O’Brien grimaced. “Too much like hypnosis.”

“If it is, it’s self-hypnosis, and unconscious. That’s the beauty of it. Just for the hell of it—draw up a chair.” Rutherford reached for a pencil.

“Hey, pop,” Bill said, “why not write it in German?”

Rutherford and O’Brien looked at each other, startled. Slowly a gleam of diabolic understanding grew in their eyes.

“German?” Rutherford murmured. “You majored in it, didn’t you, Jerry?”

“Yeah. And you’re no slouch at it, either. Yeah—we *could* write it in German, couldn’t we? The Nazis must be getting plenty sick of the Horst Wessel song.”

“Just for the . . . uh . . . fun of it,” Rutherford said, “let’s try. Rhythm first. Catchy rhythm, with a break to avoid monotony. We don’t need a tune.” He scribbled for a bit. “It’s quite impossible, of course, and even if we did it, Washington probably wouldn’t be interested.”

“My uncle’s a senator,” O’Brien said blandly.

LEFT!

LEFT!

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in

STARVing condition with NOTHing but gingerbread LEFT

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children—

“Well, I might know something about it,” said Senator O’Brien.

The officer stared at the envelope he had just opened. "So? A few weeks ago you gave me this, not to be opened till you gave the word. Now what?"

"You've read it."

"I've read it. So you've been annoying the Nazi prisoners in that Adirondack hotel. You've got 'em dizzy repeating some German song I can't make head nor tail out of."

"Naturally. You don't know German. Neither do I. But it seems to have worked on the Nazis."

"My private report says they're dancing and singing a lot of the time."

"Not dancing, exactly. Unconscious rhythmic reflexes. And they keep repeating the . . . er . . . semantic formula."

"Got a translation?"

"Sure, but it's meaningless in English. In German it has the necessary rhythm. I've already explained—"

"I know, senator, I know. But the War Department has no time for vague theories."

"I request simply that the formula be transmitted frequently on broadcasts to Germany. It may be hard on the announcers, but they'll get over it. So will the Nazis, but by that time their morale will be shot. Get the Allied radios to co-operate—"

"Do you really believe in this?"

The senator gulped. "As a matter of fact, no. But my nephew almost convinced me. He helped Professor Rutherford work out the formula."

"Argued you into it?"

"Not exactly. But he keeps going around muttering in German. So does Rutherford. Anyway—this can do no harm. And I'm backing it to the limit."

"But—" The officer peered at the formula in German. "What possible harm can it do for people to repeat a song? How can it help us—"

LEFT!

LEFT!

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in

STARVing condition with NOTHING but gingerbread LEFT

LEFT—

"*Aber*," said Harben, "*aber, aber, aber!*"

"But me no buts," reported his superior officer, Eggerth. "The village must be searched completely. The High Command is quartering troops here tomorrow, on their way to the eastern front, and we must make sure there are no weapons hidden anywhere."

"*Aber* we search the village regularly."

"Then search it again," Eggerth ordered. "You know how those damned Poles are. Turn your back for a minute and they've snatched a gun out of thin air. We want no bad reports going back to the Führer. Now get out; I must finish *my* report, and it must be accurate." He thumbed through a sheaf of notes. "How many cows, how many sheep, the harvest possibilities—*ach*. Go away and let me concentrate. Search carefully."

"*Heil*," Harben said glumly, and turned. On the way out his feet found a familiar rhythm. He started to mutter something.

"Captain Harben!"

Harben stopped.

“What the devil are you saying?”

“Oh—the men have a new marching song. Nonsense, but it’s catchy. It is excellent to march to.”

“What is it?”

Harben made a deprecating gesture. “Meaningless. It goes ‘Left, left, left a wife and seventeen children—’”

Eggerth stopped him. “That. I’ve heard it. *Unsinn. Heil.*”

Heiling, Harben went away, his lips moving. Eggerth bent over the report, squinting in the bad light. Ten head of cattle, scarcely worth slaughtering for their meat, but the cows giving little milk. . . . Hm-m-m. Grain—the situation was bad there, too. How the Poles managed to eat at all—they’d be glad enough to have gingerbread, Eggerth thought. For that matter, gingerbread was nutritious, wasn’t it? Why were they in starving condition if there was still gingerbread? Maybe there wasn’t *much*—

Still, why nothing *but* gingerbread? Could it be, perhaps, that the family disliked it so much they ate up everything else first? A singularly shortsighted group. Possibly their ration cards allowed them nothing but gingerbread *LEFT*

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in

STARVing condition—

Eggerth caught himself sharply, and his pencil began to move again. The grain—he figured rather more slowly than usual, because his mind kept skipping back to a ridiculous rhythm. *Verdammt!* He would not—

Inhabitants of the village, thirty families, or was it forty? Forty, yes. Men, women, children—small families mostly. Still, one could seldom expect to find seventeen children. With that many, a *frau* could be wealthy through bounties alone. Seventeen children. In starving condition. Why didn’t *they* eat the gingerbread? Ridiculous. What, in the name of *Gott*, did it matter whether seventeen nonexistent, completely hypothetical children ate gingerbread, or, for that matter, whether they ate nothing but gingerbread LEFT

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children—

“Hell fire and damnation!” exploded Eggerth, looking furiously at his watch. “I might have finished the report by the time. Seventeen children, *pfui!*”

Once more he bent to his work, determined not to think of . . . of—

But it nibbled at the corners of his mind, like an intrusive mouse. Each time he recognized its presence, he could thrust it away. Unfortunately, Eggerth was repeating to his subconscious, “Don’t think of it. Forget it.”

“Forget what?” asked the subconscious automatically.

“Nothing but gingerbread LEFT—”

“Oh, yeah?” said the subconscious.

The search party wasn’t working with its accustomed zeal and accuracy. The men’s minds didn’t seem entirely on their business. Harben barked orders, conscious of certain distractions—sweat trickling down inside his uniform, the harsh scratchiness of the cloth, the consciousness of the Poles silently watching and waiting. That was the worse of being in an army of occupation. You always felt that the conquered people were waiting. Well—

“Search,” Harben commanded. “By pairs. Be thorough.”

And they were thorough enough. They marched here and there through the village, to a familiar catchy rhythm, and their lips moved. Which, of course, was harmless. The only untoward incident occurred in an attic which two soldiers were searching. Harben wandered in to supervise. He was astonished to see one of his men open a cupboard, stare directly at a rusty rifle barrel, and then shut the door again. Briefly Harben was at a loss. The soldier moved on.

“Attention!” Harben said. Heels clicked. “Vogel, I saw that.”

“Sir?” Vogel seemed honestly puzzled, his broad, youthful face blank.

“We are searching for guns. Or, perhaps, the Poles have bribed you to overlook certain matters—eh?”

Vogel’s cheeks reddened. “No, sir.”

Harben opened the cupboard and took out a rusty, antique matchlock. It was obviously useless as a weapon now, but nevertheless it should have been confiscated. Vogel’s jaw dropped.

“Well?”

“I . . . didn’t see it, sir.”

Harben blew out his breath angrily. “I’m not an idiot. I saw you, man! You looked right at that gun. Are you trying to tell me—”

There was a pause. Vogel said stolidly, “I did not see it, sir.”

“Ah? You are growing absent-minded. You would not take bribes, Vogel; I know you’re a good party man. But when you do anything, you must keep your wits about you. Woolgathering is dangerous business in an occupied village. Resume your search.”

Harben went out, wandering. The men definitely seemed slightly distracted by something. What the devil could be preying on their minds so that Vogel, for example, could look right at a gun and not see it? Nerves? Ridiculous. Nordics were noted for self-control. Look at the way the men moved—their co-ordinated rhythm that bespoke perfect military training. Only through discipline could anything valuable be attained. The body and the mind were, in fact, machines, and should be controlled. There a squad went down the street, marching left, left, left a wife and—

That absurd song. Harben wondered where it had come from. It had grown like a rumor. Troops stationed in the village had passed it on, but where they had learned it Heaven knew. Harben grinned. When he got leave, he’d remember to tell the lads in Unter den Linden about that ridiculous song—it was just absurd enough to stick in your mind. Left. Left.

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in
STARVing condition—

After a while the men reported back; they hadn’t found anything. The antique flintlock wasn’t worth bothering about, though, as a matter of routine, it must be reported and the Polish owner questioned. Harben marched the men back to their quarters and went to Eggerth’s billet. Eggerth, however, was still busy, which was unusual, for he was usually a fast worker. He glowered at Harben.

“Wait. I cannot be interrupted now.” And he returned to his scribbling. The floor was already littered with crumpled papers.

Harben found an old copy of *Jugend* that he hadn’t read, and settled himself in a corner. An article on youth training was interesting. Harben turned a page, and then realized that he’d lost the thread. He went back.

He read a paragraph, said, “Eh?” and skipped back again. The words were there; they entered his mind; they made sense—of course. He was concentrating. He wasn’t allowing that damned marching song to interfere, with its gingerbread LEFT

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children—

Harben never did finish that article.

Witter of the Gestapo sipped cognac and looked across the table at Herr Doktor Schneider. Outside the café, sunlight beat down strongly on the Konigstrasse.

“The Russians—” Schneider said.

“Never mind the Russians,” Witter broke in hastily. “I am still puzzled by that Polish affair. Guns—machine guns—hidden in that village, after it had been searched time and again. It is ridiculous. There were no raids over that locality recently; there was no way for the Poles to have got those guns in the last few weeks.”

“Then they must have had them hidden for more than a few weeks.”

“Hidden? We search carefully, Herr Doktor. I am going to interview that man Eggerth again. And Harben. Their records are good, but—” Witter fingered his mustache nervously. “No. We can take nothing for granted. You are a clever man; what do you make of it?”

“That the village was *not* well searched.”

“Yet it was. Eggerth and Harben maintain that, and their men support them. It’s ridiculous to suppose that bulky machine guns could have been passed over like little automatics that can be hidden under a board. So. When the troops marched into that village, the Poles killed forty-seven German soldiers by machine gunning them from the rooftops.” Witter’s fingers beat on the table top in a jerky rhythm.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap-ta-tap-ta—

“Eh?” Witter said. “I didn’t catch—”

“Nothing. Merely that you will, of course, investigate carefully. You have a regular routine for such investigations, eh? Well, then—it is simply a matter of scientific logic, as in my own work.”

“How is that progressing?” Witter asked, going off at a tangent.

“Soon. Soon.”

“I have heard that before. For some weeks, in fact. Have you run into a snag? Do you need help?”

“*Ach*, no,” Schneider snapped, with sudden irritation. “I want no damn fool assistants. This is precision work, Witter. It calls for split-second accuracy. I have been specially trained in thermodynamics, and I know just when a button should be pressed, or an adjustment made. The heat-radiation of disintegrating bodies—” Presently Schneider stopped, confused. “Perhaps, though, I need a rest. I’m fagged out. My mind’s stale. I concentrate, and suddenly I find I have botched an important experiment. Yesterday I had to add exactly six drops of a . . . a fluid to a mixture I’d prepared, and before I knew it the hypo was empty, and I’d spoiled the whole thing.”

Witter scowled. “Is something worrying you? Preying on your mind? We cannot afford to have that. If it is your nephew—”

“No, no. I am not worried about Franz. He’s probably enjoying himself in Paris. I suppose I’m . . . *damn!*” Schneidler smashed his fist down on the table. “It is ridiculous! A crazy song!”

Witter raised an eyebrow and waited.

“I have always prided myself on my mind. It is a beautifully coherent and logical machine. I could understand its failing through a sensible cause—worry, or even madness. But when I can’t get an absurd nonsense rhyme out of my head—I broke some valuable apparatus today,” Schneidler confessed, compressing his lips. “Another spoiled experiment. When I realized what I’d done, I swept the whole mess off the table. I do not want a vacation; it is important that I finish my work quickly.”

“It is important that you finish,” Witter said. “I advise you to take that vacation. The Bavarian Alps are pleasant. Fish, hunt, relax completely. Do not think about your work. I would not mind going with you, but—” He shrugged.

Storm troopers passed along the Konigstrasse. They were repeating words that made Schneidler jerk nervously. Witter’s hands resumed their rhythm on the table top.

“I shall take that vacation,” Schneidler said.

“Good. It will fix you up. Now I must get on with my investigation of that Polish affair, and then a check-up on some Luftwaffe pilots—”

The Herr Doktor Schneidler, four hours later, sat alone in a train compartment, already miles out of Berlin. The countryside was green and pleasant outside the windows. Yet, for some reason, Schneidler was not happy.

He lay back on the cushions, relaxing. Think about nothing. That was it. Let the precision tool of his mind rest for a while. Let his mind wander free. Listen to the somnolent rhythm of the wheels, *clickety-clickety*—

CLICK!

CLICK!

CLICK a wife and CLICKenteen children in

STARVing condition with NOTHING but gingerbread *LEFT*—

Schneidler cursed thickly, jumped up, and yanked the cord. He was going back to Berlin. But not by train. Not in any conveyance that had wheels. *Gott, no!*

The Herr Doktor walked back to Berlin. At first he walked briskly. Then his face whitened, and he lagged. But the compelling rhythm continued. He went faster, trying to break step. For a while that worked. Not for long. His mind kept slipping his gears, and each time he’d find himself going *LEFT*—

He started to run. His beard streaming, his eyes aglare, the Herr Doktor Schneidler, great brain and all, went rushing madly back to Berlin, but he couldn’t outpace the silent voice that said, faster and faster, *LEFT*

LEFT

LEFTawifeandSEVenteenchildrenin

STARVingcondition—

“Why did that raid fail?” Witter asked.

The Luftwaffe pilot didn’t know. Everything had been planned, as usual, well in advance. Every possible contingency had been allowed for, and the raid certainly shouldn’t have failed. The R. A. F. planes should have been taken by surprise. The Luftwaffe should have dropped their bombs on the targets and retreated across the Channel without difficulty.

“You had your shots before going up?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kurtman, your bombardier, was killed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Inexcusably?”

There was a pause. Then—“Yes, sir.”

“He could have shot down that Hurricane that attacked you?”

“I . . . yes, sir.”

“Why did he fail?”

“He was . . . singing, sir.”

Witter leaned back in his chair. “He was singing. And I suppose he got so interested in the song that he forgot to fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, why in the name of . . . of— Why didn’t you dodge that Hurricane?”

“I was singing, too, sir.”

The R. A. F. were coming over. The man at the anti-aircraft whistled between his teeth and waited. The moonlight would help. He settled himself in the padded seat and peered into the eyepiece. All was ready. Tonight there were at least some British ships that would go raiding no more.

It was a minor post in occupied France, and the man wasn’t especially important, except that he was a good marksman. He looked up, watching a little cloud luminous in the sky. He was reminded of a photographic negative. The British planes would be dark, unlike the cloud, until the searchlights caught them. Then—

Ah, well. Left. Left. Left a wife and seventeen—

They had sung that at the canteen last night, chanting it in chorus. A catchy piece. When he got back to Berlin—if ever—he must remember the words. How did they go?

—in starving condition—

His thoughts ran on independently of the automatic rhythm in his brain. Was he dozing? Startled, he shook himself, and then realized that he was still alert. There was no danger. The song kept him awake, rather than inducing slumber. It had a violent, exciting swing that got into a man’s blood with its LEFT

LEFT

LEFT a wife—

However, he must remain alert. When the R. A. F. bombers came over, he must do what he had to do. And they were coming now. Distantly he could hear the faint drone of their motors, pulsing monotonously like the song, bombers for Germany, starving condition, with nothing but gingerbread

LEFT!

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in

STARVing condition with—

Remember the bombers, your hand on the trigger, your eye to the eyepiece, with nothing but gingerbread

LEFT!

LEFT

LEFT a wife and—
Bombers are coming, the British are coming, but don't fire too quickly, just wait till they're closer, and LEFT
LEFT
LEFT a wife and there are their motors, and there go the searchlights, and there they come over, in starving condition with nothing but gingerbread
LEFT!
LEFT!
LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in—
They were gone. The bombers had passed over. He hadn't fired at all. He'd *forgotten!*
They'd passed over. Not one was left. Nothing was left. Nothing but gingerbread
LEFT!

The Minister of Propaganda looked at the report as though it might suddenly turn into Stalin and bite him. "No," he said firmly. "No, Witter. If this is false, it is false. If it is true, we dare not admit it."

"I don't see why," Witter argued. "It's that song. I've been checking up for a long time, and it's the only logical answer. The thing has swept the German-speaking world. Or it soon will."

"And what harm can a song do?"

Witter tapped the report. "You read this. The troops breaking ranks and doing . . . what is it? . . . snake dances! And singing that piece all the while."

"Forbid them to sing it." But the minister's voice was dubious.

"*Ja*, but can they be forbidden to think it? They *always* think of what is *verboten*. They can't help it. It's a basic human instinct."

"That is what I mean when I said we couldn't admit the menace of this—song, Witter. It mustn't be made important to Germans. If they consider it merely as an absurd string of words, they'll forget it. Eventually," the minister added.

"The Führer—"

"He must not know. He must not hear about this. He is a nervous type, Witter; you realize that. I hope he will not hear the song. But, even if he does, he *must not* realize that it is potentially dangerous."

"Potentially?"

The minister gestured significantly. "Men have killed themselves because of that song. The scientist Schneidler was one. A nervous type. A manic-depressive type, in fact. He brooded over the fact that the ginger—that the phrases stuck in his mind. In a depressive mood, he swallowed poison. There have been others. Witter, between ourselves, this is extremely dangerous. Do you know why?"

"Because it's—absurd?"

"Yes. There is a poem, perhaps you know it—life is real, life is earnest. Germany believes that. We are a logical race. We conquer through logic, because Nordics are the superrace. And if supermen discover that they cannot control their minds—"

Witter sighed. "It seems strange that a song should be so important."

"There is no weapon against it. If we admit that it is dangerous, we double or triple its menace. At present, many people find it hard to concentrate. Some find rhythmic movements

necessary—uncontrollable. Imagine what would happen if we forbade the people to think of the song.”

“Can’t we use psychology? Make it ridiculous—explain it away?”

“It is ridiculous already. It makes no pretense at being anything more than an absurd string of nearly meaningless words. And we can’t admit it *has* to be explained away. Also, I hear that some are finding treasonable meanings in it, which is the height of nonsense.”

“Oh? How?”

“Famine. The necessity for large families. Even desertion of the Nazi ideal. Er . . . even the ridiculous idea that gingerbread refers to—” The minister glanced up at the picture on the wall.

Witter looked startled, and, after a hesitant pause, laughed. “I never thought of that. Silly. What I always wondered was why they were starving when there was still plenty of gingerbread. Is it possible to be allergic to gingerbread?”

“I do not think so. The gingerbread may have been poisoned—a man who would desert his family might have cause to hate them, also. Perhaps hate them enough to— *Captain Witter!*”

There was a blank silence. Presently Witter got up, heeled, and departed, carefully breaking step. The minister looked again at the picture on the wall, tapped the bulky report before him, and shoved it away to examine a typewritten sheaf which was carefully labeled IMPORTANT. It was important. In half an hour the Führer would broadcast a speech, one for which the world had been waiting. It would explain certain things about dubious matters, such as the Russian campaign. And it was a good speech—excellent propaganda. There were to be two broadcasts, the first to Germany, the second to the rest of the world.

The minister rose and walked back and forth on the rich carpet. His lip lifted in a sneer. The way to conquer any enemy was to crush him—face him and smash him. If the rest of Germany had his own mentality, his own self-confidence, that ridiculous song would lose all its force.

“So,” the minister said. “It goes so. Left. Left. Left a wife and seventeen children—so. It cannot harm me. It can get no hold on my mind. I repeat it, but only when I wish to do so; and I wish to do so to prove that the doggerel is futile—on me, anyway. So. Left. Left. Left a wife —”

Back and forth strode the Minister of Propaganda, his hard, clipped voice snappily intoning the phrases. This wasn’t the first time. He often repeated the song aloud—but, of course, merely to prove to himself that he was stronger than it.

Adolf Hitler was thinking about gingerbread and Russia. There were other problems, too. It was difficult being Leader. Eventually, when a better man came along, he would step out, his work done. The well-worn record slipped from its groove, and Hitler pondered the speech he held. Yes, it was good. It explained much—why things had gone wrong in Russia, why the English invasion had failed, why the English were doing the impossible by way of raiding the continent. He had worried about those problems. They were not really problems, but the people might not understand, and might lose confidence in their Führer. However, the speech would explain everything—even Hess. Goebbels had worked for days on the psychological effects of the speech, and it was, therefore, doubly important that it go through without a hitch. Hitler reached for an atomizer and sprayed his throat, though that was really unnecessary. His voice was in top shape.

It would be distressing if—

Pfui! There would be no hitch. The speech was too important. He had made speeches before, swayed people with the weapon of his voice. The crucial point, of course, was the reference to Russia and the ill-fated spring campaign. Yet Goebbels had a beautiful explanation; it was true, too.

“It is true,” Hitler said aloud.

Well, it was. And sufficiently convincing. From the Russian discussion he would go on to Hess, and then—

But the Russian question—that was vital. He must throw all his power into the microphones at that moment. He rehearsed mentally. A pause. Then, in a conversational voice, he would say, “At last I may tell you the truth about our Russian campaign, and why it was a triumph of strategy for German arms—”

He’d prove it, too.

But he must not forget for a moment how vitally important this speech was, and especially the crucial point in it. Remember. Remember. Do it exactly as rehearsed. Why, if he failed—

There was no such word.

But *if* he failed—

No. Even if he did—

But he wouldn’t. He mustn’t. He never had. And this was a crisis. Not an important one, after all, he supposed, though the people were no longer wholeheartedly behind him. Well, what was the worst that could happen? He might be unable to make the speech. It would be postponed. There could be explanations. Goebbels could take care of that. It *wasn’t* important.

Don’t think about it.

On the contrary, think about it. Rehearse again. The pause. “At last I may tell you—”

It was time.

All over Germany people were waiting for the speech. Adolf Hitler stood before the microphones, and he was no longer worried. At the back of his mind, he created a tiny phonograph record that said, over and over, “Russia. Russia. Russia.” It would remind him what to do, at the right moment. Meanwhile, he launched into his speech.

It was good. It was a Hitler speech.

“Now!” said the record.

Hitler paused, taking a deep breath, throwing his head arrogantly back. He looked out at the thousands of faces beneath his balcony. But he wasn’t thinking about them. He was thinking of the pause, and the next line; and the pause lengthened.

Important! Remember! Don’t fail!

Adolf Hitler opened his mouth. Words came out. Not quite the right words.

Ten seconds later Adolf Hitler was cut off the air.

It wasn’t Hitler personally who spoke to the world a few hours later. Goebbels had had a record made, and the transcription, oddly enough, didn’t mention Russia. Or any of the vital questions that had been settled so neatly. The Führer simply couldn’t talk about those questions. It wasn’t mike fright, exactly. Whenever Hitler reached the crucial point in his speech, he turned green, gritted his teeth, and said—the wrong thing. He couldn’t get over that semantic bloc. The more he tried, the less he succeeded. Finally Goebbels saw what was happening and called it off.

The world broadcast was emasculated. At the time there was considerable discussion as to why Hitler hadn’t stuck to his announced program. He’d intended to mention Russia. Why,

then—

Not many people knew. But more people will know now. In fact, a lot of people in Germany are going to know. Things get around there. Planes go over and drop leaflets, and people whisper, and they'll remember a certain catchy German stanza that's going the rounds.

Yeah. Maybe this particular copy of Astounding will find its way to England, and maybe an R. A. F. pilot will drop it near Berlin, or Paris, for that matter. Word will get around. There are lots of men on the continent who can read English.

And they'll talk.

They won't believe, at first. But they'll keep their eyes open. And there's a catchy little rhythm they'll remember. Some day the story will reach Berlin or Berchtesgarden. Some day it'll reach the guy with the little mustache and the big voice.

And, a little while later—days or weeks, it doesn't matter—Goebbels is going to walk into a big room, and there he's going to see Adolf Hitler goose-stepping around and yelling:

LEFT

LEFT

LEFT a wife and SEVenteen children in

STARVing condition with NOTHING but gingerbread *LEFT*—

THE END.

[The end of *Nothing but Gingerbread Left* by Henry Kuttner]