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THE LAKE OF  
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*A Fantastic Novelet*

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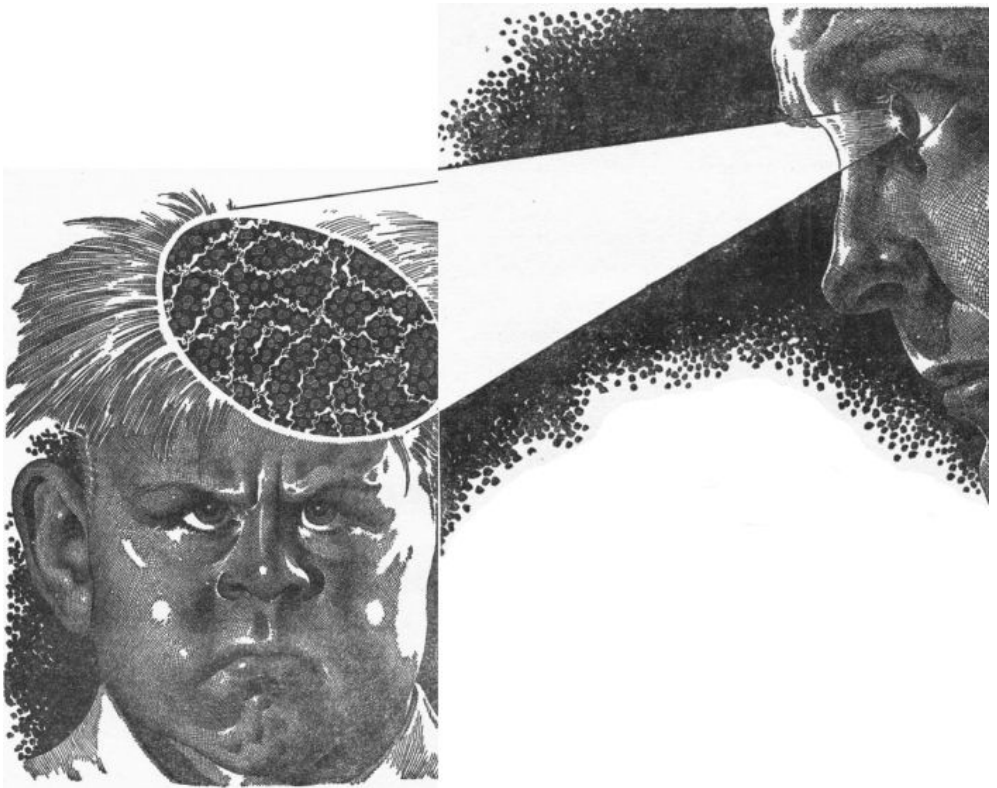
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I focussed down real sharp on Junior

# COLD WAR

A NOVELET OF THE HOGBENS

By

HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, October 1949.

*When the Pughs become a mite too troublesome, Grandpa Hogben proves himself a creature of infinite resource!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Last of the Pughs*

I'll never have a cold in the haid again without I think of little Junior Pugh. Now there was a repulsive brat if ever I saw one. Built like a little gorilla, he was. Fat, pasty face, mean look, eyes so close together you could poke 'em both out at once with one finger. His paw thought the world of him though. Maybe that was natural, seeing as how little Junior was the image of his pappy.

"The last of the Pughs," the old man used to say, stickin' his chest out and beamin' down at the little gorilla. "Finest little lad that ever stepped."

It made my blood run cold sometimes to look at the two of 'em together. Kinda sad, now, to think back to those happy days when I didn't know either of 'em. You may not believe it but them two Pughs, father and son, between 'em came within *that* much of conquerin' the world.

Us Hogbens is quiet folks. We like to keep our heads down and lead quiet lives in our own little valley, where nobody comes near withouten we say so. Our neighbors and the folks in the village are used to us by now. They know we try hard not to act conspicuous. They make allowances.

If Paw gets drunk, like last week, and flies down the middle of Main Street in his red underwear most people make out they don't notice, so's not to embarrass Maw. They know he'd walk like a decent Christian if he was sober.

The thing that druv Paw to drink that time was Little Sam, which is our baby we keep in a tank down-cellar, startin' in to teethe again. First time since the War Between the States. We'd figgered he was through teething, but with Little Sam you never can tell. He was mighty restless, too.

A pefesser we keep in a bottle told us once Little Sam e-mitted sub-sonic somethings when he yells but that's just his way of talking. Don't mean a thing. It makes your nerves twiddle, that's all. Paw can't stand it. This time it even woke up Grandpaw in the attic and he hadn't stirred since Christmas. First thing after he got his eyes open he bust out madder'n a wet hen at Paw.

"I see ye, wittold knave that ye are!" he howled. "Flying again, is it? Oh, sic a reowfule sigte! I'll ground ye, ywis!" There was a far-away thump.

"You made me fall a good ten feet!" Paw hollered from away down the valley. "It ain't fair. I could of busted something!"

"Ye'll bust us all, with your dronken carelessness," Grandpaw said. "Flying in full sight of the neighbors! People get burned at the stake for less. You want mankind to find out all about us? Now shut up and let me tend to Baby."

Grandpaw can always quiet the baby if nobody else can. This time he sung him a little song in Sanskrit and after a bit they was snoring a duet.

I was fixing up a dingus for Maw to sour up some cream for sour-cream biscuits. I didn't have much to work with but an old sled and some pieces of wire but I didn't need much. I was trying to point the top end of the wire north-northeast when I seen a pair of checked pants rush by in the woods.

It was Uncle Lem. I could hear him thinking. “It *ain’t* me!” he was saying, real loud, inside his haid. “Git back to yer work, Saunk. I ain’t within a mile of you. Yer Uncle Lem’s a fine old feller and never tells lies. Think I’d fool ye, Saunkie boy?”

“You shore would,” I thunk back. “If you could. What’s up, Uncle Lem?”

---

At that he slowed down and started to saunter back in a wide circle.

“Oh, I just had an idy yer Maw might like a mess of blackberries,” he thunk, kicking a pebble very nonchalant. “If anybody asks you say you ain’t seen me. It’s no lie. You ain’t.”

“Uncle Lem,” I thunk, real loud, “I gave Maw my bounden word I wouldn’t let you out of range without me along, account of the last time you got away—”

“Now, now, my boy,” Uncle Lem thunk fast. “Let bygones be bygones.”

“You just can’t say no to a friend, Uncle Lem,” I reminded him, taking a last turn of the wire around the runner. “So you wait a shake till I get this cream soured and we’ll both go together, wherever it is you have in mind.”

I saw the checked pants among the bushes and he come out in the open and give me a guilty smile. Uncle Lem’s a fat little feller. He means well, I guess, but he can be talked into most anything by most anybody, which is why we have to keep a close eye on him.

“How you gonna do it?” he asked me, looking at the cream-jug. “Make the little critters work faster?”

“Uncle Lem!” I said. “You know better’n that. Cruelty to dumb animals is something I can’t abide. Them there little critters work hard enough souring milk the way it is. They’re such teentsy-weentsy fellers I kinda feel sorry for ’em. Why, you can’t even see ’em without you go kinda crosseyed when you look. Paw says they’re enzymes. But they can’t be. They’re too teeny.”

“Teeny is as teeny does,” Uncle Lem said. “How you gonna do it, then?”

“This here gadget,” I told him, kinda proud, “will send Maw’s cream jug ahead into next week some time. This weather, don’t take cream more’n a couple of days but I’m giving it plenty of time. When I bring it back—bingo, it’s sour.” I set the jug on the sled.

“I never seen such a do-lass brat,” Uncle Lem said, stepping forward and bending a wire crosswise. “You better do it thataway, on account of the thunderstorm next Tuesday. All right now, shoot her off.”

So I shot her off. When she come back, sure enough, the cream was sour enough to walk a mouse. Crawling up the can there was a hornet from next week, which I squashed. Now that was a mistake. I knowed it the minute I touched the jug. Dang Uncle Lem, anyhow.

He jumped back into the underbrush, squealing real happy.

“Fooled you that time, you young stinker,” he yelled back. “Let’s see you get your thumb outa the middle of next week!”

It was the time-lag done it. I mighta knowed. When he crossed that wire he didn’t have no thunderstorm in mind at all. Took me nigh onto ten minutes to work myself loose, account of some feller called Inertia, who mixes in if you ain’t careful when you fiddle around with time. I don’t understand much about it myself. I ain’t got my growth yet. Uncle Lem says he’s already forgot more’n I’ll ever know.

With that head start I almost lost him. Didn’t even have time to change into my store-bought clothes and I knowed by the way he was all dressed up fit to kill he was headed for somewheres fancy.

He was worried, too. I kept running into little stray worrisome thoughts he'd left behind him, hanging like teeny little mites of clouds on the bushes. Couldn't make out much on account of they was shredding away by the time I got there but he'd shore done something he shouldn't. That much *anybody* coulda told. They went something like this:

“Worry, worry—wish I hadn't done it—oh, heaven help me if Grandpaw ever finds out—oh, them nasty Pughs, how could I a-been such a fool? Worry, worry—pore ole feller, such a good soul, too, never done nobody no harm and look at me now.

“That Saunk, too big for his britches, teach him a thing or two, ha-ha. Oh, worry, worry—never mind, brace up, you good ole boy, everything's bound to turn out right in the end. You deserve the best, bless you, Lemuel. Grandpaw'll never find out.”

Well, I seen his checkered britches high-tailing through the woods after a bit but I didn't catch up to him until he was down the hill, across the picnic grounds at the edge of town and pounding on the sill of the ticket-window at the railroad station with a Spanish dubloon he snitched from Paw's sea-chest.

It didn't surprise me none to hear him asking for a ticket to State Center. I let him think I hadn't caught up. He argued something turrible with the man behind the window but finally he dug down in his britches and fetched up a silver dollar, and the man calmed down.

The train was already puffing up smoke behind the station when Uncle Lem darted around the corner. Didn't leave me much time but I made it too—just. I had to fly a little over the last half-dozen yards but I don't think anybody noticed.

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Once when I was just a little shaver there was a Great Plague in London, where we were living at the time, and all us Hogbens had to clear out. I remember the hullabaloo in the city but looking back now it don't seem a patch on the hullabaloo in State Center station when the train pulled in. Times have changed, I guess.

Whistles blowing, horns honking, radios yelling bloody murder—seems like every invention in the last two hundred years has been noisier than the one before it. Made my head ache until I fixed up something Paw once called a raised decibel threshold, which was pure showing-off.

Uncle Lem didn't know I was anywhere around. I took care to think real quiet but he was so wrapped up in his worries he wasn't paying no mind to nothing. I followed him through the crowds in the station and out onto a wide street full of traffic. It was a relief to get away from the trains.

I always hate to think what's going on inside the boiler, with all the little bitty critters so small you can't hardly see 'em, pore things, flying around all hot and excited and bashing their heads together. It seems plumb pitiable.

Of course, it just don't do to think what's happening inside the automobiles that go by.

Uncle Lem knowed right where he was headed. He took off down the street so fast I had to keep reminding myself not to fly, trying to keep up. I kept thinking I ought to get in touch with the folks at home, in case this turned into something I couldn't handle, but I was plumb stopped everywhere I turned. Maw was at the church sociable that afternoon and she whopped me the last time I spoke to her outa thin air right in front of the Reverend Jones. He ain't used to us Hogbens yet.

Paw was daid drunk. No good trying to wake him up. And I was scared to death I *would* wake the baby if I tried to call on Grandpaw.

Uncle Lem scuttled right along, his checkered legs a-twinkling. He was worrying at the top of his mind, too. He'd caught sight of a crowd in a side-street gathered around a big truck, looking up at a man standing on it and waving bottles in both hands.

He seemed to be making a speech about headaches. I could hear him all the way to the corner. There was big banners tacked along the sides of the truck that said, PUGH HEADACHE CURE.

"Oh, worry, worry!" Uncle Lem thunk. "Oh, bless my toes, what *am* I going to do? I never *dreamed* anybody'd marry Lily Lou Mutz. Oh, worry!"

Well, I reckon we'd all been surprised when Lily Lou Mutz up and got herself a husband awhile back—around ten years ago, I figgered. But what it had to do with Uncle Lem I couldn't think. Lily Lou was just about the ugliest female that ever walked. Ugly ain't no word for her, pore gal.

Grandpaw said once she put him in mind of a family name of Gorgon he used to know. Not that she wasn't a good-hearted critter. Being so ugly, she put up with a lot in the way of rough acting-up from the folks in the village—the riff-raff lot, I mean.

She lived by herself in a little shack up the mountain and she musta been close onto forty when some feller from the other side of the river come along one day and rocked the whole valley right back on its heels by asking her to marry up with him. Never saw the feller myself but I heard tell he wasn't no beauty-prize winner neither.

Come to think of it, I told myself right then, looking at the truck—come to think of it, feller's name was Pugh.



## CHAPTER II

### *A Fine Old Feller*

Next thing I knowed, Uncle Lem had spotted somebody under a lamp-post on the sidewalk, at the edge of the crowd. He trotted over. It seemed to be a big gorilla and a little gorilla, standing there watching the feller on the truck selling bottles with both hands.

"Come and get it," he was yelling. "Come and get your bottle of Pugh's Old Reliable Headache Cure while they last!"

"Well, Pugh, here I am," Uncle Lem said, looking up at the big gorilla. "Hello, Junior," he said right afterward, glancing down at the little gorilla. I seen him shudder a little.

You shore couldn't blame him for that. Two nastier specimens of the human race I never did see in all my born days. If they hadn't been *quite* so pasty-faced or just the least mite slimmer, maybe they wouldn't have put me so much in mind of two well-fed slugs, one growed-up and one baby-sized. The paw was all dressed up in a Sunday-meeting suit with a big gold watch-chain across his front and the way he strutted you'd a thought he'd never had a good look in a mirror.

"Howdy, Lem," he said, casual-like. "Right on time, I see. Junior, say howdy to Mister Lem Hogben. You owe Mister Hogben a lot, sonny." And he laughed a mighty nasty laugh.

Junior paid him no mind. He had his beady little eyes fixed on the crowd across the street. He looked about seven years old and mean as they come.

"Shall I do it now, paw?" he asked in a squeaky voice. "Can I let 'em have it now, paw? Huh, paw?" From the tone he used, I looked to see if he'd got a machine-gun handy. I didn't see none but if looks was ever mean enough to kill Junior Pugh could of mowed the crowd right down.

"Manly little feller, ain't he, Lem?" Paw Pugh said, real smug. "I tell you, I'm mighty proud of this youngster. Wish his dear old grandpaw coulda lived to see him. A fine old family line, the Pughs is. Nothing like it anywhere. Only trouble is, Junior's the last of his race. You see why I got in touch with you, Lem."

Uncle Lem shuddered again. "Yep," he said. "I see, all right. But you're wasting your breath, Pugh. I ain't a-gonna do it."

Young Pugh spun around in his tracks.

"Shall I let him have it, paw?" he squeaked, real eager. "Shall I, paw? Now, paw? Huh?"

"Shaddup, sonny," the big feller said and he whammed the little feller across the side of the haid. Pugh's hands was like hams. He shore was built like a gorilla.

The way his great big arms swung down from them big hunched shoulders, you'd of thought the kid would go flying across the street when his paw whopped him one. But he was a burly little feller. He just staggered a mite and then shook his haid and went red in the face.

He yelled out, loud and squeaky, "Paw, I warned you! The last time you whammed me I warned you! Now I'm gonna let you have it!"

He drew a deep breath and his two little teeny eyes got so bright I coulda sworn they was gonna touch each other across the middle of his nose. His pasty face got bright red.

"Okay, Junior," Paw Pugh said, real hasty. "The crowd's ready for you. Don't waste your strength on me, sonny. Let the crowd have it!"

Now all this time I was standing at the edge of the crowd, listening and watching Uncle Lem. But just then somebody jiggled my arm and a thin kinda voice said to me, real polite, "Excuse me, but may I ask a question?"

I looked down. It was a skinny man with a kind-hearted face. He had a notebook in his hand.

"It's all right with me," I told him, polite. "Ask away, mister."

"I just wondered how you feel, that's all," the skinny man said, holding his pencil over the notebook ready to write down something.

"Why, peart," I said. "Right kind of you to inquire. Hope you're feeling well too, mister."

He shook his head, kind of dazed. "That's the trouble," he said. "I just don't understand it. I feel fine."

"Why not?" I asked. "Fine day."

"Everybody here feels fine," he went right on, just like I hadn't spoke. "Barring normal odds, everybody's in average good health in this crowd. But in about five minutes or less, as I figure it—" He looked at his wrist-watch.

Just then somebody hit me right on top of the haid with a red-hot sledgehammer.

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Now you shore can't hurt a Hogben by hitting him on the haid. Anybody's a fool to try. I felt my knees buckle a little but I was all right in a couple of seconds and I looked around to see who'd whammed me.

Wasn't a soul there. But oh my, the moaning and groaning that was going up from that there crowd! People was a-clutching at their foreheads and a-staggering around the street, clawing at each other to get to that truck where the man was handing out the bottles of headache cure as fast as he could take in the dollar bills.

The skinny man with the kind face rolled up his eyes like a duck in thunder.

"Oh, my head!" he groaned. "What did I tell you? Oh, my head!" Then he sort of tottered away, fishing in his pocket for money.

Well, the family always did say I was slow-witted but you'd have to be downright feeble-minded if you didn't know there was something mighty peculiar going on around here. I'm no ninny, no matter what Maw says. I turned around and looked for Junior Pugh.

There he stood, the fat-faced little varmint, red as a turkey-gobbler, all swole up and his mean little eyes just a-flashing at the crowd.

"It's a hex," I thought to myself, perfectly calm. "I'd never have believed it but it's a real hex. Now how in the world—"

Then I remembered Lily Lou Mutz and what Uncle Lem had been thinking to himself. And I began to see the light.

The crowd had gone plumb crazy, fighting to get at the headache cure. I purty near had to bash my way over towards Uncle Lem. I figgered it was past time I took a hand, on account of him being so soft in the heart and likewise just about as soft in the haid.

"Nosirree," he was saying, firm-like. "I won't do it. Not by no manner of means I won't."

"Uncle Lem," I said.

I bet he jumped a yard into the air.

"Saunk!" he squeaked. He flushed up and grinned sheepish and then he looked mad, but I could tell he was kinda relieved, too. "I told you not to foller me," he said.

"Maw told me not to let you out of my sight," I said. "I promised Maw and us Hogbens never break a promise. What's going on here, Uncle Lem?"

“Oh, Saunk, everything’s gone dead wrong!” Uncle Lem wailed out. “Here I am with a heart of gold and I’d just as soon be dead! Meet Mister Ed Pugh, Saunk. He’s trying to get me kilt.”

“Now Lem,” Ed Pugh said. “You know that ain’t so. I just want my rights, that’s all. Pleased to meet you, young fellow. Another Hogben, I take it. Maybe you can talk your uncle into—”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Mister Pugh,” I said, real polite. “But maybe you’d better explain. All this is purely a mystery to me.”

He cleared his throat and threw his chest out, important-like. I could tell this was something he liked to talk about. Made him feel pretty big, I could see.

“I don’t know if you was acquainted with my dear departed wife, Lily Lou Mutz that was,” he said. “This here’s our little child, Junior. A fine little lad he is too. What a pity we didn’t have eight or ten more just like him.” He sighed real deep.

“Well, that’s life. I’d hoped to marry young and be blessed with a whole passel of younguns, being as how I’m the last of a fine old line. I don’t mean to let it die out, neither.” Here he gave Uncle Lem a mean look. Uncle Lem sorta whimpered.

“I ain’t a-gonna do it,” he said. “You can’t make me do it.”

“We’ll see about that,” Ed Pugh said, threatening. “Maybe your young relative here will be more reasonable. I’ll have you know I’m getting to be a power in this state and what I says goes.”

“Paw,” little Junior squeaked out just then, “Paw, they’re kinda slowing down. Kin I give it to ’em double-strength this time, Paw? Betcha I could kill a few if I let myself go. Hey, Paw —”

Ed Pugh made as if he was gonna clonk the little varmint again, but I guess he thought better of it.

“Don’t interrupt your elders, sonny,” he said. “Paw’s busy. Just tend to your job and shut up.” He glanced out over the moaning crowd. “Give that bunch over beyond the truck a little more treatment,” he said. “They ain’t buying fast enough. But no double-strength, Junior. You gotta save your energy. You’re a growing boy.”

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He turned back to me. “Junior’s a talented child,” he said, very proud. “As you can see. He inherited it from his dear dead-and-gone mother, Lily Lou. I was telling you about Lily Lou. It was my hope to marry young, like I said, but the way things worked out, somehow I just didn’t get around to wifin’ till I’d got well along into the prime of life.”

He blew out his chest like a toadfrog, looking down admiring. I never did see a man that thought better of himself. “Never found a woman who’d look at—I mean, never found the right woman,” he went on, “till the day I met Lily Lou Mutz.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, polite. I did, too. He musta searched a long, long ways before he found somebody ugly enough herself to look twice at him. Even Lily Lou, pore soul, musta thunk a long time afore she said yes.

“And that,” Ed Pugh went on, “is where your Uncle Lem comes in. It seems like he’d give Lily Lou a bewitchment quite some while back.”

“I never!” Uncle Lem squealed. “And anyway, how’d I know she’d get married and pass it on to her child? Who’d ever think Lily Lou would—”

“He gave her a bewitchment,” Ed Pugh went right on talking. “Only she never told me till she was a-layin’ on her death-bed a year ago. Lordy, I sure woulda whopped her good if I’d

knowed how she held out on me all them years! It was the hex Lemuel gave her and she inherited it on to her little child.”

“I only done it to protect her,” Uncle Lem said, right quick. “You know I’m speaking the truth, Saunk boy. Pore Lily Lou was so pizon ugly people used to up and heave a clod at her now and then afore they could help themselves. Just automatic-like. Couldn’t blame ’em. I often fought down the impulse myself.

“But pore Lily Lou, I shore felt sorry for her. You’ll never know how long I fought down my good impulses, Saunk. But my heart of gold does get me into messes. One day I felt so sorry for the pore hideous critter I gave her the hex-power. Anybody’d have done the same, Saunk.”

“How’d you do it?” I asked, real interested, thinking it might come in handy someday to know. I’m young yet, and I got lots to learn.

Well, he started to tell me and it was kinda mixed up. Right at first I got a notion some furrin feller named Gene Chromosome had done it for him and after I got straight on that part he’d gone cantering off into a rigamarole about the alpha waves of the brain.

Shucks, I knowed that much my own self. Everybody musta noticed the way them little waves go a-sweeping over the tops of people’s haid when they’re thinking. I’ve watched Grandpaw sometimes when he had as many as six hundred different thoughts follering each other up and down them little paths where is brain is. Hurts my eyes to look too close when Grandpaw’s thinking.

“So that’s how it is, Saunk,” Uncle Lem wound up. “And this here little rattlesnake’s inherited the whole shebang.”

“Well, why don’t you get this here Gene Chromosome feller to unscramble Junior and put him back the way other people are?” I asked. “I can see how easy you could do it. Look here, Uncle Lem.” I focused down real sharp on Junior and made my eyes go funny the way you have to when you want to look inside a person.

Sure enough, I seen just what Uncle Lem meant. There was teensy-weensy little chains of fellers, all hanging onto each other for dear life, and skinny little rods jiggling around inside them awful teensy cells everybody’s made of—except maybe Little Sam, our baby.

“Look here, Uncle Lem,” I said. “All you did when you gave Lily Lou the hex was to twitch these here little rods over *thataway* and patch ’em onto them little chains that wiggle so fast. Now why can’t you switch ’em back again and make Junior behave himself? It oughta be easy.”

“It would be easy,” Uncle Lem kinda sighed at me. “Saunk, you’re a scatter-brain. You wasn’t listening to what I said. I can’t switch ’em back without I kill Junior.”

“The world would be a better place,” I said.

“I know it would. But you know what we promised Grandpaw? No more killings.”

“But Uncle Lem!” I bust out. “This is turrible! You mean this nasty little rattlesnake’s gonna go on all his life hexing people?”

“Worse than that, Saunk,” pore Uncle Lem said, almost crying. “He’s gonna pass the power on to his descendants, just like Lily Lou passed it on to him.”

For a minute it sure did look like a dark prospect for the human race. Then I laughed.

“Cheer up, Uncle Lem,” I said. “Nothing to worry about. Look at the little toad. There ain’t a female critter alive who’d come within a mile of him. Already he’s as repulsive as his daddy. And remember, he’s Lily Lou Mutz’s child, too. Maybe he’ll get even horribler as he grows up. On thing’s sure—he ain’t never gonna get married.”

“Now there’s where you’re wrong,” Ed Pugh busted in, talking real loud. He was red in the face and he looked mad. “Don’t think I ain’t been listening,” he said. “And don’t think I’m gonna forget what you said about my child. I told you I was getting to be a power in this town. Junior and me can go a long way, using his talent to help us.

“Already I’ve got onto the board of aldermen here and there’s gonna be a vacancy in the state senate come next week—unless the old coot I have in mind’s a lot tougher than he looks. So I’m warning you, young Hogben, you and your family’s gonna pay for them insults.”

“Nobody oughta get mad when he hears the gospel truth about himself,” I said. “Junior is a repulsive specimen.”

“He just takes getting used to,” his paw said. “All us Pughs is hard to understand. Deep, I guess. But we got our pride. And I’m gonna make sure the family line never dies out. Never, do you hear that, Lemuel?”

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Uncle Lem just shut his eyes up tight and shook his head fast. “Nosirree,” he said. “I’ll never do it. Never, never, never, never—”

“Lemuel,” Ed Pugh said, real sinister. “Lemuel, do you want me to set Junior on you?”

“Oh, there ain’t no use in that,” I said. “You seen him try to hex me along with the crowd, didn’t you? No manner of use, Mister Pugh. Can’t hex a Hogben.”

“Well—” He looked around, searching his mind. “Hm-m. I’ll think of something. I’ll—soft-hearted, aren’t you? Promised your Grandpappy you wouldn’t kill nobody, hey? Lemuel, open your eyes and look over there across the street. See that sweet old lady walking with the cane? How’d you like it if I had Junior drop her dead in her tracks?”

Uncle Lemuel just squeezed his eyes tighter shut.

“I won’t look. I don’t know the sweet old thing. If she’s that old, she ain’t got much longer anyhow. Maybe she’d be better off dead. Probably got rheumatiz something fierce.”

“All right, then, how about that purty young girl with the baby in her arms? Look, Lemuel. Mighty sweet-looking little baby. Pink ribbon in its bonnet, see? Look at them dimples. Junior, get ready to blight them where they stand. Bubonic plague to start with maybe. And after that —”

“Uncle Lem,” I said, feeling uneasy. “I dunno what Grandpaw would say to this. Maybe —”

Uncle Lem popped his eyes wide open for just a second. He glared at me, frantic.

“I can’t help it if I’ve got a heart of gold,” he said. “I’m a fine old feller and everybody picks on me. Well, I won’t stand for it. You can push me just so far. Now I don’t care if Ed Pugh kills off the whole human race. I don’t care if Grandpaw *does* find out what I done. I don’t care a hoot about nothing no more.” He gave a kind of wild laugh.

“I’m gonna get out from under. I won’t know nothing about nothing. I’m gonna snatch me a few winks, Saunk.”

And with that he went rigid all over and fell flat on his face on the sidewalk, stiff as a poker.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Over a Barrel*

Well, worried as I was, I had to smile. Uncle Lem's kinda cute sometimes. I knowed he'd put hisself to sleep again, the way he always does when trouble catches up with him. Paw says it's catalepsy but cats sleep a lot lighter than that.

Uncle Lem hit the sidewalk flat and kinda bounced a little. Junior give a howl of joy. I guess maybe he figgered he'd had something to do with Uncle Lem falling over. Anyhow, seeing somebody down and helpless, Junior naturally rushed over and pulled his foot back and kicked Uncle Lem in the side of the haid.

Well, like I said, us Hogbens have got pretty tough haid. Junior let out a howl. He started dancing around nursing his foot in both hands.

"I'll hex you good!" he yelled at Uncle Lem. "I'll hex you good, you—you ole Hogben, you!" He drew a deep breath and turned purple in the face and—

And then it happened.

It was like a flash of lightning. I don't take no stock in hexes, and I had a fair idea of what was happening, but it took me by surprise. Paw tried to explain to me later how it worked and he said it just stimulated the latent toxins inherent in the organism. It made Junior into a catalyctic agent on account of the way the rearrangement of the desoxyribonucleic acid his genes was made of worked on the kappa waves of his nasty little brain, stepping them up as much as thirty microvolts. But shucks, you know Paw. He's too lazy to figger the thing out in English. He just steals them fool words out of other folks' brains when he needs 'em.

What really happened was that all the pizon that little varmint had bottled up in him, ready to let go on the crowd, somehow seemed to r'ar back and smack Uncle Lem right in the face. I never seen such a hex. And the awful part was—it worked.

Because Uncle Lem wasn't resisting a mite now he was asleep. Red-hot pokers wouldn't have waked him up and I wouldn't put redhot pokers past little Junior Pugh. But he didn't need 'em this time. The hex hit Uncle Lem like a thunderbolt.

He turned pale green right before our eyes.

Somehow it seemed to me a turrible silence fell as Uncle Lem went green. I looked up, surprised. Then I realized what was happening. All that pitiful moaning and groaning from the crowd had stopped.

People was swigging away at their bottles of headache cure, rubbing their foreheads and kinda laughing weak-like with relief. Junior's whole complete hex had gone into Uncle Lem and the crowd's headaches had naturally stopped right off.

"What's happened here?" somebody called out in a kinda familiar voice. "Has that man fainted? Why don't you help him? Here, let me by—I'm a doctor."

It was the skinny man with the kind-looking face. He was still drinking out of the headache bottle as he pushed his way through the crowd toward us but he'd put his notebook away. When he saw Ed Pugh he flushed up angrylike.

"So it's you, is it, Alderman Pugh?" he said. "How is it you're always around when trouble starts? What did you do to this poor man, anyhow? Maybe this time you've gone too far."

“I didn’t do a thing,” Ed Pugh said. “Never touched him. You watch your tongue, Dr. Brown, or you’ll regret it. I’m a powerful man in this here town.”

“Look at that!” Dr. Brown yells, his voice going kinda squeaky as he stares down at Uncle Lem. “The man’s dying! Call an ambulance, somebody, quick!”

Uncle Lem was changing color again. I had to laugh a little, inside my haid. I knowed what was happening and it was kinda funny. Everybody’s got a whole herd of germs and viruses and suchlike critters swarming through them all the time, of course.

When Junior’s hex hit Uncle Lem it stimulated the entire herd something turrible, and a flock of little bitty critters Paw calls antibodies had to get to work pronto. They ain’t really as sick as they look, being white by nature.

Whenever a pizon starts chawing on you these pale little fellers grab up their shooting-irons and run like crazy to the battlefield in your insides. Such fighting and yelling and swearing you never seen. It’s a regular Bull Run.

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That was going on right then inside Uncle Lem. Only us Hogbens have got a special militia of our own inside us. And they got called up real fast.

They was swearing and kicking and whopping the enemy so hard Uncle Lem had gone from pale green to a sort of purplish color, and big yellor and blue spots was beginning to bug out all over him where it showed. He looked uncommon sick. Course it didn’t do him no real harm. The Hogbens militia can lick any germ that breathes.

But he sure looked revolting.

The skinny doctor crouched down beside Uncle Lem and felt his pulse.

“Now you’ve done it,” he said, looking up at Ed Pugh. “I don’t know how you’ve worked this, but for once you’ve gone too far. This man seems to have bubonic plague. I’ll see you’re put under control this time and that young Kallikak of yours, too.”

Ed Pugh just laughed a little. But I could see he was mad.

“Don’t you worry about me, Dr. Brown,” he said, mean. “When I get to be governor—and I got my plans all made—that there hospital you’re so proud of ain’t gonna operate on state funds no more. A fine thing!

“Folks laying around in hospitals eating their fool heads off! Make ’em get out and plough, that’s what I say. Us Pughs never gets sick. I got lots of better uses for state money than paying folks to lay around in bed when I’m governor.”

All the doctor said was, “Where’s that ambulance?”

“If you mean that big long car making such a noise,” I said, “it’s about three miles off but coming fast. Uncle Lem don’t need no help, though. He’s just having an attack. We get ’em in the family all the time. It don’t mean nothing.”

“Good heavens!” the doc said, staring down at Uncle Lem. “You mean he’s had this before and lived?” Then he looked up at me and smiled all of a sudden. “Oh, I see,” he said. “Afraid of hospitals, are you? Well, don’t worry. We won’t hurt him.”

That surprised me some. He was a smart man. I’d fibbed a little for just that reason. Hospitals is no place for Hogbens. People in hospitals are too danged nosy. So I called Uncle Lem real loud, inside my head.

“Uncle Lem,” I hollered, only thinking it, not out loud. “Uncle Lem, wake up quick! Grandpaw’ll nail your hide to the barn door if’n you let yourself get took to a hospital. You want ’em to find out about them two hearts you got in your chest? And the way your bones are fixed and the shape of your gizzard? Uncle Lem! Wake up!”

It wasn't no manner of use. He never even twitched.

Right then I began to get really scared. Uncle Lem had sure landed me in the soup. There I was with all that responsibility on my shoulders and I didn't have the least idea how to handle it. I'm just a young feller after all. I can hardly remember much farther back than the great fire of London, when Charles II was king, with all them long curls a-hanging on his shoulders. On him, though, they looked good.

"Mister Pugh," I said, "you've got to call off Junior. I can't let Uncle Lem get took to the hospital. You know I can't."

"Junior, pour it on," Mister Pugh said, grinning real nasty. "I want a little talk with young Hogben here." The doctor looked up, puzzled, and Ed Pugh said, "Step over here a mite, Hogben. I want a private word with you. Junior, bear down!"

Uncle Lem's yellow and blue spots got green rings around their outside edges. The doctor sorta gasped and Ed Pugh took my arm and pulled me back. When we was out of earshot he said to me, confidential, fixing me with his tiny little eyes:

"I reckon you know what I want, Hogben. Lem never did say he *couldn't*, he only said he wouldn't, so I know you folks can do it for me."

"Just exactly what is it you want, Mister Pugh?" I asked him.

"You know. I want to make sure our fine old family line goes on. I want there should always be Pughs. I had so much trouble getting married off myself and I know Junior ain't going to be easy to wife. Women don't have no taste nowadays.

"Since Lily Lou went to glory there hasn't been a woman on earth ugly enough to marry a Pugh and I'm skeered Junior'll be the last of a great line. With his talent I can't bear the thought. You just fix it so our family won' never die out and I'll have Junior take the hex off Lemuel."

"If I fixed it so your line didn't die out," I said, "I'd be fixing it so everybody else's line *would* die out, just as soon as there was enough Pughs around."

"What's wrong with that?" Ed Pugh asked, grinning. "Way I see it we're good strong stock." He flexed his gorilla arms. He was taller than me even. "No harm in populatin' the world with good stock, is there? I figger given time enough us Pughs could conquer the whole dangled world. And you're gonna help us do it, young Hogben."

"Oh, no," I said. "Oh, no! Even if I knowed how—"

There was a turrible noise at the end of the street and the crowd scattered to make way for the ambulance, which drew up at the curb beside Uncle Lem. A couple of fellers in white coats jumped out with a sort of pallet on sticks. Dr. Brown stood up, looking real relieved.

"Thought you'd never get here," he said. "This man's a quarantine case, I think. Heaven knows what kind of results we'll find when we start running tests on him. Hand me my bag out of the back there, will you? I want my stethoscope. There's something funny about this man's heart."

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Well, *my* heart sunk right down into my boots. We was goners and I knowed it—the whole Hogben tribe. Once them doctors and scientists find out about us we'll never know a moment's peace again as long as we live. We won't have no more privacy than a corncob.

Ed Pugh was watching me with a nasty grin on his pasty face.

"Worried, huh?" he said. "You gotta right to be worried. I know about you Hogbens. All witches. Once they get Lem in the hospital, no telling what they'll find out. Against the law to



be witches, probably. You've got about half a minute to make up your mind, young Hogben. What do you say?"

Well, what could I say? I couldn't give him a promise like he was asking, could I? Not and let the whole world be overrun by hexing Pughs. Us Hogbens live a long time. We've got some pretty important plans for the future when the rest of the world begins to catch up with us. But if by that time the rest of the world is all Pughs, it won't hardly seem worth while, somehow. I couldn't say yes.

But if I said no Uncle Lem was a goner. Us Hogbens was doomed either way, it seemed to me.

Looked like there was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath, shut my eyes, and let out a desperate yell inside my head.

"Grandpaw!" I hollered.

"Yes, my boy?" said a big deep voice in the middle of my brain. You'd a-thought he'd been right alongside me all the time, just waiting to be called. He was a hundred-odd miles off, and sound asleep. But when a Hogben calls in the tone of voice I called in he's got a right to expect an answer—quick. I got it.

Mostly Grandpaw woulda dithered around for fifteen minutes, asking cross questions and not listening to the answers, and talking in all kinds of queer old-fashioned dialects, like Sanskrit, he's picked up through the years. But this time he seen it was serious.

"Yes, my boy?" was all he said.

I flapped my mind wide open like a school-book in front of him. There wasn't no time for questions and answers. The doc was getting out his dingus to listen to Uncle Lem's two hearts beating out of tune and once he heard that the jig would be up for us Hogbens.

"Unless you let me kill 'em, Grandpaw," I added. Because by that time I knowed he'd read the whole situation from start to finish in one fast glance.

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It seemed to me he was quiet an awful long time after that. The doc had got the dingus out and he was fitting its little black arms into his ears. Ed Pugh was watching me like a hawk. Junior stood there all swole up with pizon, blinking his mean little eyes around for somebody to shoot it at. I was half hoping he'd pick on me. I'd worked out a way to make it bounce back in his face and there was a chance it might even kill him.

I heard Grandpaw give a sorta sigh in my mind.

"They've got us over a barrel, Saunk," he said. I remember being a little surprised he could speak right plain English when he wanted to. "Tell Pugh we'll do it."

"But Grandpaw—" I said.

"*Do as I say!*" It gave me a headache, he spoke so firm. "Quick, Saunk! Tell Pugh we'll give him what he wants."

Well, I didn't dare disobey. But this once I really came close to defying Grandpaw.

It stands to reason even a Hogben has got to get senile someday, and I thought maybe old age had finally set in with Grandpaw at last.

What I thunk at him was, "All right, if you say so, but I sure hate to do it. Seems like if they've got us going and coming, the least we can do is take our medicine like Hogbens and keep all that pizon bottled up in Junior stead of spreading it around the world." But out loud I spoke to Mister Pugh.

"All right, Mister Pugh," I said, real humble. "You win. Only, call off your hex. Quick, before it's too late."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Pughs A-Coming*

Mister Pugh had a great big yellow automobile, low-slung, without no top. It went awful fast. And it was sure awful noisy. Once I'm pretty sure we run over a small boy in the road but Mister Pugh paid him no mind and I didn't dare say nothing. Like Grandpaw said, the Pughs had us over a barrel.

It took quite a lot of palaver before I convinced 'em they'd have to come back to the homestead with me. That was part of Grandpaw's orders.

"How do I know you won't murder us in cold blood once you get us out there in the wilderness?" Mister Pugh asked.

"I could kill you right here if I wanted," I told him. "I would too but Grandpaw says no. You're safe if Grandpaw says so, Mister Pugh. The word of a Hogben ain't never been broken yet."

So he agreed, mostly because I said we couldn't work the necessary spells except on home territory. We loaded Uncle Lem into the back of the car and took off for the hills. Had quite an argument with the doc, of course. Uncle Lem sure was stubborn.

He wouldn't wake up nobody but once Junior took the hex off Uncle Lem faded out fast to a good healthy color again. The doc just didn't believe it coulda happened, even when he saw it. Mister Pugh had to threaten quite a lot before we got away. We left the doc sitting on the curb, muttering to himself and rubbing his haid dazedlike.

I could feel Grandpaw a-studying the Pughs through my mind all the way home. He seemed to be sighing and kinda shaking his haid—such as it is—and working out problems that didn't make no manner of sense to me.

When we drew up in front of the house there wasn't a soul in sight. I could hear Grandpaw stirring and muttering on his gunnysack in the attic but Paw seemed to have went invisible and he was too drunk to tell me where he was when I asked. The baby was asleep. Maw was still at the church sociable and Grandpaw said to leave her be.

"We can work this out together, Saunk," he said as soon as I got outa the car. "I've been thinking. You know that sled you fixed up to sour your Maw's cream this morning? Drag it out, son. Drag it out."

I seen in a flash what he had in mind. "Oh, no. Grandpaw!" I said, right out loud.

"Who you talking to?" Ed Pugh asked, lumbering down outa the car. "I don't see nobody. This your homestead? Ratty old dump, ain't it? Stay close to me, Junior. I don't trust these folks any farther'n I can see 'em."

"Get the sled, Saunk," Grandpaw said, very firm. "I got it all worked out. We're gonna send these two gorillas right back through time, to a place they'll really fit."

"But Grandpaw!" I hollered, only inside my head this time. "Let's talk this over. Lemme get Maw in on it anyhow. Paw's right smart when he's sober. Why not wait till he wakes up? I think we oughta get the Baby in on it too. I don't think sending 'em back through time's a good idea at all, Grandpaw."

"The Baby's asleep," Grandpaw said. "You leave him be. He read himself to sleep over his Einstein, bless his little soul."

I think the thing that worried me most was the way Grandpaw was talking plain English. He never does when he's feeling normal. I thought maybe his old age had all caught up with him at one bank, and knocked all the sense outa his—so to speak—haid.

"Grandpaw," I said, trying to keep calm. "Don't you see? If we send 'em back through time and give 'em what we promised it'll make everything a million times worse than before. You gonna strand 'em back there in the year one and break your promise to 'em?"

"Saunk!" Grandpaw said.

"I know. If we promised we'd make sure the Pugh line won't die out, then we gotta make sure. But if we send 'em back to the year one that'll mean all the time between then and now they'll spend spreading out and spreading out. More Pughs every generation.

"Grandpaw, five seconds after they hit the year one, I'm liable to feel my two eyes rush together in my haid and my face go all fat and pasty like Junior. Grandpaw, everybody in the world may be Pughs if we give 'em that much time to spread out in!"

"Cease thy chirring, thou chilce dolt," Grandpaw hollered. "Do my bidding, young fool!"

That made me feel a little better but not much. I went and dragged out the sled. Mister Pugh put up quite a argument about that.

"I ain't rid on a sled since I was so high," he said. "Why should I git on one now? This is some trick. I won't do it."

Junior tried to bite me.

"Now Mister Pugh," I said, "you gotta cooperate or we won't get nowheres. I know what I'm doing. Just step up here and set down. Junior, there's room for you in front. That's fine."

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If he hadn't seen how worried I was I don't think he'd a-done it. But I couldn't hide how I was feeling.

"Where's your Grandpaw?" he asked, uneasy. "You're not going to do this whole trick yourself, are you? Young ignorant feller like you? I don't like it. Suppose you made a mistake?"

"We give our word," I reminded him. "Now just kindly shut up and let me concentrate. Or maybe you don't want the Pugh line to last forever?"

"That was the promise," he says, settling himself down. "You gotta do it. Lemme know when you commence."

"All right, Saunk," Grandpaw says from the attic, right brisk. "Now you watch. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two. Look sharp. Focus your eyes down and pick out a gene. Any gene."

Bad as I felt about the whole thing I couldn't help being interested. When Grandpaw does a thing he does it up brown. Genes are mighty slippery little critters, spindle-shaped and awful teensy. They're partners with some skinny guys called chromosomes, and the two of 'em show up everywhere you look, once you've got your eyes focused just right.

"A good dose of ultraviolet ought to do the trick," Grandpaw muttered. "Saunk, you're closer."

I said, "All right, Grandpaw," and sort of twiddled the light as it sifted down through the pines above the Pughs. Ultraviolet's the color at the *other* end of the line, where the colors stop having names for most people.

Grandpaw said, "Thanks, son. Hold it for a minute."

The genes began to twiddle right in time with the light-waves. Junior said, "Paw, something's tickling me."

Ed Pugh said, "Shut up."

Grandpaw was muttering to himself. I'm pretty sure he stole the words from that perffesser we keep in the bottle, but you can't tell, with Grandpaw. Maybe he was the first person to make 'em up in the beginning.

"The euchromatin," he kept muttering. "That ought to fix it. Ultraviolet gives us hereditary mutation and the euchromatin contains the genes that transmit heredity. Now that other stuff's heterochromatin and *that* produces evolutionary change of the cataclysmic variety.

"Very good, very good. We can always use a new species. Hum-m-m. About six bursts of heterochromatinic activity ought to do it." He was quiet for a minute. Then he said, "Ish am eldre and ek magti! Okay, Saunk, take it away."

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I let the ultraviolet go back where it came from.

"The year one, Grandpaw?" I asked, very doubtful.

"That's close enough," he said. "Wite thou the way?"

"Oh yes, Grandpaw," I said. And I bent over and give them the necessary push.

The last thing I heard was Mister Pugh's howl.

"What's that you're doin'?" he hollered at me. "What's the idee? Look out, there, young Hogben or—what's this? What's this? Where we goin'?" Young Saunk, I warn you, if this is some trick I'll set Junior on you! I'll send you such a hex as even you-u. . . ."

Then the howl got real thin and small and far away until it wasn't no more than the noise a mosquito makes. After that it was mighty quiet in the door-yard.

I stood there all braced, ready to stop myself from turning into a Pugh if I could. Them little genes is tricky fellers.

I knowed Grandpaw had made a terrible mistake.

The minute them Pughs hit the year one and started to bounce back through time toward now I knowed what would happen.

I ain't sure how long ago the year one was, but there was plenty of time for the Pughs to populate the whole planet. I put two fingers against my nose to keep my eyes from banging each other when they started to rush together in the middle like all us Pughs' eyes do—

"You ain't a Pugh yet, son," Grandpaw said, chuckling. "Kin ye see 'em?"

"No," I said. "What's happening?"

"The sled's starting to slow down," he said. "Now it's stopped. Yep, it's the year one, all right. Look at all them men and women flockin' outa the caves to greet their new company! My, my, what great big shoulders the men have got. Bigger even than Paw Pugh's.

"An' ugh—just look at the women! I declare, little Junior's positively handsome alongside them folks! He won't have no trouble finding a wife when the time comes."

"But Grandpaw, that's turrible!" I said.

"Don't sass your elders, Saunk," Grandpaw chuckled. "Looka there now. Junior's just pulled a hex. Another little child fell over flat on his ugly face. Now the little child's mother is knocking Junior endwise. Now his pappy's sailing into Paw Pugh. Look at that fight! Just look at it! Oh, I guess the Pugh family's well took care of, Saunk."

"But what about our family?" I said, almost wailing.

"Don't you worry," Grandpaw said. "Time'll take care of that. Wait a minute, let me watch. Hm-m. A generation don't take long when you know how to look. My, my, what ugly little critters the ten baby Pughs was! They was just like their pappy and their grandpappy.

“I wish Lily Lou Mutz could see her grandbabies, I shorely do. Well, now, ain’t that cute? Every one of them babies grewed up in a flash, seems like, and each of ’em has got ten babies of their own. I like to see my promises working out, Saunk. I said I’d do this, and I done it.”

I just moaned.

“All right,” Grandpaw said. “Let’s jump ahead a couple of centuries. Yep, still there and spreading like crazy. Family likeness is still strong, too. Hum-m. Another thousand years and—well, I declare! If it ain’t Ancient Greece! Hasn’t changed a bit, neither. What do you know, Saunk!” He cackled right out, tickled pink.

“Remember what I said once about Lily Lou putting me in mind of an old friend of mine named Gorgon? No wonder! Perfectly natural. You ought to see Lily Lou’s great-great-great-grand-babies! No, on second thought, it’s lucky you can’t. Well, well, this is shore interesting.”

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He was still about three minutes. Then I heard him laugh.

“Bang,” he said. “First heterochromatinic burst. Now the changes start.”

“What changes, Grandpaw?” I asked, feeling pretty miserable.

“The changes,” he said, “that show your old Grandpaw ain’t such a fool as you thought. I know what I’m doing. They go fast, once they start. Look there now, that’s the second change. Look at them little genes mutate!”

“You mean,” I said, “I ain’t gonna turn into a Pugh after all? But Grandpaw, I thought we’d promised the Pughs their line wouldn’t die out.”

“I’m keeping my promise,” Grandpaw said, dignified. “The genes will carry the Pugh likeness right on to the toot of the judgment horn, just like I said. And the hex power goes right along with it.”

Then he laughed.

“You better brace yourself, Saunk,” he said. “When Paw Pugh went sailing off into the year one seems like he uttered a hex threat, didn’t he? Well, he wasn’t fooling. It’s a-coming at you right now.”

“Oh, Lordy!” I said. “There’ll be a million of ’em by the time they get here! Grandpaw! What’ll I do?”

“Just brace yourself,” Grandpaw said, real unsympathetic. “A million, you think? Oh, no, lots more than a million.”

“How many?” I asked him.

He started in to tell me. You may not believe it but he’s *still* telling me. It takes that long. There’s that many of ’em.

You see, it was like with that there Jukes family that lived down south of here. The bad ones was always a mite worse than their children and the same dang thing happened to Gene Chromosome and his kin, so to speak. The Pughs stayed Pughs and they kept the hex power—and I guess you might say the Pughs conquered the whole world, after all.

But it could of been worse. The Pughs could of stayed the same size down through the generations. Instead they got smaller—a whole lot smaller. When I knowed ’em they was bigger than most folks—Paw Pugh, anyhow.

But by the time they’d done filtering the generations from the year one, they’d shrunk so much them little pale fellers in the blood was about their size. And many a knock-down drag-out fight they have with ’em, too.

Them Pugh genes took such a beating from the heterochromatinic bursts Grandpaw told me about that they got whopped all outa their proper form. You might call 'em a virus now—and of course a virus is exactly the same thing as a gene, except the virus is friskier. But heavens above, that's like saying the Jukes boys is exactly the same as George Washington!

The hex hit me—hard.

I sneezed something turrible. Then I heard Uncle Lem sneezing in his sleep, lying back there in the yaller car. Grandpaw was still droning on about how many Pughs was a-coming at me right that minute, so there wasn't no use asking questions. I fixed my eyes different and looked right down into the middle of that sneeze to see what had tickled me—

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Well, you never seen so many Junior Pughs in all your born days! It was the hex, all right. Likewise, them Pughs is still busy, hexing everybody on earth, off and on. They'll do it for quite a time, too, since the Pugh line has got to go on forever, account of Grandpaw's promise.

They tell me even the microscopes ain't never yet got a good look at certain viruses. The scientists are sure in for a surprise someday when they focus down real close and see all them pasty-faced little devils, ugly as sin, with their eyes set real close together, wiggling around hexing everybody in sight.

It took a long time—since the year one, that is—but Gene Chromosome fixed it up, with Grandpaw's help. So Junior Pugh ain't a pain in the neck no more, so to speak.

But I got to admit he's an awful cold in the haid.

[The end of *Cold War* by Henry Kuttner]