

The Fellow who Married the Maxill Girl

by Ward Moore

After a couple of weeks Nan began to understand him a little. Nan was the third-oldest Maxill girl. The wild one, they called her in Henryton, not forgetting they had said the same of Gladys and later Muriel; Gladys now high in the Eastern Star, and Muriel, married to Henryton's leading hardware and furniture dealer—Muriel, mother of the sweetest twins in Evarts County. But they said it of Nan with more assurance.

Everyone knew Maxill had bought the old Jameson place, eighty of the most worthless acres ever to break a farmer's heart, the year after Cal Coolidge became President, because he—Malcolm Maxill that is, not Mr. Coolidge—wanted an out-of-the-way location for a still. Naturally they looked for his six kids, all girls, to run wild with such a background. Not that Henryton, or Evarts County either, for that matter, upheld Prohibition or admired Andrew Volstead. But buying a so-called half-pint now and then (striking a blow for liberty, the more robust males called it, a trifle shamefacedly) was one thing, and condoning moonshining and bootlegging in their midst was something else again.

Of course moonshining was in the past now. Prohibition had been dead for two years, and people wondered more how Maxill was going to make a living from his worthless land than over his morals. But Nan had been seen necking in automobiles (a Velie and a Rickenbacker) with different boys, and heavens knew on how many unobserved occasions she'd done the same, and honestly, commented Henryton—not to say Evarts County—maybe the juvenile authorities should be notified, because Nan was still underage. Besides, she had a mean, sullen look, defiant and rebellious, that showed she needed a strong hand.

No one thought of going to her father. Everybody knew he kept a loaded shotgun handy (gossips said that was how Muriel—empty chatter—those *lovely* twins) and had run more than one nosy character off his place. Henryton people tended to mind their own business—they had plenty to think about with the Depression—so talk of the authorities remained just talk. Still, it isolated Nan Maxill more than ever and encouraged her wildness.

He—the fellow; they hadn't any other name for him for a long time; all the Maxills knew who was meant when one of them used the pronoun—was found by Josey in the south pasture, which hadn't been a pasture for years and years, just a hummocky, lumpy expanse of weeds and obstinate brush. Josey was eleven and shy, a birthmark down the left side of her face was complicated from time to time by almost every possible affliction of the skin, so that she had begun hiding from strangers at the age of seven and never found reason to break the pattern.

She hadn't hidden from him. All her natural childish curiosity about people, long suppressed, overwhelmed by their greedy inquisitiveness over her blemishes, seemed stirred by the sight of him. Though, as everyone said afterward, he didn't really look different. He was oddly dressed, but Henryton had seen boys from Spokane or San Francisco who dressed even more oddly, and his complexion had a peculiar vitality and sheen and at the same time a delicacy which contrasted with those of the farmers accustomed to sun all day, or those who hid in shadowed stores or offices to earn dollars.

"Who're you?" asked Josey. "My dad don't like fellers snooping around. What's your name? Maybe you better get out; he's got a gun and *believe* me he can use it. What's that stuff you're wearing? Looks like it was your skin, only blue, not something sewed at all. I can sew real good myself; it relaxes me, so I'll probably never be a delinquent. You're not deaf and dumb, are you, Mister? There's a man in Henryton's

deaf, dumb *and* blind. People buy pencils from him and drop pennies and nickels in his hat. Say, why don't you say something? My dad'll sure run you off. That's a funny kind of humming. Can you whistle? There's a piece they got a record of in school—I can whistle the whole thing. It's called *Flight of the Bumblebee*. Want to hear me? Like this ... Gee, you don't need to look so miserable. I guess you just don't like music. That's too bad. I thought when you were humming like that—the way you are now, too, and I think it sounds real nice even if you don't like my whistle—you must like music. All us Maxills do. My Dad can play the fiddle better than anybody ..."

She told Nan later (because Nan had been the sister who had most to do with taking care of her) he hadn't seemed just not to understand, like a Mexican or something, but acted as though he wouldn't have caught on even if he'd known the meaning of every single word. He came close, still humming, though a different tune if you could call it that; it was more like snatches of odd melodies. He put his hands—she didn't notice them particularly then—very gently on her face. The touch made her feel good.

He walked with her to the house—it seemed right and natural—with his arm lightly around her shoulder. "He don't talk," she told Nan; "he don't even whistle or sing. Just hums, sort of. Suppose Dad'll run him off. Maybe he's hungry."

"Your face—" began Nan, then swallowed and looked from the child to him. She was in bad humor, frowning, ready to ask what he wanted or tell him sharply to be off. "Go wash your face," she ordered Josey, staring after her as she obediently took down the enameled basin and filled it. The muscles in Nan's cheek relaxed. "Come in," she said to him; "there's a hot apple pie."

He stood there, humming, making no move, smiling pleasantly. Involuntarily she smiled back, though she had been in a mood and the shock of Josey's face was still in her mind. It was hard to tell his age; he didn't look as though he shaved, but there was no adolescent down, and his eyes had mature assurance. She puzzled over the strangely light color; dark and handsome had always been an indivisible word to her, yet she thought them and the pale hair quite exciting.

"Come in," she repeated; "there's a hot apple pie."

He looked at her, at the kitchen behind her, at the unpromising acres over his shoulder. You might have thought he'd never seen such ordinary sights before. She took his sleeve—the feel of it sent prickles through her thumb and fingers as though she'd touched something live instead of inert, touched silk expecting cotton, metal anticipating wood—and pulled him through the door. He didn't hold back or, once inside, seem ill at ease. He merely acted—strange. As though he didn't know a chair was for sitting on or a spoon was for cutting the flaky crust and scooping up the juicy, sticky, drippy filling, or even that the pie was for putting in the mouth, tasting, chewing, swallowing, eating. The horrid thought of mental deficiency crossed her mind, to be dismissed by the sight of him, so unequivocally whole and invulnerable. Still ...

Josey ran to her. "Nan, Nan— I looked in the mirror! Look at me. My face!"

Nan nodded, swallowing again, glancing swiftly at him and away. "It must have been that last prescription. Or else you're just growing out of it, baby."

"The—the *thing*! It's lighter. Faded."

The birthmark, angry and purple, had receded in size and color. The skin around it was clear and vibrant. Nan put her fingers wonderingly on the smooth cheek and stooped to kiss her sister. "I'm so happy."

He sat there, humming again. Oh, what a silly, Nan thought cheerfully. "Here," she said, in the manner of one addressing an idiot or a foreigner. "Eat. See. Like this. Eat."

Obediently he put the guided spoon of pie into his mouth. She was relieved when he disposed of it normally; she had been afraid she might have to direct each spoonful. At least he didn't have to be fed like a baby. She hesitated a fraction of a second before pouring a glass of milk, feeling small for doing so. She wasn't mean—none of the Maxills were; their faults usually sprang from an excess of generosity—but the cow was drying up, she was a hard one to breed, her father wasn't much of a hand with animals anyway, and the kids needed the milk, to say nothing of the butter Nan preferred to lard for baking. But it would be shameful to grudge—

He had put the glass to his lips, evidently more at home with methods of drinking than of eating, and taken a single sip before sputtering, choking, and spitting. Nan was furious, equally at the waste and the manners, until she noticed his hands for the first time. They were strong-looking, perhaps longer than ordinary. On each there was a thumb and three fingers. The three fingers were widely spaced; there was no sign of deformity or amputation. He was simply eight- instead of ten-fingered.

Nan Maxill was a softhearted girl. She had never drowned a kitten or trapped a mouse in her life. She forgot her annoyance instantly. "Oh, poor man!" she exclaimed.

There was no question he must stay and her father must be cozened into allowing it. Ordinary decency—contrary to Maxill custom—demanded hospitality. And if they let him go, her unsatisfied curiosity would torment her for years. On his part he showed no inclination to leave, continuing to examine each object and person with interest. His humming wasn't monotonous, or tiresome. Though it sounded like no music she had ever heard, it was agreeable enough for her to try to imitate it. She found it deceptively complicated and hard—almost impossible for her to reproduce.

His reaction was enthusiastic surprise. He hummed, she hummed, he hummed back joyously. Briefly the Maxill kitchen echoed a strange, unearthly duet. Then—at least so it seemed to Nan—he was demanding more, far more, than she was able to give. His tones soared away on subtle scales she couldn't possibly follow. She fell silent; after a questioning interval, so did he.

Malcolm Maxill came home in ill-humor. He worked for his son-in-law during the winter and for a month or so in summer; his natural irritation at this undignified role was not lessened by the hardware merchant's insinuations that this employment was in the manner of family charity: who else in Evarts County would hire an ex-bootlegger? Maxill looked to the day he could sell the farm—it was clear of mortgages, since it would have been inconvenient in his former profession to have bankers scrutinizing his affairs—and work for himself again. But even good farms were hard to sell in times like these, and there were no offers on the eighty acres. More to give an impression to an unlikely prospective buyer that the place had potentialities than in hope of profit, he kept the cow, some pigs and chickens, planted twenty acres or so each spring to corn it never paid to harvest, and looked with disgust on the decayed orchard which was good only for firewood—for which he couldn't get back the cost of cutting.

He stared belligerently at the fellow. "What do you want around here?"

The stranger hummed. Nan and Josey started explaining at the same time. Jessie and Janet begged, "Oh, Daddy, please."

"All right, all right," growled their father. "Let him stay a couple of days if you're all so hot about it. I suppose at least he can do the chores for his board and maybe cut down a few of those old apple trees. Can you milk?" he asked the fellow. "Huh; forgot he's a dummy. Okay, come along; soon find out whether you can or not."

The girls went with them, Nan carrying the milkpail and tactfully guiding the stranger. Sherry, the cow, was fenced out rather than fenced in: she had the run of the farm except for the cornfield and the scrubby

kitchen garden. She was not bedded down in the barn in summer; she was milked wherever she was found. Half-Jersey, half-Guernsey (and half anybody's guess, Malcolm Maxill said sourly), her milk was rich with cream, but it had been too long since she last freshened, and the neighboring bulls had never earned their stud fee, though their owners didn't return it when she failed to calve.

Maxill set the pail under Sherry's udder. "Go ahead," he urged, "let's see you milk her." The fellow just stood there, looking interested, humming. "Wouldn't you know it? Can't milk." He squatted down disgustedly, gave a perfunctory brush of his hand against the dangling teats, and began pulling the milk, squirt, squirt, shish, down into the pail.

The fellow reached out his four-fingered hand and stroked the cow's flank. City man or not, at least he wasn't scared of animals. Or course Sherry wasn't balky or mean; she hardly ever kicked over the pail or swished her tail real hard in the milker's eyes. Still, it took confidence (or ignorance) to walk around her left side and touch the bag from which Maxill was drawing, slish, slish, slish, the evening milk.

Nan knew her father was no farmer and that a real one would be milking Sherry only once a day by now, drying her up, since she yielded little more than three quarts. But Maxill knew you were supposed to milk a cow twice a day, just as he knew how long to let mash ferment, and he was no chemist either. He went by rules.

"Be darned," exclaimed Maxill, who seldom swore in front of his children. "That's the most she's given in months, and I ain't stripped her yet."

The cow's unexpected bounty put him in good humor; he didn't seem to mind slopping the pigs nor the stranger's helplessness at throwing scratch to the chickens. (The girls usually did this anyway; Maxill's presence was a formality to impress the fellow with the scope and responsibility of the chores.) He ate what Nan had cooked with cheerful appetite, remarking jovially that the dummy would be cheap to feed since he didn't touch meat, butter, or milk, only bread, vegetables, and water.

Maxill's jollity led him to tune up his fiddle—only Josey and Nan noted the stranger's anguish—and run through *Birmingham Jail*, *Beautiful Doll*, and *Dardanella*. Maxill played by ear, contemptuous of those who had to read notes. Josey whistled (after an apologetic glance), Jessie played her mouth-organ, Janet performed expertly with comb and toilet-paper. "You'd think," grunted Maxill, "with his humming he could give us a tune himself. How about it?" And he offered the fiddle.

The fellow looked at the fiddle as though it were explosive. He put it down on the table as fast as he could and backed away. Nan grieved at this evidence of mental deficiency; Jessie and Janet giggled; Malcolm twirled his finger at his temple; even Josey smiled ruefully.

Then the fiddle began playing. Not playing really, because the bow lay unmoving beside it and the strings didn't vibrate. But music came out of the sound holes, uncertainly at first, then with swelling assurance. It resembled the fellow's humming except that it was infinitely more complicated and moving ...

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Next morning Maxill took the fellow down to the orchard, the girls tagging along. They weren't going to miss the possibility of more miracles, though now everyone had had a chance to think things over, the Maxills weren't so sure they'd actually heard the fiddle, or if they had, that it hadn't been by some

perfectly explicable trick or illusion. Still, if he could seem to make it play without touching it, maybe he could do similar things with the ax.

Maxill hacked at a dead limb. The ax bounded back from the wood. The tree was not diseased or rotten, just old and neglected. Most of the branches were dead, but sap still ran in the trunk, as shown by a few boughs on which a handful of fruit had set, and there was new growth on the tips. Like the rest of the orchard, the tree wasn't worth saving. The ax swung again and again; the branch broke off. Maxill nodded and handed the ax to the fellow.

The fellow hummed, looked at Maxill, the girls, the ax. He dropped the tool and walked over to the tree, fingering the rough bark of the corns, the gnarly outcrop of the roots, the leaves and twigs over his head. Nan halfway expected the tree to rearrange itself into cordwood, neatly split and stacked. Nothing happened, nothing at all.

"Yah! Dummy can't milk, slop pigs, feed chickens, or cut wood. If it cost anything to feed him, he wouldn't be worth his keep. All he can do is hum and play tricks."

"We'll do the chores this morning," Nan offered tactfully. They did them most mornings, and evenings, too, but it was a convention that their father did all the man's work and left them free to concentrate on feminine pursuits. Thoughtful girls, they saved his face.

Nan couldn't believe there was nothing irrevocably wrong with the fellow. He used his eight fingers as dexterously as anyone used ten; more so, it seemed. He wouldn't feed the pigs, but he caught on fast to gathering eggs, reaching under the hens without disturbing them at all. He couldn't milk, but he stood by Sherry's side while Nan did. The cow's production was still up; there was a lot more than yesterday morning.

After the chores, he returned to the orchard—without the ax. Nan sent Josey to see what he was up to. "He's going to every tree on the place," Josey reported; "just looking at them and touching them. Not doing anything useful. And you know what? He eats grass and weeds."

"Chews on them, you mean."

"No, I don't. He eats them, honest. Handfuls. And he touched my—the thing on my face. I ran right away to look in the mirror, and you can hardly see it in the shade."

"I'm glad it's fading," said Nan. "Only don't be disappointed if it comes back. It's nothing to worry about. And I'm sure his touching you had nothing to do with it. Just coincidence."

It took the fellow three days to go through the orchard, fooling around with every one of the old trees. By the end of the third day, Sherry was giving two full gallons of milk, they were gathering more eggs than usual in the season when laying normally fell off, and Josey's birthmark had practically disappeared, even in full sunlight. Malcolm Maxill grumbled at the fellow's uselessness, but he never said straight out that he had to move on, so everything was all right.

After the orchard (the girls went, separately and collectively, to see what he was doing; they returned no wiser), he started on the cornfield. Maxill had planted late, not merely from lack of enthusiasm for husbandry, but, possessing no tractor or plow, he had to wait till those who hired out their rigs finished their own sowing. The ground had been dry; the seed had taken overlong to swell and germinate; when the tender gray-green sheaves spiraled through the hard earth, the hot sun had scorched and warped them. While the neighboring fields were already in pale tassel, his dwarfed rows barely revealed the beginning of stunted spikes.

The fellow took even longer with the corn than the orchard. By now Nan realized his humming wasn't tunes at all, just his way of talking. It was a little disheartening, making him seem more alien than ever. If he'd been Italian or Portugese she could have learned the language; if he'd been a Chinaman she could have found out how to eat with chopsticks. A man who spoke notes instead of words was a problem for a girl.

Just the same, after a couple of weeks she began to understand him a little. By this time they were getting four gallons a day from the cow, more eggs than they ever had in early spring, and Josey's complexion was like a baby's. Maxill brought home a radio someone traded in at his son-in-law's store, and they had fun getting all sorts of distant stations. When the fellow came close and they weren't tuned in, it played the same kind of music the fiddle had the first night. They were getting used to it now; it didn't seem so strange or even—Malcolm Maxill's words—so long-haired. It made them feel better, stronger, kinder, more loving.

She understood—what? That he was not as other men, born in places with familiar names, speaking familiar speech, doing things in customary ways? All this she knew already. The humming told her where he came from and how; it was no more comprehensible and relevant afterward than before. Another planet, another star, another galaxy—what were these concepts to Nan Maxill, the disciplinary problem of Henryton Union High, who had read novels in her science class? His name, as near as she could translate the hum, was Ash; what did it matter if he was born on Alpha Centauri, Mars, or an unnamed earth a billion light-years off?

He was humble, conscious of inferiority. He could do none of the things in which his race was so proficient. Not for him were abstract problems insoluble by electronic brains, philosophical speculation reaching either to lunacy or enlightenment, the invention of new means to create or transmute matter. He was, so he admitted, and her heart filled the gaps her intellect failed to bridge, a throwback, an atavism, a creature unable to catch the progress of his kind. In a world of science, of synthetic foods and telekinesis, of final divorce from the elementary processes of nature, he had been born a farmer.

He could make things grow—in a civilization where that talent was no longer useful. He could combat sickness—in a race that had developed congenital immunity to disease. His gifts were those his species had once needed; they had outgrown the need a million generations back.

He did not pour out his confusion to Nan in a single steady flow. Only as he acquired words and she began to distinguish between his tones did their communication reach toward comprehension. Even when he was thoroughly proficient in her language and she could use his crudely, there remained so much beyond her grasp. He explained patiently over and over the technique of controlling sounds without directly touching the instrument as he had done with the fiddle and radio; she could not follow him. What he had done to Josey's face might as well have been expounded in Sanskrit.

It was still more impossible for her to envision the ways in which Ash was inferior to his fellows. That his humming—any music he produced—so beguiling and ethereal to her, was only a dissonance, a childish babble, a lisping, stuttering cacophony, was preposterous. Spaceships she could imagine, but not instantaneous transmission of unharmed living matter through a void millions of parsecs across.

While they learned from each other, the corn ripened. This was no crop to plow under or let blacken with mildew in the field. The blighted sheaves now stood head-high, the broad leaves sickling gracefully downward, exposing and protecting the two ears on every stalk. And what ears they were! Twice as long and twice as fat as any grown in Evarts County within memory, full of perfect kernels right to the bluntly rounded tips, without a single dry or wormy row. The county agricultural agent, hearing rumors, drove over to scotch them; he walked through the field for hours, shaking his head, mumbling to himself, pinching his arm. Maxill sold the crop for a price that was unbelievable, even with the check in his hand.

The meager scattering of fruit ripened. Since the coming of Ash, the trees had sent forth new wood at a great rate. Young leaves hid the scars of age: the dead wood thrusting jaggedly, nakedly upward, the still-living but sterile boughs. Under the lush foliage the girls discovered the fruit. Ash's touch had been too late for the cherries, apricots, plums, early peaches, though those trees were flourishing in their new growth with abundant promise for the coming year. But the apples, pears, and winter peaches were more astonishing than the corn.

There were few; nothing could have added new blossoms, fertilized them, or set the fruit, but the few were enormous. The apples were large as cantaloupes, the pears twice the size of normal pears, the peaches bigger than any peach could be. (Maxill exhibited specimens at the County Fair and swept all the first prizes.) They were so huge, everyone assumed they must be mealy and tasteless, easily spoiled. Juice spurted from them at the bite, their flesh was firm and tangy, their taste and plumpness kept through the winter.

Nan Maxill faced the problem. Ash was properly a gift to all the people of the world. There was none who couldn't learn from him; all would benefit by what they learned. Scientists could understand what she couldn't; piece together the hints of matters above Ash's own head. The impetus he could give to technology would make the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries seem stagnant periods. Musicians and philologists could be pushed to amazing discoveries. Farmers could benefit most of all. Under his guidance dead sands and unused spaces would be rich with food; many if not all wars might be avoided. To keep him on the farm in Evarts County would be cheating humanity.

Against all this what could she set? The prosperity of the Maxills? Her growing attachment to Ash? The threat of her father selling the farm—easy enough now—and seeing the money spent until they were worse off than ever? She would have been stupid or foolish not to have considered these things. But the picture that pushed all others aside was that of Ash on the rack, victim of polite, incredulous inquisitors.

They wouldn't believe a word he said. They'd find the most convincing reasons for disregarding the evidence of the corn, the fruit, the untouched fiddle. They would subject him to psychiatric tests: intelligence, co-ordination, memory; physical tests—every possible prying and prodding. Where was he born, what was his full name, who were his father and mother? Unbelieving, refusing to believe, but so politely, gently, insistently: Yes, yes, of course, we understand; but try and think back, Mr. Uh Er Ash. Try to recall your childhood ...

And when they finally realized, it would be worse, not better. Now this force, Mr. Ash—try to remember how ... This equation; surely you can ... We know you practice telekinesis, just show us ... Again, please ... Again, please ... About healing sores, please explain ... Let's go through that revival of dying plant life once more ... Now about this ultrachromatic scale ... Now this, now that.

Or suppose it wasn't that way at all? Suppose the peril to Ash wasn't the apelike human greed for information but the tigerish human fear and hate of the stranger? Arrest for illegal entry or whatever they wanted to call it, speeches in Congress, uproar in newspapers and over the air. Spy, saboteur, alien agent. (How do we know what he's done to what he grows? Maybe anybody who eats it will go crazy or not be able to have babies.) There were no means of deporting Ash; this didn't mean he couldn't be gotten rid of by those terrified of an invasion of which he was the forerunner. Trials, legal condemnation, protective custody, lynchers ...

Uncovering Ash meant disaster. Two hundred years earlier or later he could bring salvation. Not now. In this age of fear, the revelation of his existence would be an irreparable mistake. Nan knew her father wouldn't be anxious to tell who was responsible for his crops; Gladys and Muriel knew nothing except that they had a hired man who was somewhat peculiar; anyway, they wouldn't call themselves to the attention of Evarts County in any controversial light. The younger kids could be trusted to follow the

example of their father and sisters. Besides, she was the only one in whom Ash had confided.

That winter Maxill bought two more cows. Ancient, dry and bony, destined for the butcher's where they would have brought very little. Under Ash's care they rejuvenated from day to day, their ribs vanished beneath flesh, their eyes brightened. The small, slack bags emerged, rounded, swelled, and eventually hung as full of milk as though they had just calved.

"What I want to know is, why can't we do as much for the pigs?" he demanded of Nan, ignoring, as always except when it suited him, Ash's presence. "Hogs are way down; I could get me some bred sows cheap. He could work his hocus-pocus—I can just see what litters they'd have."

"It isn't hocus-pocus. Ash just knows more about these things than we do. And he won't do anything to help killing," Nan explained. "He won't eat meat or eggs or milk himself—"

"He did something to make the hens lay more. And look at the milk we're getting."

"The more the hens lay, the further they are from the ax. The same goes for the cows. You notice nothing's improved the young cockerels. Maybe it isn't that he won't; maybe he can't do anything to get animals ready to be eaten. Ask him."

The seed catalogues began coming. Maxill had never bothered with the truck garden beyond having it plowed for the girls to sow and tend. This year he treated each pamphlet like a love letter, gloating over the orange-icicle carrots, impudent radishes, well-born heads of lettuce on the glistening covers. Nan intercepted his rhapsody of cabbages bigger than pumpkins, watermelons too heavy for a man to lift unaided, succulent tomatoes weighing three pounds or more apiece.

And Ash was content. For the first time, Nan felt the double-edged anger of women toward both exploiter and exploited. Ash ought to have some self-respect, some ambition. He oughtn't be satisfied puttering around an old farm. With his abilities and the assurance of a superior among primitives, he could be just about anything he wanted. But of course all he wanted was to be a farmer.

Maxill couldn't wait for the ground to be ready. While it was still too wet he had it plowed. Badly and at extra cost. He planted every inch of the fifty-odd available acres, to the carefully concealed amusement of his neighbors who knew the seed would rot.

Nan asked Ash, "Can you control whatever it is you do?"

"I can't make pear trees bear cucumbers or a grapevine have potatoes on its roots."

"I mean, everything doesn't have to be extra big, does it? Can you fix it so the corn is only a little bigger than usual?"

"Why?"

Nan Maxill knew the shame of treason, as she tried to explain.

"You're using words I don't know," said Ash. "Please define: jealousy, envy, foreigner, competition, furious, suspicion, and—well, begin with those."

She did the best she could. It wasn't good enough. It wasn't nearly good enough. Nan, who had been outraged at Ash's banishment, began to see how one too far behind or too far ahead might become intolerable. She could only guess what Ash represented to his people—a reminder of things better forgotten, a hint that they weren't so advanced as they thought when such a one could still be born to them—but she knew what he was on earth in the year 1937: a reproach and a condemnation.

Spring winds snapped the dead wood on the fruit trees, pruning them as efficiently as a man with saw, shears, and snips. The orchard could not be mistaken for a young one, the massive trunks and tall tops showed how long they had been rooted, but it was unquestionably a healthy one. The buds filled and opened, some with red-tipped unspoiled leaves, others with soft, powdery, uncountable blossoms. The shade they cast was so dense no weeds grew between the trees.

Not so in the fields. Whatever Ash had done to the soil also affected the windblown seeds lighting in and between the furrows. They came up so thickly that stem grew next to stem, roots tangled inextricably, heads rose taller and taller, reaching for unimpeded sunlight. Unless you got down on hands and knees, the tiny green pencils were invisible under the network of weeds.

"Anyways," said Malcolm Maxill, "the darned things came up instead of rotting; that's going to make some of the characters around here look pretty sick. I'll have a crop two-three weeks ahead of the rest. Depression's over for the Maxills. Know what? We'll have to cultivate like heck to get rid of the weeds; I'm going to get us a tractor on time. Then we won't have to hire our plowing next year. Suppose he can learn to run a tractor?"

"He can," said Nan, ignoring Ash's presence as completely as her father. "But he won't."

"Why won't he?"

"He doesn't like machinery."

Maxill looked disgusted. "I suppose he'd be happy with a horse or a mule."

"Maybe. He still wouldn't turn the weeds under."

"Why the dickens not?"

"I've told you before, Father. He won't have anything to do with killing."

"Weeds?"

"Anything. There's no use arguing; that's the way he is."

"Darn poor way if you ask me." But he bought the tractor and many attachments for it, cultivating the corn, sweating and swearing (when the girls were out of earshot); cursing Ash who did no more about the farm than walk around touching things. Was that a way to earn a grown man's keep?

Nan was afraid he might have a stroke when he found out the mammoth products of the year before were not to be duplicated. The orchard bore beyond all expectation or reason, not a cherry, plum, or apricot was undersized, misshapen or bird-pecked. No blossom fell infertile, no hard green nubbin withered and dropped, no set fruit failed to mature. Branches bent almost to the ground under the weight of their loads; breezes twitched leaves aside to uncover briefly a pomologist's dream. Maxill was no more pleased than by the corn.

"Sacrificing quality for quantity," he growled. "Bring the top market price? Sure. I was counting on twice that."

Nan Maxill realized how much she herself had changed, or been changed, since the fellow came.

Her father seemed to her now like a petulant child, going into a tantrum because something he wanted—something she saw wasn't good for him—was denied. The boys she used to go out with were gluttonous infants, gurgling and slobbering their fatuous desires. The people of Henryton, of Evarts

County, of—no, she corrected herself—people; people were juvenile, adolescent. News on the radio was of wars in China and Spain, massacre and bestialities in Germany, cruelties and self-defeat all over the world.

Had she unconsciously acquired Ash's viewpoint? He had no viewpoint, passed no judgments. He accepted what was all around him as he accepted what she told him: reflectively, curiously, puzzledly, but without revulsion. She had taken the attitude she thought *ought* to be his, unable to reach his detachment as he was unable to reach that of those who had exiled him here, as one who cannot distinguish between apes would put a gorilla and chimpanzee in the same zoo cage.

As primitive characteristics were sloughed off, a price was paid for their loss. Ash's people had exchanged his ability to make things grow for a compensatory ability to create by photosynthesis and other processes. If Ash had lost the savage ability to despise and hate, had he also lost the mitigating ability to love?

Because she wanted Ash to love her.

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They were married in January, which some thought odd, but the season suited Nan, who wanted a "regular" wedding and at the same time a quiet one. She had expected her father's assent at least; Ash had made him prosperous in two short years; their marriage would be insurance that he would continue to do so. But Maxill's bank account, his big car, the new respect Henryton—including his son-in-law—gave him, had inflated his ideas. "Who is the fellow anyway?" he demanded. "Where'd he come from originally? What's his background?"

"Does all that matter? He's good and gentle and kind, where he came from or who his parents were doesn't change that."

"Oh, doesn't it? Maybe there's bad blood in him. Bound to come out. And he's a cripple and not right in the head besides. Why, he couldn't even talk like anybody else at first. Sure it matters: you want kids who turn out idiots with the wrong number of fingers? Maybe criminals, too?"

Nan neither smiled at his passion for respectability nor reminded him that her children would have a moonshiner and bootlegger for a grandfather. "Ash is no criminal."

Ash was no criminal, but what of other dangers? Not just children with the wrong number of fingers or differences she knew nothing of (she'd never dare let Ash be examined by a doctor for fear of what anatomical or functional differences might be revealed), but perhaps no children at all. Beings so different might well have sterile union. Or no carnal union at all. Perhaps no bond deeper than that of a man for a cat or horse. Nan didn't pretend for a second it wouldn't matter. It mattered terribly, every last perilous possibility. She was still determined to marry him.

Maxill shook his head. "There's another thing—he hasn't even got a name."

"We'll give him ours," said Nan. "We'll say he's a second cousin or something."

"Hell we will!" her father exploded. "A freak like that—"

"All right. We'll elope then, and get a place of our own. It won't be hard when anyone sees what Ash can do. And we won't have to have good land." She left it at that, giving him plenty of time to think over all the implications. He gave in. Grudgingly, angrily. But he gave in.

Ash had never gone into Henryton or showed himself except the few times he'd helped Maxill pay back a debt of work. Still, everyone knew there was some sort of hired man on the farm. Gladys and Muriel knew him to nod to and that was about all; they were skeptically astonished to learn he was a remote relative "from back East" and still more amazed to hear he was marrying Nan. They thought she could do better. Then they remembered her reputation; maybe they should be glad the fellow was doing right. They counted the months and were shocked when a year and a half went by before Ash Maxill, Junior was born.

Nan had counted the months, too. Some of her fears had been quickly dispelled, others persisted. She feared to look closely at her son, and the fear was not mitigated by Ash's expression of aloof interest nor the doctor's and nurses' over-bright cheeriness. Her insides settled back into place as she delicately touched the tiny nose, unbelievably perfect ears, rounded head. Then she reached to lift the wrapping blanket—

"Uh ... uhh ... Mrs. Maxill, uh ..."

She knew of course even before she saw them, and a great wave of defiance flowed through her. The little dimpled hands, the little rectangular feet—eight fingers, eight toes.

She wanted to shout, It's not an impediment, you idiots! Why do you need five fingers when four will do the same things more easily and skillfully, and do things no five-fingered hand will do? It wasn't physical weakness which kept her quiet—she was a strong, healthy girl and the birth had not been complicated—but the knowledge that she must hide the child's superiority as she hid Ash's lest the ordinary ones turn on them both. She hid her face. Let them think it was anguish.

She felt a curious sympathy for her father. Malcolm Maxill was triumphant; his dire prophecies had been fulfilled; he could not restrain his gratification. At the same time, it was his grandson—his flesh and blood—who was deformed. Short of betraying Ash's secret, she had no way of reassuring him, and even this might not console him. More than likely he would take Ash's banishment as further proof of undesirability; he did not try to hide his increasing animosity.

"You'd think," said Nan, "you'd injured him instead of doing all you have."

Ash smiled and ran his hand lightly over her shoulder. It still surprised her slightly that someone without anger, envy, or hate should be capable of humor and tenderness.

"Do you expect him to be grateful?" he asked. "Have you forgotten all you told me about how people act? Anyway, I didn't do it for your father, but for the sake of doing it."

"Just the same, now the baby is here, we ought to have a regular agreement. Either a share in the farm or else wages—good wages."

She knew his look of grave and honest interest so well. "Why? We have all we can eat. Your clothes wear out, but your father gives you money for new ones, and the baby's too. Why—"

"Why don't your clothes wear out or get dirty?" she interrupted irrelevantly.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I told you I didn't understand these things. Until I came here, I never heard of fabrics which weren't everwearing and self-cleaning."

"Anyway, it doesn't matter. We ought to be independent."

He shook his head. "Why?"

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Malcolm Maxill used some of the money from the bountiful crop of 1940 to buy the adjoining farm. He was indisputably a big man in Evarts County now. Three laborers worked the two farms; the house had been remodeled; a truck, two cars, and a station wagon stood in the new garage beside all the shining machinery. The banker in Henryton listened deferentially when he spoke; Muriel's husband asked his advice.

Nan saw how it chafed him to be tied to farming, beholden to Ash. When he left on the long trip to Los Angeles, she knew he was trying to end his dependence, searching for a deal to put him in a business where his shrewdness, money, energy, not Ash's gifts, would make the profit. Maxill wasn't mean; if he sold the land, she was sure he'd settle with Ash for enough so they could get a place of their own.

A freeway accident intervened: Malcolm Maxill was killed instantly. There was no will. The estate was divided amicably enough, Gladys and Muriel waiving practically all their share in return for Nan's taking full responsibility for the three younger girls. Ash was quite content to leave arrangements—which he regarded with the detached interest an Anglican bishop might take in a voodoo mask—to her. He clearly didn't grasp the importance of possessions and power.

He had to register for the draft, but as a father in an essential occupation there was little danger of being called up; anyway, he would never pass a medical examination with eight fingers. The war sent farm prices up and up; Gladys went to Washington to work for the government; Josey married a sailor home on leave.

Harvests continued bountiful; Nan noted with pleasure how other farmers came to Ash for advice and help. Since he couldn't convey his knowledge to her despite partial communication in his own tongue, there was no use trying with others. He never refused his aid; he simply limited it to visiting the poor growth, sick animal, or doubtful field, talking platitudes from agricultural bulletins while his hands were busy. Afterward, so naturally that they were only amazed at the wisdom of the trite advice, the beasts recovered, the crop flourished, the sterile ground bore.

Her faint fear of little Ash's hands becoming a handicap after all was dissipated. He could grasp, clutch, hold, manipulate, throw better than any other child of his age. (Some years later, he became the best pitcher Evarts County had ever known; he had a facing curve no opposing batter ever caught onto.) Without precocity he talked early; he learned his father's speech so well he eventually outdistanced Nan; she listened with maternal and wifely complacency as they hummed subtleties beyond her understanding.

Jessie, who took a commercial course, got a job as her brother-in-law's secretary; Janet went East to study archaeology. After V-J Day, price-controls went off; the Maxills made more and more money. Ash stopped planting corn on the old farm. Part of the acreage he put into a new orchard; on the rest he sowed a hybrid grass of his own breeding which yielded a grain higher in protein than wheat. Young Ash was a joy; yet after seven years he remained an only child. "Why?" she asked.

"You want more children?"

"Naturally I do. Don't you?"

"It's still hard for me to understand your people's obsession with security. Security of position, ancestry, or posterity. How is it possible to differentiate so jealously between one child and another because of a biological relation or the lack of it?"

For the first time Nan felt him alien. "I want *my* children."

But she had no more. The lack saddened without embittering her; she remembered how she had been bent on marrying Ash even with the chance of no children at all. And she had been right: without Ash, the farm would have been worthless; her father a whining, querulous, churlish failure; she would have married the first boy who asked her after she tired of necking in cars, and would have had a husband as incapable of helping her grow and bloom as her father had been incapable with his barren acres. Even if she had known there would be no young Ash, she would still have chosen the same way.

It troubled her that Ash was unable to teach his son his farming skill. It destroyed a dream of Nan's: Ash's secret made him vulnerable; young Ash, with no secret to be extracted, could have worked his miracles for humanity without fear.

"Why can't he learn? He understands you better than I ever will."

"He may understand too much. He may have advanced beyond me. Remember, I'm a throwback, with faculties no longer needed by my people. Sports rarely breed true; he may be closer to them in some ways than I."

"Then ... then he should be able to do some of the marvelous things they can do."

"I don't think it works that way. There's some kind of equation—not a mechanical leveling off, but compensatory gains and losses. I can't teach him even the simple sort of telekinesis I can do. But he can heal flesh better than I."

So a new dream supplanted the old: young Ash as a doctor, curing the diseases mankind suffered. But the boy, happy enough to exorcise warts from a playmate's hands or mend a broken bone by running his fingers over the flesh outside, wanted no such future. The overriding interest of his life was machinery. At six he had rehabilitated an old bicycle each Maxill girl had used in turn until it was worn beyond repair. Beyond any repair except young Ash's, that is. At eight he restored decrepit alarm clocks to service; at ten he could fix the tractor as well or better than the Henryton garage. Nan supposed she ought to be happy about a son who might be a great engineer or inventor; unfortunately, she thought the world of freeways and nuclear weapons less desirable than the one she had known as a girl—Prohibition and Depression or not.

Could she be aging? She was just over forty; the fine lines on her face, the slight raising of the veins on her hands were far less noticeable than the same signs on girls—women—five or six years younger. Yet when she looked at Ash's smooth cheeks, unchanged since the day Josey brought him in from the south pasture, she had a qualm of apprehension.

"How old are you?" she asked him. "How old are you really?"

"As old and as young as you are."

"No," she persisted. "That's a figure of speech or a way of thinking. I want to know."

"How can I put it in terms of earth years—of revolutions around this sun by this planet? It wouldn't make sense even if I knew the mathematics involved and could translate one measurement into another. Look

at it this way: wheat is old at six months, an oak is young at fifty years."

"Are you immortal?"

"No more than you. I'll die just as you will."

"But you don't grow any older."

"I don't get sick, either. My body isn't subject to weakness and decay the way my remote ancestors' were. But I was born, therefore I must die."

"You'll still look young when I'm an old woman. Ash ..."

Ah, she thought, it's well enough for you to talk. What people say doesn't bother you; you aren't concerned with ridicule or malice. I'd call you inhuman if I didn't love you. Every superhuman carries the suggestion of inhumanity with it. Yes, yes—we're all selfish, mean, petty, grasping, cruel, nasty. Are we condemned for not seeing over our heads, for not being able to view ourselves with the judicial attachment of a million generations hence? I suppose we are. But it must be a self-condemnation, not an admonition, not even the example of a superior being.

She could not regret marrying Ash; she would not have changed anything. Except the one pitiful little resentment against aging while he didn't. No acquired wisdom, no thoughtful contemplation could reconcile her to the idea, could prevent her shuddering at the imagined looks, questions, snickers at a woman of fifty, sixty, seventy, married to a boy apparently in his twenties. Suppose young Ash had inherited his father's impervious constitution, as he seemed to have? She saw, despite the painful ludicrousness of it, her aged self peering from one to the other, unable to tell instantly which was the husband and which the son.

In her distress, and her soreness that she should be distressed, she drew off from the others, spoke little, spent hours away from the house, wandering in a not unpleasant abdication of thought and feeling. So, in the hot, sunny stillness of an August afternoon, she heard the music.

She knew immediately. There was no mistaking its relation to Ash's humming and its even closer kinship to the polyphony he drew from the radio. For a vanishing instant, she thought, heart-beatingly, that young Ash—but this was far, far beyond fumbling experiment. It could only come from someone—something—as far ahead of Ash as he was of her.

She listened, shocked, anguished, exhaled. There was nothing to see except the distant mountains, the cloudless sky, ripe fields, straight road, groups of slender trees, scrabbly knots of wild berries, untrammelled weeds. Nothing hovered overhead, no stranger in unearthly clothes strolled from behind the nearest hillock. Yet she had no doubt. She hurried back to the house and found Ash. "They are looking for you."

"I know. I've known for days."

"Why? What do they want?"

He did not answer directly. "Nan, do you think I've completely failed to fit into this life?"

She was genuinely astonished. "Failed! You've brought life, wisdom, health, goodness to everything you've touched. How can you talk of failing?"

"Because, after all ... I haven't become one of you."

"Add, 'Thank God.' You've done much more than become one of us. You've changed the face and spirit of everything around here. The land and those who live off it are better because of you. You changed me from a silly girl to—to whatever I am. You fathered young Ash. Don't ask me if a spoonful of sugar sweetens the ocean—let me believe it makes it that much less salt."

"But you are unhappy."

She shrugged. "Happiness is for those satisfied with what they have and want nothing more."

He asked, "And what do you want?"

"A world where I wouldn't have to hide you," she answered fiercely. "A world you and young Ash and his children and grandchildren could better without inviting suspicion and envy. A world outraged—not happy—with bickering, distrust, animosity and terror. I think you've brought such a world a little closer to becoming."

He said abruptly, "They want me back."

She heard the four words without comprehension; they conveyed no message to her. She searched his face as though the expression would enlighten her. "What did you say?"

"They want me back," he repeated. "They need me."

"But that's outrageous! First they send you to this savage world, then they decide they've made a mistake and whistle for you to come back."

"It isn't like that," protested Ash. "They didn't force me; I didn't have to accept the suggestion. Everyone agreed, on the basis of the very little we knew, that the people and society here (if either existed) would most likely be closer to the epoch I would naturally have fitted than the one into which I was born. I needn't have come; having come, I could have returned."

"Force! What do you call the pressure of 'everyone agreed' if not force? And it was for your own good, too. That excuse for wickedness must prevail from one end of the universe to the other. I wonder if your people are really less barbarian than mine."

He refused to argue, to defend the beings who threatened—if vainly—the life she led with her husband and son, the minute good Ash was doing in Evarts County, the hope that he could do more and on a larger scale. Ash in his humility thought them superior to him; she had never questioned this till now. But supposed their evolution had not been toward better than the development Ash represented, but worse—a subtle degeneracy? Suppose in gaining the abilities so awesome to Ash they had lost some of his probity and uprightness, reverting to a morality no higher—little higher, she amended in all honesty—than that of the earth in the year 1960?

"Of course you won't go?"

"They need me."

"So do I. So does young Ash."

He smiled tenderly at her. "I will not weigh the need of millions, nor the need of love and comfort, against the need for life. Such judgments lead only to self-justification, cruelty disguised as mercy, and destruction for the sake of rebuilding."

"Then you won't go?"

"Not unless you tell me to."

Next day she walked through the orchard, recalling again its desolate condition before Ash came, Josey's face, her own unsettled heart. She walked through the new orchard where the young trees flourished without a twisted limb or fruitless branch. She walked through the new farm, never so hopeless as the homeplace, yet abused, exploited, ravaged. The fields were fair and green, the pasture lush and succulent. She came to the spot where she had been the day before, and the music filled her ears and mind.

Fiercely she tried to recapture her reasoning, her indictment. The music did not plead, cajole, argue with her. It was itself, outside such utility. Yet it was not proud or inexorable; removed from her only in space and time and growth; not in fundamental humanity. It was far beyond the simple components of communication she had learned from Ash, yet it was not utterly and entirely outside her understanding.

She listened for a long time—hours, it seemed. Then she went to the house. Ash put his arms around her and again, as so often, she was amazed how he could be loving without a tincture of brutality. "Oh, Ash," she cried. "Oh, Ash!"

Later she said, "Will you come back?"

"I hope so," he answered gravely.

"When—when will you go?"

"As soon as everything is taken care of. There won't be much; you have always attended to the business matters." He smiled; Ash had never touched money or signed a paper. "I'll take the train from Henryton; everyone will think I've gone East. After a while, you can say I've been kept by family affairs. Perhaps you and the boy will leave after a few months, presumably to join me."

"No. I'll stay here."

"People will think—"

"Let them," she said defiantly. "Let them."

"I can find you anywhere, you know, if I can come back."

"You won't come back. If you do, you'll find me here."

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She had no difficulties with the harvest. As Ash said, she had taken care of the business end since her father's death. Hands were always eager to work at the Maxill's; produce merchants bid against each other for the crop. But next year?

She and the land could wither together without a husband's care. The lines on her face would deepen, her hair would gray, her mouth sag. The trees would die little by little, the fruit grow sparser, less and less perfect. The corn would come up more irregularly year by year, sickly, prey to parasites; stunted, gnarled, poor. Finally so little would grow it wouldn't pay to plant the fields. Then the orchards would

turn into dead wood, the hardier weeds take over, the land become waste. And she ...

She knew she was hearing the sounds, the music, only in her imagination. But the illusion was so strong, so very strong, she thought for the moment she could distinguish Ash's own tones, his message to her, so dear, so intimate, so reassuring ...

"Yes," she said aloud. "Yes, of course."

Because at last she understood. In the winter she would walk all over the land. She would pick up the hard clods from the ground and warm them in her fingers. In the spring she would plunge her arms into the sacks of seed, deeply, to the elbows, over and over. She would touch the growing shoots, the budding trees; she would walk over the land, giving herself over to it.

It would not be as though Ash were still there. It could never be like that. But the earth would be rich; the plants and trees would flourish. The cherries, apricots, plums, apples, and pears would not be as many or so fine as they had been, nor the corn so even and tall. But they would grow, and her hands would make them grow. Her five-fingered hands.

Ash would not have come for nothing.

The End

Author Biography and Bibliography

(Joseph) Ward Moore was born in 1903, in Montreal, Canada, but grew up in Madison, New Jersey. He was removed from De Witt Clinton high school in NYC under threat of expulsion for "Red" ideas. He wrote from the age of 11; his first novel published in 1942. Worked on the Federal Writers Project of the WPA, circa 1937-1940. Lived in NYC, moved to California in 1929, and lived there on and off until his death in 1978. He had three children.

Moore was initially as well known for his works outside the sf field—like the picaresque *Breathe the Air Again* (1942)—as for those within. Although he contributed only infrequently to the field, each of his books became something of a classic. His first sf publication was *Greener Than You Think* (1947), a successful comic satire about a mutated form of grass which absorbs the entire world while governments dither. His second and most famous sf tale, *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), became the definitive alternate worlds novel in which the South wins the American Civil War.

Moore also wrote two of the most notable stories describing nuclear holocaust and its consequences, "Lot" (1953) and "Lot's Daughter" (1954), featuring a great motorized exodus from a doomed Los Angeles, seen through biblical parallelism as the city of Sodom. The hero jettisons his irredeemably suburban wife and his sons and goes on to make a new and incestuous life with his daughter in the mountains. The ironies attached to his monstrous survivalism are savage. The stories were used as an uncredited basis for the film *Panic in Year Zero* (1962), losing much of their power in the cleaning-up process.

Critical information adapted from material provided by *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (with special thanks to Barry N. Malzberg for additional background).

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