The Rape of the Clock

Norman Schwenk
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THE RAPE OF THE CLOCK

A BAROQUE EPIC

FIRST MURDERER: Tut, tut, my lord, we will not stand to prate:
Talkers are no good doers: be assured
We go to use our hands and not our tongues.
Richard the Third

He was a young Jesuit from Peru
And via Rome he entered Kiowa U.
To take a Ph.D. in Agronomics
Of Animal Husbandry Economics.
I was doing the same, but for my bread
I was a flunky at the Miller Maid
Computer Center. To the priest my job
Was near-angelic—toiling in the throb
And whirrl of science serving humankind:
To him, it wasn’t only another grind.
He used to preach on Henry Adams’ fear
Of a long dearth of mating, meshing gear
Between the Dynamo and the fair Virgin.
“For now,” he’d say, “now, men and clergymen
Shall banish the ghost of Science without Soul!”
Not long before, the Church had made a poll
Of priests and vested laymen, to feel out
Their feelings on the necessary bout
Between Belief and Science. The result
Proved a surprise. It seems most leaders felt
That no family feud was necessary
Between two children of the Mother Mary.
Big Sister Church and Little Brother Science
Need not war over Altar or Appliance;
They could join hands, and sister be the guide
With useful little brother at her side,
They'd serve the good of man and glory God
Together. Here the Jesuit would nod
Decisively, and glower in his tea.
None of it seemed so simple, though, to me.
God, Science, Serving Man—they were not jokes—
But don't wheel-shoulderers perish in the spokes?
Poor Henry Adams, he would gag on phlegm,
Turn in his grave at many r.p.m.
And die again, to see what I have seen:
The night our priest engaged the brain machine.

We used to have him home for lunch, the priest.
Even a light snack was a bacchic feast
With him, the dancing bear of the carnival.
He filled the room—furry beard and coronal
Grin adorning a round black frock with nugget
Nose; my kids would take his beard and tug it
And he'd laugh, and when he laughed you felt the shutters
Shudder, the walls shake—somewhere high the shingles flutter . . . .
We celebrated the week he was made
A Rockefeller Fellow—just a staid
Affair of course, stocked with people just alike
From deepest thoughts down to the children's trike,
The same desires, underthings on the shelf
(I liked the lukewarm shower of myself).
The priest raised up his glass above our hum,
Above this hive of honey stirred with rum,
And toasted Rockefeller and the Pope
And gave his clapper laugh and drank the hope
That he'd be made Herr Doktor by July
Now that he had a proper cut of pie
To woo and win the scholar's costly queen,
The Maid of Miller Hall, the brain machine.

I didn't relish this. I wasn't sure
If such a tryst would be a kill or cure.
Or both. Or nothing. Only a bellyache.
But what must be must: for the thesis' sake.
So like fat Sancho at the iron gate
I offer my good offices—"The date
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Can be arranged as soon as soonness comes.
The Miller Maid is sooner squired than won,
And there are suitors keyed up at the door
And queued up in the halls, bunked on the floor
And banked up on the Miller Walk like snow,
Like snow save for the heat their bodies blow,
For these are scholars, sweating for renown
And, like small poets, must bob for their crown,
Must do the dance of red coals on the walk.
So here they wait, and do the dance, and talk;
And talk much more, for this act saves their days;
The guest will talk who never goes or strays.”
The Jesuit smiled now, as I could not,
Vowed he had no career, no curve, no plot,
And scarcely could imagine what I meant,
Although he had an aim, more than a bent,
A calling: to bring cattle to Peru
Could fair be hitched with ours at Kiowa U.
The rest was pure ice cream that he could see.
Not, not to die a whirling squirmeree
Did God want man. Man, his most blessed child
Was not born but to roll in folders filed,
Nor was he meant to moulder like Peru.
And, for that matter, some at Kiowa U.
Were not endowed to mew and bleat of struggles
That had the weight and substance
Of hope for our two advents out of hell.

The Jesuit was set. On Christmas Eve
Would come his moment to give and receive.
Thanksgiving—then, only a month more hence
He would have two tight hours of intense
Time testing his mettle in Miller Hall—
When Truth would gather helpless in a ball.
Though save for stopping, starting it on cue
The thing was fixed, little for him to do.
The questions were laid out, the answers came
As calmly as a flower opens. Blame
The rest on me, perhaps. It should have been
As simple as a rooster and a hen,
Without even the noise or loss of plumage;
As easy as a purchase at a rummage
Sale, when clearly nobody but you thinks
To buy the bust of Oedipus that winks.

"SIMPLE. Easy," I told him, as we walked
The vacant midnight corridor and stalked
The room where the Maid rested. God's own light
Had emptied from the long, bare winter night,
And the Jesuit's time came ever near.
We both wavered a bit from Christmas beer;
He dragged a Navy mattress and a pump
To pump in air (the rubber kind you jump
On underfoot, and jump and jump). At last
We stepped up to the silent door. A blast
Of Christmas wind banged windows in the hall.
I marked the time. Two minutes by the tall
Hand until the Jesuit threw the switch.
I shoved the door open. We blinked at pitch
Dark inside. I fumbled to flip the light.
Ah! There she was! Serene. Only a slight
Purring like a tabby stretched in the sun.
She curled against the wall, as if in fun;
Yet calm, pausing for you just to begin;
And all her chambered secrets veiled within.

The Jesuit guffawed and rubbed his beard,
Produced a flask of eggnog, as I'd feared,
Placed it with his mattress under the nose
Of a partially uncoiled Ellison fire hose,
Yawned once and said, "Well? Next?" I had to coach
Him then, vexed as I was at his approach,
So flip, so irreverent, toward a thing
In which we might take pride as any king
In Andes conquered or in Congos won.
"This is the button where things are begun,"
I said as to a perky child. "This knob
Throbs red when error enters that may rob
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You of completion. You can intervene.
Just watch the knob. And here this silver, screened
Business records the time you have to run.
There's no hitch in the whole affair. The fun
Has been ruled out. So has the risk and error.”
I watched him secretly, a tropic terror
Of senseless queasing rising through my belly.
What could happen? My blood was cherry jelly
As he calmly poked objects with his toe,
Patting his black paunch and chuckling low.
I sent a small prayer up for our machine
And summed up the briefing. “This any green
Country hand could handle without mishap.
These parts you press, and these you snap
On hours and half hours, and that's all.”
I belched. He yawned. I said, “Have a Ball,”
And left. He answered, “Thanks!” starting to jump
Down on the onion of his mattress pump,
And jump, and jump. I left him pumping there.
Outside was wakefulness in the cold air.
A few lights glimmered: candles on a bier.
Far Christmas caroling chimed in my ear . . .
“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.” I would.
I headed home. And let our Maid explode.

SOMEWHERE I woke in a sweat, trembling cold.
The room. Where was the room where I had rolled
Quietly into bed and covered warm?
The house. Where went the house, and who this form?
Then I beheld his beard and sun-bright sword.
The sword swings like a bell. A small blue Ford
Blunders upon the blade and bursts like glass.
It is the priest. He pours bright crimson gas
In a huge, silver truck and strikes a match.
He mumbles, drops it down the safety hatch
And runs. The truck coughs, shaking like a man,
Then blows up. O I dance, I dance like Pan
To see my clothes catch fire in Kiowa.
But I am somewhere vague in Florida,
Here poised, pensive upon a toilet seat,
Hearkening to the jungle, jungle beat,
The whoop, screak of old plumbing in my ear.
It pummels louder. A door opens near
My knee. A man in World War One puttees
Enters and raps. He snaps, "The General, please."
A door opens. O the terrible priest
Gleams, black and soldierly, his golden, creased
Trousers piped and striped in scarlet. He laughs,
Begins growling above his gray-line staff;
They wheel around and stare down at my thighs.
I curse, mutter, "Pardon if I don't rise."
And reach for the door. Sudden the sword falls,
There sets abooming ghastly waterfalls,
And I am falling. Buildings crack apart,
The glass wall buckles, whimpers near my heart
And collapses. All, all of us go down,
Down under dark. We clog the clever drains
Of modern sewage with spoiled, glut remains.
I am lying somewhere white, in a coma.
I hear a voice. It brings me a diploma
And wrings my hand. Here am I, on sheets
At home in bed. Sharp, charging football cleats
Have used me for a scrimmage. Here my wife
Punches my arm and shouts, "Hey! Qome on! Life!
Take a Miltown will you? My God, you sound
Like ten old tomcats in the dog pound!"

AFTER THE STORM of Christmas bows and wrappers,
After breakfast, church and the funny papers,
I strolled along toward Miller Hall to see
If my incredible dream was merely me.
I had to smile. The Hall stood there so solid,
The plumb model of midcentury-stolid-
Starch design: nothing unjustifiable
In view, no jutting out, no joke, no trifle
Sullying this trim, virginal purity;
But clean, stern, unimpeachable piety
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Was upraised here, and frozen in the snow.
I yawned, noted the time, turned back to go,
And then thought I would stop and see the Maid.
A show of trust. Show I was not afraid
Out of silliness. I strode up the stairs
On past the rooms of Christmas-empty chairs,
My rubbers booming echoes in the hall.
Ah, the peace of holidays, not a soul
Around . . . .

But I stopped, staring face on face
With a red, angry, menacing grimace,
Attached to a long arm that beat the door.
"What's going on here? What's the door locked for?
They heard of keys!" GAMB! GAMB! "The schedules say
She runs again at One on Christmas Day.
Two thousand bucks an hour running time!
You think somebody'd care. I'm next in line,
And Jesus Crutch my thesis prof'll burn
If I don't get in here and get my turn."
I almost didn't say I had a key,
Sure as I was that he'd be blaming me
And bawling about his lost fifteen minutes.
But what in God's name had the Jesuit
Done? How had he botched and caused the locked-up door?
Quick, quick as flying sparkle fishes soar,
The key jumped from my pocket to the lock.
Before you could say Cricket-in-the-Clock,
The door leaped open, and before our eyes
Stood the Jesuit in full-dress surprise.
"Why are you here?!" I cried. But I could guess
He didn't know. His mouth moved like a fish,
Green at the gills. He hardly mouthed a word.
"Diablo. Diablo," was all I heard.
"Chum, I'm switching her off to start my own,"
Spit the red angry man. "Is she still on?"
I cried. "Isn't she off? The lights say free?"
"On still, and running happy as a bee,"
Came the reply. A feeble Chaplin smile,
The bleached look of a saint on painted tile
Curled over the priest's moon face, then he spoke:
"I guess I went asleep. Eh? Some joke
On me hah? I get pooped pumping air.
I lay down for a snooze like the old bear,
And boom boom somebody's beating down the door.
I guess I have to come back. Do some more
Work? Eh?" I started to laugh. The more I laughed
The more my laughter doubled, shook my daft
Brain, and I doubled up and did a dance.
I nearly laughed aloft my silly pants,
And the priest laughed enough to shake the ground
Down under the Hall—as soon as we unwound
We wound back up again—brayed, whistled, reeled,
KARAK! My dome cracked on a metal shield.
Stars hustled out. The sirens sang. A shaft
Of colored light englobed the priest, who laughed,
Outlaughing me now, quaking belly laughs,
Blind birdhouse hoots, caterwauls, gales, rafts
Of laughter. The red man was streaking white
And screaming for us to get out or fight.
So we got out, with many a low salaam,
And broke up when the door shut like a bomb.

It wasn't until February 1st
He got the bill. Till then we thought the worst
Upshot would be another long delay,
More months of waiting for the Maid to say,
"I'm ready, dear." We thought her men would make
Discreet inquiries—for her honor's sake—
And learn All was an Accident from us.
There couldn't be a fracas or a fuss
At such a farce. There wasn't. Just a bill.
$25,000 to the till
Of Monoplated Miller Maid Machines,
Please. The priest came straight to me, swimming scenes
Of being locked in jail, defrocked and sued.
No, nonsense, I assured him. I pooh-poohed
Such fears, which indeed were greatly inflated.
He wouldn't be deported. None hated
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Him or would come seeking a pound of skin;  
But I knew I just half-persuaded him.  
He moped around the house, humming songs,  
Nursing cups of coffee and giving long,  
Tedious monologues on Life. He grew vague,  
Without zest, like the place in Camus' Plague.  
He played with the children, and soon forgot  
The game at hand. The gold in a pewter pot,  
The solace of a good cigar, were not  
In any way relief. Relief? From what?  
"From what?" So I argued, over tea.  
"This is mere bureaucratic comedy—  
Detective comedy. They're solving cases  
As if no one had fingerprints or faces.  
Our weapon here can be a show of flesh.  
We'll show them smiles on lips, a moving, fresh  
Warm body that needs no leap of the mind  
To be believed. These people can be kind  
And helpful when they can't avoid the chance.  
The chance is you. Caught plainly with your grants  
Down, sorely in need of an ear of aid.  
No one will dare condemn the part you've played.  
It touches all of us, as old as jade:  
Asleep—gulled by a shrewd, gold-digging maid."

THE NEXT DAY, like experimental rats  
Put in a maze to see if they'd be bats,  
Like two mice in a labyrinthine cheese  
Inedible, we paced interstices  
Of the Miller Building. On, ever on.  
No knight with bishop, merely pawn with pawn.  
Each square, each passage was a golden tunnel  
Ending the game, then dwindled in a funnel  
And whirlpooled to another flat, dead end.  
We met an aimless, tuneless repetend  
Of receptionists, pursued more bum steers  
Than Iowa farmers yield in forty years.  
We talked with tiny voices far away.  
We talked to ones that rumored close to say
They knew just what to do; then sent us off
To hunt one straw in Farmer Miller's loft.
We talked to ones who clucked and peeped advice.
We talked to ones who squeaked like friendly mice.
And there were those who cackled at our tale,
And those who gobbled over their dinner pail.
It was the grandest Barnyard Babel din
Since Noah took the beasts and left the men.
But give them this, whether they crowed or yelped,
They all smiled, and they all wanted to help.

Or did they? Around five, we finally reached
A friendly, soothing Mr. Hayes, who preached
Patience, but said definitely he'd do
Something to help, and looked like he could, too.
His smile gripped the priest as on a skewer;
When he grew serious, the priest was dour;
He waxed wise, and slowly the priest's mouth swung
Open in a respectful o. He flung
Papers about so suave-off-handedly;
He spoke so even and clear, so candidly
That the priest's hope was won, and mine hung fire.
Here maybe was our guide of hooks and wire.
Clearly, Hayes was a weathered bureaucrat
Who knew the ins and outs, the tit for tat
Required to wage a company career.
His face was oddly green from dwelling near
Green file cabinets closing over the years.
The color of hope, I wondered? Green spears
That arm the ranks of invincible spring?
No, more an olive drab. The year-round thing,
The green same-shading armies of real wars,
Old forces of necessity and laws . . . .
For a second I was turned from my thought
By Hayes' calm voice, reminding us to write
A letter setting forth in full our case . . . .
No, he wasn't sly or sleek. A kind face
Had Hayes, though impossible to describe:
Nothing stood out, either to praise or jibe
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(Except a most decisive pair of glasses:
Thick, blackened rims, to cow the underclasses
I supposed, or squarely to meet his own).
No really tangible voice. A Monotone.
Nor any clear-cut hair or hairline either.
It seemed to be here; there it didn’t bother.
Here rather gray; there neither this nor that.
It settled partway, stayed put where it sat.
He gave no clue, would never leave a trace,
But somehow, as I said, a kindly face.
For over my friend and I spread a calm
Of easesome competence, a creamy balm
Of soft assurance things would be O. K. . . .
We slopped out in the darkened, snowy day,
And the priest whose eyes turned to the tall building
Looked serene as a saint, fit for gilding.

THE SECOND BILL arrived on March the 1st.
Now $22,000 to the purse
Of Monoplated Miller Maid Machines
Please; lettered in colorful puce on greens
With a firm footnote on bills overdue.
Good old Hayes. Grandmother’s curse on you.
The Jesuit came swimming harder now;
Black arms flew out across a blacker brow,
The eyes seemed to have lost sight of the ship.
I sat him down and poured more than a nip,
Again stressed how the danger wasn’t great,
But to little avail. To him all hate
Had curdled in a cloud above his head.
Chicago gangsters would catch him in bed,
Maim, drown, machine-gun him and drink the blood.
He never, really, ever understood
His foe to be an Everest Indifference.
To him, things had a personal reference.
Back of his bill were angry eyes and voices.
Chewing cigars in back seats of Rolls Royces.
He knew that one round dollar in Peru
Was enough to start a family set-to,
Set brothers at odds, chums to taking swings
At one another’s chins, and crazy things.
So could it here. Who could waive with aplomb
Some twenty-odd-thousand-or-other bomb?
(I wondered which was best for jolly bears;
A paw in the jaw shows someone still cares.)
So when he asked, O would I call Hayes please,
I got Hayes on the phone, though not with ease,
And he apologized in cataracts
Of course. “I’m certain the pertinent facts
Got through to DeeDad under P.P.D.’s,”
He said in eerie gobble-gobblese;
“Somebody just deducted what he owed,
Not what he didn’t. Might have been the code
Got punched wrong on the cratting-crotchitch card,”
I thought he said. “You know, our bills are starred,
Mounted and mailed by Ratt machine.
Well now, don’t worry. I’ll check with BueBean.”
Click. So we were consigned calmly to wait
According to the script, the map, the date.
But better to move right now we had a hunch.
My friend belted away a hefty lunch
And took a nap, and shortly we took off
To try and locate Dr. Amanoff,
Who supervised the graduate Agronomics
Of Animal Husbandry Economics
Program. We succeeded, not with ease,
In finding him, inspecting cheddar cheese
Out in the New Cheese Barns. A polished brow
Rose from behind a moon-white bossy cow,
And he stared down at us—sweet music curled
Within my ear, a gauze contentment swirled
Over the cows, and all of us (more cheese
With Faith’s cascading strings on piped L.P.’s).
I stammered a few times, thus introduced
Us, and we perched like fledglings on a roost
For some reply. Finally one came.
“Well, the faces are familiar. What names
Again? Uh huh. Well, let’s get out of here.”
He stroked the great white lady on the ear
And started off. His office we assumed.
"At least it isn't Hayes," I quietly fumed
Behind him. I'd seen Amanoff before
Of course; been crammed in classes craning for
A distant word of his; seen him up close
While shagging flies at the Annual Dose-
Of-Friendship Student and Faculty Outing.
Always he wore his sore, scholarly-pouting
Mien about him—his old-world teacher's ways.
So let him scowl. Better this than Hayes.

But in his office he began to warm.
The priest spun out his tale with verve and form
While Amanoff sat chuckling at his shoes—
Until he saw the priest was not amused,
Then coughed a little, dropped his brusqueness straight
And began, calmly, to commiserate.
I looked around. The walls were gaily hung
With pictures: one of workers pitching dung
On sugar beets; one of a pregnant hog;
And after the porcer, blacks beat on a log
In Africa (I crossed a mental fence:)
Each tableau made increasingly more sense).
A Hopi shaman danced against a drouth
With a fat, looping rattlesnake in his mouth;
Gaunt Mayans lobbed a young girl in a well;
Two Romans seemed to notice as she fell,
Then stooped to burn libations to their gods;
Aztecs stood feathered high above the clods
Of squalid crowds that saw the young man start
As the doctors bent to amputate his heart;
An Irishman put broth out for the fairies;
Grizzled, foreign revolutionaries
Shot someone's family up against a wall;
And towards the end, the grayest frame of all,
Two Christian peasants prayed in a dead field;
Next came a scene of blooming, yellow yield:
Red motored mowers laid the hay in rows,
A bumper gush of grain shot from the nose
Of a tall combine—Finis, the mystery—
Kiowa headed the arrow of History.
This last was close enough to read a line:
"Story of Agriculture. No. 9."
Tacked on the end, a shot of surplus-bins—
Endless, ranked, relentless muffin tins—
Seemed rude, not apropos . . . .

The priest was winding
Up his story, and Amanoff was grinding
His tie in tiny knots, so I broke in:
"Sir, is there anything you recommend?
What may appear as foolishness to us
Might be no joke at all to someone else.
This thing has worn my friend here to the bone."
The priest looked fat and grateful. Now the phone
Began to ring, "I hope you can suggest
Some easy . . . ." I began to feel undressed,
As in a dream. Amanoff on the phone
Stole far away. His talking in a drone
Went underwater. Could I touch his world?
I scraped my thumb on plaster, rubbed the burled
Mahogany desk. Here was response, bulk.
Amanoff made apologies. His hulk
Squeaked out of the swivel chair, pleading haste.
Something about a meeting on the taste
Of future yogurt. "Now I'll tell you boys
To go see the man who really enjoys
Ironing out these kinks. What's more, he can.
I'm not the one you want. Your man is Sam.
Yes, Chaplain Sam. I'll give him a ring right now
And tell him you'll be over." The tall brow
Glistening in what might have been relief,
The good doctor dialed, spread the grief
Of the good priest to the good Chaplain Sam,
Who sounded as if he disbelieved a jam
Quite so bizarre, but Amanoff prevailed.
He hung up with a smile of one unjailed;
Then shook our hands between some ugly coughs,
Scratched out where Sam was, and whistled off.
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So through some black, remote bowel of trust
The buck was passing, and the buck was us.

THE DEALER DEALT. The Chaplain heard our case
With a look of calm wonder on his face,
His baldness flashing signals all the while,
And now and then a slice of melon smile.
I tried to read his heliographic dots
And dashes, see what thundering thoughts
Rolled inside from the outside lightning shapes.
No luck of course. (Few looking-glass escapes
From our slight, gliding futures will be found).

The priest finished. The Chaplain shimmered, wound
His watch and thought a moment, blinking clues,
Then spoke: "Tsk. Tsk. Really. Stupid abuse
You've put up with. A shame. Simply a shame.
I'm sure it can be stopped. Please, what's the name
Of the fellow who's been helping you—Hayes?
Well, leave his number here. In a few days
I'll call him and we'll talk turkey awhile.
But wait a few days. There's no use to rile
The poor man if he's really trying to do
His best to help. Anyway, when I do
Get something straight, I'll tell you the result.
I'm sure we'll clear it up without insult
To Mr. Hayes, or more anxiety
To you." With brief, subdued pieties,
Agreements that we now could say no more
Sam shook our hands and showed us out the door.

HE TELEPHONED a few days after that,
And, sure enough, he'd had a manly chat
With Mr. Hayes, and he, Sam, was convinced
The priest was in the clear; no word was minced,
No hard fact brushed aside between our factor
And the helpful Hayes, who had toiled like a tractor
In our good cause . . . . However, Sam put in,
If there was difficulty, contact him.
He knew there would be no real cause to worry
Or charge off in all directions in a hurry.
Just contact him, and don’t worry a bit . . . .
So the priest and I resumed where we had quit,
Resumed our places—he to wait his turn—
Resumed our rounds within the butter churn

Of university youth during inflation
(This is the mad-about-grad-school generation).
And was the priest elated? Well, he stared
And moved about. I think he barely cared.
As if the Miller business, and the wear
Of being a Ph.D. dancing bear
Day after day, the sobering routine
Of chain and trainer’s cry and tambourine
Had done its work. Of course, I felt sorry;
But it was his cup of worms, and his worry.

THE THIRD BILL fell aflush on April Fool:
29,000 bodies to the ghoul
Of Monoplated Miller Maid Machines—
Not please. A letter from eight lawyers in Des Moines,
Who all averred that justice was not dead.
I found my friend up in his room in bed,
Nursing an earache and a hard-earned cold,
Nerving himself for agonies untold.

I telephoned Sam’s office, got a girl
Who, from the noise, was mothered by a squirrel;
Nevertheless, the nub, the crux was clear;
Her phrase went through me like a barbed spear,
Each word like downing a glass of cold grease:
“The Chaplain’s at a seminar in Nice
Until the middle of May. May I help?”
Inquiring, whining noises, like a whelp
Left home alone, came from the corner bed.
I thanked her and said No. (I should have said,
Tell him the Ghost called.) I queried her
If the name Hayes meant anything but blur.
It didn’t. So I dialed Hayes-of-the-Lees
And found a voice that knew him, not with ease,
Who, in twelve words, totaled all our profits:
“Mr. Hayes moved to our Stockholm office
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Just a week ago, sir." There lay my friend,
Come to his atom's lead, the dead end,
Looking at me, moldy-blue as his Navy
Blanket, motionless, a lump in blue gravy.
Could I say the word? Say it was quits?
End of the game of pulling milk from tits?
Our udders are run dry? The cow's played out?
No, no. Once more, into the breach and out:
I typed three letters for the priest to sign,
Where, tactfully, we laid things on the line:
One to the President of Maid Machines,
And one to Banz, Bishop of Muscatine,
And one to Weir, President of the U.
The priest had sunk beneath the blue,
Lumped-up blanket. "Come on, let's get some lunch,"
I said; then ears emerged, a spiky bunch
Of hair—and he, full-frocked and on his feet.
"I'll give you the bad news over something to eat,"
So we went out, benumbed, less than lax,
And walked the concrete and avoided cracks.

THE ANSWER CAME hard on the eve of May
With greetings to the good priest, S. of J.,
Politely urging that a meeting be
Held on any morning he might feel free;
And signed the President, D. Miller Means
Of Monoplated Miller Maid Machines.
At last. Attention. Object of all men.
The priest was not pleased as he might have been.
"It could be good," I said. "It could be bad,"
He croaked, blowing his nose and looking sad.
I tried to rouse our spirits with baloney
and dipped potato chips and pepperoni
And rings of spiced ham; we played some chess,
Erratically; we tried, without success,
Some good records, Bach's B-Minor Mass—
Some others I forget; we read for class;
Talked about bulls, then gave up all way round,
Went down to the cheapest movie house in town.
And saw Roy Rogers and Charlie Chan
Do better than the rest of us ever can.

When the day came, I didn't want to go,
But he insisted: I would have to row,
If he had to bail; say, if his English
Sprung a leak in the middle of a ticklish Passage. So I tagged along, but felt it wrong
To go . . . . Oh, like a rose on lattice hung
I see him now, back in the Miller Building—
His bobbing walk, his tortured sneakers squeaking,
Popping, slopping along the cork-floored halls,
An airy creature anchored among walls . . . .
We found the door of President's repose;
A girl with short breasts and a long nose
Greeted us, and ushered us through a door
Into a room with magazines and more
Girls, then another door, then a gloom,
The plush, hush of a carpeted room,
Lit duskily, but sunny at one end
Where a man sat intent on work. My friend
Ahemed, coughed softly at my side.
Before us there was nothing but a pied,
Pink top of a bald head. The girl advanced;
Said words in a discreet tone; the trance
Was broken then. He looked up with a smile
At once cool and friendly, not of guile,
But of knowledge. With alert civility
He seated us, deployed his ability
With few remarks to put us at our ease.
Then, with our necks unbent a bit, our knees
Crossed, our backs cradled low in cool leather,
With due comment on the too-hot weather,
D. Miller Means commenced. Did not begin,
Nor start, he commenced; with each lace and pin
Of graciousness in place. I won't forget
His speech easily. Within my brain it set
Like good cement; it holds without a dent
Of everyday erosion. This is how it went:
"Well, gentlemen, thank you for taking time
To come. I have a most important kind
Of message for you, Father; though I fear
You will refuse us. Bishop Banz and Mr. Weir—
President Weir—have been consulted, and agree
You are the one to ask concerning a key
Need that has come up. First, though, let me say
How sorry I am about the awful way
You've been harassed, no doubt to distraction,
By these bills of the past few months. Action
Has been taken. I assure you. No one owes
A cent. Please, consider the chapter closed.
I am sorry.” Life dawned in the face
Of my friend again. His sneakers came unlaced
He was so pleased; his toes danced on the rug.
And even I felt relief at last. But smug
I was not. I can’t say what I felt,
Just stopped, perhaps. A tug behind the belt,
As though I'd reached the back end of a bad
Novel, when the puppet people tick from sad
To glad. Tee hee. They laugh off those mortgages
That portaged the plot six hundred pages—
Was this all there was? No, no. More. More.
D. Means proceeded in a velvet roar:
"Your presence here, now, is fortunate, Father.
Not just for us or Kiowa U., rather
For the future of Peru and South America.
Or should I say for both, for all Americas,
Our fates are teamed together so, and you,
Here working for a free, prosperous Peru.
Our Congress, matching similar funds from Lima,
Has budgeted for a scholar’s dream of
Plans to mould the University there—
I mean in Lima—maybe you are aware
Of such a plan—it shortly will be announced.
Of course, the faculty at Lima pounced
First thing on what concerns us now, where Miller Maid
Comes in. We're asked to launch a high-grade
(You're own government will be the renter),
A high-grade, model, manned, complete computer center.
The first Peruvian computer center, and the best,
The most advanced, in Latin America.
And we need you—now, with a law
To back us up, this is the time to start.
We’re hoping, many of us, you’ll play a part
Of first importance—hoping you’ll agree;
Soon you will have an Kiowa Ph.D.
Your past training has an orientation
In the very areas that concern your nation
Most, and now, and will concern the new center.
With six months of intensive training, Father,
We can prepare you to administer—
To administer is as to minister
Nowadays. Ha Ha—to manage, run the Miller Maid
System and related complex; without aid
Or very little aid. You’d play a major
Role in the new work down there. I’ll wager
That the next years are crucial ones, for new
Peace, products, food, progress in Peru.
Please do say yes. You could start on the 1st
Of June. My men will be immersed
In planning during the weeks that ensue.
You are the one ingredient this brew
Needs, and by far the most basic. Do say yes.
Then we can do a job that He can bless.”
The priest bounded up. He thrust a fist
Toward Means’ belly, gave Means’ thumb a twist
And, heartily, shook Means’ hand; gay, without shame.
D. Means beamed like Hemingway with game.
My friend was a success; the dogs were sicced;
But my old equanimity was licked,
My equilibrium foiled, neatly whipped;
The walls were tipping and the floor tipped.
Pre-vomit salt collected in my throat.
Ignoring quizzical looks, I threw my coat
Off, loosened my tie, in my crass
Way, walked apart. I jerked some glass
Doors open and stepped out on a terrace.
For steadiness, it might have been a Ferris
THE RAPE OF THE CLOCK

Wheel built on a small barge in a heaving sea.
Even the sunset swayed unsteadily.
Far underneath I heard the squeals and groans
Of city traffic; somewhere a lone
Phone went ringing. The rail pitched and slid.
I leaned way over, gawking at the grid
Of men. I giggled, thought my viscera would go
Down on the heads a hundred feet below.

. . . When I was little and had to lose myself
From leaning things, I used a middle shelf
In a dark closet as my quiet mow
And sat long hours. What I needed now
Was that dark shelf, a cozy, Jonah maw,
A storm cellar to Oz. O world of law
And solemn accents drumming in,
I'm taking off. My feet are bare. My chin
Grows goaty. I am skipping over clouds
That wet my feet and tickle. I am bowed
By windy blows. I wonder where could I be?
Is it heaven? Is it the bottom of the sea?
I whistle five times, swivel, crack my knee.
Fish rainbow by. He rises next to me—
The priest! He dances with his nose
Aloft, like me, bereft of baggage, clothes.

DECEMBER AGAIN. My friend is ready now
To go, his face alight with status. The sow's
Ear is curried silk within six months.
He is the teacher's talk who was the dunce.
He sidles toward the fat, stiff, silver bird
Awaiting him. I've hardly said a word
And hardly know a word. I squeak and smile.
The best part of the past six months my bile
Has run the wrong way. His farewell seems weak;
I grip his hand as though he'd sprung a leak
And begun sinking. Then he mounts the steps;
My good-bye gift, his luggage, bumps; the ship's
Door opens of itself. He pauses by
The shining metal, spreads his feet awry,
As a wet creature stands to shake its fur;  
He laughs and shakes and waves his hand. The blur  
Attracts my eye, and he is gone. . . . The chain  
Stitch of the navy-blue, knitted in Maine,  
Turtleneck sweater he gave me yesterday  
Is rough and warm and comforting. The fey,  
White countryside is not, though the sun shines.  
The fields lie winter-fallow bearing tons  
Of huddled snow. Men are out with guns.  
Birds flicker past. Dark, dagger-pointed pines  
Point to the sky and seem to shout, "Oh, here! Here!"  
I turn my turtleneck up round the ear.

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