

## **22: ETHEREAL MINSTREL**

**Ken Stange**

### **I. It Was One Of Those Skies**

It was one of those skies where two separate layers of cloud scud along at right angles to each other, forming complex and quickly changing patterns. The sun was fairly low and the slanting rays tinted the clouds ever so slightly, rather like delicate watercolours. Even as quite the jaded sky-watcher, I couldn't help being impressed. I went into the house to get my son. Since he had been saying for years that he intended to be an artist when he grew up, I figured he would be appreciative.

He was sitting in front of the television, but he wasn't really paying any attention to the show; he was sketching a rocket ship on the back of a stationery box. When we got outside I pointed silently to the sky, believing firmly in the natural wonder of youth. He stared up at it for almost a minute without saying a word. Then he went back inside, turned the television back on, and continued sketching his rocket ship.

When I peered over his shoulder he looked up. "Why don't you draw some clouds?" I asked. "There are no clouds in outer-space," he replied.

### **II. I Tend To Walk Around With My Head**

I tend to walk around with my head in the clouds, so to speak. I do not know if I inherited an anatomical deformity in my spine where it rises into the brain, making it more comfortable to have my head thrown back, or whether there is some psychological reason for this tendency. But at least when I am outside I do find it difficult not to spend more time watching treetops and sky than where I am going. Falling down a lot in the bush gives other people the impression that one is clumsy, even if the true explanation is perceptual rather than motor. So I decided to break the habit. For weeks I retrained myself to look where I was going and not at what was going on above me.

During this period of stern self-discipline I went walking in the bush with a friend who does a bit of prospecting. He is a good dynamite man, it is said, if a bit absent-minded. He was blowing a fault that particular afternoon, and since I'd never seen this done I had come along out of curiosity. He instructed me, once he'd set the dynamite, that I should go stand behind a thick tree. He assured me that although rocks would rain, I was safe as long as I stayed behind the broad trunk of a tree; I needn't even bother going any great distance from the blow. So I found a nice tree, lit a cigarette, and waited patiently in its lee.

The explosion was louder than I expected and the rocks hurtling through the branches overhead made me a bit nervous, but after my ears stopped ringing, I was still intact. My friend came over, his mouth open, and his eyes riveted on something directly above my head. Firm in my resolution I resisted the temptation to look up.

"So that's where I left it!" he exclaimed. I looked up. A green garbage bag hung from a branch not five feet over my head. "What's in it?" I asked naively. Instead of answering he led me a few hundred feet away, had me stand behind another tree, then taking out his rifle aimed it at the bag. "It's an old cache of dynamite I left out last fall," he said, "which by now has deteriorated into nitro and mush." He pulled the trigger. The explosion was considerably greater than the previous one. I put out my cigarette.

### **III. In Sudbury There Is A Giant**

In Sudbury there is a giant smokestack from the INCO refining plant. It heaves tons of pollution into the atmosphere every day. Because it is so tall, and heaves this crud so high, the pollution is democratically distributed over hundreds of miles.

One fall day when my son was four years old, I was driving him to Sudbury to see a movie. On this particular day the sky was still. As we approached Sudbury the stack became visible on the horizon, and above it smoke streaming out to form a thick dark mass of great size that just hung motionless in the air.

My son stared at this for a little while. Then he exclaimed, "So that's how they make clouds!"

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