Droozle

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DROOZLE

Droozle was probably the greatest writer in the world—any world!

By FRANK BANTA

Left hand side of watermark

Right hand side of watermark

Jean Lanni could see that his girl friend, Judy Stokes, thought it was the lamest excuse she had ever heard. If your ballpoint pen won't write as you want it to, your life doesn't stop, she probably was thinking. You just get yourself another pen—You don't call off a marriage....

Skeptically the girl with the long, golden red hair pointed at his breast pocket. "This Droozle I must see. And who's that other member of the partnership there beside him? An Eversharp pencil named Blackie?"

"No, that is the other end of Droozle. Permit me to introduce you." Blandly the tall, young artist slid Droozle from his breast pocket, straightened him from his U-shape and handed his twelve-inch pen to her.

"A snake!" she shrieked.

"What else?"

"Why, I thought those ruby eyes were jewels! I must have squeezed right up against him when I kissed you," she cried indignantly.

"You did. I felt him squirm a little."

"Oh! And here I thought it was your heart beating wildly."

"Well, maybe it was. It does that sometimes."

"Let's try again. And this time hold your snake behind you." The long-

legged girl stood on tiptoe to reach him.

"It *was* your heart beating wildly," she decided a moment later. "Which makes me think you might not just be trying to get rid of me by a silly excuse."

"Believe me, I'm not," he urged. "Droozle is the key to all my fortunes."

"All right, tell me about it. But first tell me where in the universe you got him."

"Oh, that was just after I graduated from art school. I was on my grand tour. We had an unexpected stopover at the Coffin planetary system. I discovered ballpoint snakes are the chief export of Coffin Two. When we lifted ship, I had acquired my little puppy snake, Droozle."

"Is a puppy snake like a puppy dog?" she asked, fascinated. "I mean, do they have their little domestic troubles, such as the calls of nature?"

"Oh, he was thoroughly pocket-broken before I acquired him. But he did like his little jokes, and I learned to leave him curled up in a circular ashtray until maturity sobered him."

"Well, I should say! You drew sketches with him, didn't you tell me?"

He nodded. "At first he only had one color of ink—red—and if I sketched with him all day he would commence to look wretchedly anemic. He took two days to refill, normally. But I could use him again in only one day's time provided I didn't mind the top three-fourths of my pen laying on my arm."

"I hope his weight didn't get tiresome," she commiserated, holding in her amusement.

"I coped somehow," he answered sturdily. "Later he learned—after I squeezed him on the liver a few times just to show him how—to switch to a lovely shade of ochre, which was delightful on pale green or pink paper. Why, what's the matter, Judy?"

"Go on," she choked. "Go go go!"

He beamed. "I write my letters with him too. Every day I wrote with him, first in red, and then in ochre to give him a rest. He seemed to love to write more than to sketch. He would jump into my hand with tail happily pointed downward as I sat down to my writing desk. And when I later saw his dark green stripes turning pastel and knew that anemia was imminent, and started to lay him down for a earned rest, he would stiffen himself as if to say, 'Oh, come, come! I'm good for half a page yet!'"

"It sounds as though he was a willing worker, but I still can't see why his malfunction makes our marriage impossible."

"I haven't gotten to his career as a novelist yet. There lies the heart of the tragedy."

"Please proceed to the heart of the tragedy."

"It all began when I found him arched up one morning, writing by himself—with difficulty, it is true. His first message to the world was, '*I hold that the supine viewpoint is seldom downward!*'"

"I don't see how he could stand up on end to write for very long, even with such a magnificent philosophy to bolster him."

"What a terrible pun," Jean groaned. "He couldn't stand up very long at first. But I saw he had talent. I gladly learned the skill of holding him upright in a relaxed manner so that he could express himself on paper. In no time at all, he had written what was to be his first, sensational, best-selling shocker, *Naked Bellies in the Grass*."

"That does sound sensational."

"Not for snakes. He neglected to mention his characters were snakes. *I Fang You Very Much* followed swiftly afterward and was just as successful. Mothers were amused with its lispy title and got it for the children."

"Sounds like a story with some meat in it."

"Yes! Something you can get your teeth into. However, his next offering, *A Snake Pit Full of Love*, was by far the topper. It was banned in Boston."

"You haven't mentioned anything tragic so far," she observed. "In fact, you have made a pot of money."

"Right. After my snake had filed his income tax returns, we still had enough money to purchase this house and to support us for a couple of years. The only trouble is, his royalties have stopped coming in and that money is all used up. I still haven't been able to sell any of my landscape paintings. So we haven't any income, and that's why you and I can't marry for a long time yet—if ever!"

Her exquisite brows wrinkled with concentration. "I don't understand. Has Droozle written himself out?"

"Far from it," answered Jean, seating himself and parking Droozle on his knee. "He's writing more than ever."

"The quality is gone, then?"

Jean shook his head. "No, he's writing superlatively."

"Then what *is* the problem?" she asked, now thoroughly mystified.

"He's writing classics!" burst out Jean in baffled irritation. "He won't write anything else! Easily seeing the approaching catastrophe, I wrote long persuading essays to him. It was pathetically useless. Proudly he continued to write his *Rise and Fall of the Western Plainsman* in a lucid, passionate prose which would evoke an imperishable picture—but in three thousand pages."

"I think classics are *nice*," protested Judy, "and one of these days I'm going to read another one."

Huskily Jean told her the worst. "Writing classics consumes paper by the ton. And if you ever get your 750,000 word story finished, you must then start shrinking it back to an acceptable 75,000 words. This is a nearly hopeless task. Of course if you can get it back to 75,000 words the digest magazines will have no trouble shrinking it to 15,000 words or fifteen pictures, and you then get your fingers in the till." He paused and all hope fled from his face. "Droozle won't live nearly long enough to get all of that shrinking done. And in the meantime that scribbling snake is writing me out of house and home!"

"Are you going to let him get away with it?" the girl challenged.

"I don't know whether I am or not," replied the young artist, looking worried. "I thought I had the problem solved at first. He got so sassy when we were arguing about him writing classics that I had no hesitation about applying a pinch of glue to his glittering little extremity. That put him out of the writing business until he came to terms."

"Well, now. You *were* enterprising!" she approved.

"It didn't do any good though," Jean grumbled despondently, bowing his head.

"He wouldn't bargain?" she asked incredulously.

"He didn't have to. He knew right where the cheese grater was."

"Ooh!"

"My sentiments exactly. But I don't know what to do with him now."

"You're all out of ideas?"

"Oh we could sell this house and move down to skid row where the rents are cheap," he flung out airily, but quite plainly worried sick.

"I've got a much better idea than that," she said cheerily, getting a pad and pencil from her red handbag. "How about giving Droozle this ultimatum?" As she wrote, Jean read over her shoulder, "'Suggest you begin writing fiction pleasing both to you and your master, or we shall be forced to hand you over to the dog catcher!'"

Jean drew back amazed. "Why, we would do no such thing!"

"I know it, silly. I'm just negotiating."

"No," he grumped, ready to be angry with her. He got up and strode around the studio. "The dog catcher! We will not lie to that snake!"

Judy dropped the idea. "I've just now thought of another one. Here's an ultimatum we could give him and mean it, too. No more writing until we reach an agreement, or we will take away all his writing paper and reading matter for good!"

"I'd thought of doing that," Jean conceded. "But isn't that a monstrous way to treat a literary genius?"

"Not at all!" she protested. "By taking on a work that will require more time than his lifetime, he is defeating himself."

"There's that way of looking at it," agreed the artist. "All right, Droozle," he called. "You heard us talking and you know we mean it. No more writing until we reach an agreement—or else!"

Droozle quit writing at once. While the girl and the young artist watched anxiously, Droozle first wandered about uncertainly for a few minutes and then curled up on a newspaper and went to sleep.

He slept all evening.

"He has beaten us again," Jean Lanni told Judy Stokes resignedly when she arrived at his studio the following evening. He watched Droozle fascinatedly as the snake moved his restless tail over the margins of newspapers spread on the floor. "He doesn't know yet that I know. I discovered the fraud only by the merest accident."

"He isn't writing?" she asked, perusing the newspapers for signs of Droozle's elegant script.

"He most certainly is."

"Where?"

"Look at him!" Jean exclaimed, ignoring her question. "He's doing it again!"

Droozle had ceased wriggling for the moment and lay there shaking violently, as though he had malaria. Then the paroxysm passed and he took up his restless movements again.

"The poor genius," mourned Judy. "He must be sick with frustration."

"Sick, my eye! That snake has learned to centrifuge part of his blood while it is in his body, so that the hemoglobin is separated out. The result is—invisible ink!"

"Why, I'll tell that Droozle off!" raved Judy. "Here I sat feeling sorry for the little crumb!"

Droozle did not mind. While she ranted, he brazenly began writing in visible ink once more.

"How did you catch him at it?" she asked.

"I used a piece of his newspaper to pick up a hot saw blade. The heat turned the invisible ink brown."

"Droozle," said the girl passionately, looking down at the writer, "you know your master is in great need of funds. *Where* is your sense of loyalty and self-sacrifice for the one who has cared for you?"

Droozle wrote poetically, "Is there Joy or any other good thing in Abnegation? Is there Beauty in Sacrifice? What Handsome purpose do these serve a being in his race with Time? His Days will soon be spent and they will come no more; thus my Criterion: Is This the most Joy gathering, Awareness touching, Beauty sensing act of which he is capable? None other is worthy of his time!"

"Men are not so selfish," objected Jean.

"I am not a man," wrote Droozle simply.

Jean turned staunchly to the girl. "Judy, he has convinced me. I have been wrong about him. From now on *he can write whatever he likes*!"

"Good-by to our hopes then?"

"For the present, yes," assented Jean stoically, as he brought fresh sheets of paper from his desk for Droozle. "My landscapes might

begin to sell after a while," he added without conviction.

"Rotten little crumb," Judy fumed, glaring balefully at the snake. But Droozle wrote serenely on, his ruby eyes glowing enigmatically.

Jean interposed magnanimously, "I see now that I have been inexcusably selfish with Droozle. I've kept him cooped up here, not wanting to bother with him while I was out on my painting trips. True, he was busy writing. But most of his knowledge of Earth has come from books; he can't write classics about living things unless he sees living things."

As she picked up his trend of thought, Judy's face lost its resentful expression, and something like seraphic righteousness spread over it. "I see what you mean. Just how did you plan to make up for this shut-in feeling that poor Droozle must have been suffering so much from for all these years?"

"Oh, Judy, I'm so glad you asked me!" He threw wide his arms to the world. "*Out* into the wind and the rain we shall go, and there I will draw my pictures while he observes; then *into* the roaring, brawling taverns we shall go, where life thrives in all its abundance. I've been robbing him by shutting him up here."

"Jean, look at Droozle," the girl exclaimed, pointing. "He has stopped in the middle of a page and is starting on a fresh one."

Droozle wrote, "Please not out into the wind and the rain. Please not into the roaring, brawling taverns where life thrives in all its abundance. I *loathe* shudder and tilt."

"Loathing is no reason to turn away from reality, Droozle," admonished the artist. "Things are not nearly so bad as they used to be

anyway. In all justice, shudder and tilt requires far less body-English than its ancestor, rock and roll."

Droozle argued carefully, "You will recall I heard some of it once when you took me into a particularly dirty bar over in the west end of town. I feel, as a result, that I have observed this type of data to the extent that I can write of it competently without further study."

"Oh, but that was months ago," enthused Jean. "The tunes have all changed by now. New pows appear on the tapes every week. You have missed countless sockeroos already, being cooped up here. You will bless me, once you get accustomed to the realities of life—see if you don't. Heigh-ho the wind and the rain!"

The snake shuddered.

"Careful, you'll centrifuge," Judy warned.

Jean added reflectively, studying the ceiling, "Day by day, month by month, year by year, the reality of everyday existence etches deeply into our consciousness, if we will but have the fortitude to expose ourselves to it."

Droozle unavoidably centrifuged this time, but did manage, with laborious lateral movements, to mix the hemoglobin back with the plasma again.

He complained, "It is cruel of you to condemn me to this ugliness. I want only to read my books and hear a few simple fugues by Bach."

"It is not cruel. You will have exactly the same existence I have chosen for myself as an artist. It is fundamental that if you are to write serious literature, you must rub your nose against the realities of life."

Droozle wriggled unhappily for a moment. Finally he wrote, "Actually my writing may not be as serious as the title implies.

Misunderstandings conceivably arise over titles. Instead of *The Rise and Fall of the Western Plainsman*, how about changing it to *Those Lowdown Scaly Rustlers*?"

"That's really getting down to earth," cried Jean, concealing his elation. "But if you aren't going to write serious literature, who will I get to go on my painting trips with me?"

"Take that female of yours," suggested Droozle. "If she refuses to go, inform her that we shall be forced to hand her over to the dog catcher."

"Do you suppose he means that?" wondered Jean.

"Of course not, silly," said Judy, bright-eyed. "He's only negotiating."

—FRANK BANTA

Magazine cover

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