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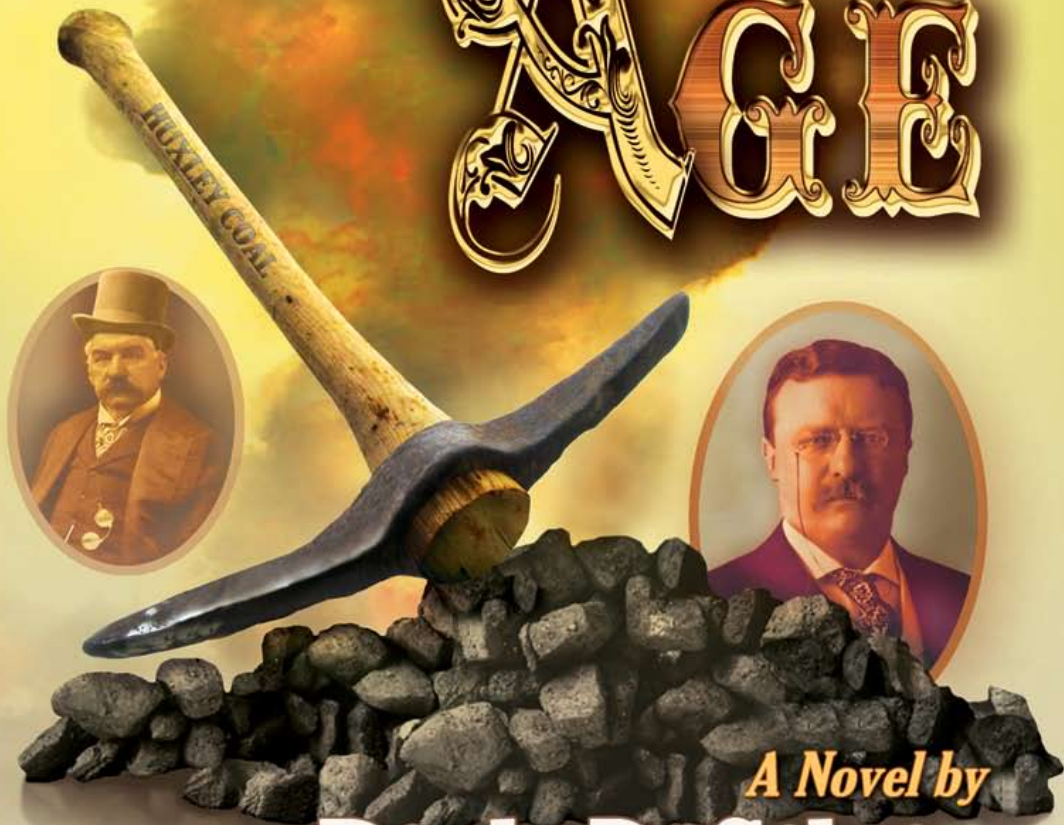
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Blazing

WORLD

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AGE



A Novel by

Rich DiSilvio



THE AUTHOR

Rich DiSilvio is an author of both fiction and nonfiction. He has written books, historical articles and commentaries for magazines and online resources. His passion for art, music, history and architecture has yielded contributions in each discipline in his professional career.

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A
Blazing
GILDED AGE

EPISODES OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY AND A VOLATILE ERA

Rich DiSilvio

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This book is a work of historical fiction; as such it contains both factual and fictional characters, places, and incidents. Many historical figures and events have been included, however the vast majority of dialogue by historical figures is fictitious, with only some actual quotes incorporated for authenticity. The character Kathleen Ward is a creative fabrication as the author is not aware of Aaron Montgomery Ward having a daughter. As such, her fictitious, haughty personality was created for drama and in no way was meant to shed a poor light on the Ward family. On the contrary, her fabrication was to draw attention to the genius of Aaron Ward. In regards to all other fictional creations herein, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales are entirely coincidental.

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THANK YOU
for your interest in reading this excerpt.

Enjoy!

Rich DiSilvio

1

The Hellhole

June 30, 1881

The cage-elevator rattled as Marcus Wozniak and the morning crew descended 1,200 feet into the mineshaft at Huxley Coal, just outside of Pittsburgh. Reaching bottom, the metal-grated door slid open as Marcus carefully lit the head torch strapped to his cap and then snorted. The stagnant air was dank, while droplets of water, oozing in from underground springs, turned the mineral dust on the ground into pungent puddles of black goo. The crew began treading through this slop when Marcus gazed at his portly buddy. "So how's the birthday boy?"

Chucky cracked a lazy smile as his fat, stubby finger picked the sleep out of his eyes. "I'm tired. When you reach my age, peewee, you'll understand."

"Don't joggle me, Chucky, you're only fourteen, not forty!" Marcus peered at Chucky's chin and chuckled. "And for your birthday, I think your ma should buy you tweezers...to pluck those three, silly new whiskers."

Chucky grimaced and nudged Marcus into the path of a mule hauling a pit car loaded with coal. Marcus quickly averted the collision, while their pal Jimmy chimed in,

"Watch it, Chucky! Even though he's only twelve, Marcus ain't like his scrawny older brother Tasso. No, no," he said as his voice echoed down the dark tunnel, "Marcus is stronger than me and my brother put together."

Chucky waved his meaty hand dismissively. "Oh, don't fret none, Jimmy. Marcus is one of my bestest buddies. Right, Marky-puss?"

Marcus shook his head with a half-hearted smile as they navigated deeper into the mine, knowing that the nickname wasn't derogatory; it referred to his cute face. "Sure, Chucky. We've been working together here since I was nine."

A rugged middle-aged miner scowled as he gazed down at Marcus. "How in hell does Huxley have the gall to hire nine year olds? The legal age is twelve, for Christ's sake. That's downright criminal."

"Yes, sir, I reckon it is," Marcus replied respectfully. "But, you see, my family needs the money, and my pa's pay just isn't enough. So he had Doctor Galton sign some paper, called an affa-David, or something, to say that I was older than I really was."

The miner sighed sympathetically. "I know doggone well whatcha mean," he said as he swung his pickaxe onto his shoulder and veered around a miner lighting his head torch. "I hear many folks have to do the same deplorable thing. It just ain't right. We slobs earn pennies a day while Huxley makes millions. This whole system stinks. But ain't you got any brothers to pitch in?"

The three boys swerved closer to the marching man, as Marcus replied, "Yes, I do, sir. But, you see, my oldest brother Stanislaw lost his leg when a pit car loaded with coal knocked him to the tracks—the flanged wheel sliced his right leg completely off."

The man cringed, while Marcus swallowed hard. "So, Stanislaw stays home with my mom. And, well, my middle brother Tasso, he's...he's a—"

"He's a troublemaking loafer!" Chucky blurted.

Marcus frowned, as Chucky and Jimmy chuckled.

Jimmy looked over at Marcus. “Yeah, I reckon Tasso is your pa’s dark and dirty piece of coal, while you’re his glittering diamond.”

The man gazed at the heckling youths and then back at Marcus. “What’s with this brother Tasso of yours?”

Marcus glanced heatedly at his two friends, and then up at the man. “Tasso might be a troublemaker, sir, but you see, he was a sickly kid. So he was never able to do what Stanislaw and I could. I reckon that must have been pretty hard on him. And while we were working, he was getting ribbed for being a loafer by imbeciles like Chucky.” Chucky grimaced, as Marcus added, “But Tasso finally got himself a job here nine months ago as a breaker boy. And just two months ago, he got moved down here with me and my pa.”

As Marcus craned his neck, trying to locate his wayward brother amid the chaotic change in shifts, Jimmy interrupted, “Breaker boy—bah! Even though the breaker house is above ground, I hated that job. All we did was sit hunchbacked over that stupid long chute, removing debris from the stream of coal that zipped past us, which dropped into the grinder and then landed in the hopper cars way down below. My back still aches from that crappy ol’ job.”

“Yeah, and you kinda look like Quasimodo, too!” Chucky jibed with a hefty cackle.

Jimmy straightened his back. “Ah, shut up, Chucky! At least I got promoted to a driver, and direct these dumb mules to haul all of our coal. You’re still a silly *nipper*.”

Chucky’s smile vanished. “Well, if we nippers didn’t open and close those huge metal doors for ventilation, we all would suffocate, you idiot! Or we might even get blown up, if the firedamp ain’t released from these chambers.”

As Jimmy rolled his eyes, the man nodded. “He’s right, son. That invisible firedamp is methane gas. And it’s mighty

flammable." He gazed down at Marcus. "So, what position do *you* hold here, baby blue eyes?"

Marcus' lips twisted, not relishing the perpetual comments about his baby face. "I happen to be a *laborer*, sir. Just like all of you *adults*."

The man adjusted the battered pickaxe on his shoulder as he looked at Marcus' deceptively sweet little face, then down at his strapping little body. He smiled. "Indeed! You're a mighty fine specimen, specially for a tyke your age."

"Much obliged," Marcus replied. "And I have ambition, too, sir. In fact, I just might become a driller before you."

The man chuckled. "Yeah, you just might, son. I appear to be just another tool to Mr. Huxley. And quite frankly, I'm sick of chiseling rocks with this dang-ol' pickaxe. I'd just love to get my paws on one of Joseph Fowle's nifty new jackhammers. Hell, they work on compressed air and can pummel stone faster than ten of us back-breaking laborers."

As the morning crew dispersed into different tunnels, making their mundane exchange with the outgoing drones, Marcus turned and waved good-bye to Jimmy—who waved back and grasped the mule from the night-shift driver. He petted the mule on the forehead. "Listen, Donkey Dan, you better not shit on my foot again today. Do you hear me!"

As they all chuckled, Jimmy pulled the reins and head slowly down tunnel 9. The animal snorted and obediently followed—ready to begin another monotonous round of hard labor, once again.

The man gazed at the youths and winked. "Now you boys all try to have yourselves a good day."

As he began strolling down tunnel 12, Marcus called out, "Hey! Excuse me, sir. But, what's your name?"

The man turned. "Larry. Larry the laborer."

As the subjugated herd of miners continued to shuffle down their dark, dreary tunnels, Marcus bent down

and began filling his Davy lamp with oil. As he did, his long golden-brown hair fell into his sparkling-blue, crystalline eyes. Whipping his head back, he smiled. His father Jedrek had instructed his sons to cut their hair short—like his—as a safety precaution. Yet little Marcus, in a rare moment, was the only one to ignore his pa’s plea. Not to be defiant or spiteful, but to assert his independence as a young man.

Meanwhile, Chucky yawned and began waddling lethargically down tunnel 13. His head turned. “Well, I reckon I’ll catch you later at lunch time.”

Marcus gazed up and chuckled. “Sure thing, Chucky. That’s your favorite time of day.”

Chucky spun around and raised his precious metal lunch box as he walked backwards. Lovingly, he kissed it, and then pivoted rather clumsily to continue onward. As he and 40 others straddled over tracks and past young drivers pulling mules and their cargo, Chucky could see the series of metal doors that were still being erected to control ventilation. His door, however, was right in front of him, and he placed his lunch box down. Taking his station, Chucky grasped the metal door, awaiting instructions.

One crotchety old sod walked past and elbowed him. “Look alive, tubby!”

Chucky flinched. “Yes, sir! *I am* alive.”

“Just keep that door open, blubber boy! We got some heavy drillin’ goin’ on down here, and we can’t have no firedamp buildin’ up.”

“*I know, sir,*” Chucky grumbled as he brazenly stuck his tongue out at the old prune—quite safely, after he passed.

Chucky smiled and sank slothfully to the floor as he pulled out his set of jacks. Yet as he tossed them, he heard a jackhammer squeal, and a *spark!* Instantly, a violent explosion erupted! With hellish fury, the blazing fireball illuminated the darkness and shattered the silence! Chucky was blown backwards as he watched the old man and seven others

light up like torches and drop like charred match sticks. Frantically, he tried to get up to close the metal door, but the raging wave of fire engulfed him. Chucky screamed to no avail as his fat, oily skin flared up and sizzled like bacon.

Over a hundred yards back, Marcus heard the deafening blast and harrowing screams. A disquieting chill ran up his back, fueling a surge of tears in his eyes. His head dropped, profoundly aware that his dear friend Chucky had seen his last birthday, while *he* would never see Chucky again. Purging the wretched thought, he immediately looked up, and with a sniffle, began scanning the mine's dark, craggy walls—aiming to regain his bearings amid the labyrinth of tunnels. Frantically, he reached down to make sure the wire mesh covering his Davy lamp was secure—knowing that an open flame would ignite the methane. But a far greater fear now wracked his mind: where were his father Jedrek and brother Tasso?

As Jimmy and a throng of miners ran feverishly towards the main exit, Marcus turned and yelled, "Hey, Jimmy, have you seen my pa or brother?"

Jimmy slowed down. "No, but I doubt you'll find Tasso. Hell, when he ain't slacking off hiding in a nook somewhere he's usually getting into trouble."

Marcus nodded nervously. "Yes, I know. Tasso's a handful, Jimmy, but I must find him and my pa."

"Jesus—you remember what happened to Jake and Eddy!" Jimmy exclaimed as he rejoined the fleeing crowd. Gazing back with fear in his eyes, he cried, "So, come on, let's go! Besides, I bet Tasso was the first one to reach the surface."

"I doubt it," Marcus replied as Jimmy vanished into a turbulent stream of bodies and mounting smoke.

As Marcus' heart pounded to the ominous rumble and harrowing screams, he pondered Jimmy's chilling reminder about their two little buddies. Jake and Eddy had both died

in one such blast two months ago—their mangled bodies being scraped off the ground with flat shovels after being squashed by fallen shale. Marcus twitched; not so much by their gruesome deaths, or even Chucky’s, but by the disturbing fact that he was now growing immune to all of these terrible calamities. Yet the fatalities of friends were one thing; family was a different matter. His mind flashed back to Tasso. He knows his brother has only been underground for two months now (having replaced their poor, dead friend, Eddy) and isn’t too swift. With a steadfast gleam in his eye, Marcus reached up and extinguished the makeshift torch strapped to his cloth cap. Although standard issue, these candled caps are often deadly at times like this, and he knew the protocol. Rising to his feet, Marcus quickly began pacing down the main tunnel, carrying the large Davy lamp in his right hand. Being only 4-feet, 6-inches tall, little Marcus did all he could do to keep the unwieldy lamp from hitting the ground.

As he ran against the tide of fleeing miners, he came across one of the old-timers; a man the crew calls Homer. That’s because of the thick cataracts covering his eyes, which made him nearly as blind as the famous Greek author. Actually, Marcus always thought his reptilian-clad eyes were rather creepy looking, and figured Homer to be almost as old as the ancient scribe. But Homer is a pretty sharp fellow, just like his namesake, and doesn’t seem to mind his limited vision. As the old man once said, “What the hell’s the difference? I’m down here like a damned mole for 14 hours a day and then rise up to the surface only to see the stars and moon. So, who needs light or sight?”

Marcus lifted his lamp. “Homer, did you see my pa or brother?”

Homer turned his head slightly, not even making eye contact, as is his custom. “No, Marcus. But from the sound of

that explosion and those screams, I suggest you make your way to the cage. Get your little arse elevated to the surface, but quick!”

Marcus shook his head firmly. “Can’t do that, sir,” he replied in his typically respectful tone. With his free hand, he yanked up his heavily stained and oversized trousers, and added, “I’m sorry, Homer. But I must find them.”

With that, Marcus quickly grasped a pickaxe nearby and began pacing down the main tunnel.

Homer’s head swiveled toward the sound of his footsteps. “You danged fool! You’re running the wrong way! Listen to me, son. There’s no telling what might happen next!”

As Marcus continued his search, he peered down each artery that branched off the main tunnel, but didn’t see a sign of either one. With each step, Marcus was growing more and more concerned, yet more and more determined.

Back at tunnel 13, the fiery blast was gaining momentum. A miner gasped at the horrific sight of eight of his buddies’ charred bodies and Chucky’s deformed carcass some 20 yards up ahead. Immediately, he lunged forward and began pushing another set of large metal doors closed, hoping to contain the fire, but the courageous miner was too late. The mischievous methane gas had already seeped into the next and far larger chamber. Instantaneously, an enormous fireball erupted, blowing the metal doors off their hinges and vaporizing the paltry obstruction of flesh and bones. The fiery mass grew swiftly in volume and now began raging through the mine’s tunnels, igniting every molecule of methane it could find. Winding its way through a labyrinth of tunnels, the blazing wave of terror made no distinction—incinerating everything in its hellish path. As it entered the

main tunnel, 18 diggers, 11 timber men and 14 mules froze in utter fear as they helplessly watched the fiery wall of death rapidly approach. In an instant, they were engulfed. Their screams of agony and honking yelps were earsplitting, yet brief, as the scorching inferno cremated their bodies and continued its frenzied course.

Trapped and petrified, other miners and young nippers scurried to take cover in nooks, behind doors or even pit cars. One miner squeezed behind a metal door, yet as the fire raged through it pinned him against the tunnel wall. Standing with his face and hands pressed against the metal slab, he began to sizzle as the metal door began to glow—frying him like a huge skillet.

Nearby stands the main airshaft; it is the all-important lifeline, supplying miners with oxygen. At the top of that 1,200-foot duct sits the enormous fan house. As the fire twisted its way through the tunnels, like a devilish snake seeking air, it instinctively made its way toward the blustery air source.

Up above, one of the mechanics was performing a routine valve repair, when suddenly the fan's motor began to labor. Curious, he began to walk closer to inspect it, when, to his surprise, huge twisting-tongues of fire blew out the top of the fan. The motor choked, and the entire unit blew straight up, through the roof, and into the clear blue sky. The mechanic was blown backwards to the ground—staring in disbelief at the geyser of fire as chunks of the fan's cowling and motor crashed down all around him.

Down below, the intense heat and bright light stunned and blinded the trapped moles, so accustomed to darkness.

Jedrek Wozniak's eyes, however, widened, as he saw his good friend, Bill "Rusty" Mulvaney, blasted off his feet, landing face down on the tracks.

Bill is a brawny Irishman with a ruddy, freckled complexion that is partially covered with a thick rusty beard and mustache, hence the nickname. He also stands a good 6 inches taller than Jedrek at a towering 6-feet, 5-inches, yet he now lies flat and moaning on the ground. Rusty had been standing behind a fully loaded pit car filling it with aggregate; however, his two work mules had the misfortune of standing in front of the metal cart, literally in the line of *fire*. Now their huge carcasses lie smoldering on the ground—looking like an oversized pig roast. Although to Rusty and Jedrek, the horrid stench was nowhere near as pleasant. Rusty now began trying to push himself off the tracks as the huge wave of fire burnt most of itself out, being followed by a thick drifting veil of black smoke.

Grasping his Davy lamp, Jedrek rushed forward, yet, as he did, he saw a timber support post, which was shoring up a loose portion of the ceiling, start to give way. Jedrek stopped briefly as the vertical member snapped and keeled over—pinning Mulvaney's body to the tracks. Amid a mounting shroud of smoke, Jedrek turned up the wick on his Davy lamp, fairly certain that the lantern's safety mesh would prevent the flame from igniting anymore of the volatile firedamp. Placing the lamp down, Jedrek grabbed his pickaxe with both hands and swung it hard and deep into the rough-hewn chunk of timber. Firming up his grip, Jedrek then jammed his heels into the sides of the iron rail. Leaning back with all his weight, he began to slide the hulking mass of splintered wood off Mulvaney's back.

Just then little Marcus appeared out of the black mist, wide-eyed and badly shaken. "Pa! Are you all right?"

Jedrek's head turned. "Marcus, stay put!" came the firm command in Polish; unable to speak fluent English like his son.

"Let me help you, Pa. Please!?"

"Żaden!"

With a nervous huff, Marcus placed the Davy lamp down as he wiped his sooty face with the ragged sleeve of his oversized shirt.

As Jedrek struggled to pull Mulvaney free, terrifying sounds of massive cave-ins and shrieking screams echoed throughout the dark chambers, sending an eerie chill down Marcus' back. As far as he was concerned, his daily work site was now beginning to feel like a creepy catacomb or, worse yet, Hades. During his search, Marcus had stepped over the dead bodies of men and mules, but now the rancid smells of burning flesh mixed with noxious gases were pushing his neophyte senses to the limit. As he covered his nose and mouth with his hand, all he could think of was his father's safety and where his older brother might be.

Anxiously, he squalled, "Come on, Pa. Hurry! Let's go! We have to find Tasso."

"Jed minuta!" his father snapped.

As Rusty rose to his feet, he hugged Jedrek, thankful for being set free and for sustaining no fatal injuries. Yet Rusty knew his Polish friend would have little problems lifting the heavy beam off his back. Jedrek was uncommonly strong and was well known for having punched a disobedient horse, sending it to its knees; hence gaining the utmost respect of Mulvaney and many fellow miners.

Jedrek wrapped his arm around Rusty's waist and began to escort him toward Marcus, who was still standing impatiently by the exit. The two strapping men shuffled their way over the tracks, while Jedrek instructed Mulvaney to continue on to make sure the cage elevator was still operational. As Rusty nodded and disappeared into the dark mist, Jedrek turned to reach for his pickaxe; yet, as he did, another tremor rocked the tunnel, sending an even larger beam of timber crashing down, missing his shoulder by mere inches. Jedrek looked down at the fallen timber and then over at Marcus—a smile of relief etching his masculine

face. Calmly, he brushed the dust off his shoulder and began picking the debris out of his eyes when, unexpectedly, another beam snapped and let loose—this one knocking Jedrek on his back and landing squarely on his chest. Jedrek looked quickly at Marcus and yelled in his typical, Polish tongue, “*Zatrzymaj się!* Stand back! I got this.”

Marcus tried desperately to obey his father, but his body was instinctively fueling his muscles to move forward. Somehow, he managed to harness the charge, but Marcus was now trembling with anxiety. Adding to his frustration were the drifting waves of thick black smoke that were marring his vision, yet he was still close enough to see his imperiled father.

Jedrek closed his eyes and took a deep breath, praying to the Lord not to take his life, especially not now in front of his youngest and most cherished son. As he exhaled, he pushed hard. But the splintery member merely budged a few inches, landing back on his muscular chest.

As Marcus worriedly took a small step forward, Jedrek barked “No! Stay back!” He took another deep breath as adrenaline pumped through his body like needles of steel. Releasing a deep, warrior like grunt, Jedrek pushed with all his might. This time the massive beam miraculously flew off his chest as if it were a piece of lath. Jedrek looked over at his son and, in his typical, rugged manner, winked.

A wave of relief washed over Marcus as a delightful grin lit up his adorable, cherubic face. Proud of his father’s Herculean feat, Marcus grasped his lamp and jubilantly lifted it—honoring his father’s triumph. Jedrek humbly acknowledged the tribute with a nod, and began brushing the dirt off his chest while rising toward an upright position. Meanwhile, Marcus had noticed the flickering glow of his lantern on the ceiling, forcing his sparkling blue eyes to drift upward. But, suddenly, *they froze*. A large fissure was spreading rapidly across the width of the tunnel.

Heightening his sense of dread was the low and menacing rumble that swiftly reached a most frightful pitch. Helplessly, Marcus watched as a massive slab of shale broke loose from the ceiling. Jedrek moaned like a grizzly caught in a bear trap as the tonnage of rock came crashing down on his legs, crushing them like grapes under a steel press.

Marcus turned ashen as he felt his tiny heart pounding rapidly inside his chest. A numbing haze washed over him, so much so that he felt faint. But somehow, Marcus managed to shake it off. Instinctively, he lunged toward his father, and began gouging away at all the rocks and small bits of lumber. What he unraveled, however, was horrifying. Marcus clenched his hands into fists and stared in disbelief. The vision before him of his beloved father—trapped under a mass of rock and revealing only his upper torso—was worse than any nightmare he had ever experienced. His body began to shake as conflicting feelings of terror, heartbreak and helplessness stormed through his veins. Tears rushed into his eyes, but Marcus bravely summoned the will to dam them. He had to show his father that he was strong, just like him. Jedrek was a rock; just like the ore he dug and, now, quite chillingly, comprised half his body. His father was a workhorse, an exemplary byproduct of his Industrial Age. He was a practical man who knew life was tough, and the only way to survive was to be even tougher. Crying was simply not an option, at least not for a real man.

Marcus' lips tensed up as he grabbed his father's pickaxe and began chipping away at the large chunk of shale. As he swung, a maelstrom of confusion beclouded his mind. He could understand the deaths of other people, but *his* father? Jedrek was invincible; a good man, a devout Catholic that did everything right. So this didn't make sense. The only logical explanation was that God placed his father's salvation in his hands. As such, Marcus' swings became more frenzied, until, that is, his father waved his hand.

In broken English, Jedrek uttered, "*Zatrzymaj się!* (Stop!), Marcus, please!"

Marcus kept swinging as he yelled, "Don't worry, Pa. The Lord placed you in my hands. I'll get you out!"

"Marcus! Enough!" he commanded in his Polish brogue. "It appears God has other plans. Please, my son, come here."

Marcus' windmill-like stride slowly came to a halt as his pickaxe slipped through his fingers and hit the ground. Marcus fell hopelessly to his knees and covered his face, pushing his little fingers into his eyes to keep the tears at bay. Taking a deep breath, he lowered his coal-stained hands. He leaned toward his father, who then pulled Marcus close to his chest with his one free arm.

Jedrek's once powerful voice was now frail and wracked with pain. "It's no use, Marcus. Please, do not risk your life for nothing. Always remember that. Fight the good fight, but never waste your valuable energy on lost causes."

The sound of those harsh, fatal words on his tender, young ears was too much to bear, and tears began to stream down like acid; burning his face, heart, and soul. "Pa, you're *not* a lost cause. You could *never* be, *never!* I can find help, and get you out of here. I can, I swear I can!"

Jedrek knew that his legs were irreparably crushed. Moreover, the iron rail digging into his back had clearly broken his spine. Even if he did survive by some miracle, he'd be a cripple, just like his oldest son Stanislaw. And to burden his wife with two invalids was unthinkable.

"Marcus, you must listen to me. You must find your brother Tasso and get out of here before it's too late."

"But, Pa—"

"Please! Shush!" Jedrek demanded with a gurgle and a choke. As small rocks and dust continued to stream down all around them, he added, "Tell your mother I love her. *You*, my precious son, will have to be strong. Take care of your mother and two brothers. You have always been my pride

and joy, Marcus. You have a great little mind and a good, pure heart. It grieves me to put such a burden on you, but I know you can handle it. You, Marcus, are now the man of the Wozniak house.”

Marcus’ eyebrows pinched as he wiped the tears from his smudgy, charcoaled face. “But, Pa, I’m the youngest!”

Jedrek coughed. As he spoke, blood began to ooze out the corner of his mouth, “Marcus, Stan is crippled and can never work again. And as for Tasso, well, he has given many indications that he might very well be a lost cause. God forgive me, but I cannot leave this world in peace if he was to watch over my flock. So, promise me that you will fulfill my last wishes.”

Marcus looked into his father’s bloodshot eyes. They looked horrifyingly different. The once sparkling orbs of sapphire blue were now dark gray and sullen, like the distant moon in a gloomy, cloud-filled sky about to fade from sight. Yet they were unnervingly penetrating, deep with import, as if his father’s thoughts and soul were being transported into his own.

Marcus summoned the courage to nod, while his father mustered the strength to smile. Aware that the magical spark of life was quickly fading, Jedrek struggled to leave his son the last bit of wisdom he would ever relay. “You must get a good education so that you can rise out of this tomb and into the sunshine of American prosperity. You must get out of this dirty business, this dirty town, this dirty slave penitentiary. I’m sorry; I brought you all here for a better life, but failed. But all my hopes ride on you, Marcus. I know you can do what I never could. You have the best of your mother and me. So, please, abandon our past. We do not live in Poland anymore. We are now Americans. Speak the language; learn the culture. No more Stanislaw, Tasso and Marcus. You must be Stan, Ted and Marc. Do you hear me?”

Marcus forced out a smile to comfort his father, having heard that last bit of instruction many times recently. “Yes, Papa,” came his tearful reply, “Americans we three shall be. So help me God.”

He bent over and embraced his father’s sturdy torso—grasping his shoulders as if never wanting to let go. With a sob, he pushed his soft fledgling cheeks into his father’s tough, leathery face. Jedrek grasped his son and hugged him with a passion that heretofore he was never able to display. Regrets filled his mind about how he never physically expressed his love; but the hellhole they lived in called for stoic strength and prevented love from fully blossoming. However, Jedrek was darn glad to have this brief moment—this beautiful gift. The lump of love and pride that now welled in his throat was from 12 years of pent-up and unspoken bliss in watching his son grow, and now all his hopes rested in poor little Marcus’ hands. Tears trickled out of the corners of his eyes, melding with his son’s—evoking an almost spiritual bond.

The blood from Jedrek’s lips soiled Marcus’ face as he kissed his precious son’s cheek. He grasped the nape of his son’s neck and pressed their faces even tighter together in a last embrace—he, too, wishing never to let go; yet painfully aware that he had only seconds to cherish the fleeting moment. The savory feeling of his son’s warm, human flesh against his would soon be gone forever, leaving Marcus with a cold carcass—frigid and lifeless as the shale crushing his lower body. The thought of slipping away from his son into the cold, black abyss of death was horrifying—unbearable. His heart began to weep in a twisted knot of excruciating sorrow mixed with utter dread as he murmured, “Now go! Fetch your brother...and get back to the cage. Get out. And you...must...visit...Cal—”

Jedrek expired just as Tasso arrived unexpectedly, panting, frazzled, and late as usual. “Marcus, is that you?”

Painfully, Marcus lifted his head and turned. “Yes, but I think pa is—”

“Oh, my God!” Tasso squealed as he placed his Davy on the ground. “Pop! I’ll get you out.”

Tasso began to dash over, but slid quickly to a halt. He wasn’t prepared for what he saw. His father’s torso perplexingly ended, meshing into a heap of rock. As his eyes cascaded up to his face, his pickaxe slipped through his fingers—falling to the floor. All he saw was a cold, blank stare; his father’s mouth was partially opened. But most unnervingly, his entire body was dead still. Tasso screamed as his chapped fingers dug into his sooty face.

Marcus turned back to his father, his tiny lips quivering at the dreadful sight. The guiding light in his life was extinguished. That magnificently strong and courageous soul, so full of life and vitality, was now unfathomably gone; his body now motionless; his eyes, lifeless; his deep, commanding voice, now painfully silent. Marcus gazed down at his father’s prematurely weathered, but still handsome, face. With a sniffle, he wiped the hair out of his eyes, and he took extra care this time to take a long, hard look—scrutinizing and memorizing every chiseled feature of his father’s face. Marcus had to imprint it in his mind—just like a carving by Michelangelo that would stand the test of time and last forever.

A call rang out, startling them both.

It was Bill Mulvaney; he had cleared a path to the cage and returned to escort his good friend and children to safety.

“Come on, lads!” he said with a grin. “That danged ole cage is still working. It’s the only way out. Call your pa, we m-must get g-go—” Rusty’s voice painfully crumbled to a halt as his eyes landed on Jedrek’s corpse. His face twitched nervously, while his head fell awkwardly. Stroking his grisly red beard for an odd moment, he then seemed to snort like a horse as his head snapped up. He reached over and grabbed

both their arms. "Keep a good hold on them lamps, boys!" He then pivoted them around and began walking them quickly toward the cage.

Tasso screamed as he flailed his arms—breaking himself free. "Leave me alone! I can't leave my father down here." As rage turned his brown eyes red, he yelled, "And *you* can't leave your best friend down here. Can you?"

Mulvaney's well-trained nose could smell the deadly firedamp amid the coal dust that wafted through the dark toxic tunnel, and he coldly dispensed with sympathy, opting for survival. "Shut your damned mouth, son! We can't get your pa's body free, and this confounded mine is right likely to blow! So, move your ass, boy, and follow us."

With that, Rusty pulled Marcus forward as he made a dash for the cage. Marcus' head spun around to see if Tasso was following and, as sure as a frightened kitten, he was right there on their heels. As the three stormed toward the cage, they watched the mesh-covered elevator begin to rise steadily up the shaft. It was chock-full of miners, and to Tasso, it appeared that they were being left behind. Panic-stricken, Tasso ran headlong and leapt onto the rising pen, his fingers desperately trying to maintain their grasp on the grating.

Meanwhile, the ascending miners scorned the frantic youth, hollering, "Get the hell off, boy!"

Another barked, "You'll get sliced in two once we enter the shaft, you danged fool. Jump, son, JUMP!"

One 15-year-old buddy bellowed, "Tasso, the cage *will* come back...now JUMP!"

Tasso's jittery eyes gazed at his friend as fear now fueled a steady stream of tears. With the deepest of regrets, he released his grip, falling to the floor. Like a wound-up tension spring just released, Tasso bounced up to his feet and frantically began racing in erratic directions—his eyes desperately seeking another exit.

The next excerpt is from Chapter 4
in order to give you a sense of the
historical elements of the novel.

Here the main villain, Archibald Huxley,
meets with President Garfield.

4

A Presidential Visit

June 30, 1881

The cerulean hues of daylight had long since given way to phthalo shades of twilight as the locomotive blew its whistle and pulled into Washington D.C. Archie had a belly-full of roast beef and a nicely numbed head from drinking Walker's Old Highland specially blended whiskey—just enough to bolster his bravado a tad more before meeting the most powerful man in the United States.

Actually, Archie smiled as he thought of that old cliché, knowing it to be just a ludicrous farce. He clearly realized the growing influence that he and his capitalist friends attained since the war's end. The Industrial Revolution changed not only the economic and social structure of the nation, but also the hierarchy of power, putting industrialists in strategic positions of enormous political influence. In fact, his whole reason for meeting with Garfield was to lobby for his own financial self-interest, something Huxley excelled at.

Stepping off the platform of the Baltimore & Potomac Station, Huxley hailed a carriage, and began riding through the dark cobbled streets toward the White House. Lampposts

shed their warm, fiery glow over the facades of Victorian and Queen-Anne buildings and the passing bodies of pedestrians—some men wearing top hats, and others bowlers, while women wore bonnets or bows. The night air was rather warm from the recently set June sun, yet the damp marshes all around the city had already begun releasing their foul odors, while mosquitoes looked forward to a summer of good hunting.

Arriving at the White House at around 7:30 p.m., Huxley paid the driver, without giving him a tip, and was greeted by an official at the front entrance. He was escorted into the Reception Room, which, to his surprise, was still filled with a throng of visitors; some wishing just to meet the president, but most seeking favors and job appointments. The prevailing policy allowed the public free access to call upon the president from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. However, since Garfield was out of town for a week (having taken his wife Lucretia, who had been seriously ill, to New Jersey in preparation for his planned vacation in two days), he rescheduled the visitor session for this evening to accommodate the public. Ironically, despite Abraham Lincoln's assassination 16 years ago the government failed to establish a security policy of any kind, believing that a free nation, run by the People, afforded them the right to see their president. Hence, complete strangers had free access to the president right in his living quarters without so much as being screened. Nevertheless, despite only being in office for four months, Garfield's personal secretary established a new policy, whereby only permitting access to people he met first. Yet, as time would tell, false first impressions and the inability to verify credentials still plagued this flawed system.

Huxley was guided through the crowd and directly up the stairs to the central Blue Room, which, oddly enough,

would be redecorated some years later by Huxley's hired architectural firm: McKim, Mead and White. As Huxley followed the aide through the great big building, he was sadly taken aback by how it had fallen into disrepair. The wooden floorboards squeaked, the wallpaper was faded and peeling, and the paint was cracked, dull and full of scratches. Yet Archie gained a modicum of relief when he spotted two carpenters at the end of the cross hall with hammers and scrapers, and at least beginning to make repairs.

The official knocked on the door of the Blue Room as Garfield's voice resounded promptly, "Enter."

The aide turned the knob and swung the door open. With a nod, he made an about-face and left.

As Huxley entered the oval-shaped room, Garfield rose from his pale-blue chair and placed the recently published biography of his life, *From Canal Boy to President*, down on the end table. The Blue Room, however, was still in excellent shape with its tall ceilings, dentil moldings, white fireplace, and a large oval carpet with a busy floral design blanketing most of the floor.

Huxley walked over and shook his hand firmly. "Hello, General Garfield!"

The president smiled, his thick beard and mustache parting as he said, "Greetings, Lieutenant Huxley. It has been quite a number of years since the war."

Huxley had two primary sore spots; one being in the presence of intelligent men who attended college and the other was being around men that attained a higher rank than he in the army. As such, he knew this meeting was going to test his patience, for James Garfield happened to be both. Therefore, he went straight on the defensive, "Well, unlike you, General, I lacked the advantage of a college education upon entering the army. Nor were my gallant actions rewarded with promotions—as they should have been."

Garfield, the intellectual gentleman that he was, responded diplomatically, “Military rank has little meaning in regards to one’s abilities, Mr. Huxley. I believe General Grant’s two abysmal terms as president proves my point most clearly. Not that I don’t have the utmost respect for his military career and his place in American history for saving the nation from complete ruin, mind you.”

As Huxley gained some comfort from the president’s remark, Garfield added, “Besides, you certainly out-gunned me, and many others, with your impressive war record and medals.”

Huxley smiled; pleased that the general would remember his citations, yet, being the consummate con man that he was, realized he needed to stroke the newly elected president in kind. “Yes, but in all fairness, I respect your bravery, General. After all, having your horse shot out from under you and seeing your orderly killed at your side while charging through enemy lines is not for the faint of heart!” As Garfield acknowledged his appreciation, Huxley sprinkled another lump of sugar on his tribute. “However, I must be candid. What I admire even more than your courage on the battlefield was your gutsy nerve to lodge a scathing complaint about your commander’s inaction. I can just imagine Major General Rosecrans’ face upon receiving word of your brash reprimand.”

Calmly, Garfield shook his broad shoulders. “Actually, Old Rosy took it better than I ever expected. I suppose deep down he knew that he stuttered at a moment that required a firm and resolute command of action. As for my audacity, Lieutenant, what I’ve learned since then was that it is not always to one’s profit to lambaste one’s superior behind their back, as men in positions of power are always surrounded by friends in power. Sometimes poisoned honey is indeed far more prudent than a saber to the gut!”

As Huxley laughed, realizing the president's military play on the cliché to be true, Garfield cracked a smile and motioned for him to sit. As Huxley complied respectfully, the president began pacing the room. "Yes, especially in the arena of politics, diplomacy—or rather duplicity—appears to be the apogee of this sullied art." As he continued pacing back and forth, he rubbed his forehead. "I'll be quite frank, Mr. Huxley. The more I engage the machine of politics the more I loathe it. As you know, my election campaign was marred by false charges trumped up by the Democrats. They had the audacity to forge my signature on phony documents to buttress their pathetic lies. Their wretched deeds have brought our nation to an all-new low. It is most painful and repugnant!"

Huxley peered up at Garfield with a bit of surprise in his eyes. Although being a full-fledged con artist, Archie's tremendous rise to power had bloated his ego and suppressed much of his tact and etiquette, thus allowing his innate lacerating tongue to speak whatever was on his foul mind. "Well, I beg your pardon, Mr. President, but how you handled your predecessor's election was what many Americans found painful and repugnant. As we all know, President Hayes' victory was a fraud by all accounts." Garfield stopped pacing and turned quizzically toward his unexpectedly candid guest, who continued his assault, "It was no secret that Governor Tilden was the front runner in that election, especially considering his role in trying to clean up the Boss Tweed ring at Tammany. By all accounts that I'm aware of, Tilden had the majority of public and electoral votes in the bag, until those voting issues arose in Florida and two other states."

Garfield's tense lips suddenly released an ever so slight smile, both concealing and revealing. "Yes, but that decision was not mine alone, Mr. Huxley. I sat on the commission with fourteen others to determine the final tallies of those disputed

states and, yes, the final result of the election.” Garfield’s face became stern and resolute. “I simply could not allow the exhausting efforts I put into Rutherford’s campaign to all be for naught. I’ll have you know that I hit the stump all across the northeast for Hayes, even though not being in complete harmony with his convictions.” Garfield’s demeanor softened as he became more introspective. “Furthermore, that decision behind closed doors was to ensure that the Southern Democrats and their iniquitous slave-owning ways would not take hold of this office. Ever since Lincoln reunited this nation, we Republicans have held the Presidency with the clear understanding that the Southern Democrats are not ready to conduct national affairs from the executive branch. And my role in making sure Hayes took office was most precarious; I’ll have you know. My party members were even prompted to supply me with a bodyguard after those deliberations, since my assassination appeared quite imminent.”

Huxley chuckled with a sinister twang, changing the mood. “Yes, I can imagine. I know of several men who would have loved to put a bullet in your head. Myself included!”

Garfield didn’t find Huxley’s dark humor to his liking. “Lieutenant, my war days are far behind me, and seeing fields draped with thousands of young bodies, seemingly in a state of slumber, yet very much dead, has steeled me to the realization of the sanctity of life and the seriousness of death. Hence, I find such crass remarks to be most inappropriate and distasteful.”

Huxley ignored the reprimand with a sadistic smile as he ran his finger along the seam of the upholstered chair. He then switched gears, attempting to add another dose of sugar. “Well, General, how you managed to emerge as president yourself four years after your Hayes victory is a testament to your political genius. I like a man with ruthless ambition!”

Garfield gazed down at Huxley with his usual calm exterior, yet his keen mind couldn't stop thinking about why he never really liked Huxley right from the start. It had been during the war when Garfield's 42nd regiment came across the lieutenant, who had gotten separated from his company while chasing down eight Confederates through a thicket of trees. Huxley had proudly boasted about how he hunted them down, killing all eight of them singlehandedly—the last three quite gruesomely, having slit their throats with a knife and then cutting off their ears for mementos. Archie had stayed with Garfield's regiment for two weeks until being reunited with his company, yet Garfield had grown sick of hearing Huxley blowing his own horn, a trait that Garfield loathed intensely. He also recalled quite clearly the lieutenant's deep admiration for his ambitious and reckless commander, General Custer. And looking at Huxley now—standing before him with his garish hunting outfit—the only change he could see, so far, was that Huxley cut his long Custer-like locks short, and they had turned gray. The man, himself, however, still appeared to be the same old deadly mixture of sugar and strychnine. Garfield was well known for never losing his patience and never hating his enemies, for he had once said, "I am a poor hater."

As such, Garfield looked calmly at the wolf in fancy sheep's clothing and simply pulverized Huxley's ruthless philosophy. "Lieutenant Huxley, I hate to shatter your delusion, but it was not my design or political genius that got me into this office. I never once entertained the idea of seizing this lofty seat. In fact, there is a tone of sadness running through this triumph, which I can hardly explain. I'll have you know, it was by a lark that I rose from being a non-candidate to become the party's nominee, and then, to my greatest surprise and dismay, being elected president. So, this honor comes to me unsought. I have never had the

Presidential fever; not even for a day! Nor should any man, in any walk of life, have such a fever of *ruthless* ambition!”

Again, Garfield began to pace as he stroked his beard. He was curious to see if there was more to Huxley than what his memory told him or what Huxley’s raw interior and flashy exterior have presented thus far. “It worries me, Lieutenant. This nation of ours began so magnificently with luminous figures like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton—all brilliant in their own unique way—yet here it is we have witnessed a bloody Civil War that claimed the lives of over half a million of our own, then the shocking assassination of President Lincoln, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and the rank corruption under Grant’s two iniquitous terms.” Stopping in his tracks, he gazed at Huxley, “Does any of that concern you?”

Huxley stood up and pulled a cigar out of his hunting jacket’s inner pocket and waved it, offering one to the president.

Garfield refused politely, while Huxley lit the stogie and walked over to the huge double-hung window. Lifting it up for ventilation, he turned around and said, “Mr. President, I reckon my eyes see a different nation than yours. I see a land of opportunity.” As his eyes caught a glimpse of the book on the end table, he continued, “I see how *you*, a canal boy, rose to be president. I see in the mirror an orphaned boy who lost his parents and endured hardship to become the owner of one of the largest anthracite mines in the country. Everywhere I travel, like New York City this morning, I see great marvels of engineering rising up like cathedrals that praise the human spirit. I see our nation moving into a far more prosperous and industrious time, Mr. President, a time that Mark Twain rightly called a Gilded Age!”

Garfield gazed inquisitively at Huxley with a renewed set of eyes as he returned to his chair to sit down. Pausing a

brief moment, he rested his elbow on the arm of the chair, while his fingers rustled through his thick, wiry beard. He then looked up at Huxley with his magnetic eyes. "I appreciate and share much of your enthusiasm and positive perspective, Mr. Huxley. However, you *are* aware of Twain's brilliant sense of wordplay, are you not?"

Huxley hesitated, and then shook his head ever so slightly. He didn't wish to appear ignorant, but he hadn't read Twain's book, nor many others for that matter, having only heard friends and journalists speak of Twain's novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*.

Garfield crossed his legs as his voice became somewhat professorial—resurrecting his penchant for serious lectures and debates when he was a teacher. "Lieutenant, Mark Twain used the word *gilded* in lieu of *golden* for a specific reason. Yes, he sees our age, superficially, as golden, for those labeled 'Robber Barons'—hence *you* and your rich ilk. Yet gilded, in a literal sense, is a thin veneer; hence our age appears golden and radiant on the outside, yet it is inferior at its core. And it is this shoddy core, which is the byproduct of your abuses, as well as this deceptive veneer of guilt, which concerns me."

Huxley took a deep drag of his cigar, turned his head, and blew the pungent puff of smoke out the window. He gazed down at the smoldering brown cylinder of tobacco and smiled. "Everyone blames us capitalists, Mr. President. Yet Uncle Sam has no problem reaping *one third* of all his collected taxes right from this little roll of tobacco!...sucking the life out of hardworking tobacco companies and taxpayers just like how I'm sucking the life out of this cigar." Huxley turned and looked at Garfield with reproachful eyes. "So, Mr. President, there is certainly enough guilt in this Age of Gilt to go around. Is there not?"

Garfield, whose opinion of the complex man before him was now in flux, offered a conciliatory nod as Huxley stood

boldly erect and continued his charge with surprising lucidity, “And I will admit that I lack a college education, and I’m not well read, but I’ll be damned if I’m not one hell of a keen observer and listener, General. I’ve rubbed shoulders with men of all vocations and all levels of education, and one thing I’ve learned is that even the great Roman Empire had its share of high-minded authors bemoaning how great men achieved great things at the expense of the common man. They, too, had a Golden Age under Augustus; yet there will always be the winners who see it as Golden, and the whiners who will vilify it as Gilded. There will always be the Haves and Have-nots, Mr. President.” Huxley’s impressive rebuttal, however, was about to take a downturn as a piece of his dark soul escaped in the heat of passion, “And my deepest concern, General, is this new wave of voices from down below, crusading for the equal rights of Negroes and women!”

Garfield sat upright; his stance on civil rights happened to be *his* sore spot. Being well noted for championing the cause of the Negroes, Garfield had proudly designated Frederick Douglas to lead his presidential procession on the day of his inauguration, making a powerful statement about the slave-free nation and his vision of tolerance. As such, Garfield’s voice became indignant, “Lieutenant Huxley, this nation was almost destroyed in its noble attempt to eradicate the primitive ways of slavery. And, you, sir, are in the distinct minority with such a barbaric viewpoint! You speak of the grandeur of Rome and its great achievements, which I’ll certainly agree with, as did our Founders, yet your archaic comment now places you firmly in the ranks of the barbaric Goths!”

Huxley laughed, taking pleasure in finally pricking Garfield’s seemingly impenetrable bubble of benevolence. He took another puff and exhaled a cloud of odorous tobacco—this time not out the window, but antagonistically towards

the president's face. "Actually, I'm not too concerned about the Negro, Mr. President. Let them have a voice, for what it's worth. After all, they were the archaic animals that started this whole mess by selling their own kind! Not to mention how after half-a-million of our white brothers died to free them, they still resent us. What's more, hardly a single one fled north to earn a better life. No! Most stayed rooted in Southern soil, only to be harassed by their former masters. So let their own lazy and ignorant ways be their downfall."

Irritated, Garfield waved the smoke out of his eyes as he countered assertively, "Mr. Huxley, evidently, you are glaringly unaware of men like Booker T. Washington. For your information, he is soon to be the president of the new Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, which is slated to open its doors next month. This is a brilliant first step toward educating Negro men to learn a trade and gain respectability. And, I assure you, he is not alone in their noble crusade!"

Huxley rolled his eyes. "Sure, there may be a handful, but I have yet to see even a houseful. However, the issues of women, especially the so-called *educated women*, like Margaret Fuller and others, I find to be another matter. They are the ones who will wreak havoc on our nation. Mark my words!"

Garfield shifted uneasily in his seat, not knowing how much longer he could listen to Huxley's rhetoric, as Huxley took another puff and continued, "You see, my wife is an educated woman, Mr. President, and if I gave her a shard of coal, she would eventually demand the whole mine. Women yearn for control, just as much as men, except their minds and dispositions are drastically different from ours. If given a chance, women would strip men of their bravado, our need for competition, innovation and progress. Instead, seeking equality for all, even if that means castrating the bull to make him a cow!" Huxley spit out a small piece of tobacco leaf that was drawn into his mouth as he added with a bit of humor,

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