



THE PICKET FENCE

The small boy, his little toes wiggling contentedly inside shoes too worn and too large to be of much use, ran the stick briskly across the slats of the fence as he moved down the sidewalk. He seemed mesmerized by its motion and thrilled by the music that bounced back at him from the hundreds of points that formed each section of the fence.

"Lackedy, lackedy. Lack." It seemed to be speaking a language all its own, as if painting a picture for someone out there in an unseen audience. The reality was simply that of a boy, a stick, a fence and above all, that sound.

He remembered so clearly that day so long ago, when he'd almost lost his grip on the 'stick'. It had only been through the experience gained by years of practice, that he'd been able to recover it. He dared not think what might have occurred if he hadn't!

As he walked cheerfully along the beautifully tree lined street, he would occasionally stop, go back two or three paces and give one or more of the slats another good 'whack' just to be sure he hadn't missed any. Other than that, nothing seemed to phase

this young man or hinder his mission. But then why should it? Hadn't he been attending this same chore for more than a hundred years?

But as he looked down at it now, Peter sighed and shook his head, "Gee, that was a long time ago, 'cause now everything looks all sorta' squiggly' like.

He made it a practice of hardly ever lookin' back, 'cause the time or two he had, he came up feeling cheated. "They never said nothing', except maybe to remind him that his fence must be guarded at all costs." Whatever that might mean?

Oh sure they'd once told him a bunch of stories (with pictures to match) about how other "Timer's had failed to carry out their duties properly and look what had happened.

Why one of the Timers had merely stopped to throw an acorn for a friendly squirrel and an entire continent had sunk into the sea. He could still remember the name... well part of it. Atlantu, Atlantee or somethin' like that.

Then another had only sat down for an instant and the whole Roman Empire collapsed. Down through the years he'd continued to hear terrible rumors about how other Timers's had slacked off and the awful results that occurred.

The boy shook his head determidley, "No siree, that was never gonna' happen to him!"

There was one thing however, that did continue to bother him. It had to do with the work War. Peter didn't know what that meant

either, but people were forever hitting each other with sticks ("Oh not his sort of stick"), these wee ugly and scary lookin and besides they seem to give off some sort of red fire surrounded by smoke, lots of smoke. and they were awful noisy too!

Peter let his eyes trail down his arm, across his fingers and let them come to rest on the end of his stick as it smacked against the next slat. He shook his head, as he gave the next 'un an extra hit, just for good measure. "But that war stuff was none of his business, so forget it."

He'd really tried, honest he had but he couldn't always get rid of those thoughts and gee sometimes they made him feel al 'scrungy' like down inside. And that wasn't all! Only last month, as he was passing this same exact spot, he suddenly had the feeling that his head had become detached from his body and was floatin' around up there. Of course, he didn't dare look up, (he'd never take a chance and do that) and pretty soon it felt better! So he just tightened his grip on his stick, stuck out his chin, pulled back his shoulders and moved on.

But then there was that time, just last week, when he'd had to slow down so he could repair one of the slats that had become loose. As he'd hammered it home with the point of his stick it suddenly felt all scrungy like and for just an instant he thought he might lose his grip on it.

A shiver ran up his spine, "then where would his world be?"

Oh, how he wished there was someone around he could talk to

about these problems, but he knew that was impossible. 'They' would never take the time to listen besides it had been more than a hundred years since one of them had even stopped by. Then he'd only hung around long enough to check a couple of slats, carve another notch on his stick (that was their way of keeping track of the 'Timer's') frown, nod his head which Peter assumed was a gesture of approval) and simply disappeared.

Now all of a sudden lots of strange and scary things started to happen, these weird voices that seemed to jump up at him from out of nowhere and the animals, like that Beagle that had followed him around for centuries now all of a sudden became sorta' fidgety and stand offish' And even worse was that big old Lion that had sat on its haunches always at the corner of Flagler and Worth waiting for Peter to call out his name, give him a wink and a smile, now turned away its head when the little boy passed by.

"It was as if they all sensed that something was terribly wrong."

And later that day, it sure seemed as if they'd been right. he had just finished the Slats on Universal Drive and was about to retrace his steps as (he always did this particular street 'cause they'd designated it as extra important) when he felt it!

At first it was little more than an occasional vibration, that came right up through the soles of his shoes, but soon it became much worse. He could hear sounds like heavy objects being moved up and down the street just off to his right, followed by loud cracks

of thunder that seemed to jump up and wrap themselves around his tiny legs. Why once it almost knocked him down and what was worse he'd almost missed hitting one of his precious Slats.

Then just after dark, a new and even more scary noise started to crash and bang and the worst part was that it seemed to be coming from right over his head.

"He was tempted to look up, but of course he didn't!"

However, it became so loud and the wind so strong, that when he could hardly keep his balance, he decided he simply had to give it a quick peek.

When he did, the sight in front of his eyes, absolutely froze him in his tracks. His little mouth opened, sucking in lots of funny smelling air, he cried out in terror. There were hundred of giant birds chasing each other all over the sky. Every once in a while one of them would stop dead, break up into a million fiery pieces and come crashing to the ground and what was even worse, there were so many that they blocked out that big orange ball that sat up there among those fluffy white things.

He'd only peeked for a second, then realizing what he'd done his eyes quickly shot back down to the safety and warmth of his beloved fence.

"Oh No! It was gone." all he could see scattered around him were crushed and splintered pieces of rotting fence.

Then his eyes suddenly felt all wet but when he reached up to brush away a piece of it, he knew he'd made a terrible mistake, for

in the next instant it was as if a hand had grabbed a 'hold of his stick, ripped it out of his grip and thrown it to the ground. when he looked down all he could see were dozens of little slivers bouncing around on the dirty hard surface.

Then out of the corner of his eye he saw a huge gray cloud rise up from the sidewalk and race skyward. In an instant it became a twisting, twirling, gyrating mass that began to roll over and over within its self as it's bottom raced down his once peaceful street, devouring everything in its path.

Then in the next second, as if some Demon's hand had swept across the entire land a boy, a stick, a fence and the once familiar sound Laced lack, Laced lack" all seemed to disappear into the mouth of this endless Whirlpool.

THE END