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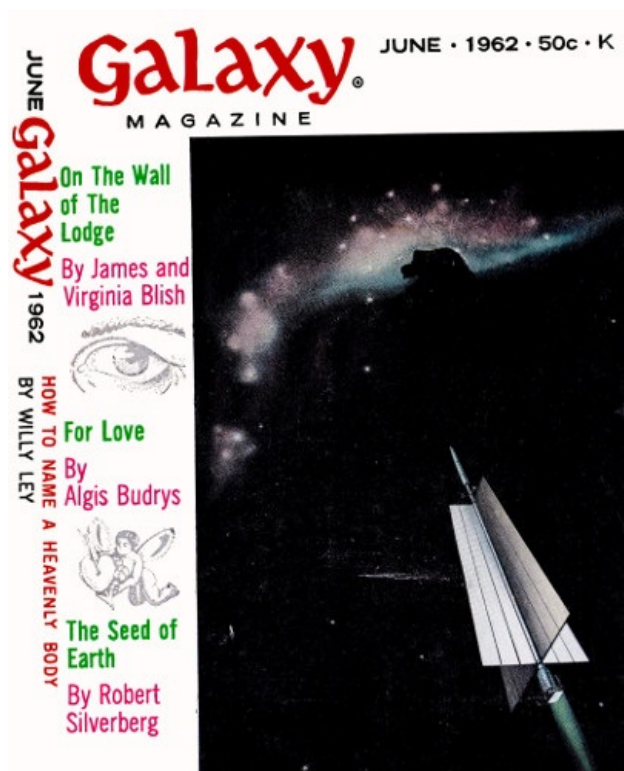
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DREAM WORLD ***



DREAM WORLD

By R. A. LAFFERTY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

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It was the awfulest dream in the world, no doubt about it. In fact, it seemed to be the only dream there was!



He was a morning type, so it was unusual that he should feel depressed in the morning. He tried to account for it, and could not.

He was a healthy man, so he ate a healthy breakfast. He was not too depressed for that. And he listened unconsciously to the dark girl with the musical voice. Often she ate at Cahill's in the mornings with her girl friend.

Grape juice, pineapple juice, orange juice, apple juice ... why did people look at him suspiciously just because he took four or five sorts of juice for breakfast?

"Agnes, it was ghastly. I was built like a sack. A sackful of skunk cabbage, I swear. And I was a green-brown color and had hair like a latrine mop. Agnes, I was sick with misery. It just isn't possible for anybody to feel so low. I can't shake it at all. And the whole world was like the underside of a log. It wasn't that, though. It wasn't just one bunch of things. It was everything. It was a world where things just weren't worth living. I can't come out of it...."

"Teresa, it was only a dream."

Sausage, only four little links for an order. Did people think he was a glutton because he had four orders of sausage? It didn't seem like very much.

"My mother was a monster. She was a wart-hoggish animal. And yet she was still recognizable. How could my mother look like a wart-hog and still look like my mother? Mama's pretty!"

"Teresa, it was only a dream. Forget it."

The stares a man must suffer just to get a dozen pancakes on his plate! What was the matter with people who called four pancakes a tall stack? And what was odd about ordering a quarter of a pound of butter? It was better than having twenty of those little pats each on its coaster.

"Agnes, we all of us had eyes that bugged out. And we stank! We were bloated, and all the time it rained a dirty green rain that smelled like a four letter word. Good grief, girl! We had hair all over us where we weren't warts. And we talked like cracked crows. We had crawlers. I itch just from thinking about it. And the dirty parts of the dream I won't even tell you. I've never felt so blue in my life. I just don't know how I'll make the day through."

"Teresa, doll, how could a dream upset you so much?"

There isn't a thing wrong with ordering three eggs sunny-side up, and three over easy, and three poached ever so soft, and six of them scrambled. What law says a man should have all of his eggs fixed alike? Nor is there anything wrong with ordering five cups of coffee. That way the girl

doesn't have to keep running over with refills.

Bascomb Swicegood liked to have bacon and waffles after the egg interlude and the earlier courses. But he was nearly at the end of his breakfast when he jumped up.

"What did she say?"

He was surprised at the violence of his own voice.

"What did who say, Mr. Swicegood?"

"The girl that was just here, that just left with the other girl."

"That was Teresa, and the other girl was Agnes. Or else that was Agnes and the other girl was Teresa. It depends on which girl you mean. I don't know what either of them said."

Bascomb ran out into the street.

"Girl, the girl who said it rained dirty green all the time, what's your name?"

"My name is Teresa. You've met me four times. Every morning you look like you never saw me before."

"I'm Agnes," said Agnes.

"What did you mean it rained dirty green all the time? Tell me all about it."

"I will not, Mr. Swicegood. I was just telling a dream I had to Agnes. It isn't any of your business."

"Well, I have to hear all of it. Tell me everything you dreamed."

"I will not. It was a dirty dream. It isn't any of your business. If you weren't a friend of my Uncle Ed Kelly, I'd call a policeman for your bothering me."

"Did you have things like live rats in your stomach to digest for you? Did they—"

"Oh! How did you know? Get away from me. I *will* call a policeman. Mr. McCarty, this man is annoying me."

"The devil he is, Miss Ananias. Old Bascomb just doesn't have it in him any more. There's no more harm in him than a lamp post."

"Did the lamp posts have hair on them, Miss Teresa? Did they pant and swell and smell green—"

"Oh! You couldn't know! You awful man!"

"I'm Agnes," said Agnes; but Teresa dragged Agnes away with her.

"What is the lamp-post jag, Bascomb?" asked Officer Mossback McCarty.

"Ah—I know what it is like to be in hell, Mossback. I dreamed of it last night."

"And well you should, a man who neglects his Easter duty year after year. But the lamp-post jag? If it concerns anything on my beat, I have to know about it."

"It seems that I had the same depressing dream as the young lady, identical in every detail."

Not knowing what dreams are (and we do not know) we should not find it strange that two people might have the same dream. There may not be enough of them to go around, and most dreams are forgotten in the morning.

Bascomb Swicegood had forgotten his dismal dream. He could not account for his state of depression until he heard Teresa Ananias telling pieces of her own dream to Agnes Schoenapfel. Even then it came back to him slowly at first, but afterwards with a rush.

The oddity wasn't that two people should have the same dream, but that they should discover the coincidence, what with the thousands of people running around and most of the dreams forgotten.

Yet, if it were a coincidence, it was a multiplex one. On the night when it was first made manifest it must have been dreamed by quite a number of people in one medium-large city. There was a small piece in an afternoon paper. One doctor had five different worried patients who had had dreams of rats in their stomachs, and hair growing on the insides of their mouths. This was the first publication of the shared-dream phenomenon.

The squib did not mention the foul-green-rain background, but later investigation uncovered that this and other details were common to the dreams.

But it was a reporter named Willy Wagoner who really put the town on the map. Until he did the job, the incidents and notices had been isolated. Doctor Herome Judas had been putting together some notes on the Green-Rain Syndrome. Doctor Florenz Appian had been working up his evidence on the Surex Ventriculus Trauma, and Professor Gideon Greathouse had come to some learned conclusions on the inner meaning of warts. But it was Willy Wagoner who went to the people for it, and then gave his conclusions back to the people.

Willy said that he had interviewed a thousand people at random. (He hadn't really; he had talked to about twenty. It takes longer than you might think to interview a thousand people.) He reported that slightly more than sixty-seven per cent had had a dream of the same repulsive world. He reported that more than forty-four per cent had had the dream more than once, thirty-

two per cent more than twice, twenty-seven per cent more than three times. Many had had it every damned night. And many refused frostily to answer questions on the subject at all.

This was ten days after Bascomb Swicegood had heard Teresa Ananias tell her dream to Agnes.

Willy published the opinions of the three learned gentlemen above, and the theories and comments of many more. He also appended a hatful of answers he had received that were sheer levity.

But the phenomenon was not local. Wagoner's article was the first comprehensive (or at least wordy) treatment of it, but only by hours. Similar things were in other papers that very afternoon, and the next day.

It was more than a fad. Those who called it a fad fell silent after they themselves experienced the dream. The suicide index arose around the country and the world. The thing was now international. The cacophonous ditty *Green Rain* was on all the jukes, as was *The Wart-Hog Song*. People began to loathe themselves and each other. Women feared that they would give birth to monsters. There were new perversions committed in the name of the thing, and several orgiastic societies were formed with the stomach rat as a symbol. All entertainment was forgotten, and this was the only topic.

Nervous disorders took a fearful rise as people tried to stay awake to avoid the abomination, and as they slept in spite of themselves and suffered the degradation.

It is no joke to experience the same loathsome dream all night every night. It had actually come to that. *All* the people were dreaming it *all* night *every* night. It had passed from being a joke to being a universal menace. Even the sudden new millionaires who rushed their cures to the market were not happy. They also suffered whenever they slept, and they knew that their cures were not cures.

There were large amounts posted for anyone who could cure the populace of the wart-hog-people dreams. There was presidential edict and dictator decree, and military teams attacked the thing as a military problem, but they were not able to subdue it.

Then one night a nervous lady heard a voice in her noisome dream. It was one of the repulsive cracked wart-hog voices. "You are not dreaming," said the voice. "This is the real world. But when you wake you will be dreaming. That barefaced world is not a world at all. It is only a dream. This is the real world." The lady awoke howling. And she had not howled before, for she was a demure lady.

Nor was she the only one who awoke howling. There were hundreds, then thousands, then millions. The voice spoke to all and engendered a doubt. Which was the real world? Almost equal time was now spent in each, for the people had come to need more sleep and most of them had arrived at spending a full twelve hours or more in the nightmarish world.

"It could be" was the title of a headlined article on the subject by the same Professor Greathouse mentioned above. It could be, he said, that the world on which the green rain fell incessantly was the real world. It could be that the wart-hogs were real and the people a dream. It could be that rats in the stomach were normal, and other methods of digestion were chimerical.

And then a very great man went on the air in worldwide broadcast with a speech that was a ringing call for collective sanity. It was the hour of decision, he said. The decision would be made. Things were at an exact balance, and the balance would be tipped.

"But we can decide. One way or the other, we *will* decide. I implore you all in the name of sanity that you decide right. One world or the other will be the world of tomorrow. One of them is real and one of them is a dream. Both are with us now, and the favor can go to either. But listen to me here: whichever one wins, the other *will have always been* a dream, a momentary madness soon forgotten. I urge you to the sanity which in a measure I have lost myself. Yet in our darkened dilemma I feel that we yet have a choice. Choose!"

And perhaps that was the turning point.

The mad dream disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. The world came back to normal with an embarrassed laugh. It was all over. It had lasted from its inception six weeks.

Bascomb Swicegood, a morning type, felt excellent this morning. He breakfasted at Cahill's, and he ordered heavily as always. And he listened with half an ear to the conversation of two girls at the table next to his.

"But I should know you," he said.

"Of course. I'm Teresa."

"I'm Agnes," said Agnes.

"Mr. Swicegood, how could you forget? It was when the dreams first came, and you overheard me telling mine to Agnes. Then you ran after us in the street because you had had the same dream, and I wanted to have you arrested. Weren't they horrible dreams? And have they ever

found out what caused them?"

"They were horrible, and they have not found out. They ascribe it to group mania, which is meaningless. And now there are those who say that the dreams never came at all, and soon they will be nearly forgotten. But the horror of them! The loneliness!"

"Yes, we hadn't even pediculi to curry our body hair. We almost hadn't any body hair."

Teresa was an attractive girl. She had a cute trick of popping the smallest rat out of her mouth so it could see what was coming into her stomach. She was bulbous and beautiful. "Like a sackful of skunk cabbage," Bascomb murmured admiringly in his head, and then flushed green at his forwardness of phrase.

Teresa had protuberances upon protuberances and warts on warts, and hair all over her where she wasn't warts and bumps. "Like a latrine mop!" sighed Bascomb with true admiration. The cracked clang of Teresa's voice was music in the early morning.

All was right with the earth again. Gone the hideous nightmare world when people had stood barefaced and lonely, without bodily friends or dependents. Gone that ghastly world of the sick blue sky and the near-absence of entrancing odor.

Bascomb attacked manfully his plate of prime carrion. And outside the pungent green rain fell incessantly.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DREAM WORLD ***

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