

HISTORY OF THE EARTH

BY FRANCES FROST

THE history of earth is a moving of leaves in the sun
closing behind the bodies of men, as the grasses
close after the hare and the junipers after the fox.

There have been those who vanished into the Summers
and did not return: whether they died in that country
or loved and put down their roots in it, none can tell.

They who returned sat old in the sun and stared,
mumbling of forests of leaves and of expeditions
ending under the flint of an unknown nation.

The young men went to this wilderness: not one among them
knew if his death would be legend or covered with leaves.

The history of earth is written in many breasts:
men speak of it in divers tongues, their throats
hoarse with the shout of it, taking again the lash
on their bloody backs and the steel in their ribs, inflicting
like wounds on their fellows.

They speak of the fields they grubbed
and the cities they built dragging the stones, the altars,
the stonehenge: they cry of the glory of man:

none knows if his death will be hard or his flesh desire it.

TRAVAIL

BY LOUIS ZARA ROSENFELD

OLD Dvorah Gelberman had been wasting away for ten years, but now Doctor Shulman, counting her pulse, knew that the long race with Time would soon be over. He marveled that she had lasted so long. Between his pink, scrupulously clean fingers her age-tanned wrist throbbed slowly. Dvorah's strong old heart was giving out. And crowding the small bedroom, its windows sealed airtight despite all the doctor's pleas, were the children and the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren tugging at their mothers' skirts, and the anxious neighbors who had dropped in to see how Dvorah was getting along, and the sick committee from the Ladies' Auxiliary that had come to console their dying sister.

The doctor completed the evening's inspection and stepped quickly from the room. Feh! he wanted air, fresh air. Chaim Gelberman, the old woman's son, waved to him as he went out, and Doctor Shulman waited obediently in the dining-room where the overflow of visitors had assembled. He had tried many times to disperse this idle gathering that haunted the little flat and the sick-room, waiting, waiting, waiting, but Dvorah had insisted on having them around, and her children, especially Chaim, who paid all the bills, were prone to disregard his advice in favor of their mother's caprices. So now the flat was crowded with people who should have been at home preparing to go to bed. Many had come, doubtless, to be remembered

with bequests for the causes they represented. They were there to remind Dvorah that they and theirs were worthy. And she, dipping into Chaim's purse, showered the "needy" with her son's cash.

They would not have long to wait now. That old body, wasted by the erosion of the years, could not survive much longer. How old was she, anyway? Mentally the doctor calculated to ninety-eight. Dvorah had admitted to eighty when Chaim had called him in that first time to diagnose a case of indigestion. Ninety-eight? At least that. He was, in fact, fairly certain that she was well over a hundred; but she had feared the envy and jealousy of her friends, and as well the dreaded Evil Eye, and so she had lied, pitifully attempting to conceal what was obvious to all.

This denying one's correct age, it appeared, was something of a family failing. There was Chaim, nearly seventy, yet only the other day the doctor had heard him give his age as sixty-four or -five. And Reuben, who was over sixty and the pauper of the Gelbermans, also snipped a few annoying years from his age. And of course Leah did the same. Even some of the younger members of the family, whom he could remember as tots, had lied to his office girl in giving their ages. They all did. Perhaps they thought the Angel of Death would alter the records to suit them. An interesting case of mass fear, reflected Doctor Shulman. Thinking of his own sixty-three, he wondered if he would act

that way, too, when and if he became much older. Longevity was nothing to be proud of, surely, but why be ashamed of it?

The doctor reached for a cookie from a bowl on the sideboard and poured himself a few fingers of saffron-hued liquor. As he nibbled at the cookie he wondered where Chaim Gelberman had got such brandy. Suddenly he remembered that Chaim was waiting for him. He finished his drink and went back to the sick-room. Impatiently he elbowed his way through the phalanx that walled the doorway, muttering "The doctor! The doctor!" and peered in.

He was shocked. He confessed it to himself. Shocked. The dim electric bulb, through its dirty, white-glass shade, cast a frightening light. It was only because he was familiar with his patient's features, had been so for the past ten years, that he recognized her at all. A gaunt and bony creature lay under the comforter. Its long arms, brown and stiff, were stretched over the sides of the coverlet, the hands lying tensed and open. On the white of the pillow the long, narrow head lay, a cadaverous thing, topped with a coarse wig. The skin of the forehead and chin was cross-hatched with lines.

Looks as though she had been soaking in formaline, thought the doctor, and a sensation of disgust rose in his nostrils as he saw the long, ugly hairs that sprouted from the corners of her lips and the knob of her chin. Her cheeks were furrowed, too, and led innumerable radii toward her eyes. Her eyebrows had grown wildly till they were a dark, bushy bar over the deep black, fireless coals of her eyes, but the lashes had disappeared almost entirely. Longevity also has its disappointments, he mused, as he detected about the bed the revolting odor of the unburied dead.

He was fascinated. He had never had so

old a patient, had never seen one struggle so for meaningless life. Suddenly the old lips moved and the sound that issued was hoarse and very mortal.

"Chaim!"

From the semi-darkness a figure detached itself and stepped forward. The doctor understood. Chaim had been waiting for her to call him before she sank altogether.

"Mameh, what is it?"

The old woman's eyelids fluttered. She seemed to be looking far out beyond this room, this flat, this world. She whispered again.

"Reuben!"

Another figure stooped over the bed.

"Leah!"

A weeping woman threw herself forward. Leah sobbed as she knelt and laid her head against the coverlet.

"Dovvid . . . Simon . . . Sarah . . ."

Others crowded through the door, standing as silently as shades, but none answered to these last names. Dovvid and Simon and Sarah, indeed, would never answer again: the kind earth had accepted them long ago. Dvorah Gelberman, the old Dvorah, raised herself as she realized that no one had responded to her call.

"Dovvid," the hoarse whisper issued again, and then Dvorah remembered.

"He sleeps," she muttered and beat her bony breast. "Let him sleep."

"Mameh," Chaim began. "What is it, Mameh?"

She shook her head.

"Be good to your father, children. He's not so old, but he can hardly crawl from one chair to another. Don't be angry with him. His mind wanders a little sometimes. His strength grows less day by day."

A murmur ran through the little room, then a long sh! Old Gelberman had been dead now thirty-six years. He had died

before Dvorah had consented to come to America to live with her children. And now she spoke of him as one still breathing, as though he were in that very room!

Dvorah looked at her children. Eleven had sought life in her womb, but here stood only three. Of the six that had come to America only these were yet alive. The others? They were not here. She could not recall them. But these three, these three she would bind upon oath.

"Swear to me, you, Chaim, and you, Reuben," the old woman began. "Give me your hands in oath that you will take care of him. And Leah, in the Summer he likes the little red radishes and in the Winter dumplings made with unrendered fat, you know the kind. You shouldn't forget!"

"We swear, Mameh," they said. "Be calm! Let your heart be at peace!"

Both men shuddered as her fingers gripped their hands. She grows cold. Soon, soon.

II

"Now go and let me rest a little," she bade them petulantly. "Don't come again until I call you to say good-bye. Let me rest for a while. You are always bothering me. Soon I'll pack and leave. The children have begged so long that I must go and see them in this Golden Land. I have a couple of jars of chicken-fat, a bottle of grape-wine, and some beet-jelly made with sweet walnuts to bring them. But it's such a long way to go. Over the sea . . ."

Chaim played with the heavy gold chain that hung across his vest. Reuben bowed his head and shifted his tobacco quid to a new corner in his jowl. Leah wept in the arms of one of the neighbors.

Dvorah lay quietly for a moment and Mrs. Aaronson, chairman of the sick com-

mittee of the Ladies' Auxiliary, crept near. The women had a promise to fulfill before Death claimed their sister.

"Does she draw breath?" someone whispered.

"Dvorah," Mrs. Aaronson began softly.

"Sh! she sleeps!" Chaim said.

The dying woman stirred.

"Who calls? I am Dvorah and the Almighty Himself watches over me!"

"The Almighty Himself should watch over you! It is Rivkah Aaronson, Dvorah. Rivkah. Do you remember what you wanted me for?"

The old hands clutched at the coverlet.

"Rivkah Aaronson? Yeh, yeh."

Suddenly she sat up. The others fell back in fright. Was she coming back to the life that was trying so hard to disown her?

"Yeh, Rivkah," Dvorah continued, "you came to wash me and dress me in my white grave-clothes. Twenty years ago I sewed them up to be ready when the time would come. Yeh, Rivkah, I remember. The old head still works. It goes slow, but it goes. So come, Rivkah! Come, old wives, wash Dvorah, wash her clean! Dvorah goes to America!"

The women gathered around the bed, Dvorah's friends of the Ladies' Auxiliary who had promised to prepare her for her coffin. She would not have the undertaker's men touch her: who can tell what kind of people they are?

The others left, looking back over their shoulders. Slowly they went out, drifting into the dining-room, the parlor, the kitchen. Chaim Gelberman had kept his mother in a flat of her own. His wife did not want to have old Dvorah in her home. Too much of a burden. An old person, one foot in the grave—too much responsibility. So Chaim had furnished this place for his mother and had engaged various of her

III

friends to drop in to see her at regular intervals. A fine man, Chaim, well-to-do and respected. His brother Reuben, on the other hand, is something of a good-for-nothing. Always in debt, always failing to make any business pay. He is a paving contractor: so is Chaim. How different two brothers can be!

Chaim beckoned to the doctor. Together they elbowed through the plague of relations, large and small, and sought privacy on the back porch.

"Nu, Doctor?" the older man began, hands in pocket, jingling a few coins.

Doctor Shulman rubbed his chin thoughtfully and stared out at the stars that winked roguishly at him and his handicraft.

"It's hard to say," he answered at last. "She has a strong heart for such an old woman —"

"She's not so old!" Chaim retorted almost mechanically, and then he added: "Talk about what you know, Shulman!"

The doctor checked his tongue: no sense in antagonizing Gelberman. He should have remembered how sensitive all the Gelbermans, mother, children, and even grandchildren, were on the point of their ages. And Chaim was the oldest of Dvora's living children. Plainly, he did not want to be reminded that Death, which was even now preparing to erase his mother, would stand bound to waylay him next, if only out of respect for his seniority.

"She has a strong heart," the doctor went on firmly, "but her breathing is becoming slower. She may not last the night. Yet she may linger for days. One can't tell."

Chaim was silent, and somewhat reproachful. He said nothing for five minutes. Then he rose and without a word to the doctor went back into the house.

"It is a shame to talk about it," Feinman apologized, "while she is yet alive. She might even live till her hundred and twenty years is over. You know, Mr. Gelberman, it's the broken pitcher that goes to the well the most times."

Chaim shuddered.

"Of course, you want a good box for the *mameh*," the undertaker went on, "and I've got them. Aluminum, steel, copper. The best your money could buy. Guaranteed to give service. It's a pleasure, a box like that —"

"Enough, Feinman! Make me no speeches! The *mameh* wants a plain wooden box like they had in the old home. So don't argue. And she has her own white grave-clothes. She sewed them up twenty years ago."

The undertaker hesitated.

"A wooden box?"

"Yeh."

"Then I'll make it nice with copper outside. It should look good at the cemetery, no?"

Chaim shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the difference? So long as there's wood in it. The *mameh* wants wood."

"And the limousines, how many should I have ready?"

"I don't know nothing about that. But let everybody that wants to pay her the last honor have a seat in a car."

Feinman smiled and rubbed his hands.

"Not many mothers have such sons," he sang mournfully.

Gelberman looked at him stonily and he shuffled out.

Rabbi Pearlbloom passed him at the door.

"She'll not die, Mr. Gelberman," the rabbi declared piously. "Such a good heart."

The charities she has done will alone earn her a long life. God doesn't forget such things."

"You know that for sure?" Chaim asked with a glare. The *rov* annoyed him. Plainly, the fellow wanted the job of conducting the ceremonies at the cemetery—it would cost a pretty penny, too—but why did he fawn so?

"For sure? That, of course, I can't say," the *rov* chanted. "But a woman that has brought such fine children into the world! God can't let her miss her reward on earth . . . Mr. Gelberman, you will want, of course, a gathering of ten young psalm-singers to repeat the Psalms when—at a hundred and twenty years!—she expires. I'll take care of it myself."

"You'll take care of it? Who said you should?"

Rabbi Pearlblock halted in dismay. He tugged at the wings of his broad nose perplexedly.

"I've already given an order to have ten of the best pupils of the Hebrew school ready."

Chaim said nothing for a moment. Then he consented with a shrug.

"Now," the *rov* continued, "I'll go in to see how the *mameh* is doing."

IV

"Bring me candles!" Dvorah commanded. Her voice rose to a high pitch as she spoke.

"Candles, candles?" Chaim mumbled. "Let some one bring candles. Reuben, run out and buy candles!"

The older brother stuffed a bill into Reuben's hand.

"Run, run!" he bade him.

"Wait, Chaim, Reuben, wait!" Leah begged them. "Maybe the *mameh* has candles!"

They asked her. Of course, she had them. She had everything prepared. She even had a list of small bequests she desired to make, ready for Chaim. To the great disappointment of the visitors, he tucked the paper in his pocket, promising to have the checks written out as soon as he got home. Dvorah had thought of everything, so of course she had the candles ready. Go in the first wide door of the kitchen cupboard. Reuben slipped the bill into his pocket: Chaim had plenty. Leah hastened and found them, tall, wax candles that one lights near the dead.

"Not these, Mameh!" Leah murmured.

"Yeh, yeh, these!" Dvorah insisted. "Both at my feet where I can see them."

They obeyed. Rabbi Pearlblock nodded his head solemnly, signifying that it was permissible.

"You shouldn't make a lot of trouble over me!" Dvorah said suddenly. "I don't want anybody to have any trouble over me now."

Chaim wanted to laugh. To laugh here at her deathbed? He controlled himself. For thirty years had she been a problem on his hands. Now she did not want to be any trouble for anyone.

"And if I have made someone angry, let him forgive me!" Dvorah continued. "Forgive me now and I'll put in a good word for you over there!"

"We forgive you, Mameh!" they chorused. "We forgive you, Dvorah!"

And that was all she said that could be clearly understood.

Her eyes now focused on the candle-flames, and she lay quietly, breathing only with effort. Then she began to murmur as in a fever. Once she turned slightly and stared at Chaim.

"Oh, Eliezer," she whispered, "you have grown so tall! I thought I would never live to see you so big."

Chaim squirmed and muttered.

"This is Chaim, Mameh!"

But she did not know him. Again she called him Eliezer. Eliezer had been born and had died a child of six before Chaim had ever seen the light of this world.

Suddenly Dvorah dug her gnarled hands into the coverlet. A fierce tensing of muscles, and then her face relaxed and her jaw dropped, revealing the dark cavern of her mouth. That was all. The travail of death was simpler than the travail of birth. Doctor Shulman felt gently for her pulse; he needed no more. Then he turned away with a manner of reverence. It was over. There was still the formality of the death certificate, but that could be taken care of later. He wanted to say something, words of condolence, but he could think of nothing: Dvorah Gelberman had taken her full measure of life. There should be no mourning here: this physiological machine had functioned till the last ounce of energy had been coerced from it. Truly dust was returning to dust, but what should he say? Rabbi Pearlbloom rose to his aid.

Quickly the *rov* produced a large, fringed praying-shawl from one of the pockets of his black alpaca coat, unfolded it, and covered the corpse. The *talith* reached only from Dvorah's head down to her knees, but that would do until the undertaker arrived. Feinman would not have to wash the body nor to clothe it. Dvorah's Auxiliary sisters would attend to that. But he would probably want to dress the face, touch it up with color to make a good appearance when the coffin was opened for the last time. And he would place the small fragments of a broken clay dish over the dead eyes to keep the lids closed: symbolic of the character of this life. Feinman would take care of all that.

In a singsong the *rov* chanted a prayer,

the others echoing him with fervent Amens. When he had finished he turned to Chaim and cut his coat lapels in several places with a little scissors that he brought forth from another pocket. There had been silence, the frightened silence that is Death's tribute from the living, but now Leah began to sob violently. Her cries grew shriller; she screamed and collapsed in a faint. Other women screamed and beat their breasts contritely; Dvorah had belonged to many charity societies in her thirty years in America. Tears trickled down Chaim's cheeks as he witnessed the grief of these strangers. Reuben blew his nose, took the little scissors from the *rov*, and cut his own lapel: mourning. The doctor slipped quietly from the room.

Rabbi Pearlbloom tugged lightly at Chaim's sleeve.

"Mr. Gelberman, when God wills, what can we do? He gives and He takes!" he declaimed eloquently but not without tenderness, and then he changed to a brisker tone. "I'll take care of everything for you. Don't bother yourself for a thing. Right away I'm running out to telephone Feinman to come. He will do his share. I have been working with him for years already. He will bring more candles to light around her bed—may she be happy in Eden!—and everything. And I'm going this minute to order the youngsters from the Hebrew school to come and chant the Psalms tomorrow when she is laid out in the coffin—may she rest in her peace! I'll take care of everything myself, Mr. Gelberman, the prayers and the sermon at the cemetery, everything. Don't worry, you can rely on me!"

He was gone with a spryness that belied his bulk. Chaim wiped his eyes, uttered the *kaddish*, prayer for the dead, and pushed through the crowded doorway as Reuben began his *kaddish*. He wanted to

get away, away from this corpse and these mourners. There was no one in the dining-room, so he poured himself a short glass of brandy. When he had swallowed it his head felt clearer. But the wailing and the sobbing came back to him.

Again he thought of his dead lying there in the next room. After all, she had been his *mameh*. In his mind he could no longer, try as he might, see her as a young woman, a young mother, who had played with him when he had been a child. He could not muster a single endearing memory of her. For him there existed only the

picture of an old woman struggling stubbornly for years, hanging on to life with her weak, bony fists, refusing to die. She had become repulsive to her friends, to his wife, to her grandchildren, even to her own children. But not to him, not to him, he insisted.

To live so long! He denied himself the pleasure of reflecting on her longevity. Instead, he mused bitterly for a few moments; would the thread of his own life unravel so far? Then something drew at his heart. The old *mameh* was dead. And he began to weep.

SWELL DAYS FOR LITERARY GUYS

BY BOB BROWN

WE WERE a bunch of word-pirates writing pulp fiction for the Frank Tousey publications. We didn't call it pulp, back there before the war. Indeed, we had no name for it. Loosely we referred to our work as doing blood-and-thunder. We concocted thrillers out of a hero, a villain, a dust-biting red-skin or two, three Colts, plenty of thin air, and much desperado dialogue. We didn't know under what classification our writing fell. We didn't care. We just wrote it. To order.

Frank Tousey, our employer, was little more than a name to us, a millionaire myth. None of us really knew him, but all of us had heard a lot about him. He had started back in the golden days of the early *Argosy*, in the catch-as-catch-can style of Frank A. Munsey. He and his brother Sinclair were closely associated from the start. Sinclair was an early distributor of the Beadle Library, the pioneer in the dime-novel field. He left the Beadles to join the American News Company. Simultaneously, Frank originated the half-price dime-novel, the nickel weekly. It differed from the Sunday-school tripe of that day only in being better written. He published a string with sibilant, stirring titles: *Secret Service*, *Work & Win*, *Jesse James*, *Pluck & Luck*, *Young Wild West*, *The Blue & Gray*, *Liberty Boys of '76*, *Old King Brady*, *Happy Days* (a home paper of the *Farm & Fireside* type), and *Moving Picture Stories* (a last desperate attempt to go modern).

Street & Smith came into competition with the same kind of thing under other names: *Log Cabin*, *Nugget*, *Buffalo Bill*, *Diamond Dick*, *Nick Carter*, *Frank Merriwell*, and *Good News*. N. C. Munro entered the field with *Old Cap Collier*, *Golden Hours*, and *Family*, and George Munro contributed *Old Sleuth* and the *Fireside Companion*.

Early in the 1900's the Beadle and Munro outfits folded, and Tousey and Street & Smith had the Nick Carter field to themselves. Munsey, though his start had been similar, managed to keep a little aloof from blood-and-thunder with *Munsey's Magazine*, the *Argosy*, the *Ocean*, the *Live Wire*, the *All Story*, the *Scrap Book*, the *Railroad's Man's Magazine*, and the *Cavalier*.

After 1900 only one independent nickel thriller sprang up to put the fear of God into the Tousey brothers and the Smith brothers. Together they strangled the upstart at birth. The Tousey papers were the first in their field and the last to leave it. In 1925 Street & Smith bought up the remaining copyrights and titles from Rosalie Tousey, Frank's widow, who had run the business after his death in 1915, with the assistance of his brother Sinclair, and a relative by marriage named Wolff. The Tousey titles exist today, I believe, only in translation, in Italy, Spain, France and Germany. I presume they are pirated. In America the nickel and dime magazines of greater pretention, the *Saturday Eve-*