AVRAM DAVIDSON

BLUNT

Recent books of Mr. Davidsoh's include The Boss in the Wall and the upcoming collections The Avram Davidson Treasury and The Investigations of Avram Davidson.

HE HAD THE USUAL MOUNTAIN boyhood in one of those mountainous counties below the Mason-Dixon line -differing from most other such counties only in being one of the few that regularly voted Republican -- where there was not much schooling; but somewhere in the course of what schooling there was, Huey P. Blunt read a piece about yellow fever and the Panama Canal and how one was conquered so the other could be built, and he decided to be an Army doctor. Someone {in after years he tried to remember who first told him, but so many people had agreed and repeated it and everyone took it for granted it was correct} told him that the way to do it was to enlist soon's he was old enough and work his way up. Blunt wasn't talkative and he was six months in the Army before anyone there knew of his plans, and before he learned what they were worth. What they were worth officially, that is. He made them worth something, after all, by an illegal conversion of knowledge. He listened, he watched, he read, he worked; and he learned much. The Army Medical Corps taught him more than it planned to. Blunt had deft hands and a good memory.

After his enlistment expired he went back to the hills, to his home country. There was a very old man practicing medicine there, his name was Elnathan Wisonant, and he had never been to college either, having picked up all his knowledge of medicine as apprentice to his father, a "doctor" of similar status. At one time there were many practitioners of that kind around-- it would not be accurate or fair to call them quacks -they represented an older tradition in native medicine than the A.M.A. -they supplied the only"care available at a time when medical schools were few, and not too well thought of, either. Gradually they became extinct. For the last forty years o[his career old Wisonant had been protected by a state law that exempted all those in the trade at the time the law was passed from having to meet the qualifications required thereafter. Blunt became his assistant, which meant that he very shortly took over most of the hard work while old Wisonant sat by watching and advising, and speaking ill of "college doctors."

"Horse-leeches," he called them; "bumshavers, quacksalvers, peddlers of snake oil and pink aspirin.

"A trust, a vile and contemptible monopoly, a guild of grave robbers aping their betters among the natural philosophers," he would snarl.

One morning the old phlebotomist was found on the floor of his office, white beard pointing to the ceiling. Although urged by the hill people to carry on and the hell with them city doctors and their laws, Blunt declined. Roads were

coming into the hills, and automobiles. The day the old man was buried from the little church of the Foot-Washing Baptists, Blunt was approached by the only representative of Big Business in' the county, the manager of a lumbering outfit that was winding up operations, there being no forests left worth ravaging.

"We can use you out in . ," he said, naming a western state.

"You know I haven't got a license," Blunt said. The lumberman's reply was brief and obscene.

"Can you set a broken leg? That's what counts," he continued.

On the advice of the lumberman Blunt went out to the western state and told the company's hiring agent that he was a former medical student whom lack of finances had forced out of school. His story, enriched with details from the gossip of the Army doctors, sounded reasonable; but the company was not too particular. Few doctors were available [or the rough life of the logging camp, and the supply of those whom liquor, malpractice, or conviction for criminal abortion made available was rather short at the time. He spent several years in the woods before he moved on.

Once, he bought an interest in a small town drug store, chiefly to improve his knowledge of pharmacy. He was not a businessman, and when his partner took to tapping both the till and the spiritus frumenti, Blunt did not wait for the end, but just walked out. There are agencies that never advertise, as their business, though needful, is illegal. Through one of them Blunt became le docteur on a sisal plantation in Haiti; he added, to the professional journals to which he subscribed, one on tropical medicine.

All that he did, he did with seriousness and sincerity, and as much capability as was possible under the circumstances -- which was a great deal more than the medical monopolists could have afforded to admit, if they had ever known about him. They never did, of course, because he went to places that never saw them.

Unlike the woman of Valor, who {we are assured on the best authority], Laugheth at the Time to Come, Blunt never even thought about it. He was in British Honduras when the European war broke out, but paid it little attention until the invasion of Denmark and Norway by a people who might have eventually become civilized, had the British in the early part of the previous century not prevented the French from continuing to civilize them. Something stirred in the heart of Huey P. Blunt as he read the accounts of the armed parachutists dropping from the troubled sky. He went back to the United States and enlisted in the Navy.

So there was Blunt at thirty-odd: big, balding, not very talkative, not much booklearning, no licenses, but a lot of practical experience for a Pharmacist's Mate, First Class. His advancement in rating was indefinitely postponed because he lacked the requisite six months duty at sea or overseas required of chief petty officers in "non-specialized" ratings. By the Byzantine logic of the Navy, a Pharmacist's Mate, 1/c --who had to know First Aid, Minor Surgery,

Anaesthesia, Materia Medica, Anatomy, Physiology, Nursing, Hospital Administration, Embalming, and so on -was not considered a specialist; while Physical Culture instructors, whose only duty and only qualification was the ability to direct mass push-ups, were so considered, and were rated CPOs en bloc. In the ordinary course of an ordinary tour of duty in the Hospital Corps a Ph.M. 1/c would have been certain to get sea duty, and thus, a rating as Chief. But Blunt's very competence undid him. He knew too much.

"I can't spare you, sorry," Dr. West told him each time he put in for sea duty.

"Long's they know he kin do ever detail here and do it better than enna bodda else, Ol' Huey goin stay here" -- Tester to Pawson.

"Ol' Huey's a mighty good man," Pawson said, but neither the "Ol' Huey" or "the mighty good man" indicated affection. No one liked Blunt, no one disliked Blunt, no one told any stories about Blun;, there were none to tell. Blunt had no personality. He was not a character. He had no existence apart from his rank-- which he did not abuse -- and his skill -which, by its greatness, baffled and discouraged speculation. If orders came in for a Ph.M. 1/c to be shipped out, the SMO saw to it that another one was shipped. Once Blunt, on leave, went to Washington, and pulled strings, but Dr. West, when he saw Blunt's name on the orders, pulled more strings; and was authorized to make a substitution. The other First Class Mate was older than Blunt, he was married and had two children, but he knew incomparably less and he was lazy and inefficient; and for these failings was destined to die while splashing his trembling and middle-aged legs through the lukewarm waters of a tropical beachhead.

But before that happened, Blunt had fallen in love.

Wilma Swansoh's family belonged to one of the several colonies of Yankees settled in Cataline. Besides the usual superannuated railroad men and retired wholesale plumbing dealers, besides the seekers after more sunshine and health, there was a group drawn to Cataline by the presence of a small denominational college that Had a Good Name. At one time it had been Southern terminus for the Chatauqua Circuit. Retired clergymen, retired schoolteachers and principals, even retired deans and presidents of other denominational colleges ismalii, had settled in Cataline so as to take advantage of its advantages.

Mrs. Swanson said that Cataline had everything.

"There's this lovely old town and those beautiful oak trees and Spanish moss. And the lovely flowers, all the year round. There's Mullet Bay, and the St. George River, and the ocean -- lovely swimming and fishing and boating and water games. There's Vallance Beach just a short ride away, and Seminole Springs. There's this lovely little college and the intellectual atmosphere it creates here. There are some lovely people who winter here-- call them Snowbirds, if you will, but I say that some of them are just lovely. As for the year-round people, well, you just won't find a lovelier community; that's all. And the Colored People are simply lovable. That's why I say that Cataline has everything."

Mr. Swanson backed her up in all this, but since he had Investments locally, naturally, he saw things from another point of view as well.

"There's your naval stores," Mr. Swanson said; "your turpentine and rosin. There's your citrus fruit. There's your lumber. There's your real estate. And I must add," he added, "last but not by any means least, there's your Sunshine and your Clean, Fresh Air."

Wilma had gone to Cataline College and graduated. She had majored in Domestic Science, that being what the aptitude test had suggested for her.

Somehow, no young man from a lovely family had ever offered to provide Wilma with the domesticity. Mr. Snyder, to be sure. Mr. Snyder, a fine Christian gentleman, had once hinted to Mr. & Mrs. Swanson that...but then, Mr. Snyder was getting on in years, he had low blood pressure and a married daughter .... No. Wilma could do better than Mr. Snyder, lovely man though he was. There was no hurry. Mrs. Swanson had been much older than Wilma when she married Mr. Swanson. Wilma was a lovely cook and had such a warm personality, and, really, when she took off her glasses, you could see that she had lovely gray eyes. Only she seldom took them off because she couldn't see very well without them. So Wilma stayed at home. Then, when the war started, she had so much wanted to Do Something, and it was really very fortunate in its way that Miss Olauson, who was Dr. Wondermaker's nurse, had joined the Army. Of course, Wilma wasn't really a nurse, but she had her Red Cross card in first aid, she made even the most nervous patients feel at ease; and besides, there just weren't any nurses available for Dr. Wondermaker. But Wilma learned very quickly and Mrs. Wondermaker said she real1y didn't know what Doctor would do without her, because she (Mrs. Wondermaker) simply had her hands full with the children.

And there was no end to the shock of the Swanson family when Dr. Wondermaker tried to kiss Wilma one day, in his office. Of course, she couldn't stay after that. Dr. Wondermaker insisted it was all a misunderstanding, he regarded Wilma almost as one of his own daughters; but of course, she couldn't stay after that. Fortunately, in addition to the Domestic Science courses at Cataline College, Wilma had studied typing. She couldn't take dictation, but she could type; she had typed all of Dr. Wondermaker's records for him. Wilma got a job in the office of the Dispensary at the Naval Air Station. Mrs. Swanson said that some of the sailor boys were really just lovely, if you got to know them, came from very fine families, really. Besides, Chief Shillitoe worked in that office, and he was a very fine man, really lovely...

At first only Ribacheck showed any interest in the new office girl. The nurses responded to her very openly expressed admiration for nurses, 'but only Ribacheck {at first) showed any interest in her as a woman. Ribacheck belonged notoriously to the Lowest Common Denominator school of venery, and was therefore interested in all women as women. The other Corpsmen claimed to find a lack of niceness in this. Ribacheck's taste, they said, was All in His Mouth. Of course, Wilma was very polite to all the men, and when Ribacheck smiled at her, she smiled back. In fact, as his smiles grew warmer, she allowed herself to look into his record book in the files. She had never heard of Poynkers Mills, New

Jersey, 'listed as his home town. And, heavens! she couldn't even pronounce his mother's first name. Lutherans were all right, although not perhaps quite so much as Methodists or Presbyterians, but what on earth could a Slovak Lutheran be? Growing more and more dubious, she noted that Ribacheck had once been operated on for a varicocele. Later on she looked up the word in the little Gould's medical dictionary in the office. She blushed, even though the definition was far from explicit enough. Would a varicocele....? Or wouldn't it....? There was, of course, no one she could ask. After that Ribacheck smiled in vain.

And then, one day, Blunt came into the office. Wilma didn't realize it, because she had taken off her glasses to clean them; but she was looking up when he came in, and smiling in his direction. She really had lovely gray eyes. After that Blunt came in the office rather often. He was exceedingly shy with women, and found it difficult to talk small talk with them until he knew them well, but Wilma was a bit shy herself.

Blunt, in short, began to court her. Before long, they had an understanding. Mrs. Swanson said that he was really a very lovely person. So quiet, she said. And really, an astonishing knowledge of medicine. After all, a First Class Pharmacist's Mate was almost the same as a civilian doctor, wouldn't you say? Mr. Swanson said that he was one of your steady young fellows. Seemed to know quite a bit about your lumber, too, Mr. Swanson said. Everything was going so smoothly that Blunt overcame his uncertainty as to the propriety of the invitation, and asked Wilma, while they were walking one afternoon near the bungalow he rented in Cataline, if she would care to just look the place over. She said she would.

"I hired the place already furnished," Huey said, leading the way. "Some of the things are real pretty," he said, waving his arm at large. Wilma looked at the pink cloth lampshades with beaded fringes, the heavy red portieres hanging from wooden rings.

"Mmm-hmm," she murmured.

"But this house, like every house, it needs a Woman's Touch," he said. Wilma's heavy cheeks turned a deeper pink.

"Oh, a house does, it does!" she said fervently.

Huey stopped in from of a closed door. He stood with the key in his hand and half turned to face her.

"Now I'm going to show you something that I haven't ever showed another person here before. You're the very first, Wilma." Her face burned. She looked at the faded and threadbare .carpet. She heard the key in the lock and the click of the light switch, and followed his feet inside. She had to take off her glasses and wipe her eyes.

"...and a woman who has, besides, a Scientific Background..."

Putting back her glasses, she saw opposite her a shelf with a row of little bottles, each one containing something like a dried mushroom, only not quite .... With a slight frown of puzzlement she read the neatly typed labels.

Redund. Prep., Cumberback, Alonso T., Steward's Mate 1/c

Redund.Prep., Williamson, Jno., Officer's Cook, 3/c

Lost in pride, Blunt fell silent and looked at his collection. Row after row, shelf after shelf, of bottles and jars, lined the large closet. In cold glass wombs that would forever preserve but never nurture them, floated homunculi, in every stage of development up to the sixth month -- after that they were always claimed, though burial (Blunt thought} was a foolish waste. Nobody ever asked for an appendix; there must have been over a hundred of them. There were tonsils, tumors, fingers, a few ears, a whole foot, several eyes. Swaying gently in response to distant vibration was something like a bunch of grapes, labeled Youlihan, Bette Lou. A shy smile on his lips, Huey reached out and touched with a gentle finger a bottle containing a twelve-foot tapeworm (Le Maistre, Cleophile). He rested his hand affectionately on a mason jar that held a scalp of chestnut colored hair. He cleared his throat.

"I don't suppose that there's another collection such as this in the whole country, in private hands," he said, in his high, flat voice. "I was hoping..." He took out a handkerchief, spat onto a comer of it, and rubbed at a speck on a bottle with a rather faded-looking testicle in it.

"I was hoping that after we were married, after that, then I was hoping that you and me could sort of catalogue it all, together, Wilma...

"Wilma?"

He walked rapidly through the bungalow with long strides.

"Wilma ? "

But Wilma was already on the bus, bound, not for her home, but for the Station. She rode in tight-mouthed containment until the Nurses Quarters, where she allowed herself to be helped off in a state of convulsive hysteria. After being drenched with aromatic spirits of ammonia, and after weeping her dress and those of the nurses tending her into quasi-transparency, she retreated with cold compresses to a darkened room. The nurses, who were fond of her, had watched, like everyone else at Sick Bay, the slow progress of the courtship. It was certainly not to be thought that Blunt, of all people, had made improper advances; they thought that he must have jilted the poor girl; they pressed sympathetically for Details. They got them, and the account of Wilma's Terrible Experiences strained through sobs and hiccups, spread almost at once to Sick Bay; and thence, to the Navy at large, gathering details at every step...

(Pawson, for example, reported to Tester that "Ol' Huey got a closet full o'

pickled coilions, an' a two-headed baby in a jar o' formaldehyde!")

"But what I want to know," said Doctor Wallop, "is she marrying him, or--?

Miss Stuart said, "According to her, Not If He's the Very Last Man on Earth."

"'She does not regard herself, nor yet wish to be regarded, in that bony light,'" Dr. Wallop murmured, sneaking his hand onto Miss Stuart's kneecap. Miss Stuart giggled.

Dr. Slide confided to Sam Mcintyre that he'd been on the point of suggesting to That Crazy Fool to join the Brethren, but not anymore.

A Bo's'n's Mate named Blascovitch got roaring drunk and hammered at the door of the bungalow one night, demanding his appendix back.

Church and State, appealed to by Mr. Swanson To Do Something, declined to do anything. Chaplain Meyers, with a far-off look in his eye, said something about Samson in the Old Dispensation having made a similar collection. Chief of Police Elsworth Smith didn't know of any law against it.

Blunt himself, vexed at the whole affair, put in for sea duty once more, and Dr. West once more refused to approve. Blunt, he patiently repeated, was Much Too Valuable a Man. Wilma, of course, couldn't stay on after that. It seemed that Huey was doomed once more to wander lonely as a cloud: but instead, he came into his own, at last, as a fully rounded "character"; a fabulous personality who was known to and talked about by everyone on the Station. In a matter of days he became famous in Naval aviation installations all along the coast and in bases in Cuba, the Bahamas, and the West Indies. Eventually his fame became a legend, as it spread in widening circles, until he lost his name and entered mythology. The closet became part of it, too.

"This old Pay Clerk," any sailor you care to name might be saying in a bull session, "was supposed to pay off the whole Ship's Company of this battle wagon in dry dock. Only whiles he was coming aboard he kind of stumbled and the whole suitcase full of money fell open. Well, they pumped that dry dock what I mean dry, but they never could find only a part of the money. Course, he drew a Court and they retired him, but, funny thing, long about six months later he opened up the biggest damn bar and grill in Honolulu. And everybody was real surprised because he never had the reputation of being a saver. It just goes to show, you never know."

"Reminds me," someone else was sure to say, sooner or later, "of this old Chief Pharmacist's Mate, he --"

"Oh, yeah! Y' mean the one who --"

"Hey, you wanna tell this story?...Well, like I was saying..,

"And his wife," the story wound up, "she took off an' never come back; and they

say that she never would open another closet door again unless someone else was in the room! .... It just goes to show."

But by that time Blunt had been obliged to hire Harold, the Sick Bay porter, as part-time houseman, because no Colored woman in Cataline would enter his bungalow -- and indeed, they fled the streets for blocks around when he walked or drove through town.

No one knew when he had started the collection. It may have begun in some mountain cabin filled with screams, or it may not. It could have been prompted by a curiosity that thought to answer mystery by amassing matter; or by a personal idiosyncrasy of no greater depth than one that brings some men to collect stamps, old silver buttons, or used trolley car transfers. Certainly, to Blunt, each item was in its way an objet d'art. And certainly he must have been doing it for years without being -- oh, not "caught" or "detected" or "discovered": these words imply wrongdoing, and Blunt came as near to anger as anyone ever saw him, when he defended himself.

"People like you," he said to Miss Sweeting, who was trying, in her tortuous way, to express Shock; "People like you Impede the March of Science."