

Tales from the Golden Age

II

by David Ackley

Johannes is putting final touches on his recently invented printing press when Ned enters the shop, several scrolls under his arm.

--What you got there, Johannes?

--It's the new press, Ned. I'm about to revolutionize the industry.

--Laundry and dry-cleaning, is it?

--Not that kind of press, Ned. I'm talking about printing and publishing, that's the game from here on out.

--What, with that thing? Bit bulky i'n't it? Where'd you say the scroll comes out?

--No more scrolls, Ned. I'm going for a whole other look.

He reaches behind the press and produces a book, printed and bound..

--I'm calling this my buke.

--Don't look like no boot I ever saw.

--Buke!

--Right, whatever...

He hands Ned the book.

--The writing and all is inside and she opens up just like a box, just lift the lid there...

Ned opens the book and begins to read.

--Kind of runs out of room at the bottom here, don't it.

--See, that's the end of what you call your page. When you get to that part, you flip it over and go to the back of it and so on...uh...the top of the next one there, Ned.

--What? Every time you come to the bottom of one of these, you got to stop, flip it over, go to the top of the next and start all over. Pretty clumsy business, if you don't mind my saying.

He ruffles the pages.

--Jesus! Hundreds of 'em. Stop,start, stop,start...Raises hell with the old continuity, don't it?...You got to think of the reader, Johannes....Look here.

He unrolls one of his scrolls, holding one end overhead while securing the other end with his foot.

--See, now you can read the whole thing in one go, without no interruptions,none of all that herky jerky you got with your boot there.

--Buke.

--Right.

Ned demonstrates the reading position, craning to see the top end

and working his way down, but the lower end slips from under his foot, rolls up like a window shade, and pinches his fingers.

--Ouch! Goddammit!...Works a lot better on the floor with a couple of rocks.

--Right...So the scrolls there, Ned. What you reading these days?

--Just between you and me, I'm not much for the reading any more. ..Too many irons in the fire, if you know what I mean. Still, I like to have a few scrolls of your old Virgil and Ovid and what-all lying around to make a good impression on the customers.

--How's the writing business? How about that thing you was workin' on? What was it, "Gawain's Green Nights?"

--Yeah, well, I'm kind of off the soft-core, but I'm still full on in the writin' game. Write, write, write all the time..just pumping it out. .. The trend now, though, is all for the short piece, stuff you can read in a flash and don't have to waste time thinking about.

--Flash, is it?

--That's the ticket. Read it. Drop it. Get back to cleaning up the cat's mess...watching the game. All the important stuff.

--I s'pose that kind of thing could work in my buke.

Ned picks up the book and hefts it, thinking.

--I can see one way this's got it all over the scroll, Johannes...I could picture a row of these up on my wall, with the titles and authors in big print so's everybody could see them. Make a lovely decoration. Cover up some of them stains too what the wife's been after me to paint over.

--I don't know as that's quite what I had in mind...

--Course it is. I'll take your first dozen. Make them all different and sprinkle in plenty of the big boys, you know who I mean... The wife's gonna love this.

He leaves, Johannes gazing after him, shaking his head.

--Sheesh, he says to the silent printing press. Why do I even bother?

