

MICHAEL SWANWICK

THE MADNESS OF GORDON VAN GELDER

In college, the members of my dining hall were challenged each year to work one particular sentence into all their senior theses. During my senior year, the sentence was a line from the film Robocop: "I'll buy that for a dollar!"

Really, that's all I had in mind at Philcon when I pulled some change out of my pocket...

THE ORIGINS OF MADNESS are a mystery. The progress of madness as a disease, however, can often be precisely documented.

For Gordon Van Gelder, it all began at a room party in the SFWA suite at Philcon. He was listening to Michael Swanwick spout off about his uncanny facility with short-short stories. Michael, it seems, had bragged to Nancy Kress about the exact same thing and then, in the face of her disbelief, written a short-short about her while waiting in the bar to go to dinner with Nancy and her husband, Charles Sheffield. The punch line to this not terribly involving story was that Nancy had immediately cried, "Oh my God, promise you won't sell this story to Gardner!"

At which point Gordon had whipped out fifty cents and said, "I'll buy it."

There were no immediate repercussions from this incident. Swanwick had taken it for the joke it was meant to be, and laughed. But afterwards...

Afterwards, thinking it over, Gordon realized that he had felt an illicit thrill from the incident. It was morally wrong for an editor to buy something sight unseen. It was wicked. It was perverse. And therefore, necessarily, it was exciting.

A week later, a story from Jim Kelly arrived in the mail. Gordon knew it would be good. Jim sweated his guts out over his fiction. He wouldn't have sent it in, if it weren't worth publishing. Reading the thing was only a formality, after all. And if he did read it, wouldn't that be needlessly depriving himself of a very special thrill?

It would.

"Buy this," Gordon told his assistant, and leaned back in his chair, eyes half closed, breathing shallowly.

But it didn't...wouldn't...couldn't end there, after all. One thing led to another. Gordon bought more and increasingly more stories sight unseen. Stories by unpublished amateurs. Stories by people he knew couldn't write.

Word got around.

Why drag out the story? Less than a year after that fatal room party, Gordon

found himself standing out on Fifth Avenue, assailed by would be writers. Gonnabes, wannabes, notachanceinhelltabes filled the street, stopped the traffic, shrieked like banshees, thrust forward clumsily typed and badly penciled and incoherently crayoned manuscripts, while Gordon, tattered and bleeding, accepted all they could give him and demanded more.

The SWAT team was called out. Water hoses were employed, and then live ammo. Writers were mowed down like the cockroaches they were. Until finally the street was cleared and an angry police officer confronted the unrepentant editor.

"All right," the policeman growled, "what's the story here?"

"I don't give a damn," Gordon said. "I'll buy it."