MISTER

"Somewhat less strange, though surely more exemplary," the other man said, "is the story of Mr. Percy Taylor, a headhunter in the Amazon jungle.

In 1937 he is known to have left Boston, Massachusetts, where he so refined his spirit that he did not have a penny to his name. In 1944 he appears for the first time in South America, in the Amazon region, living with the Indians of a tribe whose name there is no need to recall.

Because of the shadows under his eyes and his famished appearance, he soon became known as 'The Gringo Beggar,' and even the schoolchildren pointed at him and threw stones when he passed by, his beard gleaming in the golden tropical sun. But this caused no distress to Mr. Taylor's humble nature, for he had read in the first volume of William C. Knight's *Complete Works* that poverty is no disgrace if one does not envy the rich.

In a few weeks the natives grew accustomed to him and his

outlandish clothing. Furthermore, since he had blue eyes and a vaguely foreign accent, the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs were fearful of provoking an international incident and treated him with singular respect.

He was so wretchedly poor that one day he went into the jungle to search for edible plants. He had walked several yards, not daring to turn his head, when by sheerest accident he happened to see a pair of Indian eyes observing him carefully from the underbrush. A long shudder traveled down Mr. Taylor's sensitive spine. But the intrepid Mr. Taylor defied all danger and continued on his way, whistling as if he had seen nothing.

With a leap (why call it feline?) whe native landed in front of him and cried:

'Buy head? Money money.'

Although his English could not have been worse, Mr. Taylor, feeling somewhat ill, realized that the Indian was offering to sell him the oddly shrunken human head he carried in his hand.

Mr. Taylor, of course, was in no position to buy it, but since he appeared not to understand what had been said, the Indian was horribly embarrassed at not speaking good English and, begging his pardon, gave it to him as a gift.

Mr. Taylor felt great joy as he returned to his hut. That night, lying on his back on the precarious palm mat that was his bed, and interrupted only by the buzz of passionate flies that circled round him as they made obscene love, Mr. Taylor spent a long while contemplating his curious acquisition with delight. He derived the greatest aesthetic pleasure from counting the hairs of the beard and mustache, one by one, and looking straight into the rather ironic eyes that seemed to smile at him in gratitude for his attention.

A man of enormous culture, Mr. Taylor was accustomed to contemplation, but this time he soon wearied of his philosophical reflections and decided to present the head to his uncle, Mr. Rolston, who lived in New York and who, from his earliest childhood, had shown a lively interest in the cultural manifestations of the Spanish-American peoples.

A few days later, Mr. Taylor's uncle asked him (even before in-

quiring after the important state of his health) to please favor him with five more. Mr. Taylor willingly satisfied Mr. Rolston's desire—no one knows how—by return mail, saying he was 'very happy to fulfill the request.' An extremely grateful Mr. Rolston asked for another ten. Mr. Taylor was 'delighted to be of service.' But the following month, when he was asked to send twenty more, Mr. Taylor, simple and bearded but with a refined artistic sensibility, suspected that his mother's brother was selling them at a profit.

And, to tell the truth, he was. With complete honesty Mr. Rolston informed him of the fact in an inspired letter whose strictly businesslike terms made the strings of Mr. Taylor's sensitive spirit vibrate as never before.

They immediately formed a corporation, Mr. Taylor agreeing to obtain and ship large quantities of shrunken heads that Mr. Rolston would sell in his country at the highest possible price.

At first there were some bothersome difficulties with certain local residents. But Mr. Taylor, who in Boston had received the highest grades for his essay on Joseph Henry Silliman, proved to be a skilled politician and obtained from the authorities not only the necessary export license but an exclusive ninety-nine-year concession as well. It was not difficult to convince the Chief Executive Warrior and the Legislative Medicine Men that this patriotic move would enrich the community, and that soon all the thirsty aborigines (whenever they paused to refresh themselves while collecting heads) could have an ice-cold soft drink whose magic formula he himself would supply.

When the members of the Cabinet, after a brief but brilliant exercise of intellect, became aware of these advantages, their love of country welled up and in three days they issued a decree ordering the people to speed up their production of shrunken heads.

Some months later, in Mr. Taylor's country, the heads had gained the popularity we all remember. At first they were the privilege of the wealthiest families, but democracy is democracy, and no one will deny that in a matter of weeks even schoolteachers could buy them.

A home without its shrunken head was deemed a home that had

failed. Soon the collectors appeared, bringing with them certain contradictions: owning seventeen heads was considered bad taste, but having eleven was distinguished. Heads became so popular that the really elegant people began to lose interest and would acquire one only if it possessed some peculiarity that saved it from the commonplace. A very rare head with Prussian whiskers, which in life had belonged to a highly decorated general, was presented to the Danfeller Institute, which in turn made an immediate grant of three and a half million dollars to further the development of this exciting cultural manifestation of the peoples of Latin America.

In the meantime, the tribe had made so much progress it now had its own path around the Legislative Palace. On Sundays and on Independence Day, the members of Congress would ride the bicycles they had received from the Company along that merry path, clearing their throats, displaying their feathers, and laughing very seriously.

But it was inevitable. Not all times are good times. The first shortage of heads occurred without warning.

Then the best part of the fiesta began.

Natural deaths no longer sufficed. The Minister of Public Health considered himself a sincere man, and one dark night when the lights were out he caressed his wife's breast as if he would never stop and confessed to her that he thought he was incapable of raising mortality rates to a level that would satisfy the interests of the Company, to which she replied that he should not worry, that he would see how everything would turn out all right and the best thing now would be for them to go to sleep.

Strong measures were necessary to compensate for this administrative deficiency, and a harsh death penalty was imposed.

The jurists consulted with one another and raised even the smallest shortcoming to the category of a crime punishable by hanging or the firing squad, depending on the seriousness of the infraction.

Even simple mistakes became criminal acts. For example, if in the course of an ordinary conversation someone said carelessly 'It's very hot,' and later it could be proven, thermometer in hand, that it really was not hot at all, that person was charged a small fine and immediately executed, his head sent on to the Company and, it must be said in all fairness, his trunk and limbs returned to the bereaved.

The legislation dealing with disease had wide repercussions and was frequently discussed by the Diplomatic Corps and in the embassies of friendly powers.

According to this remarkable law, the gravely ill were given twenty-four hours to put their affairs in order and die, but if in this time they had the good fortune to infect their families, they received a month-long reprieve for each relative they infected. Victims of minor illnesses, and those who simply did not feel well, deserved the scorn of the entire nation, and any passerby was entitled to spit in their faces. For the first time in history the importance of doctors who cured no one was recognized (there were several candidates for the Nobel prize among them). Dying became an example of the highest patriotism, not only on the national level but on an even more glorious continental scale.

With the growth achieved by subsidiary industries (coffin manufacturing, for example, flourished with the technical assistance of the Company), the country entered a period of what is called great economic prosperity. This progress was particularly evident in a new flowered path on which the deputies' wives would stroll, their pretty little heads enveloped in the melancholy of golden autumnal afternoons as they nodded yes, yes, everything was fine, in response to the inquiries of some journalist on the other path who greeted them with a smile and tipped his hat.

I remember in passing that one of these journalists, who on a certain occasion emitted a thunderstorm of a sneeze that he could not explain, was accused of extremism and put against the wall of the firing squad. Only after his unselfish end did the academicians of the language recognize that the journalist had one of the fattest heads in the country, but when it was shrunk it turned out so well that no one could tell the difference.

And Mr. Taylor? By this time he had been named Special Adviser to the Constitutional President. As an example of what private initiative can accomplish, he now counted his thousands by the thousands, but he lost no sleep over this for he had read in the

final volume of William C. Knight's *Complete Works* that being a millionaire is no disgrace if one does not despise the poor.

As I believe I have already mentioned, not all times are good times.

Given the prosperity of the enterprise, the moment arrived when the only people left were the authorities and their wives, and the journalists and their wives. Without too much effort Mr. Taylor concluded that the only possible solution was to declare war on the neighboring tribes. Why not? This was progress.

With the help of a few small cannon, the first tribe was neatly beheaded in just under three months. Mr. Taylor tasted the glory of expanding his domain. Then came the second tribe, then the third, the fourth, and the fifth. Progress spread so rapidly that soon, regardless of the efforts of the technicians, they could find no neighboring tribes to make war on.

It was the beginning of the end.

The little paths began to languish. Only occasionally did one see a lady or some poet laureate with a book under his arm taking a stroll. The weeds again overran the two paths, making the way difficult and thorny for the delicate feet of the ladies. Along with the heads, the number of bicycles had thinned out, and the joyful, optimistic greetings had almost disappeared.

The coffin manufacturer was gloomier and more funereal than ever. And everyone felt as if they had just remembered a pleasant dream, one of those wonderful dreams when you find a purse full of gold coins and put it under your pillow and go back to sleep and very early the next day, when you awake, you look for it and find nothing but emptiness.

Business, unfortunately, went on as usual, but people had trouble sleeping, fearful they would wake up exported.

In Mr. Taylor's country, of course, the demand continued to grow. New substitutes appeared daily but fooled no one, and people insisted on the little heads from Latin America.

The final crisis was near. A desperate Mr. Rolston constantly demanded more heads. Although the Company's stocks suffered a

sharp decline, Mr. Rolston was certain his nephew would do something to save the situation.

Daily shipments decreased to one a month, and even then they included anything: children's heads, ladies' heads, even deputies' heads.

Suddenly it was all over.

One harsh, gray Friday, home from the Stock Exchange and still dazed by the shouting of his friends and their lamentable display of panic, Mr. Rolston resolved to jump out the window (rather than use a gun—the noise would have terrified him) after he opened a package that had come in the mail and found the shrunken head of Mr. Taylor smiling at him from a distance, from the wild Amazon, with a false boyish smile that seemed to say 'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I won't do it again.'"