



The Savage

An Economic Fantasy

by Constance McCutcheon

A new housing development called Peabody went up outside of Philadelphia within the space of a few years. It was located in rich farmland and was to provide not only the peace and quiet of living in the countryside, but the convenience of rapid travel to the city for work, shopping sprees, and visits to the theater. An entire farm—its until recently tilled fields, its wild slopes of underbrush, its meadows, and ponds—was soon cleared away, filled in, and replaced by loops of upper-middle-class three- and four-bedroom houses of ranch, continental, and split-level styles.

No one had paid any attention to the snatch of trees and wild grasses in the heart of the development until, as the last of the farm wilderness gave way to newly sewn lawns and sizeable homes, it became apparent that one lot was to remain untouched. And it became clear that the lot was occupied. A man lived there who had neither building to live in nor vessel in which to store food or keep a change of clothes. The lot wasn't equipped with *facilities*, either, as the delicate people termed it, and the salesmen, businessmen, and their wives who populated the development were delicate people. There were only several metal basins strewn in the mud to catch water when it rained and one large stone jug with a board covering the mouth that stored the water, as one bold child discovered.

No one in the neighborhood knew anything about the eccentric man except that his presence was alarming. In the rain he got wet, and during the sweltering summer months his clothes grew as stiff and encrusted as the man himself seemed to be. How he survived or why he lived the way he did were unanswerable questions because the man himself was unapproachable. His sole delight and activity was crying aloud to passersby while pounding on one of his metal basins with a stick.

Naturally no one ever stopped to listen to the man except the bold child, a twelve-year-old named Edgar Carrington, who lived in a house on property abutting the madman's wilderness. Edgar always made a point to dawdle in the backyard in the evenings after he came home from baseball practice, walking to the very edge of the backyard where it was still just a little scary, where the ground had not yet been cleared, where the undergrowth and wilderness of the man's lot began. Edgar waited as long as he felt his parents couldn't see him, listening for the wild man's cries. As soon as he heard anything or caught a glimpse of the horrifying silhouette, a delicious burning fear would send him racing up toward the Carrington kitchen.

The eccentric became an increasingly serious concern to the neighbors. His appearance alone, aside from his fanatical screaming, was unacceptable. His unkempt hair sprayed out from his dirty face in a filthy mass. Some reported seeing him cake mud into it to keep it out of his eyes. His only garment was a coarse robe secured by a leather belt and, regardless of weather, he wore sandals with long thongs that crisscrossed over the lumpy skin of his bare shanks. The man looked terrible and it was universally believed that he smelled worse. And this figure had nothing else to do but squat in the muck, chuck twigs at his stone jug, beat on his basins, and shriek at anyone who passed by.

However, far worse than simple embarrassment or intimidation, the man's existence was lowering the property value of the surrounding homes. And even delicate people had to repeat the big question, every once in a while, 'And just where does he go to the bathroom?'

In complaining to the local authorities, the neighbors learned that the man could not be turned off the lot, that it was his inheritance. His family had bequeathed what he was now on to him, although before death the rest of the farm had been sold off. The lot was not part of the development, not part of the suburb, not subject to sewage regulations, and not taxed by the city for services: he received no services and got water from no one but God himself. His ground belonged to older ground, his precedent rooted in the laws of the vanished Indian. The wild man had an ancient, primitive right to be there. Or so the rumors began to circulate. Anyway, the upshot was that no one had a legal leg to stand on from which to pitch his smelly, wrinkled body out of there. Whether the man was aware of his fantastic good fortune or not, no one knew.

Grumbling suspicions gradually fanned into bitter resentment. The man was a threat to the safety of the children by the simple fact that his extreme eccentricity

made him unpredictable. No one really knew what he was capable of, no one knew what he wanted. He became a figure of dread and intense animosity.

Speculation began to focus on the man's means of living. Here was one who disdained all amenities of civilized life, that was clear and, unfortunately, allowed. But he had to eat. He was a living human being and had to eat. So how did he eat? What did he eat? The idea developed: the man was sifting through neighboring garbage cans late at night. Trespassing laws were immediately unearthed and studied. It was discovered that, because the madman's land was not part of the development, and due to the unfortunate circumstance that he was surrounded by the development, he had no legal access to public ground without first stepping onto private property, and to be allowed to do that, he had to have personal permission and the good will of the property owner, which he did not.

The neighbors began a vigil, watching, waiting for the savage to step a foot off his land to reach his source of food, their garbage cans. They would then have a legal reason for hauling him away for good, for the good of all. But as closely as they watched him, no one ever caught him trespassing, which only exacerbated the general ill will against him.

For his part, the savage seemed to delight in the attention he was getting from what grew into a volunteer contingent of neighbors banded together for the continual surveillance of the wild man. He cried out to them a nonsense no one understood and continually tramped the length and breadth of his uneven plot, but he never left the scrap of woods belonging to him.

Then one lovely spring evening, as the Carringtons were sitting down to dinner, Edgar burst in on them: "He eats bugs!" the boy shouted in delight, his eyes feverishly bright from racing around in the chilly spring air.

Reprimanded and told to sit down, Edgar wiggled himself into his seat at the table but continued the unpleasant theme. “He’ll never have to eat out of our garbage can. He can sit there until he dies.”

This statement made Mr. and Mrs. Carrington uncomfortable.

“Edgar, no one can simply sit,” Mr. Carrington said, laying his fork carefully on his plate alongside his portion of beef and gravy and his hand reprovingly on the table. “And don’t you get the idea you can do it. No one has the right to sit and wool-gather like that freak. It’s not right, it gets everyone upset. Everyone has a product to peddle or a trade to ply. It’s the way to satisfy and be satisfied. Work, in other words. Work is the key to it. Anyone who doesn’t participate should be ... removed.”

“Not for him, Dad,” Edgar contradicted in a clear voice, not a trace of impudence in its tone. “You always said shelter is important. Shelter? He doesn’t have it. And clothes—he’s got clothes.”

“It’s a good thing,” Mr. Carrington replied.

“And food—”

“Which he thieves out of our garbage cans every night. And when we catch him at it, well, that’ll be it. We’ll be rid of him.”

At this remark, Mrs. Carrington cleared her throat and looked down.

“But, Dad! He’s never stolen garbage. He doesn’t eat garbage. I know he doesn’t. He gets his own food. John Campbell eats bugs! He eats bugs! I saw him.”

Edgar was sent to his room for refusing to answer questions sensibly. And although they never learned how Edgar had come up with the name John Campbell for the savage, it stuck. It was much easier to call the savage that than something else, which might have betrayed undue prejudice on the part of the gentle people.

Thereafter it was observed that John Campbell nourished himself by capturing and devouring insects. With the knowledge that the man had a fully independent food supply and was therefore able to stay on his lot indefinitely, the neighbors were forced to plot to get rid of him.

Intensified spying provided minute details of Mr. Campbell's habits. The most valuable piece of information was the fact that he ate grasshoppers in warm months and burrowed into the dead wood for smaller insects in cold months. The neighbors began spraying their property with heavy doses of insecticides. The insects on Mr. Campbell's lot seemed to survive.

The man became aware that the watchfulness stemmed from hatred. His cries became high and piercing at night. No laws against noise pollution could touch him and the neighbors were forced to endure the bitter wailing. He foamed slightly at the mouth one summer afternoon and the county health inspector, summoned, arrived promptly. Treading carefully onto the lot, he took a very attentive if quick look at the savage from a yard away then tiptoed back. "Not rabid, no trace of fever. After all, he would be dead by now, wouldn't he?" the inspector remarked before he nervously drove off.

It was Edgar Carrington who unwittingly came up with the idea that proved the solution to the neighborhood nightmare. It came in the form of a respectable and childlike inquiry to his father as to what the wild man's bugs must taste like. Mr. Carrington suddenly developed a great curiosity to cultivate for himself an appreciation for the exotic delicacies of natural suburban woodlands. Soon the other neighbors were also exercising an energetic curiosity of their own, with the satisfying result that the species of insect in question were soon caught, identified, examined, salted, and packaged. Whether they had actually been tasted no one could say. But many other facts about the insects came to light in the advertisements which

announced unequivocally that they were natural, low in calories, high in protein and roughage, and not bad lightly salted and roasted—as they were by Mr. Carrington’s company—to a turn. And they were so expensive, in part to pay for the elaborate advertisements, that the nation was soon eating grasshoppers in the warm months and a smaller type of crawling insect which lived in wood during the cold months.

Not long after the product caught on, conflicts became bitter over Mr. Campbell’s lot where the populations of the coveted insects were thickest. Regulations had to be established by the trade industry to prevent surprisingly violent quarrels between the neighbors as to which insects could be harvested by whom and when. Soon it came to light that Mr. Campbell was neither incorporated nor licensed to catch the insects, now registered items in the food industry’s lists. He had to quit his poaching of the insects or be charged, tried, and sentenced to prison. Mr. Campbell cried out as always, beating on his water jug at the bands of neighbors who now marched fearlessly over his lot to harvest the insects, but he kept his distance. Mr. Campbell’s cries were no longer high pitched, but hoarse and weak. Their strange resonance may have haunted the men who ravaged the trees and patches of high grasses to fill their quotas. It was evident that the savage was starving. The familiar swoop of his hands to catch his prey had been stopped.

One evening in late autumn, just after the first frost, some harvesters found John Campbell’s body. He had left it in the deep hollow at the center of his wood, tumbled over, his sandaled feet high on the slope, his head lying below in the depression. His water jug, which had been knocked over by his collapse, had rolled down and lay next to his gaunt, gray face. The body was quickly disposed of and the man soon forgotten. The lot of ground was

purchased at a huge sum by the Carringtons and presented to Edgar for his fourteenth birthday.

“Your first enterprise, Edgar,” Mr. Carrington announced solemnly. “This will be your bread and butter some day.”

