The Speak-Easy Bookstore

One could not see through the plate glass window of Western Avenue store front, for it was covered with a thick coat of industrial gray-green, the kind of paint usually employed to protect wooden staircases through as many harsh Chicago winters as possible.

On a hand-painted sign, on what appeared to the cardboard that once had been inserted in shirts that came from the dry cleaners, was the simple handwritten designation, scrawled in large letters with a red marker:

USED BOOKS

A casual passerby, with an interest in books, might be induced to try the door. It would be locked. If the passerby's passion for books was intense, he might knock. If he persisted—knocking two, three, four, five times—there might be an answer.

The door would be cracked open a few inches, but with the chain securing the door firmly in place. The passerby would be scrutinized by intense blue eyes, peering over steel framed glasses, quickly taking the measure of this would-be customer.

If the bookseller did not recognize the customer, he would sharply say, "Go away!" and abruptly slam the door, quickly double-locking it in almost the same motion.

Getting into the Western Avenue Bookstore was as difficult—or as easy—as getting into a clandestine after hours bar: one had to know a friend who was on intimate terms with the proprietor. Orpheus could not charm his way past this Cerberus; only the right contacts mattered.

If one were fortunate enough to have the right contacts, the bookseller would take the chain off the door, and greet the stranger with a smile and a hearty handshake of welcome.

There was a pandemonium of books, stacked higgledy-piggledy in floor-to-ceiling orange crates, apple crates, milk crates. And every aisle was booby-trapped with stacks of precariously balanced books.

The lighting did not exceed the levels of the darkest of speakeasies. There was one gooseneck lamp atop the two orange crates, which served as the bookseller's desk. There

were two or three lights, shrouded in thick black rubber, attached to long extension cords, borrowed perhaps from an auto mechanic's subterranean grease pit.

It was not the kind of bookstore that would be featured in *Good Housekeeping*. A fire-inspector, if he ever got beyond the chained door, would have condemned the place at a glance.

But it was a hell of a bookstore.

And, although it would never have won an Academy Award for neatness, this seemingly Tartarus of books was as orderly a world as any Prime Mover might desire.

I had been told that if one were to ask the bookseller about any book, no matter how obscure, he would know of it.

I tested him. "Ever hear of the Danish writer, Karl Bjarnof?"

"Sure."

"Ever see a copy of his novel, *The Stars Grow Pale*?

"Sure. Second aisle, third crate from the end, top row, second book. Buck twenty-five."

I stumbled through the dark aisle, hoping to find a grease pit lamp, thinking that perhaps I had fallen victim to a poker player's grand bluff, that there would be no such book, but only demonic laughter at my expense.

But the book was exactly where he said it would be.

Not content, I raised the stakes.

"Do you, by any chance, have Martin Andersen Nexo's *Pelle the Conqueror*?'

"Yep. Two copies. One volume edition, a reprint, $2.75. The three-volume edition, a little rarer, $3.50. Second aisle, fourth crate from the end, bottom shelf, one behind the other."

And, while I was attempting to hold the grease-pit lamp so I could compare the two editions to see if I really wanted to spend an extra seventy-five cents for the "rarer" edition, a Mephistophelean voice purred in the darkness: "If you're really interested in Nexo, I also have *In God's Land*, and the *Ditte Trilogy*: *Girl Alive*, *Daughter of Man*, and *Towards the Stars*. Same crate, right behind *Pelle*."