

# Science Fantasy

**No. 37**  
**VOLUME 13**  
**2/-**



*Short Novel*

**CASTLE  
OF VENGEANCE**  
Kenneth Bulmer

*Short Stories*

**THE WINDOW**  
E. C. Tubb

**TIME TRAP**  
Edward Mackin

**CURSE STRINGS**  
John Rackham

**STROKIE**  
Alan Anderson

*Article*

**Studies in Science  
Fiction**

**2. H. G. WELLS**  
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*Here is a truly "wacky" fantasy story of the type seldom seen any longer and author Bulmer has made full use of the novel possibilities the plot presents. As an interesting sidelight—given similar circumstances, how would you people your own ideal world?*

# CASTLE OF VENGEANCE

BY KENNETH BULMER

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## I

Masters rang down to Central Filing and as he waited for the call to be answered in the capacious lower depths of G.H. Advertising he stared from his sixth storey picture window across the snow-sheathed expanse of the Park. Children were snowballing their nursemaids. Masters chuckled. He might be just a little man in a big machine world ; but for the first time in his life he felt that the world was treating him right, that at last he was standing on his own feet with a future promising only good living ahead. Tubby answered the call.

"Send up a collection of pretty girls, Tubby, pronto."

"Righto, Bill. Clothed or showing their dimples?"

"Oh—hadn't thought. Ye-es, clothed, I think."

The filing king below stairs made an interrogatory sound.

"Yes," Masters said. "Brief, though. A bikini or two between three sort of thing. Can do?"

"They'll be up in ten minutes. Okay?"

"Fine thanks, Tubby. See you."

Masters broke the connection and then, oddly, a disturbing image of Martin Baskombe, old G.H.'s nephew, dropped a cloud over the promise of the day. Baskombe was all the things that Masters could never be—and did not want to be. But he was the boss's nephew, and he was slated for the promotion that, perhaps, should have come Masters' way. Between the two of them, there was a chance that old G.H. would lean over backwards and choose the newcomer in favour of his own nephew. G.H. was like that.

As though on cue, the door of Masters' office opened silently and the dead white face, black hair and thin, artificially blacked moustache of Martin Baskombe showed in the opening.

"Alfred Simpson!" Baskombe said.

"Yes?" Masters said without turning. "What is it?"

Then he realised; and looked up. His eyes met Baskombe's and for a moment locked. The mocking triumph in Baskombe's face was like a blow under the heart to Masters. He just sat there. Without another word Baskombe withdrew and shut the door.

Panic flailed at him. He'd done it now. Damn Baskombe! How had the swine found out?

Around him the scurry of a busy advertising agency was washed away and in its place was the vision of himself and poor old Bates standing in the dock, and of the wrangling and argument, the painstaking production of evidence that had sent Bates to die in prison and to set Alfred Simpson free. Bates had embezzled the funds, all right. And young Simpson had been innocent. But, in after life, who believed that? So that when Alfred Simpson changed his name legally to Bill Masters he found doors opening to him that had seemed forever closed and new horizons opening out.

And now Baskombe had found out. The inevitable was now about to follow. Masters wiped a hand across his brows.

Something slapped hard on his glass topped desk.

His eyes popped open, the front legs of the chair hit the rug with a thud. He struggled to bring himself back to normality to maintain his poise.

A cheeky young voice said: "'Ere's the noods, Mister Masters."

"Nudes, Albert?" Masters spoke reprovingly, forcing himself back into the mould of advertising. "Technically speaking, three scraps of material stand between a young lady and the lascivious eyes of such as you. Thanks. Now scram."

"Righto, guv," said Albert, and wandered off, whistling between the gaps in his front teeth. Masters shuddered and began to riffle through the glossy prints. Get back to work, he decided, would be the only salvation here, and sort out what he must do later on, when he had time to think.

Girls. Of all shapes and sizes—within certain well-defined limits—and all wearing the same idiotically simpering smile. Now which one of these dumb blondes would fit into the framework of the advertisement? Masters went through them all with growing dissatisfaction.

"One smile, one pose, one idea," he said, disgruntled. He heaved the lot into the 'out' tray and again leant back. He blanked his mind off from clamouring thoughts of what Bas-kombe intended to do with this dangerous knowledge, and concentrated on advertising work.

He adopted his usual position. Lying back in the chair, he placed the point of his 4H pencil against his left forefinger and the butt against his right and slowly raised the pencil until it nestled under his sharp nose. Then he curled his upper lip around the pencil. Then he shut his eyes. Bill Masters was Creating.

He visualised a ruin—a ruined castle. He pictured the decaying wall and half a tower, the inner face fallen away to reveal the thickness of the stonework and traces of a circular stairway. Grey, lichened stone that had been washed over by ages of weather. Yes—he could pull the hideous red and orange of the box of Socko the Wonder—well, whatever it was that Socko was wonderful for—partially across to provide a firm anchorage for the rest of the scene. What the rest of that scene would be depended strongly on what pretty pictures he could find or create to arouse the necessary amount of cupidity in the breasts of housewives to make them run panting to the shops to buy Socko.

The picture of the castle was a litho of a charcoal sketch dug up from some musty library by one of the firm's eager beavers. Desperate for anything new, the firm's clever boys had seen a

tie-up with its old, grimly grey ruin and the bright and shiny world of modern automation. Masters had copped it, along with the assignment that it must be used in his next Socko national advertising campaign.

Rousing himself, he went across to his layout desk and stood looking down on the plain white sheet of paper with the Socko box already stuck down in the top right hand corner. That was as far as he had reached. Now all he wanted was to settle the positions of the castle, the girl, the blurb and one or two additions he felt would be necessary.

Working with his usual meticulous and efficient skill he traced out onto a plain white sheet of typing paper the outline of one of the girls. He cut this out and laid it on the sheet. Then he reached for the castle and fiddled it about until he felt that it looked right in balance, half way down the left side. Raking about in the Cowgum tin he discovered, to his sudden petulant annoyance, that the tin was dry.

He went across to the internal phone and rang down to stores. He waited some time. Only when his impatience had nearly chewed his bottom lip away did he think to glance at his wristwatch. One o'clock. Damn! Lunchtime, shut up shop, everyone, rush to get in the queue for a coffee and a roll, gabble, and then, hey presto! Two o'clock crawl back to the office and: "A fresh tin of Cow, Mister Masters? Certainly. Coming right up."

The morning's headache broke in Masters then. His tenuous hold on a decent life was going to be callously brushed off by Baskombe—of that he felt sure—and his effervescent temper exploded.

"The Devil!" he exclaimed, really angry. He swung away from the desk, thumping his fist on the glass top. He was staring blindly at the big picture window. "This damn firm and its stupid rules—and stupid people! Old Bates said he'd get me, the dirty old hypocrite! And now I can't even get a tin of cow to get on with the job!" He took a step away from the desk, fuming, feeling his blood straining at his eyeballs. "To the devil with it all!"

The great picture window shattered. Flying shards of glass whizzed like hail. Startled, Masters ducked.

The crash was surprisingly gentle. He felt sudden cold as the outside winter air poured in. The object which had broken the window lay now in the centre of the floor, on its side. Dazed, Masters bent and picked it up.

A perfectly normal, harmless, inoffensive tin of cowgum ; the red and black bands and the white lettering the same as on hundreds of other tins he had worked his way through ; in his hands it struck chill against his fingers.

"What the—" he said, bemused. He stared from the tin to the window.

Four strides took him to the sill and he looked out, up and down and around, expecting to see—well, almost anything. Below, the street was full of people hurrying from offices to cafes and restaurants and there were even a few hardy souls eating sandwiches on snow-cleared benches in the Park. Six storeys up from the pavement, the window would be difficult to reach by sheer muscle-power, and the cow tin was a half-pound size, considerably more than even a good cricket-ball thrower would care to toss up so far.

Masters craned his neck, prepared not to be surprised if a silent helicopter hung above the roof, with publicity conscious paste manufacturers hurling their produce on all and sundry. The sky was clear and grey, with the hint of more snow. Shivering, Masters went back to his desk.

He was still holding the paste tin. He set it upon the desk, rather quickly, and started to ring Maintenance, remembered it was lunchtime, cursed, put on his coat—he wore no hat—and stalked off to lunch in a foul temper.

Only when he was halfway through his second brown ale was the sheer irrationality of the incident at last driven home in his incredulous brain. He choked on the beer and set the glass down in a smother of foam. As he brought out his display handkerchief quickly and began to mop off his face a sardonic, slightly malicious and amused voice said : "Hullo, Bill. Fallen off the wagon again?"

Masters looked up sharply and the handkerchief remained, immobile, against his cheek. He smiled. It hurt him.

"Hullo, Baskombe. In a rush to get back."

"Shouldn't bother, old man. G.H.'s out to a stuffed-shirt luncheon. And, anyway, in your condition I'd clear off from the office for a bit."

"Oh? What condition?"

Badly rattled though Masters had been by the inexplicable window smashing and the eerie arrival of the tin of paste, he had not forgotten that look in Baskombe's eyes when the boss's nephew had called him by a name he had thought dead and



buried with his past. What Baskombe decided to do about his knowledge—and just how much did the man know?—was, at the moment, much more important. Masters had been running most of his life. His deliberate choice of a new name had been just one step in his conscious plan to revitalise himself, to turn himself into a new and useful member of society. All he wanted now was a good steady job, a reasonable income and a quiet life.

He was prepared, he acknowledged with a surprise that shook him, to do a great deal to hold on to what he made of himself. A very great deal indeed.

Baskombe said: "When my uncle took you on, Bill, it was on the understanding that you were a normal responsible member of society." His white handsome face showed no expression of triumph or mockery now; rather, it held a flat menace, like the head of a snake.

Waiting for this man to reveal more of what he knew of his past, Masters felt that numb frustrated anger rise up to choke him. Irrationally, he felt a flooding sense of relief at Baskombe's next words.

"I went into your office before coming out, Bill, and it looked as though your temper had broken loose again. But now I see it wasn't temper. Windows like that cost money."

Through his relief, annoyance made him say sharply: "I didn't break the window!"

"No? Who did then? A dicky bird bucking the sound barrier?" Baskombe's over-handsome face—he habitually blackened the narrow moustache to make it visible—slipped briefly, and the hate and contempt he felt for Masters glared through. Then he composed himself and only the twitching of a small muscle at the corner of his mouth betrayed the tension that lay between these two men.

Speaking quite deliberately, Baskombe said: "You were damn lucky to get off in court, Simpson. I know all about it. I don't think you were the young innocent you pretended to be. Maybe we ought to talk about this later on, don't you think?"

"Keep your voice down!" Masters said, hating having to plead with this pup. He finished wiping off his face and wadded the handkerchief. "As of now, I don't know what you're talking about."

Baskombe laughed.

"I'll see you later, Masters. Masters!" He laughed again. "Some people and their delusions of grandeur."

Before Baskombe left, Masters, obeying some instinct that demanded that as little as possible should clutter the emotional battlefield between these two, explained how the window had been broken. His words were tight, clipped. Baskombe, insultingly drawling, suggested that someone who didn't like Master had smashed the glass; and he had a fine old time insinuating that that would include a lot of people Masters would be surprised to know.

Keeping his temper under control was difficult; and he'd been priding himself on that, just lately. He kept the rest of the conversation down to a minimum. But he could not resist saying, as he left: "Whatever you think you know, Baskombe, or whatever you don't; you don't worry me."

"We'll see about that—"

Masters cut in. "Just don't step out of line, Baskombe, that's all."

The two men left, going in opposite directions although they were leaving the same pub and going to the same office.

The fuming rage in Masters sharpened as the winter nip in the air brisked him along the roads. If Baskombe thought he was going to ditch his chance of promotion with G.H. then the whippersnapper had another think coming. Masters flogged his own anger and indignation on; well aware of the fear that lay coiled beneath the surface of his mind.

Not until he had re-entered his own office was he brought back again to the problem of the tin of cowgum. It stood now on his desk; quiet, unmoving, a mere thing. Well? Did he expect a mere tin, a mere thing, to move, to make a noise, to take off with a rocket's roar and smash through more windows? Suddenly Bill Masters caught up with the knowledge that right deep inside him, where he had to live with himself, he was more scared than he had ever been in his life.

The telephone rang.

It was G.H.

He sounded angry. "Bill! I've just returned from some damn boring luncheon and I'm told you've been smashing your window. What's it all about, son?"

Merely repeating what had happened shed a fresh, sane light on the incident. G.H. was "too darn busy to worry over trifles like that, son! Now, see here! I want that Socko ad out fast.

If you can't work in your office with the window out this weather, then take all the stuff home with you." The old man's gruff, hearty voice warmed Masters. "Get with it, Bill. Bring me results. Check?"

"Check, G.H." Masters hung up, feeling better.

Baskombe's explanation was probably correct. Some oaf with a twisted sense of humour must have reached out and flung the tin. Although it was decidedly odd that it had happened just when he was raising Cain over the very absence of any person to send him a tin of cowgum. Most odd.

He packed up the equipment he would need and went down to his car—a beautifully beat-up old Riley—and trundled home.

## II

He was, perforce, a flat-dweller and his current eyrie was modestly within his means—just. His last girl friend, Sheila, had been continually urging him to move to a more luxurious apartment and he had had to resist her blandishments with smiling self-possession and smooth explanations that did not include the truth—lack of money—as part of the argument. Anyway, that affair was moribund. Sheila might ring a couple of times more, vaguely; but for all practical purposes, Masters was on his own. The chance of upping his salary had seemingly vanished when Baskombe had joined his uncle's agency. Masters would have taken an instinctive dislike to Baskombe, anyway; but now that the smoothie was threatening to hold over him the story of his past, the feelings aroused in Masters, quite natural to a healthy and hot-tempered man, were far from pleasant.

No wonder Masters felt ugly. Inside his flat, with the standard light on and the ceiling lights off, the radio playing some muted Debussy, he had a stiff whisky and unpacked his working gear.

Brooding, he sat before his work table and spread out the Socko advertisement. The large white sheet of cartridge looked somehow vacant, waiting, almost sentient with veiled promises. He exhaled gustily, cursed, switched on the swivel lamp and reached for the litho of the castle and the tin of gum. As his hands touched it they felt a coldness in the metal that surely should have dissipated by now. He forced a smile and set to work.

He mounted down the castle picture on the left of the sheet. Then he sat back. A quick riffle through the evening paper in search of inspiration brought again only a disgust at the usual political rubbish, grown men acting like school urchins, completely selfish and having recourse to threats of H-bombs instead of their parents ; the fatuous show world in its sordid amours ; the pathetic police cases—his wandering eye was arrested by a bottom-column story given scant space but graced by a cut.

The coarse newsprint and the wide screen did little to enhance the gladiator's figure ; but at once into Masters' brain the picture of castle and gladiator merged. The story covered some restoration work in the British Museum and the gladiator was an Ancient Roman carving—he skipped the rest, reached for the scissors and in his neat way snipped the Roman out and mounted him down onto the drawing sheet before the ruined portcullis tower.

"Horatius and the bridge," he said aloud. It looked good. He could derive a secret glee from imagining that the gladiator was guarding the bridge against Socko. He chuckled, remembered Baskombe and hurled the scissors at the wall. To his surprise they went in point first, and stuck.

"Blast you, Baskombe !" he said. "That should have been you." He imagined Baskombe with the scissors sticking out of his stomach and the thought shocked him in its black revealing tide.

An undoubted masterpiece had been up at Christie's, fetching some fantastic price, and the paper had run a reproduction. The cavalcade of armoured knights would just fit nicely along the bottom right hand of the advertisement and all their upward-raking lances would drive the eye towards the packet of Socko hanging in the sky above them.

They formed a splendid frieze and he considered on reflection that knights in armour with serried lances should be used more often. Now all that was required was the beautiful damosel in a bikini hanging over the tower waiting to be rescued. If the gladiator was going to defend her he was in for a rough time from the chivalry arrayed against him.

The trouble was that there was no beautiful damosel in sight he considered worth draping over the barbican. All he had was the blank white paper cut-out in the shape of a girl.

The time had gone by and it was late. He felt tired and yawned stretching, and changed into dressing gown. Tomorrow—well tomorrow was another day, as someone had once said, and as yet unused. The room was stuffy; he'd been smoking too much.

Quite suddenly, he wanted to get out for a breath of fresh air and yet he knew that that was not the reason for this queer choking feeling. The room had changed subtly and in its stuffiness he felt a chill.

Had the time been two weeks ago Sheila would be walking down to the phone to ring him. He would be looking forward to a semi-pleasant night out, with skilfully parried questions on the subjects of marriage and larger flats. To hell with it all! Life went on.

He felt a headache coming on and then, quite suddenly, as though a sound track had had the gain boosted in micro-seconds, he thought he heard a dry evil chuckle.

That settled it. He needed at once to fill both lungs with fresh air. He was still wearing his dressing gown, a vivid thing of red and purple silk with a golden cord knotted casually around the middle, and he made up his mind on the spot to dress and venture out into the snow-filled world.

He cast one last fond look at the Socko advertisement.

A shocking sense of absolute vertigo seized him and he staggered a little as though the room had shifted like the deck of a liner caught in a storm. For the space of a single heartbeat he would have sworn that the gleaming armour-clad knights had moved, that their heavy chargers had surged forward in long menacing line under the flaunting lines of lances and banners.

As he watched, horrified, the sense of perspective in the advertisement vanished, the horizons opened out on either hand and he had the microscopic feeling of being alone on a vast plain with only the castle at his back and the grim onrushing lines of steel ahead.

Before he had time to clutch at his reeling senses all understanding of the world he knew vanished and he was left, alone, standing on a gritty plain under a sky of dirty grey, stained with tears, with a hot sour wind rushing past his ears and stinging his eyes with the breath of an oven. He whirled. One arm upflung against the wind he stared in complete and utter disbelief at the grim grey lichened walls of a castle that stretched its apron away on either hand.

One wall of the castle tower nearest him had fallen ; but the farther bastions stood up sound and strong and all along the line of battlements he saw the gleam of gold and steel.

A thin high keening reached him. Dumb, sick, trembling, he turned in the dust of the gigantic plain and looked behind him.

The long martial array of knightly pomp bearing down on him filled him with unreasoning terror, worse, even, than the shock and horror of this mad dream. He saw the ghostly glitter from helm and lance point, he saw the gleam of upraised sword and the high proud flutter of banner and guidon. He could hear—plainly—the heavy trample of many horses' hooves and the brittle neigh and the clash of bright armour.

In the sourceless, brilliant lighting flooding every object under that grey and striated sky the colours of heraldic devices on shield and trapping splashed a many-hued garden of gems upon that stern array.

Masters fell to his knees, scrabbling in the sand. His mouth opened and his neck muscles corded ; but no sound came. He stayed like that, gibbering, as the host rushed nearer like the imponderable doors of hell closing upon him.

A telephone shrilled in his ears.

Staggering from his knees, with the soft rug underfoot, he wiped his hands across his face, dragging down the corners of his mouth in abject terror. He glared about his familiar room. The telephone was still ringing.

Not quite comprehending what he was doing he reeled across to the instrument and fumbled the receiver from the cradle. His hands were shaking so that the plastic grated against his cheek and ear before, moving quite automatically, under the compulsion of performing the ordinary functions of life without question, he managed to choke out : " Hallo," into the mouthpiece.

" Bill ? Sheila here. Say, you silly old fossil—"

" Just a minute. Just a minute."

" What's the matter ? You sound funny. Bill, are you all right ?"

He was regaining some control over his shattered sense now. He gripped the phone and shouted : " Yes ! Yes, of course I'm all right. What d'you want ?"

" Well, if that's the attitude you're going to take—"

" No. I'm sorry, Sheila. I'm—it's nothing. What is it ?" He was quietening the panting heave of his chest now. " Look, I'm sorry about the other day—I've not been too brilliant. Sorry. What—"

"That's better, lover boy. Shall I come round?"

Masters wanted to say yes. He opened his mouth. Have Sheila round tonight for a spot of talk, a drink and dinner. It would quieten him down, relax him. He started to speak and then stopped, mouth hanging foolishly open, staring at the wavering line of sandy footprints leading from the advertisement to the telephone.

He glanced in terror at his slippers. They were coated with dust and grit.

He slammed the telephone down and staggered across to the cocktail cabinet and poured out an immense slug of whisky. With that inside him and its warm glow spreading around his insides, he tried to get a grip on reality.

So he'd been dreaming. So he'd been sleep walking. So he'd got sand on his boots when the ground was covered with snow? So he was going mad.

Masters began to pace up and down the expensive carpet, leaving a gradually lessening track of sandy footprints, whilst he slowly fought down the terrors that threatened to engulf his sanity. By the time he'd drunk a considerable number of whiskies, he was around to believing that he was about to embark on a great adventure. He recalled the long glamorous array of chivalry. Well, he'd always fancied himself with a sword and he could ride a horse well enough to keep from falling off. If he was ever again dragged—well, dragged just where he couldn't face up to right now—then he confidently expected to give a good account of himself.

But that was impossible, of course. Pictures just don't up and engulf a man in the privacy of his own apartment, do they? He stared calculatingly—not at the picture but at a spot a little to one side of it—this one did, though, didn't it?

That night he slept badly, dreaming of a bare brown plain and a grey lichened castle and a gleaming, trampling, onrushing line of armoured chivalry.

He did not go to the office the following morning but had breakfast and lunch sent up whilst he prowled the apartment restlessly, unwilling to face again the advertisement. Work he craved; yet he feared to go to work.

Finally he came to the decision that there was not much he could do about the weird experience except to accept it, shrug it off, and get back on the rails again. Whatever it had been, it had happened, of that he felt absolutely sure; but no one

would believe him. And he didn't intend to be locked up in a—what did they call 'em these days—Mental Welfare Institute?

Later drink and sullen thoughts of old Bates leaning from the dock, shouting: "I'll get you for this, Simpson! I'll crawl back from hell if it's the last thing I do!" drove him to stand once more before the advertisement. His nerve failed. With a supple twist he flung a cloth over the drawing sheet and turned away, feeling ashamed, and yet, understandably, purged, relieved. He went to bed on the resolve to smash this malignant fantasy once and for all in the cold winter sunshine of the morning.

That night he dreamed he was standing on a bare brown plain over which a hot mournful wind soughed endlessly. He was looking directly at the photo-lithoed picture of the ruined castle and its grey walls towered above him into a pale and colourless sky. He awoke, giggling with relief and sweating like a defrosted refrigerator. He lay for some time staring at the tip of his cigarette in the darkness of his bedroom.

The day of inactivity made sleep elusive; when he drove the Riley to the office in the morning his eyes felt sand papery and all his limbs ached. He went at the Socko advertisement with concentrated effort, mounting down fresh pictures of the castle and the gladiator and knights. The whole affair was taking on a symbolism; he wanted to finish it and start on something new.

As he worked his good humour returned; so far Baskombe had made no move and it seemed likely that the boss's nephew would be content merely to possess his dangerous knowledge and gloat over it in private. Perhaps, and perhaps not . . . And he dismissed the eerie visit to another world from his mind as a product of worry and overwork.

The final stroke of good fortune arrived that morning on his desk in the shape of a file that Albert, still gustily whistling through gap-teeth, plonked onto the glass top with: "Another lot of noods, Mister Masters."

Masters riffled through them. He discarded them one by one. Then he found her. A tremendous elation burst in him as he looked down on the glossy print of fair waved hair, innocent mouth and large expectant eyes, all in proportion and combining to a perfect shape that was more than echoed in the balance of the figure. He whistled and reached for the phone.

"Tubby?" He flicked the print over. "These prints. Audrey Cameron. I could use her. Can you get some more prints?"



"Can do, Bill." Tubby laughed. "Glad you've been fixed up. Beginning to think no girl existed good enough for you . . ."

"Might be a good plan to have her up and shoot a few ourselves in the studio. Useful addition to the files, apart from the special jobs."

"I'll get on to it right away."

"Thanks."

The Socko campaign was finalised. Life went on. One afternoon the cowgum tin ran dry—he'd been using a lot of bunje lately in cleaning up the final sheets—and he stood with the empty tin in his hand, remembering. The fresh tin which arrived when he rang down to Stores pleased him. He glanced at the window. The new pane was intact. Well, then! No more mysterious tins arriving with magical promptitude. The tin he had left at home was not to have a brother, arriving unheralded through the window.

The Socko campaign out of the way, he went along to old G.H. to discuss the new campaign for Betto.

"How the hell they dig up these moronic names is a nightmare," G.H. growled through his drooping iron-grey moustache. "Still, we make our living out of them, so we can't grumble. Bill, I want you to take over the entire Betto campaign. National, direct, TV, everything. Give it all you have."

"I'll do that, G.H." Masters glanced across the large shiny office to Baskombe, slouched doodling in his chair. One up to Bill Masters! But—would that make Baskombe bring out his information, would it precipitate a crisis?

"Well, Bill, get moving." G.H. was already turning to fresh work. "Oh—and the Socko people were pleased with the castle and the knights. And"—he chuckled—"they commented particularly on the girl. You could use her more, Bill."

"I've just discovered her, G.H. I plan to use her on Betto—make a thing out of it. People see her face and immediately they think of Betto."

Baskombe drawled: "Her face, Bill?" He guffawed.

Oddly, Masters was nettled. He nodded shortly and left. He thought about the morrow's date with Audrey Cameron down in the firm's studio and a warm glow unaccountably began just underneath his sternum. Most odd.

## III

Essentially a lonely man, Masters had not at first missed the need to discuss the weird events of the Socko advertisement and in the rush of horror he had thrust any conjectures from his mind. But as the shock of the experience of stepping into another world through a picture he had made with his own hands faded, he was faced with the incredible needs of what had happened—why? Why to him? How? And increasingly he was aware of a growing desire to know the full story. It both repelled and fascinated him. He wanted to know, and yet he dreaded the knowledge.

In this frame of mind, this vague awareness of need, he went down the following day to the studio. When he did, he was lost, sunk, a gone coon.

The photographer and Tubby exchanged knowing smiles and the girl was aware and made uncomfortable and yet, with perfect grace and tact, rose to the situation. Only Masters himself was blind both to what had happened and his own deplorable conduct.

"So you're the man who perched me in a bikini on the top of an old castle, Mister Masters?" Audrey said, trying to change the conversation and animate Master's eyes with something other than the blind look of devotion that now filled them, rendering them very much like a cod's eyes on a fishmonger's slab. The reaction surprised them all.

"On top of a castle, Miss Cameron? You mean, you were there? You saw it—and the ochre plain, and—?"

"Why—I only meant my picture in the advertisements . . ."

"Of course. Of course." Master's forced a smile. "Just a figure of speech, you understand." He rattled on, filling the shadows with words. "This is an arty-crafty agency, Miss Cameron, and, knowing the current public interest in archaeology we play it clever. If we're pushing a washing machine, say, we contrast it with an Ancient Egyptian boat sailing on the Nile. There are innumerable psychological tieups there. That old ruined grey castle made Socko that much more modern and slick and shiny, d'you see?"

"Yes," Audrey said uncertainly. She smiled, and no sensible man would demand anything else.

The following four weeks as Masters slaved on the Betto campaign he made fast progress with photographs of Audrey—but Baskombe made faster progress with the flesh and blood girl.

When Masters found out a furious regret seized him. Even in this, he was to be thwarted by Baskombe. Life, it seemed, wouldn't let Masters alone ; it insisted on tripping him up and pitching him into the mire. Warning of danger to come was very clear to him when G.H., commending him in warm terms, hinted that promotion was coming his way. The race between Baskombe and Masters was coming to a head, and reading the signs, Masters guessed that he had been slated for the upstairs job in favour of Baskombe—and he felt fear.

Coming away from the Museum where he had been picking up prints of old pictures, he saw Baskombe and Audrey walking along the pavement past his Riley, arm in arm, laughing, carefree, happy. A fierce black rage seized Masters. He sank onto the upholstery, shaking. Then he caught a glimpse of his face in the rear view mirror.

He was deeply shocked.

He started up, feeling vengeful, drove home and started on the whisky right away. He felt absolutely certain that Baskombe would not let him get away with the office promotion. Obscurely, he routed out the advertisement with the castle and the knights and the gladiator. Drinking, he stood, swaying a little, jeering at it, a creation of his own hands ; daring it.

“ Go on ! Suck me up ! You'll find out a thing or three, I can tell you ! ”

This time the transition was so swift that he was still speaking before he realised that he was once more standing on the windblown dusty plain with the grimly castellated castle rising sombrely behind him and the long low onrushing line of chivalry racing towards him over the sandy, wind-whipped expanse.

The shock was severe.

“ So it is true ! ” he said aloud and at once looked guiltily over his shoulder as men do who speak aloud to themselves in public places. Flags fluttered bravely from the castle. Banners streamed from the advancing host. That they blew in opposite directions he accepted as merely a facet of whatever world he was now in. Bending down he scooped a handful of dust and slipped it into the pocket of his dressing gown.

The knights were no nearer and yet their onward motion seemed irresistible. He took two half-hearted steps away from them. Above them all the pale and ghastly sky glared down.

Then for the first time, he awoke to the absence of sound. Before, there had been the clank and jangle of armour—now, utter silence.

That silence undermined all his newly-won arrogance. Fear, an unreasoning tide of panic rose, choking him. You just didn't step into an advertisement that you yourself had created! You couldn't make up a scene and then walk through into it and accept it as real. Dust fanned across his face and stung his eyes ; he coughed. This was real !

And what would happen to him when those knights reached him ? Making for the castle, they were hardly likely to halt for him—or swerve aside.

The eeriness of the place, the horror, his own unbalanced condition, his inner feelings that he had been played just one too many dirty tricks overwhelmed him. He stumbled. Dust gritted under his hands. Then, flowingly, the dust changed to soft carpeting and in the shrilling of the telephone he registered the first fact about this strange and unknown dimension.

Sound of ringing brought him back to Earth.

Stumbling to the phone in automatic response to the twentieth century monster, he registered that.

It was Martin Baskombe. His voice sounded like treacle that has lain so long in a pool that it has gathered dirt and dead flies.

“ Bill ? Hullo, old man. Thought I'd ring and find out how the wounded hero is today.” Baskombe laughed, neighingly.

“ Yes ?” Masters struggled to speak naturally. “ Yes ? Baskombe. Oh, yes. What do you want ?”

“ Now is that nice, Bill ? I mean. Oh, I know.” The voice was sickly sweet. “ You like to be called Alfred, don't you, Bill. Alfred Simpson.” There was a pause.

Masters deliberately picked up a telephone directory and hurled it at the wall. He did not speak.

“ You still there ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, look here, old boy. You wouldn't like G.H. to know about—well, you know what. Would you now ? Well, I feel it is my duty to—”

“ Forget all that stuff !” Masters was trembling now. “ What do you want ?”

“ That's better, old son. Much better.” More soft laughter. “ Had a little chat with G.H. today. Privilege of the boss's nephew, you know. Seems there's a little promotion due in the

office. Expected it, of course. I'm sure you agree with me, Alfie,"—Masters winced—"that of the two of us eligible for the position I am far more suitable. Hmm? You do agree, Alf?"

"And?"

The sound of the sigh on the telephone would not have disturbed the wings of a butterfly. "Ah! I thought so, Bill. Jolly good of you. You won't regret it, you know. Not at all."

Masters had made up his mind. Horror was going to be put to work—for Bill Masters. In his present state of mind, tensed-up, nervous, flaming with impotent temper, he was completely out of control of any civilised impulses. There was just enough sanity left for him to understand that if he took Baskombe's neck between his hands and squeezed, then he would pay the price society demanded.

But there was another way. A way that owed nothing to that obscene word Murder.

"Oh, Baskombe," he said, wondering if he sounded all right. "We ought to talk this thing out. When can I see you?"

As expected, Baskombe became nervous.

"G.H. intended to make the announcement on the promotion tomorrow. You'd better do what's necessary tonight, Bill! You understand that?"

"Yes. Can you come round here? I'm not well. Almost in bed when you rang."

For some reason that made Masters want to laugh.

"All right. I'll come round." Baskombe's voice dropped. "Just one little thing. I'll be bringing a gun. Understand?"

"I'll arrange an escaping prisoner or two," Masters said through his anger, and rang off.

So. He'd started this thing off; now he had to go through with it in the same sickly vicious frame of mind, before he got around to wondering what his conscience was going to have to say on the subject. One thing; if he succeeded, then Martin Baskombe would be fixed right, without any crude physical acts of violence. The man would still be alive—but he just wouldn't be around.

Bill Masters was just an ordinary little man, one of millions, who had had a rough deal from life. Now he was mixed up in some fantastic happening that, quite probably, was born of his

own strained nervous conditions. Finally, a business associate was blackmailing him into standing aside in the promotion race—and stealing his girl.

This last hurt. Masters had spent a great deal of time in the social wilderness, and only he knew the pain and struggle of climbing back—with a different name.

But these things weren't strong enough—yet—to break his basic character traits. He fixed himself another whisky, brooding, understanding that what he planned just couldn't be done ; at least, not by him. However badly he was treated in the business world with its jungle mores, he couldn't obtain from that madhouse sufficient charge to do what he had planned. The motives just weren't strong enough.

He couldn't calmly wait for Baskombe to arrive—and then murder him.

He grimaced wryly. It might have been different if Baskombe had tried his blackmailing stunt here in person. That, very probably, was why he hadn't.

A number of whiskies later the door bell rang and Masters let Baskombe in. The two men glared at each other, rather like two dogs with a single bone. And, for the moment, that bone was promotion.

It probably hadn't occurred to Baskombe Masters thought bitterly, that the question of Audrey even came into it. The girl had so obviously been designed precisely for Martin Baskombe that any thought of a third interested party was laughable. Masters felt his temper rising.

"You'd better come in," he said surlily.

Baskombe was amused, yet his eyes flickered warily. He was suspicious. "Well, what is there to discuss, Bill? You know the position—"

"Yes. If I don't ring G.H. and tell him not to recommend me for promotion—into a job I want—you'll ring him and tell him—"

"Tell him all about you, Alfie. Right !"

"I'm asking you, Baskombe, not to do this."

"Wha-at ?"

"Please, Baskombe, you're the boss's nephew. I'm just an ordinary guy. You'll get on okay. Bound to. Why stop me like this ?"

"I should have thought, Bill, that that was perfectly obvious."

It was. Baskombe hated his guts. So—that was that, then. There would be no quick blow, no flow of blood, no passionate murder for the C.I.D. to pin on him. Well . . . Probably that was just as well. Even as he was, his life was better spent alive than dead. He found, to his surprise, that he half smiled at the ludicrous phrase. Baskombe saw that smile and the muscles of his face froze.

“I wouldn't try anything—silly, Bill.”

They had moved into the room now and, filled with the suspicions of the blackmailer, Baskombe was glancing about, his eyes darting like a table-tennis ball. He spotted the drawing sheet on the table and moved towards it. He passed beyond Masters, who still stood, frozen, his back to Baskombe.

“Hullo, Bill.” Baskombe was drawling in his maddening way now, taking a cigarette from his case, platinum lighter ready for use. “What's this? Working at home. And on that old Socko advert, too. Well, well, no wonder old G.H. had you slated for promotion.”

Masters half turned. He could see the short hair around Baskombe's neck, and the starched whiteness of the collar. “Don't look at it, Baskombe!” he said, sharply. He had completely forgotten the advertisement.

“Why not? You home workers always were a crawling bunch. No wonder you . . .”

The voice tailed, oddly. Masters, standing rigid, dared not turn his head. He tried—and failed. Baskombe took a step forward, vanished from Masters' vision.

Fragmentarily, he felt a brief rush of scorching air on his cheek—and then silence. He listened, sweating. He could not hear Baskombe breathing.

He managed to break that rigor of fear and turned his head. Flame burst in his face. In that chaotic moment he saw Baskombe's platinum lighter lying at the edge of the drawing sheet, and he saw the flame that raced across the highly inflammable cowgum. Flames scorched upwards. The paper was a mass of fire.

And then he saw through the hungry joy of fire the grey castle with all save its topmost flag browning and burning; no sign of the knights or the gladiator; but, momentarily, in the centre—horror! A small, black figure, moving on the sandy plain, writhing, twitching like a beetle under a pin.

Baskombe ! Caught in that other world, trapped in that alien dimension, running and screaming in terror whilst all around him fought and roared tendrils of mighty flames—flames that to him must leap higher than the sky and curve like angels' wings to blacken and destroy.

Almost, almost, Masters fell under the compulsion that streamed from the advertisement. Almost he was drawn forward. He groaned abruptly as strain seized him and tried to draw him into the burning advertisement.

Almost, almost—but not quite.

The last of the advertisement crumbled to black ash with lines and constellations of red glow worms running avidly through the glistening black. The ashes sighed softly as they crumbled. Masters staggered towards the sofa and collapsed upon it and lay there for a long time, drained, exhausted, mind a merciful blank.

Only the brittle chittering of collapsing ashes filled the room with a dry uneasy rustle.

#### IV

The following days back at the office were days of alternate black and white ; nightmare piled on fear piled on bouts of shivering panic. Old G.H. took the disappearance of his nephew typically, brusquely. "Young rip's sported off after some wench, confound him. Just when we're busy, too. He'll be back." The fierce old eyes brightened. "And I'll have a few words with him. Yes. A few friendly words."

To Masters' growing uncase, the police did not altogether share G.H.'s point of view. They questioned and pried, trying to turn up just why a young man should choose to disappear. They had been called in by Baskombe's father over the protestations of G.H. that the affair was easily explained. The very fact of Baskombe having a father—Masters had often considered that the last of his accomplishments—put the whole business into a different perspective. Hell ! He hadn't murdered Baskombe, had he ? If it had been a cliff, and Baskombe had been warned not to go too close to the edge and had persisted—well, that was what they called an accident, wasn't it ?

But no one could tell that a simple advertisement was more deadly than the tallest precipice in the world, could they ?



He found he worked better at home than at the office and he settled down to the Betto work there, bringing in armloads of magazines and virgin drawing sheets and the clipped-together typewritten blurbs of the creative boys. Sitting at his desk, he reached for the cowgum tin. As his fingers touched the cool metal he started. He recalled his own black mood when this tin had crashed through his office window. At home, he ought to try to relax.

Betto's packet was as gaudy and as vulgar as had been Socko's.

Around it, already fixed to the drawing sheet, he now mounted down the picture of a vast, old-fashioned kitchen with stone walls, open hearths in which a whole sheep turned on a spit, shining copper utensils and long wooden tables at which a dozen bakers could roll out their dough. A number of oaken doors led off the wide room. He picked up Audrey's smiling photograph, sighed, cut out her figure and mounted it in position.

His fingers were clumsy—with good reason—he had lost his usual skill. Deliberately, he had refrained from seeing Audrey since the disappearance of Baskombe. He had wanted to go to her with clean hands. He fumbled with the tools of his trade, all thumbs. The photograph slipped, the glue parted and the scrap of card fell to the floor. He bent to retrieve it.

His hand struck cold stone. Still bending, his body remained stiff and his eyeballs rolled upwards. He gazed around a vast old-fashioned kitchen with gigantic hearths and long scarred wooden tables. The panic that hit him he fought down only by a recognition of what had happened—and *why*.

The paste ! The tin of cowgum that had been flung, or flung itself, through his office window was responsible for the transference of human beings into another fantasy world. He straightened up and looked around, breathing deeply but regularly, expecting anything, wondering, half-scared but joying suddenly in this new found power.

The place was vast. Looking closer he could see unmistakable signs of recent occupancy. A thick china plate lay on one table with grease congealing around its edges and a few picked bones piled to one side, a pewter tankard with the dregs of wine spilled across the wood lay on its side. A fire roared merrily in one huge hearth and the glowing embers of two others flanked it. Everything was clean and pots and pans

shone. Momentarily, Masters expecting serving wenches and cooks to go bustling about their business. He listened.

No sound apart from his own heavy breathing reached him. He hesitated, not quite sure what to do next. He had overcome his first wild alarm ; now he was prepared to pick up any further offerings of whatever fates were playing with him. He chuckled, suddenly ; this, too, would turn out to his advantage. He tied his golden cord more firmly around the purple and red dressing gown and his fingers were still pulling the tasselled ends when the martial tramp of feet sounded.

An oaken door opened and a man strode through. Masters knew him. He knew the rounded helmet with the red crest, the corselet engraved with mythological figures, the shirt of wool and the leather jerkin reaching to the knee. On the gladiator's right hip rested the short stabbing sword. As soon as he entered the kitchen the Roman stood his pilum up against the wall and, with a sigh of relief, rested his heavy cylindrical shield against it. Then he made for the table. He shouted as he came.

"I'm here ! Where's the food ! I'm starving !"

Not bothering to worry how he could understand the man—rules had been tossed overboard in this alien world—Masters walked swiftly to the table. The gladius was out and the point inches from his breast bone in seconds.

"Stand ! Who are you ?" The Roman scanned Masters keenly with blue eyes set in a seamed brown face that carried all the marks of an outdoor life. The chin was square and strong and neatly shaven.

Masters repressed his involuntary movement of recoil.

He said : "If you'll put that damn great sword away perhaps we might talk—"

Quick scurrying footsteps broke into the two men's scrutiny and involuntary challenge, and an undersized serving wench in white mob cap and apron laid fresh food upon the table, clearing away the broken food of the previous diner. The Roman slid his sword away. "That's good !" he roared. "Hot it might be in the day ; it's as cold as Gaul at night."

The maid showed no surprise at Master's presence but went away and presently returned with a plate of food for him, too. There was chicken and swedes and greens and a fried egg laid over all. Suddenly hungry, and quite unconscious of any incongruity in the act, Masters sat and ate.

Between mouthfuls the men talked. Masters told the Roman his name, learned that the other was Marcus Flaccus Postumius and that he did not know how he had come where he was nor even where that place might be. Masters had wit enough to understand that this kitchen was in the castle that he had so casually stuck on the advertisement. And he had chosen this kitchen, too! All that was here had been placed there by his own fingers! Except the maid and the food, of course. Creator sat and ate among the things he had created, and wondered.

"What are you doing here, Marcus?" ventured Masters.

"What? By Jupiter's snowy locks, I don't know. One minute I was—well, and the next, here. Magic, that's all."

The Roman accepted that. Masters tried again. "But how is it that you, a Roman gladiator, should be here—"

Marcus glanced up, scowling. "Stay, friend! I'm no prancing pampered gladiator. I'm a Centurion, of the second cohort of the Tenth Legion. Caesar's Own! Don't forget it, and don't insult me—"

"I beg your pardon," stammered Masters, both alarmed at the other's anger and amused at his punctiliousness. "What is it like—what do you do—out there?"

"If I knew that, I'd be a happier man. Strange things go on here. We were advancing on the plain of Pharsalia, and all Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus' host deployed against us shining in the sun. We went forward into their hail of pila and then—and then I was standing on a stinking brown plain before this castle. I assumed I had been placed on guard and so have remained ever since." He bit into a chicken leg. "I appointed myself into watches and now I'm off duty." He chuckled. "A man must eat."

"And were you ever in Rome? Did you pose for a—"

"Strange, you ask that. I was detailed to provide a decurie so some effeminate Greek sculptor could carve our likeness for a monument. Quite a day. Plenty of free wine." He laughed again.

His laughter broke off short. He leaped to his feet, the chicken bones clattering onto the plate, and his sword was out in a flash of steel. Voices shouted and screamed outside the door. Masters turned in his seat.

From the shadows under the narrow windows a shape flowed. Masters stared, not understanding what he saw and

when he grasped what it was, not believing. A tiger's head and forebody, supported on two thick legs that ran balancing the truncated animal easily, sprang forward. Where there should have been lean flanks and two rear legs and a lashing tail there was—nothing.

The tiger was sheared off cleanly half way along its body as though guillotined.

The impossible thing ran forward, spitting, seized a partially eaten chicken from the table and, wheeling, loped on its two legs away and so to vanish into the shadows.

Marcus was sweating. He put the sword on the table with a clatter, wiped his forehead and reached for the pewter tankard of wine. He drank deeply. Masters kept him company. More prepared for the incredible, he was as badly shaken as the Roman Centurion.

"And that's not all," Marcus said hoarsely. "There's other—worse—things here. This is an evil place."

Masters felt that the Roman was out of that tough, unimaginative earthy breed that accepts the issues of the moment and finds what small consolation it needs in carrying on without question. Such a one remained steadfast at his post in Pompeii when the deadly ash and dust rained down.

"What—else?" Masters asked softly.

"Shapes. Oh—not half beasts as that tiger. But shapes that float and drift, weird, chilling—I tell you, comrade, the women folk here are terrified. They prefer to have a strong arm and a sharp sword at their disposal." He laughed again and drank deeply. Masters went towards the windows where the half-tiger had vanished and peered out.

He was looking, from a low viewpoint, out upon that ochre and dusty plain. He glanced about, expecting to see the far-off glitter and flash of advancing chivalry. He must have been at a different angle; there was nothing save the brown plain and the grey featureless sky stretching out until they met in a far off indigo haze. He faced the Roman.

"Have you seen a band of horsemen out there?"

"Aye. They are forever charging but advance no nearer. One day, I feel it in my bones, they will break through and take the castle and all within. There will be great slaughter that day."

Masters said abruptly: "You would welcome friends here, reinforcements? Men of your legion?"

"Aye, that I would. All over Gaul I've marched, aye, and to Britain. Damp place that, full of priests with their mistletoe

mysteries. Veterans of the legions, we were, crack troops. Aye, I'd welcome friends here."

The conceit of it gripped Masters. He felt a heady sense of power ; he delighted in the knowledge that in his hands reposed the awful authority of investing this place with things and people to his own whims. He could feel drunk on that power ; he was a creator. No—a Creator, even.

Only then was he struck with the length of time he had spent in this other world. Previously he had spent only a few moments here and then had been whisked back into his ordinary life. Was he to be left here, castaway of the dimensions, to live out the rest of his life subject to the horrid phantoms that haunted this place ? And what of Audrey ? And his job ?

The effects of the last hour must have disturbed his balance a little ; whilst remaining perfectly composed and self possessed. Sight of the cold Roman steel, the sombre castle, the monstrous half-tiger, had inflamed his senses, making him drunk with his own power. He felt greater than mortal man.

Marcus was about to shout for more wine when the door burst open and the serving maid, followed by two or three more, rushed in, their aprons over their heads, wailing and sobbing and shrieking. The stout Roman sword was up in an instant. Masters stared at the open door, expecting he knew not what.

"It's the Ond Woman !" cried Marcus. "Gods, stand by me now !"

"The Ond Woman !" moaned the girls. They must, Masters realised, have been hidden in some room of the kitchen when he had cut the picture out and pasted it on the advertisement—thought of that made him chuckle weakly ; the fantasy had no end, then, like a Chinese box. The maids clustered about Marcus who stood, trembling very slightly, facing the door. Masters gripped his dressing gown.

Through the doorway a white ghastly shape glided. In the form of a woman, it floated along, white, shining, paper thin and transparent, waving its arms and mewing and mowing like a horrid spectre from the wrong side of the Styx.

Masters stared in utter horror.

The Shape glided into the kitchen. Its arms lifted.

"The Ond Woman !" croaked Marcus.

The Shape's mouth moved. Thin, spider-whispers of words trailed out like spume driven before a gale. "Beware Him who

lies below ! Beware ! He will drag you all down !” The Shape floated past and glided towards the window. “Beware !”

The spectral visitation turned, gibbering at them.

Masters felt his insides turn over. Cutting dryly through the horror of that moment he heard clearly the hoarse evil chuckle that he had heard before. Old Bates ! The man who had sworn to crawl back from Hell to seek his revenge !

He glanced wildly about. In the uproar in the kitchen he could not expect to see Bates and yet he glared, fearfully, expecting now he knew not what. Anything was possible, here in some world hidden in an advertisement.

The Old Woman was mewling and gibbering, swaying from side to side. Marcus took a single step forward, the gladius shining ; in Masters’ ears the terrified screaming of the woman changed, blessedly, into the shrilling of the front doorbell and he was stumbling across the soft rug of his apartment.

The door was hard and cool under his fingers. He leaned against it, drawing in gulping draughts of air, trembling, fighting to clear his mind. The doorbell rang again. He straightened up, swallowing, adjusted his dressing gown and opened the door.

The two men were square-cut, ruddy-faced, polite, distant. Policemen.

“ May we come in, Mr. Masters ? You’ve met me, Sergeant Venner, before. This is Constable Duncan.”

They were wearing civilian clothes ; C.I.D. men. Their faces were composed, masked, impersonal.

“ Come in, Sergeant, by all means.” He was surprised his voice was so firm. “ What can I do for you ?”

“ It’s about Mr. Baskombe, sir. We have reason to believe that you were the last person to see him—”

“ Alive ?” Masters said involuntarily, half-mockingly.

Sergeant Venner stared at him. “ I didn’t say that, sir.” He stood on the rug, glancing about with eyes that missed nothing. Constable Duncan stood quietly solid by the door which he had closed. Irrationally, Masters felt trapped. He smiled.

“ A quick follow-up of words, Sergeant. A sort of business trait, if you follow me. Advertising makes the mind one jump ahead of the spoken word.”

“ Quite so, sir.” Venner was not impressed. “ Mr. Baskombe came here to see you on the evening of the day he

disappeared. We're not quite satisfied that we have his movements plotted just before he saw you and just afterwards."

"Well," Masters said with slight acerbity, his mind full of a wide flagged kitchen and a Roman and a gibbering white Shape. "Well I've told you all I know. If you wish I can repeat my statement."

"That won't be necessary, sir." Venner eyed him inscrutably. "May we have a look around, sir?"

"What!" Then Masters relaxed. He laughed off-handedly. "Of course. Why not. Carry on. I'll fix you a drink."

"Thank you, sir. We don't drink on duty."

"No. Of course not. Sorry."

Venner jerked his head. Constable Duncan walked silently into the bedroom.

Masters said: "I suppose you have a warrant?"

"Yes, sir."

Masters didn't bother to ask to see it. He was wondering what had set these sleuths onto his trail again. Worrying.

After a time Duncan came out and shook his head. Venner waited as the rest of the apartment was searched. Masters sat down and sipped whisky. He glanced across at the advertisement.

Hell! Suppose . . .

He stood up, casually, and walked towards the coffee table. The silver cigarette box opened with a miniature carillon. He offered the Sergeant a cigarette. Venner refused, politely. As though seeking a light, Masters walked across the room, averting his eyes from the drawing sheet and its picture of a kitchen. He bent across it, picking up the platinum cigarette lighter from the corner of the cluttered table and his elbow brushed the cloth, dropping it down over the advertisement and the gateway to another world.

Suddenly, Venner said: "I would like a cigarette, sir, thank you."

Relief that he had covered the portal trembled in Masters as he bent again to the cigarette box. Venner took a Sullivan and Masters extended the lighter, flicked the catch and held the flame to the tip of the cigarette. Venner caught his wrist lightly steadying the flame.

"Thank you, sir." He inhaled, his hand still holding Masters' wrist, his eyes slowly leaving the lighter and travelling up to meet Masters' gaze.

Flatly, Sergeant Venner said; "This lighter, sir. Yours?"

"Eh?" Masters, flustered, did not think. "Why, of course."

"These initials, sir." Expertly, Venner twisted and the lighter fell from Masters' hand to be caught in the grip of the policeman. "M.B. Would have thought it would be W.M., sir."

"Oh—yes—"

"Do you wish to say anything, sir?"

Masters caught the official tone and the implication.

Weakness caught at him. He'd been through enough unsettling experiences recently for the threat of being held for murder to make an interesting added fillip. He found he could not take it seriously. After what he had seen, his eyes still drugged by the wonders that lay beneath the placid surface of an advertisement he had created himself, after the knowledge of power that had gripped him, the mundane world appeared merely a shadow, a phantom projection wherein even a possible charge of murder could not hold the weight it would have done a month ago.

"Say anything?" he repeated, as though bewildered.

"Why, what is there to say?"

"Is this your lighter, sir?"

"No. It's Martin Baskombe's. He left it here when he called."

"Quite so, sir. Do you mind if we take it away. I will give you a receipt."

"I don't mind. Give it to Baskombe when you find him and tell him not to be so careless with his property."

"I'll do that, sir. I'm advising you, in a friendly capacity, you understand, not to try to leave London. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes."

Venner hesitated, for the first time undecided. Masters prayed that they would leave without politely asking him to accompany them to the station. That would foul up his plans. At last, the two detectives left. Venner repeated his warning, quite politely, and Masters knew that from now on a man would dog his shadow. Well? The faceless form in the night tailing him wouldn't find the way through into the world that Masters was coming to regard as his own personal property. Not by a long shot, he wouldn't. Now to arrange to deal with that charging line of armoured knights—his mind scurried busily on . . .

This world had given him nothing. Very well, then, he would leave it, and take up residence in his own.



## V

Working with methodical haste, he rummaged through his old books and magazines and used the scissors with a fine free lack of worry over the mayhem he caused. He assembled a pile of pictures. He arranged them artistically on the picture of the kitchen, fitting in squads of Roman legionaries and comfortable furnishings, cigarettes and drink and fine food advertisements and—with a pleased smile—photographs of the Crown Jewels. "Me and Captain Blood!" he said aloud, and chuckled. Then, thoughtfully, he included pictures of rifles and machine guns and ammunition and a bazooka. "Why carry your gear on a safari when you can create it where you like?" he said and this time his chuckle was louder, more confident.

He hunted carefully through the endless pages of advertisements in the slick magazines and any trinket or object of luxury that took his fancy he cut out and placed ready on the advertisement. He extended the drawing sheet to fit in a Rolls Royce. Impishly, he added a petrol pump and wondered if the thing would go on supplying petrol indefinitely or even if it would work at all. For good measure he included a dozen playmates from *Playboy*, the front line of the Windmill, and, to keep them company, that of the Folies Bergere.

Feeling light-hearted and confident he rang Audry. She answered and was surprised at who was ringing.

"Listen, Audrey. Will you do me a favour? Will you give me a ring in five minutes? Exactly five minutes? And don't forget, there's a darling. It's important."

"Very well, Bill. I'm expecting to go out this evening but I'll ring you in five minutes."

"That's my girl! Thanks." He rang off, still bubbling, and stared at the advertisement. He would have to invest in a timing device that could be set to ring loudly after a time spent in that delightful other world surrounded by his treasures.

This time he was impatient for the transition, anxious to enter into his inheritance.

The kitchen was hard stones beneath his feet and a babble of words and greetings and exclamations about him. He jumped onto a table and stared about. His shouts and waving arms at last quietened down the mob of Roman legionaries, and Marcus walked swiftly through their ranks towards him.

"You see, Marcus, I have brought you friends and reinforcements."

Marcus was frowning. "These men are Romans, they wear a debased form of Roman armour; but they talk of Caesar as Emperor, and they call him Trajan and the rest of their stories are madness: They tell me that Caesar—my own Caius Julius—was foully murdered and that many summers have passed since then." Marcus was hopelessly caught in the toils of a displaced time; Masters sympathised with him. He called for silence and began to speak. By the time he had finished he almost believed himself, and the Romans had pledged themselves to him. It was easier for the men from Trajan's column; they were used to the Emperor situation; it was harder for Marcus with strong Republican virtues still clinging to his tough legionary outlook. But all, with the bounty he had brought them, were prepared to grant him the Imperium and to seat him on the curule chair he had thoughtfully provided.

He was already wearing the purple—his dressing gown was most useful.

"Strange things have been happening since you were last here," said Marcus doubtfully. He had been appointed Master's legate, against all his own feelings, but in view of his knowledge of this place he was the obvious choice. The cohort of legionaries was busily organising watches and sleeping and eating arrangements under capable, hard-bitten Centurions. With a sly smile Marcus had expressed satisfaction at the absence of military tribunes. "We can do better without those young whipper-snappers," he said, guffawing.

A commotion broke out over by the window. Staring across, Masters saw men stumbling back from a gliding white shape that floated swiftly across to the door.

"He calls!" the Shape moaned. "He will call us all!"

"By the gods!" Marcus shouted. "The Ond Woman!"

In the uproar the half-tiger loped swiftly along, snatched a mouthful of food and ran, claws scabbling on the stone, after the Ond Woman. Bedlam broke out.

"He's down there," Marcus said, trembling. "He calls us all. You can fight the compulsion; but one day He'll win." A shout from the window arrested their attention.

"Here, legate!" a Centurion called. "Foes!"

Masters stood behind the Roman's shoulder at the window. Around a buttress he saw a flowing mass of armoured men

banners waving, steeds trampling the ochre plain, a whole great line of chivalry charging to the high thin note of silver trumpets. "Nearer," said Marcus. "Much nearer."

Something else took Master's shocked eyes. Standing beneath the walls was a sleek and shining Rolls Royce. He had expected that. But, standing upright beside it, was the front half—the bonnet and wheels and windscreen and front doors—of a gaudy and chromium-heavy Cadillac. The half-car just stood there. The ochre plain showed sharp where the rear wheels and dramatic trunk and fins should have flared.

Only then was understanding given to Masters. He recognised the car for what it was, he realised what the half-tiger must be and he knew who—or what—The Ond Woman was. When he had cut out and pasted on pictures that in this world became actual real objects the opposite side of the picture, too, came alive. And his scissors had, in cutting out the Rolls, included part of a Cadillac. In cutting out Marcus, he had included in this weird world half a tiger.

And, when he had traced the outline of the girl and cut her out of plain white paper, he had introduced a shape into this world; a paper-thin, white, ghostly Shape that had life and walked and talked. And he had used ordinary typing paper. He pivoted slowly, looking at the Ond Woman as she advanced, keening, from the shadows.

Down her body he could see now, against the light of the fires, a plain, bold watermark. O N D. Someone's Typing Bond paper—the Ond Woman! A ghostly shape, striking terror into the souls of these simple soldiers.

What other horrors had he loosed upon them?

He glanced at his wristwatch. Five minutes was up. He felt thankful. He would be glad—very glad!—when Audrey rang and freed him from this nightmare.

Marcus said: "I've sent men to watch those armoured horse. I've been thinking this for some time—we're in Parthia." He shivered. "Those mailed horsemen—they destroyed Crassus and his legions and now they're going to destroy us. It'll be another Carrhae."

Masters shook his head. "You don't have to fear their arrows," he said with confidence. "They have been—that is, they can be destroyed by arrows, too." He peered again from the window. "Yes, they are nearer. If they do attack I shall have to provide artillery—the archers of England, say, or a

machine gun battalion of World War One." He did not want to mix up the time scale unless he had to ; that way he would confuse his allies here and render the place unsafe. And Masters was already elaborating plans for this nether world, where he reigned as supreme lord, where his every whim was law and his slightest wish inscribed upon the statute books. He'd see about that as soon as he got back.

He glanced again at his watch. Audrey should have rung by now. Well—women were notoriously unreliable ; no need to panic yet. Thought of women reminded him and he glanced about for the chorus-lines he had sent here.

" Did no dancing girls appear here, then, Marcus ?" he asked jovially.

" One poor creature came," Marcus said casually. " Thin and terrified. We put her to work with the maids—and we told her to put some clothes on."

Before Masters had time to digest this sad lapse in the regular order of events he saw Marcus stiffen and his tough legionaire's face turn grey. Stubble showed on the chin that had recently been so cleanly shaven.

" What is it, Marcus ?"

" He calls ! Can't you feel the compulsion ?"

On the words Master was possessed of a great and passionate longing to rush headlong down the stairs, to seek out the Being waiting for him there. Masters knew that some malignant evil festered below stairs ; but he saw it only as a friend, someone to whom he owed allegiance and affection, a comrade with whom it would be delight to spend the rest of his days. A sob burst from his mouth and he brushed past Marcus and ran all crabwise towards the oaken door, pushed it open and stumbled blindly in the gloom down worn and greenish stairs.

" Ho, there, torches !" he heard the bellow of Marcus behind him. Men crowded to the stair head, light flared out illuminating the spiral staircase trending in dizzying loops below. Masters hurried down. Marcus and one or two legionaries ventured a way after him, holding up blazing brands, and in the light Masters could see the small stone court at the foot of the stairs and the iron bars welling one side of the stone enclosure.

Standing on those damp and mildewed flags he recognised this place as a prison—more, a dungeon. He looked about. Something was holding him here. Someone had imposed their will upon him, dragging him so rapidly from the hustle and

bustle of the kitchen down the spiral staircase into this uncanny world of half-darkness and shadowed stone.

Masters was too afraid to enquire who that might be.

Frightened, sickened, he could only stand there, wishing with all his mind to be gone and yet remaining where he was because of the love-hate stream of feeling pouring out of the iron-barred cell.

A hoarse yet brisk, malicious voice spoke to him. Familiar voice—where had he heard it before? He could not remember and then all thoughts of that were driven from his mind by what this being was saying.

“I have summoned you here, Alfred Simpson, to answer for your crimes. I opened the portal and made the way easy and yet you have not been easy to catch for I did not expect you to fill this place with buildings and men and soldiers and beasts. You always were a wily one, Alfred, a smooth operator. I am glad to meet you again.”

Recognition was dawning in Masters and with it a great fear. He could not—he would not—believe what his ears told him. He gripped his hands into two tight-bunched knots and said: “What do you want with me here?”

“Ah!” the hoarse voice said with evil satisfaction. “So you do not enquire who I am? Most enjoyable. Tremble, Alfred Simpson! Tremble in your worthless shoes! For you are brought to judgment—”

“I stand in no fear of you,” Masters began boldly, feeling his entire body shaking.

The being cut him off with sharp and ugly laughter.

“You sent the man Baskombe here. He, also, wishes you no good.” The being giggled, senilely, a giggle filled with a black and self-consuming hatred. “Look at the far wall.”

Masters looked. The grey stones vanished, and as though on a screen Masters was looking out over the ochre plain, seeing the armoured chivalry sweeping across that flat expanse in glory of heraldic colour and waving pennon and champing steed. “Look at their leader, Alfred.” Masters looked.

“It’s Baskombe,” he said without surprise. Sitting awkwardly in the saddle, his neat clothing gone and armoured in the full panoply of plate, visor raised, Baskombe urged his companions forward, a cavalcade of armoured knights, following their new leader who brandished a sawn-off .38 Smith and Wesson.

"They will reach the broken walls soon, Alfred, and burst in and destroy all your fine Romans. And then, alone, Alfred, what will you do?"

Masters was regaining some small semblance of control. He swung angrily, brushing the vision away. He stared at the cell. "What I will do, my friend, is what I should have done long ago. I should have settled your score when I had the chance. I was too lenient with you—"

"Alfred, Alfred. Is this the way to talk? I have lain here all the weary years since the prison sentence, planning to bring you to me. I had to open the portal and my only chance was to send you some token, a sort of Solomon's stone, when you cried out for it with sufficient passion. What dark thoughts filled your mind when you called for a pot of paste I do not know; but they were strong enough for me to send the talisman disguised as paste. You would use it, that I knew, and then you would be brought to judgment."

The heat in this underground room was stifling. Masters loosened the silk scarf at his throat. He glanced upwards. The torches of his men flared in the draught high above on the winding stair. Somewhere slimy water ran and dripped hollowly on stone. He knew, now, why those girls from the Windmill and the Folies Bergere had not been transmitted here.

He said roughly: "I cannot bandy words with you, Bates. You were caught and I was set free. You must serve your sentence out, dead or alive. I care not."

"But I am dead, Alfred. Surely you recognise that? Only dead people may venture into this world—"

"What about Baskombe—and me?"

"Ah, yes, Alfred." The sound was a sigh of anticipatory relish. "Yes, Alfred. You."

"I don't fear Baskombe or his tin-can riders. I can arrange for them to be machine-gunned. I don't fear you. You dragged me here, and in doing so gave into my hands the power of—of—"

"The power of madness, Alfred. You are already mad, to believe what I tell you. Merely because you believe that you are here, you are mad."

"You may be suffering in some damned heathen Purgatory, for all I know. As soon as I have made my arrangements, you will be dealt with. You claim I killed you on Earth; well, I say I didn't. But I'm not prepared to argue it with you. You embezzled the money and I—"

"And you who were my accomplice escaped free, to change your name and resume life, whilst I rotted in a filthy prison!" Bates' hoarse old voice rose, angry, condemning, full of righteous, piteous indignation. "And so I have called you, from beyond the grave, to answer for your sins. It is very easy, Alfred," Bates said. His voice had sunk to a tired whisper. "But Baskombe—or I—will get you in the end. For remember—" his voice strengthened and rang with fury and vengeance—"wherever you may create a world I shall be in it, waiting for you."

"This world can be burnt as the first was burnt—"

"Baskombe is still here. No, Alfred, all that the burning did was to destroy that one portal to Earth. You cannot destroy this world; you can only shut the gates upon it." The cracked voice of Bates cackled then in a glee which, unholy though it might be, was sane, sane enough to fix what it said with ineradicable truth upon the brain of Masters. "Whatever world you create, Alfred, there shall I be, waiting for you."

"Get back to hell!" shouted Masters furiously, agonisedly, filled with a fear for himself that stemmed from the thin pages of an old, round-spined family Bible.

## VI

"Get back to Hell!" he was still shouting as the telephone rang in his ears and he stumbled across to answer it. He was half-kneeling on the floor—the displacement in this world that had been the walk down the spiral staircase—and he realised dimly that wherever he went in that alien world he must, of necessity, leave it through the picture.

"Only the dead may live in that world," he said. He shuddered at the furnace heat of the dungeon and at the remembered horror of talking to a man dead and buried.

"What was that, Bill?" Audrey's voice, sharp, anxious, on the telephone. "Bill. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, Audrey. Perfectly."

"You sounded odd. You said something about the dead and the living—"

"Nothing. Just quoting a poem," he said, improvising desperately. "Only the dead know how the living feel."

"Macabre. And philosophically questionable. However." Her voice stroked his panicky tension. "Oh, well. Sorry I

didn't ring dead on the dot as you asked but G.H. rang me about the latest Betto thing, and—"

"G.H.? Why should he contact you?"

She laughed, and he caught the sour little edge of self deprecation. "Maybe I am a dumb blonde model good only for posing in a minimum; but G.H. is very concerned about Martin. He knew of Martin's—attachment, interest, in me and wanted to do some sleuthing himself."

"Oh?"

"Look, Bill, I know how you feel about Martin; but, damn it, the chap's gone missing! If I could help old G.H. I would." Her voice in the phone was just as cool as she added: "And you would, too, I know that."

"Yes, Audrey," he said. "Yes. I would."

"What did you want me to ring you about?"

Masters swallowed. Before he re-opened his mouth Audrey went on: "Anyway, G. H. suggested you and I might like to go round to see him. Tubby will be there. Some sort of semi-official party thing. To do with the Betto job."

"Of course," Masters had said automatically, before he remembered the waiting world of the advertisement. He couldn't take *that* Betto advertisement layout round to G.H.! The layout itself was relatively simple. Ten minutes with scissors and cow and fresh pictures would fix it. He'd have to call in at the office, though. He had keys. He said: "Yes, Audrey, all right. I'll have to call in at the office first, though. See you at G.H.'s?"

"Oh! I was rather hoping you'd call and—"

"Delighted! Give me half an hour. Enough?"

She laughed; but he detected puzzlement still in that light, elfin voice. "Enough. Don't forget."

He hung up. Forget! Not likely!

Bemused by opening vistas of the future, he turned away from the phone. Memory of Bates, now, after speaking to Audrey, held only pity for the broken old thief. There had been a fire in the embezzler, too, for him to have been able to send his Solomon's Stone in the cowgum tin from that nether pit into the bright and sunny Earth of the living. The remembrance of his shouted words: 'Get back to hell!' recurred, making him uncomfortable. Poor old Bates! But the fear and horror had been real. Too damn real.

Turning away from the phone, still thinking, his eyes fell on the advertisement . . .



Marcus said urgently : " By Bacchus ! You're back ! And just in time. Those Parthians are at the walls ! "

Caught up in the frenzied yet orderly bustle of the garrison, feeling his responsibilities in this world more keenly than he had ever felt them in the world of his birth, Masters donned armour provided by willing hands, grasped a sword and was mounting the steep steps to the battlements long before his thoughts caught up with reality.

He stared over the plain. All around, under the walls of the castle, spread the luxuries he had pitchforked into this world. Out beyond them, the plain stretched, dry and baked. There was, he thought; a gleam of water on the far northern horizon ; but the glimpse was gone at once in the swamping rush of new impressions.

Legionaries lined the walls, helmets glittering in the sun, pila and gladii sharp and waiting. Other soldiers stood ready, their arms burnished and bright. Slowly, Masters surveyed the scene.

" It will be a grand fight ! " Marcus said. The Roman was obviously happy that at last his long lonely vigil had come to an end and there was fighting in view. All the men were in high spirits.

" Are the archers ready ? " Masters asked sharply.

" Ready. Look yonder. " The Roman pointed.

The splash of Lincoln Green was cool in the sunlight. The long yew bows bent, shining, the feathered shafts notched to the ears under round steel caps. The bows sang.

Across the sky like a black scythe swept the shafts. Horses screamed. Men shouted. The clang and crash of falling armour sounded like giant engines, shunting in fogbound yards.

All along the line of charging chivalry horses and riders reared and fell. But still the line pounded on, unwavering. In all the glitter of steel and colour of heraldic device, Masters sought out Baskombe. The man was there. Riding a mighty charger at the front of the knightly array, unharmed, he pounded on. Masters watched him, lips tight, hands clenched. Between Baskombe and Bates he had been given a taste of the seamy side of life ; and he did not like it. Personal enmity, he realised suddenly, was a weakening and betraying emotion. Now all he had time for was a thought that his own men would not be harmed.

Again arrows cleaved the sky.

"I would have to choose a ruined castle!" Masters said, aloud, his eyes firmly fixed on the onrushing host.

There were foot soldiers out there on the plain, too. Appearing from the rear of the cavalry, they ran forward, shooting in their turn, trundling up strange wooden towers and battering rams and gigantic shields through which poked the snouts of ballista and catapults. Rocks began to sing through the air, smashing stone chips from the battlements.

The first rush had been checked. Sullenly, the knights fell back from the breach. A cheer rose from the defenders. To them, Masters guessed, this was but a continuation of other sieges in which they had taken part. After their first surprise at being where there were; but with friends, they still formed their old companies; they accepted and fought, joying only in the song of blood in their temples and the feel of blows shrewdly given. Pre-Twentieth Century styles of thinking; animalistic, primitive—but wholly natural.

A slide of carved stone began over the weakened archway, slipping and crumbling down. Men dodged clear. The sun beat down on everything. Dust choked. Water boys ran their rounds, skins dewed with drops emptying as thirsty men drank deep. Arrows thudded past from the plain. Every now and then a man screamed, spun, and sank down, the shaft protruding from his body. Masters watched it all with eyes that grew more and more hateful. So this was what Chivalry was like!

He thought of Audrey. Waiting in her apartment for him, she was likely to have a long wait. He saw a creeping file of men under mantlets approaching the wall, and called down a shower of arrows upon them, his mind totally absorbed again in the realities of the world he was in. Marcus was everywhere, encouraging, fighting, urging the men on. The sun beat down.

An ugly rush was stemmed only by fierce in-fighting on the sloping treacherous heap of rubble in the breach. Looking down on it, Masters saw men in khaki with round steel hats and dusty puttees wielding rifle and bayonet against the guisarme and pike of the opposition. He frowned. Later, he called a flushed second lieutenant over to him, discovered that the youngster had an idea this was Vimy Ridge, and had no explanation for the stubborn refusal of his men's rifles to fire.

So! Firearms did not work here, then. Well. Lucky he hadn't relied on them. His desire to contain the time spans

had been based on no more than a hunch ; but it had proved right. The fight flared up again and this time it was clear that with another determined rush the knights and their foot soldiers would crash through the outer walls, smash through the barbican.

The Roman passed, shouting hoarsely, gesturing. Men ran to obey, stemming a fresh wave of attacks.

" Marcus ! " Masters called. " Can we hold out ? "

" Aye, that we can. But we may have to retire past these walls, withdraw to the inner citadel. There, we can hold out easily. The enemy have no reinforcements ; they must tire in time. " His grime streaked face smiled ferociously. " Then it will be our turn. "

Around Masters the noise battered on ; scream of horse and shout of man, the plunk of bow string and the grinding shock of flying rock striking stone. His mind assessed what Marcus had told him. If they retired to the inner walls, they must give up this tower, wall and—kitchen !

He smiled, even then. That a kitchen should be the central objective of two opposing armies ! But it was so. Baskombe knew from Bates just what was happening. He would aim for that kitchen and the portal back into the normal world.

Marcus wiped a hairy forearm across his sweating brow and smiled. He pointed down. Masters looked.

" Here comes the next rush. We'd better organise a withdrawal now, before the men are committed. No untangling them once they get in-fighting. "

The noise rose in volume. Out on the plain the knights were massing again, heavy lances dropping to charge, the hovering clouds of foot soldiers waiting to rush in after the armour and clamber up over the breach. Masters opened his mouth to utter the words which would hold his men here, to defend the kitchen to the last, and the telephone dragged at him, pulling him stumbling across the carpet.

Angry, frightened, dismayed, he turned at once, wishing to dive back into the world he regarded as his own and found a mist before his eyes and a dry, evil chuckle sounding in his ears.

The phone rang again. The chuckle died throatily.

He stood looking at the advertisement, fantastically piled with pictures where he had mounted down all the wealth and luxury and soldiery he had thought he would need. Nothing

happened. Bates was stalling him off ! And that meant that he could not get back—yet. The phone shrilled insistently.

“ Yes ? ” he said into the mouthpiece.

“ Bill ! Are you coming round or not ? ”

“ Sorry. Sorry, Audrey. Yes, of course. Be there in ten minutes. I’ll—I’ll try to explain—”

“ Well, that’s all right. I thought you might have had an accident.”

“ I’m on my way.”

He only then realised that he was wearing armour, was covered with ochre dust, and the sword that lay at the foot of the table still shone darkly, wetly red along its tip. He grimaced. He flung the cloth over the picture and then stripped off the armour, fumbling with leather thongs, and changed into a suit. Shrugging on his heavy winter overcoat, he looked quickly around the room, switched off the light and locked the door behind him.

The Riley ran well and within twenty minutes Audrey was stepping into it, muffled in furs, her face glowing with health in the frosty night air.

“ Sorry I’m late, Audrey. And I haven’t the Betto job with me. I’ll drop you at G.H.’s and then nip across to the office. Shouldn’t take more than half an hour.”

“ You sound odd, Bill,” Audrey said with conviction. “ What have you been up to ? ”

He told her about the two detectives. She poo-pooed any idea that he had been responsible for the disappearance of Martin Baskombe. “ If I know him,” she concluded, “ he’s skulked off with a girl down to Brighton.”

“ You could be right, Audrey. I don’t know where he is.”

And that was true. He might have fought his way over the walls, cutting down Ancient Roman and English Archer and World War One Tommy, to burst into the kitchen and from there into the apartment through the advertisement. Damn Baskombe ! He ought never to have left the place. If Marcus didn’t hold out . . .

G.H. greeted them puzzledly. “ I’ve just rung your flat, Bill. Some one answered the phone and then hung up without speaking . . . ”

But Masters wasn’t listening. He was racing out to his Riley and gunning the engine and skidding through the snowy slush back to his apartment—and Baskombe !

As he pulled away from the kerb he saw G. H. and Audrey and Tubby run out. They piled into G.H.'s big Bentley and then Masters was around the corner and pressing the accelerator pedal to the floor. Damn Baskombe !

Or, rather, damn Bates !

The Riley slithered the last twenty yards and he left it slewed around half on the pavement as he ran for the door. The door of his apartment was still locked. The key danced all around the lock before he thrust it in and twisted it.

Baskombe was standing before the fireplace, smiling at him.

"Come in, Bill. Come in."

Masters took deep breaths to steady himself. He glanced at the advertisement. The cloth still covered it.

Baskombe was wearing armour, dusty and dented, and his sword was red with blood. His chalk white face looked grey and tired, and his lips were shaking. He straddled there on the rug, solid before the fireplace.

Suddenly, emptily, there was nothing for Masters to say.

Baskombe said : "Your friend Bates told me a great deal, Alfie. I was prepared to keep this thing on the pure basis of your doing me a favour in return for my silence. You altered that. You tried to murder me—"

"No ! You went into the other world of your own free—"

"Maybe. I've always disliked you. Audrey tells me—or, rather, told me when I last saw her, you may have later information—that she does not care for our association. I gathered, Alfie, that it was you who she cared for."

In the wonder of that, Masters was betrayed.

Baskombe moved away from the fireplace. He said : "Just have a look at this, Masters !"

Masters looked past Baskombe, unable to tear his eyes away. In the fireplace was propped a picture. Beneath it, crumpled newspapers formed ready firelighting material. The main sheet was a stiff red cover paper. Masters' mind reeled.

Baskombe must have worked like a madman. Onto the plain red sheet he had stuck a picture of a desert island—a fringe of surf, a slope of sand, a lonely palm tree. For good measure he had also mounted down a few pictures of shark and barracuda. On the island, Masters could see a whisky bottle, mounted down in solitary glory.

Masters stood rigidly, hands gripping into fists, face taut, straining not to allow his brain to be submerged.

Some degree of control . . . he fought . . . he ought to be able to refuse . . . sweat pouring down his face . . . to be trapped like this . . . the tables turned . . .

He took a single shuddering breath. He was winning. He was holding back. The room whirled about him and the picture reached out hungry arms to engulf him. But he held it off. He stood like a drunken man holding onto an invisible support. Fires blazed in his eyes and a scorching wind sandpapered his face.

His lungs pained, red-hot needles jabbing into every part of his body and a vice that clamped over his brain, squeezing and rending and tearing his sanity apart, agony clawed at him.

"It's—my—world!" His voice was gravel in his mouth.

Baskombe laughed.

"My—world—"

He staggered. But he was fighting back, was working up strength to shut his eyes, to move away, to tear free . . .

A dry chuckle sounded. In his head? He did not know. A hoarse, leathery voice said; "I need you, Alfred. I need you so much. There is so much we must talk about, Alfred. Walk through, Alfred. Walk through."

Bates!

The vibrant compulsion caught him. He lurched wildly. Baskombe was shouting now, shouting obscenities.

"Why don't you go, Masters? Damn you, man, disappear! Vanish! Go!"

"No—" Masters tried to say, faint and nearly gone. "No—"

"That's right, Alfred," the ghostly voice sang in his head. It sickened him. "Come on, Alfred. Step through, Alfred. That's a good boy."

Masters quailed. "No! No!" He threw up both hands before his face, screaming.

"But yes, Alfred, yes."

Baskombe's loud, mocking laughter faded in the fierce imperative of Bates—and in the sullen thunder of surf. Masters knew, then, that he had lost. Old Bates had been too strong for him.

## VII

He was standing on an island. Giant forms thrashed the water. The surf rolled endlessly. And in the blood-red sky a sun blazed down, awful, burning, ravenous, intense. Huge arms of fire rose from the horizons, crackling and roaring, sweeping down, sucking up the water, sending the shark and barracuda crazy with fear.

In his heavy winter overcoat he was chokingly hot and sweaty so he threw the coat off. His foot kicked with a tinkle against the whisky bottle. That was certain death. Forget it. But, then, so was everything else.

Marooned.

Sent here to this desert island to die. He stared about the horizon across the orange sea. The arms of fire were dying down around the edge of the world and he knew that in his apartment the picture on its red paper had crumbled to black red-starred ash. What to do? He began to walk around the little island, his left side to the sea, his feet sliding in hot sand. His coat dropped off, then his tie; he ripped the collar of his shirt open, sweating.

When he saw the whisky bottle, two hours had passed. Well. A small island, then. The sun stayed obstinately in the sky but he knew, strangely, which direction was north.

He began a second circuit. The glint of sun on metal among the whitened rocks caught his eye and he scrambled down. Half submerged in the water he found the top section of a refrigerator. That must have been on the other side of one of the pictures Baskombe had stuck onto the red sheet to make this world. He looked about more keenly, swallowing; perhaps there were other objects that Baskombe, unknowingly, had put into this hell world.

A strange calm had descended on Masters. That had something to do with what Baskombe had told him about Audrey's feelings for him. The thought crossed his mind that Baskombe might have deliberately lied in order to hold his attention at the crucial moment of showing him the red picture. He had the feeling that Baskombe had been telling the truth—and that meant that if he could in some way claw himself out of this madhouse world and back to the old Earth, why, then, there was a future, there was something to strive for quite apart from himself. That was a new experience for Masters and he revelled in it, seeking with renewed purpose for a way out.

In a small bay that he had crossed above on his first circuit he found more objects from the reverse of the pictures Baskombe had cut out. A baby's pram. A packet of detergent. A bottle of cough mixture. Then, so startlingly that he stopped walking and slid in powdery sand, he saw a boat.

Choking with excitement, he ran towards it.

Here was a chance to sail away from this island ! And he knew just where he was going !

He panted up to the boat, a fibre-glass dinghy with a spanking brand new outboard engine clipped onto the stern. He put one hand on the slick gunwale. Disappointment caught him, gripped his stomach into a fist. He could not even swear.

The dinghy was sheared cleanly off halfway along its length. There were no bows. It was only half a boat. All unknowingly, Baskombe's scissors had sliced through the boat, denying his victim the chance of leaving the island.

Despairing, Masters slumped down in the sand, his back against the boat. So this was it, then. The end of it all.

Presently he roused himself and went back to the half refrigerator and took the perfectly frozen ice cubes from the freezer compartment, sucked on a cube, wondering why he bothered. He thought of the OND Woman and the half-tiger. They had had life, even though physiologically they were not all there. Even this refrigerator, sheared in half, still worked, freezing the ice cubes . . .

He was up and running like a madman back to the cove and the boat. His feet slogged through the sand. Breath rasped in his throat. By God ! It had to work !

The stern was under his fingers now, gripping, being pushed and slewed towards the water's edge. He angled the half-boat stern first into the sea, watching as the water rose rippling up the red fibreglass. The keel slid hissing over the sand. He plunged into the water, still pushing the boat, forgetful alike of shark and barracuda. The fibreglass was still under his hands. The boat was riding the ripples. It had not sunk. His heart beating like an African drum he leaped up and sprawled over the gunwale onto the thwart.

The boat floated. He dragged himself up and stared forward. Where the knife-edge of fibreglass met the sea a strange depression in the water showed where the bows should have been. The boat floated !



Masters was sobbing now with exhausted glee. He wound the string around the flywheel, switched on, checked the engine and pulled. The engine awoke in a staccato uproar. First time lucky ! And that was an omen, too. From now on he was through with despondency. He was motoring back through the wide sun-kissed sea and there was just one objective before him.

He headed south. Somewhere down there was the land of the great ochre plain, and the dust-laden wind, and the ruined castle from a Socko advertisement.

It took him ten hours. The coast was still drenched in the sunshine of this world that never failed. He ran the boat up onto a little beach, watching as the invisible bows left the water and the clean break of his half-boat slid up the sand. Sailing half a boat across the strange seas of an alien world ! He had no time for that, now. He had to reach that castle and make his way down into the kitchen.

He began to slog over the plain.

The first glimpse he had of his destination was the gold and scarlet glitter of a distant flag. The colours flaunted there, over the horizon. From sea level you could see five miles. The plain was level so that meant the castle was probably around nine or ten miles off. He set his teeth, feeling the breath harsh in his throat and the dry cracked skin of his lips, and went on slogging forward. He had thoughts now only of Bates and of Baskombe. The one he could deal with merely by burning up this world's gateway, forever shutting Bates in and refusing to accept any future presents that shot at him from infinite nothingness.

But Baskombe was different. He couldn't kill the man. Not now. He decided to think about that problem when he came to it.

If only the damn sun would move a bit, go around, set, give him an illusion that time was passing ! As it was, there was no apparent time interval before he was walking warily up to the ruined castle wall. His feet were blistered and hurt abominably. His mouth and eyes were furnaces. His head felt swollen, distended, ready to burst open. He flopped down and rested his chin on his hands, staring across at the castle.

Scattered over the intervening space were dead men. The arrows stuck up starkly. There were, mercifully, no carrion birds at work. Blood stank sickly and flat in his nostrils.

Somewhere a horse whinnied on and on and on. From the inner castle walls floated a confused sound of many voices, the tinny clang of sword on armour, the crash and smash of mangonels, the high imperious call of captains. War! He couldn't spit and his mind was overclouded by hot and angry thoughts. Groaning, he got to his feet and stumbled on through the sand, feeling the heat sucked out of the air as he passed through the ruined archway. Here dead men lay thickly.

He picked up the first canteen he found and drained its brackish contents, flinging it away in a drunken gesture. He went on. The roar and bustle of battle reached him more clearly now, and he wondered what he would do if he was attacked.

Run, most likely. It was the most logical thing a man could do, when he was confronted by the imbecility of war.

He shook his head. He felt awful. Men hadn't run in the war, had they? Well, then? He stumbled on and now he was conscious that if he didn't find the portal very soon his strength would be gone. His whole body ached and screamed for rest. Not yet. Not yet. Not until he had settled a few outstanding scores.

He found he was gripping a sword. He had no memory of picking it up. Just so must *Australopithecus* have picked up a stone. He went on into the ruined barbican and stared up at the wall where he and Marcus had stood watching the last onslaught. Had his men, then, been fighting all this time? And was Marcus still alive?

Stone rang under his feet, cool blessedly cool stone. He went down into the kitchen. The place was a shambles. One of the serving maids lay at the doorway, a halberd broken off in her body. Beyond her the half-tiger lay so studded with arrows that it looked like a hedgehog—he visualised the horrified revulsion that had prompted that continuous shooting into the poor half-beast.

Over the spiral staircase leading down to where Bates had waited for him in the dungeon was a bloody heap of men. They must have fought there, for some reason. He recognised various uniforms. He felt sick and turned away. The placidity of the world oppressed him; he was dazed by the absence of stimulation—he had expected fighting, opposition, Baskombe in angry defence. On the table where once Marcus had eaten a hearty meal he saw a tin, banded in red and black.

It stood there, the red lettering bold and brassy. He walked across and hefted it. Empty. The cowgum tin, sent to him by Bates, the tin containing a neo-Solomon's Stone, that could unlock the portals between the worlds, that tin just standing there quietly unnerved him. Why? What had Baskombe been doing?

A scratchy slithering brought his head up. He stared at the pile of corpses over and around the spiral staircase. Fear took his stomach and squeezed so that his insides turned to pap. The Ond woman glided towards him. One hand held a long sword that dripped blood. The Ond woman spoke to him in the voice of Bates.

"Thank you for coming to meet me at last, Alfred. I have been waiting impatiently, for my time is nearly up. Had you not returned now I would have had to leave this dimension before my work was done." The Shape sighed. "And that would not have been pleasant."

"Go away!" Masters shouted. The ludicrousness of that had no power, now, to move him. He was shaking with fear. Through the glaring white womanish shape the watermarked letters glowed as the Shape passed before a shattered wall through which fire glowed. Masters backed away, shaking.

"Come, Alfred. In the last few minutes of my power in this world, before I must return to—to the place from whence I come—needs must that I kill you and take you with me."

Masters swallowed. The Shape glided inexorably towards him. He started to think. He started up the flesh and blood mechanism that had made Man different from all other animals on the Earth—the flesh and blood and the something else.

So old Bates had had to possess this Shape and come for him with a sword! Well! That put things in a different perspective. He licked his lips, feeling them dry and cracked. Old Bates was vulnerable, after all. He put up his sword in a posture of defence, spread his feet, flexed his knees. He didn't intend to be killed—by anyone, let alone a gibbering white Shape speaking with the voice of Bates and brandishing a bloody sword. Not on your life!

The Shape—or Bates—whirled in murderously at him, the sword slicing air as he swayed aside. His answering cut in turn sliced empty air.

"Alfred, Alfred—do not resist. I have clawed my way out of—of a certain place—and I mean to take you back with me."

Masters didn't bother to say : ' Come and get me '—he was saving his breath for the physical contest. The Shape crossed swords, feinted and then brought a sharp back-handed cut at Masters' chest. He caught it on the guard of his sword, twisted his wrist and thrust smoothly. His sword point went into the paper under what would have been the heart position.

He felt the sword point tear through, saw the paper peel away from the metal. Then he had to duck frantically as the Shape's sword whickered back across his head, shaving the hair.

The Shape laughed.

" No good, Alfred ! Kill a paper shape ? Impossible ! "

The opposing sword beat at him, flailing a barrage of blows that took all his skill and strength to counter. And his strength was ebbing away. Fear curled like a snake in his mind, weakening him. You couldn't kill an inanimate paper shape breathed into motion by a dead man !

He slashed out wildly. Paper shredded. A slicing downward blow took the Shape's left arm clean off at the shoulder.

Bates snickered with glee and the right arm wielding the sword battered in at Masters, sapping his strength, slashing at him, reflected firelight blinding off the blade into his eyes. He fought back as best he could. The pain scored down his left side as he whirled ; a hit to Bates !

He concentrated on cutting the paper figure to pieces ; but the demoniac skill of the other held all his feints and thrusts and ripostes at bay ; he could not penetrate the guard again after that one arm-severing blow. His muscles felt leaden. Sweat dripped down his face. His hand was slimy on the sword hilt.

They were circling in the kitchen now, his feet loud on the flags, the Shape's steps a ghastly scratchy slither. The sound of the swords, ringing together, was like a tocsin of death. The sound brought visitors.

Men sifted into the kitchen, to stand in a wondering ring. Bloodstained armour caught the reflected fire glow from the kitchen ranges and Masters realised dimly that the battle must be over. He saw Baskombe, standing with his knights, the smile on his face dark and malicious. Damn Baskombe ! And damn Bates, too, slashing at him in the guise of a paper Shape !

An arrow whistled. It went clean through the paper Shape. Twirling, his sword a blur of steel before his tiring body,

Masters saw Marcus, stern-faced, fitting another arrow to his bow.

"No good, Marcus, old friend!" called Masters. "This is between me and the Shape."

Marcus lowered his bow reluctantly. Quite obviously, no one wanted to attack the Shape; how the men had the courage to remain standing there was a mystery. In the wide kitchen, with the glow of the fire beating redly upon armour and sword—and upon white typewriting bond paper in violent motion—the scene was macabre and ugly and smelled of death.

Masters was tiring. His parries grew weaker and weaker. There was a spell uncoiling in the kitchen now, a quite open realisation among all those dead men—and the two alive—present that the crux of the eerie events was unfolding, here and now, in the macabre sword fight between a dead man animating a cut-out paper woman's shape, and a panting, sweating, frightened but alive man.

The truth that he could not last much longer came home to Masters with more shock than all the Shape's violent slashes and cuts. He shook the hair back from his forehead and his sword bore down on a thrusting point that nearly penetrated. His own riposte was slow. He had to jerk aside, using feet that seemed glued to the floor, to avoid the swordsman's answer to any fumble. As he lumbered backwards around the kitchen he could hear nothing save the thunder of his own blood, the ring of blades and the occasional jeering remark from Bates speaking through the Ond Woman.

Knights, Romans, Yeomen, Tommies, passed in a blur. From that background blur one face jumped clearly into focus.

Martin Baskombe was staring at him, all eyes, his face a bloodied and dusty mask of horror.

"Bill—" Baskombe's words penetrated jerkily. "Bill! This isn't right! This isn't—civilised!"

He was fighting now leadenly. The Ond Woman's sword nicked down his chest, ripping the sweat-soaked shirt. Blood seeped out. They were battling by a rent in the wall and Baskombe was standing, transfixed, a scant three feet away.

Watching the fight as though from a great distance, Masters saw Baskombe lunge forward, sword upraised. There was no fear in him now.

Sensing the treachery, Bates twisted the Shape's sword and the three blades met in a clanging uproar. Through that tocsin that struggled its way to Master's cotton-wool padded brain, he thought he heard a shrill buzzing. He felt a force constrict about him and shook his will-power against it.

Baskombe disappeared.

The Shape staggered forward, off balance.

And Masters was flung helplessly through the air, tossed like a rag doll hard against the glowing kitchen range. He narrowly avoided being spitted by an iron rod and scorched by the glowing fire. Flames licked up around him. He staggered free, into the hearth with its ashes and broken bones and grease.

So Baskombe had been summoned back to the real world !

And Masters was left here, not hearing the shrill sound properly that might have saved him, to battle on against a dead man and a paper Shape and a sword. Well.

He looked at the kitchen range, and he thought it was worth a try.

His hand was singed as he picked up a log from the fire, holding the unburnt end, waving it to fan the flames into fiercer life. As the Shape rushed him, sword extended, he thrust the blazing brand full at the hideous apparition.

The Ond woman—the Shape—Bates—burst into flames.

Flames ran and crackled and died and a heap of grey ash drifted across the stone flags.

A hoarse old voice mumbled querulously : " All right, all right, Master, I am coming . . . "

Marcus leaped forward, sword held high.

" Emperor ! " he shouted, exulting. " Victorious ! All Hail ! "

Masters smiled tiredly at him—and heard the front door bell shrilling.

" Good bye, Marcus, old friend, " he said. " Goodbye . . . "

Then he was falling weakly onto the soft rug of his own apartment. G.H. and Tubby were there. Audrey ran towards him with a glad cry and her face bent above him, filled with pity and compassion and fear. Just beyond the group Detective Sergeant Venner and Constable Duncan had obviously just been let in, and it had been their ring at the door that had brought him—but no. No ! Their ring had snatched Baskombe back.

Then how? Who . . . ?

Martin Baskombe walked tiredly into the apartment, shutting the front door behind him.

"Hullo, Bill," he said.

"You rang that front door bell! You brought me back!"

"Of course. The whole thing had gone too far. Quite beyond the bounds of reason. I might dislike you, Bill, but we are men, alive, of this world. When you fought that ghastly Shape animated by that horrible old man—well, I just couldn't stomach it any more."

"What's going on here?" bellowed G.H., frothing.

Masters stood up, wavering, and Audrey put an arm about him. He smiled at her, then turned to G.H. and Tubby and the two detectives.

"Explanations can follow. You won't believe them all, of course. You won't believe any of it, come to that. I cannot explain the powers that might be given to a man seeking revenge. But this I do know—and I think Martin will agree—revenge doesn't get you anywhere, except ulcers, insomnia and the nut house."

"Right, Bill," said Martin Baskombe.

"And even though you might be able to design a world that was yours for the asking, mould it to your heart's desire, there'd still be something off key, a canker in the fruit. No one is perfect enough to know what is best, for themselves or for anyone else. All we can do is go on trying to make the best, and know that we can always do better."

Audrey pulled his arm. "That's all very fine, Bill. But you'd better let me have a look at you. You *are* in a mess!"

"Not any more, Audrey, not any more." He cocked an enquiring eye at Baskombe. "That right, Martin?"

"That's right, Bill."

"Let's shake on that," said Bill Masters, burying Alfred Simpson for the last time.

As the two men shook hands, Masters' foot struck a sword. He looked down and saw the metal sullied by the sombre tinge of blood. He kicked the sword, and it slithered into the fireplace.

No one took any notice of it.

—Kenneth Bulmer

*Hek Belov, the great cyberneticist, and author Edward Mackin, are up to their old tricks once more in this latest story of the ingenious genius, and Hek really runs himself into troubles which even his resourcefulness fails to overcome.*

# TIME TRAP

BY EDWARD MACKIN

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Just outside of the Hotel Roma, in Progress Square, are four rustic benches made of light alloy, and painted brown. Sitting there one pleasant Spring morning, nursing an empty stomach, and listening to the tapes belting out hi-fi bird song through the loudspeakers in the artificial trees, I gave way to bitterness. I thought of how tasteless the rich had become ; how lacking in even a semblance of culture ; how utterly vulgar, and fat and hairy, and generally repulsive they were—and how I wished I were one of them, the swine !

Is it right, my friends, that I, Hek Belov, the great cyberneticist, should be sitting outside the city's most sumptuous flesh-pot, and actually starving, while lesser brains are concerned only with questions of supertax ? Tcha ! It is my own fault. I admit it. I have been far too modest. Modesty, in fact, is my besetting sin.

At the other end of the bench was a thin-featured, middle-aged man. He sat well forward, elbow on knee, and head to chin, in deep concentration. Twice I had attempted to pass the time of day away with him ; but he hadn't answered. As a last resort I turned out my pockets and found enough tobacco dust



to make a cigarette. It was fifty per cent fluff : but one can't afford to be choosy these days. Even the final notices I get lately seem to be affected by the economy drive. They are typed on thinner paper, which is a distinct advantage when you are compelled to roll your own.

I smoked this vile-tasting apology for a cigarette, and switched my thoughts to food. Mentally, I walked into Emilio Batti's restaurant, and ordered his special three-course followed by cherry pie liberally doused with dairy cream. My pleasant drooling was rudely interrupted by the voice of my companion on the bench. I frowned at him.

"What was that?" I asked. "I don't believe I heard you aright."

He turned right round, and regarded me earnestly.

"I inquired," he said, "what you thought I might do with thirty feet of copper tubing, about fifty pieces of plastic of various shapes and colours, and about half-a-ton of miscellaneous rubbish. I want a practical suggestion," he added, severely.

"My friend," I assured him, "you are talking to a practical man ; and if you are really serious about this business then maybe I can help you. Have you a cigarette?"

He brought out a cheap, plastic case. I helped myself to a cigarette, and found it was one of the self-lighting variety. I pulled on it a couple of times and it lit.

"You must be a man of wealth," I hazarded.

"No," he said. "My late uncle left these behind along with the things I have already mentioned." He tapped the case. "These are the last of fifty. All I have now is the junk, and the empty premises where he carried on his engineering business. I wouldn't get ten shillings for the lot. Even the lease of the building runs out at the end of the year. His business was a flop. The creditors have taken everything of value."

"My friend," I said, "you're lucky. When my uncle Jek died all he left behind was thirty-six hungry cats, and a savage Alsatian. He willed them to me."

"He must have been fond of animals."

"Only the edible ones. What he did have was a perverted sense of humour. He collected those cats, and the dog, only a couple of days before he died."

We sat silent for a while, and I wondered what we could do with my friend's legacy ; but my brain kept on turning to the

more interesting problem of wangling a meal, under the influence of my empty stomach.

How, though? How? That was the question. I glanced at my companion; but he was modelling for Rodin again. Then a helicab dropped in near the hotel's imposing main entrance, and a prosperous-looking gentleman emerged, and told the heli-pilot to wait. The doorman, resplendant in his new uniform of crimson and gold threw him a smart salute. Then it was that a desperate expedient occurred to me, and with old Belov to think is to act.

I walked over to the heli-cab, and charged round it and up the steps. The doorman, who was new to the job, placed a restraining hand on my chest as I had hoped he would.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"My fare," I told him, indignantly. "That ugly-faced yard dog hasn't paid me."

The doorman frowned.

"You are speaking of Mr. Lemuel Crosthwaite," he told me, with heavy dignity, "of Crosthwaite, Crosthwaite, and Blunder. I have never found him other than generous. He forgot, I suppose. Anyone can forget."

"Forget nothing," I told him. "He owes me a pound, and unless I get it I am going to raise hell!"

"Here," said the doorman, grimly, abstracting a note from some inner pocket, "take this, and get. We don't want your kind around here. I shall warn Mr. Crosthwaite about using your cab in future."

"Do that," I said, and went down the steps, and around to the other side of the heli-cab. The driver was quietly eating a piece of chocolate. I opened the door, and poked my head inside. "Mr. Crosthwaite has changed his mind," I informed him. "You needn't wait."

"I haven't been paid yet," he said, with a touch of anger. He knocked the meter off with a flourish. "He'll have to pay me what's on that," he said, "and the jump fee. The motor's cold now, and that means extra juice."

He climbed out of the cab, and made his way up the marble steps with the air of a man who is going to stand no nonsense.

"No-one pushes me around," he informed the world at large.

From then on, as far as I could see, he was stuck with a prepared script, and the doorman was about to have the awful feeling that either he was going mad, or events were repeating

themselves. I never did like doormen, or heli-cab pilots. They have no proper respect for poverty.

I went over to the Thinker.

"Let's get away from here," I said. "There's been a hold-up. Ten minutes from now they will be looking for a man about my height and weight."

After an excellent meal at Emilio's restaurant, during which I learnt that my companion's name was George Diggle, we took the ped-strip to West Side, and walked the rest of the way, almost to the fringe of the city. His uncle's factory was a dismal little brick building, very old, and probably rat-ridden, as so many of these neglected old places were.

We went inside, and I looked at the rubbish scattered about what had once been the machine shop. There was part of an automatic lathe, and an ancient drilling machine. There were untidy heaps of plastic offcuts all over the place, and some lengths of plastic and metal tubing. In one corner was something that looked like a cross between a very old washing machine, and a central-heating boiler, same vintage.

"What did he make?" I asked, disgustedly. "Odds and ends for the municipal rubbish dumps?"

"Electric hat-warmers, chiefly; but they didn't sell very well."

"You surprise me," I said, clicking my teeth at him.

Junk, he had said, and junk it was. I raked about among the stuff, thinking hard: but I had almost given up hope of converting it into cash, even as scrap, when my eye fell on an electric clock. It was one of the old-fashioned dial type. They weren't uncommon: but there was something very odd about it. The numerals were the wrong way round. It was a kind of left-handed clock that told the time widdershins.

"That's another of my uncle's ventures," explained George Diggle. "It's really an old idea. I suppose you'd call it a joke clock. He called it a *keole sdrawkcab*, which is 'clock backwards.' That didn't sell very well, either."

"Amazing!" I said. "What genius! He should have been prosecuted."

"My uncle Ben was a very likeable man," said his nephew, staunchly. "What he lacked in talent he made up in confidence."

"God bless him!" I said, examining the clock with interest.

I had just the ghost of an idea, and then, gradually, it became clearer. I knew now what could be done with the odd bits and pieces lying about, the residual rubbish of an infertile brain.

"Can you raise the price of an ad-flash?" I asked Diggle.

"I could maybe borrow it. Why? What have you in mind?"

"Money," I said, simply. "What else? But first of all we have to set a trap for it in the form of a Time Machine. Something that looks like what a Time Machine would be expected to look like by someone with no scientific pretensions. A kind of pseudo-scientific nightmare."

"You are not contemplating a fraud?" he said, frowning. "Are you?"

Great heavens, what a thought! I have never suffered such a gross insult. I was shocked, I can tell you.

"Nothing of the kind," I said, indignantly. "I have never defrauded anyone in my life. I am merely about to make a financial re-adjustment between the over-wealthy and the under-privileged. What you fail to understand, my friend, is this. In the final analysis, what the rich demand isn't honesty, not even honesty of purpose. All they demand is to be entertained, to have their blunted senses titillated. They are always looking for something new, and if it isn't what it pretends to be—well, neither is stage magic; but it's perfectly legitimate. Now then, let's see if we can get this junk into some sort of geometrical disorder with knobs on."

"My uncle had some very advanced ideas on the problem of Time," said George, thoughtfully. "In fact he neglected his business to work on his theories; but I don't know if he had any sort of success along that line. He used to tell me that the time constant was different for different things. A block of basalt, for instance, or a steel girder, or a man. A basalt block will endure longer than the girder or the man, but not because steel or flesh is more friable or delicate. He insisted that all substances were alike in that respect, and that only their time constant is different. Their mutability is directly due to this sequential clash. Would you like to see some of his notes?"

I shuddered.

"No, my friend," I said. "I've heard enough. How many heads did you say he had?"

"He was a man of great genius," said George, frowning his displeasure. "Had he lived a few more years he would have been famous. I'm sure of it."

So was I. The country's a bit short on clowns.

"Look," I said, scribbling a few words on a piece of paper. "Get this ad flashed. It should cost you about a fiver for a single insertion; but the returns will be tremendous if we happen to hook a su—a backer, that is."

He took the paper, and read it out loud.

*"Millionaire wanted to subsidise greatest invention of the age. References available."*

He gazed at me, blankly.

"References?" he said.

"Dozens of them," I told him. "Mostly from people I owe money to. It's a simple matter of erasing their gratuitous insults and substituting whatever the occasion demands. Just leave that to old Belov."

He looked at the advert, doubtfully.

"Do you think they'll fall for it?"

"Fall for it? We'll have to beat them off with a club. You'll see."

It wasn't exactly like that; but we did get three inquiries. Two of them were from cranks who wanted money from us for their own projects—the damned frauds! The third inquiry, via the video company, was from a Mr. James K. Brezrok of Brezrok Products Inc. As I remembered him he had made a couple of millions out of cheese alone. He was the man who thought of selling it in powder form. It was packaged in plastic shakers labelled: POWCHEE—That *Extra* Condiment!

He was a small, fat man, pinkily bald, with a round, red face, heavily veined like a raw haggis, which I understand the wild Welsh eat on Saint Patrick's day. He was nudging seventy; but looked ten years younger.

"I'm James Kirdcup Brezrok," he announced. "Where's this invention of yours? I want to see those references, too. If I'm to back this thing I want some assurances that my money won't be thrown away. Here's my card."

I took it, and handed him the references. One was from the Inland Revenue thanking me for installing half-a-million-pounds worth of computers. Originally it had been a demand note for fifty nine pounds. The others were from various supply firms including an outfitters who still expected to be paid for a suit I had worn out some years ago. The human heart never gives up hope. It makes one feel proud somehow.

He read them carefully, and then looked at me, sardonically.

"You seem to be a man of varied accomplishments, Mr. Belov," he said, drily. "Cyberneticist, shoe-factor, manager of a furniture emporium, manager of a pet food establishment (I was the proud owner of thirty-six cats and an Alsatian at the time), and chief buyer to Gloggs the Grocers. All this in the space of three years." He glanced at the references again. "Your dates overlap," he announced and, scrunching the lot into a ball, dropped them on the floor.

Figures baffle me, curse them! Poor Diggle was in a blue funk. He was mumbling incoherent apologies for having wasted the great man's time, and another minute would have seen him off through the door like a frightened rabbit. So I boldly took Brezrok by the arm, and propelled him towards the fantastic rig in the middle of the floor.

"I can't be bothered with trivialities," I told him. "I want you to see this world-shaking invention. It took over twenty years to perfect, and nearly a hundred-thousand pounds in hard cash. Now we've run out of funds just as we are in sight of extending its range."

"What is it?" he asked. "A gun?"

I glared at him. A gun, he said. I looked at it myself. It didn't look anything like a gun. It was more like a twentieth-century surrealist's idea of a giant mobile carrying off a washing machine and an assortment of rubbish surrounding a genuine kcolc sdrawkcab. There was also a fluorescent tube which flashed at three-second intervals, and lots of other things, dangling, twirling, vibrating and swinging about; but right in the centre was a real piece of electronic equipment. It was the thing that looked like a cross between a boiler and a washing machine. There was an opaque glass screen set in the front panel. Heaven knows what it was for. It had a power plug, which I plugged in for show, not intending to switch it on. But it didn't look like a gun; not by any stretch of the imagination.

"You must have a headful of powdered cheese," I told him. "Of course it's not a gun. It's a Time Machine."

James Kirdcup Brezrok frowned.

"Like a clock?" he asked, ignoring the insult, and obviously puzzled.

"Yes," I said. "It folds up into a neat parcel twenty-five yards by eleven-foot-six-and-three-quarters, or fifteen rods as the crow flies, and it can catch fish, too. No sportsman should be without one."

Brezrok glared at me.

"That's an insult to my intelligence," he said. "One rod measures five-and-a-half yards."

"Don't let it bother you," I said, and turned away. I had an awful suspicion that I was playing straight man to a comedian, and I tried to think of one good reason why I shouldn't strangle him. It seemed to me that he was temptingly expendable.

"It can transport you into the far future," said George Diggle, desperately, finding words from somewhere.

"Or into the distant past," I added, regaining my customary composure. "Perhaps you'd like a demonstration. If you would just stand on this metal plate, and place this visor over your head . . ."

"Poppycock! Pure poppycock!" said the little man, fiercely; but he stepped onto the aluminium just the same. "Don't think you can deceive me," he added. "I've seen all the latest video tricks."

I dropped the plastic helmet, with the impressive-looking coils sticking out from the sides, over his fat head. He looked like some ponderous beastie from the "Deep Space Book" by caricaturist Alexander Jurgens. For the first time I felt the tenuity of our position. It just wasn't going to work; but I had to go through with it now.

I took up my position behind him, and slightly to one side, where there was a table on which I had placed a button switch. This was to fire a couple of magnesium tubes almost in front of his nose; but hidden by a metal plate. The drill was for Diggle to throw in a huge switch, wired to fresh air and then, after a couple of seconds, to switch on the fluorescents above and below the koolc sdrawkcab, which had been greatly speeded up. I was to fire the magnesium and shout that the retroex amplifier had gone (whatever the devil that might be), and I was then to add that it would cost fifty pounds to replace.

If he fell for that then our research into Time Travel would gather momentum. We could arrange a better show for him on the next occasion, when something even more expensive would burn out. We might even get him interested in a completely new model, which would cost something like three-hundred-thousand pounds to build. It had seemed all right at the time, but now I could see that it wouldn't hoax a child. It was with a feeling of failure that I stretched out my

hand to press the button switch ; but my extended finger never reached it.

Diggle, perhaps in an effort to appear busy, or because he thought that Mr. Brezrok was entitled to a better show for his money, switched in the gimmick in the middle of our modest little display of human endeavour, and a burst of violet light came from the opaque screen of this electronic doodah that looked vaguely like a washing machine.

I revised my opinions of Diggle's uncle immediately. The light enveloped our potential backer, and then he was gone like a beautiful dream, without even leaving his pocket-book behind him.

Diggle was the first to speak. He looked at the spot where Brezrok had been in open-mouthed astonishment, and then he said : " Good . . . "

" I'm glad you think so," I said, reaching for my hat, which was also on the table. " Have you thought of the construction the police will put on this business ?"

Diggle's jaws were moving silently, and then he got another word out : " God !" he added.

" What in creation *is* this thing ?" I inquired, pointing to the box with the opaque, glass screen that had spat violet light at James Kirdcup Brezrok, and sent him Heaven knew where.

" I don't know," admitted George Diggle. " My uncle was still working on it at the time of his demise. It might be a disintegrator."

" Marvellous," I said. " Now all we have to do is to prove to the satisfaction of the authorities that we didn't know it was loaded." I strode towards the door. There didn't seem any point in staying. " If you want anything," I told him, " I'll be around this way again in about ten years time. My name's Smith," I added. " If I told you anything else I'm a liar."

I opened the door, and someone knocked on my face.

" Sorry," said a tall, excited looking individual. " But there was no bell."

I staggered back, and he walked in. He wore a pair of old-fashioned rimless spectacles, and sported a tiny, grey moustache.

" Where's Mr. Brezrok ?" he asked, anxiously. " I must see him at once. I've been trying to contact him all day. I finally tracked him through a mutual acquaintance to this place. Did you know that Goldbaum Industrials are slipping ? It's



disastrous, or it will be if I don't find him pretty soon. Where is he?"

"Goldbaum or Mr. Brezrok?" I asked, playing for time.

"Mr. Brezrok, of course. Goldbaum has been dead for nearly a quarter of a century. I was referring to the Goldbaum Corporation. Their stocks are crashing, and Mr. Brezrok has a considerable holding. I'm his financial adviser," he added, miserably. He rubbed his bony hands together, nervously. "Have you any idea where he might be?"

"Conferring with Goldbaum, I expect," I hazarded. "He left here rather suddenly."

"Oh, you mean they got word through to him? Good. Well, I must get back as quickly as possible. There's a lot of work to be done if we are to weather the storm. Goodbye."

He went out, and banged the door. That seemed to be my cue. I was following him when Diggle grabbed me by the arm.

"If you run out on me," he said, pushing his face into mine, "I shall probably tell the police that it was all your doing, and that I saw you burn the body."

After all I had done for him! Friends, such base ingratitude sickens me. But then there are so few people who approach my own high standards of straight dealing, and of courage in the face of adversity.

I went over to the little table, and put my hat back on it. Then I noticed something about the gimmick with the glass eye. It was still switched on.

I belted for the other side of the room as fast as I could go. Diggle joined me in the panic rush, and we met head on at the door, where I clawed for the knob.

"You didn't switch it off," I said, "you careless swine!"

"I did, too," he returned, disgustedly. "I switched off at the wall as soon as Brezrok disappeared; but that hell-glow went with him. So I shouldn't be surprised if it hadn't burnt out."

I had Diggle switch off at the cabinet end as well rather than take any chances, and then I pulled out the plug. It was a brave thing to do, and my trembling hands attested to the fact. I removed the back panel and gazed inside. It was like Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

"I don't get it," said Diggle, foolhardily sweeping his hand about inside; "but wherever he's gone the essential works have gone with him. Do you know what I think? It's just

possible that my uncle was working on a Time Machine before he died. That's what this thing could be." His hand went to his mouth. "Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Brezrok may have been thrown back a couple of million years. Even now he may be getting chased by some horrible, pre-historic monster."

"He can do with the exercise," I said, sourly. "But there's another possibility. He may have been projected into the far future; a flesh-and-blood oddity in a world of machines. Only one thing is certain. With the kind of brain he's got he'll be selling them something they don't want for twice as much as they are prepared to pay. And if he is way back with the pre-historic monsters the uppermost thought in his mind will be 'All that meat, and no cans.'"

What puzzled me was why the power cord should stick straight out from the inside of the cabinet, and yet not appear to end anywhere in particular. It was like an optical illusion. You couldn't see the end by looking at it directly, and half-seen out of the side of the eye it appeared to shift and reform, to flow almost. I tried to catch hold of it; but it never seemed to be quite where I grasped, and while I was thus engaged there was a heavy banging on the door, and someone shouting. We both leapt to our feet, and looked at each other in dismay.

"If it's the police," I said, "I am only here in a consultative capacity. I know nothing about this rig."

"You're a liar!" Diggle told me. "Not only that but you are unlucky to me. I am sorry I ever met you."

He was almost in tears; but, putting a brave front on it, he went and opened the door. It was Mr. Brezrok's financial adviser again.

"Mr. Brezrok!" he bleated. "Where's Mr. Brezrok?" He grabbed Diggle by the arm. "What have you done with him, you scoundrel. I know he came here."

"You've got the right man there," I said. "Hold on to him. I'm going for the police."

I fled through the door, cramming my hat on as I went, and headed for the nearest ped-strip, which I reached without any sounds of pursuit. I commuted to the fast strip when I'd got my breath back, and then I had time to think out the next move.

We were in a spot all right; but I wasn't running away. Let that be clearly understood, friends. Belov never runs away. I just had to have time to think, that was all. You can't think

with people panicking all over the place. I would go back, of course, as soon as I had a solution to the problem. I had to. The police were probably on my track right now. Diggle would be certain to shift the blame for Brezrok's disappearance on to my innocent shoulders. I had to eat, too. I can't think on an empty stomach.

I thought it wise to keep clear of my usual haunts ; so Emilio's restaurant was out of the question, and I dropped off by a swank hotel on Third Level, in that conglomeration of helicab landing squares, interconnecting bridges, administrative buildings, and high class gyp joints known collectively as Victory Plaza.

I was contemplating the name over the door, which was *The Silver Salver*, when the walkway rolled under my unsuspecting feet, and slid me in and through the ornate portals, and right into the arms of a waiter. He was tall, and dressed as an old-fashioned butler, with powdered wig, and silk stockings.

He put on the respectful I-recognise-wealth-when-I-see-it act, and taking my hat handed it to another flunkey who disappeared with it. "This way, sir," he said, and led me to a table halfway across the enormous floor. There were quite a lot of the fabulous rich there, lolling about with bored expressions, or fiddling with their food, as though it were some kind of complicated game, and they were three down and no ace in the bag.

"May I have your order, sir?" he inquired, when he had me comfortably seated.

Looking around at the expensive murals, and the general air of gilt-on-gold I decided that I probably hadn't the price of a glass of water. Still, I was in. The only problem was how to get out—without paying. This was a place, of course, where such a thing was unheard of. It just wasn't done. A glance at the doorway revealed two hefty bouncers, who seemed to have the necessary dissuasive powers should such an unlikely contingency ever arise. I shelved the problem temporarily. One has to live.

Waving the menu away—my French wouldn't have been equal to it, anyhow—I ordered with studied casualness, as to the manner born.

"Salmon for the main dish," I told him, "and whatever the chef recommends ; but finish off with cherry pie."

"Certainly, sir," he said, respectfully, and departed.

There followed what I can only describe as an orgy of eating. It must have lasted a couple of hours. I never knew so many things went with salmon ; but I must say that their cherry pie wasn't a patch on Emilio's. Finally, the dreaded moment arrived, and the waiter presented the bill—on a silver salver. I didn't attempt to pick it up. That would have been fatal.

"How much is it?" I inquired in the bored voice of a man to whom money means very little.

"Twenty-one-pounds-eleven-and-fourpence, sir," said the waiter in a discreet whisper as though he were imparting a secret.

Friends, it could have been half as much, or twice as much. It made not the slightest difference, because I couldn't pay. Just the same, I went through the motions while I thought desperately of escape. Taking out my wallet I felt inside. Truth to tell, I was about to hand him that hoary excuse that I had forgotten to bring any money with me when my fingers encountered Brezrok's card. I snapped it forth with a flourish, and dropped it on the salver.

"Bill this address," I said, stifling a yawn, "and fetch me a double brandy, there's a good fellow."

Impudence is the bull-dozer of doubt.

"Yes, sir," he said, uncertainly, and went off almost at the double.

I knew where he was going. To the manager, of course. The manager would video the Central Advice Agency, and they would probably tell him that Brezrok was still solvent despite the dip in Goldbaum shares. At least, I hoped so.

When he came back he had the brandy with him, and had recovered his aloof, but respectful, butler air. I drank the brandy slowly and then, getting to my feet, took my time walking to the door. The flunkey who had taken my hat popped up from nowhere and returned it. The two bouncers saluted smartly, and followed me through the door. After a tip, of course. I was about to tell them not to bet on horses when I discovered that the waiter was with them. The door closed behind us, and their expressions changed. The waiter's voice and manner had changed, too. It wasn't a bit butler-like.

"Listen, Brezrok," he said, savagely. "You're not worth a damn penny piece. The bottom just fell out of Goldbaum's, and that's where you were standing ; but because the manager thinks that you may have influential friends he doesn't wish to deal harshly with you. Just don't try it again, that's all." He

nodded to the eager bouncers. "See him to the ped-strip, boys." Then he went inside.

The boys took an arm and a leg each. "Don't put yourselves out on my account," I told them. "I can manage when you're busy." They didn't answer, and I felt myself being swung backwards and forwards. Then I was flying through the air, and people were scattering right and left on the ped-strip. I hit it and rolled over, and scrambling to my feet grabbed a hold bar. The folk round about looked down their noses at me.

"I was collecting for the widows and orphans," I told them ; "but I was robbed of my can in that restaurant, and thrown out, just as you saw, friends. It's a den of thieves and cut-throats, that's what it is."

Then I went round with the hat. Before I left the strip I had collected three-pounds-twelve-and-ninepence. This was enough to placate my landlady, who had kept me out for three nights because of a trifling fourteen pounds that I owed her. In the generosity of her heart she allowed me to sleep in the lift, which was temporarily out of order.

A gentleman I had never seen before rolled in at about one in the morning in an advanced state of inebriation, and proceeded to feed me through the lattice gates with chocolates under the impression that I was a Himalayan bear. He went out for more chocolates, but didn't come back, which was just as well. I have never tasted nicer chocolates ; but I was getting a bit tired of making happy bear noises for him.

The following morning I was told that I was wanted on the house video. It was Diggle. He had got on to me through the cursed city directory. He was brief, and to the point.

"Get down here, that's all, Belov," he ordered me. "Just get down here. I've stalled that financial adviser of Brezrok's for the time being ; but it won't last. We've got to produce him."

He flicked off.

When I did get down to the place Diggle almost dragged me in. He was in a state of nervous tension.

"For Heaven's sake do something, Belov," he implored, "or we'll spend the rest of our lives in gaol !"

"My brain is working on the problem," I informed him, with quiet dignity. "Let's not interrupt it."

I took a look at the empty cabinet. It didn't mean a damn thing. There was no inspiration there ; so I got to thinking about Time in general. Everything, as Albert Einstein once

declared—or maybe more than once—is relative. He had to use a very special kind of mathematics to prove this, which is not altogether dissimilar to using loaded dice ; but no-one has yet challenged him on this point.

Anyway, *past*, *present*, and *future* are purely relative terms, and perhaps Einstein covered this as well ; but, in case he didn't here is old Belov's version. First of all, then, there is only the eternal present. The Life Force is at the pulsing core of it, like some eternal sun from which proceed the all-embracing and expanding force fields moving through the static figures, and creating and recreating an infinity of present times, and a relative future and a relative past, and each separated by the width of a pulse from the following and preceding quanta. That is life, my friends. Movement is illusion. All that ever moves is the Life Force through a petrified forest of film-fixed forms, living and re-living and re-enacting the same old scenes. The same? Well, maybe not always the same for a reason inherent in the whole, which is something different again.

Meanwhile I look at the cabinet and consider the possibility that Brezrok is imprisoned like a mite between the ever expanding onion skins of the force that titillates our senses, and perhaps not more than the thickness of a quantum away. Half of zero, perhaps ; but not measurable anyway, because the terms don't exist. It was aggravating, to say the least of it.

"Brezrok !" I bellowed, and George Diggle made a spectacular dive for the door before he realised that nothing had blown up, or was likely to. We can't know all the angles, my friends, so maybe it did the trick, or perhaps it was just the long arm of coincidence ; but suddenly there was an indescribable sound that rang in the brain.

"Thank Heavens !" exclaimed Diggle.

Brezrok had come back, and the cabinet was humming with a maze of gear. The snag was that he didn't know he had been away.

"Come on now," he said, impatiently. "Let's have this demonstration. What's this thing supposed to do?"

"You may never know," I told him, "but to-day is Thursday. When you planted your feet on that plate it was Wednesday."

"Nonsense," he said. "If this is some kind of confidence trick, as I suspect, you've picked on the wrong man." He

strode towards the door. "Goodbye, you damned charlatans!" he added nastily. "You'll very likely receive a visit from the police over this business."

"Don't worry," I said to Diggle, when the cheese king had gone, "he'll be back with an apology when he finds that we were telling the truth."

He was back in less than twenty minutes ; but not with an apology—with an axe. Diggle opened the door to the heavy banging, and then fled. Brezrok advanced towards him, holding the axe at the ready. There was an insane gleam in his eye. We dodged about a bit, and then Brezrok dropped the axe and put his hands to his head in a very tragic fashion.

"My money!" he wailed. "It's gone—all gone!"

"Welcome home," I said. "Have you tried the new Labour Exchange in Empire Road? The walls are fine for writing on."

"I've lost a day," he wept. "A whole day. Goldbaum stock is worth less than the paper the shares are printed on. The whole of my money was invested in Goldbaums, and my own company will have to fold. Yesterday I could have unloaded. To-day it is too late. I'm ruined! Ruined!"

I've been ruined for a long time ; but I never carry on like that. It was disgusting. I curled my lip at him, and he bent to pick up the axe. Diggle and I tried to get behind each other, and I cursed him for the coward he was.

"Perhaps we can come to some amicable arrangement," I suggested.

"I should sue you both for all you've got," said the tragic Brezrok ; "but it would be a waste of time."

"It wouldn't buy you a half share in a blown fuse," I agreed.

"Then I'll have you charged with wrongful detention, and anything else I can think of," he threatened. "You should get at least twelve months."

"That's not the kind of arrangement I was thinking of," I said.

A crafty look stole over his fat face.

"As I understand it," he said, "this machine projected me into the future. If it can do that it should be able to do the opposite. Well, then, all you have to do is to send me one day into the past so that I can recoup my lost fortune."

"It's got no reverse gear," I told him. "It's the economy type. We're right out of the luxury model."

"Never mind the funny talk," he said, viciously. "Are you going to help me, or do I call the police in?"

I hate that kind of language.

"Step on the plate," I directed.

I had noticed that one of the controls was marked off from a central zero point. This had been advanced one degree clockwise when James K. Brezrok had taken his supposed trip into the future. Now I turned it one degree anti-clockwise, which I thought might send him one day into the past, or somewhere.

"Just one thing," I said, with doubt gnawing at my mind like a rat in a box, "You've had one trip on this rig, and you didn't even know you'd been away."

"That was the future," argued Brezrok. "Perhaps there isn't a future. Only a kind of Limbo. But we know there is a past. So switch on. I've over a million pounds at stake."

"You're a brave man," I said; "but a greedy one."

With that I threw the switch. There was a tremendous purple flash that illumined everything. At the same time the electronic doodah blew up, or seemed to blow up, and then reformed under my startled gaze. Everything was as it was except that Brezrok had gone again.

There was a hammering at the door. Diggle opened it and fled. Brezrok advanced towards him, holding an axe at the ready. We dodged about all over the place, and then he dropped the axe, and put on the tragic act.

"My money!" he wailed. "It's gone—all gone!"

This was where I came in.

"Welcome home . . ." I began, under some strange compulsion, and then I stopped, and thought about it.

It was a time trap, and somehow we were all involved; unless Brezrok was a kind of anachronism, or we had distorted Time in some strange way. In which case this scene was likely to be repeated *ad infinitum*. This was where I came in all right, and this was where I got out.

I rushed into the street, intent only on gleaning one piece of information. I wanted to know what day it was, and it had to be Thursday.

There was a police officer passing, and I took him by the elbow.

"Tell me, sir," I begged; "what day is it?"

"Thursday," he said, slowly, sizing me up.



"Thank Heaven!" I shouted. "I thought it was yesterday, and no way out. That settles it. Brezrok must have changed places with himself. He'll be buzzing around yesterday unloading stock all over the city; but it won't do him a bit of good because he's sealed off in a time trap. Still, that one of him will be happy. And so am I."

I took hold of his arms, and danced round with him.

"A nut!" he said, disgustedly, disengaging himself, and then he grabbed me by the shoulder. "Wait a minute," he said. "You answer to the description of a man named Belov, who is wanted for obtaining money by false pretences from a doorman employed by the Hotel Roma."

"My name is Cartwright," I said, quickly. "I never speak to doormen. My mother was frightened by one—my father."

Just then Diggle, and Brezrok, came rushing towards me.

"Belov!" yelled Diggle. "For Heaven's sake, man, what day is it?"

I never have any luck. The police officer tightened his grip, and I got ready to slip out of my coat, and make a run for it.

"Sunday the twenty-fifth of December," I told them, "1648. Watch out for the roundheads. They're a shower of squares."

"Huh?" they said, in unison.

But I was off like a rocket, and heading for the nearest pedestrian. I jumped the fast one, heading East. About a hundred yards further on a grey-uniformed police officer leapt on athletically. He was carrying my coat.

"Put this on again, Belov," he said, grinning. "We shouldn't like you to catch cold before the judge sees you."

I'd jumped the wrong one the wrong way.

—Edward Mackin

## STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

*This interesting series continues this month with the high-lights about the "father of modern science fiction"—Wells has had a greater influence on the medium than any other writer of the century and his plots are as fresh today as they were fifty years ago.*

### 3. H. G. Wells

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The question most often asked by serious thinkers who delve into science fiction is: "But is it literature?" To this, the science fiction world has one powerful and overriding answer and that answer is expressed in the name—H. G. Wells.

Wells has produced novels and short stories of great literary distinction which are *indisputably* works of science fiction. It was on the imaginative quality of his works of science fiction that H. G. Wells gained fame. It is those works which make his name a household one around the world, despite the fact that the bulk of them were written more than fifty years ago.

When H. G. Wells was born in Bromley, Kent, England, in 1866, the French master of science fiction, Jules Verne, was already an outstanding world-wide success, with his *Voyages Extraordinaires*. Verne had written and scored with *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *Voyage to the Centre of the Earth* and *From the Earth to the Moon*.

Thirty years later, in 1896, when H. G. Wells burst on the literary horizon, with *The Time Machine*, to remain a brilliant first-magnitude fixed star in the firmament of masters of the scientific fantasy, Jules Verne was still alive and still writing.

That very year Verne had published *For the Flag*, a tale of a yacht that carried a detachable submarine, which employed super-explosives, devised by a mad French inventor, to blow up most of the fleets of the world.

Though tapering off in the presentation of really powerful imaginative concepts, and flanked by dozens of imitators and acolytes, Verne still reigned supreme in his field, though such titans of fantasy and science fiction in their own right as H. Rider Haggard and A. Conan Doyle already displayed the potentiality to supplant Verne as the master of science fiction. Except for personality preferences and timing they might have earlier smothered Wells bid for fame in the realm of scientific fantasy.

Haggard created a sensation with *King Solomon's Mines*, published in 1885, and followed it with his now classic novel of immortality, *She*, which appeared in 1887. In the years that followed Haggard poured out a procession of literary successes, but his interests caused his fantasies to take a different turn. A lawyer by profession, and, when he took pains, an author capable of biblical, almost poetic prose, Haggard merely toyed at the fringes of science fiction, preferring the colour and drama of ancient Egypt, the wilds of Africa and South America and the unprovable realm of mysticism.

As a writer of tales based on geography, Haggard was quite a match for Verne. Had he written more science fiction, his superb characterization, his classic sense of drama and his fine imagination would have made him Verne's successor. Instead, he preferred to pioneer and explore a peculiar literary nook on his own based on the pageantry of the past, lost races and civilizations, reincarnation—all leavened with an occasional sobering dash of science.

Throughout his long literary career, H. G. Wells stoutly denied any suggestion that he was influenced in any way by Jules Verne. Wells once wrote: "There's a quality in the worst of my so-called 'pseudo-scientific' (imbecile adjective) stuff which differentiates it from Jules Verne, e.g., just as Swift is differentiated from Fantasia—isn't there? There is something other than either story writing or artistic merit which has emerged through the series of my books. Something one might regard as a new system of ideas—'thought.'"

He stormed at the characterization of himself as the 'English Jules Verne,' and repeated to the end of his days that if there

was any strong influence reflected in his work it was that of Jonathan Swift, the satirist of *Gulliver's Travels*.

In all truth, Wells could not afford to permit the idea to circulate that he was in any fashion an imitator of Jules Verne. The shadow of Verne's success, particularly in his early days, threatened to obscure his own, merely because they both wrote science fiction.

For his part, Verne recognized the fact that Wells seriously threatened the one great distinction he possessed, that of being a fictional prophet and seer.

In commenting upon Wells' work Jules Verne said, in an interview published in *T. P.s Weekly* in England, for October 9th, 1903 : " I do not see the possibility of comparison between his work and mine. We do not proceed in the same manner. It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on a very scientific basis. No, there is no rapport between his work and mine. I make use of physics. He invents. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball discharged from a cannon. Here there is no invention. He goes to Mars in an airship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. *Ca, c'est tres joli*, but show me this metal. Let him produce it."

The truth of the matter was that neither of them was on very firm ground. Proof that Verne exerted some influence on Wells is quite apparent in the text of *The First Men in the Moon*, where the inventor of the moon spaceship, Cavor, is asked how it will be possible to get in and out of the vessel and is given a description of an airlock, and after his reply the questioner comments : " Like Jules Verne's apparatus in *A Trip to the Moon* ?"

Wells, on the other hand *did* use a gun in firing his Martians across space in the story *The War of the Worlds*. In Chapter 7 of that novel, where English survivors of the Martian invasion are trying to muster hope for their situation, we read :

" After the tenth shot they fired no more—at least, until the first cylinder came."

" How do you know ?" said the artilleryman. I explained. He thought. " Something wrong with the gun," he said. " But what if there is ? They'll get it right again."

The impression that Verne attempted to convey that Wells' material was not true science fiction because it did not minutely stick to the rules of scientific accuracy is an unfair one. Verne's

scientific knowledge was obtained from his personal observations and wide reading ; by occupation he was a lawyer. Wells, to the contrary, had a fine scientific education under the instruction of one of the greatest scientists of his day, T. H. Huxley. In a good many respects his knowledge of science was superior to that of Verne's.

To top it off, Wells was more than a writer, he was an artist, using words to paint a picture and when the spirit moved him, brilliantly poetic in his evocations of the strange, the unknown and the unusual. As an innovator of new plot themes for science fiction, he ranked supreme and the years since his passing have secured that distinction for him beyond any possibility of dispute.

However, he refused to limit the scope of his story-telling or of his imagination because of scientific technicalities. Verne, who would not permit his characters to land on the moon, because he could not contrive any known scientific method of having them take off again from that satellite or send their messages back to Earth, regarded Wells' anti-gravity metal in *The First Men in the Moon* as placing that novel outside the pale of respectable science fiction. Yet it enabled Wells to land his characters on the Moon, return them to Earth and give the reader some of the finest bits of other-worldly description that have ever appeared in an interplanetary novel.

Verne had good reason to stay within bounds. His formula had earned him the plaudits of the masses around the world. It is little wonder that in his later years he came near to throttling his talent with imaginative restrictions for fear he would kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

Verne would never have considered a device as questionable as a time machine. Wells not only considered it, he was obsessed by it. The idea originated with *The Chronic Argonauts*, published in the April, May and June, 1888 issues of *The Science Schools Journal*. Wells condemned his early attempt as an "experiment in the pseudo-teutonic, Nathaniel Hawthorne style," and in later years bought up and destroyed all copies of the early version he could find, making it a rare collector's item.

A second version of *The Time Machine*, titled *The Rediscovery of the Unique*, appeared in the July, 1891 issue of *The Fortnightly Review*. Wells, in a later statement, said he did not think that any copies survived.

A third try, *The Universe Rigid*, was set up in type for *The Fortnightly Review* but was never run off.

In 1894, a series of articles, containing sections from *The Time Machine*, appeared in *The National Observer*.

The near final version was *The Time Traveller's Story*, published as a serial in *The New Review* during the years 1894-5. This version is a real collector's item because it contains at least one episode which was not published in the book. A segment referring to descendants of man, built somewhat like kangaroos and giant centipedes that preyed upon them.

The first American edition of *The Time Machine* is distinguished by the fact that the author was referred to as H. S. Wells throughout the book.

This chronology of *The Time Machine* is important because that story has generally come to be regarded as H. G. Wells' greatest work, a work which has already become a classic of world literature. This story, like most of the other science fiction tales of Wells, makes it difficult to raise any argument to shade the fact that it is *primarily* a work of science fiction.

While the concept of the time *machine*, which Wells was the first in the history of literature to use, though other authors had travelled in time through other means, is highly unlikely, Wells nevertheless attains willing suspension of disbelief through the use of actual scientific theory.

This tale, which carries its hero first to the year 802,701 and then by hops to the year 30,000,000, when the sun has grown cold and man extinct, is not used as a vehicle for presenting Utopian concepts, since the civilizations described are decadent and degenerating. It is not a warning story, since the period in which it is laid is long past the peak of man's future Golden Age. Nor is the slightest attempt made at satire.

Projection of the sciences of physics, biology, astronomy and chemistry are integral to the narration of the story. Though there is depth of thought and concept, the *story* always comes first and is a fascinating chronicle; beautifully, superbly written. Most important, it is a *science fiction* story, because the events that occur could not possibly have been related in any other literary genre.

A special point is made of this fact because it is the habit of the public and some of the literary men upon reading really outstanding works of science fiction such as *Brave New Worlds* by Aldous Huxley or 1984 by George Orwell to say in effect: "That isn't really a work of science fiction, basically it's an

allegory." Even more prevalent is the phrase : " Well, that isn't science fiction. It's *good* !"

Through the use of this weird logic, whenever a work of science fiction is truly outstanding, it ceases to be science fiction. Thus denuded of its masterpieces, the field is then usually challenged to prove its worth.

Wells, the master writer and prophet of the field, has become the margin of respectability for science fiction as a *literary* craft.

World events have vindicated the *subject matter* of science fiction for Wells and the hundreds of other writers who also used future invention, atomic power and space travel as basic ingredients of their fiction. Today, the rise and fall of nations and the very survival of mankind depends on how well the world understands those very topics that were previously championed primarily by writers of science fiction.

Science fiction, thereby, reveals itself as being something significantly greater than a literature of escape. To deny that fact is to deny that the hydrogen bomb exists and that the dawn of space travel has arrived.

Proper credit has never been extended H. G. Wells for his major role in the development of the British short story. Probably the only British writer at the turn of the century who surpassed H. G. Wells as a writer of short stories was Rudyard Kipling and as a writer of short science fiction stories, Wells has never been eclipsed.

Undoubtedly Wells' greatest short story is *The Country of the Blind*. Though intended as an allegory it can be appreciated on the merits of the story alone and either way it emerges as a profound and stirring work. The story deals with a valley whose original settlers were attacked by a rare malady which gradually blinded the entire population. The valley is completely cut off from civilization by natural upheavals, and the people, though blind, gradually adjust to their environment, as their other senses become more acute. The blindness is hereditary and after a while the concept of sight becomes meaningless. A man from the outside world stumbles into this valley but instead of being able to seize control by virtue of his sight he finds himself regarded as an abnormal, not-quite-sane "unformed" person. He falls in love with a blind girl who wants him to have his eyes put out so that he will be "normal" and fit into the social structure. At the end of the story he escapes from the valley.

*The Country of the Blind* originally appeared in the April, 1904 issue of *Strand Magazine*. Thirty-five years later, in 1939, Wells rewrote the ending, adding 3000 words, and this version was published in a limited edition of 280 copies by the Golden Cockerel Press of London. It also was included in a collection titled *The College Survey of English Literature*, edited by B. J. Whiting and published in 1942.

In the revised version, the hero vainly attempts to save the village from a rockslide he sees is about to start. They do not believe him. He escapes from the valley with his blind girl sweetheart and they are later married. The girl rebuffs attempts on the part of the doctors to restore her sight, simply because she is "afraid" to see.

While the new version is as well written as the old, the allegory becomes so laboured that it destroys the impact of the original story, which is probably why anthologists have generally ignored the revision.

In most of his short stories, Wells strove for a single departure from the norm, with all other elements kept in focus. His stories were characterized by the high originality of their central themes and the wide range of ideas. Today, most of the ideas that Wells presented have been rehashed dozens of times. At the time he wrote them, they were either completely original or the first really well-done presentation of the concept.

Among the short stories with ideas that have become part of the fabric of modern science fiction are the following: *Empire of Ants*, in which the ants threaten to conquer the world; *Flowering of the Strange Orchid*, which deals with man-eating tentacled plants; *The New Accelerator*, concerning a drug which can speed up the motions of men dozens of times; *The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes*, about a man who could see through walls; *Aepyornis Island*, which sees the ancient eggs of extinct creatures hatched; *The Star*, in which a wandering body from space almost collides with the earth; *The Crystal Egg*, which is really an interplanetary television receiver; *The Grisly Folk*, a tale of prehistoric people, and quite literally dozens of others.

His mind seemed a bottomless well of diverse and new—for his time—scientific ideas. Virtually no other writer of science fiction possessed his versatility.

The success of *The Time Machine*, and the originality of this continuous stream of short science fiction stories, created a tremendous demand for Wells' work. Jules Verne had raised



science fiction to the level of popular reading and H. G. Wells not only kept it there, but gave it literary standing.

The very popularity of his short scientific fantasies emboldened Wells to work them in longer lengths. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, an extraordinarily well-done story reversing an incident in Homer's *Odyssey*, where Circe, through the use of a vapour, changes Ulysses' men into swine, finds modern science, through surgery and glandular injections, turning animals into human beings. Essentially this is a scientific horror story and one of such impact that at first publishers rejected it, and when it was finally published, outraged voices were raised against its theme. Yet time has given it stature because of the consummate skill with which it is related.

*The Invisible Man*, published in 1897, was an instant success and is undoubtedly the finest work ever done in a fictional vein on the subject of invisibility. When made into a motion picture in the United States, it had the bizarre aspect of making a renowned star of a man whose face was not seen until the last sequence of the picture—Claude Rains.

*The War of the Worlds*, which appeared in book form in 1898, scored an immediate and deserved hit. Wells was by this time a world-wide figure. The great imagination and literary artistry he displayed in tale after tale were as much a wonder as his subject matter.

It is hard to believe, but *The War of the Worlds* appears to have been the first science fiction story written about the invasion of the earth by creatures from another planet bent on conquest. The theme has been done so many hundreds of times since then, that Wells' own originality is lost sight of.

While *The War of the Worlds* was running as a serial novel in America's *Cosmopolitan Magazine* during the latter part of 1897, the distinguished United States astronomer and popular science writer Garrett P. Serviss wrote a sequel to the story, titled *Edison's Conquest of Mars*, which ran serially in the newspaper, *The New York Journal*, starting January 12th, 1897. It related how Thomas Alva Edison and a group of other scientists, built a fleet of space ships armed with disintegrator rays and traveled to Mars to punish the Martians for their abortive invasion of the Earth. This is a striking example of the impact *The War of the Worlds* had on first publication and how popular and newsworthy H. G. Wells had become.

The effectiveness with which Orson Welles employed the theme of an Invasion from Mars in 1938 to scare the wits out of a nation in a radio broadcast, underscores the vitality of the

work, which, though it has dated to the point where we know that modern science would have made short work of Wells' Martians and their robots, the novel continues to be reprinted, read and even brought up to date for motion pictures.

With such a string of true classics of science fiction behind him, Wells is to be excused if he stumbled with book publication of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, in 1899. That novel, despite extensive revision, was, as Wells so aptly put it : " one of the most ambitious and least satisfactory of my books." A tale of a man who falls into a state of suspended animation and awakes in the future, to find a world in which power is vested in the hands of a few men, devolves into a somewhat tedious muddle of sophomoric socialism.

The publication of *The First Men in the Moon* in 1901 did much to take the bad taste of *When the Sleeper Wakes* out of the mouth of the reading public. This was the first of Wells' books to be filmed, it being produced by J. V. L. Leigh for the Gaumont Film Company in 1919. The film was a rather unimaginative and tasteless transference of the story to celluloid.

The mature Wells chafed at being typed as a scientific romancer. While he boasted of the pains he took to make his tales scientifically plausible, and claimed for them merit beyond that of entertainment, he felt barred from making a contribution to mainstream literature. To the author Arnold Bennett, popular at the turn of the century, he wrote : " I am doomed to write ' scientific ' romances and short stories for you creatures of the mob, and my novels must be my private dissipation."

Finally the main-stream novels poured forth. The brilliant *Tuno-Bungay* ; the popular *History of Mr. Polly* ; *Kipps*, *Ann Veronica*, *The New Machiavelli*, and many others. Most of them were timely hits. They blasted at the prejudices and inhibitions of the period. They rocked the people out of their warped ideas of righteousness and displaced smugness and complacency with indignation and doubt.

Interspersed between the novels were non-fiction works by H. G. Wells on the future of mankind and various aspects of socialism. He was becoming more and more convinced that he had a message to impart to the world. Though the scientific fantasies continued to come, *The Food of the Gods* in 1904 ; *In the Days of the Comet* in 1906 ; and the truly prophetic *The*

*War in the Air* in 1908, which clearly foresaw the dramatic change the airplane would make in future warfare ; and though a number of marvelous collections of short stories and a few out and out fantasies such as *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Sea Lady* appeared with them, it became evident that the tenor of Wells' thought was changing.

As clearly evidenced in *The War in the Air*, he was displaying a tendency to halt his story to deliver a sermon, although he should have had ample outlet for his ideas in such non-fiction works as *Anticipations, the discovery of the future*, and *New Worlds for Old*.

Already impatience had overcome him. Whether in a scientific-fantasy, such as his master-prophecy, *The World Set Free*, published in 1914, wherein he predicted the atomic bomb and world destruction or his "realistic" novel, *The World of William Clissold*, appearing in 1926, he could no longer be bothered with the story. He had to stop and deliver sermons. Interminable sermons and often boring sermons.

He never quite realized that fiction was not the way to get his educational job across to the masses. *The Outline of History*, the first of a trilogy in which he tried to impart a factual picture of what the world and mankind was like and how business and science fitted into the scheme of things, sold millions of copies and made him more money than the hard-cover sales of most of his other books combined. The other two volumes, *The Science of Life*, in collaboration with Julian Huxley and his son G. P. Wells and *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*, by their only slightly less enthusiastic reception should have proved to him that sugarcoating was extraneous if he really had something to say.

One by one his once-famous mainstream novels dated and dropped out of print until only *Tono-Bungay* and *The History of Mr. Polly* any longer received serious consideration in literary circles.

Yet, ironically, the scientific fantasies of his youth, the scientific romances which he felt had so constrained him, refused to die. Wells often denied that he was destined to be read by posterity. Though he referred to himself as "only a journalist," it would have been less than human on his part not to have hoped that his "mature" novels would have made a lasting mark.

That Wells was completely aware of the development of science fiction in recent years is provable by the fact that 26 of

his novels, novelettes and short stories were reprinted in *Amazing Stories* between 1926 and 1930 and one in *Science Wonder Stories*. There were also reprints of his tales in *Weird Tales* and *Ghost Stories* and he must have received copies of these publications.

Then there is the letter received from him by Festus Pragnell, British science fiction author of *The Green Men of Graypec*, which was first published serially in Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*, and then reprinted in book form in England under the title of *The Green Men of Kilsona*. A lead character in that story was named H. GeeWells and evoked the comments: "Dear Mr. Pragnell, I wanted something to read last night and I found your book on a table in my study. I think it's a very good story indeed of the fantastic-scientific type, and I was much amused and pleased to find myself figuring in it." Wells signed his name "H. GeeWells," as Pragnell had used it in the story.

Perhaps it was instances like the above, that prompted Wells to turn half-heartedly towards the scientific fantasies of youth during the late thirties. Perhaps it was the obvious longevity of his work in this vein. Perhaps it was an attempt to regain some of the optimism lost because of old age, ill-health and the way the world was going, but from his pen (and Wells wrote all his first drafts in long hand) came *The Shape of Things to Come*, *The Croquet Player*, *Star Begotten* and *The Camford Visitation*. It was no use. Uniformly they were marred by preachments.

One thing these later science fiction stories did have in common with the old was the fact that the lead character was generally the unusual phenomena or world catastrophe, rather than any individual. Though a master of the art of making people come alive from the printed page, Wells failed to produce a single character comparable to Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, skipper of the marvellous submarine Nautilus in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea*.

Despite this, except for his most badly dated works, (paradoxically also his most prophetic, *The War in the Air* and *The World Set Free*) nearly all of Wells' novels and short stories of science fiction and fantasy are still in print and continue to be read. It is not the ideas that keep them alive, nor their pointed warnings to civilization, nor their sensationalism, but the word-mastery of a literary genius, who took the elements of the scientific "boys' tales" and "thrillers" and created permanent and enduring literature.

—Sam Moskowitz

*The plot of this story is so simple that under ordinary circumstances it would not be acceptable, but author Tubb in one of his bursts of literary genius has turned it into a beautifully written piece of speculative writing.*

# THE WINDOW

BY E. C. TUBB

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Every man has his star ; Colson's was a window.

He'd seen it first on the night of the day he'd moved into his new lodgings. It shone with a warm, yellow light far in the distance, a cruciform shape seeming to hover beneath the moon. He had stared at it because, at that time, there had been nothing else at which to stare.

Colson was not a believer in the early to bed, early to rise way of life ; his temperament was against it for one thing, his work for another. During the morning he slept and rested and played with words. During the afternoon he did a two-to-ten shift washing dishes in a hotel. The work, as he would tell anyone who had the patience to listen, was only temporary, something to fill in the time until he managed to produce the Great Novel.

He had been playing at producing the Great Novel for twelve years.

He was a slight, balding, shabbily dressed man of forty. He peered at the world through thick lenses and had become careless about little things like brushing his teeth and cutting his hair. He wasn't dirty but he never seemed to be wholly

clean. Some of the grease from the dishes he washed seemed to have penetrated his skin and clung to his clothing so that he always seemed to be in need of a bath.

He wasn't conscious of his appearance and had no one close enough to remind him of it. In his way he was happy but it was a negative happiness, the contentment of a man who is not aware of what he missed. He was like a mole who never misses the sunshine or a caged bird who cannot comprehend the meaning of freedom.

And he had his window.

It fascinated him, that window. It hung, so far and so remote, a patch of brilliance against the darkness, an oblong of yellow light marked by the cross of the stiles. His eyes were weak but he could make out that much and what his vision lacked his imagination supplied.

At night, when it was late, he would stand at his own window, the room darkened behind him, and stare across the houses to that window shining in the dark. It belonged to a house on the hill, that much he guessed, but which house he, at first, had no way of telling. True, he had looked during the hours of daylight but the window had then lost itself among its fellows, become one of a multitude of neat, rectangular panes. And, at first, he didn't much care just which window it was or to which house it belonged.

And then he found that the window didn't exist.

It was incredible, that discovery. It was as if he had been told that the sun did not really shine or that the stars were figments of a broken illusion. And yet, if he could believe his senses, the window at which he had stared so often had no reality in his world.

Just why he had made the experiment he didn't really know. Just when he had tired of simply watching and had converted his idle spectator curiosity into action was one of those things without a clearly defined answer. But one day he had felt restless and, that night, he had stared at the window, brightly lit as always, a patch of warm yellow luminescence, and he had taken a sight on its location.

It had been a simple thing. He had taken a match from the box in his pocket and had laid it on the upper sash of his window. He had sighted along it, adjusting it with delicate care and then, because he was tired, he had forgotten it.

The next night he had remembered it, seen that it was correctly aligned and then, in the morning, had sighted along it again.

And had stared at a patch of undeveloped land between the chimneys of opposing houses.

Someone, obviously, had moved the matchstick. Himself, probably, no other had entered the room. He had nudged it, perhaps, aligned it carelessly, or the wind had blown and moved it a fraction—the explanations were endless. He had shrugged, not greatly disturbed and decided to repeat the experiment that night. He had done so and had found the same result. Nothing. A patch of undeveloped land where a house should have been.

The window at which he had stared so long and so frequently did not, apparently, exist.

It was nonsense, of course, it had to be. The window existed, he saw it every night, it must be that his sightings were wrong. He tried a third time and, instead of using a match, used two pins which he thrust firmly into the wood. He took care over those pins. He adjusted them so that, when the heads merged, they pointed directly at the window. Five times that night, at different intervals, he tested his crude device. As soon as he woke he ran to the window and looked over the pins.

They pointed to a patch of undeveloped land.

Colson was a writer and therefore was not lacking in imagination. During the day he speculated with the wild abandon of a drunkard ; knowing all the time that his speculations were utterly foolish but, even though they were nonsense, they were pleasant nonsense. For the first time in years he had found something to intrigue his imagination. Stooped over his greasy dishes he felt divorced from the routine task, his wakened imagination soaring on unleashed wings.

His was impatient for his duties to end. When they did he hurried home, raced up the stairs and felt a strange relief as he saw the window, still shining, still there.

It came as something as a shock to realise just how much he would have missed seeing that cruciform-shadowed patch of light.

He had come prepared. He had bought a telescope, a cheap thing of low magnification but it would strengthen his weak eyes and should serve its purpose. He focussed it and stood,

staring at the enlarged window, oblivious of the chill of the night air.

It was an ordinary window.

He was a little disappointed at that, the utter insignificance of what he saw. Just a plain, ordinary window belonging, no doubt, to a plain ordinary room. It had no curtains that he could see and the source of the light was a mystery but he supposed that it was the normal electric bulb, shaded perhaps by a yellow shade. Even the lack of curtains did not disturb him. They could have been drawn back out of sight and, anyway, they were unnecessary. The window, while not opaque, had a misty translucence so that it was impossible for him to make out any form of detail behind the glass.

It was as if he stared at a window made of thin sheets of yellow paper lit from some invisible source at the rear.

How long he stared at the oblong rectangle he did not know but suddenly he was shivering with cold and the stars had wheeled in the sky. Carefully he rested the telescope on the frame of his own window. He propped it, adjusted it, used it as a gunner might use a similar instrument to aim his weapon. This time, he told himself, there would be no mistake. The failure of the matches he could understand. The failure of the pins, while harder to rationalise, yet could also be explained. The telescope, however, was another matter. In the morning he would know the house to which the window belonged.

But in the morning he stared at the same patch of undeveloped ground.

A habit is a settled tendency or practice and Colson was a creature of habit. A mania can be a great enthusiasm and Colson had never known any great enthusiasm for anything in his entire life. His novel, of course, was his prop, his excuse, his own, personal reason for living the way he did. It explained everything—to him. It justified everything, his menial job, his lonely existence even, had he stopped to think about it, his personal carelessness in trifling matters of appearance. While he had his excuse he could remain in his small, smug, private world.

The window blasted him out of it.

Another man would have shrugged, dismissed the window as something of no importance, busied himself with other things. But another man would never, in the first place, have allowed the window to exercise such a fascination. Colson had



allowed the window to become a habit ; now the habit had grown into a mania.

He had to solve the mystery of the window which, apparently, did not exist.

The next night he dressed warmly, selected a comfortable chair and, with the telescope to his eye, settled down to watch. Never before had he watched so long. Never before had he had any incentive to sit up all night and stare at the window until the dawn. For, with the coming of daylight, he would be able to see the house to which the window belonged.

His intentions were good. His enthusiasm was high. He could have cried with disappointment when he started awake, still in the chair, and realised that he had fallen asleep at his watch.

The following night he tried again. This time he managed to stay awake but, just as the first light of the false dawn lightened the sky, the telescope slipped from his numb fingers and, when he had recovered it and aimed it again into the night, the window had gone.

The third attempt was almost successful but he blinked and, in that fraction of time, the window ceased to exist.

On the fourth attempt he managed both to stay awake and concentrate but he lost the window just the same. One moment it was shining in the pearly, misty dawn, the next it had winked out and, though he kept the telescope aimed directly at the spot he saw nothing, when the light brightened, but the hatefully familiar patch of undeveloped ground.

It was then that his mania really took hold.

He bought maps, a compass, a powerful pair of binoculars. The maps and compass told him nothing he did not already know ; the window stood, as far as eye and science could determine, on a patch of land which contained no dwelling whatsoever. The powerful binoculars helped a little more.

The window, terrifically enlarged, showed a trifle more detail. It was so vague as to be almost nothing ; the mere hint of a shadow and its vagueness fed his desperation. It never appeared to move, that shadow, it was as if someone had traced, very lightly, an outline on the glass of the window itself. Sometimes he could not see it but, if he concentrated long enough and hard enough it would appear. But it never moved.

He traded the binoculars for a powerful telescope on a tripod and resumed his nightly vigil. Now the window seemed to be before his very eyes, so enlarged that he could not see it as a whole. Had any of the panes possessed a single hair-line of a crack he would have been able to see it. Instead he saw even less than before.

The shadow, if it was a shadow, could now be seen only in part and, despite the increased magnification, it appeared no clearer than before.

But, during the day, he could count the blades of stunted grass at which the telescope was aimed.

He went out to the place and stood and looked around him and sensed the utter desolation of the place. He turned and found his own window, using the small telescope to aid his weak sight so that he could see the glassy eye of the big instrument in his room. He peeled a stick and stuck it in the ground and, when another dawn lightened the sky, had something at which to stare instead of the vanished window.

Normally a shy man he conquered his shyness enough to call at neighbourhood houses and ask what must have been foolish questions. Foolish or not he received his answers. No house had ever, in living memory, stood on the undeveloped ground. No house had been destroyed by fire, by accident, by storm or Act of God. Not, that is, as far as anyone knew. The library yielded no information. The parish records could not help. The Local Council had no knowledge of previous buildings.

His questions died as they met the blank wall of negative information.

It had been foolish to begin with, a moment's thought convinced him of that. The window was a modern window, a copy of thousands of others used in the modern houses which covered the suburb like an ugly rash of barrack-like building. This was no ghost of a window, no fragment of some ancient house left, by some freak of circumstance beyond his immediate understanding, to torment him with its will-of-the-wisp image. It was a modern window with modern lighting and a modern frame. And he had to find it.

For now he was convinced that the dim shadow at which he stared so long was that of a young and lovely girl.

The mania grew. He left his job and, to conserve his dwindling money, took to missing meals as well as missing

sleep. His clothing suffered but he didn't think of that as he walked around the area where he had seen the window, asking householders if they kept their lights on all night or did a young and lovely girl reside in an upper room.

He had no success ; he hadn't really expected any but now he could do nothing else, think of nothing else but locating the window. And, each night, as soon as it was dark and that familiar, cruciform-shadowed rectangle of light with the intriguing outline on the panes shone like a yellow star against the backdrop of heaven, he stationed himself at the telescope and stared the night away.

It could have gone on forever. It ended on the night of the great storm.

The day had been oppressive, the air heavy with a humid, electrical tension. As night fell the first flickers of lightning danced over the horizon and the muted echoes of distant thunder rolled sonorously across the sky.

He had been reading, lying on his bed and turning the pages of old volumes in the pages of which men had tried to express their philosophy of the eternal. His mind was a battleground of concepts, his thoughts given a strange clarity as if he were a man in fever or intoxication. He recognised the symptoms and knew that he should eat. But his cupboard was empty, night had fallen, the window would be waiting.

Lightning seared his eyes as he approached the casement.

The storm had grown so that the jagged electrical streaks slashed the sky with an almost continuous glare, the snarling thunder rolling and echoing like the shouting of angry Gods. Even as he reached his window the rain began, slanting down in an almost solid sheet, leaping from the roofs and streets in an upward-rising mist illuminated by the lightning.

And then, even as he watched, the lighted windows before him went dark, extinguished all at once, the houses looking desolate and deserted in the glare of the storm. It was a power failure, that he knew. A cable had been struck by lightning or a junction box flooded, something like that. The result was that the entire area was devoid of electricity.

He stood at his window staring into the night, feeling an intense sensation of loss. With no power there could be no light and, without light, how could he hope to see the window ?

He blinked as lightning seared the sky and then, as the flash died from his retina, he felt his heart leap and something rise in his throat.

Before him, shining placidly in the night, hung the familiar, cruciform shape.

It was the same, his telescope gave full proof of that. The same window with the same vague, tantalising shadow behind the panes. One window glowing with yellow warmth while all the rest were dark or glimmered with the weak light of candles. One window shining like a beacon to guide him on his way.

The rain struck him like a wall of water but he ignored it, ignored, too, the rain which filled his shoes, the sting of it as it dashed into his face. He hugged his thin coat across his chest and set out on the old, familiar route.

He had followed it a hundred times during the day, almost as many during the night. Each time the glare of lighted windows had confused him so that, somehow, he always ended at the patch of undeveloped ground. Then he would run back to his telescope, take another sight and set off once more. He had followed a dozen routes but the houses were so much alike, the windows marched with such precision that always he had lost sight of his aim.

Now, tonight, there was no chance of that. Only one window shone with a calm, steady glow. It hung in the sky, for the first time an individual thing, and he ran towards it as if he ran towards Paradise.

It was hard to keep the window constantly in view. Harder to choose a route which would permit just that. Often he stumbled and once he fell twisting as he fell so as not to lose sight of the window. It grew larger before him, the shadowed bulk of a house showed beneath it, other windows glowing with light, a door and before the door a patch of garden.

Trembling with anticipation he reached the garden, felt a sudden, almost terrifying wave of giddiness assail him, then was stumbling up the path, his hand thudding on the door while, above him, the heavens glowed and the air shook to the fury of the storm.

The door opened. A man stared out.

"Please!" Colson fought for breath. "Please let me in."

If the man was surprised he gave no sign. He stepped back, took one look at the storm outside and slammed shut the portal. Colson stood dripping in the hall.

"You must forgive me," he chattered. "I had to come here." Impulsively he gripped the other's arm. "Tell me, is there a girl residing upstairs?"

"A girl?" The man blinked. "You mean Selene?"

"Is that her name?"

"My sister. Hardly a girl though. You know her?"

"In a way." Colson blinked to dispel the darkness rimming his vision. "May I—may I sit down?"

"Aren't you well?" Suspicion darkened the man's face. Colson hastened to reassure him.

"Just a touch of giddiness. I haven't been eating too well lately and I've had a long walk." He forced himself to smile. "I'll be all right."

"I hope so," said the man, he was still suspicious.

"I've been looking for this house for a long time," said Colson. "If it hadn't been for the storm I doubt if I would ever have found it. Would you mind telling me the address?"

The man hesitated, then gave it. Colson frowned. He had studied maps and walked the area until he knew it intimately. There was no such address as the man had given.

There never had been such an address.

Footsteps echoed from the staircase and a woman, tall, not young but lovely despite that, came towards him. She met his eyes and, in their depths, Colson could see the reflection of his own, desperate need for warmth and understanding.

"My brother tells me that you know me," she said. "Do you?"

"I have seen you—at your window."

"Are you certain?"

"I have seen your shadow. I have seen it many times. Each night for a long time now I have sat and watched the outline of your body. You never moved, not all the time I watched, but you were there."

"Was I?" She glanced at her brother and Colson was suddenly conscious of a barrier. "This is the first night I have spent in this house," she said deliberately. "Tonight the first time I have ever stood at the window. I was watching the storm."

She was lying, she had to be, and then Colson knew with a mounting conviction that she was telling the truth. It all fitted as it had to fit unless the world and himself were insane. He had investigated too well, knew too much for any other explanation. Haltingly he tried to make them understand and, in that, he was lucky. They too had read Dunne.

The window, a fragment of the future projected back in time so that what he had stared at so long had not, in the moment of looking, been real. The shadows on the panes, frozen, immobile, a second snatched from eternity, a rift through which he had peered. No wonder he had not been able to find the house when he had looked.

And then the storm, the coinciding wash of electrical energy, the window left shining so that he could concentrate his attention on it and on nothing else. And he had walked towards it and, by so doing, had done more than cover distance.

He wondered just how many inexplicable disappearances were due to the same cause.

The dawn ended any doubt.

Selene took him outside, her brother accompanying them, and Colson stared at a scene of devastation where once neat rows of suburban houses had stood in ranked discipline.

"They are clearing the area for the new power station," said the woman. "See?"

Colson saw. He knew the area too intimately to be mistaken. He looked at a soaring mound of concrete and glass where once his own lodging had stood. His head jerked upward as sound tore the air.

"The Martian rocket," said Selene's brother calmly. He glanced at his wrist. "Right on schedule."

—E. C. Tubb



November 7th

*Here is a truly modern version of a witch story involving psychiatry and a curse which had peculiar repercussions. John Rackham has acquired the knack of putting this type of story over to perfection.*

# CURSE STRINGS

BY JOHN RACKHAM

---

Her name was Esther. She was tall, and slim, and dark. She moved with grace, and she was very beautiful. She knew all this utterly un-selfconsciously, accepting and using it as the armament with which she fought and won her battles against 'good.' In her simple mind, 'good' was the enemy against which she was always alert. For Esther was a witch, and quite evil.

As she leaned against the coping-stone of the bridge, arranging herself so that the pool of light from the lamp emphasised her charms, the scent of danger was very strong. Somewhere, near, there was an active 'good' agency, yet she could not see it! This oddity intrigued her, but she dismissed it in face of more urgent considerations. Only a few yards away she could see her prey for the night.

He, too, leaned on the coping, staring down into the dark river. He looked ganglingly unfinished, visibly in need of a haircut and shave, and his suit looked slept in. To the eye he was unprepossessing, but, even at this range, Esther could feel his vibrant youth. She shivered, sensually, at the prospect of tasting his vitality. This one might be worth careful cultivation, a long-term parasitism, rather than the quick—and fatal—essence-gorge. If only it wasn't for that insidious aura of 'good!'

She could get a faint, phantasmal picture of an old man, a craftsman of some kind—he was handling a stone—a smooth block similar to that on which she was leaning—he was mumbling some doggerel—a chant, or odd rhyme—and, for no reason that she could fathom, it irritated her. She shook

her head, and glided, as invitingly as possible, towards the tangible and real person she could see.

Immediately, the smell of danger grew stronger, the chant rose to the fringe of audibility, and she paused, all her senses pricking a warning. She leaned again on the coping-stone—and had the shocking sensation of leaning against nothing at all. She fell, forward and out, her reflexes much too slow to counteract the surprise. All she knew was that the solid-seeming stone had moved. As the darkly oily water rushed to engulf her, she heard the chant distinctly :—

*Stand fast ; stand proud ; Stand against the thrusting crowd  
But should by chance a witch here stop—Stand aside and let her  
drop !*

A charm ! A cheap, childish charm against the Evil One—and just her luck to select that spot on which to lean ! She gritted her flawless teeth with rage as the cold waters closed over her head. Disgusted, she found her feet and stood, breast-deep against the oozy flow. She had turned towards the nearest shore when, with a mighty splash, and a whoop of out-buffed breath, the young man landed, close by her. For once her wits were nimble enough, and she threw herself flat on the swirling surface, to lie supine and await his rescue.

Obviously, having seen her fall, he was dashing to her aid in the time-honoured manner. He had been quick. That was a point in his favour, off-setting his seedy appearance. She spun plans, busily. Rescue meant an obligation, a most efficient way of engineering her way into his life. Yes, indeed, it had possibilities. She lay still, watching him through half-closed eyes, saw him blow and splutter to the surface and strike out madly in all directions. How strong he was ! How innocently good, and stupid !

She shut her eyes and stifled a scream of agony as he took a fistful of her long black tresses and began towing her to shore. By the noise, he was swimming as valiantly as if they were in mid ocean. Being rescued was a completely new experience for Esther, nor could she recall ever hearing of a witch being saved from anything. By the very nature of things, it was never necessary. However, she anticipated no difficulty, once they were on solid ground.

She had to conceal a shudder as the ' solid ' ground proved to be deep and very slimy mud, on to which he proceeded to drag her, enthusiastically. Judging by the sucking sounds, he



was having some difficulty with his own progress, so, to be helpful, she 'came alive,' and stood up, by herself. It seemed that no-one had noticed their unrehearsed swim. She looked at him, at his sodden garments from which the muddy river trickled reluctantly, at his slime-streaked and unshaven face, at his wonderful, eager, anxious expression.

She held out her arms to him, aware of their slim whiteness, their graceful curves. She threw back her long tresses, to let the dingy lamp-light beam directly on her face, and conjured up the most alluring smile she could manage.

She sloshed forward through the mud to throw her arms around him, pressing burning kisses to his lax lips. She put every ounce of realism she could into it, then stepped back and took a deep breath. How was he taking it?

He was shivering, poor thing. Staring, too, and rubbing the back of his hand against his lips. The emanation of vitality from him was deliciously intoxicating—but what was this? Why the cringing withdrawal? What was he mumbling about?

"You're dry—" he muttered, "—as a bone! But you fell in the river! I've just pulled you out. Your lips—they were hot—they burned me—and even the mud won't stick to you!" She looked down, and clicked her tongue in annoyance. Her dress was as dry and neat as the day she stole it and the mud stood in neat circles away from her dainty feet. How tiresome of him to be so observant!

"Pointed ears—" he breathed "—and a pointed tongue—you're a witch!"

"What of that?" she switched to allure, throwing wide her arms, "Am I not beautiful—tempting? And I am all yours. You have saved my life. It belongs to you. I belong to you. I am all yours. Take me!" It began to sound monotonous. She turned up the voltage of her smile. She could not afford to fail, now. This young man was the best prospect she had encountered in a long while. She might even marry this one. It was a step she had been contemplating for some time. Free-lance parasitism was becoming more and more competitive.

He had raised a trembling hand and was mumbling something. The skinny gawk—river-water glittering in his stubble, dripping from the tip of his nose—mumbling and stumbling over some mumbo-jumbo.

"You must love me—" she tried a new angle "—even if it is only a little at first. After we are married, it will grow. You will marry me, of course—it's the regular thing!" She said this as confidently as she could, hoping it was true. "You're not married already, I hope? And do stop that silly mumbling while I'm talking to you—"

She felt a mild tingle from his mutterings. Then, as his memory came back, and he switched to another language—the Lord's Prayer, in the old Latin—she jumped.

"Hey!" she squealed. "What the blazes do you think you're doing? That hurts—curse you!" she could have bitten off her pointed tongue, but it was too late. A curse half-said will recoil on the speaker, sure as sin. She had no choice but to complete it.

"Damnation!" she muttered. "Just when we were getting on so well, too!" She raised her left hand, fingers clawed, and thought, furiously. What in the name of Eblis could she curse him with? Out of the Pit an idea came to her, and she grinned, fiendishly.

"I curse you—" she pronounced, "—with extra-sensory hearing!"

She laughed at the frown of bewilderment on his face.

"You'll find out, soon enough, what that means. That'll fix you—trying your silly exorcisms on me—drat you!"

She watched him stagger away, along the river-bank, to the dark steps and up into the light, and sanity. For a moment she mused, moodily, on the rigours of fate. A fine, healthy young male—gone, slipped through her fingers. Curses were all very well, but she would have preferred a more co-operative spirit. Still, that curse was a stinker. He would 'hear' the thoughts of everyone he met, whether he wanted to or not, and he couldn't shut them off, ever. That would fix him!

In the months which followed, she thought about the curse very seldom, merely checking, every so often, to make sure it was still operative, just as you or I might tug at the dog's lead, in the dark, to make sure he's still there. Esther had more pressing matters to think of. Eventually, she did get married.

At first she had thought Mr. Bolitho a 'good catch.' She captivated him, allowed him to compromise her, then let him do the honourable thing. Then she discovered what manner of man she had caught. He was hard-headed, blunt-spoken, forthright and unimaginative—and completely immune to all

her arts. 'Brass' was his only standard. She had cost him plenty, and he was prepared for her to cost him plenty more, but, for that, he owned her, beautiful body and hypothetical soul.

He was immensely rich. Esther could do nothing with him, and she could not bring herself to let him go. She became frustrated. Even a witch can become so. She was on the verge of a common or human nervous breakdown when Mr. Bolitho himself came to her aid in a quite unexpected way.

"You're not yourself, lass!" he informed her, one morning "Losing your spirit—I've noticed it. Now—" he was very positive,—"there's many as would say you need a change of air—or summat daft like that. But not me. I know what's t' trouble—" . . .

"Yes, Herbert?" she said, carefully.

"I do—" he renewed his savage attack on his breakfast, gulped a big mouthful, and claimed her attention with an imperative fork. "It's more than just being run-down. We've had a lot o' this in t' mill, lately. It's psychological, that's what it is!"

He paused to roll the word around his empty mouth before charging it with more breakfast. "Psychological! You'll have to get yourself to one of these psychiatrist chaps. He'll fix you up, right as ninepence, in no time. I'll get my secretary on to it, soon's I get to t' office."

He was as good as his word. Esther, interrupted in her carpet-pacing, listened to her lord and master on the telephone.

"By all accounts, this chap Hollingsworth is just about the best, so my secretary tells me. He charges most, any road, so he must be good. Folk'd not pay, else. I've arranged it—" and he told her the place and the time, in his customarily commanding way.

"Very well, Herbert—" Esther was dutiful. So shaken was she that she even went so far as to consult a reference work, just to find out what psychiatry was. Her tussle with the experts left her, if possible, knowing less than when she began, so far as the finer points were concerned. She had, however, learned that there would be a couch, that she would be expected to drape her fetching curves over it—that there would be a male and they would be alone together. It was enough to cheer her considerably. She had done much in the past from much less promising material.

He was still tall, but no longer ganglingly unjointed, no longer unshaven, unshorn, nor unkept. Now he was opulently sleek, with a carefully disciplined wave in his hair and a gloss on his hand-made shoes. His face was masked behind gleaming, rimless glasses, and his feelings hidden under a schooled, confident calm. He took her hand with an aura of soothing efficiency, with just the right amount of confidential pressure, and just the hint of concern in his quietly modulated voice.

"Mrs. Bolitho—good afternoon. Please be seated. You must feel absolutely free to talk to me, to say whatever you wish—" his patter flowed over her in a warm, syrupy stream, but she knew him at once, by the pricking of her thumbs. It had begun, faintly, in the outer office, so that she had been prepared for some surprise—but nothing so unlikely as this!

She sat back in the chair he indicated, crossed her legs devastatingly, noted that he was not in the least devastated—and stared at him.

"Don't you remember me?" she demanded, at last. He hesitated in the middle of a delicately-turned phrase, and raised an enquiring eyebrow. "The bridge—" she prompted, "the splash—the rescue—all that mud—the curse—?"

"Ah—the witch!" he nodded in sudden understanding "So that's it!"

"So that's what?" she demanded, suspiciously.

"That is why I cannot hear your thoughts very well—" he took off his glasses and began to burnish them with a billowing silk handkerchief. "Usually they are loud and clear—word for word—but yours are faint—"

"But you shouldn't be able to hear mine at all!" she cried "That's not in the rules!"

"Nevertheless," he smiled, "I can. That is rather significant, don't you think?"

"Significant be damned!" she snapped. "What I want to know is—how did all this happen? My curse worked, didn't it? You hear voices, all the time—all the nasty, uncensored, wicked thoughts people are thinking—don't you?"

"I do, indeed!" he admitted, happily, and she leaped to her feet.

"But you're not supposed to snigger about it—" she was furious. "It's supposed to frighten you, to drive you mad!" Tears of rage welled up in her lovely eyes as she stood over him. "All this time I've been thinking of you going slowly more and

more crazy. I even wondered whether I should feel a bit sorry for you—and look at you! It's not right—it's cheating! How did you dodge it? Who helped you?"

"Dodge it?" he shook his head, serenely, "Not me. I use it, thankfully, every day. My fame, my success—everything you see around you—I owe directly to you and your curse. I couldn't begin to tell you how grateful I am—"

Slicing through her rage came the first sword-like stab of agony, and she shrank back—and winced again as he went on.

"When you saw me—on that never-to-be-forgotten day—you saw a young and not very bright medical student who had been cracking his inferior brain for three days and nights, cramming for an all-important examination. I hadn't a ghost of a chance of passing, and I knew it. Then—you bestowed your curse, and it was a walk-over. I romped through, and I have never looked back since."

He made a little steeple of his fingers and regarded her over them.

"I had always fancied psychiatry. Now, thanks to your kindness, I am the accepted leader in the practicing field. My colleagues—poor chaps—have to dig, to plead, to bully and trick their patients—to get up to all sorts of humiliating games, just to get the information they need—to penetrate through the facade and reach the secret, perverted, repressed thoughts that are the generators of psychosis and neurosis.

"By virtue of your gracious gift—" he smiled, with his chin on his chest,—“I am spared all that. I know what my subjects are really thinking. Not the silly little nastinesses they feel willing to tell me, but the really basic, primitive, beastly kinks they nurse to themselves. My record of successes is phenomenal—and it is all thanks to you—”

Every time he mouthed words of gratitude—‘ thanks to your kindness ’ ‘ the virtue of your gracious gift ’ ‘ how grateful I am ’—that sword-like agony cut deeper, and she died a little more, inside. She shrank back in the chair, shivering.

"Stop—stop!" she whimpered. "I can't stand it. You're killing me!"

"I know—" he said, quietly. "I've studied the phenomena of your craft considerably—since—"

"I'll revoke the curse—!"

"You can't do that, you know—" he leaned back in his chair, twirling his glasses—"I told you, I've studied this thing

It's like being pregnant, in a way. You can't take it back, once it's done !"

"I've never been pregnant," she admitted, and wondered why she should feel suddenly wistful. Switching back hastily to fury, she stormed, "But you're deliberately trying to kill me—all this harping on about gifts, gratitude, thankfulness—"

"That's right. It means destruction for you, doesn't it. You are forbidden to do good, even inadvertently. It must be a strain ?"

"You have no idea !" she agreed, fervently, "but—look here—I didn't kill you, now did I? Mine was just a little curse, that's all ! Only to drive you mad ! You wouldn't—you couldn't—not—not just for that—" she gulped, noisily, and summoned up a smile. "I mean—after all, you're grateful to me, aren't you ? You wouldn't try to kill me, would you ?"

At this he chuckled, replaced his glasses, steepled his fingers again, and gave her his best professional stare. She cringed, trying to still the death-pangs in her breast.

"A classical dilemma," he mused. "My gratitude is slow but certain death to you—springing as it does from the fact that you have done me a great service. That is—if you accept it as true. Yet you invoke that same gratitude to save you from the result of admitting that it has reason to exist. If—out of gratitude—I try to help you, I confirm the fact, which will be fatal to you. In fact, my dear, you are caught up in as pretty a circular argument as it has been my good fortune to come across."

"Well don't just sit there—explaining !" she exclaimed. "What are you going to do about it ? You're the great psychiatrist—you think of something !" Just as on that night long ago, she could feel the sheer intoxication of his vital nearness. Mingled with the throbs of his death dealing gratitude, it was enough to reduce her to shaken helplessness. "Think of something !" she implored.

"I can perform my professional function," he said, obscurely, and she shook her head, dimly. He elaborated.

"I can cure you !"

"Cure me—of what ?"

"Of being a witch !" he said, blandly, and she stared. She couldn't help noticing, on the side, that he was excitingly handsome. If only the circumstances had been a little different !

"But you can't do that!" She dragged her mind back to more urgent matters. "I'm a witch—that's all there is to it. It's not something you can cure—is it?"

"Not wholly a witch" he corrected, in a lecture-room tone. "You cannot expect to go on, indefinitely, living off—or should that be 'on'—human beings, without absorbing some of their qualities. You must have noticed one or two minor items. For example, I can hear your thoughts. They are becoming more distinct every minute."

She recalled the engrossing side-thought which had crossed her mind only a moment ago—and blushed.

"You see—?" he pounced, remorselessly, "You can blush over a perfectly natural, *human* urge. That should show you—?"

"But—" she suddenly realised that he was in deadly earnest, "I'm not sure that I want to be an ordinary human—"

There was a quite unprofessional gleam in his eye now, augmenting her rosy confusion with its unmistakable message.

"Hardly *ordinary* human—if you will permit the observation," he said, warmly, and her heart gave a most unwitchly thump in her breast.

"What would I have to do?" she asked, unsteadily, and he came out from behind his desk, indicating the couch. As his essence washed over her she tingled right down to her toes.

"Just—er—arrange yourself on there—" he took her arm, and her knees were like water. "Just stretch out. Make yourself quite comfortable. In your case I think hypnosis is indicated, although I should imagine that you would resist the usual suggestions—"

"That would depend on who was making the suggestions!" she retorted, suggestively, and was immediately intrigued with herself. Where did that one come from? That was an utterly foreign kind of wickedness, for her. She had never had such thoughts. They were nice, too! While she was investigating these unsuspected depths within herself, he was busy wheeling forward a trolley laden with apparatus.

She saw a hypno-disc, prominently displayed. That old thing, with its spirals cunningly designed to draw the eye in towards the centre, to focus the attention—that!

"I can't be hypnotised!" she declared, positively, reverting to her witch-values. "And certainly not with that thing—!"

"It has all been taken care of," he soothed. "Just relax, and let me do the rest. The thing for you to remember is that

you are not necessarily going to lose anything. There is just as much joy to be had on this side of the fence—”

As he bent over her, tender and solicitous, primitive urges flared hotly in her veins. Realising that he could hear her thoughts, she strove, belatedly, to censor them, and knew her failure as he said.

“That’s right—think as humanly as you can. Good fun, isn’t it? You said you’d never been pregnant, didn’t you? Well, think of that. Isn’t that something to look forward to? Not right away, of course—but think of it—and related matters. There—you see? Exciting, isn’t it?”

Exciting! It was almost unbearable. She felt scorching thrills as he stroked her forehead with his fingers. If he wanted primitive thoughts, he was certainly getting them now.

“What did you mean—” she gasped “—about a fence—?”

“It’s quite simple—” he kept on stroking, maddeningly, “—the whole ethic of witchery, of so-called ‘Evil’ is just opposition. What we hold good, you call evil, and vice-versa. Of course, it is just as exciting and enjoyable to do things which are good, because they are good to do—and there is the added advantage that you can, sometimes, be wicked, and enjoy that, too. The best of both worlds, in fact, and that’s a lot more than you could ever do, as a witch. All it means, in fact—” his fingers were very insistent, now, caressing away the last shreds of her self-control, “—is that you will experience a total reversal, and, if everything is in reverse, you won’t know the difference, will you?”

The agony in her breast began to flow and was as forced draught to the fires of emotion that were leaping in her heart. Through the tumult his voice came, firm and vibrant.

“Now—just watch the hypno-disc—just watch it—let your mind run freely—let the thoughts come—watch the disc—just watch—”

And, as it began to spin, slowly gaining speed until it was whirling, she realised what a cunning, clever, contriving darling he was, for the black and white spirals were turning and writhing, fascinatingly, not in towards the middle, but in reverse—outward—spreading apart, tearing her mind and soul apart, turning her inside out. She felt herself spinning and sinking—disintegrating—her last conscious thoughts before plunging deep down into the warm darkness of oblivion, were a hot surge of eager longing for the delights that lay ahead for her—as a woman—a fully human woman.

—John Rackham



*A new author—from Scotland, too—presents an interesting new light on the ‘alien pet’ theme, and proves conclusively that “one man’s meat can be another being’s poison.”*

# STROKIE

BY ALAN ANDERSON

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What, they asked, could be harmful in a small, furry darling of an animal that looked a little like a Golden Hamster? Even if its fur was a sickly shade of pea-green and the feeding tube on its posterior which it used instead of a mouth was a trifle odd, they were quite certain that a little old Strokie wouldn't have hurt even a dirty old fly. But me? Well, I wasn't quite so sure.

The first time I set eyes on the Strokies they gave me a queer, shivery feeling like the time I first set eyes on my mother-in-law, and I knew for some reason that I couldn't explain that they were not quite the little honeybunches they were set up to be.

We were sitting in the relaxie-room watching the news screen when I first saw them. Some shots of a new lunar mining project were showing when the robot announcer told us that the world council chairman, Arthur Kendal, was about to make a world-wide broadcast of great importance. I remember thinking it had to be something big, because Arthur was getting on at this time and rarely bothered to make appearances on the world's news screens.

"Citizens of earth," he began in that rich baritone voice that we can only hear on the political history tapes now, "we have tonight received some of the most startling news since the first rocket broke free of mother earth's gravitational pull . . ." Arthur's greatest fault I must point out, was his longwindedness. "The council ship *Arcturus*," he went on, "has returned from deep space." He paused and licked his top lip, savouring, it seemed, the pregnant hiatus he was creating and the fact that millions of people all over earth were hanging on his words as they were automatically translated into a dozen or more languages. Then with great pomp Arthur finally let his punch-line trickle out. "The *Arcturus*," he said slowly, "has returned with news of other life besides our own in the universe.

"Life has been found," Arthur continued, "on the planet which astronomers have called 'Clantae,' and it is intelligent life with which our ship's officers have been able to communicate."

"Now this is what I call news," Janie said and leaned closer to the screen to watch Arthur's face. She was a Think-Right teacher at the local school of political science and liked to show me that her interest in the affairs of mankind was greater than the norm.

"Sure is," I said and caught the full glare of Janie's usual look of disgust as I lit a cigarette. She hated my old-fashioned habit of tobacco smoking. Very few people indulged in the habit these days and it was only through my work with the local international trade bureau that I was able to bribe a few of the crew members on the electric ships to bring me in a little of the weed.

Arthur's speech was surprisingly short and he merely added a few words to what I've already told you, saying that various interesting specimens of Clantae life had been brought back to earth with the *Arcturus*. Then his voice faded out and the everyday tones of the robot announcer began to drone in the speaker. With films and sound-tracked interviews brought home on the *Arcturus* he gave us pretty full descriptions of the Clantae 'intelligent life.'

"Poor looking bunch, eh?" I said and blew a cloud of smoke in Janie's direction. She scowled her disapproval at my remark and smoke.

"Just like you to underrate what is probably the discovery of our time," she said and coughed as some of my smoke caught in her lungs.

But despite Janie's attitude towards my remark the Clantae natives hardly fitted the clasification catch-line of "intelligent life." The film shots showed them lounging in and about a number of low, dirty, grass-built huts which looked something like the dwellings you see in the old African history sections of the film libraries. The natives themselves were short and wore practically no clothes. They were certainly humanoid, but the coloured screen showed that they were covered in a strange, downy green fur. A lump, also covered in green fur and about the size of a hedgehog, was poking up from each of their heads.

"Wonder what these lumps are," I said to Janie and at the same time the announcer began to answer my query.

". . . are not parts of their bodies," the announcer said. "They are small animals with which the Clantae natives, according to first observations, appear to have a symbiotic relationship. The animals, which have been classified as mammals, live on the bloodstreams of the natives and in return, our officers have learned, the natives seem to gain pleasure from the animals.

"Some scientists on earth, however," he went on, "suspect that this is not a true state of symbiosis as the natives can apparently exist quite comfortable without the animals.

After this the news cast closed down; soft music rolled through the speaker and a picture of a near-naked female slipping into a circular-shaped bed flickered onto the screen.

"Ugh!" I exclaimed. "That bit about the animals feeding on the natives' blood really got me." I lit another cigarette and Janie gave me what I call her superior female look that makes me feel like a dog.

"I don't know," she said and pursed her lips at me sarcastically. "These natives obviously show more consideration for their fellow creatures than some of us on so-called civilized Sol-ground." She stared significantly at a cloud of tobacco smoke drifting in her direction.

"Oh, sure," I retorted. "You mean to tell me you'd let one of these little monsters feed on your bloodstream just so it could go on living?"

"I might," she said briefly in a way that made me wonder if she was serious. Then, yawning she pressed a button on her couch that brought a heat haze round her body. The angle of her couch swung down to 180 degrees and I saw her place a sleep tablet on her tongue. I was still thinking of a suitable repartee when she began to snore lightly like she always did when the tablets took effect.

A few weeks after the first cast about Clantae life I was in the relaxie-room with Janie one evening when I switched the news screen dials to an independent news station which gave us "Gossip of the day."

A bald-headed news caster told us that one of the world's scientific "greats" had been making some startling experiments with the Clatae animals. Most of the little monsters that had come back with the *Arcturus* had apparently died as it had been found that they needed more than just blood to keep them alive. They needed direct contact with what this scientist called the "parent brain" if they were to exist. He had attached one of them to his own head, inserting its feeding tube into his neck. It had thrived noticeably.

"I will let the professor tell you about his experiments himself," the caster said, and a small, smooth-haired fellow flickered into view.

"Good evening," he said in a soft, effeminate voice that fitted his appearance and physique. "I will merely limit my talk tonight to a description of how the Clantae animal and I have reacted to the experiments I have been carrying out at my laboratory.

"This is Johnnie," he said, and the picture changed to a scene showing one of the small, green-furred Clantae animals resting on a porcelain-covered bench.

"I call it Johnnie merely so that I can distinguish it from the rest of its companions at my laboratory," he went on. "Actually the animals are parthenogenetic and under perfect conditions they can reproduce themselves without extra-personal stimulation at a rate of about five or six a month." He picked the animal up and its beady, little eyes stared at him from a rat-like, mouthless face.

"As the caster told you," the scientist continued, "we found the animals needed more than just blood to keep them alive. What it is I have not yet discovered. It may be just contact with the parent brain or it may be some other common factor in the Clantae and human bodies. Since I copied the way in which the Clantae natives support the animals our specimens at the laboratory have been coming along just fine. Especially Johnnie," he added, and at this point his eyes took on what looked like an expression of tenderness.

"It's quite simple really," he smiled, and placed the animal on his head. Turning his back to the camera we saw the animal extend a small, thin tube towards a pin-sized hole in the professor's neck. Then it clamped firmly into place.

"There," the professor said, beaming and turning to face the camera again. "The amount of blood they consume is absolutely negligible." His smile broadened even further. "Besides," he continued, "I find that the animals have a definite effect on the human mind while they are feeding. Experiments with myself and my assistants at the laboratory as guinea pigs prove that while the animal is in place on the head there is a very calming effect on the host. If one strokes them like this," he said and brushed his hand lightly over the animal's head as it lay sedately on his head, "it has a very soothing result." Then the professor gave a tiny frown of what I thought might be consternation and carefully removed the animal from his head, gently plucking its feeding tube free from his neck.

"The relationship with the host is not, as was at first suspected, symbiotic," he said somewhat sternly. "Because human being, of course, and supposedly the *Clantae* natives can exist quite comfortably without the animals."

Suddenly the professor's face took on a sad look. "I'm afraid the dependence factor is entirely confined to these poor, little animals," he said. "And it looks as if all the specimens that were brought back to earth by the *Arcturus* are doomed to die in time as only a few are being kept alive by myself and my laboratory assistants.

"It's a pity really," he added and shook his head gravely. "At this early stage I may say that experiments with the animals could lead to some valuable discoveries. It is possible, for instance, that the animals might be used for psychiatric treatment of certain types of criminals and other maladjusted types because of the tranquillizing effect they have on the brain . . ."

When the picture closed down I lit a cigarette with a shaky hand. "Speaking of maladjusted types," I said, "that guy ought to have his head examined."

"Don't be so cruel, you beast!" Janie retorted with surprising anger. I noticed a faraway look in her eyes.

"What's wrong, hon?" I asked.

"I just think it's a shame that these lovely, little pets will die off because nobody will feed them," she said.

"Janie," I said softly but seriously. "Why, tell me why, are you being so stupidly sentimental about these disgusting little animals . . .?" But she wasn't listening. I saw the couch go down and the tablet being placed calmly on the tip of her tongue and I gave up.

It started with a businessman called Jackson buying up most of the specimens that remained from the first shipment of Clantae animals to earth. He bred them on an estate in California and sold a few hundred to psychiatric hospitals all over America. But that was only the beginning. Within another year the Strokies, as people began to call them because of the way they gave a pleasant sensation when you brushed your hand over them, were being sold and bred all over the world. And that sales were not exclusive to hospitals either. Most people who felt they needed a lift in life were rushing to buy one.

But I don't think I fully realised how strong a grip the Strokies had on people until Janie collared me one evening and told me in a flat voice : " I'm getting one."

" Getting what ?" I asked.

" A Strokie," she replied simply.

I gaped. Then I became furious. I argued with her for more than an hour. " Merely because the rest of the world has gone temporarily insane about these horrible parasites there's no need for you to shoot your rockets, too," I pleaded. But it was not use. At the end of the argument we had nearly come to blows and I had still got nowhere near convincing her that she was in the wrong. I had very little evidence, it seemed, to persuade her that Strokies were not for the best people. Just a few night previous a robot newscaster had told us that a bill to ban Strokies had failed to go anywhere with the world council. He casually mentioned that over 60 per cent of the council members had been wearing Strokies at the meeting !

Janie got her Strokie eventually and I paid through the nose for it, for by this time the price had rocketed Sol-high. Admittedly her nature became a little more placid once she'd started to wear it regularly. To tell the truth I tried out her Strokie a few times myself when she was sleeping, but either the animal had a grudge against me or I was allergic to it. The effect was nil and I couldn't help feeling disgusted with the whole business.

It must have been about three months after Janie got her Strokie that the green fur began to show on her face and neck. She pointed it out quite casually to me one morning and I gaped in horror.

" What in hell is that ?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, brushing her hand over the patches of mossy fur on her neck. "But I've a feeling that it's something to do with Lulu," she added, using the pet name she'd given to her Strokie. "There's nothing to worry about though, darling," she said and smiled at my concerned look. "Most of the girls have it now. Quite the fashion," she laughed.

"If it grows any thicker you'll look like one of these Clantac natives," I said aghast.

"Well, darling, what's so wrong with that?" she asked with annoying apathy.

"Look, hon, don't you think you'd better see a doctor?" I coaxed.

"Don't be silly. I've told you that this fur is growing on everybody now—that is everybody with some sense who has a Strokie," she added and looked significantly at my bare head. A news cast a few days later informed the public that the fur was "nothing to worry about." It was just a natural result of the relationship with the Strokies, was the specious explanation.

But after another month I still hadn't got used to the green fur. The sight of Janie stripping down at night revolted me. I think she saw my disgust, too, but it didn't seem to bother her. The fur had grown nearly all over her face and partly down her body by that time. After several arguments with her about her appearance I gave my crusade up as a bad job. What could one mere mortal do if the entire human race suddenly decided to change its appearance?

These early statements by scientific eggheads that there was no symbiotic quality in the Strokies' relationships were beginning to prove wrong. Janie for one wore her Strokie most of the day and couldn't quite get along without it. Once I tried hiding the thing and she nearly blew a fuse. Walking the streets reminded me of the fact that I must have looked strange to other people without a coating of green fur or a conspicuous lump on my dome. I began to feel like a criminal with sarcastic remarks from Janie about my bare head and icy looks from passers-by. Again I tried several times to fit Janie's to my head with the same result each occasion. No feeling. No soothing. Just disgust. I began to realise how a bald man feels in a room full of wavy-haired Greek-god types, and I was seriously doubting if there had been any foundation for my suspicions about the Strokies. Then the truth came to light . . .

I thought maybe I'd been imagining things when I noticed the guys at the bureau slacking off in their work. At home, too Janie appeared to have a couldn't-care-less attitude about everything. Then it came over in a news cast programme one night like a stun gun flash. Arthur Kendal made the announcement himself and I remember the words he used as if it were yesterday.

"The human race," he said, "has made the greatest mistake in the whole of its history." I leaned forward with interest and Janie opened an eye on the sleep couch.

"Scientists have found that the animals we call Strokies are a danger to the future of our race," Arthur went on. "Recent experiments show that the animals are affecting the initiative for work of the people who act as their hosts. Also, recent discoveries on the planet Clantae show that a civilization on a par with our own once existed. Ancient records which have been uncovered among a section of Clantae ruins show that the deterioration of the race to its present primitive level was due to a small animal covered in pea-green fur. The description fits the animal which we call a Strokie . . ." Arthur went on to make a long speech about the importance of banning the Strokies from homes if the human race was to go on progressing.

But the whole tone of his speech was spoiled by someone in the background. Arthur's stone studded, golden helmet of office was suddenly whipped off revealing a Strokie nestling among the beginnings of what would soon be a nice, green fur coat. The broadcast ended on a pathetic note.

To give people their due they made a gallant effort to rid themselves of the Strokie habit. But the symbiosis had developed to a state of perfection. Neither the Strokies nor the hosts seemed to be able to bear life without each other. I urged Janie to do her best, but after a while she gave up and relaxed into a happy state of inertia. Scientists the world over tried their best to find some drug or gadget that would enable people to give up their Strokies. In the end they put on their Strokies and their hats and went home. Newscast figures for production throughout the world showed alarming drops during the next few months. General standards began to decline and Arthur Kendal looked a worried man even with his Strokie. Despite the fact that he himself could not get rid of his Strokie he still urged others to try.



I must share some of the glory for my discovery with Bill Leslie. We had taken to sitting together at lunch in the bureau's dining hall since we were almost the only ones in the building without Strokies.

"Wonder what it is that makes us immune, Bill," I said one day after he'd admitted that he too had tried to fit one of the animals to his head.

"Dunno," he said, speaking through the large, black cigar that was seldom out of his mouth. "Must be something in our blood, I guess." I watched him casually light the black weed which had been specially imported for him on an electric ship, and my eyes suddenly popped when I realised something.

"Who else doesn't have a Strokie at the bureau?" I asked him.

He looked over the flame of his atom lighter in surprise at the urgency in my voice. Then he thought for a moment.

"There's George Marshall and Pewee Dunn and that's all, I think," he said. I clicked my fingers and laughed. "I've got it!" I shouted.

"Got what?" Bill looked at me as if I'd gone crazy.

"Never mind," I said. "I'll tell you later." Then I ran off to the bureau's check-in desk to tell a robot clerk I was taking the rest of the day off.

And that afternoon Janie smoked her first cigarette. She liked it. I made her like it! Inside a week her green fur had totally disappeared; she had more energy and didn't raise the slightest objection when I told her I'd got rid of her Strokie.

My letter to the world council took about a month to travel through a maze of red tape, then I got an urgent message to appear before Arthur Kendal. I took a fast electric ship to New York and gave him an account of my experiments.

"This stuff you call tobacco," he said. "How do you get it?" I coughed. "It comes from abroad, sir," I told him. He knew what my job was and gave an understanding grin.

"What put you on to the idea that the nicotine it yields makes smokers immune to Strokies?" he asked, and I told him that only four men at the bureau were without Strokies. I smoked cigarettes, another smoked a pipe and the others were never without their pipes. I also told him about my success with Janie.

After personal experiment Arthur put council scientists on to my tip and they did some splendid work confirming what I'd already proved. Within a few weeks the discovery was

announced to the world and people all over the globe were being issued with large quantities of synthetic tobacco manufactured in a hurry.

Soon after, I remember the night when Arthur made his world-wide speech on the news screens, a speech that probably still remains as his most famous. Speaking through the drifting smoke of a large, black Havana he ran through a description of what he called the human race's greatest battle. "Our victory was all due to one man's discovery," he said.

I was sitting in the relaxie-room with Janie at the time, and when he said this about the victory being the result of one man's discovery Janie, furless and beautiful, looked across at me and smiled. I leaned forward to light her cigarette to hide my embarrassment. I did not need such publicity, I lied to my ego. Then I sat up, savouring the moment of glory.

"That man is already in history," Kendal said, and I frowned in puzzlement. And my frown deepened when he played the dirty on me. After all everybody likes a pat on the back when it's due. And I ask you—why should he have given all the credit to this guy he called Raleigh, Walter Raleigh?

—Alan Anderson

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