

# THRILLING Wonder STORIES

VOL. XLIV, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION WINTER ISSUE

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# Counterfeiter

By WINSTON MARKS

*They duplicated lettuce of the garden, not banknote, variety . . .*

**I** SLAPPED the requisition down on Oliver's desk. "Would you mind," I said, "explaining?"

Oliver picked up the slip in his fat fingers, let it drop, and folded his hands across his belly again. "Like it says," he said mildly. "The big red rubber

stamp. Disapproved. Or in simpler words, you don't get what you want, Buster."

"But, cripes, man, I'm ready to demonstrate. Three years' work, and you bounce back a lousy two hundred buck's worth of requisition. Dollars to dough-

nuts, they got the stuff in the stock room right now."

"Demonstrate, shmemonstrate. I sent it through channels and it came back red."

"I'll take it to Stockham," I announced.

Oliver shrugged. "I think he's washing retorts in the chem lab right now," he said. "Things are tough, that's all. I'm sorry, Blakely—I really am. I know what it means to you. But when the director gets chopped five thousand a year and goes around turning out lights in his own office—well, that's what Stockham's doing."

Completely puzzled, I climbed the marble stairs to see the old man, himself. Stockham waved me in and I fluttered the pink slip at him. "I think there's been a mistake, sir. Oliver says—"

"No mistake, Dr. Blakely," Stockham snapped. "Our budget is shot." He worked the loose skin of his grizzled face with one hand and gripped the arm of his chair with the other. "Your project and all others in pure research are canceled. You'll be handed a memorandum within the hour, but I'll give you a preview. The Clow Foundation is about to become unhinged on the Ph.D. level. All but a few technicians and a small consulting staff will be terminated this week. No more funds for—" he almost choked at his anger over the words—"unproductive projects." He swiveled his chair away so he wouldn't have to meet my eye.

Which is the ungentle way I met the depression of 1961. As I walked, stunned, from the senior director's office, his girl handed me a mimeod sheet, still wet and pungent. My name was on the separation list.

In the vaulted corridor outside, the busts of Einstein and Langmuir followed me with stony eyes. They had their niches already. LaVoisier smiled at me in the curve of the stair well, but Archimedes and Pascal looked the other way, and Euclid hissed, "Alchemist!"

**M**ATH Ph.D.'s were indeed a glut on the market. My telegrams to the Ford and Carnegie Foundations were answered promptly, politely and negatively. All my ex-classmates were in the same spot or hanging onto their appointments by the glint of their Phi Beta keys.

A week later I wheeled my old '54 jalopy up the rutted side-road between the acres of rich loam that was our family farm. I came unannounced, unnerved and disillusioned. It was almost bed time, and the family was on the front porch. My brother Joe, whooped at me, and Dad, Suellen and her sister, Toby, hauled me out of my car before I could turn out the lights.

Dad noticed my black mood right off and simmered down Suellen, Joe's chubby, tow-headed wife. He led me up to the old porch swing. "Stop chattering, and let the lad say something," he said. "Wonderful to have you with us again, boy. Little vacation?"

"As we say in the theater, I'm between engagements," I told them.

"No!" Toby exclaimed.

"That's right. Fired. Separated. Terminated. Caput!"

They looked as if I'd just handed each one an anvil. Joe recovered first. "Swell," he grinned. "I got a pitchfork that'll just fit those delicate hands of yours."

Sue said, "Come on, Toby. Let's feed the brute. Looks like he's been on the breadline for weeks." Toby got off my lap, and suddenly I realized I had been holding a small, but mature young woman. The package of short pig-tails, freckles and tight denim pants was no longer a teen-age dynamo. She was a full size power-plant with a 10,000-volt smile.

When she had gone in with Suellen, Joe said, "Believe it or not Bill, we were just talking about you when you drove up, and Toby was asking when you might get down this way for a vacation. Then she came right out and announced she figured on marrying you. You know Toby. Says what's on her mind, and

darned if she doesn't mean it about half the time."

No, I didn't know this Toby. She was an impish little creature who came to live with them shortly after Joe married Suellen. She had been away at college when the fire levelled her parents' ranch buildings and trapped them on the second floor of their old homestead. Orphaned, she couldn't stand the city any more. She appeared one afternoon with her suitcase and a face full of tears, and Dad took her in as a "hired hand."

She and Suellen sold their farmland, and the proceeds were more than ample to finish Toby's education, but she'd have none of it. She was soured on city people in general and capital K culture in particular. She called herself the out-cast of sorority flats, and declared she'd die an old maid in sneakers before she'd wrestle it out in high heels with the college boys.

"I thought she was down on the intelligentsia," I said. "As I recall, I have a degree."

"Yeah, but you got nothing against sneakers," Joe laughed.

When I went in to eat the cold fried chicken the rest of them sat around drinking coffee and watching me.

Dad said, "Hope you can stay with us, Bill. Toby needs a carpenter for her new project."

"Building us a good old-fashioned highway market," Toby interrupted.

"To sell our own produce?" I asked. "What happened to the frozen food contracts?"

"Like I predicted," Toby said, "soon as this depression broke the market they started a price war—with us for ammunition. They tore up our contracts, and Dad refuses to sell at their prices. We'll undersell their frozen prices by fifty per cent and still make a profit by operating our own stand."

They explained to me that the big super-markets now dominated all food distribution, and their acres of frozen food cabinets offered everything freezable. Fresh and canned goods were al-

most entirely out.

It sounded feasible to me, and I agreed to help them.

JOE wanted to know about my work. "Did you make any progress on your conversion process theory?"

"The math and paper work are done," I told him. "That's what hit me so hard. I was ready to build a unit and prove out my formulae when the axe fell." I pointed to where I'd dropped my briefcase. "There it is, three years' work, frozen because the board of directors panicked. I can't publish until I verify my math operations with an experimental demonstration. So, let's build a vegetable stand and forget it for a while."

Toby looked up from her manicuring operation. "Is this the same deal you talked about when you were here last Christmas? The idea for transmuted metals and stuff?" I nodded. She asked, "Couldn't you work on it here?"

"It would take quite a bit of money," I explained. "At the foundation where I had their big transformers and rectifying units to work with it would have been very inexpensive, but here I'd spend two or three thousand dollars just on power equipment. And like I told you, there's nothing practical about it. The cost of power exceeds the value of anything you would transmute, by a factor of about a hundred to one. It's just a new principle, and it would bring me some recognition if I could publish my paper."

"Let's do it," she said suddenly. "Let's build you a rig. I've got money in the bank. We can be partners. You get the glory, and if there's ever any profit, we'll split it!"

"That's sweet of you," I told her, "but better save the money for your dowry. With those freckles, you'll need it." I meant it to be friendly, but it came out sounding condescending.

Toby flushed, and then I remembered Joe telling me about her assertion regarding marrying me. I could have

kicked myself.

The stand went up in a hurry. Then the real work began. For three weeks we rose with the larks, picked dewy-fresh lettuce, tomatoes and other assorted vegetables as they came ready. We cleaned, trimmed, hauled and displayed them like we remembered the old-time farmer's markets doing.

Nothing happened. Even the thrifty had lost the habit of highway shopping. Then we built a couple of huge signs on which we posted a daily super-bargain, such as:

LETTUCE, 3c A HEAD

It cost us more than that to grow it, but we had to stop those cars somehow.

It worked. As the summer wore on, more and more old cars stopped at the stand. The depression was working in our favor. But when we totalled our profit in October it was tiny. Our loss-leader items had sold all too well. Our volume was fair but the take was small.

"We got most of our operating cost out of our crop." Dad said, not too enthusiastically. "Next year we'll put in a line of groceries and increase our gross volume."

It was at Sunday dinner, the day after we closed the stand for the winter that Toby kept looking at me out of the corners of her big, gray eyes. After dinner I learned why. She led me out back in the crisp fall air. She drew me into the old chicken shed where she pulled a string that flooded us with light. She waved her hand in a triumphant arc. "All right, Mr. Brain, you need a lab. Now you have a lab. I want to see your gadget work. Let's get going."

She had scoured the little out-building, floor to ceiling, tacked up oil-cloth curtains and stuck Air-Wick bottles in the corners. Joe had built a couple of broad benches and wired in electrical outlets. A small heater warmed the air, and it had a secluded cosiness.

"You provide the gray-stuff and I'll kick in the green. We split the proceeds 50-50. No arguments this time."

Her faith in me gave me a glow. It really did. But I explained gently, "Don't you realize, baby-doll, there will be no proceeds? If I wanted to bilk you I'd have some stock shares printed. There's just no practical use for my gadget."

THE materials started arriving the following Friday morning. Toby had been banging ears in our household, and the whole family presented a united front against my objections. Dad voiced the decision. I was to be excused from all chores. They would feed and clothe me. I would encage myself and bring honor to the name of Blakely. Next spring I could pull my weight on the economic front by helping Toby expand the market.

Even so, I begrudged every dime of Toby's that I had to spend. I redrew my plans and set out to develop a miniature and somewhat revised version of my converter. Being only a second-class mechanic, it was months before my ten thumbs were able to express my math symbols in metal, wood, glass and polysterene. Toby prodded me every foot of the way. She became more expert at soldering fine connections than I, and she even developed a talent for glass blowing over the coffee hot-plate.

Finally, on a balmy May evening, I called the family to the hen-house to witness my hybrid triumph of mind over matter. It looked like a cross between an incubator and a permanent wave machine, and much, much more useful than it was designed to be. My rooters sat about on folding camp-stools as I turned on the water valve and activated the transformer primaries. Toby was flushed with excitement. She said, "Stop fiddling, Bill. We're ready."

I fed a charge to the smallest segment of my bank of condensers. My jury-rigged rectifier glowed ominously, but nothing melted. I explained, "This will all seem very remarkable at first, but be prepared for a big let-down. Now what would you like me to duplicate?"

"Duplicate?" Toby said, "I thought

that this rig—”

“—transmuted some substance into another,” I finished for her. “It does, but I need a prototype, a model, that is. The raw-material is good old well-water, but I need a pattern to copy.”

Joe flipped a half-dollar over to me, which jarred me a little. Just so they wouldn't get any serious ideas, I bled off part of the condenser charge to shorten the time-stability factor. I laid the coin in the hopper, dropped the lid and narrowed the focus of the scanner. Everyone jumped when I popped the switch, which actually made more noise than the static discharge—about like popping an old buggy-whip.

I didn't have to open the door. My screw-holes for the hinges were too big and it fell off. Anyhow, there were two four-bit pieces. Toby goggled and started to reach out. She drew back. “Have to check it for radiation or something?”

I said, “Go ahead, pick it up. You are thinking about cyclotrons and magnetrons. My process is strictly an energy shift, a warp, a—a transfer.” I looked at Suellen. “Like your cookie-cutter, Sue. Joe's half-dollar was the pattern. We used it to punch a sort of fancy hole in space, filled the hole with water mist and used the electricity charge to make up the energy disparity between water and silver.”

No one was listening. I might as well have read my formulas to them. Score zero for my lecturing ability. They passed the coin from hand to trembling hand. As the time limit approached Joe had the silver piece in his hand comparing it with the original. “Same date, even,” he said. “Can I keep it, Bill?”

“Sure,” I said, “but I wouldn't put it in my pocket if I were you.”

“Why no—hey!” he shouted. “What's —”

They were shocked to the bottom of their Scotch chromosomes in spite of my warnings. Sue whimpered, “It melted—back to water.”

“That,” I said flatly, “is the disap-

pointment.” I turned to stalk out, but Toby caught me. She spun me around and jerked my head down to her altitude. “You're wonderful, Bill!” she said and planted a most unsisterly-in-law kiss on me that I was to remember vividly and longingly.

**P**RESS of work on the vegetable stand delayed finishing my paper. We sawed and hammered for a week enlarging and closing it in. And the day the trucks arrived with our stock of grocery staples I got a phone call from the Foundation.

Old Stockham cackled cheerfully. To make ends meet they had secured a contract to do some stress analysis computations for General Aircraft. But their staff was scattered to the four corners, and could I rush down and help them off the hook?

I told him it was our busy season, but he mentioned a bonus figure that would enable me to pay Toby back what I had borrowed. I said yes in spite of Toby's heavy head-shakings. Dad and the others were happy for me. Sue said she'd help run the stand and dad could get a hired hand if necessary. I packed.

Back at the Foundation I was swept into a remarkable fury of activity. Before I had a chance to scrape the honest farm soil from under my nails they were tapping data keys on the three-story transitron computers. Research for the sake of philosophical posterity and the glory of dear old Siwash was a thing of fading memory. *Production* was the watchword, and I spent ten to twelve hours a day producing for pay.

At day's end I was too exhausted even to work on my paper. My sole relaxation was my correspondence with the folks. Toby wrote that the loss-leader idea was pulling in business better than ever, and she thought we were showing a real profit. She seemed vague in certain areas of her description, however, and it smelled as though she were concealing something.

In mid-August I admitted to myself I

was homesick, and a week later in the privacy of my sleeping cell I considered the possibility that it was really Toby I missed. With the smallest effort I could conjure up the scene in the hen-house and feel her arms around my neck, the warmth of her little vibrant body against mine and the tingle of her lips.

When we finished the G. A. project on the 29th, I stalled Stockham's grateful offer to keep me on at my old salary, and I headed down the highway like a lovesick calf. My old sports car strained every cylinder under my impatient foot. I arrived ahead of schedule four o'clock in the afternoon.

The turn-off where our market was located was obscured by some twenty assorted vehicles of vintages older than mine. Business *was* good. The ten-foot sign registered on me. No wonder they had customers!

#### HEAD LETTUCE ONE CENT

There were other changes. Toby was hidden behind a shiny, new cash register which she played with one hand while the other pawed over a mountain of groceries and produce. People were lined up waiting to pay for their loaded baskets. Suellen and Joe were trucking in cartons and fresh supplies, jamming things into bins all of which seemed almost empty.

**T**OBY saw me gaping. She planted a sneaker on the counter and dived over a short, startled customer to land all over me. I grabbed her in a hug that should have bruised her from the neck down, but she wriggled and gasped for more. I had been right about her lips. They were the juice of existence, and I was dry. My taste was sweet but short. She flipped back into the check stand and yelled, "See you soon, professor."

Reluctantly I drove on to the house. Dad was just coming out of the old hen-house. He met me on the porch. "Missed you, son," he said quietly, and he avoided my eye. He looked fit, and his grip was

firm as we shook hands solemnly.

"Keeping chickens again?" I asked casually.

He went through the lengthy pipe-loading and lighting ritual before he answered. "Well, I'll tell you, Bill. Better let Toby explain. I'm not entirely sure I could justify what's been goin' on here."

My misgivings ripened, but I was in the shower when Toby, Sue and Joe came up, and then no one wanted to talk much at dinner. Afterward, Toby begged off from the dinner dishes and got me out on the porch swing.

"Now," I said sternly, "what's with the hen-house and the one-cent sale and all the secrecy?"

"You won't like it," she said, "so kiss me first."

With considered discretion I held her off. "Have you been making change with phony money?"

She shook her pigtails. "Why that would be cheating," she said. "Anyway, it takes too much power to make it stick together long enough to pass it. And when I read the electric meter to figure costs—well, you were right. It warn't practical."

"All right, what *have* you been counterfeiting?"

"Now don't get mad, Bill. Not more than a little mad. Remember, we're partners."

"Tell me!" I said sharply.

"Lettuce," she said. "And sometimes carrots and tomatoes. It helps to vary the special, and we were running short, anyway."

"What!" I jumped to my feet, horrified. She pushed me back down to the swing.

"Now simmer down and quit worrying until I give it to you," she said firmly. "I fiddled around with the rig and found that the more power I fed to it the longer things it produced would last. Silver and metal stuff took a heck of a lot of power to hold it together, but a good-size head of lettuce used only about

half a kilowatt. On our farm rate that's about a half cents worth. And with that much power our produce stands up well for almost ten days."

I TRIED to interrupt, but she stilled my working lips with a soft palm. "Hold still, now, will you? I figured that if we sold only perishables, people would eat them up before they melted. I was right, too. Haven't had a kick all summer. Of course, we ate some ourselves first to be sure they weren't poison."

I grabbed my head and moaned. "The Department of Agriculture, the Federal Trade Commission, the Pure Food Bureau—oh, my gosh, gosh, gosh!"

"They'll never know."

"You bet they won't," I snapped. "As of right now the convertor is out of business." I had her check all made out, but the occasion was not as I had pictured it. "Here's your \$2800. Our partnership is dissolved."

She took the check and stared at it with disbelief. "Why, you—you flat-footed city hick! You misty-eyed moralist! That's not all that's dissolved." She stormed into the house slamming the screen door so hard straw from a swallow's nest under the eaves showered down on me.

Dad and Joe came out. Joe said, "Sorry you feel that way about the convertor, Bill."

"That's just how I feel," I said. I stared at them hard. "Times must be tougher than I ever knew them when even the farmers are out to gyp the public." Dad said nothing. He puffed huge clouds of smoke at the mosquitoes.

Joe rubbed a two-day stubble of beard on his chin. "We didn't exactly feel like we were cheating. So they do pay us a penny for a cup of water? They save a potfull of money on the rest of their vegetables. And how much food value do they lose when a tomato does dissolve inside them? Heck, it's 90% water anyhow."

"In other words," I said, "a little cheating is all right, Joe? Honesty is

just a matter of degree, is it? Is that what dad taught us?" I got louder the madder I became. "Do you suppose I could publish my paper in a scientific journal now? That would look good: 'Young genius demonstrates new principles of matter conversion and tomato counterfeiting!' And you all had the guts to say, 'bring honor to the name of Blakely.' Bring honor, my eye! Bring cash! And Toby—if we must starve, let's not do it in obscurity, she said."

Toby exploded out the front door again. "Stop yelling at your folks, will you! It was all my fault." She stood before me, denim legs apart and hands rammed into her riveted pockets. "I'll admit I didn't think about your publishing the paper. All right, I didn't think, and I'm sorry, but you quit yelling at people."

In the embarrassed silence that followed Joe and dad sat down on the front steps, Toby flopped on the far end of the swing, and we all stared at the full moon. I felt righteous, lonesome and asinine.

SUELLEN popped out just then with a platter of chocolate cake and a tray of glasses of milk hugged against her ample bosom. "What a gloomy looking outfit," she said. She served us, then plumped down between Toby and me with a huge wedge of cake for herself. I watched her devour it—Suellen, who was always on, or about to go on, a diet.

She said reflectively, "I've been considering putting in a little honest-to-god bakery goods down there. City folk don't know good baking any more." I offered no comment.

She finished her cake and licked the frosting from her pudgy fingers. "I guess maybe we were a little dishonest, Bill. On the other hand, we weren't hurtin' anyone. And we really didn't make anything off the phony vegetables, you know. They were just advertising. City people pay higher prices than ours, and they can't eat the advertising they are paying for, let alone digest it."

Suellen's homely reasoning made some



sense, but she could see I wasn't about to give in on the principle of deception. So she got up abruptly. "Goodnight, all. We'll have to roll out earlier yet if we have to *pick* enough lettuce for tomorrow. C'mon, Joe." They went in.

Dad got up, too, but he came over and looked at Toby and me for a long moment. "You two," he said, "don't let this throw you. Things will work out, you see if they don't."

I looked at Toby, but she stared hard straight ahead with her lower lip out half an inch. I said, "I'll be going back to the Foundation, dad. My old job is open, and—well, I can contribute more that way, I guess."

"I see, son," dad said quietly. He went in.

Then Toby got up and said in a flat voice, "Good night, chum. Sorry we went to different Sunday schools."

I sat there like a stuffed shirt and let her go in alone. Then I watched the moon go down. At midnight it had set and my spirits with it. When I went in I noticed a light in the kitchen. Suellen was at the cake again. She clutched her flannel nighty around her overfull curves and grinned at me strangely.

"I'm going to tell Joe on you," I said.

"Oh, he's all for it," she said. "You see, this cake is converted. I—I've been sneakin' out to the henhouse every day after I bake. Hope you don't mind, Bill. After all, I'm not foolin' anybody but myself, and it's such fun! What a heavenly way to reduce! Would you believe it, I've lost six pounds already, and I've been eatin' like a hog."

She saw me frowning. "Honest, Bill, I wasn't going to sell this to the public. My thought about the bakery was to offer the real stuff. I think it would go."

"Sure it would," I said. "You make wonderful cake, Sue. And you can use the convertor any time if you just eat the stuff yourself. But you get my point, don't you? Even if I weren't an old maid about deceiving people, the Pure Food people would catch up to us sooner or later."

She nodded. "Sure, sure, Billy. No hard feelings."

"It's like artificial coloring and preservatives," I went on, eager to justify my earlier outburst. "It's against the law to use them to mislead people into thinking that—that—"

She looked up at me. "You look funny. What's the matter?"

I GRABBED the heavily frosted cake off the platter with both hands, bit into it and stared at it. I opened the door to the stair-well with my elbow, ran upstairs to Toby's room and told her to turn on the light.

She did, and when she saw me she pulled the covers up around her neck. I shouted, "There's the key! Look at it!"

Toby scowled at me. "Looks like Suellen's cake to me. Have you gone squirrely?"

"It's the answer, it's the answer," I told her. I put the cake down on her night stand and grabbed her shoulders. "You were on the right track but you had your signals crossed."

She tried to wiggle free. "You're getting frosting on my pajamas," she said. "Look at your hands!"

"It's converted cake," I told her excitedly. "In ten days those stains and Suellen's excess fat will dissolve to water. Get it?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Got it. Now go wash your hands and come back. You're making sense, boy."

THE only advertising we did was on the labels in which we wrapped the bakery stuff. The boxes and sacks read:

#### THIS PRODUCT IS NON-FATTENING

Warning—these perishables must be consumed within five days from date of purchase. Contains digestible but completely unstable ingredients warranted not to yield fat-producing calories upon assimilation.

Suellen and Toby baked an assortment of prototypes, and I turned out a few dozen of each the first day. The henhouse took on a redolent aroma unknown

to chicken houses in all history, I will wager.

Within a week our clientele shifted strongly toward the better heeled trade which arrived in long, low automobiles. If ever you want to know about the effectiveness of word of mouth advertising, call on me.

By Sunday we were exhausted. After dinner we lay around on the lawn under the shade trees discussing our new problems of production.

I wanted to go into wholesaling. We had had several offers from jobbers in town already. Suellen and Joe wanted to stick with the stand. Sue sighed happily. "Did you notice the late model cars stopping now? It's the hicks with money. Toby was smart to insist on charging extra for our stuff instead of cut-pricin'. Heck, they'd pay double again. I'm for staying with the retail

end of it and pouring it to them."

Toby sprawled supine counting clouds, oblivious of the grass stains soaking into her pretty new white dress. "Just think," she said, "two thousand per cent profit! That'll teach the hicks to overfeed their big fat mouths. You know we got to expand fast. We're almost swamped already."

Dad said, "We'd better go slow. Takes cash to expand."

"We have it," I told him.

Toby raised her head. "Who has it?"

"We," I said. "You and I, partner. Remember the dowry?"

"Yeah," she drawled. "The dowry that freckled-face little me would sure need some day. Now I suppose you think you're man enough to collect it?"

I was. But I had to chase her clear up to the top of the old elm tree to demonstrate it.