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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Escape

By PAUL ERNST

A brief weird tale about the escape of a madman

HE HAD the craziest form of craziness I've ever seen.

Of course, I hasten to add, I hadn't seen much. I'd been through an asylum once before, as now, to get a story for my paper on treatment and conditions of State inmates, and that was all. On that former trip I'd witnessed nothing like this; nor had I, till now, on this trip.

The man didn't look crazy. So often they don't. He was a medium-sized chap with gray in his hair and a look of sadness on his thin, mild face. A look of sadness—and determination. Neatly dressed, precise of movement, he was very busy in his cell. He paid no attention for a while as the guard and I stood at the barred door and watched him.

He was building something. He would pick up a tool, adjust it carefully, work with all the delicacy of a watchmaker for a moment. Then he would lay the tool down and pick up a gage and check his work. All very accurate and careful.

The only thing was that you couldn't see what he was building. And you couldn't see any tools, nor gages nor work-bench. There was nothing in the cell but the man, and a bolted-down cot and chair.

Nevertheless, the fellow was extraordinarily industrious. He would seize a nonexistent tool, examine it with a frown, and then use it on thin air, after which would come the inevitable measuring movements.

"It certainly looks," I said in a low tone to the attendant, "as though there should be something there."

The attendant grinned and nodded. And I continued to watch, fascinated.

You could follow the man through his whole box of tools, from his rational movements. Now he was boring a hole, obviously a very small hole, with a tiny metal-drill equipped with an egg-beater handle. Now he was just touching a surface with a file. Now he was sawing something else, after which he took the sawed part from an imaginary work-bench and tried it in its place—whatever and wherever that was.

I got still another glimpse of unity of effort as I watched him. Each little period of accurate workmanship ended with a trip four steps to his left, to a corner of his cell which was bright with sunlight. There, his motions said, was the thing he was working on. There was the object, slowly growing bit by accurate bit, which he was making and assembling.

It was uncanny. There simply ought to have been something there—a cabinet, chair, whatnot—and there wasn't.

The man slowly screwed an imaginary part to an imaginary whole, then laid down his imaginary screw-driver and walked to the door, for the first time acknowledging our presence there.

"Hello, Nick," he said to the attendant. His voice was as mild and as sad and as oddly determined as the rest of him.

"Hello," said the attendant affably. His good-natured, broad face turned from the man in the cell toward me.

"Meet Mr. Freer, Mr. Gannet. Mr. Freer's with a newspaper."

"Oh?" said Gannet, politely. He put out his hand so that I could shake it if I reached through the bars of his door a little. I hesitated, then grasped it. He didn't look dangerous.

"How're you doing with your what-is-it, Gannet?" the attendant said, nodding solemnly toward the bright corner where lay the object of the man's attentions.

"Pretty well," said Gannet. "This damned floor isn't quite level. It's three thirty-seconds of an inch to the foot off. I have to allow for that in every line and angle, and it makes it needlessly difficult."

"*What* is it you're building?" asked Nick wheedlingly. "You won't tell any of us, but won't you tell Mr. Freer, for his newspaper story?"

"There it is," shrugged Gannet, pointing to the corner. "See for yourself."

I stared involuntarily at the corner, then, feeling like a fool, back at his mild, sad face. Was there a ghost of a twinkle in his gray eyes? Or was it my imagination? I couldn't tell. I was beginning to feel a little crazy myself.

WE WALKED away. The big library and lounging-room where the almost-cured could sit and read was left for me to see. But I looked around without much interest as we passed through. I kept thinking of Gannet.

"Has he been going through that set of motions very long?" I asked the attendant.

"He started right after he got here," said Nick. "That was a year ago. He came here raving, trying to fight free and get back to the house where he'd lived with his son and daughter-in-law. There was something in his room he had to get, he said. Then he calmed down, and next day began going through the routine you saw. Some days he 'works' only a few

hours, sometimes all day long and up until lights-out at night."

"The way he pattered around that corner made me think I was off myself, for not seeing something there," I said. "It was amazingly realistic. As though you could surely *feel* what he was working on, even if you couldn't see it. Has anybody ever felt around that corner where he spends his time?"

"Hey, boy," said Nick, "easy, now. Pretty soon we'll be sending a wagon for you."

"But has anybody?" I persisted, smiling.

"No. That's the one thing that brings out Gannet's kink: If anyone gets too close to that corner he gets quite violent. So we don't even clean there. We're trying to cure these folks, not upset 'em needlessly."

We went out the massive door of the main building, where a stalwart attendant eyed us sharply. There were nicely kept grounds, and then a high fence with inward-slanting barbs on its top.

"You don't want anybody to escape from here, do you?" I said, nodding toward the heavy door and the high fence.

Nick grinned. "Nope. And nobody ever has. Or ever will, I reckon. See you in church."

But he saw me sooner than that.

I kept thinking of the spare, mild-mannered man with the sad, determined eyes all evening, after I'd handed my story in to the paper. I kept thinking about him next morning. And next afternoon saw me at the asylum again, standing in front of Gannet's barred door.

He was as busy as he had been yesterday. But his activity seemed more mental than physical today. He would stand in the center of his cell, hand rubbing jaw, while he stared at the sunny corner. Then he would walk to the corner and touch a spot in midair with an inquisitive fore-

finger. Then he would step back and survey the atmosphere again, eyes running slowly up and down as though over the lines of a quite tangible thing.

Finally he took something out of his pocket and walked with a more decisive air to the corner. I saw his hands move close together, for all the world as though he were adjusting a micrometer or other delicate measuring-device. He applied his hands to the questionable point in nothingness.

As he had done yesterday, he paid no attention to observers at his door, at first. But finally he spoke, without looking up from his task.

"Hello, Freer."

"Hello," I said. Gannet had an unimpaired memory, at any rate.

"Come for another story?"

"In a way," I evaded.

He shook his head, meanwhile stepping a foot to the right and staring critically at nothing.

"I don't see how you stand it."

"Stand what?"

"Your work. The madness and despair of humanity—that's your stock in trade. You deal in war and famine and flood, in social injustice and political and civil brutalities. They're the intimate facts of your life. I don't see how you can live among such things. I can't even read about them."

I stared at him. I'd never met a man who seemed less crazy.

"Whether you face the facts intimately or detachedly," I said, "they are still facts and they're still there. You can't avoid them."

"But you can. At least I can. And I'm going to. I'm getting out of all this."

He squatted on his haunches, and began running his hands slowly over space, up and down, then horizontally. He straightened and repeated the process. I'll swear I could make out what he had

in his mind. It was a sort of chair, with a very high back and unusually high arms.

Just as I had decided this—he sat in it.

You've seen stage tricksters sit in chairs with arms folded, when there are no chairs there to sit in? Well, this was the same. I gaped at Gannet, sitting in thin air. Not an impossible stunt, but always an arresting one.

He got up and came to the door.

"I can't take life as it's lived today, Gannet. A weakness, no doubt, but there you are."

"So you're getting out of it," I nodded.

"So I'm getting out of it. It's not for nothing that I am a mathematician and an inventor."

What a shame! I almost said it aloud, but didn't. I'd conceived a positive fancy for the sad-faced Mr. Gannet.

He stared at me quizzically.

"You needn't hunt up Nick," he said. "I'm not hinting at suicide. It's a more literal escape, I mean."

"Escape? With these barred doors, the high wall outside?"

"Oh, walls! Bars!" He waved his hand, dismissing them.

He walked back to his sunny corner and resumed his critical ocular and manual examinations of—nothing.

"You may have another story tomorrow, Freer," he said mildly. And then he turned his back, thereby dismissing me as he had the walls and bolts of his confinement.

I HUNTED up Nick on the way out. I felt like a traitor, but I knew it was for my new friend's own good.

"Gannet's talking of an escape," I said.

Nick's customary grin appeared on his broad face.

"Forget it. He's handed out that line before. Nobody could get out of here."

He walked to the high gate in the

fence with me, and waved as I got into my car.

I wasn't coming back any more. I didn't want to see Gannet again. He was such a nice little guy. But next noon saw me knocking for admittance a third time, summoned by a call from Nick.

"Got an exclusive for you, if you want it," he said. "An escape. I don't know that it's very important to you, but we've never had one before. That might make it worth a couple of inches."

"Escape?" I said.

"Yeah. Your man, Gannet."

"So he did it! But how?"

Nick grunted. "Suppose you tell me."

"In the night?" I asked.

He shook his head. "A little while ago, in broad daylight. He was seen in his cell at ten. An hour later the room was empty. He was gone."

"But he couldn't have simply walked out of the place in broad daylight."

"No," said Nick, "he couldn't."

"Was his door unlocked?"

"It was not. It was locked, from the outside, when we came to investigate the report that he was gone. His window bars are all right, too."

"You've searched the grounds?"

"Of course. He isn't in them. He isn't in any of the buildings. Nobody saw him after eleven o'clock. He's just gone, with his cell still locked so even a monkey couldn't slip out."

"You must have some idea how he got away."

"No idea. Because it can't be done. Only, it was."

"How am I going to get a story out of that?" I asked.

"How in thunder would I know? That's *your* worry."

I put a cigarette between my lips unlit because smoking wasn't permitted here.

"What in the world do you suppose he . . . thought he was building?" I mused.

Nick snorted. "I don't suppose anything about it. If I did, I'd be as crazy as he was. Well, there's your exclusive, if you know what to do with it."

I didn't know what to do with it, so I finally handed it in as it stands now. This very story, in fact. And the little man with the big vizor at the editor's desk promptly handed it back. Not that I blame him.

Nobody ever saw Gannet again. Nobody ever thought of him again, I guess. Except me. I had a rush of curiosity to the head a few days later, and went to his cell armed with a level and a steel rule.

The floor of the barred cubicle Gannet once occupied is three thirty-seconds of an inch off level. Now how do you suppose he could have determined that without tools of any kind to aid the naked eye?

