

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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GET RICH QUICK

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by ORBAN

There was one way to get money on Delira. The pay was high, it could make a man rich overnight. But was it worth it? Had that greedy girl thought of *everything*?

“EIGHT o’clock.”

Brik jumped and almost dropped the ice cube container. The two of them were the only ones in his apartment and the voice had been distinctly a woman’s.

“It’s just my wrist watch,” Sumner explained as he held it up for illustration.

“Just your wrist watch?”

Brik stirred the drinks, handed him one and dropped into a chair. “I’ve never heard of a watch that talks!”

“This one does. The Delirans gave it to me as a sort of going-away present.”

Brik gulped his drink and prodded, “Delira sounds like an interesting planet.”

Deep lines in Sumner’s forehead met and formed a continuous pattern when he frowned. “It’s too interesting. By comparison, returning to Earth is like coming back to a dim four by four cell.”

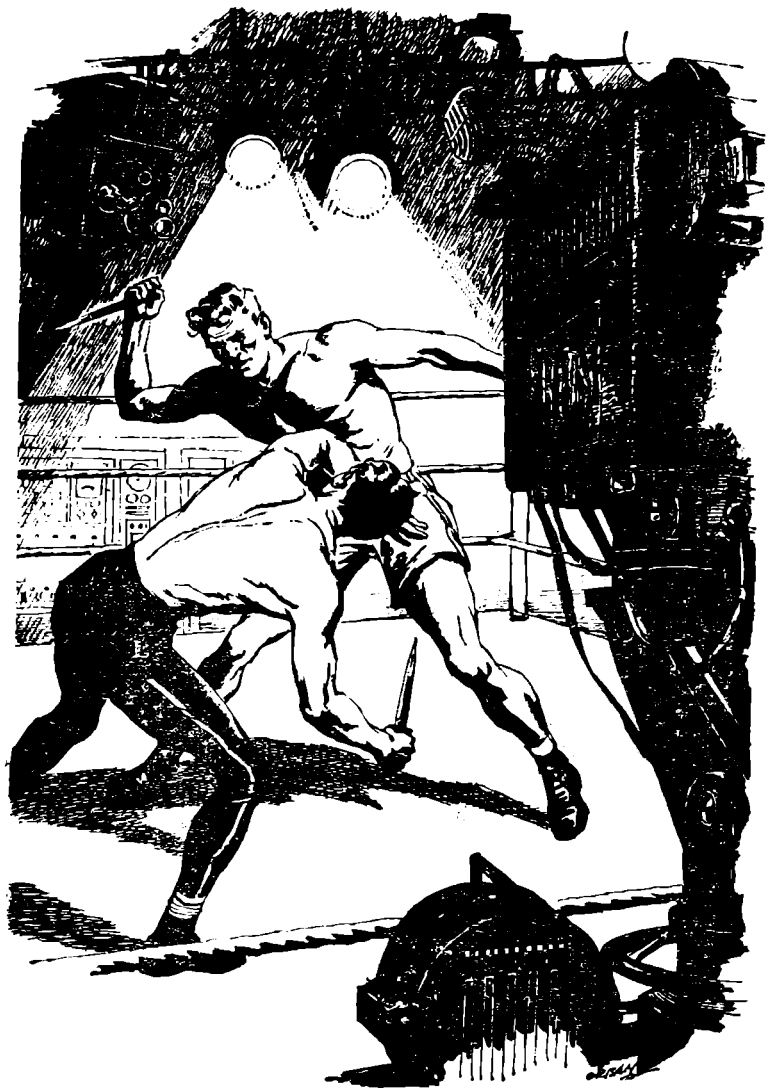
“Is that why Karla didn’t come back?”

“No. She asked me to deliver a message to you and it explains her reason for staying. I quote, *Tell him I’ll be waiting and if he wants to be a millionaire, he’d better come.*”

“Huh?”

“Those were her exact words. I asked her how she planned to make you a millionaire but she wouldn’t tell me.”

Brik closed his eyes and tried



to concentrate. He knew his fiancée was above average, but asking him to travel across space for a half a year with the promise that he'd be a millionaire was the strangest request she'd ever made of him.

"Are there many ways to make a fortune on Delira?"

Sumner shook his head. "There are no ways, believe me. When the UN appointed me as Earth's ambassador, I thought I'd be able to swing some legitimate deals on the side to make money. I soon discovered that an Earthman has *nothing* to offer Delirans."

"I thought any planet with a high currency exchange rate was a good place to get rich."

"That's a popular mistake of people who don't understand that angle of financing," the diplomat informed him. "Trouble is, currency exchange is frequently one-way: a Deliran dollar is worth a thousand Earth dollars. That's a simple illustration, but it's the basic principle behind currency exchange."

"So, if a person could get a thousand Deliran watches; he could sell them for a million dollars. Or, if he earned a

thousand Deliran dollars, he could exchange them at a bank for a million?"

Sumner nodded his head affirmatively. "Trouble is, there's no way for an Earthman to get a thousand Deliran watches or dollars. We have no exports that they want to buy and they never hire an Earthman for any reason because their machines can do any job a hundred times better than one of us could."

"And despite all that, Karla has found a way to make a fortune?"

"She *thinks* she has, and she's waiting for you."

"How do I get there?"

SUMNER'S dark eyes gleamed with amusement. "It's not the easiest place in the galaxy to reach. In fact, it's so hard to reach, there's no more than a dozen Earthmen there at present. Millionaires buy spaceships and go, but when they return, they're no longer millionaires. The government sent me to straighten out a few diplomatic matters. Outside of those two ways, there's only one other way... go as a spaceship mechanic."

"I'm a white collar man, not a mechanic!"

"You could use one of those Sleeplearn gadgets to learn all you have to know in a few months while you sleep nights. The Apex Import-Export Company sends freight ships to Delira every six months. They do not carry a cargo and they're not designed to carry passengers, but their insurance policy stipulates that every ship must have a mechanic aboard. If you went, you'd spend the trip in a six by six compartment and if you want to see Karla that much, I'll pull some strings and get you the job."

"That sounds—"

"Before you give me your decision," Sumner interrupted, "I'd like to say something as a friend rather than Karla's uncle if I may."

Brik hesitated. Sumner was always outspoken and when he drank heavily as he'd done during his visit, he was likely to say *anything*. Holding his breath, he said, "Go ahead."

"I think you'd be crazy if you went," Sumner stated. "Karla is a wonderful, attractive girl, but she's a little gold

digger. When she asked me to take her to Delira with me she said it was because she wanted to 'see Delira'. I knew her real reason. . . she hoped she'd find some way of getting rich there. She's the kind of person who'd do almost anything if there was enough money in it and I'd hate to think of you tangled up with her in a place like that. It's a sort of gold digger's nightmare. . . a place where you see a fortune everywhere you go, and yet there's no way to get your hands on any of it."

"I'll go," Brik stated flatly. "You forgot. . . I love that gold digger." *And besides*, he thought, *if anyone can find a way to get rich on Delira, Karla can and I wouldn't mind being rich!*

"Eight thirty," the watch said. "Time to leave or you'll miss your plane."

Brik walked with his guest to the door and remembered another question, "You said Apex sends empty ships to Delira. I suppose that's because we don't have anything they want, but what do the ships bring back?"

Sumner grinned wryly. "Old

clothes, broken toys and other things donated by Deliran organizations equivalent to our Salvation Army. Their clothes are of a material that never wears out and even their broken toys are better than any we manufacture. The items sell for high prices, but Apex barely makes a profit every year. It costs a lot to send a ship to Delira."

AFTER what seemed centuries, the Starfleet landed at a Deliran spaceport and Brik stumbled down the ladder eagerly. His surroundings were disappointing: he'd expected a gigantic port crowded with hundreds of ships constantly landing and taking off. Instead, the landing field was smaller than most on Earth and only three other ships were visible.

The field seemed to be located in the middle of a wilderness and a cluster of low buildings was the only sign of civilization, so he headed toward them.

He searched for an information desk but discovered there was none. After wandering through a maze of empty corridors for half an hour, he found

the bulletin board and the note tacked to it, *Dear Brik, sorry I couldn't meet you, but there's no way of knowing when you'll arrive. To your left is a brown platform. Stand on it, dial these numbers and it will take you to my apartment. Love, Karla.*

The 'numbers' at the bottom of the note were Deliran symbols that resembled chicken tracks, but when he examined the dialing mechanism on the brown platform, he found corresponding symbols.

When he had carefully dialed the last number in the proper sequence, he looked up and saw that the spaceport building had disappeared.

The spectacle before him was like none he'd ever seen. Chairs, tables, bookcases, lamps and beds were grouped in a pattern as if placed in rooms, but there were *no walls*. Trees surrounded the 'apartment' as if it were no more than a clearing in a primitive forest and fleecy clouds high above him drifted slowly across a deep blue sky.

"Brik!"

She ran to him and enveloped him in a passionate embrace before he had time to open his mouth. During the

next few minutes, he realized more fully why he'd waited for her. If he'd been engaged to any other woman and she had run off with her uncle to a distant planet, he wouldn't have waited. But, Karla was worth waiting for...

"You call this an apartment?" he asked when he had a chance.

Her dark brown eyes twinkled and he knew that she was amused by his bewilderment. "Nice, isn't it? Want to see the rest of it?"

He followed her about the clearing while she explained the intricate machines and other furnishings. "The Delirans aren't hampered by lack of space," she said. "They've explored and conquered the dimensions and this is actually in another dimension. The forest over there is some sort of plastic although you can't tell it from the real thing."

He paused before a six foot plant with colorful, myriad shaped blossoms and whistled. "What's its name?"

"Pretty isn't it? I went to a park one day and when I came back, I put my shoes aside.

When I started to put that pair on again a week later, I noticed this growing out of some sand in one." She grinned sheepishly. "It was so small then...only about an inch tall...I felt sorry for it and planted it here. It hasn't got a name...it's a weed."

"A weed," Brik repeated dully and thought, *On Delira, the weeds are more beautiful than Earth's most beautiful flowers!* For the first time since his arrival, he felt a queasiness in his stomach.

THEY had made a complete circle of the apartment and he selected a comfortable chair in what Karla probably considered the living room. "How do you afford a place like this?" he asked. "Your uncle says it's hard to make money on Delira."

"I don't pay rent," she explained. "The Delirans have places like this for Earthmen and they're equivalent to our poor houses. They realize we can't pay our way and I suppose they'd rather spend a few of their dollars than have us starve to death in their streets."

"Generous," Brik complimented the aliens.

Her thin eyebrows lost their attractive curve as she frowned and her voice was suddenly tinged with bitterness, "The cost of this place is chicken feed to them."

"Your uncle said you have a plan to get rich," he said abruptly.

"That's right."

"What is it?"

She waved a slender hand at what was evidently a bathroom. "I'll tell you when I get back. You can take a shower if you want, and before you're through, I'll have all the arrangements made and we'll be millionaires before the day is over!"

When Brik had showered, he changed into fresh clothes, went to the living room and found that Karla had returned and was smiling from ear to ear. "Everything is ready," she informed him.

"What's the big plan?"

"It's a simple one," she said. "The Delirans won't buy anything we have to sell because all their products are better. They aren't interested in any of

our talents except *one*...the ability to fight. That's the only way to make money here. They have few fighters...I suppose it's against their nature...but there are bloodthirsty Delirans just like there's bloodthirsty individuals in any race and they pay to see a fight. I've arranged for you to fight a man named Graham."

"*Fight?* A boxing match? I don't know how to box!"

She frowned at his reluctance. "Graham is no professional. The two of you can bluff your way through and the income will be five thousand Deliran dollars. That's equivalent to *five million* in our currency and even after we share half with Graham, we'll have two and a half million. That's good pay for a bloody nose!"

Brik lit a cigarette and fought the rising anger inside him. He didn't like to be pushed into anything and Karla had made all the decisions and arrangements without consulting him.

"We're lucky you got here when you did," she said. "Two men staged a boxing match a few months ago. They're on

their way back to Earth as millionaires and when they spread the news, thousands of professional fighters will come." She glanced at her watch and rose. "If you're not going to back out, it's time to go."

He shrugged his shoulders. Two and a half million was good pay for a bloody nose. It was even good pay for a few broken bones!

"You win," he said.

He followed her to the matter-transmitter and as soon as she completed dialing a number, the apartment vanished.

THEY were standing in a valley of majestic towers. High above them, slender bridges spanned the gulfs between the towering, multicolored buildings, and linked them all together with a lacy labyrinth. The streets were wide avenues of bright plastic that gleamed in the sunlight and he saw the Delirans for the first time.

Their appearance was startling: they were an incongruity on their own planet. Although their civilization was the most advanced in the galaxy and

their planet was like a magnificent paradise, they were frail creatures with yellowish flesh and antennae that seemed as fragile as strands of straw.

"Those are the things who made all *this*?" Brik asked unbelievably as they crossed a street of sparkling clean plastic. "They look as impressive as bugs!"

"Don't let their appearance fool you," Karla said. "Their race is almost twice as old as ours. When our civilization is as old as theirs, it might be even more advanced, but at the present time, they're the most intelligent beings in the galaxy."

He followed her through a triangular doorway and down a long corridor. "You certainly made arrangements for this fight quick enough. How are the spectators going to have time to get here?"

"There won't be any spectators now," she informed him. "The fight will be recorded on something like film and then copies of it will be sold later. I told Graham about you months ago and he's been waiting for you to come. He wants to be

rich... especially when he only has to bluff his way through a fight."

She stopped and indicated the door before them. "This is it. About half an hour from now, it'll all be over and we'll be rich." She kissed him, disappeared through another doorway and he was alone in the corridor.

When he reached out, the door opened at his touch and he stepped into a large, metal-walled room. The floor and walls were smooth and blank, but he saw that the ceiling was covered with strange devices that would evidently record the fight.

Graham waited on the other side of the room, his muscular arms swinging loosely at his sides.

Two and a half million is good pay for a few bruises. Brik reminded himself when he realized that Graham was a much stronger man.

He watched numbly as Graham picked up a knife near his feet. The truth was like an explosion in his mind: Karla had lied. Deliran's wouldn't pay to see a mere exchange of

fistcuffs, but they would pay to see something much more exciting as a duel with knives...

He picked up the knife near his own feet and remembered Sumner's warning, *She's a little gold digger... the kind of person who'd do almost anything if there was enough money in it.*

When Graham moved toward him, Brik saw that he was holding the knife so tightly that his thick knuckles were white over the handle. Together with the expression in his hard eyes, it was enough to tell him that he'd been tricked into a fight to the death.

He wondered briefly what sort of arrangements Karla had made. Would she still receive her share of the profits if he was killed? It was logical: if it was necessary for him to live in order to get her share, she would have told him the truth about the fight and let him prepare for it.

HIS thoughts were interrupted when Graham lunged, his knife darting through the air like a live thing. He side-

stepped but was too slow and felt a hot pain in his shoulder.

Blood trickled down his arm and he realized he didn't want to risk his life for two and a half million or *any* amount of money. He would have willingly fought with his fists, but fighting with knives against a stronger man who had obviously trained was suicide!

He ran to the door. There was no knob, so he shoved against the cold metal with all his strength.

Nothing happened.

He turned as Graham made another charge and knew he would have to fight for his life...

The duel lasted only minutes but it seemed like an eternity of dodging, slashing with the knife and driving muscles that ached with tension. His eyes burned with sweat from his forehead and his mouth was filled with the acrid taste of blood. His breath was a harsh thing in his ears and Graham's exclamations of anger were like the grunts of a savage beast.

His body was soon a maze of searing pain and the metal walls of the room seemed to

recede until, in all the universe there was only Graham and himself as they fought.

And then, like an event in a dream, he felt his legs crumble beneath him and knew he had lost...

Death was an absence of all things, and he floated in a vast, swirling gulf of nothingness...

...until, nova-like in its abruptness, something entered the emptiness...an intangible, indescribable *something*.

His brain was the first organ to function again and it vaguely recorded the revival of his body. He felt his heart pump blood once more and felt the crimson current hesitate in arteries and veins that had changed drastically in the interval of death. He felt the arteries and veins swiftly become normal and sensed his lungs as they labored furiously with the new surge of life. He heard the exhalation of his breath and opened his eyes...

It was a small room filled with strange machines that hummed and clicked continuously as if they were living things trying to communicate with him.

Karla kissed him on the forehead.

"I was dead?" he asked unbelievably.

"Yes," Karla admitted. "The Deliran machines can make the dead live again. To them, restoring life is as simple as healing a broken bone is to us."

"No," he said. "It can't be."

Karla smiled and said gently, "It's not as crazy as it sounds. Our own scientists have done it in a few cases, but the Delirans have perfected the process."

He inhaled deeply, smelled Karla's perfume mingled with the odor of alien antiseptics and knew it was the truth.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," Karla apologized. "I was afraid you wouldn't agree if you knew what kind of fight it was to be. It's all over now and we're millionaires." She held a piece of paper before his eyes and he saw that it was covered with the odd Deliran symbols. "This is a check for twenty five hundred Deliran dollars," she explained. "Worth ten and a half

million in our currency!"

"You lied to me," he said.

She frowned and explained again, "I lied because I was afraid you wouldn't do it. This was our only chance to get rich. I had to think of everything."

"Did you think of *everything*?" he asked. As he rose from the operating table, he was aware of a strange emptiness inside him. He walked across the room, flexed his fingers experimentally and thought, *What about the soul? If a person dies, the soul leaves the body and if life is restored to the body, can the Deliran machines also drag the soul back from heaven or hell and stuff it back inside the body?*

As he looked about the room, an even more terrifying thought occurred, *If you've lost something as intangible as your soul, how do you know you've lost it?*

Turning to face Karla, he repeated, "Did you think of *everything*?"

THE END