

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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This messenger of destiny sacrificed not only strangers, but himself

CHARLES H. GESNER

how can
you
be
reading this?

Here is what might be called "practical" fantasy—not the usual excursion into dreams or imagined lands but an ordered story whose only hoax lies in its own inexorable logic. Read it and weep—or at any rate, laugh. A refreshingly original effort by an author who, as a result of certain fantastic activities while slugging across Europe with Patton, holds a D.S.C.

I SNIFFED the bouquet of the cigar the salesman handed me and murmured: "It's pungent."

If I hadn't said those two words, if I'd said just anything else, the world would have continued being familiar and *known*.

Instead . . .

His reaction was astonishing.

He vaulted over the counter, seized me by the lapels, poked his nose to within an inch of mine and in a deadly voice ground out a question that seemed to accuse me of crimes beyond imagination.

"What — did — you — say?" he snarled.

I was so flabbergasted by the salesman's volcanic reaction that for a moment I was helpless. Then returning composure brought anger with it. I knocked down his hands.

"Whatever you thought I said. I didn't," I growled.

His cigar-clerk aspect seemed to slip a little. He stepped back and looked at me too quietly. I had the impression there were eyes behind his eyes, a face behind his face. Then

he was again very New York or Chicago or Los Angeles. If I had owned a cigar store I would have hired him myself. Perfect cigar salesman. Not a jarring note.

"Sorry, sir. I thought you said something you couldn't possibly know."

But I was so thoroughly irked that I foolishly ribbed the fellow, thereby strangely and terribly changing several lives.

"But I do know, my good cigar-salesperson. I do know."

"You do?" The question was incredulous.

"Certainly." My tone was mocking now. "I referred to the smell of this cigar. It's pungent. Pungent. Meaning sharply aromatic."

"And you say you know?" he asked quietly, his fingers at his bow tie.

"Sure. Why shouldn't I? Don't you?" I demanded.

"Naturally. But I don't think you do, really. You might, though, and so I'm calling on you tonight." He tilted his head to one side, gazing at me speculatively.

I shrugged.

"And I will find you," he added. The way he said it indicated that it should have meant something to me. But it didn't. Not then.

"Mister, you are so far off your rocker that you wobble," I told him as I turned and left the store.

There was dinner and a movie that night with Martha. The show something entirely believable but boy meets girl, meets trouble, meets kiss. But Martha, sitting beside

me holding my hand, did not seem entirely believable. Beloved Martha. Small, blonde, beautiful and beautifully in love with me. Lost Martha. Forever lost because of two idiotic words in a cigar store.

He was sitting in my reading chair when I got home.

"You left your door unlocked," he said, annoying his bow-tie.

"Talk fast, mister. In a few seconds you won't have any teeth to talk with," I told him.

"Then you *don't know* after all, do you?" he said.

A small glow-worm of wonderment lit up in my guts.

"All I know is that there is something about you slightly three-dollar bill. Confederate money, that is."

"Steven Crane, I'm really sorry," he replied. "I can see it's all a mistake. I thought you said *expunger* in the store. I jumped to the conclusion you had either managed an impossible recognition or else were from—" He broke off thoughtfully. "Well, it wasn't in the book but it is now. And I'm here. I have *called on you*. It's too late for you to do anything. Look at me!"

That's a challenge nobody can resist. Try it sometime. I looked into his eyes and lost—existence. As I looked, the very standard salesman face melted, rapidly at first, then slowly jelled into something so *different* that no human mind could maintain an image of it and remain sane. Something from Otherwhere. It sat there regarding me coldly.

"I am an Expunger, Steven. In a few moments you will be one too,"

remarked this horror from—where?

I began to feel faint.

When I came to it was morning and I was on the floor feeling sick all over and with that sense of diminishing terror invariably accompanying the first few seconds after a nightmare.

I decided the whole thing was—had to be—a nightmare. And that I was sick enough to go see Dr. Bassett. My body felt as though every joint and muscle had been yanked and twisted out of shape. I was all ached and my head swam.

I arose and struggled through a shower and the rest of the day's preliminaries. An hour later I walked into Room 693 of the Brand Building and asked the nurse if Dr. Bassett was in and could see me.

"Sorry, sir," she said, smiling toothsome, "we have no Dr. Bassett here."

"Impossible! Why, I've known Dr. Bassett for five years and he's always been here."

"And I," she retorted, "have worked in this office for seven years and for seven years it's been Dr. Phillips." She was regarding me curiously.

I back-watered.

"Well, then, could I see Dr. Phillips? I ache all over. Flu, I guess."

"Dr. Phillips will be out of town for several days attending a convention. Besides, he's a dentist. There are several physicians down the hall," she told me.

That was too much for me so I left while I could still be polite. I was almost certain it had said *Arthur*

Bassett, M.D., on the door as I entered.

Now it said: *J. P. Phillips, D.D.S.*

Going down in the elevator I decided to be my own doctor. On the way home I bought a fifth of strong medicine. Five doses later I felt better physically but even more baffled mentally.

I called three different people I was sure had been Dr. Bassett's patients at one time or other. The first was a clerk in my brokerage office. He had been a pneumonia patient.

"Jerry, do you know where Dr. Bassett's new offices are?" I asked.

"Bassett? I don't know any Dr. Bassett," he said.

"You sure?"

"Positive," he declared.

"Well, then—who treated you when you had pneumonia last year?"

"I've never been sick a day in my life, Mr. Crane," said Jerry.

I hung up and whistled a long soft note.

It was the same with old Mrs. Prentiss and Harvey Williams. They had simply never heard of any Dr. Bassett. She had never had a broken arm treated anywhere and he had never had appendicitis.

I looked in the phone book. No Dr. Bassett. There was not and there had never been a Dr. Bassett on the staff at Mercy Hospital, they said. I thought of his receipted bills and dug through my files to get them. No bills.

Then I called Dr. Phillips' office and got the nurse on the phone.

"Remember me? I'm the fellow who came into your office this morn-

ing and asked for Dr. Bassett."

"Yes, I remember. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Since a consultation with Dr. Calvert."

"I'm glad to hear that. What can I do for you?"

"Please think carefully," I said, "and then answer this question for me. You saw me this morning, but did you ever see me before anywhere or at any time or do I remind you of anybody you have ever seen?"

"The answer is 'no' on both counts," she answered.

"You're dead sure?"

"Dead sure. I wouldn't make a mistake like that."

I said, "It's not your fault, I guess, but thanks for nothing."

I remembered that Dr. Bassett had told me he had been born and raised in town and so I phoned the Bureau of Vital Statistics. They had no record of his birth, life or death. Before I gave up I tried to locate his wife. No such person.

So all right. There had never been a Dr. Bassett and I was either crazy or that damned cigar salesman had hypnotized me.

The phone rang and I answered.

"Is it still pungent?" asked the salesman. He seemed to be friendly enough.

"I was just thinking about you," I gritted.

"I thought you might be," he said, cheerfully. "And I thought possibly you might be thinking of coming down to the store to see me."

"I was."

"Don't."

"Why?" I asked.

"Listen carefully. If you value your existence, such as it will be from now on, and if you have any desire to escape punishment beyond human understanding—which will still be yours for a while yet—do not visit. Now or in the future. Never. Don't—ever—come—to—see—me."

"Why not? I don't get it."

"You will. And I'm relaying your orders to you. From time to time you will receive the name of some person. You will call on this person. You'll find it impossible not to. Ultimately certain* tremendous advantages will accrue to you. Meanwhile, arrange a livelihood, if necessary, that does not require you to call on people deliberately. Personally I find a tobacco store exactly suitable to my assignment."

He hung up.

"What is all this about *calling* on people?" I asked myself.

I knew the answer wasn't in the bottle, but I searched.

Next day I learned it was impossible for me to call upon a client. Making an appointment on the telephone was simple enough but after I tried to call on two of them, I gave it up.

They both just vanished from knowledge as had Dr. Bassett. Disappeared without a trace.

I decided to call upon Dr. Phillips and his nurse. As I walked in I took pains to note that it still said *J. P. Phillips, D.D.S.*, on the door.

I asked the nurse, a girl I had never seen before, if Dr. Phillips didn't just happen to be in.

"There's no one here by that name. It's Dr. Winkler."

"Thanks. Thanks for plenty," I said, and walked out.

On the door was a sign—not new—saying, "Dr. Samuel S. Winkler, Diagnostician."

That night I got a special delivery letter. It said:

"An oversight on my part. Refrain until further notice from calling on anyone unless so ordered. Especially ignore persons you may consider necessary to the future. I know you will not want to call on persons you may like or love. Cigars?"

My first "assignment" came in the afternoon mail.

"The existence of Jason S. Henderson, 2311 South Mulberry Street, this city, is dangerous. Call on him. Cigarettes?"

Jason S. Henderson was listed in the telephone book. Mrs. Henderson answered my ring. Mr. Henderson was at work. He would be home that evening. Yes, it would be all right to telephone him at work. He was the manager.

He answered the phone promptly. Yes, he lived at 2311 South Mulberry Street. He would be at home that evening and it would be all right to call if the matter was really important.

Along about dark I took a cab to South Mulberry Street and punched the doorbell button at twenty-three-eleven. A man came to the door, masticating, as though he had been interrupted at his evening meal.

"Good evening," I greeted him. "Is Mr. Jason S. Henderson here?"

"Mmmbody b'at mame nis house," he mumbled through his cud.

"You positive?" I asked.

He swallowed and said: "Lived here nine years myself. No Henderson here. Name's Potter."

I decided to get tough.

"Listen, Potter," I snapped. "I'm on to this business, see? Now, by damn, you tell me where you came from—just now!"

"From the dining room. What's the matter'th you, anyway?"

"Before that," I shouted. "Just before that, where did you come from?"

"Bathroom. Say, what're you? Drunk or Galluper?"

I gave it up, walked back to the taxi and told the cabby to stop and wait for me in front of the nearest drugstore on the way back uptown.

Sure enough, Jason S. Henderson was no longer listed in the telephone book.

Later that evening the phone rang in the apartment—the apartment that was to have been redecorated and made into a home for me and Martha. Mr. and Mrs. Steven Carter.

"Matches?" inquired the voice.

"Information," I replied.

"Still puzzled?"

"Who wouldn't be?" I asked.

"Few indeed," came the cheerful response.

"What's happening to me?" I demanded.

He laughed.

"Everything that's going to happen to you has already happened, except further orientation. It's the people you call on, or, rather, attempt

to call on, who have things happen to them."

"Where do they go?" I asked.

"At the precise moment you consummate your attempt, you expunge them. At that second they cease to exist, and what's more, from that instant onward throughout time, they never did exist. All you have to do is announce your intent or ask for them by name and—fffft."

"But," I asked, "what if somebody becomes suspicious?"

"How can they? The missing people never did exist once you make your call."

He went on to explain that in the remote possibility that curiosity was aroused, all that was necessary was to call upon the curious one and the danger was eliminated.

"And that," I stated, "is why you cannot have me call upon you."

"Precisely."

"What if I did?"

"I would cease to exist and, therefore, you would cease to be an Expunger, but would instantly be snatched off to a very nether place where you would endlessly suffer horrors so alien to you that your brain pattern, now, would permit you to sense them only dimly."

"How about the time you called on me?" I asked.

"About once in a hundred years or so an Expunger is permitted to make a recruitment call. All other calls result in erasure. If you got another deliberate personal call from me now, it would mean erasure for you.

You see, because I thought you might know too much, I had to call on you. However, I was permitted to recruit you. There was no other choice."

"But what's all this expunging about?" I asked.

"Surgery. Removal from the present of unpredicted trends and random effects dangerous to the planned goals of the future."

"But I don't care about being in on it. I'd like to have my recruitment canceled in a hurry."

"Impossible. You'd have to be called upon."

"Oh," I said.

"Anyway, go take a look at yourself in a mirror. Put your eyes a little bit out of focus and stare for several moments." He hung up.

I did just that. After a few moments my face melted as his had done and another monster from Otherwhere leered out at me from the mirror. God!

I have not written to Martha. That might be fatal—for her.

What I have done is this: I registered this morning at a midtown hotel under my own name. I will sleep there tonight. In the morning I will get up and go out of the hotel. I will go to my apartment and shave off my moustache and put on colored glasses.

Then I will return to the hotel. I will walk up to the desk clerk and will say: "I am calling on Mr. Steven Crane!"

Who knows? Maybe it will work!