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(*illustrating "Baby"*)

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A curious story, this: an odd blend of modern crime, Eighteenth Century science/magick (take your pick), and little-known historical lore—in all, you'd say, a story that only Avram Davidson could write. But the fact is, according to Mr. Davidson, that "the original idea and some of the best touches" arise from the equally unpredictable imagination of Ward Moore. However the credit is to be distributed in this not-quite-collaboration, the result is attractively off-beat even for its unconventional creators.

I Do Not Hear You, Sir

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

BLOODGOOD BIXBEE KNEW NOTHING about Art, but he knew what he didn't like: What he didn't like, he said—loudly and with much profane redundancy—was Bein Played For A Sucker . . . See?

Milo Anderson saw, all right; he knew he should never have sold Bixbee the unauthenticated Wilson Peale, any more than he should have collected in advance the five per cent of the contract which he knew he could never negotiate. But there were so few people left in the capital whom he could still expect to swindle . . . and he needed the money. He had counted too much on Bixbee's not being able to admit participation in an illegal deal, and it certainly wasn't the moral aspect of not telling the rich lumberman about the cloud on the pic-

ture's title which worried him. In fact, nothing about Bixbee had worried him at the time—for who, back in Qualliupp, Washington, would know a Wilson Peale from a citron peel?—all that concerned him had been getting the check to the bank in time. And then to the phone . . .

Checks, checks, telephones, telephones, and . . .

Damn them all, with their greedy open hands and yapping mouths.

*Big crooks have littler crooks
to bite 'um,*

And so on down, ad infinitum.

Wasn't Bloodgood Bixbee a crook, stealing lumber rights and ravishing the forests with a ruthless hand? Sure he was. And then following the classic pattern of try-

ing to set himself up as a man of culture, with Genuine Oil Paintings on his walls. How the *Hell* did he find out, anyway? Was it possible that even Qualliupp had in it someone like Edmond Hart Ransome, from whom Milo had gotten the picture? No, impossible. The whole State of Washington was too new to interest old E. H. R. who seldom concerned himself with anything later than the end of the 1700's.

Anderson ran over in his mind the list of those with whom he had done business. Some one of them—there had to be at least *one*—would be in a mood to help him now, to advance money against future co-operation.

He dialed an unlisted number, tried to swallow. A man's voice, very quiet and cautious: "Yes?"

"Ovlomov?" He must not seem too—

"Who is this?" the voice inquired. A man with whom Mr. Ovlomov had done business? Didn't he know that Mr. Ovlomov had returned only that day to his homeland? He should follow the newspapers—No, no—he, the one speaking, was not interested in Ovlomov's contacts. Nor would it be of any use to call again: the number was being discontinued: Ovlomov was indiscreet.

So that way—the way of being a tenth-rate spy pretending to be a third-rate one—was out, and he was no closer to being clear of his

snarl of checks and phone calls: people he was blackmailing (but only able to get small sums from), people who were blackmailing *him* (and getting large sums). For a while he had had an easy stretch, living at old Ransome's place.

The lease was up in a few days—another problem.

It wasn't as if the painting wasn't his, Ransome had left it to him, it was clear enough in his will. That was the devilish part of it—before simply stating "and all the rest of my property now located in my apartment," the old man had "left" him, had specifically named, every single article Milo had stolen from him. He had *known*. "And this bequest I make for a reason well known to my secretary, the said Milo Anderson." Rubbing it in. *Always* rubbing it in. "*Fast horses and slow women, eh, Mr. Anderson?*" That sort of thing.

Perhaps it would have been better not to have meddled with the old man's medicine bottles—but it was *so* easy—and so soon after the doctor had called; no trouble about a death certificate . . . *All the rest of my property . . . for a reason well-known to the said Milo Anderson.*

But little enough property was left in the apartment by now.

By now everything was coming all at once. Bloodgood Bixbee wanting his money back and raving raw head and bloody bones if

he didn't get it. Big Patsy the bookmaker wanting the markers to be made good, wanting it right away, not threatening but promising. And Mrs. Pritchard, her voice like half-melted margarine: "Carried you on the books a long time, Milo—been good to you—we all've been good to you. Now we have to get the money because the Syndicate goes over the books tomorrow, and you know what *that* means, Milo."

And he knew, oh, he *knew* all right. Even before the phone rang and the voice—an ordinary coarse unlettered unviolent sort of voice, saying its say as the cabbie might ask Where To or the laundryman announce the bill—Anderson: Get it ready, get the money ready, we'll pick it up (by now the voice a bit bored with so many routine calls) as soon after midnight as we get around there. . . .

Milo Anderson's eye ran hopelessly around the apartment. Over the mantelpiece (or over where the marble had been before he'd sold it) was the faded place where the alleged Wilson Peale had hung before going to take its place over the silent hi-fi set in the Bloodgood Bixbee place in Qualiupp (who'd bother with hi-fi when the TV offered such quality fare?). The cabinet of old coins had stood over there—the Pine Tree shillings, the "York" pieces, half-reales, the dismes: all sold by now, and sold well, but the money long ago (it

seemed long ago) spent . . . Big Patsy, Mrs. Pritchard, and all the others . . . Edward Hart Ransome's place had been stuffed with the treasures of the late 1700's, but almost everything had been sold or pawned by now except for a few pieces of essential furniture. These had been already priced and would bring only a fraction of what was needed.

Milo Anderson was not more fearful than most men, perhaps he was a degree less fearful. But there were too many things piling up just now. Everybody was putting the screws on him and there was nobody he could squeeze in turn—not *now*—not *tonight* . . . Like a hungry man who opens and re-opens icebox and pantry: there must be *some* food left, only let me look once more: Milo roamed the shadowy apartment, looking and peering and hoping and fearing, something to sell, something overlooked, *something* . . .

With sweat cold on his back and with kneecaps articulating far from firmly he pawed among the discards the dealers had left. Bellows, wool-carders, trivets ("Three fr a quarter on the Boston Post Road," the dealer said.), apple-corers and nutmeg graters, new model spinningwheels . . . and *this* damned thing. Whatever *it* was. The dealer had simply laughed. Milo was about to kick it. He groaned, sighed heavily, listlessly began to examine it.

Basic design was a cabinet, a smallish box, done—he peered closer—in curly cherrywood, a favorite wood of the period. It stood on four legs and on *one* side was a little wheel and on the *other* side, just sticking out, was a curved copper or brass . . . funnel, was it? He twisted the metal horn, it moved under pressure. He turned the wheel. Nothing happened, and this was, of course, wrong: for no Colonial craftsman would have spent time making a device which didn't *do* anything. He spun the wheel again, and a bell tinkled inside.

Well, yes—a box had to have an inside. Why hadn't he looked inside? People (he pushed a stubborn peg) were always hiding money inside of . . . There. The panel slid open easily enough. The bell tinkled again, a tiny silver bell on a silver loop in an upper corner. A small black horn (calf? bison?) hung on a thong. Copper wires led from the small end of the horn, and parchment, like a tiny drum-head, covered the wide end. Wedged firmly behind a glass panel were two glass jars lined with metal foil.

The thing to do was to get a hammer and—the bell rang a third time. Death, he thought, was waiting, and here *he* was, playing with an antique toy. He seized the horn, was about to tear it loose, then he put it to his ear instead. At once he dropped it and jumped.

“Your conversant, Sir?” That was what the horn had said in his ear. Or was it, “You're conversant . . . ?” What was the apparatus supposed to be, a music box with vox humana, a primitive phonograph, a . . . No, if it resembled any piece of equipment he was familiar with, it was the telephone. Without stopping to rationalize his action in turning eagerly to anything which could divert him from his trouble, he thought, Let's see: Buffalo horn to ear, speak into . . . mm . . . copper tube (funnel, trumpet) on outside. Feeling a bit foolish, he said—what else *could* he say but: “Hello?”

The odd voice in his ear repeated what it had said before. Milo asked, “Conversant with *what*?”

“With *whom*, Sir,” the voice corrected him; and then, as he remained baffled and silent: “I do not hear you, Sir. Pray consult the compendium, Sir, for the cypher of the conversant desired. . . . Servant, Sir.”

“Hello? Hello? Hey!” He even whistled shrilly, but there was no reply.

Putting the horn down he began pressing and poking around the box, and dislodged something from a narrow space under the shelf where the odd jars were. It was a small thin leatherbound book. He opened it. Obviously laid paper, linen-rag, age-yellowed and “foxed”: brown-flecked . . . names, numbers . . . turn to the front . . .

THE COMPENDIUM OF THE
NAMES, RESIDENCES, &
CYPHERS OF THE
HONORABLE & WORTHY
PATRONS OF THE
MAGNETICKAL INTELLI-
GENCE ENGINE.

Assuming—and a crazy-mad assumption it was, but here the thing stood in front of him—assuming that the telephone, or some long-forgotten precursor of it, *had* been invented in those days . . . But how could it still be working? Or was this some quirk of a few other off-beat antiquarians like old Ransome, to have their own odd-ball Bell System? Or was he simply out of his senses and imagining it all? Oh, well. He turned the page.

EXORDIUM. *The Artificers of this Device have spared neither Pains nor Oeconomy to obtain the primest Materials and Workmanship, the Cabinetmaking being that of Mr. D. Physe, the Leyden-jars and other Magnetick Parts are the Manufactory of Dr. B. Franklin, Mr. P. Revere has fabrickated the Copper and Brass, and Mr. Meyer Meyers the Pewter and Silver.*

SUBMONITION. *The Cypher of each Patron is listed Alphabetically. Spin the Wheel and on perceiving the Tintinnabulation of the Bell, Inform the Engineer of the Cypher of the Conversant desired.*
CAVEAT. *It is absolutely inhibited to tamper with the Leyden-jars.*

Still dubious, but certainly curious, so much so that he even forgot

his own danger, Anderson looked through the book. Almost automatically his finger stopped at *Washington, Geo., Gent. Planter, Mt. Vernon*. He spun the wheel. The bell tinkled. He put the small horn to his ear.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

This time he was prepared. He cleared his throat and said, "Patriot 1-7-7-0."

"Your servant, Sir." Somewhere away another little bell began to tinkle.

"Say—Engineer?" Milo ventured.

"Servant, Sir."

"Um . . . what's your name?"

"There are no names, Sir."

Trrringgg . . . trrringgg . . .

"Well, uh, what *time* are you in—or where *are* you?"

"There is neither time nor place, Sir. And it is not permitted to hold non-pertinent discourse whilst the engine is in use, Sir." Trrringgg . . .

Suddenly the parchment crackled and a deep voice boomed from the horn: "Ah heah you, Seh!" Milo swallowed.

"Mr. *Washington*?" Surely not yet General in 1770.

"Yes, Seh—and no thanks to you, Seh! What do you mean by it, you damned horse-leecher? Sellin me these confounded artifized denticles—! Why, a wind-broken, bog-spavined stallion couldn't get 'em comftable in his mouth!" The false teeth were heard clacking and grinding. The Patriot's voice rose.

"Haven't ett a decent piece of butcher's meat in *days!* Live on syllabub and sugar-tiddy! Plague take your flimsy British crafts—give me honest Colonial works, say I!" The outraged voice rang in Milo's ear, then died away.

Mistaken for a quack dentist! Perhaps the only crime he never had committed. Milo wanted to call back, found he'd forgotten the number—the "cypher," rather—but the place where it had been was blank. He shivered. The engineer's voice responded to his signal. "What is George Washington's cypher?" Milo demanded.

"That intelligence is not available, Sir. Pray consult—"

"But it's no longer *in* the compendium!"

"Cyphers not in the compendium do not exist. . . . Your servant, Sir."

Well, so much for the Father of His Country. Anderson had discovered a hitherto-overlooked cause of the American Revolution, but a lot of good it did him. Once again, he realized his position. There was no one he could turn to—not in the present, anyway. Not knowing what else *to* do, he turned once more to the past. Spun the wheel, opened the little book.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

"Printinghouse 1-7-7-1. . . ." Trr-rinnggg . . . The voice was brisk, still retaining after all the years a trace of the Boston twang.

"We must all hang together or we shall surely hang separately. . . . What's your need, neighbor? The colonies should and will unite, but meanwhile the day's work goes on."

"Benjamin Franklin I presume?"

"That same, my friend. Job-printing? Nice new line of chap-books for your pleasure and instruction? Latest number of Poor Richard's Almanack? Bay Psalm Book? Biblical Concordance? Hey?"

"No, no . . ."

The voice dropped a notch, became confidential. "Just on hand by the last vessel to arrive in port, a French novel in three volumes . . . no? Make you a special price for *Fanny Hill!*"

"Dr. Franklin"—Milo grew anxious—"I need your help. I appreciate—I appeal to you—a Fellow American—" he stumbled.

The voice grew wary, then a trifle amused. "Nay, nay, I'm too old a tomcod to be taken with such bait as that. None of your Tory tricks. If you're working for Sir William Johnson, now, tell him—"

"But—"

"Tell him I'm a loyal subject of the King until he proves otherwise. I do but propose a continental union against French Lewis, the Dons, and the savage Enjians—though if Providence doesn't take most of these off our hands by rum and pox—"

Milo cried, "My life's in terrible danger!"

"Sell you a nice ephemeris—you can cast your horoscope and thus see the hazards you must needs discountenance. . . . Stove? Sell you a Franklin st—"

Of course, the cypher had vanished from the book and from his memory. It was plain he was allowed but one call to each name. And time was running short: it grew close to midnight and he could expect to hear from the Syndicate about the money he owed Mrs. Pritchard—if Bloodgood Bixbee and his friends, or Big Patsy and *his* friends didn't arrive first.

Well, no help from the Continentals: Try the Tories. Try the line he'd first used to approach Ovlomov: spin the wheel and hear the bell ring. ". . . Sir?"

"Slaughter 1-7-7-7. . . . Hello?"

"I hear you, Sir." Cold, this voice, and smooth as an adder's skin.

"Sir Henry Hamilton? I'm a loyal subject of the King and I have information to sell. . . ." He held his face close to the brazen mouthpiece. By now he had no slightest doubt but that it was all real: he would connive, he would—

"Oh, demn the loyal subjects of the King. I buy no information; I buy *hair*, Sir! *That's* how I make rebels into loyal subjects of the King, Sir! I buy their sculps! Have you some'at to sell, fellow? I pay

top prices to encourage the trade—for the sculps of male Yenkees, two-pun-ten—female Yenkees, two-pun-even—infant Yenkees and disaffected Injians, ten shillin."

"Help me—help me get through to where you are—Sir Henry—I'll do—"

The Tory agent's voice grew cautionary. "Though, mind," he said; "mind they be well-cured, for if there's one thing I cannot abide, d'ye hear, Sir," he said with fastidious distaste, "it's a mouldy stinking sculp. *Fah!*"

"*You* can find out how, some way, there must be a way I can come over—"

The voice grew fainter. "*Hair*; not the whole head: just the *haiirrrr* . . ."

It died away altogether and while Milo watched the name faded from the page.

One after the other he called them up. And one after the other, though they did not know who he really was, they knew at once that he was a rogue and a scoundrel. He could not make them understand, could not find out how to get from his time and place to theirs. Voices traveled it, why not bodies? Desperately he riffled the pages of his compendium. Another name leaped at him. *This* man would not repulse him. He spun the wheel.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

"Tammany 1-7-8-9. And hurry!"

“. . . Servant, Sir.” Trrrinnggg
 . . .

A babble of voices . . . laughter
 . . . the sound of a fiddler . . .

Milo's voice trembled. “Colonel
 Aaron Burr?”

The colonel's voice was soft as
 cream. “That same, Sir.”

Lay the cards on the table. “Colo-
 nel Burr, I'm a thief, a swindler, a
 blackmailer, and a traitor.”

The colonel chuckled. “Ecawd,
 but withal an honest knave. . . .
 Nay, babe, nay, my poppet, don't
 jump so when I—”

“I need your help. I need it *now!*”

“Ah, not tonight, me lad. Burr
 might sell his soul for gold, but
 he'd not move outside the door
 even to *save* his soul when a pretty
 wench is on his knee— Why so
 flushed, my sweet tapstress? Bod-
 ice tight? Let me loose it. . . .
 Nay, don't slap my fingers. You
 know you love me. . . .”

Was there a single name left in
 the book? (Only a few minutes to
 midnight.) Yes. One.

“Your conversant, Sir?” Milo
 licked dry lips. “West Point 1-7-8-0.”
 This time no silver bell tinkled.
 Slowly and with abrupt bursts, as
 if blown by gusts of wind, he
 heard the sound of a ruffle of
 drums. . . . A puff of yellow chok-
 ing sulfurous smoke billowed from
 the coppery horn. Milo ducked his
 head.

“I hear you, Sir.” The voice was
 infinitely weary, infinitely bitter.

Milo croaked, “General Benedict
 Arnold?” And he told the whole
 story. There was a silence, but he
 sensed the listener was still there.
 And finally—

“I *can* help you. Matter *can* pass
 the barrier of time and place. For
 the sake of my wounded leg at
 Saratoga, shattered and bloodied in
 the service of my native land, I
 will do my native land this last
 service.” Milo babbled thanks. The
 bitter, weary voice spoke on. “For
 my treasons I received money, com-
 missions for myself and sons, a
 pension for my wife. Dust, all dust
 and ashes . . . I ask in my will
 that I be buried in my Continental
 uniform—”

“But *me*, you said you'd help
me—” And the clock hands al-
 most—

“I shall do for you what I should
 have done for myself. My old
 trade, in Hartford-town, ere I
 turned to war, I learned—But it's
 too late now. I should have done
 it that night at West Point, before
 I wrote to poor André—” One of
 the Leyden jars shattered with a
 sharp crack, splitting the glass
 panel. He reeled from a blast of
 heat. Amid the dust and shards he
 saw a small round box.

“*No!*” he cried, pulling back. The
 clock began softly to strike the
 hour. An automobile drove up be-
 low, heavy feet tramped the hall-
 way, stopped outside his door.

Without further hesitation he
 opened the box, thrust something

into his mouth. He trembled, fell forward, grasping the wheel. The bell tinkled once. The pillbox lay to one side. "Ben.dT Arnold, Hartford," the label said. "Licensed Apothekary."

Fists beat at the door, feet kicked it, rough voices called out.

The bell tinkled once more in the cabinet.

"Your conversant, Sir?" a voice asked faintly.

It repeated the question.

"I do not hear you, Sir," it said, at length.

"I do not hear you. . . ."
