

TALES OF WONDER

and Super-Science

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Into A Drab, Timeless World Where None Had Ventured Before, The Murderer Lured His Victim . . .



MURDER IN THE FOURTH DIMENSION

By

CLARK
ASHTON SMITH

Author of *Master of the Asteroid*, etc.

The following pages are from a notebook that was discovered lying at the foot of an oak-tree beside the Lincoln highway, between Bowman and Auburn, California. They would have been dismissed immediately as the work of a disordered mind, if it had not been for the unaccountable disappearance, eight days before, of James Buckingham and Edgar Halpin. Experts testified that the handwriting was undoubtedly that of Buckingham. A silver dollar and a handkerchief marked with Buckingham's initials were also found, not far from the notebook.

NOT everyone, perhaps, will believe that my ten years' hatred for Edgar Halpin was the impelling force that drove me to the perfecting of a most unique invention. Only those who have detested another man with the black fervour of the loathing I had for him will understand the patience with which I sought to devise a revenge that should be both safe and adequate at the same time.

The wrong he had done me was one that must be expiated sooner or later, and nothing short of his death would be sufficient. However, I did not care to hang, not even for a crime that I could regard as nothing more than the mere execution of justice; and, as a lawyer, I knew how difficult, how practically impossible, was the commission of a murder that would leave no betraying evidence. Therefore, I puzzled long and fruitlessly as to the manner in which Halpin should die, before my inspiration came to me.

I had reason enough to hate Edgar Halpin. We had been bosom friends throughout our schooldays, and through the first years of our professional life as legal partners. But when Halpin married the one woman I had ever loved with complete devotion, all friendship ceased, as far as I was concerned, and was replaced by an icy barrier of inexorable enmity. Even the death of Alice, five years after the marriage, made no difference; for I could not forgive the happiness of which I had been deprived—the happiness they had shared during those years, like the thieves

they were. I felt that she would have cared for me if it had not been for Halpin; indeed, she and I had been almost engaged before the beginning of his rivalry.

It must not be supposed, however, that I was indiscreet enough to reveal my feelings at any time. Halpin was my daily associate in the Auburn law business to which we belonged, and I continued to be a welcome and frequent guest at his home. I doubt if he ever realised that I had cared so much for Alice; I am secretive and undemonstrative by temperament, and also, I am proud. No one, except Alice herself, ever surmised my suffering, and even she knew nothing of my resentment.

Halpin himself trusted me; and nurturing as I did the idea of retaliation at some future time, I took care that he should continue to do so. I made myself necessary to him in all ways. I helped him when my heart was a cauldron of seething poisons. I spoke words of brotherly affection and clapped him affectionately on the back when I would rather have driven a dagger through him. I knew all the torture and all the nausea of a hypocrite; and, day after day, year after year, I made my varying plans for an ultimate revenge.

Apart from my legal studies and duties, during those ten years, I apprised myself of everything available that dealt with the methods of murder. Crimes of passion allured me with a fateful interest, and I read untiringly the records of particular cases. I made an intensive study of weapons and poisons, and pictured to myself the death of Halpin in every conceivable way. I imagined the deed as being done at all hours of the day and night, in a multitude of places. The only flaw in these dreams was my inability to think of any spot that would assure perfect safety from subsequent detection.

IT WAS my bent towards scientific speculation and experiment that finally gave me the clue I sought. I had long been familiar with the theory that other worlds or dimensions may co-exist in the same space with ours, by reason of a different molecular structure and vibrational rate, rendering them intangible for us; and one day, when I was indulging in a murderous fantasy in which, for the thousandth time, I imagined myself

In this little story, Clark Ashton Smith gives us yet another glimpse of an alien dimension, which this time is entered not so much in the interests of scientific knowledge as for the completion of a murderer's evil designs. We think you will never have read a story quite like this before.

throttling Halpin with my bare hands, it occurred to me that some unseen dimension, if one could but penetrate it, would be the ideal place for the commission of a homicide. All circumstantial evidence, as well as the corpse itself, would be lacking: in other words, one would have a perfect absence of what is known as the *corpus delicti*.

The problem of how to obtain entrance to such a dimension was, of course, an unsolved one, but I felt that it would not necessarily prove insoluble. I set myself immediately to a consideration of the difficulties to be overcome, and the possible ways and means of accomplishing the transition.

There are reasons why I do not care to set forth in this account the details of the various experiments to which I was drawn, during the next three years. The theory underlying my tests and researches was a very simple one, but the processes involved were highly intricate. In brief, the premise from which I worked was that the vibratory rate of objects in the Fourth Dimension could be artificially established by means of some mechanism, and that things or persons exposed to the influence of the vibration could be transported thereby to this alien realm.

For a long time, all my experiments were condemned to failure, because I was groping among mysterious powers and recondite laws whose motive-principle I had not wholly grasped. I will not even hint at the basic nature of the device which brought about my ultimate success, for I do not want others to follow where I have gone, and find themselves in the same dismal predicament. I will merely say that the desired vibration was attained by condensing ultra-violet rays in a refrac-

tive apparatus made of certain very sensitive materials, which shall be nameless.

The resultant power was stored in a kind of battery, and could be emitted from a vibratory disk suspended above an ordinary chair, exposing everything beneath the disk to the influence of the vibration. The range of the influence could be closely regulated by means of an insulating attachment.

By the use of the apparatus, I finally succeeded in precipitating various articles into the Fourth Dimension. A dinner-plate, a bust of Dante, a Bible, a French novel and a house-cat all disappeared from sight and touch in a few seconds, when the ultra-violet power was turned upon them; and I knew that, henceforth, they were functioning as atomic entities in a world where all things had the same vibratory rate that had been artificially induced by means of my mechanism.

Before venturing into the invisible domain myself, however, it was necessary to have some way of returning. So, I devised a second battery and a second vibratory disk through which, by the use of certain infra-red rays, the vibrations of our own world could be established. By turning the force from this disk on the identical spot where the dinner-plate and other articles had disappeared, I succeeded in recovering all of them. All were absolutely unchanged; and though several months had gone by, the cat had not suffered in any way from its fourth-dimensional incarceration.

The infra-red device was portable, and I meant to take it with me on my visit to the other realm in company with Edgar Halpin. I would, by this means, return in due course to resume the threads of mundane existence. But not Halpin . . .

MY EXPERIMENTS had all been carried on with complete secrecy. To conceal their true nature, as well as to provide myself with the needful privacy, I had built a small laboratory in the woods of an uncultivated ranch I owned, situated midway between Auburn and Bowman. Here I retired at intervals, when I had the requisite leisure, ostensibly to conduct some chemical experiments of an educative but far from unusual type. I never admitted anyone to the laboratory,

and no great amount of curiosity was evinced by my friends and acquaintances regarding its contents or the tests I was making. Never did I breathe a word to a single soul that might indicate the true goal of my researches.

I shall never forget the jubilation I felt when the infra-red device had proven its practicability by retrieving the plate, the bust, the two volumes and the cat. I was so eager for the consummation of my long-delayed revenge that I did not even consider a preliminary personal trip into the Fourth Dimension. I had determined that Edgar Halpin must precede me; but I felt it would not be wise to tell him anything concerning the real nature of my device, or of the proposed excursion.

Halpin, at the time, was suffering from recurrent attacks of acute neuralgia. One day, when he had complained to me of these, I told him in strict confidence that I had been working on an invention for the relief of such maladies, and had finally perfected it.

"Come out to the laboratory to-night, and you can try it," I said. "It'll fix you up in no time. All you'll have to do will be to sit in a chair and let me turn on the current. But don't say anything to anybody about it. I want to keep it secret, for the present."

"Thanks, old man," he rejoined. "I'll certainly be grateful if you can stop this damnable pain. It's like an electric drill boring through my head all the time."

I had chosen my time well, for all things were favourable to the maintenance of the secrecy I desired. Halpin lived on the outskirts of the town, and was alone for the nonce, his housekeeper having gone away on a visit to some sick relative. The night was murky and foggy, and I drove over to pick him up shortly after the dinner-hour, when few people were abroad. I do not think anyone saw us as we left the town. I followed a rough and little-used by-road for most of the way, and we passed no other cars. I felt that this was a good omen, and that everything had combined to further my plans.

Halpin uttered an exclamation of surprise when I turned on the lights in my laboratory.

"I didn't dream you had so much stuff here," he remarked, peering about with respectful curiosity at the array of un-

successful apparatus which I had discarded in the course of my labours. I pointed to the chair above which the ultra-violet vibrator was suspended.

"Take a seat," I enjoined him. "We'll soon cure you."

"Sure you aren't going to electrocute me?" he joked, as he obeyed my direction.

A thrill of fierce triumph ran through me, like the stimulation of some rare elixir, when he had seated himself. He was in my power, now: the moment of recompense for my ten years of humiliation and suffering was at hand. Halpin was quite unsuspecting; the thought of any danger to himself, of any treachery on my part, would have been incredible to him. Putting my hand beneath my coat, as I stood behind him, I caressed the hilt of the hunting-knife I carried.

"Ready?" I asked him.

"Sure. Go ahead and shoot!"

I had found the exact range that would involve all of Halpin's body without affecting the chair itself. Fixing my gaze upon him, I pressed the knob that turned on the current of vibratory rays. The result was practically instantaneous. He seemed to melt, like a puff of thinning smoke. I could still see his outlines for a moment, and the look of utter astonishment on his face. Then he was gone—completely.

PERHAPS it will be a source of wonderment that, having annihilated Halpin as far as all earthly existence was concerned, I was not content merely to leave him in the unseen, intangible plane to which he had been transported. Would that I had been so content; but the wrong that I had suffered was hot and cankerous within me, and I could not bear to think that he still lived, in any form or upon any other plane. Nothing but absolute death would suffice to assuage my hatred, and it must needs be inflicted by my own hand.

It now remained for me to follow Halpin into that realm which no man had ever visited before, and of whose conditions and characteristics I had formed no idea whatever. I felt sure, however, that I could enter it and return safely, after disposing of my victim entirely. The return of the cat left no apparent room for doubt on that score.

I turned out the lights, and seating myself in the chair with the portable infra-red vibrator in my arms, I switched on the ultra-violet power. The sensation I felt was that of one who falls, with nightmare velocity, into a great gulf. My ears were deaf with the intolerable thunder of my descent, a frightful sickness overcame me, and I was near to losing all consciousness for a moment, in the black vortex of roaring space and force that seemed to draw me nadir-wards through the ultimate pits.

Then the speed of my fall was gradually retarded, and I came gently down upon something that was solid beneath my feet. There was a dim glimmering of light that grew stronger as my eyes accustomed themselves to it, and by this light I saw Halpin standing a few feet away. Behind him were dark, amorphous rocks and the vague outlines of a desolate landscape of low mounds and primordial, treeless flats.

Even though I had hardly known what to expect, I was somewhat surprised by the character of the environment in which I found myself. At a guess, I would have said that the Fourth Dimension would be something more colourful and complex and varied—a land of multifold hues and many-angled forms. However, in its drear and primitive desolation, the place was truly ideal for the commission of the act I intended.

Halpin came towards me in the doubtful light. There was a dazed, almost idiotic look on his face, and he stuttered a little as he tried to speak.

"W-what h-happened?" he articulated at last.

"Never mind what happened," I told him. "What matters is what is going to happen now." I laid the portable vibrator on the ground as I spoke.

The dazed look was still on Halpin's face when I drew my hunting-knife and stabbed him through the body with one clean thrust, in which all the stifling hatred and cankering resentment of ten insufferable years was finally vindicated. He fell in a twisted heap, twitched a little, and lay still. The blood oozed very slowly from the wound, and formed a puddle. I remember wondering at its slowness, even then; for the oozing seemed to go on for hours and days. . . .

SOMEHOW, as I stood there, I was obsessed by a feeling of utter unreality. No doubt the long strain I had been under, the daily stress of indurate emotions and long-deferred hopes, had left me unable to realise the final consummation of my desire when it came. The whole thing seemed no more than one of the homicidal day-dreams in which I had imagined myself stabbing Halpin to the heart and seeing his hateful body lying at my feet.

But, at length, I decided it was time to effect my return; for surely nothing could be gained by lingering any longer beside Halpin's corpse amid the unutterable dreariness of the fourth-dimensional landscape. So, I erected the vibrator in a position where its rays could be turned upon myself, and pressed the switch. I was aware of a sudden vertigo, and felt that I was about to begin another descent into fathomless, vortical gulfs. But, though the vertigo persisted, nothing happened, and I found that I was still standing beside the corpse, in the same dismal milieu.

Dumbfoundment and growing consternation crept over me. Apparently, for some unknown reason, the vibrator would not work in the way I had expected. Perhaps, in these alien surroundings, there was some barrier to the full development of the infra-red power. I do not know; but, at any rate, there I was, in a truly singular and far from agreeable predicament.

I do not know how long I fooled, in a mounting frenzy, with the mechanism of the vibrator, in the hope that something had temporarily gone wrong and could be remedied, if the fault were only found. But all my tinkerings were of no avail: the machine was in perfect working order, but the required force was wanting.

I tried the experiment of exposing small articles to the influence of the rays. A silver coin and a handkerchief dissolved and disappeared very slowly, and I felt that they must have regained the levels of mundane existence. But evidently the vibrational force was not strong enough, here, to transport a human being.

Finally, I gave it up and threw the vibrator to the ground. In the surge of the violent despair that came upon me, I felt the need of muscular action, of prolonged movement; and I started off at

once to explore the weird realm in which I had involuntarily imprisoned myself.

It was an unearthly land, such as might have existed before the creation of life. There were undulating blanks of desolation beneath the uniform grey of a heaven without moon or sun or stars or clouds, from which an uncertain and diffused glimmering was cast upon the world beneath. There were no shadows, for the light seemed to emanate from all directions.

The soil was a grey dust in places, and a grey viscosity of slime in others; and the low mounds I have already mentioned were like the backs of prehistoric monsters heaving from the primal ooze. There were no signs of insect or animal life; there were no trees, no herbs, and not even a blade of grass, a patch of moss or lichen, or a trace of algae. Many rocks were strewn chaotically through the desolation, and their forms were such as an idiotic demon might have devised. The light was so dim that all things were lost at a little distance, and I could not tell whether the horizon lay near or far.

IT SEEMS to me that I must have wandered on for several hours, maintaining as direct a course as I could. I had a compass, a thing that I always carried with me, but it refused to function, and I was driven to conclude that there were no magnetic poles in this strange world. Then, suddenly, as I rounded a pile of the vast amorphous boulders, I came upon a human body lying huddled on the ground, and saw, incredulously, that it was Halpin. The blood still oozed from the fabric of his coat, and the pool it had formed was no larger than when I had begun my exploration.

I felt sure I had not wandered in a circle, as people are supposed to do amid unfamiliar surroundings. How, then, could I have returned to the scene of my crime? The problem nearly drove me mad as I pondered it; and I set off again, with frantic vigour, in an opposite direction from that which I had first taken.

For all intents and purposes, the scene through which I now passed was identical with the one that lay on the other side of Halpin's corpse. It was hard to believe that the low mounds, the drear levels of

dust and ooze, and the monstrous boulders, were not the same as those among which I had made my former way. As I went, I took out my watch, with the idea of timing my progress, but the hands had stopped at the very moment that I had taken my plunge into unknown space from my laboratory, and though I wound it carefully, it refused to run.

After walking an enormous distance during which, to my surprise, I felt no fatigue whatever, I came once more upon the body I had sought to leave behind. I think that I went really mad, then, for a little while . . .

Now, after a duration of time which I have no means of computing, I am writing this pencilled account on the leaves of my notebook. I am writing it beside the corpse of Edgar Halpin, from which I have been powerless to flee; for a score of excursions into the dim realms on all sides have all ended by bringing me back to it, after a certain interval. The corpse is still fresh, and the blood has not dried.

Apparently, the thing we know as time is well-nigh non-existent in this world, or is seriously disordered in its action. Most

of the normal concomitants of time are likewise absent, and space itself has the property of returning always to the same point. The voluntary movements I have performed might be considered as a sort of time-sequence; but in regard to involuntary things, there is little or no time-movement. I experience neither physical weariness nor hunger; but the horror of my situation is not to be conveyed in human language, and Hell itself can hardly have devised a name for it.

When I have finished writing this narration, I shall precipitate the notebook into the levels of mundane life by means of the infra-red vibrator. Some obscure need of confessing my crime and telling my predicament to others has led me to an act of which I should never have believed myself capable—for I am the most incommunicative of men by nature. Though, apart from the satisfying of this need, the composition of my story is something to do; a temporary reprieve from the desperate madness that will surge upon me soon, and the grey, eternal horror of the limbo to which I have doomed myself, beside the undecaying body of my victim. . . .
