

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

AUGUST

1961

Volume 10

Number 8

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

Publisher
MICHAEL MICHAELSON

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Cover: LEO SUMMERS

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; Hershel B. Sarbin, Vice President and General Manager; M. T. Birmingham, Jr., Vice President and Business Manager; Charles Housman, Financial Vice President; Richard Kislik, Treasurer.



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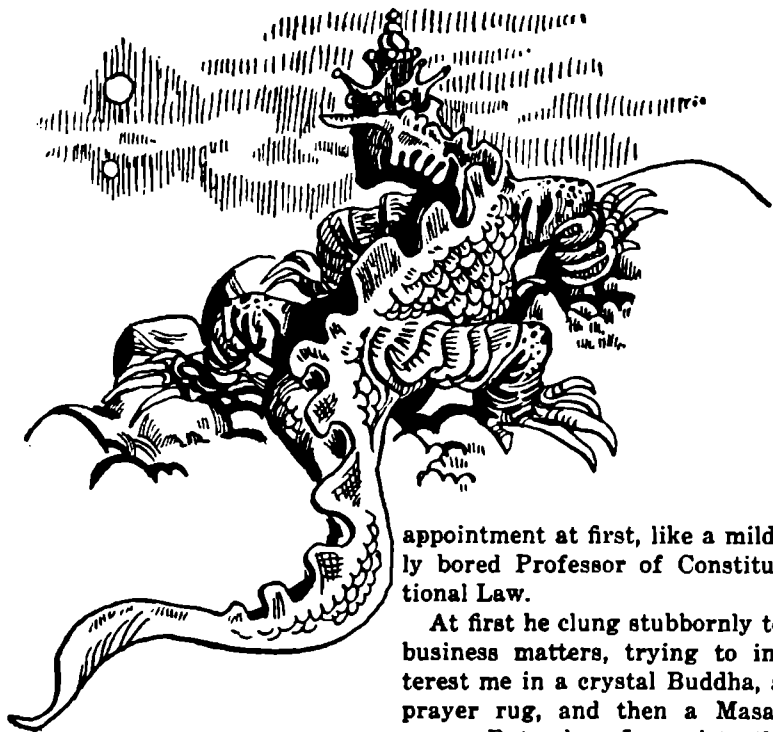
Memo From: ARTHUR PORGES

To: The Editors of FANTASTIC

Subject: REPORT on the MAGIC SHOP

MMAGIC SHOP, or just Curiosity Shop—"Kleep's Curiosities," as the sign indicated? That was the question I pondered at the door of this obscure estab-

lishment just off Times Square. There was no clue that the neat, well-lighted store was any more than it claimed to be. As for the man himself, I found Kleep a dis-



appointment at first, like a mildly bored Professor of Constitutional Law.

At first he clung stubbornly to business matters, trying to interest me in a crystal Buddha, a prayer rug, and then a Masai spear. But when I persistently

returned to the attack Kleep finally began to weaken.

"Well, it might be amusing at that to discuss some of my specialties with you. A really sympathetic amateur is something of a treat. Normally we get unbalanced women who are desperately sincere, but intellectually pitiful.

"Now, I wonder—what would be of particular interest to a man like you. I have in stock at the moment good specimens of hoop-snakes, mermaids, unicorns, basilisks, sea-serpent eggs—" He paused, furrowing his brow.

"Phoenixes?" I suggested ironically, sure that he was amusing himself at my expense.

Kleep shook his head in disapproval. "Come," he said quite seriously, "you must know better than that. One cannot speak of the Phoenix in the plural; there's never more than one at a time." He sighed. "I no longer have it. When the last one burned itself, and arose from the ashes it took wing. So far, none of us has been able to locate, much less recapture the thing."

"You didn't mention ghosts, vampires, or ghouls."

"Most of us won't deal in malignant spirits. The Association frowns on it. A few people, like Redi, dabble, but he has no ethics at all."

"Then you have nothing traditionally supernatural."

"I didn't say that. I keep a few poltergeists for rental purposes. If you will excuse a chestnut of the Trade, here is one place where the question, 'How much do you charge to haunt a house?' makes good sense. But poltergeists are not usually dangerous. I rent them for use in old houses, where they merely fling things about. An active poltergeist can actually raise the rent twenty per cent in some countries—England, for example—where snobbery thrives on ancestral homes complete with ghosts."

"You mentioned the basilisk. Surely no such creature exists."

"On the contrary. It is one of the least rare of the so-called legendary beasts. You recall, perhaps, how a basilisk is born."

"The fable is," I said doubtfully, not too sure that I wasn't thinking of the chimera, "that it comes from a rooster's egg."

"That's right. In medieval times the production—rather occurrence—of basilisks was wholly dependent upon chance. With thousands of barnyards in Europe, an occasional abnormal cock was bound to appear. Given the exact circumstances and environment, some of them laid fertile eggs which hatched into basilisks. Nowadays, of course, we operate more scientifically."

I MUST have showed my bewilderment, because he added

complacently: "We alter the odds. By a little simple surgery, plus female hormones, we provide a healthy cock with the necessary biological equipment for egg-laying. Tricky, but quite practicable. Usually the eggs are ordinary hens' eggs, and sterile as well, but in a certain percentage of the cases—far more than in medieval times—we find the typical soft-shelled, angular, basilisk egg."

"And then?"

"Oh, there are many possibilities. Some breeders prefer to let the cock hatch his own egg; that's traditional. I get excellent results with an ordinary incubator. Also, you don't lose any specimens that way. With a cock around, there's always the chance of his crowing; then it's goodbye to the expensive young basilisk. A cock's crow is fatal to a basilisk, remember."

"What sort of an animal is it?" I demanded. Not even Willy Ley had supplied information like this in his "Romantic Zoology" series.

"It looks like a rather large chameleon, except for the more vivid coloring. The scales, too, are different: very small, thick, and tough. They will stop a rifle bullet at ten yards. Basilisks have a certain attitude, also, which sets them apart. I guess you'd call it an aristocratic air—arrogant, might be closer to the

truth. The basilisk is a proud spirit, impossible to tame in any way. As Kipling might have put it—you know 'Bimi', that story about the ape?—the basilisk has too much ego in its cosmos. Besides, it's too dangerous for casual communication. One slip, and you'd be dead."

"Ah," I said. "You mean it's true about the sight of it, and the breath."

"Yes and no. Some of the stories are quite wrong. The mere sight of a basilisk is not fatal. It has to catch your eye with its own in order to destroy you."

"A sort of hypnotic effect?"

"Maybe. Nobody knows for sure, since there are no survivors once the process begins. For that reason, I inspect my specimens by closed circuit TV."

"What about the breath?"

"There I have more facts," he said complacently. "Most dealers have no interest in such things, but I have an inquiring mind. It's a pity I can't write a paper for 'Natural History,' but it just isn't done in the Trade. You see, I've really solved the problem of the basilisk's breath."

"That's very interesting," I complimented him. "I don't want to pry, but if it's not a special secret . . ."

"I can tell *you*," he said graciously. "It was easy to show, by routine chemical analysis, that the breath of a mature specimen

consists of about seventy-three per cent hydrogen cyanide, twenty-five per cent arsine, and the rest very toxic organic particle poisons which, I suspect, are similar to the worst nerve gases."

"And that breath is really deadly, then."

"Bad enough," Kleep replied. "Once I experimented with a healthy young goat. I blindfolded the animal so that the basilisk couldn't catch its eye. The basilisk knew, somehow, that the usual technique was out, and so used its secondary weapon. It blew a tremendous breath, a cloud the size of a watermelon, and perfectly aimed, right over the goat's muzzle. The goat dropped as if clubbed by a telephone pole. Didn't even twitch."

"Did it eat any of the body?"

"No, I've never seen a basilisk do more than take a sip of blood, and that seems to be a ritual rather than a matter of nourishment. I suspect that they absorb energy right from cosmic rays or something. Incidentally, I had to kill this one in order to remove the goat; the creature was in a frightful rage, and I didn't care to enter the room wearing a blindfold. They're too much like ferocious little dragons for that. Even with no special weapons, a big basilisk could mangle a man quickly."

"How did you kill it? You said

the scales were too tough for bullets."

"I keep a hi fi recording of a cock's crow. An idea of my own. Works perfectly, and unlike a cock, performs on schedule only. Any other way would be slow and messy. They do have incredible vitality. Ah, I see you're wondering about my big cabinet."

I HAD indeed been stealing glances at a large box-like structure, obviously locked.

"My collection of historical rarities—so called 'lost items,'" he added proudly.

"Lost items?" I wondered how a lost item could be collected and still qualify. Kleep proceeded to enlighten me.

"Not really lost; not any more. But believed so, except among the Trade. For example. I have the logs of Columbus; the lost books of Livy; a letter from the sole survivor of the *Mary Celeste* (there's a story for you!); the missing pages of John Wilkes Booth's famous diary, which prove conclusively that Secretary of War, Stanton, was implicated in Lincoln's murder. And Gilbert and Sullivan's first operetta. Oh, and there's practically the whole edition of 'Poems by a Bostonian,' otherwise Poe's 'Tamerlane,' believed destroyed in a fire. I've left a few of these out, but nothing else. If the market isn't

flooded, each copy will always be worth at least ten thousand dollars."

"Good Lord!" I gasped, after he had shown me a handful of the crudely bound little pamphlets. "Such things are priceless. You could get—"

"That's just the point," he interrupted me. "What could I get? Money? I have all I need. I would part with these only for other rarities of equal value. We are always dickering among ourselves that way. For example, I have offered this dragon's tooth of Cadmus, which has never been replanted, for a recording reputed to have been made of the voice of Queen Victoria. There is a play of Shakespeare's, known to have been buried with him, for which I'd give the exact location of the tomb of Archimedes, identifiable still by the carving of a sphere in a cylinder. A gifted friend of mine tells me the play is entitled 'Alexander the Great,' but although the manuscript appears well preserved, his arts cannot take him past the first page, which happens to be in plain view—to a seer—atop the remains. Unfortunately," Kleep added in a gloomy voice, "there is no way within the ethics of my profession to get that play. If Dr. Redi hears about it, I fear the tomb may be violated. All I know about the work, incidentally, are two lines quoted on the title

page. My friend read them through the solid earth and rubble above the casket. They are probably by Shakespeare, but might be quoted by him instead: I can't be certain without studying the manuscript. Would you care to hear them? At the moment only a handful of my intimates can boast of knowing any unpublished lines of Shakespeare's." He didn't wait for my reply, but chanted sonorously:

I too could seize the giddy
world i' the throat,
Choke it convulsive black
to wilder reel.

"Apparently the reference is to Alexander. The thought, at least, seems consistent with a conqueror's point of view."

"It sounds rather like Shakespeare," I said cautiously, "and has the Elizabethan rant, but—"

"Exactly. 'But.' We'll never be sure, I'm afraid."

He looked so gloomy, I changed the subject.

TELL me," I suggested. "What is your favorite item here?"

He brightened at once.

"A real prize. I'm glad you asked. A recent acquisition, and one that has my rivals climbing the walls with envy."

He led me into the back of the store, and dragging me by main force past innumerable diversions, indicated a shapeless ob-

ject swatched in canvas. It was as tall as I, and at least two feet wider. Kleep loosened a drawstring, and with deliberate showmanship, whipped away the whole covering at once. I took a deep breath and held it.

When I finally exhaled, my glance shifted from the grinning, gleaming thing with its fantastic teeth to Kleep, and then back. I stammered something in my astonishment.

Kleep seemed to purr at my reaction.

"Let me tell you about this," he said. "It's very interesting in several ways. Some months ago I heard of a Greek sailor who had been torpedoed in the last war. His life jacket was defective; there was a fog; and yet a miracle—literally—saved his life. This was somewhere off Sicily. He was about to go down for good, when just ahead of him a small island rose dripping from the sea. Volcanic action, probably. To make it brief, he spent the night on this lucky refuge, and in the morning discovered a deep cave containing enormous bones and this—my prize." He gave it an affectionate slap.

"There were temblors all day, and in the afternoon the island sank again, leaving the poor devil adrift once more. Fortunately an American patrol plane spotted him, and he was rescued.

"Now, we have ways of hear-

ing about strange finds in the Trade. All of us realized the possible value of such bones. But the man, Nikolides, is an ignorant fellow with only the vaguest idea of the island's position. The problem was abandoned as insoluble—except by me."

I gaped at him.

"You are wondering, and rightly," Kleep exulted, which was something of an understatement, since I'd been doing nothing else for some time. "The difficulty I faced was this: how to get the approximate location—latitude and longitude—of a sunken island from an illiterate, near-moronic seaman. What would you have done?"

A wordless shake of the head was my reply.

"So they all reacted—even Redi. Yet it was simple. I had one of my friends explore the fellow's mind. We got him drunk first, which was the easy part of the job. Now you will object that we couldn't abstract from his childish mind knowledge that wasn't there—but we did exactly that. My own idea!"

"You did?" I mumbled, my fascinated gaze on something stuffed and irrational, half hidden in a dark corner.

"Only a centaur," Kleep said, turning towards it with a disdainful wave of his hand. "A poor specimen, anyhow. Now—my friend is a person of great

competence—a top seer. Acting on my suggestion, he looked through Nikolides' eyes from inside the man's head, so to speak. He looked not at the island—such a description would have been useless—no, he studied the stars which this fellow had seen without conscious interest or understanding. It was an elementary exercise in astronomy to get the approximate latitude. The estimation of measures; angles, distances, weights, velocities—that is a basic technique of every first class magician. But longitude, you will say—what of that? No chronometer set to Greenwich time. Nothing. Oh, we were lucky, I don't deny it; but as Pasteur said, chance favors the prepared mind. If the fog had lasted—but it didn't, and there was a moon. A moon! An astronomer can determine longitude from the moon's place among the stars. It's not easy, but quite feasible. With the position correct to within a few seconds, I started a confidential search using trained divers, and this is the result." He pointed once more to the huge, quasi-human skull, the size of a wardrobe.

THAT terrible wound in the forehead," I said. "The giant must have been killed by a blow from something pointed—a huge spear? It had to be a terrific blow to break such heavy bone."

"Come," Kleep replied impatiently. "You're not thinking. Remember the location—off Sicily. And the absence of eye-sockets. That is no wound at all. It once held an eye—a single eye."

I gulped.

"I see you understand, now. That is the skull of a Cyclops—perhaps the very one Ulysses blinded, although that can't be proved." His face darkened suddenly. "Great heavens—the time! I'm supposed to be at the farm to receive two unicorns and a moa chick from my agent. I'll have to run."

"You're joking about unicorns," I objected. "Surely they're mythical."

"Nonsense," Kleep said, a little brusquely. "There are dozens of them in secluded places of the Amazon Basin, and also in Africa. As you know," he went on, somewhat pompously, "the unicorn is easily captured by means of a virgin."

"But nobody ever sees a unicorn anywhere."

"I disagree. Most people just don't know where to look. Actually, they're increasing, like the buffalo. It's the virgins that are dying out! Which reminds me—" He switched on the light in a small store-room, and I glimpsed a shelf lined with more than a dozen gallon jugs, each full of flaky powder. Most of them held pinkish stuff, like talc, but a few

were filled with darker matter: brown, yellow, and blue-black. Kleep took a jug of light-pink powder, and held it out to me.

"Here," he smiled. "I want you to have a little souvenir of our chat."

The jug was surprisingly heavy.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"A dehydrated girl," he said calmly. "A blonde, and if memory serves, a very exciting one."

"A dehydrated—!" I looked at the pink powder, shaking the jug in an idiotic fashion.

"When American soldiers brought dehydrated foods to Africa," Kleep explained, "there was a wedding of Western technology and Eastern magic. I haven't time to explain in detail, so listen carefully. Just pour that powder into a bathtub full of clean water. Let me see." He studied the Arabic label for a moment. "Yes, this girl was fairly tall: five, four. I should think you'd want her to weigh about

—say, one twenty-five. Anything you like, within reason. Tastes vary. Now water weighs about sixty-two pounds per cubic foot, so if you add just two cubic feet—right? Not too hot; body temperature. Some prefer to add a dash of perfume, or even a harmless dye—nothing poisonous, mind. Making love to a bright green or pale blue girl can be rather amusing. And we mustn't forget this little vial of solution. To re-powder the girl, just inject one cubic centimeter of this, and put her in a warm, dry room for an hour. Be sure to scrape up all the powder, though or after a few sessions you'll have a lovely girl, but only a scale model, so to speak.

He ushered me out, turning to lock the door. A moment later he was climbing into a big station wagon.

"Sometime I'll show you the farm, where the big, live specimens are kept." And waving cheerily, he drove off. **THE END**

