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Charles Van Doren's reign as the Heaviest-Winner-on-Any-Single-Quiz-Show was brief; but its effects may, I hope, be lasting. Other quiz heroes have been monomaniacs or prodigies; Van Doren won the affection (not the awe) of the public partly because—aside from his unquestionable personal charm and gambling spirit—he revealed himself as a genuinely cultivated man: no narrow specialist, but a curious young man whose wide-ranging intellect had touched upon the damndest things. This ranging curiosity is (as Cyril Kornbluth points out earlier in this issue) a characteristic trait of the writing profession; and it's not surprising that Charles Van Doren is beginning to follow his family's tradition. To date he has published one short story (in McCall's) and one book, LINCOLN'S COMMANDO (Harper, 1957), a biography of Commander Cushing written in collaboration with Ralph J. Roske. To this brief bibliography we now add a disturbing vision of a possible, not-too-remote future, "if this goes on. . ."

S R

by CHARLES VAN DOREN

THE MAN WALKED WITH HIS HEAD down, raising it only from time to time to check the numbers on the buildings. His coat collar was turned up; the cheap material was evidently not sufficient protection against the cold wind. He kept to the outside of the sidewalk, stepping off into the street when a party of people passed, shoving him. He did not shove back. He kept his left hand in his pocket; his right hung at his side, blue with the cold.

32, 34, 36—he turned into the large metal doorway, paused between the photoelectric cells, and entered the opening door. He muttered his name to the electronic secretary in the steel and glass lobby and passed through the turnstile, continuing down the corridor past its rows of doors. He glanced at the etched words on the frosted glass: MANAGER, SALES MANAGER, VICE-PRESIDENT. The last door on the right, the machine had said. A woman

passed him, walking quickly. He noticed that she wore the new Water-Pruf shoes. He wondered for a moment if he might buy some, but remembered that the allowance the SRP gave him would never pay their rather high price. PERSONNEL—last door on the right. He stood while the door opened, clenching his left hand in his pocket, and entered the small office. Mr. Watson looked up, smiling.

"Sit down, sit down, Mr.—" He checked with a card on his desk. "Yes . . . hm . . . We have your letter. A good letter. Now I hope you don't mind if we ask you some further questions." The man nodded, his eyes on the floor, and Mr. Watson began to ask questions in a smooth, sure voice. From time to time the box on the desk interrupted with mechanical announcements. "And of course your papers," he ended. The man took them from the inside pocket of his coat and handed them, trembling, across the desk. Mr. Watson examined them, his eyebrows raised. "Yes . . . hm . . . Everything seems to be in order." He checked with the card once more, and looked up smiling. "We'll call you. . . . Oh yes, one thing of course, before you go—just a formality. Your hand? You'll show me your hand?"

The man did not look up from the paper-strewn desk at which he had been staring during the interview. Slowly and unwillingly he drew his left hand from his pocket and ex-

tended it, palm up, across the desk.

Tattooed on the palm were the letters S R, in green.

Mr. Watson did not seem surprised. "I thought as much. The papers—they're a bad job, you know. It's quite easy to forge papers nowadays, I'm aware of that, but it isn't that easy. Now look here, you *know* we can't hire you? You fellows . . . Why do you keep on trying? You know we always ask to see—"

"Yes," the man mumbled, continuing to stare at the desk. "I thought—It's just that I haven't had a job in four years. I need a job . . . to make a new start . . ." His voice trembled and he stopped speaking.

Mr. Watson was not angry. He leaned forward over the desk. "A new start. It isn't possible, you know. The damage is done. Anyway, I don't see why you fellows want jobs. You keep coming here, you keep coming everywhere. In a way I envy you. I mean, not having to work."

The man said nothing.

"The Project takes care of you, doesn't it?" Mr. Watson went on. He became indignant. "You should be grateful. In the Other Country they shoot fellows like you. We don't restrain you, you can go anywhere you please. We feed you, give you clothes, a place to sleep. . . . Why, you've got a lot to be thankful for!" The box on the desk announced another appointment, and the man rose wearily from his seat and walked to the door. "Now I don't

want to see you back here," Mr. Watson said. "There won't be any sense in trying. The machine has your picture, you won't be admitted again. I'm sorry," he added, turning to the dictaphone and speaking into it. He glanced up. "You know quite well . . ." The man went out of the door.

It was beginning to be dusk in the street outside and the cold wind blew dust in a swirling cloud around him as he turned the corner. He shivered, and headed for the neon lights that announced an Auto-Snak. He sat down at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee, leaning forward to speak into the microphone in front of his place. He watched without interest while the machine collected cup and saucer, poured the black liquid, and placed his drink before him. "Ten cents," the speaker rasped, and he reached in his pocket and fingered a coin, checked to see that it was stamped with the regulation SRP across the Roosevelt, and inserted it in the slot. He glanced round him and found that he was alone at the counter, though in a booth two old men were arguing about whether the Other Country's latest note had been bellicose or not. The man rounded his shoulders and withdrew his left hand from his pocket and laid it, as though it did not belong to him, on the counter before him. Slowly he opened the fingers until the tattooed letters were visible. He moved the fingers of his right hand gently over the letters,

marveling as he had done so many times that there was no tactile evidence that the stigma was there. With his lips pressed tightly together, a pale line across his face, he contracted the skin of the palm in an unsuccessful attempt to make the letters disappear in the folds of skin. He could change them to C P by bringing the little finger forward and cupping the palm slightly, but only by closing the hand entirely could he make them disappear. He replaced the hand in his pocket and, having looked around to see that no one had been watching, finished his coffee and walked out into the street.

Lights were beginning to come on everywhere as he hurried home. He walked in the street, to avoid the crowds that filled the sidewalks. A single man was likely to be an S R these days (though it wasn't always so, of course), and he did not enjoy being shoved and hearing the remarks when he passed too close to people. He well knew that everyone was not as reasonable as Mr. Watson. But Personnel Directors were often that way, of course. . . . Probably it was Government Policy. He stopped at the corner and looked down the street toward the large Project Building. There was the usual crowd of rowdies and teenagers in front of it, who would push him and yell at him as he walked up the steps and waited for the doors to open, and he thought for a moment of walking the streets all night, even in his thin clothes. But it was getting toward

closing time and the crowd was not as large as it often was; and not as large as it would be at eight o'clock when the last stragglers would have to run a gantlet of curses and blows. He squared his shoulders and pushed through the crowd, taking the abuse without an answering word, and hurried up the stairs into his small square room. He sank down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He continued to hold his left hand clenched into a tight fist in his pocket.

After a few minutes he got off the bed and opened the door of the small cabinet by the narrow window, took down a glass-stoppered bottle, and sat down with it at the table. The acid smoked when he withdrew the stopper, and he hesitated for a long moment before upturning the bottle and pouring a few drops of the heavy liquid into his palm. He looked at the clock on the wall. He was able to endure the pain for ninety seconds before running to the sink and washing his hand in cold water. He fell wearily on the bed, his fist tightly clenched, his face drawn in a grimace of pain. He lay without moving for some time, and then slowly opened his hand. There was no disappointment on his features when he saw that the acid had had no other effect than to redden the skin of the palm. There would be blisters this time, he thought, but the letters were still there, a brilliant mocking green.

He lay back with his eyes closed,

listening to the hum of the clock and to the cries, faint at this distance, of the hecklers in front of the door below. He started violently when the loudspeaker barked at him, and after combing his hair—it was required—he trudged wearily down the corridor and up the stairs, joining the slowly moving, silent throng that converged on the dining room.

The meal was soon over, and he returned to his room, stopping to collect the day's SRP-stamped nickel, dime and quarter from the machine by the dining room door. He lay on the bed again, his eyes fixed on the white ceiling, listening without interest to the faint sounds his stomach made in its digestive processes.

By ten o'clock he could hear no more activity anywhere in the building. It was the night, he decided. He would do it tonight. He prepared everything carefully. He took from the cabinet the large hatchet he had bought two weeks before. He had saved his allowance to purchase it (everything metal was expensive nowadays). He lit matches under the blade until the steel was smoked an even gray-blue. It required some time to adjust the tourniquet around his arm: he used a handkerchief, and pointed a pencil through the cloth in order to adjust the tension. When he was ready he sat down at the table, the hatchet in his lap, and looked at his hand. The green letters stared up at him. He dropped his head for a moment. If there was anything to wait for, he

would wait. But there was nothing . . . nothing. He raised his head and pursed his lips, and lifted the hatchet. It did not require a severe blow.

The pain was at first slight and then terrible. He was fascinated by the amount of blood. For a while he forgot to tighten the tourniquet. When he did so the blood slowed but did not cease. He began to be afraid, and pulled wildly at the handkerchief. The blood would not stop. He stumbled to the bed, his hand over the wound, and before fainting jerked at the emergency cord on the wall. He heard voices at the door and then nothing.

He awoke in the hospital; from his bed he could see the words over the door: SECURITY RISK PROJECT, and under them AMPUTATION WARD. A nurse was tending another patient three beds away, and the man lay quietly, his eyes staring at the white ceiling. His hand throbbed under the covers, and he moved his right hand to touch the bandage. He was surprised at the shortness of his arm, and then remembered what he had done. He felt no horror at the act, only a mixture of disgust and relief. The nurse in her white gown came up to him and adjusted the pillows, smiling sourly. But she was gentle when she turned him over and washed his back, and then checked the bandage. "Don't pick at it," she warned. You'll start it bleeding again. We don't want any more trouble out of you."

"Was I trouble?" he muttered. "Of course, it's always trouble," she said, moving to the next bed. "You fellows . . ." He turned on his side, away from her. He did not want to be trouble to anyone. The bed on this side was empty, and he stared at it for a long time, going to sleep and waking again when his hand throbbed. The nurse brought him a meal and told him he would be up the next day. "We haven't got the room," she complained. "You fellows, you think we've got nothing else to do." But she was careful of his hand, and told him before turning out the lights (she left one bulb burning by the door) to ring if he needed a sedative.

It was in the faint light of this one bulb that he discovered (reaching behind him to press the buzzer because he could not, after all, sleep through the pain) the green letters on his right palm. S R, they said. There was no change. He lay back sweating. With difficulty he restrained his desire to cry out at her when she came, softly on her rubber soles, with the pill and the glass of water. After several hours he managed to sleep.

The interview with the doctor was at three in the afternoon, and the nurse helped him to dress. "You can do it fine with one hand," she said cheerfully. "Don't worry, it's hard at first." He had trouble with the buttons on his shirt, and she had to zip his fly while he faintly blushed. "Now don't be afraid," she said,

when she felt him tremble, "Doctor won't bite you. It might be different if you were the first. But he wants to talk to you, to try to make it easier. You'll find it's much better to cooperate." She smiled the sour smile again, and he left her, shifting his arm in its sling. He wondered how long he would feel the pain.

The doctor was signing papers, and without looking up motioned him to a seat. The man sat down wearily, his left arm resting on his lap, his right hand clenched in a fist in his pocket. The doctor finished. "Well!" he said. "We'd hoped, with you . . . You waited four years. We'd hoped that some sort of adjustment . . ." He stopped. "In a way, I suppose—Well, you know, it's understandable. We understand it, you know. It's a terrible punishment. But then it's a terrible crime! And this way we don't have to hate you and fear you. The hecklers outside, they don't understand very well, but then such people often don't understand. Yes. What was your crime, by the way? What did *you* do?" He looked up curiously. "I don't have your record here."

"I—"

"That's all right, you don't have to say. I know it's sometimes hard. But would you prefer death? In the Other Country, you know, they shoot them, immediately. I think we have the better way. And, you know, it's important how the others, how we feel. As I say, we don't have to hate you. You're not martyrs, you

can't be made martyrs of. Oh, I'm not accusing you!" He lit a cigarette from the lighter on his desk. "It's a difficult question though. I've thought a good deal about it. I suppose you have, too. You were a . . . what was it? A lawyer? A professor? Something professional, I seem to remember."

"Yes. I—"

"Quite. I understand. I imagine it's not pleasant to think back to those days. We don't want to make the punishment any harder than it is—and of course the Government directive . . ." He drew deeply on the cigarette. "You should thank God for that Government directive. Ten years ago, you know, you weren't allowed outside the buildings."

The man continued to stare at the floor, flexing the fingers of his hand in his pocket. He was surprised as always to discover that the tattoo marks could not be felt by his fingers as they moved across his palm.

The doctor went on. "Now we hope this won't happen again. We've tried to find some rehabilitation method, but without very much success, I'm afraid, so far. We've got good men working on it. As I said, in your case we'd hoped that it wouldn't be necessary. But now . . . well, you've got only one hand now, and you'll have to find some way of adjusting to that. Of course all the men here have only one hand—" He stopped when he noticed the puzzled expression on the man's face. "The nurse didn't tell you that you'd

been transferred? But of course you were, while you slept. But as I was saying, we can offer you an artificial hand. Some of them won't go to the trouble of learning to use it. I suppose they think there's not much point in it, since they can't work, you know. I hope you'll have a different attitude. In any case you don't have to decide now, it'll be some time before the . . . stump is strong enough." He coughed quietly. "Now is there anything you'd like to know?" He smiled faintly. "I'm here to answer any questions you might have." He waited, the cigarette burning between his fingers.

"I—" the man began. "What is . . . the next . . . ?" He did not look up.

"The next? How do you mean?"

"The next—after the hand . . . ?"

"Oh, of course, quite. Now I said I hoped that wouldn't be necessary."

"Yes."

"Well, of course, I might as well tell you. Why, it's the forehead. The forehead."

"But . . . I've seen . . . I haven't seen anyone with—the letters there. There are many of them, I haven't seen anyone with the letters on the forehead."

"No." The doctor stubbed the cigarette out in the automatic ashtray,

which whirred and then turned up clean again. They can't bear it. They can't bear that."

"You mean, they . . . ?"

"They what?"

"You mean they cut . . . that . . . ?"

"Yes, quite. Of course. Now if you'll excuse me?" The doctor shuffled through the papers on his desk. He looked up quickly. "I've got a lot of work to do," he said, brusquely. "I'm sorry. I think it would be better if you didn't go out for a few days. Of course we're not restraining you, you can go out if you wish. But I know it's painful." He delved into the papers once more, picked up a pen, and began signing them.

The man rose slowly to his feet and moved toward the door. "You mean . . . ?" He licked his lips. "They cut . . . that . . . ?" The doctor nodded without looking up. The man glanced at him as he passed through the door. The doctor had lit another cigarette, and the smoke curled up around his bowed head, filling the room with a faint blue haze, as he scribbled across the bottom of the papers. He must not have one of the new Micro-Smuthe pens, for the point made an unpleasant scratching sound as it moved across the paper.
