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# SHAGGY DOG

by CHARLES E. FRITCH

*Did you hear the story about the dog that went in a bar and asked for a drink? Trouble was this darn pooch just couldn't get drunk.*

**"A HELL OF A THING,"** the stranger said irritably. The fat man with the beer looked at him.

"A hell of a thing," he elaborated, hitting the bar with his open palm, "when a decent, respectful law-abiding citizen can't even hang on a good one!"

"Like a double this time?" the bartender said helpfully.

"Sure," the stranger said, waving an amicable hand. "Make it a triple, what do I care."

"You'll care tomorrow morning," the fat man said.

"Not me," the stranger said, sure of it. He squinted at the wall chronometer: hours 2346, day 16, month November, year 1976. "I've been drinking now for two hours and a half, with no success. I'd like to get good

and stinkin' drunk. I'd like to use vile language and sing 'Sweet Adeline' and tell dirty stories. I'd like to have a hang-over a mile long." He shook his head sadly. "But I won't."

The fat man sighed and contemplated his beer. "You're lucky then. I'll feel lousy on this stuff."

The stranger grunted. He waved an arm to indicate the saloon, with its clean mahogany bar, its plush carpeting, its red leather walls. "Don't you guys ever get sick and tired of this?"

The fat man looked blank. "I don't get you," he said. "Sick and tired of what?"

"Yeah," the bartender muttered, leaning forward belligerently. "This's a nice, clean place."

"Sure it is," the stranger ad-

mitted, "and that's just it. You know *why* it's a nice, clean place?"

The fat man shrugged and hazarded an answer. "Well, the Sterilizing Lights are always on, and the Sweepers come out whenever anyone drops anything, and—"

"Sure," the stranger exploded, "because a goddamn system of electronics makes it clean, that's why!"

"So what's wrong with *that*?" the bartender wanted to know.

"So nothing's wrong with it as far as it goes. But it's going too far. Science is doing too many things for a man better than he can do it himself; it cleans his spills, wipes his nose, and spansks his bottom, that's what's wrong. Give me the old fashioned sloppy saloons of the 1950's, with dried beer on the bar and pretzels and cigarette butts on the floor."

He took his whiskey glass and deliberately tilted it. The amber liquid spilled over the edge and dripped on the bar.

"You know what's happening now, don't you?" he said. "Under the bar, little stool-pigeon electrons are rushing around like crazy, sending messages to the Sweepers and the Spongers, and the Polish-

ers, telling them some nasty human spilled something. Now watch."

At the far end of the bar a small door opened in the red leather wall, and tiny metal insects rushed out toward the spilled liquid. Some of them had honey-combed spongeheads which they dipped rhythmically into the whiskey as though quenching a thirst. They drained it, and then others with bristly heads that whirled like brushes whisked past, leaving the now-clean spot for the ones with oilspout heads to spray the bar with a transparent liquid that hardened and gleamed.

The stranger watched the "insects" disappear quietly into the wall. "Disgusting," he said.

"Whattaya mean disgusting?" the bartender said in an unfriendly tone. "I paid ten thousand bucks for that. I like it and so do all my regular customers. This isn't the dark ages, buddy; it's 1976. If you want to be sloppy that's your business, but running this saloon is my business, and I don't need help from you."

"You've already had help from me," the stranger said. "I invented that cleaning system."

"You're kidding," the fat

man said, impressed.

"I wish I were," the man said seriously.

"Say," the bartender said, pointing a finger of recognition, "I remember seeing your picture in the paper a while ago. Yeah, sure, you're Paul Williams."

"Sad, but true," the stranger admitted, staring into his whiskey glass as though it contained some hidden philosophy. He raised the glass and jiggled the fluid in the neon light. "Paul Albert Williams, electronic genius, maker of metal insects." He set the glass down and looked up with sudden determination. "You fellows like to hear a shaggy dog story?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," the bartender said, looking surprised at the question, "I guess so."

"I've heard most of 'em," the fat man said, "but go ahead."

"Not this one, you haven't."

He reached down to the floor beside him and brought up a black satchel, which he placed on the bar. He opened it, and out hopped a small, shaggy dog.

"Forgoshsakes!" the fat man said.

"Hey, hey," the bartender said. "Get that mutt outa here.

We don't allow dogs in here, especially on the bar!"

"How does he breathe in there?" the fat man wanted to know, examining the tight black skin of the satchel.

"He doesn't."

"Now, look, Mac—I mean, Mr. Williams—even if you are—"

"Simmer down, I'm not violating sanitary laws. Fido here doesn't have any fleas."

"No?" the bartender said, unconvinced. "Then how come he's scratching?"

"Because he's a dog, that's why. Here, look at this."

He turned the dog over on its back and parted the shaggy fur.

The fat man leaned forward and nearly toppled from his stool. "Forgoshsakes," he said.

The bartender's mouth fell open. "You mean—"

Williams nodded. "The dog's a robot. Man's best friend here is a machine."

"But it looks so *real*," the fat man said, amazed. The dog righted itself somewhat indignantly, shook, and trotted over to lick the fat man's hand. He felt the fur, ran his finger gently on the damp nose. "It even *feels* real."

The bartender's eyes glowed with wonder. "I never would've

believed it. How did you ever—”

“Hard work, persistence, and clean living,” the scientist said, and drank down the liquid in his glass. “I’ll try another of those. Hell of a thing when a man can’t even get stinking drunk!”

“What about the dog?” the fat man prompted.

“Oh, yes, our shaggy dog story. Well, it’s pretty simple actually. It was a natural step in a whole stairway of natural steps; that’s the way these things happen. You keep going and don’t know when to stop.

“I started out on a small scale, with little blobs of metal, and gave them a sort of electronic life; I guess I was surprised then they actually started taking themselves seriously. Then I started giving them special functions, reasons for existing, by building them with metal legs and brushes and mops; that resulted in the ‘insects’ you have in your cleaning wall there.”

The bartender shoved a full glass on the bar. “This one’s on the house.”

“T h a n k s.” The scientist smiled wanly. “Dammit, but I wish I could get drunk!”

“And then,” the fat man

said, fascinated, “you tried building larger robots.”

“Right. That’s where Fido came in. He had a real-life counterpart, you know.” He sipped slowly at the whiskey this time. “Or no, of course, you couldn’t know. But he did just the same. A small, lovable, shaggy animal that—” He stopped, suddenly embarrassed, tilted his head and the glass, and the liquid was gone again. “Fill it up to the top this time. Maybe I can get psychologically drunk after a while.”

“Lord,” the bartender said, “you’ll be sick as a dog tomorrow.”

“Little Fido here doesn’t ever get sick as a dog.” He ruffled the animal’s fur affectionately. “That’s the advantage of being mechanical. Of course, you don’t feel hungry either, but you eat dog food because that’s what dogs are supposed to do, and you romp around and play like you’re having fun when you really aren’t, and you stop and sniff trees and hydrants without knowing why. Oh, it’s a dog’s life, all right.”

“Uh, what happened to the—uh, real Fido?” the fat man asked.

“Dead,” the scientist said,

looking into his refilled glass and remembering.

"Oh, sorry," the fat man said, and somehow he really was.

"Dead, and it's my fault."

The fat man looked away.

"It was strange. I made a mechanical Fido and then the real Fido ceased to be. Sure, he was hit by a car and that's as good an excuse as any, but there wasn't any *real* reason for it. Apparently this world is set up to accommodate only one Fido, so naturally the less than perfect one—the natural one—couldn't exist. I wasn't very happy to find that out."

"Yeah," the bartender said, watching the mechanical dog thump its furry tail against the bar. He wet his lips. "That's too bad."

"Did you make any more?" the fat man asked.

"Yes. I should have stopped probably, but I wanted to avenge Fido's death, to make it worthwhile. I wanted to lick this thing; I wanted to make mechanical life *supplement* human life, not destroy it." He shrugged helplessly. "So far I haven't succeeded. That's one reason I don't exactly approve of all this. Science is much too capable at replacing human

things with mechanical things."

He shook his head disparagingly, gathered up the wriggling dog and placed it carefully in the satchel.

"It'll stop before it goes too far," the fat man said trustingly. "There're some things they can't replace."

"Sure," the bartender agreed, grinning, "they invented the phonograph, but I still have my wife."

The fat man glared at him.

"Another drink?"

"No, thanks," the scientist said, "I guess there's not much point in it." He put some bills on the bar, and a dozen mechanical insects flew from the wall, picked up the money, and took it away.

"Hey!" the bartender said, too surprised to move.

The fat man guffawed. "Next, they'll be learning to mix drinks and *you'll* be replaced!"

"Sorry," the scientist said, extending more bills, "I guess I've only got dirty money."

"It's better than nothing," the bartender said, taking it. "I guess maybe—nothing personal, understand—but I guess maybe those mechanical gadgets have faults, too."

The scientist nodded. "Keep saying that, friend, and maybe

someday you'll want to tear down that wall." He walked away, then paused uncertainly at the door. He hesitated some more; then he slowly opened his shirt to reveal the skin underneath. "And maybe this'll help you make the decision."

The fat man and the bartender stared.

The man turned and walked out, satchel swinging.

"What do you make of that?" the fat man wondered, after awhile.

"The guy's a crackpot," the bartender said knowingly. "I just remember reading in the paper last night that Paul Williams jumped out of a window. Suicide. This one's a fake. Me tear down a ten thousand buck wall? He's got rocks in his head. You don't suppose a *normal* person would do *that* to himself, do you?"

"I guess not," the fat man said thoughtfully. "No, I guess not. Look, give me another beer will you?"

The bartender gave him one, but he accidentally spilled some on the bar, and the mechanical insects came whirling

out again, sponging and drying and polishing.

"He had enough to make a dozen guys drunk," the bartender said. "The guy just isn't human."

"You know what I'm going to do?" the fat man said with a sudden resolve. "I'm going to do what *he* couldn't do. I'm going to get good and drunk tonight. I'm going to sing songs and tell dirty stories. And I'm going to have myself one lulu of a hangover tomorrow morning and enjoy every painful minute of it."

The bartender stared at him. "But why?"

"I don't know why," the fat man said, "and I'm not going to give myself time to think of a reason. Set up another beer, and make it quick, huh?"

But even later in the night, when he couldn't remember a great many things, he still wasn't able to forget the shaggy dog and its master who couldn't get drunk and who had a screw in his stomach instead of a navel!

THE END