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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Bronze Casket

By RICHARD H. HART

*A strange tale of the Wandering Jew, and the weird experience of an American art student who was stranded in Paris*

GILBERT NYSMITH strove desperately to free himself from the embraces of a nightmare. Out late with fellow-students the night before, he had looked once too often upon the *vin rouge*; his senses seemed drugged. His mind struggled convulsively until, suddenly, it won back across the borderline to consciousness. Someone was knocking upon the door of his room.

Suppressing a groan, he tore his heavy lids apart and forced himself to rise. He stepped into his trousers and went to the door.

It was the *conciierge* with a letter. Gilbert took it, managed to squeeze out a word of thanks, and closed the door. Standing in the middle of the room, he tore open the envelope and drew out the message. It read:

Mr. Gilbert Nysmith,  
18-Bis Rue Agneau Sacré,  
Paris (Seine), France.

Dear Sir:

As you doubtless know, your uncle, Obediah Nysmith, died on March 30th, last. It now develops that your uncle left a will in which your name was not mentioned. As a consequence, we are compelled to discontinue the allowance heretofore made you for the purpose of prosecuting your studies in Paris.

Unfortunately, the intelligence of your uncle's demise did not reach us in time to forestall the mailing of your remittance of April 1st, which it now develops was without authority. Will you kindly let us have check to reimburse us for this unauthorized payment at your earliest convenience?

Yours very truly,

GUARDIAN TRUST COMPANY

By J. P. Cullinan, Secy.

The scowl with which he read the opening paragraph of the letter changed to a sardonic grin as Gilbert came to the

concluding sentence. His check, indeed! He ran a hand into his pocket and produced its total contents: three half-franc pieces.

He had known for two weeks of his uncle's death, and had even in some degree expected his studies to terminate on that account. But to find himself suddenly cut off, "without a shilling," in a foreign country, was something he was not in the least prepared for.

Mentally he enumerated the coins that were his sole wealth: breakfast, luncheon, dinner. There was today taken care of, but how about tomorrow? He got up from the bed and began to pace the floor of the room in perplexity. With his uncle, his last blood tie had been dissolved, and as for friends—well, he had always been too busy, somehow, to cultivate friendship. He had acquaintances in plenty, yet no intimates. But—wait a minute. How about Bob Andrews? He had done a great deal for Bob—there was the matter of that thesis, for one thing—and Andrews had always sworn eternal gratitude. Here was a chance to put that often-avowed gratitude to the test.

GILBERT completed his toilet, and went down the three flights of stairs to the street. Entering a little restaurant next door, he exchanged one of the half-franc pieces for *croissants* and coffee. He hurriedly downed the slight breakfast, then set out on foot for the lodgings of his friend Andrews in the Rue Bonaparte.



"A cloud of golden bubbles  
streamed from the little  
box."

It was only when he had interviewed the old *concierge* at Andrews' *pension* that Gilbert realized the true depth of his calamity. His friend had left the week before for Nice, and would not return until the end of summer. And this was early May!

He had walked three blocks in a semi-daze when he realized that he had not even asked for his friend's new address. He hurried back to the *pension* in the Rue Bonaparte, only to find that the *concierge* had gone out, leaving no word as to when

he would return. Mechanically, he turned and walked away.

Alone in Paris, and dead-broke! It was a predicament to wring tears from any but a hardened soldier of fortune. Those casual acquaintances of his—why hadn't he cultivated them more? As things stood, he could borrow a couple of francs from one, five from another, and perhaps ten from a third. Such borrowings could do him no real good; they would enable him to live precariously for a week or so, and at the end of that time he would find

himself in worse condition than ever: friendless, penniless, and thousands of miles from home.

Sauntering dejectedly along through the bright Paris sunlight, which seemed now to have taken on a queer, morbid tint, Gilbert chanced to pass a café near the intersection of the street with the Boulevard Saint Germain. As he absently threaded his way among the tables set upon the sidewalk, he suddenly found himself tripped and thrown to hands and knees. Brought abruptly to his senses, he rose and whirled about, uncertain whether to offer or to demand an apology.

The only person near him was a well-dressed, handsome man who seemed past the middle age and was decidedly foreign in appearance. He was just draining a cup of fragrant *café-cognac*. As Gilbert glared at him, he set down his cup and smiled.

"Do not apologize, I beg of you, *Monsieur*," he said with an indefinable trace of accent. "I have not been discommoded in the least."

Saying which, he extended his hand, and, half abashed, Gilbert put out his own. Instead of clasping it, as Gilbert had expected, he laid in his outstretched palm two pieces of paper, the uppermost of which was a twenty-franc note on the Bank of France.

"You will not mind performing a little errand for me, I am sure," he said rapidly but smoothly. "Have the goodness to take that pawn-ticket to the shop which issued it and redeem the pledge which it calls for: a little, empty casket. I shall expect you tomorrow at this hour, at number 18-Bis, Rue Agneau Sacré, room fourteen."

"But," remonstrated Gilbert, "that's my own room!"

"I know it," said the other, and winked deliberately. Then he rose from

his table, turned about, and walked rapidly away.

Gilbert stared after him, of two minds whether to run him down and decline the errand. Did the stranger take him for a gutter-snipe? But, on second thought, he paused. After all, he had plenty of time—his studies at the university were certainly ended—and he was badly in need of a friend. Too, the stranger seemed to know him; knew his address, at any rate. There could surely be no harm in accommodating him in such a simple matter as he had named.

His resolution thus taken, Gilbert examined the pawn-ticket curiously. A close scrutiny revealed that it had been issued only three days earlier to some person whose name he was unable to decipher, by a shop in the Rue des Archives. The amount of the loan was ten francs, and the pledge described as "one metal box."

Why the stranger did not himself redeem the pledge, Gilbert could not imagine. Of course, it might be stolen property, but in view of the other facts in the matter this seemed very unlikely. There was something decidedly queer about the whole transaction, but, strangely enough, now that he was embarked on it he felt no wish to withdraw. On the contrary, he set off toward the Rue des Archives as fast as his feet would carry him. Crossing the Seine by the Pont au Change, he turned to the right and followed the Rue de Rivoli to the Hotel de Ville. A left turn and a half-minute more of walking brought him to the pawn-shop.

THE shop was very old and dingy, and without show-windows of any kind. As he let himself in, a little bell on the door tinkled dispiritedly, but he found no one inside. He waited for several minutes in the semi-darkness, and was just about to raise his voice in a halloo when a door

opened at the rear and an old Auvergnat in velveteen trousers and carpet-slippers shuffled in.

He looked at Gilbert sharply when he presented the ticket, but all he said was: "Fifteen francs."

Gilbert produced the twenty-franc note, and after taking it and rattling it suspiciously, and even smelling it, the Auvergnat went to a safe in the corner of the shop and brought back a five-franc note and a small metal casket, no larger than his two thumbs.

"Wasn't there a key for it?" asked Gilbert.

The pawn-broker's expression did not change by a hair.

"*Non, Monsieur,*" he said.

His tone did not invite argument, and Gilbert pocketed the casket, together with the five francs change, and left the shop.

When he had turned the corner of the Rue de Rivoli, curiosity impelled him to draw out the casket and examine it. It proved to be of bronze, almost black with age, and apparently of exceedingly antique design. On its top was an inscription in queer characters that to Gilbert's inexperienced eye seemed a cross between Hebrew and Arabic. He shook the box, but heard nothing to indicate its contents. Then he remembered that the stranger had said that it was empty, and returned it to his pocket.

It was now nearly noon, and being almost penniless he naturally discovered that he was ravenously hungry. Nothing short of a whole loaf of bread, he thought, would stay his hunger. He accordingly turned down a side street and made for the nearest bakery.

He selected a large, appetizingly fresh loaf, and exchanged for it one of his precious half-franc pieces. Then he left the bakery and hurried to his lodgings in the Rue Agneau Sacré.

The sight of his room recalled to mind the discouraging letter he had received, which in turn brought a train of reflections that led him, one by one, over the events of the morning, and finally to the bronze casket in his pocket. The queer inscription on the box provoked his curiosity afresh, and it suddenly occurred to him to copy it off and try to get it deciphered at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Forgetting the importunity of his hunger for the moment, he set down his loaf, then drew the little casket from one pocket while he fumbled for a pencil in another. In his preoccupation, the box slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor.

Whether it was his imagination, a passing cloud, or whatever, the room seemed to darken for a moment. The lid of the casket flew open from its impact with the bare floor, and Gilbert's ejaculation of dismay was cut short by the apparition of a cloud of golden bubbles which streamed from the little box.

The golden cloud expanded, then contracted and took on a vague resemblance to human shape. At the same instant, Gilbert seemed to hear a deep voice speaking in a tongue utterly strange to him. Then the voice ceased, and the bubbles vanished into the air like steam on a warm day.

Although the room was again as bright as ever, Gilbert stood for a full minute with dropped jaw while a prickling of awe coursed and recoursed along his spine. But, gradually, his self-possession returned, and he was soon able to assure himself that the whole incident was a figment of an over-stimulated imagination.

He bent over to pick up the little box, and received another shock. On the floor, beside the casket, lay a ring.

His first thought, naturally, was that the ring had come out of the box. Then he remembered that the stranger had said that it was empty, and that he had unsuccessfully attempted to discover any contents by shaking it.

But there was no doubting his eyes: the ring was there. He collected his wits by an effort of will-power, and picked up the ring and casket. Both seemed warm to his touch, as if they had just been exposed to considerable heat.

The casket was unlined, and he reflected that, if the ring had been in it, most certainly it should have rattled when he shook it. He closed the lid, and was startled to find that it refused to open again; that it was, in fact, as tightly locked as when he had received it from the old Auvergnat.

This circumstance caused him perforce to abandon his half-formed intention of putting the ring in the box and saying nothing about it to the stranger when the time came to deliver the casket; it was out of the question, of course, to tempt Providence by dropping it again with the hope of reopening it.

After all, he asked himself, had the ring really been in the box? It seemed logical to think that it had, yet equally logical to believe that it had not. In the hope of settling the question, he gave his attention to an examination of the ring itself.

It was of antique yellow gold, chased all around in the swastika pattern, but its most striking feature was the setting: a fire-opal cut in the form of a T-shaped cross with a ring at the top. On the cross were inscribed characters different from, but bearing a slight resemblance to, those on the casket. They seemed to form two words, one vertical and the other horizontal.

Something impelled Gilbert to slip the

bit of jewelry upon the middle finger of his left hand, and to his surprize he found that it fitted perfectly. He stretched out his arm for a better perspective. The ring was an admirable piece of workmanship, ancient though it might be, and he fancied that it looked especially well on his finger. It somehow made him feel rich and powerful to see it there, and he enjoyed the sensation so much that he let it remain while he attacked the loaf of bread he had bought for his luncheon.

THE bread was really excellent, and needed only a little wine to make a satisfying meal. "Too bad," he said to himself, "that I was so prodigal with that Château Rouge I had last week. I wish I'd saved a bottle for time-o'-need."

At that moment a golden bubble seemed to rise from the table before him, and he followed it with his eyes. It sailed leisurely across the room and vanished in a corner. At the point where it disappeared was a wine-bottle which he certainly did not remember having put there. He crossed the room and picked it up. It was full and tightly corked, and bore the well-known Château Rouge trade-mark.

It was very strange. There was no plausible explanation of the bottle's being there. "Still," he reflected, "I *thought* my supply had vanished a little too quickly. I must have set this bottle in the corner when I was straightening things around, without remembering having done so."

He was too hungry to bother long with what seemed only a petty mystery, and soon had the bottle open, washing down his bread with its zestful contents.

The wine was potent, and his stomach otherwise none too full. He felt lifted up, exhilarated.

"I wish," he said to himself, "that I had a hundred francs or so. I feel just like picking a winner at Auteuil."

He had barely uttered the words when there came a knock at his door. He opened it and found an acquaintance named Brenner in the hallway.

"That miserable cadge," he thought to himself; "I wonder what he wants now!" Then he smiled, for he was beyond the reach of the most practised borrower.

"Hello, Nysmith," greeted Brenner; "how are you today?"

Gilbert replied that he was in low spirits.

"Maybe this will cheer you up," returned Brenner. "I've just had a remittance from my lawyer; he sold some property for me. Here are the two hundred francs I owe you. I'm in a big hurry, or I'd stop and chat a bit."

Almost stunned, Gilbert took the money. He was barely able to murmur his thanks. Then Brenner turned and vanished down the stairs.

Gilbert closed the door and sat down to think. It was hard to convince himself that the wine had not affected his brain—was not causing hallucinations. But the bank-notes were convincingly real. Suddenly he recollected his recent declaration about going out and betting on the races. The idea now appeared foolish, but he might as well admit that he had an unreasonable prejudice against changing his mind; most gamblers have the same superstition. Luck should be pressed.

"If I only knew what horse to bet on!" he muttered, closing his eyes the better to concentrate his thoughts. As he did so, he seemed to see against his eyelids a number of the golden bubbles which were becoming so familiar. They darted back and forth as he watched, then suddenly grouped themselves to form the number "21".

"*Vingt-et-un*," he repeated to himself. "That is the name of a horse which is to run in the second race at Auteuil, today.

I remember noticing it in yesterday's *Revue Sportive*. Looks as if I'm being dared to make a bet."

It may have been the ring on his finger which influenced his decision, for every time his gaze fell on it he had a return of the sensation of being rich and powerful. At any rate, he dressed himself carefully, then went downstairs and took the Metro to Auteuil.

Only a few moments remained for making bets on the second race when he arrived and paid twenty francs for admission. He wagered a hundred francs on *Vingt-et-un* to win, and turned to go to the stands. As he pushed through the crowd, he heard one man say to another:

"*Vingt-et-un* will win, certainly."

Swayed by an impulse, Gilbert turned back and placed his remaining eighty francs on the horse he had scarcely heard of the day before. Too late, he reflected that if he lost he would either have to walk back from Auteuil or go empty to bed.

"What are the odds on *Vingt-et-un*?" he asked.

"Forty to one," was the reply.

Gilbert was horror-struck. Somehow or other he had gained the impression that he was betting on the favorite. And now he learned that he had put his entire fortune on an unknown—a forty-to-one shot! Sick with disgust at himself, he made his way to the stands.

It was a close race. Surprisingly, *Vingt-et-un* ran *Prince Hebert*, the favorite, a close second. But the favorite was first under the wire by a nose.

Gilbert's interest in the races was completely killed. Cursing himself for a brainless fool, he arose, left his place in the stands, and made for the nearest exit. He was within a few feet of it when he heard a babel of shouts. Turning about, he distinguished the words:

"*Prince Hebert is disqualified!*"

Gilbert felt the earth rock. If the favorite was disqualified, then the race belonged to *Vingt-et-un!*

Dazedly, he forced his way to the betting-booth where he had made his wager and displayed his tickets. The bookmaker's clerk grumbled and swore under his breath, but counted out his winnings and shoved them under the wicket. Although his senses almost refused to credit the fact, Gilbert had suddenly become possessed of more than seven thousand francs.

WALKING in a golden haze, one forearm pressed tightly against the breast-pocket which contained his winnings, he left the race-track. Through force of habit, he made his way to the entrance of the Metro station, but fear of pickpockets in the subway brought a moment of lucidity, and he flagged a taxicab instead.

"Place de l'Opéra," he directed the chauffeur.

With seven thousand francs, he reflected, he might remain in Paris and continue to prosecute his studies for many months, or even for a year or so. But the feeling of having been snatched from the brink of an abyss was too strong. His one overpowering impulse was to flee. From the Place de l'Opéra, he went on foot to the office of a steamship company in the Rue de la Paix, where by good luck he found there was a boat sailing from Le Havre for New York on the following night. He would have just sufficient time to hand over the casket to the polite stranger at the appointed hour, then to catch the boat-train to Le Havre.

That evening, with his steamer ticket and traveler's-checks for several hundred dollars stowed safely in his pocket, Gil-

bert made an attempt to celebrate his good fortune. He ordered and ate an excellent dinner at his favorite restaurant in Montmartre, and afterward attended the Comédie Française. But the dinner sat heavily upon his stomach, and the play seemed dull and stupid, so that he could scarcely sit through it. Something weighed upon his spirits: something which seemed either a feeling of guilt or a foreboding of disaster, although he could assign no reason for either. When the play had ended, he went at once to his room.

Sleep seemed a thing remote. He sat down upon the edge of his bed without undressing, and began to review the events of the day. There was something weird, something uncanny, in so much good luck. Perhaps that explained his feeling of unease. It had all happened, he remembered, after his encounter with the stranger at the café.

His eyes fell upon the antique ring upon his finger, and it suddenly occurred to him that the jewel had in some way influenced his fortune. All tommyrot, of course, he told himself. Still, it had been upon his finger when he had wished for the money which had been almost miraculously provided him, and when he had wished to know the name of the winner at Auteuil, so providentially supplied by his queer "hunch." Although feeling slightly foolish, he determined to make a test.

He drew a twenty-franc note from his pocket, looked at the ring, and said distinctly:

"I wish this twenty francs would become a thousand."

Nothing happened. He saw no golden bubbles. The twenty-franc note was still a twenty-franc note. Grinning sheepishly, and convinced that there could have been nothing supernatural in the day's events,



he pulled off the ring and put it, together with the bank-note, in his pocket, then went to bed.

GILBERT'S trunk had gone to the Montparnasse station, the next morning, and he was ready to follow it, when the stranger rapped on the door of his room.

"Good morning," he said, when Gilbert had opened to him. "I hope you have a pleasant voyage."

"Thank — you — *Monsieur*," Gilbert stammered, his almost-forgotten forebodings of the night before returning with a rush. "How—how did you know I was going away?"

"I know many things," said the stranger, with an odd smile. "You had no trouble in obtaining the casket?"

"None," answered Gilbert. "Here it is. The pawnbroker said there was no key."

"He was right. There has never been a key to this casket."

"No key! Then, how does one open it?"

"That is a secret which I discovered many—that is to say, some time ago. Thank you very much for your kind offices. You may keep the five francs change, if it will be of any service."

"Thanks," returned Gilbert with a smile, "but I don't need it. Here it is."

The stranger returned the smile, rather wryly, but pocketed the bank-note. Then, after thanking Gilbert again, he departed.

It was only after he was on the boat-train that Gilbert remembered that neither of them had mentioned the ring.

He reached Le Havre without incident and boarded his steamer, finding that he was to share a stateroom with a college professor just returning from several years of research in the Levant. His cabin-mate had not yet appeared, and Gilbert was

just washing away the traces of his journey on the train when a steward rapped on the door. The steward handed him a card and informed him that a gentleman wished to see him in the smoking-salon. Wondering who his visitor could be (for the card gave him no light), Gilbert hastily completed his toilet and made his way to the appointed salon. There, pacing nervously up and down, was the stranger who had employed him to redeem the bronze casket.

"So sorry to disturb you, Mr. Nysmith," he began with a polite but evidently forced smile, "but I must ask you a few questions, at once. You don't mind?"

"Not at all," said Gilbert. "Anything you like."

"Then, if you please, be good enough to relate just how you passed the remainder of yesterday, after redeeming my casket—with especial reference to the casket itself."

Gilbert gave a fairly complete outline of his program, beginning with his purchase of the loaf of bread, mentioning his finding of the ring, and ending with his visit to the theater. Of his half-skeptical test of the ring with the twenty-franc note, he could not force himself to speak.

The stranger shook his head sadly.

"My mistake," he said. "I should have been more frank. I should not have told you that the box was empty. The ring which it contained, my young friend, belonged to Shelomoh—that is to say, Solomon—and is the most powerful talisman which the world has yet seen. The words which you may have noticed engraved upon it are the *Schem hammphorasch*, the Incommunicable Name, which it happens I am the only man now living able to decipher.

"The golden bubbles of which you speak were the manifestations of a djinn, the slave of the ring. Once in every thou-

sand years he is forced to perform three tasks for the wearer of it. You wished yesterday for three things, and the djinn gave them to you. The second of these wishes was for money, the third to know the name of the winning horse at Auteuil; both are understandable. But the first wish—think of it!—was for a trifling bottle of wine which might have been purchased anywhere for a few francs! On the other hand, my first and only wish would have been to fall asleep and remain so until a curse under which I labor should have been lifted."

The stranger's demeanor was so sad, so hopeless, that, although fully convinced that his visitor was crazed, Gilbert could not help sympathizing with him.

"This curse," he asked, "is it some painful disease?"

"You might call it that," returned the stranger, gravely. "In fact, one of your American poets has called it a fever."

"That's bad," said Gilbert. "But, you spoke of sleeping until the curse had been lifted. Couldn't the—the djinn have lifted the curse?"

The stranger shook his head again, more sadly than ever.

"No," he said. "It was pronounced by One far more powerful than he—as I learned to my cost."

"I'm sorry," said Gilbert. "At least, you will allow me to return the ring."

"I will take it, yes," replied his visitor, apathetically, "although it will be useless for another thousand years. And to think that I followed the last holder for fifty years, across three continents, only to become possessed of it too late! However, what is to be, will be. I must go, now. Thank you, *Monsieur*, and good-bye."

"But," objected Gilbert, "you can't go, now. We're almost out of sight of land, and the pilot has already been dropped."

"It makes no difference, unfortunately," returned the other, leaving the salon and walking to the starboard rail.

"Wait!" cried Gilbert. "You'll be drowned!"

The stranger turned for a moment and smiled sadly.

"No such good fortune," he muttered, and leaped over the rail into the sea.

Gilbert started to shout: "Man overboard," but something seemed to restrain him. Although the stranger was apparently making no effort to swim, he was not sinking. Gilbert watched his head bobbing up and down in the steamer's wake until it disappeared in the gathering twilight.

Thoughtfully, he went below, where he encountered his cabin-mate. The professor was a quiet man with grave, inscrutable eyes and a curly Assyrian beard. When they had become somewhat acquainted, Gilbert unburdened his mind of the disconcerting happenings of the past thirty-six hours. The other listened attentively, and to Gilbert's surprise did not seem at all incredulous or inclined to scoff.

"What was the stranger's name?" he asked, at last.

"I don't remember," said Gilbert. "But, hold on. Here's his card: 'I. Lak'dion.' Ever hear of him?"

"Yes—and I think you have, too," returned the professor, softly. "You remember a certain heavily laden procession which made its way toward Golgotha, nearly two thousand years ago? And that, when a bystander adjured One of the Condemned to make haste, the Crossbearer replied: 'I go—but stay thou until I return'? The name of that rash bystander was Isaac Lak'dion—the *Wandering Jew*."