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JULY

Brother Charlie (<i>novelet</i>)	by GORDON R. DICKSON	5
The Reign of Tarquin the Tall	by KIT REED	34
Gil Braltar	by JULES VERNE (translated by I. O. Evans)	48
The Day of the Green Velvet Cloak	by MILDRED CLINGERMAN	54
The Katy Dialogues	by RON GOULART	65
The Up-to-Date Sorcerer	by ISAAC ASIMOV	72
The Science Stage (<i>a department</i>)	by WILLIAM MORRISON	85
The Eighth Lamp	by ROY VICKERS	87
The Vandals	by STEPHEN BARR	98
The Blue-Eyed Horse	by MICHAEL FESSIER	103
Theory of Rocketry	by C. M. KORNBLUTH	116
Recommended Reading: C. M. Kornbluth, A Memorial Bibliography	by ANTHONY BOUCHER	129

"Coming Next Month" appears on page 84

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The Eighth Lamp

by ROY VICKERS

WITH A MUFFLED, METALLIC ROAR the twelve forty-five, the last train on the Underground, lurched into Cheyne Road Station. A small party of belated theatre-goers alighted; the sleepy guard blew his whistle, and the train rumbled on its way to the outlying suburbs.

A couple of minutes later, Signalman George Raoul emerged from the tunnel, swung himself on to the up-platform and switched off the nearest lamp. Simultaneously a door in the wall on the down-side opened and the stationmaster appeared.

"Nothing to report, Mr. Jen-

kins," said Raoul. He spoke in an ordinary speaking voice, but in the dead silence of the station his words carried easily across the rails—words that were totally untrue. He had something of considerable importance to report, but he knew that if he were to make that report he would probably be marked down as unfit for night duty, and he could not afford to risk that at present.

"All right, George. Good night."

"G'night, Mr. Jenkins."

Raoul passed down the length of the up-platform, dousing each light as he came to the switch.

Then he dropped on to the track, crossed and made for the farthest switch on the down-platform.

Cheyne Road Station was wholly underground—it was but an enlarged strip of tunnel—and the lighting regulations did not apply to it. There were eight lamps on each platform.

The snap of the switch echoed in the deserted station like the crack of a pistol. Raoul started. The silence that followed gripped him. Pulling himself together he hurried on to the second switch.

“Ugh!”

By the third lamp he stopped and shuddered as his eye fell upon a recruiting poster. In the gloom the colouring of the poster was lost—some crudity in the printing asserted itself—and the beckoning smile of a young soldier seemed like the mirthless grin of a death mask. And the death mask was just like—

“You’re all right,” he assured himself aloud. “It’s the new station that’s doing it.”

Yes, it was the new station that was doing it. But he would not grumble on that account. It was a bit of rare luck, being transferred from Baker Street—just when he was transferred. For all its familiarity, he could never have stood night-work at Baker Street—now.

Even after three weeks in the new signal-box he could never “pass” a Circle train without a

faint shudder. The Circle trains had a morbid fascination for him. They passed you on the down-line. Half a dozen stations and they would be pulling up at Baker Street. Then on through the tunnel and, in about an hour, back they came past your box and still on the down-line. In the Circle trains his half-nurtured imagination saw something ruthless and inevitable — something vaguely connected with fate and eternity.

His mind had momentarily wandered so that he took the fourth switch unconsciously. As he made for the fifth, his nerve again faltered.

“Didn’t ought to have taken on this extra work,” he seemed to shout into the dark mouth of the tunnel. “’Tain’t worth it for three bob. It’s the cleaner’s job by rights.”

Yes, it was the cleaner’s job by rights. But the cleaner was an old man, unreliable for night-work; and when the stationmaster had offered Raoul the job of “clearing up last thing” for three shillings a week, he had jumped at it. The three shillings would make life perceptibly brighter for Jinny—her new life with him.

Between the fifth lamp and the sixth was the stationmaster’s den. On a nail outside the door hung the keys with which Raoul would presently lock the ticket-barrier and the outer door of the booking-office.

He snatched the keys as he passed and then, as if to humanise the desolation, he broke into a piercing, tuneless whistle that carried him to the seventh lamp.

A trifling mechanical difficulty with the seventh switch was enough to check the whistling. For a moment he stood motionless in the silence—the silence that seemed to come out of the tunnel like a dank mist and envelop him. He measured the distance to the switch of the eighth lamp. The switch of the eighth lamp was by the foot of the staircase. He need scarcely stop as he turned it—and then he would let himself take the staircase two, three, four steps at a time.

Click!

The eighth lamp was extinguished. From the ticket-office on the street level a single ray of light made blacker the darkness of the station. But Raoul, within a couple of feet of the staircase, waited, crouching.

His hand clutched the stair-rail and he twisted his body round so that he could look up the line. He could not see more than a few feet in front of him, but he could hear, distinct and unmistakable, the rumbling murmur of an approaching train.

All his instincts as a railway man told him that his senses were deceiving him. The twelve forty-five was the last train down—and he and the stationmaster had to-

gether seen it through. There were a dozen reasons why it would be impossible for another train to run without previous notification to the signalling staff. And yet—the rumbling was growing momentarily louder. The air, driven through the tunnel before the advancing train, was blowing like a breeze upon his face.

Louder and louder grew the rumbling until it rose to the familiar roar. In another second he would see the lights.

But there were no lights. The train lurched and clattered through the station and was swallowed up in the down-side tunnel. There were no lights, but Raoul had seen that it was a Circle train.

For a nightmare eternity he seemed to be rushing with gigantic strides up an endless staircase—across a vast hall that had once been a ticket-office, and then:

“Hi! Where yer comin’ to?”

The raucous indignation of the night constable, into whom he had cannoned, recalled him to sanity.

“Sorry, matel” he panted. “I didn’t see you—as I come by.”

“Call that comin’ by?” demanded the constable. “Why, you was running like a house afire! What’s going on down there, then?”

“Nothing,” retorted Raoul.

The constable, unsatisfied,

walked through the ticket-office and peered over the barrier. The silence and the darkness gave him a hint.

"Bit lonesome down there, last thing, ain't it?" he suggested.

"Yes," grunted Raoul, as he locked the barrier, "somethin' chronic."

"I know," said the constable. He had not been on night duty for ten years without learning the meaning of nerves.

A short chat with the constable served to restore Raoul's balance, after which he locked up as usual and made his way to the tenement he shared with Jinny, resolving that this time he would report the occurrence to the stationmaster on the following day.

During their three weeks occupation of the tenement Jinny had made a practice of waiting up to give him his supper. As he came in she was lying asleep, half-dressed, in the "second-hand upholstered armchair" that had been theirs for three weeks.

"Hullo, Jinny!" he called, with intentional loudness. He wanted to wake her up thoroughly so that she would chatter to him.

"Blessed if I hadn't dropped off!" she exclaimed by way of apology, as she hastily got up and busied herself with his cocoa.

"There's no need for you to wait up, you know, Jinny," he said, as he seated himself at the table. "Only I'm not denying as

I'm glad to see you a bit before we turn in.

"Funny thing 'appened to-night," he went on. "After I'd seen the twelve forty-five through and Mr. Jenkins 'ad gone and I'd nearly finished turnin' off the lights—"

He told the whole story jovially, jauntily, as if it were a rather good joke. He attained a certain vividness of expression which only became blurred at that part which dealt with his own sensations after the passing of the train.

The woman was wide awake before he had finished. All her life she had indirectly depended on the Underground Railway, and knew its workings almost as well as the signalman himself.

"'Arf a mo', Georgel!" she said, as he finished. "How did it get past the signal if you was out of your box?"

"That's what beats me!" exclaimed George Raoul, thumping the table as if herein lay the very cream of the joke.

She looked at him with the dawning suspicion that he had been drinking; but as she looked she knew that he had not.

"What sort o' train was it?" she asked, keeping her eyes fixed on his.

For a moment he did not reply. His gaze dwelt on his cocoa as he answered:

"Circle train."

Jinny made no reply, and the subject was dropped.

An hour later neither of them was asleep.

"Jinny," said Raoul, "what yer thinkin' about?"

"Nothing," she retorted, and her voice came sulkily through the darkness.

"Go on. Out with it!"

"All right! 'Ave it your own way, an' don't blame me. I was wonderin' what Pete was doin' now—this minute."

"Pete!" echoed Raoul, through teeth that chattered, though he tried to clench them. "You've no call to wonder about 'im—not after the way he served you, his lawful, wedded wife."

"I didn't mean to," she defended herself; "only you tellin' me about that train—and 'im being a Circle driver—set me off."

"You've no call to think about 'im," repeated Raoul doggedly. "You can lay he ain't thinkin' about you—'e's thinkin' about the woman he left you for."

There was a moment's silence, and then:

"P'r'aps—and p'r'aps not," replied Jinny.

On the following morning Raoul decided that he would still say nothing to the stationmaster about the train that had followed the twelve forty-five.

The position was by no means

an easy one. He knew that his nerves would not stand the strain of turning out the lights on the platform—not yet awhile, anyhow. On the other hand, he dared not throw up his job. During the last three weeks he had seen something of Jinny's nature; and although his animal love for her had in no way abated, he had a pretty shrewd suspicion that she would not face even temporary destitution with him.

After much deliberation, he hit on a comparatively neat compromise. As he left home to go on duty he approached an elderly loafer leaning against the wall of a public house near the station.

"Suppose you don't want a tanner a night for five minutes' work as a child could do?" he suggested.

"All accordin' to what the work is," answered the loafer.

"Turnin' off the lights mostly," said Raoul. "Anyway, if you want the job 'ang about 'ere"—indicating the station—"at twelve forty-five sharp until you see the stationmaster come off. Then 'op into the station. You'll find me on the platform.

"I'm doing this on me own," he added. "My missis likes me to be 'ome early, and it's worth a tanner a night for a bit of 'elp. See?"

The loss of the extra three shillings a week, Raoul decided, could safely be ascribed to an act of war economy on the part of

the railway company. Better lose three bob a week than have to chuck up your job, he reasoned.

The services of the loafer proved a wise investment. Raoul showed him where to find the switches. On the first night he explained it all over and over again, glancing from time to time towards the tunnel, thereby extracting full value for his sixpence.

The explanation finished, and while three lamps remained burning, he left the loafer for a suddenly remembered duty on the ticket-office level. Thence, in a comfortable circle of light, he presently called:

"Turn off them last three lights, mate, and come up."

The loafer sluggishly obeyed, and then shambled up the staircase to receive the most easily earned sixpence of his life.

"Same time to-morrer night if you're on," said Raoul.

"I'm on right enough," replied the loafer.

That formula was repeated every night for some half-a-dozen nights. Then came a night on which the loafer failed to appear.

For five minutes Raoul waited. He went up to the street level and looked round. The station was deserted—there was not even a constable on point duty.

When the loafer's defection became obvious, Raoul's first thought was to leave the lights burning and go straight home. Re-

flection showed that this would mean the sack—which in turn would mean the probable loss of Jinny—the loss of that for which the very agonies he was now enduring had been incurred.

Besides, there was another thought that drove him back into the station. Somehow or other he would be compelled to explain why he had left the lights burning—why he had been afraid to return to the station. They would ask questions. And God knew where those questions might lead!

The up-platform presented no terrors. On the down-platform—in the moment of utter darkness when the eighth lamp was extinguished—he knew that his fear would reach its zenith. And precisely at that moment the distant rumbling in the tunnel began—the driven air, like a breeze, played about his temples.

He could not prevent his eyes from staring in the direction of the tunnel. He tried to move backwards up the staircase, but all power of voluntary action had left him.

The train seemed to slacken speed as it rolled into the station. As it came towards him, slowly and more slowly, his eyes were glued to a faint luminosity in the driver's window—a luminosity that gathered shape as it came nearer and nearer.

"*Pete!*" he gasped—and with that conscious effort of the mus-

cles his brain regained control of his body and he rushed up the stairs, uncertain whether the train had stopped—knowing that if it came again it would stop and wait for him.

Jinny was awake and moving about the room when he returned. She glanced at his drawn face and knew what had happened.

“Seen it again?” she asked.

“Wot if I have?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” she retorted.

She waited while he ate his supper in silence.

“George,” she said, as he put down his cup for the last time.

“Well?”

“Suppose we knew for certain as Pete was *dead*—she paused, but did not know enough to look at his mouth, and his eyes were turned from her—“why, then we—we could get spliced proper, couldn’t we?”

Still avoiding her gaze he nodded.

“Suppose,” she said, leaning across the table until her elbows touched his, “suppose we was to go about the banns to-morrer?”

Then did Raoul look up and meet the woman’s gaze. In her eye there was nothing of accusation. But there was nothing of doubt.

“Right-o!” he said.

On the following morning they went together to the parish church and, being recommended

thence to the vicarage, explained their needs. They learnt that they would have to wait for three Sundays before they could be married.

He was gloomy and depressed as they left the vicarage.

“Three weeks’ll soon pass,” she said, as if to console him.

“Aye,” he grunted.

“An’ you’ll feel a lot better when it’s done,” she added.

To this he made no reply, and she did not labour the point. Indeed, it was the last veiled allusion she ever made to the subject.

On his way to the station he came across the loafer in the usual place outside the public house. The man shambled towards him ready with an excuse, but Raoul cut him short.

“Shan’t be wantin’ you no more,” he said gruffly, and thereby burnt his boats behind him.

During the hours that passed between his going on duty in the early afternoon and his leaving the box after the passing of the twelve forty-five, he did not once repent having dispensed with the services of the loafer. True, his mind dwelt almost continuously on the ordeal before him. But Jinny had unconsciously given him a weapon when she had told him he would feel better when *it* was done.

That night, as he doused the eighth lamp, he turned and faced the tunnel.

"I'm actin' square by 'er now, ain't I?" he shouted.

Then, for all the furious beating of his heart, he walked at a leisurely pace up the staircase, and so, completing his duties, into the street.

On the next night it was easier, and, with each night that brought his marriage nearer, his confidence grew. His nerve would falter sometimes, but always he managed to ascend the staircase one step at a time. Jinny was a secret tower of strength to him—so that all went reasonably well with him until, by the merest accident, the tower of strength crumbled.

Three Sundays had passed since their visit to the vicarage when the accident happened. The accident took the form of his meeting Mabel Owen as he was returning home from duty.

He had know Mabel in the Baker Street days before he had known Jinny—a fact of which Jinny was well aware. Mabel was returning from some unmentioned errand in the West End when she ran into him and exclaimed:

"Blessed if it ain't George Raoul! 'Ow goes it, George? Seems ages since we met, don't it! An' what might you be doin' in these parts?"

"I work over 'ere now," explained Raoul. "Cheyne Road. 'Ow goes it with you?"

Then, because he had no wish

to appear churlish to a girl with whom he had once walked out, he invited her to an adjacent coffee stall.

He arrived at the tenement barely half an hour later than usual. But that half-hour was more than enough for Jinny.

"You're late, George," she said, as he came in.

"Sorry, Jinny," he replied. "Couldn't help meself. Met a friend as I was comin' off. Had to say a civil word to 'er."

"'Er!" repeated Jinny.

"Mabel Owen," he said—and his clumsy effort to say it casually fanned her suspicion.

"Oh!" shrilled Jinny. "So you keep me waitin' while you go gallivantin' about with that dressed up bit o' damaged goods!"

"You've no right to say that of Mabel," protested Raoul.

"No right!" she echoed. "Oh no! I've no right to say that of 'er, me livin' with you with no weddin' ring as you've given me. No better than 'er, I'm not. And don't you let me forget it neither, George Raoul!"

"Stow that, Jinny!" he commanded, with rising anger. "Ain't we fixed it up to get spliced proper day after tomorrer?"

The glint in his eye, partly of anger but partly also of fear, restrained her from further outburst and drove her indignation inwards so that she sulked.

She was still sulking on the fol-

lowing day, compelling him to eat his midday meal in gloomy silence, wherefore he left home for work sooner than was necessary.

He was in the signal-box before he recognised that the secret tower of strength had crumbled as a result of the accident of his meeting Mabel Owen. Jinny had shown him a side of her nature that had been conspicuously absent in the earlier stages of his infatuation. And now his life was to become irrevocably linked with hers.

With the first taste of the bitterness of his sin came remorse; and with remorse came, with renewed strength, the terror which he had partly beaten back.

The terror began to grip him even before the stationmaster had left. In the signal-box he had formed the plan of telling the stationmaster that he could not turn out the lights that night—that he must hurry to the bedside of a dying child—any lie would do provided it saved him for that night. Tomorrow night he would be married to Jinny. He would have made what reparation lay in his power and would feel the safer.

“Good night, George.”

“G’night, Mr. Jenkins.”

The stationmaster hung the keys on the nail outside his den and walked off. Raoul would have

called after him, but checked himself. The stationmaster would not believe that lie about the dying child. His face would betray his terror—his terror of the tunnel. The stationmaster would ask him why he was afraid of the tunnel, and—*God knew where those questions would lead!*

“Funny, it’s worse’n ever to-night!” he said, as he finished the lights on the up-platform—for he was not analytical and did not wholly understand why the secret tower of strength had crumbled. He only knew that he did not want to marry Jinny on the following day. He only saw his sin in gaining possession of her—in the way that he had gained possession of her—in its naked hideousness.

The odd fatalism of his class prevented him from shirking the lights on the down-platform. What has to be will be. The same fatalism drove him ultimately to dousing the eighth lamp and turning, like a doomed rat, to face the already rumbling horror of the tunnel.

More slowly than before, as if it knew that he must wait for it, the train came on. Then in his ears sounded the familiar grinding of the brakes.

The train had stopped in the station. The faint luminosity in the driver’s window grinned its welcome. Then it beckoned.

“I’m comin’, Pete.”

From the corner by the staircase, where he had been crouching, he moved across the platform and boarded the train.

Dawn, breaking over the serried roofs of Chelsea, found Jinny sitting wide-eyed before the untouched meal she had prepared hours ago for Raoul.

As if the first faint streaks of light ended her vigil she dropped her face on her arms and burst into tears.

"Fool that I was! Why couldn't I 'ave 'eld me jore about Mabel Owen till we was spliced proper? And now he's left me, and Pete—"

The passion of weeping rose to its height, spent itself, and left her in another mood.

"'E needn't think 'e can get away as easy as all that," she muttered savagely. "If I'm a fool, he's a worse one—as 'e'll soon find."

At eight o'clock she washed herself and donned her black dress. Thus arrayed as a respectable woman of the working class she made her way to the nearest police station and asked for the Inspector.

"I'm Mrs. Peter Comber," she explained. "My husband used to be a driver on the Underground. Circle train, he druv."

She did not hesitate in her confession. She had weighed the cost of her revenge, and did not shrink from paying it.

"A man called George Raoul used to lodge with us—a signaller, 'e was, and worked at Baker Street. Me and 'im got friendly, if you understand, only I wouldn't 'ave nothing to do with him while I was livin' with my 'usband, not being that sort.

"'Bout a couple of months ago George come to me and says, 'Jinny,' he says, 'you won't see Pete no more,' he says. 'Why not?' I says. 'Cos he's gone off with Carrie Page,' he says. 'Chucked up his job and everythink,' he says; 'met him when we was bein' paid,' he says, 'an' he asked me to tell you quite friendly like,' he says."

"Look here," interrupted the Inspector, "we can't have anything to do with all this."

"You wait," replied Jinny, scarcely noticing the interruption. "As soon as George told me, I was that wild with my 'usbin that I let George take me off—me that had always been a respectable woman. Never entered my 'ead as he wasn't tellin' the truth. Next day George was turned on to Cheyne Road an' we come to live up 'ere.

"Well, first he begun tellin' me as he'd bin seein' things on the Underground. That started me thinkin'. I can put two an' two together, same as anyone else, an' I started takin' notice of what he was talking about in 'is sleep. And I tell you as sure as I stand here,

George Raoul killed my 'usbin, and I dessay 'e's put 'im in one of the old holes in the Baker Street tunnel."

The Inspector began to take notes and to ask a number of questions.

"And now George has left you, I suppose, and that's why you've come along to us?" he suggested.

"He has left me," replied the woman. "But I only found all this out properly night before last, an' I couldn't be sure. I'd have come along 'ere any'ow."

The Inspector guessed that the last statement was a lie. But unless the man, when they caught him, definitely implicated the woman he knew that the Crown would not prosecute her.

"All right," he said. "We'll find George for you. Leave your address and call here to-morrow."

The Inspector, after instructing a plain-clothes man to shadow Jinny to her home, went to interview the Cheyne Road station-master.

On the following morning, when Jinny called at the police station, she was asked to examine a suit of clothing, a pocket knife, and a greasy case containing a number of small personal papers and other belongings.

"Yes, they're Pete's right enough, pore dear!" She burst into a flood of maudlin tears.

The Inspector waited unmoved.

He believed not at all in the genuineness of Jinny's grief; but convention had its claims.

"Now, Mrs. Comber," he said presently, "I want you to dry your face and come along o' me.

"It's all right," he added. "Nothing's going to happen to you."

He took her for some distance in a taxi cab to a low, vault-like building near the river.

"Steady now," he warned her. "We're going to show you a dead body."

Someone removed a cloth, and at the same moment the Inspector demanded: "Who's that?"

"George Raoul!" gasped Jinny.

As the Inspector, taking her by the arm, led her from the room a question forced itself to her lips.

"You—you ain't 'ung him already?"

"No," replied the Inspector, with a grim laugh, "we ain't 'ung him. Wasn't needed. We found your husband in that disused hole, same as you said—and we found George Raoul alongside him—like that. Heart failure, the doctor says. Funny thing! As far as I can make out, he must have been skeered or something and run all the way through the tunnel from Cheyne Road to Baker Street where he done it. Must have been the running as did for his heart."

That, at any rate, was the explanation based on the findings of the Coroner's Court.