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A Chat With the Readers

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408 Holliday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.



RICHARD CONRAD yawned. The yawn was not induced by drowsiness. Rather was it the venting of a wearied mental state bordering dangerously on cynicism.

Lazily he settled back in the yielding cushions of his favorite easy chair and stretched his legs closer toward the crackling lumps of burning cannell coal in the cavernous brick fireplace. Like an unfailing potion the leaping tongues of yellow flame seemed to smooth away the crease of irritation in his forehead.

To those glowing embers Conrad owed a goodly portion of his success in life. Many times when inspiration had failed him and his fingers idled listlessly on the keys of his typewriter, he would hopefully and expectantly shamble down from his room on the fifth floor of the club to this big quiet lounge—here to seek his muse in the fascinating flames of the friendly fireplace. And invariably he would dash back up the stairs shortly after, imagination aglow, to hammer out the animated details of a new and thrilling novelette.

For Conrad was a fiction writer. There were some who referred to him as an author—his admirers. Undeceived by the character of his output,

Conrad chose to be known merely as a writer of short stories.

His life consisted of a perpetual series of adventures—his mental life. Actually he led a most prosaic existence. Once a pickpocket had relieved him of his watch in a crowded elevated train. And years ago he had served on a jury in a murder trial. Aside from these two experiences fate had unkindly avoided Conrad. Many times he had courted adventure—only to be disillusioned by its sordidness.

But in another world, a world bounded by a limitless and romantic imagination, Conrad had lived the lives of a hundred men. With parched throat and blackened lips he had crawled across the burning sands of the Sahara. As a favored knight of Arthur he had crossed spears with the boldest squires of Olde England. In the squalid dives of Port Said he had conspired with the dregs of Asia Minor. A dozen times he had been shanghaied aboard scudding tramp ships captained by inhuman brutes.

The strain of such a thrilling life was beginning to tell—on Conrad's imagination. Where before he had tingled with excitement in weaving the strands of a mystery yarn, now

the artificiality of his efforts positively irked him.

"What I need," he frequently warned himself, "is an honest-to-goodness thrill—in real life. Night after night I sit here at the club. Never get out any more. My imagination is sadly overworked, and undernourished."

He sighed.

"But what's the use! Romance is dead and buried. Adventure only lives in yesterdays and tomorrows. Even when something out of the ordinary does happen, it's stupidly commonplace—while it's happening."

With a resigned, discouraged gesture he reached over to the table and picked up a newspaper.

"Here's a living example of the rot and corruption out of which I've got to fashion romance. 'Three Dead From Poison Moonshine.' 'Ax Slayer Gets Twenty Years.' 'Mrs. Fenton Granted Decree—Claims Hubby Threw Flat Iron at Her.'"

Listlessly Conrad turned the pages, his disgust deepening at each degrading headline. In the classified section he glanced carelessly at a few want-ads, Lost and Found, and items marked Personal.

Suddenly his eyes brightened. Again, and more slowly, he read the lines which had stirred his interest. Then with trembling fingers he opened the blade on the little gold knife at the end of his watch chain and cut a slit around the fateful paragraph. Fateful, because his very act seemed fraught with destiny.

A new light shone in Conrad's eyes—excitement, curiosity, determination. He started to his feet, hurried to the coatroom, and bounded out the doors to the street below, almost bowling over two fellow club-members in his hurried exit.

Conrad was on his way to answer the advertisement. It read:

WANTED—I am looking for a man who is willing to gamble for his life with the odds against him, a thousand to one. If he loses, it will be a speedy, merciful end. If he wins, he will have a more thrilling and extraordinary adventure than any human being in this world has ever enjoyed. Men with families or dependents need not apply. Call before midnight tonight fully prepared with affairs adjusted should you never return.—Professor X. Etheray, 34 Cambridge Court.

2

A SWIRLING blast of icy wind and sleet greeted Conrad as he stepped out on the sidewalk. He stopped abruptly.

"What an impulsive fool I am!" and his teeth chattered, partly from excitement, more from the sudden chill. Nevertheless, he hailed a passing taxi.

There is a subtle force within the mentality of every man—a force opposed to reason, that lures with magnetic power. Against conscience, against better judgment it beckons toward the most perilous danger or toward the foulest sin with the charm of the legended Lorelei. Tonight Conrad was the victim of this mesmeric influence.

Rumbling along in the semi-heated cab Conrad tried to collect his thoughts. He had given the driver the address, an unfamiliar street in an unfamiliar section of the city. A thick frost covered the panes of glass at the sides and rear of the car. Through the windshield he watched the blinking traffic lights flash from green to red. They seemed to signal "Danger Ahead", but he gave no heed to their warning.

From his vest pocket Conrad unfolded the newspaper clipping and strained his eyes toward the fine print in the dim illumination of the dome lamp.

"One chance in a thousand!"

He grinned nervously.

"There shouldn't be much competition for the job—whatever it is. I

wonder if I shall be the only applicant."

For one who was speeding toward what was advertised as almost certain death Conrad seemed strangely indifferent. So that no misconceptions may arise as to the possible desire of Richard Conrad to end his life "speedily and mercifully", it must be confessed that he really had no serious intention of being accepted as the successful candidate for whatever task Professor X. Etheray might demand. Impelled by curiosity alone he meant merely to nibble at the bait without being caught in the trap.

Attempts to solve the riddle were brought to a sudden halt by the slowing up of the cab. After Conrad had dismissed the driver he paused for a few seconds to get his bearings. Evidently the professor, if there were such a person, lived in a residential section above the ordinary.

Opening the huge iron gate marked "No. 34", Conrad found himself in a narrow courtyard. No lights were visible in the windows of the large stone dwelling that loomed up before him. As he climbed a short flight of steps to the door he felt a chill creep over him. Here was real adventure! Nothing commonplace or sordid about this. At least—not yet.

Three times he rapped the old-fashioned iron knocker. It seemed to echo throughout the house with a hollow, foreboding sound. Still no one came.

"A fine wild goose chase this has been! I might have known such things don't happen nowadays. Probably some high school youngster willing to pay a couple of dollars advertising rates to satisfy what he believes to be a sense of humor. Well, the joke's on me."

He turned away in disappointment. His excitement changed to resentment.

A creak sounded on the stairs in the house. A dim glow illumined a win-

dow. The heavy oaken door swung slowly open.

Conrad wheeled about. His heart beat rapidly.

"Ah, it is you, my friend! You have come in answer to my message."

Peering through the darkness Conrad discerned the time-worn features of the man who stood in the doorway. Bearded and with bushy eyebrows, he looked to be almost any age between fifty and seventy. His hair was white. And his eyes seemed to reflect a greenish, luminous glow like a cat who stops to glare in fright at the shining lamps of an approaching motor car.

"I—I—is this 34 Cambridge Court? I—I read an advertisement in the paper," stammered Conrad. "Are you Professor Etheridge?"

"Etheray—yes, I am he. May I invite you in?" His voice was gentle, persuasive, yet commanding.

And Conrad, like a lamb led to slaughter, followed the professor into the dimly lighted living room.

3

"BEFORE I make known my purpose in inviting you here tonight, we must first understand each other on a few points," began the professor.

He had switched on a shaded floor lamp. In the soft glow he studied his visitor. Those gimletlike eyes seemed to penetrate Conrad's mind, to read his thoughts, to detect his insincerity.

"Possibly it may surprize you," said the professor in a smooth, unhurried tone, "to learn that I expected you. I speak of *you* as a type. I do not know your name, nor your occupation. But your character—your reasons for coming here tonight—are quite obvious. An advertisement worded such as mine would attract but one type. Despondent persons? Prospective suicides? Ah, indeed not! Only the true adventurer—the seeker of thrills beyond the commonplace.

"You were attracted by curiosity. You hoped, yet feared, the advertisement would be genuine. And even now you have no idea of risking your life unless you are completely informed of the dangers involved, and certain that the odds for your surviving are reversed. Am I right?"

"Oh, you have me sized up perfectly!" said Conrad with a guilty smile. His respect for Professor Etheray was increasing. "But what do you expect me to do? Carry out some mysterious mission in a forbidden, foreign land—like, uh, well—Tibet?"

"Forbidden? Yes, decidedly! And foreign." The professor paused. "It might better be termed 'the land of the unknown.' First I must be certain of your confidence. I have already taken steps which will assure me that whatever passes between us tonight will remain a secret."

He hesitated, and a crafty, cunning expression came into his eyes. "You will remember that the advertisement stated the applicant was to come prepared for his mission. You—er—embark tonight on your voyage."

A chill of cold fear chased up and down Conrad's spine. Who was this devil who seemed to have such a hypnotic influence over him? What was his game? Hold up? No, that couldn't be it. Well, he'd wait and learn what it was all about. Not much danger. Whenever the old man started any "rough stuff", he would show him a little adventure in two-fisted pugilism.

"To come quickly to the point, I will tell you what I wish you to do. You are to vanish—to fade away into vapor—to become invisible to human eyes."

Conrad sighed in relief. His fear diminished. Now he had solved the riddle. The big adventure was over. This man, this bogus Professor X. Etheray (or perhaps he was a real professor), was just a harmless lunatic. Maybe he was not entirely harm-

less. But at least, he was merely deluded, deranged.

Bearing in mind the old advice about humoring the insane to keep them from becoming violent Conrad resolved to feign a serious interest until he could safely, and quickly, escape.

"I am an inventor," continued the professor, "also a psychologist, an electrician and a student of what is ignorantly termed the 'supernatural.'"

Conrad wanted to add "and you are Napoleon and Julius Caesar and the King of the Bootleggers' Union," but he discreetly kept his silence.

"For fifteen years," said the old man, and a dreamy look of triumph lighted up his eyes, "I have been at work on the most stupendous idea ever known to man. In Vienna, I acquired considerable reputation as an X-Ray specialist. Had I not adopted my pseudonym in this country, you would recognize my name instantly. A number of years ago you may have read of a series of extraordinary treatments received by wealthy Americans to regain their lost youth—physically and mentally. Oh, it was hushed at the time. The world was not ready for such advanced science.

"Then, suddenly, the renowned Viennese specialist was heard from no more. He had started on a tour of investigation far into the interior of India. It was reported that he had died of the plague. Others said that hostile natives had made way with him. The world quickly forgets.

"That was more than a decade ago. Since then I have lived the life of a recluse, working alone, feverishly, for the final demonstration of my—my" (he hesitated) "miracle—as the world will call it."

Conrad listened, fascinated. Even a lunatic could tell an interesting story, he thought.

"My laboratory? You are closer now to my secret apparatus than any

human being has ever been. It is—but I am diverging. Quite by accident I discovered a force of nature until recently comparatively unknown to man. In my experiments I frequently made use of ether in liquid form. It was while I was perfecting an X-Ray projector. A small wad of ether-soaked cotton was lying on a desk near the apparatus. A faint, pungent odor came to my nostrils as it evaporated.

"I switched on the current of my apparatus—and to my amazement the article upon which I had focused its rays became enveloped in a misty, violet-colored vapor. In a few minutes the air had cleared. Under the same conditions I attempted the experiment again—with no success.

"Whatever had caused this extraordinary vapor I was determined to discover. For months I searched without satisfaction. Then finally, I produced in feeble volume the ray of light—if one might term it light—which I chose to call *etheray*. Later, I assumed this coined phrase as my *nom de plume*.

"My friend, we mortals pride ourselves on our scientific knowledge, our electrical discoveries, our chemical research. We are but children playing with mud pies. There are forces about which we yet know nothing. Stubbornly we are content to believe the testimony of our limited senses. Even now our most learned physicians treat the body like a lump of animate clay—scoffing at the advanced theory which claims all matter to be but vibrations in the ether.

"The indivisible atom of yesterday—where has it gone? Ah, now it is discovered to be made up of billions of electrons. And the electron—can it, too, be divided? Yes, indeed," he paused, "into ether—its native nothingness.

"Now I come to the point of my story. My apparatus, for such it is, has fortunately been perfected while

I can still enjoy the triumph of its success. Only yesterday it gave a demonstration for which I have waited in patience these many years."

Professor Etheray paused. It was evident that he was about to disclose a fact of tremendous significance. More for the keen joy of describing for the first time to a fellow-man his life work than to impress his listener, the professor's voice became slightly dramatic.

Conrad was interested, but still on his guard.

"Under the focus of my etheray projector," the professor spoke slowly, "I have dissolved matter! A vase of flowers, beautiful roses, vanished in a violet haze. Only the stems were left and four or five inches of the tapering glass vase. These had been outside the range of the ray. And strangely, this shaft of invisible light had penetrated the wall at the end of my laboratory, cutting as clean a circular hole as you can possibly imagine through steel, wood, stone and cement. Fortunately, its course had cleared the roofs of near-by dwellings and shot upward into space. And being invisible unless in contact with what we call solid objects it was unobserved by people in the streets. So my secret is still safe."

Conrad was now convinced that the man was insane. Nevertheless he experienced a shudder of fear at the awesome portent of the professor's narrative. Suppose this man were telling the truth. Then why—why—?

Conrad leaped to his feet in horror. "What the devil has all this got to do with me?" he cried indignantly.

Professor Etheray apparently expected this sudden change in his visitor's attitude.

"Let me finish," he said calmly, "before you accuse me of being the fiend you now suspect me to be. The rose is in my laboratory at this moment, as fresh and lovely as ever; the glass vase is intact; and the wall is

none the worse for its experience. You mistake the nature of my experiment. I have not been working fifteen years on this machine to produce merely a force of destruction. Objects within the range of its ray become invisible to the human eye. Nor have they substance or solidity. To the human senses—they do not exist."

"But how do you bring them back?" anxiously asked Conrad, who had again seated himself. "If your ray reduces a material object to nothing—how then can you reconstruct the original object?"

Professor Etheray shifted uneasily. His greenish eyes lost their penetrative force; they glinted cunningly.

"It would be extremely difficult for you to grasp the technical explanation. It has required fifteen years of study and experimentation even for me fully to understand this force of nature which I have finally succeeded in controlling. But why, indeed, need I explain further to you. Tonight, you have voluntarily placed yourself under my direction. If you are ready we will proceed to the laboratory."

Conrad jumped up in anger.

"Why, you poor deluded fool! If you think I am going to let you burn a hole in me you're mistaken. I'll—I—"

Those green eyes fixed on Conrad's face. The bushy eyebrows contracted. Beads of perspiration appeared on the professor's forehead as he summoned his terrific hypnotic powers into play.

Conrad swayed unsteadily. He tried to shake off the evil influence that seemed to sap his strength and bind his tongue.

The professor stepped to the curtained doorway. Again his manner was genteel, persuasive, compelling. "Come!" he said.

And Conrad, drawn by a mental force too powerful to resist, followed Professor Etheray meekly up the creaking stairs to the laboratory above.

"I HOPE you appreciate fully the importance of this experiment," said the professor, as they entered a large room, evidently the laboratory, though it was furnished with the sumptuous comfort of a living room.

"This is my workshop," and his gesture indicated, not without a touch of pride, the battery of intricate-appearing machines on a table at the end of the room.

Around four walls were bookshelves filled with scientific volumes. An easy chair faced a fireplace in which the embers of glowing coals still gave off a pleasant warmth. No doubt the professor spent but little of his time outside his laboratory.

Conrad fought inwardly to shake off the dizzy weakness that held him powerless.

"I am going to get out of here," he muttered faintly. "I am going back to the club."

"I fear that you overestimate the danger," soothed Professor Etheray. "Truly, our little experiment is quite a harmless operation. And if it proves successful," he added in a triumphant tone, "the world will be at our feet."

"Do you realize the stupendous possibilities of the etheray? You and I, my friend, will control the most powerful force known to the world—a force which we may exercise for good or evil. At our will nations may be destroyed, cities wiped out. Governments will tremble in horror at the mysterious disappearance of their rulers. A tyrannical manipulator of finances will be sitting in a directors' meeting behind the safe walls of his moneyed temple of steel and stone. Before the very eyes of his associates, he will shriek in horror—and vanish in a mist, never to be seen again by man."

"Pointed like a machine gun at advancing armies the invisible etheray will dissolve in a few minutes entire

regiments and divisions, which formerly fought for years with their puny artillery and bullets. Under its focus battleships will disappear with less trace than those sunk by submarines."

The professor was waxing enthusiastic as he allowed his imagination to picture the terrific influence his discovery would exercise in the future history of the world.

"No longer will engineers plan railroads that wind in and out among the hills because they cannot conquer steep grades. With our perfected machine, enlarged proportionately, we will carve a clean tunnel in ten seconds' time through a rugged range of mountains.

"The possibilities are infinite. I hardly dare to conceive the enormity of our power—yours, my friend, and mine. For you shall share it with me."

He advanced fondly toward a machine which looked not unlike a motion picture projector.

"This is my life work," he said proudly, as he patted the apparatus affectionately.

Conrad stood in silent fascination, unable to move or cry out.

"You will notice that these doors lead to a balcony, which is screened from the view of outsiders. By pointing the projector slightly upward through the open doors toward the sky, objects in the background do not come under the ray. Only the object which is to be dematerialized, or etherized, as I unscientifically call it for lack of a better term, comes under the focus. The pedestal upon which it rests also vanishes.

"And now that I have explained briefly, let us begin our experiment. You are to stand over there in the doorway on that footstool. The etheray will be six feet in diameter. You will be completely within its focus."

Like an experienced photographer who putters with his camera before

snapping an exposure, the professor squinted through the huge lenses of his machine. He pressed a few switches, and examined each control to see that it would function properly.

Absorbed in the intricacies of his mechanism he failed to observe the change which had come over Conrad. Since the professor had transferred his concentrative powers to his machine, the mesmeric mist had lifted. Conrad's brain cleared. He again became alert and on his guard.

The professor walked nervously over to the paneled double doors. Cautiously he swung them open and peered out into the darkness. Then he picked up the footstool and placed it on the threshold.

As if to measure the distance from his machine and also the focus which would be necessary to envelop his subject, he stepped upon the pedestal. For the moment he had apparently forgotten Conrad in the absorption of his preparations.

He glanced across the room—and screamed in horror!

Conrad, recovering completely from his apathy, had grasped an iron poker from the fireside. With a quick, determined snap of his arm he hurled it, not at the professor, but at that damnable, fiendish mechanism.

IT ALL happened in a few seconds. A blinding flash of light! A shrieking wail of terror! Then the semi-darkness of the room was illumined by a pale, violet haze—a mysterious vapor that enveloped the rigid body of Professor Etheray as he dissolved from human view under the merciless consuming focus of his own machine.

Transfixed with horror, Conrad stood helplessly by, unable to prevent this ghastly phenomenon.

A pungent, sickening odor of evaporating ether filled the room. The faintly discernible form of what was once the professor's body grew indistinct in the violet fog.

Gradually it vanished completely—except those burning, greenish eyes. They seemed to hang in the atmosphere for a minute, sending out one last terror-stricken appeal for help. Then they vanished, and the room was plunged in darkness, except for the flickering glow of dull, red embers in the fireplace.

Conrad swept his hand across his forehead—bewildered.

“Professor!” he shouted. “Where are you? Can you hear me?”

Silence—except for the slight buzzing of the etheray projector. It was still sending out its invisible rays through the open doorway, into the starry heavens, perhaps dissolving a thousand planets that came within its deadly range.

Impulsively Conrad stumbled over behind the machine. He searched on the floor for the poker; found it; and in a fury of nervous fear he slashed again and again at the mechanism until it lay at his feet, a battered mass

of twisted wires, broken wheels, and shattered glass.

5

SUDDENLY the room was bathed in light. A man came running from the doorway.

“Mr. Conrad! Mr. Conrad! What is it, sir? Have you been attacked?”

Conrad looked up sheepishly at the club steward. In his hand, tightly clenched, was a poker. At his feet lay the twisted, battered remains of what had once been an expensive floor lamp.

“It’s nothing, Jones; just a little attack of excessive imagination. You may put the damage on my monthly house bill.”

Three hours later the clicking keys of Conrad’s typewriter slowed. He arose; walked over to the bathroom; searched in a medicine chest above the washbowl; drew out a tiny bottle marked ether; whiffed its pungent odor a few times; replaced it; and hurried back to his typing.