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AUGUST

- Fondly Fahrenheit (*short novelet*) by ALFRED BESTER 3
- The Devil and Simon Flagg by ARTHUR PORGES 22
- Gilead (*novelet*) by ZENNA HENDERSON 28
- Frustrated Frankenstein: Alfonso Herrera and
His Colpoids (*article*) by MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD 55
- The Invisible Wall by RICHARD BROOKBANK 61
- Command Performance by KAY ROGERS 70
- Recommended Reading (*a department*) by THE EDITORS 77
- Two-Bit Oracle by DORIS P. BUCK 81
- The Sexual Behavior of the Extra-Sensory
Perceptor (*verse*) by HERMAN MUDGETT 92
- The Quadriopticon (*short novelet*) by CHARLES BEAUMONT 93
- The Little Black Train by MANLY WADE WELLMAN 114
- Cover by Mel Hunter
(*exploring a green star system*)
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Here is a story of a child who made a magic wish, and was thereby able to shape his life as he thought he desired it — a subtly cautionary tale, suggesting a new proverb: If wishes were horses, beggars might be trampled underfoot.

The Invisible Wall

by RICHARD BROOKBANK

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD where a brick house was going up, George built castles of bricks in the sandpile, with steps pressed in moist sand and little mirrors for pools and fountains. Twigs of green made spreading trees, and he got the towers high before they toppled. They made a dry porcelain sound when they fell on each other in the sand. But George always built them up again with great care.

His friend Joe always became impatient and insisted on building too fast, or inventing roads for toy autos into the still courtyards, or he built a volcano out of bricks covered with sand and lit a fire inside so the top smoked.

On this day George had worked out his castle to the great wall which he always put around it, and was digging a deep moat outside the wall, telling stories more to himself than to Joe.

“My mother lives in that tower with a view of the court and fountain and now she looks at the big wall, so strong nobody dares try to come and get in except when she opens the gate.”

“And then she sees the old volcano smoking away outside the gate and she gets scared,” said Joe.

“No she doesn’t. She doesn’t even see the volcano because this castle is miles away from it and she’s perfectly safe and doesn’t worry about anything at all.”

Joe got up and went over close to the tower, where he sighted along it with one eye.

“Come here and see if you don’t see the old volcano from here, just as plain —”

“That doesn’t make a bit of difference!” shouted George. “I say she doesn’t see it and she doesn’t even know it’s there.”

“Then she’s blind or else she’s dumb,” said Joe.

George was furious and he took a brick and threw it so hard that when it hit Joe he nearly fell down. But Joe held back the tears and without saying a word he kicked down the tower while George watched in horror. Then he walked off deliberately.

"She wasn't in there when it came down, she was down in the kitchen," George kept repeating. Then he calmed down and built the tower again and smashed the volcano completely. But before he went home he took it all down brick by brick so that there was nothing left and nobody could knock it over while he was gone.

He dreamed that night as usual but this time he was in the castle and hundreds of hopping ogres, trolls, and witches were swarming up the sand to the moat and the wall. When they got nearer he couldn't see them behind the wall and waited, trembling with fear, for the first heads to appear over the top. He waited so long that the dream changed and showed them along the outside of the wall, building ladders and burrowing holes at the base. The sight frightened him so much that he woke up calling and crying and found his mother beside him soothing him with her hand on his forehead, telling him there were no witches and trolls, but only good people in the room, angels and fairies and kindly old seers.

It was recess at school. Avoiding Joe and the others, George wandered uneasily along the playground wall to a bushy corner he knew, where he dived in quickly, finding himself in a kind of protective leafy room with a clean floor of packed earth. Here he could scratch pictures into the ground with a sharp stick, islands and continents and rivers, telling himself stories of wonderful things that happened there.

Yet Joe had always watched where he went and when George wasn't there he had pushed in through the bushes and tried to make out what all the crude lines and fuzzy ciphers meant.

Today he decided to teach George a lesson. He got a gang of boys together and they stole up unnoticed close by where George was playing. It was so quiet they could hear the stick scratching where George was drawing his story.

"I've come all the way across the ocean to see you, King," George was saying softly, "and — and I need men to help me on my way back home." The scratching of the stick stopped as George reflected, utterly absorbed. Joe gave a signal.

With a wild yell of murderous triumph they all pounced in on him at once, and they kept howling with joy while they beat him up. Then the bell rang and they were gone in a flash.

George got up, stiff with pain and shock. He staggered home blindly

with one hand, bright with blood, clapped tight over his nose. His mother wasn't home when he got there so he went straight to his room, crying in bitter rage. When he paused in exhaustion and his aching eyes looked around the room, he thought time was standing still. The unresponsive pieces of furniture, the indifference of his familiar old bed and night table in the plain pale light of afternoon filled him with desolation and wretchedness.

When his mother came at last her consolation seemed thin and not enough, not nearly enough. A kiss, a gentle reproach, and a cool washing. Even when her arms were about him the thought kept with him that it was not enough, she could never make him safe. When he finally lay between the clean fresh sheets the thought of how they had sneaked up on him kept coming back and turning his heart cold inside him. But when he thought how many new times they might do the same thing again, he twisted and turned and his bed grew hot and uncomfortable while the darkness filled up with menacing spots. He turned on the light.

"I wonder if I pray and make a strong wish . . ." he said. He was thinking of the angels and old seers that might be in the room.

"I will find something and when I wear it I will have an invisible wall around me," he said, chanting. "I will find it and I will find it tonight, like an Easter egg, where I don't expect it." Then he began to search the room. He looked under the bed, under the dresser, under the radiator, but nothing he saw seemed significant. Then he saw a sewing basket his mother had left on the table and he pawed through the buttons and tangles of blue and pink yarn.

All at once a silver gleam caught his eye. It was a ring. It looked like a small curtain ring, with a little loop of silver on top. He tried it on his left hand and it fit the middle finger perfectly. He was greatly satisfied and went back to his bed.

"When I turn it this way I am surrounded by an invisible wall," he said, "and when I turn it back, the wall is gone." It seemed so convenient and reassuring that he turned the wall on and fell into a deep, quiet sleep.

When he awoke next morning he remembered the wall and turned it off carefully before he got out of bed. He felt a deep, vacant satisfaction with himself, and his mother had to remind him several times to eat or he would be late for school. She kissed him goodbye at the doorstep and watched him around the corner, waving. As soon as she was out of sight he put his books down and carefully turned the little silver loop to where the wall was on.

"Now the wall is all around me," he whispered in toneless sing-song. "It's shut up every which way, above and below." He repeated it seven times, fondly, keeping his fingers crossed and beating time. Then he re-

peated it three times seven times and turned completely around at the end of each phrase. By the time the formula was fulfilled he was at the schoolgrounds, and he had coaxed a lot of courage into himself.

"And only I can reach through it," he muttered as an afterthought.

He saw Joe at the top of the steps leading to the playground.

"My enemy, my enemy!" he thought with a little turn of excitement. Joe's hated familiar outline looked sharp and thrilling against the bright morning sky.

"Yaa-aa phoney Joe!" he yelled, and made a face.

He saw Joe stoop and pick up a stone and take careful aim. He knew he was a good shot. There was no place to hide behind, so he bent double, covering his face with his hands. Then he heard the stone strike, right beside his head, but it made a dry clicking sound like hitting cement and glanced off. Still bent, his heart leaped and thumped and such a wild joy rushed through him that he stumbled to keep his balance.

The wall was really there.

He took his hands away from his face and looked up. A shrill laugh broke from his lips when he saw Joe leaning forwards, squinting as if to see better.

"Can't hurt a flea!" he sang.

Joe stooped again for another stone and flung back his arm to throw. But this time George did not dodge, he only smiled and walked slowly and deliberately towards Joe. He saw the stone speeding at him, it was an odd sensation; then he heard the sharp cement sound again and saw it drop to his feet. Still smiling, he kept on walking toward Joe. But Joe suddenly turned and ran off to the schoolhouse.

When George came into the classroom, still smiling the same derisive smile, he noticed Joe wouldn't look at him. But he didn't care, there were too many wonderful new things to think about. The very classroom was rich with new meaning. The familiar scratches on his desk, etched in the long hours of suspense and tedium, tickled his fingertips pleasantly as he ran his hand over them. Even the dreary smell of oiled floorboards was nice. The teacher pulled down, like a window blind, the same worn map of the Central States, and for once he liked the pale colors. He smiled remembering his old resentments in this dull room: the resentment of the clock with the octagon frame in dark wood and the indifferent slow swing of the pendulum. How the agonizing slowness of the hands had tired him, never seeming to move over the foreign Roman numerals that were too carefully drawn! Then the blackboard that would never ever wear away, would last forever, and the still, vacant air between these things. When he looked at the ring, which seemed to have taken on a new secret sparkle, an intimate thrill warmed him.

"Turned on full!" he muttered. "Good old ring!"

He couldn't wait for recess.

When the bell rang he rushed out with the rest. As soon as they reached the playground, he started throwing stones at the other boys, shouting:

"Sissies! I bet you wet your beds every night! Where's your pretty hair ribbon, hey Joe!"

They stared at first as if they couldn't believe their ears. They gathered into a bundle a little ways away, looking over their shoulders at him.

"Joe's mother's a dirty bitch!" he yelled.

Suddenly they rushed him. One after another they struck the invisible wall and fell away, at first dazed, then incredulous, while George laughed a harsh laugh that hurt his sides.

From then on he relished nothing more than to see someone, goaded beyond endurance, forget the wall and try to get at him.

Only at home did he turn the wall off. But his mother noticed the change. When he came in from school his face was still hot with insolence, and he became more and more restless and fretful in the house. If she asked him to do something he did not wish to do, he just smirked and stared at her.

One cloudy Saturday afternoon when a thick heat filled the house with heavy stale air, George's mother was finishing up vacuuming the rugs in his room when he came in and threw himself onto his bed. His shoes were caked with mud and left two broad smears on the white bedspread.

"Oh how can you do such a thing!" she cried above the whine of the vacuum. "Look at the marks you've made on the clean spread! And your tracks across the rug I just cleaned . . ." She stepped to the door and looked out in the hall.

"And right across the hall rug too! The whole house from the door to here will have those dirty tracks—" She heard a crash behind her and turned to see he had kicked the vacuum across the room. It lay upside down rattling grotesquely against the bare floor.

"What's got into you?" she cried, feeling herself shake with exasperation. "You go right over there and pick that thing up!"

For answer he climbed deliberately back onto his bed, then turned his face toward her and stared, the impudent smirk on his lips. He said something but she couldn't hear him above the whine and rattle of the overturned vacuum. She snatched the cord and yanked it sharply. The plug came out and there was a sudden absolute silence.

"Go to hell, Mother," she heard him say softly, with his queer smile.

She stepped over and struck him across the face. He bounded from his bed and stood looking at her in amazement, she had never struck him before. With his eyes still upon her he slowly turned the ring.

"Hit me again," he screamed at her suddenly, "just hit me again!"

His mother turned and hurried from the room, but he went after her. "Hit me, dirty bird, hurry up and hit me you bitch you bitch!" But she only locked herself in her room while he flung himself against her door, pounding and screaming. His mind flickered red and black in a blaze of fear and anger. A high warning whistled in his head, and the shrill red behind his eyes wanted to burst. He stopped pounding on the door, opened his eyes, and looked at the ring. It was instantly comforting, so comforting that he decided never, ever, to turn the wall off again. He gave the door a last kick of contempt and walked away.

His mother, hearing the kick, knew she had lost him.

George closed his office door and turned the key absently, puzzling over a new problem. It was late in the fall, and the last leaves dropped in a cold rain. Walking toward his rooms, he paused, annoyed that he had forgotten to buy cigarettes. It was the first time he had ever forgotten them, and it was a matter of pride with him that someone had once remarked that he could set his watch by George's comings and goings. He went back to the tobacconist quickly, got the cigarettes and shoved them impatiently in his pocket, turning his back on the man and ignoring the usual remark about the weather. Once he was out in the rain again, the new problem came back to him.

There was somebody, a quiet, soft-eyed girl with exciting high-heeled shoes for whom he would have liked, perhaps, to open the wall. Her name was Olive, and he liked the click of her heels as she moved around the office. Today she had put some papers on his desk with a smile of such warmth and understanding that he had wanted her to be near him all the time. When they talked, he cautiously at first and then with greater confidence, he saw that his life had been empty. There was a happiness here at the edge of every word, a happiness he seemed to learn over again, something he must have forgotten a long time ago.

Standing here on the curb in the rain, he looked across the street to a deserted park. He went over and walked into the center among the black wet trunks of naked trees, looking around carefully to be sure nobody was near. The dampness and the chill gray of evening insinuated themselves into him. He thought of Olive and the dry crisp click of her heels on the linoleum of the office floor. Then he looked at the bright ring and decided. Once more he made sure that no one was near, and then took the loop between his fingers and tried to turn the wall off. But it wouldn't budge. His finger had grown so large under and about the small ring that it could never be turned. Looking at it, he thought he mustn't worry,

there was plenty of time to decide what to do. Then, taking big strides and swinging his arms to get warm, he started back to his rooms.

But he suddenly stopped, holding his hand as if it had been stung. Cautiously he lifted his arm and then snatched it back. The fingers had touched something hard.

It was the inside of the wall, he knew. He had never felt it before.

Could it be getting smaller? he thought. He stood quite still, his arms stiff at his sides, controlling himself while a feeling of oppression and horror swept over him. The air about him tingled with vibrant expectancy, it seemed hard to breathe. Instead of going home he hurried to a jeweler's, careful to take small steps and not to swing his arms.

He went to four different jewelers, asking for a file and insisting he be allowed to use it himself, but none had an instrument that would even scratch the bright metal of the ring. Going home, there was a menace close around him, singing in his ears and in the dead air space between himself and the wall.

"Here's the file of letters you asked for," Olive said, laying it on his desk. "Why, what's the matter? You look sick. . . . is there something I can do?"

"No, just don't bother —" George looked away, then looked at her again. He was trying to think of something to say to keep her there, but no logical reason came to his mind. He knew she somehow understood his need for company, and yet she was so sensitive about intruding. A mere thought could send her away. Why couldn't he just say, "Stay there"? The irritation of indecision was getting on his nerves again. If he snapped at her she'd go away. More than anything he wanted to avoid that. She stood there quietly waiting while he struggled for words.

"Stuffy here," he finally got out, running his finger along the inside of his collar. There was another pause.

"Olive, I — I've got to talk something over with you. No, not here," he said hastily, seeing her nod. "Maybe at my place. Could you come over tonight?"

"Why of course!" she said, with her warm smile.

He leaned back in relief. She could go now, whenever she felt like it. He didn't know what he wanted to say when she came tonight, if anything. But he knew he wanted her there.

Settled comfortably in his easy chair that evening, he knew that now she was coming, everything would somehow turn out all right. He repeated the phrase, "Everything will turn out all right," and then glanced back at the book he held.

"Something has to be done about the wall," he said aloud, looking up again. Something — he knew what — but he kept the thought away and took up the book once more. He was trying to read a page that couldn't get his attention. Over and over he read the same sentences stretching across the page, black and white and devoid of any meaning. There was a noise, a hissing noise at the edge of his consciousness, persistent and depressing. The little room was hot and stuffy. Looking up, he saw that the hissing came from the gas heater at his side. It sounded like a howling tempest caught in a tiny place. He must turn it off. He glanced at the sentences again, but they still worked across the page, saying nothing, nothing at all. Then a few words jumped out:

His mother lived in a fine brick house on a rise in the land. . . .

The sentence held some secret sweetness, he could not tell why. But the air was too hot. He wondered idly was the heater inside the wall? All at once the hissing stopped and there was silence. He started; the gas must have gone off. But he could see the wavering, bright flames in rows of blue. The heater was outside the wall, then. Or had the wall moved in again? Was it still moving in, stealthily, soundlessly? A drop of perspiration tickled and ran down behind his ear. There was no air to breathe, and his ears rang with a high whistling noise like a popcorn wagon. Slowly he lifted his hand, with the bright light of the ring on it, and started to extend his arm, palm outwards. The arm shook. Blind men, he remembered, can sometimes sense bodies with their hands before they touch them. He snatched his hand back, in dread that it might touch the wall. It was nearer, though, he knew. It was closing, contracting softly like a balloon when the air escapes. Tears came to his eyes as he fought for breath. Now if ever it was time to do the only thing there was to do.

He got up quickly and went in to the little kitchenette. He tore off a scrap of newspaper and put it where he could reach it. Then he pressed his left hand against the edge of the drainboard, so that it held all the fingers away except the middle one, which extended submissively across the wood. He wouldn't think. With his right hand, he took a meat cleaver and struck a sharp clean blow. He saw the finger with the ring jump free of his hand and roll across the drainboard. Cold air rushed in at him. There was almost no pain at all. Quickly he turned on the cold water and held his hand under the tap. With his right hand, he groped for the scrap of newspaper without looking, covered the finger with it, and stuffed it in his pocket.

He bound his left hand in a handkerchief, and later he went out in the dark, scraped a bit of earth away, and buried the finger, stamping the earth firm above it.

The wall was gone. But the absence of the wall was almost as palpable as its presence. He felt the breezes lift his hair as he ran back to his room, longing for its small cozy warmth. Sounds broke through to him with a fearful new clangor, as if he had had water in his ears and had now shaken it out. It was not a pleasant sensation.

Back in his room, he locked the door and closed the curtains. Then he went over and closed the door into the kitchenette. The throbbing in his left hand was becoming painful. But Olive would be coming soon, very soon. Almost fearfully he glanced at his watch and saw that it was already time. He hurried over to the door and bent to the keyhole, listening. Somewhere below another door banged, and the sound made him jump. A voice was raised in anger, then silenced. The gas heater hissed in the stillness. Then he heard the sound of high-heeled shoes clicking crisply across the pavement downstairs. A smile spread over his face and he took the key out and put his ear to the keyhole. *Click, click!* And then the sandier sound of feet coming up the stairs. They reached the first landing, *click, click!* and then came upstairs again. His smile faded abruptly and his heart pounded as the footsteps grew louder and louder. He put his hand tight over the keyhole, but the steps still came on louder and louder. He bit his lip, shut his eyes tight, and waited as a memory floated up in his mind. He saw Joe's stone fly at him, heard it crack against the cement, and felt again the first thrill of the protecting wall. There was no protection now. *Click, click!* On his landing. There was a knock at the door close to his head, so loud that he slipped to the floor in terror and clapped his bandaged hand over his mouth to hide the sound of his heavy breathing.

"George!" came her voice.

He stayed on the floor, not daring to move, trying to control his breathing.

"George, George!" Her voice was sharper. Then another longer fit of terrible knocking that seemed to go on for minutes.

"Go away! Get out, you silly chippy!" he finally cried in a strangled voice.

There was silence on the other side of the door. It lasted so long he began to wonder if she had tiptoed away. Then suddenly *click, click!* and the shoes descending the stairs, growing fainter.

George got to his feet and stumbled over to his chair. He heaved into it and covered his face with his hands, letting out a long sigh of inexpressible relief.

"I haven't really lost the wall," he muttered half aloud. "She couldn't get in, at least."