

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 5, No. 1

JULY

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 5, No. 1, JULY 1953. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1953, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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What if . . . is the title of a most agreeable fantasy by the usually scientific Isaac Asimov; and it is also, in two syllables, the recipe for writing delightful improbabilities. "What if," for instance, a demon of the remote past achieved his magic by time-thievery (chronoklepticism) of the inventions of modern science? Add a likable young couple whose fortunes are imperiled by this device, a lively sense of logical humor, and another ingenious "what if" reserved for a final surprise, and you have a freshly charming story to prove that Robert Sheckley, hitherto noted chiefly for science fiction, is no mean hand at whipping up the deftest of light fantasy.

The King's Wishes

by ROBERT SHECKLEY

AFTER SQUATTING behind a glassware display for almost two hours, Bob Granger felt his legs begin to cramp. He moved to ease them, and his number ten iron slipped off his lap, clattering on the floor.

"Shh," Janice whispered, her mashie gripped tightly.

"I don't think he's going to come," Bob said.

"Be quiet, honey," Janice whispered again, peering into the darkness of their store.

There was no sign of the burglar yet. He had come every night in the past week, mysteriously removing generators, refrigerators and air-conditioners. Mysteriously — for he tampered with no locks, jimmied no windows, left no footprints. Yet somehow, he was able to sneak in, time after time, and slink out with a good part of their stock.

"I don't think this was such a good idea," Bob whispered. "After all, a man capable of carrying several hundred pounds of generator on his back —"

"We'll handle him," Janice said, with the certainty that had made her a master sergeant in the WAC Motor Corps. "Besides, we have to stop him — he's postponing our wedding day."

Bob nodded in the darkness. He and Janice had built and stocked the Country Department Store with their army savings. They were planning on getting married, as soon as the profits enabled them to. But when someone stole refrigerators and air-conditioners —

"I think I hear something," Janice said, shifting her grip on the mashie.

There was a faint noise somewhere in the store. They waited. Then they heard the sound of feet, padding over the linoleum.

"When he gets to the middle of the floor," Janice whispered, "switch on the lights."

Finally they were able to make out a blackness against the lesser blackness of the store. Bob switched on the lights, shouting, "Hold it there!"

"Oh, no!" Janice gasped, almost dropping her mashie. Bob turned and gulped.

Standing in front of them was a being at least ten feet tall. He had budding horns on his forehead, and tiny wings on his back. He was dressed in a pair of dungarees and a white sweatshirt with **EBLIS TECH** written across it in scarlet letters. Scuffed white buckskins were on his tremendous feet, and he had a blond crewcut.

"Damn," he said, looking at Bob and Janice. "Knew I should have taken Invisibility in college." He wrapped his arms around his stomach and puffed out his cheeks. Instantly his legs disappeared. Puffing out his cheeks still more, he was able to make his stomach vanish. But that was as far as it went.

"Can't do it," he said, releasing his stored-up air. His stomach and legs came back into visibility. "Haven't got the knack. Damn."

"What do you want?" Janice asked, drawing herself to her full slender five foot three.

"Want? Let me see. Oh yes. The fan." He walked across the room and picked up a large floor fan.

"Just a minute," Bob shouted. He walked up to the giant, his golf club poised. Janice followed close behind him. "Where do you think you're going with that?"

"To King Alerian," the giant said. "He wished for it."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Janice said. "Better put it down." She poised the mashie over her shoulder.

"But I *can't*," the young giant said, his tiny wings twitching nervously. "It's been wished for."

"You asked for it," Janice said. Although small, she was in fine condition from the WACs, where she had spent her time repairing jeep engines. Now, blond hair flying, she swung her club.

"Ouch!" she said. The mashie bounced off the being's head, almost knocking Janice over with the recoil. At the same time, Bob swung his club at the giant's ribs.

It passed *through* the giant, ricocheting against the floor.

"Force is useless against a ferra," the young giant said apologetically.

"A what?" Bob asked.

"A ferra. We're first cousins of the jinn, and related by marriage to the

devas." He started to walk back to the center of the room, the fan gripped in one broad hand. "Now if you'll excuse me —"

"A demon?" Janice stood, open-mouthed. Her parents had allowed no talk of ghosts or demons in the house, and Janice had grown up a hardheaded realist. She was skilled at repairing anything mechanical; that was her part of the partnership. But anything more fanciful she left to Bob.

Bob, having been raised on a liberal feeding of Oz and Burroughs, was more credulous. "You mean you're out of the Arabian Nights?" he asked.

"Oh, no," the ferra said. "The jinn of Arabia are my cousins, as I said. All demons are related, but I am a ferra, of the ferras."

"Would you mind telling me," Bob asked, "What you are doing with my generator, my air-conditioner, and my refrigerator?"

"I'd be glad to," the ferra said, putting down the fan. He felt around the air, found what he wanted, and sat down on nothingness. Then he crossed his legs and tightened the laces of one buckskin.

"I graduated from Eblis Tech just about three weeks ago," he began. "And of course, I applied for civil service. I come from a long line of government men. Well, the lists were crowded, as they always are, so I —"

"Civil service?" Bob asked.

"Oh, yes. They're all civil service jobs — even the jinni in Aladdin's lamp was a government man. You have to pass the tests, you know."

"Go on," Bob said.

"Well — promise this won't go any farther — I got my job through pull." He blushed orange. "My father is a ferra in the Underworld Council, so he used his influence. I was appointed, over 4,000 higher-ranking ferras, to the position of ferra of the King's Cup. That's quite an honor, you know."

There was a short silence. Then the ferra went on.

"I must confess I wasn't ready," he said sadly. "The ferra of the cup has to be skilled in all branches of demonology. I had just graduated from college — with only passing grades. But of course, I thought I could handle anything."

The ferra paused, and rearranged his body more comfortably on the air.

"But I don't want to bother you with my troubles," he said, getting off the air and standing on the floor. "If you'll excuse me —" He picked up the fan.

"Just a minute," Janice said. "Has this king commanded you to get our fan?"

"In a way," the ferra said, turning orange again.

"Well, look," Janice said. "Is this king rich?" She had decided, for the moment, to treat this superstitious entity as a real person.

"He's a very wealthy monarch."

"Then why can't he buy this stuff?" Janice wanted to know. "Why does he have to steal it?"

"Well," the ferra mumbled, "There's no place where he can buy it."

"One of those backward Oriental countries," Janice said, half to herself. "Why can't he import the goods? Any company would be glad to arrange it."

"This is all very embarrassing," the ferra said, rubbing one buckskin against another. "I wish I could make myself invisible."

"Out with it," Bob said.

"If you must know," the ferra said sullenly, "King Alerian lives in what you would call 2,000 B.C."

"Then how —"

"Oh, just a minute," the young ferra said crossly. "I'll explain everything." He rubbed his perspiring hands on his sweatshirt.

"As I told you, I got the job of ferra of the king's cup. Naturally, I expected the king would ask for jewels or beautiful women, either of which I could have supplied easily. We learn that in first term conjuration. But the king had all the jewels he wanted, and more wives than he knew what to do with. So what does he do but say, 'Ferra, my palace is hot in the summer. Do that which will make my palace cool.'

"I knew right then I was in over my head. It takes an advanced ferra to handle climate. I guess I had spent too much time on the track team. I was stuck.

"I hurried to the Master Encyclopedia and looked up Climate. The spells were just too much for me. And of course, I couldn't ask for help. That would have been an admission of incompetence. But I read that there was artificial climate-control in the Twentieth Century. So I walked here, along the narrow trail to the future, and took one of your air-conditioners. When the king wanted me to stop his food from spoiling, I came back for a refrigerator. Then it was —"

"You hooked them all to the generator?" Janice asked, interested in such details.

"Yes. I may not be much with spells, but I'm pretty handy mechanically."

It made sense, Bob thought. After all, who could keep a palace cool in 2,000 B.C.? Not all the money in the world could buy the gust of icy air from an air-conditioner, or the food-saving qualities of a refrigerator. But what still bothered Bob was, what kind of a demon was he? He didn't look Assyrian. Certainly not Egyptian . . .

"No, I don't get it," Janice said. "In the *past*? You mean time travel?"

"Sure. I majored in time travel," the ferra said, with a proud, boyish grin. Aztec perhaps, Bob thought, although that seemed unlikely. . . .

"Well," Janice said, "why don't you go somewhere else? Why not steal from one of the big department stores?"

"This is the only place the trail to the future leads," the ferra said.

He picked up the fan. "I'm sorry to be doing this, but if I don't make good here, I'll never get another appointment. It'll be limbo for me."

He disappeared.

Half an hour later, Bob and Janice were in a corner booth of an all-night diner, drinking black coffee and talking in low tones.

"I don't believe a word of it," Janice was saying, all her skepticism back in force. "Demons! Ferras!"

"You have to believe it," Bob said wearily. "You saw it."

"I don't have to believe everything I see," Janice said stanchly. Then she thought of the missing articles, the vanishing profits and the increasingly distant marriage. "All right," she said. "Oh, honey, what'll we do?"

"You have to fight magic with magic," Bob said confidently. "He'll be back tomorrow night. We'll be ready for him."

"I'm in favor of that," Janice said. "I know where we can borrow a 30-30 —"

Bob shook his head. "Bullets will just bounce off him, or pass through. Good, strong magic, that's what we need. A dose of his own medicine."

"What kind of magic?" Janice asked.

"To play safe," Bob said, "We'd better use all kinds. I wish I knew where he's from. To be really effective, magic —"

"You want more coffee?" the counterman said, appearing suddenly in front of them.

Bob looked up guiltily. Janice blushed.

"Let's go," she said to Bob. "If anyone hears us, we'll be laughed out of town."

They met at the store that evening. Bob had spent the day at the library, gathering his materials. They consisted of 25 sheets covered on both sides with Bob's scrawling script.

"I still wish we had that 30-30," Janice said, picking up a tire iron from the hardware section.

At 11:45 the ferra appeared.

"Hi," he said. "Where do you keep your electric heaters? The king wants something for winter. He's tired of open hearths. Too drafty."

"Begone," Bob said, "in the name of the cross!" He held up a cross.

"Sorry," the ferra said pleasantly. "The ferras aren't connected with Christianity."

"Begone in the name of Namtar and Idpa!" Bob went on, since Mesopotamia was first on his notes. "In the name of Utuq, dweller of the desert, in the name of Telal and Alal —"

"Oh, here they are," the ferra said. "Why do I get myself into these jams? This is the electric model, isn't it? Looks a little shoddy."

"I invoke Rata, the boatbuilder," Bob intoned, switching to Polynesia. "And Hina, the tapa maker."

"Shoddy nothing," Janice said, her business instincts getting the better of her. "That stove is guaranteed for a year. Unconditionally."

"I call on the Heavenly Wolf," Bob went on, moving into China when Polynesia had no affect. "The Wolf who guards the gates of Shang Ti. I invoke the thunder god, Lei Kung —"

"Let's see, I have an infrared broiler," the ferra said. "And I need a bathtub. Have you got a bathtub?"

"I call Bael, Buer, Forcas, Marchocias, Astaroth —"

"These are bathtubs, aren't they?" the ferra asked Janice, who nodded involuntarily. "I think I'll take the largest. The king is a good-sized man."

"— Behemoth, Theutus, Asmodeus and Incubus!" Bob finished. The ferra looked at him with respect.

Angrily Bob invoked Ormazd, Persian king of light, and then the Ammonitic Beelphegor, and Dagon of the ancient Philistines.

"That's all I can carry, I suppose," the ferra said.

Bob invoked Damballa. He called upon the gods of Haiti. He tried Thessalian magic, and spells from Asia Minor. He nudged Aztec gods and stirred Mayan spirits. He tried Africa, Madagascar, India, Ireland, Malaya, Scandinavia and Japan.

"That's impressive," the ferra said, "but it'll really do no good." He lifted the bathtub, broiler and heater.

"Why not?" Bob gasped, out of breath.

"You see, ferras are affected only by their own indigenous spells. Just as Jinn are responsible only to the magic laws of Arabia. Also, you don't know my true name, and I assure you, you can't do much of a job of exorcizing anything if you don't know its true name."

"What country are you from?" Bob asked, wiping perspiration from his forehead.

"Sorry," the ferra said. "But if you knew that, you might find the right spell to use against me. And I'm in enough trouble as it is."

"Now look," Janice said. "If the king is so rich, why can't he pay?"

"The king never pays for anything he can get free," the ferra said. "That's why he's so rich."

Bob and Janice glared at him, their marriage fading off into the future.

"See you tomorrow night," the ferra said.
He waved a friendly hand, and vanished.

"Well now," Janice said, after the ferra had left. "What now? Any more bright ideas?"

"All out of them," Bob said, sitting down heavily on a sofa.

"Any more magic?" Janice asked, with a faint touch of irony.

"That won't work," Bob said. "I couldn't find *ferra* or *King Alerian* listed in any encyclopedia. He's probably from some place we'd never hear of. A little native state in India, perhaps."

"Just our luck," Janice said, abandoning irony. "What are we going to do? I suppose he'll want a vacuum cleaner next, and then a phonograph." She closed her eyes and concentrated.

"He really is trying to make good," Bob said.

"I think I have an idea," Janice said, opening her eyes.

"What's that?"

"First of all, it's *our* business that's important, and *our* marriage. Right?"

"Right," Bob said.

"All right. I don't know much about spells," Janice said, rolling up her sleeves, "But I do know machines. Let's get to work."

The next night the ferra visited them at a quarter to 11. He wore the same white sweater, but he had exchanged his buckskins for tan loafers.

"The king is in a special rush for this," he said. "His newest wife has been pestering the life out of him. It seems that her clothes last for only one washing. Her slaves beat them with rocks."

"Sure," Bob said.

"Help yourself," Janice said.

"That's awfully decent of you," the ferra said gratefully. "I really appreciate it." He picked up a washing machine. "She's waiting now."

He vanished.

Bob offered Janice a cigarette. They sat down on a couch and waited. In half an hour the ferra appeared again.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"Why, what's the matter?" Janice asked sweetly.

"The washer! When the queen started it, it threw out a great cloud of evil-smelling smoke. Then it made some strange noises and stopped."

"In our language," Janice said, blowing a smoke ring, "we would say it was gimmicked."

"Gimmicked?"

"Rigged. Fixed. Strung. And so's everything else in this place."

"But you can't do that!" the ferra said. "It's not playing the game."

"You're so smart," Janice said venomously, "Go ahead and fix it."

"I was boasting," the ferra said in a small voice. "I was much better at sports."

Janice smiled and yawned.

"Well, gee," the ferra said, his little wings twitching nervously.

"Sorry," Bob said.

"This puts me in an awful spot," the ferra said. "I'll be demoted. I'll be thrown out of civil service."

"We can't let ourselves go bankrupt, can we?" Janice asked.

Bob thought for a moment. "Look," he said. "Why don't you tell the king you've met a strong countermagic? Tell him he has to pay a tariff to the demons of the underworld if he wants his stuff."

"He won't like it," the ferra said doubtfully.

"Try it anyhow," Bob suggested.

"I'll try," the ferra said, and vanished.

"How much do you think we can charge?" Janice asked.

"Oh, give him standard rates. After all, we've built this store on fair practices. We wouldn't want to discriminate. I still wish I knew where he was from, though."

"He's so rich," Janice said dreamily. "It seems a shame not to —"

"Wait a minute!" Bob shouted. "We can't do it! How can there be refrigerators in 2,000 before Christ? Or air-conditioners?"

"What do you mean?"

"It would change the whole course of history!" Bob said. "Some smart guy is going to look at those things and figure out how they work. Then the whole course of history will be changed!"

"So what?" Janice asked practically.

"So what? So research will be carried out along different lines. The present will be changed."

"You mean it's impossible?"

"Yes!"

"That's just what I've been saying all along," Janice said triumphantly.

"Oh, stop that," Bob said. "I wish I could figure this out. No matter what country the ferra is from, it's bound to have an effect on the future. We can't chance a paradox."

"Why not?" Janice asked, but at that moment the ferra appeared.

"The king has agreed," the ferra said. "Will this pay for what I've taken?" He held out a small sack.

Spilling out the sack, Bob found that it contained about two dozen large rubies, emeralds and diamonds.

"We can't take it," Bob said. "We can't do business with you."

"Don't be superstitious!" Janice shouted, seeing their marriage begin to evaporate again.

"Why not?" the ferra asked.

"We can't introduce modern things into the past," Bob said. "It'll change the present. This world may vanish or something."

"Oh, don't worry about that," the ferra said. "I guarantee nothing will happen."

"But why? I mean, if you introduced a washer in ancient Rome —"

"Unfortunately," the ferra said, "King Alerian's kingdom has no future."

"Would you explain that?"

"Sure." The ferra sat down on the air. "In three years King Alerian and his country will be completely and irrevocably destroyed by forces of nature. Not a person will be saved. Not even a piece of pottery."

"Fine," Janice said, holding a ruby to the light. "We'd better unload while he's still in business."

"I guess that takes care of that," Bob said. Their business was saved, and their marriage was in the immediate future. "How about you?" he asked the ferra.

"Well, I've done rather well on this job," the ferra said. "I think I'll apply for a foreign transfer. I hear there are some wonderful opportunities in Arabian sorcery."

He ran a hand complacently over his blond crewcut. "I'll be seeing you," he said, and started to disappear.

"Just a minute," Bob said. "Would you mind telling me what country you're from? And what country King Alerian is from?"

"Oh, sure," the ferra said, only his head still visible. "I thought you knew. Ferras are the demons of Atlantis."

And he disappeared.

