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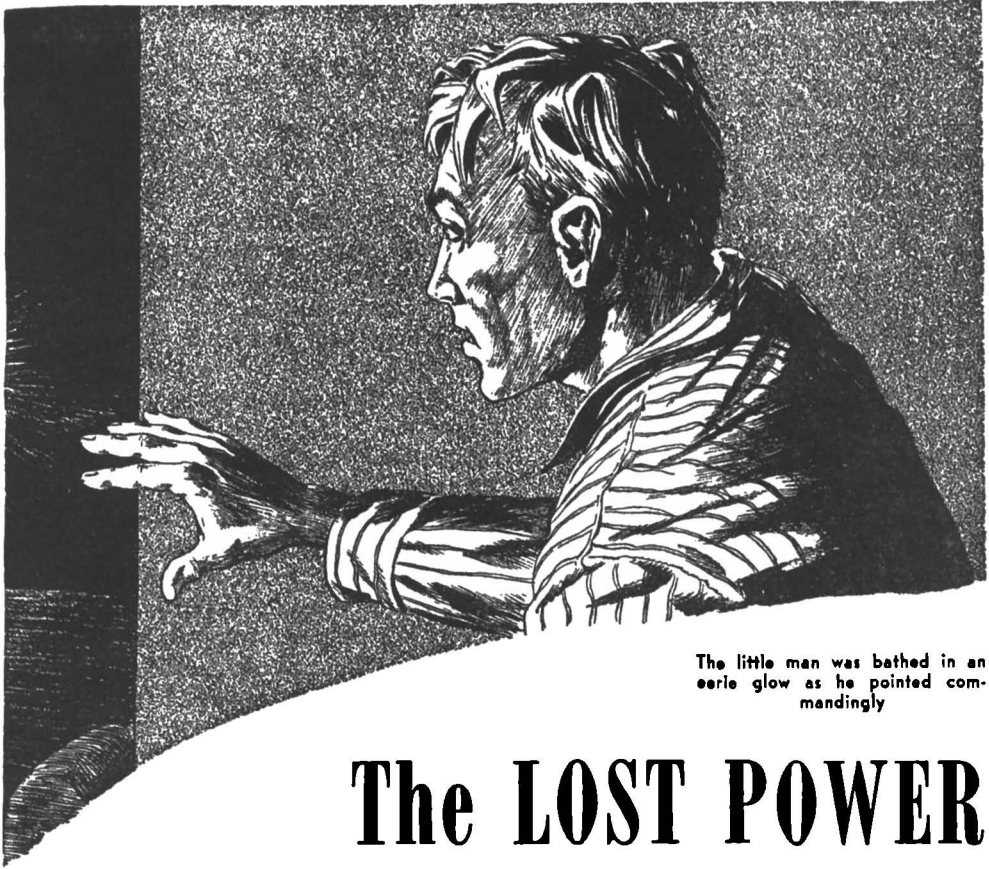


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The little man was bathed in an eerie glow as he pointed commandingly

The LOST POWER

By GUY ARCHETTE

The power had been lost; but the little man had it—and he could use it!

I WAS taking the bus to work when I met this guy. Looking back now, I still think it's queer, the way he got that seat beside me.

It's a long ride to work, and I'm lucky enough to have a seat most of the time, since I board the bus near one end of the line. I live in a distant part of the city, in a little, two-story brick house. Just Ann, the baby, and me. I'm a public relations expert for a television network, and I like the job.

Anyway, the bus fills up long before I reach my stop in the downtown section of the city. There are always a lot of strap-hangers, and these watch hopefully for us more fortunate individuals to vacate our seats. Tired faces, accusing faces, bitterly resigned faces.

But sometimes it's rather amusing. There are some passengers who feel that the paying of their fare positively entitles them to a seat. And when one is vacated they rush for it in undigni-

fied and impolite haste.

Like the grimly determined guy that morning.

He had been standing near me for some time, his sharp black eyes darting from me to the other occupant of my seat with a kind of burning expectancy. I could see that he was bleakly resolved to sit down or break an elbow trying. The slightest move from me or my companion would send him into an eager crouch. He reminded me of a cat beside a mouse hole.

So when finally the man beside me rose to leave, I watched Determined in amused interest. An expression of delight momentarily brightened his face. He stepped back to allow the other man to leave, elbowing his fellow strap-hangers out of the way and glaring at them as though daring them to take what he had already singled out for his own. None were willing to engage in a tooth and nail struggle, however, and Determined triumphantly began that series of movements preliminary to sitting down.

He never made it. The paper was suddenly knocked from my hands and I was jostled. The next thing I knew, there was a plump man with a ruddy, round face sitting beside me.

I was amazed. Even more so was Determined. He looked positively awed. A moment later he looked furious. But he said nothing, evidently considering himself beaten fairly and according to his own rules of the game.

It's a wonder how that plump guy did it. I'd been glancing at the people around me, but I hadn't noticed him among them. He must have jumped clear from the back of the bus, impossible as it seemed.

He picked up my paper. "A thousand apologies," he said. "Hope I haven't hurt you."

"Not at all," I answered warily.

He seemed disposed to make conversation.

"Crowded, isn't it?"

"Always is," I said.

"I dislike crowded public vehicles of this kind. I don't see why people ride in them."

"Not much else they can do," I pointed out. "Cars are expensive these days, and there's no place to park them, even if you can afford one."

The plump man shrugged. "Perhaps. But has it ever occurred to you that a conveyance such as this is a sign of barbarism?"

"Barbarism?" I echoed.

"Of course. A mentally enlightened people would have no need for buses or trolley cars to carry them about."

"I don't get you," I said. "How else would they get around? Walk?"

The plump man made a gesture of impatience. "Of course not!" he snapped. "They'd levitate!"

THAT surprised me. I'd already become aware that my companion was odd, but I hadn't realized it was this bad.

"Levitation," I said. "It's impossible."

"Is it? Look here, I presume you've had a good education. So no doubt you know something of psychology. By the way, my name is Walters."

"Mine is Blake," I answered. "Yes, I've studied psychology."

"Then you must know that there are large areas of the brain that have no known function. Now, in an organ as highly developed and specialized as the brain, just why should this be so? Those areas must have a reason for being there."

"That's true," I said.

"But why?" Walters persisted. "Why are they there, if apparently they have no reason for being there?"

"I'm afraid I don't know."

"I'll tell you. They are there because they are centers for senses, powers, abilities, that we no longer use. Levitation is one of them. Telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis, and regeneration are others, to name a few. Now, understand that we haven't lost these powers. All we've lost is the ability to use them. With the proper coaching, any normal person can be taught to put them back into function."

"Myself, for example?" I asked.

Walters looked at me strangely. "Yes," he said.

There was a moment of silence. The bus ground to a stop. Several passengers left through the rear door, while more came in through the front. Then the bus started again.

"The trouble with almost all people is that they refuse to believe," Walters went on. "They credit only the information brought to them by the ordinary five senses, regarding as supernatural anything which lies beyond them. They have erected barriers of doubt in their minds, through which no new or radical knowledge can penetrate."

He leaned toward me, his ruddy, round face earnest. "A man who does not believe in the existence of a thing cannot be taught to use it. The mind must be receptive, free from prejudice. Which is why the people of this age are barbarians. They live in a primitive, mechanistic culture. Machines and tools do for them what they could do with the powers lying dormant in their minds—and with far less effort.

"Here, for instance, they allow themselves to be crammed within the limited space of this bus, jolted and jostled, made weary and irritable, all for the sake of covering a few miles of distance, when, if they could use the powers nature gave them, they could rise into the air and soar quickly and easily to their

destinations."

Walters' voice softened. "But the time will come when all men will once again be in possession of their god-like powers. It will take many years, of course. In the meantime, we, the adept few, will have to wait, scattered and lonely, fearing to display our powers to an ignorant world."

I gasped and stared at him. "Do you mean that you're one of those who can use the lost powers you've mentioned?"

There was something of mockery in Walters' answering smile. "Of course," he said. "How else did I get this seat?"

Unfortunately, I had no further time to debate the matter with him—the bus had reached my stop. I muttered a hasty farewell and elbowed my way to the rear exit.

I thought of Walters frequently at work that day. Memory of him and the things he had told me just couldn't be pushed aside.

WHEN I got home that evening, I told Ann all about it. We had quite a laugh over the "lost powers." Ann told me how she wished she could levitate herself up the stairs whenever Billy yelled for attention, and do all her household chores by mental remote control.

Somehow, I couldn't escape the feeling that I would see Walters again. It worried me, because people like him can be dangerous.

And I was right. I did see him again.

It happened around four the next morning. A voice spoke to me, waking me up. Walters' voice. Not in my ear. In my mind.

"Blake, this is Walters. I want to talk to you. You'll find me down in the living room."

Softly I climbed out of bed, and quietly I got into slippers and robe. I eased myself down the stairs. My

nerves were tight with unease, and I forgot about that top set of steps. They squeaked loudly.

I paused to listen, hoping that the sound wouldn't waken Ann or Billy. It didn't, though, and I went down the rest of the way.

The living room was dark, but I could see Walters standing by the coffee table. There was a sort of glow around him.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded in a whisper.

"I had to see you, Blake." His voice was still in my mind.

"How did you get in here?"

"I didn't, Blake. You see me as a mental projection of myself."

"What do you want?" The words were raw in my throat.

"Let me tell you something first, Blake. You see, in a distant part of this world is a tiny group of men and women who are all in possession of the lost powers. These people—call them adepts—are constantly engaged in doing research, developing new techniques, paving the way for the glorious days to come. But there are so few of them and they have so much to do, that their progress is being hampered in many directions.

"One reason for this is their lack of a skilled mental co-ordinator. Once they had such an assistant, a carefully trained, highly efficient young man. But three years ago he had a disagreement with the leader of the group and disappeared. His loss was a serious one, and every effort was made to locate him. However, he had developed his mental abilities to such an extent that he could disguise himself mentally and physically. We never found him, and I have been searching for another of like talents to take his place."

"What has that to do with me?" I asked.

"You possess the latent abilities of a good co-ordinator, Blake. I boarded that bus purely by chance in my search, and the force of your mind hit me at once. It was no accident that the passenger beside you left his seat and I took it. I literally forced him out, then teleported myself into it.

"You can be trained, Blake. Your mind is open and receptive. You pretend disbelief of what is termed the supernatural in order to conform with the prevailing mode of thought. So—I offer you the position of co-ordinator within this circle of adepts. I offer you the thrilling contact of mind to mind, the delightful experience of levitation. I offer you immortality through telekinetic renewal and regeneration . . . power that can move mountains and blast cities to dust."

IT WAS tempting. Immortality. The power of a god. But I remembered the way Ann's brown, soft hair gleamed in the sunlight, and the way her small nose wrinkled when she laughed. And I remembered Billy's eyes, so much like mine, and the way his hands curled into tiny fists when he slept.

Swell people, Ann and Billy. You don't give them up easily. Not even for immortality and god-like power. They were all the immortality and power I ever wanted.

I told Walters that. The incredulous amazement in his thought hit me like a blow.

"But this is foolish!" he protested. "Think of what you're giving up."

"I know," I said. "I don't want it."

"Look," Walters said desperately. "I'll give you time to think it over, Blake. No doubt you'll see things differently in a few days."

I shook my head. "My mind is made up, and I won't change it. I'm happy here. I wouldn't exchange my happi-

ness for a place as king of the entire Universe."

"This is final, Blake?"

I nodded firmly. "Final," I said.

"I'm sorry, Blake." Walters gazed at me sadly, then made a forlorn gesture. "Farewell, then." His mental projection abruptly vanished.

I never saw him again.

Feeling better than I had felt for

some time, I started back up the stairs. Back to Ann and Billy. But near the top I paused. I remembered that top set of steps and the loud way they squeaked. I didn't want to awaken my little family.

So I levitated and floated up the rest of the way. Even in three years I hadn't forgotten how to do it. . . .

THE END