

*Here's a Quaint Little Fantasy
Born of Whimsical Imagination*

The Man Who Dared to Know

By JUNIUS B. SMITH

THE MAN WHO DARED TO KNOW closed the book he was reading and studied its binding with the eye of a connoisseur. He had employed many experts to garner the data recorded on the engraved pages between its brownish-red, flexible leathern covers. It was the genealogical record of himself, James Windsor Bournette, last of his line of Bournettes.

He had started the work some twenty years before, and had spent thousands of dollars on it; and at last the completed book was in his hands. He was glad to have finished his research. He would have traced his ancestry to the dawn of creation . . . perforce he stopped because a forbear, who had come out of the wilderness, told not whence he had come. Well, it was quite a span: himself at one end; at the other, the ancestral being who had wooed with a club and talked a language now dead and forgotten.

He thought of the money spent upon this record. A hundredfold more would he spend could he but vivify the pages and see the deeds of those who had gone before him.

The room was lighted by the blazing fire of an open grate. He watched the dancing flames until his eyes were weary and his lids closed. He would let fancy weave a picture for each page of the record he had made.

A strange voice called his name. The leg of a chair dragged with muffled cadence against the soft carpeting of the room. He opened his eyes. Seated some four or five feet distant, was a man of wonderful physique, dark-complexioned, eyes with the glint of twin stars through a cloudless night, teeth of ivory showing as he smiled an unfathomable smile and clasped the arms of the mahogany chair in which he sat.

"You wished to see me." It was a statement, positive and in even tone, as though the verb were used advisedly.

"See you? Surely you are mistaken—"

"About your ancestors."

Bournette sat upright.

"Your pedigree is not complete," the visitor went on.

"It is as complete as human research can make it."

He shook his head: "I have records older than yours."

Bournette's first annoyance had passed. Whoever he was, perhaps his visitor also made a hobby of genealogical research. Their lines might even merge at some point, as was frequently the case. A man had two parents, four grandparents; eight great grandparents, and so on till, theoretically, the world would not have held the people a few generations would make. Practically, however, they ran into each other—lines came together time and again. Blood streams flowed like fluctuating rivers, leaving islands here and there, narrowing to a tenuous thread, spreading here and there, disappearing, perchance, as in the sands of the all-consuming desert.

As for himself, he had traced his own blood back through devious channels until its source became lost in antiquity, the farthest removed authentic ancestor being he who had wooed with a club, had come out of the wilderness from nowhere and had told no one who he was.

Bournette leaned forward and regarded the other intently, eyes sparkling. "You have older records than mine . . . but tell me . . . give me proof . . . and you can charge your own price if they pass scrutiny."

"My records are not for sale; but—watch!"

He got up and crossed to a camera of which Bournette for the first time became cognizant. He focused it against one pale green-tinted wall, then waved a hand:

"Behold! An ancestor of yours in the Stone Age, beating to death an animal for food. Observe the club he is using; note the skins he is wearing for protection from the elements; see the hairy arms and legs, the knotted muscles, the low, receding forehead. Your blood and his are the same."

It was all clever trickery, of course. Some grafting photographer was showing him faked pictures for a purpose not yet disclosed. Yet he said nothing, for another picture had come upon the wall.

"I can show you the meanderings of your blood-stream, from yourself, till your stinky ancestors came out of the sea. But—if you look—it will destroy your peace of mind until you are gathered to your fathers."

"And what does it profit you?" Bournette found voice to ask.

"Kind must seek its kind; the restless consort with the restless. I would have company in my suffering." His manner was intensely serious.

"Show me things no one but myself knows," Bournette temporized.

The stranger turned to his camera and Bournette saw himself as of the present. An hiatus, and secret events were depicted. He saw his life weave back to the days of his boyhood—to the river, in which he had died save for a piece of floating wood caught in agonizing struggle. There against orders from home, he never told.

He saw his most sacred castles in the air, the soul travail through which he had one time passed.

"Go on!" he exclaimed in exquisite torture. "Show me who I am, whence I came, whither I may go."

"Of the future, it is not given for me to say. But the past—again I warn you . . . Dare ye take the risk?"

Bournette laughed shortly. "I will take the risk. I—dare—to—know."

A man, naked, save covered with matted hair, squatted before a fire. The burning sticks pointed like the spokes of a wheel. Forked stakes driven into the ground supported across the flame a green stick upon which was some meat. It was the leg of an animal . . . It was the leg of—a—man!

"Good God!" cried Bournette.

The picture changed. A beautiful woman, dressed in richest medieval silks, flashed before his vision.

"Honored in history: You descend through her."

A child was spirited away and given to the heathen—become as of another race.

"Her child. No one knew, save herself. The father died that he might not tell."

Bournette watched the child grow and become a mighty hunter; watched him rise to the command of his nomadic tribe; saw depicted the wars that netted to himself and tribal members, mothers for their children. He shuddered in fascinated horror.

Abruptly another form appeared: An impassioned orator, in Roman tunic, was haranguing an excited mob. Words fell from his lips in liquid fire. Bournette found himself on feet, wildly cheering what the orator—his *kinsman*—said.

Then he fell back into his leather chair.

THROUGHOUT the night scenes reeled before him, not in sequence, but snatched here and there, out of forgotten history—out of the secret lives of his progenitors. He sat enthralled, experiencing the gamut of human emotions.

The fire in the grate burned low. He rose and replenished its fuel, then took his seat again.

"You have not shown me my *immediate* forbears," he pointed out when the night was nearly done.

"Your parents, you mean?"

"Precisely— parents, grandparents, great grandparents. Let me look upon some faces I would recognize."

"And some that you would not. It were wise that you see no further."

"I would see it all," Bournette insisted.

"Yet . . . your parents. It were best to forego seeing them."

"You imply?"

"Nothing."

"Then proceed with the pictures. But before you do—Who are you, anyway?"

His visitor regarded him intently, fully a minute, before he answered. Then he said:

"I am the one you have summoned to your presence. I am the one come to wreck your house upon the sands. The lives of others are their own and woe unto him who seeks to wrest from them their secrets. Behold! . . . The price you pay for transcending the bounds of material self."

He turned and flung on the wall a picture of two strange people.

"Your parents: their meeting; their wooing; their marriage; the child that was born to them.

"Yourself; your early life; the adoration of your father and mother; their

poverty; Starvation. It threatens to lay hand upon you:

"The sacrifice! You are taken away and given to another: History ever repeats itself, with variations.

"Your foster parents, whom you always thought your own."

Bournette sprang to his feet and closed his eyes in agony. "My God! My God! It can't be true!"

The other laughed with ironic fiendishness.

"But my parents! Where are they? Do they live? Their names? Can I find them? Share with them my wealth!" His hands groped for support, as he reeled against the table beside which he had been sitting throughout the night.

And his visitor mocked him: "I told thee thou couldst not ask of the future."

Silence came down as a pall. Some way Bournette knew it was the end. He opened his eyes. Of the visitor, or his camera, there was not a sign.

One hand, still upon the table, touched a leathern-bound volume, viewed with so much pride the night before. He picked up the book and filled its leaves. Then he tossed it into the fire and staggered from the room.

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