

# GOLDEN FLEECE

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## COVER DESIGN

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

by Harold S. Delay, Jay Jackson and Don Ulah.  
These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely coincidence.

A. J. Gontier, Jr.

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

C. G. Williams

J. H. Bellamy, Business Manager

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He gently rippled its gleaming fabric and . . . it laughed!"

# The Mantle That Laughed

by VINCENT CORNIER

Illustrations by DON ULSH

AN IRASCIBLE and unkempt old man who described himself as Joseph Earnshaw Bedford, master-mariner, retired, went to London some time ago to sell an extraordinary kind of treasure. He picked on the world-famous firm of Messrs. Gillard and Aubersohn, of Old Bond Street, West, as that most likely to deal with him at the price he asked for this treasure.

It was a great, glimmering cloak which, at first sight, appeared to be an ecclesiastical or a royal vestment fashioned in cloth-of-gold—a mediæval *pallium*, perhaps, or a semi-barbaric coronation mantle. But examination showed it was of finest chain-mail; an intricately woven system of rectangu-

larly drawn gold wires, all as supple and thin as a woman's metal-mesh purse.

A few nodules of moonstone studded the *rigol* of the collar. The throat clasps were reminiscent of those eclipsed sun-discs which are to be seen ornamenting the May Day harnessings of dray horses. The whole garment would have shrouded a tall man from neck to heels. . . . And Captain Bedford asked a thousand guineas for it.

"Just as many quids as it's years old," he boomed.

"Really?" The suave Claude Aubersohn, who had been summoned by his puzzled buying experts, breathed that word. "I'm so sorry to have to doubt

you. But a millennium old—*no*—I'm *very* doubtful!"

"Y'can be what the hell you like, mister!" Bedford was annoyed by the sycophantically smiling group behind Aubersohn. "What a youngster like you thinks, don't matter a rap t'me. I'm telling you. And I know, y'see—I *know*!"

"That's marvelous news!" Aubersohn calmly returned. "The exact *genre* and generation of this mantle have sorely puzzled our best experts in such matters. Your deeper knowledge will be valuable, I've no doubt. *Er*—I understood you to say you were a seafaring man?"

"And y' can chuck y'r high-hatting an' all! It don't come off, see! Afore I took to shipboard I was a Bedford o' Low Ponting, Brummagem. *That* convey anything to you?"

According to his lights Aubersohn was an eminently fair dealer. He recognized the mention of one of the most remarkable gold-workers' families in existence: a family carrying on an exclusive handicraftsmanship, in a business centuries old. The Bedfords of Low Ponting, Birmingham, were masters entrusted with the noblest of work, and that alone. What one of them would not know about this specimen would hardly be worth the knowing.

"I—I'm sure I beg your pardon," Aubersohn actually made a slight bow, "That being the case, I'm saying no more."

"Well, y'seem t'be able to apologize, anyway," Bedford grimly chuckled, "and that's something." Then he grew more genial, almost confidential. "It was like this, mister. I allus had a bent for the sea and, after years in the workrooms, I chucked up and followed that bent—although, mind y', I never entirely neglected my original trade, even if it was only

studying theory. So it came about, in 1892, I got took up with the Leybourne-Hatton expedition into Central Mexico . . . looking for ancient *Anahuatltecan* remains."

"Ah," sighed Aubersohn, and he surveyed the mantle with a newer intelligence. "I recall something about that expedition. Wiped out, wasn't it?"

"*Aye*, by fever, superstitious *peons*, and murderin' Indians. Sir Albert Leybourne and me did manage to make the coast, round about Vera Cruz, but he'd gotten his death warrant. He snuffed it ten days later—yellow-jack. Anyway, that's all aside the point. I'm trying to convince you I knows what I'm talking about. That gold cloak was made by the *Anahuatltecan*s more'n any thousand years ago. . . . An' we dug it out'n the dried-up bed of the Guatualiya Lake in June, '93."

"*Anahuatltecan*s, Captain Bedford? I don't quite get you."

"The 'bird-heads,' the 'people of the waters,' if you like. The prime strain of the Toltecs and the later Aztecs; the original people of Central Mexico—worshippers of the sun. . . . But, look here, mister, I'm not giving free history lessons. I'm trying to sell that mantle. Now, what about it?"

"WELL, it's not a pennorth of peanuts, is it? One simply can't decide in a minute—"

"It's a decision within an hour, at any rate, or I'm taking it elsewhere, mister. Can't help it if I'm blunt, an' all that. Y'd better realize just how matters stand."

"Oh, quite!"

"And don't be delicate-minded, either. I can't stick niminy-piminy work. Y' needn't be frightened to ask if it's m'own property."

"Certainly that—*er*—consideration does enter."

"*Aye!* Why, now then, we'll soon settle that!" Bedford produced a grubby and bulging foolscap envelope. He emptied it of various documents which he splayed out, like a hand of cards, in front of Aubersohn. "There y'are! Y'll find my master's certificate and identity papers, with photographs and signatures attached, an' all the rest, among that lot. Satisfy y'self I *am* Joe Bedford—then take a look at that letter." He stubbed at a yellowed sheet of notepaper dated "October 7th, 1893." "Sir Bertie Leybourne, poor young feller, was dyin' when he wrote that. That's my title to the mantle."

Aubersohn carefully went through the documents.

"Everything appears very correct, Captain Bedford," he agreed. "But what does Leybourne mean, after he says you can have the cloak, by his phrase: 'if it is possible to find it again?'"

"What he says. Y'don't imagine we made Vera Cruz laden down with gold-work, d'you? *Ugh!* We hadn't no more'n our fly-picked an' tick-ridden hides on us!"

"You'd hidden the stuff again, I presume?"

"*Aye*, in seven different *caches*. It wasn't till 1910 that I managed to get back to that country. Then all I ever rediscovered was the mantle. . . . *I'd* hidden that!"

"Quite!" Aubersohn stroked his guard-dee moustache and smiled, knowingly. "Well, I'm satisfied you're the rightful owner. One final question, though: Leybourne refers throughout his letter to the 'laughing mantle.' What proof have you to provide that this golden cloak merits that curious description?"

Captain Bedford grinned and grabbed hold of the mantle. He gently rippled its gleaming fabric and—*it laughed!*

There was no mistaking the fact of that much. It laughed in the rich contralto way of a happy woman. Bedford swept it sideways and it peeled like the brazen contempt of heroes before the sounding of enemy trumpets. He lifted it suddenly and let it straighten its folds in a series of undulations, growing less, and there was heard the shrilling of excited and feather-headed girls at play. He let it slip, caressingly, gently, from his fingers, and its wild structure came to rest with the lowly echoes of a child chuckling about baby jokings on the verge of sleep.

"Now you've come to y'r last chance," said Captain Joseph Bedford. "What's it t'be: a deal, or not a deal?"

"As I—I said before"—Aubersohn was in a vicious quandary—"it's not at all possible to decide a matter like this in a few minutes. You must remember, there is my partner, Mr. Gillard, to be consulted."

"Then you consult him, lad!" Bedford took the mantle and folded it into a shape to fit the suitcase in which he carried it. "I'm not stoppin' you. Y've said y'say, an' I'll say mine—I'll sell it for its old gold value afore I'll be beat. I'll get m' price for it, that way."

"Coming from a Bedford of the Low Ponting Bedfords," Aubersohn cuttingly retorted, "that's puerile nonsense! Utterly ridiculous!" He ignored the pop-eyed fury of the old man and made rapid calculation on the back of an envelope. "Even at seven pounds a fine ounce, troy, there'd have to be nearly ten pounds avoirdupois of gold in that cloak to fetch a thousand guineas—and I'll be damned if it weighs a quarter of a stone!"

The old man pursed his lips as though something were sour behind them, but a reluctant glitter of admiration was in his eyes. He stopped packing the mantle and looked up.

"Right enough, mister! A very good

point! Well, an' how d'y' account for that?" He tapped the apparently solid collar and the clasps. "Looks heavy enough, don't it?"

"I'm afraid looks won't affect the matter. It's certainly not solid gold-work throughout—it couldn't be."

Bedford muttered something, then stood on the seat of a chair. He suspended the mantle by its ornate collar and shook its fabric as determinedly as a housewife puts a full-bodied wave into the shaking of a dusty rug.

This time Aubersohn and his buyers started back, their hands going up to their assaulted ears. Although they had experienced its faculty for making laughter-like sounds, they were not prepared for this. . . . It was a man-made thunder: an immense concussion. They felt they were made breathless in the midst of a battle of bells. Turmoils of clangorous air burst on them with stunning force and there were those velvety violences which castle upon the bankings of great organ pipes, in their fullest voicing. Then, in the collapse of all this power, the tunes of laughter came to life again. . . .

"Not gold?" snarled Captain Bedford. "Why, this is the mantle of the very god of gold! It's what the priests wore when they served his altars—not gold? *Ugh!*"

Aubersohn was a rich man, and young.

"Captain Bedford," he rapped, "I'll take this on my own responsibility." He stretched out his soft, moist hands. "You shall have your thousand guineas. . . . Give me that lovely thing!"

WITH notes for two hundred in his wallet and a check for the balance alongside, it pleased Captain Joseph Bedford to be expansive. His mood was nourished by a perfect Madeira which Claude Aubersohn produced—that, and a fine cigar, which he enjoyed in a private room.

Aubersohn wanted the old fellow to talk. He wanted to know everything about his purchase. But Bedford had little to tell. He merely amplified his account of the original discovery of the mantle in the volcanic mud-floor of Lake Guatualiya, adding to this a pronouncement by Professor Hatton, the scientific member of the lost expedition.

"Old Hatton said as how this thing 'd be made t' imitate human happiness an' heavenly wrath—laughter an' thunder. He said it would be worn at festivals, in honor of *Quetzalcoatl*, the *Anahuatltecan's* golden god. Those were proper happy do-ments, it seems: ceremonies o' flowers an' scents an' fun—carnivals like."

"That runs absolutely contrary to all I've ever known, Captain Bedford! I always understood those ancient Mexicans to be a fiendishly cruel race, addicted to human sacrifice."

"You're talkin' about Aztecs. I'm not! Those bloody-minded beggars worshipped a cannibal god, *Huitzilopochilli*. They followed on after the original *Anahuatltecan's* had left the land, acause o' drought or plague or somethin', in the eighth century. *Now, d'you see?*"

"Yes, I think I do. Sorry!"

"Y're thinkin' all cock-eyed," Bedford growled. "What you've got in mind's a sort o' medley o' sun-worshippers' treasure, the *Conquistadores*, an' the golden Spanish Main; ain't it now?" Aubersohn looked wry and nodded. "Well, forget it! I'm talkin' of a marvelous race of mild-hearted people, whose civilization died out nigh on six hundred years before them times.

. . . The greatest masters o' the art o' gold-working this world has ever known!"

Captain Bedford barefacedly applied himself to that exquisite Madeira. He refilled his big glass without so much as "by your leave." He was acting the skip-

per at his own cabin table again—master of immediate circumstance, amenable to no other man's convention or law. As the rich wine influenced him, he grew boastful and chuckled, as though in possession of a vast and secret joke.

"A YE," he vaunted at last, "the greatest gold-workers there's ever been . . . till my time—*me!*"

Aubersohn winced and made some cold rejoinder.

"Oh, y'needn't fash y'rself, Mr. Aubersohn! I'm not talkin' punk. Here, look at these!"

He pulled out a dirty roll of linen tied with tapes. Opening this, two tissue-paper wrapped packages were disclosed, which, on their opening in turn, displayed to Aubersohn a magnificently floreated Spanish hair-ornament and a bundle of long gold wires—rectangularly drawn filaments, similar to those which went into the formation of the mantle that laughed. A kind of vaseline-like coating dulled the glimmering of these wires, but the hair comb was dryly brilliant and clean.

Aubersohn picked up the ornament, then made a move to take hold of the wires. Bedford shot out a hand, clutching his wrist, and preventing him.

"Nay, nay, mister—the comb if y'like, but leave them others alone!" The affronted Aubersohn had the impression that Bedford was casting about in mind for some excuse. It came: "Y'see, mister, it's like this here—they wires has been varnished with a—*a special sort of preparation.* If you go fingering about 'em y'll do 'em no good. . . . They're still tacky."

That was quite convincing. On closer examination Claude Aubersohn acknowledged that the square-edged wires appeared to have been newly varnished—with a dingy lac, that sent up a waveringly poignant scent which he recognized but

could not for the moment define. Then a chord of memory was touched and he associated the thin and peculiar smell with creeper-clad ruins. It was that of rain-washed ivy heated by a sudden sunlight, in still airs.

Then Aubersohn forgot the wires. Bewilderingly he realized that in his right hand was poised a miracle. This Spanish-looking comb was of massive gold—he twanged its teeth and tested the strength of its high upstanding back—yet had it been made of aluminum it could not have been more delicately light. Instead of having the down-drag of the third heaviest precious metal, it was as insignificant in weight as a bit of millboard.

AND while he was gazing like a zany at the comb, an opened penknife came sliding across the table-top towards him.

"Go on, lad! Y've done y'r best to prove it or bust it—do a bit more, wi' my compliments! *Go on!* take that knife an' try t' scratch it. If y' can, I—I'll make y' a present of it."

The small blade of the penknife was turned by the gold of the comb. . . . Instead of being soft and vulnerable, the precious stuff was as adamant as high-speed tool-steel.

"Now, then, Mister Aubersohn," said Captain Bedford, "there y've got gold of nigh on twenty-four carat fineness, as light as aluminum, instead o' being heavier than lead. And, instead o' being *softer* than lead, y've got a gold so hard that naught short of a diamond point can rive its skin! *I* made that hair comb, in exactly the same way as them old *Anahualtecans* made that mantle. And, what's more, *I hardened* that gold—as the gold o' that mantle's hardened." Once again he emptied and replenished his glass. "Poor old Joey Bedford, the bloomin' mug—better'n any other gold craftsman in the world! . . . Master of a

secret worth millions, an' reduced t' selling a museum piece worth five thousand quid—t'get a bite an' sup in his empty old belly! How's that for the irony o' life, lad?"

**D**EFTLY but delicately Aubersohn regained his command of the situation. He saw that care was needed—Bedford was deliberately inflaming himself with the Madeira, and a drunken *contretemps* on those dignified business premises could never be allowed. And yet the very fact of Bedford's drinking was loosening his tongue . . . to unbind, as well, the glowing roll of fortune.

Aubersohn trembled behind his mien of patient tolerance. This old man was uttering wonder. There was no disbelieving him. Instinct was the monitor, and it was sanction absolute for every thrilling word. . . . When first it was unearthed, the extreme hardness and lightness of the *Anahaultecan* mantle had puzzled Bedford. He had laid his bewilderment before Professor Hatton. The scientist told him that the gold had been tempered or "case-hardened," as steel is case-hardened. He had no suggestion to offer in the mystery of the apparent defeat of specific gravity. By rights, the weight of that cloak should have been five times greater than it was.

As to the "hardening" of the gold—Bedford did not need instructing as to the value of that. He knew the art was anciently practiced, but its secret had been lost. To resurrect that art would mean great wealth. . . . So, for twenty-five years, he had labored at the problem: seeking to make the laughing mantle yield the craft-mystery it had embodied.

He had succeeded, but it cost him all his savings. Latterly he had recourse to a money-lender, one Julius Schillam, of High Holborn, who masqueraded as a patents agent. From this man Bedford had nearly a thousand pounds in loans.

There was infinite security. Schillam was no philanthropic fool. From such specimens as the Spanish comb, it was evident that Bedford's patient research work had succeeded. It was merely a matter of time until the commercial reward was reaped.

There the old seaman was foundered. He had not realized Schillam played a treacherous game. The patent specifications and everything else—with the one exception of the chemical formulæ—were in Schillam's keeping. But the business stopped there. At first Bedford was impatient for progress, then annoyed, and finally angrily suspicious.

Schillam showed his hand. His ultimatum was: a fifty-fifty interest in the whole commercial exploit and an immediate furnishing to him of the necessary chemical formulæ, or he would cry off and sue for the return of his lent money.

Bedford defied him, trusting to justice from the law. But when the case was heard he was astounded to discover he was not permitted to "drag in the irrelevant issues of some problematical patent." . . . Judgment was delivered for Schillam. The money and costs had to be paid forthwith.

Bedford was desperately decided. He packed all his tools and chemicals; committed his precious formulæ to mind and burned their written records—disappeared into the East End and laid low.

Starvation found him out at last. He had no resources except the mantle and that Spanish comb. He decided to sell the mantle, despite Schillam's bailiffs. He had no sentiment regarding it. It had taught him all it ever could teach. What its long-dead makers knew, he had rediscovered and reapplied to the last iota. It was useless to him now.

The money Aubersohn had paid—Bedford was brutally frank—would provide

for him in some quiet country place, until such time when he could interest some honest investor in the pending patent. Schillam would not matter, then. There would be money enough to settle his claims, and to spare.

It was all very naïve but all so importantly a part of the old sailor's simple and uncompromising faith in the eventual triumph of right. . . . And Aubersohn was oddly touched.

"CAPTAIN BEDFORD," he said, "you'll really have to go, shortly. I'm a very busy man, y'know. But I'd like you to know this as well—it might be possible for me to provide financial aid for your patents scheme. I don't make you any rash promise, but, I repeat, it might be possible."

"I—I wish to God it were, sir!"

"Well, we'll have to see. It's obvious you must have financial backing. Equally it is obvious that, if I am to provide it, I must have every opportunity of exploring the commercial possibilities you say exist. Also I must know very much more about you, Captain, than I do at present! I admit that's blunt—but then, you tell me, you don't like niminy-piminy work."

"Y'r talkin' in a way I can understand, mister."

Aubersohn considered awhile. Then he decided to test Bedford to the uttermost.

"Would you—dare you—let me interview this chap, Schillam?" He saw Bedford was puzzled but in no sense disconcerted. "What if I called on him, representing myself as interested on your behalf, and negotiated with him?"

"Aye; but what for?"

"Get it from him, in writing, that he'll release all your patent specifications, *et cetera*, on the settlement with him of the money, and the law costs, you owe him. Don't you realize that's the first, and most

vital step? There's no knowing what he'll have been up to, behind your back, while you've been playing 'possum in the East End!"

Bedford was rocked by that. It had never crossed his mind that Schillam still remained in possession of the most important, and carefully documented, part of the gold-working secret. Lucky chance might place him in an invulnerable position . . . if he managed to solve the riddle of the formulæ. . . . Bedford would have lost a fortune and would have wasted a quarter of a century's work, for Schillam's benefit.

He grew quite frantic. Indeed, he extracted a promise from Aubersohn that he would open negotiations instantly. He gave Schillam's address, and Aubersohn said he would visit the fellow that night.

Then Aubersohn furnished Bedford with his home address, in Golders Green, and wrote down a Speedwell exchange telephone number. He was eminently satisfied: Bedford's tale would bear the strictest investigation.

"It'll take you some time to get fixed up in that country cottage, Captain," he said. "Anyway, I'm relieving you of any liability of confiding in me your precise whereabouts." He gave Bedford the paper. "That'll find me, any time."

"I've been livin' over a—a sort o' sailors' junk-shop—Jake Clegg's place, in Shadwell."

"Never mind, Bedford; you'll find some better place now, I hope. Anyhow, when you want to arrange another meeting, just ring up and say so. And when you phone, you needn't give your name—just call yourself 'Mantle.' Say, 'Mantle, wanting to speak to Mr. Aubersohn,' and I'll guarantee you'll get on to me and no one else. I'll tell my domestic staff that the mention of that word demands priority



of attention, day or night. Now, *satisfied?*"

Captain Joseph Bedford solemnly thrust out his horny right hand.

"*Shake,*" he said. . . . Claude Aubersohn shook.

Not until Bedford had been gone half an hour did Aubersohn notice he had left the Spanish comb and those wires behind him, on a chair. Aubersohn picked them up, intending to put them in the safe. Then he remembered that Gillard, his partner, had equal access to that safe.

Preferring not to endure awkward questionings at this stage, Aubersohn placed comb and wires in an inner pocket. Respecting Bedford's warning, he most carefully refrained from fingering the tacky varnish on those wires—which proceeding might have done them damage, Bedford had said.

*Yes,* an eminently fair dealer was Mr. Aubersohn.

**T**HE patents agent, Julius Schillam, died at half-past eight that night. . . .

His clerk stated that when he left the office, just after six, Schillam was engaged with a Mr. Claude Aubersohn on business connected with an affair kept on file and marked: "Mexico—B—Gold-work." The clerk was sorry he could not tell more. The file was strictly private; always kept in Schillam's safe. Oh, yes, Mr. Schillam was quite well at six o'clock—although he seemed in a temper about something.

At seven o'clock a charwoman heard Schillam stamping about his office, muttering and cursing and making little, sharp sounds of pain. By half-past seven he had barricaded himself in the suite and was yelling at the top of his voice. In another half-hour he had wrecked the interior, throwing everything portable out of the windows. . . . At twenty past eight, police

and firemen, accompanied by two doctors, broke into the place.

**O**N SEEING Schillam, the doctors ordered the rescue team to stand back. There was hardly need for that. Schillam's hands and face were almost unrecognizable as human features. They were swollen and yellow and purple-splotted like the casement of an overripe pomegranate.

As the doctors touched him, he collapsed and died.

The suite was sealed, the corridor declared isolated and the whole great business floor—put under guard—closed down.

All of which, coming under the uncannily perspicacious notice of Fleet Street men, pointed to a certain conclusion. Still, they did not so much as whisper their thoughts at first. Placards of late evening newspaper editions merely proclaimed: "Amazing Holborn Scenes"—"Financier's Mysterious Fate"—"Drama in Office."

Not until ten o'clock was a special edition issued, with a few lines of "fudge" in the stop-press box and an ominous placarding of one red word on an expanse of white newsprint . . . **PLAGUE?** . . . and London's strange old heart stood still.

It had taken the newspaper men long to decide. Not in time—time was not the measure of the circumstance. Terrifying experience was that. Even as the machines ran off their copies the toll of the "plague deaths" rose to four. A constable, a street fruit hawker, and a barman who had worked in Fetter Lane, were the victims. They had died as Schillam had died. And swift investigation proved that these men had formed part of the crowd which stood and, crowd-like, found vast amusement in dodging the rain of assorted articles Schillam threw from his windows.

That printed word shocked Whitehall. Its import brought a horde of anxious officials to an all-night consideration of the problem. Here, about the City of London, menace was stalking with speed. At midnight the death roll stood at seven—and only one man, so far, had survived.

I shall never forget that crisis. Where the evening papers had ended their work, ours, on the *Daily Post*, began. The atmosphere throughout the news-rooms was almost as awesome as if we dealt with another outbreak of war. And affairs were especially complicated by an official warning to discount the news to our "utmost discretion."

We replied that policy demanded the widest possible circulation of the story: our duty was to open the public eye.

Officialdom thundered back—*No*, a thousand times, no! Publicity would paralyze the business heart of the capital, maybe for no valid reason, after all. It was doubtful if plague did exist. In fact, one expert had definitely pronounced against it. This expert's name? No need for secrecy . . . a Mr. Barnabas Hildreth.

That was enough for me. My policy was dictated by an implicit trust in the sanities of friend Barnabas. I let it be thoroughly understood that I *was* the editor of the *Daily Post*—and killed the story.

So home to Bayswater, where, in the very small hours, I was astonished to find light and warmth and the ineffable Barnabas, making himself free of my quarters, just sitting down to a breakfast he had prepared for himself and me.

"Timed it exactly, haven't I?" he chuckled. "I rang up your office and found you'd gone; hence this. Hope you don't mind," and he poured out coffee.

"You look pretty perky for a plague-hunter! Is the job over?"

"I hope so. Seven or eight have snuffed it, so I'm told—but it wasn't plague. Dam-

nably like it, though!" He ate placidly for a while. "I've just come away from the bedside of the luckiest man in England, a chap called Aubersohn. He's laid up with a nasty hand and arm, but he's the sole survivor. And he's been saved by advice telephoned to his doctors by a fellow called Bedford . . . the original 'carrier,' thinking in terms of plague, if we must."

"But I don't quite get you——"

THEN Barnabas outlined the story I have already set down, after working from Aubersohn's later and more detailed account. When he had finished, breakfast also was ended.

"That arrangement of using the code word 'mantle' undoubtedly has saved Aubersohn from going the way of the others," he concluded as we lit cigarettes. "More than that, it's indicated a way in which to combat further cases, if and when they arise. . . . Bedford must have seen the evening papers, and reading of Schillam's death, together with Aubersohn's illness, he decided to do what he could."

"I see! He rang up Golders Green, introduced himself as 'mantle'—and actually dared to give the doctors who were attending Aubersohn, their instructions? Cool, I must say!"

"I don't think so. Bedford was safe enough. He had liked Aubersohn and, knowing that plague wasn't the trouble, took steps accordingly. He told the doctors of a treatment which was very similar to that used in fighting the venoms of snake-bite."

"But—but what had caused the death of Schillam?"

"Those gold wires Bedford left behind him . . . or, to be precise, the sticky 'varnish' on them. That stuff was a terrible and instantly penetrating poison. Remember, Bedford wouldn't let Aubersohn touch

them. Then Aubersohn, playing fairly, was careful with them after Bedford's departure. So his life's been saved.

"He carried them in his pocket, you'll recollect. Well, when he visited Schillam, prepared to buy the fellow off. Aubersohn was fool enough to produce them in course

lac which coated those wires—which weren't wires at all!

"However, Schillam hung on to them. And after Aubersohn left, at six-thirty, he concentrated on them, never knowing that every sticky touch upon his flesh was just another nail in his coffin.



As dawn was breaking we found Clegg's Junk Shop.

of conversation. . . . Schillam handled them before he could be denied. He did more—he contrived to steal four or five of them.

"I argue that Schillam realized that the sticky varnish held the one key he wanted to unlock the whole of Bedford's secret gold-working process. He probably had every clue except the actual formula of the

Then the poison entered his system. He realized then . . . and, in the delirium preceding his collapse, he must have pitched them out of the window, with other things. Gold is gold . . . that constable, the costermonger, and that barman each had one of those glittering death-traps when they were searched in the hospital. Each was in that hilarious crowd, watching."

"If they weren't lengths of gold wire, *what* were they?"

"SOUNDS quite mad, Geoffrey—but you can't doubt a scientific determination: they were fine spines, gold-plated in a most revolutionary manner . . . coarse and hair-like excrescences produced from an armadillo's carapace." He got up and impatiently waved my questionings aside. "Now, are you fit? I've an idea that Bedford will have gone to earth again in that East End haunt of his. Anyway, I'm going to visit 'Jake Clegg's place in Shadwell'—coming?"

As dawn was breaking we found Clegg's junk-shop: a fusty, ramshackle, and glass-fronted dump for rubbish ranging from sailors' curios to old guns; from sea-boots to parrots.

OH, NO, Jake Clegg knew nothing at all about Captain Joseph Bedford. Moreover, he "took it proper crool fer two blokes that wasn't even coppers" to come turning him out of his honest bed like this.

But we were well inside his shop—and Barnabas Hildreth had cocked a ruminative gaze on two grotesque-looking specimens which hung above a fireplace, in a dark nook. So recently had the beast been mentioned, I immediately identified these as being the armor-banded shells of armadillos. . . . Coarse and gingery growths, like cocoanut fiber riddled with thousands of tiniest pores, or holes, fringed the edgings of each transverse plate; like bristles on the jointings of a crab.

"Quite sure, now, you know nothing about Captain Bedford?"

"Naol S'welp me strite mortal blind if——"

"Please spare yourself the oath," Barnabas smiled. Then he walked up to the shells and examined them carefully. "Tell me, Mr. Clegg, were these armadillo cov-

erings smooth and polished when you hung 'em up here?"

"Yus. Puffictly smooove. Them whiskers sorta starts ter grow on 'em after a bit, an' keeps on growin', so long's they're kep' warm an' dry. But them's not fer sale."

"No—I realize that, Mr. Clegg. I don't want to buy them. . . . They'll be of far more use to Captain Bedford——"

Clegg uttered a word not to be written. Then he shuffled away from us with his broken teeth bared in a ferocious grin. He crossed to the well of a flight of stairs, and shouted:

"Ey, Bedford! Gime's up—the blurry Busies is 'ere!"

The heart-taking smash of a shot shook all the place. And, with the staggering downfall of a body, we rushed the stairs, Barnabas Hildreth cursing . . . *cursing* . . .

Joseph Earnshaw Bedford had blown out his brains.

TEN days went past before Hildreth bore down on me again, his case completed by the research reports of half a dozen different scientists who had tried to solve the riddle of the mantle.

I learned that, in its first state, no gold went into its makeup. Originally its collar and clasps had been carved from the soft and porous shell-material of the armadillo. The "chain mail" had been *knitted*, exactly as wool is knitted, out of long and equally porous fibers—square-edged excrescences which perpetuate shell growth, cellular structure, after the swamp beast's death. They grow in its lifetime as well, but constant rooting activities keep them blunted to nothingness.

The genius of the *Anahuatltecan*s transformed this unlikely stuff into that shimmering golden cloak! When carved and knitted, the thing was plunged into a vat containing a lac in which particles of gold were held in suspension; dissolved. The

dry shell and the fibers soaked up this stuff until every pore was laden with fluid metal. . . . Now the mantle was dried. After drying it was "fired," as porcelain is fired.

THE lac was driven off in the form of vapor. The gold remained behind—its outer skin fused into a glossy mass like pottery glaze. The heat which was applied was sufficient to reduce all the shell to impalpable dust, but not fierce enough to melt the interior system of cellular metal. What remained was a man-made replica of Nature's work in forming a bone. The outer "glaze" represented the ivory denseness of bone enamel; the cells of gold, formed beneath this glazing, reproduced a bone's cancellous tissue.

Hence the apparent "defeat of specific gravity"—naturally this infinitely honey-combed production, despite its size, weighed only a fraction of what it would have weighed had it been massive metal. Barnabas provided the best possible illustration, in asking me to consider equal bulks of pumice stone and iron ore.

"That drives it home," he said. "In that mantle the normal density of solid gold had been replaced by an abnormal manufacture of porous—pumice stone—gold! Equal bulk; vastly differing weight."

I asked him then about the plague-producing poison.

"Those tacky wires, which Bedford showed to Aubersohn, represented that stage of working, previous to the 'firing' process. They, too, were fibers from an armadillo shell. Bedford had soaked them in precisely the same richly auriferous solution which the *Anahuatltecs* employed; his rediscovered secret. The Spanish comb was in another category. It had been fashioned of shell and fiber, soaked, dried out, and then fired—it was harmless, like the mantle.

"But the sticky varnish on those fibers was not!" He smiled, complacently. "Aubersohn was reminded of the smell of ivy. That was accurate! The solution containing the dissolved pure gold, so we have determined, was mainly prepared from the lac of an ivy growth—from *Rhus Toxicodendron*, the American poison ivy, a cousin of our innocuous Virginian creeper.

"All that family belong to the 'varnish-producing group' of trees. All of them yield mediums used in lacquering with precious metals. But *Rhus Toxicodendron*'s sticky sap is far too deadly for any modern employment. Evidently the *Anahuatltecs* found a way to control it, even as Bedford did, a thousand years later.

"Yes, it's murderous! The shed cuticle of the growth can make a strong man unconscious, inhaling it. A touch of a leaf means insupportable agony. And that lac, that sap, contains a fixed oil so potent that one drop in a gallon of olive oil produces a flesh-searing stuff stronger than vitriol! Finally, to walk in a place where poison ivy grows can induce on the walker a skin disease very like erysipelas . . . its vapor, its scent, causing that!

"Bedford, if you please, was using a distilled and concentrated essence of that hideous juice! No wonder it burned those poor devils like the flames of plague! Aubersohn vows he only got an accidental tap on his finger from those tacky things—in taking them from Schillam—yet look at his hand and arm! *Ugh*—the business hardly bears consideration!"

And since he shivered into silence, I asked:

"Well, what about the case-hardening of the gold? After all's said and done, that was the greater discovery."

A succession of strange expressions crossed Hildreth's face.

"Ingram, that part of the secret went

# The Round Table



## AN OPEN FORUM FOR OUR READERS

*As you know, magazines must be prepared long in advance of their sale date. Since you have not yet had time to get to your places at the Round Table, discussion will begin next month.*

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*(Continued from page 127)*

out of the world when a leaden slug went into a great man's brain! And my part in that useless suicide, I shall never cease to regret."

"But—but I don't see what you've got to reproach yourself about."

"DON'T you? I'm afraid I do!" He wearily shook his head. "Everything was running so smoothly. . . . The faculty for the emission of laughter-like sounds and a kind of thunder, had been traced to the million little echoing caverns in the spongy gold—these, in turn, had pointed to some bone-like material being used in their formation. . . . Finally, it was decided that the sticky 'wires' were

posthumous growths of armadillo shell, loaded with fine gold and poisonous lac. Bedford must have been able to procure such.

"All that remained was the obtaining of proof. And there, in Clegg's shop, proof in abundance was hanging in that chimney angle. Then, like a fool, I let my self-congratulation override reason. I—I was too cock-a-hoop: cheaply mysterious.

"If only I'd kept my tongue between my teeth, Bedford's secrets would have been alive in the world today—and he with them, a happy man, honored for the genius he was."

So I left him in a brooding silence. I could only agree.

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*NOTE: Vincent Cornier, the author of this story, is a metallurgist of considerable experience in gold and baser metals, whose stories are extremely popular in Great Britain. If you enjoy "The Mantle That Laughed" as much as we have, you will be glad to know that more of his stories are coming.*

*Also in the near future, watch for "Two Against the Gods" by E. Hoffmann Price, "Gates of Empire" by Robert E. Howard, "Golden Chains" by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr., "The White Rogue" by Anthony Rud, etc., etc.*