

# WORLDS BEYOND

FEBRUARY, 1951

VOLUME 1, NO. 3

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Cover by Van Dongen; illustrations by Harrison, Jannace and Napoli

DAMON KNIGHT, Editor

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WORLDS BEYOND is published monthly by Hillman Periodicals, Inc., at 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago, Ill. Editorial office, 535 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Application for entry as second-class matter is pending at the post office at Chicago, Ill. Price, 25c a copy; subscriptions \$3.00 a year in the United States and Canada. Copyright 1951 by Hillman Periodicals, Inc. The publishers assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts, which should be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes. All characters in stories are fictional, and any resemblance to a real person is coincidental. Printed in the United States of America.



by  
*Lord Dunsany*

# THE OLD BROWN COAT

*The thing was immensely valuable; but why — and how?*

MY FRIEND, Mr. Douglas Ainslie, tells me that Sir James Barrie once told him this story. The story, or rather the fragment, was as follows.

A man strolling into an auction somewhere abroad, I think it must have been France, for they bid in francs, found they were selling old clothes. And following some idle whim he soon found himself bidding for an old coat. A man bid against him, he bid against the man. Up and up went the price till the old coat was knocked down to him for twenty pounds. As he went away with the coat he saw the other bidder looking at him with an expression of fury.

That's as far as the story goes. But how, Mr. Ainslie asked me, did the matter develop, and why that furious look? I at once made enquiries at a reliable source and have ascertained that the man's name was Peters, who thus oddly purchased the coat, and that he took it to the Rue de Rivoli, to a hotel where he lodged, from the little low, dark auction room by the Seine in which he concluded the bargain. There he examined it, off and on, all day and much of the next morning, a light brown overcoat with tails, without discovering any excuse, far less a reason, for having spent twenty pounds on so

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worn a thing. And late next morning to his sitting room looking out on the Gardens of the Tuileries the man with the furious look was ushered in.

Grim he stood, silent and angry, till the guiding waiter went. Not till then did he speak, and his words came clear and brief, welling up from deep emotions:

"How did you dare to bid against me?"

His name was Santiago. And for many moments Peters found no excuse to offer, no apology, nothing in extenuation. Lamely at last, weakly, knowing his argument to be of no avail, he muttered something to the intent that Mr. Santiago could have outbid him.

"No," said the stranger. "We don't want all the town in this. This is a matter between you and me." He paused, then added in his fierce, curt way: "A thousand pounds, no more."

Almost dumbly Peters accepted the offer and, pocketing the thousand pounds that was paid him, and apologizing for the inconvenience he had unwittingly caused, tried to show the stranger out. But Santiago strode swiftly on before him, taking the coat, and was gone.

There followed between Peters and his second thoughts another long afternoon of bitter reproaches. Why ever had he let go so thoughtlessly a garment that so easily fetched a thousand pounds? And the more he brooded on this the more clearly did he perceive that he had lost an unusual opportunity of a first class investment of a speculative kind. He knew men perhaps better than he knew materials; and, though he could not see in that old brown coat the value of so much as a thousand pounds, he saw far more than that in the man's eager need for it. An afternoon of brooding over lost opportunities led to a night of remorse, and scarcely had day dawned when he ran to his sitting-room to see if he still had safe the card of Santiago. And there was the neat and perfumed *carte de visite* with Santiago's Parisian address in the corner.

That morning he sought him out, and found Santiago seated at a table with chemicals and magnifying glasses beside him examining, as it lay spread wide before him, the old brown coat. And Peters fancied he wore a puzzled air.

They came at once to business. Peters was rich and asked Santiago to name his price, and that small dark man admitted financial

straits, and so was willing to sell for thirty thousand pounds. A little bargaining followed, the price came down and the old brown coat changed hands once more, for twenty thousand pounds.

Let any who may be inclined to doubt my story understand that in the City, as any respectable company promoter will tell them, twenty thousand pounds is invested almost daily with less return for it than an old tail coat. And, whatever doubts Mr. Peters felt that day about the wisdom of his investment, there before him lay that tangible return, that something that may be actually fingered and seen, which is so often denied to the investor in gold mines and other Selected Investments. Yet as the days wore on and the old coat grew no younger, nor any more wonderful, nor the least useful, Peters began once more to doubt his astuteness. Before the week was out his doubts had grown acute. And then one morning, Santiago returned. A man, he said, had just arrived from Spain, a friend unexpected all of a sudden in Paris, from whom he might borrow money: and would Peters resell the coat for thirty thousand pounds?

It was then that Peters, seeing his opportunity, cast aside the pretense that he had maintained for so long of knowing something about the mysterious coat, and demanded to know its properties. Santiago swore that he knew not, and repeatedly swore the same by many sacred names; but when Peters as often threatened not to sell, Santiago at last drew out a thin cigar and, lighting it and settling himself in a chair, told all he knew of the coat.

He had been on its tracks for weeks with his suspicions growing all the time that it was no ordinary coat, and at last he had run it to earth in that auction room but would not bid for it more than twenty pounds for fear of letting everyone into the secret. What the secret was he swore he did not know, but this much he knew all along, that the weight of the coat was absolutely nothing; and he had discovered by testing it with acids that the brown stuff of which the coat was made was neither cloth nor silk nor any known material, and would neither burn nor tear. He believed it to be some undiscovered element. And the properties of the coat which he was convinced were marvelous he felt sure of discovering within another week by means of experiments with his chemicals. Again he offered thirty thousand pounds, to be paid within two or three days if all went

well. And then they started haggling together as business men will.

And all the morning went by over the gardens of the Tuileries and the afternoon came on, and only by two o'clock they arrived at an understanding, on a basis, as they called it, of thirty thousand guineas. And the old tail coat was brought out and spread on the table, and they examined it together and chatted about its properties, all the more friendly for their strenuous argument. And Santiago was rising up to go, and Peters pleasantly holding out his hand, when a step was heard on the stair. It echoed up to the room, the door opened. And an elderly laboring man came stumping in. He walked with difficulty, almost like a bather who has been swimming and floating all the morning and misses the buoyancy of the water when he has come to land. He stumped up to the table without speaking and there at once caught sight of the old brown coat.

"Why," he said, "that be my old coat."

And without another word he put it on. In the fierce glare of his eyes as he fitted on that coat, carefully fastening the buttons, buttoning up the flap of a pocket here, unbuttoning one there, neither Peters nor Santiago found a word to say. They sat there wondering how they had dared to bid for that brown tail coat, how they had dared to buy it, even to touch it, they sat there silent without a single excuse. And with no word more the old laborer stumped across the room, opened wide the double window that looked on the Tuileries gardens and, flashing back over his shoulder one look that was full of scorn, stumped away up through the air at an angle of forty degrees.

Peters and Santiago saw him bear to his left from the window; passing diagonally over the Rue de Rivoli and over a corner of the Tuileries gardens; they saw him clear the Louvre, and thence they dumbly watched him still slanting upwards, stepping out with a firmer and more confident stride as he dwindled and dwindled away with his old brown coat.

Neither spoke till he was no more than a speck in the sky far away over Paris going South Eastwards.

"Well I am blowned," said Peters.

But Santiago sadly shook his head. "I knew it was a good coat," he said. "I *knew* it was a good coat."