

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

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THE ROUND PEG

by George R. Hahn

Basil Thorpe was a phoney, all right—but the weirdest phoney imaginable...

ALTHOUGH it was immediately obvious that Basil Thorpe's name was a most clumsily assumed one—hardly a name to fit in with his small, dark, gesticulating person, or with the improbable exoticism of his accent—the obvious answer hasn't occurred to anyone else, apparently. I can't see why; I'm no genius, yet it's obvious to me.

Thorpe exploded into the quiet jingoism of our suburbia one day, just about a year ago. I met him a week after his arrival, and I had already heard much about him.

In a week he had become active, as we say, in the Masquers (our little theatre group); the Red Cross; the Community Chest; the Audubon Society; the Pathfinders, and—dismayingly enough—both the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans.

Taxed lightly with this political ambiguity at a cocktail party at the Waldrons (hostesses and Basil Thorpe discovered each other like the Holy Grail), he had responded, "I approve of some policies of both parties. In the organizations I will work to bring to life those policies."

This conversation-stopper was reported to me with amused admiration as, also, was his answer to the classic question, "What do you do?"

He had answered, "I sell bridges."

HE HAD DENIED that he was a contractor, as one would have supposed; or that he was an engineer; or, indeed, any kind of salesman for any firm.

"It is very easy to sell a bridge," I was told Thorpe had explained to his laughing audience. "I merely select a likely-looking body of water—a river—a lake, possibly—which seems to obstruct a great deal of traffic. Then I find the parties most interested in not having that traffic obstructed. If we can agree on a price, I commit myself and then buy the ingredients necessary for the required bridge. Wholesale."

My informant, a pretty and voluble matron, whooped with laughter on conclusion. We were sitting in my place of business, my maple furniture store, in the office I choose to call the interior decorating department.

"John," she said, "it's obvious he's a social climber of the crudest kind, a joiner—but where's he climbing from? You have to meet him. You're so clever—you'll get it out of him."

I was eager to do just that. Looking forward as I was to the next meeting of the Maquers, my pleasure was considerable when, a few days later, my assistant announced that there was a Basil Thorpe to see me.

My pleasure increased when

it turned out that he had come to buy six rooms of Early American.

BASIL THORPE bought no obvious misfits—which was astonishing considering the clap-trap he ordered. His main attention was to my perennial sales stock. Even at that, he cut every obvious price corner—pine rather than maple, cotton rather than wool.

Sensing the uselessness of sales pressures, I applied none, contenting myself by following him with order pad and pencil, as he floated from one item to another, exhorting and exclaiming.

He had that floating effect, I decided; he moved with short, deliberate blimp movements, like a tiny dirigible set on end.

From his bald, shining, saffron scalp—down his long, conical head—through his massive neck into the open sports shirt which swelled to a humpty-dumpty belt—Thorpe had that fat cigar look. Strangely, and properly for the comparison, he had no paunch. His wide thighs swelled his trousers, which pegged down to rather small feet that were housed in blue suede shoes.

His voice, with its unaccountable accents both guttural and liquid—went snapping through a startling soliloquy.

"Ah...that monster. That lamp! This is Pennsylvania Dutch freshly made? This is to lower the old candles up and down? So amusing it lowers the electric bulb up and down. A mighty anachronism. Good."

He brought it and opening the drawer of a desk, said, "Ah. Nailed, not notched. Ah. Yes...so green. It will warp soon. Yes. Good. Good. Very inexpensive."

His features, although mobile, seemed so small, and so abandoned in the midst of the long taper of his unlined face, that they gave his lively play of expression an effect of not accomplishing anything, a kind of unimportance and uncommunicativeness.

AFTER A full two hours of shopping he laughed finally and diminutively. "That's it. Ha. That's what you would call an Early American Decor, no? Ha!"

He paid cash and gave me the address—the Paul Revere Arms, a new apartment building on a good street. I was sorry it wasn't a credit deal; I would have liked to have had him fill out a questionnaire.

His thanks were profuse, not only to me but to my pretty informant who had referred him to me. "She tells me you are in the Masquers. Perhaps I will encounter you there?"

I agreed that this was likely and, anxious to hear the famous bridge story for myself, took advantage of this personal note to ask, "What kind of work do you do, Mr. Thorpe?"

He looked suddenly woe-begone. "Ah..."

"Yes, Mr. Thorpe?"

"I've had a setback."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm an unsuccessful hypnotist."

I was astounded, naturally. He continued. "As a realist, my understanding of hypnotism was that it would enable me to make others do my will—to contrive to have bank tellers hand me money, grocers food—even furniture men furniture. I have been very disappointed in this undertaking."

I tried to think of something to say in the face of his seriousness. I didn't want to be taken in, and I didn't want to scoff or laugh at a customer. I said, "That's too bad."

He stared at me for a long minute and I suffered this, though gradually I grew uncomfortable. He finally shrugged. "Oh well, I have not tried it every place, by any means."

FOR ALL HIS setback, Basil Thorpe was well enough fixed to have the biggest, most expensive party of the season.

The instant all his furni-

ture was installed, the invited appeared—dozens and dozens of his new and intimate friends—to help him warm his menage.

If Thorpe were social climbing, his instincts for it were sure. He had invited all the more available specimens of Anglo-Saxonry—some (Anglo) Catholic, but mostly Protestant. The well-liked country-club bartender and his assistant were most liberally meeting their demands on the bar; Haakon's had catered the viables; and the serving girls dispensed not only the right kind of little hot things, but also to the males just the right kind of little hot glances.

It was easily the best party of the season; the only thing unfamiliar about it was the host himself, floating solicitously here and there, contorting his little face, gesticulating meaninglessly, but snapping his accented conversation loudly through the most obvious tall stories, mischievous or not we could not determine.

WHEN ASKED what country he came from he brazenly and gutterally declared himself as deriving from an old Charleston family. He even permitted himself the claim that some of the clap-trap I had sold him were handed-down heirlooms.

When asked his age, he blandly replied, "Thirty."

Someone openly expressing disbelief in his protestation of being a devout Episcopalian, he plunged into complicated and extremely technical explanations of High Church procedure, affecting to misunderstand that his questioner thought him of Low Church persuasion.

Finally, when someone thought to again raise the question of bridges and whether they were going like hot-cakes, he launched into an answer that seemed to ignore that he had ever made this claim.

"I think it most important that we should have available supplies of uncontaminated air. That would be a good business. I shall go into it."

"Hot air!" someone shrieked.

"All kinds. It must be; it makes sense. You have industrial centers filled with air contaminated with poisons that make children and old people die, and others live not so long. Big cities. Little cities.

"So what I shall do is in the pure country-side take many bottles, and jars, hermetically, seal them, and ship them to the polluted places where mothers with strangling children, and those with attachments to lingering, senile people will pay any price for the pure air that was sealed in. No inventory. No stock.

No manufacturing costs. Perfect."

A chorus of hysterical laughter exclaimed that Basil Thorpe was a redoubtable social success.

I'M NOT A busybody. I've seen too much in the way of dog-eat-dog in business, and I've suffered too much at the hands of my friends because I sell something necessary—like furniture—instead of dubious stocks or dishonest advertising. So my decision to make the so-called Basil Thorpe's business my business wasn't due to any desire to protect our set from him.

I was honestly curious; that was one factor. I had the means of satisfying that curiosity at hand; that was the other.

You see, Basil Thorpe walked into my store one day and said, "Do you use stamps much?"

I said that I did, in direct mail campaigns. He was pleased; he opened a large and expensive brief-case and said, "Would you like to buy some at a discount?"

The briefcase was stuffed with sheets of three cent stamps. I examined one sheet. It looked perfectly all right. I asked him how much he wanted for it.

"Two dollars and fifty cents. You save fifty cents."

"Why don't you go across the street and get a refund from the post office."

"Oh, I wouldn't deal with a competitor." He offered me some more sheets disarmingly.

I EXAMINED them. "How many can you sell me?"

"Any amount you want." He hesitated. "Naturally, on very large orders I would need several weeks to fill them."

I said, "They aren't hot?"

He looked at me inquiringly.

"Stolen?"

"Oh, no."

I looked into his little contorting face carefully. "Then how can you sell them cheaper than the post office does?"

He laughed, looking relieved. "Oh, that's simple. You see they have a building—and postmen—and a postmaster—and real estate. I work out of a briefcase. I have no overhead."

I saw. I nodded, bought two sheets to see how they were, and when he left I called my brother-in-law in the city, who is Assistant District Attorney.

THE TRIAL had its comical aspects but as well-conducted, and both these aspects were highly publicized in our suburban paper, the circulation of which zoomed.

My brother-in-law, having broken the case, as it were, was allowed to prosecute it. You might think he would have had an easy job of it,

what with the cooperation Basil Thorpe gave him.

Thorpe (and I continue to call him that because it never developed what his real name was) told the most inconsistent and unbelievable lies in legal history. The court saw fit to reprove him at one point, when, noting His Honor's displeasure at the crowd's applause of some particularly absurd part of his testimony, he announced that he was an accomplished judge, too, and would willingly help His Honor get the conduct of the case on the right road.

The thousands of sheets of stamps found in his possession were, of course, not counterfeit—which was the suspicion that had originally led to his questioning, and which, in turn, had drawn from him the confession that he had made them. They were obviously the loot of some major office robbery, although Thorpe denied any connection with such a crime. He had no explanation for his possession of the stamps except the continuing one that

he had made them, withal the fact that this justifies a more severe sentence than the illegal possession with which he was finally charged.

The prosecution of the case was complicated, however, by its very open-and-shut nature. The defendant's true identity was undiscoverable, as I have mentioned. Fingerprints, *modus operandi*, Bertillion system—nothing helped. He was convicted, ironically enough, as Basil Thorpe of the non-existent Charleston family.

Other authorities were jealous of my brother-in-law and his plum of a case: The immigration authorities, who couldn't disprove Thorpe's stubborn declarations; the Internal Revenue people who of course, had never had a form from a Basil Thorpe. The State people.

Nonetheless my brother-in-law finally bested his competitors—and, incidently Basil Thorpe—and had the accused convicted on a municipal felony count for five to ten years. The others could wait.

THERE WAS a small or—not to be modest about it—large buzzing in our set over my part in this summary justice. I did not forget, of course, that protection of this set did not motivate my apprehending of the small dirigible.

This notwithstanding, I en-

joyed myself thoroughly in the next few months at the parties I attended, and even at the Masquers whose thespian efforts again gained my support.

I told this story and that. I explained what I thought of Basil Thorpe, and what he wanted, and where he really came from—all this, naturally, stimulating my own curiosity of these points.

I won't say that this curiosity haunted me, but I'll admit that I gave it a lot of thought; so it wasn't too impossible a coincidence that I was thinking about Basil Thorpe at a moment, six months after his conviction, when he walked into my store.

What could I do except gape at him? "You're out!"

HE LAUGHED merrily, floating towards me. "I've been pardoned by the governor."

He floated towards me with this preposterous lie and, alarmed, I shot out of my chair. "Why have you come back?"

He stopped and contorting his face ingenuously said, "Because I like it here. Here's where I want to live."

I simply stared at him, weighing the relative merits of trying to capture him alone and screaming for help.

He sat down across from

my desk. "Now I'm all fixed up," he said. "I have a good profession and I can be a good citizen like you are."

"What profession?" I said blankly.

He weighed me, his little face twisting. "It's a good one. Now I have it. I should never have been a merchant—bridges, air, stamps—I have not the commercial mind. Now I am a public servant."

"What?"

He smiled happily. "I'm the warden of the prison I was in."

I smiled at him, trying to make it gentle. He gazed peacefully at me. "And I have papers to prove it." He extracted a sheaf of papers from his pocket and laid them on my desk.

I looked at them, at first preoccupied, then bewildered.

I was confronted with a letter from the governor on official state house stationery appointing him warden and expressing the confidence the governor had in him, "*in light of his particular intimacy with the situation.*" It underlined the governor's interest in "*this bold experiment.*"

Once before I had been mistaken in thinking Basil Thorpe's goods counterfeit. Now I was not.

THERE WERE other letters addressed to him relating to penitentiary ad-

ministration. There was a plastic, counter-signed identification card from the prison. He had a big, shiny badge.

He swept them all up with a deft movement. "I should have known," he said, "that you all need proof. That is what is important. Naturally."

He laughed. "See you at the Masquers. I now must visit other of my friends."

I said, "Hey..."

He regarded me warmly. "I know. Yes, it's good. What you call turning a new leaf.

From now on, I shall be a public servant; it's much better than being a merchant. You are a merchant and, I have noticed, not comfortable in the role. I am glad I am on my way up, now. Perhaps I shall soon be governor myself. Or president. We will see." He laughed and left.

It was the following day, having thought it all over, I hit upon the obvious explanation; Basil Thorpe came from another planet. And I was afraid that he might be right, that he was on his way up.
