

U N K N O W N W O R L D S

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THE SHOES

By Robert Bloch

● The man has a pair of shoes—patent leather shoes—gifted with remarkable powers. Immortality, among other things. But not a homing instinct—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

"It will cost you your soul," said the voice.

"I know," snapped the little man, impatiently.

"You're quite willing to go through with it?"

"Quite," answered the little man.

There aren't many such interviews in this day and age. Few men have the courage, and fewer still possess the knowledge to arrange one. But the little man, despite his appearance of mild timidity, had both the daring and the wisdom.

He didn't cringe now, when he heard the voice. He didn't cringe at the Presence *behind* the voice. He sat in the curiously darkened room and stared into the red glow. Impatience marked his countenance, and greed, but never a trace of fear.

"Let's get on with it, then," he urged.

"Yes." The voice droned deeper. "Now—just what is it that you want?"

The little man smiled faintly.

"I want never to be killed."

"Eternal life?" the voice echoed, then paused. "You know that is one thing I cannot grant you."

"I didn't ask for that," insisted the little man.

"I said I want never to be killed. There's a slight difference there, I think."

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps there is." The voice was contemplative. "A very clever distinction. I must compliment you."

The little man chuckled faintly. "A compliment from you is a compliment indeed. But now—how about it?"

"You drive a hard bargain," the voice reflected.

"Still, I think it can be arranged. If I understand you correctly, you wish to be immune from normal death. From disease, accident, starvation, drowning, knives, bullets, explosives, poison, lethal gas."

"Correct."

"A very hard bargain," commented the voice.

"You must realize, that while I endeavor to do all in my power to please, there are certain natural limitations—laws, I might say—to be observed."

"Listen, I didn't go to all this trouble just to hear you make excuses. A bargain's a bargain. Either you can or you can't."

"I'd like to do it," answered the voice. "I really would. I think I'd enjoy your soul. It seems quite unique. You've got talent."

"Well, then, fix me up," commanded the little man, scowling into the red glow. "You know what I want. You ought to be able to get around those limitations, somehow."

"Maybe. But if you follow me, there are difficulties. I could keep you from dying if stabbed, or shot, or poisoned, or diseased—but I take it you don't care to run around a helpless cripple. That isn't your plan, is it?"

"Certainly not."

"You see, there's the rub. I've got to figure out a way of rehabilitating your body after such injuries, don't I?"

"You're the doctor," said the little man. "You figure it out."

"I could give you a new body each time, I suppose," mused the voice.

"Change places with other people, you mean?"

"No, certainly not. Your own body, of course. You could have your head blown off, and instantly reappear beside the corpse, as good as new. Naturally, there would be your old body to dispose of. Outside of that, no other inconvenience."

"That ought to do the trick," said the little man. "Yes, I think that will do nicely." He paused. "Don't I get some kind of token, or talisman embodying the power?" he asked "That's customary, I thought."

"In your case it might prove dangerous. Too easy to lose. I could give you the power in a garment, though."

The voice paused. The little man had the impression that the red Presence was scrutinizing him closely.

Then, "Those shoes," said the voice. "Very unusual. Patent leather, aren't they?"

"My tastes aren't stylish, I'm afraid," said the man. "But what is this—a fashion chat?"

"No. Not at all. I think . . . yes, I will! I'll give you the power through your shoes. Wear them and you won't be killed."

"Fair enough," the little man chuckled. "It's a bargain."

There was a moment of silence.

"I suppose it's customary to sign something to bind the agreement?" queried the man in the patent-leather shoes.

"Yes, it is. The mark of the Covenant. I've got a Book here. On the table—you'll see it there."

A convenient reddish glow now illumined the black tome resting on a small end table. The little man reached for it, fumbled with his fountain pen.

"If you don't mind," said the voice. "A little blood would be more—acceptable."

"So sorry," smiled the little man. "I'm afraid I'm not quite used to—"

He paused abruptly. The Presence was waiting, and a pulsation of eagerness, of impatience, filled the darkness. The man found a pin, pricked his finger. He wrote his name in the Book.

"There. Thank you. You are a cool one, I must say! Your hand didn't even tremble."

The little man laughed.

"Why should it? I've outwitted you, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?" The voice was piqued.

"Well, if I can't be killed, you'll never get my soul."

"I'm not so sure," purred the voice. "When your shoes wear out—"

"That's just what I mean. You think your bargains are so clever, don't you? Always a joker in the pack. Well, this time I hold the joker. My shoes will never wear out. Because each time I die, my body will be reproduced, brand new. And with *new shoes!*"

"Well, I'll be blessed!" said the voice, in shocked accents.

"Not likely," commented the little man. "I think I've driven about as shrewd a bargain as can be expected. So—goodby."

"For a little while," added the voice.

"Forever," insisted the man.

"We'll see."

"See you in church." The little man thumbed his nose at the fading glow.

There was a faint, indignant flicker as the red Presence faded from the room.

The little man walked over to a desk and switched on a lamp. He went to the windows and switched the black drapes back into place. He opened the porch door to air out the fumes of certain gases and vapors, wrinkling his nose at a perceptible brimstone odor. He dumped the contents of three tiny braziers into the fireplace and stamped out the embers. Taking a rag, he knelt and carefully erased a pentagram of blue chalk from the floor, then kicked the rug back in place.

Satisfied that the apartment was restored to its normal aspect, he poured a hooker of whiskey and sat down near the fireplace. There was a smile on his middle-aged face, and he hummed pleasantly under his breath.

Then the little man looked down at his feet—at the two patent-leather shoes. A slick reflection shone in their polished surfaces. The reflection of his smile, in black.

He wiggled his toes reflectively.

Suddenly he rose.

"Why not?" he grinned. "Might as well find out once and for all. Nothing ventured, nothing won."

The little man, gulping his whiskey en route, made for the bathroom. He stood be-

fore the medicine cabinet and made a face at himself in the mirror.

Opening the cabinet, he took out his straight razor. He hummed again as he sharpened the long blade.

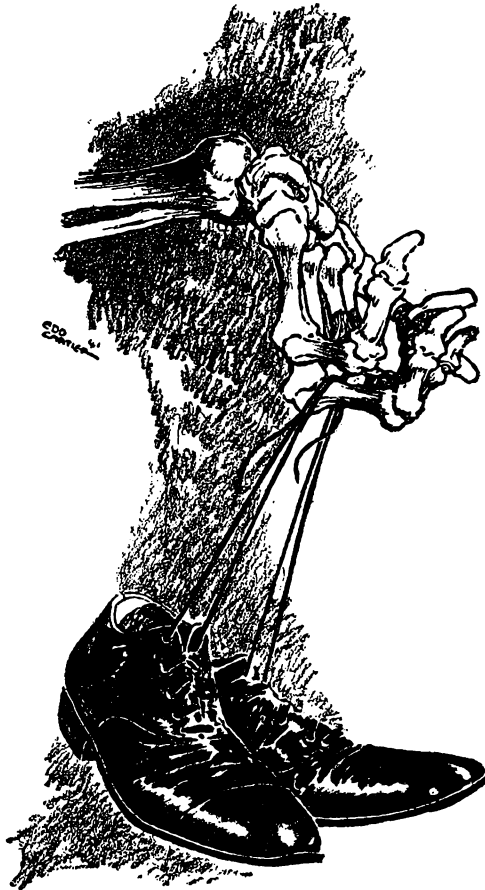
"Feet, do your stuff," he whispered.

Lifting the razor to his neck, the little man chuckled and cut his throat.

"A room and bath, sir? Certainly. Sign here."

The hotel clerk held out his pen and pushed the register forward.

Smiling, the little man signed. It wasn't his real name, but the pseudonym chosen tickled his sense of humor.



"Dr. Faust."

The clerk read the signature without comment. He rang for a bellboy.

"207 for this gentleman."

The little man followed the bellhop, who staggered beneath the weight of the small trunk.

Once in his room he rewarded the boy with a quarter, locked the door, sat down on the bed.

"Yes, guess he was right. Getting rid of the body is going to be the hardest problem. This time it might as well be a hotel suicide."

The little man pulled out a key, unlocked the trunk, and dumped his body out on the floor.

He shuddered, slightly. Dead bodies are not pretty sights. Cut throats are messy. And when you stare at your own body, lying with a cut throat—but that's just the point, you *don't* do that.

The little man forced himself to survey his corpse, between shudders. His eyes caught details. The brown hair, pompadour fashion; the sharp aquilinity of the small nose, the tightness of the mouth. The rumpled gray suit, the grotesque compression of arms and legs at the side of the body—indicating the manner in which it had been jammed into the trunk after the advent of *rigor mortis*.

He didn't dwell on the neckline—that was a little too much. He chose instead to stare at the patent-leather shoes, identical with the ones on his own feet.

"Hard night," the little man whispered, with a forced grin. "Sold my soul. Killed myself. Smuggled my body into a hotel. Very hard night."

It had been. That first moment of recovery—finding himself standing in the living room, out on his feet. Almost as though nothing had happened in the bathroom at all. In fact, he thought for a moment, then, that he really had dreamed it. Until he walked across the room, opened the door, and stared at the red thing on the white tiles.

He had been horrified, but elated. It worked. More than that, it worked in a manner exceeding his wildest expectations. He not only rematerialized at once, but he rematerialized at a spot a good fifteen feet from his own corpse!

That fitted in perfectly with his plans. His plans—

The little man sat down, lit a cigarette. Here in the hotel room there were problems to consider. He must buy clothes to fill the empty trunk. He must wait until *rigor mortis* abated, then drag the body into the bathroom and arrange details of the supposed suicide.

Well that could be done, easily enough. But it was of no importance, compared to the plans.

Sleep now. Tomorrow would be time enough to start moving. The little man lay down,

switched out the light. He hardly glanced at the still figure on the floor. A shaft of moonlight filtered across the frozen white face.

As sleep descended, he peered at the face drowsily. Funny. His own face. Ordinary enough one, too. Not a hint there of the iron determination, the fanatic purpose that impelled him. Not a hint of the mad dream. Just a dead face, a little man's face.

Quietly, the little man slept. The moonlight crept across the face on the floor, crept across the face on the bed. Two white blurs gleamed together—and two silvery blurs twinkled as the moonlight fell on the little man's shiny patent-leather shoes.

"I told you if I ever saw you again, I'd kill you." Judson Connors' voice was ice. He rose from the desk and faced the little man in berserk fury.

"Go to the devil," said the little man.

"When I found out you'd been playing around with my wife, I gave you warning. Now you come here and—"

The little man laughed in Judson Connors' face. "Why shouldn't I come here? Sylvia told me to come, she sent for me. You old fool, don't you know that we've been seeing each other right along? You know what we did after we heard your threats—we laughed at them, that's what we did. We laughed at them, and we laughed at you, like I'm laughing now!"

Judson Connors lunged forward. One bony hand scrabbled in the top drawer of his desk, but the little man made no move to stop him. The hand, trembling with the convulsive rictus of rage, emerged with a gleaming revolver. The muzzle swung up as the little man laughed.

Sobbing incoherently, Judson Connors fired. He pumped six slugs into the little man's body as he stood laughing before him. The body fell, life squeezing out of it with the last echo of the laughter.

Judson Connors stared down at the little man, stared down at the riddled form of his enemy. His eyes noted incongruous details. Like the tiny drops of red on the shiny patent-leather shoes. Why did he wear those things? Patent-leather shoes weren't in style—

Murder wasn't in style, either.

It took Judson Connors thirty seconds before the red haze cleared; thirty seconds to realize what he had done.

Then he started mumbling to himself, "But he made me do it—he taunted me to my face—he made me. Another thirty seconds and the whining subsided.

"What'll I do? Must do something. Get rid of it—the furnace. Nobody saw him come in. Nobody knows. The furnace."

The gaunt old man stooped. His hands hooked themselves into the collar of the suit. He dragged the body across the floor, wheezing more from panic than exertion. The little man's body slid out of the room, patent-leather shoes last.

And then, from the corner, the living little man stepped forth. He rocked with silent merriment.

"Perfect! Absolutely perfect!" he chuckled.

He'd seen the whole thing. It had hurt a moment when the slugs bit home. Then that blackness. And all at once, it a second's time, he was standing on his feet across the room, near the drapes. Behind the drapes he'd watched the comedy. Watched Connors fear-crazed face. Going down to burn the body in the furnace, was he? Good. It would never be confused with the body of "Dr. Faust" in the hotel, now. And while he was downstairs, there was perfect safety here.

Safety to search the desk, look for the keys, open the safe. Judson Connors had a quarter of a million in negotiable securities locked up in the house, the old miser. Sylvia had told him. Dear Sylvia! Lucky he'd had the sense to make love to his employer's wife.

The little man smiled. Yes, it was all so simple, now that he couldn't be killed. Goad Connors into one of his famous rages, get him to shoot, and search the house while the fool disposed of the body.

It was too simple. The key, now. The little man found it almost at once. It was in the top drawer, right next to where the gun had rested.

And the safe? In the library, of course. Right across the hall. Connors was downstairs. Clever, choosing a time when he knew the servants would be out. No interference at all.

Using the keys, pocketing the bulky packets within the safe, relocking, and putting the keys back in the desk—three minutes did the job.

Somewhere in the basement the fear-stricken cuckold was trying to start the furnace. Ha! He must be in a fine state of nerves. And when he returned and found he had been robbed—

Oh, it was perfect! No suspects, no pursuit. You don't suspect the man you've murdered.

Yes, life was looking up.

The little man opened the door, walked down the driveway of the Connors estate, climbed into his car and whizzed downtown. He bought a ticket to New York at the depot.

"Train leaves in ten minutes," the clerk told him.

The little man smiled, walked past the booths, and entered the barber shop near the train shed. He climbed into a chair in the corner, beckoned to a Negro attendant.

"Shine, please," he requested.

Staring at his patent-leather shoes, the little man whistled gayly.

The little man lay in his Pullman as the train did Reginald Gardiner imitations over the tracks.

He couldn't sleep, but it didn't bother him. Why sleep when he could dream with his eyes open? Dream dreams that would come true?

It didn't matter what the world looked like to anyone else. To him it was just an oyster. His oyster.

From now on he could have anything. Anything at all.

He smiled happily in the darkness. A quarter million! Not a bad start—but only a start. He was going places, fast. This trick now, of forcing somebody to murder you. That was pretty neat. It could be worked again, with variations.

Yes, and there were other gambits. A man who couldn't be killed was valuable. Espionage, for one thing. There were governments in the market for an operator whom the enemy could not destroy. Yes, indeed. Millions. And perhaps, one could aspire to rule—

The little man thought of a cartoon strip. *Hyperman*. Why not? Fantastic? A quarter million in his valise reassured him.

Nothing was fantastic any more.

They used to laugh at him for a crackpot down at the bank. Say he was a "screwball." Thought he wasted his time on "occultism or some crazy religion." Well, he'd bided his time. Waited. Studied. Learned. Learned? Why, he'd cheated the devil himself with this shoe deal. Patent-leather shoes. The man with the patent-leather shoes. The millionaire with the patent-leather shoes. "The Leader has only one eccentricity. Whatever his attire, he persist in wearing his patent-leather shoes, even on State occasions—"

The little man smiled at his own fancies. Smiled because they were soon to become realities. And stay that way. Never die. No weapon could kill him. Rich. Patent-leather shoes. Never get his soul. Patent-leather—

"I tell you, it's the guy from the hotel."

The words were more than an alarm clock. They echoed and re-echoed through the little man's consciousness like the knell of doom.

His eyes blinked open. That voice—whispering! From a berth nearby, of course.

It was morning already. The little man sat up, ears straining.

"You're crazy. You say yourself the guy cut his throat."

"I know, I know! Dr. Faust, or somebody. But if this ain't the same guy, it's his twin brother. I ain't been a hotel dick for twenty years without bein' able to spot a face. Minute I seen him climb on the train I say—"

"All right," chuckled the second voice. "All right. But you're on a vacation now, Steve. You don't wanna—"

"All the same," came the loud whisper of the first man. "When we have breakfast I'm gonna step up to His Nibs and ask a few questions. Ain't gonna hurt to ask a few questions. Yeah."

The little man's heart beat a staccato rhythm. It was a fitting accompaniment to the speed with which he dressed.

"Got to get out of here," he murmured. He edged out of the berth cautiously, brushed his way down the sleeping-car corridor. At the far end he caught a porter.

"Listen, George," he rasped. "When's the next stop?"

"Why, we gonna stop in about two hours, suh."

"Oh. Thanks."

Two hours? Too long. The detective would spot him by that time. Hide in the berth? Not safe. Other cars? The snooper would probably nose around. Ask questions of other passengers, the porter. Get him spotted. Damn! No way out.

Why, there was always a way out!

If he were to hide in his berth, he'd be searched for—unless he were seen somewhere else. Seen dead, for example.

That was it.

Grasping his shaving kit, the little man walked stealthily down the aisle toward the men's room.

He stood, swaying slightly before the mirror, and opened the razor. He grinned. "Second time in three days," he whispered. "But they can't stop me."

No, they couldn't stop him. Nobody could. God, man, nor the devil. He was going to climb, he was going to be master, he had the power, the bargain to protect him.

A recurrent vision of his splendor came to him, and he smiled again. Then he lifted the razor, laid the keen, cold edge against his bare neck with a practiced hand.

The porter opened the door.

"Say, mistah—"

Then the porter saw what was lying on the floor—lying horribly still, except for the loosely rolling head, which moved with a deeper horror of its own.

The porter stared at the wide grin on the dead face, and the wider opening at the throat. His eyes rested on the lolling arms, the legs, the feet.

Something about the feet seemed to inspire the porter with professional interest, even now.

"Dead," he whispered. "Dead. An' here I was just going to tell him about the mistake I made this mawnin'—when I got his shoes mixed up with the fella in the other berth."

Scratching his head, the porter continued to stare at the body of the little man with the tan shoes.