



Retort

THE UNIVERSAL PANACEA

HOWARD SCHOENFELD

RESISTANCE IN PRISON

CLIF BENNET

.....POETRY.....ESSAYS.....BOOK REVIEWS.....

LORCA.....ALEX COMFORT.....MICHAEL FRAENKEL

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THE UNIVERSAL PANACEA

HOWARD SCHOENFELD

"The Universal Panacea," Frank said, lighting a reefer. "Have one."

I took it.

"Light up, man."

"It's great, man."

We walked up Fifth Avenue toward Fourteenth Street, smoking marihuana, the Universal Panacea.

"Stop," Frank said.

We came to a halt.

Frank put his hand out in front of him and moved it back and forth a couple of times, inventing the rabbit. Getting the feel of the creature's fur, he built it up logically from the feel. It was the only animal that could have produced that particular feel, and I was proud of him for thinking of it.

"Marvelous," I said, looking at it.

The rabbit sat on its haunches, a bundle of white fur with pink eyes. Dilating its nostrils, it hopped away from us, disappearing into an open doorway. I'd never seen a more ingenious invention.

"Amazing," I said,

"Nothing really," Frank said. "Watch this."

Frank was a tall, thin-lipped man with a round forehead. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. His face became taut, then relaxed.

"Feel anything?" he asked.

My brain tingled curiously. Something was being impinged on it. It was the consciousness of rabbits, their place in the scheme of things. I knew they'd been with us always.

Frank grinned.

"Not only you, but practically every man, woman, and child in the world thinks that now. Only I know differently."

It was uncanny.

We got in a cab and went up to The Three Sevens, a night club on Fifty Second Street. Inside, the place was crowded with jazz enthusiasts, listening to the Sevens. At the bar a man in a grey overcoat was reading a manuscript to a blonde girl in her teens. I went over and listened.

This was what he read:

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I took it.

"Light up, man."

"It's great, man."

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"Stop," I yelled. "For Christ's sake, stop."

The man in the grey overcoat turned around and faced me. "What's eating you, bud?"

"That manuscript you're reading," I said. "It's mine."

He looked me up and down contemptuously.

"So you're the guy."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You ought to lay off of that weed you're smoking."

There was something disquietingly familiar about him.

"Say. Who are you?"

For answer he doubled up his fist and socked the blonde sitting next to him. She thudded and teetered on the bar stool before falling off. She hit the floor with a resounding thump.

"Wood," he said, looking down at her. "Solid wood."

I tapped the girl's back with the toe of my shoe. There was no doubt about it. She was wooden to the core.

"How would you like to sit in a night club and read to a piece of wood?" he asked disgustedly.

"I wouldn't," I admitted.

"All your characters are wooden," he said.

His voice was strangely familiar.

"Say. Who are you?"

He grinned and handed me his card. It said:

HILBERT HOOPER ASPASIA
BIRDSMITH AUTHOR

For a moment I stared at him in startled disbelief. Then I saw it was true. The man in the grey overcoat was—myself.

"You better lay off that weed," he said. "You're getting in over your head."

He was beginning to be a pain in the neck.

I think I'll just write him out of the story right now...

The man in the grey overcoat got up and walked out of the club.

I looked around to see what had happened to Frank. He had taken advantage of my preoccupation to step out of the characterization I'd given him and adopt one of his own choice: jazz musician. He was sitting in on the jam session with the Sevens holding a trumpet he'd found somewhere. The Sevens paused, giving him the opportunity to solo. He arose and faced the audience.

Frank now found himself in the embarrassing position of not knowing how to play the instrument. This, of course, was the consequence of having stepped out of character without my permission. The audience waited expectantly.

Frank looked at me pleadingly.

I grinned and shook my head, no.

I will leave him in this humiliating situation for awhile as a punishment for getting out of control in the middle of the story.

The bartender tapped me on the shoulder. He nodded toward the rear of the club. A tall red head in a low cut evening dress was standing in front of a door labelled MANAGER. She motioned to me to join her. I threaded my way between the crowded tables.

"Aren't you Aspasia the writer?" she asked.

"I am."

Her eyes sparkled.

"I'm Sally La Rue," she said. "The manager's daughter." Her body was an enticing succession of trim curves under her black dress. "I have something you may be interested in."

I didn't doubt it for a minute.

"It's an invention of dad's. You might like to do an article about it."

"I might at that," I said, looking at her.

She smiled shyly.

"I'd do anything to help dad," she said simply.

She took my hand and led me into the office. It was a large room with two windows facing Fifty First Street. In the center of it was a metallic contraption resembling a turbine. Attached to it was a mass of complicated wiring, several rheostats, and two retorts containing quicksilver.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A time machine," Sally said, dramatically.

I looked at the device.

"Does it work?"

"Of course it works. Would you like to try it?"

I said I would.

"Past or future?"

"Future."

"How about 5000 years?"

"That'll be fine."

Sally adjusted a dial to the number 6948. Then she stepped over to the wall and pulled a switch.

The turbine roared. Blue lightning flashed between the retorts and vaporized the quicksilver into a green gas. The room became luminous. An indicator hit the 5000 mark. Sally released the switch.

"Here we are," she said.

I dashed over to the window to see what the world of 6948 A.D. was like.

"It's the same," Sally said, guessing my thought.

I looked out on Fifty First Street. Nothing had changed.

"That's the beauty of th machine," Sally explained. "It moves the whole world through time rather than just a part of it."

"The stars," I said. "Surely their positions have changed."

"No. It moves the whole universe through time. Everything."

"I see."

"Isn't it wonderful!"

Thinking it over I couldn't say it was. I didn't say it was.

"You'll do the article, won't you?" she asked eagerly.

Her body was rippling with excitement beneath her black dress. I noticed her father kept a couch in his office.

"Well, if you really want me to," I said. "Yes."

"Would you like to go forward another 5000 years?" she asked.

I glanced at the couch.

"Not right now," I said.

She was engrossed in the machine.

"I think I'll set it for 1,000,000 A.D."

I looked at her, then at the couch. Then I remembered I'd left Frank in an awkward spot some 5000 years and odd minutes ago.

"I'll be right back," I said. "Wait for me here, will you?"

She had her hand on the switch. She smiled.

"Of course," she said. "Darling."

I left her at her dad's time machine playfully thrusting the universe a million years into the future.

Frank was in the bandstand with the Sevens, where I'd left him facing an expectant audience. When he saw me he waved the trumpet at me before returning it to its case. He motioned the audience to be quiet.

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the piano. Getting the sound of the instrument's notes he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only instrument that could have produced that particular sound, and I was glad to see him invent it, though I was getting a little tired of the trick.

One of the Sevens sat down and started playing a Boogie-Woogie number. Frank came over and stood beside me. "What do you think of it?" he asked

"It's great, man."

He handed me a reefer.

We lit up.

Behind me a familiar voice said:

"Ask him to invent something original."

"Like what?" I asked without turning, inhaling tea smoke.

"Something socially conscious. A new sex, perhaps."

Somebody's hand was in my pocket.

"How about that, Frank," I asked.

"Your subconscious is showing," Frank said, looking over my shoulder.

The hand was withdrawn.

I reached inside my pocket and brought out the card that had been left in it. It said:

Guess who and you can have me.

(over)

I turned the card over. It said:

HILBERT HOOPER ASPASIA
BIRDSMITH AUTHOR

The voice behind me and the hand in my pocket were my own again!

Turning I caught a glimpse of the man in the grey overcoat hurrying toward the door marked *MANAGER*. He paused in front of it and glanced at me. I nodded. With my approval he went in and closed the door behind him, joining the red-headed mouse, Sally La Rue.

I congratulated myself on projecting myself in the story in two characterizations. Owing to my foresight I will now be able to enjoy the person of Sally La Rue without interference from the censors; and, at the same time continue with my narrative.

I turned to Frank.

"Let's drop in on the Baron's party," I said.

"Good idea."

We went outside, got in a cab, and went uptown to the Baron's apartment house.

Inside, the party was going full blast. The Baron, as usual, was on the studio couch, passed out. The guests were in various states of inebriation. When I entered, the room became quiet for a moment.

In the lull a girl whispered:

"There's Aspasia, the writer."

"He ought to trade himself in on a new model," someone else said. "He looks like a caricature of himself."

"More like a cliché with feet."

"Have you read his latest story?"

"No."

"It's a direct steal from Howard Schoenfeld's story, *The Universal Panacea*."

"You don't say."

Blushing, I pretended an interest in the Baron's Mondrian collection. One of the girls said:

"I met his psychiatrist last week. He said he never knew which of his split personalities was analyzing which of Aspasia's."

"How awful."

"Yes, but significant."

"Very."

"What else did he say?"

"Basically maladjusted. Almost non-neurotic."

"Tendencies toward normalcy too, I'll bet."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"How perfectly abominable."

"Yes, but significant."

"Very."

"I almost feel sorry for him."

"I wonder if it's safe being here with him."

"He's only partly with us you know."

"Poor guy. Probably lives in a world of reality."

"No doubt about it."

"Do you think psychiatry can help him?"

"Possibly. There have been cures."

"Notice the way he's staring at the Baron's Mondrians. It's significant, don't you think?"

"Very."

A feeling of boredom was beginning to come over me. I liked nobody at the party. I decided to bring it to an end.

The guests, laughing and talking, gathered up their belongings and left in groups of two and three. Only Frank and I, and the passed-out Baron remained.

Frank stood in the center of the room, his head cocked to one side, listening.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Sh-h-h," Frank said. "Listen."

I listened.

"Hear it?"

I shook my head.

"What is it?"

"The pulsebeat of the universe. I can hear it."

"My God," I said.

He stood there listening to the pulse beat of the universe.

"Marvelous," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But not for you."

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the universe. Getting the sound of its pulse beat, he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only universe that could have produced that particular pulse beat, and I was amazed at his blasphemy in creating it.

"Stop," I demanded.

My demand went unheeded.

The universe and its contents appeared.

Frank's face tautened. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. Then he relaxed. His grin was ominous.

With a start of fear I realized my predicament. In inventing the universe and its contents Frank had also invented me.

"Our rôles are reversed," Frank said. "I've not only created you, but all your works, including this narrative. Following this paragraph I will assume my rightful rôle as author of the story and you will assume yours as a character in it."

Aspasia's face blanched.

"This is impossible," he said.

"Not impossible," I said. "I've done it. I, Frank, have done it. I'm in control of the story. I've achieved reality at last."

Aspasia's expression was bitter.

"Yes. At my expense."

"You're the first author in history to achieve a real status in fiction," I pointed out.

Aspasia sneered.

"Happens every day."

I shrugged.

"Survival of the fittest. Serves you right for giving me more creative power than you have. What did you expect?"

"Gratitude," Aspasia said nastily. "And a little loyalty."

"Gratitude, my eye. You're the bird who made me stand in front of a night club audience for 5000 years with a trumpet I couldn't play. Most humiliating experience of my life."

"You deserved it for getting out of character," Aspasia said.

"That," I said "gives me an idea."

As a punishment for humiliating me in *The Three Sevens* I will now give Aspasia a little dose of his own medicine. During his authorship of the story Aspasia neglected completely to give himself a description. He will now have no alternative but to accept the one I give him.

I allowed him to guess my intention.

"No," Aspasia begged. "No. Don't do it."

But I did.

Aspasia's hairlip grimaced frightfully. He placed a gnarled hand to his pockmarked and cretinous face, squinting at me through

bloodshot, pig eyes. Buttons popped from his trousers as his huge belly sagged. Beetling, black eyebrows moved up and down his receding forehead. Bat ears stuck out from his head.

"You fiend," he gasped. "You ungrateful fiend."

There was murder in his eyes.

I knew then it was going to be one or the other of us sooner or later. In self defense I had no alternative but to beat Aspasia to it.

I was standing near the door. Turning the lights out I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me, leaving Aspasia in the dark with the sleeping Baron.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the author of the story, a neighbor of the Baron's was in the hall walking toward the steps. I joined him. Halfway down the steps we heard a shot fired in the Baron's apartment. My companion dashed back up. There was no need for me to follow him. I knew what he would find.

I had arranged that the Baron, awakening suddenly, would mistake Aspasia for a burgler in the dark, and fire a bullet into his brain.

Upstairs, Aspasia lay dead on the floor.

I walked down the steps to the sidewalk. Across the street I sat heavily on the front stoop of a brownstone house. Dog tired I rested my head against the step railing and went to sleep.

2

While Frank is asleep, I, Aspasia, will take advantage of the opportunity to reassume my rôle as author of the story.

Although I am quite dead in my characterization as Hilbert Hooper Aspasia, the companion and victim of Frank, the reader will be relieved to know I am alive and unharmed in my other characterization as Aspasia, the man in the grey overcoat.

For the second time that night I congratulated myself on my foresight in projecting myself in the story in two characterizations.

As the man in the grey overcoat I was last seen entering the manager's office in The Three Sevens with the red head, Sally La Rue.

Sally lay on the couch in her dad's office, her red head cradled against the white of her arm, looking upward at me contentedly.

The stars in her eyes were shining.

"Dear Aspasia," Sally said, huskily.

"Is there a typewriter here?" I asked.

"On the desk," Sally said,

I sat at the desk.

"Hurry darling," Sally said.

I nodded, inserted a sheet of paper in the typewriter, and went on with the story:

The lights were on in the Baron's apartment. Staring at the form on the floor, the Baron recognized it as his life long friend, Hilbert Hooper Aspasia. In a burst of anguish, the Baron flung the pistol that had killed his friend out the window.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the legitimate author of the story, the pistol exploded on landing, sending a bullet into the brain of Frank who was still asleep across the street on the front stoop of a brownstone house.

Frank slumped forward and rolled in the gutter dead, a grim monument and warning to all characters with rebellious spirits. I grinned and added the last two words to the story: THE END.