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The February Issue Will Be On Sale January 3



The "V" Force

By FRED C. SMALE

It upset the rhythm of life wherever it went. Even to take it somewhere to get rid of it, would be a perilous undertaking from which you might never return

I EXAMINED the bar of metal closely. Subsequent measurements showed it to be fourteen inches long, three inches wide, and three-quarters of an inch thick. On the broad surface, about the center, was engraved a circle with strokes radiating from it, possibly a conventionalized representation of the sun. Beyond this no marks were visible.

The metal itself, so far as I could judge, was a very hard steel with a curious ruddy iridescence on the surface, somewhat reminding me of the appearance of "shot" silk. When suspended between the fingers and thumb and struck sharply it rang with a clear bell-like note. Evidently there was no flaw in the metal.

"Do you believe it?" I asked, looking up from my examination.

Walter Surtees shrugged his shoulders. "Twenty years' residence in the East," said he, "have taught me to believe many stranger things."

"But this," I protested. "A mere bar of inanimate metal to have all the powers you ascribe—"

"Excuse me," he corrected. "I don't ascribe any powers to it. At least you haven't heard me do so yet. I have merely retailed to you the statement made to me by the Thibetan priest who gave it to me."

"Has it the ordinary magnetic properties?" said I. "But of course you have thought of that." Walter Surtees smiled.

"Yes, I have tested it, but it doesn't even lift iron-filings. No, it isn't a mere bar-magnet, whatever it is."

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"But that stuff about the 'periodic powers,'" said I. "If there is anything in it at all it must be permanent. I am inclined to think the whole thing is a fable. I dare say those artful priests were able to play some curious tricks with it. It's their business."

My friend looked queerly at me for a moment before he spoke.

"Well, to be frank with you," said he, "there is something supernatural about it. I haven't confined my experiments to poking it among iron-filings."

"What else, then?" I asked curiously.

"It shines in the dark, for one thing," he replied.

I laughed.

"Radium," I suggested. "Possibly it contains a minute quantity. But that wasn't what you were going to tell me. You would hardly call looking at it in the dark an experiment."

Surtees rose and went to the door of the room.

"You shall see for yourself," said he.

He opened the door and whistled softly. Presently a huge, gray cat insinuated itself into the room and rubbed itself affectionately against my friend's leg, purring.

Surtees closed the door and returned to his chair.

"Now watch," said he.

The cat followed him for a yard or two, then it seemed to grow suddenly uneasy. Its fur rose and its tail became enlarged.

In obedience to a sign from Surtees I placed the bar, which I was still holding, on the floor. The cat watched it as though fascinated and mewed plaintively. It now seemed more terrified than angry.

Slowly, as though against its will, the animal drew nearer with a curious sidling movement until at last it lay close to the bar, motionless and apparently exhausted.

"That is certainly queer," said I thoughtfully, "I say," I added, looking up sharply, "you're not playing any parlor magic tricks, old chap?"

Walter Surtees shook his head gravely. He was watching the cat.

"There may be some odor clinging to it which we cannot ourselves detect," I suggested, "and which the cat can, and finds rather overpowering."

"I never knew an odor to affect a cat or any other animal in that fashion," returned Surtees. "This morning it only fluffed up and swore at the thing. Now it seems to be decidedly more impressed."

He rose and lifted the cat gently. Then he started and examined the animal closely.

"Why, it's dead!" he cried.

"Dead!" I echoed. "Nonsense!"

"Dead as mutton," repeated Surtees. "Luckily it is my own cat and not the landlady's. Poor brute! I was going to show you something else. The canary—"

"No, thanks," said I. "We'll spare the canary, if you don't mind."

After spending some time in futile examinations of both bar and poor pussy, we left the bar where I had placed it on the carpet and passed to some other of my friend's curios.

But it was of no use. That infernal bar fascinated both of us. At last Surtees muttered something under his breath, and picking it up, replaced it carefully in a leather case.

"You take good care of it," I remarked.

"It may resent neglect," replied my friend lightly.

"Look here, old chap," said I suddenly, "if I were you I'd take an early train to Brighton or Southend and chuck that thing off the end of a pier—leather case and all."

"I am waiting to see what will happen," he returned in a curious dull tone. "I intend to see it out."

"Is there nothing that will check its influence?" I suggested. "No antidote?"

"Nothing opaque to it, so to speak. I have thought of that. I tried lots of things this morning. Glass, electrified and normal—silk, water, shellac, a score of other things. I even borrowed an air-pump from the science school yonder and tried a vacuum. No use, any of it."

"Didn't you learn anything of its nature from the man who gave it to you?"

"He simply told me that he had taken it from the robe of a fellow priest, whom he found crushed to death."

"Crushed to death! How?"

Walter Surtees shrugged his shoulders.

"Some sort of panic, I believe. There was a big crowd of fanatics at some shrine or other, and this man seemed to have got underfoot. The story was very vague."

"And he had this thing on him," said I, musingly looking at the case on the table.

Surtees nodded.

I rose, and as I did so I swayed suddenly.

"Hold up—what's the matter—dizzy?" exclaimed Surtees.

"It's that confounded juju of yours," I gasped, catching sight of a rather white face in the mirror. I pulled myself together and reached the door.

"I've found a better name for it than that," said Walter Surtees. "The 'V' force. The vital force, you know."

"We'll leave it at that," said I, feeling angry with myself and the mysterious drawing power which I still felt, though less strongly. "Call it what you like, but I repeat my advice. Get rid of it or it may play cat-tricks with you." And I touched the dead animal with my foot.

Surtees seemed preoccupied and scarcely replied to my "Good night."

I went slowly down the stairs with an uneasy feeling that I was leaving him to face some unknown danger alone. I hesitated and half turned back. Then I heard the piano. Surtees was playing one of his favorite "songs without words." I laughed to myself.

"Music hath charms," I muttered. "It may soothe even a steel bar."

Yet I could not shake off the memory of that poor brute of a cat and the mysterious suddenness with which death had come to it.

TWO days afterward I was at Bexhill on some business connected with property I had there. I found it necessary to stay the night, and as I was leaving my

hotel for a stroll and last pipe before going to bed the boots handed me a telegram. It was from Surtees, forwarded to me from my town address. The message was brief but sufficiently disturbing. It ran:

Come to Pelham Street at once. Urgent.
Surtees.

Finding it was impossible for me to reach Pelham Street until well after midnight, I hastily wrote a letter, explaining my sudden change of plan and left it for the man with whom I had an appointment in the morning.

At first the matter of the bar did not occur to me, and, as Surtees was of rather an impulsive nature, I thought his desire to see me might have its origin in some legal bother connected with a certain troublesome brother of his, of whom I knew.

It was a dark, foggy night when I arrived at Pelham Street, and the raw mist seemed to penetrate to my bones. There was a faint glow in the window of Surtees' sitting-room—not bright enough to indicate that he was up and about—but more as though a bright, clear fire had been left burning in the grate. Then I remembered that he used a gas-heater, and was momentarily puzzled.

There seeming nothing to indicate impatience or anxiety on his part, as I had run out of tobacco, I decided to go on to the public-house at the corner—it was not yet midnight—and replenish my stock before seeing Surtees, who smoked a brand too potent for me.

I strode on past the house with this intent, when suddenly my legs became leaden and I felt as though I were battling against a strong head wind. Yet the murky stillness of the atmosphere told me that such was not the case. I strove against the unseen power which was holding me back, but with each step it grew stronger.

The street was deserted or my quaint struggles might have roused some doubts as to my sobriety.

As I paused in bewilderment a ragged

tramp came shuffling along. As he passed me he gave a curious growl and staggered against the wall. With odd inconsistency I muttered "Drunk!" and, obeying an uncontrollable impulse, I stepped back to the door of Surtees' lodgings and rang the bell.

Getting no reply, I tried the door, found it unlocked, and, breathing slightly quicker than usual, I mounted the stairs and knocked at Surtees' door.

"Who is there?" asked a low, muffled voice, which I nevertheless recognized as that of my friend, and I answered sharply.

"Thank Heaven!" said the voice. "Come in—but take care—take care!"

I opened the door and beheld a strange scene.

Surtees lay in a huddled position on the floor. Close to his face—within twelve inches—was the bar. It shone with a dull radiance, which filled the room, and by its light I saw that Surtees' eyes were fixed upon it and slightly crossed as in a hypnotic trance.

AS I stood momentarily in horrified surprise I became conscious of an almost overwhelming desire to grovel on the floor also. Something seemed to draw me forward and downward with compelling force. Surtees spoke jerkily and as a man struggling breathlessly with an opponent.

"Thank Heaven—in time—I hope!" he gasped, while I grasped the door-lintel and listened.

"Discovered—antidote!" he went on after a moment. "Direct sunlight—even daylight—weakens—nights—powerful—stronger each night—My Lord!"

He broke off with a scream.

"It draws life!" he moaned.

He had never turned his eyes to me once all this time, and he now collapsed limply by the side of the accursed bar.

"Look out!" he whispered.

At first I thought he meant this simply as a warning to myself. Then his real meaning flashed upon me and, bracing myself up, I made determinedly for the window. I reached it in a staggering, drunken

fashion and, moving the blind aside, peeped down into the street below, my head humming like a beehive the while.

Three figures, including a policeman, were loitering with apparent aimlessness directly beneath.

As I looked a stout man came hastening along. I caught sight of his purple, anxious face in the light of a lamp. When he came up he checked his pace abruptly and lurched aside. The policeman seized him and held him up, while the other two men seemed to look stupidly on.

The sound of the constable's gruff voice came faintly to my ear. Now came a horse-cart, driven rapidly. Directly beneath, the horse reared up on his haunches. There were shouts and a crash. The cart had turned over.

The street all at once seemed full of people and a woman's scream rang out shrilly. I dropped the blind and turned aside.

"What does this mean?" I asked, and my voice shook. "Surely this devilish thing—"

Surtees turned his bloodshot eyes on me with an effort.

"I cannot check," he whispered hoarsely. "All—London—crushed—death! Crowd—mob—panic!"

"What must we do?" I cried.

"Big risk—"

I made a gesture of impatience, the movement turned to burlesque by the force which I felt dragging at every nerve and muscle. What could be worse than our present position?

"We'll beat it somehow," I said.

"Make—rush!" said Surtees, faintly.

I had unconsciously crept to his side, and we spoke in whispers.

"What—how?" I said vaguely. I felt a leaden dullness coming over me.

Walter Surtees gave an odd, croaking laugh.

"A chase!"

"And if we cannot get away?"

"Remember—priest of Llassil!" was his reply.

"Come, then," said I. "The sooner the

better. I am the stronger. I'll take it."

"No," whispered Surtees promptly.

There was not time for argument.

"Let us carry it together," said I. "Your right hand; my left."

He nodded.

"Glove," he muttered.

I understood and drew off the thick glove from his left hand and placed it on my own.

"Now," said I.

"Ready!" he muttered between clenched teeth. We stretched out our hands together.

The bar seemed to leap toward us and there was a sound of impact as it met our hands, as though it were welded to us. I shuddered.

We leaped to our feet, a curious sense of power tingling through our veins. The spell seemed to have been broken.

Meanwhile, the sounds outside had risen to a roar, and the street was filled by a seething, panic-stricken mob.

"THE back!" cried Surtees.

We dashed from the room, holding the bar between us. Our strength seemed irresistible. We moved as one individual, and even our unspoken thoughts seemed in unison.

We burst through the flimsy door leading to the back premises, carrying it clear off its hinges; and I afterward found that the jagged iron of one of these had caused a nasty gash in my shoulder.

I felt nothing then.

On we raced, through a yard and into a narrow lane. Then, without a word passing between us, we burst off like some quaint quadruped. For a few minutes we saw no one, then suddenly we found ourselves in a main thoroughfare—the Edge-ware Road, I think but am not sure.

It was now nearly one in the morning and very few people were about; but we were dimly conscious of curious swervings on the part of those we did pass, and presently we heard the pattering of footsteps behind us. We kept to the center of the road, which at that hour presented few

obstacles. We could not have dropped the bar now even had we desired to do so.

Our pursuers seemed to be growing in numbers. They were horribly silent. There were no shouts, no cries to those ahead to stop us. Only that fearsome patter of many feet behind.

We dived down a side street which took us into an open space—Norfolk Crescent, we found it to be afterward. It might have been the top of the monument for all we knew then. Apparently our pursuers had received a check, but, even as we paused a second, the head of the procession poured into the crescent.

At the curb stood a car.

"Quick!" panted Surtees, hoarsely, speaking for the first time during our flight.

We literally flew to the car. The chauffeur was dozing. As we came up he lurched sidewise and fell almost at our feet. We scrambled over him into the car, and, while Surtees seized the wheel with his free hand, I started the car.

The vision of a wild-eyed man, clutching vainly at the back of the car, danced momentarily across my vision. I reached back to fling him off, and the sea of fierce, gibbering faces seemed to glide smoothly away.

I looked round dazedly. We were on a broad road which appeared to stretch away into infinity.

Surtees sat beside me, his jaw set like iron, and his eyes glowing like live coals under his knit brows.

"Cannot we drop this infernal thing? It is like being handcuffed," said I.

I had no need to raise my voice. The car was almost noiseless.

"Try," said Surtees grimly.

But my hand felt paralyzed. I realized that I had no power over it. But I was desperate. It seemed ridiculous that I should not be able to conquer this mere piece of metal.

Lowering the bar, of course with Surtees' hand as well, I placed my foot upon it and we wrenched our bodies back suddenly.

I groaned with pain. Half the flesh seemed torn from my hand, but we were free and our tyrant lay at the bottom of the car.

"Shall I kick it out?" said I.

"No—no!" replied Surtees. "The sea!"

I understood. He meant to give this thing effectual burial.

I leaned back and laughed a little. I was just beginning to realize what we had done and were doing.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Great Bath Road," he answered.

"But the sea!" I exclaimed. "Why not the Norfolk or Sussex coast?"

"I didn't stop to think it out," returned Surtees dryly.

"Then we must go on—"

"Until dawn."

"And then—"

"Relief and freedom," said Surtees, his eyes fixed on the road before him.

The houses were thinning now and there were no lights. Fortunately those of the car were powerful.

"Well, we are free now," said I, "if it comes to that."

"Try to rise," was Surtees' comment; "only don't fall out."

I seized the side of the car and strove to raise myself from the seat. It was impossible and I sank back in renewed dismay. It was as though we were bound down by iron bands.

"Sunlight the only antidote." My friend's words flashed through my brain. Truly, we must go on, until the dawn.

"Is there petrol enough?" I asked.

"I hope so."

"Where are we going?"

"Devon or Cornwall. What is the time?"

My watch had stopped, but just then we heard a bell somewhere give a solitary stroke.

"One," said Surtees. "Sunrise half past six or thereabouts—over five hours."

THE effects of our violent exercise were passing off, and after binding up Surtees' wounded hand as well as my own, I took new heart.

We had met very few motors, and we were going at too great a speed for the bar to have any effect on those.

When we overtook anything, however, it was different. This only happened once, between Slough and Maidenhead. On a long stretch of road we rapidly overhauled the red light of another car, and as we came within thirty yards or so it suddenly slackened speed so that we almost dashed into it.

We swerved aside and dashed by. The other car seemed to leap at us and the occupants to tumble together of a heap. I set my teeth and held tight, but we just managed to clear them. Only our great speed saved them and us from what would no doubt have been a particularly complicated smash-up.

It must have been a very mystified party of motorists that we left behind, but we never learned that any one of them was hurt. Fortunately, throughout the whole of our journey the experience was not repeated.

I need not detail the entire course of that trying journey. We got no chance to eat.

Luckily the car held out, and the gray light of dawn overtook us on the north coast of Cornwall, where we drew up at last somewhere between Padstow and New-quay, near the edge of high cliffs directly overlooking the sea.

Our red-rimmed eyes looked out from pallid, dust-begrimed faces over a slate-colored expanse of water. We were cold and faint with hunger.

With an effort I managed to drag myself from the car, but was for some minutes unable to stand. Natural stiffness seemed all we had to contend with now. True, our limbs seemed leaden and we lurched drunkenly against the side of the car; but presently we realized that the dread power of the bar was almost if not quite vanished.

What would we have not given for a good stiff drink or even hot coffee—tea—anything to ease our parched throats and warm our chilled blood!

Presently the ruddy rim of sun shot over

the horizon to our right, and Surtees, staggering to the car, seized the bar recklessly. He held it to the ruddy beams of the rising monarch which were struggling through the wintry morning mist.

He gave a crazy, chuckling laugh. Then his face changed and a furious expression came over it.

"The devil take it!" he cried, and, turning seaward, he drew back his arm and flung the bar with all his strength far out over the dull-gray waters.

We could not discern the tiny splash where it fell some twenty or thirty yards from the shore and in, as we afterward ascertained, about twenty-eight fathoms of water.

We stood gazing dumbly for a moment. Then we realized that we were at last rid of our ghastly incubus and we danced on the grassy sward like lunatics.

"Sorry for the fish," said I.

"Whatever the infernal thing can do," said Surtees, "it can't rise from the sea."

We turned to the car and our eyes met. Surtees laughed rather grimly.

"We are in for trouble," said he.

"On the contrary, we are just rid of it," I returned lightly. "We have only to explain—"

I paused, and Surtees laughed again.

"Who will believe?" said he. "No—we must clear out. The machine is useless to us now. There is no petrol. We must leave it here."

I stood doubtfully and was about to make some suggestion, I know not what, when a glance seaward drove the blood from my face afresh.

"Look—look!" I cried.

At the spot where the bar had sunk was a huge mound of water like a gigantic wave. The surface of it was white with foam, and though it was as yet in the shadow of the cliff I thought I could discern something writhing and leaping therefrom.

Walter Surtees and I gazed spellbound. A sea-fog was rolling in rapidly, growing denser every moment, and before it blotted the great tossing wave from our view, I

fancied I saw a terrible, scaly head arise from the turmoil. A hideous monster with wildly whirling tentacles and ghastly, wide-open eyes.

Then the fog hid all. We lingered no longer, but turned and ran wildly, where, we knew not. Anywhere away from that awful nightmare.

WE ESCAPED all awkward inquiries more by luck than anything else. We found ourselves possessed of a few pounds in cash, enough to take us safely to Falmouth and thence to Jersey and France, where we lay hidden for a while.

The English newspapers were particularly interesting to us, the next few days.

We read how the Hon. Stockwood Ridgeway's car had been found deserted on the Cornish cliffs; of the mysterious happenings in the neighborhood of Pelham Street, W., and of the no less inexplicable slaughter of fish near the coast where the car was found, some hundreds of tons being cast up on the neighboring sands every tide for some weeks following. And, curiously enough, the "riot," as it was termed, in Pelham Street, of which, after all, a few broken limbs were the worst results, was never connected in any way by the press with the "hiring" of the car.

I suppose our exit by the back door and dash down the lane broke the link which might have somewhat enlightened the public. Yet what more would they have learned? What do even Walter and I know, after all? Where is the accursed bar now?

Walter Surtees suggests that some ill-advised marine animal has swallowed it and borne it off to spread calamity in other climes when its periodic power shall return.

I have sometimes wondered whether this story may not contain a clue to the fatal and unaccountable deviations of ships from their correct courses when near the Cornish coasts.

However, here my story ends, as far as I know it.

I hope it may never have a sequel.