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time fighter

by . . . *FRITZ LEIBER*

Dave had hurdled downward with a howl that one man described as more like rage..

A REAL science-fiction enthusiast has to be a little crazy and a little sane, a little dreamy and a little skeptical, a little idealistic and also a little hard-headed. George Mercer inclined toward the first of each of these three pairs, which was why he fell for Dave Kantarian's time-traveling swindle.

George was well into middle age, rather tiredly married, and ran a small watch-repair and jewelry shop. The jewelry he made by hand satisfied only a fraction of his desire for self-expression, his wife did little to feed his yearning for romance, while voting once every two years did nothing to slake his thirst to be in on some great, undefined act of world-saving. The magazines he read and shelved meticulously left him restless, not sated. So he was ripe for becoming the victim of an adventurous, do-gooder swindle.

Not that Dave Kantarian wasn't an ingenious swindler, even though he chose an extremely bizarre field of operations. As one of the Treasury men later said,

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What happens when a swindler meets a Science Fiction fan? If you are not a SF enthusiast yourself, you may take for granted that what appeared to happen to George Mercer would be the answer—but is that so certain? Fritz Leiber, very much a part of the history of SF and Fantasy, raises an interesting possibility in this story of an SF-Con Man.

"Boy, if he had only stuck to uranium stock, cosmic-power generators, and gasoline from water!"

Dave turned up at the local science-fiction club with a half dozen magazines under his arm and a readiness to argue about the relative merits of anything from the Gray Lensman to *Playboy*. Next meeting he showed around a Heinlein manuscript and a Freas original. It was several weeks before he began to hint to George about supernormal powers and a mysterious mission. And it was only in George's room behind the shop, after carefully drawing the blinds and extracting a promise of secrecy, that he delicately parted his blond pompadour to expose two quivering golden antennae capable of sending and receiving t h o u g h t-messages across time (but unfortunately for test purposes, not across space).

Evidently Dave was a reasonably good parlor magician and mechanical gimmicker, for he made several small objects disappear into the future to Dave's satisfaction and he caused two clocks in Dave's shop to first gain and then lose ten minutes without any detectable intervention. Before George m a n a g e d to check the clocks against anything but Dave's wristwatch the brief trip in time was over and Dave didn't repeat that demonstration; but the future smelled different, George averred.

After baring his antennae, Dave told all, which was simply this: Dave was a man from five thousand years in the future, fighting on the good side of an interstellar war which was being lost because the home base of Terra had run out of certain absolutely essential metals. These turned out to be nothing really difficult to obtain, such as uranium-235 or berkelium, but simply silver and gold, which Seventieth Century technology could transform into a non-corrosive armor far stronger than steel and harder than diamond. Dave had been briefed telepathically, presumably across a short timespan, in the languages and and customs of the Early Atomic Age and hustled back across the millennia to garner a supply of the desperately needed metals before they were impossibly dispersed by use. Now would George care to drop a suitable contribution into the time machine?

To understand why George fell for this s t o r y, one must remember his stifled romanticism, his sense of personal failure, his deep need to believe. The thing came to him like, or rather instead of, a religious conversion.

Also, one must not underrate the patient artistry of Dave's build-up, his fanatical attention to plausible touches, such as occasional lapses

into an unintelligible and presumably future speech, his fierce looks of concentration as he received unheralded time-messages, and his assurance that George would eventually get a concrete token of gratitude from the embattled futurians—a token which by its very nature would convince George that his contributions were really helpful. Indeed, the ingenuity Dave Kantarian lavished on a not very profitable swindle constitutes a secondary problem: was he really shrewd or merely devious?

For instance, was it sheer lack of imagination or a brilliant stroke of understatement that the contribution box for time-traveling riches was nothing but a cheap modern alarm clock with most of the mechanism removed, a hand-drawn diagram pasted inside, and a rather crude trap-door built in the top? Anything more elaborate might have aroused suspicion and Dave claimed that the gutted clock was simply a lens that focussed his mental power to send objects into the future—a power sufficient without focussing for short trips across time, but not a five-thousand-year voyage.

At any rate George came to believe and regular contributions of the purest silver and gold he could buy were put into the clock. Then Dave would carefully set the hands, his gaze would become trancelike, the clock would be hidden and Dave would depart, still glassy-eyed. The time transit might take place at once, Dave said, or in several hours, but the next morning when George opened the clock in Dave's presence, he would always find it empty and experience a deep thrill at the thought that the futurians were a little bit nearer winning the ultiate war against the powers of evil. On some mornings Dave seemed to share his sentiments completely, on others he was mysteriously irritated, almost as if he suspected George of tampering with the time-machine during the night.

Nevertheless, this generally blissful state of affairs might have continued indefinitely, except that the Treasury Department became interested in the tenfold increase in George's gold purchases and at about the same time George's wife noticed their depleted bank balance, got no satisfaction whatever from her husband, fumed and spied for a few days, and finally consulted a lawyer.

When the Treasury men interviewed George early one morning at his shop, he denied everything and made a pitiful effort to conceal his extreme terror, for Dave had repeatedly warned him that the futurians' enemies were capable of sending back time-

spies and saboteurs, who might appear in any guise. Since unlike most swindlers there was no obvious way in which the victim could hope to profit from it himself, the Treasury men assumed that George was motivated by an unwillingness to admit that he had been duped. Despite their serious doubts of his sanity, they reasoned with him at length. They showed him what they had dug up about Dave: an unsavory record of petty confidence games, personal betrayals, generally unstable behavior, and grandiose schemes. They hinted that Dave had been preparing to pull the same swindle on other members of the science-fiction club. Still Dave stuck to his story—Dave was just a fellow science-fiction enthusiast—so the Treasury men called in his wife and things became quite nasty when she flatly called him a childish fool who had doped his mind with lurid magazines and finally fallen for a fairy tale and given away their savings to a cheap crook.

Then things got a bit nastier when the Treasury men sprang the news that late last night Dave had been scraped from a sidewalk in the local skid row and that there were indications he might have been pushed, perhaps by an enraged victim of his swindles, from the high window of a cheap hotel where he roomed. They threw down on George's small, glass-topped desk a duplicate key to his store which had been found on Dave and also the thought-transmitting antennae.

At this point George broke down and spilled the whole s t o r y: Dave's incredible claims, the quest for gold and silver to be transformed into metals harder than diamond, the alarm-clock time machine, e v e r y t h i n g. Fortunately George was able to refute the hinted accusation of murder. True, Dave had visited the shop early the previous evening, they had even put a contribution in the clock and Dave had set it; but after he departed some of George's regular s c i e n c e—fiction friends had dropped in and been with him at the moment Dave had hurtled downward with a howl that one frightened bum on the sidewalk below described as sounding more like rage than fear.

But while George was making these helpful admissions, he was also doing something that confirmed the Treasury men's suspicions of his sanity. While admitting that Dave was an out-and-put swindler and had used the duplicate key to come back secretly each night to loot the time machine, George maintained that the dead crook was still an agent of the futurians.

According to the new version, George had always sensed that there was something partly fishy about

Dave's claims. Really the futurians couldn't time-travel themselves at all, they could merely send their thoughts ranging back across the centuries and sometimes manage small shipments of metal if there were a suitable sending station at the other end. They had fixed on Dave as such a suitable station. Without realizing that he was merely following their powerful mental suggestions, Dave set up his swindle.

This would account, George pointed out excitedly, for Dave's fits of irritation and suspicion, which must have corresponded to the occasions when the time-traveling setup had actually worked, and also Dave's suicide, induced by the realization that he, the supercriminal, was being inexplicably rooked.

The Treasury men were not buying anything like that, though they didn't tell George so right out. They even went along with him a bit, pretending to round out details and making a serious business out of examining the alarm clock, which had been filled with silver and gold the previous night. Sure enough, it was empty.

"No, wait a minute, there's something in it," one of them said, and extracted a tiny star-shaped button of dull metal with a pin attached to the back of it. He examined it, blinked, and put it down on the desk.

He wanted to say, "That Kantarian was certainly a crazy stickler for details. He told you, Mercer, that you would get a token of gratitude from the good guys, and sure enough he has a cheap button ready with 'Time Fighter' engraved on it. Really pitiful, Mercer, the way he made you look like a kid sending off to a TV program for a spaceman's badge."

Instead he glanced at George's face and yielded to a rather unprofessional impulse. "Maybe you'd like to keep this," he said softly, shoving the button at him.

At that moment a puzzled look came into his face, but a second later he shrugged and followed the other man out of the shop.

George didn't miss it, however, because the light was right from where he was sitting. And because he didn't miss it, he was able to stand up bravely to the loss of his savings and even the endless reproaches of his wife. When things got rough, he merely would smile and glance inside his breast pocket, where he had pinned the cheap little "Time Fighter" button, now with a flat diamond set in the center of it—the dull metal star, one point of which had a golden gleam and, when lightly shoved across the desk, had made a deep scratch in the glass, and later, when George tested it, in the flat diamond.