

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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true
to
type

by . . Arthur T. Harris

A machine can be loyal—even to a rascal. But writer Pascal Halmer courted a monstrous retribution.

PASCAL HALMER had a superficial talent. And he was smart. You'd never find him rewriting a theme that had appeared, say five or ten years before, in a popular monthly. He was too smart for that. But Halmer would haunt the second-hand magazine stalls, and buy a pile of fiction publications published ten to twenty years ago. Then, back in his dingy furnished room, he'd uncork a bottle of cheap brandy, roll a smoke and settle back to read.

Presently he would chuckle, rip out the sheets he had read, and do some pencil work on them. Then he'd seat himself before me and begin typing the pilfered plot, twisting it about in such a fashion that plagiarism would be extremely difficult to prove.

He'd change the locale, the sequence of events, all the names, retaining only the plot gimmick, the essence of the story.

Now I am not trying to pose a moral issue. For under the deft fingers of Pascal Halmer, I had, for the first time in my life, the feeling of creativeness, of origin-

This story not only achieves a quite remarkable suspension of disbelief in the supernatural. It poses a fascinating problem. If you went to sleep over a typewriter and woke up with an idea as terrifying as this staring you in the face could you remain calm about it. Seemingly Arthur T. Harris could—and did. But then, he didn't have a typewriter like Pascal Halmer's.

ality of thought, aim and purpose.

Of course I too was a fraud. But, I told myself, nobody knew *our secret*. And we entertained just as many readers as the more creative writers in the business. All my life, I had been a hopeless drudge, used by bored typists in a little office where I was limited to legal papers, stencils for invoices and such.

Now I contributed to the pleasure of thousands of eager readers of escape fiction. Late in middle age I had found my niche in the creative world.

Thus it was that my personality began to undergo a change. I came to think of myself as a colleague of Pascal Halmer. And as his friend, his confidant, did I not acquire certain proprietary rights?

You can understand then, how shocked I became when Halmer first began to neglect me. Little things, but they hurt. An instance was the afternoon when he came home with a brand-new FM radio receiver.

Before long he became so absorbed in his recorded classics that he forgot to oil me, to change my ribbon, to put on my cover when he'd typed out "30" at the end of a story.

I sulked. My keys began to stick. My ribbon grew smudgy and faded. But Halmer paid me no heed until he received a humorous little note from an editor one day.

"Your yarns are tops," he read

aloud, "but reading them has made me wear trifocals!"

With a muttered oath Halmer left our attic studio, returned with typewriter oil, a type brush, a new ribbon. *But he didn't do this for love of me!* He did it only to keep his editor happy. And that hurt.

Naturally my morale was affected. My keys began to rattle. My warning bell, to signal a line's end, became so inhibited that Halmer would curse when I failed to ring. And my platen began to crack.

The climax came one afternoon when I had been particularly difficult to handle. Halmer finally banged my keyboard with his fist, picked up the phone, and dialed a number. Stunned, I listened as he said:

"Acme Typewriter Service? This is Pascal Halmer, the writer. My old machine is on its last gasp. I need a new one. You have several new models on hand? Good! Send one over—"

The end—"30"—*fini!* My faded keys stared upward at Halmer. At all costs I must regain his confidence! He must see me, must understand that I was more than just an old beat-up machine!

And he did. My concentration gradually drew his eyes to me.

Sardonic, amused, cynical, Halmer gazed down at me, his gray eyes cold and calculating.

"You're the only one that

knows the story of my struggles," he said. "With you, my hard days go. I am now an established writer. My stories now get top rates. You always were too slow and stodgy, anyway. On a new machine I shall write better than ever!"

That's what you think, my fine-feathered friend, I thought, as my mood shifted violently from abject contrition to bitter anger. *That's what you think!*

Pascal Halmer had a plot to plagiarize that night. He ripped right along until three in the morning, producing five thousand neatly mortized words with my help for a men's magazine. He typed out "30" at the end of his stolen tale. But he couldn't think of a new title for the story.

So he left page one in my carriage, where he had re-inserted it, to write in the title. He yawned sleepily, muttered: "Hell with the title. I'll do it in the morning. Set the alarm clock for nine, deliver the script at ten—"

I waited until my feckless friend was drowned in gurgling snores. Then, taking a grip on my nerves, I steeled myself to perform an independent act such as I had never before dared to attempt.

Of my own volition I began to type . . .

The alarm clock went off at nine the next morning and Halmer came grudgingly, stiffly awake. His eyes were bloodshot; his reflexes were down. Presently he

walked stiffly across the room, stopped in front of me and gazed at the title I'd written—"The Brave Die Hard"—not brilliant but a change from the title used originally on the story.

The author's name that I had typed below the title made no impression on Halmer at all. He had been so sleep-dazed the night before that I was gambling on his being vague about details.

"Of course!" he muttered. "Fell asleep thinking I hadn't doped out a title! I guess I was too tired to register . . . But it's a pretty good title considering the state I was in . . ."

Hurriedly he gathered up the typescript, attached a clip, put the story in a manila envelope, and dashed off to see his editor.

Now I had but to wait . . .

A half hour before noon Halmer returned, his face haggard with fatigue, but his gray eyes alight with arrogance. After two stiff shots of brandy, he bent over me, waving before my type-eyes a publisher's check for two hundred and fifty dollars.

"See?" he sneered. "They raised my rate. At last I'm on my way! Tomorrow I'll trade you in on a new machine, move out of this crummy garret . . ."

He had another drink, then stretched out on his cot and was soon asleep.

I waited . . .

Late in the afternoon, as the sky grew gray and clouded, the

phone rang. I tensed. Halmer woke up, fumbled for the desk-lamp switch, uncradled the phone.

"Yes?" he said sleepily, petulantly. "Oh, hello, Evans . . ." He sat erect, his voice becoming polite, ingratiating.

Evans was his editor to whom he'd given the story I'd typed last night.

"I don't quite follow you, old boy . . ." Halmer stammered.

Now Evans' angry voice was loud and I could hear it, too. "No? Well, I just wanted to tell you that 'The Brave Die Hard' is just as good today *as when it was first written forty years ago!*"

I thought Halmer would have a stroke. "But *how—why*—what makes you *suspect*—" now his voice was a shriek—"it's *not* the same story! It *couldn't* be! I wrote that story from scratch!"

"Then you didn't scratch hard enough," the phone sneered. "We found the original by checking through bound volumes in the public library. When the word gets around, you'll be skunk bait in the publishing business. And, incidentally, we've stopped payment on your check."

I almost felt sorry for the poor fool.

"But you can't *do* this to me!" Halmer screamed. "It's a miserable coincidence! I challenge you to prove—"

"If it's coincidence how come the other guy's name appears in the by-line?"

"*His* name? Instead of *mine*?" His voice was incredulous.

"Maybe you typed it subconsciously, Halmer, unless you've got an enemy in the house!"

The mocking voice hung up.

Like a sleepwalker, Halmer cradled the phone. He stared at the check, still propped up on the desk where he'd left it. Suddenly he lunged for it, tore it to bits, flung the pieces on the floor.

Then he threw himself on his bed, and beat his fists against the wall.

Wait till he gets over the first shock, I thought. *Wait till he begins to think . . .*

It wasn't long before Halmer sprang from his cot, lurched across the room and stopped in front of me.

"*You!*" he shouted. "You mechanical Judas! Only *you* could have crossed me up!"

With berserk strength he swept me up, stalked across the room again—and hurled me straight through the dormer window!

There was a sharded crackle as the glass shattered. There was a much louder crash when I hit the flagstones in the courtyard alley, collapsed into a mass of twisted junk . . .

Maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought!