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# ASTONISHING STORIES

ALL STORIES NEW

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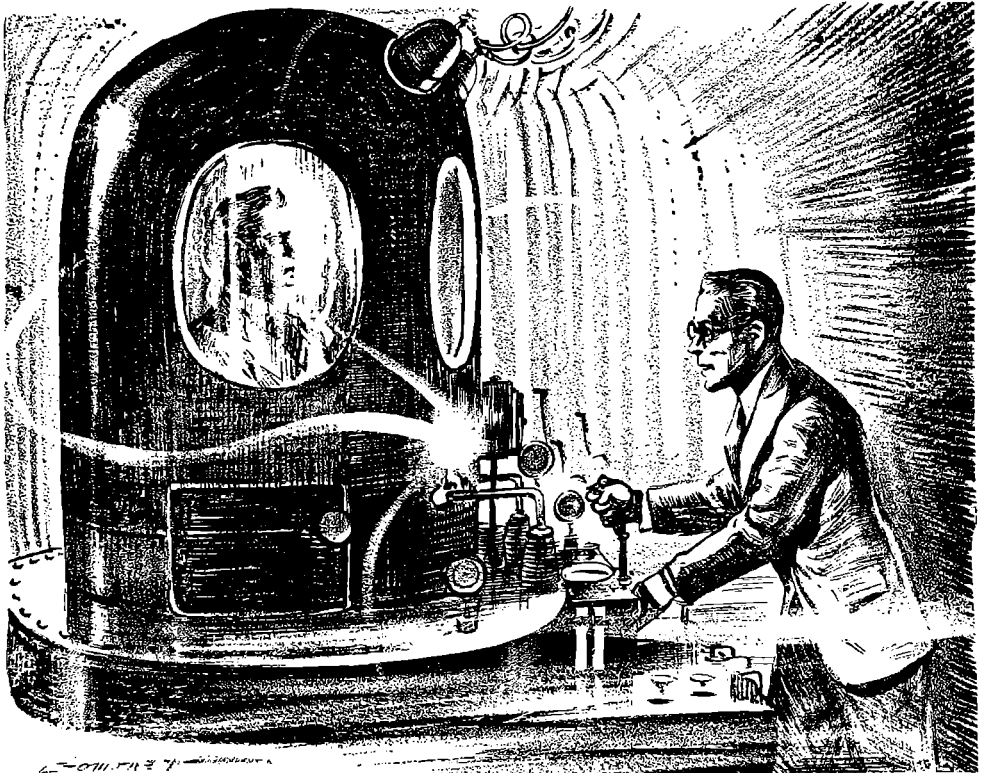
Inside illustrations by Bok, Giunta, Morey, J. B. Musacchia

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# THE UNSEEN BLUSHERS



By Alfred Bester



Like a pack-rat was the strange man out of time—he stole unpublished stories—and left literary immortality!

**W**ITH all kinds of plots twisting in my head, I hadn't slept well the night before. For one thing, I'd worked too late on a yarn that wasn't worth it. For another, there'd been a high wind howling through the streets. It made me restless and did a lot more damage than that. When I got up I found it'd blown a lot of paper and junk in the window and most of the story out—only a part of the carbon was left. I wasn't especially sorry. I got dressed and hustled down to the luncheon.

That luncheon's something special. We meet every Tuesday in a second-rate restaurant and gossip and talk story and editors and mostly beef about the mags that won't pay until publication. Some of us, the high-class ones, won't write for them.

Maybe I ought to explain. We're the unromantic writers—what they call pulp writers. We're the boys who fill the pulp magazines with stories at a cent a word. Westerns, mystery, wonder, weird, adventure—you know them.

Not all of us are hacks. A couple have graduated to the movies. A few have broken the slicks and try to forget the lean years. Some get four cents a word and try to feel important to literature. The rest come to the luncheon and either resign themselves to the one cent rate or nurse a secret Pulitzer Prizer in their bosoms.

There wasn't much of a turn-out when I got there. Belcher sat at the head of the table as usual, playing the genial host. He specializes in what they call science-fiction. It's fantastic stuff about time machines and the fourth dimension. Belcher talks too much in a Southern drawl.

As I eased into a chair he called, "Ah, the poor man's Orson Welles!" and crinkled his big face into a showy laugh.

I said, "Your dialogue's getting as lousy as your stories!" I don't like to be reminded that I look like a celebrity.

Belcher ignored that. He turned to Black, the chap who agents our stuff, and began complaining.

He said, "Land-sake, Joey, can't you sell that Martian story? I think it's good." Before Joey could answer, Belcher turned to the rest of us and said, "Reminds me of my grand-daddy. He got shot up at Vicksburg before his father could locate him and drag him back home. Granny used to say, 'All my life I've believed in the solid South and the Democratic Party. I believed they were good; and if they aren't, I don't want to know about it.'"

Belcher laughed and shook his head. I gave Joey a frantic S.O.S. When Belcher gets going on the Civil War, no one else gets a word in for solid hours.

Joey didn't move, but he said, "What story?" very incredulously, and then he glanced at me and winked.

"That Martian story," Belcher said. "The one about the colony on Mars and the new race of Earth-Mars men that

springs up—I've forgotten the title.—They say Fitz-James O'Brien never could remember the titles of his stories either."

Joey said, "You never gave me any such yarn," and this time he really meant it.

Belcher said, "You're crazy."

Down at the other end of the table someone wanted to know who O'Brien wrote for.

I said, "He's dead. He wrote 'The Diamond Lens.'"

"He was the first pulp writer," Belcher said. "Most folks believe Poe invented the short story. Land-sake! Poe never wrote a short story. He wrote mood pieces. O'Brien was the first. He wrote great short stories and great pulp stories."

I said, "If you're looking for the father of the pulp industry, why don't you go back far enough? There was a boy named Greene in the late Sixteenth Century.

"You mean 'Groatsworth of Wit' Greene?"

"The very same. Only forget that piece of junk. It was his last grab at a dollar. Get hold of a catalogue some day and see the quantity of pulp he pored out to make a living. Pamphlets and plays and what not."

Someone said, "Greene a pulp writer?" He sounded shocked.

I said, "Brother, when he turned that stuff out, it was pulp. Passes three hundred years and it turns into literature. You figure it out."

Belcher waved his hand. "I was talking about the invention of the short story," he said. "O'Brien—"

I tried to cut him off. "I thought O'Brien predated Poe."

It was a mistake. Belcher said, "Not at all. O'Brien fought in the Civil War. He was with the Thirty-seventh Georgian Rifles, I believe. A captain. He—"

I nudged Joey so hard he yelped, but he said, "I tell you I never received any such story!"

Then Mallison grunted and sipped his

drink. He started to talk and we missed the first few words. It's always that way with Mallison. He's white-haired, incredibly ancient-looking, and he acts half dead. He used to be in the navy so he writes sea stories now. They say he acquired a peculiar disease in the tropics that makes him mumble most of the time. He turns out a damned good yarn.

Finally we figured out Mallison was calling Joey a liar.

"Say, what is this?" Joey said indignantly. "Are you kidding?"

Mallison mumbled something about Joey stealing a story of his that never got paid for and never showed up. Belcher nodded and poured wine from a bottle. He always drinks a cheap kind of stuff with the greatest ostentation. He acts as though it makes you more important if your drink comes out of a bottle instead of from a glass on a tray.

He said, "I'll bet some mag paid two cents for it, Joey, and you're holding out."

Joey snorted. "You better look in your desk, Belcher. You probably forgot to give me the yarn."

Belcher shook his head. "I know I haven't got it. I can't think how I lost it—"

**H**E BROKE off and glanced up at some people who were threading through the restaurant toward our table. There came a man followed by a couple. The lone man I knew, although I never remember his name. He's a quiet little fellow who smokes what looks like his father's pipe. Joey says he's past forty and still lives with his folks, who treat him like a child.

One of the pair was Jinx MacDougal. He turns out a fantastic quantity of detective fiction. None of his yarns are outstanding; in fact they're all on a consistent pulp level. That happens to be why he sells so much. Editors can always depend on Jinx never to fail them.

Jinx had a stranger with him. He was a tall, slender young man with scanty, tow-colored hair. He wore thick glasses that made his eyes look blurry and he was dressed in a sweater and ridiculously tight little knickers. He smiled shyly, and I could swear his teeth were false, they were so even.

I said, "You've got a helluva nerve, Jinx, if this guy's an editor." And I really meant it. Editors are taboo at the luncheon, it being the only chance we get to knock them in unison.

Jinx said, "Hi, everybody! This here's a white man that'll interest you. Name of Dugan. Found him up in one of the publishing offices trying to locate the pulp slaves. Says he's got a story."

I said, "Pass, friend, and have a drink on us."

Jinx sat and Dugan sat. He smiled again and gazed at us eagerly as though we were the flower of American Letters. Then he studied the table and it looked as though he were itemizing the plates and glasses all the while Jinx was making introductions.

Belcher said, "Another customer for you, Joey. Even if Jinx hadn't given it away, I could have told you he was a writer. Land-sakes! I can smell the manuscript in his back pocket."

Dugan looked embarrassed. He said, "Oh no— Really— I've just got a story idea, so to speak. I—"

He said a lot more but I couldn't understand him. He mumbled something like Mallison, only his speech was very sharp and clipped. It sounded like a phonograph record with every other syllable cut out.

Jinx said, "Dugan comes from your home town, Mallison."

"Whereabouts?" Mallison asked.

"Knights Road."

"Knights Road? You sure?"

Dugan nodded.

Mallison said, "Hell, man, that's im-

possible. Knights Road starts outside the town and runs through the old quarry."

"Oh—" Dugan looked flustered. "Well, there's a new vention."

"A new what?"

"Vention—" Dugan stopped. Then he said, "A new development. That's a slang word."

Mallison said, "Why, man, I was back home less than a month ago. Wasn't any development them?"

Belcher said, "Maybe it's very new."

Dugan didn't say anything more. I hadn't listened much because I was busy watching his fingers. He had one hand partially concealed under the table, but I could see that he was fumbling nervously with an odd contraption that looked like a piece of old clock.

It was a square of metal the size of a match box, and at one end was a coil of wire like a watch-spring. On both faces of the box were tiny buttons, like adding machine keys. Dugan kept jiggling the thing absently, and pressing the buttons. I could hear the syncopated clicks.

I thought, *This guy is really soft in the head. He plays with things.*

Belcher said, "Sure you're not a writer?"

Dugan shook his head, then glanced at Joey. Joey smiled a little and turned away because he's very shy about ethics and such. He doesn't want people to think he runs around trying to get writers on his string.

Mallison said to Jinx, "Well, what in hell is this story?"

Jinx said, "I don't know. Ask him."

They all looked at Junior G-Man. I wanted to warn him not to spill anything because pulp writers are leeches. They'll suck the blood right out of your brain. You have to copyright your dialogue at the Tuesday luncheons.

Dugan said, "It's—it's about a Time Machine."

We all groaned and I didn't worry

about Dugan's ideas any more after that.

Joey said, "Oh God, not that! The market's sick of time stories. You couldn't sell one with Shakespeare's name on it."

Dugan actually looked startled.

"What's the matter?" Belcher asked, showing off his erudition. "You got a manuscript with Shakespeare's name on it? Discover a Shakespeare autograph on a pulp story?" He laughed uproariously as though he'd cracked a joke at my expense.

Dugan said, "N-no—only that's the story. I mean—" He faltered and then said, "I wish you'd let me just tell you this story."

We said, "Sure, go ahead."

"WELL," Dugan began, "perhaps it isn't very original at that, but it's what you might call provocative. The scene is the Twenty-third Century—over three hundred years from now. At a great American university, physicists have devised a—a Time Machine. It's a startling invention, of course, just as the invention of electric light was startling; but its operation is based on sane physical laws—"

"Never mind the explanations," Belcher interrupted. "We've all alibied a Time Machine at one time or another. Land-sakes! You don't even have to any more. You just write 'Time Machine' and the readers take the rest for granted."

"When the story begins," Dugan continued, "the machine has been in use for several years. But for the first time it's to be used for literary purposes. This is because back in the first half of the Twentieth Century there lived a great writer. He was so great that modern critics call him the New Shakespeare. He's called that not only for his genius, but because, like the original Shakespeare, almost nothing is known of his life."

Mallison said, "That's impossible."

"Not altogether," I argued. "It's con-

ceivable that wars and unprecedented bombings and fires could destroy records. Why even today there are gaps in the lives of contemporary artists that will never be filled up."

"To hell with that!" Mallison said. "I still say it's impossible."

Dugan gave me a grateful look. He said, "Anyway, that's about what happened. The literature department of the university is going to send one of its research men back through time to gather material on the life of the new Shakespeare. This man is an expert in ancient English. He's shuttled back into the Twentieth Century, equipped with camera and stenographic devices and all that. In the short period at his disposal, he attempts to get hold of his man."

I said, "It's a cute idea. Imagine going back to the old Mermaid Tavern and buying Marlowe a drink."

Mallison said, "It's a helluva dull story."

"I don't know about that," Belcher said. "I did something of the sort a couple of years ago. Got a cent and a half for it, eh Joey? Also a bonus."

Joey said, "Say, Dugan, you're not cribbing Belcher's yarn, are you?"

"Certainly not!" Dugan looked shocked. "Well, the research man had less than a day. There was some trouble locating the new Shakespeare's address, and when he did, it was already late at night. Now here's the first little surprise. The man lived in the Bronx."

We smiled back at him because most of us live in the Bronx. Maybe it was a kind of sour smile, but we appreciated the irony. No Bohemian Greenwich Village, no romantic New England retreat—just unadulterated Brox.

Dugan said, "He lived in an ordinary apartment house, one like a million others. The research man hadn't time enough for formality, so at three in the morning he learned how to operate the self-service

elevator, went up to the apartment, and broke in to snoop around.

"He expected, at least, to find something different—to see in the furniture and decorations and books an outward sign of the new Shakespeare's great talent. But it was just a plain apartment—so plain that it needs no description. When I say that there are a million others like it, I've described it down to the ultimate detail."

"What'd he expect," Joey asked, "genius?"

"Isn't that what we all expect of genius?" Dugan countered. "Certainly the research man was disappointed. He sneaked a look at the sleeping genius—and saw a dull, undistinguished person thrashing ungracefully about on the bed. Nevertheless, he crept about silently, taking motion pictures and—"

"At three A. M.?"

"Oh well," Dugan said, "cameras of the Twenty-third Century and all that, you know."

"Could be," Jinx said. "Infra-red photography."

The little guy with the pipe bobbed his head as though he'd invented infra-red rays.

"Then," Dugan went on, "he went to the new Shakespeare's desk and gathered all the manuscript he could find, because in his time there were no surviving manuscripts from his hand. And now—here's the final surprise."

"Don't tell me," Jinx said. "He'd gone to the wrong apartment?"

Belcher said, "No, that's what I used."

"The surprise is," Dugan said, "that the research man is doing this work for his doctorate, and he knows he'll never get his degree because even coming back to the time of the new Shakespeare he can't gather enough material!"

Dugan looked around expectantly, but it'd laid an egg. There was an uncomfortable pause while Mallison mumbled bitterly to himself. Jinx was very unhappy

and tried to say complimentary things. I suppose he felt responsible.

Only I wasn't doing much supposing because I had the most peculiar sensation.

I believed Dugan's story.

I WAS thinking of that manuscript that'd blown out the window and I was trying to remember whether I'd used a paper weight to anchor it down. I was thinking of that gadget with buttons and I was realizing how this mysterious Dugan'd slipped from one tense to another—which is a thing all writers are conscious of and which began to have psychological import for me.

But the most convincing thing of all was how the others were looking at Dugan. Belcher was staring keenly from under his black eyebrows—Belcher, who wrote that sort of stuff and who should have been sophisticated. The little guy with the pipe was absolutely electrified. I knew it couldn't be the story because the story was lousy even for pulp.

Finally Dugan said, "That's all there is. How d'you like it?"

Mallison said, "It stinks!" and probed in his pockets for cigarettes.

"What was this new Shakespeare's name?" Belcher asked slowly.

Dugan said, "I haven't decided yet."

The little guy took the pipe out of his mouth. "What was the name of the story he took?"

Belcher said, "Yes, what was it?"

Dugan shrugged and smiled. "I haven't decided yet. It's not really important, is it?"

I said, "Dugan, when was that manuscript taken?"

I know it was foolish, but I had to ask—and none of the others seemed to think it peculiar. They leaned forward with me and waited for Dugan's answer. He looked at me, still smiling, and as I stared at those blurry eyes behind the vast thick

lenses, I began to shake with uncertainty. In all that blur there was a strangeness, a something—Oh, hell!

Suddenly Belcher began to laugh. He laughed so hard he overturned his wine bottle and we all had to scurry out of the wet. When it came time to sit down again, the spell was broken. Anyway, the luncheon was over.

When I got outside, Joey was standing there with Dugan. He was saying, "I'm afraid you haven't got much of a yarn there."

Dugan said, "I suppose so." Only he didn't seem put out. He shook hands with us cheerfully, said he hoped he'd see us again, and turned toward Broadway.

We all waved once, just to be polite, and then lost all interest. We turned on Joey to see if we could get the price of that lunch out of him, and we kidded Jinx about the lousy stories he picked up. Maybe it was because some of us felt a little self-conscious. I know I glanced over my shoulder and felt guilty when I noticed Dugan standing on the corner. He was watching us intently and adjusting his glasses with both hands.

Then I stopped haggling with Joey and turned around because—well, because it occurred to me that cameras of the Twenty-third Century could be so small you couldn't see them at that distance. All that flash and glitter couldn't be coming just from Dugan's glasses. Yes, brother, I turned around while Gray's *Elegy* went thrumming through my head.

It could be Belcher or Jinx or Mallison, or the little guy with the pipe, but I don't think so. I've got a pretty good idea who it is, because something suddenly occurred to me. I turned around to give Dugan a nice full-face and I waved . . .

Because one of those scraps of paper I thought had been blown in my window was marked very peculiarly in red: *Load Only in Total Darkness. Expires Dec. 18, 2241.*