

Science Fiction QUARTERLY

ALL
STORIES
NEW

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor*
MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*

DOROTHY B. SEADOR, *Asso. Ed.*
MARIE A. PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

Cover by Ed Emsh

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The ultimate in audience — participation shows!



There were one hundred percent genuine, hungry carnivores around.

YOU RISK YOUR LIFE

by Joseph Slotkin

WHEN THE Broadcasters' Association of Democracy, Inc. telecast its first nationwide surgi-drama in color, Pat Price, who was watching the screen across the mahogany in the *Wish-A-Wile Bar* on Wilshire near Vermont, got a brainstorm that came close to revolution-

izing the scientific outlook, and certainly *did* make show business history.

Pat Price was one of the sharpest promoters in the Hollywood public relations game. He was in the Wilshire Boulevard bar mooning around for inspiration for a kinescoped show he was building up into a package, when

he saw the sheeted, anesthetized body as the telelens saw it.

Then he saw it as his miasmatic Muse saw it.

It was a simple program, really—Actually, one of the few "public service" broadcasts the B. A. D., Inc. had room for, after it had sold all its top time spots to agencies procuring for deodorants, laxatives, diuretics, anti-histamines and palliatives.

True, the B. A. D. secretly hoped to secure a tie-up with a manufacturer of surgical equipment, or of a line of hospital supplies, as a result of this surgi-drama. Ostensibly, though, that night the telecamera was focussed upon that brilliantly-lit hospital surgery amphitheatre and its Stanislavskian-attitudinized doctors, nurses, and orderlies, purely in order "to demonstrate to the public at large the immense strides our modern medical men are making in protecting the health and lives of *the pee-pul!*"

At least, that was what the grinning announcer with the Panchro Number Seven smeared on his face was saying.

Pat didn't see the possibilities—the gigantic, beautiful possibilities of this form of entertainment—immediately. As he sipped his Martini, he was as curious as any of the other imbibers about the way those white-clad and green-clad figures would perform upon the "star" of the program: a small, exposed square of pale pink skin, shaven to an embarrassing nakedness, and filling the entire twenty inches of the cathode screen for a moment as the first incision was made.

It happened so quickly. The deft, slim surgical hands, those latex-clad fingers as sensitive as the tendrils of a tropical vine, made that first swift stroke, and a thin pencil line of red was drawn for a moment on the pink-white square, to be erased immediately by other lightning tendrils.

But as the flap of skin was drawn back, and the pathological organ ex-

posed—as catheters, clamps, sponges, forceps, sutures and scalpels darted in and out of that full-color picture tube, Pat lifted his olive out by the toothpick, lifted it up. As he opened his mouth, his eyes strayed from the tele-screen, glancing across the bar, and the olive eased off the trembling pine splinter, dropped and rolled along the mahogany like a marble down a sewer.

He saw an enthralled audience. A "hypnotized house". The fat man next to him was unconscious of the fact that his cigar had leaked ashes into his Scotch, and his thick lips drooled unblottedly onto the plaid vest rising and falling rapidly with his bulging midsection. A woman with a red feather in her hat was gripping the feather tightly, and rhythmically pulling it back and forth, her eyes narrowed to thin slits as she watched the telescreen.

Even the slot-machine-faced broad-shouldered bartender, who was in the act of pulling the cork from a bottle of rare vintage continued the circling motion of his corkscrew; continued it until the metal tip had gone clear through the cork and was twirling brightly above the lapping liquid.

The surgi-drama was over quickly, and the camera panned to the chief surgeon's face for a closeup as he was removing his mask, then dollied back to reveal the attendants wheeling the patient from the green-walled room. The grinning panchro was back again, in his unctious, "Public Service" announcement promising more of the same the following week.

But Pat Price, his sense of promotion clicking like a Geiger Counter, had already left the bar.

PAT WAS A persuasive character, and Osborne Associates were ripe for a change. There had been too many audience-participation shows that were losing their precious Hooper-ratings—despite the immense giveaways and the increasing audacity of

the "stunts" perpetrated upon the willing "participants".

As Pat had said to Ollie Osborne, "Ollie, what have you got to lose? A percentage? What has happened to the agency business when great geniuses like yourself refuse to gamble a percentage?"

"What has the network got to lose? Its license? Remember those hearings back in 1941? The FCC's Report on Chain Broadcasting? The suits? How long did it take—remember?—from the time the first report came out, to the Supreme Court decision?"

While Ollie fingered his Countess Maritza tie, Pat leaned over the desk and held up four Martini-stained fingers. "Four years, brother. Think that over; four years to grow fat on."

Ollie, who was already tipping the scales at a modest 280, protested, albeit weakly, since the genius gimmick had had its effect. "But how we gonna get this thing started, Pat? And who's gonna submit to gettin' the works like you say—?"

Pat chidingly dug his fingers through the padding of the Bronzini jacket and kneaded the padding of Ollie's unbronzed shoulder. "Ollie, what was the last stunt pulled on the Lardo soap show last Tuesday? Remember what Harry Gatling, the m.c., did to that couple from Nebraska? Tied 'em together with strips of raw cowhide and had 'em wait for a Sunset bus during the noon rush. Remember what happened when those hunks of hide began to shrink in the sun?"

Ollie's shoulder wriggled protestingly under the promoter's clutch, but his plump cheeks began to crease into a broad smile.

A look of triumph stole over Pat's face. "And they weren't even married, remember?"

They both hesitated then, and looked at each other. Both were remembering the headlines in the papers the next morning, and the sensation

of the final court decision: *Since the plaintiffs freely and of their own accord, and solely for the purpose of self-enjoyment as in a game, gave their consent freely and without coercion to engage in the aforementioned activities, and furthermore attached their signatures to a lawful waiver of responsibility, fully aware of the possible outcome of their venture into such game, we find that there has been no liability on the part of the defendants, and hereby find for the defendants, whom we adjudge free of liability and not guilty of the charges as brought. Case dismissed.*

That decision had made history for show business. If knife throwers in night clubs, whip snappers at fairs, stunt skaters in theatres, wire walkers in circuses, fire throwers at outings, had all been afraid to call for audience volunteers before, they now found their fears completely allayed.

And *The Nation's Business* magazine published a little article about two Korean veterans who had snowballed a small G. I. business loan into a sizable fortune, printing the most weasel-worded release-forms ever smacked between the plates of a Kluge Press. *Time*, then *Newsweek*, followed suit.

For a time, however, there had been a tendency for studio volunteers to hang back when the "master of cemeteries", as he was sometimes now playfully called, asked for participants.

But the public's memory being a short one, show business and television were soon back on their feet—even though more and more of the "volunteers" found themselves off theirs.

SO WHAT WAS Pat Price's proposition to Ollie Osborne? He hadn't begun by outlining his scheme immediately. Instead, like a wise promoter, he had started by giving a brief history of what it was that made for good show business:

Whether it was "good theatre", with Judith Anderson displaying her hands red with the blood of her two slain sons to a delightedly gasping modern audience; an assortment of ancient Romans chewing contentedly on the first century equivalent to hot dogs as they were "wowed" by the panorama of disemboweled martyred victims and bloody-pawed lions; knights-in-armor delivering the coup-de-grace for some giggling maiden's sleeve; Dionysians slitting the throat of a goat in a Greek amphitheatre; John Wayne in "The Sands of Iwo Jima"; or the cozy little parties of the Spanish Inquisitors and the Hitlerian hordes in their Dachaus or Nurembergs, the prime element seemed to be excitement, very liberally mixed with blood—preferably someone else's.

"And what makes you feel so good when you hear the traffic accident statistics, complete with details? What sells a million copies of a tabloid better than a good axe murder? How come the pix mags play up the Katyn Forest massacres so much? Aristotle's 'catharsis of the emotions'? Serutan, brother, Serutan!"

Ollie Osborne had agreed, although he had frowned at the mention of Hitlerian hordes, and at the Katyn Forest pitch, had nervously fingered the American Legion button in his lapel.

"So you've got to have something with guts in it. That's what's wrong with show business, with television today," Pat hammered his point home.

"Nothing but a copy of oldtime radio shows, with m.c.'s making fun of some bald-headed guy when a pretty girl in tights comes out and sits on his lap, and his wife is in the audience. Sure, they make fools out of people, and the audience thinks it's a boofola. But they're getting tired of the slapstick."

He paused, and leaned over the desk, eyes narrowed. "They want blood."

While Ollie shuddered, Price told

him of what he had just seen on the video screen at the bar on Wilshire Boulevard.

"Sure," Ollie agreed. "A surgical operation, that's a natural. First time the FCC's agreed to a public performance. But that's public service, my friend. How are you goin'—?"

"Can't you just see it?" Pat waved his arms. "A big arena—maybe the Los Angeles Coliseum, the Pasadena Rose Bowl, or the Hollywood Bowl—thousands of people, there to pay tribute to the prime quality of American enterprise and bravery that has made this country what it is today! Brother, if the FCC doesn't eat that up, I'll eat your cigar!"

"Why, we'll get a medal—a nice gold one! Maybe even a Pulitzer Prize for helping to develop a greater and better living American."

Ollie Osborne had reached for another cigar, and at the word "living" he clipped off the panetela's end. "Sounds good. How does it pay off?"

"There'll be a million sponsors standing in line to sign up when they find out we've got a program idea that's the first new twist since the time that radio m.c. put a ladies' corset on over his clothes—even greater than the time Dooly Forbes emptied a lady's pocketbook before the telecamera and found she was carrying a .38 to kill her hubby's sweetie, and that sweetie turned out to be that gal who sang on the show.

"Remember how the camera panned away from Dooly, the lady and the thrush? And all you heard was the shot and the screams? Brother, this will be better, believe me."

A few more references to Ollie's "genius", and a program format was born. Soon after, Lardo Soap announced a new, immense teleshow, with the premiere at the newly-constructed Lardo Soap Coliseum.

Details of the show were classified "Top Secret", because Pat Price, who was working on the promotion, fig-

ured it would be more of a sensation when the show did finally break.

HE WAS right. The night of the premiere, searchlights played over a vast audience. Each lady had been presented with a free orchid corsage, and each gentleman with a carnation. The tele-announcer stepped before a battery of the new cold lights, and to a hundred and eighty million people all over America announced in full color: "Lardo soap, the soap that gets under your skin and stays there, presents the first of a new series entitled, *You Risk Your Life!*"

There was a stir in the audience. But the commercials had already begun, and the guests settled back as the announcer, in attitude of prayerful reverence with a tense, devoted, over-anxious look on his panchromatized face—*d e m a n d e d*, begged, pleaded, whined like a puppy prostrating itself for a pat on its wriggling posterior, for the womanhood of America, yes, of the world, not to smell bad when it was so easy to have the appeal of a Turkish harem with Lardo Soap, every ingredient fresh from nature itself.

As he said the sacred words, he involuntarily clutched his checked jacket over the heart, his head bowed slightly in a moment of meditative devotion. The watching audience saw four girls in bathing suits who were singing the commercial, climax the jingle with something that old-time radio could never master: four pronounced pelvic jolts toward the four corners of the world, signifying that Lardo Soap covered the earth.

The time had come for the unmasking of the program's format. There had been volunteers picked earlier from the studio audience, and now here they were, determined to do or die. Yes, to do or—and the announcer paused dramatically; it may have been the slight chill in the Los Angeles smog, but he pronounced the word with such grave portent—*die*.

Then he introduced the master of ceremonies for the new show. It was Dooly Forbes, and there may have been a few who remembered the little drama in one of Dooly Forbes' earlier shows which had ended with a shot and a scream. A real shot, and a real scream. Those few leaned forward a trifle uneasily, a little more expectant, for Hollywood type casting was in the blood of the audience, too.

What happened next is, of course, video history. There had been ten contestants. The show began in a relaxed manner, but with plenty of snap. A few buckets of ice water fell; a few pies were thrown.

Pat Price, sitting in tuxedoed splendor with Ollie Osborne in the sponsor's booth, nodded knowingly to the agency man, indicating the slightly bored expression of the thousands in the audience. Ollie nodded back, then raised his right hand, holding his middle finger over his index finger in the universal gesture of "here goes nothing but here's hoping."

The huge, movable platform of the Coliseum's stage began to slide. The audience gasped. Revealed was a reproduction of an ancient amphitheatre at one end of which were five snarling lions and two growling tigers, full-grown, hungry, savage, menacing—but caged.

After the first shock, when the audience realized the beasts were caged, it settled back to enjoy the spectacle, at least, for the scenic designers had done an inspired job, and the lighting was superb.

Now, Dooly Fumble was saying, America would prove what made it great. Just as in days of old, knights were sent on dangerous missions by their lords to prove their bravery and gain the hand of their lady loves or some other sought-after prize, these volunteers were to go after a prize much greater than any might imagine—but the dangers were real, and there

was no telling what the consequences would be.

ANY SCHOOLCHILD knows the details of that first program and what followed.

There are even line drawings in some of the schoolbooks of those first contestants (all photographs were censored), as they sought, one by one, to climb the artificial crag upon which was the key which meant that the winner would receive one million dollars in cash.

And the sound of Dooly pulling the rope which released the savage lions and tigers from their cages is still known as the squeak that was heard around the world—for someone had forgotten to oil the pulleys, or perhaps it was just another bit of inspired showmanship.

The lawsuits, initiated by the survivors of the deceased volunteers, are history, as are the decisions of the courts. Pat Price had been right again. In each case: *We cannot but find for the defendants, since there was willful participation with full knowledge of the possible consequences, as the signatures on the attached releases attest...* Case dismissed.

Of course the Federal Communications Commission started an inquiry immediately, as Pat had known they would. By the end of the first year, 97 witnesses were introduced and heard—their evidence filled 8713 pages; 707 exhibits were introduced; the testimony and exhibits filled 29 volumes.

The stockholders of Lardo Soap Co., Inc. & Ltd. were delighted, that first year, at the announcement that there would be a return of two hundred per cent of their investments. Nine agencies attempted shows in imitation of *You Risk Your Life*, and up to the time of the show which put an end to the "Blood Cycle" as it was dubbed by Variety, the B.A.D. had sewed up every national sponsor in the country, merely by promising a

chance at the option of their juiciest property.

The show which put an end to the "Blood Cycle" was one of the *Risk Your Life* series, and to tell the truth, Pat Price had already figured out that this might be the last show.

"Maybe it's too big," he told Ollie Osborne after the conference on the coming thirteen-week cycle.

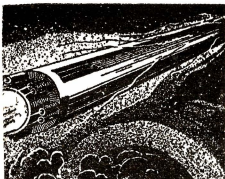
"So if it's too big, we drop it; what have we got to lose?"

Pat agreed. The very next day he had his interview with the head of the Atomic Energy Commission. It was very short, since he had done the field work months before. Or, rather, a little, stoop-shouldered, hollow-chested and big-browed recent graduate of the UCLA Drama Department had done the field work, aided by a Mark IV type computer and two Geiger Counters.

Pat knew the world needed energy desperately, since the coal, petroleum and uranium supplies were near exhaustion; and if this public need could be linked with Pat's promotion scheme it might get the B.A.D. out of a bad spot. The "Blood Cycle" cast was coming up in the Supreme Court after seven years, and a decision was expected any month now. If they could link *You Risk Your Life* with "public service" then all might be as before—or, at any rate, all might be forgiven.

The scheme depended only on the consent of the A.E.C. head. And Pat, being a persuasive person, found the rather kindly, bespectacled man with the drooping mustache and sagging shoulders a very easy prey for his idea.

AGAIN THERE was little buildup for the night of the performance. There was a double reason this time. "Top Secret" was stamped across the folders containing all written material to be used in *You Risk Your Life*. The F. B. I. had given everyone concerned, including the floor manager, a



thorough loyalty check. Armed guards and quiet, unobtrusive, wiry little men in Brooks Brothers suits scrutinized everyone entering or leaving the Osborne Agency.

For this one program alone, all the Hollywood writers were relieved of the assignment, and several promising young graduates of the Pasadena Playhouse who had had a year's briefing at Caltech were assigned.

The program was again scheduled for the Lardo Soap Coliseum—a greatly enlarged Coliseum, with a huge back wall screening some gigantic object around which armed guards patrolled in twenty-four hour shifts.

Again the brilliant searchlights played over the audience, beflowered as before with free orchids and carnations, and generous samples of Lardo Soap had been passed out to everyone by that year's Rose Parade queen, who was wearing a fascinating ensemble concocted to look like a batch of Lardo Soap bubbles.

Again the announcer made his cadaverous entrance, gave his Gordon Moore's English Toothpaste grin, and then his sepulchral announcement: "You Risk Your Life!"

Ollie and Pat watched from the glassed-in sponsor's booth as the program got off to a slow start with a few volunteers being sacrificed to the old chestnut of hunting for a million dollars in a forest full of lions and tigers, or swimming across a crocodile-filled pool, or wrestling an eighteen-foot python. Ollie nodded again, as he

and Pat watched the faces of the spectators become masked with boredom.

Then Dooly Forbes stepped forward as a blood-red curtain swept across the scene of a contestant being squashed by a Grizzly bear. He held up his hands, and his usually-comic face took on the almost religious look usually reserved for the sacred words, "Lardo Soap."

"Tonight, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "we have an event that is truly out of this world. But first—" and he introduced the sagging-shouldered head of the A.E.C. While the audience fidgeted, there followed a brief interview.

It was revealed that the earth's resources were almost depleted; that energy from atomic piles might have been possible, but there just wasn't enough fissionable material left.

Several of the ladies in the rear started to get up and head for the Sepulveda exit, but stopped as the explanation went on. Of course, everyone knew that the sun's energy came from the continued atomic disintegration of its own matter in a perpetual hydrogen explosion. There was a possibility that the sun itself was a source of energy for the earth—if a way could be found to link hands, as it were, with the sun itself!

The audience stopped fidgeting, and the ladies returned to their seats as sag-shoulders said that perhaps it was even possible that the sun itself was not unavailable, but that the only way to find out would be to try to get to the sun and establish a base.

At those words, on cue, the giant wall in the rear slowly began to sink into the earth. The audience tensed. There was a scream. Two men swallowed their free cigars, and four women fainted.

REVEALED was a gigantic rocket ship, on a platform, ready for launching. Sag-shoulders turned to

Dooly, who took up the gauntlet. This ship, he said, could make the trip to the sun, since it was powered with atomic energy. But once there, if it could get back, the machines inside would automatically have set up the link the A. E. C. needed to draw energy from the sun practically forever.

The chances were— "What would you say, professor?"

The old man peered over his spectacles. "About ten per cent."

"That's what my agent gets, and he's satisfied," Dooly cracked, and the tension was broken, as the audience laughed.

Then the volunteer chosen from the studio audience came out from behind a screen. He was dressed in a shimmering, helmeted space suit, designed by Adrian and decorated with the autographs of two thousand science-fiction fans from the world's fan clubs.

It was explained that the volunteer was to ride in the ship; when it landed, he would wait ten minutes while the machines in the nose did their work. Then when the ship had automatically turned about, he would press one lever.

As soon as he pressed the lever, the ship would rise up from the sun, and return to Earth. Unless the sun burned him up before then.

But what a glorious prize he would receive if he succeeded! Five million dollars in cash, and as much Lardo Soap products as he needed for the rest of his life.

While the audience watched, the telecameras swung about, focussed on the giant ship, and the small figure clambering into it. The figure waved clumsily in its fancy space suit, then vanished into the metal giant. A cover clamped shut. Counting slowly, dropping a cake of Lardo Soap into a gold-plated dishpan for each second, Dooly started backwards from ten.

"Minus nine, minus eight, minus seven..."

In Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, a dairy farmer made garbled sounds to his wife, clutched at his heart and pitched forward in front of his Silvertone, as the telescreen was filled with a blinding flash of unearthly light, and the loudspeaker shrilled like a banshee.

The giant ship rose from the earth, majestically, in a beautiful arc, and headed into space. The millions watching saw a speck dwindling among the stars.

The next day, astronomers at Palomar perceived a disturbance of mild proportions, too infinitesimal to be described as a sunspot, upon the surface of the sun. That was all; the incident occurred around noon.

The volunteer never came back.

It was too much of an anticlimax. But it had been the last of the current thirteen weeks of the "Risk Your Life" series. The FCC had been awarded a favorable decision by the Supreme Court, and had issued a restraining order against the B. A. D.

And, as Pat Price pointed out to Ollie Osborne at the bar on Wilshire Boulevard that night, the "Blood Cycle" was just about wrung dry of Audience Appeal, anyhow.

"You can milk a good thing just so far," Pat philosophized. Then he stopped, and again a Martini olive dropped onto the polished mahogany and rolled like a marble along a sewer.

"Which gives me an idea for a switcheroo. "From Blood to Milk"! How do you like that?" He grasped Ollie's lapel and tugged gently.

"Now listen to this, will this get the full approval of the FCC, or will this get the full approval of the FCC?"

He leaned forward and whispered, for Hollywood pirates were known to frequent these bars on Wilshire Boulevard. "As a *public service*, the Lardo Soap Company presents: 'A Mother Every Minute!'"