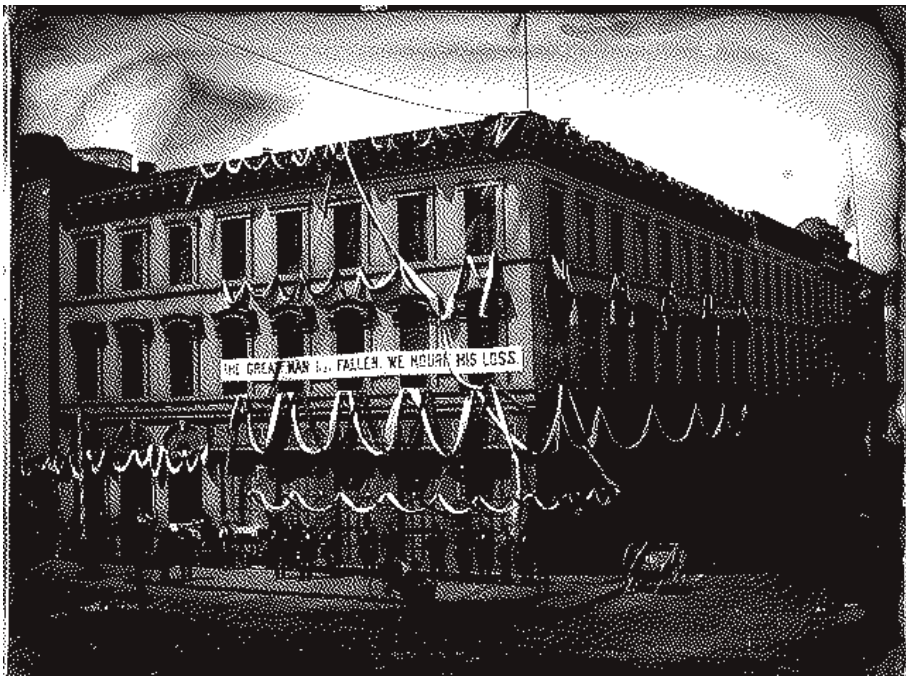

The Ambulance Made Two Trips

By Murray Leinster

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION, APRIL 1960

THE AMBULANCE MADE TWO TRIPS

First published: Astounding Science Fiction, April 1960.

Cover: [The Great Man Has Fallen], Robert H. Vance, 1856, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This story is in the public domain. Copy it, print it, pass it on. More at gaslight.neocities.org.

A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald found a package before his door that morning, along with the milk. He took it inside and opened it. It was a remarkably fine meerschaum pipe, such as the sergeant had longed irrationally to own for many years. There was no message with it, nor any card. He swore bitterly.

On his way to Headquarters he stopped in at the orphanage where he usually left such gifts. On other occasions he had left Scotch, a fly-rod, sets of very expensive dry-flies, and dozens of pairs of silk socks. The female head of the orphanage accepted the gift with gratitude.

"I don't suppose," said Fitzgerald morbidly, "that any of your kids will smoke this pipe, but I want to be rid of it and for somebody to know." He paused. "Are you gettin' many other gifts on this order, from other cops? Like you used to?"

The head of the orphanage admitted that the total had dropped off. Fitzgerald went on his way, brooding. He'd been getting anonymous gifts like this ever since Big Jake Connors moved into town with bright ideas. Big Jake denied that he was the generous party. He expressed complete ignorance. But Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald knew better. The gifts were having their effect upon the Force. There was a police lieutenant whose wife had received a mink stole out of thin air and didn't speak to her husband for ten days when he gave it to the Community Drive. He wouldn't do a thing like that again! There was another sergeant--not Fitzgerald--who'd found a set of four new white-walls tires on his doorstep, and was ostracized by his teen-age offspring when he turned them into the police Lost and Found. Fitzgerald gave his gifts to an orphanage, with a fine disregard of their inappropriateness. But he gloomily suspected that a great many of his friends were weakening. The presents weren't bribes. Big Jake not only didn't ask acknowledgments of them, he denied that he was the giver. But inevitably the recipients of bounty with the morning milk felt less indignation about what Big Jake was doing and wasn't getting caught at.

At Headquarters, Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald found a memo. A memo was routine, but the contents of this one were remarkable. He scowled at it. He made phone calls, checking up on the more unlikely parts of it. Then he went to make the regular investigation.

When he reached his destination he found it an unpretentious frame building with a sign outside: "Elite Cleaners and Dyers." There were no plate-glass windows. There was nothing show-off about it. It was just a medium-sized, modestly up-to-date establishment to which lesser tailoring shops would send work for wholesale treatment. From some place in the back, puffs of steam shot out at irregular intervals. Somebody worked a steampresser on garments of one sort or another. There was a rumbling hum, as of an oversized washing-machine in operation. All seemed tranquil.

The detective went in the door. Inside there was that peculiar, professional-cleaning-fluid smell, which is not as alarming as gasoline or carbon tetrachloride, but nevertheless discourages the idea of striking a match. In the outer office a man wrote placidly on one blue-paper strip after another. He had an air of pleasant self-confidence. He glanced up briefly, nodded, wrote on three more blue-paper strips, and then gathered them all up and put them in a particular place. He turned to Fitzgerald.

"Well?"

Fitzgerald showed his shield. The man behind the counter nodded again.

"My name's Fitzgerald," grunted the detective. "The boss?"

"Me," said the man behind the counter. He was cordial. "My name's Brink. You've got something to talk to me about?"

"That's the idea," said Fitzgerald. "A coupla questions."

Brink jerked a thumb toward a door.

"Come in the other office. Chairs there, and we can sit down. What's the trouble? A complaint of some kind?"

* * *

He ushered Fitzgerald in before him. The detective found himself scowling. He'd have felt better with a different kind of man to ask questions of. This Brink looked untroubled and confident. It didn't fit the situation. The inner office looked equally matter-of-fact. No.... There was the shelf with the usual books of reference on textiles and such items as a cleaner-and-dyer might need to have on hand. But there were some others: "*Basic Principles of Psi*", "*Modern Psychokinetic Theories*." There was a small, mostly-plastic machine

on another shelf. It had no obvious function. It looked as if it had some unguessable but rarely-used purpose. There was dust on it.

"What's the complaint?" repeated Brink. "Hm-m-m. A cigar?"

"No," said Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald. "I'll light my pipe." He did, extracting tobacco and a pipe that was by no means a meerschaum from his pocket. He puffed and said: "A guy who works for you caught himself on fire this mornin'. It happened on a bus. Very peculiar. The guy's name was Jacaro."

Brink did not look surprised.

"What happened?"

"It's kind of a strange thing," said Fitzgerald. "Accordin' to the report he's ridin' this bus, readin' his paper, when all of a sudden he yells an' jumps up. His pants are on fire. He gets 'em off fast and chucks them out the bus window. He's blistered some but not serious, and he clams up--but good--when the ambulance doc puts salve on him. He won't say a word about what happened or how. They hadda call a ambulance because he couldn't go huntin' a doc with no pants on."

"But he's not burned badly?" asked Brink.

"No. Blisters, yes. Scared, yes. And mad as hell. But he'll get along. It's too bad. We've pinched him three times on suspicion of arson, but we couldn't make it stick. Something ought to happen to make that guy stop playin' with matches--only this wasn't matches."

"I'm glad he's only a little bit scorched," said Brink. He considered. "Did he say anything about his eyelids twitching this morning? I don't suppose he would."

The detective stared.

"He didn't. Say aren't you curious about how he came to catch on fire? Or what his pants smelled of that burned so urgent? Or where he expected burnin' to start instead of his pants?"

Brink thought it over. Then he shook his head.

"No. I don't think I'm curious."

The detective looked at him long and hard.

"O.K.," he said dourly. "But there's something else. Day before yesterday there was a car accident opposite here. Remember?"

"I wasn't here at the time," said Brink.

"There's a car rolling along the street outside," said the detective. "There's some hoods in it--guys who do dirty work for Big Jake Connors. I can't prove a thing, but it looks like they had ideas about this place. About thirty yards up the street a sawed-off shotgun goes off. Very peculiar. It sends a load of buckshot through a side window of your place."

Brink said with an air of surprise: "Oh! That must have been what broke the window!"

"Yeah," said Fitzgerald. "But the interesting thing is that the flash of the shotgun burned all the hair off the head of the guy that was doin' the drivin'. It didn't scratch him, just scorched his hair off. It scared him silly."

Brink grinned faintly, but he said pleasantly: "Tsk. Tsk. Tsk."

"He jams down the accelerator and rams a telephone pole," pursued Fitzgerald. "There's four hoods in that car, remember, and every one of 'em's got a police record you could paper a house with. And they've got four sawed-off shotguns and a tommy-gun in the back seat. They're all laid out cold when the cops arrive."

"I was wondering about the window," said Brink, pensively.

"It puzzles you, eh?" demanded the detective ironically. "Could you've figured it out that they were goin' to shoot up your plant to scare the people who work for you so they'll quit? Did you make a guess they intended to drive you outta business like they did the guy that had this place before you?"

"That's an interesting theory," said Brink encouragingly.

Detective Fitzgerald nodded.

"There's one thing more," he said formidably. "You got a delivery truck. You keep it in a garage back yonder. Yesterday you sent it to a garage for inspection of brakes an' lights an' such."

"Yes," said Brink. "I did. It's not back yet. They were busy. They'll call me when it's ready."

Fitzgerald snorted.

"They'll call you when the bomb squad gets through checkin' it! When the guys at the garage lifted the hood they started runnin'. Then they hollered copper. There was a bomb in there!"

Brink seemed to try to look surprised. He only looked interested.

"Two sticks of dynamite," the detective told him grimly, "wired up to go off when your driver turned on the ignition. He did but it didn't. But we got a police force in this town! We know there's racketeerin' bein' practiced. We know there's crooked stuff goin' on. We even got mighty good ideas who's doin' it. But we ain't been able to get anything on anybody. Not yet. Nobody's been willin' to talk, so far. But you--"

The telephone rang stridently. Brink looked at the instrument and shrugged. He answered.

"Hello.... No, Mr. Jacaro isn't in today. He didn't come to work. On the way downtown his pants caught on fire--"

Fitzgerald guessed that the voice at the other end of the line said "*What?*" in, an explosive manner.

Brink said matter-of-factly: "I said his pants caught on fire. It was probably something he was bringing here to burn the plant down with--a fire bomb. I don't think he's to blame that it went off early. He probably started out with the worst possible intentions, but something happened...." He listened and said: "But he didn't chicken! He couldn't come to work and plant a fire bomb to set fire to the place!... I know it must be upsetting to have things like that automobile accident and my truck not blowing up and now Jacaro's pants instead of my business going up in flames. But I told you--"

He stopped and listened. Once he grinned.

"Wait!" he said after a moment. He covered the transmitter and turned to Fitzgerald. "What hospital is Jacaro in?"

Fitzgerald said sourly: "He wasn't burned bad. Just blistered. They lent him some pants and he went home cussing."

"Thanks," said Brink. He uncovered the transmitter. "He went home," he told the instrument. "You can ask him about it. In a way I'm sure it wasn't his fault. I'm quite sure his eyelids twitched when he started out. I think the men who drove the car the other day had twitching eyelids, too. You should ask--"

The detective heard muted noises, as it a man shouted into a transmitter somewhere.

Brink said briskly: "No, I don't see any reason to change my mind.... No.... I know it was luck, if you want to put it that way, but....

No. I wouldn't advise that! Please take my advice about when your eyelid twitches--"

Fitzgerald heard the crash of the receiver hung up at some distant place. Brink rubbed his ear. He turned back.

"Hm-m-m," he said. "Your pipe's gone out."

It was. Sergeant Fitzgerald puffed ineffectually. Brink reached out his finger and tapped the bowl of the detective's pipe. Instantly fragrant smoke filled the detective's mouth. He sputtered.

"Now.... where were we?" asked Brink.

"Who was that?" demanded Fitzgerald ferociously. "That was Big Jake Connors!"

"You may be right." Brink told him. "He's never exactly given me his name. He just calls up every so often and talks nonsense."

"What sort of nonsense?"

"He wants to be a partner in this business," said Brink without emotion. "He's been saying that things will happen to it otherwise. I don't believe it. Anyhow nothing's happened so far."

* * *

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald tried at one and the same time to roar and to swallow. He accomplished neither. He put his finger in the bowl of his pipe. He jerked it out, scorched.

"Look!" he said almost hoarsely, "I was tellin' you when the phone rang! We got a police force here in town! This's what we've been tryin' to get! You come along with me to Headquarters an' swear to a complaint--"

Brink said interestedly: "Why?"

"That guy Big Jake Connors!" raged the detective. "That's why! Tryin' to threaten you into givin' him a share in your business! Tryin' to burn it down or blow it up when you won't! He was just a small-town crook, once. He went to the big town an' came back with ideas. He's usin' 'em!"

Brink looked at him expectantly.

"He started a beer business," said the detective bitterly. "Simultaneous other beer dealers started havin' trouble. Empty kegs smashed. Trucks broke down. Drivers in fights. They hadda go outta business!"

"What did the cops do?" asked Brink.

"They listened to their wives!" snarled Fitzgerald. "They begun to find little grabbag packages in the mail an' with the milk. Fancy perfume. Tricky stockin's. Fancy underwear they shoulda been ashamed for anybody to know they had it on underneath. The cops weren't bribed, but their wives liked openin' the door of a mornin' an' findin' charmin' little surprises."

"Ah," said Brink.

"Then there were juke boxes," went on the detective. "He went in that business--an' trouble started. People'd drive up to a beer joint, go in, get in a scuffle an'--bingo! The juke box smashed. Always the juke box. Always a out-of-town customer. Half the juke boxes in town weren't workin', on an average. But the ones that were workin' were always Big Jake's. Presently he had the juke-box business to himself."

Brink nodded, somehow appreciatively.

"Then it was cabs," said Fitzgerald. "A lot of cops felt bad about that. But their wives wouldn't be happy if anything happened to dear Mr. Big Jake who denied that he gave anybody anything, so it was all right to use that lovely perfume.... Cabs got holes in their radiators. They got sand in their oil systems. They had blowouts an' leaks in brake-fluid lines. Cops' wives were afraid Big Jake would get caught. But he didn't. He started insurin' cabs against that kinda accident. Now every cab-driver pays protection-money for what they call insurance--or else. An' cops' wives get up early, bright-eyed, to see what Santa Claus left with the milk."

"You seem," said Brink with a grin, "to hint that this Big Jake is ... well ... dishonest."

"Dishonest!" Fitzgerald's face was purplish, from many memories of wrongs. "There was a guy named Burdock who owned this business before you. Y'know what happened to him?"

"Yes," said Brink. "He's my brother-in-law. Connors or somebody insisted on having a share of the business and threatened dreadful things if he didn't. He didn't. So acid got spilled on clothes. Machinery got smashed. Once a whole delivery-truck load of clothes disappeared and my brother-in-law had to pay for any number of suits and dresses. It got him down. He's recovering from the nervous

strain now, and my sister ... eh, asked me to help out. So I offered to take over. He warned me I'd have the same trouble."

"And you've got it!" fumed the detective. "But anyhow you'll make a complaint. We'll get out some warrants, and we'll have somethin' to go on--"

"But nothing's happened to complain about," said Brink, quite reasonably. "One broken window's not worth a fuss."

"But somethin's goin' to happen!" insisted the detective. "That guy Big Jake is poison! He's takin' over the whole town, bit by bit! You've been lucky so far, but your luck could run out--"

Brink shook his head.

"No-o-o," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm grateful to you, Mr. Fitzgerald, but I have a special kind of luck. I won't tell you about it because you wouldn't believe but--but I can give you some of it. If you don't mind, I will."

He went to the slightly dusty, partly-plastic machine. On its shelf were some parts of metal, and some of transparent plastic, and some grayish, granular substance it was hard to identify. There was an elaborate diagram of something like an electronic circuit inside, but it might have been a molecular diagram from organic chemistry. Brink made an adjustment and pressed firmly on a special part of the machine, which did not yield at all. Then he took a slip of plastic out of a slot in the bottom.

"You can call this a good-luck charm," he said pleasantly, "or a talisman. Actually it's a psionic unit. One like it works very well, for me. Anyhow there's no harm in it. Just one thing. If your eyelids start to twitch, you'll be headed for danger or trouble or something unpleasant. So if they do twitch, stop and be very, very careful. Please!"

He handed the bit of plastic to Fitzgerald, who took it without conscious volition.

Then Brink said briskly: "If there isn't anything else--"

"You won't swear out a warrant against Big Jake?" demanded Fitzgerald bitterly.

"I haven't any reason to," said Brink amiably. "I'm doing all right. He hasn't harmed me. I don't think he will."

"O.K.!" said the detective bitterly. "Have it your way! But he's got it in for you an' he's goin' to keep tryin' until he gets you! An' whether

you like it or not, you're goin' to have some police protection as soon as I can set it up."

He stamped out of the cleaning-and-drying plant. Automatically, he put the bit of plastic in his pocket. He didn't know why. He got into his car and drove downtown. As he drove, he looked suspiciously at his pipe. He fumed. As he fumed, he swore. He did not like mysteries. But there was no mystery about his dislike for Big Jake Connors. He turned aside from the direct route to Headquarters to indulge it. He drove to a hospital where four out-of-town hoods had been carried two days before. He marched inside and up to a second-floor corridor door with a uniformed policeman seated outside it.

* * *

"Hm-m-m. Donnelly," he growled. "How about those guys?"

"Not so good," said the patrolman. "They're gettin' better."

"They would," growled Fitzgerald.

"A lawyer's been to see 'em twice," said the patrolman. "He's comin' back after lunch."

"He would," grunted the detective.

"They want out," said the cop.

"I'm not surprised," said Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald.

He went into the sick room. There were four patients in it, none of them looking exactly like gentle invalids. There were two broken noses of long-ago dates, three cauliflower ears, and one scar of a kind that is not the result of playing lawn tennis. Two were visibly bandaged, and the others adhesive-taped. All of them looked at Fitzgerald without cordiality.

"Well, well, well!" he said. "You fellas still here!" There was silence. "In union there is strength," said Fitzgerald. "As long as you stay in one room everybody's sure the others haven't started rattin'. Right?"

One of the four snarled silently at him.

"It was just a accident," pursued the detective. "You four guys are ridin' along peaceable, merrily takin' the air, when quite inadvertently one of you almost blows the head off of another, and he's so astonished at there bein' a gun in the car that he wrecks it. And when they get you guys in the hospital there ain't one of you knows

anything about four sawed-off shotguns and a tommy gun in the car with you. Strange! Strange! Strange!"

Four faces regarded him with impassive dislike. The bandaged ones were prettier than the ones that weren't.

"That tommy gun business," explained Fitzgerald, "is a federal affair. It's against Fed law to carry 'em around loaded. And your friend Big Jake hasn't been leavin' presents on the White House steps. Y'know, you guys could be in trouble!"

Three pairs of eyes and an odd one--the other was hidden under a bandage--stared at him stonily.

"Y'see," explained Fitzgerald again, "Big Jake's slipped up. He hasn't realized it yet. Its my little secret. A week ago I thought he had me licked. But somethin' happened, and today I felt like I had to come around and congratulate you fellas. You got a break! You're gonna have free board and lodging for years to come! I wanted to be the first to tell you!"

He beamed at them and went out. Outside, his expression changed. He said bitterly to the cop at the door: "I bet they beat this rap!"

He went downstairs and out of the hospital. He started around the building to his car.

His eyelid twitched. It twitched again. It began to quiver and flutter continuously. Fitzgerald stopped short to rub the offending eye.

There was a crash. A heavy glass water-pitcher hit the cement walk immediately before him. It broke into a million pieces. He glared up. The pitcher would have hit him if it hadn't been for a twitching eyelid that had brought him to a stop. The window of the room he'd just left was open, but there was no way to prove that a patient had gotten out of bed to heave the pitcher. And it had broken into too many pieces to offer fingerprint evidence.

"Hah!" said Fitzgerald morosely. "They're plenty confident!"

He went to Headquarters. There were more memos for his attention. One was just in. A cab had crossed a sidewalk and crashed into a plate-glass window. Its hydraulic brakes had failed. The trouble was a clean saw-cut in a pressure-line. Fitzgerald went to find out about it. The cab driver bitterly refused to answer any questions. He wouldn't even admit that he was not insured by Big Jake against such

accidents. Fitzgerald stormed. The owner-driver firmly--and gloomily--refused to answer a question about whether he'd been threatened if he didn't pay protection money.

Fitzgerald raged, on the sidewalk beside the cab in the act of being extracted from the plate-glass window. An open-mouthed bystander listened admiringly to his language. Then the detective's eyelid twitched. It twitched again, violently. Something made him look up. An employee of the plate-glass company--there were rumors that Big Jake was interesting himself in plate-glass insurance besides cabs--wrenched loose a certain spot. Fitzgerald grabbed the bystander and leaped. There was a musical crash behind him. A tall section of the shattered glass fell exactly where he had been standing. It could have been pure accident. On the other hand--

He couldn't prove anything, but he had a queer feeling as he left the scene of the crash. Back in his own car he felt chilly. Driving away, presently, he felt his eyelid tentatively. He wasn't a nervous man. Ordinarily his eyelids didn't twitch.

* * *

He went to investigate a second memo. It was a restaurant, and he edged the police car gingerly into a lane beside the building. In the rear, the odor of spilled beer filled the air. It would have been attractive but for an admixture of gasoline fumes and the fact that it was mud. Mud whose moisture-content is spilled beer has a peculiar smell all its own.

He got out of his car and gloomily asked the questions the memo called for. He didn't need to. He could have written down all the answers in advance. The restaurant now reporting vandalism had found big Jake's brand of beer unpopular. It had twenty cases of a superior brew brought in by motor-truck. It was stacked in a small building behind the café. For one happy evening, the customers chose their own beer.

Now, next day, there were eighteen cases of smashed beer bottles. The crime had been committed in the small hours. There were no clues. The restaurant proprietor unconvincingly declared that he had no idea who'd caused it. But he'd only notified the police so he could collect insurance--not from Big Jake.

With a sort of morbid, frustrated gloom, Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald made the necessary notes. He put his notebook in his pocket and backed his car out of the alley. Oddly enough, he thought of a beautifully carved meerschaum pipe he'd found with the milk that morning. He'd presented it to an orphanage mainly because, irrationally, he'd have liked to keep it. There had been other expensive gifts he'd have liked to keep. Bourbon. A set of expensive dryflies. An eight-millimeter movie camera. Scotch. Shiny, smooth silk socks that would have soothed his weary feet. He'd denied himself these gifts because he believed--he knew--that they came from Big Jake, who tactfully won friends and influenced people by making presents and denying it. In business matters he was stern, because that was the way to collect protection-money. But he was subtle with cops. He had their wives on his side.

Sergeant Fitzgerald growled in his throat. He'd always wanted a really fine meerschaum pipe. He'd had one this morning, and he'd had to get rid of it because it came from Big Jake. He felt that Big Jake had robbed him of it.

He turned the police car and drove back toward the Elite Cleaners and Dyers establishment. As he drove, he growled. His eyelid had twitched twice, and each time he'd been heading into danger or trouble. The fact was dauntingly coincidental with Brink's comment after giving him a scrap of plastic from the bottom of that crazy machine. These things were on his mind. He couldn't bring himself to plan to mention them, but he needed to talk to Brink again. Brink could testify to threats. He could justify arrests. Sergeant Fitzgerald had a fine conviction that with a chance to apply pressure, he could make some of Big Jake's hoods and collectors talk, and so bust things wide open. He only needed Brink's co-operation. He drove toward the Elite Cleaners and Dyers to put pressure on Brink toward that happy end. But he brooded over his own eyebrow-twitchings.

When the cleaning establishment came into view, there was a car parked before it. Two men from that car were in the act of entering the Elite plant through the same door the detective had used earlier. He parked his car behind the other. Fuming, he crossed the sidewalk

and entered the building. As he entered, he heard a scream from the back. He heard a crashing sound and more screams.

He bolted ahead, through the outer office and into the working area he had not visited before. He burst through swinging doors into a two-story, machinery-filled cleaning-and-dyeing plant. Tables and garment racks and five separate people appeared as proper occupants of the place. But something had happened. There was a flood of liquid--detergent solution--flowing toward the open back doors of the big room. It obviously came from a large carboy which had been smashed as if to draw attention to some urgent matter.

The people in the room seemed to have frozen at their work, except that Brink had apparently been interrupted in some supervisory task. He was not working at any machine to clean, dye, dry, or press clothing. He looked at the two individuals whom Fitzgerald had seen enter only fractions of a minute earlier. His jaw clenched, and Fitzgerald was close enough behind the bottle-breakers to see him take an angry, purposeful step toward them. Then he checked himself very deliberately, and put his hands in his pockets, and watched. After an instant he even grinned at the two figures who had preceded the detective.

They were an impressive pair. They were dressed in well-pressed garments of extravagantly fashionable cut. They wore expensive soft hats, tilted to jaunty angles. Even from the rear, Fitzgerald knew that handkerchiefs would show tastefully in the breast pockets of their coats. Their shoes had been polished until they not only shone, but glittered. But by professional instinct Fitzgerald noted one cauliflower ear, and the barest fraction of a second later he saw a squat revolver being waved negligently at the screaming women.

He reached for his service revolver. And things happened.

* * *

The situation was crystal-clear. Big Jake Connors was displeased with Brink. In all the city whose rackets he was developing and consolidating, Brink was the only man who resisted Big Jake's civic enterprise--and got away with it! And nobody who runs rackets can permit resistance. It is contagious. So Big Jake had ordered that

Brink be brought into line or else. The or else alternative had run into snags, before, but it was being given a big new try.

There was the shrill high clamor of two women screaming at the tops of their voices because revolvers were waved at them. One Elite employee, at the pressing machine, took his foot off the treadle and steam billowed wildly. Another man, at a giant sheet-iron box which rumbled, stared with his mouth open and blood draining from his cheeks. Brink, alone, looked--quite impossibly--amused and satisfied.

"Get outside!" snarled a voice as Fitzgerald's revolver came out ready for action. "This joint is finished!"

The companion of the snarling man rubbed suddenly at his eye. He rubbed again, as if it twitched violently. But it was, after all, only a twitching eyelid. He reached negligently down and picked up a wooden box. By its markings, it was a dozen-bottle box of spot-remover--the stuff used to get out spots the standard cleaning fluid in the dry-cleaning machine did not remove.

The man heaved the box, with the hand with which he had rubbed his twitching eye. The other man raised a hand--the one not holding a revolver--to rub at his own eye, which also seemed to twitch agitatedly.

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald had his revolver out. He drew in his breath for a stentorian command for them to drop their weapons. But he didn't have time to shout. The hurtling small box of spot-remover struck the large sheet-iron case from which loud rumblings came. It was a dryer; a device for spinning clothes which were wet with liquid from the dry-cleaning washer. A perforated drum revolved at high speed within it. The box of spot-remover hit the door. The door dented in, hit the high-speed drum inside, and flew frantically out again, free from its hinges and turning end-for-end as it flew. It slammed into the thrower's companion, spraining three fingers as it knocked his revolver to the floor. The weapon slid merrily away to the outer office between Detective Fitzgerald's feet.

But this was not all. The dryer-door, having disposed of one threatening revolver, slammed violently against the wall. The wall was merely a thin partition, neatly paneled on the office side, but with shelves containing cleaning-and-dyeing supplies on the other.

The impact shook the partition. Dust fell from the shelves and supplies. The hood who hadn't lost his gun sneezed so violently that his hat came off. He bent nearly double, and in the act he jarred the partition again.

Things fell from it. Many things. A two-gallon jar of extra-special detergent, used only for laces, conked him and smashed on the floor before him. It added to the stream of fluid already flowing with singular directness for the open, double, back-door of the workroom. The hood staggered, sneezed again, and convulsively pulled the trigger of his gun. The bullet hit something which was solid heavy metal, ricocheted, ricocheted again and the second hood howled and leaped wildly into the air. He came down in the flowing flood of spilled detergent, flat on his stomach, and with marked forward momentum. He slid. The floor of the plant had recently been oiled to keep down dust. The coefficient of friction of a really good detergent on top of floor-oil is remarkably low,--somewhere around point oh-oh-nine. Hood number two slid magnificently on his belly on the superb lubrication afforded by detergent on top of floor-oil.

The first hood staggered. Something else fell from the shelf. It was a carton of electric-light bulbs. Despite the protecting carton, they went off with crackings like gunfire. Technically, they did not explode but implode, but the hood with the revolver did not notice the difference. He leaped--and also landed in the middle of the wide streak of detergent-over-oil which might have been arranged to receive him.

He remained erect, but he slid slowly along that shining path. His relatively low speed was not his fault, because he went through all the motions of frenzied flight. His legs twinkled as he ran. But his feet slid backward. He moved with a sort of dignified celerity, running fast enough for ten times the speed, upon a surface which had a frictional coefficient far below that of the smoothest possible ice.

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald gaped, his mouth dropped open and his gun held laxly in a practically nerveless hand.

The thing developed splendidly. The prone gunman slid out of the wide double door, pushing a bow-wave of detergent before him. He slid across the cement just outside, into the open garage whose delivery-truck was absent, and slammed with a sort of deliberate vi-

olence into a stack of four cardboard drums of that bone-black which is used to filter cleaning-fluid so it can be used over again in the dry-cleaning machine. The garage was used for storage as well as shelter for the establishment's truck.

The four drums were not accurately piled. They were three and a half feet high and two feet in diameter. They toppled sedately, falling with a fine precision upon the now hatless, running, sliding hood. One of them burst upon him. A second burst upon the prone man--who had butted through the cardboard of the bottom one on his arrival. There was a dense black cloud which filled all the interior of the garage. It was bone-black, which cannot be told from lamp-black or soot by the uninitiated.

From the cloud came a despairing revolver shot. It was pure reflex action by a man who had been whammed over the head by a hundred-and-fifty-pound drum of yielding--in fact bursting--material. There was a metallic clang. Then silence.

In a very little while the dust-cloud cleared. One figure struggled insanely. Upon him descended--from an oil drum of cylinder-oil stored above the rafters--a tranquil, glistening rod of opalescent cylinder-oil. His last bullet had punctured the drum. Oil turned the bone-black upon him into a thick, sticky goo which instantly gathered more bone-black to become thicker, stickier, and gooier. He fought it, while his unconscious companion lay with his head in a crumpled cardboard container of more black stuff.

The despairing, struggling hood managed to get off one more shot, as if defying even fate and chance. This bullet likewise found a target. It burst a container of powdered dye-stuff, also stored overhead. The container practically exploded and its contents descended in a widespread shower which coated all the interior of the garage with a lovely layer of bright heliotrope.

Maybe the struggling hood saw it. If so, it broke him utterly. What had happened was starkly impossible. The only sane explanation was that he had died and was in hell. He accepted that explanation and broke into sobs.

* * *

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald had witnessed every instant of the happening, but he did not believe it. Nevertheless, he said in a strange voice: "I'll phone for the paddy-wagon. It'll do for a ambulance, in case of need."

He put away his unused service revolver. Thinking strange, dizzy thoughts of twitching eyelids and plastic scraps and starkly incredible happenings, he managed to call for the police patrol. When he hung up, he gazed blankly at the wall. He gazed, in fact, at a spot where a peculiar small machine with no visible function reposed--somewhat dusty--on a shelf.

Brink stepped over briskly and closed the door between the scene of catastrophe and the immaculate shop. Somehow, none of the mess had spilled back through the doorway. Then he came in, frowning a little.

"The fight's out of them," he said cheerfully. "One's got a bad cut on his head. The other's completely unnerved. *Tsk! Tsk!* I hate to have such things happen!"

Sergeant Fitzgerald shook himself, as if trying to come back to a normal and a reasonable world.

"Look!" he said in a hoarse voice. "I saw it, an' I still don't believe it! Things like this don't happen! I thought you might be lucky. It ain't that. I thought I might be crazy. It ain't that! What has been goin' on?"

Brink sat down. His air was one of wry contemplation.

"I told you I had a special kind of luck you couldn't believe. Did your eyelids twitch any time today?"

Fitzgerald swallowed.

"They did. And I stopped short an' something that should've knocked my cranium down my windpipe missed me by inches. An' again--But no matter. Yes."

"Maybe you can believe it, then," said Brink. "Did you ever hear of a man named Hieronymus?"

"No," said Fitzgerald in a numbed voice. "Who's he?"

"He got a patent once," said Brink, matter-of-factly, "on a machine he believed detected something he called eloptic radiation. He thought it was a kind of radiation nobody had noticed before. He was wrong. It worked by something called psi."

Sergeant Fitzgerald shook his head. It still needed clearing.

"Psi still isn't fully understood," explained Brink, "but it will do a lot of things. For instance, it can change probability as magnetism can change temperature. You can establish a psi field in a suitable material, just as you can establish a magnetic field in steel or alnico. Now, if you spin a copper disk in a magnetic field, you get eddy currents. Keep it up, and the disk gets hot. If you're obstinate about it, you can melt the copper. It isn't the magnet, as such, that does the melting. It's the energy of the spinning disk that is changed into heat. The magnetic field simply sets up the conditions for the change of motion into heat. In the same way ... am I boring you?"

"Confusing me," said Fitzgerald, "maybe. But keep on. Maybe I'll catch a glimmer presently."

"In the same way," said Brink, "you can try to perform violent actions in a strong psi field--a field made especially to act on violence. When you first try it you get something like eddy currents. Warnings. It can be arranged that such psi eddy currents make your eyelids twitch. Keep it up, and probability changes to shift the most-likely consequences of the violence. This is like a spinning copper disk getting hot. Then, if you're obstinate about it, you get the equivalent of the copper disk melting. Probability gets so drastically changed that the violent thing you're trying to do becomes something that can't happen. Hm-m-m. ... You can't spin a copper disk in a magnetic field when it melts. You can't commit a murder in a certain kind of psi field when probability goes hog-wild. Any other thing can happen to anybody else--to you, for example--but no violence can happen to the thing or person you're trying to do something violent to. The psi field has melted down ordinary probabilities. The violence you intend has become the most improbable of all conceivable things. You see?"

"I'm beginnin'," said Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald dizzily, "I'm beginnin' to get a toehold on what you mean. I'd hate to have to testify about it in court, but I'm receptive."

"So my special kind of luck," said Brink, "comes from antiviolence psi fields, set up in psi units of suitable material. They don't use up energy any more than a magnet does. But they transfer it, like a magnet does. My brother-in-law thought he had to lose his business be-

cause Big Jake threatened violent things. I offered to take it over and protect it--with psi units. So far, I have. When four hoods intended to shoot up the place and moved to do it, they were warned. Psi 'eddy currents' made their eyelids twitch. They went ahead. Probability changed. Quite unlikely things became more likely than not. They were obstinate about it, and what they intended became perhaps the only thing in the world that simply couldn't happen. So they crashed into a telephone pole. That wasn't violence. That was accident."

The detective blinked, and then nodded, somehow painfully.

"I see," he said uncertainly.

* * *

"Somebody set a bomb in my delivery truck," added Brink. "I'm sure his eyelids twitched, but he didn't stop. So probability changed. The explosion of that bomb in my truck became the most unlikely of all possible things. In fact, it became impossible. So some electric connection went bad, and it didn't go off. Again, when Jacaro intended to plant a time fire-bomb to set the plant on fire--why--his eyelids must have twitched but he didn't give up the intention. So the psi unit naturally made the burning of the plant impossible. For it to be impossible, the fire-bomb had to go off where it would do next to no harm. Jacaro lost his pants."

He stopped. Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald swallowed carefully.

"I don't question it," he said dizzily, "even if I don't believe it. Will you now tell me that what just happened was a psi something keepin' violent things from happening?"

"That's it," agreed Brink. "The psi unit made the dryer-door fly off and knock a pistol out of a man's hand. If they'd dropped the idea of violence, that would have ended the matter. They didn't."

"I accept it," said Fitzgerald. He gulped. "Because I saw it. A court wouldn't believe it, though, Mr. Brink!"

"Well?"

"I've been tryin' for months," said Fitzgerald in sudden desperation, "to find a way to stop what Big Jake's doin'. But he's tricky. He's organized. He's got smart lawyers. Mr. Brink, if the cops could use

what you've got--" Then he stopped. "It'd never be authorized," he said bitterly. "They'd never let a cop try it."

"No," agreed Brink. "Until it's believed in it can only be used privately, for private purposes. Like I've used it. Or Hm-m-m. Do you fish, or bowl, or play golf, sergeant? I could give you a psi unit that'd help you quite a bit in such a private purpose."

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald shook his head.

"Dry-fly fishin's my specialty," he said bitterly, "but no thank you! When I'm pittin' myself against a trout, it's my private purpose to be a better fisherman than he's a fish. Usin' what you've got would be like dynamitin' a stream. No sport in that! No! But this Big Jake, he doesn't act sporting with the public. I'd give a lot to stop him."

"You'd get no credit for it," said Brink. "No credit at all."

"I'd get the job done!" said Fitzgerald indignantly. "A man likes credit, but he likes a lot better to get a good job done!"

Brink grinned suddenly.

"Good man!" he said approvingly. "I'll buy your idea, sergeant. If you'll play fair with a trout, you'll play fair with a crook, and an Irishman, anyhow, has a sort of inheritance--I'll give you what help I can, and you'll do things your grandfather would swear was the work of the Little People. And for a first lesson--"

"What?"

"Big Jake discourages me," said Brink. "So I'll call him up and say I'm coming to see him. I'll say if he wants this business I'll sell it to him at a fair price. But I'll say otherwise I'll tell the newspapers about his threats and the four of his hoods in the hospital and the two others on the way there. Want to come along?"

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald reached his hand to where his service revolver reposed in its holster. Then he drew it away.

"He's a very violent man," he said hopefully. "I wouldn't wonder he tried to get pretty rough--him and the characters he has on his payroll. If they have to be stopped from bein' violent by--what is it? Psi units? Sure I'll come along! It'd ought to be most edifyin' to watch!"

* * *

There was a clanging outside. Brink and Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald delayed while the two unnerved, helpless, and formerly

immaculate gunmen were loaded into the paddy-wagon and carried away--to the hospital that already held four of their ilk. Then Brink called Big Jake on the telephone.

Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald listened with increasing appreciation as Brink made his proposition and explained matter-of-factly what had happened to Big Jake's minions who should have wrecked the Elite Cleaners and Dyers. When Brink hung up, Fitzgerald had a look of zestful anticipation on his face.

"He said to come right over," said Brink. "But he was grinding his teeth."

"Ah-h-h!" said Fitzgerald pleasurably. "I'm thinkin' of the cab-drivers an' truck drivers that've been beat up. I'm thinkin' of property smashed and honest people scared.... Do you know, I'm terrible afraid Big Jake's too much in the habit of violence to stop, even if his eyelids twitch? It's deplorable! But on a strictly personal basis I think I'll enjoy seein' Big Jake an' his hoods discouraged by ... what is it Psi units? Yes!"

And he did. Big Jake's eyelids undoubtedly did twitch while he was preparing a reception for Brink and Detective Sergeant Fitzgerald. But he did not heed the warning. He did not even think of the legal aspect of violent things attempted against his visitors. So he tried violence--he and his associates. They started out with fists and clubs, regardless of discretion. They tried to beat up Brink and Fitzgerald. From that they went on to sawed-off shotguns. Their efforts were still unsuccessful. Then they went to extremes.

Fitzgerald wore an expression of pious joy as Big Jake Connors and his aides, obstinately attempting violent actions, were prevented by psi units.

When it was all over, the ambulance had to make two trips.

■ ■ ■

GASLIGHT

Free to read and print. More stories at

gaslight.neocities.org

HOUDINI Magazine
houdinimagazine.com

HOUDINI.TV
houdini-tv.neocities.org

Support Gaslight:
ko-fi.com/A0A81D040N

Rest in Peace Chris // Grim Dark (Half Off) - This Page Dedicated to Your Contributions to the Culture