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DIESELPUNK

ePULP SHOWCASE

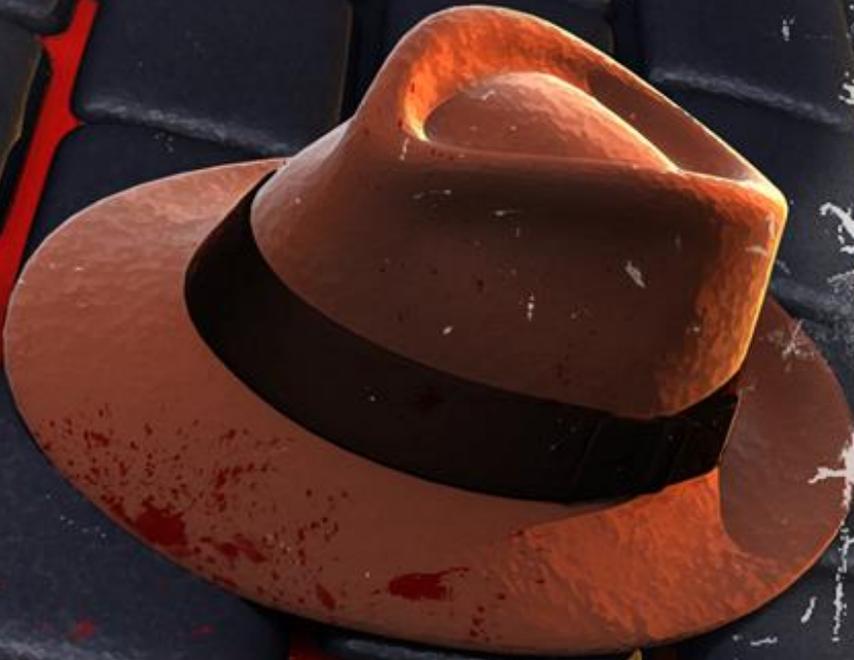
**TALES of the
AETHER AGE**
by GRANT GARDINER

**PANDORA
DRIVER**
by JOHN PICHA

**TROUBLE
SHOOTER**
by BARD CONSTANTINE

**WORLD of
MAÑANA**
by JACK PHILPOTT

FOUR FANTASTIC TALES!



Dieselpunk ePulp Showcase

Created by

John Picha, Grant Gardiner, Bard Constantine and Jack Philpott

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WELCOME TO THE RETRO FUTURE

When I started the Dieselpunks website years ago, the word “dieselpunk” was still a curiosity. Sure, it was loaded with familiar tropes like Pulp Adventure, Film Noir, and Weird Horror, but the artists were mashing these concepts together with something different, something a little more contemporary. At that time, the steampunks were just starting to climb their way from the underground and gain traction as a legitimate style, but there was something to be said about this little-known corner of dieselpunk, or "low-brow pop surrealism" as it was known back then.

Like the French film scholars who codified Film Noir as a genre years after the movies were in the theaters, I could see a similar thread binding the dieselpunk work together. Whether they realized it or not, these artists were creating work with eerily similar concepts. They were creating a future fueled by the spirit of the Jazz Age. In their world, they wanted to

see if old Sam Spade could work in an era of smartphones, or if Dillinger could make a clean getaway in a cherry red hovercar. These artists were writing cyberpunk stories from inside The Great Gatsby's mansion, and they invited everyone to the party.

What was missing at the time was a sense of community. We had fashion designers, musicians, architects, directors, sculptors, mechanics, authors... almost every artistic discipline was represented, but there was no single place they called home. That's when the Dieselpunks website started. It was created as a research site for these budding world-builders, someplace to find the weird and wacky (but mostly true) things that happened between World War I and World War II. In short time though, the community turned our quiet library into a raucous speakeasy and it's been growing ever since.

What you're about to read is a collection of short stories assembled from the best authors the dieselpunk community has to offer. Each tale will showcase a direction dieselpunk can take while still remaining true to the spirit of the genre.

I hope you enjoy these tales. I'll be seeing you again at last call.

-Tome

Tome Wilson is the owner/operator of Dieselpunks (www.dieselpunks.org), the web's largest and most active dieselpunk community.



THAT SORT OF WORLD

Created by Grant Gardiner

THE 1920s.

MID-WESTERN COMMONWEALTH, CHICAGO.

“Well if it ain’t *that* then what was it?”

“It was all those damn fool bankers in New York.”

“Bankers?”

“Yeah, *bankers*. They’re the ones who caused everything that’s happened. A huge pack of New York bankers got greedy. And the country was the one to cop it in the teeth when it all headed south.”

“Nah. It weren’t that.”

“It was too. And everyone knows it. Bankers got greedy, they sold Louisiana back to the French and that’s why the Grand Dream of the

United States of America is now just a footnote in history.”

Mickey thought about this for some time before shaking his head. “Nah, that ain’t it. That don’t explain half the crazy things that have happened.”

Mack growled. “Jus’ *listen*.” He began checking points off on his fingers. “New York sold Louisiana to the French. Which made everyone else really mad. Which made Chicago form the Mid-West militia. Which meant New York had to stop pretending and actually get serious about The Prohibition act. This made the North West secede to Canadia, which made California blame New York and change their name, which made Texas want nothing to do with no one no more, which made everyone else agree that Texas had the right idea.” He emphatically flicked his glowing cigarette butt into the cold, dark shadows. “From there it was all downhill. No more Union. No more United States of America.” He grinned. “And plenty more space ‘round the edges for young upstanding ‘entrepreneurs’ like ourselves. So we can make a little dosh on the side when we ain’t running booze for the gin joints.”

Mickey clutched himself tighter against the cold. “I’m sure that ain’t it. Me old man explained it diff’rent. A *lot* diff’rent. It had something to do with the Great War and zeppelins and aether and... stuff.”

“Well your old man don’t know his head from his toes. And that’s when he’s sober.” Mack stamped his feet in the sludge left over from the previous night’s snow. Then he started fishing inside his coat for his cigarette case. “Speaking of which – where the hell’s your hat? You look like a bum, huddled out here with no hood for your head.” He found the case and flipped it open. “You look like someone rolled you and left you wanting.”

Mickey replied with a glare but didn't do nothing about it. Instead he just turned his sullen gaze from the shadows of the alley to the dimly lit street beyond. "Bessie been complainin' that I don't dress to the nines. So I'm tryin' somethin' new. I'm goin' hatless from now on."

Mack stopped. Slack jawed, he stared at Mickey, cigarette left hanging unlit from his lower lip. There was a stretch of silence between them but Mickey refused to make eye contact.

Eventually Mack finished digging the book of matches from his pocket and stopped shaking his head long enough to light up. A bright flare cast orange light across his face, vanished instantly, and he sucked back his first lungful of smoke. He pocketed the matches and resumed his head shake. "You said some crazy things in the past, Mickey, but that one takes the cake." He exhaled. "You gotta be all outta crazy ideas now."

"What? I been speakin' to a Sicilian guy. Out at the zeppelin docks. Smart Import/Export fella who's into all that French *coo-chorr* stuff that Bessie makes me buy for her. He reckons no one will wear hats in future. That was his hot tip for the Wall Street bucket shops – he reckons that hat makers are on the slide and that I should go short on 'em for the long haul. He said I'll get at least 10 points."

Mack shook his head again as he once more stamped his feet to get the blood moving. "I stand corrected. You ain't fresh out of stupid; you're now *importing* it. The good stuff they develop in scientific laboratories or places like Wall Street bucket shops." He shook his head again as his own gaze returned to the street beyond. "Not wearing hats." He scoffed. "What sort o' world would that be?"

Self consciously, Mickey played at the front of his slicked over part. The

pomade was wet from the constant drizzle of rain that had only recently stopped. “I ain’t in charge. It’s just the way it’s gonna be. An’ Bessie wants me on the cutting edge of it.”

Mack shook his head once more as he pulled his watch out of his pocket and flipped open the face. “Hot tips about not wearin’ hats...” 9.22pm.

He snapped the watch-face shut and swung the timepiece by its chain for a few seconds, blowing smoke in the direction of the street beyond. “Ah, what’s the use?” He pocketed the watch and readjusted his gloves. “Let’s get goin’, Mickey. If this moll complains about us bein’ a few minutes early, well...” He took one more drag and threw his cigarette away. “Then we can just pull rank on her.”

Mickey nodded and stepped forward to see if the coast was clear. But he waved Mack back. Someone was coming.

It was just a horse drawn wagon. Safe, they both huddled up under their long collars and watched as it clopped past. The barrels lined along the dray said ‘Fresh Milk’ but at this time of night it could only be an emergency gin run. Someone somewhere was having a lot of fun. But on a Saturday night that probably described half the town.

When the driver was safely out of sight the two hoods emerged from the alleyway and quickly crossed the road. Firtfully they looked up and around at the various windows in case someone was taking an interest in their progress. Reaching the sidewalk they took one more glance around then shuffled down a series of steps till they were below street level and out of sight. Above towered the tenement building. In front of them was a wooden door reinforced with bars and bolts.

Mack rapped on the door and a peep hole slid open. Beady little eyes looked out at them. “What’s the password?”

Mack was already taking off his gloves. “Blue aether for green gin.”

The eyes frowned. “Mack, that’s tomorrow’s password. You’re supposed to give me *today’s* password.”

Mack glared up from his gloves. “Beady, jus’ open the damn door. You know it’s me.”

The eyes were offended. Then the peep hole slid shut and the door clicked and clunked. A few more heavy clanks and it edged open to reveal a mousy little man in a deep green waiter’s vest and ruffled bow tie. “There ain’t no purpose in having a password, Mack, if no one’s gonna use it.”

Mickey pushed open the door and the little man scurried out of the way. Mack stepped inside. “And there ain’t no need for a password, *Beady*, if you knows who’s on the other side of the door.”

Mack reefed off his final glove and began moving across the small cloakroom towards the attendant’s counter. Mickey followed, both of them ignoring Beady as he muttered to himself and returned each of the door’s heavy bolts to their original place. When the two men reached the counter they started hauling off their overcoats, scarves and gloves. They draped them across the bar in front of the pretty little hostess who waited behind the counter in a tiny hat and dress, both in matching black.

Picking up their things, she frowned at Mickey. “You lose your hat Mickey?”

The hatless hoodlum gave a sullen growl.

Mack laughed in triumph. “Y’ see? You’re a damn fool, you are.” He turned back to the girl behind the counter. “Margie, tell Mickey he’s a damn fool. He’s decided, in all his wisdom, to go *hatless* from now on.”

Margie frowned and took Mack’s hat. “Hatless?” She looked at Mickey. “You mean outside?”

Mickey, now coat and scarf less, looked daggers at Mack before he turned back to Margie. “It’s the fashion. An’ one day you’ll be hatless too.”

The girl blushed. “Mickey! You don’t go saying such things.” She gave him a stern frown as she picked up their overcoats and made to hang them up. “You’re going to get yourself a reputation talking like that.” She leaned in over the heavy garments. “People will talk.”

Mack gave one more cackle as Mickey threw his hands up in defeat and led the way past the counter. Mack winked at Margie as he passed. They pushed their way through a set of heavy curtains and began crossing the small waiting room beyond.

“Aw, c’mon, Mickey. Are ya feelin’ misunderstood?” Mack chuckled. “Does no one understand y’r fancy-pants, lar-dee-dah fashion-ability?”

They approached a door. In gilded letters the door announced it was a ‘Funeral Parlor’. In sullen silence Mickey pushed his way straight through.

The room beyond was dark, empty and lined with display coffins. It gave the room a sombre, still atmosphere. An atmosphere disturbed by their

stomping feet and Mack's incessant giggles at Mickey's expense. But there was also the waft of cigarette smoke in the still air and the sound of muffled music. A sound that grew stronger the closer they moved to the door at the back of the room. The one with 'Staff only' scrawled crudely across its face.

They pulled up in front of the new barrier and Mack groaned. "Aw, jus' take the laughs, wiseguy. What y'r doin: it's crazy. And if you can't take the ribbin' from me then you might not want to tell anyone else why y'r without a lid." Mack guffawed again. "Cause they ain't gonna be half as understanding as I've been."

Mickey snorted his disgust before rapping on the door. Another peep hole slid open and both Mickey and Mack were blasted with rowdy noise. Then the peep hole snapped shut and the door was reefed open.

"Mickey! Mack!" A portly maitre de with a waxed moustache held his arms wide in the riot of noise. "How are you, my friends? You have not forgotten your old friend Gustav after all."

Both men smiled and nodded their greeting as the beaming, rosy-cheeked maitre de dramatically ushered them into the big noisy room like they were royalty. "Your usual table?" he asked over the quick stomping band and the burbling crowd noise.

Mack slipped him a dollar and leaned in close. "No need, Gus. We're here to meet someone. We can take care of ourselves."

Gustav bowed low and then withdrew, leaving them to scan the crowded room.

Unfortunately – for Mack and Mickey – The Green Gin Joint was jumping. Smoke and patrons swirled about the big speakeasy with abandon. Music lovers crowded in on the hard drinking, hard playing band and made sure space on the dance floor was hotly contested. The raised dining section was full and the multiple bars each had a burbling scrum of eager drinkers fighting for the barmen’s attention. Here and there a well dressed thing would stumble, spilling gin and cackling as their cheering friends hauled them upright. Flappers were camped out on the laps of their jacket-less beaus – without a thought for decorum – yelling outrageous things at the band. Or, if they felt the beat, the same girls hauled their men up onto the dance floor where they literally kicked up their heels and weaved back and forth at a frenetic pace.

It was also populated with different types from all over the city. From the Italians to the Irish to the Germans and everyone in between, the crowd was cosmopolitan and colourful. Everyone was dressed up in their best furs, pearls and pinstripe suits. There was even some black couples blitzing the dance planks or seated around the tables, confident enough to flaunt both themselves and their wealth amongst the other folk.

It was a brave new world in a brave new decade. And, as the crowd was demonstrating, a loud and fast moving world at that.

Mack and Mickey started drifting through the crowd towards the dining section. They skirted the dance floor as they went. Mickey shook his head and leaned in closer to be heard over the din. “I ain’t ever goin’ to get used to this.”

“Used to what?”

“Having *them* here.”

Mack tried to provoke him. “Who?”

“*Them.*”

Mack looked to see Mickey pointing out a gaggle of flappers over by one of the bars.

Mack looked bemused. “You mean the dames?”

“Yeah.” Mickey gave the buzzing and giggling girls a troubled look as they passed. “I ain’t saying it’s *always* a bad thing having dames in saloons. But I ain’t ever going to get *used* to it.”

Mack snorted his disbelief and scanned the crowd again, almost bumping into a well-sauced couple who saluted and staggered off. He craned his head upwards and then tapped Mickey on the shoulder. He pointed towards a table on the wall with a clear view of the band. A table where an unaccompanied female sat with a cream coloured ribbon twisted all the way up and down her left arm.

Mickey nodded and followed in his wake. Soon they had squeezed past the last of the dining tables and their smiling, smoking diners to stand over the final table. To wait.

The demure little flapper just sat at the table, ignoring them. She had the mandatory bobbed hair, cloche hat and tasselled dress. Radiating a faintly amused boredom, she idly played with her fur shawl while splitting her attention between the band and an immaculately groomed and tuxedoed gent wearing a white dinner jacket at one of the bars. He was drinking dirty cocktails and she was clearly thinking dirty thoughts.

Mack waited until it was obvious she was ignoring them. Not amused, he put his hands in his pockets. “Enjoyin’ the band, dollface?”

She didn’t look up. “They’re quite good,” she quipped, “for white folk.”

There was another pause as the band played on.

Mickey scowled. “So at least *you’re* enjoyin’ yourself.”

With a dry look she slowly turned towards him. “I’ve never been more bored in my life.”

Between the confident slump of her near-bare shoulders to the relaxed bite of her eyes it was clear that staying bored around this girl would be hard work. Easy for her. Hard for them.

But Mack was all business. “You the dame from the newspaper?”

She frowned and looked them up and down. “That depends. Do you have a story for me?” Her eyes stopped at Mickey’s greasy hair. “’Cause I ain’t in the market for sob stories.”

Mack leaned in close. “How about stories that end in a very big ‘boom’?” One eyebrow crept up towards the brutally sharp cut of her fringe. She reached into her cream, fingerless driving gloves and pulled out a delicately thin time piece. She scowled. “It isn’t nine thirty yet. You weren’t supposed to meet me till nine-*thirty*.”

Mickey gave her a menacing smile. “You can enjoy the bandstand once we’re gone. But we ain’t gonna be left waiting out in the rain and snow so

you can listen to jass music.”

She scowled back as good as she got. “Some of us have a cover to maintain, you guileless fool. I happen to be a newspaper columnist by day. *A newspaper*. Which is something people *read*.” She draped a delicate arm over the back of her chair and looked Mickey up and down in disgust. “You wouldn’t be sharp enough to read. The concept may escape you... *dar-ling*.”

Mack held his hands up between them. “We ain’t here for your day job, sweetheart. We’re here to make some dosh of our own. From your *other* job. So are we talkin’ to the right person or not?”

She took one more disgusted look at Mickey then gave an unenthusiastic wave for them to sit down. Both did so and Mack quickly waved away the approaching waiter. Instead he leaned forward on the table. “So you have what we need?”

The flapper reached into her purse and produced a set of large brass keys, the sort used for large brass padlocks. She covertly placed them on the table. Mack swept them inside his jacket.

The flapper leaned back again. “Those are from a security guard at the airfield. He’s sweet on one of our agents and tonight she’s keeping him occupied with dinner, a dance and a late night picture. He won’t know they’re missing until morning. So the only way you’ll be caught is if you do something wrong on your end.”

Mickey scoffed which earned him a sarcastic smile from their informant. She looked back at Mack. “But you have to do the job tonight. You have what you need?”

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