

THE UNSEEN BLUSHERS

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With 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 Prize 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 poured 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—"

He 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 impossible. 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 then."

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

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