

- 1 -

There wasn't anything really wrong with Corky Bumberton, except that he had his belt caught on the top spike of the fence and looked very silly, and his friend down on the ground was making great sport of him. No, Corky was an all right fellow. The few people who gave him any thought appreciated his best qualities. He had enough imagination to choose ice cream flavors, his sense of humor could discriminate between witty remarks and things people said while striking him, and when he danced the Twist, the bulk of his stomach would always twist the opposite way from the rest of his body.

Corky was not accustomed to hearing his own heart beat. He was not accustomed to being stuck on top of fences, either; or to being out of doors in the middle of the night. Trespassing and danger were new experiences that made his cardiovascular system do things it wasn't used to. Corky preferred the ordinary, the tangible, the edible.

Corky's friend Hewlett, the one on the ground, was less predictable, which he saw as a quality, and which Corky saw as his own misfortune. Hewlett imagined that people thought he was very benevolent to grace Corky with his friendship. But then, Hewlett imagined many things.

Twenty minutes earlier, Hewlett had noticed a lovely brunette at the coffee shop across the street from Thunderwood College, and imagined that she had been

created for him. Corky didn't feel like any excitement that night, especially Hewlett's brand, and so tried to dissuade Hewlett by pointing out that the brunette wore too much eye shadow; but Corky's disapproval was always enough to make Hewlett like anything.

The two had followed the brunette's sports car for three short blocks on foot and arrived, completely out of breath, at the Colonel's estate.

"I bet she's his daughter," said Hewlett, trying to peer through the bushes to see whether she pulled into the garage or not. "Do you think she's his daughter?"

"Granddaughter, more likely," said Corky, but didn't have time to say more, because his belt finally gave way and he plunged into the hibiscus bush beside Hewlett's hydrangea.

"Stop making so much noise."

"Sorry."

Hewlett crept to the edge of the shrubs, then tumbled across the lawn and took cover behind a voluminous oak. There was no need to tumble, but Hewlett had seen commandos do it on TV and thus it was obligatory. He motioned for Corky to do the same, but Corky had recently eaten, and deemed tumbling to be poor judgment.

"Stop shaking your head no, Corky, and get over here."

Corky crawled over and joined Hewlett.

"The light in that top floor window just turned on. I think it's her room."

Hewlett eyed the window much in the way a cat stares at a mouse before springing.

"The Colonel's going to find he's got a new son-in-law to add to his will."

Hewlett quickly planned Corky's route: up the vines, across the ledge, up the chimney, hand over hand from the treacherous rain gutter, and drop to the ledge below her window.

"I want you to climb up there."

“But that’s four stories.”

Corky felt a pang of guilt as Hewlett’s anxious brow twisted into despair. He grimaced, swallowed hard, and tiptoed across the moonlit dew to the vine bound columns. With a last look back, Corky reached high into the prickly leaves and pulled himself up.

Corky had never been widely acclaimed for his extraordinary athletic ability. He had been good at wrestling, for that required nothing more than to fall against his opponent. He had left many a muscular jock pressed into the mat flailing his fingers and toes for air. But Corky found those skills of little use here. As he reached the top of the column scratched and sweating, he rolled onto the first ledge, felt his pockets for the inhaler presently on his bathroom counter, and looked up at the spinning heights which remained. Corky set his teeth with grim determination, but bit his cheek and winced.

Minutes later, inside an exquisite Victorian chamber, an opened window blew on a crackling fire. Corky Bumberton peered in, saw that he was unobserved, and clambered in over the sill. He looked out at Hewlett, standing on the grass far below.

“Is it her room?” asked Hewlett in the loudest whisper he could muster.

“No. It’s something like a den, at the end of a great hallway.”

“Is anyone pointing a gun at you?”

“No. There’s nobody here.”

“All right,” said Hewlett, and gripped the vines. “I’m coming up.”

Corky wondered how a Colonel could have enough money to own such an expansive estate. In fact, much about the Colonel was mysterious and almost mythical to the local student population; consequently, the wooded grove surrounding his estate was a favorite place for making out. The Colonel was retired, and little was generally known about any military career he might have had. He

wore big white muttonchops all over his face, like the kind you laugh at in Old West photographs. He had a monocle, too. Corky observed that a monocle was probably difficult not only to keep on, but also to buy a replacement for. One doesn't exactly find monocles at Glasses in One Hour in the local mall. There must be a mail order catalog for monocles. Or else there's some weird old guy in a basement somewhere making them, and he doesn't know that it's not the year 1350 anymore.

The Colonel stood like a bow, once you've drawn back the string and are about to release the arrow. He had this big gut that projected way out in front of him, and kept him from bumping his face if he ran into something. There were layers of vests and smoking jackets and things all over him, and it looked like he had about twelve watchguard chains draped all over the place. He was pretty old, but looked like he could still knock you flat with his cane. Corky figured that the cane was about as useful as the monocle. The Colonel never relied on the cane for support, but only used it to impressively punctuate his sentences, and add drama to his poses.

"What a spread," said Hewlett as he swung his legs inside and kicked the wet grass from his shoes.

"You might have wiped your feet on the ledge. You're a guest in someone's home."

"I'm a trespasser, guilty of breaking and entering, and so are you."

Corky felt ashamed, but nevertheless felt justified in having wiped his feet.

"Perhaps one of these doors is hers," said Hewlett, and had just started out into the hall, when suddenly came the sound of approaching voices!

It was the Colonel and two others. Their footsteps sounded to be about halfway up the stairs.

“I tell you that whiskery chap at Thunderwood doesn’t know as much as his own white mice,” said one. “If Einstein knew anything at all, one can move through time as easily as through space.”

This was, quite obviously, Old Guy Talk. Corky’s first thought was that these people must be retired, because they clearly had way too much free time.

“Indeed, but moving through time may not be as abstruse as you imagine,” said another voice. “And I’ll prove that to you tonight.”

“The customary wagering amount,” came a third voice, “says that neither of you are right.”

“Done,” said the others, just as the party reached the top of the stairs and hove into view. They turned down the long hall straight toward Corky and Hewlett.

“Quick, in here,” said Hewlett, and pushed open a door.

It was one of those two-story libraries that had a pair of ladders going up to the second level, but no stairs. You could slide the ladders around on little tracks, then climb up and disembark onto a narrow catwalk, from which the slightest fall would mean serious injury. Corky studied this arrangement, contemplated it, and determined that whoever thought of it was operating on a mental level so superior as to be incomprehensible to the ordinary. The guy who thought of it probably thought so too.

“Come into the library,” said the Colonel’s voice from outside the door. Corky and Hewlett each sprang for a ladder and scrambled up to the catwalk where they lay flat, out of sight. No sooner were they hidden than the door swung open and the three old guys came in.

Corky’s ladder was only just sliding to a stop. One of the three men, the Poet, noticed the ladder, but seemed to be either scheming or highly dense, and made no alarm.

The Poet was fat and always had one hand in his pocket. He smoked a pipe with the other hand and wore glasses that made it look like he didn't have any eyes, unless he was facing you straight on, in which case his eyes looked like cue balls. He had this little stupid thing of hair that probably wasn't worth the bother of tending.

The Poet had neither gained great notoriety and respect nor accomplished anything particularly noteworthy, but because he was a literary type, coupled with his appropriate appearance and the comfortable manner in which he puffed on his pipe and seemed to be at ease with the profound and complicated matters being discussed around him, qualified him as a friend of the Colonel's and nobody ever thought to wonder why he hung around the estate all the time and didn't seem to have a job.

"I bet that fat guy doesn't have a job," whispered Hewlett. "Look at that tweed jacket. It doesn't even fit. I bet he stole it from a thrift store."

The Colonel walked to a grandfather clock and set his watch by it while the Professor carried in his machine, which was inside an ordinary backpack, and set it on the Colonel's grandiose desk. The desk was actually second hand, and the color of the wood didn't match the rest of the room, but the Professor was not offended and set his machine there anyway.

"My greatest achievement," said the Professor, and stepped back to take a bow. He looked like he had about three joints in every limb, and could extend and retract his body, and could step over a house, and reach across a cafeteria to fill his glass.

"What a spazz," whispered Hewlett. "Look at that guy. I don't even need to say anything."

"You might say something nice," suggested Corky, but Hewlett gave him a look of stunned bewilderment that made Corky feel like apologizing for the remark. Corky always felt like apologizing for everything. By the time he was four, his

mother got him a T-shirt that said "I'M SORRY" on the front and "I'LL SHUT UP NOW" on the back.

The Professor took three steps back, expending about ten times as much energy on each step as a normal person would. He gestured by swinging his arms out wide, and Corky and Hewlett could have sworn they heard a swoop.

"Think of a dentist's mirror," said the Professor. "He holds it behind your teeth, and he's able to see round the corner."

"Extraordinary," proclaimed the Colonel, and pounded a fist on the desk for effect.

There was awkward silence for part of a moment, until the Colonel blushed and realized his applause was premature. The Professor cleared his throat and continued.

"Quite," he said. "Only he's not seeing the tooth as it is; but rather as it was a tiny fraction of a millisecond in the past. Just as the stars we see at night might be thousands or millions of years older than we observe."

"You've invented a way to circumvent the speed of light?" asked the Poet, and proudly noticed the approval his intuitive question provoked in the learned Colonel.

"Not to circumvent it, my friend," said the Professor, "but to use its advantage to observe our own past."

Straightaway Hewlett remembered episodes in his own past that he was not anxious for anyone to observe. The word "sabotage" flashed through his mind; but within a few seconds his native instincts replaced it with "profit," and then even more basic impulses focused this latter suggestion with "brunette." Hewlett would steal this machine and use it to win the brunette.

The glow of the light bulb over Hewlett's head did not escape Corky's notice, and he wished he was home in bed.

“Observe the past,” said the Colonel, and began pacing impressively.

“Even if you could hold a mirror far enough away from the Earth,” said the Poet, “the time it would take to get it there could not better than equal the amount of time into the past you wished to observe.”

“Indeed,” explained the Professor. “In fact, the speed at which your point of view moves away from the Earth would have to exceed the speed of light in order to observe the past. And you would be limited to a two-dimensional view, exactly the same as what you could see through an ordinary telescope.”

“This is all well and good,” said the Colonel as he stopped pacing, “but what the devil are you getting at? I need more than dime store philosophy to put the whiskered fellow where he belongs.” And he struck the desk with his fist again, shaking the machine.

The Professor scooped it up delicately to protect it. “Just as the two-dimensional optical image of Earth’s history streaks into space at the speed of light, so is there a three-dimensional image just a space fold away, streaking off into the fourth dimension at the same speed. This machine, by imploding the energy of a laser beam out of our universe and into the fourth dimension, reflects back into the present a spatial image of the world as it was, through which an observer might move about. Attend.”

The Professor wriggled his long arms through the straps of the backpack, drew out a cord with a control box on the end, danced his fingers over the keypad and in an instant, was gone!

“Great Scott!” cried the Colonel and the Poet in the same breath.

Corky and Hewlett jumped, rattling the catwalk, but its telltale thump was lost in the excitement and shock of the moment.

“He can’t have gone far,” said the Colonel, and poked about the room with his cane.

"I haven't gone anywhere," came the Professor's disembodied voice. "The room that I see is as it was six minutes ago."

The Poet strolled about the spot where the Professor had been standing, marveling. He looked about, as if checking for hidden microphones or mirrors.

"Extraordinary," said the Colonel again, and reached to pound his fist on the desk, but was too far away; and so stamped his cane on the floor instead.

"That's strange," said the Professor's invisible voice. "One of the bookshelf ladders is sliding along by itself, as if someone had given it a shove."

Ten feet above the Colonel and the Poet, two hearts stopped beating. The Professor must have entered the past at precisely the moment the boys had scrambled into their hiding place.

"And now I see the three of us coming into the room," the Professor's voice continued. "The Poet seems to notice the ladder."

Corky wished he was dead. Hewlett wished Corky was dead. He could shove the body off the catwalk to create a diversion, and escape.

The Poet, meanwhile, simply stood there and said nothing.

"I say," said the Colonel. "Can you hear us, old boy?"

"Of course I can."

"Can you move about and see different parts of the room as they happened?"

"Certainly. That's the whole point."

Hewlett gripped Corky's arm. "The Colonel's onto us. He's going to have the Professor watch us come in and hide here."

"That's stupid. He could just climb up here now if he wanted, and find us."

The Colonel did indeed have something up his sleeve. He had a look on his face with one eyebrow up and half a smile, as if he was about to put something over on somebody.

"When I set my watch," said the Colonel through his half of a smile, "was it fast or slow?"

"I'm watching you do it now," the Professor's voice said. "It's slow. You're moving the minutes hand from five up to seven."

"Extraordinary," said the Colonel, and stamped his cane again.

"How do you get back?" asked the Poet.

And, with as much flair as he disappeared, the Professor was back. "I simply switch the machine off," he said. It was like having a giant spider suddenly appear in the middle of your room, filling the space with long, angly appendages.

"Great Scott," said the Colonel and the Poet, simultaneously, as before.

Corky and Hewlett sighed. "We're going to get that machine," said Hewlett.

"I don't feel very well, Hewlett."

"Shut up. There's nothing wrong with you."

"We must lock this machine up," said the Colonel. "In the morning we'll take it to the chap at Thunderwood, and show him a thing or two about relativity. Blasphemous non-believer."

Hewlett and Corky remained still. The new threat of the machine being locked up was not promising.

The Poet took out a handkerchief ("What a dork to have a handkerchief," thought Hewlett) and began to polish out the bowl of his pipe. Corky had seen pipe smokers do that before, but it had never caught his attention until now. What's the point? It's going to get his handkerchief all dirty, and who cares if the inside of his pipe is shiny or not.

"I agree," said the Poet, "and furthermore, we ought to find someone fairly large to take with us tomorrow. One never can be too careful, can one."

“My driver’s an awful sized chap,” said the Colonel. He walked to his desk drawer and took out a key. Then he swung open the picture above the fireplace—it was hinged and opened like a door—and there, hidden in the wall, was a safe.

“He keeps the key right there in the desk,” whispered Hewlett to Corky. “What a lamo. We’ll have that thing out of there ten seconds after they leave.”

“The key?”

“Yeah. The key. I’m not talking about the machine; we’re going to steal the Colonel’s key, and sing and dance about what a lark it was.”

Corky thought a moment, suspecting sarcasm; but remembered that he was good at singing and dancing, and was again at ease.

The Professor shoved the machine back into the safe. The Colonel locked it with the key, swung the picture back and replaced the key in the drawer.

“Now to the drawing room,” said the Colonel. “I’ve just acquired the most charming set of crystal flagons. And even more charming is the scotch that goes in them.”

The Colonel held the door as the Professor strolled out. “Coming?” he asked the Poet.

“Yes, in a moment,” said the Poet, and the Colonel left. The Poet stood alone, and pointed his fishbowl eyes upward at the catwalk.

Corky and Hewlett drew in their breath and rolled away from the edge, pressing themselves flat against the bookshelves.

It was silent for some moments. Then the Poet turned toward the door, but didn’t look overwhelmingly satisfied. In fact, he looked much like the Colonel did, when the Colonel was trying to put something over on somebody.

The Poet went to the Colonel’s desk, took out the key and pocketed it. He turned out the light and left.

Quite suddenly, Corky and Hewlett found themselves speechless—and in the dark. And quite precariously positioned on treacherous catwalks.

“He took the key,” said Hewlett, and angrily thumped the bookshelves. A volume of Milton fell and struck Corky. “That fatso took the key.”

“Ouch,” said Corky.

Moments later, the library door burst open and Corky and Hewlett slid out onto the hallway’s slippery marble floor.

“They’re gone,” said Hewlett. “I’ll check the stairs; you see if they went that way.”

Corky went back to the room they climbed into and happened to catch a red flash out the window. “Hewlett,” he said, with a tone that sounded like he’d just broken Hewlett’s VCR, “the brunette. She just drove off.”

Hewlett was there in an instant, skidding to a stop just in time to see the red sports car vanish around the corner.

“You idiot!” said Hewlett, and slapped Corky atop the head. “Get the key from the fat guy. I’ll follow the brunette.”

“But you haven’t a car, and she’s already down the road.”

Hewlett was stumped. Corky’s logic stood proudly and magnificently, much like the Rock of Gibraltar. But then Hewlett remembered whose logic it was, and modified his opinion to reflect that Corky had simply accidentally stumbled upon a very obvious fact, and repeated it like a parrot.

But Corky wasn’t finished. “Hewlett,” he said thoughtfully, “what if we were to get the machine in the future; couldn’t we then get the key out of the drawer before the Poet did?”

Hewlett pondered the multidimensional physics of Corky’s proposal, and quickly concluded that multidimensional physics was entirely over his head.

“As usual, Corky, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Hewlett, and Corky hung his head sadly.

At this moment, an overstuffed leather chair facing the fireplace spun round, and sitting in it was the Poet, engrossed in the maintenance of his pipe’s bowl.

“But his idea,” said the Poet, very matter-of-factly, as if he had been participating in the whole conversation, “is intriguing.”

The Poet probably figured that spinning around in the chair, and then jumping into the conversation as if he were an appreciated participant, would produce an imposing Dramatic Effect on the boys, thereby rendering them Under His Spell. Instead, Hewlett simply thought the guy was a moron, and Corky was already under everyone’s spell.

Hewlett leaned toward Corky and murmured, “I thought you had this room covered.”

“I was supposed to find him, and here he is.”

The Poet finally took out some tobacco and filled the bowl, deliberately taking way more time than it should take any semi-capable person. He did this to further enhance his Dramatic Effect.

“You’ve been playing with that thing for half an hour,” said Hewlett to the Poet. “Don’t you ever smoke it?”

The Dramatic Effect suffered a crushing blow, and the Poet tried haphazardly to salvage it by continuing to act as if nothing special had happened.

“Unfortunately,” said the Poet, “the machine doesn’t work the way your friend is proposing. It only provides glimpses into the past. You can’t change anything.”

“Why not?” asked Corky.

The Poet smiled at Corky's question, believing that his Spell had overwhelmed the boys, and that he had them at his feet. He didn't know that being overwhelmed and at people's feet was Corky's native condition.

"It's enough that it doesn't work that way," said the Poet, immensely enjoying the power of being able to answer a question with flippancy, especially when it was covering the fact that he didn't know the answer.

"Do you boys know a young brunette?" asked the Poet.

"Sure," said Hewlett. "We're friends of hers."

"Friends of the Colonel's grandniece?"

"That's right. We're friends of the Colonel's grandniece."

The Poet grinned with his fat pasty lips and pulled the Colonel's key from his pocket. The key dangled, and caught light from the fire, and looked very enticing indeed.

"I knew there were two of you hiding up there," said the Poet. "But I had no idea you were two such industrious, strapping young lads."

Corky had never quite understood what "strapping" meant. Once, as a youth, Corky had unloaded three cords of firewood, with the expectation of being paid equitable compensation, for a guy who seemed like he was about six hundred years old, and when the job was done the guy gave Corky fifty cents, proudly told how much work he would have had to do for that much money "in *his* day," and concluded with an admiring lecture of what a "fine, strapping young lad" Corky was. Corky walked away richer, not only by fifty cents, but also by the knowledge that "strapping" is perhaps not the most profitable quality to have.

"Is your friend all right?" asked the Poet.

"Ignore him," said Hewlett. "He's having a childhood memory. Just how industrious and strapping do you think we are?"

"I think," said the Poet, "that you're strapping enough to go back into the Colonel's library, and remove a blue leather bound volume from the second drawer in his desk, and deposit it in the hydrangea bushes outside when you leave."

A twinkle from the key sparkled in Hewlett's eye. An innocent enough adventure. A lark. Not even theft, as they would not be removing anything from the property. Harmless. "And we'd get the key," said Hewlett.

"You may have the key for four hours. And not a moment longer."

When the evening had begun, Corky had not been in the mood for any excitement. And now that feeling was magnified to the point that he did an unusual thing. He grabbed Hewlett by the collar and whisked him around the corner, pausing to apologize to the Poet for his rudeness. Once they were out of earshot, Corky said:

"Hewlett, I think you're making a very big mistake."

"Relax, Corky. You've got nothing to lose. In fact, just to show you I'm on your side, I'll fix it so there's no risk to you."

"How?"

"I'll stay here with the fat dorky guy, while you go get the machine and the blue leather book by yourself. We'll be in here, so nobody will see you do it. No witnesses, no risk. I won't even look myself."

Corky started to think about this, and it seemed to make sense, though not everything was in order, but it certainly *seemed* all right...

"Done," said Hewlett. "I'll talk to him, I'll make the deal, it's between him and me. Corky, I envy you."

Hewlett strode back into the room and snatched the key from the Poet's hand.

"Four hours," said Hewlett. "You'll have the key in four hours, and the book in four minutes."

The Poet grinned, and leaned back into the leather chair, and finally took a long draw from his pipe. Hewlett handed the key to Corky, and just as Corky looked like he was about to say something, Hewlett pushed him out into the hall and closed the door.

Corky looked at the key, then down the hall toward the library. He thought it was very kind of Hewlett to close the door, because Hewlett knew that Corky couldn't stand pipe smoke.