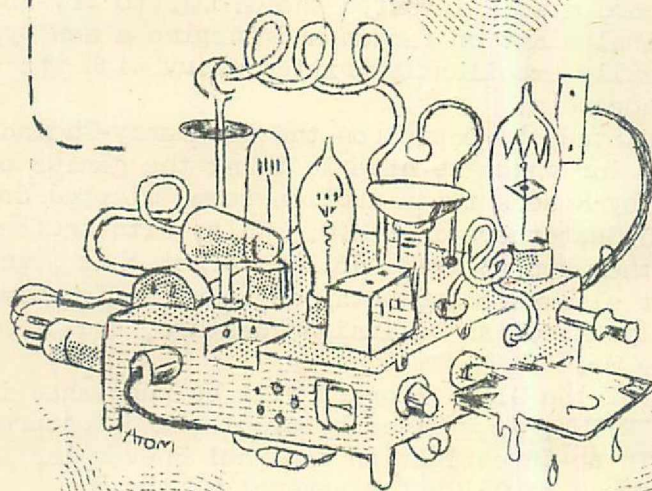


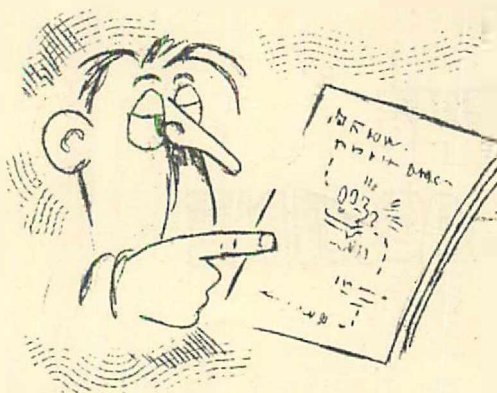
THE ENIGMA OF THE HIERONYMOUS MACHINE



A STUDY
IN RATIOCINATION

BY STEVE SCHULTEIS

A GOON LIBRARY PUBLICATION---



IT'S LIKE THIS

It is a pleasant duty for me to write a preface for this remarkable story by Steve Schulties, the Cleveland Op. Reading, indeed, stencilling it made me feel sorta humble - because Arthur

Thomson and myself invented the G.D.A. to try and get an original slant on fandom and inspire a new type of fan-fiction - and this really excellently written story with its original plot proves we've succeeded.

We've printed 140 copies on the new Berry-Thomson Gestetner, an acquisition for which we have to thank the genius of Walt Willis, who, guided by Roscoe to an auction room, slapped down £6 (18 dollars) and got TWO Gestetners in P.M.O. Walt, with trufannish zeal, flogged me one of them for £3 (Nine dollars - get that) when he could easily have sold it elsewhere and obtained four or five times the amount. It was a typically unselfish Willisian guesture, one of many kind services he has done me.

Volume 2 of the G.D.A. Library will be published in May. It is entitled CLOCHE BY NIGHT, is written by myself, and features the Goon and Arthur Thomson in an investigation for Paul Enever last autumn. (Which explains what happened to ORION for several months.)

Like THIS GOON FOR HIRE, all the clues are given in the story, and I'm willing to refund the cost of the volume (6d) to any one who says he or she was able to guess the name of the mysterious greenhouse intruder before I reveal it.

Further volumes in preparation include FISSION III TROUBLED WATERS, also by myself, and reveals what happens when the Goon is let loose in a secret atomic research station. This story is 10,000 words in length, and we don't know how much it will cost at the moment.

My reference to 'we', of course, is my co-editor Arthur Thomson, to whom my sincere thanks go for his unstinted assistance, financial, material and artistic...without which the cogs of the G.D.A. would grind to a halt, and Antigoon would finally triumph.

Sub rates. Vol 1. The ENIGMA of the HIERONYMOUS MACHINE...by Steve Schulteis. Price 6d.

Vol 2. (Ready May) CLOCHE BY NIGHT ...by John Berry.

Price 6d.

US fan send 25 cents for both, 50 cents keeps you on our books for a year.

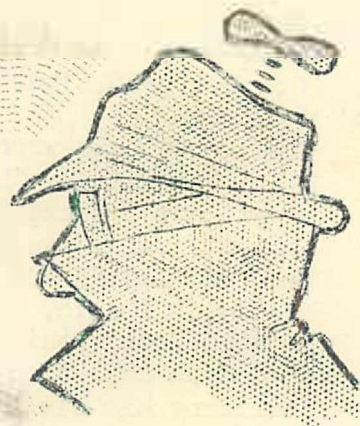
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THE ENIGMA OF THE HIERONYMOUS MACHINE

A STUDY IN RATIOCINATION

G.D.A. 'FACTUAL' INVESTIGATION
BY STEVE SCHULTEIS



I

"Get yer mits offa the kuchen," Noreen said, making a futile stab with her fork.

I was too fast for her. "Just scrambling for the crumbs, doll. "After all, I only had three helpings."

"I wonder how Willis got rid of Bob Shaw?" muttered Nick, absently taking a swig with the cream pitcher. He sadly watched Noreen replace the ravaged kuchen in the bakery box.

"Do you realise," he said, "that only a quarter o' that kuchen's left for our breakfast tomorrow?"

"That ain't the question," I snapped back, hastily interrupting his line of thought. "The question is, what are you offering iffen I solve this case?"

"I'm not so sure it's in your line, anyhow," said Ben. "If anything is

"What d'ya mean by THAT?" I yelled. "ANYTHING'S in the GDA line. The Cleveland Op can manage anything."

"Well, I sure hope so," sighed Nick. "This thing certainly has me beat."

"There, there," I said, "it isn't as bad as all that."

"It isn't, huh," Nick replied. "Op. I've got to get the thing working. Noreen made the motion in the first place that the Terrans build a Hieronymous Machine as a club project, and I'm chairman of the committee that's supposed to get it working properly. And now look at us. Ten dollars outa the club treasury sunk into a gimmick that won't work right. None of us has any idea what's wrong, but Noreen and I are responsible. I wish I'd never seen the June 56 ASTOUNDING."

There was a pause.

"Op," he pleaded, "Opit wouldn't be so bad if the damn thing didn't work at all. I could probe around in its guts and find out what was wrong. But this is working TOO well, it gives me the creeps."

"Yeah," I said, "you might say we're stuck with it."

Nick winced. Noreen paused with the dirty cups in her hands. "Please,

you aren't Willis".

These people don't appreciate my puns.

"O.K." I said, "but what'll ya say if I get the Hieronymous Machine workin' properly?"

"You know whats wrong?"

"No," I admitted, "But I could find out ...for a fee."

"Op," gasped Nick, "Op, if you do, the next time we have coffee here.."

"Yes," I said, "yes."

"ALL THE KUCHEN YOU CAN EAT."

"A deal," I said. "Let's see the machine."

"I still don't think this is your line," Ben insisted pessimistically, as he preceded us into the living room. "After all, you weren't much help when Nick was building his hi-fi set."

That stopped me cold. Momentarily inspired by kuchen, I'd completely forgotten that I didn't know the first thing about electronics.

"You underestimate the potentialities of the GDA," I said weakly, "what I don't know, I can find out."

"Here's the machine," said Nick, levelling the pile of magazines on the coffee table to park it on top. "So here it is. What's wrong with it?"

There it was ...a conglomeration of electrical junk mounted on an aluminium chassis. Detector coil sticking out at one end, looking like a depleted roll of toilet paper. tuning knob for the condenser sticking out in front...the prong of the fixed radiating electrode protruding from the chassis above it...with insulating baffles, prism, exploring electrode, adjusting knobs, and the three stage amplifier, snugly ensconced behind their eloptic shields, marching down in a staggered row to the detector plate at the other end. All very scientific looking, and totally incomprehensible.

"Ah...let's review the operation of this dingus agin," I said, stalling for time.

"O.K" Nick cried, as Ben yawned and settled down in the easy chair behind the latest copy of PLAYBOY. "You place your mineral sample in front of the detector coil." Noreen and I nodded. "Then you adjust the position of the exploring electrode until it picks up the eloptic radiation refracted at the characteristic angles for that mineral through the prism."

"If there is anything such as eloptic radiation for the widget to pick up," Noreen interrupted.

"Shaddap," said Nick. "If Campbell don't care, who are we to quibble?"

"Yeah," I said, having been lost somewhere near the point of radiation.

"At which time" Nick continued doggedly, "Ya otta be able to feel the usual sensation on the detector plate."

"But it don't work that way," I pointed out.

"It don't work that way," Nick agreed.

"It sure don't," Noreen confirmed.

"It gives me the creeps, I tell ya," Nick broke out. "Campbell thinks it indicates psionic detection, but it shouldn't otta work outside the law of cause and effect, should it? It shouldn't detect when there ain't nuthin' there to detect. IT OTTA STOP SOMETIME."

He covered his face with his hands, and sat there, head bowed, on the edge of the sofa, in front of the machine, his shoulders shaking silently.

"Yeah," Noreen agreed, putting a comforting arm around him, "it otta stop being sticky."

I nodded, drawing my fingers lightly over the detector plate. It was sticky alright. The unique, inexpressable, slippery, yet sticky feel of the detector plate of an operating Hieronymous Machine. Yet, with nothing in the field of the detection coil, it shouldn't have been operating at all.

"It's sticky alright," I said.

"It sure is," Noreen agreed.

"Awright. So it's sticky," said Ben, unfolding the PLAYBOY gatefold. "So what?"

"So what?" Nick yelled, rasing his head. "So what am I gonna tell the rest of the club? That our Hieronymous Machine's sticky ---"

"And that we're stuck with it," I said. But I said it to myself.

"--- and that I can't get it unstuck."

Another pause.

"Op," he said, "Op. What's the answer?"

"I'll hafta have some time to think it over," I said with a confidence I didn't feel, "to draw on the resources of the GDA, you know."

"Tell you what," I added, "when we come up here for coffee after the next meeting, I'll set the old stickymous Machine alright --- and then collect."

"But," Nick protested, "what'll I tell the club at the next meeting?"

"Aw, tell 'em you're still tinkerin' with the dingus," I said, "and then present 'em with the unstuck machine at the meeting after next."

A plan was already forming in my mind.

"Alright," Nick agreed, "but I sure hate to have that thing sit around sticky for two weeks."

"It sure is sticky," said Noreen. "Collects dust."

"Yeh," I agreed, running my fingers over the detector plate again, "it's a sticky wicket, for sure. Just about the stickiest wicket I ever felt."

Ben threw the copy of PLAYBOY aside.

"It's time we were going," he said disgustedly. "Let me drop ya off, Op."

"Thanks," I said, and then to Nick and Noreen, "good night, you lucky people. See ya in two weeks, if not before, and we'll take care of the kuch- of the Hieronymous Machine, or I ain't the Cleveland Op."

II

Two weeks later, as I mooched up the sidewalk to Cudell House, I saw I was gonna have to play my trump card. This was the out I'd left myself. The plan.

Two weeks I'd been rackin' my brains over the enigma of the Hieronymous Machine, and there I was. I didn't have any more idea than when I had started. But I had the Terrans meeting ahead of me, before I had to give

the facts to Nick. My plan...pump the other members for the info.



I pulled down my hat brim, tightened the belt of my trench coat, plastered a confident grin on my kisser, and sauntered into the basement room.

Most of the other members were already there.

I tipped Nick a wink.

He smiled weakly and called the meeting to order.

I leaned back in my chair, surveyed the mob. I saw to my satisfaction that everybody in the know was there. 'You might be able to pull this chestnut out of the fire yet, me boy,' I thought.

Nick was explaining about the Hieronymous Machine. He mentioned a questionable resistor, and mumbled something about impedance..said the

machine needed a few minor adjustments (certainly true) and ended with a flourish by saying how great it was that the club was really doing something at last.

Later, when the meeting had degenerated through the adjournment into the usual bull session, I went into action.

"Gene," I said, nudging the member of the Hieronymous Committee who had bought most of the parts, "what'd you figure's wrong with the gadget?" He otta know, I thought, if anyone does.

"It's the resistor, I suppose," he said, "like Nick was saying."

"Yeah, I know," I insisted, "but just suppose it ain't the resistor, what then?"

"Weeeell, it might be a leakage of eloptic radiation between the stages of the amplifier," he said, "but while that would make the machine innaccurate, it would hardly render it inoperative. More likely the condensor is tuned wrong --- though Nick has undoubtedly tried it at different settings. But if that's the case, and the condensor is out of phase with the amplifier, then the interfrequency modulation would cancel out the eloptic radiation or reinforce it, depending on which end of the spectrum it was integrating from."

"Oh," I said. I was with him as far as leakage.

"Yes," he said. "While, on the other hand, the 500Kc signal might be cancelled out by the .001 uF ceramic condensor or the 10 uF four-section 300 volt electrolytic ---do you follow me?"

I cracked my face into a smile.

"Weeeell, er, that is ..."

"Well, in everyday language, if the signal isn't radiating at more than ten thousand B.T.U's, give or take a millihenry or two, the output isn't going to be enough to homogenize the voltmeter, and your stilson guage is going to warp. I don't really think that's wrong, though, because I put an oscilloscope across the arc, and it didn't turn blue."

"Sure," I said, "thanks."

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Having learned all I could from Gene, I sought out the third member of the committee who, with Gene and Nick, had helped build the machine.

"Well, George," I said, "what's your opinion as to why the Hieronymous Machine don't work?"

"It's stupid, that's why," he said firmly.

"Oh. ? How so ?"

"It don't work, does it ? If it don't work, it's stupid. That's obvious."

"But it ought to work," I said. "What if we do get it to work ?"

"We won't," he said.

"Why ?"

"Because it's stupid. I already told you that."

This was getting me nowhere.

"You didn't think it was stupid when we started to build it," I said.

"Yes I did," he said. "I always thought it was stupid."

"Then why did you agree to be on the committee to help build it ?"

"I didn't know it wasn't going to work, then."

"Why," I said, sneaking one in under the belt, "why didn't it work.?"

"Aw, everyone knows that."

"Yes ?" I panted.

"Because it's stupid."

"You've convinced me," I said.

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"Why don't we talk about science fiction ?" asked a voice behind me.

"Who ...wha" I said, "Whazzat you say, Don ?"

"Why don't we talk about science fiction ?" he repeated. "After all, this is a science fiction club, isn't it ? All you been talkin' about ever since you came in is that Hieronymous Machine. Why don't we talk about science fiction?"

"Well, " I said, having given George up as a lost cause, "The Hieronymous Machine is science fiction in a way. Besides, I'm curious about it, aren't you? I'm especially curious, bein' a GDA op. This sorta thing's in my line."

"Yeh, and that's what I don't understand," he said, getting warmed up on his subject. "Why do you waste your time on that sorta thing. I been reading these magazines you lent me. Like this RETRIBUTION. Shucks, they're just the same as HYHELIS and QUANDRYS you gave me to read a few weeks back."

"Wha ?"

"Don't you have any magazines with anything in them ?"

"But....."

"We otta talk about science fiction, an' authors, an' writin' stories and stuff like that there."

"There are fanzines that have that kind of material," I said, somewhat stunned, "and I like 'em too, but these that print more humor...."

"You mean that stuff's supposed to be funny ?"

"Well, you seethat is, in a way, " I tried to collect my scattered wits, and rally to the cause, "yes. But there is, above all, an underlyinger...in other words, we of the GDA try to make fandom a Better Way of Life," I finished triumphantly.

"What's that got to do with science fiction,?" he said.

"Those magazines you read, they're all full of stuff that don't have nothin' to do with science fiction; all full of funny stories, an' detective stories, an' articles on books that ain't science fiction, an' on mind readin', an' politics, an' stuff like that there. An' we keep-talkin' about that stuff at all the meetings here. An' now, all we're doin' is talking about this here Hieronymous Machine. Why don't we talk about science fiction?"

"But the article on the Hieronymous Machine was in ASTOUNDING " I said,

"That's one of the magazines I was talkin' about," he said.

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I was beginning to wonder if my plan was working so well. Looking round for a fresh start, I decided to try the feminine angle. Cherchez la femfan, as the Goon would say.

"What d'ya say, Bea?" I said. "What d'ya say is wrong with the Hieronymous Machine?"

"Don't ask me, Op. You know I don't know anything about that."

"Well, you could at least hazard a guess, couldn't you,"

I figured even a guess from Bea would be more than I'd dug up so far.

"I wouldn't know where to start," she said. "I think this whole thing's silly anyway. Taking ten dollars out of the club funds to build a ...whaddy call it?"

"A Hieronymous Machine," I said.

"A...uh...yes. I think it's silly, anyway. Remember, Op, I wasn't there when you voted on this. That was the weekend I spent on my friend Pete's yacht. You should have been there, Op. Just loafing around in the sun, with the water calm and sort of rocking you and the cool breeze making the temperature just right. Boy, what a life."

"Sure," I said. "But about the Hieronymous Machine. I"

"And that evening Pete took us out to dinner at one of those swanky restaurants, and I had lobster with some sort of real rich thick sauce, and for dessert there was a sort of strawberry tart with ice-cream and just gobs of real thick whipped cream. Oh, you'd've just died."

"I sure would've," I said, thinking about kuchen.

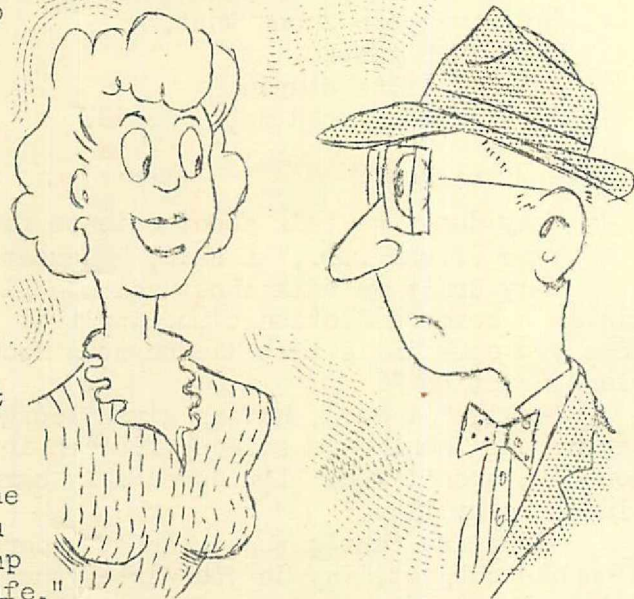
"And then afterwards, Pete took us dancing at another swell place, and they had Guy Coop and his orchestra, and I danced all the dances. It was real dreamy."

"Sure it was, but ..."

"And then afterwards Pete took me in his convertible, way up in the hills..."

"But"

"And then afterwards, where you could see the lights of the city, and the top was down, and the night air was real soft and warm....."



"But"

"And you should have smelled the air up there, Op, all fresh and clear. We parked there for a while and then we drove and drove, and then it was almost dawn....."

"Hey look," I said. "About the Hieronymous Machine"

"What Hieronymous Machine?" she said.

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"Well, David," I asked, deciding to give it one last whirl, "What's your opinion on what's wrong with the Hieronymous Machine?"

"Huh. Oh. It's that resistor, isn't it? That's what Nick said."

"Yeh. I know. But I mean ... That is, supposin' it don't even work with the right resistor. What else do you think might likely to be wrong with it?"

"I don't know," he said, "but I won't be surprised if it don't work. What else would ya expect from Campbell?"

"But Campbell's machine worked," I protested.

"Yes," he replied, "but if Campbell didn't use up half the pages of ASTOUNDING for stuff like that, it'd be a lot better magazine."

"Some people find it interesting," I said.

"Sure," he said, "so do I. But there's so much stuff that's better. Campbell's trouble is that he's always dreamin' up new sciences, or v'ing long, long editorials. What science fiction needs is better stories."

"I agree with you there," I said, "but, besides bein' interesting to a lot of people that read ASTOUNDING, the articles and editorials that Campbell runs, quite often have ideas for stories"

"An' the stories are just like the articles and editorials," David interrupted. "That's the trouble, there's no punch to them, no adventure. Now you take the stories that were printed back in the '30's, they had punch and adventure. Like E.E. Smith, ferinstance, his stories had punch and adventure. Campbell's trouble is that he's all so het up over extrapolation. Extrapolate this, extrapolate that. I thought science fiction was supposed to be escape literature. I wanta enjoy a story when I sit down"

"But some people"

"More monsters, that's what it needs, more monsters. They're really exciting. Scientific explanations are O.K. in their place, but you can read 'em in a text book. There aren't any monsters in a text book. You take all the really good science fiction movies, the interesting ones, I mean, the ones that made lots of money at the box office, they all had monsters."

"But" I said.

"Let's face it," he said, "Campbell's no Ray Harryhausen."

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I collapsed into a chair to add up what I'd found out. I checked my notebook. Nuthin', but absolutely nuthin'. My time was running out. It was almost 10.00, and I didn't even have a lead.

Then I noticed Ben sitting across the table from me. Suddenly I realized that all through the caper Ben hadn't given an opinion. 'He's keepin' somethin' hid' I thought. 'Gotta trip 'is up. I'll play this one cagey.'

I sidled around the table and sat down beside him. "What's this I

hear about the Hieronymous Machine ?" I whispered confidentially.

"You still worried about that ?" he said. "I thought you'd given that up long ago."

"Heck, no," I said. "We got ten dollars of the club money tied up in that gimmik, an' it's my dooty as the Cleveland Op to find out what's wrong with it. You got any idea's, Ben ?"

"I got more important things to think about," he said.

"Ten dollars seems pretty important to me," I said, thinking of the kuchen. "Besides, don't you want to see the Hieronymous Machine workin'?"

"Look, Op," he said, "when you've been a fan as long as I have, you will discover that these crazy ideas come and go. Sure this seems important to you now, but in ten or twenty years ..."

"O'course, o'course," I interrupted, breakin' in while I still had a chance, "but we got the Hieronymous Machine, and it's not worth anything to the club unless it works right"

"There are other things to worry about, Op. That's your trouble. You have a one track mind. When you've been in fandom as long as I have, and read the IMMORTAL STORM as many times as I have, you'll learn to take a broader view. After all, Op, sure you're more active in fandom right now than I am, but remember, I been around a lot longer than you have ..."

"Well, natch, Dad," I said, struggling to follow the point of the conversation.

"That's why my collection's larger than yours, Op. Why, if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have your set of WEIRD TALES"

"Now just a minute ..."

"And even so, you don't have the third issue, while I ..."

"Awright, Jason," I said, "now you've gone too far. You mention that missin' third issue of WEIRD TALES just once more, an' I'm gonna zap you one."

"O.K., O.K.," Ben said. "But don't come cryin' to me about the Hieronymous Machine. When you've been round as long as I have, and've read the IMMORTAL STORM as many times as I have, you'll look at these things ..."

"Fergit it," I said, "fergit I ever said anything."

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III

After the meeting, we went out to Ben's car.

"Well,?" said Nick eagerly, "Well ?"

"Patience," I said, stalling for time, "Wait till we get to your apartment."

By the time we were climbing the stairs at 11125 Lake Avenue, I was really sweatin'. In just a few minutes, Nick was going to want to know why the Hieronymous Machine was such a sticker, and I didn't know from nuthin'. I racked my brains. The honour of the GDA depended upon me. What would the Goon do in a situation like this ?

What would the Goon do ? I remembered from the immortal pages of THIS GOON FOR HIRE, how the boss had once been in a tough spot like this, up the creek without a paddle, so to speak, and what did he do. ? He reconstructed the crime.

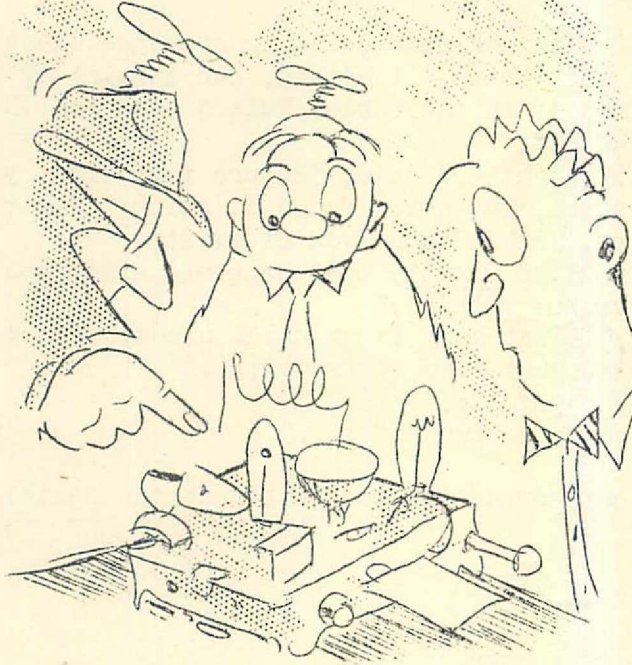
"Awright," I said, as soon as we got inside the apartment, and before Nick could open his yap, "We're gonna do this methodical like."

They just gaped at me.

"You may take off yer coats," I said.

They took off their coats. Noreen went into the kitchen to make coffee.

"Now," I said, as we sat down, and Ben found the usual copy of PLAYBOY, "think back, Nick, and tell me, when was the first time you noticed that the detector plate of the Hieronymous Machine was sticky?"



"Well," said Nick thoughtfully, "it was just two days before the last meeting. Gene gave the machine to me at the meeting before last, you remember, and he had everything finished except that resistor he couldn't find. I knew where I could get one at the lab, so I did, but what with the night school and one thing or another, I didn't get the chance to complete the machine before then."

"Yeces. Go on," I said encouragingly.

"I had night school that night, but when I got home, I decided to install the resistor while Noreen warmed up the coffee an' got ready for bed," Nick leaned

back on the sofa, his eyes closed, re-living the experience. "I wanted to get the machine workin', you see, and have a chance to test it a little, before the club meeting. So it was around 11.30 pm when I finished it."

"Yes," I said, "yes."

"I was sitting on the sofa right where I am now, with the Hieronymous Machine in front of me, right where it is now, and I was just ready to try it out for the first time, when"

"Coffee's hot," Noreen called from the kitchen.

".....when Noreen called me out to the kitchen for coffee."

"Hang on," I said, "I wanta get this exactly the way it was..... you went out to the kitchen...right?"

"Of course," said Nick, "Noreen called me."

"And you left the machine here, and tried it out for the first time later?"

"No, I took it into the kitchen with me."

"Righto," I said cheerfully, thinking of the kitchen, "bring it along," and sashayed into the kitchen. There, I found Ben already seated at the table, having willingly deserted PLAYBOY for once. Noreen was reaching for the bakery box to cut the kuchen.

"Hold it, folks," I gritted. "We got a little business to take care of here, before we get down to culinary matters. Not that I think I'm gonna scorn such as them tonight. Heh heh." I licked my chops and looked fondly at the bakery box. "We're gonna reconstruct the scene right here, the way it was the night Nick first found the Hieronymous Machine to be sticky."

"For what?" Ben asked scornfully, "for what?"

"For to have me show youse lugs how not to put a Hieronymous Machine

to-gether so it won't turn off, that's for what," I said with some certainty.

"Then you do know what's wrong with it?" Noreen said, registering surprise. They all did. The sceptics.

I was sorta surprised myself. I still didn't have the slightest idea about anything. But if the Goon could pull off a caper like this, the Cleveland Op could. I hoped.

I mopped my forehead with a kleenex, and ignored the question.

"We'll take one thing at a time," I hissed, and snakin' my zap outa my shoulder holster, I slammed it on the table. Rule 1 outa the GDA Handbook; - Always impress the subject.

"Now let's get this straight," I said. "Before this time, you'd touched the detector plate many times, but never found it sticky. Right?"

"Right," Nick murmured, lookin' bug-eyed at my zap.

"O.K.," I said, "now tell me exactly what happened after you sat down at the table. Don't leave out nuthin'."

"Well," Nick relaxed, "I sat here in my usual place, with the Hieronymous Machine in front of me, just like it is now...."

Nick paused, thinking carefully.

"...and it was all ready to try out"

"Yes?" I said.

"So I took a sip of coffee and started to adjust the position of the exploring electrode"

"Yes, yes, go on."

"...and reached over ..."

"Yes ????"

"...and got a piece of kuchen."

"Say, can't we cut the kuchen? That'd make this whole deal more realistic."

"Yes," said Noreen.

"Yeh," said Ben.

I counted slowly to ten. I was achin' to get my choppers into the kuchen, too. But unless I could whop up a miracle in the next few seconds, I was only going to be able to chisel a few measly helpings. Nearly half of that kuchen was almost within my grasp, and Nick had to interrupt the investigation with his own selfish greed.

The kuchen. I licked my chops. How to get the kuchen? Following the Goon's lead, I had reconstructed the situation right to the point where Nick reached for the kuchenthe kuchen.

"Of course, THE KUCHEN."

"Huh". Nick jerked his hand back from the bakery box, but I hadn't even picked up my fork. I realized that I'd shouted out loud, and everybody was lookin' at me again with confused anticipation.

"Bless you, Goon," I thought, and gave a hard, confident smirk. "Naturally, the kuchen's the key to the whole thing," I said, calmly replacing my zap.

"What in the hell does a kuchen got to do with a Hieronymous Machine?" Ben snorted.

"Everything," I replied with a certain amount of smugness. "A Hieronymous Machine operates on psionic principles. A person's psionic powers are governed by his physical and mental state. Nick's physical and mental state the night that he finished puttin' the Hieronymous Machine to-gether, tried it out for the first time, and got it stuck at its

stickiest, we know now was governed bykuchen"

"I guess that makes sense," mused Ben, trying to sort out my logic, "sort of, anyways."

"All right, Nick," I said, striking while I had command of the situation, "now what are the ingredients of kuchen?"

"I still don't see what this has to do with the Hieronymous Machine," Nick said, "but...." he concentrated, "...let's see. Dough an' cinnamon an' raisins an' icing an' ground nuts an' ..."

"Enough," I choked, dabbing my chin with another kleenex. I licked my lips and looked at the bakery box. I hadn't expected this line of reasoning to be such an ordeal. "Now tell me, when these ingredients are combined, what are the physical properties of the kuchen?"

"Weeeell," Nick replied, "it's sort of doughy an' crunchy an' yummy an' gooey..." the light of realization dawned in his eyes "....and sticky."

"Exactly," I said, fetching a damp washrag from the sink, and wiping the detector plate. "I think you will now find that the Hieronymous Machine no longer produces a constant sensation of stickiness."

"He's right," Ben said, feeling the plastic and turning a dial.

"In fact," I mused, "I sorta doubt that you're gonna get a sensation of stickiness from the dammed thing ever again."

But they were too far gone to heed my skepticism. They just kept gazin' from me to the machine and back again, with expressions of mingled awe and dissatisfaction.

Nick grabbed the machine and verified Ben's verdict for himself.

"And now," I said, "for my fee."

I opened the bakery box.

"Foiled," I screamed, staring in shocked disbelief at the four minute pieces of kuchen remaining on the tin plate. "Duped, swindled and gyped."

I felt the blood drain from my head. That old gnawing hunger formed in my stomach. I saw red. I lost control of myself. My trigger finger twitched. I waved the polished muzzle of my zap in front of their kissers.

"Awright," I snarled. "Awright, which one o' you apes crooked the rest of the kuchen?"

"Oh," said Nick, "working over the Hieronymous Machine, "I had it for supper, just before Noreen and I left for the meeting....you know, you're quite right, Op. This damn thing wont get sticky at all, now."

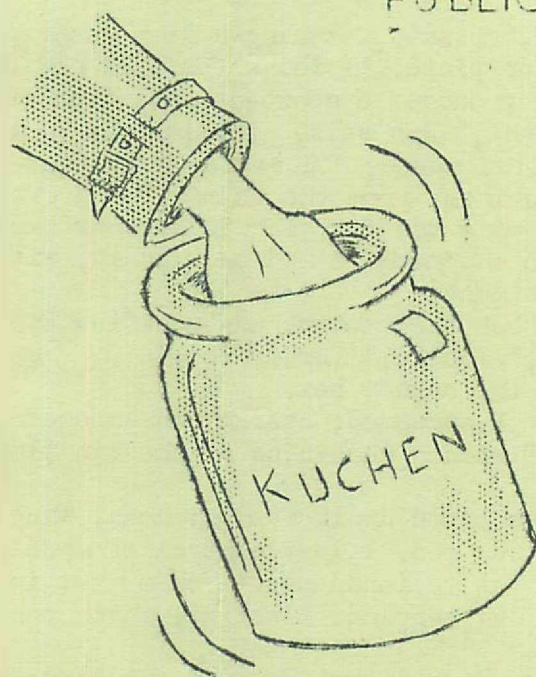


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