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The Literary Agent
by Kage Baker
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THE OBJECT, had it been seen when it arrived, might have been described as a cheap aluminum trunk. In fact it was not a trunk, nor was it made of aluminum, and it was certainly not cheap. Nor was there anyone present who might have seen or attempted to describe it. So much for the sound of a tree falling in the forest.

Nevertheless the Object was there, between one second and the next, soundless, spinning slowly and slower still until it wobbled to a gentle stop. For a moment after that nothing much happened. Clouds roiled past it, for it had arrived on the seaward face of a coastal mountain range. It sizzled faintly as moisture beaded on it. Underneath it, ferns and meadow grasses steadily flattened with its unrelieved weight.

Then the lid flew back and from the chest's interior a cloud of yellow gas boiled away. A man sat up inside, unfolding with some pain from his coiled fetal position. He exhaled a long jet of yellow smoke, which was whipped away at once by the driving mountain wind. Retching he pulled himself free and tumbled over the side of the Object, sprawling at his length beside it.

He lay perfectly still there a while and then sat up, alert, apparently fully recovered from his ordeal. He groped in his vest pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a watch. Actually it was a sort of a watch, certainly more so than the Object was a trunk. He consulted the timepiece and seemed satisfied, for he snapped it shut and got to his feet.

He appeared to be a man; actually he was a sort of man, though human men do not travel in trunks or breathe stasis gas. He was of compact build, stocky but muscular, olive-skinned. His eyes were hard as jet buttons. They had a cheerful expression, though, as he squinted into the wind and viewed the fog walling up the miles from the Bay of Monterey.

Leaning over into the Object he drew out the coat of his brown worsted suit, and slipped it on easily. He shot his cuffs, adjusted his tie, closed the lid of the Object that was not a trunk -- but for the sake of convenience we'll call it a trunk from here on -- and lifted it to his shoulders, which gave him some difficulty, for the thing had no handles and was as smooth as an ice cube.

Clutching it awkwardly, then, he set off across the meadow. His stride was meant to be purposeful. The date was September 8, 1879.

He followed a wagon road that climbed and wound. He clambered through dark groves of ancient redwoods, green and cold. He crossed bare mountainsides, wide open to the cloudy air, where rocks like ruins stood stained with lichen. None of this made much of an

impression on him, though, because he wasn't a scenery man and the thing that we have agreed to call a trunk kept slipping from his shoulder.

Finally he set it down with what used to be called, in that gentler age, an oath.

"This is for the birds," he said.

The trunk made a clicking sound and from no visible orifice spewed out a long sheet of yellowed paper. He tore it off, read what was written there, and looked for a moment as though he wanted to crumple and fling it away. Instead he took a fountain pen from an inside coat pocket. Sitting on the smooth lid of the trunk he scribbled a set of figures on the paper and carefully fed it back into the slot that you could not have seen if you had been there.

When he had waited long enough to determine that no reply was forthcoming, he shouldered his burden again and kept climbing, quicker now because he knew he was near his destination. The road pushed up into a steadily narrowing canyon, and the way grew ever steeper and overhung with oak trees.

At last he saw the dark outline of a wagon in the gathering dusk, up ahead where the road ended. He made out the shape of a picketed horse grazing, he heard the sound of creek water trickling. A few swift paces brought him to his destination, where he set his burden down and looked at the figure he had traveled so far to see, sprawled under the tree by the coals of a dying fire. He snapped off a dry branch and poked up flames. He did not need them to see the object of his journey, but courtesy is important in any social encounter.

The fire glittered in the eyes of the man who lay there, wide-set eyes that stared unseeing into the branches above him. A young man with a long doleful face, shabbily dressed, he lay with neither coat nor blanket in a drift of prickly oak leaves. He had yet to write *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *Treasure Island*, and from the look of him it was unlikely he'd live long enough to do so.

The other scanned him and shook his head disapprovingly. Malnutrition, tubercular lesions, malaria, a hideous case of eczema on both hands. "Tsk tsk tsk." He drew a little case from his pocket. Something he sprayed on the scabbed hands, something he injected into one wrist. He peeled the back from a transdermal patch and stuck it just behind the young man's ear.

Then he turned his attention to the fire again. He built it up to a good blaze, filled the tin kettle at the creek and set more water to boil. It had not yet begun to steam when the young man twitched violently and rose up on his elbows. He stared at his visitor, who put his hands on his trouser-knees and leaned over him with a benevolent smile.

"Robert Louis Stevenson! How's it going?"

"Whae the Hell are you?" croaked he.

"Allow me to introduce myself: Joseph X. Machina." The other grabbed his limp hand and shook it heartily. "At your service, even if I am just a hallucination. Would you like some tea? It's about ready."

The young man did not reply, but stared at him with eyes of extraordinary size and luminosity. His visitor, meanwhile, rummaged amid his belongings in the back of the wagon.

"Say, you didn't pack any tea. But then you didn't really come up here to camp, did you? You ought to do something about that death wish of yours." He found a tin cup and carried it back to the fire. "Luckily, I always carry a supply with me." He sat down and from an inner pocket produced a teabag.

"What's that?" inquired Stevenson.

"Orange Pekoe, I think." The other peered at the tag. "Yeah. Now, here's your tea, and let's make you nice and comfortable --" He found Stevenson's coat, made a pillow of it and propped up his head. "There we are."

He resumed his seat on the trunk and drew from the same inner pocket a bar of chocolate in silver foil. He unwrapped one end of it and took a bite.

"Now, Mr. Stevenson, I have a proposition for you," he said. Stevenson, who had been watching him in increasing fascination, began to laugh giddily.

"Is the trunk to carry off my soul?" he gasped. "Is the Accuser of the Brethren different in

California? I'd have wagered you'd look more like a Spanish Grandee in these parts. Do you change your coat with the times? Of course you would, wouldn't you? Yet you haven't quite the look of a Yankee. In any case, _Retro, Sathanas!_"

"No, no, no, don't worry. I'm not that guy. I'm merely a pleasant dream you're having. Here, have some of this." Joseph broke off and handed a square of chocolate to Stevenson, who accepted it with a smirk.

"Sweeties from Hell!" The idea sent him into a giggling fit that started him coughing. The other watched him closely. When he recovered he pulled himself up on his elbow and said, "Well then -- you haven't any cigarettes, I suppose."

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"Lucifer not smoke?!" This time he laughed until he wept, wiping his eyes on his frayed sleeves. Consumptives do not wipe their eyes on their handkerchiefs. "Oh, I hope I remember this when I wake. What an idea for a comic narrative."

"Actually that was sort of what I wanted to talk to you about," Joseph went on imperturbably, finishing the last of his chocolate in a bite.

"Is that so?" Stevenson lurched into a sitting position. He grasped the cup of tea in his trembling hands, warming them.

"Absolutely. Remember, this is all part of a dream. And what is your dream, Louis, your most cherished dream? To make a success of this writing business, isn't it? Financial independence so you can win this American lady you've come mooning after. Well, in this dream you're having right now, you've met a man from the Future -- that's me -- and I've come back through time to tell you that you've _got_ it, baby. All you wanted. Everything. Mrs. Osbourne too."

"What nonsense. I'm dying penniless, unknown, and (I fear) unloved." Stevenson's eyes grew moist. "I came such a long way to do it, too. She sent me away! What does _she_ care if I expire in this wilderness?"

"Louis, Louis, work with me, all right?" Joseph leaned forward, looking earnest. "_This is your dream._ This dream says you're going to become a famous author. You write slam-bang adventure stories."

"I write abominably derivative fiction. The only good stuff's from life, my essays and the travel books."

"Come on, Louis, let's make this bird fly. You'll write adventure novels about the sea and historical times. People love them. You're a hit. You're bigger than Sir Walter Scott, all right?"

"_He_ couldn't write a lucid sentence if his life had depended on it," Stevenson sneered. "Oh, this is all the rankest self-conceit anyway."

"Then what will it hurt you to listen? Now. I represent the Chronos Photo-Play Company. Let me explain what a photo-play is. We have patented a method of, uh, making magic-lantern pictures into a sort of effect of moving tableaux, if you can grasp that. Maybe you've read about the cinematograph? Oh, gee, no, you haven't." Joseph consulted his timepiece. "You'll just miss it. Never mind -- So, in the Future, we have these exhibitions of our photo-plays and people pay admission to come in and watch them, the way they'd watch a real live play or an opera, with famous players and everything. But since we don't have to pay live actors or even move scenery, the profit margin for the exhibitor is enormous. See?"

Steven gaped at him a moment before responding. "I was wrong. I apologize. You may or may not be the Devil, but you're most assuredly a Yankee."

"No, no, I'm a dream. Anyway. People are crazy about these photo-plays, they'll watch anything we shoot. We've adapted all the great works of literature already. Shakespeare, Dickens, all those guys. So now, my masters are looking for new material, and since you're _such_ a famous and successful writer they sent me to ask if you'd be interested in a job."

"I see." Stevenson leaned back, stretching out his long legs and crossing them. "Your masters want to adapt one of my wonderful adventure stories for these photo-plays of theirs?"

"Uh, actually, we've already done everything you wrote. Several times."

"I should damned well hope I got royalties, then!"

"Oh, sure, Louis, sure you did. You're not only famous, you're rich. Anyway what my masters had in mind was you coming up with something completely new. Never-before-seen. Just like all your other stuff, you know, with that wonderful Robert Louis Stevenson magic, but different. Exclusively under contract for them."

"You mean they want me to write a play?" Stevenson looked intrigued.

"Not exactly. We don't have the time. This dream isn't going to last long enough for you to do that, because it's a matter of historical record that you're only going to lie here another -- " Joseph consulted his timepiece again, " -- forty-three hours before you're found and nursed back to health. No, see, all they need you to do is develop a story treatment for them. Four or five pages, a plot, characters. You don't have to do the dialogue; we'll fill that out as we film. We can claim it's from long-lost notes found in a locked desk you used to own, or something."

"This is madness." Stevenson sipped his tea experimentally.

"Delirium. But what have you got to lose? All you have to do is come up with a concept and develop it. You don't even have to write it down. I'll do that for you. And to tell you the honest truth -- " Joseph leaned down confidentially, " -- this is a specially commissioned work. There's this wealthy admirer of yours in the place I come from, and he's willing to pay anything to see a new Robert Louis Stevenson picture."

"Wouldn't he pay more for a whole novel? I could make one up as we go along and dictate the whole thing to you, if we've got two more days here. You'd be surprised at how quickly stories unfold when the Muse is with me." Stevenson squinted thoughtfully up at the stars through the branches of the oak tree.

Joseph looked slightly embarrassed. "He's ... not really much of a reader, Louis. But he loves our pictures, and he's rich."

"You stand to make a tidy sum out of this, then."

"Perceptive man, Mr. Stevenson."

Stevenson's eyes danced. "And you'll pay me millions of money, no doubt."

"You can name your price. Money is no object."

"Dollars, pounds or faery gold?" Stevenson began to chuckle and Joseph chuckled right along with him in a companionable manner.

"You've got the picture, Louis. It's a dream, remember? Maybe I've got a trunkful of gold doubloons here, or pieces of eight. I'm authorized to pay you anything for an original story idea."

"Very well then." Stevenson gulped the tea down and flung the cup away. "I want a cigarette."

The other man's chuckle stopped short.

"You want a cigarette?"

"I do, sir."

"You want -- Jeepers, Louis, I haven't got any cigarettes!"

"How now? No cigarettes? This is my dream and I can have anything I want. No cigarette, no story." Stevenson laced his slender fingers together and smiled.

"Look, Louis, there's something you should know." Joseph bent forward seriously. "Cigarettes are not really good for your lungs. Trust me. They'll make your cough worse, honest. Now, look, I've got gold certificates here for you."

"It's cigarettes or nothing, I say."

"But I tell you I can't get any -- " The other seized the hair at his temples and pulled in vexation. Then he halted, as if listening to an inner voice. "Hell, what can I lose?"

He opened the lid of the trunk and brought out his pad of yellow lined paper. Casting a reproachful glance at Stevenson he scribbled something down and fed his message into the invisible slot. Almost immediately the reply emerged. He scanned it, wrote something more and fed it back. Another quick reply. Stevenson watched all this with amusement.

"He's got a wee devil in the box poking his letters back out," he speculated.

"All I want is to make the man happy," Joseph retorted. "Fame, I offer him. Riches, too. What does he do? He turns capricious on me. Lousy mortal." He read the next communication and his eyes narrowed. Hastily he backed away from the trunk, putting a good eight feet between himself and it.

"What's amiss now?" inquired Stevenson. "Old Nick's in a temper, doubtless."

"I'd cover my ears if I were you," replied the other through gritted teeth. As if on cue the trunk gave a horrific screech. It shook violently; there was a plume of foul smoke; there was one last convulsive shudder: then a cigarette dropped from the orifice, very much the worse for wear, mashed flat and in fact on fire.

Joseph ran forward and snatched it up. He blew out the flame and handed the smoldering mess to Stevenson.

"There," he snapped. "It's even lit for you. Satisfied?"

Stevenson just stared at it, dumfounded.

"Smoke the damned thing!" said the other. Stevenson took a hasty drag while Joseph bent over the trunk and did some diagnostic procedures.

"Did we break Hell's Own Postbox?" ventured Stevenson after a moment.

"I hope not," the other man said. "And I hope you're doing some thinking about story ideas."

"Right." Stevenson inhaled again. The cigarette did not draw well. He eyed it critically but thought it best not to complain. "Right, then. What sort of story shall we give them? A romance, I dare say."

"Sex is always popular," conceded Joseph. He stood, brushed off his knees and took up the yellow lined pad. "Go on."

"Right. There's a woman. She's a beauty, but she labors under some kind of difficulty. Perhaps there's a family curse, but she's pure as the snows of yesteryear. And there's a fellow to rescue her, a perfect gentle knight as it were, but he's knocked about the world a bit. Not a hapless boy at any rate. And there's an older fellow, a bad 'un, a dissolute rake. Byronic."

"Not very original, if you'll pardon my saying so," remarked Joseph, though he did not stop writing.

"No, I suppose not. How many ways are there to write a romance? Let's make it a woman who's the bad 'un. Tries to lure the hero from the heroine. There's a thought! A sorceress. Metaphorically speaking. Perhaps even in fact. Wouldn't that be interesting?"

"Sounding good." The other man nodded as he wrote. "Where's all this happening, Louis?"

"France. Medieval France."

"So this is a costume drama."

"A what? Oh. Yes, silks and velvets and whitest samite. Chain mail and miniver. And the sea, I'm sure, with a ship standing off the coast signaling mysteriously. To the beautiful wicked dame, who's a spy! Build this around some historical incident. Put the Black Prince in it. Maybe she's a spy for him and the hero's a Frenchman. No, no, no -- the British public won't take that. On the other hand, this is for the Yankees, isn't it?"

"Sounding good, Louis, sounding really good." The other tore off his written sheet with a flourish. "Let's just feed it into the moviola and see what winds up on the cutting room floor."

"I'm sure that means something to you, but I'm damned if I know what," said Stevenson, watching as the sheet was pulled into the trunk. "How does it do that?"

Joseph did not answer, because the sheet came spewing back at once. He pulled it forth and studied it, frowning.

"What's wrong? Don't they like it?"

"Oh, er, they're crazy about it, Louis. It's swell. They just have a few suggestions. A few changes they want made."

"They want something rewritten?"

"Uh ... the Middle Ages is out. France is out. Knights in armor stuff is expensive to shoot. They want to know if you can make it the South Seas. Give it some of that wonderful tropical ambiance you do so well.."

"I've never been in the South Seas," said Stevenson coldly. He remembered his cigarette and puffed at it.

"No, not yet, but that's all right. You can fake it. California's almost tropical, isn't it? Hot, anyway. Parts of it. That's the Pacific Ocean out there, right? Just write some palm trees into the scenery. Now, er, they want you to drop the girl and the guy. There's just no audience for pure sweethearts now. But they think the evil lady is fabulous. They think the story should mostly revolve around her. Lots of costume changes and bedroom scenes. She plays for power at the court of this Dark Lord guy. Black Prince, I mean."

"The Black Prince never went to the South Seas either, you know. He was a medieval Plantagenet."

"Whatever. I'm afraid the distinction is lost on them, Louis." Joseph gave a peculiar embarrassed shrug. "Historical accuracy is not a big issue here. If we're going to make it the South Seas he has to be something else anyway. Maybe some kind of witch doctor in a black helmet or something. They just liked the name, Black Prince, it's got a kind of ring to it."

"They sound like a supremely ignorant lot. Why don't they write their own bloody story?" Stevenson muttered. His airy humor was descending fast.

"Now, Louis, don't take it that way. They really love your stuff. They just need to tailor it to their audience a little, that's all."

"South Seas be damned." Stevenson leaned back. "Why shouldn't I write about what I know? If France isn't good enough for them, what about this country? I saw some grand scenery from the railway carriage. Now, wait! What about a true American romance? This has possibilities. Do you know, I saw a man threaten to shoot a railway conductor dead, just because he'd been put off the coach for being drunk and disorderly? Only in America. It's as good as the Montagues and Capulets, only with revolvers instead of rapiers. Prairies instead of pomegranate gardens. Picturesque barbarism. What about a hero who's kidnapped at birth and raised by Red Indians?"

"Well, it's been done, but okay." The other began to write again.

"And there's some additional obscurity to his birth ... he's the son of a Scots lord."

"Gee, Louis, I don't know..."

"And his younger brother succeeds to the title but emigrates to America, fleeing punishment for a crime he did not commit. Or perhaps he did. More interesting character. Or perhaps -- "

"Is there any sex in this?"

"If you like. The brothers fall in love with the same woman, will that suit you? In fact ... the girl is the betrothed of the brother who emigrates. She follows him devotedly. While searching for him, she's kidnapped by the Red Indian band of whom her fiance's brother is now Chief. _He_ falls in love with her. Claims her as his bride. Forced marriage takes place. She's terrified, but compelled by the mating rituals of man in his primal innocence."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, Louis!"

"Let's see them get _that_ past the scribes and Pharisees of popular taste," sneered Stevenson, and tossed the last fragment of his cigarette into the fire. "Meanwhile, the fugitive brother has become a frontiersman, with buckskin clothes, long rifle, and quaint fur cap. Gets word that his betrothed has gone missing. Goes in search of her (he's become an expert tracker too) and finds unmistakable evidence of her singular fate. Swears an oath of vengeance, goes out after the brave who committed the enormity, vows to eat his heart, all unwitting they're really brothers."

"We've got a smash hit here, Louis."

"You can cobble on some sort of blood-and-thunder ending. True identities revealed all around. Perhaps the Red Indian brother has a distinctive and prominent birthmark. Fugitive

brother becomes a heroic guide leading settlers across the plains. Red Indian brother accepts his true identity as a white man but refuses to return to Great Britain, denounces the irrelevancy of the British aristocracy, runs for Congress instead. What about another cigarette?"

"Not a chance in Hell," Joseph replied, politely enough nevertheless. He ripped out the page he had been scribbling on and fed it into the trunk. "But how's about a cocktail?" He produced a flask and offered it to Stevenson. "French brandy? You like this. It's a matter of record."

"Great God, man." Stevenson extended his long hand, just as the yellow sheet came curling back out of the trunk. It was covered with dense commentary in violet ink. Both men frowned at it.

"You drink," Joseph told him. "I'll see what they say."

"I can tell you what they don't like, old chap." Stevenson took a long pull from the flask. "Ah. The plot's derivative and wildly improbable. How's the hero to get kidnapped by Red Indians in Scotland, for Christ's sake? Disgruntled family retainer makes away with the wee baby and sends it off down the Clyde in a Moses basket, which by some inexplicable chance washes up in the Gulf of Mexico a day later?"

"Actually they don't have a problem with that part." The other man read swiftly. "But the Wild West business tends to bomb big time. The frontiersman doesn't work for them, either. He can't have a rifle because that would mean he shoots wild animals, see, which is marketing death, protests and threats against distributors, bad boxoffice. They like the sex stuff, though. They just want to know if you can make it the South Seas where all this happens."

Very slowly, Stevenson had another swallow of brandy.

"Why don't your masters send you round to that Herman Melville chap?" he inquired with an edge in his voice. "He wrote some jolly seagoing palaver, didn't he? Why isn't he having this dream?"

"Too hard to film his books," responded Joseph. "But, Louis baby, listen to yourself. You're arguing with a hallucination. Isn't that silly? Now, would it really be so hard, changing the plot around a little? That whole primitive mating ritual bit would play just as well in Tahiti, you know. You could even put in -- " he looked cautiously around, as though someone might be listening, " -- Pirates."

"Buccaneers and native women? Who do you propose is going to come see these photo-plays of yours? Not the bourgeois citizens of Edinburgh, I can tell you."

"Well, it doesn't have to be pornographic. Just, you know, racy. Mildly prurient. Nothing criminal. Say your pirate's a fine upstanding young fellow who just happened to get press-ganged."

"Men were press-ganged into the Navy, not into pirate crews," said Stevenson in disgust. "I grow weary of this dream. Why don't you clear off and let the other beasties come back? I'd rather blue devils than this."

"But I'm not a nightmare! I'm a good dream, honest. Anyway, I can't go. I've been assigned to stay with you until I get a usable concept."

"Then I'll leave you." Stevenson struggled to his feet. He gasped for breath and with a determined stride moved out from the fire into darkness; but his legs seemed to curl under him, impossible thin long inhuman legs, and he fell. The other man was beside him at once, leading him back to the fire solicitously.

"Hey, hey, hey, Louis, let's take it easy. I'm here to help you, remember?"

"It's the damned fog." Stevenson was trembling. "I cannot get away from it. Damned wet air. Mountains aren't high enough."

"Gee, that's awful." Joseph settled him down by the fire, put the folded coat back in place under his head, poured another cup of tea. "Maybe you should travel more. Now, you could go to the -- "

"South Seas, yes, I'd guessed you were going to say that," Stevenson groaned. "Look

here, what about a compromise? The story takes place on a ship traveling in the South Seas. I've been on ships. I can write about them. Your hero is a strapping young Kanaka who's been carried off by whites."

"A Hawaiian? That's an interesting angle." The other was writing again. "Why'd they kidnap him?"

"They needed crewmen. Theirs died of scurvy, I dare say."

"Shanghaied!" exclaimed Joseph with gusto. " _Love_ the title. Go on, Louis, go on."

"He's carried off on a whaling ship, away from his island home and his aged parents. He's a heathen (this is before the missionaries) but nevertheless naturally virtuous. The drunken behavior of the white sailors fills him with righteous dismay."

"We can show a lot of sleaze here. I like it."

"His ship comes to the rescue of another ship under attack by pirates. Buccaneers have just boarded the other vessel and are in the act of putting passengers to the sword. Among passengers a beautiful young virtuous Scottish girl, no doubt traveling with her minister father. Probably has money too. Our Kanaka performs particularly daring act of rescue of maiden. She falls in love with him, he with her."

"Okay, okay, and?"

"They take him back to Scotland with them and ... stop a bit!" Stevenson's eyes lit up. "It's not just one girl he rescues from pirates, it's _two_! Minister's daughter and a harlot who for some reason's been traveling in the South Seas. Both fall in love with him!"

"Boy oh boy oh boy." The other man fed his notes into the trunk. It spat them back again. He read the commentary. Stevenson, watching his face, gave a sob of exasperation and lay back.

" _Now_ what's wrong with it?"

"They didn't go for the title. Funny. And they don't want the hero to be a real Hawaiian. They like the other idea about him being a long-lost duke or earl or somebody like that. Like, his parents were English and their yacht got shipwrecked when he was a baby or something? And he just looks brown because of the tropical sun? Not really some native guy at all."

"Bigots," said Stevenson with contempt.

"No, no, no, guy, you have to understand. Look, you write for the magazines, Louis, you know the popular taste. They want sex, they want violence, but they want the hero to be a white guy. Preferably an English peer. Brown guys can't be heroes. You _know_ that."

"They're heroes in their own stories."

"Oh, yeah? What about the Musketeers guy, Dumas, he was a quadron or something, right? Who's in his books? French Kings and Counts. Black, white, it's only a metaphor anyway. Believe me, our audience wants rich white guys as heroes."

"Well, I despise your audience."

"No, you don't. You need money as much as anybody else. You know the stuff you can't write about. You know where you're free to put in those really interesting bits in a way readers won't mind. Villains! It's the villains everyone secretly loves, Louis. They can be lowborn, they can be strange, they can do rotten things and it's okay because that's what the audience wants. And why? _Because people are lowborn and strange and rotten, Louis! _They want the hero to be this impossible perfect white guy so they can watch the villain beat the crap out of him, since it's what they'd like to do themselves. As long as the villain loses in the end, they don't have to feel guilty about it. And it's all phony anyway. I mean, have you ever really talked to a member of the House of Lords? What a bunch of pinheads."

"I see your point, but I can't agree. The human condition is evil, but we _must_ strive to be otherwise. A writer can't glorify evil in his work. He can't write of the miserable _Status Quo_ of human life as though it were a fine and natural state. He must morally instruct, he must inspire, he must hold up an ideal to be worked for -- "

" Oh, garbage. You don't believe that yourself, even. That's why you wrote -- " Joseph halted himself with an effort. "Well, look. Given that a writer has this other fine noble purpose

in life, he's still got to eat, okay? So there's no harm in a nice swashbuckling adventure yarn with a swell dark villain -- Byronic, like you said -- and a little thin white cardboard hero to bounce off him. It sells, Louis, and there's no point denying it. So. About this Dark Lord guy."

"This is really too depressing." Stevenson gazed into the fire. "I've never seen the pattern in this sort of thing. But it is what we do, isn't it? We feed a perverse urge in our readers by creating supremely interesting images of evil. Perhaps we even cultivate that urge. The villain wins sympathy in our hearts through the skill of the writer. I've felt admiration for the rogue of the old romance myself, the man with the hand of the devil on his shoulder. Great God, what are we doing when we create such characters? And yet they make the story live."

"Now, now, buck up. Look. Suppose you've got your hero sailing along with his two ladies, one good, one bad. Nice tension there. Suppose, Louis, he's got a Bad Guy chasing him, say the chief of the pirates, only this guy isn't just a pirate, he's the Pirate of Pirates, powerful, intelligent, interesting -- maybe he's some kind of magician, picked it up in the islands -- maybe he has something weird about his appearance, in a fascinating way. Huh? Huh, Louis?"

"You even intrigue me with it." Stevenson turned listless eyes on him. "You persuade. You seduce. I want to take pen in hand and write the awful thing and gain immortal fame thereby. Oh, God, this is the real temptation."

"Ah, come on, Louis. We're not talking about sin, we're talking about Dramatic Conflict."

"What if Dramatic Conflict were a sin?" Stevenson said in a small frightened voice, looking back at the flames. "What if my old nurse were right and storytelling does imperil men's souls? Because we do pander to their worst instincts. We do. Let me make my hero as brown as I will, he'll still be the innocent, the Fool. He'll still inspire contempt by his virtue. All my art is spent on making my villain fascinate and charm."

"Hey, look, Louis, don't get sore. I don't dictate public taste, I just try to accommodate it. People live such sad lives. Why not take their minds off the fact by entertaining them?"

"And this is to be my choice, isn't it? I can die an unknown scribbler of essays or I can write the kind of thing you want for your photo-plays and live a successful and famous man." Stevenson shut his eyes tightly. "Well, you can get straight back to Hell with your infernal trunk. I won't sell my soul for eternal fame and you can tell your master so from me. Thee and all thy works I utterly reject."

"Believe me, Louis, you're taking this all the wrong way," the other said soothingly, getting down on his knees beside him. "Isn't it possible to use people's appetites to instruct them in a, uh, positive moral way? Sell 'em tickets to the Palace of Excess and then slip 'em out the back to Wisdom by putting up a sign that says This Way to the Egress? Sure it is. Sure you can. You will. Dickens did it all the time. And even if there is something wrong with the entertainment business, can't you atone for what you do? You can use your loot to do something good. Fight injustice. Defend the brown guys oppressed by white guys, maybe. Louis, you can use this talent of yours to do such good."

"This is just the way you'd have to talk to convince me." Stevenson was trembling, clenching his poor scabbed hands. "Fiendish. Fiendish. Can't you let me die in peace?" The other looked at him with something like compassion. He leaned forward and said:

"Has it occurred to you that you might be wrestling with an angel, Louis?" Stevenson opened his eyes again and stared at him, sweat beading on his high brow. "Come on now. We've almost got it right. Tell me why the pirate is chasing after our hero. Is he after a treasure map? Is he in love with one of the girls? Are they rivals from childhood? Tell me the story, Louis."

Stevenson's breathing had grown steadily harsher. "Very well," he began, covering his face with his long hands and staring up through his fingers at the stars, "your damned pirate's the man for me. Perhaps he's got a cloak that blows about him as he makes his entrance in a storm, black as shadows dancing on the wall of the night-nursery, black as devil's wings. And if you're good, and lie very still, he can't see you ... why can't he see you?"

Evil's not blind, no, Evil walks in the sun with a bland and reasonable face." he lowered his hands and glared at Joseph. "But there's some horror to him as he searches for you there in the dark. _You can hear him coming._ He's a limping devil, you can hear his halting step -- or his wooden leg! The man is maimed, that's it, he's had a leg clean gone by a round broadside of eighteen-pound shot!" He sat up in excitement, taken with his creation.

"And that's the mark by which you may know him, for you couldn't _tell_, else, he looks so big and bluff and brave, like somebody's father come to chase the night horrors away. There's your subtle evil, man, there's the Pirate as honest seaman in plain broadcloth, a man full of virtues to win your trust -- until he finds it convenient to kill you. Yes! And the damnable thing is, he'll _have_ those virtues! Not a mask, d'you see? He'll _be_ brave, and clever, and decent enough in his way -- for all his murderous resolution -- oh, this is the man, _ecce homo_, look at him there large as life! Dear God, he's standing there beside you even now, leaning on his crutch, and there's the parrot on his shoulder -- "

He threw out his frail arm, pointing with such feverish conviction that Joseph, who had been sitting spellbound in spite of himself, turned involuntarily to look. Louis' voice rose to a hoarse scream:

"Oh, give me paper! Give me even a scrap of that yellow paper, please, you can have the bloody soul, only let me get this down before he slips away from me -- " and he groped at his pockets, searching for a pencil; but then he went into a coughing fit that sprayed blood across the other man's trousers. Aghast, Joseph pulled out a tiny device and forced it between Stevenson's teeth.

"Bite! Bite on this and inhale!" Stevenson obeyed and clung to him, strangling, as the other fumbled out another needle and managed to inject another drug.

"Jeez, this wasn't due to happen yet! I'm really sorry, Mr. Stevenson, really, just keep breathing, keep breathing. Okay? You'll be okay now. I promise. This'll fix you up just fine."

After a moment Stevenson fell back, limp. His coughing had stopped. His breathing slowed. Joseph had produced a sponge and a bottle of some kind of cleaner from the trunk and was hastily dabbing blood from his trousers.

"See what you made me do?" Stevenson smiled feebly. "Blood-red ensign's hoisted at last. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Hey, you'll be okay. What I gave you ought to keep it off for months. You won't even remember this." He finished with his clothes and went to work on Stevenson's. "Besides, I've seen worse."

"I dare say you have." Stevenson giggled again. "My apologies for the blood. But it's a sort of a metaphor, isn't it? And now you've foxed your own design, for I'll die and he'll never live, my limping devil ... though he'd have been a grand piece of work..."

"Oh, you'll live long enough to write about _him_." Joseph peered critically at his cleaning job and decided he'd gotten everything out. "Not that it'll do my masters any damn good."

Stevenson closed his eyes. Joseph gave a final swab at his shirtfront. As he was doing so the trunk made a chattering noise and spewed out another sheet of paper. Almost absently he reached out to tear it loose, and glanced at the reply:

CLIENT SAW "NOTES" ON KNIGHTS IN ARMOR STORY, LOVES IT. _DE GUSTIBUS NON EST_ _DISPUTANDEM_. SOME ADAPTATION POSSIBLE. SECURE RIGHTS ON FORGERY BELOW AND PROCEED TO NEXT ARTIST.

Stevenson had opened his eyes again at the sound the trunk made. Joseph looked up from his communication and met his gaze with a frank smile.

"Well, Louis, you've won. Your soul has been tested and found pure. You're one of the Elect, okay? Congratulations, and let me just ask you one last favor."

"What's that?" Stevenson was groggy now.

"Can I have your autograph? Just sign here." He put the pen in Stevenson's hand and watched as Stevenson scrawled his name on the paper, just below the cleverly faked holograph of plot outline and character notes.

"Thanks, pal. I mean that. Sincerely." The other fed the paper into the trunk and this time it did not return. He stood and hoisted the trunk up to his shoulder.

"I'll be running along now, Louis, but before I do I'd like to give you a piece of advice. You won't take it, but I feel compelled. That's just the kind of guy I am."

Stevenson peered at him. Joseph leaned down.

"You really would live longer if you'd give up the cigarettes."

"Tempter, get thee below," Stevenson said.

"Funny you should say that, you know, because that is where I'm based. In a geographical sense only, of course, Down and South being sort of the same? Little suburb just outside of Los Angeles. We produce our photo-plays down there. It's not a great town for writers, Louis. I know you like to travel and everything, but you'd want to leave this one off your world itinerary. Believe me, it's not a place for a man with your scruples to work. The climate's good, though, and they really like your stuff, so it might have suited you. Who knows?"

"I'll die first." Stevenson closed his eyes. The other man nodded somberly and walked away into the night.

* * * *

IN ENTIRELY another time and place, there was a whirl and scatter of brown beech leaves and the trunk was there, spinning unsteadily to a halt; and as there had been no witness to observe its previous arrival, there was no witness now to notice that it was spinning in the opposite direction. It slowed and stopped, and the winter silence of an English forest settled over it. When the lid popped the trunk fell over, and the man in the brown suit had to push the lid aside as he crawled out on hands and knees through a small cloud of yellow smoke.

He crouched on the forest floor a moment or two, panting out stasis gas. As he got to his feet and brushed off his clothes he heard the approaching rattle of an automobile. He looked at his (for lack of a better word) watch.

It was December 3, 1926.

At that precise moment there was a mechanical squeal followed by crashing sounds and a thud, coming from beyond a nearby grove of trees.

He grinned and gave a little stamp of his foot, in appreciation of perfect timing. Then he turned and ran in the direction of the accident.

The automobile was not seriously damaged, although steam was hissing from the radiator cap under the hood ornament. The bug-eyed headlights stared as if in shock. So did the woman seated behind the wheel. Her cloche hat had flown off her head and lay outside the car. He picked it up and presented it to her with a bow. She turned her pale unhappy face to look at him, but said nothing.

"Here's your hat, Mrs. Christie. Say, you're lucky I came along when I did. I think you've had a bump on the head. That sort of injury can cause amnesia, you know."

She did not respond.

"Don't worry, though. Everything's going to turn out all right. Allow me to introduce myself, Ma'am. I represent the Chronos Photo-Play Company. You know, I'm quite a fan of your mystery novels. That Murder of Roger Ackroyd, that was a real peach. You ought to do more with that Hercule Poirot guy."

She just looked at him sadly.

"Tell you what." He leaned his elbow on the door and looked deep into her eyes. "You look like a lady who could use a vacation. Maybe at a nice anonymous seaside resort. What do you say we go off and have a nice private talk together over a couple of cocktails, huh?"

After a long moment of consideration, she smiled.

"I don't believe I caught your name," she said.

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