

THE IMPROBABLE  
by Charles R. Tanner

(Author of "Out of the Jar," "Tumithak in Shawm," etc.)  
It was all utterly impossible. Therefore as Professor Hoopdeowdow Gallows explained, it just had to happen!

BOB DECKER WAS PROPOSING to Dorothy Gallon. It was not the first time that he had proposed to Dorothy. To be exact, it was the eleventh. He was using the cool, calm, reasoning method. The first five times Bob had proposed, he hadn't used any "method" at all. Then, seeing that he was getting nowhere, he decided to put a little psychology into his attempts, and so his sixth proposal had been the romantic, passionate, moving-picture type. That hadn't worked so well, so number seven was the "cave-man" type. That was a fiasco. Then in quick succession had come the careless, man-about-town style, the love-me-or-I-die type and the warning type. And now--this. But Dorothy remained firm in her resistance. It was almost as if she really didn't want to marry Bob Decker. But the cold, calm, reasoning method demanded persistence, and so Bob Decker was persisting. "You know, Dorothy," he was saying. "There's more to life than just romance. We must think of the future, of the days that lie ahead. Just think how convenient it would be, if we were married. Already I'm your father's assistant, and I could come and live at your house and work in the lab-- And you could keep on being your father's housekeeper, just like you are now--" Dorothy interrupted him. "Bob Decker, this is the most miserable proposal you've ever made. As if I'd keep on living with father after I'm married. He doesn't need me and you know it. With all his money, he could hire a whole house full of housekeepers. And as far as convenience for you is concerned--Well, it just goes to show how much romance there is in your make-up. You never think of poor little me. All you think of is how nice it would be for you. "But I think of love and marriage in a lot different way than you do. I want a bold, strong, masterful man. I want a hero. Someone who can pick me up and carry me off over the hill to the land of dreams where a castle and servants await me--And I just can't imagine you even picking me up." She glanced at Bob's slight form in a sort of contempt. "No, Bob," she went on, a softer tone creeping into her voice. "I like you well enough, but I couldn't see you as a husband. As far as I'm concerned, you're still just the little man who works for father." As they were speaking, they had been walking along the street on the way from a movie-house, and now they had reached Dorothy's home. Bob was expected to supper, and he had a strong suspicion that Professor Gallon was going to ask him to do a little overtime work in the lab. It was customary. Professor Gallon never hesitated to ask Bob to work overtime when he needed him, and Bob, who nursed his job because of Dorothy, seldom refused to work, when asked. Sure enough, after supper, the crusty old professor's mouth cracked into an experimental smile as he suggested that Bob and he repair to the laboratory.

With hardly a nod of agreement, Bob followed him down to the cellar and donned a smock. Professor Gallon turned his attention to his "machine." This "machine" (and that was all Bob ever heard it called) was a huge complicated thing that had something to do with dimensions. Professor Gallon had a theory that the arrangement of the carbon atoms in the molecules of the benzene series was due to their placement in a four dimensional structure. After long study, he was convinced that important discoveries in multi-dimensional theory might be made by a careful arrangement of the benzene molecule. Hence this machine. And hence his keeping Bob working overtime, this Saturday night. For the machine was finished at last, and Gallon was so excited to see if it would work as he had planned it that he almost forgot his usual testiness. Once, Bob could have sworn he even saw a pleased smile pass over Gallon's features, but this was probably merely a trick of the lights in the room. And then the professor reached for a big switch and shoved it home. Bob expected some remarkable phenomenon and squinted his eyes and half raised his hands to his ears. But nothing happened. Professor Gallon scowled. He studied the wiring on the top of the machine. He went around behind and opened up the apparatus and peered into it for a long while. Then he came around from behind it and scowled at Bob over his glasses. "Have--you--been--monkeying--with that--machine?" he asked, firing the words at Bob like shots from an automatic. Bob started to quail, decided not to, and answered truthfully. "I haven't touched that machine since it was built," he said. "You've done all the work on it." " 'S dern funny," complained the professor, and mumbling further comments under his breath, he returned to the back of the machine. Presently he gave a pleased ejaculation and seized two wires which dangled loosely in their places. He seized them up and fastened them to two binding posts nearby. But Professor Gallon made a mistake. He connected those wires to the wrong posts and then, never noticing it, came around and threw on the switch again. This time there were results. A light began to glow from somewhere in the interior of the machine and a high-pitched whine was heard, a whine that grew higher and higher until at last the sound grew too high to be heard by human ears. Then Professor Gallon picked up a tuning fork and a small metal mallet. "Watch carefully, now, Bob," he said tensely. "If this thing works at all, it'll work when I strike this fork." He hesitated a moment and then struck the tuning fork with the mallet. PWOONG! That sound had never come from the tuning fork! It was a tremendous sound, a sound as though someone had plucked the lowest string on an immense bass viol! And there was a flash of light, too, a flash so brilliant that for a moment, Bob was unable to see. As his eyes readjusted themselves, the assistant of Professor Hezekiah Gallon found himself unable to believe them.

For a huge maw had developed in the machine, an immense black void that seemed almost solid in its blackness; and it was calmly devouring the professor, swallowing him whole, in fact. Yes, there went his coat, his trousers, his socks, last of all, his shoes, heels first--Professor Hezekiah Gallon was gone!

Or--was he?

An image was forming above the machine. An incredible image, that seemed at first to be made of haze or smoke, but that thickened rapidly and assumed solidity. It was Professor Gallon, all right, or his living double. The creature

was certainly alive, and it certainly looked like Hezekiah Gallon. But Professor

Gallon had been clad in a neat, pinstriped suit, he had had his usual mean, crabbed look on his face, and he had had nothing in his hands save a tuning fork

and a mallet.

While this utterly impossible creature, seated cross-legged in his great lotus

carved from a single ruby, wore a most beatific expression on his countenance,

and, clad nattily in an old-style, striped convict's suit, he held in one hand a

crow-bar, and in the other an easter lily!

AT ABOUT the time Bob Decker and Professor Gallon entered the laboratory, a young man a few blocks away was seating himself at a typewriter. Andrew Montieth, his name was, and he was hungry. Of course, just being hungry wasn't

so bad, he was hungry most of the time, these days. What made it bad was the chance, or rather the certitude that he was going to be much hungrier.

For when one still has ideals at thirty-five, one is an incurable idealist.

And

incurable idealists do not accept charity, nor do they work on the W.P.A. If they are inclined to literature, they write, as Andrew Montieth did, and spend

foolishly for typewriter paper the money that they should have spent for food.

And when they might be writing advertising copy profitably, they pass up the chance in order to write the Great American Novel.

So Montieth remained hungry. And took it philosophically, even with a sort of a

smile. The smile was for posterity, for Montieth had a Great Idea. Yes, beyond a

shadow of a doubt, he had completed the plot, and all the details, of what was

certain to be the novel of the century.

If Montieth lived to write it.

For, quite plainly, he was really starving. And, being Andrew Montieth, he thought not at all of himself, but only of his novel. Could he possibly live to

finish it? Would a publisher be found soon enough, who would consider its obvious merits? Would he be able to get an advance check?

Montieth inserted a sheet of paper listlessly, and typed the title of the story.

He paused for a moment and wrote his name. And paused again.

Pwoong! From the distance had come a sound like the twanging of a string on a bass viol. What was it, the doorbell?

Yes, there it was again. No mistaking it this time, it was the doorbell. With a

scowl at the almost inevitable interruption, Montieth rose and went to the

door.

A messenger stood there, with an envelope and a package. Montieth wondered what

they were, signed for them and brought them back into the room.

He wondered idly which he should open first, then shook off his lassitude and tore open the envelope. A letter fell out, and a check. He glanced at the check

and then gasped. It was for two thousand dollars! Hastily he read the letter, mounting panic sweeping over the joy at his good fortune. With trembling hands

he tore the cover off the package.

It was a book. Publishers, Keith & Wright. Author, Andrew Montieth! He turned hastily to the contents page. There was no longer any doubt. Andrew Montieth slumped to the floor in a faint.

He had collected advance royalties on his great book, the book he had just sat

down to write!

DOWN THE STREET, past the home of Professor Gallon, Mr. Ezekial Morganstern was

walking. Mr. Morganstern was irritated. He had had to take the afternoon off and

business was in no condition to take an afternoon off.

Indeed, business was never in such condition that he could take the afternoon off. Look what had happened the time he had that spell of acute indigestion.

Two

days off, and Mannheim had lost the Hildering account. And mamma had gotten her

budget mixed up because he was too sick to help her with it, as he did every night; and there were still two dollars unaccounted for.

So now he worried, wondering what should happen at the office while he was gone.

Of course, it was worth taking the afternoon off to bid Uncle Ben good-bye.

It

would be worth a lot more than that to get on the good side of Uncle Ben. For Uncle Ben was rich beyond the dreams of avarice. And this visit had

definitely

impressed him with the integrity and good business sense of his niece's husband.

So when his ignorance of the city gave him reason to insist that Mr.

Morganstern

accompany him to the depot when he left, Mr. Morganstern had sighed and done his

best to arrange things so that he could be away from the office for that one afternoon.

He was walking down the street now, in the direction of his home, where Uncle Ben awaited him. And someone was calling him. He looked around, and that someone

was coming down the street, waving his hands. Mr. Morganstern waved back and peered through his glasses until the uncertain form resolved itself into Mannheim, his office assistant. Mannheim was panting.

"Mr. Morganstern--uh--down at the office--uh--uh--Hildering is there! He is asking--uh--to see you!"

Hildering! That big account that Mannheim had lost for them last year. If he was

asking to see Mr. Morganstern, it meant that there was a chance that they might

get that account back, after all. Only--

Leib' Gott im Himmel! Who would take care of Uncle Ben?

What a predicament to be in. Two jobs to take care of, each equally important,

each equally unavoidable. Before he had thought for a minute, Mr. Morganstern found it necessary to clap both hands to his head. Hastily, he explained to Mannheim, his head spinning more and more as he detailed his dilemma.

Pwoong!

Mr. Morganstern heard the sound, but found no time to speculate about it.

Sounds

should bother him now, with all these real troubles. He groaned and tried to reason a way out of his problem. No chance. He groaned again.

"One of 'em is got to lose," he decided, woefully. "I can't tend to everything.

I can't be in two places at once, can I, Mannheim? It's impossible, I should be

in two places at once."

He suddenly realized that he felt very strange. He was standing still, but his

legs felt as if they were walking. He was facing down the street, but he could

see very clearly what was going on up the street, behind his back.

A man was walking toward him. Coming up the street. A man who was familiar, whom

he was certain that he knew. He started forward walking down to meet him--and then suddenly he realized who the man was.

Briefly, it was Mr. Morganstern.

The street was quite unchanged, the world was the same old world, he was still

walking down the street--but he was also walking up the street, to meet himself.

And curiously enough, his mind occupied the bodies of both the Mr.

Morgansterns,

and saw everything through the two pairs of eyes.

Mr. Morganstern had achieved what he had just spoken of as impossible. He was in

two places at once.

BILLY THE HEIST had seen better days. A darned sight better. He could remember,

a few years back, when a guy could go out with a rod and have a century or two

before he'd contacted more than three people. And in those days, as soon as you

flashed your rod, they heisted and came across. Nowadays, it was different.

Plenty different. These hard times made it tough to get enough to live unless a

fellow worked regular hours every night. Might as well be honest as do that.

So Billy the Heist no longer confined himself strictly to hold-ups. This job he

was on now, for instance. A "case" had slipped him the dope on a house where the

owners were sure to be out on a certain evening, and where large quantities of

real silver were to be found, to say nothing of jewels, maybe. Billy the Heist

had taken the job; and here he was, on a common burglary lay, a run of the mine

breaking and entering job.

The silver was all in the cheap suitcase which he had brought especially to carry it. He switched off his flashlight and rose from the floor. He stepped into the reception hall.

Pwoong!

Billy's heart leaped into his mouth. What was that? Sounded like--like somebody

had rung a bell. Was there someone in this house after all? Billy turned and sped.

On soundless toes, he ran down the hall, flung open the door and dashed out on the porch. There was a flight of three or four steps that ran from the porch to the small lawn, and Billy took them two at a time. After the first step, he noticed something impossible.

Across the street, the houses stood, just as they always had. On this side, to

left and right, nothing was changed. But--there was no street.

Just that! There was a place for the street to be, all right, but in place of the street was an awful void. Emptiness stretched away horribly, and far, far down in that emptiness winked the stars of the southern hemisphere!

Billy the Heist wanted to shrink back from that awful void, wanted to flee back

into the house and lie on the floor and hold onto things and cry.

But the impetus of his exit was too much, and with a cry of mortal fear, he tumbled over the last step; and, like a character out of Dunsany, fell screaming

toward the unconcerned stars.

HE WAS LATE again. He sat in the street car and fidgeted, and wished he could make the car go faster. He searched the street for a clock as he rode along, and

every time he saw one, his panic mounted higher, and his nervousness increased.

Lord, didn't time fly by when you wanted it to go slow?

He wondered if Old Man Pickering would be down at the office when he got there.

He hoped not.

He'd be there, though. Never knew it to fail; when he was late, that was always

the morning Old Man Pickering chose to be early. Joe had already been caught twice before, and last time the old man had been pretty sore.

Gosh, suppose he lost his job! He simply must break himself of this infernal habit of being late. If he got by this time, he'd make mighty sure that he was

never late again.

He rang the bell for his stop and, leaping from the car, literally flew up the

street. He was panting as he swept through the outer office and flung his hat and coat at the rack. He missed Clara's cheery "hello" and Mike's bass bellow at

once. He looked around, but there they were, seated at their desks as always.

They had rather strange looks on their faces, and they replied weakly as he forced out the usual morning salutation. Joe felt a chill go down his back. Something was up, all right.

Jimmy, the office boy, popped in from the hallway, and:

"The old man wants to see you, Joe," he said. "He's been waiting for fifteen minutes. He's madder than a hatter. Gosh, I'm sorry for you, Joe," he ended, commiseratingly.

Joe began to tremble. Inside, like. He didn't shake, but it seemed impossible that the others wouldn't notice it. He felt like he was getting red in the face,

too. But he smiled as scornfully as possible at Jimmy's commiseration and strode--boldly, apparently--into Old Man Pickering's office.

The Old Man was busy. He would be, of course. That was to make Joe wait, and get

him more rattled. Old Man Pickering would have been busy, right then, if

there  
hadn't been a thing on his desk. He'd have painted the walls, but what he'd  
have  
made Joe wait.  
So Joe waited. And got more fidgety, just like the Old Man wanted him to. And  
at  
last, the boss looked up and peered at Joe over his glasses.  
"Oh, it's Metzger," he grunted. "What do you want?"  
"You sent for me, sir. Jimmy said you wanted to see me."  
"Wanted to see you? What for-- Oh, yes, I did want to see you. Want to have a  
little talk with you."  
He took off his glasses, wiped them very deliberately and put them back on.  
He  
peered at Joe like an entomologist examining a bug.  
"You've been late pretty often, here lately, Metzger," he snorted. "I'm  
afraid  
you're running it into the ground. And, personally, I'm getting sick and  
tired  
of it."  
He cleared his throat and settled down to tell Joe just what he thought. Joe  
knew he was in for a long siege of windiness, and so he settled down, too, to  
weather the storm as well as he could.  
Old Man Pickering wandered on and on; and Joe shifted from one foot to  
another,  
occasionally answering, as well as he could, the questions that the Old Man  
fired at him. He was thinking only one thing--was this tirade going to end in  
a  
discharge or wasn't it? He wished the Old Man would finish and end his  
uncertainty.  
Old Man Pickering was summing up. Joe, long familiar with the boss's  
peculiarities, recognized the symptoms. He began to pay a little more  
attention.  
"The trouble with you youngsters is that you got too many other things on  
your  
mind," the boss was saying. "You've got to forget all these distractions and  
concentrate your mind on your work, instead of forgetting it the minute you  
leave the office."  
Somewhere beyond the door, Joe heard a peculiar sound. It was a sound that  
had  
no place in this office, a "pwoong," as if someone had plucked the string of  
a  
bass viol. He gave it but slight attention, however, for Pickering would be  
reading him his fate in just a minute, now. And Pickering ignored it, too,  
and  
went on with his speech.  
"If you ever want to make a success of yourself, young man, you've got to  
forget  
women and clothes and automobiles; and throw yourself into your work. Like  
this!"  
Old Man Pickering stood up. He carefully arranged the letters and papers on  
his  
desk. He backed away to the far end of the office, took a running jump--and  
quite literally threw himself into his work!  
The papers fluttered up into the air, scattered, and came down over his  
disappearing body like falling leaves. Where they touched him, they seemed to  
suck him up, like blotters suck up ink. In a moment, the boss was quite  
absorbed  
in his work, and there was no sign of him left at all.  
And that was the last anybody ever saw of Old Man Pickering!  
BOB DECKER gaped speechless for all of a minute. Then he reached out and

touched

the ruby lotus bowl in which the astounding professor sat. It seemed solid enough, in spite of the fact that it hung, without support, a good foot above the machine. A little emboldened by the fact that this was evidently no spirit,

Bob finally spoke.

"Are you--are you Professor Gallon?"

The beaming figure beamed, if possible, even more.

"Eh?" it shouted suddenly.

Bob started back. "I--I said, are you Professor Gallon. Professor Hezekiah Gallon?"

"Hezekiah?" The professor's double cackled merrily. "Hezekiah! Of all the silly

names. No, indeed, young man. I'm not your Hezekiah. Though I may possibly be a

projection of him. But my name is Gallows, Hoopdeowdow Gallows. In fact, Professor Hoopdeowdow Gallows."

Bob was taken aback.

"Gallows?" he stammered. "Not Gallon?"

"Indeed, no. Gallows, I said. G-A-L-L-O-W-S. You know, Gallows, like you hang yourself on?"

"Like you--hang yourself on?"

"Sure, you know, when you go on picnics."

Bob gasped again. If this were Professor Gallon, he was apparently was insane.

But the incredible "Professor Gallon," then whoever it was, was insane. But the

incredible "Professor Gallows," unaware of Bob's astonishment, was speaking again.

"I fear an explanation is due you regarding my sudden appearance. I don't doubt,

you've worried considerable about it during the last few years. But it has a very rational explanation, I assure you."

Bob was not interested in explanations, rational or otherwise. He didn't even care to comment on the amazing use of the word "years."

"If you're not Professor Gallon, then where is he?" he demanded. "And can you make him come back?"

"Oh, he'll be back, I expect, as soon as I release the warp. He's probably wandering around in some impossible world or other."

"Well, release that damn 'warp' then, and bring him back."

"Oh, no. I couldn't do that." The creature was shocked. "I've had trouble enough

getting here to ever think of leaving so soon. You see, it was utterly impossible for me to ever get here in the first place. So that's how I was able

to do it. But now that I've done it once, it's possible to do it again. So I don't suppose I'll ever be able to accomplish the feat."

Bob was no longer amazed. He was angry.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, hotly. "It sounds like so much gibberish to me. It sounds like so much 'Alice in Wonderland'."

"Oh, but it's sound science. Sound science. Let me explain."

With a bound, the double of Hezekiah Gallon leaped from his lotus cup to the floor. He made no attempt at balance, he just threw himself out of the ruby and

spread-eagled on the hardwood. The crowbar and easter-lily flew from his hands

and slid up against the opposite wall of the room. The creature picked himself

up and looked ruefully at Bob.

"What a world!" he muttered. "What an incredible world!"

He picked up his crowbar and lily and laid them on the table. Then he turned, all smiles again, to Bob.

"Look here," he said. "Do you know anything about dimensions?"

"Quite a little," admitted Bob, deciding to abandon, temporarily, at least, any

attempt to get news of Professor Gallon.

"Very well then, listen carefully."

The little man assumed the air of a teacher lecturing his class.

"Here we have three dimensions. Length, width, and thickness, if you call them

by the same name we do. And, whether you know it or not, there is a fourth dimension. It's called time!"

He looked at Bob as if Bob should be astounded, but the young fellow only nodded

impatiently.

"Oh, you understand that, eh? Very well, it makes my explanation that much easier. Do you know about the fifth dimension, too? The dimension of probabilities?"

Bob thought for a while.

"I've read speculations about it in stories," he said. "But I never thought it

was taken seriously by scientists."

"Oh, but it should be! It's really a fact! Extending sidewise in time, at right

angles to each time-line of the space-time series of universes is a fifth dimension, in which lie the planes of all the realms of possibility--the worlds

of 'if,' I might say, or the branches of time."

"And you've come across that fifth dimension from some other possible world?" asked Bob.

The thing that called itself Professor Gallows snorted.

"Do I look possible to you? No more, I'll bet, than you look to me. No, I have

come across the sixth dimension!"

"The sixth dimension!"

"Quite so. The sixth dimension is at right angles to all the others and embraces, in its infinity, all the events that couldn't possibly happen in any

universe of probability. In short, as the fifth dimension is the dimension of probability, the sixth is the dimension of improbability. See?"

"No!" said Bob Decker, bluntly. "I get you all right, but I don't believe it. Even if there was a sixth dimension, it would be impossible for any one to cross it."

"Quite so." The professor was insufferably smug. "And its very impossibility made it inevitable, somewhere in the immensity of the dimension of impossibility. It just happens that this is the spot where that impossible event takes place."

HE PAUSED, reached into his pocket, took out a long, black cigar and calmly began to eat it. He went on:

"I am surprised, though, at one thing. How did your Professor Gallon ever manage

to create that receiver, if he didn't know about the sixth dimension?" He pointed to Hezekiah's "machine" and Bob looked at it, puzzled.

"That's not a receiver, it's a--a--I don't know what it is, but if it works as a

sixth dimensional receiver, it's due to an accident."

"My. My." The stranger was pleased. "Such an accident would have been quite impossible in my world."

He approached the machine and looked at it with a new interest. Presently, he frowned. "Crude," he said.

"Crude, but effective." He studied it again for a while and smiled rather patronizingly. "I imagine the warp at this end is not as tight as it ought to be," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if a number of impossible events might happen around here, soon. Although the spatial and temporal warps may not tally.

Still--"

He turned away from the machine and faced Bob.

"And now, if I may, I would like to question you, a little bit, about the conditions here in your world. Do you know much about--let's see--astronomy?

I

guess we'd better start with astronomy."

Bob Decker was just about to answer when he heard a sharp crackling from somewhere in the room. The impossible Professor Gallows paled and cried, "Oh, the warp!" and rushed to his lotus cup. He almost reached it when: "Pwoong!" went that viol string again, and lotus cup, professor and all faded away like a

dream. Out of the machine flew a bundle of clothes which fell in a heap on the

floor, unwound themselves, and stood up. Unhurt, but amazed, it was Professor Gallon.

The real Professor Gallon, this time, pin-stripe, crabbed look and all. But there was a cowed touch to the crabbed look, and the pin-stripe was a ruin.

He

looked dazedly around for a moment and then fled to Bob for protection.

"Hold me, Bob, hold me!" he cried. Don't let me get back in there. I've been through hell, during this last week. But I'm back now. Thank God, I'm back!"

Bob made no attempt to comment on that "last week." It was on a par with the other one's "last few years." Professor Gallon seized Bob's hand, and it looked

for a minute as if he was going to kiss him.

But it wasn't the professor that kissed him.

THROUGH THE DOOR sped a feminine form that flung herself on Bob's shoulder and

smothered him with kisses. It was Dorothy, and she was sobbing with joy and relief.

"My hero!" she cried, like a heroine in an old time melodrama. "Oh what would

I

ever have done without you?"

More kisses and then she turned to her father.

"Oh, Daddy, Bob was wonderful. So masterful, so daring! Where would I have been

now, do you suppose, if he hadn't rescued me from those little green men with whips?"